

AFTER THE NOISE

In his first interview in several years, David Jackman discusses his latest works, the architecture of the Organum sound, and his ongoing departure from Noise.

Interview by Kevin Spencer during April/May of 2007.

Q1. The new trilogy of SANCTUS, AMEN, and OMEGA is your longest work to date. How did it start ?

A1. Those works have got me into a bit of trouble. Some critics have inferred irony or game-playing where there is none. Perhaps those folks are stuck in a frame of reference which says that an artist should never, ever say anything which he actually means. Others, not constrained by such fetters, sit easy with the work.

As for the sounds, the pieces of the trilogy have some of their extremely loose origin in my liking for several of our early English Christian texts, such as the Miles Coverdale Bible, and in my enjoyment of the many forms of Christian chant, including psalmody. In particular, I am drawn to the unhurried pace of the chant.

Compositionally, not much happened in the way of sounds which were of any real value until a day when, in need of some drones, I paid attention to an old Hammond organ tucked away in a corner of my local studio. And so it began, the work which grew into SANCTUS, a piece with the unusual feature of being dedicated to an individual, in this case my mother. She died in unfortunate circumstances many, many years ago.

The rest of the trilogy, AMEN and OMEGA, followed in fits and starts, one piece from the other. There was no overall plan and it is not possible for me to describe the very long and complicated process of making the three works, except to say that it was one of the more arduous tasks of my life. Now that they are done, it is clear to me that they are pieces which I had always wanted to make.

The process which led to those works began in mid-2003 and concluded in early 2007. Along the way a total of thirteen albums got built and ten of those got scrapped. It was tough going at times. I got there in the end.

Currently in progress is a revival of one of the ten Lost Ones. It is in roughly the same vein as the trilogy, although I consider it to be an entirely separate work. Beyond this latest piece I have no idea.

The first two parts of the threesome have an obvious flavour of Christianity, an ambience which probably does not merit much discussion beyond saying that it is an echo from my childhood. One gets old. One considers these things.

The trilogy is tonal and more or less consonant. The final piece, OMEGA, has a dash of buried dissonance here and there, but Noise, in its full and, I am sorry to say, now worn-out glory, is absent from my thoughts. Instead, for this set I am thinking about the big slow shapes in time, and

about structure, proportion, deliberate design. Those sorts of consideration are, I suppose, rooted in my far-away background in the visual. Works of visual art and of architectural engineering are of more inspiration than most pieces of music could ever be; I mean with regard to the shapes for each composition.

Incidentally, in these works there is no connection to anything 'alternative'. I am just making my own music, nothing more. I am not offering a 'position'. I do get a little tired of saying that. People expect far too much of a few sounds.

The new music involves a lot of repetition; more accurately, near-repetition. It is a quality which I find most elegant. In the visual arts, such formal arrangement would be greeted without a murmur but in music it does seem to cause people some problems; problems which I am afraid I have no interest in solving. That sonic architecture *is* the piece, every time, and is also the reason why I can use many of the sounds again and again. However, despite the tight palette and the even tighter structures, the pieces have proved very hard to get into their final shape. What looks so easy has been, in fact, the opposite.

Artists who have been useful to me are Barnett Newman and Dan Flavin, particularly the latter. Flavin was a better colourist than Newman—who did not need to be one—but it was an understanding of the internal structuring of both artists' work—within the huge spaces of that work — which fired off my imagination, accompanied, as I mentioned earlier, by a liking for the sound and pace of the old chant, and for the language of the English medieval church. That language made a kind of atmosphere. It does not feature directly in any of the music.

Since the 1960s I have been intrigued every now and then by Flavin's remark about his art becoming: 'keenly realized decoration... psychologically indifferent decoration'. There is a link to be made there with Satie's Furniture Music. The decorative: I may experiment with that in the current piece. There goes my reputation.

Q2. With the new work, is there a direct reference to the medieval Organum ?

A2. Unfortunately, no-one can have a perfect understanding of the original Organum sound. However, given what has been re-assembled from that period, my answer to your question is no, there is no self-conscious, direct reference to the old Organum, although the overall feeling is similar. That similarity is going to be more or less unavoidable when the work consists almost entirely of drones.

Despite its considerable history, drone work now seems to sit outside of all the normal rules of music. I am not sure what to make of that last remark.

Q3. Is there a formal development in your work ?

A3. If there is, you have spotted something which I have never thought about. More likely, there is merely change. Change is inevitable. One's beard keeps on growing. I do not think about development and progress in music, art or anything else. They seem to be phantoms, somewhat like those visions beloved of our religious fanatics, professional politicians and other deluded people, all of whom bother our world severely. How can I put it ? There is nothing which this music has to do and there is nowhere that it has to go.

Q4. There is a lot of obvious symmetry within these works. How did that come about ?

A4. You have seen the latest piece on-screen. The visual patterns are utterly clear and, as I said earlier, they *are* the work. Symmetry is useful to me because it allows the placement of the various sounds in time without my having to think about the usual things like, say, the interactive development found in an improvisation, or in a symphony, or in most music for that matter. Instead, the sounds just sit there, alone or in beautiful collision with others and they do not make a fuss.

Symmetry is also a way of avoiding psychology. Twisted stuff, neurosis, which interests me not a bit, is absent. There is though a lot of warmth. I do like to use some fairly hot sounds within these cool structures.

Where did the symmetry come from ? I looked with admiration at things with that quality inherent, things like bridges and the great cathedrals, and thought: that's a fine way of declaring shape. A liking for the look of mathematical curves also came into it somewhere. None of that has anything to do with sound. I am not really inspired much by music.

So: feats of engineering, the pace of Christian chant, some number systems from Flavin, the Golden Section from Newman: they all went into the pot. Three years later, out came the big shapes of the trilogy. Big shapes and comparatively big works. I thought that they would be impossible, particularly for someone living all his life on a small island but somehow, and with conscious effort, I have achieved a little of a vaster scale. That pleases me a lot.

You know, to have managed that, and to have broken out successfully from my earlier work, is probably enough for now. I am not sure what there is for me to do next. We shall see.

I continue to enjoy the activity of making, of course. Like many people, I work very intently. I am not, however, addicted to specific sounds. I am more concerned with the piece. Usually, the sounds are just the bricks. That is why I was able to drop Noise without a second thought. It was also why I could use the clatter of machine guns, and the whirling tones of a Hammond organ, and fragments of a Latin mass. I like all of those sounds a great deal—I could not work with them if I did not—but they are not always the actual point of the music in which they appear. Most frequently the point, particularly in the recent work, is the space which the work creates.

Look, all of this is highly retrospective. Does it have any value ? Normally, I do not think consciously about *any* of these things while I am working...

Have I said enough ?

I have said enough.