



NEIL ROLNICK

Gardening at Gropius House

1. Gardening At Gropius House (2012) 30:02

performed by members of Alarm Will Sound

Todd Reynolds, violin solo

Alan Pierson, conductor

Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

Erin Lesser, flute	Jason Price, trumpet
Alexandra Sopp, flute	Mike Gurfield, trumpet
Christa Robinson, oboe	Michael Clayville, trombone
Kathy Halvorson, oboe	Christopher Thompson, percussion
Bill Kalinkos, clarinet	John Orfe, piano
Elisabeth Stimpert, clarinet	Miles Brown, bass
Michael Harley, bassoon	Gavin Chuck, Managing Director
	Jason Varvaro, Production Manager

2. Anosmia (2011) 29:24

performed by

The New Music Ensemble

of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music

Maya Kherani, soprano

Carrie Zhang, alto

Daniel Cilli, baritone

Nicole Paiement, conductor

Neil Rolnick, laptop computer

— 59:28 —



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GARDENING AT GROPIUS HOUSE (2012)

What does the mid-20th century architect Walter Gropius have to do with this concerto for violin, computer and ensemble? Gropius, for me, is representative of a kind of modernism which I embraced enthusiastically as a young man. Musically, this style meant: the inclination to hear all sound as music, the inclusion of chaos and clangor, the imposition of various kinds of abstract structural ideas on musical materials. At the same time, I've always been a sucker for beautiful melodies which stick in my ear, for rhythms which make me want to move my body, for harmonies which I can follow and which can surprise and delight me.

Gardening At Gropius House is a kind of exploration of these two sides of my musical being: elements of modernism poking through a fabric of more "traditional" musical values. Or maybe the other way around. Perhaps it's a battle of styles or aesthetics. Or perhaps it's a reflection on my encounter with Gropius.

In the spring of 1967 I answered an ad for a part time gardener posted at the Harvard student employment office, and found myself working for Walter Gropius. I knew that Gropius was an architect, though when his wife Ilse, who assigned me most of my chores, told me he was famous, I didn't have any context to place him in.

When he was around, I'd sometimes take a break from my gardening tasks, and we'd talk. He was intrigued that I had ambitions to be an artist of some sort. At that point I had been writing music for about 5 or 6 years, but was thinking my real calling might be to become a fiction writer. I was a 19 year old, and not sure where I was going.

My interest was initially sparked when he talked about some of his friends in Europe, before he emigrated to the US. He had pictures of himself with Schoenberg, Bartok and Stravinsky, who were three of my musical heroes. He also had pictures and stories about his relationships with Klee and Kandinsky, two painters whose work I had recently become enthralled with. And from a recording by Tom Lehrer, an MIT professor who moonlighted as a musical humorist, I learned that his first wife had been Alma Mahler, the widow of Gustav. I felt like I had encountered a flesh and blood connection to the musical and artistic histories I'd been studying.

He probably mentioned something about the Bauhaus. I knew a little German and thought something called "build house" seemed like an odd name. Only many years later, when I began thinking about starting a new degree program in Integrated Electronic Arts, did I begin to really research the ideas behind Gropius' Bauhaus, and to adopt some of his ideas to the program I imagined. But in 1967, I knew him as an inspiring 84 year old architect who took the time to talk with me about Europe between the world wars. We also talked about the exciting times my generation was entering in the 60s and 70s, where he saw great promise, but also saw the potential of a throwback to the problems of Weimar Germany, which led ultimately to the Nazi regime which caused him to flee Europe for the US.

But that summer, he was the person who paid me to keep up the extensive gardens around his house in Lincoln, MA. After his death a few years later, that house was re-named Gropius House, and it is a museum of the kind of archetypically modernist architecture which Gropius practiced. In fact, the Bauhaus under Gropius' leadership was a prime venue of European modernism, with Kandinsky's colorful abstractions, and Klee's fancifully drafted drawings. Likewise the composers he spoke about were at the very vanguard of musical modernism in the first half of the 20th Century.

Sometime during that summer, Gropius asked me if I could rework the field which bordered their back yard. My memory is that it was open, with a few small evergreens and some bushes. It stretched back to some woods, and was surrounded by a typical New England stone wall. I told him that he was wrong to even think of trying to tame the wild field; that it was beautiful as it was, and that I was not about to mow the grass, lay out paths, plant new shrubs and re-shape the existing shrubbery. I was adamant that I would not be party to this misguided effort.

I don't know if he ever did landscape that field. And I regret a bit of my temerity as a 19 year old college student telling my boss, the world famous architect, that his design was a terrible idea. But the exchange about that landscaping job has stuck with me. And I was not wrong.

Gropius' vision was the vision of mid-century modernism. Sleek lines, cinder block and glass, exposed infrastructure. The art from the Bauhaus likewise sought new forms in abstraction and the complete abandonment of painting and drawing as representations of reality's surface. And the music and art he championed was the same: the music was atonal, or pushed the boundaries of tonality, the boundaries of regular meter and pulse, often abandoning traditional ideas of melody and harmony for new ways of thinking about musical materials. Gropius' vision was one in which what was new was most prized, what was previously un-thought was unquestionably good, what destroyed old paradigms was the way of the future.

As a young music student, I accepted all this. I wrote music which was aleatory, which used chance techniques. I also wrote work which was serial, using Schoenberg's 12-tone technique and applying it to many musical parameters. I experimented with tape music and early synthesizers. I was committed to doing what was new, what no one had ever heard.

Then, at some point after the birth of my daughter in 1975, I asked myself what I really liked, and why I liked it. I was singing nursery rhymes and folk songs to her, and thought: why aren't I singing 12-tone songs? Why simple tonal tunes which children have loved forever? Maybe what I hear in my head is really much simpler than what I studied in graduate school. And if I'm a composer, isn't my ultimate responsibility to transcribe what I really hear? Not to edit it to meet some criterion of newness?

As I've marinated in this thought over the intervening years, I'm often brought back to my argument with Gropius about his wild field. It was really my first, un-premeditated stand against modernism. I still love a great deal of the music of the mid-20th Century which followed the modernist aesthetic. From Ives and from Cage there's a sense of wonder at how all sound can be music, and all musics can co-exist. From Stockhausen and Varese there's an eagerness to engage with new technology, and a recognition that it can change how we think of music and how we make music. But for me, that's just part of the pallet, part of the vocabulary for composing. Because 50 years later, it doesn't sound new – so if its value was in its newness, it's expired.

But if being new isn't what gives art and music its value, what does? Like the natural state of Gropius' field, there's a natural state of music. It involves the common features of music found in all cultures: melody, harmony, repeated rhythms, structure defined by changes and contrasts. The explosion in the distribution of recorded music in the last 50 years has led to a situation where we don't just know about the changes wrought to the western classical tradition by Ives and Cage and Stockhausen and Varese, but we also can hear how musical materials are used in varied ways in the many musics of cultures from around the world, from both classical and popular traditions. My task as a composer is not to come up with sounds that are so new that the uninitiated won't believe it's music, but rather to find fresh and expressive ways to use what I've heard in my life, from Mozart to Mahler to Ives to Cage, from court music of Java and of Japan, from Robert Johnson to Leadbelly to Howlin' Wolf, from Beny More to Tito Puente, from Scott Joplin to Miles Davis to Ornette Coleman.

'To compose,' from the Latin, means 'to put together.' Not necessarily to reshape material in an unnatural way, but perhaps to build something more natural. Something which reflects what we really hear, not what is dictated by style or fashion, not something which is forced into a predetermined mold by a concept of newness or modern-ness. So, I think letting Gropius' field run wild was an excellent decision for me. And probably for the field. I haven't been back to look at that house or the field since 1967, so I don't know if he actually went ahead and got someone else to do the work. But what matters to me is that my encounter with Gropius, like encounters I had with other established modernist artists in my formative years, helped me recognize the values which were important for me, and helped me understand that I needed to go my own way. What a gift that was. And secretly, I hope that the field has continued to grow wild ... and that's probably why I haven't gone back to look at it. At least it remains wild and natural

in my mind and in my memory.

Gardening at Gropius House was commissioned by the Juilliard School, with the generous support of the Music Technology Center, First Performance on Beyond The Machine, A Festival of Electro-acoustic and Multimedia Art.

ANOSMIA (2011)

Anosmia, which means the loss of the sense of smell, is one of a series of pieces I've written over the last two years which examine the loss of various senses. The overall project, *MONO*, has its genesis in my own loss of hearing in my left ear in 2008. This loss, and the accompanying white noise tinnitus in the affected ear, have made me very aware of the relativity of our perception. I had always assumed that our experiences of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste were pretty much the same from person to person. But because my hearing has been so different since losing my left ear, I began to wonder just how many of us there were co-existing with compromised perceptual equipment.

Shortly after experiencing my hearing loss, I sent out requests on the net and via email, for people to send me stories of experiences which were analogous to my own: not totally disabling or life threatening, but a change in the way they perceive the world, and something they needed to learn to adjust to.

It turns out there are quite a lot of us, and many of the people who responded to my request have been generous enough to let me adapt their stories for my *MONO* project.

Although the stories for the various pieces come from all over the world, the story of Anosmia actually came from my next door neighbor in New York City, and the text was shaped in large part by another neighbor in my building, the playwright and poet Barbara Blatner.

Anosmia, the music, is a love song. It describes how loss can lead to a deepening and strengthening of the bonds between two people. As I imagined the music, I heard it as a kind of mono-drama told in the first person by the character affected by the condition, and supported by a chorus which comments on the character's story as it unfolds. In the process, the chorus turned into back-up singers, and the vocal ensemble took on a name, at least in my mind. I think of them as Andy Osmia and the 2 Scents. Identifying them this way helped me keep my focus on the fact that this is a story, and a musical setting, which is primarily positive. For me, the important feature of the story is the strengthening of love, and of the willingness to depend on each other in our frailty. The loss is just what it takes to get us there.

Besides being something of a signature of my work, the use of the computer in the piece takes on a metaphorically important role. None of the electronic sounds are prerecorded. The processing and changes in the sounds are all created in real time, either by me or by the interactions of the voices and instruments through the computer. In one sense, it's a simple case of what you see isn't necessarily what you get ... or at least, it isn't necessarily what I see. Or what I hear. Or smell.

The first violin and clarinet appear throughout the piece as soloists, commenting on and supporting the musical and narrative materials of the singers. Both they and Andy are frequently processed in ways that re-pitch or duplicate their musical gestures. And often Andy will have a shadow voice accompanying him by modulating his voice with one of the instrumental lines.

Rather than being an imposition of strange effects, the various digital manipulations, together with the singers and players, create something different from what you'd hear if you just heard the acoustical sounds alone. But like me with my ears, or Andy with his nose, you have to take what you hear, and assume that it is reality. And hopefully, the experience ends up as something beautiful and uplifting. But of course, each of us may be hearing something unique to our own ears.

The commission for *Anosmia* was part of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music's second annual Hoefler Prize. The commission was for the SFCM New Music Ensemble, Nicole Paiement, Artistic Director.

ANOSMIA

Text by Robert Osborne, Barbara Blatner & Neil Rolnick

THE 2 SCENTS

Do do do do, do do do do wah, do wah do ...

ANDY OSMIA

(SPOKEN)

New York City, rush hour.
The subway doors open wide.
It's pretty empty inside.
I sit but my partner
touches his nose, gestures:
let's get out of here.
Let's get out of here.

(SUNG)

Rush hour subway opens wide.
It's pretty empty inside.
I sit, but my partner
touches his nose, gestures:
let's get outa here,
sequester ourselves in another car.

Why? Does it smell in here?
I see on the farthest bench
huddled in throes
of solitude the homeless man
in his ancient clothes.

Hey, why didn't I smell it?
What's wrong with my nose?

2 SCENTS

Anosmia.

ANDY

What?

2 SCENTS

Anosmia, baby:

ANDY

a complete loss of smell.

2 SCENTS

Bye bye nose.
Do do wah do wah do

ANDY

The doctor tells me
it can be temporary.

2 SCENTS

Do do do wah
Bye by nose

ANDY
It can be temporary,

2 SCENTS
temporary, from a cold or obstruction,

ANDY
or permanent as hell.
They say mine will go on forever.
They don't know what causes it.
It's not serious, this condition.
Is this my invisible perdition?

TUTTI
Anosmia.

ANDY
This nose has always been with me,
right here on my face.
This nose has been me,
It goes where I go,
around New York City,

2 SCENTS
This nose has always been with you,
right there on your face.
This nose has been you.

ANDY
It goes where I go,
around New York City.
So now I discover:
this nose of mine has quit its job.
It doesn't want to smell a thing.
It's now a sedentary knob.

TUTTI
This nose of mine has quit its job.
It doesn't want to smell a thing.
It's now a sedentary knob.

2 SCENTS
do do do do ...

ANDY
How will I
know when to shower? Brush my teeth?
Launder the quilt? Toss the milk?
Cap the poison? Sweeten the stench?
Smell the lilacs of my childhood again?
Oh god this is wrenching!

Dear nose, sweet nose, what do we do?

2 SCENTS
Dear nose, sweet nose, what do we do?

TUTTI
Dear nose, sweet nose, what do we do?

ANDY
What if I
burn up the kitchen? Ignore the fire?
Eat something putrid? Lose my desire?
It comes through the nose, you know.

2 SCENTS
It comes through the nose, you know, you know, you know.

ANDY
My partner's allure,
I don't want to lose you, my dear.

Do I smell?
I mean, CAN I smell?

2 SCENTS
Uh uh, no more smell,
Do wah do wah do wah do wah ...

ANDY
But do I smell? Smell ME?
I can't tell.

2 SCENTS
Well sure, sometimes, you do.
Do wah do wah do wah do wah ...

ANDY
So what do we do without my nose?

TUTTI
So what do we do without your nose?

ANDY
There was a time I teased my partner:
"Hey super-schnoz!
Mister sensitive snout."
Suddenly he's less super-schnoz,
and I'm schnoz-less, without a doubt!
Dear nose, sweet nose,
what do we do without my nose?

(SPOKEN)
What do I do now?

(SUNG)
I can still taste
without the smell.
It's not the same. It's very well
to bliss out on a grapefruit tart,
but I can't smell the ginger
at its heart.

TUTTI
What do I do without you nose?

ANDY
This is what I'll do:
I'll woo you again, dear partner.
Darling, be my surrogate.
Tell me when to change my shirt.
Tell me the bologna's expiration date.
Check the soles of my shoes.
Give me mouthwash as needed.
Don't let me set the stove on fire.
Honey, I'm pleading.

Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose,
Be my one and only nose,
Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose.
Oh do wha do wah, do wah do wah ...

2 SCENTS
Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose,
Be my one and only nose,
Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose.
Oh do wha do wah, do wah do wah ...

ANDY
Luckily, my memories haven't gone the way of my nose.
But I need you to help me remember:
Thanksgiving turkey, a campfire's roar,
a new Christmas tree, an Indian spice store,
the air after a July thunder storm,
garlic browning in oil just right.
Oh, you on a hot summer night.
Yes you on a hot summer night,
Ah, that hot summer night.

ANDY
Dear lover, sweetheart.

2 SCENTS
Dear lover, sweetheart,

ANDY
be my nose,
Be my one and only nose.

ANDY
Dear lover, sweetheart.
2 SCENTS
Dear lover, sweetheart,

TUTTI
be my nose,
Oh do wah do wah ...

The city could be burning,
the Hudson ripe with toxic oil.
Bring your beak close, dearest,
I won't miss the news at all.
Springtime, we'll take you nose
under apple trees,
and pledge evermore
to fragrant eternity.

ANDY
I'll woo you again, again, again.
I'll depend on you.
I'll depend on you, on you, on you, mightily.
Flowers are beautiful, are beautiful to my eye.
But the perfume of my days and nights
is a cold fire, a cold fire, a cold fire.

TUTTI
We'll find a new way
to stoke up, sweetheart,
Desire!
We'll find a new way, a new way.

2 SCENTS
Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose.
Be my one and only nose.
Dear lover, sweetheart, be my nose.
Oh, do wah do wah ...

ANDY (SPOKEN)
There's the occasional fleeting moment when I sense the smell of something, a sweet, unnamable smell, near me but not coming from me. And sometimes I think I smell myself, it's not unpleasant. It passes in an instant, this ghost. But I've got you – you're no ghost.

TUTTI (SUNG)
Dear lover, sweet lover, be my nose,
Be my one and only nose.
Dear lover, sweet lover, be my nose,
Be my one and only nose.
Dear lover, sweet lover nose.

Alarm Will Sound & Alan Pierson
Todd Reynolds
SFCM New Music Ensemble
ensemble.asp
Nicole Paiement
Daniel Cilli
Neil Rolnick
www.alarmwillsound.com
about.me/toddreynolds
www.sfcm.edu/new-music-ensemble.asp
www.nicolepaiement.com
www.danielcilli.com
www.neilrolnick.com

Recording Information:

Gardening At Gropius House was recorded in the Recital Hall of the National Opera Center in New York City, on June 13-14, 2013. Recording, editing and mixing by Silas Brown & Legacy Sound. Gavin Chuck, Associate Producer. Trevor Fedele, Patrick Hyland, Stephan Dyachkovskiy, Assistant Engineers. Neil Rolnick and Silas Brown, co-producers.

Anosmia was recorded in the Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on March 4, 2012. Jason O'Connell, recording engineer
Editing and mixing by Jody Elff. <http://elff.net>
Neil Rolnick, producer

Photo credit: Chloe Bland

The recording of *Anosmia* was funded with support from the Hoefler Prize, from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.
CD Mastering by Silas Brown & Legacy Sound
www.legacysound.net
Neil Rolnick, Executive Producer

innova is supported by an endowment from the McKnight Foundation.
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