

Symphony No

Introduction

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translation: Ewa Bodal

An avant-garde composer, associated with progressive genres of music and controversially received works might seem to be an ideal – and thus, in a way, obvious – interlocutor for the editors of a journal that itself decided to provoke with the word “avant” in its title. Nothing could be more wrong. It would be a misunderstanding to expect any facilitation, a miraculous coming together of thoughts on the science-art field, knowing winks of the eye, or understanding without unnecessary words.

Glenn Branca is unruly and individualistic as an artist, but also unruly and individualistic as an interlocutor. The exchange of opinions turned out to be far from easy, a few times we even “got one in the head”. Our provocative questions resulted in various, but always clear reactions from the American composer. Yet, even those questions which turned out to miss the mark provided a rather brilliant picture of the creator’s attitude. Musical embodiment is, on many levels, consistently obvious for him. However, in Branca’s case this corresponds with an uncompromising approach of a progressive artist. He is also an artist who does not express a particular urge for cooperating with scientists, entering sub-personal areas of creating art and reception thereof. He does not need that; he works with a completely autonomous laboratory, and his body of work is contemporary in and of itself, and not through extra-artistic connections. When these are suggested, he says, for example, *Maybe you should be talking to a businessman.*

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Glenn Branca – one of the most renowned contemporary avant-garde composers. This American creator, who composes and performs his own music, is associated with such musical genres as *No wave* or minimalism. Attended the York College and the Emerson College in Boston. The founder of the avant-garde theatre group Bastard Theater. Experimented musically with, among others, electric guitars. The initiator of numerous music projects; boasting a large and attractive discography. The winner of the prestigious award of the Foundation For Contemporary Arts, an organization founded by, among others, John Cage, who... could be counted among Branca's critics.

Discography:

- Lesson No. 1 (99 Records, 1980)
- The Ascension (99 Records, 1981, Acute Records 2001, Fortissimo Records 2010)
- Indeterminate Activity of Resultant Masses, (Atavistic, 1981/2007)
- Bad Smells from Who Are You Staring At? with John Giorno (GPS, 1982)
- Chicago 82 - A Dip In The Lake (Crepuscule, 1983)
- Symphony No. 3 (Gloria) (Atavistic, 1983)
- Symphony No. 1 (Tonal Plexus) (ROIR, 1983)
- The Belly of an Architect (Crepuscule, 1987)
- Symphony No. 6 (Devil Choirs At The Gates Of Heaven) (Atavistic, 1989)
- Symphony No. 2 (The Peak of the Sacred) (Atavistic, 1992)
- The World Upside Down (Crepuscule, 1992)
- The Mysteries (Symphonies Nos. 8 & 10) (Atavistic, 1994)
- Les Honneurs Du Pied from Century XXI USA 2-Electric/Acoustic (various) (New Tone, 1994)
- Symphony No. 9 (I've future) (Point, 1995)
- Faspdelaybop from Just Another Asshole (various) (Atavistic, 1995)
- Songs '77-'79 (Atavistic, 1996)
- Symphony No. 5 (Describing Planes Of An Expanding Hypersphere) (Atavistic, 1999)
- Empty Blue (In Between, 2000)
- Movement Within from Renegade Heaven by Bang On A Can (Cantaloupe, 2000)
- The Mothman Prophecies [Soundtrack] (contributed 1-minute "Collage") (Lakeshore Records, 2002)
- The Ascension: The Sequel (Systems Neutralizers, 2010)
- Symphony No. 7 (Graz) (Systems Neutralizers, 2011)

Online resources:

<http://www.glennbranca.com/>

http://www.brassland.org/ahb/writing/archives/2006/03/the_master_marg.html

<http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/branca.html>

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/glenn-branca/>



Interview with Glenn Branca

questions collected and prepared by Witold Wachowski

***Avant:* Would you allow someone to take a scan of your brain in the name of neurological research into creativity and musical perception?**

Glenn Branca: I don't think that something like creativity can be objectively analyzed. In the same sense that consciousness itself is still not understood by science.

Assuming that at a certain point we would have access to a vast collection of data from such research – would you (and if so, to what degree), as an artist, be willing to make use of these information to elicit appropriate reaction from your audience? This would probably come close to neuromarketing, manipulating a customer.

Maybe you should be talking to a businessman. I'm not interested in marketing or in manipulating anyone.

How much could the process or mechanism shaping musical sensitivity have changed from when people started to create make music until today? To what degree is it now a different process?

It isn't a different process, it never has been. The only difference would be in a composer's access to the audience. And that would be more related to changes in the structure of society than in changes in the creative process. If you're thinking about changes in evolutionary factors affecting the working of the brain you're going to have to reach back

more than a few hundred years. Even a few thousand would not be enough. I don't think humans have changed very much, only the world that they live in has. This would explain why this world is such a mess.

To put it simply: what may listening to early music have in common with listening to Glenn Branca?

The fact that it's all music. Although changes in fashion and style make early music an anachronism that only appeals to a small audience. Most people feel more connected to music that speaks to their concerns in the world they live in.

When such a representative of early music as Marcel Peres performs at the Festival of Contemporary Music (Warsaw Autumn) – could this conjunction be perceived as unnatural?

It doesn't seem to make sense. Why call it a festival of contemporary music if you're not presenting contemporary music.

What do force of habit and spontaneity mean to you – an innovative musician – when it comes to reception of music? Is it possible to talk about a line of escape from the former towards the latter only?

No. People like what they hear most often. Some of us are immune to this kind of hypnotic suggestion. But the percentage of us who are immune will always be very small. Nothing's going to change that. With rare exception most innovative composers were not extremely popular in their lifetimes. Only later when their music had been often imitated by other composers over a long period of time were people then able to "discover" their work.

When you work with a traditional orchestra, do you oversee the process of preparations and rehearsals in an entirely different way than a traditional musical director would?

No. The orchestra is entirely capable of working in non-traditional ways without altering their traditional practice. That is if they are willing to do so of course.

To what degree do you take the audience into your considerations?

To a great degree, if you consider the fact that I am the audience and my ears are the only criteria I have for judging the value of a piece. I have been a member of many audiences and when I'm writing a piece I'm out there listening to it and wondering if I would like it or not.

What do you demand from them?

I never demand anything. It's up to them. As I've implied earlier I don't think you can change people but you can expose them to something they may have never considered before and allow them to discover something new inside themselves. Something that's always already been there.

Do you ever happen, for instance, to be angry with your audience?

Rarely and only as part of the show. The performance is a metaphor and not the thing itself. I wish more people could understand that. My job, like an actor, is to create an effect onstage. The audience can't be a part of that unless the work is meant to include them in some way.

What does the body in music (musician's body, listener's body) mean to you?

Music is a physical experience. It engages the senses more than any other form of art. It means to me that music can speak to that part of us that cannot be articulated in words or images.

Rock music and related genres are said to use rhythmical structures that strongly correspond with our sexuality.

No kidding.

Would you say today that it may limit the influence rock music has over a young listener, or perhaps, conversely – that it has enriched the sphere of influence?

If it gets you off it's working. But due to the extremely subjective nature of music its effect can be very different on different people. I like to engage both the mind and the body. But there are many people who prefer just one or the other.

Is Glenn Branca ensemble the horizon of your musical activities at the moment?

It's one of the things that I'm doing at the moment. I still write for electric guitars for both small and large ensembles. While at the same time I still write for acoustic instruments in both small and large groups. And I will most likely continue to for as long as I write music.