

COMPUTER MUSIC COMPOSER JAMES DASHOW

A Conversation with Bruce Duffie, recipient of the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Broadcast Award broadcast on WNIB-FM (Chicago), September, 1994

*The original transcript -- with graphics -- can be found at
www.bruceduffie.com/dashow.html*

This conversation took place in mid-September of 1994, when James Dashow was back in Chicago for a visit. As noted, he was about to have his fiftieth birthday, and now this transcript is being prepared – in 2019 -- to celebrate his seventy-fifth!

While setting up, we spoke of the specifics of the political situation in Italy at that moment. Needless to say, the situation has changed and re-changed many times and in many ways since then.

Bruce Duffie: Let me start right there by asking you why contemporary composers are so endangered?

James Dashow: [Sighs] This is not so much what I perceive in the United States, because, as you know, I've been living in Italy for twenty-five years. The situation in Italy, recently, has gotten rather, shall we say, unfortunate because of extreme cuts in possibilities of earning a living as a composer. The royalties have been cut significantly by the state royalty agency, as well as the radio broadcasting, which means considerably less time for contemporary music. This is because of a shake-up within the national radio, and because of the political situation in Italy, which has taken a sudden turn to the right.

BD: [With a gentle nudge] I thought the Italian political situation was always in upheaval.

JD: [Smiles] It's always in upheaval to a certain degree, but what's going on over there now is really a bloodless revolution. Major things are happening. It's not just a revolving door. Now a lot of people are in a one-way door, and are out. Major political parties that used to be the controlling parties, have disappeared. They're just off the map, and that took place in exactly one year.

BD: So how does that affect the arts, and contemporary music specifically?

JD: How it affects the arts is that especially in Italy, and in other parts of Europe, culture is politics. Culture is very much involved in politics, and vice versa, because things like music and various aspects of the arts are an important part of Italian life.

So, political parties want to show that they are participating in the life of the country, and contributing to the life of the country by supporting the arts, so they would prefer to be the ones who are supporting that composer or that painter and so forth. So, there are these little battles going on, and we benefit because they are after composers to write pieces that, somehow or other, show that particular party is involved in the arts. It's not political music. There are some composers who were involved in specifically political things, but it's generally not political music. It's more esteem, where the politicians want to show that they're cultured people as well as being the developing politicians. [Laughs]. We are beneficiaries of this battle as to who supports the arts most, in effect.

BD: Do you feel that you're just a prized bauble?

JD: No, not really. People are serious about it. There hasn't been much interference on the part of politicians as to the content of the art. In certain cases, yes, and as soon as you go a little bit to the left, it becomes more of a cause because whoever is on the platform has always got a cause. But no, it's nothing like being a trinket. It's traditional that the arts have been important in Italy. There are people who want to have contemporary art. Even if they don't understand it, they feel that it's important their country produces contemporary art.

BD: Then, how is this shifting?

JD: It's shifting in so far as the political situation is very, very confused. The major old political parties have more or less been wiped out. They've had to re-organize, and have given themselves new names. The people who were running the show for about forty or fifty years have disappeared completely. What used to be one of the old leftist parties — the old Italian Communist Party — changed their name, and they've become a whole different kind of thing. They're changing their philosophy to go in line in a so-called modern democratic state. As a result, the priorities for these parties now are just getting their act together, as opposed to worrying about whether some composer gets played. Supporting any kind of art has taken a low priority. The major problem that emerged just in the last couple of weeks is the fact that one of the major political movements that has emerged is run by a man who owns privately three major private television networks, and he's indicated no interest whatsoever in contemporary art. He is a very successful businessman.

BD: Is this going to affect Verdi at La Scala as well as contemporary music, or just the new works?

JD: Just the new works. But, for example, La Scala had commissioned a well-known contemporary composer to do a piece, but they can't find the money to do it. So, he has written an opera and there's no money to do it. This happened in Milan, and this happened in Rome, and also in several other places that had scheduled contemporary music, or commissions for new operas. The pieces have been composed, and they've not been done because there's no money.

BD: You're a composer. If the money isn't coming from the state, are you still going to compose?

JD: Well, of course! During the good years, I was obviously able to put some away. Fortunately for me, my wife is a full professor at the University of Rome, so we have something to fall back on.

BD: [With a bigger nudge] You mean, you're not going to starve in a garret???

JD: [Laughs] No, I'm not going to starve in a garret!

BD: [Being serious] Would you compose differently if you were starving in a garret?

JD: [He sighs] No, I would probably not stay in a garret, but since I do have a little bit of expertise programming computers, I would do the contemporary version of driving a taxi. I would program a computer to earn a living, and compose like a lot of composers do, as a matter of fact, in this country.

BD: So you'll be a cabbie on the information highway?

JD: Exactly. An information hack, in both senses of the word. [Both laugh]

BD: How long ago did you get involved in utilizing computers with music?

JD: I had the good fortune of being an undergraduate at Princeton University when computer music actually was born just up the turnpike at Bell Laboratories, with the research that was done by Max Matthews (1926-2011) at that time. He interested a few of my professors at the time in working with computers as sources of sound, as

sources of making music, and I was there at the time when things just got started in the middle 1960s. It immediately captured my fantasy and my imagination, and I got a little bit of experience at that time. Then, when I went to graduate school at Brandeis University between 1966 and '69, they had an interest in electronic music, and they asked me to go to my old stomping ground at Princeton, and get as much information and as many programs as possible, so that Brandeis could possibly get its feet wet doing computer music as well. That never got off the ground at Brandeis because they decided to go for analogue-electronic because it was easier to do with the computer facilities, which were really were non-existent at that time in the late '60s. Their idea was to go over to Harvard and use their system, and it would have worked at Harvard. It was just that there was no easy way of interfacing between the two institutions to get the kind of things that were necessary. To do computer music in those days, when we were using mainframe computers, you needed an enormous amount of computer time just to get a nice little tune out.

BD: Let me stop you for a moment. What is the major difference between electronic music and computer music?

JD: Computer music is nothing more than electronic music generated by digital synthesis, by digital means. The major difference is the fact that since you can tell the computer what you want, you have an enormous variety and control. You can do all kinds of things with computer synthesis and analogue synthesis, with the traditional old-fashioned instruments, such as the famous Buchla synthesizer from England, which is one of the first portable analogue synthesizers back in the early '70s.

BD: There were pieces of music written for that machine?

JD: You could do things with those machines, but a lot of those machines were just sources of sound. Then you would record them, and splice them, and re-record them, and so on.

BD: Will there come a time when someone who composed on those machines say that you must use original instruments?

JD: I don't think so! Most of us are delighted that we don't have to put up with those awful sounds, especially spliced-up tapes. If you want to get a nice fast passage with all kinds of interesting timbral variations, that means recording those sounds one at a time. Then, if you it wanted it to be fast, maybe eight or nine sounds a second, that meant taking tiny little pieces of tape and splicing them together, and that could be very time consuming. Perhaps that is the equivalent of copying, I suppose, if you're writing operas and have to copy out an entire orchestral score. The computer

alleviates that problem completely. All you have to do is type in the appropriate data, and all the mixing and cutting and splicing is done automatically. In fact, you can do things with the computer that you can't possibly do with the old analogue systems.

BD: Is it still your imagination, and your sound, and your idea, and your creation?

JD: Oh, absolutely! It's as with any music instrument. It's the man that uses it that counts, not the instrument itself. It's as if you're saying you hear a bad piece for piano, and you blame it on the piano. Nobody would think blame it on the piano. You blame it in you, the performer or the composer.

BD: The thing that worries a lot of people is that there are now computers which do the music for you. Are we getting the possibility of someone who is musically illiterate producing something that is almost musical?

JD: That can happen. In fact, one should have the courage to say you don't what is behind the piece. Does the piece work, should be the major question. By and large, to make a piece work you do have to know something. But, it's like the question of whether a million monkeys can turn out Shakespeare after a while. That's entirely possible. If you get Shakespeare from one of those monkeys, are you going to complain that it was a monkey that did it?

BD: It was just the serendipitous monkey.

JD: Could be, but those are problems that beg the question. The real question is whether we have an instrument that can make interesting music.

BD: Who is it that decides whether it is interesting or not — is it the composer, it is the performer, is it the audience, is it the critic, is it the historian?

JD: With any kind of musical instrument, who decides that? The composer thinks he's writing some interesting music. Any composer who thinks he's not writing interesting music is... well, that's an extinct species. It's like a unicorn — I don't think it really exists. Any composer will say that he's writing interesting music, otherwise he wouldn't bother writing it, but is it really interesting? You can ask the same question about any piece of music. If you get a performer who believes in it, you'll get a convincing performance, and then the performer will convince the audience. In many cases with the computer — where you don't have a live performer — then the composer becomes his own performer, and the composer then has the double job of convincing compositionally and convincing as the performer. He has to put out automatically the definitive performance of his own music. This makes the

job extremely difficult, which is why the amount of time that goes into a good piece of computer music is quite large.

BD: Is this one of the reasons you often combine live performers with the computer sound?

JD: That's one reason, yes. I'm very much interested in the contrast between the two, and the mixing of the two. The way that you can get the traditional sound of the instrument, and you can have its timbre seem to be amplified by the electronic sounds that are coming out of the loudspeakers. It's very much a close cousin of the orchestration. You take any kind of instrument, and you put it within a different orchestral context, and you give it a different sort of sound. It will communicate a different idea, what you might even call a sensuous value. The electronic palette of sound then just increases our possibilities of elaborating on the traditional instrument.

BD: At what point does the number on possibilities become overwhelming?

JD: Always! [Both laugh] Most of time one spends in choosing and discarding, as opposed to inventing. For each piece that I prepare, I take a great deal of time preparing catalogues. So far, I have done pieces for lute and computer, and cello and computer, and violin and computer. So, I will prepare whatever computer resources that I'm using at the time. I now have the good fortune of being able to work in my private studio with programs that I've written myself for hardware that I have purchased from a small company. I can now spend a great deal of time trying out sounds, matching them with what I can imagine the soloist is going to sound like.

What I prefer to do, nowadays, is to invite the soloist to my studio, and just turn on a tape recorder and have him show me what he can do. We get sounds from his instrument, and then use that as a point of departure for designing some of the electronic sounds. I can then get the kind of blend, or discover different kinds of blends that I would never have suspected by myself. Sometimes it's a very empirical sort of thing. I will have a sound, and I'll say to myself, "My goodness. I just heard the contrabass doing a very interesting harmonic. Let's see what they sound like together." So I'll put on the tape, and start the computer going, playing around with the different aspects of the sound. Different kinds of things come out which suggest musical ideas.

BD: So, rather than always creating, a lot of times it's purely discovery?

JD: Absolutely! It's the same as many composers who have the experience of working at the piano. Stravinsky worked at the piano at the time. In fact, you can hear many of his orchestrational touches which are obviously piano-inspired. For

example, in *Agon* he'll have the two trombones playing the same note. One attacks short, and the other one holds. That's obviously a piano attack, but he transforms that into a trombone attack, and into an interesting trombone timbre.

BD: That's Stravinsky's genius?

JD: That's the kind of discovery that one gets in working the way that he works. Not all composers, obviously, work at instruments. Some of them do, but don't tell you because for many, many years before Stravinsky admitted that he wrote at the piano, you were not allowed to admit that you worked at the piano. You were supposed to sit at your table and 'fantasticate,' and then invent everything on your own. But then the composers who directed orchestras had chances to discover and play around with timbres. Mahler changed his orchestrations all the time while he was directing his own pieces.

BD: Sure! Do you get enough time and enough opportunity to 'fantasticate?'

JD: Oh yes, that I do. When I begin to work on a piece, then I'm very much dedicated to that piece. One of the nice things about having written software for my own system is that I can change my system any time I want. Whenever I hear about something, or learn a new particular kind of technique that might be interesting, I can play around with some of the procedures that I use that occur to me, to try doing it this way instead of that way. With just making some very quick adjustments to the program, I can see how things work out. The more experienced I get, obviously the more I can do a lot of work just imagining things I already know how they sound, and I begin to get things to work together. Again, that's standard for anybody who's worked with any particular medium for an amount of time. You just know how things work.

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BD: Are there some of your pieces that are purely electronic?

JD: I haven't done any purely electronic pieces since *Sequence Symbols* in 1984.

BD: So, that's about ten years.

JD: Ten years, yes. I've had a lot of requests for soloists who like to have the opportunity to play with electronics, because it makes a nice addition to a concert program. Quite often, if a good player has to do a contemporary program, he will like to mix things in different kinds of styles, and an electronic piece is always something

that adds a good deal of interest to a program. The only problem with that, of course, is the economics of having to have a tape recorder, and loud speakers, and amplifiers for just one piece. So, inevitably the player will put on two or three electronic pieces to take advantage of the fact that the hardware is already there.

BD: Do you still meet resistance among the audience towards electronic pieces?

JD: Unfortunately, yes, but again it depends on the context where the piece is being played, the kind of concert series the piece is being introduced. Unexpectedly, this experience happens in my CD with the trumpet player, Mauro Maur, who is the first trumpet for the Rome Opera. The Rome Opera also has a series of chamber concerts that they do in the afternoons — two or three a month — and some of the soloists from the orchestra are invited to play, and given an opportunity to form a small chamber ensemble. Sometimes the players get together and form string quartets, or wind quintets. They get a little cachet like that, but they enjoy doing it because it gets them away from having to play *La Traviata* or *Aida* again. [Much laughter] *Morfologie* was done in 1993, and it was done last year. He commissioned me to do it for him, and he put it on one of his solo recitals. Almost immediately after, we did the recording. Now this audience consisted of the typical Italian opera-going audience, that is over seventy-five-year-old, little-old-lady-type audience. These people have been going to opera all their lives. They know the traditional repertory inside and out, and if they had the energy, they could probably conduct better than some of those conductors. [Laughs]

BD: [With a gentle nudge] They can tell you why today's tenor is not as good a Gigli.

JD: Absolutely. [Laughs] So we had this audience in a small hall with a couple of hundred people, and there were maybe two or three people who were under thirty. But by and large, the average age was about sixty-five, and most of them were little-old-lady-types. When Mauro started to play this electronic piece, first of all they were thrilled that there was a live composer there, because most of the pieces in the concerts they go to are by composers who have not been with us for at least a hundred years. They were delighted that I was there running the mixer for the electronic sound, and the attention that these people gave to the piece while the trumpet player was playing was extraordinary. There was absolute silence. They were really listening. There wasn't the usual coughing, and humming, and hawing, and wondering if this is music. There was real concentration, and afterwards there were some fine comments that I received. There were the usual congratulations, but many of the people said, "Well this is new to me. I don't really understand it, but thank you for the experience."

BD: That's encouraging!

JD: That's terrific. That's first class. It means that music is still alive for these people, whereas in other instances where you have even younger audiences who expect to hear certain kinds of music, they're the ones who get impatient with it. For most people for whom music is the traditional repertory, and they know only one kind of traditional repertory, they are not genuinely involved in music as a living force. Rather, they're involved in music as a kind of a museum. They're the people who often are squirming in their seats, and humming and hawing, and only clapping in a rather lukewarm manner.

BD: Then let me ask you the big question. What is the purpose of music?

JD: [Bursts out laughing] Don't ask! [More laughter]

BD: [With a mock-stern look] I'm not going to get an answer

JD: [Thinks a moment] That's one of those questions like, 'I know what the word means as long as you don't ask me what it means'.

BD: Okay, then let me change it a little bit. Why do you write music?

JD: [Thinks another moment] It's difficult for me to conceive of not writing music. I write music because I also breathe the air, and eat two or three times a day, and I take a walk. Music is what I do. It's what I am. I can ask you why you broadcast.

BD: [Matter-of-factly] Because I love sharing what I have with other people. It's as simple as that.

JD: Okay.

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BD: Are you an American living in Italy, or are you now an Italian citizen?

JD: I'm an American living in Italy. I could have double citizenship, but I've not done the paperwork.

BD: Is there anything about your music that is particularly American, or particularly Italian?

JD: Particularly American, and the more I make my way in my work, I realize that I live in Italy. I've been there for twenty-five years, and probably will be there for another thirty-five years, but I'll always be eighty per cent an American composer. Americans have a sense of rhythm, regular or irregular. I don't mean rhythm in the sense of a steady tempo. I mean a conception of rhythm which is very much jazz-derived. I grew up in the Chicago area playing jazz for the first twenty years of my life.

BD: On what instrument?

JD: Saxophone, and writing for my jazz group, and arranging. So I have had a busy old experience of that. There is a sense of moving forward, an energy that moves forward, whether it's a regular rhythm or an irregular rhythm. This means things of the [Elliott Carter](#) style, or less-adventurous composers who are content with steady pulses. There is a sense of an ongoing upbeat, which is distinctly American...

BD: As opposed to Italian *melisma*?

JD: Not *melisma*, but as opposed to what I've perceived to be the European way of doing things, which is very much involved with the downbeat, that is involved with arriving and sitting on the notes, whereas the American way of doing things is that you're always looking forward to the next note. You're always up, whereas the European style seems to be very much being concerned with where you are now, which is down on the beat. Quite frankly, I am not very satisfied with many performances that I get in Italy because they don't have that sense of upbeat, whereas when I come here (to the U.S.), the performances in this country are always first-class because it's the way people do things.

BD: It's in our blood?

JD: It's in our blood, yes. It's a temperament thing, and I do not hesitate for a moment to say that one of the people who's had an enormous influence on the way I work within my kind of phrasing has been the famous jazz saxophonist, Cannonball Adderley (1928-1975), who, if you listen carefully to the way that man phrases within just an ordinary blues framework, is extraordinary. He does beats and counter beats, and phrasing, and it's almost two- and three-part counterpoint rhythmically within the single kind of phrasing. This is quite extraordinary, and is very much gotten into the way I do it, even though I know you won't hear that kind of sound. Definitely I don't write blues, and I definitely don't write 1, 2, 3, 4 kind of music. But that energy is definitely something which is very natural to me.

BD: Is that something that Cannonball would know he was doing, or was it just the way he felt, and it came out, and we imposed the logic on it later?

JD: I'm sure it was a combination of his having a very strong instinct for it, and also knowing that he was doing it, because the man was an extremely intelligent musician.

BD: Then the question becomes, do you know that's what you're doing, and is it a more conscious effort on your part because you understand all of these details in your music?

JD: No, it's not a matter of a specific kind of thing. I'm talking more on a general level of a way of conceiving musical energy more than anything else. I'm not sitting down saying that I'm going to do a group of three, then a group of four, and then a group of two but that's going to be an upbeat here. It's just that I know the kind of music I conceive naturally, and the way I develop the kind of things that I like to do has that energy. I would not be surprised to find out that Adderley himself had a sense of knowing what to do, and then utilized an instinct of what he wanted to do, and developed it consciously as he became a more mature player.

BD: But, you're also a theoretician. This is why I'm trying to make sure that the music comes first, then the theory, rather than the theory first and then the music gets put on it.

JD: Oh, of course. The whole theoretical thing that I've developed over the last ten or fifteen years is based entirely on the way I hear certain kinds of sounds, certain kinds of rhythms, certain kinds of phrasing which were natural to me. I had certain ways of doing things that I wanted to do, certain ways that interested me, and I wanted to make convincing music. Then, I was going back and seeing what was happening, and discovering that there were certain kinds of systematic ways of developing these ideas, these instincts that I have. Systematic does not mean mechanical, by the way. These are definitely two kinds of things. There's nothing mechanical whatsoever about it. Even with the computer things I do, it is all within a system, but a system that allows for an enormous amount of variety, and a great deal of exploration into development of ways of hearing, which is the way that I hear. I enjoy working with a system in so far as certain long-range ideas can be developed if you have a system. That's my feeling about it. You can create expectations, you can create a sense direction within a systematic writing, whereas pieces that float, that don't seem to go anywhere, is an aesthetic I do not enjoy, which I don't share with another way of doing things. They are consciously non-systematic, and that doesn't interest me. That kind of formlessness doesn't interest me. I'm very much interested in trading recognizable shapes that generally participate in some kind of systematic

development, that will help to ‘concretize’ that shape, and that will help to define that shape in a more specific manner. It helps you perceive the piece, and it gives you something to think about, and something to remember. When I say ‘think about,’ I don’t mean verbally. It gives you something to musically grab onto, which is one of the things music is about.

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BD: Now you’ve answered a lot of these question for yourself, and I assume you keep re-answering of these question for yourself. What advice do you have for younger composers coming along?

JD: Listen a lot! That certainly is one of the things that I would suggest to a lot of younger composers.

BD: To a specific kind of music, or to all kinds?

JD: All kinds. Form tastes, and follow them. Right now, in this part of the history of music, we’ve come down the river and it’s now a huge delta, where the pluralism in music is like a river that’s widened and open. Many people are going back to writing tonality. There’s the neo-romantic; there’s the minimalism; there’s the continuous development of serialistic techniques; there’s free dodecaphonic; there is the enharmonic writing; there’s using microtones and various kinds of intervals that you can’t get with normal instruments, but which computers allow you to get. An enormous number of discoveries have been made, and recuperations of old styles have been made as well. It now becomes important to grab onto an idea, a style that you might like, or a mixture of styles you like, and get good at it. There is so much returning to a different kind of a style because it’s fashionable, or because maybe you won’t get a job if you don’t, or you won’t get to play at a festival if you don’t. But again, the result of that is music that’s half-hearted, or lukewarm. Even if one chooses a style that I’m not interested in particularly, if it’s good and if it’s something that’s convincing, meaning the person that’s convinced in what he’s doing and gets good at it, that’s okay. That’s something which is making a contribution to the musical literature, even with a style that might be a reference to the past.

BD: Are you optimistic about the whole future of music?

JD: [Sighs] Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. As you can well imagine, music isn’t an isolated field. It’s mixed in with cultural aspects of all kinds. It’s mixed in with the society. It’s mixed in with cultural politics, and real politics, and academic politics, and all kinds of non-musical things, so you can’t think about music as having

a life of its own. It's got roots everywhere, and everything else has got roots in it.

BD: Music is part of the fabric of life?

JD: Well, it's part of life. Being optimistic about music is being optimistic about life, and if I think that things are going to go well generally, then perhaps music is going to go well generally. There is an enormous amount of talent around. What is distressing is that a lot of this good talent is ignored because they're not doing the right style right now.

BD: You're talking about compositional style?

JD: Compositional style, yes. Right now there is a great reaction against non-tonal music, for example, which is inevitable because the pendulums have a tendency to swing over time. The nice thing about that, of course, is it means that anybody who's genuinely interested in writing non-tonal music is doing it because they want to, and not because they have to, whereas in the 1960s and '70s you had to. Nowadays other styles are the 'have to' styles.

BD: Should there be a 'have to' style, or should every composer just find his own way?

JD: Ideally, everyone should strive to find their own. The point is that we now have an opportunity for everyone finding their own. As I say, there is a sense that we've reached a huge river delta where all kinds of styles can exist simultaneously as long as they're well done. For example, there is Italia Radio. Some of these private Italian radio stations in Rome broadcast non-stop plastic Rock'n'Roll. It's dreadful, it's absolutely dreadful. You go from one end of the day to the other, and it's all the same stuff. It's Commercial Rock'n'Roll, and then all of a sudden, you'll hear some Rock, or some Pop Music by somebody who knows how to do it. It sticks out, and there's something that grabs you. It may be that the intention is just another piece of Commercial music, but you'll hear a talent there, or a good melody. There's always room for a good melody writer, and I'm a great admirer of some of the older melody writers, like Richard Rodgers, who was a great melody writer.

BD: Are you a great melody writer?

JD: No, I don't think I'm a great melody writer. I'm more interested in training forms and training shapes in music in degrees of tension, and creating senses of movement. But melody is not anything I've been really strong at, even though I had a long time while I was playing jazz, and writing for my own group. Having that

experience, I began to realize that I was more drawn to the improvisational aspect that would help in improvising on the chords, as opposed to trying to get a specific tune out of the chords.

BD: Are you basically pleased with the music you've turned out over the years?

JD: Most of it, and I'm pleased that I have a feeling that it's getting better. In looking over the last twenty, twenty-five years of my output, there is an awareness of how to compose that is getting deeper and deeper, which is very pleasing to me.

BD: You're about to hit the Big Five-Oh! Are you in the place in your career that you want to be at this age?

JD: Nope! [Both laugh] Is anybody?

BD: Where do you want to be — apart from twenty-five years younger? [Both laugh]

JD: Twenty-five years younger, but with all the experience of the last twenty-five years.

BD: Put an old head on young shoulders.

JD: Yes. [Sighs] Goodness! I don't reflect on that question because it's not helpful as far as I'm concerned. As with all composers, one has one's ups and downs. There have been moments when pieces don't seem to be going well, or when you don't seem to be getting enough performances, or enough broadcasts, and there are good moments when things are cooking, and everything is going well. Recently I had a down moment, and was talking with a sculptor friend of mine, who was living just outside of Rome, named Robert Howard Cook (1921-2017), and he too was having a down time. He said he hadn't sold a piece in six months, and he gave me a very wonderful short compact piece of advice, "The only thing left for us during these down moments is that we just have got to get better." I subscribe to that.

BD: [Wistfully] Each day, in every way, you get better and better... Sounds like a twelve-step program. [Both laugh] Or, in your case, it could be a twelve-tone program!

JD: [Laughs] No, much more than twelve tones! With the electronics, you can play within the cracks.

BD: What should the ordinary audience member know about computer music? Is there one bit of advice that they should have going into a concert?

JD: That all depends on previous experience. If you're talking about someone who has had no experience whatsoever, then it would be the same advice to hearing any new piece — just keep your ears open, and don't expect to hear what you heard in the past. To anyone who's had a little bit of experience, then the suggestion would be to attempt to hear where the more specific and more emphasized ideas are within a particular piece, especially on a first hearing. Certainly, a piece will have its moment where it's more focused more than elsewhere. You'll have moments of solution, and other moments of more concentrated energy. Do not try to comprehend the whole piece on a first hearing, but at least begin to recognize where the moments of more specific definition are. A good composer will have those moments, and will point them out to you — one way or another — with a kind of a texture or a kind of a sound that is very characteristic and very striking. I strongly feel that computer music is only another kind of music. It's nothing more unusual, other than the fact that we have different instruments.

BD: Is it the ultimate kind of music?

JD: No, there's no such thing as an ultimate kind of music.

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BD: Is composing fun?

JD: [Sighs and laughs at the same time] Should I answer that? Composing, as I mentioned before, has its ups and its downs. There are moments when it's extremely difficult and it's not fun, and there are moments when things are cooking and it's a ball. One of the nice things about what I'm working on — the electronic aspect of things — is that I can hear it right away, as opposed to when I write instrumental music, and I sit and listen to the tunes in my head. You still don't hear it until the players are out there doing it. With electronics, I can hear them right away, and I can make the adjustments right away, and when those start to work, that's fabulous. So, like with any profession, it's fun and it can also be deadly tragic.

BD: But in the end, is it all worth it?

JD: I think so, yes.

BD: Do you work on one piece at a time, or several pieces at a time?

JD: Generally, one piece at a time, although one piece will have spin-offs into other pieces. For example, I just finished the *Septet* that was commissioned by the Fromm Foundation. In the meantime, I'd had a request from a very good composer/conductor friend of mine in Rome, named Flavio Emilio Scogna (1956-), for an orchestra piece. I found myself, all of sudden, beginning to get orchestral ideas while I was writing my *Septet*. I maintain a little notebook on the side, and started doing some sketches for that. In the meantime, I'd also had a request from a contrabass player for a piece for contrabass and computer, so when that was in my head, I began every now and then getting a contrabass idea, which, since the *Septet* doesn't have a contrabass in it, I realized I was also working on that other piece. But as far as actually composing is concerned, I'm dedicated to one piece, although quite often I turn out enough material for one piece that's good for at least two other pieces.

BD: When you get requests and commissions, how do you decide if you'll accept them, or delay them, or turn them aside?

JD: Quite often it's a matter of whether the performer involved knows my music well enough to be able to give the kind of performance that I want. I'm very careful about that, because since my music does require a special kind of energy through it. If I know the performer, or if I don't know the performer and I get a phone call, I will find out about the performer, and the kind of music that he or she is accustomed to doing. I'll ask them to give me their recordings to hear what kind of pieces that they do, or what kind of music do they like. That way, I get an idea of the kind of performance that I could possibly get from this performer, and quite often I begin to get a fairly good feeling about whether the performer can do what I do. Then I'll have them out to my studio, and have a session to record their instrument. That also gives me an idea of the kind of player they are.

BD: Would you tailor the piece specifically to them?

JD: By and large I do... for example, my piece on the Wergo CD for flute and computer. When I got to know Marzio Conti, I heard him play and discovered that he probably has the fastest tongue in the West. So, there are some sections that are just wickedly fast, but they are fine for him because I knew he could it.

BD: Does that preclude any other flute player from attempting it?

JD: No, no, other players can do it. In fact, that piece has been played quite a bit. If Marzio hadn't asked me for it with his particular technique, if another flutist had asked me for it who was not particularly and obviously as fast, and delighted in being

fast as Marzio, then I probably would have had other characteristics to the piece. The problem with Marzio was slowing him down! [Laughs] He tended to play things all the same speed, so we had long sessions when I'd say, "No Marzio, twelve, not fourteen!" [Much laughter]

BD: Have you been pleased with most of the performances you've heard of your music?

JD: Oh, yes.

BD: Have you been pleased with the recordings?

JD: Oh yes, absolutely. For most of the recordings I've actually been in the control room, and have been working on them directly. In fact, all the CDs that you have there are under my direction, and I've worked a lot with the performers. As you can well imagine, there's a lot of splicing going on, so sections will be done at a time. It also means, obviously, not straight run-throughs by any means.

BD: Does that become a fraud?

JD: No, absolutely not. Ask Glenn Gould. [More laughter] The performers want to get the right notes. In a live performance, you'll make little mistakes that, in the flow of the performance, are secondary. But when you commit yourself to a recording, you want to get every note in place.

BD: Do you ever get a recording that can't be duplicated in live performance?

JD: Oh, goodness... [Sighs] I don't think so... If somebody was really up for it, they could do this. The nice things about all of these recordings is that they were done after the performers had played them in performance several times, so they were not fresh pieces done just for the recording session. Marzio had played the piece about a half a dozen times before we went into that studio. In fact, the night before we went into the studio, he played it on a major concert for the Italian national radio [RAI]. So, he was up for it.

BD: That's great, sure.

JD: The violinist on that same CD, Mario Buffa, had played *Mnemonics* about twenty times. He plays it so well that it was almost a straight take. There were only three major cuts that we did in that thing, and then Mario himself heard a couple of notes that he didn't like. He said, "That sounds flat to me," and I said, "No, Mario,

it's fine." But he wanted to change it, so he changed the one note and we spliced the one note into the recording. [Both laugh] But that was Mario. He has that big sound. He plays it so naturally now. Performers quite often complain about being slaves to the tape. The tape is going along, and doesn't change speed. It's always there, but that is always the reaction the first two or three times they play a piece of mine. Then, all of a sudden something happens. It clicks, and they get into the tape, and it almost sounds as if the tape is following them. They get so fluent with it, they begin to grow accustomed to the way the interaction works between the soloist and the tape, that it becomes a purely natural phenomenon to them.

BD: And yet it's not a straight-jacket. They can still have a little bit of *rubato*.

JD: Absolutely. Quite often there are moments where they can take certain kinds of liberties, and then there'll be a point where I indicate in the score — with dash lines between the computer part and the violin part, or the flute part — that the soloist has to arrive exactly there to have a certain specific synchronization that I want. But by and large, the kind of rhythmic notation that I do in my scores is completely traditional. It really is not the exact intentions of what I'm trying to get across, which is why I like to work with my performers, and get recordings that are under my direction. I'm more interested in a certain kind of flow, so that whether they play those sixteenth notes absolutely right is not as important as the flow of those sixteenth notes. Again, we're talking about that kind of upbeat thing. It's got to go where I want it to go, so if they play it a little bit too fast or a little bit too slow, that's not important. What is important is the flow and the interaction with the tape, and these are all kinds of things which are human. You can never notate that kind of flexibility. It just means that they have to know the piece, get a feeling for it, and then work within it — which these soloists have done.

BD: On most of these pieces you start the tape and it just goes. Do you have to mix it while it is playing?

JD: When we do a live concert, I do a great deal of mixing. I play the console, in effect, because no hall is going to be exactly right.

BD: But suppose you're not there, and they want to do it when you can't come. Are we going into the age of the virtuoso technician?

JD: I wish! [Both laugh] Unfortunately, that usually happens in those situations when any soloists play it without my being there, or when I've sent a piece out after having gotten requests for it. For example, a Chicago flutist, named Caroline Pittman,

did this piece twice — once with my direction, and once when I wasn't there. There's always the problem of who's going to run the console, and generally it's the technician not the musician. They don't know the score, so they leave the level where it is, and that kind of interaction that I like to do — with fading things in and out, and balancing with the soloists — isn't done. Unfortunately, you need it just the same way as you need any musical instrument to be able to adjust and feel the sound.

BD: [With a wink] I hope that I can 'feel' this conversation when it is presented on the radio!

JD: [Smiles] I am sure you'll do a fine job. Thank you.

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This conversation was recorded in Chicago on September 19, 1994. Portions were broadcast on WNIB two months later, and again in 1995 and 1999. A copy of the unedited audio was placed in the **Archive of Contemporary Music** at **Northwestern University**. This transcription was made in 2019, and posted on this website at that time. My thanks to British soprano [Una Barry](#) for her help in preparing this website presentation.

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[Award](#)-winning broadcaster **Bruce Duffie** was with [WNIB, Classical 97](#) in Chicago from 1975 until its final moment as a classical station in February of 2001. His interviews have also appeared in various magazines and journals since 1980, and he now continues his broadcast series on **WNUR-FM**.

You are invited to visit his [website](#) for more information about his work, including selected transcripts of other interviews, plus a full list of his guests. He would also like to call your attention to the photos and information about [his grandfather](#), who was a pioneer in the automotive field more than a century ago. You may also send him [E-Mail](#) with comments, questions and suggestions.

