

Interview

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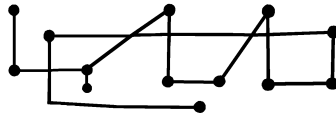
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CHRIS STOVER



RACHEL VANDAGRIFF: Do you remember your first experience with *Perspectives*, or when you first heard about the journal? What were your first impressions?

CHRIS STOVER: I first heard about the journal when I was an undergrad at Central Washington University. This was in the pre-internet days. I was starting to get interested in other kinds of music and starting to explore and experiment more, which meant a *lot* of time haunting the music library. One of the main things I was interested in was “new music,” very broadly defined, and here I stumbled across this journal called *Perspectives of New Music*! So I was pulling books off the shelf and reading them and finding some things that were utterly fascinating and others that I thought were pretty much the strangest things I had ever read. I remember very distinctly reading some of Ben’s articles and some of Randall’s articles and just sitting there, scratching my head in the library, trying to figure out what on

earth they were talking about. But it was intriguing, and I kept coming back to it.

I don't think it is too hyperbolic to say that that was one of the things that really got me interested in music theory. A few years later I went to Eastman and I ended up working with Bob Morris. Bob was actually my thesis advisor for a minute, but by the time it came around to write my thesis he was on leave, so I went in a different direction. But I took several classes with him, as well as some composition lessons. So that was my early history. I left the scholarly world for several years while I was touring and involved with a lot of other music activities, and then I went back to school, at the University of Washington, and ended up working closely with John. So I had a direct teacher-student relationship with both Bob and John. I still hadn't met Ben at that point, but I met him at a conference a few years later when he was talking—along with John and a few other folks—at a session that ended up being published as the Deleuze special issue, which I edited.

VANDAGRIFF: How did you come to have the job of managing editor?

STOVER: John asked me—I don't remember anything further than that. I was around and knew everybody who was involved with it, but I hadn't previously been directly involved with the making of the journal. When Jason Yust left suddenly for the University of Alabama, John called me up and asked me if I could take over.

VANDAGRIFF: How long did you do that job?

STOVER: About two years, three issues and toward a fourth—then I left to begin my current position at the New School.

VANDAGRIFF: Is there anything you remember in particular about that job? Or how it changed your relationship with the journal? Do you remember the experience of working with any authors in particular? Do you feel any connection to any of the articles you helped publish?

STOVER: One highlight was working on that Deleuze special issue. It was a great group of authors—John, Ben, Martin Scherzinger, and Michael Gallope—a fascinating quartet of articles, and they were all good people to work with. Ben's article was particularly fun. Its opening gambit is wonderful—it begins with a sentence that goes on for one long paragraph and requires *multiple* layers of unpacking, but then when you finally do unpack it, you realize what the implications

are: some heavy stuff! And it takes off from there in a million intriguing, rhizomatic directions. And then throughout the article, here's Ben apologizing for crashing the party of the Deleuzians, as if he's an outsider looking in. But he can spar with the best of them.

VANDAGRIFF: No kidding.

STOVER: Besides that . . . I got to work on an Andrew Mead article (2009), and he is someone I have always admired. I got to work pretty closely with Godfried Toussaint on more of a math-related article that was a lot of fun and also intersected with some of my research, so that turned into some fruitful conversations about African music and bell patterns and things like that (Colannino, Gómez, and Toussaint 2009). Same with Fernando Benadon's article (2009)—that led to some insightful exchanges too. There was also a wonderful piece on tuning systems in Javanese music by Larry Polansky (Polansky *et al.* 2009); and the Ben Levy (2009) article that won the SMT award, and many more.

VANDAGRIFF: Are there any particular articles that you have read in *Perspectives*, from any time in its history, that had a strong impact on your thinking or your work?

STOVER: Oh, yes: some obvious ones, like “Meta-Variations,” which I imagine a lot of people would cite. That is an article . . . Well, that hardly counts as an article! That is a major work that I continually come back to and that I continually find—pardon the pun—new perspectives from.

More recently, and staying in the family, there were a couple of articles John wrote that I also come back to frequently. There's his 2004 piece “The Swerve and the Flow” on the relationship between music and mathematics, which I've used in several classes. Also “Chloe and her Friends,” (2003) which is very playful while also loaded with heavy content; very fun to read. John's writing in general, and some of these articles in particular, have inspired me to think about the ways you can write music scholarship. I think that, to broaden the picture a little bit, that is one of the ways that *Perspectives of New Music* has been really good for the field: asserting that academic writing can be fun, too. Well, fun is not the right word—I should say, there can be a poetic aspect to academic writing, too. And in *Perspectives* that happens in a literal sense, where people are writing poems, but much more often in more of a figurative sense, where there is a care for the beauty of the language that matches the rigor of the content.

VANDAGRIFF: I know you redacted your use of the word “fun,” but Ben and I were recently talking about how he wanted to introduce the idea of play into *PNM*.

STOVER: Yeah, and I think that is palpable. You can really feel that in a lot of the writing. I mentioned J. K. Randall’s writing earlier. I still don’t think I understand all of what he was doing at the time, but I always think it is interesting and playful.

There have also, of course, been many other important pieces. There’s the collection of articles on feminist music theory, for instance, from I think ’94, which I recently took a student through in an independent study. At that time, especially, I don’t know if any other music journal would have had the temerity to publish something like that.

VANDAGRIFF: Yes. Would you be able to tell me any more if or how any of the articles you mentioned, or others, relate to your own work?

STOVER: I forgot to mention one very influential article, though I did mention the author’s name. There is a monumental article that Martin Scherzinger wrote (2001), which was tremendously instrumental on my work. Jonathan Bernard, who was my dissertation advisor, suggested that I read this article when I was starting to pursue some ideas related to time and cycles in diasporic African music, and suggesting that maybe I wanted to take my research in this direction. So I read this article—I am sure you know the article I am talking about, the one that ruffled the ethnomusicologists’ feathers.

VANDAGRIFF: The one that won an award?

STOVER: Yes, and it deserved to win an award. It is an amazingly well-articulated article that put forth a very strong and very important argument. So that article was huge, because I think it reified the idea that I could do what I was doing. That I could do music theory in consideration of non-Western music, and specifically with African music. Now, I don’t do research on African music specifically, I focus on Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music, but they both function as diasporic strands of West African music. So that was a huge influence, and it is an unusual article for *Perspectives*, because until very recently there hadn’t been many articles (in *Perspectives* or anywhere else in the theory world) that addressed non-Western music. There have been a few in *Perspectives*, though. There have been a number of articles on Indian music, and Richard Hermann wrote a piece on Charlie Parker

some time ago (2004), and the articles by Lynette Westendorf (1995) and Andrew Bartlett (1995) on Cecil Taylor (these have been very influential on my own work on Taylor), and there's the article I mentioned by Godfried Toussaint on Steve Reich and African bell patterns. So there have been little spots of activity.

VANDAGRIFF: You were saying that this helped you see that doing your work was possible? Had it just not occurred to you? Did it not feel as if you were allowed to use the tools you were taught to use as a music theorist and apply them to non-Western music? Do you have a sense that music theory and/or ethnomusicology regards the sorts of music they are "supposed" to look at or "allowed" to look at as separate and apart?

STOVER: I think that, on one level, yes, it was validating. It was saying, "Yes, it is okay to do this." I am speaking specifically to the Scherzinger article now. On another level it was deeper than that—I think that it suggested some avenues for exploration beyond just saying, "Yes it is okay to do this," which was the main argument of Martin's article, that it is okay to hold this music, which has been the turf of ethnomusicologists, up to analytic scrutiny, and that the music holds up just fine, thank you very much. Both ethnomusicologists and theorists tend to be fairly territorial about what they do, which is why the article was controversial. I ran into some controversies of my own, when I started talking to some ethnomusicologists about my project, and they were not too subtly suggesting that I was getting into an area in which I didn't belong. I remember a conversation with someone who, when I was talking about analyzing drumming patterns in Cuban music, suggested something along the lines of, "well, they do tune the drums to specific pitches, so maybe the pitches would be something you could talk about," suggesting that all music theorists do is talk about pitch. That is a fair accusation, I suppose, if you don't really know anything about music theory or about what music theorists do.

So that article was very important for that, but also, digging deeper, there is a lot of food for thought in there, there is a lot of information, there are a lot of avenues suggested for exploration. There is a great quote—and I am going to botch this—about grappling in the dark for methodologies that are untested or infelicitous or improper, just to see what shakes out that might be useful. It is a great line and an important sentiment.

VANDAGRIFF: That is great. I know you are a trombonist and have a lively and busy performing life. I wonder then if your life or career as a

performer has intertwined with your work as a theorist at all? Do those interests you just described bridge those personae?

STOVER: That is a great question. I try to bring my performing life and my composing life and my scholarly life and my teaching life together to the extent that I can. That is also one of the reasons that I started doing more research on Afro-Cuban and Brazilian music, because that has been the music that I play the most. Trying to streamline my life a little bit so that I am not doing 10 million things at once, but maybe only 7 million things.

VANDAGRIFF: (Laughter). One of the things you mentioned just now is that you also compose. One of the special things about *Perspectives* is that the journal has a place for the composer and the composer's voice alongside, with, or among music theory and music theorists. Do you have any thoughts about that?

STOVER: That has been an exciting aspect of the journal, too, for as long as I can remember. For an easy example, there have been the various Festschriften that have come out for various composers, whether it is Ben, or Babbitt, or Stockhausen. There have even been some for less-celebrated composers: Ken Gaburo or Stuart Sanders Smith, for instance. The best part of these issues, I think, is when it involves—and they often do involve—someone who is part of the journal writing a piece of music for someone else. Bob writing a piece for Milton Babbitt, for instance, or Tom Baker writing one for Ben. I think it is a nice gesture and an important thing to have, because it really does subtend theory and composition in a very powerful way.

VANDAGRIFF: Has that meant anything to you personally? As someone who does a lot of different things in the music world? Especially a number of things that are often categorized exclusively?

STOVER: Well, it actualizes something that Berio said once, which is that sometimes the best analysis of a symphony is another symphony. . . . Or Liszt, upon being asked to explain a piece he just played, plays it again with no further commentary.

When it really comes down to it, on one level, music theory is about compositions. There wouldn't be a lot of music theory if people weren't writing music to theorize about. More specifically, or more personally, the kinds of ways that *Perspectives* engages composers—especially with these larger pieces and these Festschriften, for instance, which have multiple people engaging a composer at the same time,

offers a unique way to get into a composer's head. I think that—with the caveat that I have never really thought about this before, so I am making this up as I go—I think that there is a little bit of a reflective part of that, where it gets me thinking about the kinds of things I want to be as a composer–theorist, and again, how to bring those two things together. Especially when I think about some of the various writers who have been frequent contributors to *Perspectives*, including the three editors, who are all theorists and composers, and who could all be said to blur the boundaries between the two disciplines. Just take Bob, for instance. His work as a theorist and his work as a composer are inseparable. When I used to work with him at Eastman, I remember that being a crucial part of his identity, in my opinion at least. I was taking his atonal theory classes, and I was writing a lot of music, and those things were informing each other so much. It permanently affected my way of thinking about composing music, even though I am not writing music “like that” anymore. I am not writing twelve-tone music or music with all-partition arrays, or anything like that, but I still think about what those ways of structuring musical design and process mean from the perspective of writing music.

VANDAGRIFF: It has been interesting to talk to people about these fields and activities, especially as their definitions and possible boundaries are broken or found within the pages of *Perspectives*.

STOVER: Of the top-tier music theory journals, I think that *Perspectives* is unique. *The Journal of Music Theory*, *Music Theory Spectrum*—they are not publishing articles that come from the perspective of the composer. That is not their beat. And that is okay. Conversely, I am trying to think of an example from the opposite vantage point—that only publishes articles written by composers. I would have to go back pretty far to an old journal like *Source*, which was solely about composition and expression and things like that. It was not analytic or theoretical at all. I don't know if there are journals like that today, but I imagine there are. *Open Space* comes close. I admit, I might be a little bit out of touch in that regard.

VANDAGRIFF: Do you have anything you would like to share about what the *Perspectives* community means to you? Or what it has meant to you to become more involved in the journal rather than only be a reader?

STOVER: It has changed the nature of my relationship with John, Ben, and Bob ever so slightly. I feel like I have one little tiny toe in the

club. That is great, and that has been especially nice with Ben, because I didn't know him personally, prior to my work at *Perspectives*, and he is the first one of those guys whose work I read closely. And I continue to keep a little toehold in there—I am still communicating with all of them and keeping possibilities open for collaborating or working together on projects in the future.

VANDAGRIFF: Are there any other thoughts you would like to add about *PNM* and its history?

STOVER: It has really been fifty years?

VANDAGRIFF: Yes.

STOVER: That is amazing. And Ben has been there since the beginning.

VANDAGRIFF: Pretty much. I don't think he expected it to last fifty years.

STOVER: Yes, I think he said that in his 70th-birthday issue: that he didn't expect for it to go on this long. But you know, it has stayed relevant that entire time. It has not only stayed relevant, but it has stayed at the front end of relevance. It is still pushing. It is still pushing in some cool new directions. It is not as blatantly avant-garde as it used to be, I don't think. At the same time, it is one of the first places you go—when the new issue of *Perspectives* comes out you go right to it, because there is going to be something good and something important in it. That is pretty amazing. Even though, again, it does not have the same kind of overt poetic playfulness that it used to have—you don't see as many paintings or poems or more avant-garde pieces inserted in there—it still has its identity; that is very obvious. You can tell a *Perspectives* article. I am not sure why that is the case—it is more than the font, or anything trivial like that. You can tell content-wise what defines a *Perspectives* article, which is pretty cool.