

FIVE QUESTIONS: 40 ANSWERS

Newel Kay Brown, Barney Childs,  
Sydney Hodkinson, Don Martino,  
Richard Moryl, Pauline Oliveros,  
Elie Siegmeister, John Watts

These questions, originated and sent by Thomas Everett (editorial staff, THE COMPOSER) to the above-named composers, are presented here with the responses of each of these composers. The listing is alphabetical, and no composer was aware of the answers given by any other. - Ed.

Have you composed and/or worked with any type of electronic music? What advantages or interest does electronic music hold for you? What disadvantages?

Brown: This past summer I enjoyed an introduction workshop in electronic music and plan to continue working in the field, seeing the greatest possibility with combination of instruments and prepared tape. Another advantage is that of exploring the mixed media field. The only disadvantage is that it requires TIME. Lots of time!

Childs: Yes. Occasional ways to deal with familiar sounds. Usually too much work to produce sounds I don't much care for.

Hodkinson: a) Yes. Early works were produced in an educational FM radio station in Charlottesville, Virginia with a colleague, David Davis. We "used" everything from a boiling coffee pot and our own vocal chords to pure sine tones and often did incidental music for the Drama Dept. A film score for "Scissors" by Kee Dewdney was written at the well-equipped studio at the University of Michigan in 1967. Since I have been away from Ann Arbor, recent works employing tape have involved simply the pre-recording of live instrumental sounds.

b) Many (advantages), the same ones as are held by most of my colleagues--those often quoted in Music History books, I suppose (That's not intended as a snotty answer).

c) My own ignorance and lethargy (are disadvantages). The field itself grows overnight so who can say where we'll be and what we'll have to work with even two or three years from now?

The all-too-common ugly toilet-flushings, belches, beeps, etc. hold little interest for me, however, and if the sounds don't interest you, baby, it's all downhill----

Martino: I have not as yet composed an electronic piece, nor have I had an overwhelming desire to do so.

Up to now, in spite of an oppressive preponderance of poor performances, I have not been

driven to electronic resources because there have always been a sufficient number of skillful, even brilliant, performances and enough modest commissions (though never as many as I might hope for) to incline me toward writing performer-required works. Moreover, neither a file cabinet full of bad reviews nor the knowledge that I am not generally regarded as being "in" has sufficiently motivated me to leap to 'lectric music (or any other kind) because I spend more time composing, after all, than listening to my compositions in performance or reading what other people think about them. And I have found that greater-amount-of-time very enjoyably spent the way I now use it.

It is probably my habit of endlessly tinkering and toying with my little musical games in the solitude and comfort of my study that most prevents me from using electronic resources. For I could not bear to work away from home, to forsake my study for a room I have not made and to which I must agonizingly commute, only to find my composing time restricted by others' needs. And the same factor that prevents me from owning an adequate piano or tape recorder prevents me from owning even the most modest electronic equipment.

Finally, the sense that there still remains so much to explore with non-electronic instruments and so very little time in which to do it has thus far kept my nose very close to Passantino.

I guess that of all the obvious and often-cited lures of electronic music, to me the most seductive is the possibility of almost completely controlling the total music-work--that is, of performing again. But I still regard myself as a performer although I have not played in public for many years. And I know that if I live long enough I shall again concertize as I shall also come quite naturally to confront electronic media.

Moryl: I have, since 1965, composed a number of works for instruments and various electronic sounds. I feel that this new medium, in both studio and performance capabilities offers endless possibilities in the combination of sounds which have never before been available to the composer. The advantage lies in the immensely wider musical perspective, which requires a greater musical imagination than ever before.

The disadvantages, for most, have been the mechanics of the studio itself, and the amount of time needed to control what finally comes out. There are relatively few composers who have developed enough skill to be the master of the machine, rather than its victim.

I feel that its greatest contribution so far has been its effect on instrumental writing, as it

relates to textures and more abstract musical shapes.

What electronic music needs now is some good composers who will realize its great potential, without limiting its execution to the instrumental concepts of today.

Oliveros: Yes. Advantages for the use of any musical medium, electronic, acoustic or what have you?, accrue when a balance or mutual dependence exists between the medium and the message. The medium serves the message and vice versa or the situation is natural. Since the quality of nature must be infinite, all of the advantages cannot be known simultaneously. Time must pass. Repetitions must occur. As certain advantages are discovered others may be hidden by the discovery. More advantages of a musical medium surface as the context changes or as conditions change or both change. As contextual and conditional changes occur even the medium and message may change. More advantages surface when conditions, context or both are held constant during repeated use.

Disadvantages for the use of any musical medium accrue when balance or mutual dependence does not exist between the medium and the message. The medium does not serve the message and vice versa. The situation is not natural. It is likely parasitic. Disadvantages are discovered in the same way as advantages: during repeated use of a medium with constant or changing elements.

Advantages and disadvantages exist on many different levels. For certain kinds of music (message) the band is an excellent medium where the orchestra or another kind of ensemble is not. A condition might be playing out-of-doors in the context of a football game. On a very windy day, a poor out-of-doors condition might be improved by some sort of acoustic shell to keep the sound from blowing away from the intended audience. The message (music) has a better chance (serving the medium) of fulfilling its intended function (spurring the rooting section for the team, generating excitement during lulls, etc.) if the medium (band) serves the message: Instruments or elements of the band chosen for their ability to project sound out-of-doors then are advantageous. An ensemble of guitars, though rousing or exciting in a small indoor space (condition) for entertainment of perhaps a different kind (context), would be disadvantageous at a football game because of far less ability to project sound out-of-doors. The medium is then parasitic or out of balance in such a context and does not serve the message.

What are the characteristics of the medium? What are the characteristics of the message? What is

the context? What are the conditions? The answers (a continuous process which must involve any composer) to these questions yield more and more and less and less of the advantages and disadvantages. However, what is advantageous in one context or with one kind of condition may be or become disadvantageous in another context or with the change of any condition or vice versa. With the above considerations in mind, I choose the electronic medium when it suits my purposes and my purposes suit the medium.

Siegmeister: No; no advantages. Disadvantages: ugly sound, disorganized, formless arrangements of primitive material.

Watts: Yes. The advantages can be summed up in two words, "accessibility" and "immediacy." Disadvantages include quickened friendships with technicians, repair men, and bankers, jealous wives and girl friends, and ever-present reminders that we've done little more than scratch the surface of the medium so far.

Some music being created for records or tapes lessens the importance of the performer: with the aid of electronics, the composer creates the work without outside assistance. Other music depends on the performer to complete the music (e.g. aleatoric and improvisational techniques). What role do you see the live performer playing in the future?

Brown: The performer of the future has to travel with a larger bag. Beethoven concertos will always be with us (I hope) but some performers will desire to add to their abilities. New ideas and performance techniques are coming on so fast it's enough to scare old dogs like me. Don't worry-- the tape deck will never replace him!

Childs: Much the same role he has played so far.

Hodkinson: The same as in the past. I can't see the importance of the performer being "lessened" by electronics. Aleatoric and improvisational techniques in the hands of knowledgeable, gifted players often produce groovy results, but isn't that true of Bach and Bacharach also?

I like tubas, violins, slide whistles, and so on and performers are still investing the good part of a life in trying to play them well. My personal interest as a woodwind player tends more toward live-electronics and I hope to learn what little I can about this in the future.

Martino: The fundamental role of the performer, essentially unchanged throughout the history of notated music, is to transform the symbols of music notation into sound. The magnitude of that role and the propriety with which it is executed have less to do with the composer's philosophy or its attendant notational idiosyncrasies than with

the performer's interpretive genius. To admit that a performer played musically is not to admit that he played music. Which music he chooses to interpret often has less to do with the intrinsic value of the music-work than with fads and fancies whose transientness is thankfully guaranteed. But as there will always be composers, there will always be those among them who, despite the very considerable lure of electronics, will remain dedicated to live performance simply because there will always be performers of genius to inspire them.

Moryl: It would seem that the relationship between the composer and the performer has become more as one. The dichotomy between the two has narrowed into a more dualistic relationship, which I feel can create a kind of total involvement, and thus improve the final results.

The performer can now contribute as never before to the overall shape of a piece, not only as interpreter of symbols, but as an individual with greater creative potential.

Oliveros: This question is based on wrong assumptions. For example, the Beatles (both composers and performers) became more and more studio-oriented (created music for records and tapes). Studio technique expanded their performance means. Their role as performers was emphasized in importance, not lessened. The range of aleatoric and improvisation techniques is pitted against a narrow view of electronic music (the composer working alone in a studio without the aid or collaboration of a performer). In this case the composer is the performer and the role of the composer has been expanded. Music for records and tapes is still being performed. It could not be otherwise. There is more performance and composing today than ever before in history. There is no reason to believe that the performer and composer will ever not have the same or expanded roles in music now or in the future.

Siegmeister: He will continue to be the mainstay of musical life. After a time, people will become bored with mechanical sounds.

Watts: One of my persistent fantasies takes this form: One day (soon?), all composers everywhere will go on strike and refuse to release anything to performers or the public for at least ten years. Wouldn't that be something? Among the first to squirm would be those musicians and listeners alike who think their service to music ends somewhere around 1910. (That alone would make a strike worthwhile!) While it would be somewhat unfair to that small, dedicated minority group of musicians who performs contemporary scores, at first glance, this inter-regnum might even make their positions more secure in the long run by allowing the public

a catching-up period (If there isn't a public, then it's folly to talk about the "live" performer). More and more composers (the ones I know at least) are writing less and less for the "generalist" (the grand opera, the symphony, the concerto, etc.), but, rather, zeroing in on the "specifist" situations (an experimental work for amplified accordion, soprano sax, and tuba? why not?). I see two things happening, then, in the near future: more and more tailoring of works for the individual performer; and more direct and personal collaborations between composer and performer, to the extent perhaps that, in time, works may have collective "composers" and so noted.

Who comes first: the performer that interests composers in new techniques for his instrument; or the composer who forces a performer to learn new techniques in order to play his music?

Brown: In the past it has always been the composer pushing the performer to explore his instrument beyond the status quo and I believe it will continue to be the case. In the past fifteen years or so, however, there have been more interested performers--interested in exploring their "thing" with an eye towards interesting a composer (or commissioning a new work). This trend is healthy but certainly not widespread. I'm not pushing the composition of musical or instrumental effects!

Childs: Chickens? Eggs?

Hodkinson: What difference does it make? The latter is more common, of course, but the former is not at all unheard of. What is important is that some rapport between the two be attempted. What is it anyway, a race? Who wins? Does one get a prize?

Martino: I have experienced this phenomenon in both ways. That is, on some occasions I have "expanded" the performer, on other occasions he has "expanded" me. It really doesn't matter "who comes first" as long as the dialogue continues.

Moryl: There is no question that the performer himself is the composer's best guide to new performance techniques. Pieces are usually written for particular performers, who are willing to experiment and become part of the new sounds. The composer may know what he wants, but it is up to the performer to develop the new techniques needed for the execution of his ideas. Just as Brahms worked with a famous violinist when writing his concerto, most composers depend upon the performer to show them the way.

Oliveros: I don't care.

Siegmeister: The composer.

Watts: This is one of those chicken-or-the-egg and/or,