

In the 1st Person : February 2004

NewMusicBox

Waking Up to Alvin Curran

Wednesday, November 26, 2003
1:30-2:30 p.m.

A Conversation with Frank J. Oteri at the American Music Center

Videotaped by [Randy Nordschow](#)

Transcribed by Jonathan Murphy

© 2004 NewMusicBox

Over the past couple of months, I've been waking up to parts of *Inner Cities*, a massive composition for solo piano by Alvin Curran which seamlessly blends elements of post-minimalism, free-form atonality, neo-romanticism, contemporary jazz improvisation, and numerous other ingredients into a remarkably cohesive whole. It's one of the best ways I've found thus far to be transported from a dream state into the reality of getting ready to go to work in the morning.

I don't mean to imply here that it's a good idea to listen to just any music by Curran first thing in the morning... I doubt there are ruder awakenings than his amazing *Crystal Psalms*, which is nothing less than an audio nightmare. But how else to capture as nightmarish an event in human history as *Krystallnacht*? Then there's the remarkable string quartet *VSTO* inspired by his mentor Giacinto Scelsi, which probably works best really late at night, preferably over port.

I can think of no other composer whose music works in so many different settings while managing to transcend all of them. Just when you think you've figured out what's going on in one of his pieces it totally changes direction: a Feldman-esque harmonic landscape turns into a Thelonious Monk cover, a formal trio for violin, piano and percussion turns into a chaotic free-for-all with toys and theatrics, and on and on...

After speaking with him, I can also think of no other composer who is as respectful of his forebears. Few things said to me in conversation were as moving as what Alvin Curran said to me about Elliott Carter, with whom he studied and with whom he maintains a close friendship to this day.

Curran's music will defy your efforts to put it in a category. After speaking to him at length, I realize that's exactly how he wants it.

-FJO

Curran's "Common Practice"

FRANK J. OTERI: Last night I got out all the recordings I have of your work and did a massive listening session just to rev myself up for this. It was so interesting hearing all of your music back to back because I was trying to walk away from it with one stream of thought, and it defies that.

ALVIN CURRAN: Yeah. Well, this is part of the problem, carrying my own work around with me all of these years, because it isn't all in one bag. It's a bunch of bags. Some come from one direction, some come from another. Some are heading over here, some over there. I've given up trying to define my work. I'm just redefining it all the time. I actually wrote a considerably sizable article some years ago for the German music magazine *MusikTexte*, written in English, called "The New Common Practice."

My thoughts concerning the new common practice came about due to my unexpected teaching activity that began in 1990 at Mills College. There, through engagement with students and courses called Composition Seminars where I actually had to create problems—and the problems that I took up the most were of course my own. It turned out that these were infinite and then they spread across pretty much all of the musical disciplines that we can think of in the late 20th century. Just to name them: composition with a capital "C," that is, those people who still insist doggedly to write notes on paper, and improvisation as a counterpoint to that. My career took off doing both of those simultaneously every single day.

I started in Rome in 1966 with the foundation of the group *Musica Elettronica Viva* with [Frederic Rzewski](#), [Richard Teitelbaum](#), and other people—we were all Harvard/Yale/Princeton composers. Composers! I mean we didn't think of ourselves as anything different. In the same year [Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra](#) project had been launched in London. A project which involved the invitation for musicians and non-musicians to bring in conceptual pieces, instruction pieces, text pieces, any kind of piece that could be played by anybody. Incidentally, in the late '60s, 'anybody' and 'everybody' were the same thing. *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: That seems a strange path to take after to take after being a student of [Elliott Carter](#)...

ALVIN CURRAN: I was a student of Elliott Carter. Richard was a student of [Mel Powell](#). Frederic had studied with [Milton Babbitt](#). So we had all of these Ivy pedigrees, but on the other hand this desire—this need—to grasp the moment in the mid-1960s that required us to make a kind of *tabula rasa* in our lives and practices. That didn't cut out composing as such, but it did bring us to the place where we immediately recognized that making spontaneous music was another form of composing. Actually, all of us to this very day have incorporated the old traditional, classical—I use that word in its classic sense—classical sense of being a composer, and at the same time a composer who at any given moment can make music with anything, with any object, or with nothing, just their body. In the new common practice, composer and improviser are only two of the large practices within many, many smaller and less well-defined compartments.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now within each of those larger categories of composition and improvisation, you have within them 'what are you composing?', 'what are you improvising?' Are you creating music that's tonally rooted, atonally rooted, that's based on repetition, that's indeterminate in its form, that uses electronics, that doesn't use electronics. What I find so interesting is that you are all of these things, sometimes even in one piece.

ALVIN CURRAN: I find that when you really start to look around, you don't see any distinctions anymore. It isn't just all one big blur. It's all of these techniques, all of these languages, all of these alphabets, all of these worlds of sound, all of these tendencies in direction are available to everybody now, that's what it is. This is the new common practice.

It isn't that I don't think about what I'm doing, but I'm not the composer who gets up with rigorous schedules at 5:30 in the morning and sits at my desk. I don't have a desk. I hardly ever get up at ungodly hours like that, nor do I compose every day. But I do compose in a larger sense every minute of my life. This practice, for all of its lack of rigor, is my own personal structure in my approach to making music.

I love tunes. I love triadic chords. I love clusters. I love noise. I love silence. And I began making music with all of these things, because all of these things thrill me. There was no intellectual meditation to do this, that and the other. It just all came bit by bit. I must say, the catalyst was from a traditional learning practice, namely the Yale School of Music, a Master of Arts degree, and long association and friendship to this day with Elliott Carter, who is a real mentor. But on the other hand along the way I moved toward [Cage](#), became very close to him. Then moved toward [Feldman](#) and became close to him. I'm saying also on a personal level.

Mentors

FRANK J. OTERI: What did Carter give you as a composer and how has he been a mentor to you?

ALVIN CURRAN: Let me answer the first question: what he gave me in terms of tools for composition? I could say *nothing*. But what was exciting about working with Carter was that it was in the period in his life when he had just finished his second string quartet. I was still trying to digest the first one, but the second one came along and that was, 'Oh my god, that's like over the edge; I can't get it.' We had the pleasure of working with a living composer who was in the prime of his life and gaining amazing recognition. There was something—not about working with a great person, a successful person—but he was, at least for us, a model for being a composer. Maybe not the model to follow in every detail or in every precept and idea, but he was definitely a model. This was not just some college professor. This was a composer.

FRANK J. OTERI: Looking back on all of Carter's music now without the baggage that it once had in academia, really looking at from a 21st-century common practice vocabulary, it's fascinating to me how his ideas about music are a real harbinger of polystylism: all the instruments playing, as he puts it, different kinds of music together, even though it doesn't necessarily come off sounding that way. I would dare say that it's a harbinger of your own musical ideas although they sound completely different.

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, there is one thing we do have in common: we're obsessively polyphonic. That is, we think in layering. We think in terms of the coloristic bands and panels and strokes and gestures of many, many, many different materials going on simultaneously to create magical complexities or magical simplicities, as it were.

The influence of Carter is something I have not talked about at great length publicly. My fondness and gratitude for Elliott is infinite for his having reaffirmed and reinforced my desire to make a career in music. Now, that may sound a little bit like a personal reflection, but I really feel that without Carter going overboard too much to praise me or to give too many useless pats on the back, I felt that he was really there for me and felt that he was saying, in his very introspective way, that I should really go on in music. He's said to people that he really thought a lot of me as a student. I can say that openly. I think the direction I took, ultimately, did not please him originally. I think, now, possibly yes. He went to every concert I ever did at Roulette, The Kitchen, all but the Knitting Factory, I think. He and [Helen](#) were always there. They always sat in the front row and embarrassed me. [*laughs*] I'm touched by this. This is not their cup of tea—the performance style and the directions I took, especially the more tonal ones. But I think Elliott realized that I was just taking my world of music on its own course, and he respected that.

FRANK J. OTERI: And have you kept up with his compositions?

ALVIN CURRAN: Yes, yes. In fact, I'm actually writing a memorial piece for Helen, who I loved dearly. To do that I'm actually going to quote a little from Carter's *Night Fantasies*. It might be backwards or upside down, but he'll recognize it. [*laughs*] He can decodify anything.

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to talk about some of your other compositional heroes early on. You mentioned Cage, and I'm also thinking of people like Cardew, who was one of your contemporaries. And [Giacinto Scelsi](#), who was an important person for you a little later, once you established yourself in Europe. What was their impact on your music and what was your connection to them on a personal level, as a colleague?

ALVIN CURRAN: Actually, Carter invited me and Frederic Rzewski to come to Berlin for a year with him. After that year in Berlin in '65, I hopped in [Joel Chadabe's](#) Volkswagen and we drove to Rome, just two American kids looking for adventure. Joel knew Rome very well. He knew [Franco Donatoni](#). He knew Scelsi. He knew a lot of people there. So, that's how my Rome life started, by pure chance. I just got into a car and drove to Rome from Berlin.

I met Cardew for the first time in Rome. I had just gotten there, and he was on a fellowship to study with

[Petrassi](#) and ultimately to write an orchestral piece that was played by the Radio Orchestra of Rome. And I ended up being Cornelius's copyist. In fact, the piece had a weird title – it was called *Bun*. [*laughs*] In this period, I was very close to Cornelius, and then of course Cornelius already was a very close friend of Frederic Rzewski, who came to Rome the following year.

So, Cornelius had a very, very strong mentoring effect on me. Again, I wasn't a kid lost at sea in Rome, but I was looking around, looking in all these directions and especially the directions and magnetism of the classical avant-garde and the post-classical, namely the Fluxus movement, chance music, the whole Cage story—all of these things I didn't know about, quite honestly. I was a sheltered kid coming out of Yale. Believe me, really sheltered. Blinded, you might say. We were blinded by the road signs that pointed from Milton Babbitt's office in Princeton to Elliott's office in Yale [*laughs*]. I mean, that was it. These were conscripted times and conscripted behaviors.

On the one hand Cardew became a very strong force because of his conceptual rigor and profoundly revolutionary spirit—I didn't understand that it had to do with the social and spiritual, I didn't get that yet, but there was something really powerful about Cornelius. Furthermore, he was an amazingly expressive musician, in his composing, his written works, and his conceptual pieces, graphic pieces, and all kinds of things. He was really someone who opened up amazing chapters to me—again, someone slightly older who I could feel very close to, not someone who I had to admire at a distance.

Now, Scelsi was a kind of a mentor for the whole foreign community of musicians who came to Rome. Since he, himself, was an outsider in his own society, in his own musical environment, he only conspired with other outsiders, namely the foreigners: the young kooks like Frederic or myself that happened to be living there, or much more prominent ones like Cage and Feldman who were coming to Rome all the time in that period. Earle Brown as well.

Scelsi had a regular salon in the real, old 19th-century sense of the word. People went to his place in the late afternoon and had a tea, sat and talked. Then he also had regular parties and dinners. But his salon, as it were, was a real meeting place in Rome and a very important part of my life. Of course Scelsi was off on this spiritual quest which started very early in his life and was consolidated by many travels to India, to the far east, to central Asia, to all kinds of places looking for the great meaning of everything. And above all, focusing on music making practices, which later, of course, were very influential in his own composition, namely, microtonal music and music in and around one note, which he's quite famous for. So, this was an added feature in my early musical education, an exposure to a whole world of eastern philosophy and practice. That had a great influence on me. Scelsi was a very, very open and enthusiastic supporter and came to all my concerts in Rome even right up to the very last one I gave just a few days before he died.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

ALVIN CURRAN: This was in the summer time, and he was such a nut about being outdoors. He was there in a fur coat and a fur hat. It was an outdoor concert. He waved from a distance, beautiful sparking eyes and smile that he always had, and that's the last time I saw him.

FRANK J. OTERI: And Cage?

ALVIN CURRAN: Yeah, the Cage story, another marvelous stream in my life. Again, all of these encounters were incredibly important moments of validation, because you're always saying, 'What the hell am I doing this for? Who needs this? Who needs this music? Who needs to go out and play for fifteen people? Who needs this crazy way of making music and all of these sounds, researching and looking and digging for it in all of the minds of geology?' It was the older generation who had already paid their dues to some extent and were still paying them heavily, who could see younger ones coming up behind and doing what was right: not pushing them, but inviting them into that world and making that world a real home, a real comfort space, a real space of communication.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's that fabulous anecdote after Cage and [Feldman](#) met. Early on, Cage asking Feldman how he wrote a certain piece for string quartet, Feldman saying he didn't know, and Cage's response, "Well, that's beautiful!" I thought about that comment in connection to some of your work that I was listening to, the question of compositional structures and rigor—composition with a capital "C," as you said—versus intuition.

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, intuition is my middle name, and because I don't use systems, because I am definitively a non-rigorous, non-theoretical person, I'm more like a kind of Rousseau animal in nature. I just smell and go to that. I'm always out there listening. New York has a special sound, which comes into a lot of pieces of mine.

Beyond Academic Battlegrounds

ALVIN CURRAN: My very first meeting with Cage took place when I was student at Yale. People had been urging the music department to invite John Cage because he was only a few miles away at Wesleyan University at the time. It was as good as asking them to invite an open can of the Botulism virus into the University, so that never happened, but magically though the dean of the philosophy department was a good friend of Cage's and invited him to do a concert. So they produced one of the pieces of Cage's with eleven record players, *Imaginary Landscapes*.

FRANK J. OTERI: You hear so many of these stories now. I studied composition at Columbia at the tail end of all of this. I was at a symposium at the centenary of [Varèse](#) and somebody mentioned [Alvin Lucier](#) and there were loud boos in the audience.

ALVIN CURRAN: [laughs] I love it!

FRANK J. OTERI: It's absolutely amazing now to think about. There's this legendary story of the first [Bang on a Can](#) festival where they programmed both [Steve Reich](#) and [Milton Babbitt](#). They both showed up, but they each walked out before for each other's pieces, so as not to 'be there.' New music has historically been a divided kingdom, but you bring it all together...

ALVIN CURRAN: I do have these threads through all of this stuff. I am not a product of the uptown music world, but in a way I am as comfortable in the uptown music world as I am in any music world. I know what the score is. I know how that stuff is done. I know where it's coming

from and maybe even why, but it's not my way of proceeding on my musical journey. On the other hand, I wouldn't for a minute refuse an invitation into that world because why should I? I'm part of that, just as you say.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in terms of teaching—you taught for years at Mills—could you imagine wanting to keep somebody from talking to your class?

ALVIN CURRAN: Absolutely not. On the contrary, I would go out of my way to find people who are contrary to my views, or contrary to the Mills directions, or the experimental music history or whatever you want to define it as. Nobody has taken me up on it yet, but I've always insisted that [John Adams](#), who lives just down the street, should come and talk to the students at Mills. Tell these students how you can make a success writing symphonic music today, or orchestral music or opera. I mean, it's stuff that none of these students would ever think of, but why shouldn't they?

FRANK J. OTERI: If a student came to you, writing at this point totally rigorous, total serial music with serial rhythms and serial pitches and serial everything. How would you respond to that?

ALVIN CURRAN: With loving care, because I know that music inside out. I was spoon-fed that music, or force-fed it, actually. I drank out of a flask of retrograde inversion. I would make the student aware, however, that there's a lot of good use you can put that musical style to. You just have to widen your context, widen your picture frame. I would attempt that. If there was no response to that, then I don't see why a piece of rigorous 12-tone music couldn't be a great piece of music today, just like any other.

Improvisation

FRANK J. OTERI: To get down to the other side of this equation: the capitol "I," the improvisational world. What was your exposure to jazz early on? What was its impact on the directions you took later on?

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, I think it's like the history of so many American musicians, which is grounded and founded in American popular music of whatever era. I grew up in a musical family. My father was a part-time professional with his own dance band, sang in the synagogue and in community choirs. So from a very early age I was playing dance band music, and then with my friends we were playing jazz—first forming Dixieland bands, then West Coast/[Gerry Mulligan](#)-style type bands, and then later into [Miles Davis](#) and [Coltrane](#) and so on. As a kid I was a very avid follower of all of the new directions, especially around Miles and [Monk](#). I would come down from Providence, or New Haven, or wherever and go to clubs here in New York, or in Boston. I saw all of these great artists many, many times live.

FRANK J. OTERI: Did you ever make any contact with them?

ALVIN CURRAN: No, my contact came with the second or third-generation—people like [Anthony Braxton](#), [Leo Smith](#), and [George Lewis](#)—it became a community of musicians that we all worked together with.

In any case, I came from the fundamentals of structured and codified forms of improvisation in the jazz world or in the popular music world, which made it easy for me to become an improviser in general. Even back when I was 15 or 16 years old, somehow this cell of making music spontaneously was already in me. I just had it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you talked about Cage not being invited to Yale, being the equivalent of bacteria in a can being let loose. As radical as it would have been to invite Cage to Yale at that point, what about inviting Thelonious Monk to Yale at that point?

ALVIN CURRAN: Oh my God, that would have been unthinkable.

FRANK J. OTERI: And what's weird about that being unthinkable is that Mel Powell was there, and [Mel Powell was a jazz pianist](#).

ALVIN CURRAN: Yeah, he was a jazz pianist, but he renounced that and all that went with it. He somehow re-whitened himself. Mel was a loving, beautiful, admirable person. I used to love his stride jazz playing with [Benny Goodman](#). But somehow there was a point when he turned his back on it, at least in the persona that he presented as a teacher at Yale in those days. And furthermore, even though Monk comes right out of the great stride piano tradition, I don't think Mel would have been interested. Maybe if you said [Earl Hines](#) or [Oscar Peterson](#). Maybe. I think Monk was too far out, strangely enough, for someone who had gone from that world to the world of Milton Babbitt. It's really unusual.

FRANK J. OTERI: But now you can hear a connection between these things. You can hear the connection between Monk and Babbitt and [Sun Ra](#) and Cage.

ALVIN CURRAN: Oh, it's there. I think Babbitt is completely grounded in American popular music, the music of Broadway, jazz, blues and so on. I've always said of [Arnold Schoenberg](#): you scratch beneath any page of Arnold Schoenberg, and you find a Viennese waltz. I think the same is true of Milton Babbitt, [Don Martino](#), any of these composers. It's in their blood. *[laughs]*

Playing "The Whole World"

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, how did a piece like *Magnetic Garden* happen?

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, by attentive, loving years of gathering ambient sounds. I just recorded everything around me. Going everywhere, looking for stuff. Going to weird places. Staying up at night and waiting for some sound that I knew was out there, that was going to happen at that hour. Looking for particular flocks of birds that take off. It was practice of my own investigation and research into embracing natural sound as a form of living music and then composing with that sound. It would be a difference, let's say, from using watercolor technique and watercolor material in one form of composition to sculpting in stone. There's absolutely nothing that connects the two.

The use of natural sound is such a thrilling medium and one that was so inherently natural to me. I realized immediately that I was composing, as it were, how a photographer or a filmmaker thinks and works, with almost completely extant and existing compositions—that is, whole blocks of recorded time, whole documents of a site or a moment in time. To go back to my self-definition as an obsessive contrapuntalist, I am layering, and layering, and layering. In those layers—blending and fading in and out, crossing each other, mixing, contaminating—in all of these things lies the practice of a contrapuntal composer. Not an [Ockeghem](#), but a modern-day one who's painting with pure color.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to bound off of something else you just said, I find this such a wonderful irony that the way to create music using nature is with technology, with electronics, which almost seems like the opposite thing.

ALVIN CURRAN: Indeed. But I don't think anyone has run into a contradiction because of the technology that is necessary in acquiring or embracing the use of natural sounds. Today, for example, I'm able to program an 88-note keyboard with about 1,000 samples. Imagine, conceptually imagine, as I improvise with these. I don't know where every one is. Sometimes there are three per note depending on how hard I hit the key. I imagine that I can play the whole world, so that the whole world is literally under my fingers. I've got mating bison over here, and loons over here, hyenas over here, human beings making love here, [Steve Lacy](#) over here, [Pauline Oliveros](#) over... You know, all my friends and family. I've got [Zorn](#) screaming over here, gorillas here...

FRANK J. OTERI: Did you get permission to use that Zorn clip? He's very touchy about that stuff. *[laughs]*

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, we just mastered it yesterday, so he had no choice. He loved it! *[laughs]*

Being American

FRANK J. OTERI: Your comment about Babbitt, Martino, and all of these composers as having this American-ness in their blood, so to speak, as opposed to Schoenberg having Viennese waltzes in his blood... This is an interesting concept coming from a composer for who, for most of the year at least, is an expatriate himself.

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, first of all I never liked the word though I have come to understand that it is not so negative anymore, that is, to use it and apply it to oneself. To me the word expatriate had meanings of the Gertrude Steins and the Hemingways and so on in the '20s and '30s. The Ezra Pounds that went to Europe and got acculturated, or got more Americanized, even. I've lived nearly 40 years in Italy, and it's been 40 years of joyous living. The great part of my creative life took place during these years. My creative life is continuing there now, together with my bicoastal American life, which is part in California with stops in New York all the time. My sense of myself is 'I'm an American composer.' And I'm not waving the stars and stripes here. It's a recognition which is the most truthful and the most profound for me. My European years have made that all the more true and made me all the more aware of it.

There is a vast difference in sensibility, style, approach, and in concept that exists among American artists and our European colleagues. There are places we just don't connect. We don't communicate. They don't get it. [Minimalism](#), for example, was a blatant example of that. The success and the obvious power of American minimalism in the late '60s and '70s and '80s did not sow one damned seed in any composer in Europe. Maybe a couple here and there, but it did not take off. Nor did the whole mystery and magic of Cage's [chance concept](#). Cage was an amazingly powerful figure in Europe—but the music did not leave many traces. It didn't have this natural, fertile ground from which to grow like it does here—or it might not now for a few years. I think people may be overdosed. My students get nervous when the name Cage comes up now. They don't want to hear about it anymore. It's an overmyth. I'm just making that up, I don't know what an overmyth is! But there's too much.

However it may be, those distinctions are noticeable to me. These are two of the most American inventions, not to mention the [Harry Partchs](#) and the [Nancarrow](#)s—the real outsider music, total outsider music which has no counterpart whatsoever in Europe with a few exceptions. One is [Giuseppe Chiari](#) who lives in Florence. He's a real outsider/Fluxus nut and someone who's been

an inspiration to me, as well as a great friend. But there are very few exceptions. You can count them on a few fingers.

FRANK J. OTERI: In a sense, [Stockhausen](#) was a total outsider.

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, he's become an outsider in his own country. He's so active and so much his own person. He's loved and reviled. I mean, I'm talking about reviled by people who studied or worked with him, people he might have taken advantage of, ripped off, or had bad relations with. Now, John Cage was loved or avoided, but to my knowledge he wasn't reviled, except by the academic community. The Stockhausen story is very, very complex, but it's one that I come back to from time to time because Stockhausen was a figure who's had a very, very powerful force in my early compositional formation.

Being Jewish

FRANK J. OTERI: Another cultural characteristic that I want to talk about that seeps through a number of your compositions is your Jewish heritage. It comes up in titles of works like "Why is Tonight Different From Any Other Night," which is—anybody who hasn't sat through a seder might not know what that refers to, right? [*laughs*] Or even the *Schtetl Variations* or [Crystal Psalms](#).

ALVIN CURRAN: Look, in a nutshell I can give you a little soundbyte on that because 'I never really meant to show my Jewish roots.' I say that both ironically and seriously. All of these pieces incidentally come out of the mid-'80s. It's a whole series culminating with *Crystal Psalms* in 1988—not that it's finished. I think these works were a necessary part of a personal reflection and recognition, catalyzed without willing—just by simply living in Berlin, period. As Morty Feldman once said, you can hear them calling out from under the sidewalks. It's something you have to deal with. If my way is through music...I don't know what it means, because the music has to stand on its own. It can't lean on this crutch of exile or tragedy or whatever.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in terms of standing on its own and then the impact; when I think of pieces that are really, really powerful memorials about the Holocaust, that really talk about this in a musical way, the two pieces that keep popping back in my head are Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, and your *Crystal Psalms*. These are two pieces that are just absolutely vivid and they work as music, but they work as music because of the context as well.

ALVIN CURRAN: Absolutely, and it would be silly to deny that. I mean, once I was attacked for this very thing by a German philosopher who said I was stirring up memories, and that has nothing to do with the music. I argued that a piece of music like this can be created in two ways. One is from the heart, because it has to be done. It's a purely emotional and artistic response. The second is when I can stand back and look at this musical object, as pure music devoid of any meaning, just like an abstract painting.

FRANK J. OTERI: I've been thinking to myself—now we're going to get political—that there's all this 9/11 music. As a composer, I won't go near it. And a lot of composers I know won't. How do you deal with a subject like this in music, with the Holocaust or with 9/11?

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, for one thing you need distance. The Holocaust is not less tragic because of the more than 50 years of space between us and it. I came to this work at the right point in my life and it was a moment of meditated creation. The 50th anniversary of [Kristallnacht](#) was coming up. I went to various radio producers in Europe and I said, 'I have this idea. I would like to create a unified concert hall throughout all of Europe with hundreds of musicians playing with other musicians who they don't even see or hear, connected by radio as a memorial event for this occasion.' The project was ingenious. It was typically me. It was right in every way. It was

accepted and it was a remarkable co-production with six radio stations, six European countries, and a lot of wonderful musicians playing at once.

For me, it would just be personally unthinkable to make a 9/11 piece. I just couldn't even though I heard the first plane fly over Fifth Avenue. I felt very much involved, in that I was here that day, but it would be unthinkable to jump in, because it's just too immense.

Beauty

FRANK J. OTERI: There was a whole period in the '70s where you did these solo works involving all different kinds of sound, and then a bunch of chamber music and solo piano pieces. There's your trio for violin, piano, and percussion, *Schtyx*, and the string quartet, and the piece for [Rova](#).

ALVIN CURRAN: Well, *Schtyx* is, I can openly say, one of my favorite, favorite pieces of all time. It's only been played once by the [Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio](#), produced by the now defunct CRI. It's going to be coming out again on [New World Records](#).

This was a piece for violin, percussion, and piano—straight ahead, you know, anybody's anytime universal chamber music. And, I bring my own language and my own antics into this music—and it is a piece full of antics. It actually starts with Willy Winant, at least in the original performance, pushing a sofa across the floor, creating these squeaks and squeals and rumbles. There are a lot of gestures and ideas that really come from the old MEV improvisations where we'd walk into a room and start moving furniture around. It wasn't Satie's furniture music, but it was this concept, this neo-primitive little 1968 utopia of being able and ready at any moment to make a piece of music with anything, and that's where all of this stuff comes from.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'd like to talk about the remarkable solo piano pieces, the *Inner Cities* series, and what I like to call dysfunctional tonality. [*laughs*]

ALVIN CURRAN: Yes, very, very dysfunctional.

FRANK J. OTERI: I really identify with it as a composer and as a listener. I think it really is music that's not afraid to be beautiful, but that at the same time isn't encumbered by the obsessive directionality of European rationality in the past.

ALVIN CURRAN: This leads back to, again, what I call the new common practice. In the new common practice, you can do anything, you can speak any language, and you can speak multiple languages. I have this need to at once, and in the same space, and sometimes in the same moment be sweet and sour, be incredibly, openly tonal and harmonic and openly, plainly in the Schubertian sense, beautiful. There's the other beautiful. There's the Morty Feldman beautiful. Morty, for me, is the source: The one composer that could do those things at every moment in his pieces. On the surface you're going to hear more European music that's coming from the great [Webern](#) tradition, but there's some other thing going on there. You don't even know what it is! [*sings*] It's three, four semi-tones over and over until you want to shut the thing off. And yet, there's *something*. I mean this obsessive melody is some sort of molecular torture, getting into the molecules of the essence of melody.

FRANK J. OTERI: I hear *Clarinet and String Quartet* or *Piano and String Quartet* or even *For Samuel Beckett* and I go, 'Wow! He really understood what the emancipation of the dissonance meant.' Here, you have this system that liberates music from directionality, and all these guys were so busy trying to keep it going with directionality, this European idea. Just let it be!

ALVIN CURRAN: Let it be, exactly. Morty really liberated the 12 notes. Not Arnold.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you hear this, and all the 12 notes are equal, but it's beautiful! And it doesn't go anywhere, but why does it have to?! It's great where it is, *[laughs]* for six hours!

ALVIN CURRAN: Talking about six hour pieces, my first experience with a six hour piece—actually, no, it was five and a half hours—was *Einstein On The Beach*. That was a terrific experience. Philip *[Glass]*'s piece, in the original Bob Wilson production, was absolutely a knockout. Time didn't matter.

But when I heard Morty's second String Quartet in Darmstadt, the very first performance—with Morty snoring in the front row by the way. Let's tell the truth. Everyone was afraid to wake him up! But listen, this piece... you could have snored for ten hours and come back for more. I mean, this was an abundant gift! This is music as a gift. He is giving you something. All music has to give you something, but this was so generous. Of course you could go out and come back, and of course they would be playing the same *[sings]*. The same little melodic cell would still be there, maybe slightly different. But this piece blew me away. Not because of the dimension, not the six hours—what do you care? You know, it was an event! It was someone who'd gone to the ultimate stage in their musicmaking, which took them to this radical place where there are no beginnings and no endings. Where time stops. Where it doesn't matter how much you hear. And if you come in and you missed the middle two hours and only heard the first hour and the last two, so what? It's still a terrific piece of music. It's a monument.

FRANK J. OTERI: Which is why I think Feldman's music works so remarkably well on recordings. Maybe even more than it does in the concert hall. As with a lot of your pieces, I know most of them through recordings and certainly many of the pieces would have difficult ongoing lives in the concert hall both in terms of resources and duration. But then, with some of the earlier stuff, like the *Musica Elettronica Viva* recordings, I feel, 'Gee, I wish I was there for it,' because I'm not sure it translates onto the record.

ALVIN CURRAN: Yeah. You're right. It's in a way a period piece where you really have to have some olfactory input as well as sonic. You've gotta smell this stuff. You've gotta be in these dank, funky underground cellars somewhere in Rome or Brussels, you know, where people are screaming their brains out and making this crazy feedback and stuff.

FRANK J. OTERI: But of course for us in this day and age, the way new music is disseminated is through recordings. That's it. There are concerts, certainly, but Cage and Feldman are prime examples of this. They're living on through their recordings. The orchestras and the big chamber music groups aren't presenting their music.

ALVIN CURRAN: No, that would be death to their season. Though, you know, Michael Tilson Thomas gave a very nice presentation of one of *The Viola in My Life* pieces on the regular season. Those things sneak in every once in a while, but they're very rare on the normal concert series. There was an interesting article last Sunday in the *Times* about the difference between the new Los Angeles Philharmonic and their tendency now to encourage more contemporary, living composers compared to the New York Philharmonic program which has remained very, very staid and classical.

FRANK J. OTERI: When I talked to Fred Rzewski, he said abolish the symphony orchestra.

ALVIN CURRAN: Yeah, well, Fred was always a little more radical than I am, but we're thinking along the same lines. I'm not saying abolish them. No. On the contrary, I would love to know that every night I could go and listen to a Beethoven symphony somewhere. But on the other hand, it is depressing to know that every night, it's only Beethoven symphonies and that as a living

composer, you don't have a chance in hell to get your music in there. Or so little chance that it really doesn't count. Something is wrong with the equation and that has to change. If the orchestra world has to support itself and continue as a pure museum piece, then that's fine. You know, museums are great. We stand there in awe of these great paintings as we do of the great European masters in music. But it is a real disservice to living music to have created such a gap, such an abyss in time by not paying attention to the people making music today, and with very few exceptions to discourage many young composers who possibly could enter that world.

FRANK J. OTERI: So last question for you, would you want to write for symphony orchestra?

ALVIN CURRAN: Absolutely.

FRANK J. OTERI: I would love to hear that.

ALVIN CURRAN: I would love to hear it, too. *[laughs]*