

ENCORE



ALVIN CURRAN

BY GEORGE GRELLA

"My friendship with Richard goes back to 1961." That is composer Alvin Curran, speaking from Rome, explaining how he first met Richard Teitelbaum, a composer, improviser and important electronic musician who died in April 2020. Curran will be in New York this month for a tribute to Teitelbaum at Roulette, which will also feature Elliott Sharp, James Ilgenfritz and the Ghost Ensemble playing a world premiere from the leading contemporary composer Catherine Lamb, who studied with Teitelbaum at Bard.

"I was already a graduate student at Yale and Richard became a graduate student in '61," Curran explains. "We became very, very close friends and actually roommates in that period. We were coming out of a strict period of 12-tone theocracy. I was invited by Elliott Carter, who was my teacher at Yale, to join him in Berlin in a residency program. After my year there, I decided I needed a Mediterranean cure. So I came to Rome. Richard was already there on a Fulbright. We met up again and with others, primarily [political composer and pianist] Frederic Rzewski, we decided to form an experimental music group called Musica Elettronica Viva [MEV]. This was vital musically and even, to some degree, politically revolutionary."

There had never been a group like MEV before, nor one like it since, bringing electronic instruments—even homemade ones—to the stage, including early Moog synthesizers, and using those for free improvisation. Their performances were often raucous and explosively chaotic, going on until the musicians could no longer sustain the energy. "We absolutely swore to create a music that had no score, no director, no starting time, no ending time and accepting anything within the arc of time that we played together. This had a lot of risky musical and social, even economic consequences," Curran said.

At times, the group included trombonists Garrett List and George Lewis and soprano saxophonist Steve

Lacy. "We were among one of the first groups," Curran avers, "I can't say in the world because that would not be entirely true of composers, that is those people who thought it was still about writing notes on paper and of being a musician in a historically classical way, to have decided to radically expand our musical perspective. And some of us, like myself and Rzewski in particular and also Richard, continued writing music on paper. But above all, we began to improvise, to create collective works, in a very honest and political sense of the word. We truly shared everything, the good and the bad, equally among ourselves as a kind of a principled family."

He adds that "the experience, the friendships and music making, with Richard in particular...all very unique individuals, hardly ever agreeing on anything, except being able to sit down together and really knock out spontaneous music." It also opened up a longstanding direction in Curran's work, using found sounds as musical material. He explains: "I would go around with a microphone and record everything around me. And that's become one of my characteristic compositional and musical languages."

Curran still uses found sounds in his language, but modern technology now means he has them collected in a sampling keyboard and can bring them up instantaneously, everything from a piano to screeching car tires. "I've created a monstrous patch, which has over 3,000 files, which basically covers sounds from all over the world, its people, its machines, nature, atmospheres, rivers and so on. And I'm a performer with the old fashioned grand piano too, which is something I feel very, very comfortable with."

Curran covers what is arguably the broadest range of any contemporary composer, including *Songs and Views of the Magnetic Garden*, one of the classics of electronic composition; radio compositions like *Maritime Rites* and *Crystal Psalms*; the massive piano collection *Inner Cities*; and *The Art of the Fluke*, a spontaneous composition with Cenk Ergün using turntables. There is the *Alvin Curran Fakebook*, collecting hundreds of his ideas in lead-sheet format, available for any musician to play on any instrument. And there is more than a little jazz in the music he has produced.

"In my youth, you know, I was both in jazz and dance bands. A third part of my sounding life is with wind instruments, namely brass. Originally as a young man I took up my father's trombone and then I went on to playing flugelhorn"—his lovely brass playing

can be heard on *Songs and Views*—"and more recently that's just come down to my playing primitive instruments like shofar and animal horns and huge Australian shells, these gigantic shells. So I keep my lips useful."

The shells and shofar may seem a separate world from sampled sounds and electronic instruments, but Curran's thinking makes them all part of the whole. His work, whether composing or improvising, always connects back to the fundamental impulse to make music and to make it using the simplest means possible. That can produce complex results, but the roots are always in the most basic material, as in his *Fakebook*, which distills his ideas down to straightforward notation.

Curran digs into the human experience to point out that making music is one of the essential things that separates humans from the rest of life on Earth. "I speak about humans being musical animals, like animal horns and shells, because believe me, when there's a glitch in the electrical systems or when things fall down, people are going to have to go back and learn how to make music, beat on their chest, find something that makes comparable and simple expressive sounds. So I never let go of these very, very simple forms of expression and these primitive instruments. They're very meaningful to me, especially when they're going through very complex digital systems today, which are completely unreliable. You can look at a seashell and you know that this thing has been there for millions of years and is always going to work." ♦

For more information, visit alvincurran.com. Curran is at Roulette Dec. 20th with a Richard Teitelbaum Memorial Celebration as part of the Infrequent Seams Festival. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Musica Elettronica Viva—MEV 40 (New World, 1967-2007)
- Alvin Curran/Evan Parker/Andrea Centazzo—(In) Real Time (Ictus, 1977)
- Alvin Curran/Rova Saxophone Quartet—Electric Rags II (New Albion, 1990)
- Alvin Curran—Toto Angelica (I Dischi Di Angelica, 1999-2005)
- Alvin Curran—Shofar Rags (Tzadik, 2008/2012)
- Alvin Curran—Endangered Species (New World, 2018)

