AURAL ARCHITECTURE: 
THE CONFLUENCE OF FREEDOM 
MYRA MELFORD

A man sets himself the task of drawing the world. As the years pass, he fills the empty space with images of provinces and kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, houses, instruments, stars, horses and people. Just before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face. 19

"Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?"

"We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now," they answer.

Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars.

"There is the blueprint," they say. 20

...evident forms have been created in man's search to experience the divine. These spaces are the embodiment of deeper reality, maps that point the way and offer pathways back to the Self within... These spaces are enlivened by the power of the One who resides there, whom we meet on our own inner ground. 21

The house in which I lived from the ages of three to eighteen, designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright, had a major impact on my development and direction as a composer and improvising pianist.

Another such building is the mosque, La Mezquita, in Cordoba, Spain, which I visited in 1994. I happened to walk into this building one morning before it was officially open to the public. As soon as I entered I felt like a different person. All the distracting thoughts and chatter in my mind were suddenly stilled. The space was beautiful, quiet, and dark except for occasional shafts of dusty sunlight; and it was completely empty except for a forest of stone columns and arches which my guide book aptly described as a meditation in stone. This experience kindled an aspiration for me as a musician: to create an aural space, if you will, that is not only structurally and esthetically satisfying, but that also allows for the individual listener or player within it to have her

own experience—an experience that perhaps leaves one feeling alone, but that brings one back to one's Self, that affirms one's deepest feelings or longings.

Architectural concepts, in particular those of Frank Lloyd Wright, have both inspired and informed my approach to creating music. And music, it seems, was an important inspiration for Mr. Wright. In the first volume of his *Collected Writings*, Wright discusses the development of his vision for modern architecture, and he describes his affinity with music: "...as a small boy...I used to lie and listen to my father playing Beethoven...To my young mind it all spoke a language that stirred me strangely, and I've since learned it was the language, beyond all words, of the human heart...to me architecture is just as much an affair of the human heart...I know there are possibilities in the way of putting things together that are to my eyes or sense of fitness what music is to my ear or sense of sound." These words suggest the importance of an intuitive as well as an intellectual process, which is very much the way I work. What's crucial is the connection between the language of the human heart and the act or purpose of creation.

The house in which I grew up is the earliest extra-musical influence on my direction and development as an artist. It was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and was located at 1023 Meadow Road in Glencoe, Illinois, a suburb about twenty-five miles north of Chicago on Lake Michigan. Built in 1915 in the 'Prairie Style,' it is one of five houses that Wright intended for middle-income housing, situated near the larger Booth House which was built for his lawyer. This subdivision was called Ravine Bluffs and had elegant poured concrete markers at either end of the roadways leading into the neighborhood and a beautiful bridge spanning the ravine on one end, all designed by Wright. As a little girl I loved this house but didn't realize until I'd lived in many other places how special it was. It was truly a beautiful esthetic experience. The exterior of the house was white stucco with dark brown wood trim defining the major horizontal lines and flat roof. In winter it blended beautifully with the snow and bare trees around it. There were many windows bringing in a lot of sunlight, and there were lovely details in the light fixtures and woodwork. One in particular was an interior window, trisected with wooden slats, between the staircase and the living room, allowing air, light, and sound to filter through. There was a beautiful big gray brick hearth and fireplace in the middle of the first floor, around which the dining area flowed into the living room. Everything exemplified Wright's idea that the wall as wall was vanishing—that

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all was vanishing—that
interior space should be fluid, not boxy, and in turn should flow out and blend
into the surrounding landscape. Wright aspired to "the natural build-
ing, naturally built, native to the region...a building as beautiful on its
ite as the region itself."23 The Booth House was an even more dramatic
example of this, with its many rooms and levels seeming to grow out of its
hilltop perch and its cantilevers jutting out over the ravine.

In high school, I began studying Wright's architecture and philo-
osophy. I visited many of his buildings in the Chicago area and in Spring
Green, Wisconsin, where he had built Taliesin East, his home and school. I haven't yet
had the opportunity to visit his house, Fallingwater, in Bear Run, Pennsylva-
ria, but I came across a description which would apply to many of his designs:
"For Wright's rooms were rarely enclosed by four walls; rather areas were
defined by a change in ceiling height or the position of built-in furniture, so
that functions as well as spaces interpenetrated and overlapped, especially at
corners. What constituted the indoors and outdoors was deliberately left
vague; even the continuous metal windows...touched the walls without a
frame to emphasize the same materials used either side of them. The same
stone floors seep out under the doors."24

After moving to New York City, when I began to practice com-
position and improvisation seriously, I realized there were certain of Wright's ideas
I could apply to creating music:

In music the Romanza is only a free form or freedom to make one's own
form. A musician's sense of proportion is all that governs him in it. The mys-
terious remains just enough a haunting quality in a whole—so organic as to
lose all tangible evidence of how it was made—and the organic whole lives in
the harmonies of feeling expressed in sound. Translate 'sounds and the ears'
to 'forms and the eye,' and a Romanza, even, seems reasonable enough, too,
in architecture.... To be potentially poetic in
architecture, then, means—to create a build-
ing free in form (we are using the word
Romanza), that takes what is harmonious in
the nature of existing conditions inside the
thing and outside it and with sentiment (beware of sentimentality)—bringing
it all out into some visible form that expresses those inner harmonies perfectly,
outwardly, whatever the shape it may take.25

This idea of working within a free form, guided by one's sense of propor-
tion, not being able to tell how the form was created, as well as allowing for
a free flow between inside and outside, made sense to me metaphorically as I started to develop my musical and compositional vocabulary. I was exploring sound and texture within mostly free and structured improvisations, experimenting with different frameworks, playing with the balance of composed and improvised material within a piece and also trying to create an invisible seam between what was notated and improvised. I was also developing my keyboard and inside-the-piano vocabulary—playing directly on the strings and soundboard. At the same time I was beginning to write within more traditional sounding song forms using the language of jazz, classical, folk, blues, and gospel music, and I was looking for a way to synthesize or make sense of these seemingly contradictory tendencies—improvising both within and without form; playing inside the harmony or rhythmic feel as well as with a greater sense of tonal and rhythmic freedom. Through my understanding of Wright’s approach to architectural design and subsequent composition lessons with Henry Threadgill, I began to find a way to integrate these ideas into a coherent whole through combining composition and improvisation in an organic way. Both Wright and Threadgill likened the creation of their work to that of a living organism.

One of the key ideas of Wright’s philosophy pertained to what he called ‘organic architecture’: the building growing out of the site, out of materials that fit with the site, out of the function it needs to serve, without imposing a design, rather, letting the design create itself. He explained it this way: “An architect must ‘grow’ his buildings from his motif, so that his building is just as natural an expression of thought and feeling directing power toward ultimate purpose as any tree or any engine for that matter... Things of themselves begin to proceed from generals to particulars—they begin to build of themselves, to develop, emerge, and take inevitable form, forcing nothing, imposing not at all... There is destiny inherent in every chosen motif and it finds destiny anew in your hands guided by imagination to your heart’s desire.”26 During my composition lessons, Threadgill talked about organic composition—starting with a small cell or musical phrase and allowing a whole composition to grow naturally, through an infinite number of permutations, out of that initial material including the form or structure of the piece. This lesson from Henry continues to be the basis for my approach to composing and improvising—allowing/following this organic growth.

Some of the techniques I use for developing the initial musical cell are familiar to many composers. They include the analysis of the phrase in terms of its intervals and the transposing above, a minor 3rd below complement, reordering from stacking or vertically to a 4th below the lowest to a minor 3rd above 2nd-inversion minor triad...

26. Ibid., pp. 199, 190.
to me metaphorically as I ocaulary. I was exploring ed improvisations, experi- ence balance of composed and to create an invisible seam also developing my key-directly on the strings and write within more trad- jazz, classical, folk, blues, nthesize or make sense of sing both within and with- eel as well as with a greater understanding of Wright's composition lessons with these ideas into a coherent nsion in an organic way their work to that of a liv- phy pertained to what he ut of the site, out of mate- s to serve, without impos- He explained it this way: otif, so that his building is ght and feeling directing tree or any engine for that proceed from generals to develop, emerge, and take ..There is destiny inherent our hands guided by imag- sion lessons, Threadgill mall cell or musical phrase ; through an infinite num- ding the form or structure the basis for my approach this organic growth. ; the initial musical cell are is of the phrase in terms of its intervals and the transposition of the phrase into all those keys (i.e., a 4th above, a minor 3rd below, etc.); finding the inversion, retrograde inversion, and complement; reordering the notes within the phrase; and deriving the harmony from stacking or verticalizing the horizontal phrase (putting it on another axis) and then developing permutations of that through a concept that Edgar Varèse called crystallization: "...internal structure expanded and split into different shapes or groups of sound constantly changing shape, direction and speed, the form of the work is the consequence of this interaction—limitless as the external form of crystals—the dimension of the infinite." 27 This process of crystallization has much larger implications in terms of overall compositional structure, which accorded with both Threadgill's concept of organic composition and Wright's organic architecture. Varèse was working with a very visual and sculptural approach to music—creating and manipulating timbral blocks of sound within space. 

The Varèse techniques I use include rotation, projection, expansion, and contraction. Here's a simple example of using rotation to derive variations in harmony: say you have a chord like e—a—c, a perfect 4th with a minor 3rd above it. You rotate the middle note (a) from a 4th above to a 4th below the lowest note creating this chord: b—e—c; or from a minor 3rd below to a minor 3rd above the c: e—c—eb (e-flat). So this traditional sounding 2nd-inversion minor triad evolves into something more unusual [Fig. 1].

Figure 1.

One way I'll use expansion is to widen the intervals of a phrase by a minor 2nd (or larger) and then play two or more of these lines simultaneously to derive the harmony [Fig. 2].

I once read that Picasso would intentionally take an initially pretty idea and work it over and over again to find something more substantial, and that Stravinsky had a penchant for a certain awkwardness in a work of art. The techniques to which Henry Threadgill introduced me gave me the tools to take what might be a pretty or conventional idea and develop it into something more compelling. The ear plays a crucial role in all of this. It's the ear that

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decides finally which of the many permutations get used and how; determining order, rhythmic feel, and tempo. My own hand size and physical tendencies influence my choices as well. Sometimes I’ll deliberately choose something that’s awkward to play in order to break away from habit and arrive at a new sound or feeling.

The first piece that I worked on with Threadgill was in fact the piece I titled “Frank Lloyd Wright Goes West to Rest.” The title comes from the headline of an editorial in the New York Times about how Wright’s second wife was having his remains disinterred from his burial site in Wisconsin and sent to be buried next to her in Scottsdale, Arizona, where Wright had lived the latter part of his life and where he built Taliesen West. At the time, I had been thinking about writing some kind of homage and quasi-portrait of Wright (‘quasi,’ because I was basing the piece more on subjective feelings of having grown up in and around his architecture and persona; it’s really a very personal impression). The musical cell I chose to start with is this one [Fig. 3]:

Then I began making and came up with the first idea for the Brooklyn mendous amount from the ensemble before, nor ever provise. This piece has had piano piece from the origi it both for trio and quintet.

That initial phrase theme [Fig. 4]:

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Figure 2. Changes I, last measure.

Figure 3.
Then I began making worksheets using the processes I’ve described, and came up with the first incarnation of this piece which was originally given a reading by the Brooklyn Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. I learned a tremendous amount from that experience, having never written for chamber ensemble before, nor ever having asked classically trained musicians to improvise. This piece has had many lives since then—I later reduced it to a solo piano piece from the original orchestral score and since then have arranged it both for trio and quintet.

That initial phrase and the ensuing permutations became this opening theme [Fig. 4]:
This theme is then developed through improvisation, sometimes structured and sometimes not, depending on the situation. One thing I enjoy is to change the game plan for the improvisation sections from one performance to the next. For instance, I might begin my improvisation by playing through the material backwards in another tempo, or turning the score literally upside down. I also use the same techniques for developing the vocabulary or language for the improvisation as I use for writing the material. In these times, when composers’ music is so personal, standard jazz, blues, and even so-called ‘free’ improvisational vocabulary isn’t necessarily or always appropriate. Whether I’m improvising on my own music or someone else’s, I find that I need to mine the piece for ideas, rather than trying to apply some vocabulary that worked in other music. In a group situation, I might set up revolving duos and trios interspersed with overlapping quartets and quintets, or assign textural qualities to the smaller groups, using different devices like this in an attempt to keep the music fresh. This idea of rearranging the music on the spot was something I experienced working with both Threadgill and Butch Morris.

Many of the techniques used in developing the pitch material can be applied with regard to rhythm; for example, expanding and contracting the units—a group of four sixteenth notes becomes a group of four quarters and evolves into a walking bass line for Part II of the piece with an even more temporally spread out melody floating on top of it.

A more encompassing compositional process, that of integrating musical as well as extra-musical material, is exemplified in my piece called “Even the Sounds Shine.” Before writing this piece I collected the following ideas which I intuitively felt belonged together: numerous melodic phrases I had transcribed from a bird I heard in Wiesen, Austria, that sounded like a cross between Ornette Coleman and Leroy Jenkins [Fig. 5];

an impression of that bird and animals chattering out tures I’d ever heard; and the

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I have wa
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This poem inspire convey—the idea that sound has the potential to understanding or aware itself, a moving, transform rest in its place of origin, by of its existence into the sur idea of experiencing the se with another sense, the re experience of nonduality; altered state of union with

I started with the tions, and then played the theme consists of the bird out of this same material the between improvisations didn’t use actual musical n I was after.

The piece starts w few seconds and then imr with little bits of melody j is played [Fig. 6-8].
an impression of that bird singing accompanied by hundreds of other birds and animals chattering one dawn that was one of the most beautiful sonic textures I’d ever heard; and the following poem by Fernando Pessoa:

In broad daylight even the sounds shine
On the repose of the wide field they linger.
It rustles, the breeze silent.
I have wanted, like sounds, to live by things
And not be theirs, a winged consequence
Carrying the real far.28

This poem inspired both the title and an image or feeling I wanted to convey—the idea that sound can shine (‘seeing’ with the ears) and that this sound has the potential to carry us beyond ourselves, to an understanding or awareness of something greater. Sound itself, a moving, transformative expression of energy, doesn’t rest in its place of origin, but continually carries the message of its existence into the surrounding space. Within this poem are both the Zen idea of experiencing the senses in relation to sense objects typically associated with another sense, thereby short-circuiting the intellect and producing an experience of nonduality; and the potential for sound to transport one to an altered state of union with the Self.

I started with these birdcalls, and I came up with all kinds of permutations, and then played with them until I heard a theme emerge. The entire theme consists of the birdcall material. I then constructed the rest of the piece out of this same material used in different ways, as a series of landing points between improvisations and/or backgrounds for improvisation. Where I didn’t use actual musical notation, I gave verbal instructions about the texture I was after.

The piece starts with the ensemble playing very loud and dense for a few seconds and then immediately getting quiet setting up a very soft texture with little bits of melody jumping out until the piano gives a cue and the theme is played [Fig. 6–8].

Figure 7.
The piece then moves into a duet improvisation that...

At the end of the saxophone to solo over...

This develops with another written b...textured piano trio with...
The piece then moves into a slower tempo to set up an open bass and trumpet duet improvisation that leads into a trumpet solo over this material [Fig. 9].

At the end of the trumpet solo, the piano sets up a background for the saxophone to solo over which sounds like this [Fig. 10]:

This develops into either a piano and saxophone duet or trio with drums. As the improvisation develops, the trumpet and bass come back in with another written background and this moves into a high-energy, densely textured piano trio with bass and drums, based on the diminished triad material, which is also one of the birdcalls [Fig. 11].
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Figure 12.
This is followed by a call-and-response section between the horns,
over the original quiet texture that builds to a repetitive phrase played by the

group [Fig. 12].

Then I give the original cue, and we play the opening theme one more
time to end.

Recently I've been considering the ideas of Heraclitus as I compose
for my new quintet project, "The Same River, Twice": "All things flow; oppositi
bレーション brings together, and from discord comes perfect harmony; the hidden
harmony is better than the obvious one; it is in change that things find rest; and
you can't step twice into the same rivers, for other waters are ever flowing onto
you." His ideas perfectly express my evolving aspirations as a composer and
improvisor: to synthesize and find beauty in atonal and polytonal vocabularies,
in dense, highly energetic passages as well as in more serene and consonant
sections; and to create music that is constantly evolving within each piece, as well as from performance to performance. My techniques include the use of cross-fades and overlapping sections of improvisation and written material, one plane of music dissolving to reveal another, as well as the juxtaposition of contrasting materials. I'm interested in finding new ways of using improvised sections to develop the music—exploring how a player might improvise his or her part in a particular section without it being a featured ‘solo’ per se, or how a group might improvise a section with the emphasis on ensemble texture and interplay, again, rather than featured solos. For me, the use of improvisation is the key to making ‘expansive’ music—music that's fresh, vital, and spontaneous with a sense of inevitability to it, like the flow of a river or the flow of space in a Frank Lloyd Wright building. “The contrast of light and shade, different materials, solids and voids, and varying bright colours and textures, create a rich tapestry where inside, outside, and their interface merge imperceptibly.”


In recent years, my practice of the martial arts (aikido and nei kung) and meditation has provided inspiration for pursuing my musical goals. It has increased my overall energy level and my understanding of the subtle presence of chi (life-force or universal energy), and how to begin to use it to create/perform music by focusing on the movements of chi within the player, amongst the players, and between players and audience. The process of learning to still and focus the mind in the present moment has strengthened my ability to concentrate. I'm able to react with greater flexibility and to trust my spontaneous musical choices, both as a composer and improviser. But more than this, the insights and the physical experiences I've had while meditating have become the goal that I want to reach through playing music and to communicate experientially with the audience. There’s a tangible link for me between being in a meditative state of focus—experiencing vast, infinite internal space; the dissolution of boundary between self and other (the sense of being a separate body/person); a sense of timelessness; and a deep sense of well-being and joy—and the aural space I want to build through music.

Through my studies of Eastern philosophy I've come across two ideas which seem to shed some light on my own creative process and aspirations and point me in a direction for further investigation. One is the Sanskrit word spanda which is the root for our word ‘expand,’ and which contains within it the unstruck sound om, from which the universe arises. The other is Savasvati, originally the river goddess and later the goddess of knowledge, language, the
arts, and music, which is directly linked to spanda through the potent quality of sound contained within her. "Saraswati is the embodiment of the purity of supreme Consciousness from which all creation flows."  

I'm reminded of a childhood ritual I had when I would go swimming in the Wisconsin River where it flowed through Spring Green, not far from Taliesin and right next to a restaurant that Wright had designed. Whenever I entered the water for the first time, I'd face upstream, hold up my arms, and ask the spirit of the river to heal me. In some way I was talking to Saraswati then, as I am now, working with "The Same River, Twice" and related ideas and projects.

I've read that all music is an attempt to recreate this internal, divine music, the primordial om, that is itself the same energy that creates all forms — buildings, cities, compositions — and which is also the source of supreme bliss. Emotion is projected through sound, and when that sound vibrates at the right frequency to harmonize or create a resonance with the physical world, a space of union and healing is created. The key is in "identifying and expressing the appropriate combination of vibrations for the effect you desire...the right use of intention, awareness, and sound."  

This gives rise to the experience of timelessness — when there's no distraction or awareness of duality, no separation from immediate experience. Again, the concept of flow — that meditative state of focus in which there's no awareness of past or future. There's only a sense of merging and the knowledge that everything that exists in the universe comes from the same source of universal consciousness which dwells within all people in the space of the heart. Everything we create, whether material, conceptual, aural, or imaginary, is only a projection or reflection of ourselves, the universal speaking through the personal. "A man sets himself the task of drawing the world."  

Unity is the goal. A transient experience that longs for eternity. In that moment when the musician, the listener (which includes the performer as well as the audience), and the music are One, this aural space of union is created and one experiences the Self of all. It's for this experience referred to as 'the confluence of freedom' that I look forward to continuing my exploration of the relationship between internal, external, and aural space — meditation and architecture; and the healing and transformative power of music and sound.
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Darshan 37: 5.

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The flute of the Infinite is played
without ceasing, and its sound is love:
When love renounces all limits, it reaches truth.
How widely the fragrance spreads! It has no end,
nothing stands in its way.
The form of this melody is bright like a million suns:
incomparably sounds the vina, the vina of the notes of truth."39

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