

## A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLES WUORINEN

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*On September 1, 2017, a few months after his 79th birthday, I visited Charles Wuorinen at his brownstone on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. We spent the afternoon chatting about his impressions of—and his contributions to—the world of serious music, and later we were joined by Ashlee Mack and Howard Stokar for a dinner that lasted late into the night. The interview that follows is a distillation of our long and wide-ranging conversation. It was lightly edited by each of us shortly after transcription.*

**JR:** For better or worse, you've been described and defined—throughout your career—as a twelve-tone composer. In a 1963 issue of *Perspectives of New Music* you stated that twelve-tone composition was "the familiar and hardly-conscious language of young composers." You even went so far as to say that "pitch serialization is no longer an issue." This, obviously, is not the case a half-century later; was it truly the case in 1963?

**CW:** I don't know. It seemed that way to me, however limited my perspective may have been. The circles that I moved in, and the evidence that I had from outside—journalistically and in other ways—suggested that it was the case. It's always bad—and I haven't done it much since then—to say what is the norm, because of course it always turns out, at very best, not to be permanent. Beside that, the whole question of what is the prevailing mode of composition, or whatever, is no longer of any interest—because there isn't one. I still think it's extraordinary that for the last hundred years composers have not been able to come to an agreement on what constitutes compositional value. This interview today got me thinking about *Perspectives of New Music*, which used to be—when it started out in the early 60s—something that, for example, journalists of the New York Times, or people in the big institutions—the operas and orchestras—knew about and were slightly intimidated by. What that means is that there still was, at that period—now fifty years ago—a residual sense of respect for high culture. That is now completely gone, and so discussion of any of these things is, I think, pointless.

**JR:** Do you think the reason that the twelve-tone concept is so misunderstood, and has in most circles fallen out of favor, is that it was often referred to as a style as opposed to a method?

**CW:** I don't know. That was the sort of the thing that music critics might say, but I think the main problem is that twelve-tone composition is simply too much work. People, especially at the end of the 60s, with the sustained assault that occurred at that time on all forms of authority—whether legitimate or illegitimate, including intellectual and artistic authority—I think people got the idea that all of this stuff was just too much trouble and things could simply

be done intuitively, which of course meant repeating the clichés of the moment that came into one's head. I don't think it amounts to much more than that, especially because even during the Schoenbergian period, and before, there were already so many different ways of approaching the composition of music using ordered interval sets that it would be misleading to call it a style. That's a locution that comes from people who haven't composed—people who think that there's Style X or Style Y and that you decide to use one or the other: you plug stuff in and off you go. Those of us who write music know that this isn't the way it works.

**JR:** I wonder if twelve-tone music, especially the twelve-tone music that you've created, is not as different from so-called tonal music as some people might think. You and I have talked about this sort of thing before: can music truly be "atonal" if it employs equal-tempered tuning? A half step is a half step; a perfect fifth is a perfect fifth, and so on. The acknowledgement of this is what allows you to make "tonal puns," as you call them, on the surface of your music.

**CW:** Well, as I've said—and it's quaint now because it's so far distant—the compositional environment in which I grew up was not the radicalism of John Cage, but the other kind of radicalism. A composer like Milton Babbitt—or even Elliott Carter, who always claimed that he had nothing to do with the twelve-tone system—would claim to be completely redoing music and claim that what he did was a total break with the past. I always felt—even as a very young man—that, first, this is not possible since the past is so much with us and remains so; second, it is not desirable. As a result, I always felt that the evolutionary—rather than the revolutionary—approach to these matters was preferable, and that the idea of avoiding—in the actual execution of composing—relationships, sonorities, and situations that sounded referential to the diatonic past was unnecessary. I always thought it was perfectly fine. I also thought that certain conceptual notions associated with twelve-tone composition, such as aggregate formation and progression, were a mistake—because they don't reflect the way musical continuity really expresses itself. As a result of this, a lot of compositions in that general mode seem to me to be static rather than dynamic, and I've always been interested in the latter.

**JR:** This is important, because what you are talking about is the background form and long-range unfolding of a composition. The approaches you mention—aggregate progression, for example, or all-partition arrays, etc.—were created as structural frameworks to replace those of the tonal system. If you consider those approaches to be mistakes, what do you recommend instead?

**CW:** I've always worked, as you know, from the outside in—from the general into the specific—precisely to recover some aspect of those qualities that real diatonic music has. So, I'm not quite sure what one does. I think it's a mistake to try to replicate, on a one-to-one basis, the behavior of tonal music. It doesn't really work that way. But there are certain ways of making a forward-dynamic movement, such as large-scale acceleration—a fluctuation of density which increases over time, etc. That kind of thing can be done, and what I've always done with ordered sets has been to elect a zero—which really is a kind of tonic referential point—that perhaps can be sensed through repetition, or by emphasis in other ways, within the musical texture. All of this strikes me nowadays as slightly nostalgic since I'm much less inclined to

methodological consistency and rigor than I used to be. That was always an intention that I had. As you know, I've always reflected on the way in which, say, 18th-Century Classical composers wrote their pieces: they seem to me to be objects created by artisans who had learned a trade, whatever their great qualities may or may not have been. Philosophical reflection on deeper structure and the nature of music was not something that preoccupied them in any way, at least not that we have any evidence of. So it seemed to me that if I could re-create, in my own compositional activity, a set of practices that had some relation to what they did, I could eventually reach the stage that they seemed to reach—where they simply employed the means, and recipes, and the rest of it, without all this musical/philosophical aesthetic reflection, which I don't think helps much of anything.

**JR:** Are you still creating large-scale structure from nested time-points?

**CW:** Well, in a very general way, but an awful lot of that sort of stuff has disappeared. I'm still likely to lay out some very broad, approximately quantitative, time relations dominated by a succession of pitch classes from some ordered set or other, but I don't think you'd get very far by looking for that. And, unfortunately for anybody who's interested now, my documentation is very sparse—sometimes to the point of nonexistence. I try to forget—actually I don't have to try: I forget without effort, and almost immediately—precisely what I've done, so I'm not helpful.

**JR:** You've always been that way, and when I was a student I was never sure whether you were being coy or truly didn't remember.

**CW:** No. I don't want to remember. In the earlier days of developing and using those methods, I had a lot of sketch material. I was able—and I suppose I still could if there were any reason to bother doing it—to talk about pretty much exactly how I did things and show the various stages of what I had done. But, you know, these kinds of things just aren't that interesting once they've served their purpose. Like any scaffolding, you get rid of it, or it falls away by itself.

**JR:** In theory books and analysis classes we talk about large-scale form in the Classical period, but by the time we get into the 20th and 21st centuries it seems that the focus is often narrowed to the measure or phrase—small-scale "counting to twelve," or searching for set-classes. This is difficult to do in the case of your music. It seems nearly impossible to choose, say, a two-measure excerpt from one of your compositions and fully explicate its content, and its implications, in a neat and tidy way. It's always seemed to me that the order in your music is found at a deeper level, instead of on the surface. Is this correct? What is the key to an analytical understanding of your work? Is it necessary to take a broader view, or can one choose a short excerpt and learn something important?

**CW:** I have no idea. How am I supposed to answer something like that? I suppose that trying to sense the broader picture is always a good idea. I'm not really sure what analysis is, but I am sure that it isn't the retrograde of composition, so I don't think that even in the case of your

Weberns—or in other similar kinds of music—that row-counting is of any help. What does it prove?

**JR:** Many of Webern's works are so short that small-scale row-counting does tell something about the entirety of the composition.

**CW:** But what does it mean? What is the point of identifying rows? Yes, you can do it. But having done it, what does it accomplish by way of musical understanding? In my own teaching days, occasionally someone would explain a work of their own with this kind of thing, as if a list of set forms somehow conveyed much of anything. That's the problem. It's like cataloging all the scales that someone uses in a diatonic piece and then leaving it at that without then saying how they relate to one another.

**JR:** Because of your highly personal and relatively consistent common practice over the course of your career, does the path to understanding a specific work of yours require one to examine all the others?

**CW:** I don't know. One could also examine the influences I've had: I think they're fairly straightforward. I suppose it couldn't hurt to look at something else—to see how Piece A relates to Piece B. As I've always said, self-portraiture is a difficult task and I don't possess the skill to do it. So I can't say what would be the best way. If I could answer that question intelligently it would mean that I have a key to something, which I don't.

**JR:** But you must have some sort of "key" if you're able to compose, now, without a lot of sketchwork—with general ideas as opposed to more specific ones. What does your sketchwork look like these days?

**CW:** Well, it looks very rudimentary and primitive, but remember there are also drafts. Each subsequent draft is a reaction to the previous one. Most of the time there are a good many of these—half a dozen, typically. Sometimes a little less, sometimes more. So, in a certain sense, you might say that whatever gets put down in the initial primitive form is already something that represents a sketch of some sort, to which one reacts subsequently. But, also, you know, a lifetime of developing tastes and habits makes many choices—in detail, especially—relatively simple, and relatively straightforward. Probably the longer one goes at this, the more these habitual choices can become clichés. But one has preferences, and some of these things—a lot of them, I think—are surface-level matters of taste.

**JR:** What has shaped your taste over the years? Composers? Authors? Poets? Scientists? Architects?

**CW:** Not architects, God help us. But all of the others yes, of course. The kinds of things that I admire, and that influence me, are—for the most part—those things that embody a sort of Stravinskian musical model. Not exclusively, though, because I was also very strongly influenced, in my early years, by the work of Stefan Wolpe: the irregularity, asymmetry, and

spontaneity of a lot of his music impressed me greatly. And then there's Elliott Carter, with the kinds of multiple simultaneous happenings that he liked to compose. So, there's all of that in the picture. The question of taste is something that has a broader application since we seem so much to lack it now. By taste I don't mean something that is necessarily always refined, and always discrete, and always held back—by no means. But—on the other hand—the clichéd, the vulgar, the stupid, and the offensive are not things that are to be sought after, in my view.

**JR:** Are there periods to your compositional output? Are there boundaries or turning-points?

**CW:** I think things change gradually. That's always been my sense. Maybe someone looking at it from the outside could identify discontinuities that I'm not aware of, but since I've always worked continuously—I've never taken nine years off to think things over or anything like that—I don't know when there would have been the chance for a radical change, especially because I've always been aspiring toward some kind of degree of musical coherence that I felt was largely lacking in what I was hearing. That's something that seems to require not sitting around and waiting for lightning to strike, but continuous effort.

**JR:** If none of your works represent turning-points in your compositional evolution, are there any that stand out for you?

**CW:** I don't know. I don't think about them, particularly. Some do, I guess, but I wouldn't want to single any out. Take something like that piece *New York Notes*, for instance, which gets played a lot: it's fine; it's alright. I like it well enough, but I just wish—when yet another performance of that comes—you know, maybe it would be nice to do something else?

**JR:** I want to talk a little bit about teaching, even though that's not your primary focus and hasn't been for a long time. I remember that when I first started taking lessons with you I wanted to start a piece from scratch, so I created a sketch for a one-minute piano piece. I spent a lot of time and effort creating time-point strands, and mapping pitch rows onto them, before I began notating anything resembling actual music. I remember being surprised—when I brought those initial sketches to my second lesson—that you didn't seem especially concerned with how I chose my rhythms, or even my pitches. Instead I got the distinct feeling that you wanted to spend more time helping me figure out what to do with the actual musical instantiation of these abstract plans I had made: you helped with decisions of register and duration, the voicings of simultaneities, and the overall sweep of gestures. I quickly came to the conclusion that you were trying to teach good taste, and I remember being amazed at your ability to take a combination of pitches and rhythms—things that I had been struggling with for a week—and in mere moments rearrange their octave positions to create something that sounded musical and directed. You frequently told me to resist the urge to revise my basic structures and instead to take the time, and apply the necessary skill, to work with my materials until the music went somewhere and sounded polished. I suspect that you take a lot of pride in your ability to take a jumble of notes and make them into something special—much like the chefs on popular cooking-contest television shows who are given mystery ingredients and a time limit. This might

explain why you've written for just about every combination of instruments and voices that one could imagine. Is this your biggest skill as a composer?

**CW:** I don't know. That's not for me to say. But it's a matter of, finally, the fact that the music has to sound, and that's all that matters. That's not to say that you don't need all this other structural stuff, because you do. But if we were living in a halcyon diatonic period—and I don't say this wistfully or nostalgically, just factually—a lot of this stuff wouldn't exist as an issue. You'd know exactly what to do, and your range of imagination would be constrained by the current practice, and therefore not be in danger of running off the rails. One of the things that I often feel when I have a reservation about someone else's composition—a work that is otherwise unobjectionable—is that I don't think the music "rings" properly. That is to say that the deployment of notes is such that natural acoustic resonances are not exploited. Simply put, I think that certain sonorities are preferable. I don't have any systematic way of describing them, except by how my ear responds to them, but there are certainly some that are better than others. This kind of selection, I think, needs to take precedence over any sort of more deeply-buried principle. It's a cliché to say that the ear is, finally, the thing that has to test the music, but it is, and I don't see a way around that. What you have described, about our lessons many years ago, might also in part be a result of a kind of change of attitude that I had as a result of my exposure to fractals, and to Benoit Mandelbrot, and the things I did at Bell Labs—the little experiments that I made, not as compositions but as attempts to find out a kind of relationship between materials and structures. I became convinced that the only thing that matters is the existence of organizational principles. It doesn't even matter what those organizational principles are, as long as they're sufficiently specific. I became convinced that the mere existence of these things is far more significant than the degree to which they are arbitrary, and that to try finding some kind of cosmic justification for a structural system that you might elect is a waste of time. There may, of course, be plenty of things out there that are totally wrong-headed and don't work, but the idea that there is one correct system—a system that opposes something like the diatonic system that evolved over a long period of time, with many contributions by individuals—is a waste of time. It's the existence of the system, not its rectitude. On the other hand, the absence—the refusal—of any kind of consciously-chosen systematic procedure is what gave rise to Babbitt's famous remark about how those who think they are operating without constraints are simply operating under constraints of which they are unaware, which is another way of saying what I said before.

**JR:** So you really were trying to teach your students good taste—more than you were trying to teach a system or technique.

**CW:** Yes. Other than that, there isn't much anybody can tell anybody else, I think. And even that sort of thing is very limited, because everything comes from experience.

**JR:** Do you miss teaching?

**CW:** No. Even in the most relaxed circumstance, teaching is very taxing. I'm sure you find it to be so.

**JR:** It can be exhausting.

**CW:** It doesn't seem like it ought to be, but it is—because you're trying to enter into the world of the other person. The trouble often is that what you find there is blank.

**JR:** In a 1962 interview with Barney Childs, you stated that you "wish to see united all aspects of music, in a single person, who will be known simply as a musician... [who will] perform, administer, write (words) and speculate on theoretic, historic, etc., subjects—all of these musical functions along with the central preoccupation of composition." This happened in your generation thanks to your efforts with the Group for Contemporary Music, and probably also in the case of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, who performed and recorded with their own ensembles. I think this trend continues today, though I suspect that it might not be as you envisioned 55 years ago?

**CW:** I don't know. I have no idea. I can't pretend to remember specific motivation for something I said that long ago, although it sounds sensible. Things have changed so radically that the mere fact that a composer also has an ensemble doesn't necessarily have anything to do with what I was saying. I think that what I had in mind was not a kind of semi-pop situation in which there's material produced by the leader of the group and then the group performs it, but rather something a little more serious and elevated. I don't follow these things now, so I really don't know what people who write music of the sort that I might find interesting are doing in this regard. I can't give an updated answer.

**JR:** When you asked "How can you make a revolution when the revolution before last has already said that anything goes?" did you foresee that the next revolution might end up being—in some compositional circles—a retreat from the avant-garde to a more conservative, reactionary approach to music?

**CW:** I might have. I don't know. But is it really conservative? It's not so much conservative as it is the destruction and abandonment of all respect for, and all attempt to practice, high culture. Part of that has always been the case, especially in America—a populist contempt for the intellect. But it's also a surrender, because high culture takes work. But anyway, that's what we have and live with.

**JR:** Do you think the situation is irreversible?

**CW:** I don't know. Consider history: it takes a long time for anything to come back. And of course one thinks of the Marxist pronouncement that history occurs the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce. Are we in the farce phase of this? Because—the revolution—there isn't one anymore. Or, if there is, it's a kind of populist, luddite destruction of cultural norms. But that's happened already, so I don't know that there's much we can do about it. The outer trappings of high culture—say, operas and symphonies—who knows how long they'll last? When another generation goes by and the current crop of hedge-fund managers—who

are now in their 40s and 50s and still want the social prestige of getting on to the boards of the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera—I'm not so sure that the generation after that is going to care at all about any of these things.

**JR:** But, 50 years ago, wouldn't you have predicted that high culture would be extinct by now? Things didn't look very good then, either. Isn't there some reasonable justification for optimism in the fact that the two of us are here talking, today?

**CW:** No. It was different then, and I was very naive. I thought that the universities, who seemed to be embracing all this stuff, were going to turn out to be the real locus for serious artistic activity. Well, it turned out to be wrong. It didn't happen that way. Essentially, the promise of universities evaporated and turned back into what it has become now: a heavily politicized and deeply anti-artistic environment in a great many places. I had hoped for better, but it was a silly hope that came to nothing.

**JR:** What do you hope an audience would possess in order to appreciate your music?

**CW:** Familiarity.

**JR:** What's the best way to get the familiarity? Are recordings ok?

**CW:** Yeah, sure. Why not? Mainly, it's just familiarity with whatever level of generality you want to talk about: a specific piece; a group of pieces; a specific composer; music of the 20th century... One of my shticks always was to say to an audience: "Welcome. Here we are and it's 2000-whatever, and most of you don't know the music of a hundred years ago, which is the ancestor of all this stuff. How, possibly, can two minutes of talking make anything any different? Just relax, listen to it, and see what you think."

**JR:** So I assume that you're still against program notes?

**CW:** Well, I think that if a program note contains basic information—like what the music is scored for, when was it written and for whom, that kind of thing—that's fine. But specifics about what pitches the bassoons play in measure 27: that's not fine. I suppose one should simply write something like: The movement opens with a perky little theme in the clarinet, then the orchestra responds...

**JR:** ...and this sort of thing goes on for quite some time, then stops.

**CW:** Yes, exactly.