

Morrow Catalog Introduction - Charles Bernstein 1989

Charlie Morrow's works extend well beyond the conventionally defined parameters of a composer or conductor, as this catalog of his complete works dramatically illustrates. Morrow's compositions range from traditionally scored works for chamber and large orchestra, to vocal music, audiotape collages, film scores, "conceptual" performance-art events, stage works, and large-scale multimedia events involving global radio and telephone interconnections. This range reflects Morrow's commitment to constantly breaking new ground formally, in terms of musical structures, and socially, in terms of the environment and contexts in which his music is heard.

"Morrow's work presents an extraordinary combination of the world's oldest and newest technology—an exploration summed up in the idea of New Wilderness," according to his long-time collaborator, poet Jerome Rothenberg. "His innovations and breakthroughs are numerous and extraordinary. Global works, like the Solstice Festivals, use modern telecommunications to link multiple nations and cultures, new (avant-garde) forms and traditional (tribal) forms. Morrow's idea of ritualized events unifies all his work from the dream chants, to musical works for massed performers (100 tubas, marching bands), to vocal and instrumental performances, number compositions, and ethnological pieces."

"I have sought to push the limits of what a composer does— and is—by focusing on new/old," Morrow explains. "As an artist committed to a greatly expanded idea of the avant-garde, I have worked to synthesize the ancient with the current. This has meant using the telecommunications systems and mass media to express a personal perspective on native and vernacular cultural traditions. Specifically, I have used contemporary telecommunications systems to link native and experimental artists." Through his use of mass media as part of the artistic process, Morrow's work has been heard and seen worldwide.

In order to realize his vision of the New Wilderness, Morrow became a media professional as well as a composer. "I have used high-technology and the media in the context of a ritual of communication, synthesizing the new and the old. This has required major collaborations with artists in many disciplines. As an early experimenter with rock 'n' roll as performance art, I worked with Pop musicians such as the Young Rascals. I have also pioneered the use of new music in advertising and noncultural media. In addition, I have worked with many native artists, even scoring the first feature film made in Sami (Lapland language)."

Morrow's work has brought him into collaboration with poets as well as musicians. "In many ways my work is closer in spirit to poetry than it is to much contemporary music, even in the avant-garde. But I have close affiliations with a number of composers and performers, including Sten Henson, R.I.P. Hayman, Alvin Curran, Pauline Oliveros, and Annea Lockwood."

"My work moves from the personal (grounded in chanting) to the tribal (public ceremonies). As an official eventmaker for New York City's Commissioner of Parks and Recreations, I have created Solstice events every year since 1973. My events have used a combination of local, national, and international media to coordinate, for example, 30 boats on Lake Michigan in "Toot 'n' Blink" in Chicago and 2000 performers and the entire city of Copenhagen in "Copenhagen Wave." The international scope of these activities will continue with projects like "The Zurich Event: Lenin, Dada, and Jung", which will gather artists and thinkers from three radical streams of twentieth-century thought to perform and reconceive the revolutionary spirit of their traditions.

It will be a Swiss spectacle and a global TV show."

Morrow has been creating musical works and events for over thirty years. It is striking that his earliest works—written when he was in high school—bear a startling resemblance to his most recent large-scale performance works in their insistence on rethinking the basic conceptions of what makes a musical work. In 1957, while attending high school in Newark, New Jersey, Morrow spent his free time talking to people all over the world on his ham radio set and being an active member of the school marching band. Amidst these activities, he had the idea to write three "conceptual" works for orchestra. "I guess I was anticipating the works of the Fluxus group, who did similar things in New York a few years later—but I knew nothing of the avant-garde, except my own private invention of it."

Morrow, who was born in 1942, interrupted these Dada-like explorations to study science and music at Columbia University. "My greatest influences in college were the ethnomusicologist Willard Rhodes and the ethnologist Colin Turnbull. Their interest in non-Western cultures greatly expanded my sense of what music could be and do. And it confirmed my own sense of music as kinetic rather than stationary, which I had picked up playing the trumpet in parades all around the country."

After graduating from Columbia, Morrow continued his musical studies at the Mannes School of Music, graduating in 1965. At Mannes, he pursued several different directions at once. His teacher William Sydeman was interested in structurally rigorous, but expressionistic, music using the "intervallic" systems developed by Schoenberg and others. "Working with Sydeman, I was able to focus on developing a unique musical voice. And voice is something that has remained a central concern in all my work, along with motion and activity: having a framework on the earth based on location, direction, and voice."

While Sydeman initiated Morrow into the forms of mainstream music, as is reflected by his music of the early 60s, a stronger influence for him during this period was Stefan Wolpe, whom he worked with as his "unofficial teacher." "Wolpe helped me to get the next step with my music. His interest in the theories of physicist Neils Bohr encouraged my own interests in thinking of music in more broadly conceptual and quasi-scientific ways than was acceptable in the academy. Wolpe thought that every note, every sound, was at a particular energy level and that composition involved creating a sort of atomic universe of simultaneous and sequential levels of energy. It's a geometric way of thinking about music that was enormously liberating for me, especially compared to the stultifyingly structured work encouraged at Mannes." At this time, Morrow joined avant-garde musicians James Tenney, Malcolm Goldstein, and Philip Corner in the "Tone Roads" series at the New School for Social Research that in many ways precipitated the split between the "downtown" independent music scene and the "uptown" (Columbia University-based) academic music context. He also met Jerome Rothenberg, beginning a lifelong friendship involving many collaborations between the two artists.

The mid- to late-60s also saw Morrow at the heart of the Pop music world, designing the sound for Simon & Garfunkel's classic album "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary, and Thyme" and working with the Young Rascals on a number of projects.

"Marilyn Monroe Collage," a 1967 work performed at the Sidney Janis gallery, was probably Morrow's most significant work to that time, turning him into both an investigative musician—he located the sound material collaged into the piece—and a soundscape architect. Exploring the Monroe theme made Morrow conscious of the negatively sacrificial role artists play in American

society, and how artists often lose creative control of their work due to commercial pressures or marketplace manipulation. These considerations encouraged him, a few years later, to build his own fully equipped sound studio to produce his own work and record the work of others. At the same time, it enabled him to pursue more commercially oriented music projects, including jingle writing. **[[NB: As per JR note, have dropped additional info on CM Associates.]]

In 1970, Morrow composed one of his most musically compelling, scored works, "Q2," originally conceived as a film score for "Here Is New Jersey," a documentary film. This is one of the first of Morrow's "new/old" pieces—a post-Ivesian collage incorporating harpsichord, noise music, and marches. "At this point, I began to see musical improvisation as an increasingly important element in my composing. In the soundtrack for the 1971 film "Sasha Kolin," Morrow recorded a 30-minute free "testimony" by visual-artist Kolin and used this improvisation as the film's score.

The next stage in Morrow's musical evolution centered on chanting as a source for both "world" music and avant-garde experiment. This intense, improvised vocal music was the focus of his work throughout the early 70s, starting with "Three Personal Chants" (1971). "At that time the only way I could do my chanting work was to sit in front of a microphone to document the improvisation; I considered this a form of writing." While related to Native American music, Morrow sees his chanting primarily in terms of intimate personal expression that reveals "an inner, or dream, landscape." The chanting work developed simultaneously with a series of "sound-oriented" works where the actual acoustic textures and timbres—what might be called the physical properties of the music—are more important than melody, rhythm, or harmony.

In 1973, Morrow and Rothenberg (who had been working with ethnopoetics and already published his ground-breaking anthology Technicians of The Sacred) founded The New Wilderness Foundation, a nonprofit, artist-run organization dedicated to cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural music, poetry, and performance. Morrow's and Rothenberg involvement with ethnopoetics and tribal music anticipated the resurgence of interest in "World Music" in the 1980s. Over the next decade, the Foundation produced a number of live and radio/TV events, sponsored the publication of the New Wilderness Letter and Ear Magazine, and produced a series of Audiographics cassettes. The Foundation set the stage for the creation of the New Wilderness Preservation Band, an art band featuring Joan LaBarbara, Carol Weber, Bruce Ditmas, Harvey Swartz, and occasionally Paul Abels and G. Rich Cook. The group performed many times between 1975 and 1978, usually at the Washington Square Methodist Church. Poets actively collaborating with New Wilderness included Jackson Mac Low, Armand Schwerner, and Alison Knowles. **[[{Is AK a poet?}]

"A large part of my work since the inception of the Foundation has involved moving away from the concert hall and into the ritual area. Ultimately, this was the inspiration for my recent urban and global events. I wanted to get away from the commodification of music implicit in the concert hall situation where people buy a ticket, walk through a door, and sit quietly in a hall and listen to a piece. For me this has meant developing interactive works that are as much performance art as music." These interactive works include music for concert bands, art bands, jazz ensembles, conch-shell bands, "machine" orchestras (jack hammer trios, bicycle orchestras), and the large-scale multimedia events of the 1980s. "At the same time, Morrow says, "another aspect of my performance and ritual orientation at this time were a series of `transaction' pieces that arose from the chanting work and that involved direct explorations of both the performer-audience

interaction and of the music of basic body functions."

The New Wilderness Foundation's best-known project, the Summer Solstice Festival, began, like the organization itself, in 1973 and continues to the present. Started as a local New York celebration of the longest day of the year, the event has grown in scale and complexity as Morrow's work has become more involved with world communication. While still firmly rooted in the local and the particular, in the early 80s, Morrow began a series of global radio and telephone link-ups, so that performers from all over the world could together welcome the advent of summer (see Appendix A).

The Solstice celebrations merged with Morrow's increasing concentration on large public events with a national and international interactions / interconnections. The global scale of Morrow's events are relatively unique. Like Nam June Paik, and very few others, Morrow has assembled a group of international collaborators, linking avant-garde and tribal communities across the globe.

***[[[INSERT NEW NY TIMESQUOTE]]]

Another aspect of the increasing scale of Morrow's work in the mid-to-late 70s is his acclaimed "Wave Music"

series. These are works composed for ensembles of 30 or more of the same instruments. "Wave" pieces have been composed for and performed by large assemblages of cellos, harps, harpsichords, clarinets, conch shells, and drums. "Wave VII" for harps has received much critical acclaim. Bernard Holland, writing in The New York Times, called it "subtle and variegated," while Tim Page, also in the Times, noted that "the listener was surrounded by an array of sound that, paradoxically, created a sensation of spiritual quietude."

Related to the "Wave" series is the conch-shell and ocarina orchestras (OcOrc) created by Morrow in 1977, which performed at many site-specific and Solstice celebrations over the following years and became the most visible manifestation of Morrow's community-oriented aesthetics.

Both the Solstice and "Wave" events merge in Morrow's large radio, TV, and action event "Toot 'n' Blink-Wave VI," first performed in Chicago in 1982 and inaugurating a series of ongoing multi-media, grand-scale productions. "Toot 'n' Blink" involved a fleet of boats honking and flashing lights under the direction of instructions broadcast over FM radio channels. The audience was able to listen to the instructions and live broadcast on their radios and watch the performance unfold in Chicago's Lake Michigan.

Morrow's ever-escalating events, involving more and more performers and mass audiences through radio and TV and international telecommunications, reached a culmination in his 1985 "Copenhagen Wave." "One of Europe's largest outdoor art events," according to Back Stage, "involving some 2,000 musical performers, bright costumes, and choreographed music, the two-hour event was transmitted live over radio and broadcast all over Europe, and witnessed by 100,000 people."

In the years ahead, more large-scale events and broadcasts of this type are planned. This is the direction to which Morrow is wholly committed.

Morrow's thirty-year career shows him as a composer and artist of international scope who utilizes available technology—new and old—that can bring the range of human potentials together.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Morrow rejects the constraints of an identifiably consistent style. "My music is characterized by a fluid changing of surface. I am writing site-specific

music. I don't have a conscious application of style: I have a conscious application of concept."

"Yet all my music involves some aspect of counterpoint— though a concept of counterpoint that was greatly expanded by the influence of non-Western music. The chants are, literally, 'voice against voice'; and at a more elaborate level, the large events like 'Toot 'n' Blink' involve the counterpoint of each element—musical, social, nautical, natural—against each other. My role as 'composer' is as much involved with precisely organizing the sequence of events as with creating the sounds themselves. I create new/old artworks, pushing the limits of the world's newest and oldest technologies. The new in counterpoint with the old: that's what New Wilderness is all about."

Unless otherwise noted, all listings are for scores of indicated page length and duration; or for instructions, documentation, audiotapes, or videotapes, as applicable.