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NewMusicBox

The Inside Story: Stephen Scott talks with Frank J. Oteri

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Like much of the music I love, Stephen Scott's music first entered my life on an LP. It was over 20 years ago, when I was a DJ at Columbia University's radio station WKCR. Stephen Scott's LP, New Music for Bowed Piano, arrived in the mail with two others—one featuring music by Ingram Marshall, the other by Paul Dresher—all on a record label I had never heard of before called New Albion. In the years since, I've actively followed the careers of all three, both as a listener and someone who writes about music. I've talked with Ingram for NewMusicBox and I've written program notes about Paul Dresher. But, until now, I was never able to verbally catch up with Stephen Scott until he came to visit us at the American Music Center.

In some ways, Stephen Scott is the most methodical of these three postminimalist composers who all made minimalism less methodical in very different ways. Not in terms of compositional techniques, but in terms of his sonic vocabulary: all of his work on recordings and most of the music he composes is for his own ensemble of musicians who bow, hammer, scrape, and do any number of other activities inside a grand piano.

To this day, aside from this brief video of his piece *Entrada*, I've never "seen" his music live. Live performances of his music are not so easy to come by due to specialization involved, but every recording that's ever come out has been in heavy rotation at home. I'm a huge fan so I had a million questions to ask him about minute details of how this music is conceived and executed. This talk gets very detailed—sort of an everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-the-insides-of-a-piano-and-weren't-afraid-to-ask approach—and, as such, is a bit of an indulgence. But I think it's an indulgence worth indulging. Listen to the music and watch the video, and you'll find yourself asking some of the questions I did.

-FJO

The Physical Process

FJO: Your music is uniquely communal, but of course any music played by more than one person is communal.

SS: I always say that too.

FJO: But the idea of all these people huddled over a single instrument seems without precedent.

SS: I can think of some smaller precedents, but I think this particular size of group and size of instrument—the closeness and intensity—is probably precedent-making, or was years ago when I started doing this. However, on the smaller level there's a xylophone tradition in Mexico where four guys will play two on each side of the xylophone. We thought it was a big deal when Steve Reich was doing that in the '70s, but that's actually a pretty old folk tradition. I can't think of anything on the scale of what we do, particularly because we all move around. We don't stay stationary. So we are sharing the same part of the instrument at different times.

FJO: There are Native American traditional drum dances where a group interacts with one large drum.

SS: But in Western historical concert music there aren't precedents; I can't think of any.

FJO: There's piano four-hand music, but that's hardly a comparison to what you're doing. You're really doing piano twenty-hand music.

SS: Sometimes I liken this to what it might be like in a string quartet performance if you're the violist and I trade instruments with you, or I take your chair, or I borrow your bow for awhile, or I take your music stand. Multiple people are handling the same devise or the same area of the piano at different times—sometimes at the same time, and then it's really crowded.

FJO: Are there ever any soloists?

SS: No, not really, I guess, except for what I've been doing lately with vocal solos. But a lot of it is individually recognized parts, certainly.

FJO: You call it the bowed piano ensemble, but that's not a completely accurate description for it because it's not just bowing; there are many other kinds of sound activities going on.

SS: To start with, everything was literally bowed in the first pieces except there was one anomaly where we used something that was the equivalent of having 12 EBows on a chromatic octave on the piano in a piece called *Resonant Resources*. Except for that, all the ensemble-played pieces were done using nylon fishing line drawn under the string or horsehair on a stick rubbed against the string. Both are kinds of bows. So, originally, the Bowed Piano Ensemble seemed like the thing to call it and it stuck. I have resisted calling it The Bowed, Plucked, Rubbed, and Struck Piano or The Thoroughly Extended Piano or The Total Piano, which people have suggested, but it sounds a little bit pretentious.

FJO: What is the basic tool kit for you?

SS: I still consider the bows a basic tool, especially the nylon fishing line. I do still use what I call the rigid bows and my friends and I are developing new kinds. The other basic tools that we use frequently are guitar picks and/or fingernails, but those steel strings are very hard and very taut. I've got a fingernail split from the rehearsal yesterday. I couldn't find a pick—somebody had moved it—so I just started plucking with my fingernail. You can do that but it's tough. It's a lot harder than finger picking on a banjo or a guitar. We use piano hammers we just discovered by accident. We found a box of piano hammers in a piano shop that had been taken out and new hammers had been put in, so we started experimenting with handheld piano hammers. It's a great technique. You can use the felt end of it, which is the way a piano is normally played when you hit the key, or you can turn it around and use the wood which is the counterbalance on the other side. I call that col legno 'cause it's like the playing with the wood on a violin or a cello bow. I use some much older techniques like Henry Cowell's "Aeolian Harp" technique, where you depress certain keys to raise the dampers and then you strum the strings. There are places where that works quite effectively compositionally.

FJO: Any "Banshee" kind of techniques like rubbing fingers across the string?

SS: Occasionally we'll use that a little bit, especially in some of the improvised sections.

FJO: Do you ever prepare the piano?

SS: Not in the Cageian sense of adding stuff to or between the strings with one little exception and that's mutes. We invented a whole kind of piano mute that we make from a secret formula and we form this on to the string. But it remains elastic so you can take it off, but it has a memory and it will remember that particular string when you put it back on and mute the sound. So anytime I use this on the keyboard, that's a kind of preparation, I guess.

FJO: How'd you get the bird sounds in *Paisajes Audibles*?

SS: The strings on a piano have bridges on both ends. The string is strung between two points as on a violin between the bridge and the nut. But, as everyone knows who plays the violin and guitar, after the bridge there's still some string. They're not tuned rationally or in some way that you would care about because you're playing in between those two other points on the string, but you can use the other parts. That's what that is, on the very high end, the top octave of the piano, toward the keyboard from the bridge.

FJO: It was so authentic sounding. Even my cat, who couldn't care less about most music, but is always unsuccessfully trying to chase birds thought it was a bird and went nuts!

SS: I never even thought of that as a bird sound but I will from now on. Just last week we discovered a new way of bowing the strings. It was actually my assistant who came up with the idea. I was trying to get them to use a particular technique to produce a new kind of sound and it just wasn't working. There's a thing I call a rigid bow which is a flat piece of wood—it's a tongue depressor in fact. And it has horsehair tied and glued to one side, or both sides if I want to use two adjacent pitches. And it's rosined and that's rubbed against the strings. But it makes a very short, choppy, staccato kind of sound and I used a lot of that in my earlier pieces. *Rainbows*, for example, used that technique. I don't use those as much anymore but I wanted kind of a lilting sound with a beginning but not an end. In other words, with a long ring, but still a kind of bowed attack; the kind of stuff you can do with an EBow on a guitar very easily, but not so easily on the piano, although I know some people who have done it. Anyway, these little tongue depressors with horsehair tied and glued on them weren't working. My assistant, who is a member of the ensemble and does a lot of technical work for me, just went and got a piece of Plexiglas that was lying around because she had been making some other stuff that we make out of Plexiglas, and ruffed it up with some sandpaper, and took it in and *rrruhing*. It was just the sound that I was looking for. You know, we all applauded and said, okay now we want 12 more of those for the next rehearsal. So there's always new stuff that's evolving and I don't always think of it; it's often members of the group.

FJO: What about the physical stamina needed to play this music? I have back trouble so I think about this all the time.

SS: So do I.

FJO: I know why!

SS: Believe it or not I had back trouble before I started doing this. I'm actually like a lot of people, when you get to a certain age sometimes the back trouble goes away. But I still get a little lower back pain sometimes, and members of the ensemble, even younger players, have it too.

FJO: Playing a piece like *Rainbows* is probably OK for your back, but something like *Vikings of the Sunrise* which lasts over an hour seems a lot to ask.

SS: I think the most demanding part is the mental concentration. Generally speaking, I try to keep it this way so that no one person does something for so long that there's physical pain or extreme physical

discomfort. Sometimes that happens but then I'll modify it because I don't want to hurt people and they'll let me know if something is bothering them.

FJO: So if they do, you'll rework the score?

SS: I'll rework the instrumentation. I'll say, OK, at this point, so and so will take over to keep this figure going. There are ways to solve these problems. I've had a few people have problems with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome especially from repetitive stuff like using these little sticks. That can cause injury and so I try to be sensitive to that. People have suggested that we hire a chiropractor as a regular member of the group but we haven't done that yet.

Influences and Precedents

FJO: How did you come to create such communal music? Did you grow up in a commune?

SS: [*laughs*] Well, I grew up in Oregon. So you know, maybe. No. Maybe it's not such a simple story. But I spent some time in Africa in 1970. Steve Reich was there at the same time and that's when I met him. He sort of mentored me a little bit—he's older than I am. We talked a lot about his compositional ideas. I was lucky enough to be taught by master drummers in Ghana who do polyrhythms where each person has a fairly simple part but the result is extraordinarily complex and impossible to count or beat. I was a part of that community experience of music making in Africa, where there's no division between performer and audience. Everyone is a performer. Everyone is participating. It's a very social and communal kind of thing. I was looking for some sort of communal music making device I guess. I was also, as a lot of people were back then, interested in music made of multiple players on the same instrument, like Robert Ceely's piece for 40 flutes, *Rituals*. There was a lot of that kind of stuff going on in the late '60s and early '70s. Purely by accident I discovered the sound of a sustained tone made from nylon fishing line on the piano in the work of C. Curtis-Smith who was writing solo pieces at the time. As part of his extended techniques, besides some of the usual inside the piano Cowell-esque stuff that was going on then, he had the performer, David Burge, take some fishing line and just run it under the string and draw it across to produce a sustained tone. As far as I know, that was his invention. There's some precedent in the last couple of centuries for bowed string instruments like hurdy-gurdy. There was a harpsichord maker in London that made a harpsichord with a bowed stop.

FJO: Before you had heard that sound of the bowed piano, what were you doing as a composer? What was your instrument?

SS: I was floundering. I went to graduate school in composition and I wrote the obligatory string quartet, some orchestra pieces. As a reed player I wrote clarinet pieces, that was my principle instrument, and saxophone eventually.

FJO: We recently did an issue on the symphonic wind band. Did you ever write wind band music?

SS: I did actually. I did one piece prior to discovering the bowed piano medium, but I was already much under the sway of Terry Riley and Steve Reich, so it was very repetitive and the clarinet section hated it because they had to go *diddle- diddle- diddle- diddle- diddle- diddle*, you know, that kind of stuff. It got one fairly decent performance.

FJO: Before you came to know Riley and Reich and what is now known as minimalism, growing up in Oregon, what were your earlier musical influences?

SS: Jazz mostly. I first really became aware of the world of music, besides maybe just tinkering around on the piano or playing a few chords on the guitar, when I was in junior high school. I discovered the jazz players, specifically Parker, Monk, Davis, Coltrane, and so on. And I played jazz. I learned to play and I played in a small group.

FJO: Playing clarinet and sax?

SS: I played saxophone entirely. At that point it was so unhip to play clarinet in jazz that nobody would touch it. Fortunately, that is not the case anymore.

FJO: Yeah, thanks to Don Byron.

SS: Yeah, Don Byron, among others, but especially Don Byron. When Parker came around everybody thought they had to play alto or tenor or something like that. At least that was my perception of it. I grew up in a small town in Oregon, but it was a university town so Bay Area culture would filter north and we would get a little bit of it. So I have quite a bit of jazz in my background. I think you can hear it in my music through the harmonic structures and some rhythmic devices that I use.

FJO: Who were some of the people you studied music with?

SS: My first composition teacher was a guy named Homer Keller at the University of Oregon. He had studied with Howard Hanson and had a degree from Eastman. He was not well known, but he was a really fine composer. But the more I've thought about it, the more I have concluded that Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis were my composition teachers, and then Bill Evans and Gil Evans especially. Then I spent awhile at Brown. I studied with Ron Nelson and Gerald Shapiro. I studied electronic music. You know, Moog IIIP analog synthesizers.

FJO: That's very interesting because the bowed piano sonorities sometimes sound like they're electronically generated. It's so otherworldly sounding. But I think you make a real point that your music is in no way electronic. In fact, your own publishing company name is Adigital Music. I know it refers to the fact that you're not actually touching the piano, but there's also this acoustic connotation as well.

SS: A lot of us in my generation and maybe slightly older than my generation who spent time in electronic music eventually saw more and more of its limitations and shortcomings. The resonance of the instrument, the resonance of the grand piano with the pedal down and the soundboard vibrating, is just really hard to match. The experience of being right over that and hearing that, as a lot of people know and have discovered, to me it's much more fun and attractive. I just gradually stopped doing electronic stuff. You know there was never the right patch chord that had the right ends.

FJO: So, what originally became a neat idea for a piece that extended a C. Curtis-Smith idea became a lifelong obsession. I mean, you and the bowed piano are sort of synonymous. I can't image a Stephen Scott wind quintet.

SS: [*laughs*] There are a few, but you might not want to listen to them.

Compositional Aesthetics and Strategies

FJO: All of the bowed piano music you've done feels somehow interrelated; it builds upon itself and connects in ways that is not true for most composers. Do you think of your music as individual compositions meant to exist autonomously, or is it a continuous body of work that keeps evolving?

SS: I guess I like to have it both ways, because when you perform a piece on a concert or it's heard on the radio or whatever, it more or less stands by itself, particularly if the people listening don't know all the other work. I would be vain if I thought that many people know what I have done beside myself, maybe a few friends. But certainly I can look back and see a long progression, as you say, the work building upon itself. One of the most exciting ways that that happens is I have players doing things now that eight years ago the players would not have considered possible, and I wouldn't have considered it possible. And fifteen years ago the things that were happening eight years ago were inconceivable. For example, playing very fast melodies with 16th and 32nd notes and using both hands for ornaments with pieces of nylon, and one person playing a note in hocket. Well, it takes five people to play a simple melody of five notes. That's just an example, but each group gets better than the last group.

FJO: Do you ever find yourself going back to the older works and touching them up?

SS: I haven't done that. Well, for example, on the program we're putting together for a tour in the spring, we're doing an old piece. We're doing *Rainbows*, which was from 1981. It wasn't the earliest, but it was one of the earliest pieces. I hadn't listened to it for a long time and then I listened to it on a CD and I thought it still stands by itself. So it will be a nice foil for this new vocal piece that I'm making which also has a lot of what I consider advanced techniques. But I don't go back and rewrite those pieces. There's one piece that we let drop for a while; it wasn't in our repertoire. It was called *Arcs*. It's a piece that's on the same recording as *Rainbows*, but was not on the original vinyl release. I brought that back into our repertoire at one point and I thought I could improve it compositionally. So I did make some changes. I added a long sort of coda section which brings back some material that had happened earlier.

FJO: So it's different than what's on the recording?

SS: No, the recorded version is actually the more recent one. I composed that piece in 1980 and I think I revised it in 1985.

FJO: The revisions that you're addressing are compositional rather than technical. What if someone came up with a new way of producing a sound that would work better than the sound that's in the version that you wrote when you wrote it because you didn't know that sound was there?

SS: [laughs] I guess I wouldn't rule that out, but I guess part of the excitement for me is when I discover some new sonic material to see what it suggests compositionally rather than the other way around, rather than reorchestrating another piece.

FJO: The earliest pieces for bowed piano, like *Rainbows* and what came before that, really do seem like etudes in those techniques. This is something that can be done and here it is; listen to it happen. But then you started doing larger pieces that seem to be about much more than that. Bowed piano is the medium but it's not an end in itself. *Minerva's Web* and *The Tears of Niobe*, for example, seem to be about how a minor second expands into larger intervals, and you can hear it.

SS: You have been listening haven't you!

FJO: Then in *Vikings*, there's a whole anthropological and historical narrative going on.

SS: Yeah, there is a sort of program to that.

FJO: What struck me when I read your notes was how deeply researched they were beyond the music. How important was that narrative to the music you wrote? Which came first?

SS: Actually, that was exactly the inspiration I had. I have been working some in Australia and lived there for a while. I also did a couple of tours there with my ensemble so I got quite interested in James Cook because he's a national hero, at least among the white population.

FJO: Not among anyone else?

SS: He's a controversial figure everywhere. I got interested in the stories and I hadn't composed any of the music. I was actually just reading for my own pleasure because I'm interested in sailing and in navigation, especially. I learned about the traditional celestial navigation for the Polynesians through reading some book about James Cook. That really got me intrigued and excited, that there was an alternative to and maybe an older and in some ways more precise way of navigating that had come from the East. We think all of our wonderful navigational instruments like sextants, compasses, and the marine chronometer, the clock and all that stuff were so cool because they allowed Cook to find these places and know what his longitude was, but there was this ancient tradition that was an alternative. That got me really excited. Then I started reading books about Polynesian navigation. The more I read, the more this music started happening. I started composing the piece in my head as I was doing that reading.

FJO: So you compose music in your head?

SS: I do, but I'm not one of those people who can hear or claims to be able to hear everything in his or her head and then just write it down. Maybe partly because I have a background in singing and I'm a former wind player, I can hear a lot of stuff in my head. And because I was a jazz player, too. That's one thing jazz improvisers do. They hear it, either it's just before or as they're performing. I was never a great jazz player, but I have some competence in improvising on chord changes and all that. So I do get ideas in my head. I can't get them out of there until I notate them or figure out how I'm going to use them. Or I just write them down and forget about them, throw them in a heap and never use them.

FJO: Do you use standard Western notation? How does that work?

SS: Pretty much. Yeah.

FJO: So you're notating pitches and harmonies, but your music is all about timbre.

SS: Indeed. Well, I suppose in a way that would be similar to writing an orchestra piece. Sometimes I can see the sound that I want and then the melodic idea or the rhythmic idea will follow from that. I use the piano, by the way, to compose.

FJO: The keys of the piano?

SS: That's right. Well, I use the insides too. I sometimes compose in the abstract, just notes. Then I decide how to orchestrate it, just the way you might orchestrate a symphonic piece. Some orchestral composers don't work that way. They know what the timbre is when they hear it. But often it comes later.

FJO: So, since you'll have these ideas and then you'll flesh them out, do you ever come up with an idea for the ensemble that, given the nature of this ensemble, physically just doesn't work?

SS: Yes. And that's the great thing about rehearsing with your own ensemble, especially over a period of time. You can throw stuff out. You can recompose it during rehearsal. I do that often. It's easy for a player to say, "Oh, I can't do that. That can't be done. That hasn't been done before." And even these players who are automatically, by virtue of the fact that they're open, not about to say, "Oh, I can't play that high C on my bassoon," or whatever, they're just going to try to do it, and they'll say, "I can't do that." I try to somehow make it happen, or get them to make it happen.

FJO: So do you test an idea yourself before you throw it to other people?

SS: I do some. Some I don't.

FJO: Of course, you can't be 20 hands at once where this person needs to pass this person, like in a football game.

SS: Sure. There are those plays, like football plays almost, or choreography. Sometimes it's just literally not possible for a person to get from this end of the instrument to that end of the instrument in two beats to do something they have to do down there and they're the only person available to do it. Sometimes my ideas are just a little too impractical, so I'll make a change, but only when I'm forced to.

FJO: Do you always have an exact idea of what you want? Does any of this ever happen by chance? Someone will do something and there'll be a sort of an accidental thing and then that's kind of worked into the piece.

SS: Yes, definitely. I'm trying to think of a concrete example and I can't right off the bat. There are accidental sounds that are produced. I often do this myself. I still think of this as experimental, although that's a word fraught with difficulty, as we all know. I sometimes just go down into the studio where we have our own grand piano dedicated to this ensemble, a lovely luxury. There are so many places in the world where I wouldn't be able to do that. We have this beautiful room with a wood floor and a Baldwin piano, and that's mine. You know, I mean that it's mine for this work and that's great. So it's like my little laboratory in a sense. I'll go down and drop things on the strings. I'll do things to that piano that I wouldn't do to someone else's piano just because it's my piano, basically. So for example, the other day—we use magnets sometimes to fasten the nylon to make it taut, or to keep it out of the way of another piece of nylon, and we just put those on the frame, so they're not a musical device—but I started dropping those magnets on the strings, but also on the frame of the piano. Taking the magnets and just letting them go about two inches from the frame. Then they go *thunk*. As a lot of us know who work inside the piano, the steel frame inside, or the harp as it's called, is very resonant and has different pitches. Depending on what the length is and what sort of tension is on it and so forth, they're often played with mallets. George Crumb does a lot of that sort of stuff with mallets. But I discovered that this magnet makes a really beautiful sound. I haven't figured out how to use it yet. It was just an accident. I picked up magnets to move the bow that it was fastening down to the frame, and I let go of it and [*claps hands together*]. It wasn't like that. It was a beautiful, metallic, but almost drum-like sound at the same time—like a steal drum almost, without that finely honed sense of pitch. So, little accidents like that will sometimes materialize.

FJO: But there aren't any bowed piano improvisations, per se?

SS: Well, no. That's not exactly true. Even in *Vikings of the Sunrise*, but also in this newer recording of *Paisajes Audibles* there are a few improvised sections. It's pretty carefully controlled improvisation, but the details are left to the performers.

FJO: The details about specific pitches or about how they're played?

SS: Well, in one section that I'm thinking of in the *Paisajes Audibles* piece, the pitches are specified but not when they're played. So there's a little bit of an aleatoric character in it with the judgment of one player deciding when or how to respond to another player's part, but it's carefully controlled in terms of pitch. There's a section in *Vikings of the Sunrise* where there's a metric structure, but not all the details for the sounds, pitches if there are pitches, noises.

FJO: Is that the passage that sounds like a bunch of birds taking off?

SS: That's one of the figures—it's not really a figure because it's not set—but that's one of the kind of timbral/rhythmic devices I have going on.

FJO: Your compositions seem to gestate for a very long time or are there many more pieces than there are recordings?

SS: Not many more, but there are a few.

FJO: There seem to be eight year stretches between them. Is this how long something usually takes to reach completion?

SS: On the first recording, there's a span of maybe four years between the oldest and newest pieces. That was recorded in 1981. Recordings are fairly spread out. I was doing a new album every six to eight years. I think that's partly that the pieces take me a very long time. I'm slow. But it's also because I have other responsibilities. I teach.

FJO: You've also been creating big, ambitious pieces.

SS: They got bigger. There are a few pieces that aren't available on recording. There's one that I really hope could see the light of day, a collaborative piece we did with Terry Riley in 1990 with the ensemble essentially as accompanist to electric keyboard improvisations that Terry was doing in this just tuning that he developed.

FJO: Wow. So did you retune the bowed piano to the just intervals?

SS: We did. Terry did a piece around that time for the Kronos Quartet that was called *Crow's Rosary* and did some other pieces with this tuning he called the Rosary Tuning. It's a 13-limit just tuning, so you've got a lot of prime intervals in there. It's really gorgeous. So we did a live performance and then we made a recording of it. And Tom Lazarus, a long-time New Albion engineer, edited the recording and it's just kind of sitting there in limbo. But I'm hoping maybe during 2005, which is Terry's 70th birthday year, we'll either re-edit the piece, re-fashion it, or re-compose it, because neither of us was entirely happy with the way it ended up.

FJO: Now you say collaborative and improvised, but you can't really improvise in real time with the bowed piano since it involves the interaction of so many people.

SS: We did a little bit of improvisation, but most of what we were doing is what I would call orchestral textures. I composed some of those and he composed some of those. Or he'd jot down some ideas or send me a tape and then I'd orchestrate it. And then we spent a week together with the ensemble in rehearsal but also Terry and I just imagined this thing together, how it was going to move and work. It was really a collaborative composition which I know raises the hackles of a lot of people

FJO: One man: one work.

SS: Yup, there you go. I generally don't go in that route, either. But we just had something that was simpatico. I'd compose some texture, have the ensemble do a rough recording, send it to him and ask, "What do you think?" And he'd say: "I like this, I don't like that, or I started improvising over this in my studio and I think this is going to work."

Performance Realities

FJO: You have a piano that you work on, but when you travel around, you don't travel with that piano.

SS: No.

FJO: So you're provided with a piano. That becomes a tricky issue because every piano is a little bit different I would imagine.

SS: That's right. Different manufacturers create a different geography, so to speak, inside the piano. That doesn't matter so much to a performer who sticks to the keyboard, although the voicings and the sound is, of course, important. But traditional piano literature stops at the keyboard and it doesn't matter where the bracing is inside.

FJO: But for you, it makes quite a bit of difference.

SS: Yes. So we try to know as much about the pianos we're going to play when we tour as we can in advance. If it's an instrument I'm not familiar with—like a Petrof, which I first heard of ten years ago—then we'll ask for photographs of what it looks like inside. Some pianos have huge sound holes inside, big rectangular things. Bösendorfer has a little bit of that kind of structure. The bigger the sound holes are, the harder it is for us to deal with because those are traps for things to fall into and just get lost.

FJO: So are there certain pianos that just don't work for this music?

SS: I've never found one. As long as it's nine feet or close to it.

FJO: So these techniques wouldn't work on an upright?

SS: No. You can make some sounds but it's extremely awkward.

FJO: Does what you do ever damage a piano?

SS: No, and I have been very careful not to do that. In fact, I have some testimonial letters that I like to send to technicians at some venues who might be a little leery of this. I have a rule that we only use material coming into contact with the piano that's softer than what it's going to touch. So nylon on a steel string is not going to do anything. We use the frame of the piano sometimes with the hammers, but we use the felt side so it's very soft. It would be like using a yarn mallet on a percussion instrument. We try not to use the wood on the piano. I've never had a complaint after the fact so far. The only possible problem can be from the rosin that we use, but my long-term technician says all you have to do is wipe it off. We often leave the piano cleaner and in better shape than it was before. Not in better shape as far as regulation and tuning and that sort of stuff. We don't repair or overhaul these pianos, but we do clean them up. We often find them pretty dirty when we get there and we leave them clean because we want to be good citizens and we want to be invited back.

FJO: In terms of tuning, does doing what you do knock the piano out of tune?

SS: No, certainly not as much as you would if you were hitting the keys really hard.

FJO: You mentioned using alternate tunings in the piece you did with Terry Riley. Were there other times you've explored those possibilities?

SS: No. People who work with those tunings including Terry will say that it has its practical limits because it's hard to travel with those tunings. You have to travel with a tuner, which Terry does when he tours with those tunings, and which La Monte Young always does. And you have to retune the piano for several days.

FJO: Or if you're Michael Harrison, then you are the tuner yourself.

SS: Yes, exactly. Then you have it all right there.

FJO: Is your music always done without any amplification?

SS: Almost always, and I prefer to do it that way.

FJO: It is, after all, Adigital.

SS: Yes, exactly [*laughs*]. But we have all of those digital recordings now. Sometimes you want it both ways. I prefer not to amplify. There are some situations. For example, we played once in a volcanic cave in the Canary Islands where there is this visual music festival. It's a beautiful place. It's a huge lava tube into which they built the concert hall with a great big beautiful stage and great seating. But it was so dry that they have to amplify everything they do. We had to amplify or we wouldn't be heard.

FJO: Now with all those people huddled over the piano, where would you put the mic?

SS: Good question. Sometimes underneath the piano. There are these things called PZMs that you can attach to the soundboard underneath. When we record we have mikes over the piano. They just have to be high enough so that we don't hit them and run into them and cause interference, but a good engineer like Tom Lazarus can do anything with a microphone.

FJO: I know your music only from CDs and LPs. I've never heard it live, which I imagine is how many people know your music because you tour here and there but you haven't toured everywhere. Considering how it's made, how important is the visual component to this music to you?

SS: It depends who you ask.

FJO: I'm asking you. [*laughs*]

SS: [*laughs*] I know. It depends who I talk to then. It adds a significant dimension, I think, partly because I don't choreograph the performances in the sense that I'm imposing any sort of movement on the music—what a dance choreographer might do. I don't mean impose in a bad sense—superimpose let's say. Rather, I try to shape the movements that are necessary to perform the music: moving from one part of the piano to the other; placing your hand under this person's arm rather than over this person's arm; getting two sets of arms interlocked so they can both play in the same area and not have a collision. All of those, and all of what goes on with fingers and wrists, that's all pretty carefully choreographed before we get to a performance. Just so it looks good. So it doesn't distract, I hope, from the experience of the performance. It's organic, I guess—maybe that's too grandiose a word—but it comes out of what we have to do to play the music. Just the way a string quartet is playing: the motion of the bow, the elbows, and leaning in to hear each other better. It's just part of what you have to do to play the piece. But the reason I say it depends on who you talk to is because I've had the experience of hearing from a first time live listener—someone who has heard the recordings and comes to a concert—who says, "Oh, I see now. I get it. I figured out how all of this is happening." And there is that curiosity that a lot of people have if they just hear a recording. "How are they doing that anyway?" For some people that's not a negative thing, but for other people it is. Not knowing how something is produced maybe can effect their enjoyment of it.

FJO: The very first part of *Rainbows* is wonderfully energetic, and had I not known from the LP title, *New Music for Bowed Piano*, how the sounds were produced, I might have thought it was a slightly-odd sounding string ensemble of some sort, maybe viola da gambas. If a group of viola da gambas could play this, would that be a legit representation of *Rainbows*, or is *Rainbows* something else?

SS: I think it's something else because at least in the not very mature way I was working with it then, I was working with this medium. As you say, it's sort of an etude, though maybe less in *Rainbows* than earlier pieces. It's more developed compositionally. I still feel that the details and the form of the piece come out of the material and the material suggests, in a way, what to do with it. I'd certainly enjoy hearing a concert with viola da gamba. There's nothing wrong with that, but it probably wouldn't have the essence of the piece in it, in a sense.

FJO: The first time I heard *Rainbows*, before fully processing in my mind that this was made by bowing a piano, I was moved by the harmonies, the melodies, and the rhythms. How it was played was an added bonus. In a way, it's what makes your body of work so unique, how focused it is on timbres. But for most listeners and most composers, historically music has been about the tunes and the harmonies and the rhythms. Timbre is mostly an afterthought, except in music since the last century. It's the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself.

SS: Well, I think that's the argument in favor of something like *Switched on Bach*, for example. Great stuff, but it's just another way of realizing Bach. But it also follows what I understand as the Baroque attitude, or part of the Baroque attitude: that a piece of music was there to be performed on, transcribed for anything and everything, just the way Bach transcribed things of other composers and changed the medium entirely. It's still the same music.

FJO: Yeah, but once I heard Bach's keyboard music on a harpsichord, I never wanted to go back.

SS: You didn't want to listen to Glenn Gould playing it?

FJO: No. He's interesting, but I think he's interesting for other reasons that are not necessarily about Bach. I don't know. I do think Bach's performance practice makes a difference in his music as it does in yours. Of course, your performance practice is unique to you.

Inhabiting and Typifying a Niche

FJO: Nowadays, do you ever think about writing music for other ensembles?

SS: Well, I have occasionally done pieces for other media since I started this bowed piano thing, but only if someone asked me to write a piece or I got a commission for it that I wanted to take. I wrote on commission a solo piano piece for Lois Svard. Then I arranged a two-piano version for a duo called Quattro Mani. Sue Grace, one half of Quattro Mani, is a college friend of mine at Colorado.

FJO: Is it meant to be played on the piano keys, rather than inside?

SS: Yeah, it is. Well, there's a little bit of inside stuff.

FJO: You can't resist it.

SS: I suppose. But there are no bows. There are things like piano hammers that are wielded by hand by the performers on the strings, and some standard, or by now standard stuff like pizzicato, and finger dampening to change the timbre.

FJO: Have you written anything that's not for piano?

SS: Not much, really. There are a few things here and there. I did a brass ensemble piece once because someone wanted a processional for a commencement at the college where I teach. And I composed an orchestra piece which was kind of a concerto—bowed piano in the middle of a chamber orchestra—which had a couple of performances by a very good chamber orchestra, the L.A. Chamber Orchestra, but none since then. It wasn't well enough rehearsed. You know the old story—it didn't come across the way I felt it should in the first two performances, and there were only two.

FJO: As a clarinet and sax person, do you ever pick up those instruments?

SS: I haven't for years. I decided a long time ago that there were a lot better players and if I wanted to even be competent I'd have to practice everyday. I just didn't want to spend my time doing that. I wanted to compose and do other things rather than practice.

FJO: Well, on your latest recording, there's a vocal element and that's something completely new. It's still the bowed piano ensemble, but you have a solo voice as a separate soloist. What I find so unusual about the piece is you have this solo voice, but then you have the members of the bowed piano ensemble singing as a chorus as well. They sort of do double duty.

SS: I got to a point in composing that piece where I thought all these other human beings there have voices as well. In fact, I had some really good singers there at the time, voice students of Victoria Hansen, who is the soloist. And I've done some choral singing myself. Not in a solo way, but I can sing fairly complex music. So I came to a point where I needed some sort of choral response to something that was going on in the piece. I don't remember specifically what it was now because eventually I ended up

using the technique quite a bit. Some people liked that a lot and other people have not been excited by that.

FJO: Critics or the people in the group?

SS: Not people in the group. I think they pretty much got into it. Some of them had to be browbeaten into actually singing because of how they considered themselves. You know, like "I'm only a bassoonist, I don't sing." I'd have to say, "Everyone sings. That's the original instrument; that's where it all comes from." I'm working on another piece now that's similar, but it will be quite different compositionally. Not everybody likes this, but I do. I'm having fun.

FJO: Are you ever afraid of being typecast as a composer? You know, "You're the guy who does the bowed piano thing."

SS: No, not at all. In fact, I kind of like that because at least there's this sort of niche that I fit into, and maybe inhabit and typify.

FJO: We have a whole tradition of the American maverick composer who has an idea and follows it. Like Partch and his homemade 43-tone instruments or Nancarrow and the player piano.

SS: Nancarrow is a great example.

FJO: But Nancarrow also wrote wonderful string quartets and they're now starting to get played from time to time. Meredith Monk, who's devoted her whole life as a composer to creating a new kind of vocal music, has recently done stuff for orchestra with Michael Tilson Thomas and a string quartet for Kronos. Phil Kline made his reputation doing music for boomboxes, but his recent work doesn't have a single boombox. Yet it's still his music. Labels can be limiting.

SS: I think you have to go where your mind leads you. This medium still has so much in it that I haven't discovered. I know it's in there, but I don't know quite what it is or how to get it. That's a feeling that a lot of people have. You know, like Charlie Parker when he was trying to figure out what to do with "Cherokee" and realized that there were all these other notes up there—all those extensions in the chords—and finally figured out that when he used those he could do what he had been hearing but hadn't known how to play. I have that feeling still about this big resonant box with all those strings in it.

Creating Outside Standard Parameters and Surviving

FJO: You have a number of recordings out there, but they're all on small labels. I know you're self-published. How do you make a living as a composer?

SS: I teach, so I have a salary and I have a health plan. I teach nine months a year and have a three-month vacation in the summer. I had a conversation once with Peter Sculthorpe about that. He's considered the most significant Australian composer of his generation and he teaches at the University of Sydney. He said, "Security is a great thing, knowing that you have a paycheck." I'm very lucky in that I have a teaching gig where I can do a lot of composition and have this ensemble happening in the realm of that teaching environment and tour and make recordings. So I'm very fortunate. I probably have the best composer job there is.

FJO: Do you try to disseminate your music aside from the recordings?

SS: I generally resist sending out scores to people. Not for any reason that I'm concerned about copyright or being ripped off or anything like that, but just because I have standards for a performance that I would like to have achieved. There's all this give and take and all this conversation and I usually say I'd be delighted if you'd play this piece, but you have to let me come and coach a couple of rehearsals, the last two or three at least. What they do get when I send a score is something that looks like an orchestral score, expanding and contracting as the medium gets more or less complicated.

FJO: So there's no odd notation to convey some of the playing techniques?

SS: Well, there are words, phrases, abbreviations, etc., which indicate what the orchestration is, but you don't see that at the left edge of the page as you would with a string sextet or an orchestra because it's always changing. I'll have a line that starts off with what I call soft bows—they're nylon bows—and then maybe there's a figure using the ridged bows that's on the same line, played by different players. Or I'll have a melody that requires several players. So I'll put player numbers in there. They're all labeled, 1-10.

FJO: So it will be on one line with different numbers.

SS: Exactly, but then there may be other layers and other instrumental choirs going on in the score against those. So I have evolved my own kind of specialized way of using standard notation.

FJO: Now, when the players play this stuff, they're obviously not playing from a score. They can't possibly.

SS: Absolutely. Except in those relatively small improvised sections that I was talking about. Yeah, the score is memorized.

FJO: But not from parts. They don't have separate parts.

SS: No player has a continuous part from the start to the end of the piece. A few people have tried to do that and they usually give up because it's not a good way to learn the piece. It would be like switching instruments—I play the clarinet, then I go to a triangle—it's hard to put that in one coherent part. But if there is a repeating pattern or there's a pattern that evolves and changes, if the meter changes and the pitches change, those are harder to memorize than other kinds of musical ideas. So I often just extract those out of the score and make them into a small part on a little index card. And they can use that inside the piano. But usually by the time that we get to performance, when we've done a lot of rehearsing, they don't even use those. It's just a learning aid. But it's really not possible to do a lot of this stuff inside the piano while you're looking over your should at a music stand. I haven't figured out a good way to get the scores, you know, actually in or above the piano.

FJO: Most of the performances are by your group, but there was a performance of your music at Eastman by another group a few years ago.

SS: Yeah, but I had something to do with it. I helped coach the ensemble.

FJO: Has there ever been a performance of any of these pieces that you were not at all a part of?

SS: *Rainbows* was done at San Francisco State. Some of Dean Suzuki's students wrote me and said, "We want to do this piece; would you send us a score?" I sent little index cards for working inside the

piano so you could see what your rhythm patterns are. And I sent them volumes of words and talked on the phone.

FJO: So you were still involved.

SS: I was, just not in person.

FJO: But it's still not like sending a score of a string quartet off to a group in New Zealand with nothing else except maybe a brief composer's note.

SS: There's a crucial difference. And that is every member of that quartet in New Zealand knows how to play his or her instrument and plays it probably more or less in the same way that a quartet in Jersey City is going to play. Interpretation questions aside, the actual manipulation of the instrument, they know how to do that. Well, this group in San Francisco, even as much as I said and as much as I wrote, there were some things I forgot to say, or I thought were elementary, or I assumed that they would know that they didn't. So it was a very interesting performance. I usually make the nylon about so long. They made it about this long. They almost had to stand on stools. I think one guy stood on a ladder. They added a whole theatrical element to it, which was probably really cool. I saw some photographs afterwards and got a recording. I was not unhappy about that but, had I been there, I would have corrected some things. Or I would have said, "Well, this is the way I think it should be done."

FJO: The players who come to your ensemble are all students where you teach?

SS: Colorado College is a liberal arts college, undergraduate only. Some of them are music majors. Some are not. They're all musicians. They all have training and background. They all read well and they all have ensemble experience of some sort. And I audition them for this. There's quite a bit of cachet to being in this ensemble; it's the showcase musical ensemble of the college. So I get a lot of people auditioning and I can be selective.

FJO: This is a wacky thing to be the showcase ensemble of the college.

SS: I know. It's very weird.

FJO: It's hard to imagine someone, unless you're a new music fanatic who has the whole New Albion catalog, saying, "I want to go to Colorado College so I can be in the bowed piano ensemble."

SS: There are a few of those people. I had a very fine student from Maine who was into new music in high school and listened to a lot and had heard one or more of my recordings. He came more or less specifically to the college because of that. Fortunately, he passed the audition and got in. But most of the kids who end up in my group haven't heard of it before, or [only] when they come for a campus visit with their parents doing their college search. Then, the music department shows off what it can do. The lady who gives the tours of the music department always brings them down to the bowed piano room if they express any interest in music at all. Whether they are in an a capella group or they've played in a concert band, she'll take them down there and show them this stuff and our recordings and say, "If you've got time, go look at this film in the library." She's our recruiter, in effect. She recruits for the whole department but we get a lot of attention.

FJO: Now what's really amazing is that this university music department is behind the whole thing. How did you land such a great gig?

SS: Well, I made it. I mean, I invented it. [*laughs*]

FJO: Is that all you do there, or do you teach other courses?

SS: I do other stuff. I teach an experimental music course in which we spend almost no time on this stuff. We do the American experimental tradition from Ives and before. And I actually teach jazz history, too—listener courses.

FJO: Do you teach composition at all?

SS: Well, I teach composition as experimental music. It's a composition class, but it also involves some history and literature and so forth. It's a combination. They all do composition projects and I have them invent their own instruments and/or work with extended techniques in some sort of new way.

FJO: Now, in terms of the bowed piano thing happening at the college, did it evolve there? It's very unconventional for an academic thing.

SS: When I got there in 1969 it was an academic department. The chair of the department, Albert Seay, was a fairly noted musicologist. The Middle Ages was his specialty.

FJO: He wrote a book for the Prentice-Hall series.

SS: Yup, sure. He was very well regarded as a scholar of Medieval music. He had a great performance background. He was a bassoonist. He had composed when he was young. He wanted to go out and study with Roy Harris who happened to be out at Colorado College at that time. But he had created a department whose emphasis was on theory, composition, and music history, not on performance. There was performance happening, but there was very little going on. So another young colleague of mine at that time and I wanted to do some performances. We had free reign. He started an early music ensemble and I started a new music ensemble, and it evolved out of that. That's one of the reasons I've stayed there so long—I've had such moral and financial support. Especially when we started getting a little bit of a reputation. It was good public relations for our music program.

FJO: Since you're a new music ensemble, do you ever do compositions by anybody else? Does anybody else write for bowed piano?

SS: That a very good question. Yes, in a limited way. My friend Vincent Plush wrote a piece for us. We toured it in Australia with some of my stuff on the same program. One or two other people. A couple of my students have done music for the ensemble. A guy named Jason Reinier, a sound art guy in San Francisco who's part of 23five. A few other people have done some pieces but I'm pretty stingy with the ensemble's time. I mean, I'm possessive of it because I always have these pieces that I want to do so it's just pure self interest that I do my stuff.

FJO: What is the auditioning process to get into the bowed piano ensemble?

SS: Well, I'm looking for musicality probably more than anything else.

FJO: Do you test them on the piano?

SS: No, I don't, unless their instrument is the piano and then we test them playing, you know, a sonata on the keys.

FJO: You don't test them inside to see if they can bow?

SS: No.

FJO: Aren't there people who can't do it, a great trumpeter who just has no physical facility with a bow and can't get a good sound from it? Is that possible?

SS: To a degree it's possible, and some people are quicker studies than other people. But I think just about everybody can learn these techniques: people that have good overall musicianship, people who know how to turn a phrase on their own particular instrument or voice, for example, and who have rhythmic accuracy. I do make them sight read rhythms. Also, general presence and attitude and enthusiasm. I pay attention to personality factors that might cause some issues. Sometimes I will shy away from a particular player even though he or she may be very good and very musical. We're in such close quarters; all those things get amplified.

FJO: People really have to get along with each other. And, not to be silly about it, but I think that personal hygiene is probably even an issue when choosing someone for your group since you're all so close to each other.

SS: Absolutely. Sure. That's true. And I do pay attention to those things. I can predict those things from other experiences I've had with that person. Maybe he or she has been a student in a course of mine and I've seen that maybe that person doesn't get along terribly well with classmates.

FJO: So, in a way, it sounds like a perfect scenario. You compose and you teach to earn a living and the college where you teach also helps support your work by giving you the space to create your work, allowing you to tour it and providing you with a steady stream of students who take part in your ensemble. But ultimately, it means you can only spend part of your time composing. You've written these monumental pieces but sometimes there are many years in between each one. Wouldn't you want to spend 100 percent of your time composing?

SS: No, I like to do other things. I have a classic car I like to tinker with. And I love boats and sailing and all that kind of stuff. I'm an outdoor person. I like to write too. I wouldn't want to do nothing but compose.