

# Reflections on James Tenney

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# reflections on james tenney

BY CHIYOKO SZLAVNICS



**W**hen I heard in March of 2006 that Jim Tenney's lung cancer had returned, I was still processing the very recent death of my mother from breast cancer. Two extremely significant people in my life died within the space of eight months. Both had been crucial to my artistic development: my mother, a visual artist, had instilled in me a very strong visual aesthetic—an organic, powerful sense of form, colour, and layering; Jim introduced me to the concepts of sound as material (the mathematical-acoustical-physiological principles underpinning its consistency), and form as something that could be created by controlling, or shaping, its parameters over time. What was most striking to me back in 1994, as a young composer just starting out, was Tenney's incredible rationality—his ability to clearly explain principles, and everything else he was interested in; his candidness and openness; his contagious enthusiasm; and his generosity with time. The underlying principles for shaping form, which Tenney showed me during my first lesson, have become—in a surprising way—intrinsic to my method. And now, more than twelve years on, what I am most struck by is Tenney's legacy: his large and varied body of compositions, writings, and notes, which contain a myriad of fertile theoretical proposals, representing the activity of an enormously creative mind—a mind that delighted in linking the past to the future, and in exploring ideas which may well continue to evolve through the countless number of students he inspired and influenced throughout more than three decades.

Tenney's oeuvre comprises a large variety of approaches, ranging from single concept pieces for single instruments to stochastic-

based forms for computer-generated music or acoustic instruments; from purely graphic scores to those that are fully notated; from pieces whose basis is a single overtone series (with or without electronic processing) to those without any direct harmonic control; from aleatoric systems (such as stochastic or ergodic forms, graphic scores, or his use of the I-Ching) to empirically composed works, including tributes to other composers, such as Conlon Nancarrow or Scott Joplin. Rather than using various modules of pitch and rhythm as the basis for compositions in the traditional sense (or even as "aggregates"), Tenney tended to favour the aleatoric approach, following Cage's lead: individual sounds within a piece were regarded as having a kind of autonomy, except insofar as all events in a work were somehow coordinated by an overriding form—some rules or laws predetermined by the composer.

One of the most impressive aspects of Tenney's compositions and writings is their conceptual clarity: he was very interested in illustrating a formal idea or a clearly delineated experiment in his work. Tenney was a mathematician-composer, and approached the task of composing music as a scientist might—with an idea, a theory, some questions, and a set of variables with which he wanted to experiment and ultimately produce a "solution"—albeit just one solution out of an infinite set of possibilities. Tenney himself was a lucid thinker, able to articulate ideas in the clearest, simplest way, and when he set out to compose a piece, he made sure that his intention was clear from the start.

Tenney absorbed and integrated Cage's new, abstract perspectives on musical material and ways of structuring it, examining, challenging, and extending Cage's ideas and language in his own way (as Cage had

done with the ideas of Schoenberg, and Zen Buddhism). Cage was a political philosopher-composer, who articulated the logical extreme of musical (conceptual) developments, the kind of revolutionary redefinition of music that previous generations strove for. Tenney, on the other hand, was a practical mathematician-composer, deeply engaged with the human perception of, and occupation with, the innate, structural aspects of sound. Cage had proposed that the future of musical structure lay in the horizontal (duration), but Tenney, responding to this, reintroduced the imperative that the vertical (harmony) still had a future, that its potential had not yet been exhausted (see Tenney's article, "John Cage and the Theory of Harmony," an essay published in *Musicworks* 27, and in *Soundings 13, The Music of James Tenney*, Soundings Press, Santa Fe, NM. 1984).

Tenney's research and longer writings, *A History of Consonance and Dissonance* (Excelsior Music Publishing Company, New York, 1988), *Meta + Hodos*, and *META Meta + Hodos* (Frog Peak Music, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1988), reflect deep investigations into the nature of sound and form, and human perceptions and conceptions of them. This research enabled him to link contemporary and ancient thinking in his own work, and extend it. Tenney created a living link between Pythagoras-Aristoxenus-Helmholtz-Schoenberg-Partch and composers today who are working with ratios, whether they are using the Just Intonation system, Partch's forty-three-degree division of the octave, or any ratio-based system of microtonality, such as that employed by the Spectralists. What is perhaps not unique to Tenney, but has certainly been powerfully elucidated in his writings and compositions, is a firm conviction that



and complex, it satisfies—and still thrills—the basic human experience of listening.

One of Tenney's most profound theoretical proposals, which he continually explored and developed in compositions and writings throughout most of his career, is the concept of "harmonic space," an outgrowth of his work with ratios. Using the ratio system as his starting point, Tenney proposed that each prime could represent an imagined dimension of harmonic space, and that all ratios would, therefore,

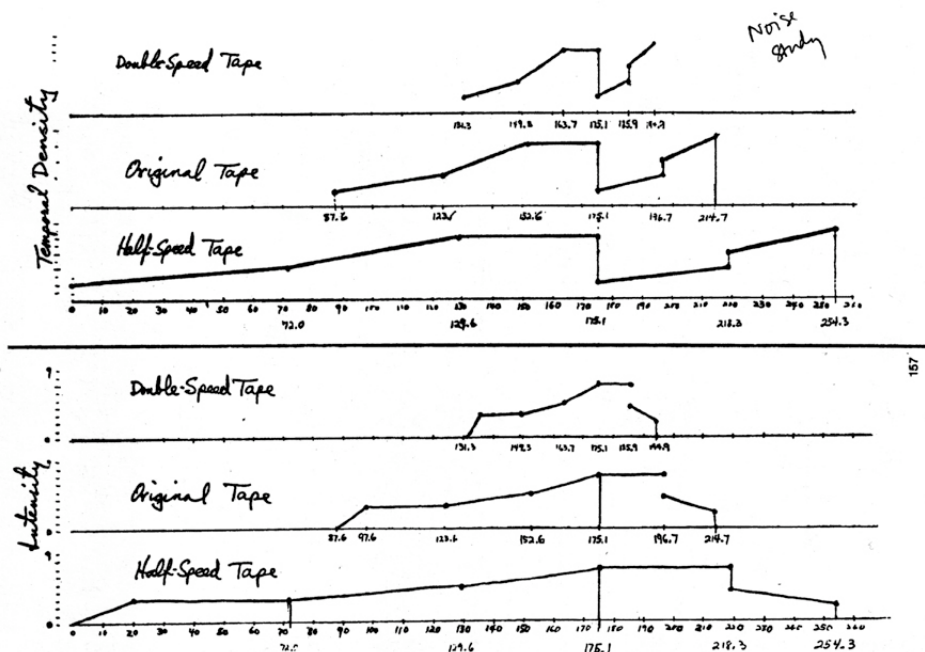
Probably as a result of his Gestalt-inspired analyses of form, which encouraged the use of graphs to track and represent change, and his association with Varèse, who had been actively scoring details of various sound parameters to represent different perspectives of three-dimensional forms, Tenney developed a method using graphs to shape each parameter of a work. During my first lesson with him in 1994, Tenney encouraged me to use such parametric graphs to develop the composition I was working on. He suggested using graphs to represent the parameters of duration (temporal density), pitch range, and dynamic. (Tenney himself also used graphs to represent timbre and envelope, especially for computer-generated music.) This multi-levelled structuring method proved to be extremely versatile. The composition I had brought to our session—my second ever—was relatively traditional, yet the method proved effective for the composition's development. I believe Tenney might also have used such graphs to plan—or control—the shapes of his own empirically composed works. But because the parametric graphs represented a set—a limit—of possibilities, from which a computer program would make random choices, this method lent itself well to the aleatoric forms Tenney favoured, and was almost certainly developed to facilitate such compositions.

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regarded it, how he handled it—the kinds of processes he used. Just as in the music of Bach, Schoenberg, Nancarrow, and that of other numerically inclined composers, the sounds in Tenney's music often seem to proceed by a self-contained logical impetus. Our enjoyment in listening to his music is, in part, an enjoyment of our awareness of a logical process, an idea or a formal progression unfolding over time, as well as pleasure in listening to the sound at any given moment. We can simply enjoy the experience of some kind of form of musical, mathematical, or abstract truth, without somebody's "I" intruding or overshadowing the purity of unadorned sounds.

Part of my affinity with Tenney, and perhaps with this particular generation of American composers, is that I have always most enjoyed composing with limits and producing unembellished works, those reduced to the essential. I find such works to be the most satisfying to listen to. If a work's form and content are heard to be inseparable, and if a work is abstract, i.e., not burdened by clichés, external references, or the composer's emotions getting in the way of the experience of the sound, then I get the most satisfaction out of listening to it. Tenney, upon hearing a recording of the composition I mentioned above, the saxophone quartet *Papyrus Bending*, said, "That's a really good piece! It's austere!" When he said this, I think he meant that the piece does not stray from a commitment to formal ideas, does not try to entertain the audience, does not sell out. It is my wish to create music in which the sounds themselves seem to have their own life, without an aesthetic or style directing how they act in a work. Perhaps, like Tenney, I also feel a kinship to composers such as Bach and Schoenberg, to the relatively pure, numerical aspect of their expression. For it is through such experimentation that new sounds, not harnessed by an external ideology, fashion, or style, can be heard as pure explorations of the potential of sound as raw material, unaffected by human sentiment. To me, it is music such as this that seems most to be universal.

But if Tenney's artistic stance was one of austere focus on pure idea and pure sound, he was nonetheless possessed of great personal warmth, entering enthusiastically into direct social experience, celebrating



Superimposition of the three analogue tapes in the Noise Study, by James Tenney

life and sexuality. And he also maintained a close involvement with other art forms. In the 1960s he participated in the art action performances of his then partner, Carolee Schneemann, and from the 1950s on, he collaborated often with experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage. His compositions *Blue Suede* (an electronic deconstruction and reconstruction of Elvis Presley's famous version of the song "Blue Suede Shoes"), and his tributes to Scott Joplin, the American ragtime pianist-composer, and to Conlon Nancarrow, show the side of Tenney's personality that celebrated the danceable aspects of life. His joy in the human experience, his incessant and infectiously positive spirit, and his ability to clearly articulate both simple and complex ideas made Jim one of the most vibrant, informative, inspiring figures for so many musicians and composers over the past few decades.

**fyi** Chiyoko Szlavncs wrote about performance in public spaces in *Musicworks* 69, and her scores were featured in *Visions of Sound* in *Musicworks* 95. Ciarán Maher interviewed Tenney on harmony and phenomenology in *Musicworks* 77.

*Chiyoko Szlavncs* is a Canadian composer based in Berlin. She has extensively performed in and composed for experimental contemporary music ensembles and projects in Europe and North America. After having studied composition privately with James Tenney in Toronto, she received a Fellowship Grant from the Akademie Schloss Solitude in 1997, when she moved to Germany. Her compositions have been performed in concert and on radio by such ensembles as Arraymusic, Ensemble Zwischenräume, Janacek Philharmonic Orchestra, Wandelweiser, New Music Concerts, and Quatuor Bozzini, at festivals such as MaerzMusik, Interface Festival, Ostrava New Music Days, and the Darmstadt Ferienkurse.

## résumé français

La compositrice canadienne Chiyoko Szlavncs offre un portrait personnel de ses liens artistiques et intellectuels avec le compositeur américain décédé récemment James Tenney. Elle explique en quoi il fut un professeur de composition si pertinent pour elle. Elle discute des rapports de Tenney avec Edgard Varèse et John Cage de même que son intérêt pour les ratios et le système d'intonation juste — qui l'auront conduit à formuler certaines théories dont celle de l'espace harmonique —, les formes aléatoires et les représentations paramétriques.