

Describing Planes of an Expanding Hypersphere Glenn Branca and His Ensemble

First Première

Sunday, September 9th, 1984, 8:00 p. m.
Brucknerhaus, Great Hall

At the moment Glenn Branca is one of the most controversial composers of American New Music. He was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1948, and is a typical representative of a movement which is called Art Rock or Art Gore.

Having been an actor and a stage-director in New York since 1976, he founded and was the leader of two experimental rock bands, "Theoretical Girls" and "The Static". This was also the time of the beginning of the Art Rock movement.

Already when he was working with "Theoretical Girls" and "The Static" his academically unincumbered interest in composing was directed towards the electric guitar and its possibilities. In 1979 was the concert for an ensemble of electronically amplified guitars, "Instrumental for Six Guitars". Branca varied the tuning of the guitars using very simple systems, he used uncommon material for the strings and developed "guitar-armies". Since then Branca has been going on to develop new sound qualities. His interest in physical connections led to the construction of various keyboards which have some relation to the cembalo.

His pronounced sense for structure had him compose his first symphonies, which were performed in New York with great success.

Among American critics Glenn Branca is said to be one of the greatest composers alive and the leader of the Art Rock movement.

Glenn Branca Statement

In June 1982, I began a project to realize a pure tuning system for orchestral and chamber ensemble works. The tuning is a mirror reflection of the actual complex tones which make up the ideal, harmonic structure of the physical wave energy produced by a vibrating string. This system necessitated the design and construction of instruments which could be tuned directly to the exact intervals of the first seven octaves of the harmonic series (128 notes). This tuning makes it possible to determine and produce specific resultant (or differential) tones.

Compositional structures have been determined by the logical geometric symmetry of the harmonic series. The series is a natural phenomenon which exists as a physical manifestation of symmetry and form. The existence alone of this language in nature seems to explain itself as a reflection of its own logic. The existence of this language as music seems to indicate music as reflection of the movement of its own sound waves not a symbolic, but a literal expression of dynamic symmetry in time. Ideally every aspect of the tuning, instrument design, compositional structure and performance should reflect the logic of the harmonic series.

The following list is a series of compositional prototypes which I plan to develop over the period for which the fellowship is requested:

1. spiral scores
2. Fibonacci sequence
3. sympathetic harmony
4. diagonal movement
5. repeated prime series
6. modulation through divisible modes
7. exact locations of the first 32 harmonics (nodes) on the length of a string
8. growth structures
9. fluid motion
10. inner-developing theme
12. light wave frequencies
13. fugue-form
14. implied fundamental movement
15. all possible futures
16. describing planes of an expanding hypersphere
17. continuous reflection (or reflection as the catalyst for expansion)

Interview Glenn Branca

New York (July 1984)

Interviewer: Wolfgang Kos Kos: When was the piece for Linz written, when was it developed?

Branca: I've been working on the piece for about a year now. I mean, I haven't done any new pieces since the Symphony No. 4, that was the last new piece that I did publicly.

Kos: The title?

Branca: Describing Planes of an Expanding Hypersphere.

Kos: Describing planes like airplanes?

Branca: No, like the plane of a geometric figure.

Kos: And will it be the same kind like the Symphony No. 4, the same kind of instrumentation, the same amount of people?

Branca: It's basically the same amount of people involved, but the instrumentation will be a lot different, I mean basically the same instrumentation but actually almost all the instruments will be changed or will be new instruments. The tunings will be different. And in this piece—I mean, since I started working with the harmonic series, I still haven't been able to really even touch the surface of the lot of a composition like this. I have heard about it. One thing is there was quite a bit of time and work to develop a composition like this, so usually I watch situations when it comes to composing these pieces, but now for the last year I've had some time to develop these ideas a lot further, and I think this piece is going to be a better example of the way I'm trying to use and work with the harmonic series than any other piece I've done.

Kos: Why?

Branca: Because I haven't had the time to develop the ideas the way I wanted to, in the same way that Symphony No. 4 was an expansion or development on the ideas from Symphony No. 3, this piece will be a further expansion on the ideas plus the fact my thinking about this is

already gone a lot deeper than it was a year ago and the connections of this becoming more and the connections between mathematical theory and geometry is becoming more interesting to me. And I am being able to develop some score ideas based on the mathematical ideas, which ideas I had had a while back, but it requires some effort. Because I am not interested in simply realizing a dry sounding score, just for the sake of representing an idea, I mean, there has to be something in the sound, it has to be able to clearly represent the idea.

Kos: In Linz you will perform in Brucknerhaus. What kind of meaning has Bruckner to you?

Branca: I am not very interested in Bruckner's music, I am trying to listen to it now, people have mentioned a kind of relationship to my music. I used to listen to a lot of Mahler, but I am not really very interested in him either, I seem to see connections between the two of them. But people played something about Bruckner which was wonderful, but I have not quite got very involved with it. For a long time I only listened to 20th century music which has changed, I don't listen very much to 20th century music anymore. I listened to a lot of Bach recently. And actually the inspiration for this piece is Bach's "The Art of the Fugue". I really liked the form of that piece, I have not seen very many pieces in that form. The form, although it is in many short sections, it is not really a suite, and he is developing the thematic ideas through the use of very short sections, and that's exactly what we are doing in this piece, and this piece will be in somewhere between 15 and 20 movements. This idea I like very much, because I am very interested in structure.

Kos: Is this the first time you will perform in a kind of concert hall which is normally only for symphonic orchestra? I think you perform mostly in galleries, in churches and folk clubs.

Branca: No, that's not the case, we perform—now we do perform a lot of concert hall situations—the only other place we performed there was specifically for symphonic music was in Holland in Utrecht. We mainly perform actually in concert halls now and I think I am beginning to get a grasp on that particular situation. This is very good when you are working the small space.

Kos: And this Haag concert—you had some problems with the resident orchestra?

Branca: I think the whole thing was a complete farce. And I would not even be surprised if it had been staged. I don't really think it was staged, but they were very happy that there was some kind of a controversial situation. I thought it was a joke. With the opening concert of Den Haag festival which they were televising and there was incredible cheering at the performances. They clearly tried to make some kind of a context for what I was doing. They had a Schoenberg piece with a full orchestra chorus, and they were doing a Wagner piece at the end of the program. What happened was that after my performance the conductor of the orchestra—he was going to perform the Wagner piece with singers also--was very upset. He said that it wasn't even played in tune and it sounded horrible, that it was ridiculous and that he would not perform. However, some of the musicians liked the music. So, some of the musicians were walking out and the other ones were staying and then the singers began to make fun of the Wagner piece which was the most outrageous part of the whole thing. For some reason the singers began to goof around with the Wagner piece, so the whole thing became a fiasco. Some of the audience liked what I had done and some hated it and there was booing and I did not actually see what went on, I only heard when I was going out to the dressing room. So, that's basically what happened. I think it was totally ridiculous. Myself, if there had been a conventional rock band performing maybe they would have been playing

much louder than we were, I mean for instance if a hard core band had been performing they would have been just as upset. So I think they were prepared for this.

Kos: Do you see a difference between what you are doing and what you call the new music world?

Branca: I don't think that I am approaching my work any differently then any other composer approaches his work. Obviously each person has his own individual way of working, but basically I am not trying to attack anything, I am not trying to break down any establishment, barriers, I am really not actually, I am simply wanting to be able to present the work that I want to make and which I am very deeply involved in and as I said, all this is not coming from me, it is coming from other people, it affects me, but it's—I'm being used, basically by other people.

Kos: You used similar kind of tactics.

Branca: Basically my work has not really changed, it has taken a different form and I think I am happy with the way the work has developed and what I've really tried to develop is not to have a conscious say. I mean, part of the idea of the work is that I want the force to take its own form as much as possible. I've been interested in ambiguity and I see ambiguity and complexity as being two very closely related things. A multilevel kind of work, a work that can be experienced by two different people in completely opposite ways. Two people can be thinking exactly diametrically opposed ideas which are both totally in dialogue and both of those things are exactly what the piece is about. For instance, when I was in Germany, people were yelling fascist—the fact of the matter is some of those people as far as they were thinking were absolutely right but that's OK. But as the same time that it was fascism it was something else that was absolutely opposed to that idea. And somehow the way I work is that if people weren't yelling and making me feel like maybe at that moment, at that time, in that piece, maybe it was fascist, I don't rule anything out, maybe somehow I am a fascist, you know. So I decided to carry it farther to see whether I was or not, I decided to push it, OK, I am going to be a fascist—I am going to create fascist music, let's see where it goes, what is this music. If there is nothing new for me to find out from the music, it's definitely not interesting for me. I have to have something new as much as possible, I have to be finding something new, and I want music which is going to surprise me, which is going to show me something, not teach me something. And so I am happy about the fact, I think, my work has been able—I mean I have found a way of making a work which I consider, which I don't consider to be manipulative—I am actually very opposed to manipulative work, commercial music is almost entirely manipulative.

Kos: Are you interested more in giving with your performance the kind of information about your knowledge about the harmonic series about physical possibilities with acoustic phenomena or do you like that people listen to your music who normally don't know these things?

Branca: I want to present it together with this knowledge, that's exactly what I want to do. The problem is, on one hand I want to write music, on the other hand I would like to express these ideas, these are two very different things. Wanting to express the ideas that I have developed in the last couple of years would require stopping all work and trying to articulate these ideas in a form out of the music. I don't want to stop working, I want to continue going farther, but sometimes I think I'm going to take six months off and sit down. I have a book that's being planned, I have been planning now for a year and a half, which I am slowly putting together

information for. So, at some point now I've got to take six months off, I want these ideas to get out, I also want to incorporate these ideas into the music, I would like to have the audience even aware of some of the ideas I am working with while they are actually hearing the music. One reason I am interested in this is because I've sometimes when replaying a tape of composition that I've been working on, at the same time I will be looking at a chart that I have made or thinking about some ideas and I see when my mind is looking at the ideas, the music begins to take on, begins to sound different, begins to take on a different quality—it begins to have a totally different meaning. And I know that when the audience becomes more aware of the ideas I am working with, they will actually be able to hear more of the music. It will have more impact.

Kos: Do the musicians or the people who work with you in concerts, do they need to share your way of thinking about music phenomena?

Branca: They have to share an idea, it's more of a visual thing, it's more of an intuitive understanding of what has to happen, but there is absolutely no doubt that the musicians have to understand what the music is trying to do. When I start to work with a number of new musicians on a new piece it usually is not—it does not work as good as after they start to understand what I am trying to do. There is no doubt, the better the understanding the musicians have of the music the more closer it comes to what it's supposed to sound like.

Kos: Can you imagine being in the academic world? Can you imagine one day being the professor of some university?

Branca: Imagine?—Sure, are you kidding me? I am doing very serious work, I have a lot to say about it. I would love if people were interested enough to want to learn more about the work. I think it's a real pity that the academic world sees me and people like me working with ideas outside of the equal temperament system as being a threat, as a warning that the equal temperament systems will die and be buried. They are completely mistaken, absolutely mistaken that they think this will be the end of western music, all our wonderful western music and music theory that has been developed for hundreds of years—and that is not the case at all. Now there is no reason why another system can't exist alongside this. There are many other systems, why does a composer have to be restricted to working in one system which almost can be seen as a system invented by one man, somebody's idea of a system of music. Why can't each composer use whatever system he wants to use anyway a composer can, but being accepted in the world of music and understood. But what I wanted to say is that the more I work with a system the more valuable I see western music theory is! Not all, but much of this theory can very easily be applied to the system I am working with, very easily. And it's very valuable. And I think the people are ignorant of these ideas, they don't want to know about it.

Kos: You did work with rock bands for a short period of time—does it not interest you?

Branca: Sure it interests me. I was interested in it for a long time, and I am still, but I can't. I have to make a choice of where I am going to put my time and my energy. And I can't—there are other things that have to be done, and I can't deal with that. I cannot limit myself to a very specific kind of structure, and a very specific kind of commercial world which is totally ridiculous.

Glenn Branca—Press

"HIS FORTE IS MASSIVE SONIC GRANDEUR"

"Whether this is 'serious' or classical or rock or all three, Mr. Branca is the leader of the most vital new trend to transform downtown new music since the minimalists. The unprecedented aural density sets up new acoustic and artistic ramifications: ringing harmonics, directional counterpoint from the different loudspeakers, the inherent theater of this new kind of guitar orchestra. In an important sense, Mr. Branca is presenting neither classical music nor instrumental rock but a new kind of live electronic music. He uses electric guitars, not as artifacts of rock but as electronic music instruments bent to use, having their roots in Futurism, Dada, Varèse and the 60s sound-colorists as well as symphonic music, free jazz and heavy-metal rock. However one chooses to categorize this music, the fact remains that it is part of a movement and that if anyone can claim leadership of that movement, it is Mr. Branca."

(John Rockwell NEW YORK TIMES)

"Branca is now frighteningly good, one of the best composers alive: the exuberance, intelligence, and newness of his music can make everything else around sound stale and tame. Rock and roll shocked and transformed the pop music world when it emerged; when Branca's work surfaces, the new music community is in for an equivalent surprise."

(Greg Sadow VILLAGE VOICE)

"Branca had me shaking. I found myself responding in ways that brought me back to my ego. My feelings were disturbed. I recalled a piece composed by La Monte Young that was a recording at highest volume of a gong scraping on cement. But there had been a change. The gong is no longer a thing but a performance group. It was hard to take the conducting and the willingness on the part of 1,200 people to experience the same thing. I found in myself the willingness to connect the music with evil—with power. I don't want such a power in my life. Since I was concerned, I asked the people who were talking to me what they thought. I was brought back to my senses because a number of people said they were exhilarated by the music. One said he had heard sounds he had never heard before. Ben Johnston said it was like looking through a microphone at a world he'd never seen. One Belgian critic felt this was the next step, the seed of the 21st century."

(John Cage CHICAGO SUN-TIMES)

„Glenn Branca ist der Schamane, der sich wie in einer Vision auf der Bühne bewegt. Jede Zuckung seines Körpers wird exakt in Klänge umgesetzt, die ekstatische Steigerung seiner Bewegungen spiegelt sich in einer musikalischen Ekstase wieder. Bei Branca's Life Performance läßt sich das Publikum auf ein Ausleben der Gefühle ein, auf eine schmerzvolle Begegnung mit der mit Gefühlen geladenen Wirklichkeit, auf eine kultische Beschwörung oder auf eine Illusion. Es sind Augenblicke, in denen bestimmte Dinge, die wir sicher kennen, nicht wahr sind." (Nemi S. SPEX) "Branca stretches his music further than is normally deemed acceptable or even possible in the world of rock, frequently reaching a plateau of sustained intensity rarely achieved outside of the spiritual or sexual encounter. If anyone else described their music as forcing you 'far back into the subconscious to find out what it is you are hearing' they might appear pretentious; when Branca makes this kind of statement it merely seems modest, inadequate."

(Lynder Barber MELODY MAKER)

"Glenn Branca is a rock 'n' roll renegade who has left the standard rock circuit behind to become a trailblazing new music iconoclast. Branca's music is absolutely hypnotic, building with an enormous cascading crescendo that seems non-stop and nonstopable. It's absolutely riveting, completely devastating."

(Rob Baker, New York DAILY NEWS)

Compositions By Glenn Branca

1975: ANTHROPOPHAGOI

A music/theatre piece written in collaboration with John Rehberger.

Presented at the Bastard Theater at the Red Studio, Boston. Percussion, Electronics and Mouth

Music for the Dubios Music Ensemble. Presented at the Bastard Theater at the Boston Arts Group.

1976: WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

A music/theater piece written in collaboration with John Rehberger.

Presented at the Boston Arts Group.

1977: SHIVERING TONGUE FINGERS AIR

A solo music/theatre piece. Presented at the Placenter, NYC.

SONGS FOR THEORETICAL GIRLS

Rock band existed from 1977—1979. Presented at Franklin Furnace, NYC.

1978: SONGS FOR THE STATIC

Rock band that existed from 1978—1979. The first performance also included the extended instrumental piece Inspirez/Expirez (12 mins.). Presented at Franklin Furnace, NYC.

1979: (INSTRUMENTAL) FOR SIX GUITARS

Length: 12 mins. Presented at Max's Easter Festival.

THE SPECTACULAR COMMODITY

Music for the dance Fluttering Black by Elko and Koma (20 mins.). Presented at the Performing Garage, NYC.

DISSONANCE

Length: 13 mins. Presented at the Kitchen, NYC.

LESSON NO. ONE (FOR ELECTRIC GUITAR)

Length: 10 mins. Presented at TR3, NYC.

1980: (INSTRUMENTAL) FOR SIX GUITARS (second version)

An expanded version in 3 parts (25 mins). Presented at the Kitchen, NYC.

THE ASCENSION

Length: 12 mins. Presented at TR3, NYC.

LIGHT FIELD

Length: 9 mins. Presented at Danceteria, NYC.

LESSON NO. TWO

Length: 8 mins. Presented at the Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis.

1981: STRUCTURE

Full length version—16 mins. Presented at Real Artways, Hartford.

SYMPHONY #1 (TONAL PLEXUS) In 4 movements, total length—60 mins.
Presented at the Performing Garage.

INDETERMINATE ACTIVITY OF RESULTANT MASSES

Length: 30 mins. Presented at Arts on the Beach, NYC.

1982: Music for the dance BAD SMELLS

Length: 17 mins. Commissioned by the Twyla Tharp Dance Co. First performance (music only) at the Mudd Club, NYC.

SYMPHONY #2 (THE PEAK OF THE SACRED)

5 movements, total length—90 mins. Presented at St. Marks Church, NYC.

1983: SYMPHONY #3 (GLORIA)

Music for the first 127 intervals of the harmonic series. Total length: 90 mins. Presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

SYMPHONY #4 (PHYSICS)

Presented at the Vienna Festival

Recordings by Glenn Branca

1978: "YOU GOT ME"

(Theoretical Girls) 7" single on Theoretical Records, NYC.

Performers: G. Branca, Jeffrey Lohn, Margaret DeWys, Wharton Tiers.

1979: "MY RELATIONSHIP"

(The Static) 7" single b/w "Don't Let Me Stop You" on Theoretical Records, NYC.

Performers: G. Branca, Barbara Ess, Christine Hahn.

"LIVE AT RIVERSIDE STUDIOS"

(The Static) cassette of live concert released on Audio Arts of London.

Performers: G. Branca, Barbara Ess, Christine Hahn.

1980: "LESSON NO. ONE"

12" E. P. (b/w "Dissonance") on 99 Records, NYC.

Performers: G. Branca, Frank Schroder, Harry Spitz, Mike Gross, Anthony Coleman, Stephan Wischerth.

1981: "THE ASCENSION"

Album (also includes: "Lesson #2", "The Spectacular Commodity", "Structure" and "Light Field"). Released on 99 Records.

Performers: G. Branca, Ned Sublette, Lee Ranaldo, Jeffrey Glenn, David Rosenbloom, Stephan Wischerth.

"FASPEEDELAYBOP"

45 second piece on compilation record Just Another Asshole #5.

Performer: G. Branca.

1982: Music for the dance "BAD SMELLS"

(Music commissioned by the Twyla Tharp Dance Co.) One side of the album "Who You Staring At?" Released on Giorno Poetry system, NYC.

Performers: G. Branca, David Rosenbloom, Ned Sublette, Lee Ranaldo, Thurston Moore, Jeffrey Glenn, Stephan Wischerth.

1983: "ACOUSTIC PHENOMENA"

7" record. Limited edition of 1000 released by The Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland (as part of a catalogue).

Performers: G. Branca, Margaret DeWys, Axel Gros.

"SYMPHONY #3 (GLORIA)"

Album recorded live at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Released by Neutral Records.

Released in Europe by Crepuscule Records, Belgium.

Performers: Craig Bromberg, Margaret DeWys, Barbara Ess, Michael Gira, Jeffrey Glenn, Greg Letson, Amanda Linn, Thurston Moore, Lee Ranaldo, Arleen Schloss, Stephan Wischerth, Dan Witz, Axel Gros, G. Branca.

"SYMPHONY #1 (TONAL PLEXUS)"

Cassette tape recorded live at the Performing Garage. Length—60 mins.

Released by Reach Out International Records and Tapes.

Performers: G. Branca, Craig Bromberg, Dave Buk, Anne DeMarinis, Barbara Ess, Robert Harrison, Thurston Moore, Lee Ranaldo, David Rosenbloom, Richard Edson, Ned Sublette, Wharton Tiers, Gail Vachon, Fritz Van Orden, Margot Zvaleko, S. Wischerth.