

# La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela at the Dream House In Conversation with Frank J. Oteri

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## 1. Anahata Nada and Long Sustained Tones

LA MONTE YOUNG: Performance of music for me is a spiritual experience. I didn't exactly realize that that was what it was when I was a little boy and first began to perform music. But, in Indian musical theory, they conceive of two kinds of sound. Actually, it's best to think of it as two kinds of vibration: the struck sound, that is the sound that we can hear and feel manifest physically; and the unstruck sound, which is the Pythagorean equivalent of the music of the spheres. The unstruck sound is considered to be vibrations of the ether. We can think of this as vibrations on an atomic level. We can think of it as vibrations on any level. The unstruck sound, we are told, is Anahata Nada. Nada means sound. Actually, it translates very well as vibration. Anahata Nada is the unstruck sound. Ahata Nada is the struck sound, this is music that we can experience as vibrations of air molecules, water molecules... We're told that Anahata Nada, the unstruck sound, the unstruck vibrations, are actually a concept in the mind of God, that these unstruck vibrations are like an abstract mathematical concept in the mind of God. Yogis practice bringing their energy up, the kundalini energy, through the chakras up to the fifth chakra in the voice area, the sixth chakra up here in the forehead, and the seventh chakra in the back of the top of the head.

Sound, music, the study of raga, Indian classical music, is considered a form of yoga, the fifth form of yoga. And it can be practiced in such a way that it's a meditation. And it's a way to find union with God. Yogis practice a discipline, nada-yogis practice a discipline where they bring the energy up and listen to the sound inside their heads, the sound of the sixth and seventh chakras, and this is a preparatory exercise for finding a way out through the top of your head to meditate on the music of the spheres, the unstruck sound, the Anahata Nada. And the Anahata Nada is a concept in the mind of God, so when you go out and find that place, you're actually inside the mind of God. And we can think of music as the language of God, all music. Now, what we speak in this language becomes interesting. We can say that folk music, popular music, rock, rap, it's all the language of God.

One of the questions that became interesting to me as my music evolved over the years is how it happened that I actually discovered this process of writing long sustained tones. You know, the idea of writing long sustained tones came to me around 1957 when I wrote *for Brass*, which had the long sustained tones in the middle section, and *Trio for Strings* in 1958, which was pretty much all sustained tones and silences. How did this come to me? What happened? It came to me totally by inspiration; this is what I've always said. Not only did nobody tell me to do it; people told me not to do it!

I had become very inspired in the '50s... I started to play jazz in high school in the early '50s and it turned out that the high school I went to, John Marshall High School, was a hotbed of jazz activity. As soon as I got there, the very first day I walked onto the campus, I was drafted into a Dixieland band that played every morning before band first period outside the band bungalow and from there it was just one step after another. This tenor player, Pete Diakonoff started bringing me records of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, *The Birth of the Cool*, Lenny Tristano, Lee Konitz, and telling me stories of all the jazz musicians who were at John Marshall before me and also telling me that as soon I graduated I had to go to L.A. City College and play in the L.A. City College Dance Band because it was the best college dance band in America. And so, this was the atmosphere I walked into, this Mormon hillbilly from Idaho and Utah.

When I was the age of about four or five, my dad hitchhiked from Idaho where we were living at the time, in Montpelier, to L.A. to get work. It was the middle of the Depression. There was no work. We were extremely poor. When I was born, my dad was a shepherd in Bern, Idaho. He was herding sheep up in the hills and mom and I would stay down in the log cabin. And every day mom would get on a horse and sometimes I would go with her and take food up to dad who was living in a teepee, herding sheep. So, we were extremely poor to begin with. The rent on the cabin was five dollars a month but dad couldn't afford it so the landlord just let him to do work on the cabin for the rent. In the midst of the Depression, nobody had any money. It was extremely rough and it's something you can't recover from. You find yourself saving every little thing for the rest of your life just because you were born during the Depression. And so, dad hitchhiked to L.A. and was eventually able to bring mom and the rest of the family on a train. I had been tap-dancing and singing at the Rich Theatre in Montpelier. I started when I was five years old. And my aunt Norma, who was a rodeo singer, had started teaching me cowboy songs and how to play the guitar when I was two years old. So I was very interested in music from the beginning. In grade school I wasn't sure if I going to be a visual artist or a musician. They let me paint in the back of the room in grade school instead of doing geography so that I could represent the class at exhibitions.

But, by the time I had graduated from John Marshall high school and entered L.A. City College—I made the L.A. City College Dance Band—and then went on to UCLA, somehow in that period I did a lot of things that were extremely formative. Playing jazz, for one thing, opened up the understanding of how to improvise. And improvisation has something to do with being tuned into a higher level of inspiration.

In Indian Classical Music, improvisation is very highly classicized. They speak of three kinds of improvisation. The first kind is the unfolding of the pitches. The way we do in the alap section of the raga at the beginning, you introduce each pitch and gradually build a structure with these pitches. This is the first kind of improvisation. The second kind of improvisation is combination/permutation—different kinds of patterns that bring the pitches in different relationships to each other that make musical sense within each particular raga. And then the final form is "swimming like a fish and flying like a bird." This is the highest form and Guruji explained after you've studied for twenty years, then he can put you on stage and what you do is forget everything that you've learned and you open yourself up to this higher inspiration. He said, "You don't think about people; you tune yourself into this higher source and if you really do it and become very pure and very focused, it comes through you and it produces everything." And somehow I was totally inspired to write long sustained tones. I didn't understand exactly why but I thought I really had to do it.

At UCLA, I heard the school Gagaku orchestra, and before I got to UCLA I heard Ali Akbar Khan's recording of the first full-length raga ever released in the West. Raga Sindh Bhairavi. It was released on Angel Records around '55 and I've always tried to determine whether I heard it in '56 or '57, where exactly in there did I hear it. But it had such an influence on me, when I got home—I first heard it on the radio—I jumped into my little blue '39 Ford convertible and drove down to Music City which was a record store that was a whole block. You know how things are in L.A.: really gigantic. And so I found it immediately 'cause obviously it was a promo I had heard on the radio! But I bought it and I took it home to my Grandma Wilde's house where I was living (she was my father's mother who married Leonard Wilde after divorcing my Grandfather Leonard Young). She was like my first music patron because when I was living in my parents' house there were so many brothers and sisters—there were six siblings all

together; I was the eldest. I would leave my saxophone on the bed and the kids would sit on my reeds and so forth and I was already a serious musician in high school, so I eventually moved to my grandmother's house. When I bought this record, I went into my room and I listened to it for days and days. Every time I went into my room I would listen to it and it had an enormous effect on me. It was the first time I ever heard tambura. On the recording they introduce each instrument and say this is Ustad Ali Akbar Khan on sarod and this is Chatur Lal on tabla and then they each play a few notes, and Dr. Shirish Gor on the tambura, and there I heard tambura for the first time, the drone. A drone with nothing else around it, just a drone. Only for an instant, you know, it seemed like so much then but when I go back to the recording and listen it's only a few seconds. But this recording and Japanese gagaku music and the music of Anton Webern that I had been listening to all somehow jelled together to make what became the beginnings of what my music was.

And, why did I write long sustained tones? Well, if we have a concept of the music of the spheres, it is continuous. And through long sustained tones I was able to make a model manifest that was especially representative. Before my music it's very difficult to find just long sustained tones. You can find examples here and there, just snippets of it. I heard some great music once of Eskimos singing into each other's mouths singing perfect fifths. Great! So fantastic! The concept has been around, but it's always been somewhat associated with the spiritual process and through the long sustained tones it was possible to discover the importance of rationally-related intervals, rationally-related frequencies, because when the tones are very short it's very difficult to analyze them. For example, how did Indian classical music develop such an elaborate system of frequency relationships. If I sing a tone today and then sing it again a year later, it's hard to say if I sang the same tone or not. Some people are better at it than others. But if I sing it today and I sing it tomorrow, it's still hard. Even if I do it an hour from now... But if we sing together [*La Monte and Marian sing together*], you can immediately tell whether we're singing the exact same frequency or not. And then we can work on it and make it more and more perfect. Pandit Pran Nath said that when you're singing and you're perfectly in tune it's like meeting God. The meaning of this statement is that the concentration is so much to sing perfectly in tune that you literally give up your body and go to a higher spiritual state. Sound... Musicians like to think that sound is the highest form of meditation, that it takes you the furthest. Certainly, in my experience this is the case. I feel through sound I have come closest to God and closest to the understanding of universal structure. We can think of this abstract structure and you know the Sufi story when God created the body the soul did not want to go inside. It could see that this was a trap, this life of physical hell, and God used music to lure the soul into the body because the soul already loved music because it is the language of God. But there was a reason why the soul had to come to earth. By taking on a body, we can experience physical sound and we can study vibrations in a way that is manifest to us and is comprehensible. When you and I listen to music, we have an experience which, when we're at the beginnings of our lives is hard to quantify. It's really hard to understand the mystery of what music is. But if we conceive of it as the language of God and that it is given to us as a means for understanding universal structure, it takes on a whole new meaning. And it includes all music, but some is much more to the point and gets you to a higher place. But it all utilizes this principle of vibration and through vibration, we are understanding something about the nature of vibrational structure.

In the system of just intonation, every frequency is related to every other frequency as the numerator and denominator of a whole number fraction. That is my definition of the system of just intonation. I find it very workable for me. And only these harmonically-related frequencies

make composite waveforms which are periodic: three times seven comes out to be some whole number, four times seven, etc. And after a certain number of cycles of these two going along, the pattern repeats. In equal temperament, the pattern does not repeat. So we're presented in equal temperament with extremely complex sound. The reason it works is because it's really modeled on the simple diatonic scale and the chromatic embellishments in between. So we always have a memory of what that was and we think it into place when we hear music in equal temperament. We never really got away from the diatonic scale and its chromatic embellishments.

Even Schoenberg himself, the master of the democracy of the twelve tones, wrote very tonal music and he often analyzed it in that way. He was always thinking of how this was relating to tonality because it's a simple physical phenomenon that we are totally enmeshed in. And without periodicity, we have no concept of time. Our entire concept of time is dependent on the concept of periodicity. So, rationally-related frequency ratios, whole number frequency ratios, produce periodic, composite waveforms. Therefore, these periodic patterns are particularly understandable and usable by the human mind. When we listen to music, we listen to vibrations of air molecules come and strike the ear drum and enter transferred through the ear mechanism up through the neurons into the cerebral cortex and to some degree make patterns that are very much similar to the air molecule patterns that are coming against the ear drum. The profound effect of when we hear music in just intonation has to do with recognizing these structures and their relationship to all vibrational structures. And the profound thing that we experience when we hear music that is very beautiful is an understanding of specific patterns of vibrational structure.

By the time I discovered Pandit Pran Nath in 1967, I had already influenced generations of composers with my music. And I had not imagined that I would take a teacher. Again, it had been very hard for me to get through school because I had to really go against most of what my teachers were telling me in order to become myself. I have found that in life, most people really don't want me to be what I want to be. I have to isolate myself in order to allow myself to really be what I need to be. And I discovered early on if I really listen to this strong sense of inspiration that was coming through me and allow myself to be that, that it was guiding me and it was giving me the truth. And the reason my music has been so influential is not because I created it, it's because it's coming directly by revelation and it is the truth. And when people hear it, they understand that it's the truth and it's something that's far beyond me. I could never do it. As much as I have studied, and as much as I have practiced, and all of these things put together, how seriously I have dedicated my life to the study of music, this thing that comes through me is some other kind of miracle. It's like a blessing. It has to do with seeking it. I wanted it. It was something I was interested in, in the abstract, and somehow I was given it. And this extraordinary energy that I have when I perform, to do *The Well-Tuned Piano* for six hours and twenty-four minutes, or sing raga for two hours straight, somehow I've always found music flowing out of me. I used to go to sessions in Los Angeles, jazz sessions. I used to play at this place called the Big Top on Hollywood Boulevard, one of the most creative session spots in the whole L.A. area. As soon as they saw me walk through the door, they knew I was going to play for a long time. Other guys would go on the stand and take a couple of choruses, but I would never stop. I was just playing and playing. And somehow, something began to flow through me. Improvisation helped me understand this process.



## 2. Improvisation vs. Composition

LA MONTE YOUNG: One of the questions that you had raised, Frank, had to do with this relationship between improvisation and written composition. It's interesting, you know Morton Feldman and I had a long interview about this very subject. I tend to think of it as all one and the same. You get these ideas and either you stop and write them down or you don't. Once recording was created, it opened up an extraordinary possibility. I believe that the definitive version or versions of *The Well-Tuned Piano* are the recordings. I have a score that's very thick—it's about an inch and a half thick—and it's got most of the themes written down and even transcriptions of some special variations. But it would be an enormous project for one person to transcribe one performance. And after 1962 when I wrote the Death Chant, for the death of Jackson and Iris Lezak MacLow's baby, I didn't write anymore completely notated scores until I wrote *Chronos Kristalla* for the Kronos Quartet in 1989-90. And I was going to make that more of a set of instructions for them to put together, but they specifically requested that they would like me to write out as much of it as possible. So I did. I wrote a complete notated work for them, an hour and a half long...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Have you heard it?

FRANK J. OTERI: Never, I'd love to hear it...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, Kyle Gann thought very highly of it. He said it was my second most important masterpiece after *The Well-Tuned Piano*. But, certainly, I surprised myself when I wrote it down because in a way I found that the written out version is perhaps more imaginative than anything anybody might have put together. It's hard to say. It's really hard to say. But when I'm performing *The Well-Tuned Piano*, I could never play it from a written score. People ask me, "Do you have a score? Do you have something written down? Do you have music in front of you?" I can't play from music. I have never played from music since I don't know how long. I've played in dance bands, of course, and orchestras, but that was in the '50s. I was in school orchestra since the second grade. But I gave up that kind of playing because, first of all, it's of no interest to me, and second of all, *The Well-Tuned Piano* is an enormous structure, it's a whole big set of ideas and part of the fluidity of the experience has to do with things coming to me as they come to me.

FRANK J. OTERI: Certainly early on, you wrote *Trio for Strings* and *for Brass*, both of which are completely notated. I think the whole question of whether or not to completely notate a piece relates to the whole question of whether or not you want other performers to play your music. How does this music live beyond you? How does it live beyond the 20th, now the 21st century? And yes, it's great. Now we have recordings and so much of the music that evolved during the 20th century, jazz, rock, etc., will live on because of recordings. And this is true of other improvisation-based musics around the world, Indian classical music, Ghanaian drumming, Iranian music, Arabic maqams, etc. All this music can be preserved now on recordings. But Western classical music evolved this whole tradition of survival based on other people playing music from scores. Is it possible for someone else to perform your music?

LA MONTE YOUNG: This is why I became so interested in the guru-disciple process.

### 3. The Guru-Disciple Relationship

LA MONTE YOUNG: I found that when I was studying with Pandit Pran Nath I was learning on a level that was far beyond the level I was learning on before. As I was beginning to say, I had already influenced generations of composers and I didn't think I'd be taking a teacher. And when I met Pandit Pran Nath, we were drawn together like iron filings to a magnet. Suddenly some process began to take place...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He lived on this floor. He lived in this space before we had the Harrison Street place.

LA MONTE YOUNG: He sang right here where we gave the concert the other day. He sang many concerts here.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: This was also his living space. His shrine is now here. We came upstairs and he gave us lessons here.

LA MONTE YOUNG: For many years, before we had this space, he was also living with us downstairs on our floor. We essentially studied in what is called the *guru-shishya* tradition, the tradition where the disciple lives with the teacher. And this tradition has been going in our gharana, the Kirana gharana of Indian classical music for generations. And it's disappearing in India. People go to school now and study music. And Pandit Pran Nath said that you absolutely cannot learn raga in school, it cannot be done. He said to me, "The slow way is the fast way. The only way to learn it is by spending three lifetimes." The first lifetime is with the guru. The second is a lifetime of practice. And the third lifetime, you sing. This way of learning is so different from the way we learn in Western schools. Don't get me wrong. I love the Western system of education. I'm a product of it and it gave me so much. I'm a firm believer in it.

But I think that the guru-disciple method of learning goes far beyond it. And in the 26 years that our guru was alive and we knew him, we spent about 50 percent of our time with him. So that's like spending about 13 years continuous with a teacher, living together. And we served him night and day. And some days, he wouldn't even give us a lesson, he'd just maybe hear us practice from a distance or we would just do work for him and that was that. One time he had been with us for a few months, and he'd hardly given us a single lesson. So we said to him, as the days were getting short, "Guruji, you know, you haven't given us a lesson." And he said, "What, I have to teach you like children? We used to be proud of the fact that our children just learned by being around us, and they'd learn to sing the way they learned to talk." In musicians' families, there are stories of mothers whispering the talas into the ears while they are little babies. And they pride themselves that the children just grow up doing it. And he really taught us on this highest level and it takes a lot of time. He would sing a composition for us after dinner or give us a lesson when he was having a drink. He would give us a lesson when he really felt inspired to give us a lesson, or teach us something, or tell us something. And we went with him everywhere he went and took care of him constantly, so this was totally a different experience.

And, in fact, Jon Hassell, who also studied with Guruji, once said to me, "La Monte, how can you be Guruji's slave? Aren't you afraid you're going to lose yourself?" And I said, "Well, Jon, when you're really there. There's nothing to lose." There was nothing to lose. I had made up

my mind that I was doing this to learn. I admired him and I was going to do it. I was able to give myself up. And in return, he gave something enormous. So, this was entirely a new way of learning. It's not something rigid that's written on a page (and that certainly has its values) but it was something actually that makes a step in the direction of immortality. Because when the guru dies, he literally can give his soul to the disciple. You can think of this musical process and part of that entire transformation and what the guru leaves with the disciple is what was the most important thing in the guru's life. And so the disciple then takes that on and becomes a guru and teaches the next generation. So it's a different process from writing it down, but the way you have to memorize things, there's something very related to it as well. You memorize and memorize, and you repeat things, and you do it over and over with the understanding on the most advanced level that things will change. In fact, a great artist is expected to make a contribution to the tradition. A great artist is expected to know the tradition completely, but also to be able to contribute something eventually.

FRANK J. OTERI: You said something just now that crystallized a connection that had never before occurred to me. You mentioned your being influenced by Webern very early on, and now you're talking about becoming a disciple of Pandit Pran Nath. Well, it's not exactly analogous to the guru-disciple relationship, but the relationship that Webern had with his teacher, Schoenberg, was so much more than the standard teacher-student relationship. It was a lifetime thing as well. And Webern didn't lose himself. He became himself through the process of studying with Schoenberg. And it's interesting that of the three things you mentioned that shaped your music, a decade before you even met Pandit Pran Nath, you were hearing Indian music, improvising with jazz musicians, but also hearing and studying the music of Webern, who had this very special relationship to a teacher.

LA MONTE YOUNG: That's right! When Dennis Johnson, Terry Jennings and I were in L.A. in the '50s and I was writing long sustained tones, they were the first two people who gave me any support whatsoever. They were the first two people, in fact, to follow me in this style of writing long sustained tones. We used to think of ourselves as the three romantics, you know, something like Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, and we were all very interested in the relationships of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. Somehow they represented something important to us. And Webern gave such a clarity in his music, such a pristine beauty. Yet, the important thing for a really good guru is not for La Monte Young to turn out little La Monte Youngs. But to let the student, to teach the student how to find the student's own self, and to find the student's way to this higher level of inspiration which will give them something that is extraordinary and allow them to be completely creative and go beyond any fixed formal structure that might be considered to be "IT." That's not necessarily "IT." A fixed formal structure is a model for something else, and it's necessary for the student to be able to receive this creative impulse that comes through them and allow them to create something that is really meaningful for people on earth.

When I perform I never think about the audience. This has been for a long time, even before I met Pandit Pran Nath. However, I think the music is for the audience completely. But I don't think about trying to please them. I think that it's my responsibility to give it to them on the highest level so that eventually, when they're ready for it, which might be right this minute just as it comes (some people are really on top of it, but some people may not be). That is the difference between what I think of as high art and entertainment, if you will. It's one thing to make people feel good on a simplistic level. There's nothing wrong with it. Everybody needs to feel good on a simplistic level sometimes. But what comes through me when I perform, when I



go into this highest state of spiritual communion, has to do with spiritual process and it flows through me. And if the people are there, it flows to them. But I never think about them. I think about being pure and letting it flow through me. Somehow I learned very early on how to focus and how to concentrate and I have to be in a very focused state to let this through me.

#### 4. The Evolution of The Well-Tuned Piano

FRANK J. OTERI: To take it specifically to what brings us together here, *The Well-Tuned Piano*... It's almost 40 years old at this point. And now, with the release of *The Well-Tuned Piano* on a single DVD, it is a great moment in this 40-year history of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, and also, the two of you being together this year will be just over—actually 41 years, since 1962.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yes, it's true.

FRANK J. OTERI: This remarkable moment in time has not stayed fixed; it has evolved. *The Well-Tuned Piano* has not stayed the same as it was when you first created it; it is so much more. And you can't really say that for compositions in the Western classical sense. It's interesting that *The Well-Tuned Piano* happened after you were dealing with the concept of long sustained tones, after you were dealing with and starting to think about just intonation and the relationships of intervals with one another and the purity of sound. In so many ways, the piano as a construct is antithetical to all of these things. On a piano, you can't really sustain a tone. Yes, you can press a pedal but the decay cannot be prolonged. It's not like bowing a string or blowing into a brass or woodwind or singing until your breath runs out. It's a chopped, percussive sound. And pianos are traditionally tuned in 12-tone equal temperament, where you don't have any of these pure relationships between the intervals. And it's also a manufactured instrument that comes out of a factory, which is the opposite of a guru and a teacher. And you took this instrument and you turned it into something completely different. You remade it into your own instrument in spite of all of the piano's qualities. Why the piano? What brought you to the piano?

LA MONTE YOUNG: This is a great question! It all goes back to the lyre of Orpheus and the harp of David. From the beginnings of time, it seems that stretched strings became an instrument of measurement for men and women to study music. It seemed that with our voices we could go directly to God, but when we became interested in the measurement of the whole thing, we began to stretch these strings and make them different lengths and different tensions. Some people say that this approach to the relationship between music and mode goes back to the lyre of Orpheus. Actually, it goes back further. It goes back to the Vedas. And we can find these ideas in the Vedas, going through Greek thought, through Orpheus, through Plato, on up to the present time. And the piano is this glorification of Orpheus's lyre and David's harp. It's just a big lyre that's been set up in such a way that you can press the keys and strike the strings and you can manipulate the pedals and do various kinds of sustenances. When I began to study music I was two years old. In the beginning my dad was teaching me cowboy songs and my aunt Norma who used to sing at the rodeo was teaching me cowboy songs and playing the guitar. We know she was teaching me in Bern when I was about two years old and by the time I was five they had me singing and tap dancing at the Rich Theatre in Monpelier. But my mother's parents, Grandma and Grandpa Grandy, owned a piano, and before I left for California, between when I was one and five years old, we would sometimes go over to Grandpa's house and I would sit at the piano. Of course, somebody taught me "Chopsticks" [*laughs*]. I found it so profound to sit and play the interval of a second; I didn't know what I was doing but I would just listen to the sound of the piano. And later, I had saxophone lessons from the time I was seven years old. My dad bought me an alto saxophone and he taught me saxophone. My dad's uncle Thornton had taught him saxophone. Uncle Thornton had had a swing band in L.A. in the late '20s. This was a dance band. When I was

ten, we moved to Utah where my father managed my Uncle Thornton's celery farm for four years before we moved back to L.A. and I went to John Marshall High School. I was living on Uncle Thornton's celery farm working out in the fields all day. But Uncle Thornton also gave me some coaching in saxophone and he introduced me to sheet music of Jimmy Dorsey. So it was through Uncle Thornton that I began to get some sense that jazz existed, although our radio hardly worked. We were like hillbillies, you know, farmers, cattle people, sheep people, and we were extremely poor. My family never really recovered from the Depression. They never ever earned a whole lot of money but somehow I was always learning music. And so Uncle Thornton gave me the sheet music from his dance band. But I didn't have any piano lessons until around 1955 after I was already at L.A. City College. But every jazz musician starts to play chords because sometimes the piano player doesn't show up so somebody has to lay down some changes so that some of the other guys can play. So I started to play piano. And especially after I met Terry Jennings because I liked to listen to him play and I would play piano for him. When I graduated from John Marshall High School, Terry Jennings entered. And this valve trombone player named Hal Hooker brought me a recording of Terry Jennings. I was astonished. He sounded just like Lee Konitz when he was only in the tenth grade. It was remarkable...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...You played in an orchestra when you were in Utah. So you were aware of pianos and many other instruments. Maybe you didn't play it, but...

LA MONTE YOUNG: I've played music my whole life. The piano exists. The piano exists. You can't avoid the piano!

MARIAN ZAZEELA: There was probably always a piano in church...

LA MONTE YOUNG: At the world premiere of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, the live world premiere in Rome in 1974, Pandit Pran Nath was there. And he said, "You literally transformed the traditional instrument of Europe before their eyes." Somehow, by tuning the piano in just intonation, it takes it back to the lyre of Orpheus and the harp of David which had to be tuned in a much simpler way, and it brings out some of those characteristics. The piano just depends on what you do with it. It's like everything else. Remember when electronic instruments came out and the Musician's Union said, "This is going to be a problem. Musicians are going to be out of work" and so forth. They weren't really. It just became another instrument. And what you do with electronics is what's important.

## 5. La Monte's Approach to the Piano

FRANK J. OTERI: The piano has been so many things to so many different types of composers both in music that continues the Western classical music whether Barber or Babbitt, or jazz. And certainly someone like Thelonious Monk sounds nothing like Fats Waller. There are connections, but they are few and far between and the piano was the instrument that inspired most of the music of John Cage, but it inspired Rachmaninoff also. And it's what led to this massive composition of yours. You had written fixed compositions like *for Brass* and *Trio for Strings* and you had even written some piano music like *Arabic Numeral (any integer)* or the *Compositions 1960*. But when you got involved in interacting with a retuned piano, instead of writing a series of pieces for this new instrument, you created one piece that became more than a composition. It was no longer: "I'll write this piece then I'll write that piece" but rather the piece became a way of life.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We have to also recall that the work La Monte did on saxophone—it's not so well known and I don't know if you ever heard it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes, I have, many years ago there was a festival of La Monte Young's music on WKCR...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: That was actually extremely formative going towards what he did with the piano. We were given the little spinet piano that my parents had in their house. They gave it to La Monte after we were married and were living down here on Church Street and had the space for it. So we had a piano in the house and we did some things with the saxophone, with the group. La Monte would actually go from saxophone to piano and gong and back to piano. We did these symmetrical sequences...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...We called it "Long Gong Set"...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ... And as he moved away from equal temperament—the found these inherent problems in equal temperament—although he had the facility to play extremely fast on saxophone, he could not get away...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...The instrument is designed as an equal-tempered instrument...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He could not adjust his embouchure to get the intonation that he wanted and still play as fast as he wanted. He thought about having a special shehnai made or a special saxophone made, but it was not really practical; there was no money for it. And he started to try to tune the piano. And this was really interesting because it was both a study in tuning and as well an introduction to a new instrument for him. And, with the piano, he was actually emulating some of the things he had been doing on saxophone. So the early 1964 version of *The Well-Tuned Piano* has a lot of relationship with the saxophone and that was definitely a stepping-stone to what he did. I think it is true that if it were another composer he might have said, "Well, I've written 80 pieces now." You can take so many of the parts of *The Well-Tuned Piano* and say each one is a different piece. Between the '64 versions of *The Well-Tuned Piano* which were done on tape (they were never performed live because we couldn't make those arrangement to have a piano that would be tuned and kept in the same place for concerts at that time in his career). But later with The Theatre of Eternal Music and Dream Houses we started traveling to Europe with a group and half a ton of equipment and insisting

that we have a week in advance on location to set up a light environment that we perform in and a projectionist, it became a more elaborate production. So by the time the opportunity arose to actually have a piano in a space and tune it and have it stay in that space for a while, it was no longer such an impossibility.

FRANK J. OTERI: You raise an interesting point about what *The Well-Tuned Piano* has become. It is so much more than a composition and the presentation of it is so much more than a concert, its full title really must be *The Well-Tuned Piano in The Magenta Lights* because ideally it's not just a sound entity, but it is also a visual environment that you're in. And about an hour ago, La Monte said something about it being documented on recordings, but it is so much about being in this sacred space.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yes, even with this wonderful achievement of the five hour recording that Gramavision put out—we had the opportunity to put that out on five CDs and five LPs and five cassettes and the CDs were an hour long—still, we had to find those breaks. It was quite unnatural. We spent a lot of time in the mastering studio finding where to make the breaks and whether they would overlap with the next one. And if you're familiar with it, I think they're very good, those transitions. It's masterful. But it was like composing those endings and picking them up again, but it was not in the original composition at all. So, you're perfectly right, that when this opportunity came to do a DVD... We came to video rather slowly because we tried some video back in the early '80s but the result was so poor—the technology was not yet well developed. You could not get magenta; you could not get this kind of blue. We just left it at that point thinking this is not going to work. And we couldn't afford to work in film. So when we're performing *The Well-Tuned Piano in The Magenta Lights* in 1987 at Dia's Mercer Street space, someone whom we knew had some video equipment and said, "You really should video it" and they offered to bring in their equipment. So, we did one performance that the man who used to have the Samaya Foundation—did you ever know Barry Bryant? He died unfortunately some years ago—and so he videoed one week. And then we felt that things were not very clear with him and he took the tapes. You know we're very possessive about our work. And then we hired a camera person we knew and kept it under our own control. The last three concerts we videoed under our own control. The final concert in the seven concert series was recorded, however, the state of the art that we could manage at the time was Betacam and we used 20-minute Betacam cassettes. We had two cameras and we alternated, and we also ran a 3/4-inch. So for every hour, we had approximately six 20-minute Betacam reels.

LA MONTE YOUNG: In the end, there were about 22 Betacam reels for each camera as well as seven 3/4-inch one-hour back ups...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: So we had 51 reels of tape altogether...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...And it all had to be edited together...



## 6. The Theatre of Eternal Music

LA MONTE YOUNG: When music becomes a spiritual experience, it goes beyond the concept of "I have the fixed composition right here which is a certain duration." And this process was beginning as I was learning how to improvise. But by the time I had put together my group The Theatre of Eternal Music, I was creating music in which I had sustained drones. I asked Tony Conrad and John Cale and Marian Zazeela to sustain tones while I played saxophone...

MARINA ZAZEELA: You were already performing saxophone over the voice drones...

LA MONTE YOUNG: I was already performing saxophone over the voice drones before they joined the group and I had been listening to harmonics. Once you begin working with the sustained tones that I began in my demonstration earlier... [*La Monte and Marian sing a unison*]. Once the tones are sustained, you have the opportunity to listen to them. And sometime in the '60s I got this idea that tuning is a function of time. When astronomers want to study the periodicities of some heavenly body, they go way back into history and say, "Well, what did the Greeks write about it and what did the Chinese write about it." It takes a long-term study to really make a very precise analysis. And simply by sustaining the tone, we have the opportunity to listen to the harmonic content. Out of the harmonic content flows tuning in just intonation because every frequency is related to every other frequency as a whole number ratio. This is exactly what the harmonic series is; it's a system of positive integers. The positive integers—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, on to infinity—are such that anytime you sustain two of these integers together, the by-product of these integers, a whole number multiple, is some harmonic in this harmonic series. The harmonic series is the same thing as the positive integers in terms of numerical analysis. Danielou mentions that in sound there's such a thing as intelligible sound and less-intelligible sound and he thinks that these harmonics are very closely related to intelligible sound. I've gone on to discuss the concept of periodic composite wave forms as being one of the key elements in these sets of relationships. Our concept of time could not exist without a concept of periodicity. Periodicity is one of the most important principles that we have. Kronecker said, "God created the integers; all the rest is the work of man." Through the integers, we are led into periodicity, and through periodicity we are led to the integers.

When I put together my group, The Theatre of Eternal Music—it actually began a little bit earlier in L.A. with Terry Jennings and Dennis Johnson and me and this tenor player Mike Lara together—and I would play piano. But in New York, I met Marian and had her sing drone while I played saxophone and then sometimes Terry Jennings would come to New York and Dennis Johnson would come to New York. And then I met Tony Conrad. And John Cale played in the group. And later on Terry Riley replaced John Cale in the group, my old dearest brother from Berkeley. Terry Jennings was the first person to appreciate my long sustained tones, and Dennis Johnson was the next, and I would say that Terry Riley was then the next. The same way that Schoenberg and Berg and Webern were very close to each other and had to give each other emotional personal support to do what they were doing... Because the critics, they don't know anything; they'll pan you. The public certainly doesn't know. Half of them just think what the critics write. So who knows? Well, you know, the person that's creating it knows, hopefully. And if he doesn't know, he has to find out. He's the one that's responsible. The buck stops there. What comes through you is what you're giving and what you're leaving to humanity. It's the lesson that you're offering them. It's important that you offer them the truth and that it be extremely pure. Recording has brought an extraordinary new situation into the process. It puts the guru-disciple relationship in a new light. It's just as important as it ever was.

It's just the same as it was even after they created electronic instruments. The composer was just as important as he ever was. The performer was just as important as he ever was. But it brings a new tool, a new element. Before recordings, the disciple really had to memorize and memorize and memorize.

## 7. Discipline and Relationships

LA MONTE YOUNG: Disciples were highly prized if they were good at memorizing. It was part of the whole process. You raised the question. What about *The Well-Tuned Piano*; who's going to play it? First I want to say that Michael Harrison *did* play it very well when he played a private concert that we presented...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...It was at the Mercer Street Dia Art Foundation in 1987...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...I was myself impressed at how well he could learn it. I didn't ever have him practice it for me until just shortly before the concert. He just learned the piece by helping me tune and sitting beside me during performances. And that's very much the way I learned from my guru. Of course, there were some sit down lessons with my guru where he'd give me this and give me that. Just as I would say to Michael, write down this theme and Michael would write it down. That way I got a few themes transcribed. And then, later after the Gramavision recording came out, I let Kyle Gann transcribe a few more. And, of course, these are useful. But when I prepare for a concert of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, I spend a lot of time listening to my previous recordings and it gets in my ears. When Heiner Friedrich asked me to perform *The Well-Tuned Piano* in 1987, I said, "I've already done it" (meaning the one I was releasing on Gramavision that I recorded in 1981). I felt I couldn't go beyond it.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We had been working on the Gramavision recordings just before and we were getting it ready for release. So we had been listening to it over and over to write down all the themes and get all the timings right for the program booklet. So, of course, in listening to it we also realized that it really was really a fantastic work. But then when we brought the piano into Mercer Street and contemplated La Monte's playing it again, he was a little bit in awe of what he had already done and was thinking, "I'm not so sure." But within a week, he had already gone beyond it. It's in his nature...

LA MONTE YOUNG: The process of writing down the timing of all of the themes to make the timed theme score was very labor intensive. I had to hear *The Well-Tuned Piano* again and again and again and again to go over everything because at that point I didn't have a digital clock running. So I was dependent on the times on the VHS deck, and the timers are really not the same as real time. Plus there was tape slippage. So we had to go over it and over it to realign our zero and check it and make sure we had identified the material properly. In the course of that process, I really relearned the piece again that I had not played since 1981. My relationship with the piano is a very profound love relationship. I cannot stand to touch the keys unless I am preparing for a serious concert. I can't just play with the piece. It becomes a big disappointment for me, because I sit down and I play something and it's so beautiful and then it's gone. Whereas, when I play the piece, it becomes a whole world. The process of discovery of Anahata Nada, the unstruck sound, and making it manifest is a completely involving process. The one reason that the light environment is so important in the process of creating music for me has to do with the fact that the body has several senses. I actually burn the incense for a reason. If I had another life to live, I would create my own incenses!

LA MONTE YOUNG: It requires tremendous discipline to achieve this level of concentration. When a yogi meditates to the point where he can actually take his energy up out of his body and go into the cosmic sound, the music of the spheres, he has to have tremendous discipline to do that. So in order to be in a state of bliss, you have to first develop an extraordinary sense

of discipline. And this comes through rigorous practice. When I was first studying saxophone with my father when I was seven years old, he would hit me and so forth to get me to learn my lessons. It was typical. A lot of musicians learned this way. But when you're a little boy, you don't for sure understand why you have to practice. You know the story that is written about Hafizullah Khan and how he would practice with a rope around his neck while his guru would lie on the bed with the other end of the rope tied to his toe. If Hafizullah made a mistake or fell asleep, the guru would pull on the rope. During the day they would let him fly kites and then at night he had to practice, every night. When you're living with your guru, everything is according to what your guru wants, his sense of time. If he wants you to practice from 10 PM to 4 AM, that's when you practice. If he wants you to practice from 3 AM to 7 AM, that's when you practice. You have no choice in the matter. In a love relationship between man and wife, it should be a two-way street, like 50-50. Or some days 40-60 and other days 60-40, but somehow it's got to balance out and be a two-way street. The guru-disciple relationship is a one-way street. The guru is always right. You always do what he says. When he wants to go out, you go out. When he wants to stay home, you stay home. He wants to drink; you drink. If he doesn't want you to drink, you can't drink. It's exactly what he wants. And in order to do that you have to really have an extraordinary understanding of what you're doing, that you're really doing it with purpose in order to give yourself up. They say that service to guru is greater than service to God, because the guru becomes a model of your relationship to God. You know the story of when everybody in the town knew Jesus was coming. And everybody was preparing their house for Jesus to show up, and then finally a beggar comes to the door of this woman's house and he asks for some food and she says, "I'm too busy. The master is coming and everybody is preparing for him." And of course we all know the story; that was Jesus. And we all can imagine what we would do if we were in the presence of God. How we would serve Him and how we would bow down to Him or Her, whatever. But when you have a guru, this is your chance to prove it. You can really serve somebody. This is how you would behave. And this is why in the choice of guru, it must be someone who you really respect completely. Otherwise you could never go through this process. It has to be a very highly realized being. And to us it was a magical relationship. And it wasn't all roses. It was extremely hard work. We were completely sleep deprived for almost all of the time we were with him. He never allowed us to get any rest and if he thought we were resting, he would make us work. It was a very rigorous discipline. So in order to achieve this higher state of meditation where you can actually go out of your body and be in the mind of God, so to speak, in this cosmic sound, the yogi has to practice an enormous amount of discipline. Similarly, to sing raga or to perform *The Well-Tuned Piano*, to perform in this way that I want to perform, to bring this experience down, this very high spiritual experience, and make it manifest for people to understand and assimilate and enjoy and participate in, I have to work very hard to achieve that. When I'm performing *The Well-Tuned Piano*, or raga, I lead a completely disciplined life. I try to do nothing else in the week. In fact, when I do *The Well-Tuned Piano*, I require three months on location: a month of set up and practice and two months to perform. Because something that's six and a half hours long, I can only perform once in a week. I need time in between to recover. And I lead a highly disciplined life. I'm only thinking about music. I try to only think about music. On the day of a concert, I try never to speak to anybody. Pandit Pran Nath taught me this. On the day of a concert, he would not allow us to speak to him. He would keep totally within himself, high up, focusing on the music. Because somebody can say something that's absolutely a downer, so to speak, and no matter how high up you are, because you're still a human being, you're still in this world, these things can definitely have an effect on you. You and I had discussed doing this interview for a long time. But I had to get through the concerts. This concert that I just gave was very important to me. I had to get through that period, totally

focused, in order to then free myself up so that I could really focus on this event. And the reason I do so few things in life, is because I'm always trying for this level of quality, this level of experience, and I find that I have to totally give myself to the experience in order to achieve it.



## 8. Pandit Pran Nath

FRANK J. OTERI: At the same time that you were studying raga, immersing yourself in Indian classical music and giving your all to your guru, you were also actively pursuing your work as a composer and your work as a performer in non-Indian music with *The Well-Tuned Piano*. You said that Pandit Pran Nath heard it Rome. So he was supportive of the work you did outside Indian classical music.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Absolutely. That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's remarkable!

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He was very remarkable.

LA MONTE YOUNG: He was a remarkable human being. He was a rare person. In India, it's true, everybody says my guru is the greatest and nobody else is any good. So I accept that context, but even so, Pandit Pran Nath was a miracle of God, literally. He was a very rare human being. He definitely had extraordinary psychic and physical powers. One time he gave us a letter that we were supposed to mail and he said, "Don't mail it until tomorrow morning. I'll let you know." We were in India. And we thought: we'll mail it now. The post office is still open. We want to be sure we'll manage it. We don't want to be late in the morning. So we did it.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: The next day something came in the mail that drastically changed the plan that we had. It had to do with a tour that we were going to be on in Europe after we left India. And something came in the mail the next day. And I guess we came to his house and the mail came there. And he got the letter and we read it to him because it was probably in English. And it turned out that something, which I don't even remember, some detail that was in the letter we were sending was going to be wrong. So, of course we then had to confess that we already mailed it. And he said, "I told you not to."

LA MONTE YOUNG: *[laughs]*

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He came with us. We went back to the post office and convinced them to give up this registered letter in India, where they're martinets. You think of the Post Office here...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Talk about red tape... Perfect administrators, the postal clerks!

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We did get the letter back. But it was an example. You really have to learn to do what the guru says because you just don't always know why.

LA MONTE YOUNG: And that's why it is necessary that the guru be a real guru and that you have ultimate respect for the guru. Because if you get hooked up with the wrong person, it could be a travesty... But it was a miracle the way we were brought to him and he was brought to us. We went to a Bismillah Khan concert. Ralph Metzner took us.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know who Ralph Metzner was? He and Timothy Leary and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...Baba Ram Dass (Richard Alpert)...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...were the big three in the psychedelic movement in America in the mid '60s.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Ralph Metzner was the editor of a periodical called *The Psychedelic Review* and he had published an article by Alain Danielou on sound in which he talks about some of these vibrational processes that I had become very interested in. So, we went together with Ralph Metzner to a Bismillah Khan concert. And there Ralph Metzner introduced us to Shyam Bhatnagar. And Shyam said, "Well, if you like this, I have some tapes that you really must hear." And then he brought us these tapes of Pandit Pran Nath. And that's when I first heard Pandit Pran Nath singing in 1967. And together we worked with Shyam to bring Pandit Pran Nath in January of 1970.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Actually, we thought that we would have to go to India. We started corresponding with him. Shyam suggested writing him a letter. Of course, there was no phone. He had no phone in his home until much, much later. And, it's hard in the context of our rapid-fire digital world, to look back only what was it, 35 or something years ago to what it was like. Looking back to when La Monte was a child and living in that primitivism in Bern, Idaho. But in 1967, you still wrote letters and so on. Anyway, we thought we would have to go to India and were planning to go and then Shyam had the idea to try to make an arrangement to bring him here. So we went along with that and we succeeded.

LA MONTE YOUNG: And, in turn, he wanted to come here. It was very good for him. The economic opportunity for an Indian in America is just fantastic.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He had three daughters and this was a big burden to him. In an Indian household, you have to come up with the dowries to make a good marriage.

LA MONTE YOUNG: So part of our service to our teacher was to help him earn money so that he could eventually arrange for the weddings of his daughters.

## 9. How to Learn

FRANK J. OTERI: To turn it the other way around. You had this relationship with a guru, but to take it to the next generation and even before, you as a guru and as a mentor... You were already a mentor to many composers and musicians before you even got involved with Pandit Pran Nath. And you continue to have that role to this day. You mentioned Michael Harrison playing *The Well-Tuned Piano* and I'm curious about what that meant for you as a composer being in the audience hearing this piece of music you created that had always been done only by you up to that point, a quasi-improvisational work that really cannot be learned from a score. Was it still your *Well Tuned Piano*? What did Michael add to it? How was it different?

LA MONTE YOUNG: It was a very positive experience. It was very heartwarming. You have a sense that the tradition will go on. It's definitely still my piece. He may add to it. And, of course, he's written his own pieces, *From Ancient Worlds* and *Revelation*, all of which grew out of *The Well-Tuned Piano*.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Although they're his compositions, they're children of *The Well-Tuned Piano*.

LA MONTE YOUNG: But he added his own world. Pandit Pran Nath used to spend part of his time in California, so one time we went to Berkeley and someone arranged a little house concert for us to sing at his house. It's traditional for the guru to not sit in the same room as the disciples when they sing because it's considered too hard for them to have to sing in his presence, so he sat in the other room. But he said to one of the students who was sitting with him, "These are my children." It's a feeling of eternity. It's the idea that something can have eternal life, that music can have eternal life. That's why it's so interesting to consider recordings in this context because whereas we do carry on Pandit Pran Nath's tradition, in addition we now have an added support of the entire body of work that's been recorded. And literally, one supplements the other; there's no loss. At first, it seemed like when recordings came in, Pandit Pran Nath would not allow us to record any of his lessons. Many of the students wanted to record, and some of the students he let record I think because he thought it was hopeless. They weren't going to get anything if they didn't record. But for us, once, twice, three times, he said, "O.K. Now I'm making this special recording for you." But 99.9% of the time, we had to just listen and remember. There's a story of when he came to one of his first lessons in front of Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan Sahib and he bent over and a pencil fell out of his pocket. And his teacher slapped him and said, "Don't ever bring that again!" It was just considered out of the question because you had to rely on your memory; memory was everything. So recording is a very interesting and important phenomenon. You must take it positively and use it as a tool and then it's very valuable and nothing is lost.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We found there was an interesting mechanism that came into play; when he made the few tapes for us as teaching tapes, we tended to not concern ourselves with what was on them because we thought we could always go back and listen to the tape. Whereas the lessons he gave us that were not recorded, we hung on every single note and tried to practice, to memorize them. And he gave us a technique for this. He told us that when we sit and practice, we should think of him and think that we were sitting in front of him. And then everything would come flooding back to us, and actually this does happen. And it's quite extraordinary. If you really focus, the mind is quite powerful. Cognition is a very interesting process. We learn how we learn through this study. We find that even while we're sleeping,

something is going on. And we wake up the next day and we can remember something that we couldn't get the day before.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Repetition. Memory is repetition. You set something up inside the mind and you repeat it, and you keep checking it out and bringing it back. If you don't ever bring it back, it fades and it fades and it fades. In a recent letter we wrote to Ralph Metzner, in fact, we said, "Do you remember this?" And he wrote back, "Memory is a very tricky concept." Even that old process of saying something to somebody in the first row of the auditorium and by the time it gets back to the last person, it's a completely different sentence. Imagine what happens to memory each time you bring it back. Is it really the same memory or are you adding to it? How are you reinforcing it? But periodicity and repetition are a part of this process of memory.

## 10. On Minimalism

FRANK J. OTERI: So, the whole question of how to use repetition, to take this back now to Western classical music, whatever we want to call this tradition that we trace back to Gregorian chant in the West that evolved into contrapuntal music to symphonies to late romanticism to Webern to you... You have gone down in the history of Western classical music as the father of this genre that is called minimalism, which is music based on repetition, which is still very much a part of the language of Western classical music now, more than 40 years later. Do you accept that word for your music? Do you feel that it describes what you do? Do you feel the music that came after your work by other composers and is also called minimalism is connected to the music you do?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, I think the fact that I created something and had an enormous influence is indisputable. What it's called is very interesting. How much can words really describe it? I have my own definition of minimalism, which is that which is created with a minimum of means. There were a great deal of precedents for minimalism before me. There was haiku. There were these paintings of Hokusai. Ancient Chinese calligraphy. Some parts of Webern are very minimalist. In fact, the reductiveness in the Bagatelles, these very short little pieces, there's something very minimalist about them. Can minimalism describe everything I did? Impossible. Can it describe some important aspects of what I did? I think so. People search for tags for a means of description. Can music ever be described in words? It's an interesting question. As Dan Wolf wrote in the Introduction to *The Well-Tuned Piano* booklet, *The Well-Tuned Piano* is really a maximalist work. We strive to describe music and our musical experiences and musical trends and musical genres. I'm O.K. with being called a minimalist to some degree. I realize that it's only one aspect of my work. Certainly, within *The Well-Tuned Piano*, which is extremely maximalist, there are elements that we associate with minimalism. I think that eventually people will understand that my entire contribution was much more vast. I was an influence on concept art and on conceptual art. I was an influence on Fluxus. I did a number of things that grew out of my understanding of music history and the history of the world, yet in their first appearance they somehow seemed radical, like they were totally new. When we study history, we find out where we've been, and it puts us in a position where we have perspective and allows us to maybe do something new. But at least we can take all of that into consideration and let it feed our creative process so that what comes out of it takes into consideration what has been done up until this time. You know, they say: "Beware of the man who's only read one book." There used to be composers you would meet in college. They were these wild young guys and they could bang the piano and do all kinds of things. It was really something to hear them. But there was only one thing they could do, because they didn't know any other history and they didn't have enough training and they didn't have enough tradition. So, on the one hand, they had enormous potential. But, on the other hand, if they had also had enormous training, they would have then been able to take that creative impulse and really go beyond and beyond. John Cage once said, "Artists are bearing gifts." They're special emissaries bearing gifts for people, and they have an enormous responsibility to leave something important. It has to be something that's good for the people. And you don't do that by giving people what they want, you do it by giving the people this higher source of information that comes through you that you make manifest in some physical model that actually moves them deeply into the state where they want to have this experience and go higher into this exalted state.



FRANK J. OTERI: So to bring it back to repetition—let's eliminate the word minimalism from this because it's sort of become a buzz word...

LA MONTE YOUNG: It only has a limited usefulness.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And also, if you recall what Kyle Gann wrote in his very important essay that received the Deems Taylor Award.... He acknowledges that repetition and the cyclic part of minimalism is what is mostly known as minimalism, he would reject any definition of minimalism that did not start with *1960 #7* and the sustained drones that La Monte Young initiated into contemporary music. So we can't really only rely on that cyclic definition of minimalism.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's about hearing something for a long time. You played the saxophone very fast over drones and that then in turn led to your approach to piano playing. This total speed is exactly the opposite of holding a sustained tone for a long time, yet it isn't. There's an ancient Greek paradox about an arrow or a bird in flight. If something is moving, can it be somewhere while it is moving? And if it is always somewhere, how can it be moving? I reached the feeling I still have about music back in 1981 when I first heard *The Well-Tuned Piano* at 6 Harrison Street. I was a freshman at Columbia and I was hearing Bruckner for the first time and I was hearing Schoenberg. I was getting all this information at the same time. Everyone at Columbia seemed to be into this rigid interpretation of twelve-tone music and anything else was invalid. But what I loved about twelve-tone music, was that since you got rid of the tonal pull of various intervals, it no longer had to be goal oriented and that meant there was a stasis to it.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: I think that's what La Monte liked about it too.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Stasis as opposed to Fluxus.

FRANK J. OTERI: That stasis is what you heard in Webern and translated into your own *Trio for Strings* and *for Brass*. Those pieces with long sustained tones were serial pieces, but you were hearing the stasis of no longer needing to go anywhere.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: La Monte's concept of playing the saxophone so fast and then later playing the piano so fast, was that the notes actually blurred together and made a chord. He felt that he was aiming at sustaining chords over long periods of time. Certainly with the clouds in *The Well-Tuned Piano*, you can feel that he achieved it, because you do actually get to that point. Of course he has the sustain pedal on continuously, so there are a lot of sustained notes. So, actually, that was his goal to have the pitches go so fast that they would create a continuous chord.

FRANK J. OTERI: And that actually connects this music to visual art. And Marian, I wanted to talk with you about your being a visual artist and the influence that that in turn has had on La Monte's work and the influence that you have had on each other. Morton Feldman, in his writings about his music going back to early '50s, talks about how he wanted to create music that floated like color field paintings. If you look at Mark Rothko's paintings, you can see a connection to Morton Feldman's music. There's something painterly about the music. And there's something painterly about La Monte's music and about all this that we've come to call minimalist music. It's no longer about something happens over here, and it develops like a

Dickens or a Thackeray novel, but rather it's a canvas. Your ears are paying attention to this music the way your eyes would look at a canvas. It's all happening at once and you focus on one detail, then another, but it's there all at once.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: What's more, as a student of Paul Feeley and Tony Smith at Bennington in the late '50s, I was very influenced by their interest in the ideas of Clement Greenberg and the idea of getting rid of three-dimensionality and having the flat canvas be the flat canvas and not reference another space that it wasn't. In the paintings I did through 1962 when I stopped painting and came to work with light, that was my main intention and focus, to flatten out this flat area, to keep this two-dimensional canvas two dimensional. The opportunity I had to present my work with music, I would say, allowed other elements to come into play that went beyond making two dimensions be two dimensions. And that was to create an atmosphere that was conducive to listening to music and paying attention to it for a long period of time.

## 11. Alternative Concert Venues

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It became important to create an atmosphere that was conducive to listening to music over a long period of time. So in 1962, -3 and -4, when we started presenting all this music there weren't really proper venues. I mean, the whole thing of alternative spaces hadn't really come into being although La Monte had presented the first series in an alternative space at Yoko Ono's loft in 1960-61.

LA MONTE YOUNG: If you'll remind me, I want to talk about the importance of the Yoko Ono concert series.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: So he had done that and we had that idea, but, actually in 1962, Angus MacLise knew somebody who had a gallery on 4th Avenue and they loaned it to us on Sundays. In fact, at first it was two days a week; we did concerts on Thursdays and Sundays. But in any case, we did have a chance to perform in a gallery and that was very good because we could sit on the floor and the audience could sit on the floor and it was a much freer space and we could really see that concert halls were just not right at all for this kind of music. The chairs were very rigid and you couldn't do much with the lighting in a concert hall. And so on and on as the years went on, it developed that—well, I guess in 1964 we had another opportunity at the Pocket Theater, which was a proscenium theater and had seats. It was a place that was on the Bowery.

LA MONTE YOUNG: The first gallery was the 10-4 Gallery, right?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Right. The 10-4 Gallery, that was in 1962. But in 1963, a friend of John Cage's got together with Arthur Conescu. He may have been connected with the Cunningham dance group in some way. I don't know exactly how they knew him. And they rented this old vaudeville theater on the Bowery. I think it's now a movie house, but he called it the Pocket Theater and they produced some concerts there in the early fall of '63 and actually that was when John Cage presented *Vexations*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Satie's *Vexations*. And you know, it was 24 hours and he got a lot of different pianists to come and they took turns performing on a schedule of twenty or thirty minutes at a time. And we actually attended the whole thing...well, that was an obvious role for us.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, they even invited me to play, but I didn't.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah, La Monte considered it but he decided not to play. When we did have a chance to—in '64—to have a whole evening of our own work (the first performances of *Pre-Tortoise Dream Music* and *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys*) at this theater, basically by then I had designed a light box and we simply hung it over the performance area and we had very subdued lighting and that was really the only kind of lighting. So, we went from that idea and then we, soon after I guess, then we did perform in other proscenium theaters—the Wurlitzer Theater, which was in the old Wurlitzer building on 42nd Street which has since been torn down—was the place that Jonas Mekas organized an Anthology Festival of Expanded Cinema. We gave a performance there and that was the first time I used slide

projections on the group in winter, late December of '65. Following that we did performances of *The Tortoise* with The Theatre of Eternal Music at Larry Poons' loft. He invited us and Henry Geldzahler raised money for our group to do a series of performances there. Larry had a net lease on a loft building in the next block here on Church Street and he let us perform on the top floor. So that experience made it even more clear to us that we needed to perform in these alternative spaces and the lighting would be the vehicle to take it out of whatever ordinary condition the space was in and bring it into a space that was conducive for the music and enhance the music and that was how it developed. Another was the Hardware Poets' Theater, which was the creation of or project of Jerry Bloedow, whom you know...

LA MONTE YOUNG: One of the concerts that we performed there was on the eve of our wedding...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...Marriage....

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...of our marriage.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It wasn't much of a wedding!

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, we just got married at City Hall. We got married a year to the day we got together. On June 22, 1962 we got together and on June 22, 1963 we got married.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We almost didn't make it.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, because I had a concert the night before.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We had the concert the night before...

LA MONTE YOUNG: And I was so young that I didn't yet realize that that was an impossibility to have a concert and then recover and wake up and go down to City Hall and get married...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: The marriage was on a Saturday morning and you had to get there before noon. They closed on Saturday at noon.

LA MONTE YOUNG: One enormous thing that I learned from Pandit Pran Nath was how to really prepare for a concert. You know, performing is such a classic tradition in India, that by the time the student is ready to perform, he has learned everything about his teacher—what food he ate, what food he cooked before a concert. He was a master cook and he cooked dishes specifically for singers. He could cook a different recipe every day of the week...of the year! Everyday of the year and they felt that you had to prepare the food with your own hands, that the vibration of what went into the food was the vibration that went into you. Everything about preparing for a concert is completely worked out. And I was so young and foolish that I didn't realize that it is impossible to give a concert, recover...you know, you have to unwind. You probably don't walk home until dawn, after you go to a restaurant and eat something, so then you have to wake up at 9 AM to be down at the Court House at 11 or something. You know—come on! *[laughs]*

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It was touch and go. *[laughs]*

LA MONTE YOUNG: But what I really want to talk about is the importance of the alternative venue in this panorama of ideas that has to do with what I was able to achieve in my work. When I came to New York in 1960 I had already been presented in New York by John Cage and David Tudor and in Europe. But, somehow, I met Yoko and she invited me—she knew that I was collecting a lot of scores... I had always been collecting scores because I was presenting concerts at Berkeley; they let me do the Noon Concerts at Berkeley. In fact, the story goes that Terry Riley and I both won scholarships. And they gave him the residency grant to stay at Berkeley because he was so easy to get along with and then they gave me the traveling grant because they were afraid I was going to take over the music department. They wanted to get rid of me, so I came to New York, in any case, I wanted to get out of there because it was a very stifling situation. Berkeley is not a big artistic scene, whereas the music department was extremely good, and at the university it was extremely good—we were second in the nation, second to Harvard. The music scene in the Bay Area wasn't much. There was much more in L.A. and there wasn't much there. There were only the Monday Evening Concerts and nothing compared to what was possible in New York. So when I got to New York, I was extremely inspired about the possibilities and I was already collecting scores from having been director of some of the Noon Concerts at Berkeley. And when Yoko met me, she had a loft and she invited me to direct a series of concerts in her loft and it became an enormous discovery process because the only concerts being presented were uptown and you had to be a friend of Oliver Daniel's, the head of BMI, to get a concert. Not a concert, you couldn't get a concert, you'd get a slot on a concert. You could be a composer who had a 20-minute piece if you got a long time. So that was the only outlet for serious music. There was no other outlet, practically. So, when I had this possibility to present concerts in a loft, suddenly, you could have as many rehearsals as you want, you can give composers two or three nights of their own music. You know, 'til this day, if you give a concert in a union hall, they won't let you record it unless you bribe them with a lot of money and you can't bring your own recording engineer unless you pay more money and you have to do a soundcheck and do a concert and go home, exactly between these times and to get another day in the hall, it's like just about impossible. So how can you create work on a high level under those conditions? And it was the opportunity to present concerts that Yoko gave me in her loft that made me immediately realize that this was the only way. If you were going to be creative, you had to have a space in which you could do things according to your own time and your own inspiration and this is I'm sure what inspired the concept of a Dream House. By the time Marian and I got together, we were beginning to talk about the idea of a Dream House—a place where a work could theoretically exist in time and go on with a life and tradition of its own. I even had the idea that the musicians would live in the building and that they would be playing continuously and that they would come in and take shifts and two or three would come in and two or three would go out and the music would go on and on. Then of course electronics were developed and that was a big help to making continuous music. Even to this day, O.K., right at this moment, I have a Dream House, but the cost—keeping musicians playing continuously—boy, talk about just getting them for one concert, they cost money. And the musicians, they must be paid. They deserve to earn money. They have worked their lives to do it. So you have to give them money. And the whole process of having a space, it's all about economics. But if one is able to solve that problem or work with that problem, then the possibility for true creativity opens up, because to have true creativity, you really must have a large degree of freedom. This situation in an uptown hall is impossible. You cannot do what I did at my concert the other night. The reason I could be so inspired is I had had weeks of rehearsals in this same space and everything was fine-tuned, every sound, the way we were going to record, it was pre-worked out. You cannot do that when you go into a regular concert space. It is just the antithesis of what we have here. So the concept of an

environment relates directly to this concept of the discipline of the body in order to achieve this high-spiritual state, because the various senses must be dealt with. If you give people a mandala to focus on while they're listening to the music, it's totally different than if they are focusing on somebody dancing around on stage. And to have Marian's lights as the environment takes care of the entire visual sensation... This puts you in a special state that allows you to have visual stimulus that is supportive of the music and the music can be supportive of the visual stimulus. And the entire environment is simply an extension of this same concept.

FRANK J. OTERI: But at the same time, wouldn't it be glorious in terms of the sound to have *The Well-Tuned Piano in The Magenta Lights* at Carnegie Hall?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, yes, that's a nice place! If they would give it to me for 3 months, I'll take it! *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: *[laughs]*

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, we did a performance at Merkin Concert Hall of *The Second Dream of The High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer* from *The Four Dreams of China*. We did light it; it just was kind of hard. We had about one rehearsal in the space. Everything was rushed. I did a light installation and it was, as I recall, a pretty nice realization for the space that it was. And I think Merkin Hall has never quite looked this good, but it's really difficult. We've had some beautiful installations in more traditional, church-like spaces and galleries in Europe and places where we have been given time in the space and a chance to make a site-specific installation and everything comes together. There has been an ongoing installation of *The Well-Tuned Piano in The Magenta Lights* at the Kunst im Regenbogenstadl in Polling, Bavaria. You can actually take a virtual walking tour through the installation that I designed for Jung Hee Choi's Web site.

FRANK J. OTERI: If I can jump in before you jump back in, what's so interesting about the way your music is experienced—and this goes back to *The Well-Tuned Piano* at 6 Harrison Street, the raga concert this weekend, and the memory I have of the concert at Dia...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: With the Big Band.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, The Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band. And all of those situations, I was sitting on the floor and it was only uncomfortable because it was so crowded, because there were so many people who wanted to be there. But the ability to do what you want with your body as it were...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah.

FJO:...as opposed to sitting in a seat looking this way and having your physicality completely imprisoned, is liberating as a listener.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yes, absolutely.

FRANK J. OTERI: And concert halls don't do that.



LA MONTE YOUNG: There's something very profound about the fact that for meditation we learn to sit on the ground. And it is a grounding process. It brings us in contact with the earth...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...On the third floor!

LA MONTE YOUNG: And I have a saying: "In order to live in the clouds, you have to first have your feet on the ground." And if you, once you ground yourself, then you can leave the body and go out, and leave the body sitting here and really go out of the body. And for some reason the chairs are not as conducive to this process, but traditionally from the beginnings of time, meditation has taken place sitting on the ground. And I similarly think that people should have the option to lie down if they want to. I mean, some of these works that I do now are very long and some people cannot sit on the ground to begin with, so we offer them chairs sometimes, but it's not the idea to make the audience uncomfortable, the idea is to make them comfortable and give them the possibility to really go deep into the artistic, spiritual experience.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, as glorious as *The Well-Tuned Piano* would be at Carnegie Hall, I couldn't imagine sitting in one of those chairs for six hours.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, I have to say, I would love to be able to have Carnegie Hall for a long enough period of time to be able to transform it into one of Marian's light environments. It's a great space.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, that reminds me, when we were in Holland in 1977 and Terry and Pandit Pran Nath and we were on tour, and Pandit Pran Nath gave a concert in the Concertgebouw and they scheduled it...it seems that annually they have a tradition in Europe where they do a lot of things for disabled people, you know, they had so many people who were injured during the war, so they actually removed all of the seats for a classical concert, they invited many amputees and people in wheelchairs and they removed the seats and we had a chance to perform before they put them back.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow!

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And it was really beautiful, and acoustically...

FRANK J. OTERI: You had those acoustics, but you didn't have the discomfort.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Acoustically it was a perfect thing.

## 12. The Experience of the Audience

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it raises a question: Can you have this spiritual, transcendent experience—there are so many pieces of the Western Classical canon, you think of the Mahler symphonies or the Bruckner symphonies, that are these vast spiritual journeys and, you know, I as a listener get more from them sitting on my floor at home listening to a recording than I ever have had in concert hall because of that constriction.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's the fact that the chairs are fixed... It's like being on an airplane. You know, you can't move, you start getting claustrophobic, you're afraid you're going to disturb your neighbor—it's a very restrictive situation. It's not that a chair is bad, I mean, a chair is O.K. It's the idea of being so crowded and together and not having enough freedom. That's why a large Dream House is better than a small Dream House. You have more room for people to have their own space.

FRANK J. OTERI: Except that Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band concert that I remember as being one of the most wonderful nights of my life started out being one of the most uncomfortable nights of my life.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Mmhmm.

FRANK J. OTERI: Because it was a very small space, but something happened in the listening experience.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It was a big space, but it was crowded.

FRANK J. OTERI: There were tons of people there.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah, we had a lot of people there.

FRANK J. OTERI: And for the first hour I was so uncomfortable, I couldn't get past it, but something happened with the music that took me somewhere else, which makes me think that it's possible, it's possible if a performance is that great and the music is that great, no matter how constricted you are, if there is a glorious performance, you can even get it on an airplane. (Well, the acoustics are terrible on an airplane, it's a bad metaphor, I really loved that metaphor, but...) So, that said, it could happen that you leave your body even if your body is completely trapped...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Those who want to make the effort, will make it. They will achieve it, but there is still something to be said about giving people the experience. But something I want to say is space—the question of space and time are still key factors. And all of this being said, you know, how does one get a space to work with and how does one get a larger space to work with? It's very difficult you know, when you go to a museum and say, I need your biggest gallery or I need a gallery for three months. You know, they're accustomed to giving it maybe for three weeks or a week and at a concert hall they're accustomed to giving it for one night with a sound check in the afternoon, so, space and time are enormously important commodities.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We had an installation at the Metropolitan Museum back in 1971 and they gave us space for about two and a half weeks. We presented a Dream House; it was in a wing that was scheduled to be renovated and transformed into something else, so there was an intervening period in which they were able to give it to us. So, you know, those are the kinds of things that come up in life. You just have to say, well you're grateful for that chance.

### 13. Funding Serious Art in Today's Climate

LA MONTE YOUNG: How many people who have the money have the spiritual interest? So what is interesting about...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...Heiner and Fariha Friedrich...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...is that they believed in our work ever since they discovered us and this is very unusual. They believed in it on some totally other level and so you know, most patrons, if they give you something, they want a lot in return. They want this or they want that. They want objects. They want this, they want sex...whatever they want. It doesn't matter what they want; they almost always want something. But they didn't want anything. All they ever wanted from us was for us to do our work. And Heiner would take such joy in coming to one of the installations that we were constructing and talking to us about it and participating in the creative process and seeing us do something that was completely creative away from the constraints of the marketplace. And, it was really a miracle that he discovered us and it is something that we have to be eternally thankful for because there is nobody like him. It's very rare that anybody comes along in life and gives a person that kind of support so they can do free, creative work.

FRANK J. OTERI: Which raises another entirely different area that I didn't even think of going into, but I think it is something we should talk about: the whole question of how serious art can exist in a society that's based entirely on profit motives.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yes, it's really difficult.

LA MONTE YOUNG: I mean, Kyle's essay was so great, you know the one I'm referring to, where he talks about...it's all about commodity.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It was on his website. It was a diatribe against the commercialism of music. It's still there, I think.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It basically says, you can't do the concert in this place because it's not going to make money. You can't make this recording because it's not going to make money. And everybody comes to you with the preconceived point that it must make money.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And, you know, even our beloved funding organizations such as they are, like New York State Council on the Arts, it's definitely under this thumb also and may, you know, we can think our days are numbered, I mean MELA Foundation gets a very small grant from NYSCA to carry on our work, but it could even be cut off soon because of various reasons. One is this space is not ADA compatible or up to that level. Of course it's an old building so maybe we can slip by for a few more years. But, other things like that and just because we have small audiences, I know that they look at how many people are there and I don't. I worry a lot about how the panels look at these reports that you send in and I guess that they do read them, amazingly.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, in the past there has been some tradition of those who are in power supporting the arts. For example, the Maharajas in India prided themselves in keeping the best musicians, the best poets, and actually studying music with them.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And calligraphy! These maharajas who did miniatures and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: And when Marian and I go to Europe, we're really treated like we're important and we earn money and people pay us and they think it's important that we're artists. In America, nobody wants to pay me. Nobody wants to pay me to do art and that's a sad situation, you know, that we live in such a materialistic society, that we have lost track of the importance of spiritual evolution. We can see the arts as part of the spiritual process and the powers that be could just as well support it, if they were interested in it, if they understood it.

## 14. The Record Business

FRANK J. OTERI: Which brings us to this whole notion that creative people sort of have to take it into their own hands in our society and do it themselves. And you know, 40 years ago that was harder to do than it is now—and that's not saying that it's easy to do now—but you've created your own space, you've started your own record label and that's something that I'd like to talk about a bit and what that means about taking this and...you know, the large corporations are not going to be able to make \$500,000 on it in a week—maybe they would over time if they gave the time to do it, but they're only interested in the fast buck, so it's not going to happen.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, we tried. Well, also we were lucky with Gramavision because Jonathan Rose had independent income, so he wasn't running the company to make his own fortune. I mean, he did intend it to make money, he didn't set it up to lose money, but he wasn't dependent on it. So he was very generous with giving us our own artistic freedom and supporting the projects, you know, like, I remember when we wanted to put a color photo in the centerfold of the Blues Band booklet and he said, "Oh well, let me make a call." And he called us back and said O.K. [*laughs*] But, you know, it really was dependent on the personal relationship because he loved the music and it meant a lot to him and he hated the music business and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: He said the reason he left the recording business was because he just couldn't do what he wanted to do.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And he was just crushed that he put out music that he loved and the music business just cut it off right at its feet, cut its legs out from under it and, you know, wouldn't distribute it.

LA MONTE YOUNG: What was that story about there were only 10 slots on the list?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Well, he told us that, I guess, he had something that he produced that was a little bit more popular and was really getting a lot of radio play, but when the royalty statements came in, nothing was showing up on them. So they called the radio stations and said, well, you know, you played this a lot, how come it's not coming up on your playlists?

LA MONTE YOUNG: How come you're not writing it down on the playlists?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And they said, well, there are only 10 slots and this is the 11th or something like that, but actually what he found out was that the other 10, the people who were going into the 10 slots...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...The people who were going in the 10 slots, were buying in...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...were buying the radio station personnel tickets to Japan and so on. And although there was Payola, there was a big scandal and then it was kind of put out, but it's still there.

FRANK J. OTERI: Of course. And those were all major labels as opposed to independent labels.



MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah. And Gramavision, always had problems with the distribution thing and that totally discouraged him.

LA MONTE YOUNG: So for many years, I lived a dream that because I thought my music was important and there was some substantial proof of it, some record company would buy me up and give me enough money so that I could really do things and they would put out my music. But aside from Gramavision, it never happened and so then I realized that the technology had provided...even my students were making their own CDs, so I thought, what's wrong with me? I better learn fast. And I decided that I would just put them out one at a time and I would be happy to sell what I could, so that's how I created Just Dreams. I'm so happy now that I have my own recording company because I don't have to have any arguments with people about what I'm going to release next. I make all of my own deadlines. *[laughs]* I can carry it to the printer myself if I want.

FRANK J. OTERI: You can print it yourself!

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah, I can print it myself. You know, it's really satisfying and I feel that it will be the first time that I've ever really done something that is both business-like and helpful to my creative process. Because, as you may know, I've decided to stop touring. You know, I've been on stage since I was 5 years old and I did many, many European tours and I love to perform and I love to go to special cities like Rome and Milan and eat the food and drink the wine, but I began to realize that I was living for the recordings I was making of these concerts and at that point, that was the main thing, and that even though I was getting paid more for touring than for anything else, that the cost on my body was enormous and it was extremely labor intensive, so a few years ago I decided that I would not tour anymore and that I would create my own recording company and that I would perform in the Dream House and I would perform locally and I would try to really create my last works in peace and quiet and record them and video them and hopefully release them with my own company. And I found that it is so much more satisfying to work in this simple, mom-and-pop kind of way, where we can watch over everything. And O.K., maybe I don't produce thousands of copies. Maybe I only print a thousand at a time or two thousand. It's O.K. It's a gradual, continual process and until I get more funding that's the way it's going to have to be.

FRANK J. OTERI: I wonder though, one thing that strikes me as so interesting about the transition of going to recordings and giving up concerts, because so much of your work together is about this creating of environment in which to suspend time. To experience sound and light, visual imagery and auditory imagery, and be transported into this sacred space and can that sacred space exist in somebody's Walkman? Or in somebody's living room?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Absolutely. It definitely can and it should be able to...

## 15. DVD

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Now we have the possibility with DVD, people can you know, have it in their own home system and they can see—although it's a small screen, I guess, relatively small unless they have a really big screen. At least they can see the visual element of how it did exist in this particular performance. We also have had some success with presenting installations of the DVD in a light environment or at least in a light setting that I design like the one currently at the Regenbogenstadl in Bavaria. The DVD came into being just for such a project—the celebration of the year 2000. The French government organized a very large, major art exhibition to take place in Avignon and Daniel Caux was invited to be the music curator. Do you know who he is? He's really the best music critic in France. He's incredibly knowledgeable and a very, very brilliant writer and a wonderful person. We've known him since 1970 when he was the actual, let's say, curator or influence behind Shandar. And Daniel and his wife Jacqueline were involved at that point...

LA MONTE YOUNG: They were the main musical advisors.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And you know, they encouraged her when she had the opportunity to bring us to the Maeght Foundation. Chantal Darcy, that is, they, you know, suggested really who they should bring and then who she should record on the Shandar record label that she started after those performances in 1970. So Daniel had been a friend and supporter for many years and he was the music curator for this big international art exhibition and the director of the exhibition, Jean DeLoisy had already worked with us at Hors-Limites, an exhibition that was at the Pompidou Center in 1994-95, so he knew us. Anyway, the French government devoted a lot of money to this exhibition because, you know, everybody thought that 2000, I don't know, the millennium...*[laughs]*

LA MONTE YOUNG: Some people thought the world was going to end. *[laughs]*

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And so, fortunately, it was in their budget to do this and however, there wasn't enough money, they wanted to do *The Well-Tuned Piano* live, but there wasn't enough money in their budget for that.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah. Well, it's a very big project to do it live.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: So they came up with some amount of money and Daniel knew that we had this footage from *The Well-Tuned Piano* recordings, and he had looked into with us trying to get it realized as a single film.

LA MONTE YOUNG: This is the footage that we discussed earlier that was like 22 reels of Betacam per camera.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It seemed impossible in earlier years, but by 1999 and then actually 2000 the technology came around to where it was possible and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, it had been in the cases for so long that I never thought that it was going to happen. So it was a big thing in my life that I was able to put out this DVD of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, because—

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We had a lot of good fortune because we met a young man, Chris Harvey, who had just started being on unemployment and he had the technical ability...

LA MONTE YOUNG: He had a huge interest in our work and he donated his time to do the online editing and he really introduced us to that part of the video world and commercial studios and that sort of thing.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: And he helped us find where we could edit it and realize it. Then it was between producing it on a hard drive, but that would have been more complicated for projecting it in the exhibition, or doing it on DVD.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, I wanted to do it on DVD because I also wanted to release it.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: But then this company that Chris had contacted, Zuma Digital— this guy was very farsighted—and he said, well, I can get it on one disc.

LA MONTE YOUNG: He had just bought some totally new piece of equipment that had just come out—

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah, this was right at the end of '99.

LA MONTE YOUNG: —that would allow them to put the whole thing on one DVD, on two layers and up until that moment in time, it would not have been possible.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Up until that moment, until this guy came forward and said "I can do it," we thought, either this is going to be on two DVDs or it's going to be on hard drives and we'd have to have some computer program that went from one to the other.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Although the hard drive realization was elegant, I wouldn't be able to reproduce it and sell it. So I opted for the DVD version because I could both do the video installation and have a product that I could put out there for people to take into their own homes. And I do believe that it is possible to get into that very same high state with your headphones, looking at your video screen. It's not the same as the Dream House. For example, certain environments that are created in this Dream House are unique to that space, they're site-specific and they can never be experienced in the same way. But at the same time, you can set up your headphones, you can set up your video screen, and you can make your world. And you can set it up so that it can be extremely conducive to the highest spiritual experience. And therefore, you achieve the same goals by making it available in some sort of documentary format for people to take into their own world. After all, some Yogis are sitting in a cave. Some Yogis sit in a tiny cave that's barely big enough for one man to sit inside of and they go in for long periods of time and shut off the world in that way. There are various techniques that have been practiced over time to achieve a high spiritual state, but the Dream House is one approach to this concept and it takes into consideration the various senses and tries to, through a vibrational process, take people up into this high spiritual state and allow them to have a very specific communion with God.

## 16. The Tamburas of Pandit Pran Nath

FRANK J. OTERI: So what are some of the other releases that are going to happen on the Just Dreams label? Are we going to finally be able to have a recording of the *Trio for Strings*?

LA MONTE YOUNG: [*laughs*] Yes.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: So far, we started with *The Tamburas of Pandit Pran Nath*, which was a recording we made actually in 1982, you know La Monte tuned—it's two tamburas that La Monte tuned for several hours to really achieve a perfect tuning and then we recorded, I guess the original recording is about an hour. And in transferring it on to CD, we—well two things happened. One is we wrote very extensive notes on the tambura, so the combination of the recording also brings people information about this great instrument, the tambura, which is coming down in history from India, it's just the most remarkable instrument; it's the only instrument that's designed to play harmonics continuously.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's designed to feature the harmonics. It's a drone instrument and it's designed in such a way that a thread is placed beneath the string, between the string and the bridge, and this thread sets the string into a special mode of vibration that amplifies the harmonics. So, unlike any other instrument, it is designed to truly present an array of the harmonic series. And it is said that the tambura was created by Tumburu. Tumburu was one of the four original gandharvas. Gandharvas are celestial musicians. He was a great grandson of Brahma, and whereas you cannot go back and say for sure that he really invented the tambura, the stories are that he invented it and in the booklet that goes with the CD *The Tamburas of Pandit Pran Nath* we show a sculptural tableau that is across the river from Rishikesh that shows Tumburu in the court of Vishnu. Tumburu was the court musician of Vishnu and he was a great musician and in this tableau it shows Vishnu and Lakshmi, his consort, and Narada, the renowned celestial musician, Narada, who played the ektar, an instrument with one string, and Tumburu. And Vishnu is reclining on his pet snake. The snake's name is...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Shesha, right?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: We did a lot of research and wrote this treatise basically on the tambura and offer the whole release as an homage to Pandit Pran Nath. He taught us to play tamburas and he spent a lot of time teaching us and refining our technique. You know, the tambura looks easy to play and it is easy to play superficially, but to play it well, so that it just really is a continuously droning sound, you don't hear any of the clunk that you could hear of the strings, because they're not plucked, they're stroked.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, it's played in such a way that you let your fingers just pass by the string and they barely touch the strings and it's like a breeze blowing the strings and they come into a state of vibration without an attack.

FRANK J. OTERI: And ideally it should be a long, sustained tone.

LA MONTE YOUNG: That's right. And so it takes us back to my hearing the tambura on that original Ali Akbar Khan release on Angel Recordings in the '50s.

## 17. Working with Musicians and Orchestras

LA MONTE YOUNG: But the *Trio for Strings*, little did I realize when I wrote it that it was so hard to play. You see, at the time I wrote it, the head of the ethnomusicology department at UCLA was also the university organist and he let me write the piece on the organ in Royce Hall. So I had this enormous pipe organ at my fingertips and one of the things that had been a factor in the music that I had written before, such as *for Brass*, was that I had written them at the piano. And so the durations were in my mind but I was never able to really hear them sustained and when I wrote *for Guitar*, the piece that was in between *for Brass* and the *Trio for Strings*, I actually wrote it on my Aunt Norma's guitar. Remember, she had taught me cowboy songs and guitar accompaniment and she was living in my grandmother's house at that time too, and she let me write the piece on her guitar so I actually could hear the sounds of it. Because one of my composition teachers said to me that it's very important to write the piece specifically for and ideally on the instrument. And I began to learn that this is a very important part of musical composition, that you really should write for the instruments. That's why it was important for me to work directly with the Kronos Quartet. And from that point on I began to write by working with musicians and in fact I took it so seriously I began to organize my own groups and from that time on all of my musical process was real music making as opposed to armchair composing. I almost completely got away from the idea of writing. Even though I have the kind of mind that thinks abstractly and is able to create abstractly, I found that through the process of working on real music directly with musicians and hearing it as you create it, I took that concept to the extreme and I found that it gave back much more than I was getting through the process of notation. Therefore notation became an adjunct to music making, whereas the recording allowed me to be completely free and I could improvise and create on the spot. You see, my creative process is such that, because I learned how to improvise when I was young, when I was in high school, the ideas just flow through me. If I stop to write it down, it's very, very different what I do, because you can't keep the flow going. It takes so long to write, whereas if you record it while you're playing it or—like the way my raga ensemble performed with me—we've worked together over such a long period, singing together, exchanging phrases, I teach them all of these phrases and Marian and I had lessons together with Pandit Pran Nath, then I teach Jung Hee Choi and Charles Curtis and our disciple Rose Okada who plays sarangi. We teach them various patterns and ragas and how it goes. And of course, no performance is ever exactly the same. I mean, with the notational process we can make everything exactly the same and there is something to that. It's important. On the other hand, it's been my experience that process of live improvisation with a group that has been instructed over many, many years can produce something that is on a much more profound level.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, has there ever been a desire for you to write for, say, symphony orchestra?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, you know, I used to talk to Charles Curtis about this. You know Charles was first solo cellist of the Hamburg Radio Orchestra, for years. And I used to talk about, you know one time the Brooklyn Phil was asking me to do something and I said, O.K., let's do the *Orchestral Dreams*. And in the *Orchestral Dreams* I said, I want 8 French horns, 8 trumpets with Harmon mutes, 8 trombones and 8 tubas. At first they were saying, O.K., O.K. And then they started to get serious and they said, well, you know we've only got 3 tuba players on salary and we've only got 5 horns on salary and we've only got 3 trumpets on salary, and I have to bring in all these extra musicians? So I was saying, O.K., I'll bring in these



other musicians, you pay them. But it could never come about, plus I said I wanted many rehearsals...And I decided that working with my own group was better. The Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band, that's my symphony orchestra. 23 pieces. O.K., if I could get a bigger group, but you have no idea how devoted those musicians were! They were the best freelance musicians in New York City. I mean, the lead tuba player...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...Steve Johns...

LA MONTE YOUNG: He plays first tuba with the Metropolitan Opera and the Symphony and he's just a great tuba player. All the musicians in the group were on that level. The trumpet players, some of the best jazz players in town and each group of musicians—and Jon Catler on guitar, you know, just intonation specialist, Brad Catler, on bass and...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Actually that is one of our very next releases because we did receive a grant from the Mary Flagler Cary Trust a few years ago to put out the Big Band and that was going to be our next release on Gramavision but then Gramavision folded and so we looked around for several years for another record company, but we couldn't get it out. But eventually, we will definitely put it out on Just Dreams and it should come out maybe in this year.

FRANK J. OTERI: I can't wait. Is that the concert I heard at Dia?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It's going to be the last one of the series. I don't know which one you came to.

LA MONTE YOUNG: The last one was the best.

FRANK J. OTERI: I think that's the one I was at.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Oh.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Because we did four live concerts in the series.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Monday night was Big Band night so we would rehearse this group on Monday nights, because it's their off night from the Metropolitan Opera and so forth. And these musicians donated their time; we had 23 rehearsals before the first concert. I paid them well for the concert, but it was based on how much attendance they had had at the rehearsals. If people didn't show up as much, I didn't pay them as much for the concert. But the thing was, their attitudes were so fantastic. Steve Johns would leave a rehearsal saying, oh boy, I need a tape to take home so I can practice my drone. He was playing one tone! Or two tones all night long and he wanted to practice his tone. You know, what an attitude!

FRANK J. OTERI: That's great.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It was so rewarding to find musicians that took such a serious approach to music and cared so much about what they were doing.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, there is one thing about this. It has to be 2 CDs. It actually just fits in 2 CDs, it could be a little over, but it might be nice to release it as an audio DVD.

LA MONTE YOUNG: We might release it as a DVD, as a music DVD.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: In fact, you know something about that, right?

FRANK J. OTERI: Audio DVDs. Yeah, I know that Mode Records did this audio DVD of the Morton Feldman 2nd String Quartet, which is a 6-hour piece.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Right. And they released it as several CDs.

FRANK J. OTERI: They released it as 5 CDs and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: I wanted to address your question of the symphony orchestra, whether I would ever write a piece for them. I used to discuss this idea with Charles Curtis because he's had so much experience playing in orchestras. He said, "You know, it's an institution. Why do you want to even try to deal with them?" They don't give you any of the conditions that you want. Terry Riley was invited to write a piece for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. The conductor was very interested in Terry's music and he commissioned the piece...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Wasn't it Leonard Slatkin?

LA MONTE YOUNG: After the first rehearsal the orchestra stood up and booed the piece. I mean, why do you have to put up with this kind of indignity? It's unnecessary and just because the symphony orchestra is a machine supported by the establishment—that's the reason. That's the only reason. And it's no reason for me to want to do a symphony. I get so much satisfaction out of working with musicians like in the Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band. Would I want to work with a large group? Absolutely. Would I like to have eight French horns, eight tubas, eight trumpets in Harmon mutes...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know from the very beginning he conceived of the *Trio for Strings* as a string orchestra piece, also. But we've never had the opportunity to have that realized...

LA MONTE YOUNG: The finances, of course, are a factor. But I have found that you can get more love out of a group of musicians that you gather yourself, tell them what the conditions are and that this is how it's going to be and we want to do this together, if we want to do it together. They decide if they want to do it. If they want to do it, we do it. As opposed to dealing with this—you know when you go to Europe there are masters of red tape, like in France or Italy if you want to get something done it's impossible because there are so many more signatures that you need. Then you got to go here and get another signature, then go there for another, and eventually you can't do it. It's impossible. That's what happens when you get hooked up with a symphony orchestra. It's made for this kind of music that can be played by a machine. I used to say that I want five rehearsals. They would laugh at me! No way! They we're going to give me one rehearsal and play it. I don't want that. The one thing that I'm known for is quality. I got it by hard work, by dedication, and, quite frankly, by establishing alternative spaces where I could invite musicians to do something that took a lot of time. Imagine when you go into a union hall... You can't do this. You can't do that. You can't do

anything. O.K., that had its place in time. There were two lines. There was a line of music coming out of the churches and the cathedrals, out of religious experience, and out of ritual. Then there was another line of theater and so forth that came out of entertainment, dances and various kinds of entertainment. To some degree the symphony orchestra, with all its pretensions of being high art, is really tied in to this entertainment factor. Where does it pay? Can we do this piece? I've heard so many stories of Webern and Schoenberg not being allowed the number of rehearsals they wanted and they had to just go right in, put it on the stands, and play it. It requires people who have a concept—the way Heiner Friedrich had a concept—that there was something more important in life, that it should be funded and should be made possible. Very few beings that have money have this sense, or sensitivity, because it's rare that you both have the money and the concept at the same time. The mentality that goes after earning the money isn't often the mentality that is able to produce the high artistic-spiritual experience. On the other hand, if the money is sometimes handed to you and you have that mentality anyhow, if you happen to have it anyway, then occasionally a person comes along who is willing to spend their money in such a way that it can do some of these things that establishments usually don't want to do.

## 18. The Sacred and the Profane

FRANK J. OTERI: So then the question you raise by these two separate streams in Western music: music coming out of the church and music for entertainment...

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's the sacred and the profane, that same old concept.

FRANK J. OTERI: Would you consider your music and the work that you do to be part of Western classical music?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yes. Yes, but it's much more inclusive. I was very fortunate. I was an ethnomusicology major at UCLA, as well as composition because they didn't have a composition department, really. They had a composition department, but you couldn't be a composition major. But I was a composition major even though they didn't have it. I was an ethnomusicology major and I was an English minor, or something like that. Finally, I got to Berkeley and there was pure composition as a graduate student. Because I was in ethnomusicology, I was able to listen to recordings from all over the world. UCLA had a big library. I could hear Korean music and the music of the drunken fishermen, a very famous piece. I could hear Eskimos sing into each other's mouths. I could hear American Indian music. I could hear African music. I heard all kinds of music. So did a lot of other people, but to me it really meant something and I absorbed it. It became a part of me so that when I wrote, when I created, when I improvised I took into consideration the entire world of music in such a way that would not have been possible before my time because the recording did not exist. Imagine what it meant to Debussy to hear the gamelan orchestra that came to Paris. One instant in time and it had such a big influence on him. He was so carried away. I was able to play recordings of gamelan orchestra after gamelan orchestra. I really just soaked it up. When I began to write I took everything into consideration: Western classical music, Indian classical music, Gagaku, Chinese opera, African music. So I was in a different position. We find that a number of composers in our time have taken advantage of that new informational situation. Communication now takes seconds with email. We used to have to write a letter and wait a month to get the reply. Now we're anxious if we don't have the reply in five minutes. This access of information has changed everything. I really feel my music includes all of these subsets, so I'm really writing music on a cosmic level.

FRANK J. OTERI: Other forms of music making in the West and America today: jazz, rock. These are musics that you've had tremendous influence over and, in the case of jazz, have been influenced by. I can't say that you were influenced by rock because you started composing before rock really happened and your evolution is almost simultaneous to the evolution of rock music. Where do you see those things fitting in as part of Western music?

LA MONTE YOUNG: We have to also take into consideration blues.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes.

LA MONTE YOUNG: When I played jazz I especially liked to play blues. Blues has a very strong static element. In early blues sometimes it was going along on one chord. You can still find examples of that kind of blues. In my blues piano playing—as with the Forever Bad Blues Band and the way I played behind Terry Jennings on something I haven't released yet—I would stay on one chord for a long time before I would then move to another chord. It's a

precursor of what I did in *The Well-Tuned Piano*. Blues was a spiritual music, and it was involved with alcohol, too. Most of the blues musicians drank. Coming out of the conditions that black people were subjected to, blues was a cry of the soul and a reaching out to God for help. Under those circumstances the alcohol was a help. I think the two are really tied into each other. But somehow stasis was a very important concept in blues. It wasn't until later when they tried to write it down that it became 12-bar blues. Originally nobody knew how many bars it was going to be. Even now you listen to some of the recordings of early blues players and you get these 13 1/2-bar rounds and 11 1/2-bar rounds, sometimes even in the same piece. You get different numbers of bars in the rounds because it wasn't so fixed. But when they wanted a bunch of people to play together, then the question came to be how many bars are there going to be in a round and how many rounds is it going to be? Twelve is a very profound number. In Indian classical music the first tala is called ektaal. Ek means one, the first tala. Twelve bars and/or 12 beats, if you want to call them beats.

FRANK J. OTERI: So blues evolved and began morphing into rock and roll, which was simultaneous to your coming of age as a composer. A lot of the people who played with you early on went on to be leaders in rock music. In a sense, just as you're the father of minimalism, in some ways you're the father of various schools of rock music that happened. You're almost the father of punk rock in some ways.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's been said that I'm the father of punk rock because I influenced...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...Robert Palmer has written about your influence...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...and my influence on the Velvet Underground through John Cale. Of course Tony Conrad was in the original group that came before the Velvet Underground. Weren't they called the Ostriches?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: The Primitives?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah, the Primitives. They did a piece called "The Ostrich" or something?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Right.

LA MONTE YOUNG: [laughs] "Doin' the Ostrich." I have to take whatever I did as some kind of blessing that came to me. I applied myself to devotion to my muse. Whatever it was that was inspiring me, I followed that throughout life. The influences I had happened without my trying. It just came out that way. These things happened. I have tried to remain devoted to this higher sense of inspiration because I've found that if I follow that it's much greater than anything I can do personally. It's like I said earlier in the discussion: the reason that what I've done has been so influential is not because I did it, it's because I open myself up to this higher flow of information. That information is the truth. Therefore when people hear the truth, they recognize it, and they want to be a part of it.

## 19. Fluxus

FRANK J. OTERI: Then to the question of conceptual art. That was another thing that was happening, the whole Fluxus movement was something that you were a central part of as it was happening in time. You mentioned Yoko Ono's loft concerts before and we've barely touched on the *Compositions 1960*, *Arabic numeral (X for Henry Flynt)*, and these pre-*Well-Tuned Piano* piano pieces, but they were very much a part of what was going on in Fluxus. The whole ideas of George Maciunas and works that were not just music, but that were somehow beyond music or beyond art that were the origins of performance art, really breaking down genres between genres of art.

LA MONTE YOUNG: The *Compositions 1960* were a result of two things especially. One is my visit to Darmstadt in the summer of 1959 where I met David Tudor and heard him play live, heard him talk about John Cage, and just saw what a wonderful performer he was. He was one of my heroes. He was one of my greatest heroes. He was the greatest performer of new music that ever lived. I admired him very much. I met him that summer at Darmstadt when I was in Stockhausen's class. His ideas and John Cage's ideas had a big influence on me. But at the same time, being at Berkeley in this very stifling academic situation also had an influence on me. The *Compositions 1960* were a reaction to being at Berkeley. They were a sociological reaction. To some degree, they are a social statement. The music department allowed me to direct some of the noon concerts. I presented a few concerts in which we performed John Cage, Dennis Johnson, Richard Maxfield, and my own music. Of course the student body was not prepared at all for this level and they made various reactions. It was at that point, in 1959-60 that I began to realize how easy it is to manipulate an audience. It was later, when I began to have my group Theatre of Eternal Music and when I began to write and play *The Well-Tuned Piano*, that I strove to create pieces that were on a much higher level and which offered the audience a key to unlock a door which would then lead them to another level, which would unlock another door and take them up to another level which they could never have reached had I started out with this level were you get them all riled up, shouting at you, and tearing up their programs saying, "burn the composer" and this sort of thing, which I quickly, although inadvertently, learned how to do. I did a concert where Terry Riley and I accompanied Ann Halprin's company at UCLA after I had been at Berkeley for about a year. It must have been around 1960 that we came down to UCLA and did a concert.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: I think it was in April 1960.

LA MONTE YOUNG: I presented some of my sustained friction sounds where you would drag a gong on cement. Terry and I would do cans on windows or a wastebasket on a wall. The whole place would really rumble and shake.

FRANK J. OTERI: Pulling chairs and...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah, those kinds of sounds.

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...benches and so forth, that kind of sound. At this concert, my parents came and they left crying. They were in tears and just heartbroken to see what their son was doing. Of course I didn't expect them to understand, but when you're young you're very



idealistic. I was it at an age that I was hoping my parents would understand. Eventually it became clear to me that I had to do what I was going to do. I had to go out into the world totally alone and by myself. There was no way to know who would understand, or whether or not anybody would ever understand what I would do. When I wrote *for Guitar* in 1958, I played with this great young jazz guitar player Dennis Budimir. He later made a recording with Ravi Shankar. He was my guitar player. Tiger Echols, another young guitar player I played with, he disappeared, I lost track of him. These guys were really good. I'd show them the score of *for Guitar*, they would look at it, and then they would hand it back to me and say 'far out man.' Nobody ever tried to play it. It wasn't until 21 years or so later that Ned Sublette said, I heard you have a piece called *for Guitar*. He took the piece and worked on it for months and months. Then he did the world premiere...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...at The Kitchen. The old Kitchen on Broome Street, I think it was in '79.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah, '79.

LA MONTE YOUNG and MARIAN ZAZEELA [in unison]: Twenty-one years after it was written.

LA MONTE YOUNG: John Cage was there, and Merce Cunningham...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yes, because Ned also played a piece of John's...

LA MONTE YOUNG and MARIAN ZAZEELA [in unison]: He did the Satie piece...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...what's it called? *Cheap Imitation*.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah, *Cheap Imitation*.

LA MONTE YOUNG: He did *Cheap Imitation*, so John and Merce were there. So it was a really elite, hardcore audience. You know, really avant-garde. Jackson MacLow was there. They all considered it really beautiful, but look how long it took for this piece to get a performance. I was surprised when in the last 10 to 20 years I actually developed a following of people who could understand my music. I was so accustomed to not being understood that I had given it up.

FRANK J. OTERI: Getting back those early conceptual pieces, how did you first come in contact with the Fluxus movement in New York?

LA MONTE YOUNG: No, no! I influenced the whole Fluxus movement. There was no Fluxus movement before me.

FRANK J. OTERI: But how did these people come together?

LA MONTE YOUNG: George Maciunas was in the class that Richard Maxfield gave at the New School. I was Richard Maxfield's teaching assistant. George met me. He came and heard me at Yoko Ono's loft.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, Kyle Gann, as good a scholar he is, he has it wrong in his essay. First of all he says that La Monte and Richard co-curated the series at Yoko Ono's loft. That is wrong. La Monte curated it on his own.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Richard didn't even know Terry Jennings and Terry Riley, except through me.

[speaking at the same time]

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It's kind of a question of semantics. If you want to talk about Fluxus, you really shouldn't refer to Fluxus until the word Fluxus came into being. It wasn't until late '61.

LA MONTE YOUNG: There was no word Fluxus when I did those Yoko Ono loft concerts. George came and heard my 1961 compositions that I premiered there.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: [speaking alone] The first Fluxus events were in June '62 in Wuppertal. This is documented in Jon Hendricks's *Fluxus Codex*.

LA MONTE YOUNG: As Gil Silverman said, George always said that La Monte was número uno.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah.

LA MONTE YOUNG: I was the main influence on George Maciunas. Henry Flynt describes it in an essay...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Well, it leads up to Flynt's essay in our book *Sound and Light*. He wrote an essay for the *Ubi Fluxus ibi motus* exhibition at the 1990 Venice Biennale that had a Fluxus pavilion that we were all part of. He wrote a very scathing essay about Fluxus that's published in that book.

LA MONTE YOUNG: As Henry says, at the time he met us, George was still showing social realism in his gallery. He was saying, "why can't I express myself?" We were trying to tell him that he should be presenting this stuff that I was presenting at Yoko's loft.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah. Henry said they had to drag George kicking and screaming into the 20th century. You know, let him know what he really should be showing. Then he went along.

LA MONTE YOUNG: He not only went along, but eventually he caught on...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He gave it his own spin, which was not really this direction that La Monte...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, I like to think of George as one of the Marx Brothers. He was so good at this kind of slapstick vaudeville. I mean he was funny, very humorous. He didn't completely, at all, understand the depth of my work. But he understood the humorous side, like the *Compositions for David Tudor*. In *No. 1* you bring a bail of hay and a bucket of water on stage for the piano to eat or drink. The piece is over after the piano eats or decides not to. To me the concept was extremely important. The humor is there. Nobody laughs harder than me

when I see that piece performed. Some people have done hilarious realizations of it. It's very funny. George got that, but he didn't so much get the deeper side of it. Then you have these second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-generation Fluxus artists doing warmed over versions of my *1960 Compositions*. The thing is, my compositions came from somebody who had done music his whole life, from somebody who had a rigorous training in music, who had won scholarships in music, and a lot of these guys were just tenth-rate artists. They were like that guy that you meet in the music department at school who could do one very creative piece and bang away on the piano. It really sounds like something, but he doesn't know any music history, he has no technique, he has no understanding why he's doing it or what his own personal revolt is about, and as a result he's unable to bring it up to a higher level where it really can do something in relation to the entire history of music and mankind.

## 20. Piano Technique

FRANK J. OTERI: The question of technique takes us into one of the other areas I wanted to go into prefacing *The Well-Tuned Piano*. The very early piano pieces, the pieces of 1960, some of them are, from a pianistic standpoint...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Which ones?

FRANK J. OTERI: Two notes held for a long time, for example. They don't require traditional pianistic virtuosity.

LA MONTE YOUNG: *Composition 1960 # 7*. That's not particularly a piano piece, by the way.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It has been realized as a piano piece.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's just a piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it can be realized on any instrument.

LA MONTE YOUNG and MARIAN ZAZEELA [in unison]: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Or *Any Integer (Arabic numeral)*.

LA MONTE YOUNG: That's the repeated forearm cluster. That's definitely a piano piece, or a gong piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's extraordinarily difficult to do, but not in a conventional pianistic way.

LA MONTE YOUNG: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: But once you get into area of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, you're entering the area of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. You're entering an area that you really need to be a Horowitz to do this. It almost has a conventional 19th century Romantic sense of virtuosity.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It absolutely does.

FRANK J. OTERI: How did that become part of the language? I know from the saxophone playing you said that it was translating over, but all of the sudden there becomes this piece that is very much about technique in a really conventional pianistic way.

LA MONTE YOUNG: When you study the harmonies in *The Well-Tuned Piano*, especially in the transition to the "Romantic Chord" from the area of the "Magic Opening Chord," the harmonies I present in that area show a remarkable knowledge of traditional harmony and how it can be applied to modern harmony, and then I do it in extremely complex tuning ratios of just intonation. The thing is that I've done music my whole life. All of this stuff is a part of me. I've played in orchestras. I did all of these things. What has been the oversight is that, necessarily, the way that work appears, piece by piece, little by little, people at first—critics, for example, or other composers—can only have one example at a time. People tend to pigeonhole you right away. *Newsweek* headlined an article, "Johnny One-note"; "He only wrote one note," some

people said. Well, you know, turns out I didn't just write one note. Turns out I did a lot of things. Somebody has to take the trouble, or somehow be fortunate enough to be exposed to the whole big picture in order to realize how much I have been involved in music, how much music is a part of me, and how other musics are a subset of my being that then become expressed. *The Well-Tuned Piano* sums up a very, very large area of musical knowledge.

## 21. Singing Raga

LA MONTE YOUNG: Until this most recent raga singing that I have been doing, I would say that *The Well-Tuned Piano* is my most evolved work. The Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band has the same potential, but I need the chance to work with it over time to make it grow into that kind of experience. The way I work is that I'm constantly building the piece, changing it and developing it. We've sung this raga in public before, and we've been working on it for years. It's the raga that I wrote about in the notes that Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan had Pandit Pran Nath practice as his only raga for eight years. Any one raga, especially the deep ones, have enough material for it to take a lifetime to really do justice to them, to really bring out their inner meaning. *The Well-Tuned Piano* is a work that sums up a large area of my musical knowledge. Not everything.

FRANK J. OTERI: There were things that I was hearing in that raga the other night that I'd never heard in a raga performance before in my life. It was amazing. I told you about hearing those three-part harmonies and hearing chordal movement in this music that's never presented as harmonic music. There have been times where people have tried to do this, but it comes across as sounding like a crossover, not as part of the tradition. This sounded like it was coming straight from the tradition.

LA MONTE YOUNG: I consider this very traditional. You see, in raga you're first expected to master the tradition. Then, and only then, you're expected to contribute something. The form of raga that is being sung today by Indian musicians is called Khyal. Khyal means imagination. It was kind of a revolt against Dhrupad. Dhrupad means four parts. Dhrupad over time became very classicized. Great, of course, and full of feeling and everything, but it became very classicized. For some it became a little bit stuck. So Khyal developed, it was a very romantic movement. In Khyal, improvisation is everything. The form—what *is* the form, you know. There is definitely form there, but it's an alap, then a slow development, followed by a fast composition. Within that you improvise. You have you're talas. Beyond that, it's pure creativity. These three-part harmonies are growing out of traditional precedence. When we sang with Pandit Pran Nath he would sometime have us sing and sustain the tonic or the dominant, and rarely another note. From that I began to realize that if I did it with great consideration for the true nature of the raga, that it would be possible to have these harmonies. Indian classical music is probably the beginning of Western classical music. All of the ornaments of Western classical music are already found in Indian classical music. All of the modes of Western classical music are already found in Indian classical music. The form, A-B, and elements of the form are very similar to the simpler musical forms of Western classical music. Even the beginnings of harmony are in Indian classical music. What is a melody over a drone? It's two-part harmony. If you have a tonic and a dominant, the 5th, you have three-part harmony. O.K., the simplest kind, but nonetheless, it is harmony. In each raga, some tones are allowed to be sustained, and some are not. Some notes get special ornaments. A raga is more than just a mode for a scale. It is a mode, but within that mode there are specific melodic patterns, specific notes which are considered possible for a cadence or to begin a phrase. Two or three ragas may share the same modal scale, but they are completely different based on their melodic patterns, which notes are the predominant and which notes are the supporting notes, which ornaments are considered correct for that raga, and which microtonal srutis are appropriate for that particular raga. A raga is a set of musical information that is not only a modal scale, but also a number of other elements as well. In the Kirana style they especially prided themselves on the knowledge of raga and on feeling. They felt that feeling was the main

thing. This feeling came out of the proper attention to the pitches. In Indian classical music if you take all of the gharanas (those are families, or styles of music) and put them on a line with pitch at one end and rhythm at the other, the Kirana gharana would be at the extreme pitch end. Within the Kirana gharana, Pandit Pran Nath and his teacher Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan were at the extreme pitch end. So this end was very related to the directions of music that I had become interested in. It's really amazing how Pandit Pran Nath became my guru and we had this interrelationship that brought together these two worlds of East and West. These notes that are sustained are really correct notes in the raga that can be sustained. I brought my approach to long sustained tones and my understanding of composition to raga. I have tried to create something that I feel is true to the tradition, which really comes out of the tradition. In the same way that *The Well-Tuned Piano* brings together many, many, many musical traditions, I feel that my approach to raga is also bringing together everything that I understand about music and everything that was given to me. I feel that raga may have had more sustenance at one time, but whether it did or whether it didn't somehow it was given to me to present sustained tones. These sustained tones are a model for the music of the spheres. These sustained tones give something to music that either was lost or was never there before, but now that it's here it's making a contribution that allows an evolution that would not have been possible without it.



## 22. Future Interpreters

FRANK J. OTERI: To spiral this back to *The Well-Tuned Piano* and potential future performances of it, Michael Harrison is the only other person besides you who has ever played this. He has also studied Indian music and he has worked very closely with you. Let's say some imaginary pianist at Juilliard or the Moscow Conservatory who is watching and reading our discussion on NewMusicBox with great interest says, I want to play *The Well-Tuned Piano* now. What does that person do to play *The Well-Tuned Piano*? How does that become a reality?

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's possible. It's very possible. Several pianists have asked me about it in the past. There's only one answer: you have to become my disciple and learn it the way Michael learned it, the way I learned music from Pandit Pran Nath. I feel that is the only way to learn it. I'm not saying that eventually over time there won't be people, who will listen to the recording so much, that they could be able to play it. That will happen. After I die, I won't be able to control it completely. It will go out and become what it becomes. To me, it's like my life. It's not just something I write on a piece of paper and send off for a score rental fee. Nobody wants to pay you anyway when you send it out for the score rental fee, so why bother? It's really an extraordinary experience to play *The Well-Tuned Piano*. The only way I would give anybody permission to play it, they would have to become my disciple of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, work with me on it for a long time, do things with me to help the piece grow, and learn it in that kind of way. Then if I consider them okay, I can give them permission to play it. I want to say that if my recordings survive, there's no need for somebody else to play it. There are many ways of looking at it. It's a great pleasure to teach a disciple, like Jung Hee Choi or Charles Curtis. I know the music will go on. But if nobody comes forward who is really going to learn it in the right way—and you have these recordings. It's so fantastic that we have these recordings of Pandit Pran Nath. Even though I'm going forward with the tradition, I'm me and Pandit Pran Nath was Pandit Pran Nath. I'm going to try and keep the tradition pure and present it in the most pure way possible. But no matter how good I become at singing raga and no matter how much I try to sing exactly like him and retain the purity of the tradition, I will never sound *exactly* like him, just as he never sounded *exactly* like his teacher, and his teacher probably did not sound *exactly* like his teacher before him. Therefore, the recordings have great significance.

FRANK J. OTERI: In a Western classical sense, if there are these great pieces that in the canon, say, of piano music—the 32 Beethoven sonatas, the piano music of Chopin, the *Etude Tableaux* of Rachmaninoff, and taking it back to pre-piano music to earlier keyboard and harpsichord music, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach—that have these elaborate traditions and people, in order to become pianists, have to play through these pieces to become pianists and be able to think about the piano. I almost think that people who are at conservatories ought to be made to learn to play *The Well-Tuned Piano* the same way that they learn Beethoven sonatas because it's that level of a piece.

LA MONTE YOUNG: I'm sure they will. It will happen.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: They really could learn it from the recording, even though it's not written out in the little dots. They could learn it and they could play it back. The question is, could they then go on and improvise within it.

LA MONTE YOUNG: There are many factors.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Maybe.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Not everybody will be a La Monte Young. Not everybody will be a Pandit Pran Nath. But from time to time special, extremely creative people will evolve. If it's meant to happen, it will happen. I can't control it completely. During my lifetime I would teach somebody who would learn seriously as a disciple. If somebody learns it in that way, that's very good.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, Jon Catler has also studied *The Well-Tuned Piano*. He was one of La Monte's tuning assistants.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yes, and he plays things like it on guitar.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yeah.

LA MONTE YOUNG: On the other hand, a lot of classical musicians are really just very rigid. It makes no difference if they play *The Well-Tuned Piano* or not, because it's not going to help *The Well-Tuned Piano*. *The Well-Tuned Piano* is an extraordinary experience. I put my life's blood into it. The records convey something that is literally out of this world. Unless somebody can do that... I don't know? Going back to the *Trio for Strings*, it's nearly impossible to play. Eckart Schloifer, a really terrific viola player who was the founder of the Trio Basso, said that it's impossible. It just can't be played perfectly the way you want it. He's right. I wrote it on an organ. The organ could speak and sustain those tones unfailingly. Eventually, a whole younger generation of string players will evolve, the same way these little kids learn how to play the Wagner horn parts. They start practicing when they're nine years old or four years old. They know them by the time they grow up. The same thing will happen. People will practice the *Trio for Strings*, they'll learn it, and they will be able to play these incredible performances. Similarly, people will listen to *The Well-Tuned Piano* and if they're going to do it, you can't stop them. There's this famous story in Indian classical tradition: Guru Dronacharya lived in this cave and he was the guru of all the young warriors. He was the top guru. He taught them archery, spirituality, and everything. Arjuna was his main disciple. He said to Arjuna, you're the greatest and you'll be the only one. Of course Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer. Krishna led Arjuna into battle in the great war of the *Mahabharata* where fathers fought against sons, brothers fought against brothers, and uncles fought against nephews. One day Arjuna was practicing archery in the woods. An arrow came and split his arrow in half in the air. Arjuna went and found this fellow and said, "Who are you?" I'm Ekalavya. He says, "Who's your teacher?" He said, "Guru Dronacharya." And he said, "Guru Dronacharya? I've never seen you around." So he said, "He didn't take me, but I am his disciple." Arjuna went back to Guru Dronacharya and he said, 'you told me that I was the greatest. I'd be the only one. I was shooting in the woods and this young fellow comes and shoots my arrows in half in the air. He said he's your disciple.' Guru Dronacharya says, "O.K., let me see. Take me to him." They go to the woods and shoot an arrow and the arrow comes, cutting it in half. They find Ekalavya and guru Dronacharya says, "Who are you?" He says, "I'm your disciple, Ekalavya." Guru Dronacharya says, "I don't know you?" He says, "I know. I came to you and you didn't accept me, but I truly believe that I am your disciple." He said, "O.K. then, if you're my disciple then give me your thumb." So he cuts off his thumb immediately and gives it to guru Dronacharya to show his devotion. Some years later, Arjuna is in the forest shooting arrows and another arrow comes again and cuts his in half. Meanwhile, without a thumb, Ekalavya had learned to shoot

left handed. Arjuna returns to guru Dronacharya who says, "He feels in his heart that he is my disciple. This is the meaning of devotion." If somebody wants to do it and they really believe in what they're doing, you can't stop them. They'll do it. If somebody really wants to learn it from the recording, it's possible. They can't learn it from the notation in my book. The book is only this thick and it only has some sketches of the themes. They would either have to learn it from me directly or from listening to the recordings over a long period of time, as well as figuring out how to tune their own piano in order to do it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Could they do it from hearing the recording and hearing it that way, not being exposed to Indian music and not being exposed to all the other music that shaped who you are?

LA MONTE YOUNG: You see, I think my performances are unique. They always will be. Likewise, I think Pandit Pran Nath's recordings are unique and different than mine, and always will be. I think both are important. Recordings have simply given us a new tool. It does not relieve the disciple of their burden of seriousness in leaning, but at the same time it gives us a new way to carry information into the future. You can't say. Someone may evolve who captures the entire spirit of the thing, and really can do it.

FRANK J. OTERI: The reason I bring this up about having the context of the music is that there is this wonderful recording of piano music by Milton Babbitt performed by this pianist named Martin Goldray. He plays the music so well but apparently knew nothing about the structure of it beforehand at all. It sounds wonderful. He makes Babbitt sound like Franz Liszt. It just dances off the ear and it's remarkable. He has no theory behind the performance, it's just the musicality of having learned it and making it his own. It's not informed by notions of integral serialism. The question then becomes, could somebody play this music who is not immersed in the theory behind it and just feels it as music?

LA MONTE YOUNG: I think so. I think so very much. You see, we talk of a certain number of senses, five or six, or whatever, but music is an introduction to an entire other process of perception, evolution, and experience. People can evolve and do miraculous things. Some people may evolve who really capture the spirit of *The Well-Tuned Piano* and can play it just fine from listening to it on the recording. I think it would be good if they studied with me, the way Michael did, because I can convey something to them, the way Pandit Pran Nath conveyed something to me. The future can create beings that evolve in ways that are far beyond our imagination.

## 23. Choosing Intervals

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to plunge into the theory for a bit. That's the one thing we haven't done. That wonderful tuning system that is so rich in possibilities that is based on pure fifths and pure sevenths, and combinations of those intervals, but avoids thirds. Yet, the third is the most common interval in the harmonies of Western music. I guess for starters, why did you avoid the thirds?

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's interesting if we look at the history of Western classical music. If we were to tune it in just intonation, it would all be factorable by 2s, 3s, and 5s: 2s being octaves, 3s being 5ths, and 5s being the major 3rds. What I did in *The Well-Tuned Piano* was base it on 2s, 3s, and 7s. I noticed when I was composing the *Trio for Strings*, and early on, that major 3rds were not expressing the musical feeling that I was having. The third became so overused in Western classical music. Every cadence at the end of the composition eventually had to have a third in it. A major third was more common and a minor third was considered special. Which intervals have been in vogue over time is an interesting study. Back at the time of organum, fifths and fourths were considered good, while thirds were considered too dissonant.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's because they were using a Pythagorean third which was super sharp, and it was dissonant.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yes, the Pythagorean third was dissonant. Then, gradually over time the 5:4 interval works its way in and people could not live without thirds. Although I didn't realize exactly why at the time I created the tuning for *The Well-Tuned Piano*, I knew that major thirds were not creating the feeling that I wanted to create.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: This goes back to the *Trio for Strings*, you pretty much avoided thirds then. So it goes back a long way.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Although in *The Well-Tuned Piano* you have the 9:7, which is a bigger third. It doesn't convey the same feeling at all as the 5:4 major third conveys. *The Well-Tuned Piano* then is based on a system of 2s, 3s, and 7s. One is able to sense it immediately as a classical tuning system because it has the same number of factors that the Western classical music system has: 2s, 3s, and 5s. But it leaves the 5 out and puts the 7 in. After that I did many other things in tuning. In the Dream Houses I have, to a great degree, focused on this area between the 9:7 interval. The symmetry in the current Dream House is all made up of microtones within the 9:7 interval. I became fascinated with this area of the scale. First I worked on 56, 57, 58, 59, skipped 60 because it's a multiple of 5, 61, 62, 63, 64, skipped 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, skipped 70, 71, and 72. Those were the tones I worked with in a work I called *The Big Dream*. Then I began to do symmetries with those and began to go into higher octaves of the same 9:7 interval. For some reason these ratios within 9:7 convey something very profound for me. I find it necessary to present these intervals. They create a different feeling than anybody has ever worked with extensively before. The special Rayna synthesizers that I use allow me to enter intervals that have large numerators and denominators. They have very precise relationships that hardly drift, or don't drift over time. Therefore it is possible to make up periodic composite waveforms out of very complex intervals and therefore the waveform itself is more complex, but it's periodic. The fact that it's periodic allows the human mechanism to recognize it, remember it, and treat it as something that it can work with. In the study of vibrational structure we have to begin somewhere. Like in math, if you begin with the

integers then this can lead you to many, many different places. Similarly, if you begin with the rational numbers and learn what they are, physically, musically, vibrationally, and spiritually, then they're like stepping stones toward other more evolved places.

## 24. Physical Limitations of Instruments

FRANK J. OTERI: Obviously on the piano, there are exceptions—Michael Harrison developed ways with pedals that he was able to get more than 12 intervals on a conventional piano and certainly in the 19th century Möllendorf designed a quarter-tone piano, Wyschnegradsky in the '20s, Haba, and all these people worked on elaborate designs, Joe Maneri in Boston has this elaborate keyboard—if you are working with other instruments, say, a string quartet, you can have more than 12 intervals in a scale. Are there compositions of yours that use more than 12 intervals in a given piece?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, for example, in the current sound environment in the *Dream House* there are 32 unique frequency ratios. When the Theatre of Eternal Music Big Band played, they were playing with an environment that was the ancestor of this environment. I can't remember how many frequencies it had, but it had a number.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: It was 20. We were performing, what was it called?

LA MONTE YOUNG: The number of frequencies that you have available to work with, of course in just intonation, is limitless...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: *The Lower Map of the Eleven's Division from The Romantic Symmetry in Prime Time from 144 to 112 with 119.*

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...the number you work with at any giving time doesn't matter. More is not necessarily better. Depending on the group, and depending on what they have to refer to in order to stay in tune, the most important thing is that they *can* be perfectly in tune. They have to work from a point that they can actually hear. When I first began to learn to hear some of the intervals in just intonation, I was working on the ration 63. Sixty-three is  $9 \times 7$ . I actually learned to hear it as a whole step, a 9:8 interval, above 56. That is the seventh harmonic. In the Big Band, there was a sine wave for every frequency that the musicians could tune to. A similar technique was used when I wrote *Chronos Kristalla* for the Kronos Quartet. Everybody thinks that natural harmonics on strings are in tune, but they're not unfortunately. It would be nice if they were. They have a special quality that I wanted to make use of. You know, *Chronos Kristalla* is made up of all natural harmonics on strings. I wanted the sound of natural harmonics. They sound like sine waves. They have a special timbre coming out of the string, being that one frequency component, but they're not perfectly in tune. In fact, sometimes they're horribly out of tune. What I had to do was provide the Kronos Quartet with a Rayna synthesizer that was dedicated to that chord, the 8 pitches of "The Magic Chord," up in the octaves that they were going to play their natural harmonics. They would tune their strings in such a way that the natural harmonics that they played were in tune with this pitch standard before they would start the concert. It meant that they could only really play one or two harmonics on each string. Each string was dedicated to only one, or at the most two harmonics. You couldn't have one in tune and have the other one in tune. That's how out of tune harmonics on strings are. It's unfortunate, but it's a fact. It's true of all strings. The string is not a perfect vibrational medium. It has its physical limitations. As a result, it vibrates in such a way that the harmonics are not perfectly in tune. The harmonics on the piano are somewhat better, but they get consistently sharper as you go up. When we tune *The Well-Tuned Piano*, we have to listen in many ways. We have to listen to the combination tones that are produced by the whole envelope of the composite waveform, as well as listening to the unisons of the



harmonics. Sometimes we have to sacrifice one harmonic, usually the fifth, in order to get the third or seventh perfect. At the same time we listen to the combination tones to make sure that the whole envelope really lines up. The tuning of a string, which is an imperfect resonating body, is a very intricate and detailed process. It's not simple at all. There are decisions that have to be made all along the way. Every tuning of *The Well-Tuned Piano* is somewhat unique because things change: the strings get older, the temperature is never the same even though you try to control the room temperature. We've actually documented each tuning of *The Well-Tuned Piano* since about 1981. Bob Bielecki created a measuring device, a several digit counter. He would measure the tuning, right after Michael had finished tuning it and just before I would play it for the concert. Each succeeding concert, instead of Michael having to start by ear, he could first tune it up to the numbers that he had recorded from the last tuning and then perfect it by ear beyond that point. Each tuning had the potential of getting better, but each tuning was slightly different by some milli-nothing. Depending on which area he had tuned most perfectly, I would tend to spend most of my time in that area. For instance, in the last concert of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, the one that is on the Just Dreams DVD, *The Well-Tuned Piano in The Magenta Lights*, Michael did an especially good tuning of the "Magic Harmonic Rainforest Chord." Within this chord is an area called "Blues for Eurydice." It's a new section I composed and developed during the 1987 series. He tuned it so well that I spent much more time than usual in that area, maybe an extra hour. So when I was coming towards "The Romantic Chord"—I try to never look at the clock when I'm playing *The Well-Tuned Piano*, but I glanced at the clock. I always try to record one tape that goes straight through; otherwise it takes years before you get a copy to listen to. I like to sit back and listen to it from beginning to end. In the PCM process we had tape that would last...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Six hours.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah, six hours. I was already heading into the fifth hour it seemed like when I was getting into "The Romantic Chord." Usually "The Romantic Chord" had been the longest section. I shortened "The Romantic Chord" and went on into another totally new section, which is called "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Elysian Fields." To me, it's one of the most beautiful sections. Somehow the recording came out to 6 hours and 24 minutes. I thought, oh, I've done it this time. They won't have it all on one tape and it will take them forever before they could provide me with a tape that I can listen to. Luckily, by some stroke of good fortune, that particular tape had enough tape and it made it all the way to the end so that I had a digital recording of *The Well-Tuned Piano*, 6 hours and 24 minutes. It became 6 hours and 25 minutes in the process of making the DVD.



## 25. Perceptibility

FRANK J. OTERI: The question of perception, and this is really the last area that I wanted to get into, perception on the part of players, perception on the part of listeners, the audience. We talk about these intervals and...you both hear them, I hear them as a composer and as somebody who listens to music day in and day out. The average person who hears this music, might have a perception that it sounds different than what they're used to. To some people it might sound out of tune. Is the perception of the intervals essential to appreciating the music?

LA MONTE YOUNG: I think you haven't phrased the question properly... the thing is this: people hear the interval automatically. The interval is this set of frequency relationships that we can think of as the mathematical abstract. The Anahata Nada, the music of the spheres, the unstruck sound can be thought of as a mathematical abstract. The interval comes, and it comes through our neurons up through the cerebral cortex and makes patterns. Now, each one of us is different, and each one of us has different learned conditioning, but the mathematical abstract is the same. We differentiate the moods that we get through a particular set of frequency ratios from the more mundane moods of personal feelings. Happy, amorous, sad, war-like, these are moods indeed. But the moods that intervals create, that music create are very specific to the mathematical abstract. That is what is it that makes Dorian sound like Dorian every time we hear Dorian. It's that we hear those same intervals coming again and again, and even though each one of us is different and has a different set of learned preconditioning, to some degree we all hear this same set of patterns. And how we respond may indeed have to do with our preconditioning, in part. But in part, the degree to which that we can leave all of that, and go directly to the abstract, that is the true feeling of the interval. You know when you call forth a raga it's like calling forth a spirit, and that spirit is literally that set of vibrational relationships. You can think of that set of vibrational relationships as a spirit, because it's a very ethereal thing. Very few people have defined it the way I'm defining it, very few people have been able to say exactly what's going on here. And the spirit of the raga is this set of vibrational relationships that comes in certain ways that are defined by what are the traditional melodic patterns of that raga, what are the typical notes to cadence on, what are the typical notes to begin on, what are the most common ornaments for that raga, what are the most common shadings of that particular mode. And this is a set of information that when presented together in one construct, we recognize as Raga Yaman, Raga Darbari, Raga Bhairavi, and although we can say, well, this raga is more sad, that raga is more happy, that's just bringing in some common terminology from everyday usage. It's O.K.... It helps us do something, but the real definition lies in the numerical relationships, the sets of melodic patterns, the set of ornaments, the set of microtonal shadings... These are what go in, really, to making up the raga. And people are in a situation throughout existence where they are dealing with the interrelationship of what they have learned, with the interrelationship of what they've experienced. And the degree to which they can become part of a new experience, and be taken up into that world, the way I spoke of getting into the world of the sound of my lecture in 1960. When you go inside the world of the sound, I said, you can go so far into it that the outside world disappears at times, the world that you were in, the physical world that we live in disappears as you go way deep into this world of the sound. Well that's the same kind of experience that we're talking about when you go deep into the world of the raga or *The Well-Tuned Piano*. And incidentally, in reference to your earlier comment, it was actually with *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* that I began the idea of a piece that becomes a whole life of its own, even before *The Well-Tuned Piano*. But *The Well-Tuned Piano* comes out of some music I was playing, *Pre-Tortoise Dream Music* I call it, that was long, sustained tones when I

was still playing saxophone, I went from the fast saxophone to playing long, sustained tones as I began to work more and more on the intonation and also harking back to the *Trio for Strings* and *Composition 1960 # 7*. But, through the process of discipline we can give up the physical body and go into a spiritual state that can bring us in direct communion with God. And music has the potential to do this on a level that can teach us something about universal structure, vibrational structure.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, you referenced something that makes me almost want to take this yet somewhere else. Certainly with ragas, there are certain ragas that are appropriate to sing in the evening, sing in the morning, different times of the day, because those different combinations of intervals effect listeners in different ways. Is there an ideal time then, using that same idea, to play *The Well-Tuned Piano*? Would there be certain times of the day that you wouldn't give a concert of *The Well-Tuned Piano*? And mind you it's a seven or six hour endeavor no matter when you begin. But the performances that I'm aware of have all been evening performances. Could it be done as an afternoon performance? Or morning?

LA MONTE YOUNG: It can be done anytime. I think that the thing is, there are two schools of thought. In South India, they like to make fun of North Indians by saying "I can enjoy my raga any time of day, 24 hours a day." In North India, they're very much into this idea of certain times of day and night, and certainly Pandit Pran Nath was a master of this approach to music. But it might be performed differently at different times of day, and certainly whether the sun is shining, or whether it's night makes a big difference in how we feel, and how we react. But on the other hand, *The Well-Tuned Piano* could be played at any time, and intervals will have their, what I'll call abstract mathematical effect at any time of day or night. This is not to say anything at all against the idea that a night raga should be performed at night, a midnight raga should be performed at midnight, and a morning raga in the morning.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, even within the North Indian idea of that, Pandit Pran Nath used to give the example of, say the komal 're'...

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...The flat second degree...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: He would say it's really a different flat 're' in the morning than the flat 're' in the evening. But actually what it is, is the approach and the way it's articulated is what's different. A lot has to do with coming to the note from where you come from, and the way you come, and the way you slide, or the way you would approach it. And so these factors also are a part of what to North Indians give them the sense that this is the evening, and this is the approach of the morning.

LA MONTE YOUNG: But there are different forms of flat 're', there are definitely different degrees, as well as different approaches to them. It's complex and it's extremely evolved. But, this is a special, thing that ragas must be performed at a certain hour of day, and night, and certainly I believe that that's how they work the best. And it's tradition and it's something that is given to us and we take advantage of, and we learn it, and make use of it, but at the same time, I believe *The Well-Tuned Piano* could be played at any time of day, but I think it's especially a night piece, and as I think it through, even though I live on a schedule where sometimes my day is night, and sometimes my night is day and I'm asleep during the day and I'm awake all night, there is a certain peace that comes with the night. You see, there's a long tradition. People could only see when the sun was out. And so they had to do a lot of things

when the sun was out that had to do with seeing, yet they learned to hunt at night for certain animals. It became a much more complex process and gradually over time we learned how to work at night and now we have all-night supermarkets and all-night factories, and all-night movies, and a lot of things go on at night. You know there are nocturnal animals and there are diurnal animals. We in our process of evolution have reached a point where we are able to affect our own evolution in our own lifetime. We are at a very evolved point in evolution as humans, and I believe that some of us can actually change ourselves in our own lifetime. What are we doing when we're learning these special intervallic ratios? Well, nobody ever listened to them before. Until I had a Rayna synthesizer I couldn't listen to these intervals. So, I'm affecting my own evolution by learning what these intervals are, by listening to them, by presenting them to people to listen to, we're changing. They found that some of these big cats that escaped in London and lived in the parks—well, maybe not in London but in England there, you know—they already started to change in their lifetime, just by being in a different environment. Like some people had owned a panther or something and abandoned it and it got loose in a park and then created a family and animals change very quickly if they're put into a totally new environment. And because of our extreme intelligence, we've developed the ability to evolve so much, we have the capability I think to actually influence our own evolution and if our imagination is great enough and our ability to tune in to the highest source of vibration is pure enough, we can do things that are really remarkable.

## 26. Ragas Using Upper Primes?

FRANK J. OTERI: That sounds like a great place to end this discussion and we might want to make this our ending and throw in a question before it, just because I have one other question that I want to ask, but...

LA MONTE YOUNG: Sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I was at the concert on Saturday and I thought, knowing the work that you've done with these upper primes and I thought, what would happen if some of the ragas were sung with some of these other intervals? If some of these upper intervals became melodic content for scales, where would that go?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Interestingly, also, in relation to the raga I sang, you saw how much I loved it and how much I was deep into it. It's all based on 5s.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes I know that! [*laughs*] I was thinking that too.

LA MONTE YOUNG: It's really something that I could give myself up to that raga in such a way, but I became crazy in love with the raga and for me this is what music is about. When I perform a piece, I really go deep into it.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: But you really focused and brought out the tonality of it...

LA MONTE YOUNG: The 7th degree of the scale.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: The 7th degree.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Yeah, because it's a polytonal area: the major third and the 7th degree. That's true, but the tonic drone is still there and...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: ...major thirds.

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...the drone is really there...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Yes, it is.

LA MONTE YOUNG: ...and in relation to it. And interestingly enough, in Raga Yaman Kalyan, the sharp 4th degree, remember the sharp 4th degree?

FRANK J. OTERI: Mmhmm.

LA MONTE YOUNG: This pitch is not a perfect 5th above the 7th, the 7th is a natural 7th degree, it's 15, ok? In other words it's 5 x 3, it's 5 times the dominant, it's the major 3rd of the dominant, so it's 15. And the major 3rd of the raga is 5, O.K.?

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

LA MONTE YOUNG: So the 7th is a perfect 5th above it. But the 4th degree, it's not...the 4th degree is 7:5 which is also a major 3rd below the 7th harmonic, which is not even in the raga.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

LA MONTE YOUNG: So to sing the sharp 4th of Yaman, I have to listen to the 7th harmonic—and then there's an ornament that goes back and forth between this sharp 4th degree, which is not a perfect 5th above the 7th, and some note slightly above it which might just be the perfect 5th above the 7th. And it's a very tiny little difference there going between 7:5 and 45:32. In fact, if the higher pitch is 45:32 then the difference between 7:5 and 45:32 is 225:224, very tiny indeed. 45:32 is a perfect 5th above 15, right?

FRANK J. OTERI: Which is the tritone in just intonation...

LA MONTE YOUNG: 3 times 15 is 45. So, to some degree the raga offers this possibility with the microtones, and of course, as a composer, I'm free. I can compose anything I want and I can perform it. I can tune anything I want. But as a disciple of raga, I have a responsibility to the tradition to try to carry on what has actually already been there so that it won't be lost. And when I first began to study raga I made it very clear to everyone that I was never going to do fusion. I was not interested in it. I was interested in being totally creative in my own work, but totally faithful to the tradition of raga and devoted to it, to really learn what it is. But once you really learn what it is—and I hope I'm humble enough to admit that I never have and never could—but once you really learn what it is, then you have the freedom to go on to the next step or to other steps and to other levels and with *The Well-Tuned Piano*—I was describing this before—one of the most important things about *The Well-Tuned Piano* is that it exists on so many levels, but at the very beginning levels, it offers this key, as I mentioned, a key that unlocks a door that leads to another level, that leads to another door, that leads to another level, so that theoretically, people from all levels of development and evolution could find their way into *The Well-Tuned Piano* and eventually work their way up to the most evolved, complex level.

## 27. Appreciation

FRANK J. OTERI: Theoretically, could any person with any background in any music, no grounding in classical music, no grounding in Indian classical music, maybe not even grounding in the blues, just somebody who's grown up listening to AM pop music radio, can that person hear and grow to appreciate your music without having to learn any of the theory behind it?

LA MONTE YOUNG: I certainly hope so. I believe it very strongly and I think that's how it should be. I think you shouldn't have to learn all the theory that I know to enjoy the music. If the principles that I really believe are at work in my music and in raga are really there, I think this is something that automatically draws you in and allows you to go straight to heaven. However, sometimes we come with preconditioning that holds us back for a while. But there is another factor. We cannot pretend that everybody is really created equal and has the same opportunities and the same physiological structure. I mean, people are born in all kinds of conditions and some people just may not in this particular lifetime be able to hear for example—to make it obvious, just to make it obvious. So we can't say that everybody absolutely, but theoretically everybody who is capable of hearing and capable of feeling and capable of coming up to a certain level of evolution, I would hope that they should really be able to enjoy *The Well-Tuned Piano* or raga without any knowledge of the system that goes into making it up.

FRANK J. OTERI: You talked a while back about repetition being the way in or long-sustained tones being the way to hear intervals, to be able to hear patterns and absorb them as a listener. And I found this to be true as a composer; I've found this to be true as a listener. A lot of the music of the past century in the West has been about denying repetition, about creating musical structures where intervals never repeat and various formulas are used to subvert hierarchical relationships between intervals and I love a lot of that music. But I love it because I've been able to immerse myself into it and I'm speaking now of the music that goes past the Second Viennese School and actually music including Webern, where when a row was finished, it just ends. So it might be 11 measures long. There's no repetition content, there's no thematic development in a conventional sense. Is that music something if listeners had no prejudice toward it that they would be able to appreciate without all the theory that gets in the way of thinking that it can be entertaining?

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, you know, I think that some of us cannot hold ourselves back and we have to study theory. [*laughs*] We're just driven. We just can't live without learning what theory is. Certainly I think that listeners should be able to love Schoenberg, Webern without learning row technique. I certainly knew so much theory by the time I got to Schoenberg and Webern that I know, you know, you can't use me as an example. And it is true that your average man on the street is probably not going to appreciate the Schoenberg Violin Concerto or the Webern Symphony. I mean, I think that they wrote very sophisticated music that was based on a lot of knowledge of music tradition and they reached a certain point and, you know, some people never develop beyond a certain stage of listening to very, very simple music and...

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, I've had people say to me, you know, "I only like figurative painting. I just don't like abstract art." Well, you know, you can't even move, you can't get anywhere with that attitude. They're locked off in some idea, whether they got it culturally or



from heredity, or you know, why they have that limit and they can't see the beauty in abstract art. I can't fathom it, but it's like some people are locked off in some way of thinking and just...

LA MONTE YOUNG: You and I were driven to do what we did and to learn more and to listen more and to write more and to really do something with our lives. I mean, some people are really only interested in making a lot of money and some people aren't even that ambitious, you know?

MARIAN ZAZEELA: You know, when I first heard that there was such a thing as electronic music—I'm not sure if I heard anything, but I was in my apartment and I heard sort of a screech of breaks and some other sounds from outside and I thought, well, I can imagine that something like that could be music. And that was just from having the idea. Not even from having heard so-called "electronic music," but, you know, having it presented as an idea somewhere and it allowed me to recognize, well, perhaps that could be electronic music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, one thing I find so interesting is that certain composers like Stockhausen would be anathema to the traditional concert hall music goers, but to a lot of younger people involved in techno and electronica, he's a father figure. He's a guru to these people.

MARIAN ZAZEELA: Sure.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Mmm. Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you know they, you try to track down those Deutsche Grammophon Stockhausen LPs, you know, they're like 100 bucks a pop because the DJs want them.

LA MONTE YOUNG: Well, you know, education is still one of the major keys. Let people have an education and you can't stop them, you know. Give people knowledge and they really eat it up and they appreciate it a lot and the more that knowledge is made available to people, the more they will utilize it and let it be a part of them. And I think that's the optimistic side. You know, there is this side that you have people that come up in the same schooling system that we came up in and they end up being criminals. You know, why? Why do these people send out viruses to destroy our computers, you know? Like what happened to them? We all went to school and they learned how to do something and they ended up doing something destructive. Well, you know, that's sad. I'm sure this guy who does that could appreciate Stockhausen, could appreciate Webern, could even appreciate La Monte Young. Does he? I don't know if he does or if he doesn't, but it's important to really have very high ideals and principles and a dedication in life to doing something that gives something back to humanity. And it's important that people are taught that because through history we are able to learn about our mistakes. And unless we study history and unless we study what has happened and understand what has happened and are taught how to go forward, we end up just going back to the same set of mistakes. So education is definitely an important part of the process. But in every system, no matter how evolved the average person becomes, there will be certain unique people who will be somehow evolving yet even faster for whatever reason. But not everybody is the same and this is a fact and we have to observe that and it's just a fact to observe. It's not a qualitative statement, it's just an observation that people are evolving at different rates, we can say partly because of education, partly because of inner drive, whatever. Whereas I think all of this music should be accessible to everybody without having studied the theory, some people are in a



state, like you have a Plato coming along. He was unique and he had ideas and he was able to expound those ideas, but not everybody understood them. And you know, a long time later, we're understanding them. This is always going to be true, that from the average some people are pushed up, some people try harder, whatever it is that makes them that way, it happens and these people will be a unique intelligentsia—like it or not—and they have the potential to give something really important to humanity and to the earth. And in fact, they have a responsibility.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is there anything we missed.

LA MONTE YOUNG: [*laughs*] Probably!