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The Composer as Weakling

by Julius Eastman

I don't want to introduce ... as in a "happening" ... the public ... there is something that has to come through ... I think you know it immediately ... that the composer is like a weakling ... and that the audience is ... in a dialogue with the loudspeakers ... the text is coming out from the loudspeakers ... there is a possibility ... to do things ... yes, right in the moment ... even if the text is on the tape ... the fact of giving it on stage ... and it's the same for interpretation ... some poetry ... gives to the text a brittle aspect ... the text can break its legs ... you don't know what's going to happen ... it's really going out of the book ... a living thing in the right moment ... there is ... that splendid fragility ... which is important ... for the text to die ... Do you ever change a piece after you have performed it ...?

The way to give it ... yes ... sometimes ... not the text itself ... but the way it's given.

In what direction is your present work going ...?

The last piece I did was "Democracy" which I performed last night ... and I'm on another one now ... I'm very interested by simultaneity ... caused by being able ... to put on tape ... different things at the same time ... the central idea of the text ... or the intention of the text ... and it is a different problem each time ... of course ... coming from the interactions of different things put into the same tape ... all problems that revolve around that interest me ... the ear is like a hammer ... you can hear several things at the same time ... what the eye cannot do ... so fastness interests me.

Do you find sound poetry being accepted more now ...?

Yes ... surely ... I think it's a problem of diffusion ... making it known to people ... the word "poetry" has a terrible image in peoples minds ... because it's connected with boring things ... or mad things ... the word seems worn out ... and now still ... presenting something which is called poetry is wrong ... "sound poetry" has become the term of all us ... "poetry" is in the term ... there is the word "poetry" in it ... I don't know if it's good or not ... but you have to fight against the information media ... there is great prestige in france ... for the written thing ... it comes from the roman influence ... our law is written law ... it is strictly and definitely put on the paper ... and you have to struggle to go through orality is beaten ... in france ... for the moment ... but things are beginning to change ... the Anglo Saxons are nearer to orality than the people of europe ... that's why it seems like there is such a sacrilege to take the text out of the page ... but the new phenomenon is ... that writers or poets ... are starting to do readings ... of their own works ... in galleries and museums ... that is quite common ... in the universities ... in doing it at all the time ... but it is not the custom in france ... two years ago ... when I organized a festival in a private gallery ... the radio did all what it could to announce the festival ... and it was announced every day ... a lot of people came ... but there was no article in the newspaper ... because people who manage the art reviews ... that normally should have spoken about that ... refused to speak about it ... a real war of ideas ... the ear is like a hammer ... you can hear several things at the same time ... what the eye cannot do ... so fastness interests me.

Recent sound poets ... who work purely with phonetic sounds ... is there much of a difference between their work ... or any historical progression ... from that work of ... say marinetti ...?

Yes ... surely ... I think it's a problem of diffusion ... making it known to people ... the word "poetry" has a terrible image in peoples minds ... because it's connected with boring things ... or mad things ... the word seems worn out ... and now still ... presenting something which is called poetry is wrong ... "sound poetry" has become the term of all us ... "poetry" is in the term ... there is the word "poetry" in it ... I don't know if it's good or not ... but you have to fight against the information media ... there is great prestige in france ... for the written thing ... it comes from the roman influence ... our law is written law ... it is strictly and definitely put on the paper ... and you have to struggle to go through orality is beaten ... in france ... for the moment ... but things are beginning to change ... the Anglo Saxons are nearer to orality than the people of europe ... that's why it seems like there is such a sacrilege to take the text out of the page ... but the new phenomenon is ... that writers or poets ... are starting to do readings ... of their own works ... in galleries and museums ... that is quite common ... in the universities ... in doing it at all the time ... but it is not the custom in france ... two years ago ... when I organized a festival in a private gallery ... the radio did all what it could to announce the festival ... and it was announced every day ... a lot of people came ... but there was no article in the newspaper ... because people who manage the art reviews ... that normally should have spoken about that ... refused to speak about it ... a real war of ideas ... the ear is like a hammer ... you can hear several things at the same time ... what the eye cannot do ... so fastness interests me.

The Composer as Weakening

by Julius Eastman

We must now start to analyze the poor relationship between composer and instrumentalist; the difficult state of the contemporary composer in the classical music world. If we make a survey of classical music programming or look at the curriculum and auditions at conservatories, we would be led to believe that today's instrumentalist lacks imagination, scholarship, a modicum of curiosity, or even the love to believe that music was born in 1700, lived a full life until 1850 at which time music caught an incurable disease and finally died in 1900. If we look closely before 1750, we will notice that composer/instrumentalist were one and the same whether employed by the church, the aristocracy, or self-employed (Trost). At the beginning of the age of virtuosity, beginning with the life of Paganini, we see the splitting of the egg into two parts: the composition/instrumentalist, one composer. At this time we also notice the rise of the solo performer, the ever increasing size of the orchestra, the ascension of the conductor, and the recrudescence of the composer from active participation in the musical life of his community, into the role of the unattired queen bee, constantly birthing music in his lonely room, awaiting the knock of an instrumentalist, conductor, or lastly, an older composer who has gained some measure of power. These descending angels would not only have to knock, but would also have to open the door, because the composer had become so weak from his isolated and torpid condition. Finally, the composer would be borne aloft on the back of one of the three descendants, into a life of ecstasy, fame, and fortune.

This being the case, it is the composer's task to reassert himself as an active part of the musical community, because it was the composer who must reestablish himself as a vital part of the musical life of his community. The composer is therefore enjoined to accomplish the following: he must establish himself as a major instrumentalist, he must not wait upon a descending being, and she must become an interpreter, not only of her own music and career, but also the music of her contemporaries, and give a fresh new view of the known and unknown classics.

Today's composer, because of his problematical historical inheritance, has become totally isolated and self-absorbed. Those composers who have gained some measure of success through isolation and obscurity will find that outside of the loft door the state of the composer in general and their state in particular is still as ineffectual as ever. The composer must become his own instrument, not only a composer. To be only a composer is not enough.