VII. Postal Pieces

The postal pieces, written between 1965 and 1971, but actually produced in 1971 (with the help of Alison Knowles and Marie McRoy at Cal. Arts), are a series of ten short works printed on post cards. Several of the pieces were written in and around 1971 for a few of Tenney's friends at Cal. Arts. His explanation of the set is that he hated to write letters, and since he had a number of very short compositions, what could be easier than to make postcards out of them. Whether this was an idea original to Tenney or not is rather academic (Pauline Oliveros' wonderful postcards are the only other example I know), but musically, I think that the series is certainly unique. The set consists of:

Scorecard #:
1 Beast (7/30/71)
2 A Rose is a Rose is a Round (3/70)
3 (night) (8/6/71)
4 Koan (8/16/71)
5 Maximusic (6/16/65)
6 Swell Piece (12/67)
7 Swell Piece #2 and Swell Piece #3 (March 1971)
8 August Harp (8/17/71)
9 Cellogram (8/17/71)
10 Having Never Written a Note for Percussion (8/16/71)

(The entire set is reproduced in the following pages). Seven of the ten pieces were written in 1971 (the same year as Quiet Fan and Hey When I Sing..., with the second two "swell" pieces in the same month as the latter), and of these, Beast, (night), Having Never Written a Note..., (two percussion pieces written on the same day), Koan, August Harp and Cellogram (the latter two again written on the same day, Koan the day before) are all written within about two weeks of each other. On the back of each is the indication 1954-1971 for the set, which is somewhat confusing since none of the pieces seem to have been written that early. He had originally intended to include two small songs written on short poems by the important experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage, but that was never completed.

Most of the pieces deal with one of three fundamental ideas: intonation; the swell idea, which we have seen earlier but which here becomes explicit; the unadorned use of musical structures which will produce meditative perceptual states. In these latter, the listener, and to some extent the performer have to create their own "dramas" and interpretations (in this sense, Tenney and others sometimes refer to all the pieces as "koans", although only one is so named). None of these ideas are new in the context of Tenney's work, but in these pieces he is presenting them almost as theorems, and leaves no doubt as to their intent.

Tenney elucidated these ideas at some length in an interview (1978) with Canadian composer, writer and instrument builder Gayle Young:

> "GY: How do you deal with musical form, in that light? You obviously wouldn't be concerned with the release of tension which is the conclusion of the usual type of classical music?
> JT: No. I think of form as the same thing, on a larger temporal scale, as what's called content on a smaller scale. That old form/content dichotomy is, to me, a spurious one, because they involve the same thing at different hierarchical levels of perception. What we take to be the substance or content of some sound - say, a string quartet - is really the result of forms - formal shapes and structures at a microscopic, or 'microphonic' level: particular envelopes, wave-forms, and sequences of these - details in the signal. All form is just the same thing at a larger level, involving spans of time over, say, five or ten or twenty minutes or more. It's precisely the same thing physically. When you begin to see it that way, you can begin to feel it musically. So my interest in form is identical to my interest in sound (LAUGHS).
> GY: Your postcard pieces, for example, are essentially a single musical gesture that continues until it's over.
> JT: Those pieces have a lot to do with this attitude toward sound, but also with something else, which is the notion of the avoidance of drama. They involve a very high degree of predictability. If the audience can just <u>believe</u> it, after they've heard the first twenty seconds of the piece, they can almost determine what's going to happen the whole rest of the time. When they know that's the case, they don't have to <u>worry</u> about it anymore - they don't have to sit on the edge of their seats...
> GY: Waiting for the big bang.
> JT: What they can do is begin to really <u>listen</u> to the sounds, get inside them, notice the details, and consider or meditate on the overall shape of the piece, simple as it may be. It's often interesting how within a simple shape there can be relationships that are surprising. It's curious - in a way, the result in this highly determinate situation is the same as in an indeterminate one, where things are changing so rapidly and unpredictably that you lose any sense of drama there, too. Now people react to that in two different ways: some are angry about it, because they expect, and demand, meaningful drama. But if you can relax that demand and say 'no, this is <u>not</u> drama, this is just 'change' (LAUGHS) -

then you can listen to the sounds for themselves rather than in relation to what proceeded or what will follow.
GY: Would you go so far as to say, 'Sound for the sake of sound'?
JT: It's sound for the sake of perceptual insight - some kind of perceptual revelation. Somehow it seems to me that that's what we're all doing - searching to understand our own perceptual processes. In a way, science is about the same thing, but its enterprise seems to understand the nature of reality through thought and intellection. It seems to me art is about understanding reality to the same extent, and as singularly, but through a different modality - through perception.
(p. 16 "Only Paper Today" - June 1978)

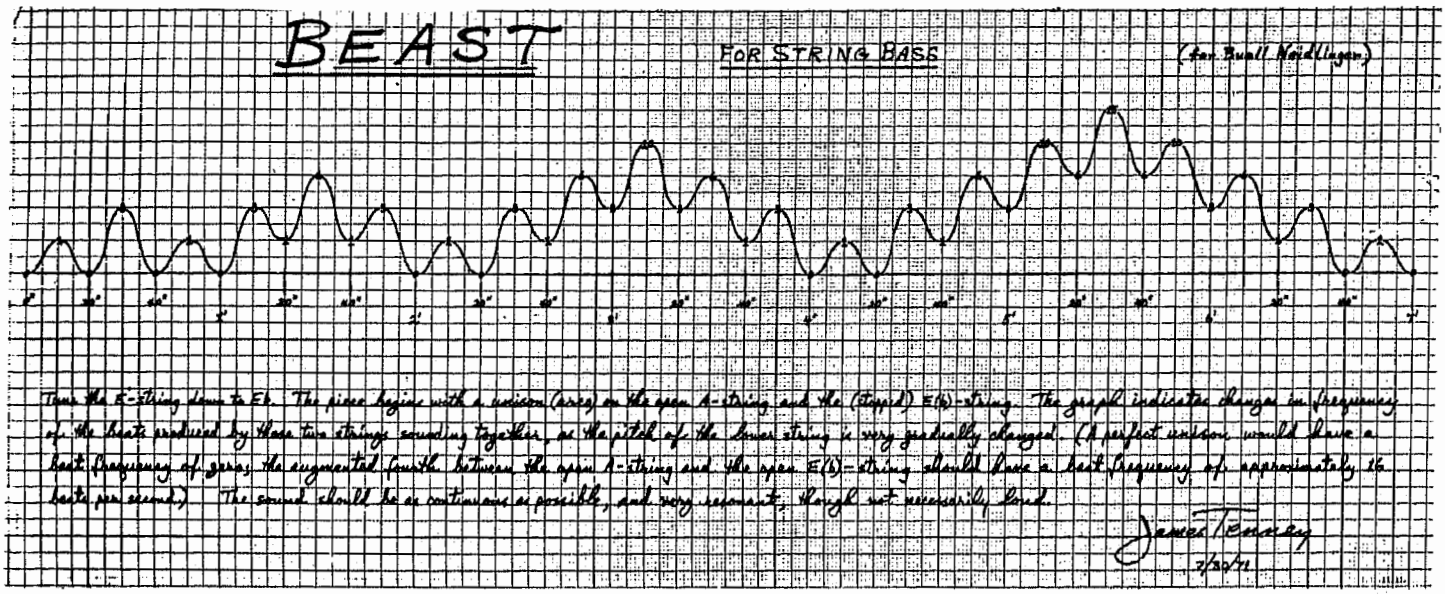
Beast, written for Buell Neidlinger, the great jazz and classical bassist, is one of the most well known and performed of the set. It is a study in rhythm, using the low frequency first order difference tones (or slow beats) produced by the simultaneous sounding of two bass strings whose relative intonation is constantly changing. The bass low E-string is tuned to Eb, and assuming an A=44Ø c.p.s (55 c.p.s. three octaves below), a little calculation shows that, as Tenney says, the open tritone below it has a frequency of about 38.8 c.p.s.. The maximum amount of beats produced, or the "quickest" tempo of the piece is about 16 per second. (In comparison, a just tuned E below would have a frequency of 41.25 c.p.s., producing 13.75 beats per second). One can see that the number of beats per second produced is directly proportional to the distance from the unison, since the frequency differences increase accordingly. (This should not of course be confused with the relative consonance of an interval, which might be related more closely to the entire system of beat frequencies between the spectra of two tones. See Tenney's "consonance-dissonance" theory for more on this). Beast, whose title is a double-entendre on the word "beats" and on jazz vernacular (in homage to Neidlinger's virtuousity), is seven minutes long, and its form is rather simply related to the Fibonacci series and to the idea of recursive replication of inner forms (as in so much of his other music, like Quiet Fan, and the computer pieces). Incidentally, this type of thinking predates by many years the recent interest of many composers in the use of fractals, functions whose "shape" is replicated at infinitely many levels of detail. The score indicates the "target" values for the beat frequencies, connecting them sinusoidally, with each of the four large humps made up of smaller ones which resemble the "swell" type shape. The durations of the four large humps, whose respective target beat per second values are 3,6,1Ø, and 15, (in a roughly exponential series); are 1 minute, 1 minute, 2

minutes and 3 minutes (as in the Fibonacci series). In addition, the intermediate values in each of these larger shapes are 1,3,6,10 and 15. The intervals that roughly correspond with these target values are: a 53 cents flat major third (55/45 = 11/9 = 10 beats per second); a 32 cents flat major second (55/49 = 6 beats per second); a 3 cents flat semitone (55.52 = 3 beats per second); and a sixth-tone (55/4 = 1 beat per second). In performance, this is all done of course by the players' ear, who need not be versed in the intonational arithmetic manipulations. I have now heard Beast several times, and my impression is that of a stark and unassumingly beautiful sonic meditation, that like the other pieces, asks more questions that it answers.

A Rose is a Rose is a Round is written for Tenney's old friend Philip Corner who, for a short period in the late 1960's, composed rounds almost exclusively. Tenney's postcard (the only one in color - rosy pink) is a very direct homage to his friend's interest. (Corner has told me that originally the intention was that of an exchange of pieces - a Tenney round for a Corner rag, but Corner has been delinquent in his end of the trade). It is, I think, meant as a kind of amusement, and is a clever use of simple diatonic melody that cycles out of phase with itself. It is written in circular notation for reasons more visual than musical, and could just as easily be written conventionally. Each successive musical phrase starts on a different word of the three word pattern, resulting in the three repeating lyrics (A ROSE IS/ ROSE IS A/ IS A ROSE), since the melody has 11 notes in it (non-divisable by three until it is repeated three times). The only remaining "trick" is the traditional canonic requirement of finding the best place to start the repetition (I use the word "start" loosely here). Tenney's solution, beginning the "inner" melody six beats behind the outer, minimizes the number of vertical seconds in the melody and emphasizes a conventionally consonant contrapuntal texture. The second best solution (Example VII.1, beginning on the third eighth), will not observe the metrical and lyrical structure and will also result in two fourths. There are other reasons why Tenney's is the "optimal" solution. As Philip Corner has pointed out, Tenney's canon is also interesting in terms of its harmonic (tonic-dominant) implications, symmetry, contrapuntal obliquity, and textual alignment. What can be seen from this is how carefully Tenney explored someone else's idea, and I think this meticulousness is central to the idea of proper homage prevalent in so much of his music.

(night), for the composer Harold Budd, whose lush and lyrical music made a deep impression on Tenney at Cal. Arts, and who became a good friend, is a piece about which little can be said. It seems to be a kind of musical poetic evocation of the nature of Budd's music, and is rather singular
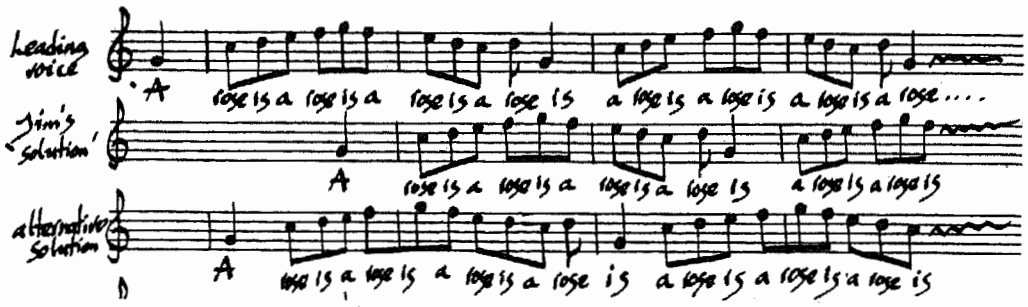
Example VII.1



Example VII.2



Example VII.3



in the set and in Tenney's opus as well.

Koan is written for violinist and composer Malcolm Goldstein, one of the co-founders of Tone Roads with Tenney and Corner. A kind of miniature For Ann (rising), it consists of a perpetually ascending tremolando double-stop. The continuity is effected by dovetailing the glissandi on adjacent strings (e.g., the G rises to an A above D before the D string begins to ascend). In a sense, it is a tribute to and study of the rather personal and introspective nature of Goldstein's work, both as performer and composer. It can be quite long, and Goldstein has said that although at first it was physically difficult to perform, on successive playings the piece became much easier, as he relaxed and ceased to worry about it. As I've mentioned above, a koan is a "question" in classical zen tradition which a teacher or master poses to his student, not so much to answer as to ponder. Typically, it involves some apparent paradox or inconsistency, as in "There is a high mountain in a range where all others have snow on top, yet this one is snowless". Something that has interested me about this piece, after several hearings, is the question "In this koan, who is the teacher and who is the student?".

Maximusic was written for another good friend of

Tenney's: percussionist, composer, sculptor, etc., Max Neuhaus. This piece is an inversion of the swell idea, with the attack happening in the middle. It is the earliest of the postal pieces, and I think that the era in which it was written (the middle 60's, when Tenney was involved in various artistic movements in N.Y.C. like FLUXUS and the "art happenings") has something to do with the form and nature of the piece. (Tenney has said that it is also a "parody on European music of that period").

Swell Piece for Alison Knowles, N.Y. artist, sculptor, composer and poet, is perhaps the expression of the swell idea in its simplest form. It is an early example of what is currently called "minimalism", though I think Tenney would likely reject that description of any of his work. It was about this time, 1967, that Alison Knowles created the famous House of Dust, a computer aided poem/sculpture, with Tenney's assistance. (The poem/computer program actually grew out of an informal "course" in FORTRAN Tenney gave to several of his friends, including Philip Corner, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Jackson MacLow, Max Neuhaus, Nam June Paik, and Steve Reich).

Swell Piece #2 and #3 were written for Pauline Oliveros and LaMonte Young respectively, two composers whose work Tenney admires. These are two lemmas (or variations) on the swell "theorem". The first stresses personal sonic/perceptual processes (with respect to Oliveros' sonic meditations), and the second is a "parody" of LaMonte Young's famous "B-F# (hold for a very long time").

August Harp was written for the harpist Susan Allen (in August), a study of possible pedal combinations of an adjacent diatonic tetrachord. Each one of the combinations is to be played four times, until the harpist feels she has run out of combinations. Since each of the four strings can take three possible values, there are 81 possible combinations (thus 324 notes at a slow tempo). Note that many of the pedal combinations produce enharmonic octave doublings, with seconds being the most predominant interval, as a kind of secondary statistical resultant.

Cellogram, written for Joel Krosnick the same day as August Harp, is similar to Beast in its use of resultant tones, similar to Koan in instrumental technique, and strangely similar to Quiet Fan in its use of a kind of aborted coda at the end. Once again, the ideas of inner canonical form and replication of small shapes at large levels are present.

Having Never Written a Note for Percussion is my favorite of the postal pieces, and extremely popular among many percussionists I've known. Written for John Bergamo,

Example VII.4

For Percussion Perhaps, Or . . . .

(night)

for Harold Budd

very soft

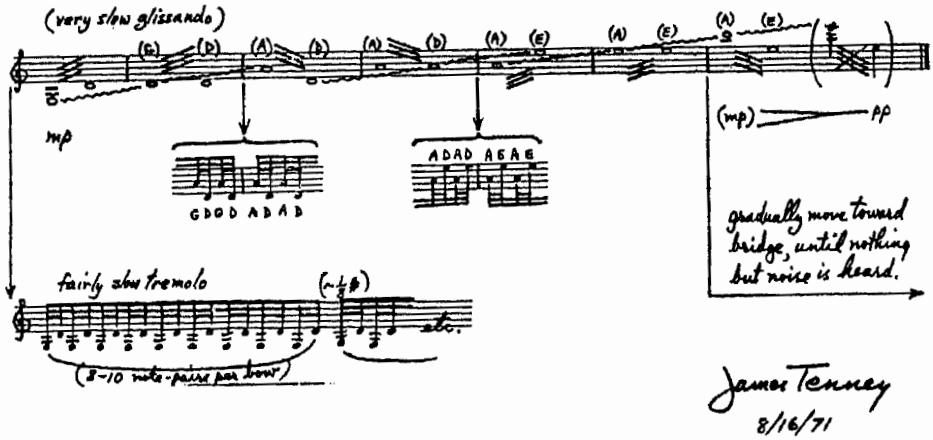
very long

nearly white

James Tenney
8/6/71

Example VII.5

KOAN for solo violin for Malcolm Goldstein



MAXIMUSIC

Example VII.6

for Max Neuhaus

(1) Soft roll on large cymbal; constant, resonant, very long.
(2) Sudden loud, fast improvisation on all the other (percussion) instruments except the tam-tam(s)—especially (but not only) non-sustaining ones; constant texture; continue until nearly exhausted from the physical effort, but not as long as (1); end with tam-tam(s) (not used until now)—just one blow, as loud as possible.
(3) Same as (1), but now inaudible until all the other sounds have faded; continue ad lib but not as long as (1) or (2), then let the cymbal fade out by itself.

James Tenney
6/16/65

Example VII.7

Swell Piece

for Alison Knowles

To be performed by any number of instruments beyond three, and lasting any length of time previously agreed upon.
Each performer plays one long tone after another (actual durations and pitches free and independent).
Each tone begins as softly as possible, builds up to maximum intensity, then fades away again into (individual) silence.
Within each tone, as little change of pitch or timbre as possible, in spite of the intensity changes.

James Tenney
12/67

Example VII.8

SWELL PIECE NO. 2 (for any five or more different sustaining instruments):

for Pauline Oliveros

Each performer plays A-440, beginning as softly as possible, building up to maximum intensity, then fading away again into (individual) silence. This process is repeated by each performer in a way that is rhythmically independent of any other performer, until a previously agreed-upon length of time has elapsed. Within each tone, as little change of pitch or timbre as possible.

SWELL PIECE NO. 3 (for any eight or more different sustaining instruments):

with respect to LaMonte Young and his COMPOSITION 1960, No. 7

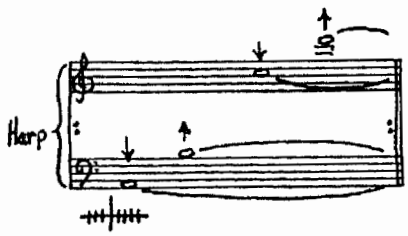
Divide the instruments into two approximately equal-numbered groups, primarily on the basis of a treble-bass distinction. The higher-pitched group plays the F-sharp a tritone above middle C, the lower-pitched group the B a fifth below. Play as in Swell Piece No. 2, but "for a long time".

James Tenney
March, 1971

Example VII.9

AUGUST HARP

for Susan Allen



Let the tempo be determined by, and synchronous with the breath (↓ = exhalation, ↑ = inhalation)

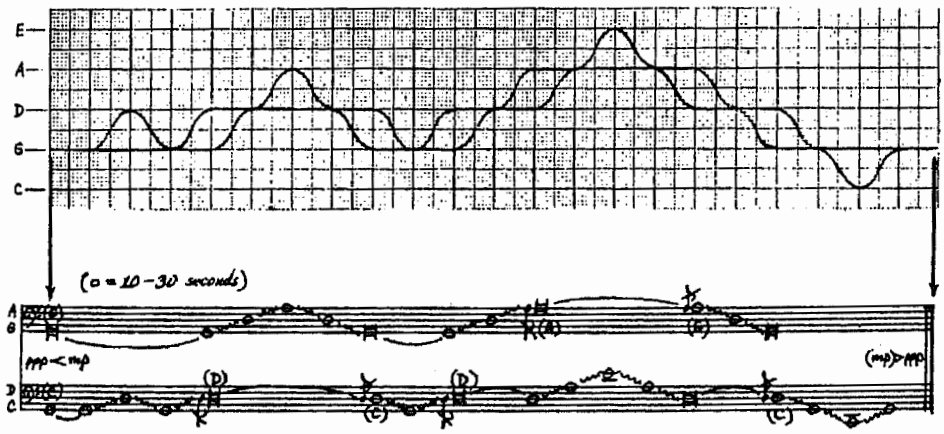
Play this figure four times with each pedal-combination. After every fourth repetition, improvise a new pedal-change for one or more of these four strings. Try not to repeat a pedal-combination already used. Continue as long as any variation still seems possible.

James Tenney

8/17/71

Example VII.10

CELLOGRAM for Joel Krosnick



James Tenney
8/17/71

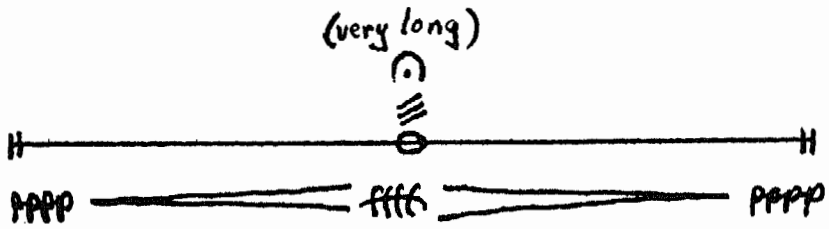
percussion teacher at Cal. Arts, the piece (and the multiple entendre) usually consists of one continuous roll on a tam-tam (although that instrument does not appear on the score, and I think it would be interesting to perform the piece occasionally on another instrument), with a crescendo from quadruple piano to quadruple forte and then back down again. The only duration inidication is "very long", and the several performances I've heard range from eight minutes to about 20. All are quite astonishing, as the gentle inaudible hum of the instrument builds into a complex and somewhat

frightening chaos of non-periodic spectra, room resonances, illusory tones, and indescribable concurrences with the listener's psyche. I think it is fitting that it is the last of the scorecards, for in a way it most clearly expresses the intent of the whole set. Incidentally, the titular claim, as far as I know, was true.

Example VII.11

HAVING NEVER WRITTEN A NOTE FOR PERCUSSION

for John Bergamo



James Tenney

8/6/71