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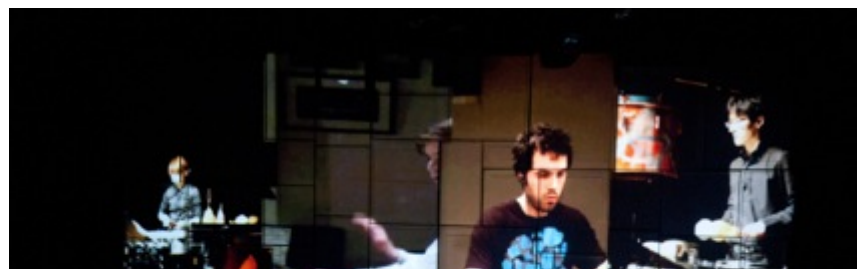
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Monday, May 21, 2012

ED BILOUS: 21ST CENTURY MUSIC MAN

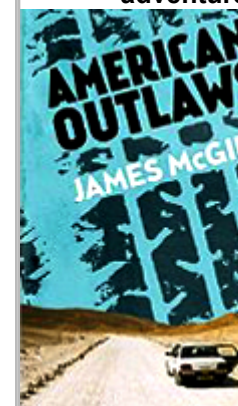
by Randolyn Zinn



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Ed Bilous, the composer and teacher, met me the other day at Juilliard where he has created the Center for Innovation in the Arts. Last month he was awarded the William Schuman Chair at Juilliard and you will be able to watch a video of his stirring speech at the end of this interview where he makes the case for re-imagining our educational system with the arts placed at the center of the curriculum.

Ed and I met in the early 1980s when we were teaching artists together at Lincoln Center Institute--the aesthetic education program that matches artists with schoolteachers to prepare students for seeing productions of dance, theater and music.

Randolyn Zinn: What year was that exactly...?

Ed Bilous: Had to be between '81 and '83. I was working on my PhD at Juilliard at the time.

RZ: Just think, no cell phones or Internet. The extent of personal technology were our SONY Walkmans and telephone answering machines with tiny reel-to-reel tapes inside. You couldn't dial in for your messages from outside the house.

EB: That's right.

RZ: So how did you become so adept with technology and its interface with music?

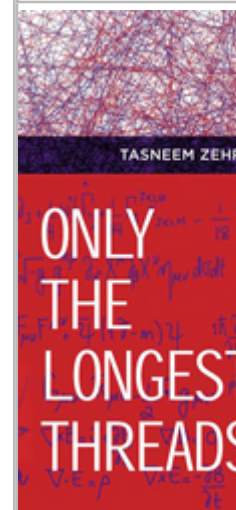
EB: Technology has always been a part of music making. The shift from harpsichord to piano was largely a technological revolution, as was the creation of the organ. When you think about early composers a thousand years ago, their resources were fairly undeveloped, basically just primitive string and wind instruments. Bit by bit, technological changes brought them to life in a way that allowed far more expressivity and creativity until we got the kind of instruments we see in the orchestra today. The transformation from harpsichord to piano is amazing. The harpsichord doesn't really have dynamics; you play loud or you play soft, but you can't really achieve a crescendo. Having that ability with the piano transformed music making and a whole new kind of playing and composing. Trumpets went from just

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being bugle-like things, cones of brass, to instruments with valves that allow all kinds of sophisticated chromatics and articulation. So...technology has always been a part of music.



I got interested in music listening to the Beatles and watching them change from being a simple rock band of four guys playing electric guitars and drums to what they accomplished in the recording studio via technology. That was all I needed to set me off. My life has been one steady outgrowth from that early bit of inspiration.

RZ: I'm wondering if this intersection of music with computer and video challenges the classical music world's status quo. Their mission, or a large part of their mission, seems to be about sustaining the musical canon in its historically intact form.

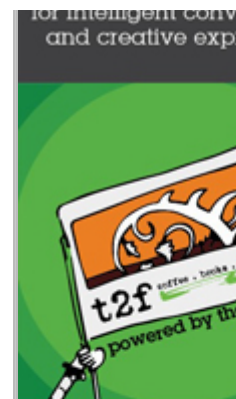
EB: You're right, it does. What we'll be doing in the Center is not only doing new works that use technology, but also devising productions of master works by looking at them through the new lens of technology. I'll give you an example of how we have

recreated an older work using technology.

There's the wonderful Bach Chaconne, one of the most famous pieces ever written and certainly the most famous piece for solo violin. Some musicologists believe the piece was based on a hymn. There is a study and a recording of this work in which we hear the solo violin perform the piece with a vocal part mysteriously woven through like a ghost-like presence that doesn't appear in Bach's score, but the musicologist that created this version believes the vocal line is implicit, or sort of buried in the score.

So what we did was to have a solo violin on stage performing the piece as written and then a pre-recorded vocal part that was triggered by a dancer who did a solo with the violinist. The vocal track was triggered by hand gestures so that the recording of the voice sort of wafted through the audience via speakers surrounding the hall. On the one hand, it was a perfectly beautiful performance by the violinist that Bach would have been happy with--we didn't change any of the notes—and then this other element was mysteriously woven through in a very magical way through the use of technology.

We also did an interesting production of a work by Pérotin, a 12th century composer (1160—1225). While notated, his music doesn't really have much beyond text and pitches, so if there was some instrumental accompaniments and doublings in his day, it's not clear from the score what they might have been or how it sounded, so it's up to the performers' interpretations. Most of the time it's done as a



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- Raza Husain

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cappella singing or with organ. We performed some of his works with vocalists doubled with electronic sounds surrounding the hall that were triggered, again, by choreography.

RZ: Could you explain what the Yamaha Disklavier does?

EB: It's a wonderful instrument. A single Disklavier is basically a grand piano, and Yamahas's latest, newest models are competitive on the highest level with every other piano manufacturer, fabulous-sounding traditional instruments that you could put onstage at Carnegie Hall and play Brahms.

But what's really wonderful is that they come in pairs with a variety of options. On the first of the two, sensors under the keys and pedals register and store every bit of motion that happens as the performer plays: all the fingerings, all the phrasing, all the pedal work, whether legato or staccato, and so on. Then all that info is sent via the Internet to the twin piano and those exact motions of the first are recreated through certain mechanisms so you see the keys and the pedals move on the twin instrument.



RZ: It's really a ghostly presence to see those keys moving without a player.

EB: Yes. When I learned of these instruments and saw their potential, I had an idea to do a piece by John Cage that requires several pianos. I set up one pianist participating in Tokyo, one in Los Angeles, and the third one in New York. The pianists in Tokyo and L.A. were playing -- you could see them on a video screen--and the twins of their instruments were in New York where the audience watched the keys and



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Yes, the immediate problems that have the potential to be lessened. Like, helping to feed one...

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pedals moving. It was a little like being at a séance.

RZ: Do most of the Center's projects stem from music and musical impulses?

EB: Yes. Students of Music and Composition seem to have a more direct connection with technology – and I don't want to seem prejudicial here -- but more connection than I've seen with actors and dancers. I don't know why that is. Students will come to Juilliard as violinists or pianists or composers with composing software loaded on their computers. Dancers and actors might edit their performances on FinalCut or iMovie, but their creative impulses don't begin there – or not that I've seen. That could change.

While dance might look somewhat different from 50, 100, or 300 years ago, musicians today couldn't pick up an instrument created 300 years ago and play it. The fingering is different, the tuning, the manner in which one plays has changed dramatically with technology...as I mentioned before about the differences between the harpsichord and the piano. By the nature of their trade, musicians are forced to stay in touch with machines in a way that a dancer or an actor is not.

RZ: Because, for actors and dancers, their bodies are their instruments.

EB: That's right.

RZ: What do you teach at Juilliard? And will your course load change now that you're the director of the Center for Innovation in the Arts?

EB: I started teaching Intro level Music Theory in the Drama, Dance and Music programs at Juilliard after earning my PhD there. Then I became the Chairman of the Music Theory department, but 15 years in, it became clear to me that the school needed to have technology offerings if we were going to really prepare young musicians for careers in the 21st century. So I got permission from the school and a substantial donation early on to build a music technology center in 1993, which very quickly caught on and was in high demand with the students. When the school built the extension and the new addition, we created the new music technology center and a multi-media black box theater that we now oversee, the Willson Theatre, named after Meredith Willson. I also teach art in education and classes in interdisciplinary work in technology.

RZ: So is Juilliard leading the way with this new Center?

EB: Now we are. In the 1970s there were other schools with music technology. Our new center is interdisciplinary. It's not at all about research and development; it's project-oriented. We pull creative

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- Raza Husain

people together and light the spark to send them making new work.

RZ: Will the Center have its own roster of students?

EB: It will draw from all departments. My personal goal is to try and create a special certificate program where a student could be an actor, dancer or musician and have something akin to a minor or an emphasis doing interdisciplinary work and work with technology.

RZ: Can you do interactive performances within in the building?

EB: Absolutely.

RZ: Do only faculty at Juilliard get to participate or will you cast a wider net?

EB: We've always involved artists outside the building, especially filmmakers or visual or multimedia artists because we don't have those kinds of artists here in the building, so that's been a natural. We reach out to alumni who have gone on to create careers that are a little broader and use skills and technology that are outside the classical purview. I do think it's important to cast, as you say, a wider net. Also, we now have the capability via the Internet to collaborate with artists all over the world, and likewise, to share our work with artists elsewhere.

RZ: Say a student in the drama department wants to spearhead a project, is that possible?

EB: Yes, in fact there are 2 such proposals from drama students on my desk right now.

RZ: Does the Center offer a pre-determined season and/or allow for spontaneous laboratory projects within the school year?

EB: That's the million dollar question. We do have two fixed concert programs: one in November, eVirtuosos, focusing on music and technology, and then in April InterArts, featuring interdisciplinary work. The dream is to use our wonderful new black box theater as a lab space so students can go in and play and explore without the pressure of creating something that must be performed -- or maybe it could go on to be performed. But our students are so incredibly busy; we're working on how to figure out ways to open up windows of opportunities for them. The Willson Theater was designed specifically for these multimedia interdisciplinary works.

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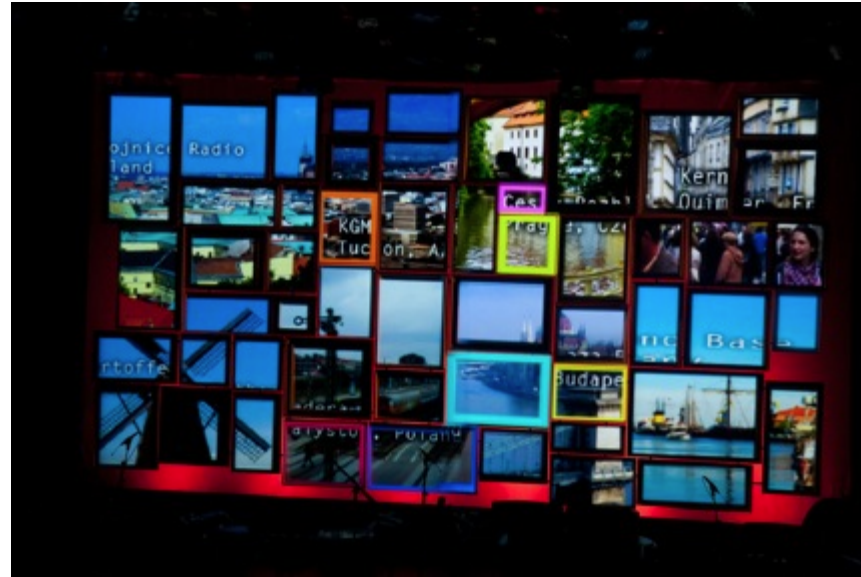
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RZ: Does the Willson have its own technical director?

EB: It does, plus a sound engineer, lighting engineer, a whole team, and of course, Internet access.

RZ: So I noticed upstage center a projection screen that rolls down. Is that the only place available for a screen?

EB: No, in fact, we've used multiple projection surfaces in other areas.

RZ: Great. So could performers carry small screens on their bodies, say?

EB: That's right.

RZ: Or costumes that can display projected images?

EB: Yes. Honestly, I'm a little weary seeing a string quartet with a video projected overhead. Harkens back to the days of silent movies. The idea of making projection surfaces as flexible as the ensemble itself is part of the vision.

RZ: What happens in the summer?

EB: The school shuts down. I want to create a summer program for students interested in collaborating on multimedia projects. The goal is to create a 4 -6 week program from May until June to develop work,

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I therefore can't tell if your reply is good or not can I? ;)

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The word "good" is too ambiguous to use as the basis for solving many problems. Some things that...

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and then when we pick up in September we could start rehearsing in earnest with a performance date in March.

RZ: Has the Center come about because of your own compositional interests? And how do you think your work will be affected by what you're doing here?

EB: I think it's fair to say that the Center exists because of my work and the fact that I had persuaded the President of Juilliard Joseph Polisi and the Board that an understanding of technology is essential for educated artists today, even if they don't use it; just to know it's out there is important. It would be like a composer that understands how to write for strings and brass but doesn't know what woodwinds are capable of.

But a lot of the energy for this movement comes from the students themselves. They say, gee, we'd like to go to Juilliard for all the usual reasons, but we also don't want to miss out on these other technological opportunities at these other universities. Our goal was to make sure we could offer those same opportunities, if not go beyond them.

RZ: Are you worried that students will leave behind certain key understandings in their studies?

EB: I'm not worried, but there are some faculty members who are and I understand their position. For example, it's difficult enough for a young pianist or violinist to develop the skill and artistry needed to be in the front of the pack, meaning that they not only get heard and seen, but make a living too. So there are many faculty members that believe that while this technology stuff is interesting, it's a diversion from practice time, from focusing on the basic canon.

RZ: You're doing the rebellious stuff.

EB: (laughs) We are kind of off in the corner of the building here, where the irreverent stuff happens.

RZ: I notice the office we're meeting in today is called The Play Room.

EB: Yes. You know, in the Drama and Dance divisions there are so many opportunities for the students to play and put on masks, but in the Music division it never happens.

RZ: Not even in the Jazz program?

EB: Well, even so, the Jazz division is very rigorous and disciplined. In the Classical Music division, you wake up and your hours are organized from September through May. What you do with your instrument is extremely regimented. The thought that you might wander into a space, explore and try

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Abbas, I love these dangerous airplane landing videos. These are incredible pilots.

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I think you're reading a little too much into it. The problem is the report itself, which focuses...

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things out, feeling free to make mistakes...music students just didn't have those kind of opportunities here. So in establishing our environment in the Center for creativity, The Play Room is a space where students know they can come in and play, just like when they were children.

RZ: Ed, you've found a way to be rebellious and respectful at the same time.

EB: (laughs) It's been a balancing act.

RZ: What are you doing now in your own work?

EB: Right now I'm developing a piece that's been in the works for some time that uses women's voices, an assortment of instruments and new media. The piece is based on the Gospel According to Mary Magdalene, a Gnostic gospel. There are a couple of venues possible for the premiere, but nothing's settled, so I can't speak specifically about dates. It's a piece that's been very close to my heart for some time, not only for spiritual reasons and philosophical interests of mine, but also for the musical possibilities.

RZ: You're working on something else, too...inspired by Facebook?



EB: Yes, my credit there is "conceived and produced by...". It's a concert based on a photojournalist

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He says the only reason not to give to charity is because you're "stuck in the status quo, where...

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We received a written apology in the mail

Teru Kuwayama, who was embedded with the Marines in Afghanistan where he took photographs on his iPhone of soldiers, the war environment, and villagers, and created a blog, Basetrack.org, in which soldiers can communicate with their families, but in a collective manner. It became so popular that it replaced all traditional means of communications between soldiers and their families. I think they've tracked 5 millions hits on the website.

When I became acquainted with the blog, I realized that there was a work of art in it, even though it was a work of journalism. We reached out to him and I asked if we could take his images and some of the text on Facebook and adapt it for a staged performance. He agreed, and in March we did a concert on our series Beyond The Machine. The piece features two actors speaking text posted from the blog, photos and film as the set design, and a musical ensemble in the middle playing a score that tied it all together. We're exploring possibilities to perform it again at the UN. We're also having some conversations with people in Washington, as well as the possibility of taking it on tour to military bases.

RZ: So your thoughts on technology in regards to teaching....

EB: I think media education should be less about data transference than the creation of new work.

RZ: Thanks, Ed. This has been great.

EB: Thank you, Randolyn.

Here's the video of Ed's inspiring speech about our educational system, re-imagined with art placed at its dynamic center.

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**** For more on Ed and to listen to his music go to: http://edwardbilous.com/Edward_Bilous.html

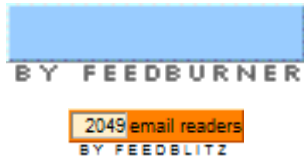
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MISCELLANY



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jim lawry · 2 years ago

Want more on a piece that might work well in your play room? I have written "Otto's Inferno" concerning Otto Hahn, Lise Meitner and eight German scientists incarcerated in Farm Hall in 1945 showing how German scientific hubris collided headlong with Allied scientific power. Uses western and eastern arts. Contrasts Noh's understatement, abstraction, and refinements with Kyogen like western theater images, using song, chant, music and dance to reveal the Yugen or the essence or soul of things beneath the surface. "When you enter Farm Hall, you leave the world."

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Jennifer · 2 years ago

Ms. Zinn never disappoints, I always rush to read her latest contribution, and again, she identifies clearly and specifically the persons and issues that are steering the complicated mesh of artistic activity firmly forward. Thanks for bringing us all up to speed.

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chuck p · 2 years ago

A wonderful, stimulating and enlightening interview/conversation between two fascinating individuals. Sometimes I found myself marveling at the depth and breadth of your conversation and the information and ideas you shared (I think, if I had been there, I would have just sat in my chair gaping wide-eyed and slack jawed). I am certainly attracted to Professor Bilous' concepts for melding the music with technology - wedding something visceral and emotional with something more structural and concrete - tremendous accomplishment. AND. I

