The Log Cabin, birthplace of composer La Monte Young, born October 14, 1935. Photo by Marian Zazeela, October 14, 1979. Dia Art Foundation. Copyright © La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela, 1979.

A conversation on composition and improvisation (Bunita Marcus, Francesco Pellizzi, Marian Zazeela)

MORTON FELDMAN and *LA MONTE YOUNG*

The following is the transcription of a conversation between Morton Feldman and La Monte Young that took place in La Monte Young's studio-apartment at the Dia Art Foundation (6 Harrison Street, New York City) on March 3, 1985, over a period of two hours.

The purpose was to bring about a dialogue between two seminal composers belonging to two generations of post-war modern music, with particular regard to their different attitudes toward the problems of notation, improvisation, and non-Western musical traditions. It is hoped that a second conversation, also to be published in Res, will explore the last theme further.

FP: Perhaps I could just start with a question to you, La Monte, but I would ask you to ask a question rather than answer a question. That immediately would put you in a different role.

LY: I'll say it would.

FP: I heard you mention how it was relatively late that you heard your first Feldman piece—that you became acquainted with his music. You knew, of course, of Cage's music much earlier—much, much earlier.

LY: Well, by much earlier we speak of about two or three years.

FP: Well, that's a lot, though, if one considers the speed at which things were happening in avant-garde music, and painting, in those years.

LY: At that age for me it was a lot, I guess, because, well, you have to consider that coming out of my very humble, sort of hillbilly type of background, being born in a log cabin in Idaho and . . . later, in Utah, where my father ran my Uncle Thornton's celery farm. My Uncle Thornton Young was the celery king, and I went to live on the shore of Utah Lake on the celery farm for four years in junior high. I started playing saxophone in Los Angeles when I was seven. My dad was my first teacher in saxophone, although they had started me singing and playing guitar when I was about three or four. My Aunt Norma was teaching me to play guitar, and she and my dad were teaching me cowboy songs. My uncle Thornton had been my father's saxophone teacher and when we lived in Utah he introduced me to a broader approach to the instrument based on his background as a dance band musician. But then I came back to L.A. to begin high school. It must have been in about 1950, and I was a music major in high school; and I would say that it's then that I really started to learn about music, because my teacher Clyde Sorenson had studied with Schoenberg at UCLA. So finally I was starting to really get to know a little something about music, but I didn't have that same kind of classical background that a lot of young students that I met had had. I mean they were all conversant with the Beethoven quartets and so forth and each new piece was a revelation to me.

FP: But what could you say now that interested you first? When you heard Feldman's music for the first time, what was the musical interest that you found in what you heard then, and what question would you have asked him then? If you were going to ask him some questions at that time, what would you have wanted to know?

LY: I don't know if I would have questioned him, because I liked what I was hearing very much, because, you see, I was coming out of a period where I had been very influenced by Webern, and I felt that I could see Feldman coming out of that same background to some degree. I could hear that he had the exposure or relationship to John Cage, because there were elements, I believe . . . I can't recall the names of the pieces on that Columbia album, but I believe there were elements of indeterminacy involved there, and this is of course what made it different from Webern. In Webern everything was fixed, exactly. And I felt that the sound of the music was coming partly from this Webernian tradition, and partly in relation to this exposure, perhaps to John Cage, but in fact a great deal from himself. I mean the real Morton Feldman was very strong in those recordings. It's hard to say what I would have asked, because I found it very fulfilling to hear it and I don't think I had a question. I think Morty remembers my coming to some of his concerts in New York over the years. My thought was always how beautiful it was.

FP: When I say question, I don't mean question in terms of a questioning, but rather in terms of musical dimension.

LY: One of the things I liked about that, and many of his other pieces, is something that he has carefully pointed out in a recent issue of *Res* as not being the principal aspect of his music: it was this beautiful, soft atmosphere, or dynamic range that he had set himself in. Now I am aware that he points out, I think it's in *Res* 6, that his music isn't all soft and that there often

are very loud sounds, too. And he also notes that he handles the *fortes* maybe so well that he saves them for special events, and he also does write, he claims, what he considers "ugly" sounds. Even though most of what I've heard is just extraordinarily beautiful, and I think a composer probably hears into that ugliness not the ugliness maybe, but something more far-reaching and challenging. But again, I guess I don't have questions. Maybe I'm on a level with Morton's music where it would just be interesting to talk, and let the conversation flow.

MF: Well, there is a question I would like to ask you, and it is this. I think that the consensus amongst all of us is that John Cage is a seminal figure—

LY: Very much so.

MF: And for me he's a seminal figure because I could pinpoint what he's done, just like I could pinpoint what I feel that you've done, your contribution. And I'd like to start off with this capsule pinpointing. Because there is no sense going on if I'm pinpointing the wrong pinpoints. I feel, in Cage, what affected me—I would use the term affected, rather than influenced me—was the degree to which continuity was no longer a factor. Now, how I would technically want to talk about that is a little more difficult than if I started talking about, say, the conceptual voice of Duchamp being a break between one period and another period. I cannot say what John was doing was conceptual insofar as all his contributions in notation were . . . well, how could I put it? You know, when something is really good, I never consider it conceptual!

LY: Right.

MF: Bunita looks as if she's ready to jump in here.

BM: Well—the comment earlier about how Morton seemed to be influenced by Cage's indeterminacy seemed rather strange to me. So I started wondering about, well, what *sort* of indeterminacy. Because with Cage it's sort of an indeterminacy of events, but I don't think there's an indeterminacy of continuity. And then you say that what you, Morton, learned from Cage was that continuity wasn't important, but I really think continuity is one of the most important things in Cage. I think that somehow he skirts the issue, but yet it's still in the front of his mind and that's what holds his pieces together. And I think you have less continuity, but what holds your pieces together is then that what happens is amongst instruments, so we're ready to believe that there is continuity because everybody is blowing, or bowing, or doing something like that.

MF: All right. As I was coming down here, with Francesco, we discussed how it would be very interesting how Bunita would comment about Cage, and also her comments about La Monte, insofar as she's the youngest of us at the table. And it's absolutely just—as this dialogue is really a trio of different perspectives, in a sense. I remember once, if I could just interject a humorous comment, when my *King of Denmark* was first performed, in the early sixties, soon after it was written, and I was standing in the back of a hall with Lukas Foss, who couldn't hear the piece. But he liked it because it looked pretty, the way the hands were moving against the thing. But I heard it once in a while . . . I would say Lukas is three years older than me. But sitting down front were three women, each one of another generation: the youngest one heard everything. The one in the middle heard it once in a while, and the oldest one didn't hear a damn thing!! So we're going to have different thoughts about Cage. But —and I made this point as we were coming here—where to the younger generation it seems absolutely acceptable, to me his absence of what I would feel, how I understand the word continuity, is still shocking. You see? I still hear it and I'm saying, "Now wait a minute." Not that I hear it as a non sequitur, but I do say, "Wait a minute."

BM: Well, what is it that's making you say "wait a minute"? I mean, is it a move? Or is he making a move—

LY: The thing that Cage moved beyond, as in my *for Brass*, even, is precisely notated music, and this is what I meant by the influence or exposure to indeterminacy in Morty's music. Correct me if I'm wrong, because I believe that in some of Morty's music the exact timings are not written out; it's left somewhat to the performer to determine when this note will end or when the other note will begin.

MF: Yes, it's either that or if I give the timings, I don't give the exact pitches. I give the register, but I don't give the exact pitches.

LY: Right. And you see, in music, leading up to, let's say Cage, one sound was calculated to lead to another, and another was to follow upon that, and there was the concept of line, and this F-sharp was eventually going to get to this G, and everything even in *for Brass* is composed that way. That's why when I came to you after the performance, I said, "Oh, and there were some notes that weren't even played." See, I hadn't heard really much John Cage yet when I wrote *for Brass*. So that in that piece this concept of continuity is of the old kind of continuity. I'm thinking now that we

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can talk of two types of continuity. There's the later, static kind of continuity, where things exist, as we could say in Cagian philosophy, in Zen, the car horn, and that's continuity. It's just it's happening, it's a continuum in time. But then the old continuity, the kind that Morty's talking about, is the kind defined by the composer's craft. I mean, if he really is a great composer practically from the opening sounds the rest of the piece unfolds, you know, and that's continuity.

MF: Well, it's not actually a question of searching, as John pointed out in *Res* 6, for the right note, or the right event, or the right this, or the right that. But wouldn't you say that, essentially—and this is the reason I want to start with Cage, because otherwise it's very difficult to know where to start—so if we start with John, it helps focus the situation somewhat. Say—and this was the interrelationship in my whole association with John in the early years, the big excitement—it was not in what happened per se, in something that became a new continuity or in what Christian Wolf pointed out very beautifully: "Eventually," he said, "everything becomes melody." But what was exciting, it seems to me, was notation. And this raises some of the questions we should get into later. The whole aspect of notation, how you think about it when you work, how you thought about it then, how you think about it now. I think that to me that would be a very important aspect. In other words, I feel that the notational aspect is a very major area of thought, which certainly has not become as influential, for example, as notating systems, or things like that. I would characterize Cage's Contribution, in capital C, as being in notation. Now, when I think about you, La Monte, I think about one thing. I hate to make analogies, but we have to generalize something to understand it. In other words, I can only understand you by first making a generality, and my first generality, at the time I first heard your music, was that it was the first music that I know—I had previously heard a little echo of it in a piece by Christian Wolf, for two violins —with . . . I don't call them drones, I call them *sustained tones*—

LY: Right, that's fine; "sustained tones."

MF: Okay, and this piece of Christian Wolf's is just two

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pitches, alternating one against the other. And that's the first piece that gave me a suggestion, in a sense, of the possibility of music also becoming reductive. I would say that if you are Malevich, I'm in this sense close to, say, Mondrian, in the way he himself never—
LY: Just remind me of what the Maleviches look like.
MZ: Malevich is white on white.
MF: Mondrian is a lot. There's more furniture. So in that sense I think that that's how . . . that's how I understand your work, because up until this particular period, there were always characters like myself that wrote very beautiful things that were a little bit strange. But we haven't had, in the sense of what your teacher Seymour Shifrin once referred to, speaking of you, as a "fanatic." In that sense, we hadn't had that kind of possibility that music could be an art form, you see.
BM: Yes. At first I didn't quite understand what you were talking about with notation. But going back to the idea of continuity, and considering what John Cage's contribution is, we take that for granted, my generation. Because it's just, music, Western music as a logical sequence. One thing happened logically after another, and this is how we defined experience; and we never looked at notation as other than one note following another, and defining this experience. But with Cage's new notation, and Morton's new notation, and Earl Brown's new notation, all of a sudden we saw that experience could be represented other than in a linear fashion. That it could be a simultaneity of different things happening. Well, I don't know how I'm going to get to this, but somehow I want to ask you this question, La Monte, about your music, because it has something to do with what we're talking about here. Christophe de Menil asked me a year ago, what did I think of your music? What did I think of your compositions, was the way she put it, and I said, "Well, I don't know if they're compositions. I know they're improvisations, and something holds them together, but it's not the standard improvisatory gesture, or move, that we know from jazz, or other musical forms of that kind. The source that the improvisation is coming from is not on the surface. It's from someplace else, someplace deeper than where we normally assume composition is coming from. And I'd just like to ask you, could you tell me more about that?
LY: That experience, well, yes.

MZ: Do you mean that experience, or composition?
BM: Do you think it's composition?
LY: Oh. See, the way I deal with words like that is that I tend to expand the meaning of the word. So I see it as composition, but in a very, very expanded sense of composition. Enough so that you can discard the old meaning of composition. Otherwise you have to come up with a new definition for what it is that I'm doing. But, for instance, my music covers a very wide range of types of activities, of works. Many different kinds of works. You've heard *Dream House* now, and you've heard *for Brass*, and some of *Trio for Strings*, and Morty's heard *The Well-Tuned Piano*. Morty's heard really quite a number of my pieces. Some of the works are more clearly in the old tradition of compositions, like these works that come with a score. You can tuck it under your arm or put it in your attaché case, and pull it out and show it to another composer, and it may just be pages and pages of words. As *Poem for Chairs, Tables and Benches* is, and/or it may be pages of numbers as *The Well-Tuned Piano* might tend to be, or *Dream House*. You can say those are scores, but the way I improvise is for me a very special experience, although I think one that has been common to other great improvisers—I don't mean to say that I'm great, but to great improvisers over the years. And that is . . . did you hear *The Well-Tuned Piano*?
BM: Yes, I did.
LY: Oh good. So, what I do is, when I sit down to play—naturally I've been practicing over the past few weeks before I'm going to do a concert, and usually I've done a few private concerts before the first public ones in a series. Because I look at it as a very great commitment when I play. You heard me complaining about the performance of *for Brass*. See, I idealize every performer being up to my standards, and . . . so when I sit down to play I clear my mind of everything, and try to tune in to some very high source, which I don't try to define, which I open myself up to. And then I sort of go into this state where I am a receptor or

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a transmitter. Something comes through me, and I start to play. What I play is to a great degree based on what I have practiced, and what I know the work to be, but from that basis—
BM: That is composition.
MF: That is composition.
LY: Yes.
BM: That's what I would call it.
MF: Why would you call it improvisation?
LY: Well, because at times things start coming out; I sometimes play things that I've never played before. So that it's a—
MF: We call that, in music, variation.
LY: Let me put it another way.
MF: That's what variation is in the world's mind.
LY: Maybe here's my question: what is improvisation?
FP: Variation is fixed, no matter how—
MF: No; by variation I meant that it comes out of the material, that there are implications of this new material out of the source material.
FP: Yes, but all variation is determined in relationship to the event. Whereas in the case of La Monte, it isn't.
MF: I don't know about that.
LY: Well, let me ask a question now, just for the purpose of semantics: do we have a definition for improvisation? I'm open to whatever words we want to use, and I certainly agree that this is variation, what we've just discussed, but does improvisation fit in here? What do we think improvisation is?
FP: Well, you are a great improviser, you tell us.
LY: Well, from what I have studied of improvisers over the years, listening to jazz improvisers and Indian classical improvisers, it seems to be what you do is that —except in what's called free jazz it seems, and even there this is in play, it seems that what happens is that nobody plays anything much that they haven't already played before. What they do is—like Charlie Parker has a whole set of licks and ideas that he plays in a new context, and these from time to time inspire totally new improvisatory outbursts that weave out of the old material.
FP: Yes. That's what I call the event.
LY: And there are days when you really take off, and other days when you stay pretty close to the original source material.
FP: Doesn't the difference between improvisation and traditional Western music derive from the fact that improvisation is tied to oral music—I mean, to music which is not written?
MZ: But I think there's also another factor, which has to do with what Morty was saying—or maybe with a possible interpretation of what he was saying about John's contribution being in the area of notation—that notation at that time developed into allowing a lot of latitude for the performer, and some classical musicians became really great performers. David Tudor certainly is a great example. In fact, he, in a certain way, developed into such a great performer based on his ability to interpret this notation that he crossed over the line and became a composer himself, you could say. Now in La Monte's case, being a composer who also performs, I think that's something that's happened in the last number of years; I'm not sure where it started from, but here you have a case of a composer who also performs. It's perhaps like an instantaneous composition, where we use the word improvisation, while you would use the word composition with variation.
BM: That's an important distinction.
LY: And also this idea, it's not a new idea. It was an ancient idea. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, they were all great improvisers, and then there came a point where it started to disappear. Maybe it was in the nineteenth century, but certainly by the twentieth century one began to develop the image of a Western classical composer who absolutely did not perform. Who wrote on a page and that was that.
FP: Who sat in the studio writing—
MZ: And he sent the scores to the publisher, the publisher sent them out, and they went out into the world, and he stayed in the attic.
LY: That's right. And as a result of my getting involved in jazz, in high school, I really started to improvise, probably before I was doing much composing. I was in high school, so how old are you? You're in your late teens in high school, and then I started doing the compositions that I really begin to count as being worth anything after high school, after I got into college, so that my ability to compose was probably developed a lot in my improvisations in jazz. You know, you learn your instrument in a way that you don't as a Western classical musician. You learn to play every scale, every chord, every tune in every key.
MF: I've been suffering from this problem in conversation, because I become very condescending about the whole idea of improvisation. Though I try to find it in imagery—for example, in Beethoven where rather than use the word improvisation, I would just say that he gets a little looser, less tight, like in his Bagatelles. A little less tight about time, less tight in terms of the time between the old-fashioned sentence structure of antecedent and consequent. Because I'm very involved, again, in this aspect of notation, and in discontinuity as an aspect of a new type of continuity. But thinking of syntax somewhat differently . . . because you know, about music, unfortunately when you are teaching it, like myself, you get a little overly involved. So you take a world that for you was absolutely "fabulous," a magnificent new world that was still new for you, like Ives, but then you start teaching it, and then little by little you begin to see how it actually was constructed . . . how its building blocks were still determined by, say, tonal shapes, or a tonal way of putting things together in this new way, and you really begin to see it not as some phenomenally fresh thing, but you actually see it as some kind of science fiction novel of something crazy coming out of something else; you know, you see it as a transitional phenomenon. You begin to see it really as it was, as transitional, and it becomes very disconcerting.

But getting back to Cage and La Monte, because I think that's my theme here. It's that you handle continuity differently and notation differently, insofar as you didn't subscribe to the conventional anxiety of making, for example, rhythmic shapes. And I enjoyed hearing what Seymour Shifrin would say, which I just want to put in print. He died recently, at an unfortunate early age. (We both started composing together; we went to high school together; and so we were there from the beginning, and he went one way, and I went the other way.) But for the readers, I would like to just mention what La Monte earlier was telling us about a problem that he had in graduate school with Seymour. Seymour told him that unless he put it really into conventional rhythm, the piece was too austere, like the piece of an old man. I'm more or less just paraphrasing all this, but because of this La Monte then had to write a piece with more conventional types of rhythmic shapes in it. Essentially, by rhythm here what was meant was a kind of articulation where you could make the gestalt a little quicker in the ear, you see.

Okay, now that that's said and done, how did you avoid having—using—the old notation and transcribing it on essentially a fixed notation in which the only thing you did change—I'm talking about the *Trio*—was, how could I put this? On one hand the piece looks conventional, in the sense that you have metronome modulations that you would find also in other music of the early fifties. And on the other hand, the metronome modulations had nothing to do with rhythm, in terms of how we hear it. It doesn't really have much to do with time, unless you really look at the score; you know, the fact that the ictus is going faster really doesn't mean that things are going faster.
LY: Right, right.
MF: So it looks to me as if time became more or less a structural thing—where rhythm isn't structured, but time itself is kind of divorced between rhythm, which was, I think, historically, a very very difficult thing to do at that particular time. Even in the late fifties. For me time was always involved with rhythmic shape.
BM: And it still is in your music.
MF: In me, in my music? Oh yes! Time to me is rhythmic shape. Except it took me many, many years. Recently in one of my last pieces, for Phillip Guston, I decided to go even further with this lack of rhythmic syntax, and you just can't capture it. But unfortunately, the energy is so terrific that you just start counting every ten minutes for a few seconds, and then you stop counting again. So I'm still involved—my music is still involved—with rhythmic shape; it might be a little slower than most other music, but it's still rhythmic shaping. And that's something I have to live with. I mean I don't—I guess it's just part of my handprint, just like all of our music is part of us. But to me that seems to be the most characteristic thing. No matter how I break down ideas about syntax, no matter how I break down ideas about continuity, there was always this element of rhythmic shape, or time shapes, and so forth.
LY: Well, it's interesting how this approach came to me, of working away from rhythm. But I can talk about it, because it's still very clear to me how I felt at that time and what led me to move in this direction of long sustained tones where rhythm really gradually—well, there are different ways of thinking of this concept of rhythm that began to take shape in my music. One way is you can think of it as time in augmentation. Having studied counterpoint and the principle of augmentation, I wrote in one of my program notes for the *Trio for Strings* that you can think of it as Webern in Augmentation. That's one way to look at it. But it came to me, also, on another level—let's say a philosophical level—and it came to me most of all on the level of intuition and inspiration, in that I very strongly felt I wanted to write music that did that. And the thing was that I began one summer, maybe around the summer I wrote *for Brass*. I spent that summer in semiseclusion at my grandmother's house living across the L.A. River

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from that train yard that was making those slow, sustained sounds that influenced *for Brass* and then later the *Trio for Strings*. And I was doing a lot of my own silent meditating. I had been reading haiku— speaking of my approach toward reductivism—and I began to feel that for me pitch represented the spiritual level of vibration, the spiritual qualities, the spiritual values, and that it was most tied in with an approach, a path to finding a source of spirituality. And that rhythms, for me, were more tied to the earth; that they were more earthy, that they were more corporeal, that they had to do with these bodies, with our everyday lives. And spending that time in a sort of self-styled meditation—I would lie flat on my back on a bed, actually, and just try to go off into another state—I became drawn to this approach of long sustained tones. I just really wanted to do it, and I wanted to have a state where it was only pitches and this big long sense of time, all spread out, and where there was no more dum ta-dum ta-dum, you know, no more something going along making a pulse. No more drumming, no more one-eighth note following another. And so that was the philosophical level. The intuitional level was just a level where I had this very strong urging of the muse to do this. I just felt that I had to do it and that this was the direction I had to go in, that I really wanted to do this very, very much.

MF: Could I ask you, could I interject to ask to some degree an irrelevant question?

LY: Sure.

MF: What made you use the—what were you thinking about in terms of notating something like this? Certainly notating something like this, one had to think about it. You already had, especially being out in L.A., four or five years involvement with musical sophistication, but you also had a green light for notation. Remember, you had a green light for notation. But what made you decide to put it for example, in an eight-eight ictus?

LY: Right. Okay, that's a very good point, and it's one that has been challenged by many performers, since the day I wrote that score. When I wrote that piece, you see, even though one does not hear this underlying structural pulse that I wrote into the score as a way to determine how long things would be and when notes would enter and what kind of maybe feeling they would have when they entered—even though—

MF: First of all, I just want to say we're not looking a gift score in the mouth here. We're very happy to have this piece. It's very easy to bring in a red herring eighty years later. I mean I go through that every day with my students. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

LY: No, no, it's a very interesting point, in fact. I'll jump ahead and come back to this. Four years later, I then went on to write *The Four Dreams of China*, one of which you heard, *The Second Dream of the High Tension Line Step-Down Transformer*, played by two violins in double stops, the piece with four pitches in it. When I wrote that piece—

MZ: But you had written *Composition 1960 Number 7* in between.

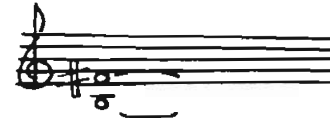
LY: Which is just a B and F-sharp to be held for a long time. Right. But when I wrote that piece (there are no rhythmic markings whatsoever)—it's all described in terms of rules. If the F-sharp is in, it can play alone, or the next pitch that can enter has to be the G; the F cannot enter unless the G is in with the F-sharp; and the C cannot enter unless the F and the G are in with the F-sharp. There were rules that said that notes can be of any duration, and it gave some emphasis toward long tones, and there were silences in between entries and exits, and it went very well. But, down to this date, I've had the opportunity to redo the *Trio for Strings* and make it with a stopwatch, say "six minutes here, seven-and-a-half minutes there, this rest will be four minutes long, that note will be six minutes long." And I resisted it because I feel in *Trio for Strings* that this underlying pulse, whether or not you hear it as such, is the way I composed the piece. You see, this eighth-note ictus was running through my mind when I put the piece together.

BM: You notated it that way, you—

LY: And it was the only reason I had—

MF: When you notated it. When you went down into the fractions, it was—

LY: Yes. I notated it all the way, and I felt that—remember, coming out of the Webern/Stockhausen tradition, I felt it made a difference if you started the long sustained tone on the upbeat of a triplet or on the



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upbeat of a quintuplet or if it was right on the beat or where it was. And even though—

MF: Would you call—let's get down into some fine tuning here, in terms of definition. You did it with pictures, but you might as well have— Would you call the ictus the beat, however?

LY: Well, I would, although I encourage performers to play it without a conductor when possible. I told them, you keep the beat in your mind; since the entrances are primarily pretty independent, you'll see, you'll hear when a performer comes in, you'll take your cue from there, and you're counting, and you'll come to the next one. I think that the *Trio* is more meaningful when played that way, with these tempi in mind; even though the person in the audience may not ever be able to quite grasp the tempi involved, I think that the way the performers will play it will give it that extra feeling that it wouldn't have otherwise.

BM: I found this in a piece of mine too, the exact same thing, that you have to give them something to focus on. Even if it's just the beat and how to enter in reference to the beat—the up beat, the down beat, before the beat, after the beat. I wrote a piece where I had a whole series of quarter-notes, and if I just gave the performer quarter-notes, they wouldn't know how to shape it or how to phrase it, and they wouldn't concentrate on each note, which was very important. So I had to break the quarter-notes down into very small little parts and tie all the parts together to make one quarter-note—parts of four, parts of five. They have to have something to concentrate on. If you just say do this for ten seconds, it becomes so mechanical and they lose the sense of the moment.

MF: Okay. Which gets us back between improvisation

and composition. Wouldn't you say that composition is something which you're looking at as you're writing it, and concentrating on it, that it keeps us on our own railroad tracks, so to speak, as John Cage would say?
BM: It's a slower process, but you know what I think is the most important thing about composition? It's that you have to decide at any particular moment that I'm going to do this, and then, having made that decision, you have to make the next decision, and the next decision. When you're improvising there's always a tendency to redo the past.
LY: Well, what I think happens in improvisation is—I definitely want to say that I believe improvisation is composition. I want to say that. Then I want to go on to say that it is, however, composition on an even more, if I may—perhaps this is not quite perfectly worded—but on a more intuitive level, where, if you have the technical facility, so that you don't have to think about what you play, the musical impulse can guide you on at a speed that is much— You see, the one problem I've always had with scoring is that you have to take the time to write the notes, and mark— You see the way I talk, if I have to stop to write, it becomes for me a very laborious procedure. But if I can talk, record as I talk, or somebody takes dictation, my imagination just flies, and it's the same when I'm improvising on an instrument that I can really play. My imagination is just out there ahead of me somewhere, and okay let's say imagination becomes synonymous with this higher power that's coming through me, whatever that is, that determines, really, what I play. Sometimes, as I said before, I play things that I didn't ever imagine before, albeit, they usually somehow grow out of something else, but that's how a new section then develops, and then in a later moment—the next week, for instance—I practice that and it grows into something else. So what I tried to say before about improvisation is that for me it's composing on—I don't know if more intuitive is the correct way to say it—but it's perhaps something like more intuitive, because I don't get bogged down with the procedure of getting the information fixed in some form that we can retrieve. But now what I want to say is what a fantastic and important form I think fixed notated compositions are. Because there is a certain type of complexity and large-scale form that can sometimes take place in structuring and sometimes can't in improvisation.
MF: Okay, now it's my turn; then it's Bunita's turn, who is young. I disagree. I used to improvise on occasion. But the reason I'm weary of improvisation is it is questionable whether I want my imagination to take flight. What happens is that in improvisation I'm involved with headlines; in written notation, the smallest thing could take root. I don't have the instinct when I'm just improvising, to arrive, to just pick something, to have the reflex. After all, musical ideas is an aspect of how quick you can hit the ball back, you see, back onto the paper, so to speak. You are really in a performance, so that's why there is such a thing as first desk people.
LY: Right.
MF: I made up an unfortunate analogy that one has to discipline oneself in such a way that when you're writing it down you have to be like that fellow McEnroe?
LY: The tennis player?
MF: Right. I'm convinced that he sees the ball coming at him in slow motion. I could see the way he's standing there; while the other guy looks great, he's standing right on the line, he's crouched down, he's waiting for the ball, and he's watching the ball. That means the ball's coming at him at a very conventional speed. McEnroe's just standing there, and I'm convinced that there might be something the matter with his—some mental eye vision, that perhaps it's not because he's a great—he has something that other people don't have. He has an unfortunate disease where he sees things coming at him slowly. And that's the same thing with notation. To me things are coming ve-e-r-r-y slowly. I think one of the things that I find in teaching—again I have to refer to my teaching, because teaching made me conscious of many of these things—is that the reason nothing is really happening with thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands—I don't want any of this to be deleted—of young composers in the world is that music is passing too quickly, to have any kind of—to either leave it alone or not to leave it alone. And most of the times they can't leave it alone because it's passing, and it's passing, and it's passing, and it's passing, and all ideas and all continuity and all the things which they feel would be reasonable, you see, is something that they cannot handle; the music is passing. If they stopped, if they thought for a minute—that's another reason why they're so conceptual. If they start thinking for four seconds, they can't retrieve it; it's down the block, you see. It's down the block already. They can't. The hat's off their head, and it's down the block in the wind.
LY: Well, I very much appreciate this point that you're making about the slow motion and the kinds of things that can take place in notation as a result of being geared down to this slower rate of speed, and I believe in that very much. However, I tend to see McEnroe differently: I tend to see him as the ultimate improviser. I tend to see the game as taking place at this breakneck speed, and his ability to see it in slow motion comes as a result of incredible amounts of practice whereby he has learned to improvise with every possible situation. He's a pyrotechnician, and no matter where the ball comes, for him it's coming in slow motion, and he is so fast, and he's ahead of it all the time, that he's just dealing with it. So I guess I tend to see improvisation more in that way, and I don't think that improvisation and written composition rule out each other. I think that together they make this more expanded palette or this more expanded framework within which we can work and compose and create music.
MF: Beautifully said. Would you concede to this point: the whole notion that improvisation for many people, especially many musicians—of course improvisers—is synonymous with freedom?
LY: There is a certain kind of freedom, a concept of freedom involved. I have a very clear idea about freedom, which is that I feel that the only man who can be really free is he who has mastered the past technologies. I feel that the reason I was able to do what I was able to do in composition is because I had such a strong classical training once I did start studying music.
BM: Yes.
LY: I learned so much from Seymour Shifrin, for instance. Sometimes some of your best teachers are not the ones who agree with you because—this is something that came out in my relationship with Pandit Pran Nath. You know, I was drawn to him like iron filings to a magnet. I didn't know how, but the more I worked with him, the more I kept running into things like—I used to live on my own sleeping, waking schedule, you know, where in twenty-seven hours I would be asleep for about seven hours and then awake for about twenty, and this cycled around and around. Well when I met him—and I'm a very slow riser—when I met him, he was up at three, four in the morning, and I had to be making tea for him, and then the lesson was going to be at five or six. I came after seven o'clock: no lesson. And there were many things about his personality that were—he was very punctual. Not only was he punctual, he was usually always early. And I was always late. It was like—this was just the beginning, it was on all levels. I was suddenly finding that I could hardly be with him. And, you know, at one point in the early days, I used to say, my God, did I do the right thing? This is my spiritual leader, you know, and I became his disciple and all of this, and then one day it dawned on me, that if he was always just patting me on the head and saying "oh you're just great, you're so nice, you're just fine, and you're just like me," what would I have learned? I would have learned nothing. I learned so much from him, in part because—in addition to having something I wanted to learn—he was a great master of a tradition that I could appreciate, and that's what we had in common. But on the other hand, there were all of these differences. And so, being in Seymour Shifrin's class, studying with Dr. Robert Stevenson in keyboard harmony and with Leonard Stein the classics of modern music, and studying harmony in high school with Clyde Sorenson, a student of Schoenberg. All of this kind of background feeling: you know, I wrote baroque fugues for Dr. Robert Stevenson, and he said I was the best fugue student he'd ever had, and he really pushed me in my fugue writing. Well, once you have that under your belt, suddenly you feel that you are free, and this is the kind of freedom that I have been interested in achieving and accomplishing, and I think this is the kind of freedom that you're referring to, Morton, where many improvisers think they're free. And now I will let you continue.
BM: What're you up to?
LY: I didn't say what I thought you were thinking because I want to hear you say it. Because you asked me a question but I led around to that point. What about these people who think they're free when they improvise?
FP: Perhaps Morty was referring to the people Nietzsche talks about, you know, who think they're free because they just follow their inclinations.
LY: Yes.
BM: They're brainwashed. They're totally brainwashed. Marian made the distinction and it's very important: we have to distinguish between a performer that improvises and a composer that improvises. Morton, you keep thinking of performers that improvise, but you improvise when you compose, to some degree. Not all the time, but certain passages for sure are improvised.
MF: Yes.
BM: And Stravinsky improvised. We know it; we can sense it in his music. It has that sponge quality.
LY: Oh, I think that composing is improvising in the slow motion way that Morton pointed out; it has such a

great virtue, which is that when you can compose at that speed, you can get all of these very fine details; you're not just writing the headlines that, as he said, are so frequently the substance of improvisation. You can have everything slowed down; in fact, you can freeze the frame for a moment, and dissect it, you know, and say, oh that's the wrong chord after all, and you can take it out. Or you can put in a whole new—

MF: I was just trying to think of—for example, say in written music, as in a lot of my recent music that deals with various steady-state situations, where I keep something going in various different patterns, but, say, for fifteen minutes. But I wouldn't, for example, let a student put repetition marks, or something. And the students' whole idea of long periods of time, coming out of their improvising, really comes down to very short spans; you see, if they were onto something for, say, a second or a minute and a half, there would be a terrific discrepancy in the kind of music they then would write. It almost would mean a change of music. I'm convinced that when Handel and these people went on the road—you know it was a way of making a living—they would have organ contests and big prizes and who improvised best. But the style was somewhat different. It had characteristics of this style we are talking about, but there was a difference, because if you're improvising, you have to get into some kind of pyrotechnical feat, I mean you have to demonstrate some virtuosity of sorts. The point that I really want to make is that I feel that written music in a sense produces an absolutely different kind of music than the best improvised music. For example, every ten years I go into the percussion room at the university and I try something out. Once, this was before an important piece of mine, and I was trying out something and the steady-state of the percussionist playing this particular combination between two instruments was such that you could listen to it with great joy for three or four minutes, and not weary of it. The minute you wanted to capture it and put it into a composition, however—the minute you want to write it down, that took a lot of courage, because do we really want it this long, you know, is it really this long? And it became a different question. And then, what's going to happen after it? You see. So the choice of material in a sense had the largesse of not being written down. And that's the subtle point that I'm trying to make because—but my concern of recent years is essentially—I might put it this way: my chief concern has been *what is material?* Is this material, I would say to myself—in my context, could it be *this* reductive, in my context, could I bring in more furniture? Could I make the same kind of music with more furniture as I did with less furniture? So what I'm very interested in is changing the material somewhat though the style seems to be pervasive, from piece to piece. So we noticed that last night we just very quickly went up to Clemente's studio, and I realized for the first time that most of his pictures were different from each other. And yet it's the same style. And that was very interesting. I haven't really thought about it too much, but I identified with it, and I thought it was very mysterious what the unifying aspect was.

FP: In fact, this morning, Morton, you also said that La Monte had really changed the content of music, of its material.

MF: That's what I was getting at.

FP: Let me go back a moment to this question of improvisation, because I think that the key word, which La Monte also mentioned, is *practice*. I mean, improvisation is really involved with practice in a way that writing isn't. Writing is involved with the practice of writing. Improvisation is involved with the practice of playing. So if you are composing while you are improvising, you are composing in the state in which you are involved with the practice of improvising. If you are composing while you are writing, you are composing while you are involved with the practice of writing. I think they are two very different practices.

BM: No, but there's practice to composing. A lot of practice to composing.

FP: Yes, of course. But it is the practice of writing, of composing by writing—

BM: No, no, it's a practice of the ear. The ear does it. It has nothing to do with writing. It's the ear. And the ear knows, and it's a direct connection between the ear and the brain. They know simultaneously.

FP: Yes.

LY: Right. What happens in my improvisations and composing at the instrument or voice or whatever it is that I'm performing, is that at the practice sessions in between the concerts I essentially compose more in the slow-motion framework, or gear, as Morty has referred to this composing through writing. Whereas at the concert, I feel the responsibility to make it into one complete musical statement that stands. True, in some of my works, as in *Dream House*, it was a static musical statement, one which I felt had no beginning and no end, one in which I tried to have the music already going by the time the audience walked in, and we ended usually at some point, but sometimes a good portion of the audience had already left by the time we ended. In *Dream House*, I felt that a person could come and hear any part thereof and have had a legitimate experience and he would have heard that section, and stasis is one of the really important structural philosophic aspects of work, for me. But in *The Well-Tuned Piano*, the more I worked on it, the more I tended to think that, yes, it was perfectly all right if somebody came in and heard two hours of it, but I was especially interested if somebody could afford the time or find the time to hear a complete four- or five-hour concert, because I tried to let it evolve in such an organic way that the statement was like a complete statement from the way the piece evolved out of the opening chord. Every rhythm that I see, the way I improvise, is very organic: every note that I play helps determine every next note that I will play. It's true I have an "Opening Chord" here, and it's true I have "The Theme of the Dawn of Eternal Time," and it's true I have certain worked out variations that I know. But how and in which context and which note comes first and how long I held this note and how long I held that note influences how long I hold the next note, which then influences which notes I play in the transition and which parts of the transition I leave completely out and which new sections might come to me, how long I spend in "The Magic Chord," what kind of clouds I play in "The Magic Chord," if they're long or short or with which chords. And then the transition to "The Pool," and so forth, and am I going to spend an hour in "The Pool," or two hours in "The Pool," or an hour and a half, and will I refer to the themes from "The Magic Chord" in "The Pool," or will I forget about that for a while and bring back "The Magic Chord" in "The Romantic Chord." All of this kind of thing. It's a very organic process, and it is totally different from performance to performance. And at the practice sessions in between, I stop, and I'll get lost in "The Pool" for three hours, and I'll go over things, and I'll want to hear that again and again and again. So that the slow motion process happens there.

MF: I appreciate and recognize the simultaneity of what's happening between one aspect which you—I understand the schizophrenic conversation between thought and action, if we could just put it that way.

BM: But you do it, too, when you compose. You sit and you play the same chord over and over and you listen. Now you might not be listening to the same things. I don't know what you're listening to, but you're going through the same procedure; you're playing it, you're listening, you're trying it out. I mean, you just don't write the chord down and go on to the next one. You listen to it for a long time; you digest it.

MF: Yes, but the only difference—well, what happens many times is that you might hear it being played quite a bit, and then it's not written down. But let's get to an area which in a sense I wanted to avoid in this conversation. And that's the philosophical aspect. And yet at the same time I know enough that when I look at a Mondrian I also know his theosophic attitudes about the vertical and the horizontal, and I know in a sense that those ideas did the work, perhaps are the work. So I'm not dismissing it; that would be the iconography, the real iconography behind the icon. How would you call that kind of iconography behind the real—which is the real iconography?

FP: It's a referent, but it's not an iconography.

MF: It's not an iconography; it's a reference, behind the iconography. Okay, maybe the point that I really want to make is this: that I feel that composition, that part of composition—

LY: Which part?

MF: The part that's written down. And by written down, I don't mean selective. You see, I'm caught here because I don't mean selective; I just mean written down. Just the act of writing it down, and you're looking at it. What I mean, then, is that I find it more anonymous. I find composition more anonymous; I find that I'm left out of it, that I have a way of distancing myself away from effectiveness, from logic. Writing conventionally helps me become more unconventional. I cannot improvise as well as I can compose, and by compose I'm not talking about the right note at the right time, I'm not talking about logic, I'm not talking about coherency and consistency, I'm just talking about where *I* am more anonymous and *it* becomes less of an object. That's essentially what I mean. But let's not—unless you want us to continue this aspect of the conversation, I have no argument.

LY: No, I have no argument either.

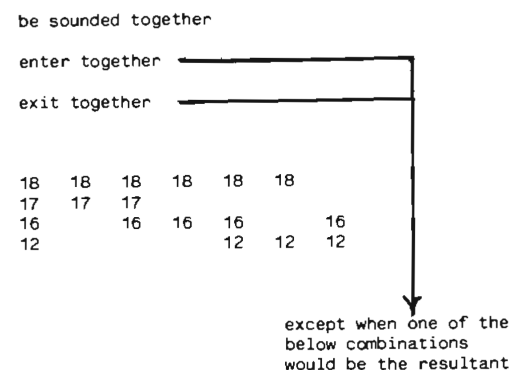
MF: About one or the other. I just want to make it very clear, that I'm just interested in just talking about it to learn a little bit more about it, either in terms of myself, or—

LY: I have no argument with anything you have said in this regard. I do have a *response*, however, to what you said, which is that I appreciate this anonymity that is achieved by the composer working at the page. There are a few factors that I want to touch on in relation to that. One is that when I sit down to play, when I say I

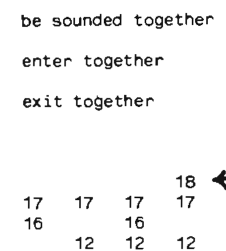
clear my mind and try to open myself up to this higher power that transmits through me—I'm trying, I feel to some degree I achieve that anonymity. Another point I want to make in relation to this is that I am achieving some of this written-downness of composition when I practice. That is, I fix certain variations under my fingers as opposed to on the page. But let's take a certain composition, such as *The Four Dreams of China*, where we have only four pitches. I've written those pitches on the page. Or in *Dream House*, I've written those pitches down, I've taught them then to the

The Harmonic Version

The following seven combinations may



The following four combinations may not



Silences may be of any duration and, as long as the above rules are followed, pitches may also be of any duration, however, the work should evolve from the style of long sustained tones and silences presented in the *Trio for Strings* (1958). Performances of over forty-five minutes in duration are preferable to performances of shorter durations.

La Monte Young, The Melodic Version (1984) and the Harmonic Version (1962) of the Second Dream of the High-Tension Line Stepdown Transformer, from The Four Dreams of China, 1962, page 2 of 7. Copyright © 1985 La Monte Young DBA Just Eternal Music.

performers orally. I haven't let them read them from a page, but I say "here are your pitches," and we learn these pitches, and we sing them in tune. Then I've written down certain rules. But I teach them the rules orally usually, and we learn the rules. This chord can go together, that note can be in, another note can't be out, we can hold it this long. If I'm singing in the group I say, "I'll make the first change, you follow me." Things like that. But this anonymity that you achieve, or that anyone can achieve by writing, is sometimes colored by the performer who then takes this written-out work and plays it, and I think there's also then some interrelationship between the performer playing the written-out work and me, the performer, playing out my preconceived work that I have notated on my fingertips.

MF: Would you say that only you could perform your own pieces?

LY: Well, then, this is what I was explaining downstairs, where I showed you some of the charts of *The Well-Tuned Piano* that were made by my disciple Sarmad Michael Harrison. Sarmad plays *The Well-Tuned Piano* remarkably well. And he learned it in the oral tradition of sitting with me at the keyboard adjusting mutings in the piano, tuning for every concert, helping the piano-regulator make sure the notes are regulated properly, listening to me practice. And so, no, I'm not the only person that can play them. But the ones that aren't notated I presume we're talking about right now?

MF: Yes.

LY: Yes; I'm not the only person that can play them, but I almost prevent anybody from playing them who hasn't worked with me directly. For instance, in the *Dream House* group, all those players who've played in *Dream House* could go off and organize a *Dream House* performance on their own, and do it very well. Somebody who hasn't worked with me on any of these pieces, they couldn't play it. No way. Nor do I want them to, in fact. You see, one of the things that I think is very strong about the Indian classical tradition in music is that here is a tradition that is perhaps thousands of years old—certainly hundreds documented—that still to this day is very strong and viable, and it came down by oral transmission, guru-to-disciple, guru-to-disciple, so the feeling that is inherent in each raga could be taught along with the pitches, along with the "musical structure," along with the pitch and technical structure of the work. The feeling that is tied in with each raga could be taught with it as well. And I think that this oral approach to notation, if you will, is a very strong, viable—

FP: That is really what he's teaching you. I mean the kind of practice that you were talking about before. The notation that goes into your fingers in that kind of practice, which is your form of writing, as you were saying to Morty. Is that what you learned in India?

LY: Well, let's see, I had started it—Yes, this is a very interesting point. I was not unaware, though, of Indian classical music. I started training with Pandit Pran Nath in 1970.

MZ: You started in admiration of that tradition.

LY: But in admiration of that tradition which I became exposed to in the late fifties.

MZ: Actually, La Monte became very fed up with performers, because he couldn't get good performances of his work.

LY: Well, you've heard me perform, and I think you know what my standards are. You know how hard it is to get that out of performers.

FP: You were interested in that. But you say you started before you became a disciple of Pandit Pran Nath.

LY: That's right.

FP: But how could you start? One of the essentials of tradition is that you do need a master, that you cannot do it by yourself. Just as now, nobody can play your pieces who has not worked with you, so how could you do it before you worked with somebody else? Nineteen seventy is very late in your work! What is the connection between your earlier composing and the traditional apprenticeship?

LY: Right, and to play the devil's advocate for a moment, I could imagine some young composer listening to *The Well-Tuned Piano* on a tape, or a record if it comes out, and going off and saying "oh, this is really interesting." And he tunes up his piano, and he starts, and lo and behold, he does about the same thing as what I did with my influence from Indian classical music before I had studied. He gets something going that, depending on his ability, could become significant or not. So, I had heard it, and I had been impressed, and—

FP: He gets more something like what Morty was referring to as headlines, and that's not what the work is.

LY: He gets the headlines. I was getting, to some degree, headlines. Except that I feel the work, my "headline work," such as the sopranino saxophone improvisations—I don't know if you've heard that of my music—you must have—or the work that Morty heard in the early sixties at Henry Geldzahler's, which was with my group *The Theatre for Eternal Music*. Well now, that's before I had studied Indian classical music. It was certainly La Monte Young. It was not Indian classical music, in any sense of the word. I mean this was *real* La Monte Young we were hearing, coming out of these long, sustained tones, with no melody over it. That's the strong distinction I've made in some of my writings, which I think you've read. What I did, in music, was—there were long tones before. But they were always drones over, under, a melody, or they were always *cantus firmus*, or a pedal point with some stuff going on over it.

FP: Yes, but it did come mostly from a tradition of improvisation, which was the tradition of jazz. And you had been practicing that for years. That's another form of practice in the sense I was referring to.

LY: Oh, that I had practiced for years. And also from listening to tapes and records of Indian classical music, so that all of these things were interwoven.

MZ: But I think when La Monte was teaching *Dream House* to his group, it's more like he was just using the *method* of transmission that's used in Indian music while creating in a way his own oral tradition for this particular work and with these particular people.

MF: I was reading the other day about ancient Palestine some time before its inhabitants were forced to go into exile. They were very worried that the chants should be remembered, and at that time they were just involved with the oral tradition. And any Jewish kid that goes to Hebrew school today learns that there are certain punctuation marks on the top of words which tones them down; they give you the lilt of the thing. That was added, you see. That was added because they figured they weren't going to last very long, which I thought was a very interesting idea; some kind of prophetic idea by which notation maybe has a lot to do with some kind of crisis in society where—or fads of society. Certainly, information theory helped a certain period of notation to become much more intelligently complex, in the way Xenakis would do something or the way John Cage would do something. I think that John's notation is a real aspect of information theory. It came just at that time, and there was a way of handling all the new phenomena, putting back all the new phenomena. Again, I'm very, very interested in notation only because of this anonymity and redirecting to some degree the performer to play music with the right attitudes. I heard a performance of Aki Takahashi; she gave me this record, I had never heard of it, and I

played it in my seminar, and it was the Webern *Variations*. And it was the most incredible performance I've ever heard. Everything disappeared. All your thoughts about—you couldn't sit down and write an article about Webern after that. All you could write about, you know, was how beautiful it was. You could only use this very nonprofessional language in discussing the beauties of her performance. And so that's essentially my concern with—

FP: But isn't it also that above a certain level of proficiency of performance, it's really also a question of your receptiveness and your perceptiveness, the state of mind that you are in when you listen to it? Maybe you got to the point where a beautiful performance of Webern at that point—you know, you were ready for it in such a way that if you had heard it twenty years before, you wouldn't have had that same—

LY: No, no, but I think now this is not what's happening here. What's happening here is performers—a young student of mine, Dan Wolf, who's doing research at Wesleyan pointed out to me—I was telling him how much I like Webern, and he said "you know, La Monte, when did you last hear any Webern?" I said "oh, it's been a long time," and he said "you probably heard it on the Robert Kraft recordings," and I said "right," and he said "well you know, now they play Webern totally differently." And it's that people have learned what his music is and how to play it. It's a whole new generation of performers, and I think the same is true of— You know when I wrote *for Guitar*; it's the piece in between *for Brass* and *Trio for Strings*. It was 1957, and I used to play jazz, and I would show it to each guitar player I played with. And they would say, "wow, that's really far out, man," and hand it back to me. Nobody ever said to me "oh, I think I'll try to play this." And then, in the seventies, Ned Sublette came searching for me for this guitar piece. He said that he'd heard that I had a guitar piece, took the piece and practiced it for three years, and twenty-odd years after the piece was written did the world premiere. I mean, at the time I was writing these pieces, nobody wanted to even look at them, let alone play them.

FP: Yes, but Webern has been played by *very great* performers already, for a very long time, which detracts nothing from the great merits of Aki Takahashi. But I mentioned the question of the perceiver because it is very important from the point of view of the relation of traditional music versus Western music, and it has to do with the limits of composition also. The fact that you write pieces that are "interminable," and the fact that you write pieces that are "terminable," and others in between. You write pieces where the perceiver can go in at any time, and leave at any time, that's the *Dream House*. You write pieces where you would rather have the listener sit in throughout, and that corresponds more to the situation of one of those very long ragas in India, where people tend to stay throughout but not have to. In fact, they walk in and out. Although ideally, I guess even the Indian singer would prefer them to stay for the—

LY: That's right.

FP: And then you have also written pieces—although not, as far as I know, in the last fifteen or twenty years—which were really terminable pieces. They were pieces where a time frame is imposed on the piece and the audience. People, of course, can always get up and walk out and, although rarely, they do when they're bored. But really, in the conception of the piece, and in the conception of the audiences going to it, it's really not permissible to get up and walk out or walk in in the middle. You are there supposed to respect the time dimension of that experience. This is true also of Morty's four-hour-long *Quartet*; it could be ten hours, and it still wouldn't make any difference in this respect. You are submitted to that time framework, which is his time framework, which he's imposing on you and you are there to get it. Right? Now this is not the case with some traditional music, ritual music, you know, where often you don't really know very well where it starts. Kagel, in a way connected with that aspect of traditional music once, in *Heterophonie*, which starts with a section called "Accordez, s'il vous plaît": the public, still milling in, doesn't know when the piece starts and that the players are already playing while "tuning" their instruments. They are not tuning, they are really playing, but they are playing while they are tuning (in itself an interesting idea). So the piece has no "beginning." Very intriguing to have a piece that has no beginning. Of course you always have to end it somewhere. So, how do you feel about that, and how does Morty feel about that? I've always been puzzled, because it concerns the question of the definition of a "piece," even of the word, "piece." Piece is something which is discontinuous, something with a beginning and an end. What is a piece, in art, today? What is a piece in music?

MZ: And where do you place these environments, of electronically generated sounds, which are—

FP: They are pieces, of course, but without distinct framework. And since in music, time is so important and the time frame of music so essential, traditionally. Then, a piece like the *Dream House*, which does not have, ideally, this time framework, because it's always on, in what sense is it a "piece"? It's a piece in another sense. I wonder if you could say something maybe to define what this sense may be and how would Morty feel about it, about the definition of what a piece in music is.

MF: But before we go on, I have a feeling this conversation has to be done in two sections. And I had that feeling from the beginning.

LY: I have that feeling too. I think that we're making a good beginning, but that the next session would really take off.

FP: Yes. But maybe some aspect of this question could be addressed now.

LY: Oh, yes, I'm free now, I can go on, as you like.

MF: I would like to just go back a little bit. That's what I meant by two sessions. And talk about the oral tradition as being more or less involved with the less written down. But there is an oral tradition of the written down, the little things that you pick up from one teacher to another teacher. "Don't do this, write it down this way." And—I'm doing that now. I'm going back now, teaching as if they don't know how to write it down. Which they don't. So now the way I'm going about doing it, in a sense, is from the oral tradition that I know, from my teachers. Not all teachers. We have to go beyond common practice, writing down.

FP: That's why written music today in the West is a more "traditional" kind of activity.

BM: I disagree. I think that the act of notating music is the most advanced type of thinking that happens. And I think computers—

FP: But by traditional I don't mean less advanced or not advanced. I am not proposing the view of an evolution.

LY: What he means, I think, is that it's the most disciplined. I think he means what you mean, Bunita. He means that it's the most disciplined formal kind of training—

FP: Yes. I think you just misinterpreted my use of the word "traditional." I think painting, for instance, is in that sense not traditional, by and large today. Painters today don't like—

BM: I was thinking about what Morton was saying about notation and expanding on it. When I'm involved with notation, I'm not involved with notation, I'm involved with thought and the different levels where that occurs. And the different levels where experience occurs. And somehow trying to codify them and to organize sensation, I suppose. And it seems to me, when I look at one of my manuscripts, I can see my brain working. I can see every level that it's working on; I can see all the kinds of thoughts that go into describing the experience, and you're your own analyst. And you get into the way the mind operates on such a sophisticated level. I don't know; instead of composing music by computer, the computer should be learning from notation about how the mind works. Instead of the other way around, it seems to me.

FP: That's how the most interesting people who work with computers are working now. They are studying the brain; they work the other way around, as you say. They don't go from computer to brain, they go from brain to computer.

BM: Could I just say one more thing? It's such a personal experience, working with notation that you develop your own oral tradition with yourself, and with your life and how your life keeps changing, and how you keep changing your responses to that. My own music has changed drastically in the last six months, and I suppose it parallels my life. It's frightening. It's frightening for me to see it happen and to know that I have to go with it and to deal with it.

MF: And you see the person by finding blemishes on the paper. It's like the mirror. It reveals it to you. Yes, I find notation is the ultimate revealer.

BM: And maybe it's not so much the music that we're notating, but we're using the notation as a process to grow as a composer and a person. And to understand the experience better. Earlier we were talking about linear experience. Now we know that experience, even in writing, happens on so many different levels that this notation we are discerning is just one way to try to get into contact with it.

MF: You could make a move.

LY: Well, I think that something of relevance that is evolving in this conversation is that there is apparently an interplay in all of the kinds of approaches to composition that we have discussed, in particular between the oral and the notated tradition, and that this interplay between the oral approach and the notated approach is in effect perhaps in all forms of composition. It's a question of emphasis. Sometimes the attempt is to capture it in the notation with the oral approach as the support system, as the something that goes along—I was going to say unspoken, but it's obviously spoken if it's oral—that doesn't get spoken into the score. And then in the way I was referring to

in my own approach to improvisation, whereby the notation is imprinted on my fingertips or in my vocal chords, and it's captured there. But then having that captured, I can use that in different frameworks, perhaps in a way that we can say is analogous to having something written on the page but giving a certain leeway to the performer in placing it in time or which pitches he might use. And so I guess what I'm trying to point out here is how this whole, which is the sum of these various parts, can have many aspects, and that we're especially focusing on two aspects—the oral and the notated—and that these two aspects can be more or less brightly lit, and in some cases they could be more equally lit, and that there is at all times some interplay between these.

FP: May I ask you something about this? Do you feel that there is a difference, in this question of written versus oral, concerning the relationship of composition to memory?

LY: Oh, yes, sure. Whenever you write it down, that takes the place of memory. You don't have to remember it.

FP: Yes. But that is a very important difference; it's extremely important. Because even if you are leaving—the pitch is indeterminate, or the timing, or whatever, still the place of memory is taken by that written page. In your case, memory is all inside you. So in a way there is a sort of existential, experiential nature of the composition the way you are redoing it every time, no matter how much you have practiced, that is not present in the performance of a written piece, at least not present to the same extent, although there is always an element of it in any performance of any piece. If there isn't, the performance is bad, is not a good performance. That's why the Webern performance is great by Aki, because she puts that into it, but still, I think, it's on a different level of that, the oral, don't you think? I mean there must be a difference there. Morton, I know that you have been involved with the question of memory, you've been thinking about it, you've been thinking about Frances Yates and Proust. I think this question of the *locus* of memory, in music, is possibly a very interesting one.

MF: I don't know why I just can't answer that directly, why I'm always going back. And I want to go back again to learning, and then the utilization of learning on images that you put down on paper and that you have to look at and live with, in a certain degree of existential silence. It's almost like a Greek—what are those things called?—a Greek eternal curse of sorts, that the composer must live in this silence with the things he is putting down on paper. Let me give an anecdote that was very important in my life. It changed my music. Rather it really added greatly to what my music would've become in terms of my sense of time. As I was eighteen or seventeen, I started to visit Varèse, and he looked occasionally at some of my student pieces; he never gave me advice before. He just looked at them and told me I should come again. That's the nonoral tradition of a support system for a young composer. But then a few years later, my early twenties, he said one thing to me. He just absolutely said one thing which was responsible for my music. He said to me, "You have to remember the amount of time it takes for the music, when first played on the stage, to go out into the audience, and then to go back again." And that's all he told me; he gave me a little advice that I should be conscious of the fact, first of all, that I'm *listening*, that I get involved with the acoustical phenomena, you see, and so I had to *hear*. So it was like a boomerang. I had to throw it at such a distance, that it'd come back in the right ratio to everything. And I think that my music indicates it. I think that I am giving that amount of time for the boomerang to come back before the next boomerang is thrown. There are two directions: If I had been an improviser, it would've been another kind of music, and the written music is another kind of music. Because I understand what La Monte was going through, as a twenty-one-year-old, to actually *see* these long durations in front of him; because there's a fantastic fear in all societies, probably including India. I know, as someone who loves nomadic rugs, that there is this *horror vacui*, this fear of space, this fear of time, in all cultures. I don't think Oriental cultures are free of it.

FP: Absolutely not; if anything, they're more aware of it.

MF: In fact, they're more aware of it and they act more hysterically toward it.

FP: We are the ones who *pretend* to be free of it.

MF: No one is free of it. But I really think that it's a Western invention to present time with a little less anxiety than any other culture.

LY: Well, I would support this because one of the interesting differences between the formal approach in the kind of music that I think we can say that I write and that Morty writes, and even John Cage writes, and some of the others of our time, and the kind represented by Indian classical music, is that we really write in static form. Whereas Indian classical music is strictly in climactic form. It starts out with a very slow beginning. The notes gradually evolve and develop organically, then you bring in the tabla, at usually a slower speed, and then gradually it starts getting faster and faster, and it builds up to one big climax. That's climactic form, and in spite of the drone, in spite of the set of only certain pitches that run all the way through each raga, the static element is not present in the way it is in this kind of music that we have been writing. I think that this static approach to music that we're involved with, now, in the twentieth-century West, has some very interesting lines of origin, and some of those are rooted in the East. For instance, I always think of chant, and there is chant in most of the important ancient traditions: Hebraic chant, Indian chant, Islamic chant, Vedic chant, Gregorian chant, Dominican chant, all kinds of chant. And then, chant, however, was pretty static, and there's American Indian chanting too, and that's pretty static. Then you can move through Michaud and Perotin in the West, and that was still pretty static, whereas as you moved into the raga in the East, it started to develop climactic tendencies, as in various other traditions. You have some of this stasis still hanging in Debussy, and—

MZ: What about Gagaku?

LY: And Gagaku tends to be pretty static compared to the climactic form of Indian classical music, although there is some tendency toward climax in Gagaku, because of the way the drums are introduced. But one of the most important works to me in Western classical music was Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, and *Summer Morning by a Lake—Colors* piece, where stasis begins to show up, in really static format.

MF: But all continually—

LY: Changing.

MF: Well, continually rippling with the bass clarinet.

LY: And then it moves through, as I see the Viennese line of stasis evolving, into some of what we're doing.

MF: Varèse particularly is the music of stasis. And I think that's only because it was music that was. I think that if you hear, you automatically get involved in a musical stasis. Cage's music has no musical stasis.

LY: Not so much, no.

MF: Once you start to listen you gotta stop a little bit.

FP: It is a very interesting point La Monte is developing.

LY: As I see it, the line comes through Schoenberg's *Five Pieces*, through Webern's technique of repeating the same octave identities of certain pitches throughout sections of his work down to this "technique" by many of us, which takes it over more strongly. Certainly it's strong in Morty's music, and this is one of the things I really appreciated in his music in the early listenings I did. You find it in Stockhausen and Nono and Boulez to some degree.

FP: You came to my opening question, regarding what you found particularly interesting in Morton's music, when you first heard it; you finally answered it.

LY: Oh, yes, right. I guess it took me a while to get around to this, but that was just one of the things that I found very striking in Morty's music, and I had been following this static line coming through Schoenberg and through Webern and so forth, and in my early writings, like in my *Lecture 1960*, I was talking about the importance of stasis as a way, as a path, as a way to create music. And it was this approach that in all appearances represented the other side of the coin from what our Western tradition had been. Because even though our Western tradition grew out of chant, which was fairly static, once it developed, especially in its Germanic line, this Germanic line became very climactic, and very much goal oriented. It's true of the Italian line, too, and of the French, to some degree. I always see Debussy standing there as a special case of something different. I feel he made one of the most innovative statements in music. Before Debussy—how did Debussy reach where he reached? Okay, they say he heard a gamelan orchestra. Of course, he must have heard a lot of chant and so forth, and maybe some Organum. I don't know what he heard; I don't know how he did it. But it's incredible what he achieved, and even though in his music, too, there is a lot of climax, certainly, still there is an element—

FP: But then there would seem to be some sort of contradiction in your deep involvement with climactic music, as you define Indian music, and your very very deep interest in staticity as—there would be unless you have a particular way of understanding the climactic in Indian music. And, in fact, I think the climactic in Indian music cannot be simply assimilated to the climactic in classic German music. Because there it is a cyclical kind of principle at work, it would seem, and then the fact that the raga ends on that climax does not provide a definition of its conception. The dance of Shiva is a dance that perpetually restarts. It destroys the world, and the destruction is needed for the world to start again. The ending of a classic Western composition may be an apotheosis but does not point to a beginning. We should not forget that a raga invariably ends on a descending note, in tone and in loudness.

MF: Could I just interject?
LY: Go ahead.
MF: Some things about the fact that music has varying degrees of stasis. Let's say that at the top of the list we put Debussy, and then we work our way down. As you've been talking, I was thinking about these two camps. And it seems to me that music with varying degrees of lesser stasis is also, in varying degrees, not involved in self-expression.
LY: Yes, one could say that. Absolutely.
MF: I don't know, just as an initial thought.
LY: Absolutely. That could be said. Right. I'm not sure I would say that's the final statement, but that could definitely be said.
MF: Because I never realized until I heard in my broken way, in retranslating a lecture on my *String Quartet* in German and trying to put it together a little bit, that is one of the significant remarks that I caught and I was really interested in it. They do think of Cage as static, only because they don't understand the nature of the information, you see, so they're not putting it together, and I think that you're going to be in this category more, especially after this piece in Cologne. In other words, more people are going to know about your work now that these pieces are going to be played. But the point that I want to make is this: let's say that the big difference that was pointed out to the young Europeans sitting in the audience between my music and European music, or American music and European music, is the lack of self-expression. That regardless what stylistic aspects their music takes on, it's still wed to self-expression.
FP: I would like just La Monte to comment a second on the question of the possible contradiction, which, as I have said, I don't see truly as a contradiction.
LY: Okay, on the stasis and the climactic in raga?
FP: Yes. Because there is a paradox I want to call attention to. If Western music—you know, romantic music, let's say just to be simple—is climactic, it's very often climactic in the sort of a-b-a kind of structure. So it has the appearance of a *cyclical* structure on the face of it. The paradox, then, is that what would appear to be the dominant Indian structure, a-b, goes from a to b, to the climax, you know, and then stops. But that stop, that dualism, which does not let it get back to a, in fact implies cyclicity more strongly than the formal a-b-a of Western music. That's my feeling, perhaps because of ignorance.
LY: Okay, well, that's an interesting philosophical point. The only problem with that point is that it doesn't completely hold on all levels, and then there's another factor too, that I wish to bring up. First I'll say why it doesn't hold on all levels, but remind me that I want to go on to the other factor. Structure in Indian classical music has a-b-a; they often do a-a-b-a in the compositions. There are a-b structures, and a lot of the basic approaches to composition that we have in the West are already implied or fully stated in Indian classical compositions, so that that's already there. So I think that doesn't line up with what you were saying. Then the other thing is that you wanted me to comment on the fact that there is cycle. Well, there is cycle in the sense that you have the rhythmic cycle going and that the improvised variations are over the composition, which is repeated over and over, but you repeat—you sort of freely work with the rhythmic cycle over and over in between the statements of the composition, although the improvisations are more or less—with the great performers more—related to the composition. But what I think is the real significance here again—I'm always looking for the coming together—is that the a + b becomes the, you know, the gestalt, where you have thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. I'm always looking for synthesis, and again what I find is that you'll have your two extremes: You'll have what I might say is the most static, one of these sound environments, and with the least self-expression, certainly, or you've assigned it to a set of frequency oscillators, and they're just wailing away there, doing their best.
MF: Don't say "wailing"; that's a good way of self-expression.
LY: Wailing their hearts out. Turning out sixty cycles, or whatever it is. And, then, on the other extreme you have the romantic performer, or the romantic composer expressing his unrequited love, or whatever it is, in his works, and leading to this climax, or whatever it is. Then you have this totally huge, vast expanse in between where you have the interplay, again, of these two poles; and it's like what Cage once said to me, you know, he said, "La Monte, your music is the other side of the coin from mine. I'm everything goes." Right? He's everything goes. It's the Zen approach to meditation, where it's the void, and things are coming, and passing, and the car horn honks, and the subway goes by, and somebody turns off the water faucet. And my approach to meditation is—coming out of the Indian classical approach to meditation—concentration, focus, perfection. You zero in on that path that will take you to the highest spiritual level.

Like a finely sharpened sword, everything is just tuned right to that fine point. It's like the two sides of the coin. And between these two sides of the coin where you have the totally static and the totally climactic, you have this vast expanse where the two very strong polar principles are pulsing and vibrating and making different relationships to each other, and I think what we're defining here is two very strong polar opposites like night and day, black and white, mother and father, sun and moon, *sa* and *pa*, *do* and *sol*, C and G, tonic and dominant, on and on.
BM: But I think the static also has climaxes. It's just that we're not being manipulated into feeling the climax at a certain place, as we do in the more romantic music.
LY: Well, yes, I guess one could then begin to talk about detail. I mean, as Cage once said about my music, what at first seems all the same, later you find that it's full of enormous variation. Some of my music really has to do with what he said, but my music covers so much ground that you could also say entirely the opposite.
FP: And in the same spirit, you can find a lot of staticity in Indian music, its vast areas; in fact, that's the dominant impression you get.
LY: Absolutely, and I might even go on to say that Pandit Pran Nath's performances of Indian music tend to be more static. He doesn't go for this kind of climactic—
FP: Subtle, in fact.
LY: Subtle; in fact, many people have pointed out to me, when he comes to *sum*, the first beat of the cycle, that it is so subtle, it is so refined. I mean these other players, they jump on it, you know, "Oh, here it is! I made it, I did it!"
FP: Shall we stop here for today?
LY: Great. It's the perfect preparation for another one that there should be, I think.
MF: Fine. I think we're just getting into the subject. The only thing is, in a sense, that the proportions of the statements are larger. Just like a piece of music.
LY: Well, we had to lay a certain amount of groundwork to establish a vocabulary, and interplay, and now we've done that.