

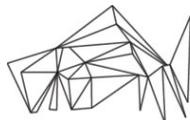
WEDNESDAYS@7 Presents

Charles Curtis, Cello

Wednesday, February 20, 2019 – 7:00 p.m.
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall and
Conrad Prebys Music Center Experimental Theater

Éliane Radigue:
Naldjorlak for solo cello (2005)
Concert Hall

Alvin Lucier:
Slices for cello and pre-recorded orchestra (2007-2012-2019)
Experimental Theater



Two long works for cello, made for, and with, Charles Curtis. Each to be played in its own room, and with its own cello.

Concert Hall, 7pm: Radigue

In *Naldjorlak*, the cello is tuned to its own native resonance, the so-called “wolf tone.” The performance sets forth a detailed and exhaustive investigation into the instrument’s hidden resonances, following the body of the cello as both geography and musical form at once. In Salomé Voegelin’s words (from *The Political Possibility of Sound*), *Naldjorlak* “performs the entanglement of composer, cello, cellist, bow and breath... the playing of the instrument activates a composition between the different resonating bodies of the space, the performer, the cello and the audience, working on an impossible yet aimed for unison.”

For Radigue (born January 1932), legendary for her work with feedback, the ARP 2500 synthesizer and analog tape, *Naldjorlak* was the very first work for an acoustic instrument and a live performer. This collaboration led to a florescence of new works for soloists and ensembles, all created collaboratively without written score. In this collaborative model, the piece is considered non-transferable; it is not intended to be performed by anyone other than the individual for whom it was made.

Experimental Theatre, 8:15: Lucier

The range of the cello is presented as a 53-note chromatic cluster sustained by the traditional instruments of the European symphony orchestra. The soloist articulates a melodic sequence of the cluster, and with each successive note from the soloist, the corresponding orchestral instrument falls silent. In a new ordering, the reverse takes place: with each new melodic step, the orchestral instrument enters again, once again building up the arrayed cluster. This process of erasure and re-inscription is followed seven times in all.

Lucier (born May 1931) originally conceived *Slices* as a piece for cello with live orchestra, as it was premiered in 2007 at Ostrava. The impracticabilities of performance led to a version with pre-recorded instruments (recorded by Tom Erbe), looped and mounted in a supercollider patch (originally written by Scott Worthington); this was first performed at the Berlin MaerzMusik in 2012. Jacob Sundstrom has now re-written the patch to accommodate as many individual channels for the orchestral instruments as possible. This performance will be the first presentation of *Slices* with 32 loudspeakers.

A Conversation (February 2019)

Youarin Sankt-Jakobi: What about this no applause thing?

The Artist: People get very upset about that.

Y. S.-J.: Well, they want to express themselves.

T. A.: When La Monte forbids applause, people think it’s authoritarian. It isn’t that at all. It’s a way of appealing to peoples’ respect for silence, and for the lingering of the sound, in memory. Applause is nice, I guess, but it’s also a kind of blotting-out of what just happened. Like scaring away ghosts.

Y. S.-J.: Plus the whole bowing and curtain call routine, I'm sure you're not a great fan of that.

T. A.: No, right, I'm always trying to figure out ways to be on stage already, so I don't have to walk out and bow, you know, house lights down, stage lights up, open door, striding forward to the edge of the stage, big smile, all that nonsense. Might as well be an awards ceremony. Which, if it were that, would be fun at least. But if I have to play, I'd rather just play. But there's another thing.

Y. S.-J.: Yes?

T. A.: Well, if you're doing something with people, I don't know, having a conversation for example, or going to the beach, or playing basketball, you don't applaud each other. You applaud when there's a total separation between you and the others, between the performer and the audience. The applause sort of enforces the separation. Supposing we thought of the concert as something we are all doing together, concentrating together, meditating, being in nature, that kind of thing. I mean, I realize I'm the one who's playing, and the others are listening, but supposing we try to play down that difference, and think of it as sharing a space, sharing a bit of time, sharing something. Then the applause and the bowing would be terribly out of place.

Y. S.-J.: OK, I can see that, I guess that's true. So no applause?

T. A.: Well, maybe it will just seem unnecessary. I don't want to make a big deal out of it.

Y. S.-J.: I wanted to ask about the 32 speakers. How was it to work with that in *Slices*?

T. A.: Complicated. It's not so much the speakers, as it is the room. Or the room and the speakers, as a thing, because that's how they're conceived. You know, the speakers are not there for different instruments, they're there for the reverb.

Y. S.-J.: So you're using them in a different way, that they were not intended for?

T. A.: Right. I'm mis-using them, re-purposing them, maybe. They're there to create different sorts of reverbs, simulate different spaces. And I'm using them as signal sources for individual instruments, for playback of instrument recordings.

Y. S.-J.: So you're using the same speakers that project the reverb, and then I wonder how do you get the reverb, how do you do both of those things with the same speakers?

T. A.: Oh, I'm not using the reverb at all.

Y. S.-J.: But the room is dreadfully dead, is it not?

T. A.: Well, it is very dry, yes. It's not "dead", it's a room with a floor and walls and a lot of absorbent material, curtains, foam or whatever that stuff is, but it's not dead, it has sounding properties of its own, it sounds a certain way.

Y. S.-J.: A way that it's not meant to sound, no? It's supposed to be dead, or dry, not in order to sound that way, but so that the reverbs can be appreciated optimally.

T. A.: That may be, but I can't get into that, I can't get into some fantasy of what the Medici Chapel sounds like, or the Concertgebouw, or some huge cistern, or better yet, the Meyer Loudspeaker Company's fantasy of these places. As a room, it's a room, you know, on a state university campus in Southern California. This is where we are, and I think it's fine to just be here, to let it sound that way, to sound like what it actually is, the room itself. I sometimes go to concerts in that room and as soon as I walk into the room I'm freaked out, because the sound of my footsteps is in complete disharmony with what the rest of my sense perception takes in about the room. The footsteps, peoples' voices, incidental sounds, are boomy and echoey, but what I see around me is a room that shows no evident cause for boomy or echoey sounds. It's trickery!

Y. S.-J.: Well, that's the point.

T. A.: I have to say that I'm enjoying the room as what it is, dry and direct, and the many individual loudspeakers contribute to that, giving the instruments' sounds in a kind of unembellished, I don't know, a kind of candid, plain-spoken way.

Y. S.-J.: So it's working for you.

T. A.: I think so.

Y. S.-J.: Albeit in a way that it's not really intended to work.

T. A.: Probably not. But, you see, Lucier likes the process in his pieces to be as clear as possible, and this situation does contribute to clarity. Which then shapes the performance, because my procession through the piece is guided by what I can hear. If I can hear the unisons with the orchestral instruments, I hold them longer. And the strange "remainder chords", as I take instruments out, sound very ensemble-like with the many speakers. Sometimes I'm tempted to just wait, and join the ensemble, or just listen, rather than keep moving along. I'm afraid the performance is going to get rather long.

Y. S.-J.: When you say "if I can hear", does that mean that you sometimes can not hear the unisons?

T. A.: Oh yes. It's such a dense chord that much of the time the ears are overwhelmed, or the ears' ability to parse and sort, is overwhelmed. But in this setting I feel I'm hearing more than I ever have in this piece. Strangely, I hear the unisons when I am making beats with them. Especially with horn and clarinet. The beats lead the ear to that instrument, and then when I remove that instrument, it's pretty obvious.

Y. S.-J.: OK. And then the Concert Hall for the Radigue piece.

T. A.: Yes. So, the concert hall itself is a kind of amplifier. It's the opposite of the room with all the speakers. It's interesting to take a piece that is so detailed and fine-grained in what the instrument and the bow are bringing out of the sustaining sound, all the little tiny changes and surprises, and to subject all of that to the magnification process of the hall. That's how I'm hearing it.

Y. S.-J.: How do these two pieces go together?

T. A.: I suppose one could think of the Radigue as a piece that goes inward, into the heart or into the innards of the cello, directing the listener toward sound activity that is otherwise ignored or avoided, or filtered out. Or just inaudible. And the Lucier is a piece that opens outward, casting the orchestra as a resonating chamber of the cello. The 53-note cluster is simply the entire range of the cello, as a chromatic tone cluster, opened out like a huge fan. Unfurled. Going outward. Does that make sense?

Y. S.-J.: I think so. It will be interesting to try to hear the pieces that way, and this makes the change of rooms at intermission entirely logical. But I still have to ask about the wolf tone.

T. A.: I know. It's become a thing with this piece. I think of it as a kind of feedback. And tuning to feedback is kind of perverse.

Y. S.-J.: That's true. And that may account for something I've noticed. It's basically a very soft piece, but at the same time, I find that when those wolf resonances really get going, it gets almost violent. The cello seems to be shaking and trembling at times.

T. A.: It's true. I keep hoping the instrument doesn't split apart.

Y. S.-J.: Let's hope!

T. A.: Right, let's hope. Although, that would be quite something too!

Y. S.-J.: Thanks so much! I'm not going to applaud.

T. A.: Much appreciated.

Youarin Sankt-Jakobi is a musicologist based in National City, California.

Excerpt from the notes for the premiere performance, 2005:

The tuning that I developed for *Naldjorlak* expresses a general congruency of all of the potential resonating elements of the cello. The tailpiece, endpin, and tailpiece wire I have tuned nearly to the essential frequency of the cello's resonating cavity, for these purposes defined as the frequency of the so-called wolf tone. The wolf tone itself is to some degree tuneable, it slides up and down a bit in response to greater and lesser overall string tension. If one of the cello strings is tuned exactly to unison with the wolf tone, the wolf tone evades that frequency and settles nearby. This may be due to sympathetic resonances cancelling the strong beating frequency of the wolf tone. I tune the cello in a kind of consensus tuning, getting everything near, but not too near, to the wolf tone, then adjusting the other elements accordingly. Every adjustment of a single element causes changes in the other elements, but over time it is possible to get everything in a very close range, within a small semitone at any rate.

This congruency of frequencies makes for a surprising degree of responsiveness. Potentially any bowed action will excite all resonating elements simultaneously. The cello behaves somewhat like a bell, resonating in a complex but unified fashion.

Looking back:

Naldjorlak was premiered at the Tenri Cultural Institute in New York on December 5, 2005, as part of the concert series Waking States. In the meanwhile, I have given over 50 performances of the piece in numerous countries and in a wide variety of venues, including the Rothko Chapel in Houston, the Auditorium du Louvre in Paris, Issue Project Room in New York, the Hebbel-Theater in Berlin, and the College des Bernardins in Paris, to name only a few. Much has changed in the years since its premiere. *Naldjorlak* became the first of a three-part composition, joined by *Naldjorlak II* for two bassett horns and *Naldjorlak III* for two bassett horns and cello. Radigue embarked upon the *Occam* series, a prolific project involving numerous instrumental performers collaborating with her individually on solos, with some of these solos combined as small ensemble pieces. Radigue has ceased to work with tape or with any electronic equipment whatsoever, preferring to work in the context of acoustic instruments and collaborative relationships with human performers.

This late blossoming of acoustic music in Radigue's career would have been impossible to predict fifteen years ago. When I met her and began to discuss *Naldjorlak* in 2003, she indicated that she had virtually retired from composing; she suggested that she was not inclined to continue to wrestle with the ARP 2500, and that the painstaking process of making new work seemed no longer urgently necessary (these are my recollections of her statements). At the same time, when the concept for *Naldjorlak* became clear, she stated that this was the piece that would represent the most complete realization in her music of the basic theme of the unity of body, mind and spirit, a theme that had preoccupied her for many years. In various ways, *Naldjorlak* seemed an end point, not an opening into a late florescence of creative production.

One has to admire the courage of a composer switching over to a completely new medium of expression at the age of 72. She made it clear at the time that she knew very little about the cello; but she created, in our work together, a framework for using my very personal relationship to the cello as a compositional element - possibly the central element. At the same time the piece is unmistakably a work by Eliane Radigue. This sensibility, this natural affinity for shaping a work to be played by an individual performer, with all his or her subjectivity on full display, into a work *by Radigue* but *for that performer*, has to be accounted as a kind of alchemy. Some kind of turning inside-out of performer-work or performer-score or performer-composer is at play here; it is slightly beyond my theoretical reach right now to fully analyze what this is. To date, *Naldjorlak* has not been performed by any other cellist. It is in some sense a piece for cello, but more than that, for a particular cellist, a person. While this notion is given lip-service by countless composers, it functions here in concrete and literal ways.

This may in large part explain why there is no need for a score. And without a score, the work is allowed to breathe and evolve and change with each performance, not referring back to a written codex. This is essentially the procedure adopted for all of the work that followed *Naldjorlak*, and with these late works a striking model has been set for the status of the compositional work in relation to performance and performers. While this working model is not without its pitfalls, and may not be equally efficacious across all situations, I have the

sense that with Naldjorlak a very particular domain was delineated - at the time unwittingly - bridging ideas of the work as an ephemeral state activated only in performance, and of the interpreter and the instrument as musical content, maybe even as score. One could draw comparisons to Nono's late works, some of which were withdrawn because they were so dependent on the circle of performers he was working with, or to Scelsi's collaborative strategies, and certainly to La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's commitment to performance as the site of composition, as well as to Lucier's works which vary radically across performances and performance spaces. But within this constellation, what Radigue is doing seems particular and radical.

Charles Curtis, from the liner notes to New World Records, Alvin Lucier: *Orchestra Works* (2012)

“A clear procedure defines the form of *Slices for cello and orchestra* (2007). The full range of the cello, arrayed as a 53-note chromatic scale from the low open C string to the high E above the treble staff, is sounded as a sustained cluster by the 53 musicians of the orchestra, each assigned one of the 53 notes, appropriate to register. Thus the lowest C is held by the tuba, the next lowest notes by contrabasses, then cellos, trombones, bassoons etc., and on up to clarinets, oboes, and flutes at the highest notes. Only sustaining instruments are used, and their sustaining is soft but as continuous as possible (short breaths are allowed in the wind instruments). Against this splayed background, the entire potential ambitus of the cello unfolded like an enormous fan, the solo cello articulates a melodic sequence of the cluster in a measured and moderate pacing. With each note that the solo cello sounds, the corresponding orchestral musician holding that note falls silent; and as the 53-note sequence is traversed, the sustained cluster is erased, note by note, finally reaching complete silence. At this point the solo cello begins a different melodic ordering of the 53 notes, and with the sounding of each new note the corresponding orchestral musician begins again, re-inscribing what had been erased until the complete 53-note cluster is again present. This process of alternately erasing and re-inscribing is repeated seven times in all, each time in a different melodic ordering, such that at the end of the seventh sequence the work ends in silence.

“Lucier approaches the selection of melodic orderings by systematically laying out a wide range of possible orderings, then choosing a handful that dispose the cluster in coherent patterns. The notion of “drawing in the air” is echoed here in wedge and wave shapes scaled by a particular interval or an alternation of intervals. In the sparse sections when orchestral instruments enter, these patterns give rise to very striking arpeggiations of stacked intervals. In the opposite situations, when orchestral instruments stop, the patterns result in remainder sonorities that Lucier almost certainly did not consciously aim for. In my performance of the solo part I try to use as many natural harmonics as I can, in order to highlight the space of slight difference between the native resonance of the cello, heard through the overtone structure of its open strings, and the unbending rule of the sustaining orchestral instruments in their equal-tempered chromaticism. It is hard not to be reminded of the work of the acolyte, snuffing out 53 candles, lighting them again in a different pattern, snuffing them out again, and so on, until they have been snuffed out a last time.

“The orchestra is reconceived as a virtual cello, or as a resonating chamber calibrated exactly to the frequencies that here define the cello. A 53-note chromatic cluster in mixed orchestral instruments is a very complex sound indeed, conforming to none of the sonic expectations we have of orchestras or orchestral instruments. Barring advance knowledge, one would be hard-pressed to identify the source of this sound as a symphony orchestra. And the listener who accepts and yields to the experience of the sound as unattributable may

succeed in sustaining a state of not-knowing, not identifying, throughout the piece, even when only a handful of instruments are playing with the cello. Without extended techniques, without processin or distortion, even without amplification, Lucier has made of the acoustic sound from traditional instruments a site of perceptual uncertainty, defamiliarization, and discovery.

“For the present performance the instruments of the orchestra were recorded individually and multi-tracked in order to achieve maximal clarity of timbre and balance. Although they played alone, the musicians were seated at locations on the stage that correspond to that instrument’s spot in the traditional seating arrangement of the symphony orchestra. The recordings were made in the Conrad Prebys Concert Hall at U.C. San Diego, the last auditorium designed by legendary acoustician Dr. Cyril Harris. During the sessions, the experience of listening to only one tone at a time, in long durations, from a wide variety of instruments over a period of days, proved to be a case study in the remarkable acoustical complexity of what we casually think of as ‘a single note.’ ”

Great thanks to Jacob Sundstrom, Tom Erbe, Anthony Burr, Peter Ko, David Espiritu, Rachel Allen, the Music Department staff, and to the grad students, with whom I have had such fruitful and inspiring conversations.

Contact us for information on upcoming concerts:
Music Box Office: (858) 534-3448 | <http://music.ucsd.edu/concerts>

Audience members are reminded to please silence all phones and noise-generating devices before the performance, and to remain seated during the performance. As a matter of courtesy and copyright law, no unauthorized recording or photography is allowed in the hall. UC San Diego is a non-smoking campus.

David Espiritu, Jr. - Theatrical Production Specialist
Caroline Louise Miller, composer - chimes