

Prof. Lucier: Alvin Lucier the teacher

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, from 9 AM to 12 PM, we had our composition seminar class in the conference room at the back of the music wing of the Wesleyan University library. Prof. Lucier would sit at the front of the conference table without much material, maybe a few scores he was interested in at the moment, ranging from Mozart to Earl Brown, and began our discussion by easing into a conversation about campus events. Often this initiation of class developed into a story about a bygone performance or interaction with another artist that provided an insight into his practice that, while subtle, would make me think about my own approach to music for the next day or two. In one story, for example, he spoke about being invited to present his work in Indonesia. Prof. Lucier spoke about his bemusement that his music had led him to this far-flung opportunity; he remarked on having the constant thought of “If only my mother could see me now.” while undertaking this endeavor. I think making room for the pleasant surprise was a catalyst in both his individual works, and the trajectory of his career. Remembering to afford myself that same sense of grace has been a nourishing part of my own practice.

I took part in Prof. Lucier’s seminar towards the end of his tenure at Wesleyan University. I started my masters degree in 2008, and he retired in the Spring of 2010. A work that he had just finished at the time I started my first year at Wesleyan was *Music with Missing Parts* (2007), a re-orchestration of Mozart’s Requiem. I remember Prof. Lucier bringing this work up for discussion in seminar. He commented on how he was curious about the way Mozart composed and why we find his music interesting, and that perhaps his piece was a way to investigate that. While this work was not premiered in full by an orchestra until 2020, Prof. Lucier presented a rendition of it with the Wesleyan University orchestra around that time. In this rendition, a short excerpt of Mozart’s Requiem performed by the orchestra was repeatedly recorded and played back into the concert hall, much like the process of *I am Sitting in a Room*. As a result, the precise harmonies of Mozart blurred into the resonance of the concert hall. To me, it was not only washing away acoustically, but also presented a continued convolution of a poignant representation of music history. Beside looking towards retirement from Wesleyan at this time, Prof. Lucier was establishing his archives and planning for a major retrospective festival as well. I think *Music for Missing Parts* may have been, in part, a piece that addressed his awareness of legacy and history in addition to his curiosity.

One of the best aspects of Prof. Lucier’s seminar was the comradery I felt amongst my fellow participants. This seminar offered plenty of time for those participating to present their work. In the discussion surrounding these works, Prof. Lucier would engage lightly. This would offer space for exchanges between emerging artists, instead of a steered presentation of student work. The cohort of artists that I met while at Wesleyan University

are still some of the artists that I admire and respect the most, and their ideas and comments offered over the table in Prof. Lucier's seminar still guide my own practice today.

- Benjamin Klein (MA, Wesleyan University, 2010)

It was through story-telling that Alvin shared his wisdom and reflections on life, art and music. I learned an important lesson about the realization of experimental music through the story of his conceptualization and composition process for *Music on a Long Thin Wire*; he told us his first impulse while developing that piece was to perform on the wire, with bows, by plucking it, by changing the frequency of the oscillator, but it somehow didn't work well. It was when he let the system act alone that the piece made complete sense. The acoustic and kinetic phenomenon by itself was beautiful and varied, and human interaction would only disrupt it.

He used to say, regarding the performance of experimental music: don't try to make it interesting.

In 2007, I assisted him -along with Ron Kuivila, Phillip Schulze and Forrest Leslie- on the recording of *Music for Solo Performer*, released in Lovely Records in 2009. He thought that the piece had to be approached differently for recording than for a live performance. The brainwaves were recorded in advance and he used several layers of them. He liked the idea of using a particular set of percussion instruments and avoided others for each performance or recording and spent a significant amount of time and dedication in finding it. In this case, small and medium-sized western classical percussion instruments were used.

- Ivan Naranjo (MA, Wesleyan University, 2009)

When I TAed for his 109 class, Introduction to Experimental Music, what really stuck with me were his standards on performing process pieces.

I wish I could remember his exact words, but of course it was all about following the steps of the piece simply and without fanfare, while maintaining an almost businesslike stage presence. Having trained in a type of performance in which maximum expressiveness was expected, it was a revelation and a relief to me to discover a performance practice that was methodical and didn't demand emotional vulnerability. And that such a process often still produced sounds that elicited all kinds of responses in the listener.

The one other memory that comes to mind is of hearing Alvin perform *I Am Sitting in a Room* live in the Zilka Gallery on the Wesleyan Campus in 2005 I think. It was a great example of how the simple execution of a process piece, in this case by someone with a distinctive "instrument", can be incredibly moving for the audience.

- Anne Rhodes (MM, Wesleyan University, 2006)

Is there a specific lesson that Alvin taught me that still guides my work today? Yes, it is among others, the importance of flexibility and honesty when it is about one's own work. As a composer you should let yourself be driven by your idea consequently and end up wherever it needs to end up, independently from expectations or common practices.

In his seminars he reflected on many pieces from all genres and epochs from choir music, experimental, and traditional works from different traditions. Still for me the most significant was when he was telling something about the process of the piece he was working on at that time. It was the solo cello piece *Glacier* which was commissioned in the framework of the Feet to Fire program at Wesleyan. The program was raising awareness of climate change. The piece became an almost half an hour long downwards glissando of the cello, as a sonification of a chart of melting glaciers. This can be roughly seen as a very simple idea, meanwhile to listen to the piece is a very rich and differentiated sound experience. He gave us updates on how he was thinking of this piece throughout the weeks of composition. It was magical to see how he reduced his ideas to the final decision to have that long downwards glissando on a solo cello, and finally ending up with a work that gives a unique listening experience which is an unmistakable mark of all compositions by Alvin Lucier.

- Samu Gryllus (MA, Wesleyan University, 2010)

During the summer of 2003 I assisted Prof. Lucier in putting on a performance of "Music for Solo Performer" and "Bird and Person Dying" in New York, with Lucier himself performing on stage and Joel Chadabe mixing. In hindsight, I was probably selected because I had a station wagon and a willingness to schlep vast amounts of gear and other assistants down to the city without complaint. However, just being there - placing speakers, laying cables, dutifully following directions - all felt like a huge personal accomplishment.

In the afternoon that Lucier had been allotted for installation and sound check we spent most of our time setting up Music for Solo Performer. 16 loudspeakers were arranged around the venue with all manner of cymbals, gongs, drums, and other percussion instruments placed in various relationships to them so that Lucier's brain waves could be transformed into a range of sounds during the performance. Lucier was particular about some of these relationships (i.e. This speaker goes on top the snare drum and that speaker goes behind the gong), but allowed his assistants to experiment with most of the others, "tuning" the setups ourselves. We were given further freedom by the fact that producing the brain waves necessary for the piece required Lucier to close his eyes and sit motionless while attached to the EEG machine.

During the first five minutes of performance, the cymbal at the back of the room closest to where I was standing began rattling off its loudspeaker. I was attached to this cymbal and its fate. Not only had it ridden in the back of my car from Connecticut, but I had spent time placing it just so over the speaker cone, maximizing the most beautiful aspects of its resonance. Out of sight of the majority of concertgoers I kneeled down next to the cymbal, delicately coaxing it back to its

ideal location for the remaining half an hour of music. I wondered if I was breaking any "rules." Among my jobs that summer was archiving a large original set of piano preparations used by John Cage, and I could almost hear him scolding me for intervening in the divine right of almighty Chance as my fingertips tapped the cymbal's edge. But the way in which Lucier had invited his assistants into the process, not as collaborators exactly but more as mutual admirers of the beautiful possibilities of his composition, imbued me with a sense of obligation that overrode my Cagean zealotry or any quizzical stares that might come my way.

Looking back, I think the main difference between this moment and the many other emotional musical experiences I had had as a pianist up until then was that I was able to care deeply about the sound being produced without letting go of the wonderfully comic absurdity of the moment, and more broadly the wit of the piece itself. The hyper-dramatic staging, the cacophony of sound, the idea that performing meant doing as little as possible: if I was less sober I'd have been laughing out loud. Many of Lucier's pieces walk this line between dry absurdity and deep feeling. It's a wonderful creative space to exist in, and although I have lost hold of it for long periods of my life it is a space I know I can reach again in the future as long as I can delicately keep that cymbal from falling off of the speaker.

- Dan St Clair (MA, Wesleyan University, 2010)