

In the 1st Person : April 2005

# NewMusicBox

## Sitting in a Room with Alvin Lucier

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A Conversation with [Frank J. Oteri](#) at Lucier's pied-a-terre in Tudor City, NYC

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I still remember the first time I listened to *I Am Sitting In A Room*. As an undergrad eager to hear everything there was to hear of new music in the Columbia University Music Library, I had stumbled upon the various issues of Peter Garland's *SOURCE* Magazine, an audiovisual compendium of new music which, to this day, inspires NewMusicBox. I was immediately captivated by the title: I Am Sitting In A Room. At that point, I had never heard of a piece of serious contemporary music with a title so mundane and personal. But my surprise over the title was nothing compared to the shock I experienced after putting the needle onto the groove. The composition was nothing more than a recording of Lucier speaking in a room and then having the recording played back over and over in the room until his speech turned into ethereal harmonies. So absurdly simple and even somewhat vulnerable, yet so unlike anything else... Wow, music could do this!

I soon played the recording on my radio show at WKCR. Someone I was training to use the equipment during my broadcast was appalled. What was it? How could I be playing such a thing on a classical music show? Of course, it made me an even bigger fan of this piece.

About a year later, I attended Columbia's Varèse Centennial Symposium. Someone mentioned the name Alvin Lucier in one of the panels and people in the audience booed. I had to learn more about this man. Whenever a piece of Lucier's appeared on a concert, I made sure to go. And whenever a new recording of his came out, I made sure to get it, even though most of his music is concerned with processes that are extremely difficult to convey on commercial 2-channel recordings.

Over the course of the hour I finally sat in a room with Alvin Lucier to talk about his music, I found the same simplicity and vulnerability. Here is a composer who admits that not all his pieces work, who is unafraid to explore, and is still searching for new ideas and is still finding them. Like that first time I heard *I Am Sitting In A Room*, I walked away in total awe.

-FJO

## Not Fitting In

**FJO:** Here we are in this lovely little apartment in [Tudor City](#). Usually we visit composers and there's a grand piano over there and a synthesizer there and a pile of scores. None of that's here.

**AL:** No, I have a piano at home which I use to compose these pieces with single pitches, but I don't have a studio, I don't have loudspeakers set up downstairs. I think I'm a post-studio composer. I never wanted that. I have two CD players. I have a cassette recorder. I have an [Otari 5050B](#) beautiful reel-to-reel recorder. I never use it; it's in the basement. My sine waves, I compose the values for those and I send them to an engineer who executes them.

**FJO:** How do you compose those values?

**AL:** Well, time and frequency, I exactly notate them.

**FJO:** Now is this something you'll hear in your head in advance?

**AL:** Yeah. For instance, a piece for singer and the oscillator sweeps from one pitch to another pitch, goes down and up and does various things, say D at 296 cycles going up to so-and-so in so many seconds. Thankfully my sine wave sweeps are fairly simple so I don't have to do a lot of calculations, but I get them exactly and then I notate them on a page for the singer. He sees the sweeps, he sees the chromatic pitches, where they are timed, and then he has his own notes to sing. But I don't want to spend my life learning how to do that on a computer. I would rather get somebody to do it for me.

**FJO:** You work out ideas on a piano, but most of your musical ideas seem beyond the piano.

**AL:** If it's for a singer or instruments and they're playing, for example, *In Memoriam John Higgins*, all the pitches are chromatic pitches, there isn't any microtuning. The oscillator does that. In *Still and Moving Lines* there is microtuning. So obviously I can't play those, but I do go to the instrument and hear it. I hear something.

I was watching a videotape of [Robert Craft](#) talking about [Stravinsky](#). After Stravinsky had died, Craft goes into Stravinsky's studio and he plays a chord on the upright piano. It's totally out of tune, totally. And I thought, of course, Stravinsky's dead, nobody's gone in and tuned the piano. Craft says that Stravinsky didn't care whether his piano was tuned or not. Now, then my mind went to the chord in *Orpheus* which is two trombones, B and C's semi-tone, and then B-B-B octaves, F, B. That's the sonority—C-B-B-B-F-B—and no one in a million years would have chosen that sonority; it's so beautiful. It doesn't make sense. I'm thinking that Stravinsky used the out of tune piano to give him the idea. I mean, it could be that it was a C major chord out of tune, the C's have slipped to B's, because the B is the leading tone, the F is the subdominant. It may have generated those wonderful sonorities. It's hard to believe that a composer wouldn't have a tuned piano.

Now I have my piano tuned, but before it gets tuned—you know it's in the cold weather and things go—I hear beats in the single tones because one of the strings has slipped a little bit. There's more to that [for me] than in the Stravinsky case.

**FJO:** So, in a way Stravinsky is still a role model for you. *[laughs]* He seems to have been a role model for every composer once upon a time.

**AL:** I was very impressed by Igor Stravinsky, as we all were in those days. And I had professors in school that took from Stravinsky.

**FJO:** I've often wondered if there was a secret Lucier sonata for violin and piano that you wrote in the '50s lurking around in a drawer somewhere. Thumbing through a catalog of your work I see that there are works that could be considered part of that tradition. But you've withdrawn that work.

**AL:** [My professors] were frustrated and enraged that their music wasn't getting played; they were very skilled composers but it seemed like the musical establishment had not much interest. Somehow, I thought, I can't go on with this if that's the result.

**FJO:** What other music you were exposed to growing up?

**AL:** My father was an amateur violinist and my mother played piano. There was a lot of popular music in our house. My father liked serious music, but I would have to say it was more [Gershwin](#) and things of that kind. There was a music store in my small town. I went there once and there was a recording of [Schoenberg's Serenade](#), of all things. I bought it and it was shocking. It didn't make any sense, but there was something about it that kept my interest. At that point I decided I was interested in challenging things.

**FJO:** What you wound up doing musically seems to be a complete break from the music of the past.

**AL:** It strikes me that experimental music is totally different from European avant-garde music or American avant-garde music that comes from there. It's made out of totally different stuff. It has different ideas that don't come from the music of the past. They come from another source. For example, [Vespers](#) is based on physical echoes in the environment, not echoes that you hear in [Monteverdi](#), which are instruments imitating each other, but actual physical echoes. So it doesn't fit in.

Somebody used that term "fit in" the other day with me. The composers in America who are successful with orchestras write work that fits in and sounds like other music that is written for orchestra. It doesn't challenge anything. He didn't think it was going to last that long either because it was made to fit in. We have a building at [Wesleyan](#), where I teach, that was put in between two 19th century buildings and it's made of glass and steel. Some people say that it's bad architecture because it doesn't fit in. But if it fit in, then it wouldn't be good architecture because the architect would have had to relate to this other architecture. Years ago we performed in Arizona where there was a [Frank Lloyd Wright auditorium](#). People hated it when it was put up. Now you go and there's a tour guide who says, "This is our Frank Lloyd Wright building." They love it now. Anyway, I think a lot of us are making work that doesn't come from that other source. I'm thinking of [Bob Ashley's](#) works. They're a genre of their own, but he thinks they're operas.

**FJO:** But clearly this had to come from somewhere.

**AL:** I was lucky to go to Europe on a [Fulbright](#) in 1960 and I heard all the wonderful European avant-garde pieces. I think I heard the first performance of [Luigi Nono's Canto Sospeso](#). It dawned on me that this was their music and they were good at it. It was in their souls. Structuralism, [serialism](#)—I was incompetent in that field. I could imitate it, but it would be that, an imitation. So I was at an impasse. Then I went to the [Fenice](#) in Venice where [Cage](#) and [David Tudor](#) and [Merce Cunningham](#) did an event. That just stopped me dead in my tracks. After that, I decided to do something totally different that would seem to be something my own.

**FJO:** So what makes American experimental music different from classical music and modern European music? How did it become something else?

**AL:** It's hard to actually pin that down. I think a lot of it came from Cage, the early tape pieces where he ecologized. He would record sounds of the city, sounds of the country. He made these works that mixed these found sounds and environmental sounds. Then there was [4'33"](#) which was about hearing the sounds around you and the idea of non-intentionality—whatever you do, you don't control. When I was in Milan, I had access to work in an electronic music studio and everything was controlled. People like [Luciano Berio](#) were in there. Control and possibility were the words they used to use a lot. We've got all the possibilities and we control them. The idea of Cage is that you have all those possibilities but you don't control them, and if you [don't control them](#) something wonderful is going to happen.

I was at an improvisation concert the other night and it just didn't interest me at a certain point. It reminded me of a misconception of Cage's ideas about chance. Two things happen simultaneously and something really special occurs that you can't get if you plan it; you can't get that if you react to someone

else. And the improvisers were reacting. They were hearing the other players and deciding to do things. It's got the randomness of the six players improvising, but they're all reacting to each other so nothing special happens. It drives me crazy to hear performances of [Christian Wolff's \*For 1, 2 or 3 People\*](#)—which is based on coordinations and uncertainty, anxiety, accidents—[but some] players plan in advance what it's going to be like. The result is a spectacular performance but it doesn't have that quality. That's what they miss. I don't know why they don't understand that quality.

**FJO:** But all of the training for classical musicians is predicated on having a score with lots of details. If those details aren't there, what is the musician supposed to do? And if it's a large ensemble, that control goes even one step further—you follow a conductor who tells you how to interpret that music.

**AL:** Oh, don't talk to me about conductors! [*laughs*] I was a conductor of the [Brandeis Choral Society](#) and I did [Morton Feldman's \*The Swallows of Salangan\*](#). That piece is for a huge orchestra and a four-part chorus. You give a down beat and then everybody proceeds at their own speed, so you get this beautiful phasing thing. The singers do the same, even though they're following a single part. When I did it in [Town Hall](#), and Morton Feldman was sitting there, I gave a downbeat and *that* was the performance. [But] I heard of a performance in Europe where the conductor would give a downbeat at turns of the page to keep everybody together, which is anxiety about letting it happen. I had an argument with another conductor who wanted to conduct the choral parts because they were single parts.

**FJO:** So I imagine you don't really like writing for the orchestra.

**AL:** I'm doing a new piece for the [Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble](#). It's based on an overture by Beethoven called [The Consecration of the House](#) which he wrote for the reopening of a concert hall in Vienna in 1823. I've done these acoustic experiments like [I Am Sitting In A Room](#) and so forth, and I thought of a piece called [The Exploration of the House](#) where I would have an orchestra play in a concert hall, preferably a new one, and use the recycling technique of [I Am Sitting In A Room](#) to explore the acoustics of that space. I thought about what I would have the orchestra play, and for the life of me the idea of composing something didn't ring a bell for me, so I finally decided to take the Beethoven overture by itself.

It's a dangerous thing I'm doing. I chose seventeen fragments from that overture. The conductor conducts one fragment, seven seconds perhaps, nine seconds, and it's stored in the memory of a computer in digital delay. Then he stops the orchestra and it's played back again and again and you start to hear these beautiful resonances, and then he'll conduct another fragment. So I'm using the Beethoven as a found object, but the process transforms it so much that it seems to make no sense.

**FJO:** Do you know what the sound resulting from this process will ultimately be?

**AL:** No.

**FJO:** That's part of the excitement for you?

**AL:** Sure. I don't know how fast it's going to happen. There are seventeen phrases, some of them are up to thirty seconds long. The mock-up version I made of the piece, with ten iterations of each fragment, is about fifty-seven minutes which is a little long for a concert. But in a place such as [Zankel Hall](#), which is a live space, I have the feeling the transformation is going to be a lot faster, maybe four or five iterations, which is O.K. I don't really care. The conductor can decide how many iterations. I just told you I hated conductors but here I am making a piece for a conductor! So he could conduct one fragment, it may go six times, and transform itself into something very nice, and then he may decide to move on. We can also eliminate some of them. I'm not wedded to the idea of seventeen. That's just what I chose as material.

## Science vs. Art

**FJO:** What is your compositional process, going from the initial conception to its final realization?

**AL:** So often, when I'm writing a piece, I have to de-compose, I have to not compose. I have all these ideas about the piece that come from composition that you study. I have to eliminate those things that distract from the acoustical unfolding of the idea. For each piece, it's a little bit different. I get an idea, usually about a sound that is not realized, you don't know it yet, like echoes or brainwaves. I'm very interested in that, that's what gets me started. To reveal it, I have to work hard to put it in a form that allows it to reveal itself and the magical quality it has without the interference of other ideas that don't fit in.

I had a student once from Germany who wanted to do this kind of thing. He made a piece for several gongs. It was very nice because we'd hear the gongs. And then he came in the next week and he had something else going on. He said, "I felt I needed another layer of form in this piece." He was very skillful at layering, but he was distracting from the perception of the natural quality of these gongs by putting another thing over it. If you think of La Monte Young's piece for bowed gong—that's all it is and you can hear all of the resonance of that. If he would have crescendo-ed, or done this or that, it would have been a different piece. You wouldn't hear the natural quality of the gong.

**FJO:** You described your music as "experimental" which already carries with it a scientific connotation. Certainly the model of not knowing how a piece will turn out until you do it is in some ways akin to a science experiment.

**AL:** Absolutely. I'm not ashamed of that. I was never good in science in school, but when I get interested in these acoustical ideas, I learn just enough to execute the piece. I read a high school book for students by some Englishman to learn about acoustics, the nature of sound: [Pythagoras, the vibrating string, echoes](#), things of that sort. That's about the limit of my intellectual abilities in that field, just enough to execute the piece. I don't like to preach ignorance by any means. I think when you do *I Am Sitting In A Room*, a scientist would say, "I could do that in a minute; that's easy." First of all, they *don't*. And secondly, I make that piece as an artist. I think about the timing and I think about what I'm saying. So it's not that I'm an expert in the scientific aspect of it, but I try to use my artistic sense.

*In Memoriam John Higgins* uses a rising sine wave. It's inexorable—nothing changes. I remember [Fred Rzewski](#) saying, "Why don't you do something? Change the speed, make it rise and fall." He wanted the sine wave to be interesting. I want the sine wave to be neutral, to be eliciting information and not giving information. Now, when you have a sine wave going at the same speed from beginning to end, it really isn't going at the same speed because in each octave the frequencies are doubled. It's going one speed but the frequencies are gaining speed. And then when you have the players playing long tones across the sine wave, the audible beating—interference patterns—slow down and speed up and at each octave they do it at a faster rate. If I had interfered with the sine wave, those proportions would be lost.

**FJO:** But it's clear that you also find these phenomena interesting aesthetically. In fact, your comments makes those neutral sine waves sound extremely interesting. I would dare say, even though you say you're just letting these processes happen, you choose certain processes which will yield results that are readily identifiable as your artistic work. [Music for Solo Performer](#), your piece for brainwaves, is one of the only exceptions I can think of. Most of your music is slow but this piece is much faster due to the process of how [alpha waves](#) trigger the sounds.

**AL:** That was that piece. I enjoy pieces that do that. I have so many pieces that have sustained sounds and I'm trying to find a way to make pieces without that.

**FJO:** Slow motion certainly gives listeners a chance to actually hear how these processes play out, like all your pieces where pitches come extremely close together and then move slightly apart. In some ways, it's the ultimate **microtonal** music.

**AL:** My pieces are not microtonal, although I use that word sometimes to describe it. If you try to have a player play one cycle away from a **sine wave**, he can't do it exactly. Sometimes he can, but he can't do it all the time. When you microtune something, you're getting different intervals of different sizes. When you are closely tuning, as I do, you're getting rhythms—one cycle away is one **beat** a second. So it's the rhythmic quality, not the tonal quality.

Now, in some of the pieces, under certain circumstances when the beats are so close, you hear the sounds move in space. That's what I'm trying to get after. It very seldom happens, but sometimes it does. There's a phenomenon which was described to me by a scientist: If one pitch is above the other, the beats spin towards the low sound. So if one pitch goes above and below, theoretically I can spin the beats in one direction and then the reverse. That only happens once or twice in my work, but that's what I'm trying to get at. The intention of doing it is very important, even if it doesn't really work. So many of my pieces don't work.

**FJO:** Don't work in terms of what you initially wanted to do?

**AL:** The intention is important and I always have the feeling that someday they will work, somehow.

**FJO:** So what are examples of piece in your opinion that work and pieces that don't work?

**AL:** Well, **Anthony Burr** played a piece of mine two nights ago for bass clarinet and low oscillator. I think the low pitch is an F in the score, and he's not supposed to go more than three cycles on either side of that sustained sine wave low F, and there are symbols for sliding up and down a little bit. If he starts two cycles above and slides across the unison to one cycle below, theoretically when he's close those beats should spin. If the sound of the clarinet in some way matches the sound wave, you should hear some kind of spinning or some spatial aspect. Well, of course there is a spatial aspect anyway because the sine wave is so pure that, if it's a stationary wave, the standing waves have a palpable, physical presence in that space.

I didn't invent that idea. **La Monte Young** did work with that, so I pay him my respects. If the wave slides around, as in *Memoriam*, the wavelengths are getting shorter and they're reflecting in different ways, so that the waves move around the space. In the hall the other night, it sounded as if the engineer was raising and lowering the volume levels, but he never touches them. It's that the wave crests are moving across you in one point in space. So that's a physical manifestation of these phenomenon, and they're not electronic, they're physical.

**FJO:** You've talked about people not able to execute your music in performance. Early on you worked pretty exclusively with electronics. Yet, since the '90s, you've worked frequently with classically trained musicians: string quartet, pianist, trombone, orchestra pieces. What made you turn to, in essence, classical music?

**AL:** Very simple—performers started asking me to make them works. There was an ensemble at school, they had seven players and they wanted a piece to inaugurate their first performance. They asked me, and I was delighted because the reason I went into music was because of my love for classical music. So

my task was to find a way to use these instruments in my own way. And I think I found it. [laughs] Making those instruments do what they can do without the gestures and the other things that go along with it.

**FJO:** One of my favorite pieces of yours is [Panorama](#), a trombone and piano piece with no electronics in it at all, but it does the same kinds of things. On the recording, I hear those acoustic phenomenon working. [The performers](#) clearly got it.

**AL:** In Japan I did a piece for four [kotos](#). We recorded it last night, and there's no electronics in that either. They just pluck their strings. It's a very simple-minded form. They all start on the same pitch and then over a period of twelve minutes one player moves to an F, one player moves to an E, one player moves to an F#. They go up at different intervals, slowing down as they do so. Very simple. They fan out into this. And after a while you start really hearing the beats, the plucks, and of course they can't control their speeds exactly. They don't use metronomes or anything, it's all done by innate sense of timing, so you get this sort of random, rhythmic feeling. Beats occur because one player is 30 cents lower than the next player and so forth. The string plucks last about four or five seconds, so when they overlap there's some little sustains underneath it.

This piece for four kotos has this inexorable form where just one idea goes through the whole piece. They all start in sync and then the piece speeds up very fast because they all move out of phase. By having a simple form that doesn't change, speeds change within the piece. It starts in sync, it goes faster, and then it slows down at the end. Pieces like [Steve Reich's Come Out](#) are essentially one [process](#), but unexpected things happen. In [Jim Tenney's percussion piece](#) [*Koan: Having Never Written A Note For Percussion*], the directions are simply crescendo, diminuendo. So it looks like a joke. But when you roll on a gong from very soft to very loud, along the way the gong steps into different modes. At a certain point it's at a level where it's unstable. So something that's gradual in a form doesn't necessarily produce a gradual result. Other composers wouldn't have had the patience to stay with the process because nothing was happening. But you wait for it and then it does happen. Sometimes in my own pieces I don't hear the phenomenon at the beginning. I think something's wrong with the performance or with myself. I can't prove this, but it takes time to perceive it.

**FJO:** The time factor is crucial, but it's interesting that many of your recent pieces are a lot shorter than the earlier ones.

**AL:** I'm making pieces for performers that are shorter for practical reasons. If it were longer it would take away from some other pieces that would be on the program.

**FJO:** But for listeners, those other things on the program are probably going to be very different listening experiences than the kind of things you're doing. Imagine someone going in and hearing, say, a Beethoven string quartet, and then hearing your quartet for [Arditti](#). They require two different kinds of listening. It's unfair to Beethoven but it's even more unfair to you.

**AL:** Well, we can be a little unfair to Beethoven.

**FJO:** But perhaps it's ultimately unfair to audiences to make them try to appreciate things that are so different from each other.

**AL:** I was somewhat anxious [at] the concert at [Tonic](#) the other night. [Charles Curtis](#) and [Anthony Burr](#) have made a [double CD of these pieces](#) and they're almost all sustain pieces. There's *In Memoriam John Higgins*, there's a piece I wrote for Charles, there are two pieces from [Still and Moving Lines](#). And I thought, my god, this is about an hour and a half of music, you're in a club downtown, how are these people going to sit and listen, because each piece is so similar in certain ways. And everyone was very

attentive, except me. I had this funny idea on the way back home that I was a little bit ahead of the curve, at least my own curve, in making these works where players sustain long tones and they tune closely and the beats speed up and slow down. But now I'm behind the curve because I need constant change and contrast whereas audiences, at least that audience, just sat and shared the whole thing. I was very surprised.

**FJO:** It's curious that much of your music is site specific, yet a lot of the way it reaches people is through recordings where you have no way of knowing what the listening environment might be.

**AL:** You know people say, "Well, why do you do those? You can't get the same effect." Well, you do something else. In pieces like *Still and Moving Lines of Silence*, and *In Memoriam John Higgins*, the stereo is set up in such a way that an instrument is on one channel and the oscillator is on another channel, and in your own room you hear not a performance of the piece but you're hearing the piece in your own room and the physical phenomenon are happening in your room. They're not a document of what happened in some other room.

**FJO:** The way people listen to music at home is very different than the way people listen to music in a concert hall or in a gallery setting where they're just walking through. At home, most people are doing other things when they listen to music.

**AL:** There's a wonderful CD that the [Wandelweiser](#) people in Germany did of Christian Wolff's piece *Stones*. Five players chose stones, something very minimal, and over a period of an hour and ten minutes those sounds are heard. There could be one or two minutes between sounds. So I play the CD in one room and I'm in the other room and I forget it and all of a sudden I could hear *xhock*, this little sound that I don't associate with the sounds of my environment. And then a minute after that I hear *xhockxhock* [*laughs*]. It's beautiful. It's a different thing. It's just wonderful.

## Unlearning and Keeping an Open Mind

**FJO:** In terms of working with players, interacting with them and rehearsing, how much does somebody need to know about the ideas behind the pieces in order to perform them?

**AL:** It's what they need not to know. I don't mean to give a flip answer... A wonderful percussion player was doing *Silver Street Car for the Orchestra* which is for solo triangle. Right in the middle, not at the concert but in dress rehearsal, he changed his beater. I said, "Why did you change your beater?" He said, "I think it's more interesting." But the interest in the piece is not in changing the beater; it's exploring the acoustics of that folded metal bar. The idea comes from all those percussion pieces where you pick something up every two minutes, you pick up a different beater and you play on different instruments. Usually players, when they're anxious about something, resort to what they know. What they know is very good, but it doesn't fit my work. I heard about a player doing a diminuendo in a Morton Feldman piece, which is already quiet and a diminuendo makes it even more quiet. Players will do what they already know; they will make pitches expressive. So the player started his diminuendo at a mezzo-forte, misunderstanding that Feldman was making a philosophically impossible idea. You're already very quiet and you even get quieter.

**FJO:** The other night the [Bang On A Can All-Stars](#) played with [Philip Glass](#) and they did *Music in Similar Motion*. What I love about that piece is that it's so relentlessly loud, but they were doing crescendos and decrescendos on it. It was very strange.

**AL:** The [New York Philharmonic](#) players did *In C* several years ago. It was just terrible. They moved the pulse around from instrument to instrument. They had piano and marimba and xylophone and they would soften and crescendo and it's just adding something to it that it doesn't need to have—that's what you learn in music.

**FJO:** What should listeners be bringing to this music when they hear it? What's the ideal listener for you?

**AL:** They asked [Wallace Stevens](#) that and he said "an informed reader." I don't care whether my audience is informed, but they should be open to these experiences. I have a friend who is very closed to things. He'll say, "I hate opera." And his spouse loves opera. So, I felt like saying to him, "Well, how many operas have you gone to?" Probably one. I should have said to him, "Why don't you go to an opera every month for five years and then decide if you don't like opera?"

The idea of closing your mind immediately. I like this; I don't like this. It doesn't make any sense to me. My students are very open, but I always say to them at the first class, "I'm not interested in your opinions." [laughs] And they get a little upset. But I say, "I'm interested in your perceptions. So don't hear a piece and decide. That doesn't interest me, whether you think it's good or not. What do you hear? Tell me what you perceive." That's interesting to me. I just want people who are open and take it for what it is.

**FJO:** Last night I was re-reading through some of your CD booklet notes and came across the story of your confrontation with a music critic who hated *Music on a Long Thin Wire*.

**AL:** That was at New Music Miami. There was a panel and one of the critics said, "I don't like wires." And I said that in a piano, there are more than 88 of them! It's amazing. These critics don't know anything. They're not educated in any particular way. The ones at *The New York Times* are; they know what they're talking about. But there's not much critical ground in the United States. There aren't informed music critics that discuss this kind of music.

**FJO:** Yet, despite that, there seems to be more of an openness among audiences for new music now than ever before.

**AL:** Well, things are changing. Audiences are listening now. I did a performance the other night at school and we put up a big wall by [Sol Lewitt](#), a big curved wall in this art gallery, and some of the audience was on the other side. We didn't do that intentionally, but during these pieces the students would go on the other side of the wall, lay down on the floor, and they were just enjoying it.

**FJO:** What is your own experience as a listener? Do you enjoy listening to your own music? What else do you listen to?

**AL:** I don't really enjoy listening to my own music too much. Something's wrong with my ego. [laughs] I always think, "Why are people interested in what I'm doing?" I have friends that have egos and whatever they do they think it's the best thing that's ever been written, and I wish I had part of that but I don't. But maybe it's good because it keeps me thinking and it keeps me from getting complacent. Why I'm writing shorter pieces, I think is a courtesy to the audience, trying to make pieces for more conventional audiences in a concert hall.

What do I listen to? Not much. I teach and I listen to all that music that I love from John Cage, through [La Monte Young](#) and Bob [\[Ashley\]](#) and on up, younger composers. I listen to European composers that interest me. [Helmut Lachenmann](#), people like that seem to me to be writing extraordinary pieces. I teach a course on [Orpheus](#), so I have [the Monteverdi opera](#), which I play sometime. I have Bach. I have [Glenn](#)

Gould, his new version of the *Goldberg Variations* which is very different from his original version. But I don't play a lot of music.

The NPR station in the state of Connecticut is a complete disaster. They play one after the other of the Baroque-Italian, you know what I mean. It's just wallpaper. So in my car, I play rock'n'roll.

**FJO:** And you enjoy that music?

**AL:** When I'm in my car, sure. It's got this energy. And I've been going to a fitness club and I have an iPod, and I play pop music. It's wonderful music for exercising. It's got that energy—you have to move on that treadmill when that music is being played. Eminem. Even Elton John, I'm sorry to say I enjoy. And the Gipsy Kings.

**FJO:** Do you think it's going to eventually influence you as a composer?

**AL:** I don't think so. *[laughs]*