

# Creative Music Making



**William L. Cahn**



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**William L. Cahn**

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Bill Cahn

Bloomfield, New York

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*That beauty is not an immediate property of things, that it necessarily involves a relation to the human mind, is a point which seems to be admitted by almost all aesthetic theories ... [but] the artistic eye is not a passive eye that receives and registers the impression of things. It is a constructive eye, and it is only by constructive acts that we can discover the beauty of natural things.*

—Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*

### MARLBORO, VERMONT, 1968

Improvisation has been at the very core of my own music making through many years of performances with the Toronto-based percussion quintet, NEXUS. Just before NEXUS formed as an ensemble, in the summer of 1968, the five members of the group—Bob Becker, Russell Hartenberger, Robin Engelman, John Wyre, and I—came together at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont to perform the percussion parts in Igor Stravinsky’s “Les Noces.”

John was the timpanist/percussionist in residence there. During his stay he used some of his free time to visit the local antique shops in search of unusual musical instruments, especially bells and gongs. In one shop he found a set of bronze, dome-shaped Japanese temple bells, which he purchased and suspended in the backstage percussion storage room. John had been collecting bells of Asian origin for some time and these new acquisitions were to be added to his collection.

After one of the Stravinsky morning rehearsals, with all of the percussion instruments removed from the stage and arranged back in the storage room, we just started playing around, having fun and experimenting. We amused ourselves by challenging each other to play orchestra excerpts and soon we were playfully distorting them in any imaginative way possible. John’s temple bells came into play for a moment in one of the distortions, the fast and tricky xylophone passage from George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Of course, the temple bell pitches were all wrong because the intonation of the bells fell somewhere in

between the notes of the chromatic keyboard scale, all of which made for a great outpouring of fun and laughter.

One result of this shared experience was that our friendship increased and a mutual willingness emerged to go beyond the restrictions with which our musical thinking had been formally educated. Gradually from that time forward in our music making, “notes” and technical issues became diminished in importance and joyful expression became more of a concern.

## TORONTO, ONTARIO, 1970

*An individual can hear sounds as music (enjoy living) whether or not he is at a concert.*

—John Cage, *M: Writings* ‘67–‘72

A few years later, Bob and I made a visit to John at his house in Toronto. By that time John’s bell collection was prominently organized in one room. Each bell was individually suspended to allow for its sustained ringing. Clusters of small bells were also suspended on strings of four- to six-foot lengths in such a way that when activated by a push of the hand, they could swing freely and strike each other for as long as several minutes. In fact, even after it seemed to us that the ringing had stopped, two bells might later come together, producing a single delicate sound completely unexpected and out of context, maybe punctuating a conversation and prompting all of us to laugh.

John was completely enamored of the bell sounds, and he would move around the room playing them while encouraging his visitors to join in. The experience of listening deeply to the sounds of these bells had a lasting impact on our musical sensibilities, as did the experience of using our intuition in creating our own musical responses. Two new conceptual approaches in listening to the bells emerged: there were no wrong sounds, and there were frequent, but seemingly random, occurrences of what might be called *consonance*—a coming together of pitches or timing or resonance. Furthermore, the bell sounds were fully capable of involving us and sustaining our attention.

Inspired by John’s bells, the rest of us began collecting our own instruments—mostly bells and gongs. At that time such instruments were to be found only after a considerable expenditure of time and effort in hunting for them in antique shops. We searched in antiques shops rather than music stores because most of the kinds of instruments that interested us had originally been transported to North America by international travelers. Over time, as estates were liquidated, the instruments had found their way into antique shops, where they could usually be purchased at relatively low cost.

## ROCHESTER, NEW YORK, 1971

*If the goal [of music] is to appeal to a certain number of people, there’s a danger of not being true to yourself. Each person has to present the music that’s true to one’s self, or there’s a phony aspect to it.*

—Russell Hartenberger of NEXUS, interviewed by the author in 1998

In May 1971, at the prodding of composer Warren Benson, the first NEXUS concert was presented in Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. The stage was filled with our collection of instruments, which had grown to include not only bells and gongs from all over the world but also our own homemade percussion instruments, and even a few flutes and string instruments. The music in our two-hour concert was entirely improvised. There were two reasons for this. First, we had collected many instruments, the sounds of which we were still interested in exploring, even in front of an audience. Second, every instrument in the collection was one-of-a-kind in its sound (pitch, timbre, resonance) and there were no composed pieces of music available for our specific collection of sounds.

The improvisations that occurred in this concert had no preconceived rules or plans. Every one of the performers was free to play anything at any time. Rather than being a license to “go crazy,” the absence of a plan was taken as a responsibility to listen carefully and to make interesting music, just as had been done with the bells at John’s house.

The concert was a great success for NEXUS, though we may not have fully conceptualized yet what we were doing. We were not following the established concert canon, in which the performer, speaking by proxy for the composer, says to an audience, “Here are our musical ideas, which are now being presented to you after much hard work and preparation.”

NEXUS was instead saying to this audience, “We don’t know yet what musical ideas we will be presenting to you; we’re going to search for them now, right before your very eyes and ears.” Left unsaid was that there was no guarantee. Even if we were successful in finding and developing our sounds and ideas, an audience might not find them interesting. Our assumption was simply that an audience could be as involved in the searching process as we were. Little thought was given to any risk we might be taking.

This approach to playing our music was vindicated when the music reviewer for the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle* wrote, “How [the performers] germinate, grow, then gyrate a musical idea—from a few fundamental sounds into a sonorous symphony orchestrated with spontaneous, original composition on-the-spot—is utterly fascinating.”

For the first few years of its existence, every NEXUS concert was completely improvised. Over time it became apparent to us that the state of mind that existed in our improvisations could be beneficially transferred to making music in other contexts, notably in symphonic music and composed chamber music. Such a state of mind has the following characteristics:

- A deeper knowledge of the instruments and their sound-making possibilities
- A deeper level of listening—to one’s self and to other ensemble members—focusing on an acute awareness of the sounds being made
- A more developed intuitive sense in making appropriate musical responses
- An increased ability to embrace the sounds produced by others
- An increased confidence in musical expression and risk taking

The value of our experiences in improvisation gradually became evident to us as time went by. The musical mind-set that has just been described was easily capable of being transferred from improvised music to other areas of music performance. In my own situation it was transferred to the performance of orchestral music.

## YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, ONTARIO, 1973

*I have experienced the feeling of becoming the actual sound I have been playing ... the feeling of literally losing your identity. This is why I don't think the issue is whether the music is improvised or written, Bach or Takemitsu. If that kind of thing can happen, that is music.*

—Robin Engelman of NEXUS, quoted in the *Toronto Star*, March 7, 1982

The fascination with improvised music soon motivated NEXUS to present improvisation workshops, starting with a week of improv sessions and concerts at York University in July 1973. From that event onward, such workshops were regularly presented by NEXUS, mostly at universities and music schools. However, a formal pedagogy for improvisation was never developed.

The workshops were structured very loosely. Normally, NEXUS would first perform a short improvisation or two on the group's collection of world percussion instruments and then selected participants would improvise on the same instruments, sometimes joining NEXUS and sometimes without NEXUS playing along. Standard orchestral percussion instruments like marimbas, vibraphones, timpani, and the like were rarely used in the NEXUS improvisation workshops. The general approach to playing was simply for the participants, who were usually percussionists—rarely other instrumentalists, although occasionally there might be a wind or string player—to play whatever they wanted to play.

Around the time of the York University workshops, NEXUS also crossed paths with Paul Winter and his consort of wonderful musicians, all of whom were great improvisers. Soon Bob Becker, Russell Hartenberger, and I were performing with the Winter Consort and interacting with wind, string, and keyboard instruments in the creation of spontaneous music, some of it tonal and some completely free form. The transition from our NEXUS improvisation mind-set—derived mainly from experiences with percussion instruments—to creating improvised music with musicians on other kinds of instruments was effortlessly accomplished.

## ATSUGI, JAPAN, 1998

*Don't make images: Create meaningful rituals.  
Don't occupy space: Identify with it.*

—Frederic Rzewski, quoted in John Cage, *Notations*

In 1998 I was invited to Japan as a visiting artist in residence at the Showa College of Music and the Arts near Atsugi, south of Tokyo. Upon my arrival it occurred to me that by improvising with individual students in their initial session in my studio, it might be possible to create an immediate personal bond based on the shared creation of music. I decided to obtain an audiocassette recorder and sound system for my studio so that I could record improvisations for playback and analysis with each student. Instead of using bells, gongs, and other non-Western percussion instruments, I decided that we would improvise on instruments that were not only available, but also of particular interest