

[The below essay was written for Essential Music's 10th Anniversary 3-concert festival at The Kitchen in 1997.]

EM = X

Essential implies necessary, indispensable. We are near the end of a prolific epoch of history, yet amidst all of the proliferation, experimentation, and rupture of belief, there is a shortage of meaning. Essential Music was formed to help address this void, by enacting events that stand in contrast to the prevalent docile harmony. For us, the necessary, indispensable, essential music is that which helps restore the meaning of things.

– From the program of our second concert, 1987

As we approached this anniversary, we have been reminded that our initial impulse to start Essential Music was to attempt to fulfill a need. It was never about adding another new music group to the community or finding a performance niche with a unique specialization. It was, and continues to be, about music – lots of music – that needs playing and hearing.

From the beginning, we knew that this effort could not be restricted by a specific instrumentation or unchanging ensemble. We hoped to avoid the prevailing trend in our musical culture in which the personalities of performers and the marketing of an ensemble overshadows the music. And so we proceeded with the notion that from a leadership of two, we would adapt the group to each project and piece of music with the flexibility to do anything we chose.

Because both of us are composers trained as percussionists, Essential Music has always had percussion at its core. The historical role of percussion in 20th Century music, and the expansive nature of percussion as an ever-growing family of instruments and sounds, has afforded us a center from which we could go in many directions.

Percussion is completely open. It is not even open-ended. It has no end. With percussion, you will find yourself thinking of the next step to be taken in that direction. Perhaps you will need new material, new technologies. You have them. You are in the world of X, chaos, the new science. The spirit of percussion opens everything, even what was, so to speak, completely closed.

- John Cage, 1989

It seemed to us in 1987 that most concerts of new music lacked a programming rationale, and any spirit worthy of the term *new*. We sought to reinvigorate things by joining the new with forgotten works from earlier in the century, and thereby regenerate a context for the present and the future. But with such a tremendous range of 20th Century music to choose from, and musicians and audiences alike exhausted by an orgy of musical styles, we declared the importance of finding a path out of the forest and into the future. In notes for a 1988 retrospective of the music of Dary John Mizelle, we unabashedly linked the act of performance with belief:

Why do we call ourselves Essential Music? It is not bravado – it is discrimination. As part of a musical community that is seemingly aesthetically tired and often paralyzed in its capacity to assert judgment, what we decide to program – and not program – defines our values. We choose this music – carefully – because we feel it has meaning worthy of advocacy and contemplation, and because its appearance fulfills a need in the community.

Critical to our thinking then, and still today, is the imperative of presenting music as a form of environmental and cultural consciousness. We needed no further catalyst in this regard than the widespread lack of understanding of the music of John Cage. And there are many other composers, with a wide range of intentions and non-intentions, whose work is incomplete when listened to as only a set of notes. Morton Feldman declared the spirituality of listening when he said, "There was a deity in my life, and that was *sound*." Ministering this idea became for us a union of environmentalism and music, and a way to broaden and soften the musical landscape of New York.

To ears that are expanded what a harp this world is! The occupied ear thinks that beyond the cricket no sound can be heard, but there is an immortal melody that may be heard morning, noon, and night, by ears that can attend, and from time to time this man or that hears it, having ears that were made for music.

– Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau's sensibility and the framework of American tradition provided by Henry Cowell's *New Music Editions*, Peter Garland's *Soundings*, and the Tone Roads Ensemble of Philip Corner, Malcolm Goldstein, and James Tenney, all served as a legacy which we sought to amplify. In 1989, we began a tradition of including an essay in our annual season flyer, and while this initial effort may be overdone with the idealism and flowery excesses of youth, it still makes our case today:

A TRADITION OF POSSIBILITY

The music of the Twentieth Century is often viewed as a series of aesthetic dead ends. In the urbane community of compositional fashion, it is in vogue to believe that the tonality of "minimalism" and "neo-romanticism" is the backward path out of this perceived dead end – as if pitch relation were the determinant of musical endurance. Concerts of new music are often plagued by an unfocused neutrality towards the music presented, and what it may or may not have to do with our world. In other venues, new music is presented as spectacle and sensation, a commodity to be consumed and forgotten. Meanwhile, decades worth of great American music lies unplayed and unknown, full of promise and possibility. Where are we, and where do we turn to center our musical values?

The question of aesthetic focus is more than one of a privileged intellectual dilemma. We live in an era which has as ethical imperative the careful and conscious allocation of energy and resources, beginning with our own. In the dimension of human energy, it is possible to funnel collective sentiments and sensibilities into resonating fields of ideas, to generate social change and

historical movements. Art is more than metaphor, it is also agent.

If we choose art to be our work amidst the social and environmental devastation that surrounds us, our choices cannot be indiscriminate. And in full cognizance of the impossibility of finding easy and definite solutions, it would seem our beckoning is this: to see that our work contributes, albeit in abstract, tangential, and minuscule ways, to a more diverse, and thereby healthy cultural landscape.

Music, being one of the original, magical elements of the ecosystem, is a garden from which many seeds of consciousness can be spread. Of the many musical movements propagated in this century, one stands out for its enduring openness and inexhaustible possibility: the American Experimental Tradition. Usually relegated to the fringe of the music world, often forgotten, and sometimes misunderstood and despised, this tradition embraces a protean and non-didactic variety of forms and aesthetics. At its core is a celebration of this century's sense of rupture and renewal, the collision and integration of cultures, and the extension of consciousness into new worlds.

Essential Music believes the American Experimental Tradition is of particular relevance to the questions that need to be asked today. Our concerts do not represent a polemical agenda; they are a small offering from the rich musical garden we live amidst. We share these concerts with the community in the hope that they reflect on the issues at hand. Please join us if you share this hope, and help us resonate what we think is essential music.

The joy for us is that people have joined us. The roster of extraordinary musicians who have played with Essential Music might suggest to some that we go through a lot of friendships, or that our ensemble lacks identity. On the contrary, including many musicians has been a deliberate effort to see our work and the music we play go more far afield.

The great learning takes root in clarifying the way wherein the intelligence increases the process of looking straight into one's heart and acting on the results. It is rooted in watching with affection the way people grow. It is rooted in coming to rest, being at ease in perfect equity.

– Confucius' text as used by Cornelius Cardew, translated by Ezra Pound

This weekend of concerts gives us a chance to mix brand new music with the recent, old, and forgotten, featuring music by those who might be called our signature composers. The model for this kind of linkage comes from Peter Garland's journal *Soundings*, which for many years served as a source for unpublished scores. Garland's music captures the spirit of a new musical era that goes back to the early work of Henry Cowell in the 1920's, in which composers have drawn on many traditions besides the western classical tradition. We might think of it as pan-cultural music, or use Garland's term "new indigenous music" – but more important than a label is that the composers we link are unabashed in nurturing the element of music that Cowell described as "the force of its spirit".

We are the first generation ever to have access to all the world's cultures. This is

perhaps the single-most important fact: the entire world is open to view, our culture and its attitudes are placed in a proper perspective amidst a multitude of others. 'World music' ceases to be exotic or peripheral: it becomes the heart of a search for a re-casting of values...And this is the key: not only that we are one among many (equals), but that we are all *ethnic* music, ethnic, the music is rooted in the land, and in us.

– Peter Garland, 1974

Over time, the music of certain composers has become rooted in us, from the earthy designs of Dary John Mizelle and James Tenney, to the lyrical freedom of Robert Ashley and the gregarious social dialogue of William Duckworth. Their work speaks in very different ways to the musical climate at our inception described by Kyle Gann:

Undoubtedly our musical situation is fragmented. But the overriding duality that pertains is not minimalism vs. serialism, but minimalism/serialism vs. X, with many of the more thoughtful composers trying to figure out what X is. It has something to do with intuition, with the choice of a note or rhythm simply because one likes it, or has something emotional or spiritual to express; it has to do with the transcendence of *technique*, which from our habitual science-worship Americans presently overvalue. The challenge is to rescue subjectivity from bad faith, to learn to rely once again on taste, feeling, inspiration, and the right brain.

– Kyle Gann, *The Village Voice*, 1987

Ten years later, that challenge still applies, but it seems the "X-factor" Kyle described is less of a mystery. In fact, our many concerts have been devoted to exhibiting what those "thoughtful composers" have been up to.

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One particularly thoughtful composer has passed on since we began our work. During our first five seasons, John Cage was a devoted audience member, giving us tremendous encouragement and validation with his presence and interest. We really miss him. His presence and influence is still everywhere in the music we play and the work we do. He led the way in creating a climate of musical freedom, and he would want nothing more than for all of us to take this freedom and run with joy. And so we play on. But not before saying thank you to the many musicians, composers, and audience members who we share this with.

– John Kennedy and Charles Wood,
Artistic Directors