

Reaching for Tomorrow... one sound at a time

What would a 200-piece orchestra including three contrabass saxophones, five tarogatos, solovox, bass marimba, electric doorbell organ, tower chimes, bass/contrabass banjos, and 9-foot Philippine temple drum sound like? I've been trying for seven years to find out.

Since the late 1990s, when Roscoe Mitchell sent me his beautiful, overdubbed solo album *Sound Songs*, I have wondered what kind of amazing sounds I could create through overdubbing, with the hundreds of rare woodwind, brass, percussion and electronic instruments I have amassed throughout my decades-long obsession with sound. How about a giant orchestra, the kind you could never actually assemble anywhere on Earth? An orchestra with sarrusophones, theremins, slide saxophones, contrabass oboes, etc.? If I had a facility to do it in, I could overdub entire sections of instruments so rare that only one or two actually exist in the world. I could create a large-scale symphony, of the kind heard only in my dreams.

But at that time I was living in an apartment, where things had become unmanageable. The large kettle-drum I'd been using mostly as a coffee table had gotten buried under piles of instrument cases. The incredible bass marimba that Sun Ra played on *Heliocentric Worlds* in 1965 stood in a corner of the room, barricaded in by piles of horns, cymbals and gongs. In another room, two sets of metal shelves held wind instruments of every description along with theremins, gadgets, and parts. It had gotten to where I couldn't use much of what I had, because it was simply inaccessible. I began to dream of a "laboratory" where I could have everything set up and ready to go, along with the equipment to record.

Well, I am a very slow person. ScienSonic Laboratories was finally completed in 2009, in a building behind my New Jersey house. The Lab is my temple of sound, the sacred space where I work on Music every day that I'm not on the road, usually quite late at night after the gig. A stream of creative and unusual albums have emanated from the Lab, including collaborations with Roscoe, Marshall Allen, Milford Graves, and many others... but still, I was slow to begin work on the mammoth symphonic project I had long imagined.

A little over seven years ago I reached my 60th birthday: a sobering milestone which brought home the realization that if I wanted to see this project through, I had better get started. The following day I finally began work on my one-man, improvised, four-movement symphonic work that I expect will take a good 20 years to complete, if not more... the sort of thing one might call a magnum opus. My peculiar process is painstakingly slow and deliberate, and quite solitary.

The basic method is this: I improvise something and record it. If I like it, I add to it. If not, I try again. All thematic material is improvised (unless I am revisiting or developing a theme that was improvised earlier). All vertical harmonies are built up strictly by ear, one note at a time, made up as I go. Each time I work on the piece I add whatever I hear, on whatever instrument or instruments I hear playing it. Some sessions are spent finding just the right little bell or shaker to add the needed color. When a section feels complete, I move forward.

This is a new way of making music - certainly for me, anyway - and it has been exciting to discover just some of what is possible with the many sound sources I have available.

I have certain rules concerning the creative methodology for this piece:

- 1) **I work on the piece every day that I am home, without exception.** I put in daily bite-size chunks of about 45 minutes, so I can keep my many other balls in the air... never skipping any day that I am home with access to the Lab.
- 2) **There is no written music.** Nothing is ever written down, either before or after it is played. There is no score, and no parts. All material is improvised directly to the recording, but very slowly and carefully.
- 3) **Nothing is worked out in advance.** Not at the piano, or on paper, or in my head. I know only that there will be four movements, for which I have four titles, and a vague idea of the general mood of each. Beyond that I do not allow myself to plan ahead.
- 4) **Everything is done strictly by ear, without regard to functional harmony.** I do not think about harmonic progressions or chord structure at all, even though these things can certainly be heard in the piece. If I am building vertical harmonies, I do it by simply adding whatever pitches I hear, one note at a time, until the sound feels complete. I don't think about what to call it.
- 5) **There is no cut-and-paste.** Each sound is made specifically and uniquely for the musical moment it occupies, and none other. If I need seventeen cymbal crashes, I record each one individually, because I want it to sound like a real orchestra as much as possible. For the same reason, I keep a spreadsheet of where each instrument sits in the stereo field, so if an instrument returns after a long absence it will sound as if it is in the same place in the room.
- 6) **No click track, autotune, sampling, or AI.** Every part is played on a real instrument.
- 7) **I mix as I go.** Each section of music is mixed (except for reverb/EQ) before I move on to the next, so that I won't lose track of the sound I'm trying to achieve and then have to try and recall it later. I also keep a timeline spreadsheet of musical events so I can quickly relocate earlier themes, etc.
- 8) **I don't allow myself to rethink earlier sections of the piece.** Once I have completed a section of music, I move on, and do not allow myself to go back and change it beyond minor adjustments to the balance or the mix. This is the only way I can hope to ever finish.

A few weeks ago, just after returning from a lengthy European tour, I turned 67... and I can now report that, seven years into this project, I have finally completed the first movement of my symphony. It consists of about 13 minutes of music, fully mixed, in a rough sonata form, for more than 200 instruments including saxophones, woodwinds, brass, mallets, percussion, some strings, and vintage electronics... all of it played only by myself.

Is it jazz? Concert music? I don't know. The whole thing is improvised, but at such a slow and careful rate that it sounds more like composition – which it is, in a way -- and yet there is nothing written. It is a very unusual way of making music for 200 instruments. I've never done anything like it, and don't know of any other examples. "Will it be performed live?" people ask me. No. It never could be. There is no score, and even if there were, no such orchestra could ever be assembled; there aren't enough of these instruments in the world. It can only exist as the recording I have made.

My plan was to not let anyone hear the work until the whole thing was completed (other than a teensy snippet I posted on youtube). But now that the first movement is complete, trombonist Ryan Keberle has proposed hosting a listening/lecture event at Hunter College in Manhattan, where he teaches, to unveil the first movement. Given how long this has taken, I've decided to accept his kind offer... so on Thursday, Oct. 1 at 7 PM, in Hunter College's Lang Recital Hall, I will play the completed first movement,

talk about the process, and take questions from any who are curious and care to attend. This event will be free and open to the public.

Meanwhile, the daily work continues. I hope and expect that the two inner movements will progress more quickly than the first. But I know that the fourth will be a bear.

Oh yes, one more thing: The title of the piece is *Reach for Tomorrow...* a title which has taken on extra significance given the 6-hour cancer surgery I recently underwent (while still keeping up my daily work on the piece, I am pleased to say). I seem to be fine now... but the experience serves as a reminder that none of us have forever, and I figure that *Reach for Tomorrow* is at least a 20-year project, likely more. Should have started sooner.

Wish me luck!

Scott Robinson (not AI!)

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