

Gordon Mumma. 2015. *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music*. Edited with commentary by Michelle Fillion. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03943-0

Eric Smigel

Volume 35, Number 1, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038954ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038954ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smigel, E. (2015). Review of [Gordon Mumma. 2015. *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music*. Edited with commentary by Michelle Fillion. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03943-0]. *Intersections*, 35(1), 181–185. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038954ar>

journals including *Contemporary Music Review*, *Performance Research*, and *Musical Quarterly*.

Gordon Mumma. 2015. *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music*. Edited with commentary by Michelle Fillion. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03943-0.

Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music, a collection of essays by Gordon Mumma, presents a compelling history of American experimental music from the perspective of one of its most distinguished participants and astute observers. Possessing the aesthetic sensibilities of an artist, the applied knowledge of a computer scientist, and the communication skills of an attentive journalist, Mumma provides first-hand accounts of historic musical events from the 1960s and 1970s, details the technical configurations of electronic media in numerous productions, and analyzes dozens of compositions that now hold established positions in the canon of experimental music. Perhaps most importantly, his essays reflect a profound respect for his colleagues by recognizing music and the arts as a collaborative practice, a creative means of forming and sustaining a vibrant community.

Mumma's writings overwhelmingly dispel the romantic and grossly misleading myth of the experimental artist as an isolated figure. Indeed, he has thrived on collaboration, as is evidenced by his well-known association with such organizations as the ONCE Group, the Sonic Arts Union, and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, with whom he developed many of his most celebrated projects. Also, as a veteran composer and performer of live-electronic music, Mumma consistently affirms the human element in technology by highlighting the aesthetic and social implications of people interacting with electronics. The idea of collaboration has been so fundamental to his artistic process that he famously adopted the term *cybersonics* to refer to "a situation in which the electronic processing of sound activities is determined (or influenced) by the interactions of the sounds with themselves—that interaction itself being 'collaborative'" (39–40).

For over fifty years, Mumma regularly documented his collaborative experiences in journals, essays, and photographs, which form the basis of the articles in this collection. Expertly edited by Michelle Fillion in consultation with Mumma, this compilation of thirty-seven essays is organized into seven sections carrying themes variously defined by chronology, geography, ensemble, and individual. Although many of the articles have been drawn from pre-existing publications, several of the pieces have been out of print, and almost



all of them have been revised. There are also a few previously unpublished papers, new essays, detailed notes, an appendix of a selection of Mumma's compositions, and a bibliography, making this volume not only a convenient compendium, but also an illuminating retrospective of Mumma's work.

Mumma demonstrates a unique blend of pragmatism and idealism in part 1: "Ann Arbor and the ONCE Years (1960–66)," which relates his time in the Midwest before relocating to New York. Assembled from early notes and drafts, "Manifestations: Light and Sound" (1961) describes Milton Cohen's Space Theatre, the venue and resources that facilitated Mumma's first multimedia productions, which set the foundation for his work in live-electronic performance. In "An Electronic Music Studio for the Independent Composer" (1964), Mumma sets out to "demystify" the technology by offering practical suggestions for assembling functional but cost-effective equipment when most electronic devices were financially inaccessible. The most substantial essay in this section, "The ONCE Festival and How It Happened" (1967), is a revision of Mumma's classic account of the historic new music series. After outlining the formation of the festival and detailing specific productions, he highlights artistic and logistic challenges that emerged, providing a useful guide for those with ambitions to mount similar events. Mumma also situates the enterprise in sociopolitical terms, describing conventional avenues of support for the contemporary artist and calling for a patronage system that invests in the "nourishment of the total artistic community" (23), as opposed to the customary practice of funding an institution or a selection of unrelated individuals.

The second section, "Cybersonics and the Sonic Arts (1966–75)," focuses on Mumma's years in New York and California, when he worked as a musician and technical assistant for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company before accepting an appointment at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a time in transistor development when electronic units had not yet been standardized in the commercial realm, leading to an especially fertile environment of custom-built circuitry, and would prove to be Mumma's most prolific period of working with live-electronics. In "Creative Aspects of Live-Performance Electronic Music Technology" (1967), Mumma describes his involvement in the real-time electronic processing of acoustic sounds. He places creative emphasis on the "system concept," where the configuration of different components shape the composition and performance rather than just facilitate it, and he provides a technical overview and performance history of such live-electronic works as his own *Mesa* and *Hornpipe*, as well as Alvin Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer 1965*. In the last three essays in this section—"What We Did Last Summer: A Commentary on ICES 1972" (1973), "Two Decades of Live-Electronic Music, 1950–1970" (1975), and "Witchcraft, Cybersonics, and Folkloric Virtuosity" (1975)—Mumma takes stock of the growing community of live-electronic musicians and surveys exemplary works in the repertoire, giving particular attention to the innovations of John Cage. Even if his attempts to draw critical conclusions remain underdeveloped, he is especially conscientious of sociopolitical issues that arise in relation to the artistic deployment of electronic media.

In 1966 Mumma began working for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the productions of which had recently begun to favour live-electronic music. He sustained an unrelenting schedule of touring, performing, composing, and electronic instrument-building with the company, which presented an abundance of artistic, collaborative, musical, technical, and social challenges that Mumma regularly documented. Part 3, “In the Cunningham Circle,” begins with “A Day on the Road with the Cunningham Dance Company” (1971), Mumma’s description of interactions among the dancers, musicians, and crew during tours. “From Where the Circus Went” (1975), the largest essay in the book, is Mumma’s hallmark portrayal of the Cunningham Company. He describes the innovative and notorious relationship between the classic Cunningham choreography and music, where sound and movement coexist independently, and surveys the interdisciplinary collaborations for several dances in the touring repertory. In addition to detailing the choreographic, musical, decorative, and lighting configuration for many pieces, Mumma emphasizes the social and artistic implications of each work, acknowledging the complex and occasionally “uncomfortable” politics within the organization. Mumma developed an especially close working relationship with David Tudor, the pianist who gravitated toward live-electronic composition precisely during Mumma’s tenure with the Cunningham Company. In two essays, “With Tudor the Organist” (2013) and “David Tudor the Composer along the Path to *Rainforest* (2006/13), Mumma makes connections between Tudor’s early experiences as an organist and his creative work in live-electronic composition and surveys Tudor’s work as a “composer of sound resources” (151) leading up to *Rainforest*, his signature work for the company.

Although Mumma’s account of working with colleagues occupies the majority of this collection, an entire section is devoted exclusively to John Cage. In “Cage as Performer” (2001), Mumma positions the maverick composer as a pianist, percussionist, vocalist (including his renowned performances as an orator), and performer of live-electronics, combining elements of a historical survey with insightful commentary on the aesthetic and social implications of Cage’s activities. In “John Cage, Electronic Technology, and Live-Electronic Music” (2012), Mumma describes Cage’s extensive and diverse involvement in live-electronic music and highlights practical issues associated with the construction, functionality, and maintenance of the electronic components in such complex works as *Variations V*, *Reunion*, and *HPSCHD*. “Twenty-Five Minutes with John Cage” (2010–12), which Mumma modelled after *Indeterminacy*, Cage’s famous collection of anecdotes, consists of twenty-five segments that presumably should be read aloud at the pace of one story per minute. Drawn mostly from Mumma’s diaries, the stories relay personal reflections about Cage, and capture the human sentiments, musical politics, and playful quality of Cage’s writings.

Mumma’s interaction with Latin American composers was initiated by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company tour of the region in 1968, which was also the occasion for Mumma, Cage, and Tudor to visit with Conlon Nancarrow in Mexico City. Solidifying Mumma’s relationship with South America

was his appointment in the mid-1970s to the early 1980s as an invited faculty member of the two-week Latin American Course of Contemporary Music, which he served in Uruguay, Argentina, and the Dominican Republic, and he became an avid advocate of the music by his Latin American colleagues. In “Briefly about Conlon Nancarrow’s *Studies for Player Piano*” (1977), Mumma gives an overview of the monumental collection of player piano etudes that Nancarrow began composing in the late 1940s. In addition to providing basic analytic comments about the music, Mumma explains the physical working procedures and technical issues associated with Nancarrow’s equipment and instruments, describes his homebuilt studio, and includes personal photographs of the composer at work. The essay “Uruguayan Diary: The Cuarto Curso Latinoamericano de Música Contemporánea, Cerro del Toro, Uruguay” (1975) was assembled from Mumma’s personal journal during the two-week residency in Uruguay, where he was enlisted to discuss electroacoustic music and provide practical guidance on the artistic application of technology. His experience, which he counts as “one of the most inspiring activities of my life” (231), persuaded Mumma to reflect on the sociopolitical ramifications of his own use of technology.

In part 4, “An American Gallery,” Mumma offers brief tributes to several of his colleagues, including Richard Nelson, Christian Wolff, David Tudor, George Cacioppo, Earle Brown, Pauline Oliveros, and his Sonic Arts collaborators Robert Ashley, David Behrman, and Alvin Lucier. Even “On the Ives Railroad,” an excerpt of a panel discussion at a professional conference, is more about his generation’s response to Ives than about the pioneering composer himself, once again conveying a primary interest in his contemporaries.

The concluding section, part 7, “Mumma on Mumma,” features a single, rare document: “Notes on My Creative Procedures,” in which Mumma describes his own compositional systems as well as his ideas regarding performance and listening as vital aspects of the creative process. He then provides detailed technical comments on a selection of his compositions, including sample pages from several of his scores, with one work drawn from each of the six decades of his creative life. It is an appropriate end to a book of essays dedicated to personal observations of his contemporaries.

In his final remarks about his own compositional processes, Mumma identifies music as a “human activity, not an object” (282), which underscores the sociopolitical theme that permeates these essays. In devising his concept and practice of “cybersonic arts,” Mumma extends the principle of collaboration to electronic technology: “If we admit of musical performance as social intercourse, then we may include the varieties of artificial intelligence in our musical ensemble, not merely for their sophistication and speed but also for their ‘personalities.’ We may treat artificial intelligence not as a slave but as a collaborative equal in a democratic musical society” (90). Mumma’s inclusive vision for an artistic democracy relies on continuous feedback, an ongoing exchange of perspectives that affects the entire network. In this sense, “cybersonics” serves as an apt metaphor for Mumma’s longstanding custom of recording and sharing his experiences with the collaborators who nourished his own artistic

development, and this publication is both a testament to his investment in that community as well as a generous invitation for us to join them.

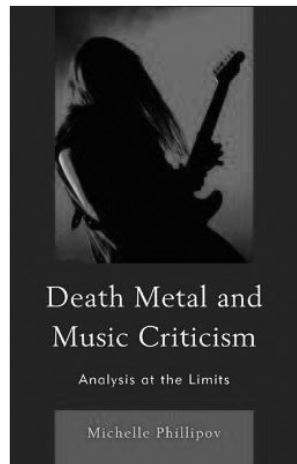
ERIC SMIGEL

BIOGRAPHY

Eric Smigel is Associate Professor of Music and Coordinator of the Musicology Program at San Diego State University, where he teaches courses in music history, music research, and a general education course in Psychedelic Rock of the 1960s. He has published articles, reviews, and liner notes on various topics of American experimental music, including studies of John Cage, David Tudor, James Tenney, Joseph Byrd, and Lois V Vierk. Eric is currently under contract with the University of Illinois Press to write a book-length biography of Tenney, which will highlight the composer's relationship with independent filmmaker Stan Brakhage and visual artist Carolee Schneemann. He received the M.A. degree in Music History and Ph.D. in Historical Musicology from the University of Southern California.

Michelle Phillipov. 2012. *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*. Plymouth (Royaume-Uni): Lexington Books, 158 p., bibliogr., discogr., index. 978-07391-6461-7.

Dans son ouvrage *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*, Michelle Phillipov¹ porte un regard critique sur la manière dont les musiques populaires sont généralement envisagées en études culturelles en prenant pour exemple le cas du death metal². Dans la première des deux parties de l'ouvrage, Phillipov remet en question la lecture politique des principaux courants de musique populaire (punk, hip-hop, electro dance music [EDM], etc.), qui demeure généralement le fondement de toute analyse. En effet, elle explique qu'en se limitant à une telle approche (même si elle demeure pertinente), plusieurs chercheurs mettent de côté un des éléments les plus fondamentaux de la



¹ Phillipov est chargée de cours à l'Université de Tasmanie (Australie) en journalisme, média et communication.

² Le death metal est un style musical appartenant au metal extrême, s'étant développé vers la fin des années 1980 (particulièrement aux États-Unis et en Suède), et qui se caractérise par un rythme très rapide à la batterie (blast beat), une sonorité lourde et claire à la guitare et une voix grognée (voix growl) très grave. La complexité des progressions harmoniques, mélodiques et rythmiques définit ce style et exige une grande virtuosité de la part des musiciens. Les thèmes abordés par les premiers groupes de death metal (p.ex. décapitation, cannibalisme, éviscération) sont d'une violence crue et explicite, et visent à transgresser les normes musicales et textuelles non seulement de la musique metal, mais de l'ensemble des musiques populaires.