

Sunday, March 11, 2007, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Composer Portrait: Conlon Nancarrow Alarm Will Sound

PROGRAM

- Conlon Nancarrow (1912–1997) Study for Player Piano No. 6
(arr. Yvar Mikhashoff)
- Nancarrow Study for Player Piano No. 2A
(arr. Gavin Chuck)
- Nancarrow String Quartet No. 1 (1945)
Allegro Molto
Andante Moderato
Prestissimo
- Nancarrow Sonatina for Piano (1941)
Presto
Moderato
Allegro molto
- Nancarrow Piece No. 1 for Small Orchestra (1943)
Andante—Moderato—Allegro—
Allegro molto

INTERMISSION

- Nancarrow Three Movements for Chamber Orchestra
(1993) (transcribed from the piano rolls by
Carlos Sandoval)
♩=90/72
♩=56/♩=80
As fast as possible

Program

- Nancarrow Septet (1940)
Allegro molto—Moderato—
Allegro molto
- Johannes Ciconia (1370–1412) Le Ray Au Soley
(arr. Gavin Chuck)
- Nancarrow Study for Player Piano No. 3A,
Boogie-Woogie Suite (arr. Derek Bermel)

Alarm Will Sound

- Jessica Johnson *flute*
Jacqueline Leclair *oboe, English horn*
Bill Kalinkos *clarinet, saxophone, keyboards*
Elisabeth Stimpert *clarinet, bass clarinet, saxophone*
Michael Harley *bassoon, percussion, piano*
Matthew Marks *horn*
Kate Sheeran *horn*
Jason Price *trumpet*
Michael Clayville *trombone*
Dennis DeSantis *percussion*
Payton MacDonald *percussion*
John Orfe *keyboards*
Courtney Orlando *violin, vocals*
Caleb Burhans *violin, electric guitar, percussion, vocals*
John Pickford Richards *viola*
Stefan Freund *cello*
Miles Brown *bass, percussion*
- Alan Pierson *Conductor, Artistic Director*
Gavin Chuck *Managing Director*
Nigel Maister *Staging Director*
Kate Sheeran *Personnel Manager*
Dave Polato *Production Manager*

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Program Notes

Composer Portrait: Conlon Nancarrow

A Nancarrow concert might seem to miss his point. It is, after all, Nancarrow's music for player pianos which consumed the bulk of his career and was the source of his fame. His entire work with live musicians was confined to the years before 1948 and after 1983, the intervening time having been devoted to composing for machines. His instrumental music then falls into two categories: early pieces, written before his discovery of the player piano, and late ones, when growing fame finally brought him—in his 70s—his first commissions. This afternoon's program, running the entire course of Nancarrow's career, includes works from both periods: the *Septet* (1940) is his first ensemble work, and *Three Movements for Chamber Orchestra* (1993) was the last piece he wrote. The three earliest works being presented—*Septet*, *Sonatina* (1941) and *Piece for Small Orchestra* (1943)—are closely related. Nancarrow composed the *Septet* shortly after returning from fighting with the communists in Spain, and wrote the other two works shortly after he—having begun to grasp what his association with the Spanish communists would do to his status in this country—left the United States for Mexico. All three works share a stylistic language rooted in the jazz that Nancarrow had played during his years of work as a trumpeter, most notably in the blues movements found in each and in the brilliant and manic pianism that ends the *Septet*. There are also touches of Stravinsky and Bartók throughout. And all three works hint at the rhythmic obsessions that were to occupy Nancarrow for the decades he spent with the player piano: canons, layers of conflicting rhythms and tunes that move at different tempos simultaneously.

Nancarrow's final work before abandoning composition for live musicians was the *String Quartet* (1945). This was his most substantial and sophisticated music yet, and is perhaps the greatest instrumental work of his career. The direct appropriations of jazz material found in the earlier works are replaced by a more individual and confident idiom and Nancarrow's rhythmic interests are explored more deeply than ever before, with complex tempo layering and canons in which the voices move at different speeds.

Soon after finishing the string quartet, Nancarrow was given money from his father's

estate which allowed him to travel to New York to buy a player piano and a piano roll punching machine. Nancarrow had been long frustrated by his experiences with performers—the premiere of the *Septet* had been so awful that Nancarrow tried to destroy the piece afterwards—and one of his first projects with the player piano was to make a mechanical version of the string quartet in which the complex rhythms could be correctly realized. But soon Nancarrow began to conceive music specifically for the unique capabilities of his new instrument.

There is a tension in these early player piano studies between the vernacular styles of jazz, blues and Spanish music, and Nancarrow's increasingly complex rhythmic thinking. This produces some of the composer's most colorful and exciting music. **Study No. 3A** (1948), this afternoon's finale, was his first work for the player piano. (Nancarrow's numbering system for the studies is not directly connected to their composition date, which he often did not even record.) Although a standard 12-bar blues bass line pervades the entire piece, this is one of the freest and least methodical of the early studies: the sense of joy that Nancarrow must have felt at being released from the limitations of performers seems to be expressed in the sheer manic exuberance of the piece. Over each cycle of the bass line, a new melodic figure moves in its own independent tempo and meter. At the culmination of the study, the bass line itself becomes fodder for Nancarrow's tempo canons, as the upper voices take it up in increasingly slower tempos.

Study No. 2A (1948–c.1950) is more typically single-minded in its exploration of Nancarrow's new rhythmic realm: two unchanging but independent bass lines outline a traditional blues chord progression; above them, a simple tune is played in four different tempos. Nancarrow specifies a particular kind of swing for each tempo, specifying the ratio between the duration of the long note and that of the short one to create different rhythmic sensibilities. In his arrangement for Alarm Will Sound, Gavin Chuck has harmonized Nancarrow's tunes and added drum sets to undergird the various tempos, making the study's layers even more vivid.

Study No. 6 (1948–c.1960) is one of Nancarrow's most explicitly Spanish works. As with **Study No. 2A**, the basic materials—a simple

bass line and a single melody—are remarkably simple; it is the tempo relationships which complicate the music. Although the bass line sounds like a simple ostinato, it isn't: the pitches repeat regularly, but the rhythms are dictated by an independent process using two alternating tempos, such that the apparent ostinato seems continuously off-kilter.

It is no coincidence that the only player piano studies to have been arranged were written during Nancarrow's early work in the medium. His later studies venture into still stranger rhythmic territory, with independent accelerandi in different voices and tempos related by irrational numbers. These late studies are also of a new stylistic world, with jarring harmonic juxtapositions, inscrutable phrase structures and jagged, sometimes cartoonish gestures—large leaps, fast glissandi and wild trills—which seem to regard the jazz riffs of the early works from a remote distance.

The *Three Movements for Chamber Orchestra* (1993) comes from this world. A stroke in 1990 had left Nancarrow more sedate and somewhat indifferent; by the time that the Parnassus Ensemble commissioned *Three Movements*, he was unable to compose anything new. Instead, the new piece was arranged from abandoned piano rolls made before the stroke. (The few new works he composed in the time immediately after the stroke are spare, diatonic and almost naïve—utterly different from the older rolls drawn upon to create *Three Movements*.) Nancarrow's assistant transcribed the rolls and orchestrated them with some involvement from Nancarrow himself. All three movements involve complex tempo relationships typical of Nancarrow's late works. (He had fantasized about using computer-controlled mechanical conductors to facilitate performances.) The first movement is Nancarrow's only work for percussion ensemble—the roll from which it was transcribed may be a remnant of Nancarrow's attempts to make a percussion version of the player piano, which would allow a small orchestra of percussion instruments to be controlled by a piano rolls. All five instruments play the same rhythm, with each successive instrument entering in a faster tempo so that all players hit their final note precisely together.

Nancarrow's work, while unique, has both precedence and consequence. The voices in *Ciconia's*

Le Ray Au Soley (late 14th century) present a single melody in three different tempos, related through the same ratios as the canon in the final movement of *Three Movements*. *Ciconia* is one of many composers from the period who used rhythmic devices that seem more the province of contemporary music, and while it's not clear whether Nancarrow was aware of these works the resemblance is undeniable.

And in recent decades, a resurgence of interest in writing music which draws on vernacular styles and has an audible beat has made Nancarrow's work seem prescient. Nancarrow spent his entire career responding to the challenge posed by that interest—that of creating adventurous music out of familiar and simple materials—and the imagination and ingenuity of those responses have made him an inspiration to many of the great composers of our time: György Ligeti and John Adams, in particular. It is significant that these composers have used ideas from Nancarrow's player piano music in their works for live instruments: although Nancarrow's decision to free himself from the limits of playability was critical to his success, musicians have since taken up the implicit challenge posed by Nancarrow's retreat to mechanical instruments, and a significant amount of what he assumed to be out of their reach is now within the realm of possibility. And the territory that Nancarrow pioneered in these studies is particularly inviting to Alarm Will Sound, who on the recent *Acoustica* disc of its arrangements of music by techno artist Aphex Twin have already grappled with performing music designed for machines. Many of the composers in Alarm Will Sound's repertoire draw on Nancarrow's ideas, and the twin demands of Nancarrow's music—his staggering rhythmic complexity and the easygoing manner demanded by the vernacular styles he draws on—are ones the band enjoys in much of its repertoire. And although something is inarguably lost in bringing Nancarrow's music to human musicians—the speed, accuracy and clarity of his player piano performances cannot be matched—the sense of exuberance and variety of color that live musicians can bring to his works seems utterly appropriate to the wild creativity and innovation of his ideas.

Notes by Alan Pierson

About the Artists

Alarm Will Sound is a 20-member band committed to innovative performances and recordings of today's music. Musical Artists-in-Residence at Dickinson College, they have established a reputation for performing demanding music with energetic skill. ASCAP recognized their contributions to new music with a 2006 Concert Music Award for "the virtuosity, passion and commitment with which they perform and champion the repertory for the 21st century." Their performances have been described as "equal parts exuberance, nonchalance, and virtuosity" by the *Financial Times* and as "a triumph of ensemble playing" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. *The New York Times* called Alarm Will Sound "the future of classical music" and "the very model of a modern music chamber band."

The versatility of Alarm Will Sound allows it to take on music from a wide variety of styles. Its repertoire ranges from European to American works, from the arch-modernist to the pop-influenced. The group fosters close relationships with contemporary composers and has commissioned and premiered pieces by Steve Reich, David Lang, Anthony Gatto, Cenk Ergün, Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Gordon, Augusta Read Thomas, Stefan Freund, Wolfgang Rihm, Payton MacDonald, Gavin Chuck and Dennis DeSantis.

Alarm Will Sound may be heard on four recordings. Their genre-bending, critically acclaimed *Acoustica* features live-performance arrangements of music by electronica guru Aphex Twin. This unique project taps the diverse talents within the group, from the many composers who made arrangements of the original tracks, to the experimental approaches developed by the performers. *Reich at the Roxy*, their latest release, is an award-winning, surround-sound DVD/CD recording of a live concert of music by Steve Reich performed in the famed New York nightclub.

Members of the ensemble began playing together while studying at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. With diverse experience in composition, improvisation, jazz and popular styles, early music and world musics, they bring intelligence and a sense of adventure to all their performances.

For more information, visit Alarm Will Sound's web site at www.alarmwillsound.com

Alan Pierson (*Artistic Director*) has been praised as "a young conductor of monstrous skill" by *Newsday*, "commanding" by *The New York Times*, and "gifted" by *The Boston Globe*. In addition to his work as artistic director of Alarm Will Sound, he has appeared as a guest conductor with the London Sinfonietta, the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, the New World Symphony and the Silk Road Project, among other ensembles. He has collaborated with many major composers and performers including Yo-Yo Ma, Steve Reich, Augusta Read Thomas, David Lang, Michael Gordon, La Monte Young and Wu Man, and choreographers Akram Khan and Elliot Feld. He has received a Tanglewood fellowship, and has recorded for Nonesuch Records, Cantaloupe Music, Sony Classical and Sweetspot DVD. Born in Chicago, he began conducting while pursuing a physics degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a composition degree at the Eastman School of Music.