

Michael Boyd

Avante-Garde Experimental Composer

*interview by Mark Cook for
Art Anomaly*

1. What got you started in avant-garde/experimental music?

I made a pretty gradual transition the point that I currently occupy. During my first few years as a composer, like many young composers and artists, I primarily imitated those that I admired – early on I was enamored with Philip Glass and Reich's music (particularly *Einstein on the Beach*) that, though experimental, has many connections with more traditional music (tonal sounds for example). After that I moved on to other, arguably more experimental or avant-garde composers: Morton Feldman and Iannis Xenakis.

My recent music results from my personal perspective on a compositional trend that is traceable to the mid-twentieth century: indeterminacy. ...I would like to differentiate between two distinct terms, indeterminacy and chance, that are typically used synonymously (incidentally both terms are strongly associated with John Cage, and reading his writings can also help one to correctly conceptualize them). Chance music is "indeterminate with regard to composition." What this means is that a composer uses a process that is somewhat out of their control (rolling dice or flipping coins for example – there is a statistical element to such processes) and utilizes data gleaned from that process to make compositional decisions. The work that results is a fully notated composition that is performed in essentially the same fashion each time. Indeterminate music is "indeterminate with regard to performance." In this case, certain aspects of a performance are left to the discretion of performers. Cage correctly points out that music from the classical canon is indeterminate in some respects – dynamics for example are notated in a very general manner with the specifics left to performer discretion. In my opinion then, this term is best reserved for music that renders indeterminate facets that are specifically composed in traditional settings (for example pitch, form, rhythm, etc.). Different composers who have explored indeterminacy did so in personal, idiosyncratic ways, making it impossible to generalize further.

I began composing very pedantic music in a high school music theory class and decided to study composition more seriously with Lawrence Moss during my undergraduate studies at the University of Maryland where I started as a trombone performance major (1996-2000). Kristian Twombly, a composer and good friend who now teaches electronic music and new media at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, was a couple years ahead of me at the Maryland. He acted as a sort of aesthetic guide for me, introducing me to new sounds and composers during my formative years that helped move my interest from standard orchestral literature (I initially aspired to be an orchestral trombonist) to experimental and avant-garde music. I also learned a lot taking classes with Thomas DeLio, an internationally known experimental composer who has done really interesting, groundbreaking work with silence. I first learned about indeterminacy through Kristian, and DeLio furthered my knowledge of this approach to composition by introducing me to Feldman's *Durations III*. I also started reading his book *Circumscribing the Open Universe* which has significantly influenced me – this book is a collection of non-traditional analyses by DeLio of a variety of "open form" works by composers such as Feldman, Cage, Christian Wolff, and John Ashley. During the end of this period I had thoughts about incorporating indeterminate aspects into my compositions, but never found a satisfactory way to do so.

I moved to Long Island to start graduate school at SUNY Stony Brook as a music theory/musicology major. The grad music program there was highly interdisciplinary with really inquisitive, intellectual students and faculty. Being part of that community really opened my mind in a lot of ways. I also started composing more and began working with electro-acoustic music – I took a class on classic analog techniques with Daria Semegen and worked with Dan Weymouth on several short CSound pieces. I also studied with Peter Winkler for a semester, a very interesting composer with a great knowledge of Cage, Xenakis, and others. Again I toyed with indeterminacy but never really integrated it into my music. I also met a lot of great performers, composers, and scholars who were studying at Stony Brook – Sonya Hofer (musicologist), Ben Lanz (trombonist), Phil Scheussler (composer), and Mike McCurdy (percussionist) just to name a few.

I returned to Maryland in 2003 to begin their doctoral composition program and study with Thomas DeLio. I knew during my undergraduate work that he was a unique artist and teacher, and I was anxious to work with him on my compositions. DeLio held group composition lessons – two to four of us would meet to discuss each other's music every week. I started working a piece for the experimental trombonist I mentioned previously from Stony Brook, Ben Lanz. To try to figure out all of the possible sounds that could be produced on the trombone I began drawing flow-charts of how one makes sound on the instrument. DeLio suggested that it might be interesting to use the charts to make the piece, which led to my first indeterminate work, Hand Leg Suit. Since that time, I've felt that this is the approach that I had been moving towards or searching for throughout my time as a composer.

One of my overriding goals is to (re)integrate performers into the creative process. Too often performers, who can be incredibly inventive, are relegated to the role of “replicator” and are judged on accuracy and the conveyance of feigned emotion. I would rather create compositional scenarios that transfer significant creative agency to performers so that a composer/performer partnership exists (rather than pretending that the composer is the solitary “genius”).

Each of my recent compositions and the graphic notation that I choose for these pieces addresses fairly specific issues that interest me at the time. Hand Leg Suit (2003) is for mixed instrumental ensemble of two to six players. In this work I attempted to graphically deconstruct the process of performing on each instrument and recast that process in a new ways by highlighting different actions and parts of the instrument and body. Becoming...everything else (2004) is a performance installation for a group of performers from any discipline who perform in a single building at moments of their choosing during a longer span of time such as a week. This piece most overtly reflects my interest in installation and public-space art, and the notation reflects this as well. The top of a score page lists starting and ending cues (for the interpretation of that page) that the performer might (or might not) encounter in the space (some are visual, others are aural, others focus on the behavior of other building occupants); once the starting cue is found, the performer concurrently interprets a graphic image (which may imply spatial characteristics) and three verbs. Bit of nostalgia... (2005-06) is my most recent finished piece for one or two percussionists and live electronics performer. Here a limited series of graphics are combined in different ways creating a sort of permutational character to the score.

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These pages are interpreted by the percussionist(s) at a variety of instrumental set-ups (the performance space is divided into sectors, several of which contain distinctive groups of traditional and non-traditional instruments) – one possible outcome of this scenario that interests me is that the variety of instruments and semi-repetitive score will allow the percussionist(s) to make somewhat similar types of gestures in different contexts highlighting the differences between the instrument groups. The computer performer uses patches that I made using Cycling 74's MAX/MSP (software that allows users to create graphical interfaces for real-time sound synthesis and processing) to recall and manipulate recordings of previous performances and rehearsals; the percussionist(s) respond to these sounds at times, bringing a sense of self-history into the piece.

2. How much do you instruct the musicians how to interpret your compositions?

The amount of time that I spend with performers varies depending on the logistics surrounding each performance situation. I enjoy working with performers during the rehearsal process, but I also like to see what can happen when I have little to no influence. This spring I had pieces performed at conferences where I didn't get a chance to hear the ensembles until the day of the performance – I heard/saw fascinating interpretations of my scores each time. Typically I provide few very specific instructions, but rather provide more general comments, clarify performance instructions, suggest rehearsal techniques, or help with formal design.

3. John Cage had very defined ideas about how his graphic scores should be performed. Is there a right or wrong way to perform your music, or is it interpretive?

Cage's music varies significantly depending on which compositions you are performing. For example, his "number" pieces are less open than the Variations which don't specify a lot about sound materials. What is interesting about Variations IV, for example, is that while it does not give a lot of instruction about what types of sounds one makes, but is very specific about how one constructs a performance and what locations one occupies relative to the performance space while making sounds (Cartridge Music is another example that comes to mind of a piece that is very specific yet very open at least sonically).

My music is similar to these Cage pieces in that certain facets are fairly specific (in Hand Leg Suit this includes actions and parts of the body and instrument) while others (pitch, rhythm, etc.) are open to performer interpretation. I frequently employ graphic images and text that are not standard music notation – these images allow a significant degree of performer inventiveness since historically they do not imply specific actions and sonic results (all notation, after all, is graphic, but traditional notation implies that performers do certain things).

I suppose for me, the main facet that is important is that the musicians and artists I work with should always experiment and be searching for new ways to perform rather than simply going through the motions by making idiomatic gestures.

4. Zorn's "Cobra" and Cardew's "Treatise" are graphic scores that allow the musicians a lot of freedom. What are your thoughts on improvisation?

I think that actual improvisation is rarely heard by audiences, and more often occurs in practice or rehearsal situations. What is commonly understood as improvisation could probably more accurately be referred to as "flexible performance" or something like that. I find these situations interesting, particularly those that are less traditional-based (jazz for example typically, though not always, entails a pretty specific set of expected performance practices). I try to compose music that will present unknown scenarios mid-performance that the performers will have to deal with and respond to in their own way. If you look at what a few composers were doing in the mid 1960s, Christian Wolff's earlier music and Karlheinz Stockhausen pieces like Kurzwellen and Plus Minus, something similar is apparent. There's a sort of unquantifiable aesthetic (perhaps an "aesthetic of immediacy"?) that results from compositions like this – I guess it's a similar effect to the "aesthetic of difficulty" that one can sense in performances of Brian Ferneyhough's music.

5. A unique feature of your music is the combination of music and movement of the performers. How did this element come about?

That's an interesting question that I haven't actively considered until now. One of the composers whose music I've spent a lot of time with, Roger Reynolds, often creates very distinctive spatial gestures, though my study of his work postdates my first composition that integrates movement. Another connection that could be more overt in my interest in installation art – I've always been fascinated by art that situates itself in a space in a way that allows the viewer to understand or conceptualize the space in a new way and makes the art seem inseparable from the space it inhabits. This interest in space as an integral part of one's experience of art is something that I want to apply to my concert hall as well as installation work.

6. Are there visual artists or authors that have influenced you?

Visual artists: Wolfgang Laib, Robert Irwin, Bruce Nauman, Cy Twombly, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, Dan Flavin, James Turrell

Authors: Jackson Mac Low, Hermann Hesse, John Cage, Peter Inman

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