

James Tenney: Notes to Conlon Nancarrow: Studies for Player Piano (Wergo CD)

General Introduction

Tucked away in a quiet suburb of Mexico City, in relative isolation from the urban hustle, Conlon Nancarrow is probably right now at work on the next in his remarkable series of *Studies for Player Piano*. Begun some forty years ago, the set already consists of over sixty individual pieces, ranging in length from one to ten minutes each, and adding up now to a total playing time of about five hours. It is thus a very large body of work, which was almost totally unknown until recently. Over the last several years it has been my good fortune not only to meet the man, but to acquire a nearly complete collection of scores and tape recordings of the *Studies*. It is a dazzling experience to listen to this whole body of work – an experience not unlike the one many of us had some thirty years ago when we heard the first recordings of the complete works of Webern. And I predict that 21st-century historians will rank Conlon Nancarrow's *Studies for Player Piano* with the most innovative works of Ives, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Webern, Varèse, Partch, Cage, Xenakis – and perhaps a very few others – as the most significant works composed since 1900. This prediction may seem extravagant to some, but I am convinced that, when Nancarrow's music is as accessible and widely known as that of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, its importance will be just as widely recognized, and there will remain no room for doubt.

What is it that makes the *Studies for Player Piano* so important? To begin with, they manifest an incredibly thorough investigation and creative realization of countless new possibilities in the areas of rhythm, tempo, texture, polyphonic perception, and form, all of which will provide exciting challenges to composers, theorists and listeners alike for many decades to come. But more than this, the extraordinary quality and variety of his "investigations" are truly remarkable. On the one hand, there is enough in these pieces in the way of systematic intellectual organization to satisfy the most mathematically abstruse "constructivist". On the other hand, there is enough lyrical freedom, rhapsodic invention, and sheer fantasy to warm the heart of the most outrageously romantic "intuitionist". The music is at times austere, dry, cold-as-ice; at other times warm, passionate, explosively exuberant. And yet one has no sense of stylistic inconsistency or esthetic contradiction here. It is rather that these *Studies* explore a very wide range of formal and expressive realms.

Among several ironies arising in any consideration of Nancarrow's work, the most profound is the fact that his achievement has been wrought entirely within an apparently obsolete, even anachronistic medium – a medium whose primary *raison d'être* had always been entertainment, not art – the player piano! His decision to concentrate all of his efforts in this one medium was made sometime in the 1940s, after several years of frustration in trying to get his earlier instrumental pieces played accurately. The *Toccata* for violin and piano (1938) and the *Sonatina* for piano (1941) were already extremely difficult pieces to perform, extending to their very limits the abilities of players at that time. Nancarrow has told me that if he were younger – if that moment of decision had occurred a few years later than it did – he would surely have begun working in the electronic medium. But in the 1940s this was not yet an available alternative – electronic music was little more than a dream in the minds of a few composers like Edgard Varèse, John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, Henry Cowell, in his book *New Musical Resources* (1930 [Something Else Press, New York, 1969]), had suggested that the player piano could provide an effective means of realizing the complex rhythmic relationships he envisioned, and Nancarrow has said that Cowell's book was an early inspiration to him. In retrospect, it seems curious that Cowell himself – or Charles Ives, for that matter – never tried composing for the player piano. It would have been an ideal medium – in their time the only medium – in which some of the more difficult rhythmic ideas in Cowell's *Fabric*, for example, or Ives' *In Re Con Moto Et Al*, could have been realized accurately. Stravinsky, Antheil, and Percy Grainger were among the very few serious composers ever to have made an effort to work with the player piano, but these efforts were incidental to their work as a whole. Thus it remained for Nancarrow alone to rescue this instrument from the oblivion of antique shops and pizza parlors, and give it a new life – a life far more vital than it had ever had as a medium for commercial or entertainment music. And in his hands it has turned into an extraordinary medium indeed!

The limitations of the player piano are obvious enough, and surely no one is more painfully aware of them than Nancarrow himself: its fixed tuning, its timbral homogeneity, and the sheer physical difficulties involved in punching a roll. We shall see, later, with what ingenuity he has managed to deal with the problem of timbre, and because he professes no great interest in subtleties of intonation or of harmony, the fixed tuning of the piano has simply never bothered him. As for the practical problems of punching the rolls, he seems to have done about all that *could* be done to facilitate the process, although it remains a slow and tedious one, requiring incredible patience and persistence. But Conlon Nancarrow is a patient and persistent man – a fact for which we may all be grateful. In the late 1940s Nancarrow had a machine built for accurately punching his rolls, the design for which was based on equipment then still in use at one of the commercial player piano companies in New York. Later he had this first machine rebuilt to incorporate certain improvements (which will be described in more detail in the notes for *Study #21*), and it is this second machine which he is still using to cut his rolls.

It would be a mistake, of course, to mention the limitations of the player piano without considering its great advantages. The first and most obvious of these is its capability of realizing, with great precision and at an incredible speed, virtually any rhythmic or temporal relation that can be marked out on a roll. In this respect it is still superior to most of the current analog-synthesis techniques in electronic music, and it is surpassed only by digital computer synthesis methods like MUSIC V – and these, it should be noted, have their own problems and limitations. Secondly, the medium is completely self-contained – Nancarrow does not need the help of other musicians in order to make his music, and thus the whole “politics” of musical performance is happily avoided.

Nancarrow is unusually reticent about the history of his work, both in terms of biographical information (“It’s nobody’s business”) and with respect to any precise chronology of the *Studies* themselves (the scores are not dated, and “it doesn’t matter much”). This reticence may be a source of frustration to those of us who like to get our bearings somehow through such historical points of reference, but it need not prevent us from trying to gain some understanding of the work itself – even of certain developmental aspects of it. Nancarrow has provided a few clues to this kind of question simply by numbering the *Studies*, although even this information does not always correspond exactly to the chronological order in which the pieces were composed. Some earlier pieces, for example, have been withdrawn from the set and replaced by others, and some have been completed before earlier-numbered pieces were finished. Nevertheless, I think it is safe to assume that the numbering of the *Studies* may be taken as at least an *approximate* indication of their chronological order, and I shall base any observations I make regarding stylistic development on that assumption.

Study #3 is the phenomenal *Boogie-Woogie Suite*, and here the blues/ragtime/jazz influences are more explicit than in any of the other *Studies*. The five movements of the *Suite* are in the keys of C, F, C, G, and C, respectively, recalling the I-IV-I-V-I harmonic structure of the second *Study*, although there is considerable use of polytonal (as well as polyrhythmic) textures in the *Suite*. The first and last movements are the most clearly in “classic” boogie-woogie style, but these are in fact rather *surreal* manifestations of that style – as if Jimmy Yancy, Fats Waller, James P. Johnson and Art Tatum were all ecstatically jamming together in heaven (or wherever it is that such men go after that “last gig”)! Over a boogie bass, running along at superhuman speed, several rhythmically independent voices are heard (up to eight such voices near the end of #3a), producing a texture that approaches that perceptual threshold beyond which a multiplicity of individual parts coalesces into a single resultant sonority. The effect here is absolutely hair-raising, and yet wonderfully amusing at the same time. One can well imagine the delight Nancarrow must have felt when he heard these pieces for the first time!

The middle three movements of the *Suite* explore other facets of the style. In #3b, over a leisurely “walking bass”, several melodic lines unfold, in what seems like a freely improvisatory fashion. The trochaic (“swing”) rhythm of the bass line is here expressed as ♩ ♩ ♩ etc., with duration ratios of 5/3. #3c is in a style somewhat more abstracted from the blues/jazz origins of the *Suite*, though here, too, the trochaic rhythm (in simple eighth-note triplet form) predominates, and the melodic patterns still have a blues flavor. Though not a strict canon, there are extended canonic passages, heard against a pizzicato-like bass line, all in a moderately fast tempo. Finally, #3d is a slow, pensive blues, whose role in the *Suite* as a whole might be described as the “lull before the storm” unleashed in the fifth movement.

Study #5 carries through to an altogether different conclusion a process similar to one heard earlier in the *Boogie-Woogie-Suite* although it is in a more abstract style. Here, some twelve independent strata are involved (nominally thirteen in the score, but I hear the first two as forming a single resultant). Each of these strata consists of a sequence of elements – many of them complex aggregates – which is repeated periodically throughout the piece. In some strata this period of repetition is constant, while in others the period is progressively shortened (by shortening the duration of the rests intervening between successive soundings of the figure). These strata are introduced one by one, gradually building up a texture that *does* cross that “perceptual threshold [see the notes for *Study #3*, Vol. I] beyond which a multiplicity of individual parts coalesces into a single resultant sonority”, finally becoming a virtual “white noise” – and thus, *compound-monophonic* – before coming to an abrupt halt. The number of different kinds of aggregates used in this *Study* is larger than in any previous work of Nancarrow’s, anticipating, in this way at least, the greater richness of the most recent *Studies*. In addition to single tones and octaves, these aggregates include triads, arpeggios, glissandos, miscellaneous figures, and both two- and three-note chords of various kinds. Finally, it is of interest to note that there is a use of two *duration series* simultaneously (in the first two parts, mentioned above as merging into a single resultant).

Study #31 is a canon in three voices, in three different tempos (in the ratios 21/24/25). The slower voice begins first, the other two voices entering after delay-times which are related to their tempos in such a way that all three end at approximately the same time. The sonorities in this piece are simple – mostly single tones, later octaves – and there is even a certain (subtle) jazz or ragtime quality in the individual voices, not heard in the *Studies* since #11.

