

UPON THE OCCASION OF THE MILTON BABBITT (1916–2011) CENTENARY: AN INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN BORETZ

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Abstract: This edited transcript of a public pre-concert discussion with composer, theorist and critic Benjamin Boretz not only touches on early personal encounters with Babbitt but also ranges over issues of reception of his music, listening experiences, transformations of music's temporality, connections to Schoenberg, Webern, Cage, and postmodernism, stylistic changes over Babbitt's career and composerly poetics, as well as motivations and consequences for pre-compositional structures and systems. The discussion took place on 22 November 2015, at the first of three recitals during the 2015–16 concert season at Spectrum, in New York City, in which Augustus Arnone for the second time performed all of Milton Babbitt's solo piano works, this time in honour of the composer's centenary.

Joshua Banks Mailman (JBM): As part of this series of concerts of all Babbitt's solo piano works,¹ I thought it would be interesting to talk to someone who knew Milton Babbitt from way back when. Before his association with Babbitt at Princeton, Ben Boretz studied at Brandeis University with Irving Fine, Arthur Berger and Harold Shapero, and then was a founding editor of *Perspectives of New Music*, music critic for the *Nation*, later a professor at Bard College and founder of *Open Space Magazine*, and of course is also an active composer.²

Ben, can you help us imagine what it was like before Milton Babbitt was part of the fabric of music history as we think of it today. What was it like to encounter his music, and Babbitt himself, for the first time?

¹ Arnone's centenary presentation of the complete set of Babbitt solo piano works was spread over three concerts in the 2015–16 concert season. Arnone's first tour through these works was spread over two concerts in 2007, at Merkin Hall, in NYC.

² Boretz's compositions are recently celebrated in '9x9', a 537-page Festschrift comprising essays, compositions and other documents, as well as a three-CD set of contributed recordings, published as *Open Space Magazine*, 19/20 (2015/2016).

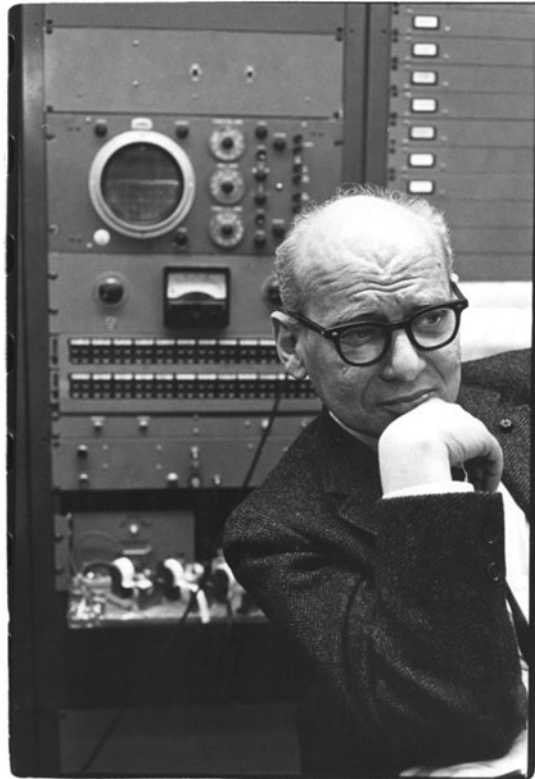
Benjamin Boretz (BB): I heard Milton's music on the NYC American Music Festival before I met him. It was probably around 1953. I heard the composition for viola [and piano], which I also heard – performed by the guys who recorded it, Alvin Bauman and Walter Trampler – at a Third Street Music School concert. So that was – coming up on the radio – something different. I talk about it in this piece I wrote for the *PNM* memorial issue to Babbitt.³

But Milton in person was something else. I was at Brandeis; of course Brandeis was sort of the epicentre of neoclassicism in America but they were very interested in Milton and in serialism and in Schoenberg. The idea of the world being divided into discrete mutually antagonistic units is pretty exaggerated. It was part of it but there was mostly professional competition; underneath the competition there was real musical and intellectual curiosity. So everybody was curious – and Milton was of course a mesmerizing speaker. Nobody could understand what he was talking about but he was mesmerizing. [Chuckles from the audience] Well, that's not entirely true – it just wasn't that many. Even so, he did have a very charismatic way of speaking to people. I suppose my impression of Milton is that one of his roles in the world was to be a professional social entertainer at a very high intellectual level of vocabulary and style. And it was pretty entertaining.

But also I was a fairly young person at the time – I was 19 when I first heard him speak and got to know him, around 1955. Because he came up to Brandeis a lot. He was very friendly and popular with people there so we became friends pretty quickly. And Milton was the first person who really liked my idea – which I had way back then – of what became *Perspectives of New Music*; the idea was a result of my feeling like there wasn't anything being published for people who would like to read about contemporary music; we weren't getting much to read in America. We had been reading *Score* magazine which was published in England by the BBC. And then there was the *American Composers Alliance Bulletin* and *TEMPO*, but there weren't very many in-depth articles. *Score* magazine had the most. In fact it had some of Milton's first articles, twelve-tone theory articles, an interesting article by Elliott Carter. But they went out of business. So I said let's just start our own. So we went up to see Arthur.⁴ Arthur Berger was our main teacher and he had a lot of experience with editing

³ Benjamin Boretz, 'What did Milton mean by his music?', *Perspectives of New Music*, 49:2 (2012), pp. 372–7.

⁴ This included Barclay Brown and David Burrows, fellow composer-grad students at Brandeis.



Milton Babbitt at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. Photo by William Gedney, courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

and writing in journals and magazines. He said, well: interesting idea.

And Milton of course came in on it. We came down to see him in the Belmore Cafeteria on Lexington Avenue and 23rd street, where we used to hang out with Milton. And we kicked it around a lot. So he was very much involved with, at least encouraging the idea of *Perspectives*, which didn't really get going until seven or eight years later under very unlikely circumstances. Anyway Milton's ideas, his articles in *Musical Quarterly* and *Score* magazine – we knew them, very intensely. We used to refer to them by quoting their first lines, because they were very arcane poetry.

JBM: Can you remember, between hearing his music on the radio and actually meeting him which was first – hearing his music for the first time, that was before you actually met him?

BB: Yeah, and also before I went to Brandeis, I was in New York, I heard it on the radio, and at that Third Street Music School concert.

JBM: Did you in any way conjure, upon hearing his music, the person, that is, try to conjure the person? And do you remember – that was a long

time ago – but do you remember whether there was any difference or resonance between what you conjured and what he was like in person when you met him?

BB: Listening to the music didn't make me think of people [chuckle] It was ... music. And it was very unmistakable music, unmistakable for me at the time because it was very resistant to me penetrating it the way I was accustomed to just having music be immediately intuitive, even Varèse, Webern, I mean things that I was hearing for the first time as a teenager that were far out but very *immediate*, Wolpe, Krenek, Schoenberg, you know. But Milton's music was not like that at all, and I still think it's not like that.

JBM: We've talked about this a little bit. I would like to read what you wrote in the Babbitt Memorial for *Perspectives*. Maybe you say it's not readable aloud; I think I can read it aloud so I'm going to just quote from this.

BB: You're allowed. [Chuckles]

JBM: OK!

BB: It's public domain at this point.

JBM: [reading from Boretz's essay⁵] Starting from impenetrable, beyond anywhere ever travelled, a cold sonic monolith, way out beyond Webern, Varèse, Cowell, Cage, none of the ways in led in, experience that disallowed experience, in 1953, the *Composition for Viola and Piano*; in 1955, the *Three Compositions for Piano*; in 1957, *All Set* at the Brandeis Jazz Festival; by 1959, the *Compositions for Twelve and Four Instruments* – the latter at the first Princeton Seminar; at the off-Broadway Nonagon Gallery, a 'composers' showcase' pairing of my old Brandeis guru Harold Shapero's piano music with some of Milton's; someone says, about Milton, or, his pieces, I wasn't sure, 'clean, clear, and to the point' – the ways in, when they developed, developed not via unmediated sound like almost every other music in my life (discounting the constant babel of propagandas which assuredly had their effect in turning my ear on or off of whatever historic, exotic, far-out wavelengths I could discover) but via the appeal of a complex philosophical rationale, a conceptual interpenetration being materialized between the rivetingly deep new thought in which I was most absorbed around and outside of music, and the intransigently pitiless multiform complexity of the music, now spanning, by 1961, *Partitions, Vision and Prayer, Composition for Synthesizer*. I could hear the music because I could see the point. Or at least a

⁵ Benjamin Boretz, 'What did Milton mean by his music?' *Perspectives of New Music*, 49:2 (2012), pp. 372–7, here 372.

particular point, one I could infer out of my own meta-intellectual rather than music-intuitive perspective, more or less the point that I wrote in my 1964 *Nation* article explicitly about Milton, thoughts that started from the intersection of his discourse with the resonance of my own thought and reading, and with the insistent electric charge of listenings to his music. Milton was, of course, mostly known and notorious for his invention of previously unenvisaged compositional devices, derived from previously unimagined modes of construal of traditional and post-traditional pitch-structural music. And it has been these devices and construals which metastasized into the compositional/theoretic world of musical intelligence and ingenuity which evolved in his name, on his account, and in his image. His solutions to problems of structure and his invention of means of structuring became a rhizome of limitless invention and an ideology of unlimited imaginative-structural possibility for a very powerfully focused music-intellectual culture.

BB: Can I leave now [smile, and gentle chuckling]

JBM: So, ...

BB: Yeah?

JBM: ... what did Ben Boretz mean by that? I mean, I have my own ideas, but ...

BB: Just what I said. Well, times are so different; you know, the context in which people think about music, and hear music, changes all the time. And I was trying in that to make a kind of [long pause] an impressionistic portrait of what it was like to experience that, being *me*, because that was what it was about; it wasn't 'what does Milton mean by his music?' but 'What did I mean by Milton's music?' which is more or less the question you always ask yourself when you ask what a composer means. The thing is, at that time so many musics seemed aesthetically dissonant to each other – for example right now it's much more vivid to me what the commonalities are in things that were happening in American music right back then, and subsequently. But it's also obvious to me that there are certain unique characteristics that Milton has – we could discuss this as I already do a bit in the article – characteristics that he doesn't share with the people who are most inspired by his way of doing things; that is, for the most part I don't think his aesthetic, and the meaning of his music, are shared by those who are most inspired by them. This is reasonable, because otherwise they'd just be, kind of, aping it, I suppose. I don't really think that happens.

I think Milton has much more in common aesthetically, *cognitively*, or epistemologically perhaps,

with John Cage, than certainly anybody could guess, or imagine at that time. I mean they actually were, polar opposites in some sense.

JBM: Richard Kostelanetz, has a similar take . . . ⁶

BB: Yes. Did he actually align them in some sense? That article in the *New York Times Magazine*?

JBM: I can't remember where it was from . . . ⁷

BB: He did sort of put them on the map as the *polarities* of American contemporary music. But the point is that they were.

Yet I don't think they were just the founders of schools. I mean, they were in some sense the founders of schools, but I don't think their schools really followed them. There are some ways that, in complementary and, I could say, polar opposite ways, they were finding something aesthetically which had to do with continuity, with time, with the way that musical time was radically transmuted into something which, in another piece of writing about John Cage, I talked about as the difference between *going* and *being*. Generally, music is thought of as *going*. But John Cage's music is more like *being*.⁸ And this is perhaps an impossibility. It creates an aesthetic tension which is perhaps the most interesting thing about it. Of course, what I'm saying with respect to John Cage doesn't really apply to all of his music – there was much more variation in his work: he was always preternaturally 'experimental'.

But I see Milton as having had a *single* compositional project throughout his creative life, like Schoenberg for example, who you could say had a single creative project in a sense that Stravinsky did not. You know Stravinsky was just all over the place, constantly looking for something to get excited about. So it's sort of like in philosophy the way [Willard v. O.] Quine has a single project throughout his life, whereas Nelson Goodman is always looking for some interesting problem, in some other field, to get at. These are different kinds of minds.

Augustus

Arnone (AA): Can I ask a question?

JBM: Yeah.

AA: This is a topic I'm really interested in, because I perform Cage's *Music of Changes* as well as *Etudes Australes*, and I've always been aware of an aesthetic commonality between Cage and Babbitt, which is striking. But later in Cage's life he said 'you

⁶ Richard Kostelanetz, 'Milton Babbitt and John Cage: The Two Extremes of Avant-Garde Music (1967)', in *On Innovative Musicians* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989).

⁷ See note 6.

⁸ Benjamin Boretz, 'Regretting John Cage and Kenneth Gaburo: A Gathering of Texts', *Perspectives of New Music*, 31:2 (1993), pp. 118–26.

know, really what I do is transcribe numbers to music' – so we know he had been working with lists of numbers generated through various means. Do you think to a certain extent that accounts for commonality between Cage and Babbitt, in that they both are working with lists of numbers?

BB: Well, likely, but you know that's not the angle from which I'm taking things in. I'm taking things in from the consumer angle: listening. Where does it put me in the output? Because I honestly think that cause and effect are not the same thing. You think of the numbers and charts and the theory and philosophy as causes. Then there's this musical result. And I think: I want to just look at that, listen to that. So what I'm speaking about is what I hear.

For example, one of the things that you might know, that's interesting, is how, even early on in Cage's career, the translation of his scores into piano music, by David Tudor, sounds a lot like some of Milton's music – generically, I mean, not literally. You know, there's a certain kind of sound quality, a continuity quality. So there's a place where, strangely enough, they even sonically share something. But that's not the most significant thing. For me the most significant thing is that they both really radicalise continuity in their music, pretty much from beginning to end. Milton's music I hear as evolutionary, but not cumulative. I think that there's a sense in which it doesn't go, but it just is. And that's very radical . . .

AA: You're talking about static vs. linear?

BB: 'Static' is a way of describing it I suppose. But I'm not thinking of it in such a comparative context, putting it in the context of other music. I think it really creates a different context of its own. Of course you come to it with your conditioning. So you start out perhaps by hearing in terms like static, but ultimately go past this.

You play it all the time Augustus, so you know the rhythm of the music doesn't really allow you to put it together in a certain way. It enables you to take it in and have it come *at* you, and just be there, for each thing; and they're all connected, in what I'd, say is an evolutionary way. But the music doesn't go from here to there.

JBM: There are actually some analyses fleshing out a related notion. Christopher Hasty⁹ has some analyses of Milton's song cycle *Du*, where he shows that there are projections of rhythm, projections of durations actually. Yet these are short-lived and they are interfered with by new projections of rhythms – durations projected from the past into

⁹ Christopher Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

the future – so you're constantly having to shift your rhythmic expectations, as these projections are not always realised, sometimes being curtailed, stretched, or interrupted.

I was wondering, when you said 'radicalise continuity', could you clarify? Do you mean radically *more* continuous? Or do you mean a radically different kind of continuity? Or something else.?

BB: I'm using the term 'continuity' generically. It doesn't represent a certain type of thing. It's that the general category of continuity, and the parameters involved, if you want to call it that, are radicalised.

JBM: Right, but when you say radicalised

BB: What I mean is that in the tradition of music, the history of music, music is always moving, or consecuting from one thing to the next, as an arrow of time, so to speak. That's not what these guys . . .

JBM: So the radicalising is the rethinking of that, in a sense.

BB: Well, whether they were consciously rethinking it, I don't know – I never talked with either of them about it – but I hear that. And I think that with respect to Milton, there's a very aggressive compositional intention to create a sufficient density in various dimensions, including the dimension of how stuff is coming at you, to fragment your capacity to just put it together as a continuous, cumulative, unfolding. Instead, it *particularates*. It becomes a shower of particles; so there is much less of a macro dimension. For example – as I've said at some point somewhere – I find that minimalism is in a lot of ways a very direct rebellion against this kind of music, music such as Milton's or Cage's. The failure of listeners to put it together sometimes leads to a rebellion prompted by frustration. People get frustrated with all this particularisation, that just doesn't ever become macro, at least for them. It just keeps being, and coming at you.

JBM: It doesn't really accumulate.

BB: I'm saying it never congeals into macro-structures, *during* your in-time experience of listening. Whereas I think Philip Glass's music, for example, is all macro at that level. This is a rather trivializing thing to say, but what I'm aware of is that, in a blatant sense, it really projects that macro quality. It almost doesn't seem to have a micro, but rather all the small-scale repeating events frame into a recycling macrotime.

Even though a lot of the music that was called serial didn't really do what his music did, I think there was a certain sense that Milton's music was so powerful and paradigmatic that it kind of stood for everybody's music, that it stood for all serial music. I know this because I composed some pieces that

people thought were like Milton's, but weren't like Milton's at all.

My music was always very purposefully and intentionally cumulative. Like post-modernists, I reacted against the non-cumulative time qualities that I was hearing. I composed pieces where even the pre-compositional thinking was about cumulative rhythm, in the classical sense. Things that connected recursively, and kept adding on to each successive thing. So that I have been concerned with macro just as much as minimalists are, but with a different aesthetic, and without losing particulate intensity. So I understand that frustration with the extreme articulation in Babbitt's music.

But I think Milton's purpose, Milton's aesthetic purpose, was very radical in the sense that he really was breaking through into a new way of experiencing time.

JBM: It seems to me that there's something further interesting about this: Even when one knows something about how he composed his music with arrays, this fact does not in and of itself entail the experience you get when you actually listen to it. So I thought it was very interesting what you said: 'you could hear the music because you could see the point'. Sometimes when people say something like 'Oh, I get the point' they mean it in a pejorative way, which is 'well, I got it; I heard that this is repeating over and over again; thank you Philip Glass; I got the point; I don't need to hear the rest'. Whereas you mean it actually in a different way, almost that there's a point which you get a glimpse at, so you're curious to experience more. Or something like that. Could you elaborate on this?

BB: We're supposed to be talking about Milton, but we should probably talk about my own tendency. Since I was listening to music a lot before I had any meta-musical thoughts about it, my relation to it is always: first it's there, and then it makes sense, if you think about it after. But it penetrates. You just enter it. It enters you; you enter it; it becomes your world. And it's there. This is the ontology of music. And then afterwards, if you think about it, you might find a way to convey to yourself ways of getting further into it by making sense of it. But the sense it makes as an intuitive identity, musical identity, what I call a 'determinate feel', doesn't have any meta-language attached to it.

Meta-language is a way of attributing sense to something that already makes sense, just not verbally. So what I'm saying about Milton's music – and just for me; I'm not claiming anything about it for others – is that, of all music, it was music that, when I understood it, when I could work out in my head what he was trying to do, or what I thought I could do to make sense out of

it, only *then* could I hear it, which is the only music I knew about which that was true.

JBM: There was a *different* way of making sense of it than ...

BB: Well, normally music made sense without any explanation. I say first it's there; then it makes sense. But in Milton's case it was like first it made sense and then it got to be there. I could get it to be there by working at it from the perspective of what sense I could make of it.

JBM: I feel like your experience ontologically changed the thing that was your stimulus.

BB: It's like making music intuitive to yourself by studying the analysis first, which is not something I recommend usually.

JBM: I want to read another passage.

BB: Oh gosh, really? [many laughs all around]

JBM: [quoting Boretz again¹⁰] If I as an intently listening music receiver could not follow Milton's structures by paths of motivation rather than paths of data-configuration, or, rather could not motivate the paths of data by intuitions of a meta-motivation, my mutual opacity with this music signified to me not the absence of such motivation but a limitation of my imaginative capacity to locate within my perceptual resources a unique intuition, a truly new-musical mode of being which could not be 'musicalized' under any of the mental filters of 'modernity' – not the aesthetics of ugly, brutal, or urban-industrial, not the strenuous crucible of radically reinvented classicism, not any of the super-, neo-, counter-, metaphysically idealized romanticisms, nor vivid theaters of evocative imagery, nor even any of the post-catastrophic militant inverted conventionalities of the assorted politicized serial insurgencies camping in the capitals of Europe, on the streets of downtown Manhattan and San Francisco, Berkeley, and assorted outlier American university campuses. And not even through Milton's own public-social interfaces; neither the revolutionary rethinking of traditional musical issues in the languages and contexts of contemporary rational discourse; nor the new-invented world of prophetic visionary cognitive compositional possibilities materialized spectacularly in that amazing series of writings through the unfolding of which we all scarcely dared to exhale, up through the time-point article in the first issue of *Perspectives*. And especially not through Milton's scintillating fulfillment of his public role as superstar intellectual virtuoso or his inner-circle personification as omniscient all-worldly infallible guru – not even though these self-

¹⁰ Benjamin Boretz, 'What did Milton mean by his music?', p. 373.

creating theaters and world-recreating prophecies were all and always somehow relevant to the holistic composition and performance of a total persona and lifework radical in every detail beyond a fault and – above all – utterly *sui generis*.

BB: Yeah, it was not a score I wrote for vocal performance exactly. [chuckles]

JBM: Thank you.

BB: Thank *you!*

JBM: You go on to say that the . . .

BB: There's more? [smiles]

JBM: Yes, yes. ' . . . the persona was radical totally, but so too hidden beneath his dazzle, was the person'. That was what you wrote.

BB: What was that?

JBM: Well now I'm just leaving you in the middle of a paragraph.

BB: Oh, OK.

JBM: You say 'the persona was radical, yes, totally, but so too hidden beneath his dazzle was the person'.

BB: So what is the question?

JBM: The question is again what did this experience have to do with your interaction with him as a person eventually, if at all? Or was that never something whose surface could be . . .

BB: You talk about experience as if it's different from the thing you experience. But the thing you experience is a consequence of your experience as well as the input to it. So it becomes what it is for you, by that transaction. So there's no way to make the ontological split between cause and effect at that point, which is different from the point about precomposition and the output. So when you asked about the experience of the dazzle of the radical persona in relation to the person, my thought is that there's an extremely problematic relationship between the preparatory work that people do and what the ontological result is.

For one thing I think that precomposition is a setup. I don't think you can make a very profound thing about the implications of a precomposition, because – and this is an opinion on my part, not anything I *know* about anybody else – precomposition is a setup by the composer, with malice aforethought; the composer is trying to set up a schema to optimize certain musical outcomes. And the schema itself is neutral relative to those outcomes; but the interaction of the composer with [it leads to] his or her fully orchestrated intention that is being [sought]. The schema is a kind of personal stimulus to get to where a person wants to go, where that creative desire is already leaning.

JBM: So it is almost as if the composer is thinking: if I had a situation like such and such I would be

able to perform well and do the kind of thing I like. So then the composer makes, develops, a schema that presents that situation

BB: To put it in very down-to-earth terms: the composition is not the discovery of the implications of a structure, but the structure is an assistant to the implications of a compositional idea, so that it's not like the composition interprets the precomposition, but rather that the precomposition prefigures or prepares the composition; so it's the other way around. It sort of concretizes for a composer the things that he or she wants to crystallize. And therefore any precomposition can produce any music. But in the particular transaction of one composer and one precompositional setup, it's all bound up together. That's why Milton's procedures are so usable by all kinds of composers who have actually very little in common with him aesthetically, such as composers who use or devise similar structures, who are miles apart aesthetically. I mean for example Bob Morris.¹¹

JBM: Yeah I was thinking . . .

BB: I mean Bob Morris's music is, I'd say, polar opposite to Milton's music.

JBM: I do agree with you about that. Although when Bob composed for the *PNM* [*Perspectives of New Music*] memorial it was amazing to me that he was actually able to make a piece that sounds more like Milton Babbitt's music than any other composer I've ever heard has ever done. It's quite uncanny. Strikingly this shows just how far apart Bob is from Milton aesthetically: the fact that he is so adept at composing music that sounds like Babbitt's, but doesn't choose to do so, except in this one instance where he chose to do the thing which he doesn't normally do.

BB: No he doesn't. That piece, called *Ends and Odds* [1996], which he gave us [*PNM*] actually had been composed much earlier. Bob says it's the only piece he ever did that really was like Milton aesthetically.¹²

JBM: Yes.

BB: So yes, absolutely. Although it wasn't totally that.

JBM: The resemblance amazes me nevertheless.

BB: I'm just saying Bob is an example of somebody whose precompositional schemata could look a lot like Milton's but the music's aesthetic has nothing to do with Milton's, except in the one instance you mention.

¹¹ Robert D. Morris's compositions were recently celebrated in 'Robert Morris at 70', a Festschrift comprising essays, compositions, and other documents, as well as a three-CD set, published as *Perspectives of New Music*, 52:2 (2014).

¹² The composition was published with a brief article on the structure of the work by the composer in Robert Morris, 'Some Remarks on "Odds and Ends"', *Perspectives of New Music*, 35:2 (1997), pp. 237–56

David? [After a hand gesture from former Milton Babbitt student David Saperstein seated in the audience.]

David Saperstein: If I could propose something for a view of the question? I'd like to try connecting a couple of the dots – well, I guess connecting dots is sort of counter to the aesthetic you're talking about – but it's often said that one of the main projects of modernism is to bust up intuitive syntax, and I'm just wondering if what you're saying about Cage and Babbitt is that they were exceptionally good at really dedicating themselves to precompositional schema that were counterintuitive. And then what people like Bob Morris, and others who adapt the theoretical tools, often are trying to do is to restore an intuitive surface to these schemas which were particularly powerful because they were counterintuitive.

BB: Well, I think you have to accept the point – if you're interested in Milton – that he had an ideological-philosophical aesthetic stance (*intention* you might even say) which was actually very contrary to most of the world. And Bob Morris certainly does not at all share in this contrary stance. Milton was an ideological rationalist; he did not at all just perform this as an aesthetic-compositional act, he really was radically the way his music sounds. The hard-edge quality of his music is such because it was for real.

And in a way I think Milton's earlier music is more holistically representative of that than some of his later music. Because, I think, later he got interested in realising further possibilities of what he started with. He had his life-long project as I say – so he was always in some sense rewriting in a new way the same piece, and always finding very interesting ways to do so. I mean the evolution of the *Allegro Penserioso* [1999] for example is very striking to me in how, by proceeding the same way as earlier, he nevertheless arranges the precompositional setup so that certain kinds of intervals, harmonic qualities flow forth, so that his music actually becomes much less generically modern in its surface, in its sound, in its harmony as compared to his earlier pieces.

JBM: I agree with that.

BB: So that when you get, for example, *Three Compositions for Piano* [1947–48], you know, way back ...

JMB: *Partitions* [1957] too ...

BB: ... the sense in which Milton is classical is always there. Let's say his basic core model was always Bach; it's not Beethoven. Therefore, even though his affect at the beginning is very much rubbing

off of Webern, his musical continuity is much more coming off of Schoenberg, because Schoenberg at the beginning is much more classical in his structure of time, than Webern. This is in a very superficial overt sense – I'm not speaking about anything deep and profound. But I think what happened was that Milton got liberated from that modernistic kind of harmony, and just found more interesting ways of doing things that spoke a sonic language that was really even more original, more different, by the time he did *Allegro Penseroso*. I was very struck, listening to it recently, how much it was in a different world, even though he had the same basic programme, and the same basic relationship to you, as a listener. It carries you into a different sonic landscape, which is not so referential to traditional modernistic music. Do you agree with that?

JBM: Indeed, yes. This stimulated the thought that deciding that he was going to use a precompositional structure that is his all-partition arrays, which have, in a way, this kind of diversity built into them from the beginning – they are a setup that enables this – was a decision, it seems to me, that would lead to these kinds of varied textures and varied harmonic flavourings witnessed in *Allegro Penseroso*.

BB: Yes.

JBM: It would lead to a move away from a uniform surface that might describe his earlier music. So it wasn't so much an accident; it was planned.

BB: What I was saying before though is that, with this precompositional setup, it wasn't that he discovered in the precompositional setup, a way of creating music, but rather he set it up ...

JBM: He rigged it to ...

BB: ... to write music like that.

JBM: Yes, exactly.

BB: That's my impression. We should let Augustus play, shouldn't we?

JBM: We didn't open for questions yet, that people may have. Does anyone have questions they want to ask?

Augustus Arnone: Speaking of precompositions: reception of Babbitt's music is dominated by preoccupation with the precompositions. Wouldn't you say? People study the precompositions intensively. Almost universally people are trying to enter into the music via the precomposition; I think the challenge of being able to draw parallels between aesthetics and the precomposition makes some people uneasy ...

BB: It's just a way music is taught in schools. You listen to all kinds of music from various points of view; but when you come to twelve-tone music, it's all technical ...

JBM: Well, there have been a number of articles about Milton Babbitt that are actually in the other direction; there's Greg Sandow's article, Steven Mackey's 'What Surfaces'; the article by Joel Lester; there have been people writing about trying to just listen to Milton's music.¹³ And you, Ben, have written on this as well.

BB: I don't read much. [chuckles]
[Laughter]

JBM: Well you have, for example, in 'Whose time, what space?' Your article 'Whose time, what space?' is ...¹⁴

BB: Right.

JBM: ... is like that, so ...

BB: Yes, right. But you see my interest in Milton has never been in the precompositional aspect; I've always been more interested in the aesthetics and the philosophy ...

Augustus Arnone: It's a curious phenomenon; there's a story that I find really amusing; It came up when I was rehearsing Babbitt's piece for cello and piano *Dual* [1980], with cellist Chris Gross, who was studying with Joel Krosnick (of the Juilliard Quartet) who premiered *Dual*. Krosnick tells the story of the Milton coming to the premiere. He thought, let's do something different this time: I'm going to introduce the piece and I'll explain to the audience what some of the more important parts of the piece are so that everyone can know what they are. And so he would talk: 'You know that measure 3, page 6? Would play that for them?' And it would turn out to be, on the surface, a seemingly innocuous little group of notes where the players themselves were thinking: 'That's important?!'

His way of introducing the piece – what he thought the audience should know – were these moments that may not have stood out during listening. I think there is – certainly for me when learning these pieces – a structure and phrasing I get a sense of, mostly through changes in register, preponderance of certain pitch configurations. And that may or may not be linked to the structures. But I bet if he showed me where the structural points were it would be wildly different from what I'm taking away.

BB: I said before that I thought that Milton's music is very aggressive, and I think that goes along with your story. Because I think that Milton is going to put in your face things that would be the last things that you would think of, because he would want to really shake it up. He, you might say, in

¹³ Greg Sandow, 'A Fine Madness' *Village Voice*, March 16 (1982); Steven Mackey, '... What Surfaces', *Perspectives of New Music*, 25:1/2 (1987), pp. 258–79; Joel Lester, 'Notated and Heard Meter' *Perspectives of New Music*, 24:2 (1986), pp. 116–28.

¹⁴ Benjamin Boretz, 'Whose Time, What Space', *Open Space Magazine*, 4 (2002), pp. 136–48.

a certain sense – and not necessarily a misanthropic sense – wants to put you at a disadvantage in terms of your preconceptions, so that you can't use them.

JBM: Yes, that seems totally right.

BB: And to me that story just reeks of that Milton character, and I went through a lot with him, and I always perceived that that was what he was doing.

JBM: Is that a kind of ...

BB: ... It's a social thing; that's what I'm saying. In other words it's between you and him, as much as it is a revelation of what his private thought was.

JBM: Is it kind of a thwarting complacency then, in a way?

BB: Well ...

JBM: And I wonder what that might have to do with the rationalist ideology that you mentioned. Maybe that is what it's for.

BB: You don't want to try to get too deep into the ...

JBM: [Chuckling] OK.

BB: ... psychological nuances of a person. You know: 'what is the guy up to when he does what he does?' You know: 'what is he doing when he's doing what he's doing?' Because it's too complicated; there's a lot of operations ... And Milton was not a simple person. A lot of things are going on at the same time, and a lot of them may have been contextual. Think about a guy who wrote music that is the most far out, in a certain sense, of any music anybody ever wrote, and at the same time trying to function as a personage in a public musical world. It's just a total contradiction in terms. And his way of doing that was to proclaim how he wasn't doing that.

JBM: [Chuckling] ... an ironist; he was an ironist, in a way.

BB: Milton wrote an article called 'Composer as Specialist' which got a different title when it was published.¹⁵ I always thought Milton's music was about the *listener* as specialist. He wanted to put you in that position. You had to compose it for yourself.

¹⁵ The title sent to *High Fidelity* was 'The Composer as Specialist' for publishing a lecture 'Off the Cuff'. As later explained by Babbitt, the editor without permission changed the title to 'Who Cares if You Listen'. See Milton Babbitt, 'A Life of Learning: Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1991'. ACLS Occasional Paper 17 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1991); Gabrielle Zuckermann, 'An Interview with Milton Babbitt'. *American Mavericks* on American Public Media (July 2002). http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/interview_babbitt.html; Rodney Lister, Review of *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt*, edited by Stephen Peles, with Stephen Dembski, Andrew Mead, and Joseph N. Straus. Princeton University Press. *TEMPO* Vol. 59, no. 233 (2005), pp. 67–9. Milton Babbitt, 'Who Cares If You Listen?' *High Fidelity*, Vol. 8, no. 2, (1958), pp. 38–40, 126–7; reprinted in Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs, eds, *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), pp. 243–50.