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

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 seminal composers belonging to two generations of post-war modern music, with particular regard to their divergent 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 on 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 Weibem. In Weibem everything was fixed, exactly. And I felt that the sound of the music was coming partly from this Weibenian 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 Moxy 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...
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, and he might just like I could pinpoint what I think that the continuous in 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 I think he's done, just like I could pinpoint what I feel 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 pinpoint. 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 would you 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: Bunila 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 any determinacy 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 Bunila 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 intersect 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 he 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 La Monte, I think about one thing. I hate to make a generality, and my first generality, the kind that Morty's talking about, is the kind defined by the composer's craft. I mean, if he is a great composer practically from the opening sounds the rest of the piece unfolds, you know, and that's continuity. But well, it's not actually a question of searching, as John pointed out in Res, 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 is the interrelationship in my whole association with John in the early years, the big influence — 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.'

BM: Well, I think that's the thing 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 next 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, 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 had heard really much John Cage yet when I wrote for Brass. So that in that piece this concept of continuity of the old kind of continuity. I'm thinking now that we can talk of two types of continuity. There's the later, new 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 is a great composer practically from the opening sounds the rest of the piece unfolds, you know, and that's continuity. But well, it's not actually a question of searching, as John pointed out in Res, 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 is the interrelationship in my whole association with John in the early years, the big influence — 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.'

BM: All right. As I was coming down here, with
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La Monte Young, Trio for Strings, 1958, page 1 of 11. Copyright © 1964
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Feldman and Young: A conversation on composition and improvisation

The Well-Tuned Piano might tend to be, or
Do you mean Dream House.

You can say those are scores, but the
M: Do you think it's composition?

I-.../;

way I improvise is for me a very special experience,
Oh, See, the way I deal with words like that is that
And that is... did you hear The Well-Tuned Piano?

M: Yes, I did.

LY: Oh good. So, what I do is, when I sit down to play
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
Morty's heard The Well-Tuned Piano, Monty'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 attache case, and
pull it out and show it to another composer, and it may
just be pages and pages of words, As Poems 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...

Do you mean that experience, or composition?

LY: Just remind me of what the Maleviches look like.

M: Malevich is white on white.

MF: Malevich is a lot. There's more furniture. So in
that sense I think 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.

LY: Malevich is white on white, Mondrian, in the way he himself never—
M: He just reminded me of what the Maleviches look like.

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LY: Malevich is white on white, Mondrian, in the way he himself never—
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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—

**FM:** That is composition.

**LY:** That is composition.

**MF:** What's that I would call it?

**LY:** No; but variation means that it comes out of the material, that there are implications of this new material out of the source material.

**LY:** 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 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?

**LY:** It's carrying out the idea of composition, 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 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 improvisory outbursts that weave out of the old material.

**FP:** Yes—that's that 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?

**MF:** But I think there's also another factor, which has to do with what Monty 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 in a way that 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 performed, that's happened because the notation at that time developed into allowing a lot of freedom. 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 handle the event. Whereas in the case of La Monte, it isn't.

**LY:** Well, it's interesting how this approach came to me, of working away from rhythms, 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 which rhythm really gradually—well, there are different ways of putting it. For me, this 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—which is 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 *Augmentation*. Essentially, by rhythm here what was meant was a kind of articulation where you could make the gestures a little quicker in the ear, you see. Okay, now that's what I'm talking about, 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 first piece, how could I put this? On one hand the piece looks conventional, in the sense that you have metronome modulations that 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 licks is going faster usually 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 it was always involved with rhythmic shape.

**LY:** 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 voluntary—rhythmic shape; it might be a little slower than most other music, but it's still rhythmic. 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 presence of rhythmic shape, or time shapes, and so forth.

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Right. Okay, that's a very good point, and it's one that's been challenged by many performers, since the day I wrote that score. When I wrote that piece, you see, I mean even though one does not hear this underlying musical pulse that I wrote as a way to determine how long things would be and when notes would enter and whatever, it would have made sense when they entered — even though — if you'll pardon me. I mean I go through that every day with my students. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

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

MF: But you had written Composition 1960 Number 7 is between —

LV: 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 notes that can enter and what kind of maybe feeling they give 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.

LV: 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 finding 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 was the direction I had to go in, that I really wanted to do this very, very much.

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

LV: Sure.

MF: What made you use the — what were you thinking about in terms of notating something like this? Certainly noting 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-eighth instance.

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and composition. Wouldn't you say that composition is something which you're looking at as you're writing it, and concertrating on it, that it keeps us on our own railroad tracks, so to speak, as John Cage would say? Would 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: What do you think happens in improvisation—is it a discipline?

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 Vivaldi.

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 Vivaldi's able to hit the ball at a very conventional speed. McEnroe is just starting there, and I'm convinced that there might be something the matter with his—some mental eye vision, that perhaps it's because he's a great—he has something that other people don't have. He has an unfortunate disposition where he sees things coming at him slowly. And that's the same thing with notation. To me things are coming very, very slowly. One of the things that I think in teaching—again I have to refer to my teacher, because teaching made me conscious of many of these things—is that the reason nothing is really happening is that the music is passing. If they can't handle; the music is passing. If they can't leave it alone, and they can't let it sit, then they're going back in the past, and I think that's the thing that Morton pointed out; it has such a slow motion way that Morton pointed out; it has such a

LY: But I learned so much from Seymour Shinn, for instance. Sometimes some of your teachers are people 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 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 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 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 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 with Pandit Pran Nath.
great vogue, which is that when you can compose at the speed, you can forget all of these very fine things; you’re not just writing the headlines that, as he said, are so frequently the substance of improvisation. You can’t really do that; if you do, 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 five minutes you wouldn’t, for example, you also had a whole another section, a whole another section in the middle in “The Magic Chord,” and I’ve felt that same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to see the same kind of thing in my context, so I wanted to 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clear my mind and try to open myself up to this higher power that transmits through me—I'm trying to get 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 performers orally. I haven't let them read them litera-

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 that way. This means that we 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, it is sometimes colored by the performer who then takes this written-out piece, and I think there's also then some relationship between the performer playing the written-out work and me, the performer, playing out my preconceived work that I have notated on my fingertips.

PF: Would you say that only you could perform your own writings? L: Well, then, this is what I was explaining downstairs, where I showed you some of the intensity 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'll talk about later.

MF: Yes. L: 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 with all the freedom that's possible. Somebody 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 of documented—that still to this day is very strong and viable, and it came down by oral transmission, guru-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 are a very strong, viable—

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

L: 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.

MF: You started in admiration of that tradition. L: But in admiration of that tradition which I became exposed to in the late fifties.

L: Actually, La Monté became very led up with performances, because he couldn't get good performances of his work.

PF: 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.

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

MF: That's right.

PF: 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. Even an Indian musician who does not have a master, nobody can play your pieces if he 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 earliest composing and the traditional apprenticeship?

L: 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 takes up his piano, and the sheets, and to begin, 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 depending on his ability, Could become significant or not. So, how I've heard it, and I had been impressed, and—

PF: He gets more something like what Morty was talking to its headlines, and that's not what the work is.

L: He gets the headlines. I was getting to some degree, headlines. Except that I feel the work, my "headlining work," such as the soprano 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 Monté Young. It was not Indian classical music, in any sense of the word. This is what I'm saying, La Monté 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're aware. That I did in music, was—there were long tones before. But they were always drones over, under, a melody, or they were always cantoforms, or a pedal point with some stuff going on over it.

PF: Yes, 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.

L: 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.

MF: But I think when La Monté 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.

PF: 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 this 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 they don't know if you've heard that of—

L: 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 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 it sat down and wrote 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, it's really also a question of your perceptiveness and your perceiving: the state of your mind that you are in when you listen to it? Maybe you go to the point of understanding the whole music of Webern at that moment—you know, you went 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 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 other pieces where the piece itself is not 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 of the time frame of music so essential, traditionally, has a piece like the Dream House, which does not have, ideally, this time framework, because it's always as, in a certain sense is a "piece" if it's a piece in another sense. I wonder if you could say something maybe to what sense this music may be and how would Morty get about it, about the definition of what a piece in music is—FP: But before we go on, I have a feeling this conversation has to be done in two sections. And I had that feeling that work with computers are working now. They are the study 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. ME: 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 reveal—FP: Well, and maybe it's the way to think about 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 you've been writing, and that happens on so many different levels that that notation we are discerning is just one way to try to get into it. ME: 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 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 is captured there. But then having that captured, I can use it 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 in time, no matter how much you have practiced, that is not present in the performance of a written piece, at least not to the extent, although there is just 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. Moron, I know that you have been involved with the question of memory, you've been thinking about it, you've been thinking about Francis Yates and Procto. 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 called?—a Greek eternal curse of sorts, that the composer must live in this silence with this thing that he is putting down on paper. Let me give you one anecdote that was very important in my life. It changed my music. I was amazed greatly to what my music would've become in written form. As I was eighteen or seventeen, I started to visit Yasue, 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 moronal tradition of a support system for a young composer. I guess a year and a half, two years later, I had been starting to write a one hundred-page-long thing that I absolutely said one thing which was responsible for my music. He said to me, "You have to remember the amount of time it takes to read a note, 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, just of that, 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. 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 Louis Monot was saying when I was a twenty-one-year-old, I would've actually to see these long durations in form, the duration because there's a fantastic fear in all societies, probably including India. I know, as someone who loves non-western music, 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 I write and that Morty writes, and even John Cage writes, and the kind represented by Indian classical music, is that we really write in static form. Whereas Indian classical music is really in climactic form. It starts out with a very slow beginning. The notes gradually evolve and develop organically, then you bring in the table, at usually a slower speed, and then gradually it starts getting faster and faster, and then the same kind of conception, that static and climactic form, and in spite of the drone, in spite of the set of the only certain pitches that run all the way through each piece, 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 chanting. And then, however, was static, and there's American Indian chanting too, and that's pretty static. Then you can move through Michael 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 statics 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 interesting forms in the Western classical music was Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra, and Summer Morning by a Lake—Colors piece, where it starts to show up, in really static form.
FP: But all continually—
LY: Churning.
MF: Well, continually rippling with the bass clarinet.
LY: And then it moves through, as I see the Viennese line of statics evolving, into what we're doing.
MF: Varèse particularly is the music of statics. And I think that's one of the most interesting aspects that was. I think that if you hear, you automatically get involved in a musical statics. Cage's music has no musical statics.
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 are not going 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, sure. I guess it took me a while to get around to this, but that was just one of the things I found very striking in Morty's music, and I had been following this static line coming through Schoenberg and into Webern and Varèse. Of course, in my writings, like in my Lecture 7960, I was talking about the importance of statics 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 Oruans. I don't know what he heard; I don't know how he did it. But there is a sort of existential, experiential anxiety than any other culture. I know that you have been involved with the question of memory, you've been thinking about it, you've been thinking about it. One is free of it. But I really think that it's a Western invention to present the environment of time. We should not forget that a raga invariably ends on a descending note, in tone and in thematic nature of the music, is possibly a generic 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 Oruans. I don't know what he heard; I don't know how he did it. But there is a sort of existential, experiential anxiety than any other culture. I don't think Oriental cultures are free of it. But all continually—
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, 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—we 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 cyclecy 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 gnali, 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 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. I think 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 up 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 opposite 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.

LY: 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 sides of the coin where you have the totally static and the totally climactic, you have this vast expanse where the two very strong opposite 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.

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 people, 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.