

INTERVIEW

Philip Corner: You Can Only Be Who You Are

by Jody Diamond

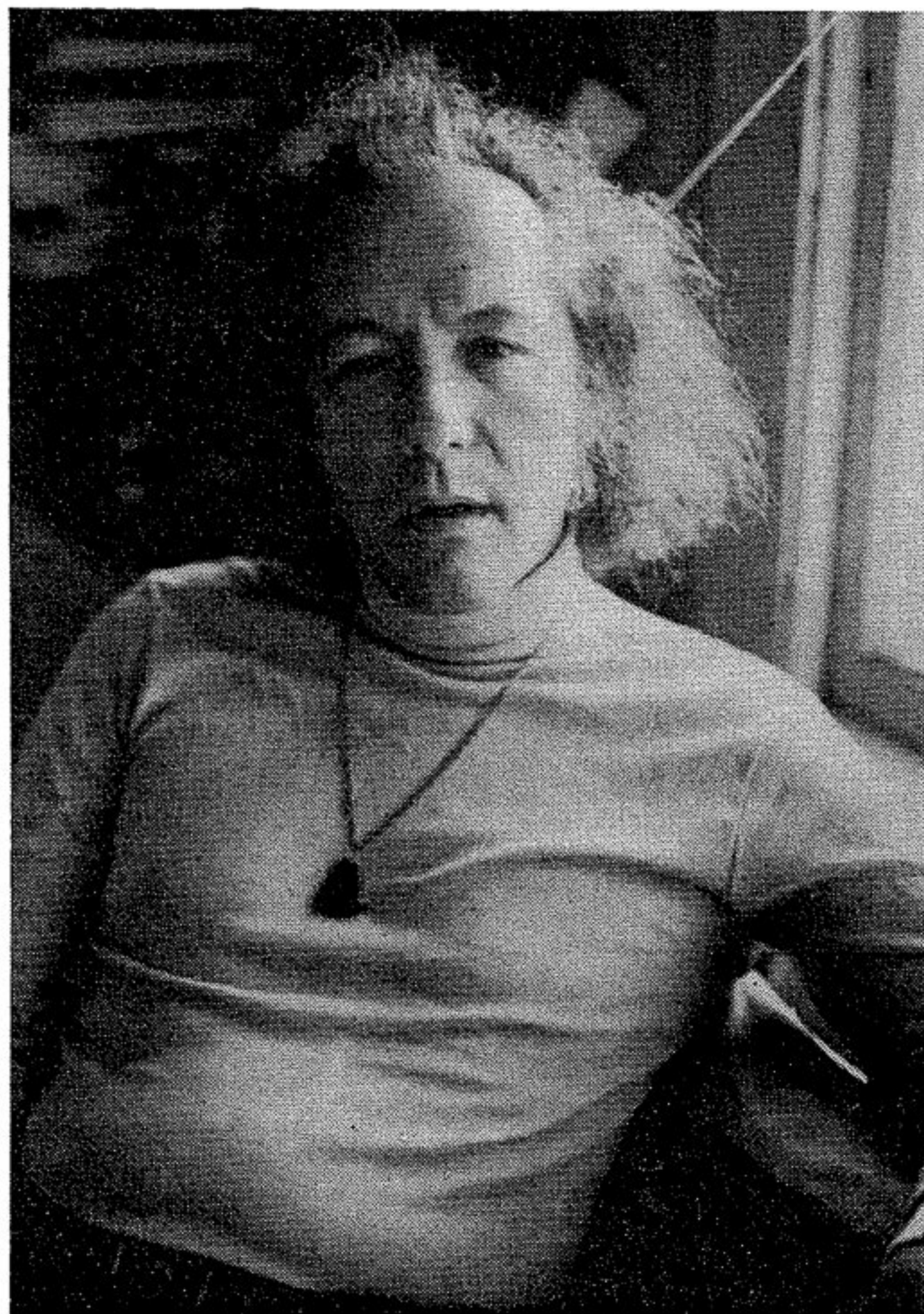
Even Philip Corner's resumé looks like a poem. It's possible to tell that he was born in 1933, had some kind of an education, and then embarked on over thirty years of projects, collaborations and experiments. He has worked with many composer/performers and artists of all kinds; he performs, and has been performed, all over the world. He is particularly known for his graphic scores, usually for indeterminate instrumentation; his contribution to minimalism; and his association with Fluxus and "Tone Roads," the latter an important new music series of which he was co-founder. He presently teaches at Livingston College at Rutgers University. He is a regular member of Gamelan Son of Lion in New York City, and recently appeared with them at the First International Gamelan Festival in Vancouver. Here he explains his unique perspective on culture and music, and his approach to composing for gamelan.

Diamond: I had hesitated to interview you because I think of you as a composer, but not necessarily as a gamelan composer. How do you see yourself?

Corner: I'm an American who got involved in the European classical tradition, which is already a little foreign. When I first started studying at Columbia, I was the only one I knew who was interested in listening to classical music and everybody thought I was a little crazy. And the attitude of the relatively small elite group that liked classical music was that if you were interested in contemporary music you were even weirder, and you were even more far out if you were influenced by Varèse and Cage instead of Walter Piston. So I was the "far out of the far out" which means that I've always had a somewhat ambiguous relationship to tradition. I've never been able to feel I'm in a particular tradition.

Diamond: You don't feel you are in the Western avant-garde tradition?

Corner: Well maybe I'm in it but I never felt that I belonged to Western culture. One strange thing about the avant-garde in 20th century America is that it is not at all certain that it is part of the Western tradition. America is a transplanted provincial place on the terrain of another culture which was wiped bare but still leaves traces and



auras. With the admixture of African culture and everything else, America as a whole sits uneasy with the Western tradition. It is already not part of the Western tradition as we know it in Europe. So we could say that none of us are Western in a wholly unadulterated sense.

I always say this when people talk about bi-culturality: any American who is involved in classical music, and also grew up listening to jazz and several types of popular music is at least tri-cultural to start with. And contemporary music can be seen as a separate culture—whatever it is, wherever it's going.

And now we see, in Japan, South America and other places, a quasi-international avant-garde tradition that

cannot just be called part of the West. Perhaps it's the beginning of a proto-global civilization, but in any case something decidedly different has happened that puts us in a questionable relationship to whatever our tradition had been. And I feel as a modern, as an American and even to a certain extent as a Jew, that there is not a music that is mine. I have never felt as a Balinese might or a Southerner might or even a European—the way I see a German respond to Beethoven or Bach as theirs—

Diamond: You don't have a music that feels like your music?

Corner: My music is the only music that feels like my music. I compose in order to create my culture. I am interested and open-minded, but I've never felt that there was anything that was mine, in the sense of my family or my culture.

Diamond: Not even American folk songs or things you sang when you were a kid?

Corner: I have no sentimental attachment to any of that at all. I feel that my only culture is my music, and radiating out from that are the people very close to me—Larry [Polansky] and my other composer friends, that's my culture. Then the grandfather figures—Cage and Feldman, that's also another ring further out. Then the great Americans, like Ives, or Messiaen, a Frenchman that I studied with, that's in another outer ring. And then everything that I've learned that I can identify with, like Javanese music or Tibetan music, that's like a far outer ring of what my culture is.

Like Dylan once said, "I just keep my ears open and it comes out me," and I keep my ears open to everything. At the heart of it I feel I am creating my own culture because no one else has created what I want to hear and what I have to hear, so I have to do it myself.

Diamond: So you feel close to the people who have that same approach in their own lives. You are defining culture, as a perspective on life and creativity.

Corner: I identify with people who are working right now, making something that's like what I'm making and that I can identify with. And it no longer exists in one localized geographical place. People say "Oh the avant-garde is so small, you give a concert and only 25 people come." But I say no, the avant-garde is huge, but it's spread all over the world, and it's just that there are only 25 people in any one place. I can go all over the world to give concerts...

Diamond: ... and there are 25 people wherever you go.

Corner: Now I've found that there are people in

Indonesia who I can also identify with and feel as part of my culture. I know from direct experience that they exist in Seoul and in all sort of places in Japan. And in Europe there are people who invite me to come and play in alternative spaces. It's like a finely spun-out network over the whole world—that's my culture.

Diamond: So the framework of contemporary music has formed its own culture, one that doesn't have national boundaries. I think that's why in the EXPO festival we seemed to have a lot in common with Indonesian composers. Perhaps not our musical technique—we don't have the same skills—but a sense of artists dedicated to increasing musical development and expanding the human perception of music.

Corner: I felt that too, and it was a great revelation to me. It made me feel very good. The last day of the Festival was a kind of apotheosis. I talked to some people, like Franki Raden, about planning to visit Indonesia. And I was invited to give talks, lectures, etc. It meant to me that they have the same kind of interest and open-mindedness we have, that we recognize each other.

Diamond: Do you think the presence of extreme openness that characterized some of the new Indonesian compositions—throwing away structural rules, changing the usual timbre of instruments—is a western influence? Or do you think it's a natural evolutionary step?

Corner: I think it's a natural response to the circumstance that we are all modern. None of us is traditional anymore, none of us can be solely traditional. Even in the wilds of the Amazon there are radios and people know what popular music sounds like.

Diamond: In order to preserve a tradition, you have to become conscious of it and just that consciousness changes the way that music functions in the culture. I don't think that exposure to pop music will destroy a tradition—I hope that Javanese karawitan and wayang music will always be played, and I assume that they will—but in order for people to preserve and protect music they have to be conscious of its boundaries, where it comes from, what's contained in it. It can't be only an artistic context anymore, it becomes a particular repertoire. That changes the function of traditional music as something that you live your life in; it becomes something we are choosing to play.

Corner: Even if you preserve it and even if you play it, it's not the same. It's very clear in America that no matter how good an orchestra is, how well they play a Beethoven symphony, it's not the same—it's not what it was or what it was supposed to be [at the time it was written]. It's something else.

I think it's great to have gamelan clubs here that play traditional Javanese and Balinese music. You can also go to Jakarta or Tokyo, bring your violin and sit in on a string quartet; there's shape note singing and country music in Japan. It happens all over the world and I think it's terrific. But that shouldn't be confused with having your own culture and making your own creative contribution.

Diamond: At what point does gamelan become our own culture? Many of us started off playing it because it was the music of another culture.

Corner: I didn't do that.

Diamond: You didn't? How did you start if not that way?

Corner: Let me tell you exactly what my response has always been. I am a composer and I always have been a composer. My interest in other music was twofold. One was general open-mindedness—the stuff is beautiful and why shouldn't I listen to it and get pleasure from it? in many cases I get more pleasure from it than from the classics of my own "culture." The other reason is exemplary: why should I be bound by the arbitrary limits of what I was taught was my culture? If there are things that are beautiful and expressive to me that have been pioneered in other cultures and don't exist in mine why shouldn't I learn from them? There's no guarantee that conformity or innovation or anything else will make you a genius, so you might just as well go ahead and do the best you can and be judged by it. And that's all that anybody can do no matter what culture you belong to and no matter what material you choose to use. That's always been my attitude.

I was the only graduate student at Columbia University in 1957 who took Kurt Sach's course. The ethnomusicology courses were given at night, and people took them as electives. Most of the people were non-music majors. I was already expressing my open-mindedness at that time. But even earlier, I was at City College and I heard African music. It was the "Drums of the Yoruba of Nigeria." A wonderful record and very influential. I didn't get minimalism from Steve Reich—I got it from the Yoruba and the chants of the Navajo. Those wonderful simple interlocking endlessly repetitive—I used to love it and think it was wonderful. Long before I saw any way of assimilating it into my own compositional work, I was absorbing it.

Then I remember Felix Galimere, a violinist who was a pioneer within the limits of his own culture. He used to come by and listen and say "Oh! so you listen to all this funny stuff and get ideas for your music?"

Diamond: Was that happening?

Corner: In a very deep sense, in the sense that as it was coming into my consciousness, it was changing my consciousness. I was open to the possibility of assimilating this material and going from appreciation to creative potential. In that sense he was right, but I have never, never, never in any sense looked at any music and said "Aha, that's what they're doing and I'm going to do something like it."

Diamond: Was gamelan part of the music that you were exposed to at that time?

Corner: I must have heard gamelan for the first time in the late fifties or early sixties. But one of my first deep responses to world music and contact with it was with Korean music. That was in the sixties and it came out of being in Korea. But I had also heard Japanese music and shakuhachi music and Zen music through Cage. Part of the aesthetic in American avant-garde music at the time was the use of microtonal ornamentation and things that were close to noise and silence and irrationality. So you might say that it was fortuitous that the Army sent me to Korea of all places, since that was the most nourishing place for me to be.

I studied some Korean music theory and I went around with my friend Chung Du Youm who was a flutist in the Seoul symphony. He was learning Korean music theory too. I had a little *yangum* and he would play along on his flute, but it was on an elementary level. I never thought in any way that I had to learn an instrument and become a master of Korean music. I listened to it as much as I could and thought about how to assimilate its richness into my music.

Eventually I wrote a piece in Korea, *Situations/Sangteh*, which was performed in Seoul before I left. It was my first indeterminate piece and was quasi-twelve-tone and totally chromatic, and had verbal instructions about the texture, ornamentation, improvised microtones, color changes and everything else in the overall structure.

Diamond: Was it written for Korean musicians or Western musicians?

Corner: It was indeterminate. It was tried with Korean instruments but it was finally performed on Western instruments, with both Koreans and Americans playing. It used an obviously western structure, a totally chromatic twelve tone type of structure, but added the idea of heterophony and gliding tones—the tone color changes and richness of ornamentation and vibrato and all of that stuff that western music doesn't have with its firm attacks and strong held tones with a sharp cutoff.

Even before I went to Korea my pieces were already

"GAME"

Longest set to Lowest.

Be patient and progressively add in the parts.

Once in they stay in.

A player on each
because waves of intensity

Best bells are "untuned",

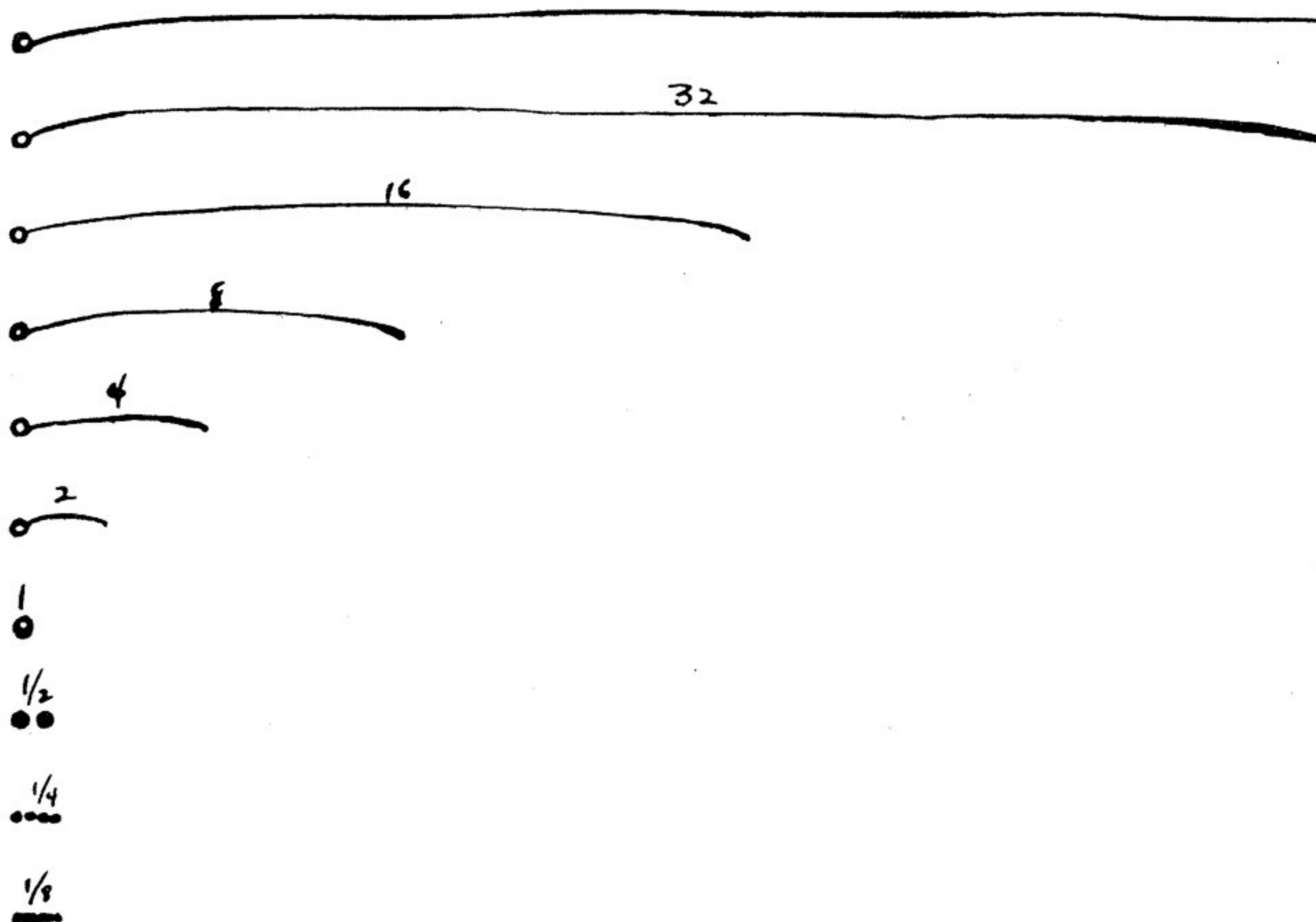
Begin with gongs,

A real gamelan orchestra would be good,

Each resounded note could be well

"thickened" by adjacent tuning.

At the ending, they drop



ELAN"

ty flow control texture's clarity.

out in reverse order - faster than before.
(But it could start up again!)

64

written in a semi-graphic way and had microtonal ornaments. But when I was suddenly confronted with a culture in which that had been a major field of exploration for hundreds of years, I saw the great richness that I could enter, not by imitating, but by absorbing the field of potential.

I wrote a piece in which I tried to absorb what I learned from this culture into my work, but I never thought of either impossible thing: to become a virtuoso on their terms in their music, or to write new music that was imitative and derivative of theirs.

Diamond: How does this relate to your compositions for gamelan?

Corner: When I first wrote for gamelan, I didn't think that because I had heard Javanese music I should do something like it. I also did not think "Oh, I don't know enough, I better go listen to some more." I basically treated it as a set of instruments.

Diamond: I feel that the instruments of the gamelan evolved along with the music that was played on them. By studying the traditional music, we can understand how those instruments came to be the way they are. When you first began to compose for gamelan, even though you considered it as a group of "found instruments," didn't you find that the very structure of the instruments themselves contained composition lessons?

Corner: I didn't rush to study Indonesian music in order to prepare myself. For a long time I didn't do it. People would say, "Oh you're writing for gamelan, have you been to Java?" I would say I would like to go, rather than I have to go.

Diamond: How did you come to write your first gamelan piece?

Corner: What I did was accept Barbara Benary's invitation to write a piece for Son of Lion. I had helped hire her in 1973 at Livingston College. We wanted somebody who was an ethnomusicologist, but not a "sit down" ethnomusicologist, somebody who had hands-on experience. She could play music from West and East, she'd been in the Philip Glass ensemble, she'd had a lot of experience. I had already suggested that I write a piece for her, to experiment with her playing of Carnatic style violin from North India. At the time, she had a complete split between her skills in Western and Eastern traditions, and wasn't interested in combining them.

In 1974 Barbara built her first gamelan. She tried one of her own compositions on it, and it "worked." In 1975 she invited me to write a piece for it. And then she asked

Daniel Goode, another Livingston faculty member, to write a piece. During her half-year leave, the members were merged with a "Free Form Contemporary" group, to work on what eventually became the first Folkways record by Gamelan Son of Lion. The name is a translation of Barbara Benary's last name, the Hebrew "ben ari."

Later the gamelan, with Barbara, moved off campus to a new location in my New York City loft. The membership has always been a mix of professional composers or musicians with amateurs experienced in gamelan. There has never been a "group style." Freedom of creative direction has ranged from using contemporary innovations like noise, indeterminacy, and even serialism to attempting a traditional "Oriental" sound, though stopping short of direct imitation of Javanese or Balinese models.

Since my first piece in 1975, I have been writing this gamelan series. I keep the word gamelan as a kind of homage. The pieces could be performed by gamelan, but also by other instruments.

Diamond: What makes them all gamelan?

Corner: It goes back to the premise on which I based the first piece. I had been doing metal meditations—strike one sound and then listen to it until it ends and then dance around—all irrational. But I didn't want to just transfer this to gamelan. Gamelan has something that is different from the richness of random sounds—it has uniformity and concentration, refinement, a tuning system, a homogeneity of color, a limitation of scale. The instruments invite you to play them together. So I began with the big gong. One stroke, and you listen as it fades away into silence, but I added a 64 second cycle, and the next instrument played at exactly halfway through the cycle. So what I added was a number, a rationality.

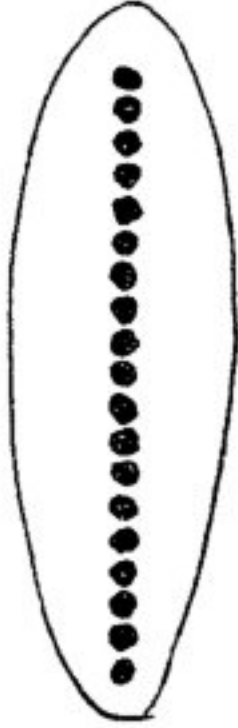
Diamond: Did your idea for this piece come from the structure of the instruments and not from your previous knowledge that Indonesian gamelan music was cyclical?

Corner: It's hard to know. The long gong resonances, the metal sounds, the way the instruments were laid out—all this invited me to take the step from just listening to the sounds to combining them to form precise tight rhythmical relationships. And that's what I have been doing for ten years. To me it's an integration of left and right brain, the world of the intellect with the world of gestalt. There's no opposition between the analytical structure and the intuitive structure. I see this in Indonesian music more than any other music I know. Those elements, which of course exist in all music, both intuitive and rational, are clearly integrated and balanced so that there is no disharmony.

gamelan
STEIN

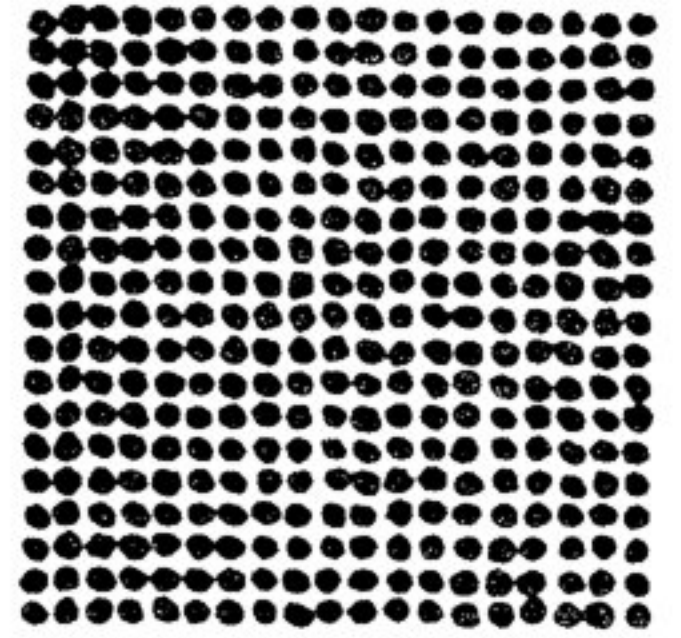
To be played with/on/by pitched rocks, or other materials — as metal, eg.)
(when played "clunky")

--- arrange them as a scale ---



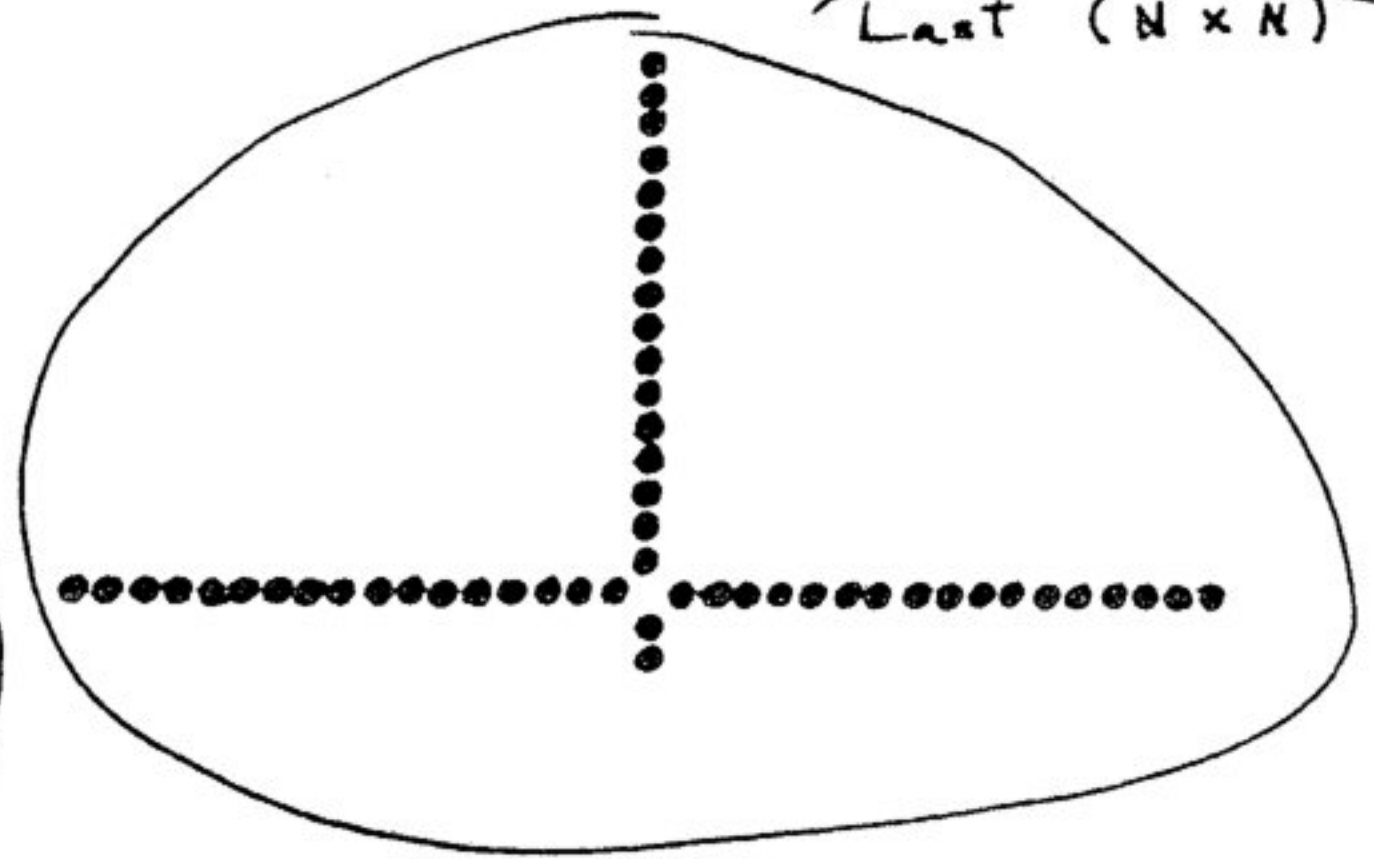
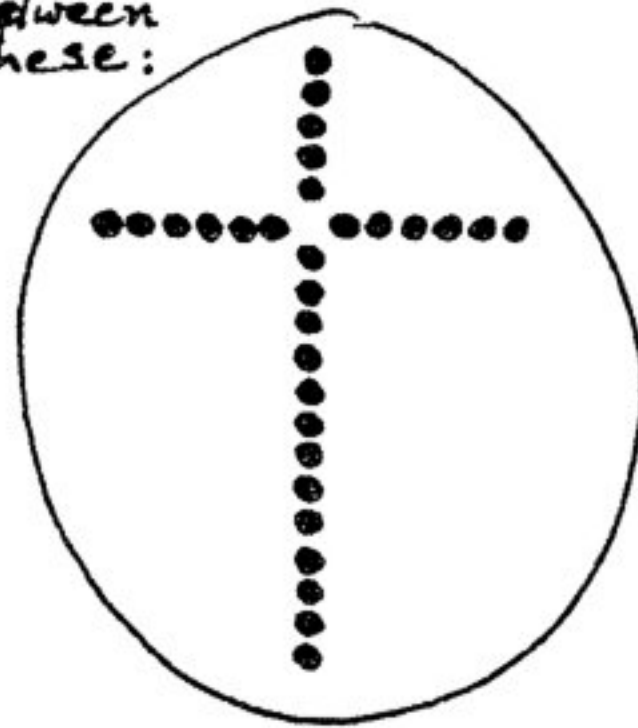
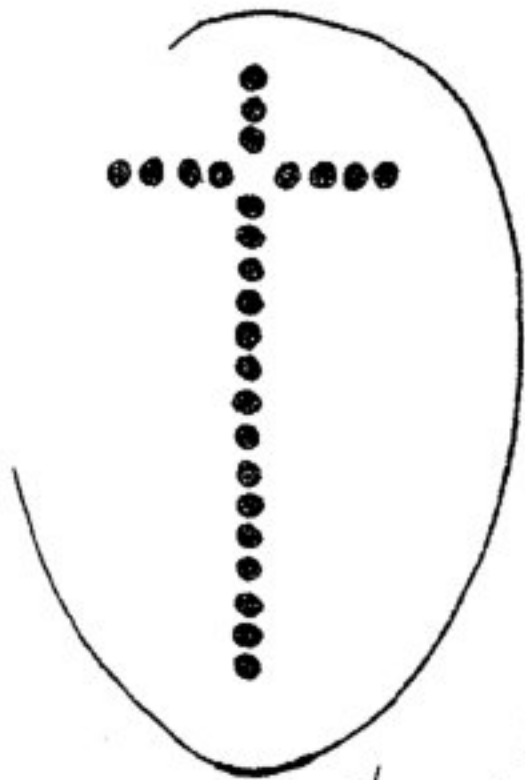
1st

long silences between



Last (N x N)

between
These:

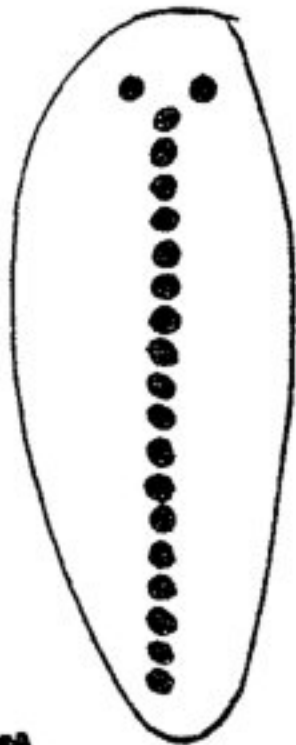


This basic pattern

The note's position in the scale (going from high to low) will be the number of times that note will be struck before and after a chord-cluster formed by all the others.

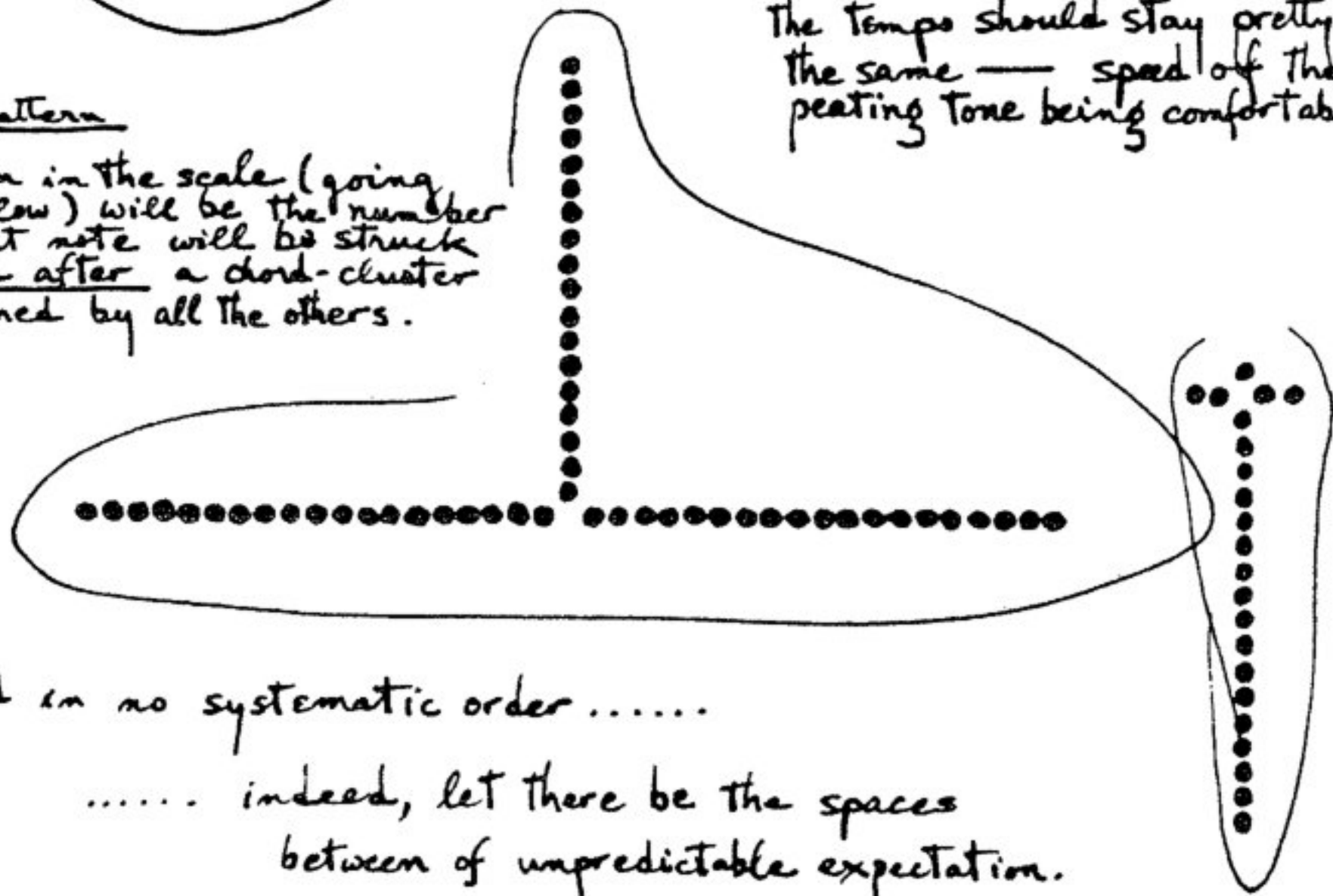
The tempo should stay pretty much the same — speed of the repeating tone being comfortably fast.

with a particular relationship with Smerfellnes and Kolla!



And in no systematic order

..... indeed, let there be the spaces between of unpredictable expectation.



— individual Touches should be expected —

(see other Iceland pieces, and "Takki fyrir tónlist.")

© 1981

Philip Corner

Indonesian music presents this in a minimalistic way. Even underneath the drama of Balinese kebyar you hear the regular pulse of the balungan, the periodic cycle of the gongs. There is still that sense of multiples of two to four to eight to sixteen. That's a kind of proto-minimalism in a way.

Diamond: I think of Javanese classical music as a meeting of the intellectual and the intuitive, because there are elements that can be flexible and different every time, and those that must be the same every time.

Corner: That's obviously part of it. But I mean specifically that there is a structure that is very tight, that is based on divisions and multiples of two. This is a structure that can be very rigid, mixed with the incredible richness and sensuality of just the sound itself. The pure gorgeousness of sound is bound and put into a structure.

Diamond: When you go to Indonesia will you ask people to play your music?

Corner: They said [in Vancouver] they were interested in doing it and I would be delighted. One can only hope that something like that would happen.

Diamond: Do you think Son of Lion could play the Indonesian compositions that we heard in Vancouver?

Corner: Yes, if we had something written out.

Diamond: Maybe the musicians in Indonesia would like to play your piece for Icelandic rocks, Gamelan Steinn. Why is this piece in your gamelan series?

Corner: It shares the common premise of a strict relationship between pitch and time, manifested in a simple scalar arrangement: note one equals duration one, note two equals duration two, etc., and it could be played by a gamelan. Each of the gamelan pieces has its own special definition, and one of the definitions of this piece is the tone color.

All of my pieces are for indeterminate instrumentation, with some specifications. They're usually indeterminate in regard to other things as well, like specifics of scale, intonation, etc. Most of them depend on shape and pattern recognition, apart from specifics of tuning.

Diamond: Is there one stable element, something that is always there?

Corner: It could be some of the details of the rhythm, the actual melodic shapes, the patterns of rise and fall, and the texture. And the overall feel, some comprehensive thing that gives the piece its character. The form is

determined, but the instrumentation can be chosen from what is available at the given time.

I try to make the scores as general as possible, so that there are many possible realizations compatible with the ideal. Sometimes even if I get a very specific idea, I will try to generalize it and write the score so that it encompasses other possibilities. Sometimes I start from something quite abstract, like a number scheme or a formula, that begins to generate possibilities. The real piece is the general idea behind the actual performance.

Diamond: So your compositions exist more in the mind than in the sound. What is ultimately the most stable is at the conceptual level.

Corner: I'll accept that if you don't equate mind with abstract. The pieces exist in the mind as a kind of generalized, all-at-one conception of the total field of sonic possibilities, an imagination of sound, a global imagination of a sound world that can't be manifested outside of the mind.

Diamond: Actually this is a way to describe a gamelan piece. If you have a balungan, or a melody, it can be realized on any number of gamelan in any number of possible tunings, in any irama, in any number of treatments—the essential character of it is an inner melody, an identity that exists before the first instrument sounds.

Corner: We find that there is nothing new under the sun. All we do is discover something that had been forgotten. So we're concerned with breaking out of the limitations of our traditions. I don't give a shit about avant-garde because that's just a western idea of progress. The more avant-garde you are, the more conservative you are.

When I first realized that Boulez, particularly, meant the "new" as a linear advance in the forward march of Western culture, I was shocked. To me it is an expanding circle, it only means more possibilities, and they all exist simultaneously. Everything expands, and all the possibilities are there. An African colleague once said, "You have no tradition; every year you try something else." I told him, "That is our tradition."

No matter how much you know, there is no guarantee that you can use it creatively. To focus on the knowledge that you're supposed to need, rather than on your creative strength, is a total cop-out. It's a definition of academism. No matter what culture it refers to. It's a reliance on past knowledge and correctness rather than on spirit and creativity.

You can only be who you are. It's clear that there is an

Gamelan Series: compositions by Philip Corner

"The 'Gamelan' series pieces are open structures, scored on graph paper, that require or permit either improvisation or realization, and are, within limits, indeterminate with respect to instrumentation and duration." P. Corner

This is a list of pieces that have been realized on gamelan instruments. A complete list of all 96 pieces in the series may be obtained through the Archives. These include works for jazz ensemble, percussion ensemble, flower pots, toy piano, alarm bells, water glasses, solo voice and chorus.

"Gamelan" 1975

Performed by Rutgers Univ. NJ 1975; Son of Lion, New York, 1976-7; on the instruments of Kyai Muntjar Wesleyan Univ. CN 1979.

gamelan II 1975

["Number Measure Increase Downward"] Performed at Rutgers Univ. NJ 1975. For *pekings* Son of Lion, NY 1976, Philadelphia 1982, for *gambang*s Son of Lion, New York, 1985, on Lou Harrison's just-intonation keyboard Berkeley, 1980. Also for *ensemble: instr. & perc.; voices; actions*. The score also exists as *visual art*: "Rainbow Rhythmic Polyphony."

gamelan III 1975

["10-Second-Centered Cycles"] cf. *perc. ensembles*

gamelan IX 1976-7

["evening of evennesses"] for *kenongs*. Performed by the composer, Vancouver 1986. Also for *perc. solo & ensemble*. (recorded and published)

gamelan BK 1979

Performed by Banjar Gruppe Berlin, 1981. Also for *solo piano*.

(gamelan) the Barcelona Cathedral, 1st 1978

Performed by Son of Lion. Also for *piano 4-hands* (recorded and published)

gamelan BROSSA - EXOTICA 1981

For *solo gender*. Performed by the composer, NY 1982.

gamelan CONCERT!O 1981

performed by Son of Lion, NY w/*solo harpsichord* 1982, w/*solo gambang* 1985, w/*solo harpsichord and gambang* 1986. Also for *solo piano*.

gamelan HOURS 1980

Performed as part of Son of Lion's collaborative composition "Gamelan N.E.A." (commission), NY 1982; The Berkeley Gamelan, Berkeley; Gamelan Pacifica, Seattle; Gamelan Si Darius, Oakland, 1983; at "New Music America" by B.A.N.G., Los Angeles, 1985.

gamelan I SECOND[S] 1978

Performed by Son of Lion, PA 1982. Also for *solo piano*.

gamelan IRIS 1981

For *flutes (transverse, sulings, shakuhachi)* and *gamelan, ensemble or "one-man band."* 3 movement version by Iris

Brooks, performed by Iris Brooks, with Son of Lion, NY 1982; and Peter Griggs. (published)

gamelan Italy revisited - III "regolato" 1978

Performed by Son of Lion, NY 1982. Also for *piano (prepared) & perc. solo*.

gamelan LY "Lyra" 1979

For *erhu, clarinet and gamelan*. Realization of melody by Barbara Benary. Performed by Barbara Benary and Dan Goode with Son of Lion, NY 1979,80. Also for *instr. and prepared piano*.

gamelan MASS 1980

With *added percussion; environmental*. Performed by Son of Lion, NY 1980.

gamelan MED I AN 1982

Kendang featured. Performed by Son of Lion, with Barbara Benary, NY 1984; Überseemuseum, Bremen 1986.

gamelan MIX 1982

Preferably environmental. Performed by Son of Lion, Sparkill NY 1986.

gamelan PRO CESSION 1979

Ritual march with hand-held alarm bells. Performed by Son of Lion, NY 1979; w/*flower pots* Madrid 1982.

gamelan QUASI 1985

With *dancer-conductor* in two separable parts: KNOWABLE & UN-KNOWABLE. Performed by Son of Lion with Deena Burton, Sparkill NY 1985.

gamelan RORYRX 6 1980

Performed by Son of Lion (as part of group piece "45s"), NY 1981.

gamelan STEINN 1981

For *Icelandic rocks*. cf. *perc. ensembles*

gamelan VOX 1981

With *voices*. Performed by Son of Lion, NY, Baltimore 1981. Also a solo.

Gending in the Western Manner 1982

["the three Bs": Berlioz, Bruckner, Eubie Blake]. For *Javanese gamelan (pelog)*. duration about 5 minutes, traditional number notation. Performed by Mills College Gamelan CA 1982.

Lancaran "A Good Laugh For A Glad Heart" 1982

For *Javanese gamelan (pelog)*, w/*optional singing*. Variable duration, traditional number notation. Performed by Son of Lion, NY 1984.

Son of Lion Discography

Gamelan in the New World Folkways 31313

Gamelan in the New World, Vol. 2 Folkways 31312

Philip Corner "Two Works for Gamelan Ensemble"

RADIOTAXI© vibrazioni del sonoro #8 (0724)

Gamelan Son of Lion

New Wilderness Audiographics 8542A cassette

Barbara Benary

New Wilderness Audiographics 8442A cassette