

mudboy/ Night Eyes

An Introduction by Roland Robert Cowperthwaite



1.

The grand pipe organ of the Dortmund Konzerthaus is in perfectly conscientious hands this evening: the four hands, that is, presently belonging to mudboy. Putting the sodden name aside, tonight's performers are perfectly, perfectly, perfectly - well - nice people. Yes, microphones shall be affixed to the pipes, cables run throughout the apparatus, signals transmitted through the hall, the organ's great yodel warped and manipulated through a labyrinth of additive circuitry. True, there is not formally an 'organist' presiding, no one has been specifically apprenticed to a grand master of the instrument for decades, or even days. The nature of the music we are gathering to hear is not something that would be recognized, as such, by the 17th century developers of the classical pipe organ. (Though, of some note, I think it would be quite a bit more recognizable to the listeners of the Greek hydraulis, the pipe organ's two-thousand year old water- and not wind-powered predecessor. Tonight's piece is considerably more drama than symphony, *δρᾶμα* instead of *συμφωνία*.) I am assured, generally, that the instrument of the house will not be dented, scuffed, or nicked the instrument in the slightest.

I feel it's worth making a point of this for a couple of reasons. One, mudboy has been known to perform covered in slime, swing lighting fixtures around, appear a bit tattered. There has never been a tossing of tuxedo tails over a piano bench, in that classical gesture of concert-hall authority; though it did sound like our performers were looking for some nice shoes for the occasion. So, in light of the contrast between the spare grandeur of the space and the dusty earthiness of the artist, I feel a testament to temperament is important.

My other reason: while this work was being rehearsed on the pipe organ in the Baptist Temple Church of Brooklyn, that historic instrument was burned by fire. The church was built in 1894 and the organ restored just last year, and the damage was catastrophic. I have inquired, and been assured that none of our evening's performers were anywhere nearby, nor considered responsible in any way for the tragedy. Such things happen; I once lived in a building which burned down, and though I was nowhere near the combustion, the cause of the fire was put down to 'artist in residence.' No such accusation ought to be levied at mudboy, however vague. Yes, this piece does come to us from the 'experimental' school of sound art and abstract music, but there is no fire hazard whatsoever. The reader is put at ease.

Experimentation has, regrettably, been conflated in the public perception with subversion. The factional history of 20th Century art (and politics) has left us with the impression that every effort at the 'new' must also be a gesture of destruction, of what came before. Institution gives way to revolution; revolutionaries age and settle into institution, and the cycle moves forward. For too long, it hasn't been *cool* to honor the past in one's work, other than by demolishing it. mudboy's work here, however, is in fact appreciably respectful of tradition, built from it. This is the work of a maturing generation of artists who have begun to tire of constantly reinventing culture.

mudboy comes out of an aesthetic practice of post-industrial appropriation, developed in this case in the sooty mills of Providence, Rhode Island, where a great deal of such industrial refuse awaits new purpose. mudboy, though, has extended the scope of available historical resources well back into the pre-industrial age. While many contemporaries are still sifting through the kitsch and detritus of the 20th century, here we will discover influences across a much wider span of time. Not to say the 20th century will be forgot; not to say that perhaps Sigmund Freud, Reagan-era slasher films, John Cage, Fritz Sennheiser, and magnetoencephalography don't have

their place next to Ctesibius of Alexandria, Schnitger, and Bach in the piece we hear tonight. They surely do; but those latter presences are what makes this work more curious, less reactionary, more humane, less technological.

I am gratified by how historically concerned mudboy is, by how comprehensive and thoughtful is the approach to composition and performance using historical methods. The instruments, both old and new, are *studied*; there is intellectual time invested in this work... tonight will not feature - by any means - 'jamming.' Thank goodness, really, in this day of academicized juvenility, to have an experimental performance of such measured construction. There is a stage in the life of a contemporary artist when he or she must realize that the search for originality is futile. The artist who is truly cut out for the avant-garde is the one who then looks far enough back, and borrows a wide enough set of materials, to make something that is at last, new, even though its pieces be old. Like relativistic space - as we peer further and further into the past, the more we seem to be looking into the future.

The experimental is made accessible through our recognition of possible sources, familiar patterns, even while our expectations are subverted. By *nice* people.

2.

Music is so rare in the history of humanity. While we, the contemporary generation, are relentlessly serenaded, grinded, bumped, and jingled at, we mustn't lose sight that our modern indulgence in recorded music is a tremendous species-wide gesture of compensatory satisfaction, after millennia of reluctant silence. Most of our history has been spent cherishing the single instrument and the skilled practitioner, listening for the faraway drums, charmed by the arrival of the bard, clamoring to hear the band, peering in at the opera. Music hasn't always been everywhere.

The pipe organ is perhaps second only to Edison in transforming the historical scarcity of music into a modern bounty (an excess?). Each of its pipes is only responsible for a single pitch, but the 'ranking' and multiplicity of the instrument make it ideal for the re-creation of dozens of apparent tones, such that a single player could replicate the aural experience of a large group of instruments and voices. A single key may be struck, but with the proper set of stops and swells engaged, notes in multiple octaves, as well as dozens of harmonics may be experienced by the listener. It was an orchestra of one. It is, in this regard, an early synthesizer - the definitive instrument of our age - and in this respect mudboy's pairing of the pipe organ with its young transistorized cousins is an apt union. Apt-er still (may I coin such a barbarism?), mudboy stops short of digitizing the sounds we will hear tonight - the instrument constructed here is a scaled up version of the 'mudboy mini,' an experimental twin of pipe organ and analog processors. This is a non-digital presentation, a worthy distinction for those among us who have heard everything before.

Considering the ubiquity of music in our lives, considering its cheapness, its uniformity, it is worth reminding oneself that music has been programmed into our evolution for purposes beyond merely 'grooving' - though that's nice, too. One of those purposes was as a key to the closed rooms of our brain. Music summons moods, inspires revelations, induces trances and recollects dreams. In small, petty ways, all of our music does this, from 'Eurovision' ballads to jazz played to the empty tables of a basement club to the soundtrack of a movie. Music is a form of psychological control, over ourselves or others - to psyche ourselves up for sport or war; to encourage our customers to shop; or our audience to laugh or be afraid; to relax the natural human anxiety of riding in an elevator... Even further, we have lately added the 'playlist' to the tools of control, a sustained program of music designed by ourselves to invoke a precise set of emotional reactions over a calculated period of time - 'party,' 'mellow,' 'workout,' 'driving.' The soundtrack to our own lives. Indeed, since the advent of Edisonian recorded 'popular' music, we now spend more time cultivating our individual self-awareness than at any time in our species' history. Is the ascent of music-recording technology and psychoanalysis intertwined? Though I am often happy to pretend expertise, on this speculation I will go no further than to pose the question; and contemplation of the question by itself I think will lend an insight to this program.

mudboy, replete with tonight's capable collaborator Peter Schuette (a 'real' musician, I am informed, whose accomplishment is necessary to offset mudboy's own more organic methods with the keyboard), is here composing something that is not cheap, not common, not catchy, and won't simply switch on and off a given gland. This music is that prehistoric key, rattling at the

deadbolts in the back of our mind. And while it does so, it also brings along intellectual questions, pop cultural questions, academic questions. I suspect it will be something like attending one of the most interesting lectures you can remember from your school days, while idly drawing on your notepad the silly detritus of your culture-added brain, and then dozing off to a half-conscious state. Or perhaps it will be nothing like this at all.

3.

As to the forms employed here – I have called them more dramatic than symphonic, and I have not changed my mind. However, mudboy's model of narrative here is not so much an Aristotelian one, with three acts and a neat moral – but one which takes a familiar moral engine and plunges it somewhere into Jungian synchronicitous space.

The postwar American horror film has a primary moral mechanism, wherein teenagers are given freedom to fornicate, and upon their concession to temptation are savagely murdered. In considering this mousetrap, we ought to again remember the sub-cerebral functions of music, one of which is surely to facilitate reproduction. Erotic dancing, ballads and love songs, 'techno' music designed obliterate inhibition behind atrocious taste and disorienting lighting displays... All different ways of holding the same key to our libido. And so sound may be a unique entryway to trigger an anxious mood and foreboding of mortal danger, while simultaneously drumming up the inclination to copulate... A fine subject, when you really think of it this way, for a pipe organ composition.

mudboy here explores a particular horror film which did not merely rest on the easy shocks of Puritan revenge fantasy – 1984's "A Nightmare on Elm Street." Besides cravenly frightening, titillating, and repelling its audience, it furthermore explored the layers of existence beneath libido, beneath consciousness. Its morality play took place inside its characters' dreams – and indeed suggested itself was taking place within the audiences' dreams as well.

When the teenagers of Springwood, Ohio doze off – often in the *petit mort* of illicit adolescent intercourse – they are pursued through their very dreams by the murderer Freddy Krueger. There are themes of retribution (the townspeople had killed Krueger in a mob attack years before, in an act of vigilante justice) and the plain old neurosis of Reagan's rapidly suburbanizing and homogenizing America... But of more interest, at least to mudboy in this composition, is the psychological layering, the threading of drama across multiple tiers of consciousness. We have dreams of love, of sex, and to a great extent on Elm Street, death. And none of this is separated, none of it is discrete. The same key can open every door, and we always enter through the ear.

To explore this sub-space, indeed, we must be led by the ear. As an aid, the lights will come down, as per the request of the composer (the composer has other requests, too, and you are directed to the reverse of this page to hear them). And from there we can begin to ask ourselves the same set of questions, as the pipe organ hums and oscillates, as the microphones amplify and the circuitry stretches and compresses the signal before flinging it into the heights of the hall: Are we awake or in a trance? Is the sound telling a story or inducing a state? Are we hearing something which is very very old, or is this something quite new? Do we smell smoke?

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A Note on the Production

For all the many sounds mudboy was able to coax from the device, there still lacked the unique presence of the human voice, and so the performance, at a point, will include the irreplaceable sound of two singers, Jasmine Guffond and Theresa Stroetges. The organ makes noise when it is commanded - it has no will; singers, however, *decide* when to make sound, and for their decision tonight we should applaud them more greatly.

Roland Robert Cowperthwaite is an accomplished media artist, director, critic, and scholar.

