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question. Nancarrow has always hated interviews, and he's less interested than ever in straining his memory. He answers musical questions by telling me I know more about his music than he does. He's recovering from a visit by a German TV crew out to make a documentary on him. He'd nearly thrown them out; they made him run Study No. 21 through the player piano over and over, filming it in different lights, until he told them, "I've played that piece 18 times. I used to like it. But now I'm getting sick of it." Words escape him, and he can no

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longer call a study to mind given its number, but he can still reel off stories about the Spanish Civil War. (I learned on this trip that he was famous in the Lincoln Brigade for his ability to roll a cigarette with one hand.)

What's more revealing is going through his studio, for tremendous changes have taken place in Nancarrow's creative routine. For one thing, the mountains of paper are gone. Doctors told Nancarrow that, with his chronic bronchitis, he wouldn't survive his studio's decades' worth of dust. His wife, the archaeologist Yoko Segiura, hired nine people for a week to clean out the place, and sent three truckloads of papers to the dump. She describes how religiously he inhabited that studio for decades, and he adds, "I composed every night from 8 to 3 a.m. That was my schedule."

For another thing, Nancarrow's new assistant, composer Carlos Sandoval, has sorted out piles of disordered manuscripts, found missing scores and piano rolls, unearthed the percussion machines that Nancarrow once tried to corral into a piano-roll-run orchestra and closed up mysterious

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# Conlon Nancarrow's Tempo Tornadoes

*The  
Grandfather  
of Totalism  
Brings  
World-Class  
Complexity  
to American  
Music*

By Kyle Gann

**MEXICO CITY**—Mexicans live in little fortresses. Conlon Nancarrow hides from the music world, in the Alpes district of this exhaust-fuming city, behind an un-

marked gate in a stucco wall. Inside the gate, as inside the man, lurks a jungle beauty not hinted at externally. Bordered by ficus trees and bubbling with bougainvillea, the house is fronted by a mosaic of yellow, gray, red, and blue stones made by Nancarrow's late architect-painter friend Juan O'Gorman. Next to the house is the shrine of my pilgrimage: a garagelike studio centered around two player pianos. Here Nancarrow has sat for 15 years, concocting the most rhythmically complex music the world has ever known.

Why player pianos? you may ask, if you're not tapped into the Nancarrow aura. Because in the 1940s Nancarrow became fascinated (as the totalist composers are now) with the sound of different tempos running at the same time. Americans have long flirted with the idea, partly because the complexity of jazz and much African drumming is based on poly-rhythms such as three-against-four. There's a satisfying feel to steady beats going in and out of phase, for

often the body can feel a recurring convergence that's too fast for the ear to track. Only, Nancarrow's taken the idea to undreamed-of extremes of numerical ambition.

For instance, his Study No. 48 (in some respects his magnum opus) plays two identical layers of themes and textures at once, one 61/60 as fast as the other, converging at last with a crash. Study No. 37 is a 12-voice canon in which the different lines spell out competing tempos at ratios of 150:160 5/7:168 3/4:180 1/2:87 1/2:200:210:225:240:250:62 1/2. Nancarrow's even gone irrational: Study No. 33 contrasts tempos related by the square root of two. The music's complex, but it's also joyous, superfast, chaotic, and infectiously energetic. Obviously, no human hands could play such rhythms with accuracy, but the player piano (first suggested for such a purpose by Henry Cowell in 1930) gets them perfectly.

A shadowy underground presence in the '60s and '70s, Nancarrow's slowly come into public fo-

cus in the last 16 years. Wergo has released 48 of his Player Piano Studies on CD. New York's Continuum Ensemble has recorded most of his nonmechanical music, and a half dozen major European festivals have paid him homage. This is my third trip to Mexico City for a book I'm writing on Nancarrow's music, and my first since his illness of 1990. That year, misdiagnosed pneumonia sent him into a coma, bringing with it the effects of a small stroke. For a while his hearing was diminished, his attention span minimal, blocks of his memory were wiped out, and it looked as though he'd never compose again. This trip was a welcome revelation that he's as back to normal as any life-scarred octogenarian can be.

Interviewing him is out of the

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inhabited that studio for decades, and he adds, "I composed every night from 8 to 3 a.m. That was my schedule."

For another thing, Nancarrow's new assistant, composer Carlos Sandoval, has sorted out piles of disordered manuscripts, found missing scores and piano rolls, unearthed the percussion machines that Nancarrow once tried to corral into a piano-roll-run orchestra, and cleared up mysteries about Nancarrow's early working methods. (He's also found Nancarrow's notorious Septet from the 1940s, whose one wretched performance spurred Nancarrow to give up on humans for 40 years. Next trick: finding the manuscript for orchestra Nancarrow sent to Carlos Chavez.) Once a secret lair guarded by a dragon who hardly seemed to care whether anyone heard his music or not, Nancarrow's studio is now, to some extent, open for musicology.

Since his stroke Nancarrow has penned five new scores, not at all diminished in inspiration, and some in fact more impressive than his music of the late 1980s. The new music has grown lighter and more consonant, even as he's upped the tempo complexity. The Trio No. 2 for oboe, bassoon, and piano, premiered by Continuum in 1991, is in transparent 6/8 meter, but its utterly original tonal pointillism somehow manages to remind you of complex rhythms. The latest work is a rhythmically hair-raising commission for the Parnassus ensemble.

Three more pieces are for player piano. The newest Player Piano Study (ostensibly No. 51, but playfully titled No. 3750 for now) is a canon climaxing in wild but tonal note-clouds with tempo ratios of 24:32:42:56:77:96. Next is a 4:5:6 tempo fugue, *For Yoko*, whose finale sweeps the keyboard up and down at once in chirpy C

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major. Nancarrow's excited about the computer-run prepared grand piano made available to him by Seattle composer Trimpin. His latest piano roll, a whirlwind of scales and triads in 4:5:6:7 tempo, is called simply *Trimpin's Piece*; Trimpin insists that he think of a new title.

Nancarrow's tempo procedures are hot news at the moment, for a wave of rhythmic complexity is washing across New York music, centered in the movement known as *totalism*. Through the '80s, many musicians listed Nancarrow as a primary influence, but they imitated his tempo freedom in a loose, improvisatory way without exploring his rigorous numerical structures. Totalist composers, whether directly sparked by Nancarrow's music or not, have become excited about the ambiguous energy of different beats going at the same time or in close succession. Totalism gets its harmonic ideas from imagists like Feldman and its instrumental concepts from minimalism, but rhythmically, Nancarrow is the movement's grandfather.

In a way, totalist complexity is simply America's way of catching up with the non-European world. European music's rhythmic wimpiness has been widely noted. (Serialism created some wildness, but by defining rhythm as duration, it completely missed the obviously more crucial concept of beat.) The minute American music began to assert its independence, it began to steal beats from the East and South. Henry Cowell, who started Nancarrow on the

player piano trail, was a pioneering ethnomusicologist as well as composer, incorporating traits of other cultures into his symphonies. Nancarrow searched the world for new beats on his own: his record library includes an immense collection of world music on old 78s, dozens of volumes of Indian music, African drumming, and an intriguing series on Cuban "cult music" that I couldn't listen to because his 78-playing turntable long ago gave up the ghost. (The only music he doesn't like is European classical and mariachi.)

Performers who grow up in a sophisticated oral tradition, such as Balinese gamelan, South Indian mridanga playing, or Ewe drumming, have a level of rhythmic complexity available to them that musicians who notate their music don't have. On the other hand, composers trained in the Western tradition of evolving musical form aren't content with the static repetitiveness of African or Balinese musics, nor does collective, rule-based improv satisfy their ideal of individuality. Composers born in the '50s were the first to be surrounded by world musics in college, and also to hear the fruits of minimalist culture-jumping: the lessons Steve Reich learned from Ewe drumming, Phillip Glass from Ravi Shankar, and Terry Riley and La Monte Young from singing ragas with Pandit Pran Nath.

When Mikel Rouse began writing music with different tempos going at the same time, he didn't know whether anyone had done it before. When he stumbled across A. M. Jones's *Studies in African Music*, he says, "A huge light went on. Jones notated each rhythm separately to understand what

they were doing, and assembled the parts into a score so you could see the relationships. It confirmed what I was doing with different tempos related by mathematical ratios." Next, Rouse stumbled across Joseph Schillinger's *System of Musical Composition* (with foreword by Henry Cowell), which offered him systematic methods of notating tempo contrasts. Now his rock quartet music uses four-against-five poly-rhythms as an underlying cantus firmus, or else accents every third, fifth, and eighth 16th note for a shimmering effect of different tempos. In the early '80s, he made up Nancarrowian structures before anyone had analyzed what Nancarrow was doing.

Evan Ziporyn is a jazz clarinetist (Nancarrow made his early living on jazz trumpet) who's visited Bali four times since 1981, twice touring with Oakland's Gamelan Sekar Jaya—the first non-Balinese gamelan allowed to play in Bali. (He also studied Shona mbira music in Zimbabwe.) "The thing about Balinese music that's different from any other culture," he says, "is that a lot of expression is in tempo: ritards and accelerandos and abrupt tempo changes." (Nancarrow's middle-period studies thoroughly explore gradual acceleration.) Ziporyn's *Tree Frog* (on *Animal Act*, CRI) is a trope on the Sukawati *Pamungkah* shadow play, with Balinese-style quick accelerations and passages played first slowly and then fast. He sees difficulties in coaxing an Eastern level of rhythmic complexity from score-reading classical players: "You're dealing with types of rhythm that people spend lifetimes developing, then throwing them at Western musi-

cians to sight-read. We think because we can notate we can play anything, but it's a big problem, getting it to sound legitimate."

Though he comes mainly from rock, and has studied Japanese shakuhachi music, Michael Gordon achieves the most complexly Nancarrowian tempo assemblages of any of the totalists. The middle section of his *Four Kings Fight Five* is a melee of pulses, up to seven tempos articulated at once in ratios of 8:9:12:16:18:24:27. While Nancarrow loves the ear-knocking rhythmic dissonance, *Four Kings* blends the various lines in a boiling continuum, like ripples caused by rocks thrown in various parts of a pond.

Ben Neill's tempo complexity has the same impetus as Henry Cowell's: a correspondence between pitch and rhythm. In *New Musical Resources*, the book that got Nancarrow started, Cowell developed whole systems of rhythmic complexity by making tempo analogous to the frequencies of pitches of common chords. Working with La Monte Young on drones of purely tuned pitches, Neill went the same route. For example, the pitches B-flat, C, D, and F, well-tuned, vibrate at frequencies with ratios 8 to 9 to 10 to 12. In his *Antiphony* for trumpets, Neill uses trumpets playing in those four keys, and also in four different tempos with ratios of 8:9:10:12.

**Totalists**, like Nancarrow before them, treat rhythm and tempo the way European composers treated pitch and harmony. In fact, that's the hidden beauty of the term *totalism*. At first, its harking back to the "total organization" of 1950s serialism seems unfortunate. But

serialism was an attempt to merge harmonic methods with rhythmic ones, to create a unified musical universe in which pitches and rhythms speak the same lingo. Cowell had already figured out such a unified field theory, based not on the 12-tone row, but on the ratios between whole numbers. And while Nancarrow developed the rhythmic side of Cowell's theories to an incredible degree, not until the advent of totalism did such ideas grow into a collective language.

Even more than tying threads from various world musics together, totalism blends music's various elements into a lively harmony. As George, the bartender at Rudy's, where I first heard about totalism, put it: "I get it—it's holistic. You got holistic medicine, this is holistic music." (And that's a better explanation than *The New York Times* came up with.)

Nancarrow doesn't know he paved the way for a 1990s movement, and he probably doesn't care. This November he'll make a rare American trip; spending a week in San Francisco for the Other Minds festival at Yerba Buena Center; here Trimpin will realize one of his new works on computer-driven instruments. The morning I left Mexico City, I noticed a half dozen newly sharpened pencils on Nancarrow's piano-roll work table, and a new score tentatively dotted with notes. The tempo grids marked off on the piano roll promised a complexity he hasn't matched since the '70s: eight tempos at once, with ratios of 8:10:12:14:17:21:25:28. At 81 next month, Nancarrow is not only hard at work, but still breaking new ground. ■

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