

Clay Gold interviewed by composer Marina Vesic for 'The Arts' app

M.V.: We all remember how we started our musical careers; what do you remember from when you began composing? Have you always had a supportive community for your artistic endeavors, or have you encountered a lack of understanding from those around you? How did it all start?

CG: My grandfather introduced me to recording technology when I was very young. This was in the 1970's. He had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, a Super-8 camera and an impressive hi-fi stereo. I borrowed the recorder and made secret recordings of my family and my neighbourhood with the little plastic microphone. I took piano lessons but it was a disaster. On the first day the teacher named all the white notes and asked me to say what came after "G" and I said "H" It didn't get much better after that. Later I had a "double-cassette" machine, which meant I could record back and forth between two cassettes in an approximation of multi-track recording. I remember mixing two completely different instrumental pieces together, one track by ABBA with another by Status Quo, in different keys, because they had the same kind of ambience, a heavy atmospheric reverb feel. I think this is an early example of how I hear music. I became a musician really so that I had something to record that was my own, I picked up my sisters guitar and taught myself. Later I bought a cheap bass and found that to be the instrument I felt most comfortable with. I made all these recordings, playing bass, improvising on the piano and adding noise from my field recordings. I mixed them onto cassette and made little covers for them. It was quite a secret thing for me and was a long time before I presented anything to anyone.

M.V.: In your music, there are influences of Edgard Varese and John Cage. How is this connected with your inner expression in your own music style?

CG: Their influence, I would say, came to me quite late. After early teenage years listening to powerfully expressive music like punk and what came after, I discovered Steve Reich when I was attracted to the cover artwork of '*Drumming*', which is some kind of tapestry and in retrospect looks like a page of ProTools or mapped midi notes. I loved '*Drumming*' and from that became very interested in '*It's Gonna Rain*' and '*Come Out*' and the processes behind those, crucially analog recordings. Reich was being rediscovered by everybody in the 80's and minimalism was being turned into dance culture, which I happened to dislike for its digital repetitions. I find exact repetition to be extremely nullifying and unnatural, whereas analog repetitions make new faults into each copy of itself, which I think is what Reich was exploring in his Phase works, this subtle drifting out of time and back again. It seemed to me that it did not matter what the sound was, to Reich, but it was the process that was important. I, however, was very taken by the spoken word or field recording source materials of his early works and I went deeper into this with my own work, which aligned me with Cage and Varese, being more concerned with the 'thing' rather than the processing of the 'thing'. I'd never heard of musique concrete at this time, until I started researching this. I was also reading about Stockhausen, about reducing a

Beethoven symphony to a duration of one second and being left with a noise; a noise whose inner structure had been composed by Beethoven. So you have Varese with his “organized sound”, which totally brought classical music to life for me; Cage with his extension of that, all sound being available to the composer of music; and Stockhausen with his unrepeatable genius for experimenting with sound, and especially language. I think that Cage and Stockhausen, being such visionaries, spoke to me as much through their writing; it was quite difficult and expensive to source their work at that time, before the Internet. I was liberated by the knowledge that we need not be restricted by rhythm or by key or by timbre or duration. We can use anything to compose with, especially silence.

M.V : You have collaborated with many artists. You also had a chance to talk with Dave Hunt, a collaborator and sound engineer of *Diamanda Galas* ("Litanies of Satan "). What are your favorite memories of these experiences and how have they influenced your work?

I'm considering writing a book about Dave Hunt as he has a unique insight into the sound art scene, having worked with Max Eastley, David Toop, Michael Nyman, Ryoji Ikeda and many others, plus Diamanda of course. He bridges the divide between recorded and installation work, analog and digital eras, theatre and corporate, art and academia. I spent three hours talking to him and he was inspirational and very open. I have a similar background, in that I have worked as a sound engineer with a lot of artists, in the studio and in a live environment, and you do assume a collaborative role in assisting them to achieve their aims, you get very close to people and then it's gone. As an artist I really enjoy collaborating, there's no substitute for having someone beside you, sharpening your ideas, forcing you to go one step further.

M.V. : I have listened closely to your artistic creations. I am delighted to work with you on our new project, based on improvisation. But how does that actually work? Where does the inspiration for these new sounds originate? Explain the influences in your works such as "*Stay Where You Are*" and "*Breathing to Death*".

CG: Improvisation is about working together very intimately, listening to each other and the environment. For me I think it's best to leave identity outside and play without bias or personal baggage. We have to be broadminded, obliging and respectful. We have to be prepared to take risks and learn the value of mistakes. The two works you mention were the last two thirds of a trilogy of very different recordings I made for 'Three Legs Duck', a French netlabel. '*Breathing to Death*' is two separate improvisations edited together, one on top of the other. It was recorded in my kitchen. Location is important to me. I worked for a long time in very dry, treated studios where everything is pristinely recorded before you try to stamp it with a location. This is very tiring. I now find that I have to like the sound of a location in order to record there. I don't care too much about environmental interferences, they're

like weeds in a garden. It's part of the deal and you have to let them in. I like happy accidents, I'm not trying to create a perfect world, but just be a part of an imperfect one. I even take recordings that I've made in a studio and play them back through a speaker in a new environment and re-record them, to bring them to life. Hear their impact on the surroundings. This process is called Worldizing and was pioneered by Walter Murch in the movie industry. '*Stay Where You Are*', on the other hand, is my most recent release. It's really a piece of minimalism which I dedicate to a good friend who died 10 years ago this. This piece is very relevant on the subject of memory or remembering. The source material is a ringing telephone, from the 1980's, a proper analog ring, which I have processed with granular synthesis techniques. Communication is my current obsession and my new work is almost exclusively made with the human voice or telephones.

M.V. : As a multimedia artist, you have cooperated with artists in film too. Tell us how your collaboration started with *Filmgruppe Chaos*. Is the sound also based on experimental, acoustic improvisation ?

CG: I got in touch with Chaos about a year ago, after discovering some of their work online. They are based in Berlin and have been operating for some 40 years. They eventually started sending me short films in February and I think the collaboration will continue until someone dies because we're all very happy with the results. My process is different for each film, but I always watch the piece in silence several times, without bias, like I would approach an improvisation, like listening to a space before recording in it. I listen to what is going on in my mind at first, get a feel for the rhythm of the images or a particular frequency range. Then I start to think about it conceptually and decide what sort of sounds I might use. There is one piece for instance, '*Zeitgeist*', the footage of which was shot in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, it reminded me of an old recording I'd made many years before, in Brighton, UK, along the promenade, beside the sea; this recording contains a version of '*Everytime We Say Goodbye*' which was being played in some bar, and the song drifts in and out as I am walking up and down. I used this, not just for the lyrical content but for the juxtapositions: the happy sound of the seaside with the melancholy song, sitting with the statue and stone of the cemetery. The piece also contains a recording of some children running across a bridge which I thought provided some nice "sonic imagery", as a cemetery is one side of a bridge between life and death.

M.V.: Listening to your album "*The Light Slow Down*," which combines auto-improvisation and concrete music, I can feel somewhere the spirit of the sound of French composer Olivier Messiaen. Is there any impact of his work on you, and do you feel any connection with his music?

CG: It's nice that you notice this association and it is entirely unconscious, even though I have been listening to and reading about Messiaen for many years. The connection is nature, I would say. '*The Slow Light Down*' is a series of

interconnecting pieces which mostly began life as a collection of field recordings, not all from nature actually, and each of these became a template or map for the rhythmic structure of each piece. For example, '*Roadwork*' began as a recording I made of 15 men clearing snow from a street in Moscow. I mapped and remapped the rhythm of their tools against the road and the ice and recorded a drum track in time with it. This was the first piece I made which completely rejected repetitive rhythm and awakened me to the natural chaos of the world around me, which is something I think Messiaen explored with way more beautiful and natural sounding results than I could hope to achieve. He used notation to imitate or represent nature, a form of memory. Music was very much a language for him, into which he translated the world around him.

Relevant Links

Varese: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGFLUerbLhk>

Cage: <https://vimeo.com/12597582>

Reich: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGDo1YN_q3c

Stockhausen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcwLDxlNKdU>

Toop and Eastley: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?>

[v=BsTptTD8JXs&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsTptTD8JXs&feature=player_embedded)

Ikeda: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?>

[v=Gf8PY0kru2c&feature=player_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf8PY0kru2c&feature=player_embedded)

Filmgruppe Chaos: <http://www.filmgruppe-chaos.de/>

Clay Gold: <https://vimeo.com/claygold>