

A Composer's Voice:
An Interview with David Hahn
Conducted by Martin Marnov¹

Tell me about your background. How did you choose music as a career?

I grew up in Philadelphia during the 1960's and 70's. It was a turbulent time but also a time of renaissance for the arts. The city was home to many world-class musicians like guitarist Pat Martino, avant-garde keyboardist and band leader Sun Ra and other less well-known acts like the jazz-fusion group Catalyst. Much of the music I listened to growing up would be difficult to categorize. My aesthetic was developing and I was constantly on the look-out for new challenges.

My family was very supportive of my musical interests and intellectual development. I got my first instrument at age 12. It was a red guitar from Sears—the high action made it nearly impossible to play! As I began to show increasing interest, I soon got a guitar of a higher quality and began plugging into a Fender Super Reverb amp (which sounded great but with had a back-breaking weight!). In high school I played guitar in a rock band. I enjoyed the band as a social experience, but the music I liked listening to more often resided at the "outer-edges." Scriabin, Miles Davis, Stockhausen, Webern, and The Mothers of Invention were commonly found on my turntable. I liked getting together with my best friend (a bassist) to do free improvisations. I was drawn to music that made me sit up and think "Wow! That was weird...how and why would anyone do that?" Then I would repeatedly listen to the piece and try and figure out what made it tick. Even the most mainstream pop groups at the time, the Beatles, were experimenting with electronic music both with their recording techniques and sound collages like *Revolution #9* from the *White Album*.

After high school I majored in comparative literature and classics at Brown University, though all the time remaining involved with music. I took lessons in classical guitar and renaissance lute

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with Thomas Greene. I performed in the Brown Early Music Group and did various recitals. I also studied the mandolin and played in the Providence Mandolin Orchestra.

After Brown, I made the decision to fully devote myself to music. This was due in part to having taken some lessons with guitarist Robert Paul Sullivan, who was to become my teacher and mentor at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston where I focussed on the study of early musical performance. The conservatory atmosphere was incredibly rich, and I miss not having such access to so many diverse and talented musicians. NEC provided many opportunities and I developed many skills there especially in the area of practical musicianship.

I spent a year at The Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, where I studied with lutenist Nigel North. Upon returning to Boston in the mid-1980's, I developed a career as a performing lutenist, co-founding the Boston Renaissance Ensemble which toured the US and Europe and won the American Musicological Society's Noah Greenberg Award for "excellence in the performance of early music." This grant helped to sponsor a concert series in collaboration with vocalist Andrea von Ramm who would later become an influence on my compositional career.² One of my first real forays into the juxtaposition of electronic and acoustic music came working with composer Robert Ceely³ who used his Synclavier to electronically realize the tenor line of the 15th-century chanson *De tous bien playne*. The Ensemble made a set of 5 pieces with this same tenor melody (by Josquin and others) and we would perform with lute, recorder and viola da gamba with a stereo playback of 5 differently realized electronic tenors.

During this time I was on the faculty of the Early Music Department at The New England Conservatory and performed as a freelance musician with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony and Opera Orchestras, Boston Musica Viva, the Seattle Symphony, Musica Nel Chiostrò in Florence, and the City of London Festival.

² There is an excerpt of her on my web site: <<http://www.davidhahnonline.com/>>.

³ Robert Ceely's web site is <<http://www.ceelymusic.com/>>.

In the late 1980's I received a doctoral fellowship in musicology at Stanford University where my career in music composition began. My instrument of choice once again became the electric guitar. My initial work in composition was shaped by two central influences: the polyphonic vocal works of the Medieval and Renaissance masters, particularly Machaut, Dufay and Josquin Des Prez; and creating improvised pieces for multiple electric guitars. There is a very good electronic music studio at Stanford and I was lucky to have worked with faculty members Chris Chafe and John Chowning—both talented guys who were open to sharing their knowledge and expertise about MIDI and the DX7 synthesizer. Some of my first electronic projects had to do with creating sounds in FM—a medium I continue to enjoy—and working with different tunings and temperaments which was relatively easy to do on the DX7.

Since receiving the doctorate in 1993, I moved to Seattle with my family where I have my studio.

What sort of music have you composed?

I have wide-open music tastes and am a very eclectic composer.

The most immediate and personal music I create is with the electric guitar. I both compose and improvise using processed guitar sounds and over-dub myself. This activity began in a fairly "low-tech" manner around 1991 using a 4-track cassette deck and an electric guitar played through a portable Zoom 9002 effects processor. Guitar pieces from this period include *Charon Crosses The Styx* (1991) and *Chernobyl* (1992) which feature re-tunings of the guitar and use of the eBow, a glass slide and some other modifications like. This music is a fusion of the sounds of the guitar used in a way in which electronic composers whom I admired—such as Ussachevsky and Lucier—worked with electronic sound. I continue to work in this medium today using digital recording (ProTools), adding a baritone guitar and other effects. Pieces from the recent period include *The Mask Of Sanity* (2006), which premiered at the 2006 Bellingham Electronic Music Festival;⁴ and the recent *Ruinations #2* (2007).

⁴ <<http://www.bellinghamelectronicartsfestival.com/>>.

I am a big fan of French innovator Pierre Shaeffer, and use "found" sounds both within the context of the electric guitar pieces as well as mixed together and arranged on their own. *Be So Sweet!* (2001)⁵ was made entirely from a 13 second .wav file of a friend of mine saying the words "Be so sweet!" *Augury* (2006) which was made from sounds collected from the web site of the European Space Agency.⁶ I used my own children's voices for *Kindergarten Word Ring* (2005) for octaphonic speaker system which premiered at the Sonic Odyssey Series in Los Angeles.

It is easy to get a startling array of sounds from the web and the quality can be high. When time allows, however, it is also fun—and more "original"—to personally record sounds I want to use. This way you cannot entirely predict what sounds you ultimately end up with. Stealth methods are sometimes a necessity. At Stanford in 1992 I worked with two Russian poets who wanted music for a public reading. We did a show called "*Punishment*" which for the audience it might have been! For one piece I needed the sound of a phonograph needle scratched across the surface of a record and the crash of glass breaking. The needle scratching was easy to record at home. For the glass, I went to the laundry facilities where there were large glass recycling barrels among the washer-dryers. This was about 11 PM and one student was folding his laundry. None of the machines were running so there was no background dissonance for the recording. I walked in unnoticed, dropped my mic into the barrel, pressed "record" and threw in a large, empty Hellmann's mayonnaise. The subsequent crash was truly outstanding, although much louder than I had anticipated as it was a cinder-block room. The student suddenly dove under the folding table (we had had some earthquakes in the recent past). I immediately apologized and explained but was told very clearly to warn "by-standers" before the next recording.

I have written music for classical guitar both as a solo instrument as well as in chamber and concerto contexts. This repertoire includes *Four Short Pieces* (1997)⁷ written for and performed in Carnegie Hall by Cem Duruöz who teaches at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. *Concerto*

⁵ Available on my CD called *Giraffes!* at: <<http://cdbaby.com/cd/hahnonline>>

⁶ Here is the web site where I got the sounds: <http://www.esa.int/esaSC/SEMLAJWO4HD_index_0.html>.

⁷ Published by Doberman-Yppan Publications. This piece has also been recorded on Centaur Records.

Alla Barocco (2003) was written for the Minneapolis Guitar Quartet and performed by them with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. The most recent *Concerto Anatolia* (2007) is for solo guitar and orchestra based on themes from Turkish music. It is scheduled to premiere in Antalya, Turkey in early 2008. I have some begun some sketches for a piece for four electric guitars which explores the movement of sound and melodic development through space.

I began writing chamber music in the 1990's, when I received an Arts-Link Grant from the Soros Foundation⁸ which enabled me to compose music for myself in collaboration with musicians from Zagreb where we performed and had recording sessions. The resulting project, called "ConneXions," resulted in about 30 pieces including *World Circus News* (1995) for voice, alto sax, accordion, electric guitar and tape and *Old Dog* (1995) for voice and electric guitar and *'Tis of Thee* (1995)⁹ for alto sax and electric guitar. Much of the music thematized the conditions of the war which ripped apart Yugoslavia. It remains very important to me to work with people outside of the US. The basic idea of the "Open Society" which provides cross-border collaborations is a good one and can help heal this increasingly polarized world.

A love of literature and attraction to the works of the renaissance masters sparked an interest in writing for voices. My music for choir includes *Three Songs from Ariel* (1997) which are settings of poems by Sylvia Plath and scored for female voices. *De omnibus apostolis* (2003) a sacred Latin text which comes from a 16th-century Book of Hours. *this is the garden* (2006) is a setting of an early sonnet by e. e. cummings, scored for SATB choir and six instruments. I have a song cycle for classical guitar and voice called *Ostraka* (2005) which is settings of 18 fragments from archaic Greek poetry including poets such as Sappho. I also have a theatrical song for soprano who uses props, a cabasa, a whistle and piano called *Aria Anum J* (1999). The title is an anagram. Other word-inspired music includes *Hell No! We Won't Go!: Vietnam At Home* (1992) with a text by anthropologist and anti-Vietnam War activist Peter Knutson and *Zagreb*

⁸ See <<http://www.soros.org/>>.

⁹ This is available as a free download on the Stasisfield label here:
<<http://www.stasisfield.com/releases/year02/sf-2007.html>>.

Everywhere (2001) with texts by Gordana Crnkovic.¹⁰ The latter, which includes still photographs taken in Zagreb, was transformed into a video work by Victor Ingrassia¹¹ and shown at film festivals in Paris and Berlin.

Some larger works I am working on are *The Ants* a "futuristic musical comedy" written in collaboration with Andrea von Ramm, *Virus Cosmos*, an oratorio, and *Shouting Dexter*, a musical farce by Canadian Barry Healey.

How do you compose? Do you have a specific method?

I have spoken a bit about my music for electric guitars and collecting sounds. My compositional method usually depends on the individual piece. Ideas for new works come from many places: while listening, making sketches, improvising, notating ideas into Finale and playing them back, recording and listening to myself playing or singing. Many ideas have their source in a specific situation or a feeling or a person. A couple of examples can show how different ways pieces were realized.

One of my first electro-acoustic pieces was called *E/Gone* (1993) for 2 cellos, electronic sound and projected slide. This was written for Egon Scotland, a friend of mine who was a Knight Fellow in journalism at Stanford University in 1989. I studied Serbo-Croatian in a class with him. He was a reporter for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* out of Munich and while gathering news of the civil war in the former-Yugoslavia, he was shot and killed by snipers. I remember watching the news on TV in Zagreb when the image of Egon on a gurney came onto the screen. Never had the consequences of a war come so close. The idea for a piece in his honor was generated late in that summer when the weather was sultry and hot and the crickets were imposingly loud. I imagined using these cricket sounds as an environment for an elegy with 2 cellos playing in slow imitation without vibrato and incorporating quartertones. I wanted to re-create that end-of-summer deadness in the piece. The crickets, which I wanted not to be "real" but to be more abstract sounding, were made on a Moog Source. It recall that it took quite a bit of tweaking to

¹⁰ An article about *Zagreb Everywhere* is available here: <http://www.kinoeye.org/03/10/crnkovic10_no2.php>.

¹¹ There are excerpts from this video on his web site: <<http://www.victrolux.com/>>.

get the sound I was happy with. In performance the piece is played in total darkness. After finishing their parts, the cellists turn off their stand lights while the cricket sounds continue for another 30 seconds. The slide fades in and slowly out of a screen showing Vedran Smailovic, a cellist who is shown weeping over his instrument in a graveyard in war-torn Bosnia.

Another example of compositional method is quite different. *Corporate Coitus* (2001)¹² was made when I worked for a time at a company which produced background music. One day the marketing department asked me to burn a CD of the company CEO being interviewed by an Internet business journal. This task turned out to present me with quite promising compositional material. As I listened to the interview, I thought about John Cage's piece *Points in Space* (1987), which he created for a dance of the same name by Merce Cunningham. Cage uses a spoken text, but with the consonant sounds isolated; all the vowel sounds were removed. The resulting piece creates an impression of the spoken words as musical instruments; we hear only the fricative attacks of the words without the expected vowel. With Cage's piece as inspiration, I began to extract and collect all the voiced, extra-verbal sounds---the *ahs* and *ums* and intakes of breath---for use in a new piece. I wanted to retain the dialog format---in this case a repartee between a male CEO and a female journalist. I also used some tone-generating elements from Cool Edit software (notably the software's touch-tone telephone sounds). Since sex and business are somehow connected, either metaphorically or otherwise, I imagined the piece as an imaginary sex act with a climax toward the end and a gradual detumescence.

Working with electronic elements, there are so many options and different avenues to follow that it is essential to have strict limitations to the method and materials for a piece. Otherwise the path to ruination lies open!

¹² This piece is available here: <http://thediagram.com/3_6/hahn.html> and on my CD called *Giraffes!* available here: <<http://cdbaby.com/cd/hahnonline>>. For more information about this piece, see my article " *Corporate Coitus: Disfluencies as Compositional Building Blocks*" in *Leonardo Music Journal* v.15. It is available here as a .pdf file: <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/leonardo_music_journal/toc/lmj15.1.html>.

Is the beginning of the 21st century a good time to be a composer?

We live in a time when our leaders have overseen the liquidation of masses of people and have thereby developed a hard shell to their egos in order not to suffer sleepless nights. They possess what Norman Mailer calls "the mightiest of all social engines of psychic numbification—patriotism."¹³ At the same time the earth, as we drive around every day, is being destroyed. It is difficult for anyone—let alone artists who are innately sensitive to the trials of the human race—to work productively in the present climate. We are a long way off from John Lennon's utopian vision of "imagine there's no countries."

This is a difficult time to both compose and to listen. People are stressed out, distracted by their cell-phones and blackberries and constant multi-tasking. The economic discrepancies run so deep that there is little attention left for the art of music and the idea that it can be very useful and productive for us. I grew up in the anti-war climate of the 1960's and 70's, and it is amazing to see the present culture of obedience which pervades the land. The gains of feminism have been essentially reversed, racism—still rampant especially now against middle-eastern people—has returned, we are openly torturing people and imprisoning them in what amount to concentration camps. I resent that our country has turned into a proto-fascist nation because of a few ignorant, oil greedy tyrants who don't believe in science. I do not relish having these negative feelings and I cope by using music composition as therapy. I made sound collages like *Apocalypse Cow* (2004),¹⁴ which uses excerpts of speeches by President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld along with sounds of war planes, bombs, cows (of course) and sex, and *Amerika Ist Nun Erwacht* (2006), which mingles recordings of a Hitler speech and with one given by our non-elected "decider." The juxtaposition of these two voices is chillingly apt. As the bumper sticker reads: "If you are not *completely* appalled, you are not paying attention." I have also composed a suite for guitar and violin with the apt title *W Is For Weasel* (2003)—even though, be assured, I have absolutely nothing against weasels!

¹³ Norman Mailer: *The Castle In The Forest* (New York: Random House, 2007) p. 405.

¹⁴ Which is available as a free download on my web site.

But while this reaction is therapeutic and satisfying on one level, there is a limit to the amount which art can do to affect change. As the late Kurt Vonnegut said, artists' antiwar protests have the "power of a banana cream pie."¹⁵

There are also some very positive things about our time which encourage new sonic art. The advancement and availability of digital technology has democratized the process of composing. No longer does one need a mammoth institutional "main frame" computer to create and process sounds. Also, the recording and notating and sharing of music is very easy today; some programs are even offered for free.

There are some great friends of composers (aside from the performers and patrons and artists who commission us). Joel Chadabe has provided a forum and an excellent resource with the Electronic Music Foundation.¹⁶ Robert Voisey, who started the Vox Novus Composer's Collective,¹⁷ has been tireless in helping new voices get heard both in the US and internationally with his innovative 60x60 compilation recordings and concerts. Despite the overall trend of consolidation of media and the homogenization of its content, there are many good radio shows out there including Max Shea's *Martian Gardens* from the University of Massachusetts and Ken Field's *The Edge* at WMBR in Cambridge. Organizations that provide opportunities and create communities like the American Music Center and SEAMUS really help composers out.

Do you have suggestions about how to listen to music?

Composers are first and foremost listeners. We listen to "find" what music we will compose and we listen as our own premiere audience. But listening has become more of a challenge these days. I recently heard a lecture by Barry Truax who has worked with recorded environmental sound for decades. It became clear from listening to him that even the act of recording a natural setting has become difficult because of the encroachment of human noise pollution. This is something we rarely think about in this era of other sorts of pollution and global warming but

¹⁵ <<http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/44/>>.

¹⁶ <<http://www.emf.org/index.html>>.

¹⁷ <<http://www.voxnovus.com/>>.

noise pollution has serious consequences for humans: it restricts our ability to think! I have read articles about animals who are losing the specific bandwidth of their mating calls because it is masked by that of construction.

The main word is "focus." Like T.S.Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*: one should "listen so deeply that you are the music while the music lasts." The dominance of video in popular music has hurt our ability to listen with all the power of our imagination. Music as purely audio experience can really open up our minds without a pre-made video telling us what to imagine.

What are you working on now? Any performances coming up?

I am working on several projects at different stages of their developments. I very much enjoy collaborations and re-acting to the work of other artists. I get composing jobs and commissions from soloists and ensembles as well as from filmmakers, poets and writers.

I am working on a musical comedy, first conceived by Andrea von Ramm, called *The Ants*. This will have some electronic elements especially with regard to the character "SHESHE" who is the Queen. The aesthetic of the show is derived from Futurism, the artistic movement from the early 20th-century which was about being brash and loud and blatant. It fits very well into our present times.

Ruinations is a spoken word piece which will include processed electric guitar sounds and texts written and read by Gordana Crnkovic. I am beginning to work on a piece to submit to the next Spring in Havana electronic music festival. There is also a film-scoring project still in the brewing stages.

I am looking forward to performing and recording with *Concert Imaginaire*, a performing ensemble which I founded in early 2011.