

The Singularity of Sound in a Plurality of Vision: The Early Works of Joseph Byrd

The imaginative and carefully crafted music of Joseph Byrd assumes an astonishing variety of guises: he was an integral part of the experimental arts scene in New York and Los Angeles in the 1960s; he founded the psychedelic rock band The United States of America, and its successor Joe Byrd and the Field Hippies; he arranged and produced a recording of Civil War music for Capitol Records, as well as recordings of synthesized Christmas music, patriotic songs, and a critically acclaimed jazz album by Ry Cooder; he has also written music for film and television, including theme music for CBS Evening News, and designed sound for toys manufactured by Mattel Inc. Byrd is a veritable polymath, and the high quality of his projects earned him respect among his colleagues, but the exceptionally wide-ranging nature of his oeuvre has obfuscated his musical identity. “I had always been eclectic as a composer,” Byrd admits. “Indeed it was a detriment to my finding a single distinctive voice in the avant-garde, as I changed styles with almost every piece.”¹

Byrd’s career resists easy categorization because his collective activities encompass a broader sound world than is typically admitted within the confines of a single genre. In this sense, Byrd possesses the spirit of radical exploration that has long characterized composers of the American experimental tradition. From the polystylism of Charles Ives to Edgard Varèse’s call for the liberation of sound to the new musical resources of Henry Cowell to John Cage’s campaign to let sounds be themselves, composers have long sought to incorporate elements of sound and noise previously regarded as inappropriate or unmusical, a principle of inclusivity that Byrd extended into his entire musical life. Byrd’s professional eclecticism, in other words, emerged from an acute attention to sound, a practice that he cultivated as an undergraduate student.

By the time Byrd enrolled as a music major at the University of Arizona in Tucson, he was already performing professionally as an accordionist, vibraphonist, and bassist. Also interested in arranging, the precocious Byrd found the lower-division coursework unchallenging, but he learned of a new professor of English named Barney Childs, who also happened to be an experimental composer. Childs recognized in Byrd a raw talent—he was creative, disciplined, and had an outstanding ear with a keen ability to reproduce the sounds he heard—and Childs agreed to work with him individually. He introduced the eager pupil to a wide variety of genres from different historical periods: “He gave equal weight to all styles and approaches to composition,” Byrd recalls, “a stylistic democracy I’ve never seen in any other teacher.”² The key to their sessions, and the pedagogical connection among the seemingly disparate musical styles, was the importance of critical listening: “He cared more about hearing music perceptively,” Byrd points out, “than he did about technique or style.”³

Childs provided a glowing letter of recommendation for his ambitious student’s admittance into Stanford University, and in 1959 Byrd moved to Palo Alto, where he befriended Bay Area composers La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and others who would soon gain recognition for their contributions to minimalist music. Byrd shared the unbridled curiosity, intensity of the listening experience, and meticulous attention to detail that engaged the early minimalists, but by his own account, he stood apart from most of his peers in two closely related

¹ Joseph Byrd, “Unlike Anything: A Commentary by Joseph Byrd,” liner notes, *The United States of America* (Sundazed SC-11124, 2003), compact disc.

² Byrd, correspondence with Daniel Wolf, August 29, 2008.

³ Byrd, email correspondence with the author, November 7, 2012.

regards: his conventional musical training and his facility and interest in composing in a wide variety of styles. “I was an oddity when I joined them from conservative Stanford,” Byrd recalls. “As a former student of Barney Childs, I was steeped in tradition. But worse, I could write with fluidity in styles ranging from Renaissance to Impressionism.”⁴ (As Byrd later mused, “I’m probably the only experimental composer of my generation who can write a crab canon, a six-part madrigal, or a concerto grosso.”⁵) Although many of the early minimalists went on to develop recognizable musical identities based on the refinement of individual styles, Byrd constantly explored different modes of composition.

As were several other young composers with a penchant for radical experimentation, Byrd was intrigued by the music and ideas of John Cage, and in 1960 he moved to New York, where he quickly became immersed in the heady and varied downtown environment. “New York in the early ’60s was intoxicating,” Byrd writes. “There was every kind of artistic activity imaginable. . . . The city teemed with young artists and writers, musicians and dancers, and there was a sense of being ‘on the axis of the wheel of life.’”⁶ During the three years he spent in New York, Byrd continued his association with La Monte Young, who collaborated with George Maciunas, Henry Flynt, and other avant-gardists who had attended Cage’s experimental music class at The New School. Several of these individuals comprised Fluxus, an informal community of artists from a variety of disciplines who fostered the development of concept art, sound poems, and other innovative types of performance pieces. From December 1960 to January 1962, Young organized a series of concerts in Yoko Ono’s loft that presented works by different Fluxus musicians, including a program dedicated exclusively to Byrd’s music on March 4–5, 1961.

Byrd had initially moved to New York to study with John Cage, but among the most influential of his experiences during this period were his two lessons with Morton Feldman, whose delicately floating music enchanted the young composer. As Byrd recalls their first meeting, Feldman criticized his preference for linear counterpoint: “He took one look at my work and said, ‘Wrong. All wrong. You are writing lines, not sounds. You must learn to listen vertically, so that every event is a sound you have played on piano scores of times until you are sure it’s right.’”⁷ Feldman instilled in Byrd an acute sensitivity to what he describes as the “singularity of the sound, at that moment,”⁸ and in his subsequent music Byrd relaxed some of the contrapuntal rigor that had characterized his earlier works. “Gradually I moved away from my Feldmanesque pieces,” Byrd indicates, “but the advice about playing each vertical intersection over and over has been part of my compositional technique ever since.”⁹

In addition to his activities as a musician, Byrd took on several odd jobs to earn a living in New York, including working as a secretarial assistant to Virgil Thomson from 1962 to 1963. It was on Thomson’s recommendation that Byrd, with his skill in composing in a wide variety of styles, was

⁴ Byrd, email correspondence with Alan Zimmerman, June 5, 2010.

⁵ Byrd, correspondence with Daniel Wolf, August 29, 2008. Byrd respectfully qualifies this claim by following it with the admission, “Well, no—I’d bet Doug Leedy could do it,” citing the American composer Douglas Leedy, who studied at the University of California at Berkeley along with La Monte Young and Terry Riley.

⁶ Byrd, “Unlike Anything.”

⁷ Byrd, email correspondence with the author, November 6, 2012.

⁸ Byrd, email correspondence with Alan Zimmerman, November 10, 2011.

⁹ *Ibid.*

hired as a staff arranger for Capitol Records, for which he would produce several albums. “The opportunity to work with a wide range of styles and artists at Capitol was a godsend,” Byrd remarks. “I gained fluency in myriad kinds of music, and I became increasingly interested in the music of India and Indonesia.”¹⁰

Byrd’s interest in world music traditions led him in 1963 to Los Angeles, where he was offered a teaching assistantship at UCLA to pursue a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology. Together with experimental jazz trumpeter Don Ellis, Byrd co-founded The New Music Workshop, which presented concerts of avant-garde music in the vein of his previous activities in New York. In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1965, Byrd discusses the workshop and promotes its mission to enlarge the palette of sounds available for modern music. He makes a distinction between traditional “note music” and experimental “sound music” by drawing an analogy with the artistic relationship between an oil painting and a collage: “Traditional music,” Byrd says, “is a few sounds in many different arrangements, but with the new music we include a whole world of sounds. We’re trying to create an excitement of sound and we think it’s a beautiful thing.”¹¹ He also bemoans the common tendency to label music, which impedes the perceptual experience: “People listen too much to terms and definitions,” Byrd notes. “If people are enthusiastic about the ‘stuff’ we play at the workshop they can call it whatever they like.”¹² Byrd’s advocacy of “sound music” and his dismissal of labels recalls Varèse, who responded to critics with “stubbornly conditioned ears” by referring to his music as “organized sound” and to himself as “a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities.”¹³

The rhythms, frequencies, and intensities on this recording provide a rich musical document of Byrd’s activities between 1960 and 1963, from the end of his studies at Stanford through his time in New York, when he studied with Feldman, served as an apprentice to Cage, and participated in the Fluxus group. Crafted with technical precision, all of the works were designed to explore the “singularity of sound” that was central to Byrd’s lessons with Feldman. Byrd remains sensitive to the vertical qualities of any given pitch collection, but rather than presenting static drones or sequences of isolated chords, he frequently animates the relationship among the materials through indeterminate procedures and shifting cycles. “I think [Feldman’s] influence is hugely evident,” Byrd explains, “although by incorporating loops I still managed to bring polyphony into the picture. Counterpoint has been my pride since forever.”¹⁴ In other words, he mobilizes the rhythmic arrangements of the independent components, which creates a sophisticated brand of variable polyphony, similar to the ever-changing spatial arrangements of a Calder mobile.

Animals (1961) was written for a solo prepared piano to be accompanied by an animated drone played by a group of six string or percussion instruments who each sound a single pitch throughout the entire work. The score indicates preparations for a collection of thirteen pitches, subsets of which appear within specific timeframes. Each of the ten staff systems is equal to one minute, with the duration of notated events to be determined by approximate spatial relationships. Although the performers are instructed to play an “even and continuous” pulse, the

¹⁰ Byrd, “Unlike Anything.”

¹¹ Mal Terence, “Studies in Cacophony: New Sounds Make Music of Tomorrow,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1965.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Edgar Varèse and Chou Wen-Chung, “The Liberation of Sound,” *Perspectives of New Music* 5:1 (Autumn–Winter 1966): 18.

¹⁴ Byrd, email correspondence with the author, November 6, 2012.

specific order and rhythm of the musical figures are indeterminate. Dynamics are very soft throughout and there are no accents, so the harmonically static music is devoid of dramatic points of arrival. Instead, there is an undulating texture of constant activity, with articulations by the soloist occasionally surfacing and submerging. Complex polyrhythms emerge from the overlapping of multiple patterns, similar to the cyclic temporal structures of Indonesian gamelan.

Byrd composed *Loops & Sequences* (1961) for cellist Charlotte Moorman, who organized several performances and would soon establish the New York Avant Garde Festival. The score consists of two sets of materials that appear on two staff lines—one for the cello, and one for the piano—which the performers may arrange in any sequence or organization they choose, as long as each unit is played only once. The loops are conventionally notated cells, but the sequences are full lines of sustained tones and non-sustained tones. The specific pitches and pitch sequence within each unit are determinate, as are their coincidence within the loops, but the rhythm of the sequences and the overall structure are indeterminate. As with the score for *Animals*, each system is assigned a total duration, and performers must play everything as notated within the allotted timeframe. The effect is mesmerizing: a floating sequence of isolated figures that occasionally get caught in loops.

Three Aphorisms (1960), the earliest of the works on this recording, is a solo for prepared piano that Byrd composed while studying at Stanford University. Although it is a highly deterministic work in that everything is conventionally notated, there are variable aspects of timbre that are associated with any preparation of the piano, which the composer acknowledges in the score instructions. In addition to providing precise directions for preparing eleven notes of the instrument, Byrd describes the intended sound that should result from the preparation. As short statements that encapsulate a principle, these “aphorisms” suggest an influence of Barney Childs, who instilled in Byrd the idea that every composition should serve to address a specific musical issue, but in this case the title simply refers to the haiku-like brevity of the pieces.

Densities I (1962) features a solo viola with four treble instruments. Like *Animals*, there are ten staff systems, each of which is to last one minute in duration. The viola plays a disjunctive line mostly in harmonics or pizzicato, with an occasional note marked *col legno*. The accompaniment is a series of simultaneities, or “densities,” that are pitch specific, but all durations are notated according to an approximate relational value—there are open notes (i.e., whole notes), solid notes without stems, and open and solid notes with eighth-note stems and beams. Without an index of pulse or meter, however, any sense of rhythm dissolves into a succession of isolated sonic events within an undifferentiated spectrum of time, similar to Feldman’s notion of the noble procession of ghostly figures within a Greek frieze.

*Four Sound*Poems* (1962) are original poems by Byrd, each of which is dedicated to a woman who was active in the experimental arts scene in New York: composer Lucia Dlugoszewski, pianist Judy Winkler (now Judy Eda), poet Diane Wakoski, and cellist Charlotte Moorman. Reminiscent of the non-semantic poetry of Gertrude Stein, these poems feature the repetition of a limited collection of words, where meaning emerges from their accumulation, permutation, and varied juxtaposition. The four performers read the text slowly and deliberately with pauses at the end of each line, but they are only to vocalize those phonemes or syllables that are underlined at random points, which amounts to approximately half of the text. “The effect,” Byrd explains in the score, “should be that of turning up and down sharply the volume control on a radio so that only parts of words or phrases are heard.” A stuttering polyphony results, not unlike medieval hocket,

which produces a live, acoustic rendering of a *musique concrète* deconstruction of language.

String Trio (1962) for violin, viola, and cello also bears the conspicuous influence of Morton Feldman. The score is conventionally and precisely notated, but the rhythmic preponderance of unequal subdivisions, sustained pitches, and metrically displaced figures obfuscate any regular sense of pulse or meter. As with many of Feldman's works, the hushed dynamics persuade an especially close listening of the fragile gestures, which are often faint harmonics. There is also a considerable amount of silence, including a seven-measure rest for all instruments in the middle of the first movement. What materializes are kaleidoscopic permutations of limited pitch collections, rhythmic cells, and timbral combinations, like light refracting off a slowly revolving shard of glass.

Byrd wrote *Water Music* (1963) after he began work at Capitol Records, where he had access to multi-track recording equipment. Commissioned by and dedicated to percussionist Max Neuhaus, *Water Music* consists of a pre-recorded tape of electronic sounds, and percussion instruments to be performed live. After an introduction of rolling gongs, there are three sections of the work that are delineated by different electronic sounds, which the composer describes broadly as “rumbles,” “tinkles,” and “clanks.” Byrd selected the percussion instruments—large gongs, high marimba, and tuned cowbells (Swiss Almglocken)—to resemble the electronic sounds on the tape. The percussionist is asked to select from among the notated music of each section, which indicates relative durations, based on the “quality and/or mood” of what is heard on the tape at any given moment. Whether the live music is in accordance with or in contrast to the recorded sounds is left to the discretion of the performer.

Prelude to “The Mystery Cheese-Ball” (1961) is a somewhat whimsical work that served as the opening to a chamber opera by Byrd that was performed by Jackson Mac Low, Yoko Ono, David Tudor, Diane Wakoski, La Monte Young, and the composer as part of his concert at Yoko Ono's loft in the spring of 1961. The verbal score, which exists only in Byrd's memory of the event, instructs each player in an ensemble of any size to release air from an inflated balloon as slowly as possible. Pinching and stretching the neck of a balloon emits a distinctive assortment of faint, high-pitched sounds, which in consort produce an otherworldly polyphony of squeals, squeaks, and chirps. The piece concludes when the last balloon has expelled all its air.

When Byrd's music was performed at Carnegie Recital Hall in the spring of 1962, Eric Salzman of *The New York Times* described the concert as a “thimbleful of tiny sounds” that were “generally just this side of the threshold of inaudibility.”¹⁵ Initially, the “thimbleful of tiny sounds” assembled on this recording may not appear to anticipate the extraordinary diversity of Byrd's subsequent work, but they reveal the key to his early studies and the foundation of his artistic development. As with much of Feldman's music, the low dynamic levels and subtly shifting timbres and textures persuade the listener to attend to the sounds more carefully, thereby enriching the perceptual experience. According to Byrd, the integrity of art relies precisely on this premise of attention—a sentiment shared by John Cage, who cited with approval Byrd's following statement: “[T]he obligation—the morality, if you wish—of all the arts today is to intensify, alter perceptual awareness and, hence, consciousness. Awareness and consciousness of what? Of the real material world. Of the things we see and hear and taste and touch.”¹⁶ Byrd's musical career is eclectic, therefore, because the material world is eclectic, and any stylistic

¹⁵ Eric Salzman, “Joseph Byrd Works Played in Concert,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1962.

¹⁶ Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 52.

inconsistency is simply a result of his having directed his sharp attention to the singularity of the materials at hand.

—Eric Smigel

Eric Smigel is Associate Professor of Music and coordinator of the musicology program at San Diego State University.

Joseph Byrd (born 1937) received a B.Mus. at the University of Arizona in 1959 and an M.A. at Stanford in 1960. During his three years in New York he studied under Morton Feldman, apprenticed under John Cage, was secretary to Virgil Thomson, and staff arranger and producer for Capitol Records.

He was involved in the seminal new-music, concept art, and performance art avant-garde movements in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1950s, New York City in the early 1960s (a founding member of Fluxus), and Los Angeles in the mid-1960s. His first New York concert was at Yoko Ono's loft in Greenwich Village in 1961. Together with experimental jazz musician Don Ellis, he founded the New Music Workshop at UCLA in 1963, and co-produced with Barbara Haskell the first West Coast festival of experimental arts in 1966. Throughout the mid-1960s he produced happenings, wrote for the LA Free Press, lectured at the Pasadena Art Museum and elsewhere, and wrote the liner notes for John Cage's LP of *Variations IV*. In 1967 he formed an electronic-sound/performance-art rock band, The United States of America, and released two albums on Columbia Records in 1967 and '68. Then and subsequently he designed "user specs" for pioneer analog synthesizer manufacturers Tom Oberheim and Donald Buchla, and was the first rock artist to use synthesis in combination with live instruments.

From the late 1960s he worked in Los Angeles as composer/arranger, electronic synthesist, and music director for film, radio, and television programs, record companies, and ad agencies. Artists for whom he wrote and produced include Linda Ronstadt, Phil Ochs, The Los Angeles Brass Quintet, The Harvey Pittel Saxophone Quartet, The Gregg Smith Singers, Su Harmon, Miles Anderson, Ry Cooder, and David Lindley. He moved to Humboldt County in the 1990s, where he is Adjunct Professor of Music at College of the Redwoods in Eureka.

Led by artistic director and cellist Clarice Jensen, **American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME)** is dedicated to the outstanding performance of masterworks from the 20th and 21st centuries. The ensemble presents cutting-edge literature by living composers alongside the "classics" of contemporary music. ACME's dedication to new music extends across genres, and has earned them a reputation among both classical and rock crowds. ACME has performed at Carnegie Hall, BAM, The Kitchen, Le Poisson Rouge, Whitney Museum, Guggenheim, Columbia's Miller Theatre, All Tomorrow's Parties in the UK, and Stanford Lively Arts in California, among many others.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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JOSEPH BYRD (b. 1937)

NYC 1960–1963

AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC ENSEMBLE

CLARICE JENSEN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

AND ALAN ZIMMERMAN

80738-2

1. *Animals* (1961) 10:00

Timothy Andres, prepared piano; Caleb Burhans, violin; Caroline Shaw, violin; Nadia Sirota, viola; Clarice Jensen, cello; Chihiro Shibayama, marimba; Chris Thompson, vibraphone

2. *Loops and Sequences* (1961) 7:36

Clarice Jensen, cello; Timothy Andres, piano

Three Aphorisms (1960)

3. Movement 1 1:11

4. Movement 2 :33

5. Movement 3 1:33

Timothy Andres, prepared piano

6. *Densities I* (1962) 9:53

for viola solo with 4 treble instruments

Nadia Sirota, viola; C.J. Camerieri, trumpet; Clarice Jensen, cello; Chihiro Shibayama, marimba; Chris Thompson, vibraphone

7. *Four Sound*Poems* (1962) 3:22

Clarice Jensen, Caroline Shaw, Nadia Sirota & Chris Thompson, speakers

String Trio (1962)

8. Movement 1 6:25

9. Movement 2 4:39

Caleb Burhans, violin; Nadia Sirota, viola; Clarice Jensen, cello

10. *Water Music* (1963) 12:40

for percussion solo and electronic tape

Alan Zimmerman, percussion

11. *Prelude to “The Mystery Cheese-Ball”* (1961) 3:41

for antiphonal rubber balloons

Timothy Andres, Caleb Burhans, Clarice Jensen, Caroline Shaw, Nadia Sirota, Chihiro Shibayama & Chris Thompson, balloons

TT: 62:30

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