

Interview: Robert Scott Thompson

DEEP LISTENINGS,



1. For those who are unfamiliar with you and your music: could you tell me something about your beginnings, your studies and your artistic activities?

My orientation toward the creation of music is that of the experimentalist. I suppose I would be best described as a classical avant-gardist, though I do cross over significant stylistic boundaries in my music. Generally speaking, I am interested in the connection between sound (music) and "the landscape of consciousness." Often I refer to my activities in composition as "sonic biology" or "musical alchemy." I believe that sound has a universal importance in shaping human experience, and my creative activity is dedicated to an understanding of this phenomena.

As a composer I concentrate upon remaining actively engaged in creating in a variety of forms, from works for the virtuoso soloist to chamber music and orchestral works, to experimental pop music, I have cultivated a central focus in computer music. I am also interested in what I consider as two essential trends in the creation of new musical architectures, namely, the intersection of the avant-garde and popular music genres and the influence of World Music concepts on contemporary composition.

I am a university professor of music composition and electroacoustic music at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, where I have been teaching since 1989. Throughout the 1980's I was a sponsored researcher at the Center for Music Experiment (CME) Computer Audio Research Laboratory (CARL) at the University of California at San Diego. At CARL I was involved in advanced computer music research focusing primarily on software synthesis - the creation of unique sonic objects using hybridized synthesis methods, and digital signal processing.

In 1991, while a Fulbright Scholar, I was invited by the Danish Institute of Electroacoustic Music (DIEM) to create a computer music workstation based around cmusic and the CARL software. While there I was also a Composer in Residence working on my own projects. The result of my research at DIEM is the compact disc *The Strong Eye* a 67 minute computer music work. This was released by Aucourant Records as the first CD in the Computer Music Series.

As a computer musician - and, as a musician in general I suppose - my approach is probably best described as eclectic. My fundamental interest is in the sonic object itself (be that a timbre, a gesture or a complete work of art) rather than in the out-working of a specific and particular process, or the algorithmic definition of a musical form. I approach the creation of computer music works, for example, in much the same way that I approach writing for acoustic forces. My tools, techniques and methods are malleable by design and bend to the dictates of the particular circumstance. Obviously, to work at a high level in computer applications to art, the practitioner must also be a programmer - it is a necessity. In my practice, I endeavor to keep the programs and methods used to facilitate the creation of a work hidden from the listener. They are, after all, simply a means to an end.

My early musical experiences were shaped by environmental forces, much like many others I expect. There was a piano in the house, a grand, and as a child I was very attracted to it. I began to spontaneously compose, as distinct from improvise, strange, clangorous, pieces. I would also play inside the body of the instrument. I was about eight years old at the time. We also had many records in the house and a large reel to reel tape-recorder that did not work very well. This odd machine fascinated me, it had a big glowing green eye, a vacuum tube for a VU meter. My earliest work was with tape recorders, eventually I learned about electronic sound generation.

The music of the progressive rock movement of the 1970's had a profound impact on me. Bands such as Genesis, Yes, King Crimson, PFM, Jethro Tull and the like were of great interest to me. I have admired not only the musicianship but also the forms and structures used. My first serious instrument was the electric guitar, but it was through progressive music that I became interested in the synthesizer. I was fascinated by the sonic resources of the primitive early synthesizers, which I believed at the time were surely infinite. The timbres of the instruments of the 70's were very attractive. The MiniMoog, with it's marvelous filter, the ARP 2600's fat analog sound and the ethereal timbres of the Mellotron and the Chamberlain.

From the very beginning I have been interested in the notion that the purpose and point of musical activity in composition was the sound object itself. If one could control all of the parameters of a complex sound then one could truly and completely compose within this new framework of a "music of sounds." I was delighted to learn along the way that Varese, Cage, and Eno, among others, were already working along the same philosophical track.

Early on I realized that my ultimate goal was the mastery of software synthesis computer music techniques, though at the time I had no idea what this actually meant. Now it is clear to me that my ideas have also been shaped by the computer music instruments themselves. Random access recording has changed completely the way I conceive of recordings in the studio and the process of creating a mix. These days I have used very little multitrack tape. Software synthesis, using one of the available "acoustic compilers", Csound for example, has also figured prominently in the definition of my general technique.

2. What are your main influences and how have they shaped your music and your artistic point of view?

The notion that any and all sound is viable musical material is a distinctly post 1945, avant-garde experimentalist point of view. And, living in this time of mass communication it is impossible not to have been influenced, and profoundly so, by stimulus in my environment. My main influences therefore are of two different kinds, sonic, and what I refer to as "points of ideation."

I am often influenced (and sometimes quite positively) by the music of other contemporary composers. So, I listen a great deal to new music. Recordings have always fascinated me and I have been an avid collector.

At home, when I was growing up there was a rather large though admittedly populist collection of records. Among the recordings a considerable number of seminal releases including Dylan and Hendrix, the Doors, the Beatles and the Stones, the Who, Led Zepplin. There were also many records of art-music spanning from the Renaissance to the 20th century. My parents were very interested in classical music and opera. My father was a composer in his youth.

While at school, one of my mates showed me his Roxy Music LPs, there were only three at the time, the most recent was Stranded. He would play them for me, albeit only rarely. He was extremely protective of those records. This devotion intrigued me. Later I got my own copies of the Roxy releases and learned of Brian Eno. I came upon Another Green World in a record store, the cover fascinated me and connecting Eno with Roxy I bought it. The first listening was a revelation which had the profound effect of re-focusing my ideas and musical goals. Similar experiences over the years with other composer's music have shaped my development. Somewhat later I became immersed in the experimental avant-garde. I study this music continuously because I also work a great deal in this area. George Crumb's timbric and gestural variety was of great interest initially, then I learned of Webern, Schoenberg, Xenakis, Stockhausen and many others.

My influences are also philosophical, scientific and psycho-spiritual. In fact, these "points of ideation", are crucial to me in my compositional process. While I believe that the sounds organized in time is sufficient for a sonic work of art, I like to have a mental, intuitive, connection to the work, a sub-text as a point of orbit during the long process of creating a piece. John Cage's influence here is significant, as is the influence of my teachers, Roger Reynolds and Joji Yuasa. My training was in the tradition of mentoring and apprenticeship; it is inevitable that some key traits and philosophies will be passed on.

3. You have a huge discography: do you consider yourself an avant-garde musician or what else?

As I mentioned at the outset, I would refer to myself as an avant-garde musician. However, it seems that the stylistic barriers have eroded so significantly that the distinctions often seem arbitrary and offer little in the way of illumination. Is not every composer working today a member of some avant-garde?

A few years ago I was referring to my work in three basic categories, avant-garde (which includes orchestral and computer music), ambient and experimental pop. These personal distinctions are quickly eroding, or shall I say, blending into each other, creating new hybrids. It is true that I am working in these three categories of style, and computer music forms a large part of my avant-garde work. I enjoy almost too much about music. It is a discipline which invites, or perhaps compels, a more narrow focus, for example, a focus on only one particular style. Such narrow devotion is not of much interest to me however, and I like the opportunity to shift focus after some months and work in a different stylistic domain.

One thread that seems to interconnect my work is an interest in the reflection of avant-garde conceptions of musical materials and methods upon music aimed at a broader, popular, audience. It is not so much that I desire popularity as an end result, rather my music is shaped irrevocably by environmental and temporal forces. Recently, someone asked me about blending all three styles on one recording - I would resist doing this on principle. However, it seems that this person was already hearing something that I believe is occurring in my work, this portends a deeper kind of synthesis of ideas, a more significant blurring of distinction.

My discography dates back to 1976 or so. Much of the early music was released on cassette and little of it holds much relevancy for me now. Over the past, nearly 20 years, I have created roughly 45 album projects. Some of the recordings are very special to me, but none of it is holding me back from creating new things.

4. I really appreciate your article about psychoacoustics: please explain your interest and your ideas in this field.

Joji Yuasa, one of my most special teachers and noted Japanese composer, remarked at one time that the future of music, its development into the coming centuries, will be concerned with the origination of musical theories based in the effects of sounds organized in time upon our consciousness. If one thinks about the possibility of sound organized in time itself (apart from the composer/performer) becoming a creative force, through its action - inciting moods,

memories, meditations, reveries and reflections - the scope of application for psychological theories of music as applied to composition quickly expands.

My work in ambient music is closely related to this concept. What Brian Eno calls "thinking music" and Erik Satie referred to as "musique d'ameublement" (or furniture music). These ideas are surely not new by any means, but to a world which cuts itself off from a reference to the past with its intention to reinvent itself and its products on a continual basis, and which tends to discount moments of introspective perception, they appear as fresh, new conceptions to the majority of uninitiated listeners. The whole ambient movement, especially in its current forms which blend environmental and instrumental sounds, is of great interest. I like a great deal of the music produced in the genre. Clearly, with the advent of recording and the utility of the personal listening space and headphones we have invented new uses, and perhaps new needs, for music. Naturally there is danger in this as concert music is clearly suffering, but this is another matter. Ambient music can also be very close to the "music of sounds", so important to John Cage and Edgar Varese, in conception. This is of interest because it opens the ears of listeners for the new music of the 21st Century.

I am of the opinion that every mind, in the sense of consciousness, is unique. Every brain is also unique in terms of its physical structure. It follows that the activity of "hearing", in the sense of critical or attentive listening, even for emotive stimulation, is unique among listeners. How is it that a piece of sonic art can have an immediate and enrapturing effect upon a concert audience, or a recording become iconic in its own time (Switched on Bach, Tubular Bells, Dark Side of the Moon)? How music moves us to a transcendental moment of experience intrigues me and this is my interest generally speaking.

Psychoacoustics is a very young field of study. There are two basic approaches to it, one through the psychology of perception and the other through the psychology of affect. I am interested in the latter. Studying how music affects listeners, in terms of emotions, consciousness, feeling states and the like, is very difficult for the obvious reasons. Suffice it to say that I am more interested in the realm of consciousness than in mechanical stimulus/response models.

In the long run it will be common for composers and sound artists to intelligently use the information gleaned from psychoacoustics in the creation of new sound complexes or musical compositions. If one listens critically to much of today's music it becomes obvious that music is, for the time being, largely ill-used by the majority of its practitioners.

5. What kinds of music do you listen to? And please list your favorite artists.

My listening habits are eclectic and I tend to go through phases of listening that seem to have some significance to my work. I have been listening to avant-garde art music, both electronic and acoustic, continuously. I tend to enjoy music of the more experimental composers such as Ligeti, Lutoslowski, Xenakis, Stockhausen and the like. I have a large interest in the Italian composers Berio, Nono and Maderna. Of late I have been interested in some of the composers from Eastern Europe. I am also a very big fan of Takemitsu and Yuasa, for me these are the two masters of the modern orchestra.

In other genres: I am very fond of ORB, Future Sound of London, Eno, and other similar composers. I am especially fond of Thomas Dolby who I feel is horribly under-rated as a composer.

I receive recordings at my label on a daily basis. Some of these are quite interesting. Nearly all of the music sent to me at the moment is unpublished and there are such amazing things being done. The sad fact is that the major labels and their distribution companies have saturated the market with over-produced "Hollywood" style music and it is making it impossible for smaller companies to consider putting out something innovative. I have dedicated Aucourant Records toward a 21st century vision and am actively seeking innovative new music for publication.

World music is of special interest to me as well. I derive a great deal of inspiration from listening to the music of other cultures. Particularly Persian Classical music, which is among my favorites, and Balinese and Javanese gamelan.

6. What is the perception of your music in USA and in Europe?

My work is still only known to a very small audience. This is not of great concern to me, although I would like to have more acceptance for my compositions. In the USA I have some very dedicated broadcasters who play my music quite a bit. In Europe I have people writing me all the time asking for discs so, I think my work is getting around albeit slowly. The two main problems are getting into the stores with the recordings and getting print reviews in the various key magazines. Without these things it is hard to get any audience at all.

Recently, I have been getting my work into Japan which I think is a place where there may be some interested listeners. However, they also tend to be into very commercial, mainstream stuff such as "Hollywood" music and hard rock. It is yet to be seen if I will catch on there. On the other hand, I am getting nearly constant airplay in Latvia of all places. I am also moving my work into Hungary through some interested radio people. This is really gratifying for me. I want people to be able to listen to my work and find the CDs if they are interested.

One of the biggest problems is with independent distribution. It is really difficult to find a committed distribution company who will get the recordings to the record shops. This is especially true in the USA which has the largest market for recordings in the world. Japan seems more open to new sounds and ideas about music. Europe remains an enigma to me. There have been some moments of interest but nothing has culminated yet and I am still looking for a

distribution company who can help my records find their way into the shops there. Many of the indie distributors are clearly understaffed and undercapitalized. In Europe it is rare to even get a response to a solicitation.

7. It seems that in this age dominated by electronics anyone can sit and play good music (I mean, you don't need to have a classical training...); what do you think about the situation. Do you think technology helps creativity?

There are a number of issues here. Does musical creativity require a "training"? Obviously, it does not. I would suggest however that creativity in a general sense is served by various "trainings" and mindsets. I think that unique music requires a unique vision. Great music, by contrast, has very special requirements it seems, and I do not know what they are really. Exceptional talent is indeed rare. For the rest of us, practice, experimentation, realizing goals - these things are required to grow as a creative artist.

It is certainly the case that modern electronic synthesizers have irrevocably changed the way music is made. I tend to use synthesizers in my pop and ambient work and use mainframe computers in my avant-garde work. I feel that essentially the synthesizer is a rather bleak instrument. It is true that recent instruments sound very beautiful indeed. It is just that commercial synthesizers are conceived in a very particular way and use, to perhaps too great an extent, a piano-style keyboard as an interface. MIDI itself tends to favor equal temperament as a rule and 12 tones per octave. Naturally, a certain kind of music is possible using these tools. It is amazing what composers have done to circumvent the more limiting attributes of these instruments.

Also it is undeniable that MIDI software and innovative synthesizer designs have allowed many people to become active in creating musical compositions who would not have otherwise. I tend to think that these new technologies for music also have a tremendous impact on basic musical creativity. For example, I have moved from analog tape recording, the typical multi-track paradigm, to tapeless disk-based recording during the last year and the effect on my own creative processes has been profound. I first got interested in the digital audio workstation, as these kinds of systems are often called, while I was working at the Danish Institute of Electroacoustic Music in Aarhus in the Spring and Summer of 1991. There they have an AudioFrame hard disk system. Working with the system I created the compact disc *The Strong Eye*. That experience has changed my methods completely.

During the 1980's I was a researcher at the Center for Music Experiment Computer Audio Research Laboratory under the direction of F. Richard Moore, the well known designer of the *cmusic* acoustic compiler. During that time I created some of my most ambitious computer music - all of it in the digital domain on a mainframe computer. Some of this music can be found on the compact disc *Shadow Gazing* which I released last year.

8. What is the direction you are going now? Are you planning any new sound explorations?

At the moment I am working on a new pop album. I have not released in this genre for nearly ten years. The recording, called *The Science of Change*, will be out in late 1996. I am blending my various techniques together along with vocals to create, I hope, a unique and enjoyable recording. This is not a new direction really, but perhaps a refinement of my work in the genre.

I have also recently completed a new CD or computer music entitled *Gwyddon* which I hope to have out by the end of the year as well. This is all new material created on the mainframe computer and I think it has turned out quite well.

A recent album, *Air Friction*, a collection of ambient work, has opened a new direction for me and I intend to put quite a bit of effort into developing further my projects in this genre. I think that *Air Friction* has turned out quite well and it contains some very evocative material. My next ambient release, perhaps within two years, will be very different I am sure as I am interested in pulling in more environmental material.

One of my current projects is sound collection from the field. I am particularly interested in squeaking hinges, rusty door frames and other similar complex sound sources. Once I have collected the sounds I use digital signal processing to slow down and unravel them. My work in this particular kind of activity is on-going.

9. Choose your favorite album.

I would have to say that *Ginnungagap* is perhaps my current favorite project. Not only do I like the flow of the album but the dedication to my father is personally important to me. He was the one who really got me going in all of this and was a tireless supporter of my dreams.

10. Your future projects.

In addition to the upcoming releases I have already mentioned I am working on some new acoustic music, a work for clarinet and computer generated sound for F. Gerrard Errante entitled *Canto "de las Sombras"* and a work for large orchestra. My violin work *Sutras* will be recorded by Janos Nagyesy and released on Neuma Records in 1996 and a new recording of ambient music to be released on Oasis of Canada will be out in 1996 also.

Thanks for the opportunity to share my ideas with you through this interview.