Two Discussions With Milton Babbitt

Interviewed/Moderated by James Romig

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These two short conversations took place during a Milton Babbitt festival at Dickinson College on April 11, 2002. Discussions were held during each of the two intermissions on the following concert:

BABBITT	None but the Lonely Flute (solo flute, 1991)
BABBITT	Sheer Pluck (solo guitar, 1984)
BABBITT	Play It Again, Sam (solo viola, 1989)

—INTERMISSION/DISCUSSION ONE—

BABBITT	Homily (snare drum, 1987)
BABBITT	Beaten Paths (marimba, 1988)
ROMIG	Sonnet 4 (marimba, 2002)

-—INTERMISSION/DISCUSSION TWO—

BABBITT	Philomel (soprano and synthesized tape, 1964)
BABBITT	Phonemena (soprano and synthesized tape, 1969)

— DISCUSSION ONE —

MB: Jake, how are you?

JR: I'm very well. How are you?

MB: Good.

JR: How are you enjoying the concert?

MB: I am enjoying it very much. And, I must say, it would seem like one of these routine compliments if I said I'm deeply grateful for these three performers, and I think they were terrific performances. And I say that, really, not as a gesture, except as a gesture of great appreciation.

JR: So, you've heard these pieces many times. We've all seen your scores, and they are very specifically notated. The rhythms are precise; the dynamics are precise; tempos are always given in metronome marks. What, then, varies from performance to performance? Or, to put it another way, what's left for the performer to interpret?

MB: Oh, there's a great deal. As a matter of fact, I'll say something: this viola performance -- by someone who I really haven't known, but we worked together last night (we didn't rehearse this piece -- purposely did not -- I wanted to hear it fresh. But we worked a little bit with the quartet -- not, again, a rehearsal, just checking things with the score) -- and I must say this is a more masculine performance than that of the person for whom it was written, Sam Rhodes, who's very masculine. For example, I'll tell you what happened -- and I mean that, again, very seriously: she interpreted the dynamics over a much wider range. Her fortissimos were much louder than his, and she got a much wider range of dynamics. Now look, it could be -- I mean, Same Rhodes was the person for whom it was written and who's a marvelous violist (he's the violist of the Juilliard Quartet, by the way, and one of my oldest... "colleagues," I'll say -- in every sense of the word) -- it may simply be this hall, which is very live, and I happen to like it, particularly for this. I was particularly thrilled with the guitar piece because he played very intimately, and it worked extremely well. The guitar is usually a problem in live performance -- that is, the acoustic guitar -- and in this hall it just worked marvelously, and he could get extraordinary extremes of dynamics. The dynamics are very important in the piece -- in all of these pieces, as you know -- because dynamics, after all, are not absolutes. We can't scale dynamics the way we can scale pitch, but relative dynamics are of the greatest importance and they usually serve to project some other dimension of the music. So, the differences are how the performers decide, again, the total scale of dynamics, the relative scales within the dynamics, and then, of course, the modes of sound production between the two. For example, in the flute piece she made enormous differences in various kinds of tenutos, and various forms of stacatto, and so forth. And yet all of them are certainly within the defined characteristics of the piece as my notation defines them.

JR: You talked about the ability of the viola to be aggressive. The guitar can also be aggressive, but it is still an intimate instrument. When you're conceiving these works, to begin with, how soon in the process do you start taking into account the limitations -- or, the capabilities, I should say -- of the instruments?

MB: Oh, from the beginning, Jake.

JR: So you set out to write a "guitar piece."

MB: Yeah, exactly. Well, all of these pieces, like most of my pieces for the last fifty years, have been written for specific performers. They ask for the piece; I write the piece. I never have written a piece in the abstract. I haven't written a piece in the sense that I'm going to write a piece for so-and-so in over fifty years. Since that time, it's always been for a specific performer, and for a specific instrument, therefore. So, from the very outset, the -- I don't want to say limitations -- characteristics of the instrument, the range of the instrument and so forth, play a fundamental role in the whole question of shape and structure of the piece.

JR: That question leads us to the next portion of the program, where we go to the percussion instruments. The marimba cuts down on the possibilities -- well, YOU have eliminated one of the possibilities (or maybe you haven't, and you can talk about this): the duration of the instrument. We hit the bar, and the bar rings. The low bars ring longer than the high bars. We can create the illusion of sustained sound, on a percussion instrument, by rolling.

MB: I hate that.

JR: You haven't employed that technique.

MB: I don't like rolls.

JR: There aren't any in my marimba piece either, actually.

MB: It's nothing more than that it's a kind of cliche. I must confess that I miss that ability to change the dynamic of a sound in its duration. That is something I miss very much. Of course you have it in the piano, too, and I've written a lot of piano music. It's simply one of the aspects that constitutes a boundary condition for a particular kind of instrument, and for the particular kinds of compositions that result. I do miss it, and therefore I really do prefer to write -- good heavens, I shouldn't say this -- I do prefer to write

for instruments -- string instruments, wind instruments -- which can control the dynamic in the course of the duration of the sound.

JR: Then what ever possessed you to write a snare drum solo?

MB: I'll tell you what did: somebody asked for it! Every piece that I've ever written, somebody asked for it. I don't want to write something that nobody wants to play. In this case, it was a very special event: it was a collection -- and aren't you glad you weren't there -- of snare drum pieces. They're published as a collection. And somebody -- I've forgotten now, there were a number of people in charge (this was one of those affairs, you know) -- got these snare drum pieces, and they did it in a very strange hall in New York. I don't think any hall that wasn't strange would allow it to happen. But there we were, writing snare drum pieces. Well, most of the people who wrote -- maybe all, I've simply forgotten -- were professional percussionists, as indeed Jake is. These were people who had ideas of what they wanted to do with the snare drum, and you can imagine the kinds of things they did with the snare drum: various kinds of sticks, various kinds of uses of everything but the head of the drum, and so forth. Well, I'm not a percussionist. I'm not even a percussion lover. In most of my orchestral music I use very little percussion, and sometimes none. I have a percussion problem. I've never used timpani in my life: I can't tell the pitch, and I just don't use them. I mean, you kind of think you understand the pitch, but only when it's being supported by other instruments. But in the case of the snare drum piece, I thought: let's see what I can do for just a structure -- again, a structure of attacks; I'm not even thinking about duration here. You do have durations, of course, between the attacks, but you can't control them. You control virtually nothing in that area, so it was just a way of writing a piece that -- I will say -- contained and exhibited certain of my musical characteristics -- compositional characteristics -- in a medium that can exhibit many of the most fundamental ones. Therefore, my snare drum piece. The snare drum piece, to me, was in many ways the hardest piece I've ever had to write, and I mean that. Maybe I shouldn't have done it. The marimba piece is, of course, an entirely different matter. It's like writing for the piano, in some ways.

JR: Is it more limited, even, than the piano?

MB: Oh, yes, more bare-bones. I mean, there are a lot of things you can't do, and there's nothing, really, the marimba can do that the piano can't. It doesn't have the range, and it doesn't have the capacity of complicated simultanaeities. But it's a different instrument: that's like saying that the oboe can't do, in many ways, what the clarinet can do.

JR: So, at this point, perhaps we should listen to the percussion music, where things are a bit more limited, and then when we meet back here in a few minutes, we can discuss the electronics, where anything is possible.

MB: Not only is anything possible, we also have a singer with whom anything is possible.

JR: Excellent.

— DISCUSSION TWO —

JR: We must announce that the order of the last two pieces has been changed.

MB: As it was originally intended, first will come Philomel, and then Phonemena. I originally conveived it that way. Philomel is a 20-minute piece, and Bethany Beardslee -- after she had done it a number of times, to resounding success -- asked for a little encore piece, so she could come on as everyone was applauding and demanding an encore. She couldn't possibly do Philomel twice, but she wanted a little piece, and she got Phonemena. I regret to say that by the time I did Phonemena and synthesized it, Bethany was in no position to sing encores anymore. So it goes.

I want to express my great gratitude to our percussionist, who really was extraordinary. Jonathon not only played our pieces marvelously -- he certainly played mine maginificently and I'm sure he must have played yours, too --

JR: Absolutely.

MB: I not only want to thank him for our little presents [souveniers from Singapore, where Jonathon Fox lives], but also for our big presents.

JR: At this point, perhaps some of you in the audience might have some questions for Milton Babbitt.

MB: Okay, but before the questions, if I may... Just so there be no misunderstanding: what you're going to hear next -- probably some of you know all about this -- you're going to hear two works in which the singer, the soprano -- the "girl singer," as I like to think of her and I like to think of all of them -- is accompanied by a synthesized tape. Now I realize from some questions that were asked me yesterday that the word "synthesizer" has been so deplorably bastardized that it connotes all kinds of images of a young man sitting at a synthesizer -- someone with whom I prefer not to be associated -- and making sounds on a keyboard. This is nothing of that kind whatsoever. The source of the sound is totally different. Well, that shouldn't matter to you because you're concerned with what you hear, but there is a misunderstanding. This is made on an instrument which was invented at the RCA labs, and this is the second version of it, and it's a huge affair. It's a digital-analog machine: the digital aspect is entirely in the input, and the analog is a huge machine that would stretch across this whole and complete stage. It is a kind of analog device, therefore controlled by inputting binary signals. If this sounds technical, the only reason I tell you that is because no such animal exists anymore. RCA made a very small one at first, experimentally, for the birthday of David Sarnoff, and when they discovered that composers of whom even they had heard were interested, they then enlarged it in what was known as the Mark II synthesizer, which finally was moved to the Columbia-Princeton electronic music center in New York. The capacity of a singer to work with this is beyond anything I dare try to explain now, because although it gives her a great deal of security -- she doesn't have to worry about an accompanist who might skip a measure or play a wrong note -- this machine gives nothing. She's singing to a tape, a tape that has been synthesized and is not susceptible to any kind of modification in the course of the performance. So that is it, and any questions about that I'd be pleased to answer, because there's been so much misunderstanding. I was sitting behind a lady at Kennedy Center when Robert Taub was playing a similarly synthesized piece of mine for piano, a piece called "Reflections," and she got very angry. She said "why don't you have the person who played that machine back there come out and take a bow?" Of course, the person playing the machine back there was sitting behind her -- or in front of her; I've forgotten. But of course nothing was being played in real time. It is not a real-time machine. You can't play it in real time, there's no way you can sit at the keyboard and play, because the keyboard is simply a punch mechanism which is instructing the machine with regard to every aspect of the musical event and the mode of progression from that musical event to the next such specified event.

We should talk about your piece a little bit, Jake. Thank you very much for this piece, by the way. I appreciate it very, very much, as I appreciate that marvellous percussion playing. This is an extraordinary occasion for me.

Do we have any questions?
We don't have any questions, Jake, so talk.

JR: I can always come up with questions for Milton Babbitt... In the upcoming works, the tape -- the electronic performance -- is combined with a human performance. Do you prefer electronic music that involves live performance?

MB: A good question. What Jake is referring to is the fact that whereas most of my synthesized material is either a pure synthesized piece -- that is, a purely electronic piece -- or just synthesized sound with piano or string orchestra, and -- what else have I done? -- voice, of course. Now, in this particular piece you will hear a tape on which there are some sounds which are not synthesized in that same way. You will hear the voice of the singer which has been modified by MEANS of the synthesizer, but was originally sung by a human soprano -- in fact, the very human soprano, Bethany Beardslee, for whom the work was written. It was modified through the synthesizer, which was capable of doing that because you could put input in -- not just the input of the keyboard. And this was a terribly difficult task, so if you mean do I prefer not having to do that, yes Jake, I prefer not having to do that. We had to go to a studio, first of all, to record it straight, and then I had to modify it and work on it. It was an enormous task, and it was the second such piece I had done: "Vision and Prayer" was also for voice and synthesized tape, but there was no pre-recorded voice or anything of that kind which makes enormous difficulty when it comes to integrating these things temporally.

No, I haven't worked in this medium for 27 years. Since the synthesizer is no longer possible because it was rather badly destroyed by some vandals (you see, there is justice in the world) I haven't done any electronic work. Nothing can substitute, for me, for the synthesizer, which was my baby, and my poor little baby is no more.

Audience #1: Certainly you take great care in organizing all the various musical elements that you use -- pitch, timbre, and volume. I was wondering if you consider and take similar care with silence within your music -- if that's a factor that you give similar care as you would to other musical elements. Could you speak to your thoughts on silence?

MB: Silence is simply a part of a duration. It depends on how you're partitioning the duration -- how much of it consists of sound and how much of it consists of silence.

Audience #1: I was just wondering if you had any thoughts on the use of silence, or if that's just a by-product of...

MB: Yes, well... it's not a by-product. It's a direct result of the structuring of the total piece, and at a certain point if you have a certain duration, how much of that duration is silence and how much of it is sound, that's part of the structure of the piece, of course.

Audience #2: With all the books that have been written about your music...

MB: It's very flattering.

Audience #2: ...and about the techniques that you use and have developed -- probably different techniques for each piece, I would think (at least, that's my impression)...

MB: Not completely. But keep talking. (I only interrupt you because I may forget it.)

Audience #2: The real question is: beyond the technique -- and this is the first time anybody has ever spoken of it with regard to your music -- there is the intuitive element that goes into the composition of each musical moment, and I want you to talk more about that for a second, if you would.

MB: Well, look, you talk about "intuitive." All that intuition, after all, can possibly mean is your recalled experience. It means all of that that you have learned, all of your thought, your formal or informal

conditioning, and that, of course, plays a part in any decision you make. The very decisions, which you call "techniques," are not separable -- in any sense of the word. They're not separable from each other, and they're not separable from the decisions you make. And why do you make those decisions? Those decisions come from all of your past experience, and therefore that is your intuition, acting at all times. How do you make any decisions with regard to a piece of music? How do you decide what to write, or for what instrument to write? (Though the latter might be derived from more practical considerations.) So, in this case, of course the answer is that these so-called "techniques" are not separable from any notions of intuition. These all interact, and perhaps I don't understand what you mean by "technique," but one doesn't think of using "techniques." One thinks, again, of the total piece and the total interaction of all the dimensions. And the decisions about those come from, if you wish, call it your inspiration, call it your intuition, call it your technique.

Audience #3: I want to ask you, then, again, about intuition. Intuition, to my mind, includes not only what you've consciously learned...

MB: I didn't say consciously learned. I said formal or informal, which meant all that you've assimilated.

Audience #3: A lot of people's notions about music are deeply connected to references in the music, or feelings that people have in music that they don't necessarily understand. It's part of the mystique of music. I'm curious what role you think the subconscious -- or things that you can't necessarily think logically about -- play in your music.

MB: Well, I object to the word "logically" there, because that has special connotations. There are a lot of things people can't think logically about. Perhaps you should enlarge your question a little bit.

Audience #3: Perhaps I misunderstood what you said, but I felt that when you were emphasizing intuition that had to do with your background...

MB: It has to do with everything you've been.

Audience #3: Right. I was trying to extend that to realms of the subconscious...

MB: No, I wouldn't presume to indulge in that, because who knows what created all of those things? Who knows what the forces were that created any of those decisions in the past or the present.

Audience #3: Let me ask you also: it seems like the process of combining voice with technology is something that everyone in the room experiences every day...

MB: Absolutely.

Audience #3: ... in popular music...

MB: And also when you play the piano with the voice.

Audience #3. I guess I mean, specifically, the use of synthesizer and other futuristic technology. Do you see yourself as a pioneer in that sense, or are you saddened when, for instance, in many contemporary church services, one sings with a taped recording. That is something that would have been unthinkable...

JR: I don't think we can blame Professor Babbitt for that.

MB: I can't regard that as having any relation to me. But regarding the "pioneer" aspect of it -- well, one didn't think in those terms. I was very excited about the possibility of using this machine which very few people had access to. One doesn't think of one's self as a pioneer, at least I don't. You know, after all, if one thinks of one's self as an innovator, you'd better recall, immediately, that an innovator may be, in some sense, honored for his name, but usually not for his music. So the question of innovation doesn't play a

very large role in one's thinking about these things. You have something you're interested in, and you do it. Anything else is excess baggage, in a sense.

JR: To perhaps tie this together... These electronic pieces are relatively old, and I know that some of your theoretical texts that we, as composers, most appreciate -- specifically the time-point system, and ways of dealing with rhythm -- were at least written ABOUT, if not developed FOR, the electronic medium: the electronics can do things that humans can't. We do a lot of complaining about the state of music today, but it must make you feel proud that so many people can play -- on instruments, now -- these rhythms that you might have originally thought more appropriate for electronics. Is the state of performance better today than it was 40 or 50 years ago?

MB: That's a very good point. We learn so much about how we hear by working with these electronic instruments. I mean, things that we thought were impossible to distinguish we learned we COULD distinguish. We would try things almost constantly, though we weren't sure whether or not things could be distingushed. In other words, the boundaries of music now are not what the performer can do, but what the ear can distinguish -- obviously, the "ear" in a slightly metaphorical sense. Of course, you know what I mean: what can be construed. And that is very important, because as a result of this, many performers began to be influenced by what these instruments could do. For example, Harvey Sollberger -- who was, at that time, I would insist, the best flutist I'd ever known -- came to the studio once, and I played for him a trill that was actually 35 alternations a second. He listened to that, and said "well, I can play that," and he simply got his flute and he tried it: he couldn't come close. He could only trill at half that speed. But the reason he thought he could do it was because he could perceive it so easily. I mean, if you could hear that differentiation -- I remember it was a C to a D 35 times a second -- he could hear the pitches; of course he thought he could do it. But it was physically impossible: 15 alternations a second is about the limit of the muscular system. But it did lead people to think of hearing in a way they never had before, particularly in the temporal domain. It was there, more than anywhere else, that the electronic medium had its effect. Wouldn't you say so?

JR: Yes.

MB: And we were finding ways, in other works, to extend it -- ways that could be realized ONLY with the electronic medium. There are undoubtedly things -- you'll hear things in Philomel, and you'll hear things in any electronic piece of mine -- which simply couldn't be played by instruments. And one doesn't say that boastfully; it's another medium, and just because it can't be done by an instrument doesn't make it, necessarily, a superior phenomenon. But it did lead to things that had never been heard before.

JR: So let's hear them.

MB: Let's hear them.