

A Conversation With Composer Thomas DeLio

Tracy Wiggins

Director Of Percussion Studies

The University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Dr. Thomas DeLio is currently a professor of theory and composition at The University of Maryland at College Park. He holds bachelor and master of music degrees from the New England Conservatory of Music and a Ph.D. from Brown University. He studied at the New England Conservatory with Robert Cogan who he considers his primary teacher. Cogan is also a leading theorist and inspired Dr. DeLio's love of theoretical research and his extensive work in music theory. He also studied briefly at the Temple University Summer institute. Dr. DeLio did graduate work at Brown University in a program called Special Interdisciplinary Studies but did not really study composition there. This research-oriented program (combining music, mathematics and the visual arts) deeply influenced his compositional style.

*Dr. DeLio is one of the leading composers and music theorists in the United States and has lectured extensively in the U.S. and Europe. He is a noted specialist in the field of electroacoustic music and has composed many works in that medium, as well as for traditional instrumental and choral ensembles. Dr. DeLio has published over thirty articles in such journals as *The Journal of Music Theory*, *Interface*, *Perspectives*, *Art Forum*, and *The Musical Quarterly*. He is the author of five books, including *The Music of Morton Feldman* and *Circumscribing the Open Universe*. His biography can also be found in the *New Grove* and *Baker's Biographical Dictionary*. This interview was conducted while preparing the DMA lecture Recital "Against the Silence: The Solo Percussion Music of Thomas DeLio."*

TW: You have mentioned that Xenakis and Feldman were two of your compositional influences. What attracted you to these composers, and what aspects of their music have had the most profound influence on your compositions?

*TD: Funny, I just wrote a memorial essay on Xenakis for *Perspectives of New Music**

(Winter 2001 issue). When the editor asked me to write this paper he asked me to spell out how Xenakis influenced me. So I did, especially in the first part of the paper. If you can't find the issue let me know and I can send a copy. Both Xenakis and Feldman are influences in the general sense that they each tap into very personal and unique sensibilities (in this sense they should be role models for all composers). Also (and I touch on this in the *Perspectives* paper) for these composers, sound is the source of the compositional process. Sound, in all its richness and complexity, is the essence of that process for both – not system or method or gesture, as is the case for so many other composers. This is true for me as well. First and foremost, I think about sound when I start working on a piece.

TW: Can you describe some of your compositional processes: where you start; do your pieces have outside influences (art, literature etc). Also I've read that much of your music has mathematics as its basis. Can you explain this a little bit?

TD: My music is not really mathematical at all! I start typically with either a sonic image – a quality of sound that I want to deal with – or an image of a formal design which seems to be expressive in ways that I find important. I seek a concrete expression of sound. My forms arise from the desire to find some way to “frame” each sound, to render it concrete and palpable. I am interested in forms that seem to impose as little as possible on sound, but rather reveal the inner nature of sound itself. A young music theorist Mike Boyd has written an analytical essay about one of my piano pieces, *Though*, which is very similar in conception to my percussion solo *as though*. I will ask him to download a copy to you. In it he outlines my working methods quite clearly.

[*Perception / Form: Thomas DeLio's **Though** for solo piano*, Mike Boyd, Masters Research Paper, SUNY Stony Brook, forthcoming)

TW: What has attracted you to writing for percussion instruments?

TD: This is reflected too in the aforementioned Xenakis paper. I am very concerned about expressing the entire world of sound, not just that of pitch. This is why I often turn to electronics. This is also why I often turn to percussion. Percussion allows a composer to deal with sounds drawn from the entire pitch/noise continuum. It is important today to

see all sound as part of this continuum. Thus, pitch is one manifestation of all sound ranging from pure tones to noise bands. When we deal with electronic sound we absolutely must do so in these terms. Conventional composers do not think this way. They view pitch as a special body of sound matter to be reserved for “music.” If they use percussion at all it is secondary to pitched instruments. For me that approach denies one of the fundamental truths revealed in the best new music – that pitch and noise are part of the same sonic universe. Of course you can express this fact also using other instruments (violins or flutes, for example). However, percussion lends itself quite naturally to this exploration. In this sense I see percussion as central to contemporary compositional practice (at least the practice that matters to me). You may have noted that I use percussion in almost all my works in one way another. Percussion is central to my sonic thinking.

TW: Are there common links to be found between any of your compositions for percussion - I know "wave/s" is an expansion of the marimba solo "Transparent Wave IV", but was wondering if there are others?

TD: I suggested a few links in my answer to the previous question. Actually, I think of all my music as related. Each piece is a different facet of my view of music. Perhaps one could say that, of my instrumental works, my percussion pieces are the most extreme instances of my exploration of the pitch/noise continuum. Certainly this is true of *as though* (where one pitch rings out near the end, the only pitch heard in the piece).

TW: As a listener/composer what do you look for in a work? How would you define a "quality" piece of music?

TD: A piece must reflect clearly the unique sensibility of the composer. Each work is a reflection of its creator's unique way of perceiving the world. The great contemporary poet Charles Bernstein once said that (I am paraphrasing here) the form of any work is how we understand all that is swirling incomprehensively around us in the real world. I would add that a “quality” work is one that vivifies what is truly unique in its composer's

understanding of that swirling mass of experiences. We each perceive differently, and we organize what we perceive differently. The composer's job is to vivify the uniqueness of these perceptions with absolute clarity.

TW: Who were your composition teachers?

TD: I studied at the New England Conservatory with Robert Cogan who I consider my primary teacher. He is also a leading theorist and inspired my love of theoretical research and my extensive work in music theory. In addition, I studied briefly at the Temple University Summer Institute with Salvatore Martirano who was also an inspiring teacher and very insightful. These were really the only people that I showed my work to. I did graduate work at Brown University in a program called Special Interdisciplinary Studies but did not really study composition there. I did an interdisciplinary program involving music, mathematics and the visual arts. It was a research-oriented degree (though the research deeply influenced my composition).

TW: You often hear this questions asked of composers: What would you consider to be the five pieces that every serious performer of music should be familiar with? How would you respond?

TD: Do you mean from 20th century music? If you mean five pieces from all of Western music history, that would be tough; five pieces from all of world music even tougher. Hard enough if one restricts oneself to 20th century Western music. I'm not even sure I agree with the premise of the question. I find in many ways that the work of minor composers (if we even allow ourselves such a term) to be as valuable, for listeners and performers alike, as that of many major composers. If we think of music as an edifice with many bricks, each composer of merit adds a unique brick. Or another way to put it, music is a mosaic of compositional ideas and styles that complement one another, each element worthy of being in the mosaic adds something that no other element has introduced. (Of course this is why we avoid music by those composers who have little to say that is original. They add nothing to this mosaic.) Perhaps a minor composer adds a small (yet still quite valuable) element; while a major figure adds many valuable elements. But who is to say that that unique contribution by one minor figure will not be

the most important thing that some listener experiences in his lifetime! I have often come from a concert or an art show profoundly affected by some small aspect of the work of a composer or painter whose art may indeed be minor. What value is there to isolate a few great figures from the rest? Sorry I'm not trying to evade your question. I just can't really figure out how to answer it.

TW: Many years from now, when students are studying your works in their classes what would you like them to learn from your pieces a) historically (how do you want your pieces remembered) and b) analytically (how should they analyze the pieces, and what should they be able to glean from the analysis)?

TD: I would like to think that students (and all others) would become more sensitized to their world as a result of their contact with my music, and all music. I believe deeply in John Dewey's notion, as expressed in his great book *Art as Experience*, that art provides a way for us to re-connect ourselves with the world. Great art sensitizes us to our experiences, with sound (through music), design (architecture)... I hope future listeners will find in my work something that allows them to re-energize their contact with the world, and re-evaluate their experience of reality. All great work does this, but it does this in different ways, hence the difference in compositional styles and approaches. My way (my compositional style) may work for certain people who did not respond to, say Berio's style. Hence, my work may be of value in the revitalization of their contact with the world.

Regarding analysis; analytical approaches change over the years. Analysis, like music itself is never static. This is important because if analysis is static, students who undertake it learn the same thing over and over again from pieces that should teach different things! So my answer to how they should analyze any piece is that they should analyze in new and hitherto unforeseen ways, using information theory, spectrographic analysis, psychoacoustics, etc. Find what is new, special and unique in each piece. Too many theorists today devote their time and energy to finding what is trivially similar among different musical compositions and, when the expected similarities cannot be found, these theorists conclude that the music is at fault. Now

you've gotten me started on my pet peeve, which is the Allen Forte/ David Lewin approach to musical analysis, which I find truly destructive. I am attaching a pair of short essays, one written 20 years ago, the other written this year. The second half of the second essay addresses this issue of analysis (*Circumscribing the Open Universe*, Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1981; and *The Open Universe, Revisited*, forthcoming).

TW: Respond to this statement if possible: While their compositional styles share the common trait of silence versus sound, the extent of compositional control differentiates the works of DeLio and Feldman.

TD: First of all I don't think Feldman's work is really about silence, except in the sense that he is engrossed with the question of how sounds decay into silence. This is actually the real link between my work and his - but perhaps the only link. Cage, of course, is the real source of all consideration of silence in music. But even his approach to silence is not like mine (though I deeply admire his work). For Cage silence is the space in which all unintended sound comes into play. Silence is part of his definition of non-intentionality. However, my sense of silence is different. Silence is like a location for the experience of sound. For me it defines place with respect to sound. My silence frames sound, isolates it and creates an opportunity to hear sound both as an object (an entity unto itself divorced from its role as a mere unit of linguistic baggage), as well as part of a process of evolution. This is different from Cage or Feldman.

Here we return to an earlier question. What I am describing is my part of the mosaic that is music; my particular way of allowing sound to be sound while remaining an integral part of the process of a piece. By the way, Chris Shultis has told me that he has been thinking about the differences between my use of silence and that of Cage and perhaps he would have some insight in this area.

TW: What has been the most significant moment of your compositional career?

TD: I assume you do not mean in the purely practical sense of most significant commission etc. But on the purely musical level, I would say that one of the most significant was the composition of *Against the Silence...* (1984-85) for percussion ensemble and quadraphonic tape. In this piece, for the first time, I started to understand the possibilities of juxtaposing sound and silence as equal partners in the compositional process. In this piece I first defined silence in a new way. I think that perhaps later developments in my work are more sophisticated in this regard, but this piece, was really a great discovery for me. How sound could be part of a process, yet remain pure sound. How musical processes themselves could be defined through the opposition of sounds heard as isolated moments versus sounds employed as elements of a larger musical design.

TW: What elements of Feldman's compositional style do you feel are most evident in your own works?

TD: I think I discussed this earlier. Feldman once said (somewhere) that one of the most beautiful things that sounds do is decay. He could have added that in order for this decay to be felt they must be attached to silence. I agree with this and this has affected my work, deeply.

TW: Are there any thoughts or reflections you have about the following works?

Transparent Wave I and IV; as though

TD: These *Transparent Wave* pieces are part of a series of works for different instruments (snare, piano, soprano, marimba, cello, vibraphone). While each piece is, of course, written in my own style, it also addresses issues of playing the specific instrument in question. In a sense you could say each instrument is examined through the microscope that is my style. So I look at how each instrument will behave when placed under the constraints that are imposed by my style of composition.

as though was part of a broader attempt to create an entire world of sound, to embrace all aspects of sound, from white noise (the snare roll) to pitch (the vibraphone note at the end). I wanted these extremes as well as all gradations in between (the maracas for example, a filtered white noise), and to juxtapose these levels of sound constantly

throughout the piece. Again, this juxtaposition occurs within the context of - under the constraints of - my style of composition which involves the extensive use of silence to inhibit the flow of events, as well as radical discontinuities provided by the juxtaposition of very different musical materials. As you can tell by now I really avoid creating music that flows continuously, gradually from one state to another. I like the sudden, jarring juxtaposition of opposites (though, as you have pointed out elsewhere, the snare drum piece is more continuous than the others; this fact itself, however, within the context of the Wave series, creates yet another level of discontinuity).

TW: I have noticed that in your works you typically utilize only a small part of the tessitura of each keyboard instrument, typically staying above middle C, with the extreme upper ranges of the keyboard utilized during peak moments of activity. This tends to keep these instruments in a more percussive (less sustaining) range. Is this intentional?

TD: Yes! You are certainly right. I usually choose register, dynamics, and articulation to emphasize the percussive quality of keyboard instruments. That means of course, emphasizing the attack characteristics of the instruments. I treat the piano this way too, typically. This is shocking to my colleagues who teach piano but I do believe that the piano is a percussion instrument (which of course it is). Certainly I treat it that way.

TW: Do you have any plans for future percussion compositions? Where do you see percussion composition developing in the future?

I have just finished a new piece for percussion ensemble and soprano, - *qu'un espace / sépare* - (- *that a space / divides* -). It's about five minutes long and involves an ensemble of six percussionists playing a large number of instruments. Most of the materials of the piece are non-pitched. A few pitched sounds are heard on occasion throughout to prepare for the entrance of the soprano who enters only at the very end of the work. The text is drawn from a source that I have used quite a few times, a collection of fragments of a large unfinished poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. The numerous existing sketches for this work were collected and first published in 1961 under the title, *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*. The piece has a very complex spatial design which was central to my

compositional process. The performers are placed in a circle surrounding the audience and sound moves around and across the space in a variety of ways. I was moved to compose this piece as a result of a recent re-acquaintance with the magnificent composition for percussion ensemble and soprano by the French composer Jean Barraqué *Chant après chant* (1966) which I hope every percussionist has an opportunity to hear and/or play at some point in his career. It is one of my fondest hopes someday to hear, - *qu'un espace / sépare* - performed on a concert alongside Barraqué's masterpiece.

TW: Do you have any final thoughts on composition for percussion you would like to make?

Prior to the 20th century the sonic materials of Western music were largely restricted to a set of twelve pitch classes. Over the course of the past hundred years this restriction has virtually disappeared. All sounds are fair game whether pitched or not. Moreover, we now hear every sound in a musical work in the broadest possible context – that of the entire world of sound. This is, for me, the greatest transformation of Western musical practice that has taken place over the course of the 20th /21st centuries. Percussion instruments have been and will continue to be a key resource for composers in realizing and exploring the far-reaching implications of this new awareness of sound. (Certainly, electronic music affords an equally powerful resource, though a rather different one, with different implications.) It is my hope that more young composers will embrace the incredible sonic richness and diversity that characterizes the percussion world and that they will utilize this richness to break down any barriers still constraining their own personal sonic worlds.

Tracy Wiggins is the coordinator of the percussion program at **The University of North Carolina at Pembroke**. Mr. Wiggins is also a candidate for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the HARTT School, University of Hartford. He holds a Masters Degree in Percussion Performance from the University of New Mexico and a Bachelors Degree in Music Education from Oklahoma State University.

