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*Pamela Madsen**Eric Dries*

An Interview with Composers Pamela Madsen and Eric Dries from Los Angeles

Dear readers of the journal “ICONI”!

We are offering you an interview with two innovative American composers residing in California, Pamela Madsen and Eric Dries. They demonstrate the rich context of new trends in American music encompassing the serial Uptown School and the experimental Downtown School, as well as their connections to contemporary European music. The composers describe the styles of their respective musical compositions and their versatile musical activities, including teaching at the California State University at Fullerton, performing and organizing concerts of contemporary music.

Интервью с композиторами Памелой Мэдсен и Эриком Дризом из Лос-Анджелеса

Уважаемые читатели журнала «ИКОНИ»!

Предлагаем вашему вниманию интервью с американскими композиторами-новаторами Памелой Мэдсен и Эриком Дризом (Калифорния). Они представят богатый контекст новых течений американской музыки, охватывающей серийную школу «Аптаун» и экспериментальную школу «Даунтаун», а также свои связи с современной европейской музыкой, опишут стили собственных сочинений, разнообразную музыкальную деятельность, включающую преподавание в Университете штата Калифорния в г. Фуллертон, а также выступления и организацию концертов современной музыки.

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Can you tell me about your backgrounds, where you studied music, how you became involved in contemporary music, and what your main influences in contemporary music were?

Pamela Madsen: My musical background was that I studied composition at Indiana University with John Eaton. I was the pianist in the performances of John Eaton's microtonal operas. His incredible expression in his writing for voice inspired me as a composer early on. Then I moved to California, where I studied composition at the University of California at San Diego with Bernhard Rands, my Master's degree with Will Ogden, and then for my Doctorate studies, Brian Ferneyhough, Chinury Ung, Chaa Czernowin and Roger Reynolds — so all of them were influences for me. From there I went on and did a Doctoral research and studied for my Doctorate at Yale University. My interests have always been the emulation of compositional thought. So what I was studying originally as a composer I also wanted to study as a theorist, to get more grounded in music theory and theoretical ideas, so that I could find my own path. I studied the teachings in the Darmstadt school and the evolution of open form. I was also a researcher at Darmstadt in the archives, and also worked at IRCAM in electronic music, on the influence of technology on compositional thought. All of these have influenced my music. However, a particularly important influence was Pauline Oliveros and her ideas of open form and "deep listening." The latter especially combines with my interest in the evolution of compositional thought and understanding different ways to form a theory based on physical ideas, working at the acoustic bases of musical ideas, understanding how they evolve.

Eric Dries: I studied at the University of California at San Diego the same times as Pamela and with many of the same

teachers, including my Master's degree with Will Ogden, my Doctorate with Brian Ferneyhough. I did research in Schoenberg's teaching in *Harmonielehre*, in the Theory of Harmony and in the juxtaposition between Schoenberg's tonal and atonal theory, in how he describes chromatic harmony, which is very interesting. Then I continued my studies with Rand Steiger as my main composition teacher. Prior to that I studied at the University of Wisconsin in Madison with Stephen Dembski, as the result of which I started thinking a lot about pitch organization structures, because that was something he was really involved in. I was also inspired in his interest in music theory. So that is how I became associated with Joseph Strauss, when he was teaching at the University of Wisconsin. After that, near the end, when we were finishing up our degrees, we both studied with George Lewis for a while, working on musical improvisation, since I am also a pianist. But I have also acquired a great degree of critical thinking from George Lewis, besides performance technique. I also worked at IRCAM at the same time as Pamela did, studying with Thomas Kosciuszko, who now teaches at Harvard University, and also with Miller Puckette. There is a small network of electronic composers, who worked at IRCAM, so many of the same names appear in different places.

Pamela Madsen: We both worked with Miller Puckette and learned all the computer programs at IRCAM. Going on for the technology, I went back to IRCAM, where I was a researcher in the archives during summers in the early 2000s. I was working on the topic of "The Influence of Technology on Compositional Thought," studying the works of Kaija Sariaaho, Jonathan Harvey and Brian Ferneyhough that used electronics, to see how this influenced their work and the development of their musical structures. I have published articles on Ferneyhough's work on Patchwork and compositional

programs to generate material. I am always interested in how compositional ideas come about.

Eric Dries: I was a witness to the period of transition for Ferneyhough, which was interesting to be in the midst of, because at that time I was working as his copyist, and I helped him at some notation, when he was making the shift from handwritten to computer notation. If you know Ferneyhough's scores, it seems remarkable that he would change to computer notation. But he told me and Pamela why he decided to do this: it was not because he thought that computer notation was necessarily better, but because of his use of his other compositional algorithms in the Patchwork program and its predecessor deMax, and similar programs, which was more easily translatable into notation in Finale we were using at the time. But then from there his musical ideas and their notation required more editing, and that is how I got involved in that aspect of notation. I was also a copyist for many other composers, including Roger Reynolds, who worked with me at IRCAM at that time I was there, in the summer of 1998.

Can you describe the main essentials of your musical styles, and whether there are any particular compositions which exemplify this the most? What particular styles in American and European music is your music closest?

Pamela Madsen: My work came out of the very new, complex style I absorbed while studying with Brian Ferneyhough. All of my music is characterized by this intensity of being in the present moment, however that may be achieved. It is neither a minimalist style, nor a style pertaining to the "New Complexity," but something in between these two styles. Also in the work of Pauline Oliveros, my other mentor, the idea of the "present moment" and how it is achieved, through what means, is manifested, which I aim to be conscious of in my own music. It is achieved through a process, through

the intensity of expression, through hyper complex notation, through layering of many ideas one on top of the other. That is what characterizes my work, even though the stylistic results may be extremely varied — it is microtonal, it is tonal, it is atonal, it is twelve tone — it uses whatever means is needed. So I am proficient at every variety of techniques, and I use them to achieve that effect.

One example of this is my composition "Omeri" for string quartet, written for the Arditti Quartet, which uses microtonal and notational overload, and also incorporates text. A lot of my music translates text into musical expression, so not only expression of line, but also expression of sound of the actual phonemes and articulation of the words. My composition "Melting away Gravity" for orchestra uses a process of layers and overload, as well as aims to create a moment when expression is necessary. It also uses spatialization of sounds and projected images to immerse the listener in the experience of that piece. It has ideas which are very different in sound — one is more pitch-centered and has a different style of pitch organization, one is tonal and the other is microtonal, but the same kind of ideas are present there. My "Luminous Etudes" for piano are based on ancient chant material, which I had studied, so they are modal — so this presents yet another system. The chants utilized in this set of pieces are taken from the "Llibre Vermell de Montserrat," a collection of songs and dances from the 14th century. I have worked with the monks of Montserrat on the way of their singing, and how the process works. It was very interesting to be there and to learn how the monks worked on their singing, how they embellished the tunes to make their system work. The Etudes involve careful study of piano technique, and work on exhausting the different technical means of pianists' abilities. They are modal in their harmonies, not only because they are derived from chant material, but also because this enables them to resonate with the body, and their idea

is to create a harmonic setting more involved with the overtone series, more involved with sonic resonance, and the texture of the piano, to create a system. So these are three different kind of harmonic systems I use in my music — microtonal, tonal and pitch-centered, and then modal and overtone-series-resonant — and in many of my pieces I combine these and other parameters with electronic means as well, to enhance that experience. My composition “Big Basin” for singer and two pianos is a very simple piece, meant to engage the audience. It is a set of pieces, all of which founded on a D drone bass, and they are meant to involve the teachings of Pauline Oliveros concerning “deep listening” and are meant to teach the audience to listen attentively to the music. They contain both free elements and fixed elements. The reason for this particular structure for this work is that I wished both the performer and the audience to be involved in the process of the development of the music. Often, if you simply perform a composition by Oliveros, what would happen is that some musicians would be uncomfortable with not having notation, so they cannot follow the music by playing the notes. In contrast to this, the pieces forming this composition involve conventional notation, so that some players can open up very freely to playing music they can sight-read, and there are elements which are fixed, and also elements which are free. So there is an invitation to improvise, which is very open — immediately a musician can engage in performing and in the process of creating a piece. Also these pieces have spoken voice, as well as movement and sound, which you can engage in many different ways.

Eric Dries: First of all, I shall speak about my written music, which I had been composing a while ago. These pieces demonstrate my initial interest in pitch organization, which was formed from my studies of the music of Schoenberg and chromatic harmonies. I was thinking of ways of composing music which would

contain an extension of that idea. That is probably why I started with the idea of using collections of pitches as sets in a loose way. I think this tied in with my general approach to a lot of those pieces, which was the idea of fragmentation — so that I could fragment the chromatic scale in different ways and use these as resources for further musical ideas of how these fragments may be put together, either in a sequential manner or by overlapping each other. I wrote three solo compositions which utilize this tactic. One was called “Splinter” for alto-flute, another was called “Shred” for trumpet, and the third was “Coquina” (which is a kind of seashell) for solo violin. Each of them is constructed by that idea of taking small fragments of an existing line, breaking those fragments up, and then interspersing them against each other, like you would with the three metaphors of those ideas: where if you had a shell, you would have different layers of the shell; or if you splinter a piece of wood, you would have several splinters layered within one another, too. I think that paved the way for the bigger composition called “Divergences” I wrote for chamber ensemble of three flutes, three low strings (viola and two cellos) and three percussion instruments. And then the thought was to take those layers — which served the idea that one instrument (for instance, one flute) represented three different parallel universes of that flute — one fragment of, say, if you applied it to a pitch collection, the one flute would be having that one pitch collection for a time, and the second flute would have a slightly similar pitch collection, and the third flute would have one slightly different from the second, but they would be playing off-pitch from each other in a very small way. So it is as if there is one flute which is refracted as if through a mirror into three different flutes, which were sort of the same and sort of different. So that was the general thought of the work — to take small fragments and bring them together to build a bigger structure. But then, following that, I stopped thinking along these lines and

composing written music with these kinds of structural functions, and focused more on improvising and on playing.

What kind of improvisation do you do?

Eric Dries: My improvisation originates in my background in jazz. For the most part, it still follows along traditional jazz history, but at the present time also uses these parameters to put myself in various different improvisational contexts. The latter include the open form ideas, following which Pamela's compositions are written. These parameters have remained grounded in Pamela's and my perception of music and musical improvisation, and they continue to manifest themselves, even if we are doing something else, like our own compositions, which have loose structures based on very minimal material. So, in this sense, as I improvise a piece of music, I treat it as a written composition. Some of my improvised compositions, similarly to my earlier written-out works, also end up being composed as splintered fragments, which are then put together. The idea of my pieces is to see what players can make out of very minimal material. So as a result I do write down in notated form some of the pieces originally created as improvisations.

Do you give any titles to these compositions-improvisations?

Eric Dries: So far, they are only coming up with numbers, such as 2C, 3D or 4F. The essence of the music is that there is some preliminary material composed, which I myself develop in an improvisatory form, or I write down instructions that are specific enough for the performer to follow and play, but not too specific, so they are limited in what they are given. So the performer can use his or her own imagination when realizing them. It is a tricky combination of how to verbalize these instructions, so that a player can feel that he or she has the freedom to do things, but at the same time that

it is not complete freedom to play whatever they want. This is always a perennial problem for that kind of music. John Cage had a lot of difficulty with that too. If you look at his written instructions, he talks a lot about that. But performers just assume that they can play anything they want, whereas that is clearly not the intention of the composer.

Pamela Madsen: We both work with our ensemble at California State University at Fullerton with these exercises — both Eric's exercises as my exercises and compositions. We have students whom we teach these systems of improvisation.

Eric Dries: It also works very well for me, too, since I think of it not as much as teaching students, as finding out what happens with the musical material, so it is more a case of me learning the art of improvisation during the process of teaching this discipline.

To ask a very out-of-date question: would you identify with the Downtown school of contemporary music? Do you retain any connections with the Uptown school?

Pamela Madsen: We both have the rigor of Uptown composers, and we have the immediacy of Downtown composers, because we work with open forms, which is a trait of the Downtown school. So we can be classed as pertaining to both of these traditions. Presently in the United States a composer feels free to belong to many opposite traditions at the same time. By now the "Uptown" and "Downtown" schools are something which musicologists classify composers, rather than what composers feel themselves adhering to. These terms are still relevant, since they are means for identifying composers' styles. At the same time, as I have said before, every single technique is now at my disposal to use for whatever means.

Eric Dries: At the present time the terms "Uptown school" and "Downtown school" are relevant in the United States

for marketing. This is not necessarily meant in a bad way. But it means that not only thereby it is easier to classify a composer such as, for instance, John Adams, but also oneself, if you say: “I write like John Adams,” then it becomes much easier to sell that. But I think that there must be a term to come up with for composers who are trying to engage in styles or techniques they have not tried out before — if they are good at writing in one style, but then they go on and try doing something they are not as good at and achieve some satisfactory results in that. This may be termed “the evolving composer.” One must have a sense of freedom to allow that to happen. But both of us have the luxury of having academic positions as faculty members of universities, so we are able to take on the risk of trying out writing in new styles we have not written in before.

Pamela Madsen: In addition, we receive financial support for our compositional activities. My compositions are funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and New Music USA, which is incredibly competitive. These are the two foundations which have funded my works. In order to receive funding from these two organizations composers must understand what they are doing and position themselves and comprehend why they compose.

What kind of activities do you engage in within the sphere of new music in Los Angeles? What courses do you teach in your universities and what performance activities do you pursue? You have already mentioned that you work with a chamber ensemble devoted to new music.

Pamela Madsen: I teach at California State University at Fullerton — my students are primarily upper division and graduate students. I teach advanced seminars in advanced form and analysis and contemporary compositional techniques, as well as graduate seminars in music theory, inter-arts collaboration, and I have

a whole composition studio. I also direct the Cal State Fullerton New Music Ensemble, which has changing open instrumentation for whichever compositions we decide to perform. We may have a quartet or a trio, we may have a full orchestra, or we may have a lot of percussion and a lot of pianos. Presently there are two pianists, three percussionists, two accordionists, trumpet, trombone, saxophone, other wind instruments and voices. So it is a very mixed group of musicians. Next week we plan to perform Terry Riley’s “In C” and several compositions by Christian Wolff. Prior to that we have performed “Coming Together” by Frederick Rzewski. We have performed works by Philip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, George Crumb, and other composers of that generation. We also seek to bring in guest composers and guest performers and work with them. I am also the Composer-in-Residence at the Mojave Desert, a National Natural Reservation in the middle of the California desert. I am brought out there to compose musical works that are inspired by the environment. There is also a research center, where I am also a Composer-in-Residence, so I would bring in the Los Angeles Percussion Quartet, the Eclipse Quartet, pianist Vicky Ray and my New Music Ensemble from Cal State Fullerton, and we would create music inspired by the desert and record sounds there. This is our residency, and it is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and New Music USA, and we compose musical works inspired by that very strange and wild environment of the desert, where there is nothing else except for desert sands and dryness. So the compositions we are working on are called “There will come soft Rain,” “About the Need for Water” and “The Meaning of Rain.” That is the project I am working on now, besides teaching in the university and being resident composer at the Christopher Hope State on the Ocean and Curie Amphitheater on the Ocean. I bring compositions which are environmentally based to that residency. What it means to be a Composer-

in-Residence is that you are allowed to curate the space, you are allowed to come there and compose musical works, and it is also supported by the organization which funds it. I also travel around the world to different sites, to bring my compositions and perform them at those sites. I am a performing pianist, as well as a theorist, a scholar in research and a composer. So those are the other venues I work in. in Los Angeles I am involved with the American Composers' Forum, and my compositions are performed in its different venues at the new music concerts and festivals organized by it.

Eric Dries: I teach at California State University at Fullerton, where I have a selection of courses, both undergraduate and graduate. I teach music theory and composition and also technology and jazz courses. My extra-curricular activity is, for the most part, playing jazz in clubs and small concert venues, including Senior Club 33 at Disneyland, Cooke's Chapel and what used to be a club at Fullerton called "Steamers," which was there for 30 years, and now is called the "New Jazz Club at Fullerton." I used to tour different cities in the United States playing jazz, but now I mainly perform in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

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