

## **INVOLVING AUDIENCES IN THE SWEEP OF THE MUSIC**

**JOHN EATON in conversation with FRANK J. OTERI  
at The American Music Center**

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**Transcribed by Karyn Joaquino**

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## 1. A Non-Theoretical Approach to Microtonality

FRANK J. OTERI: A lot of the concerns that you have as a composer and as a musical thinker are very near and dear to my own musical interests: the whole notion of microtonality as a direction for music, working with electronics, vocal music, new approaches to opera... Let's start by talking a bit about microtonality. Most of the music that you've written incorporates, to some degree, to a very strong degree, the use of quartertones, yielding a 24-note equal-tempered scale. What led you to writing music in this scale with this system?

JOHN EATON: Well, let me, first of all, say, that as a microtonal composer, I've never been much of a theorist. My mind doesn't work that way. I use whatever gets the job done. I haven't been very much involved with any kind of puristic approach, nor have I been particularly concerned with finding a system that I could teach, or a system that would be consistent. I've just simply used what I've used because of the great, great expressive potential of it. And although I've composed a lot of chamber music and a lot of orchestral music, I am fundamentally interested in opera and I believe that more than anything else, microtonality extends expressive possibilities, particularly for the voice. Believe it or not, I think it was George Avakian who said to me once that he thought the microtonal approach was the one that held the greatest potential for the future, because it makes the greatest challenge to performers, composers and listeners.

FRANK J. OTERI: In your essay for the Kenyon Review, you talk about why you use quartertones in the operas... Our standard practice 12-tone equal tempered scale has major and minor thirds. And many of us think of the major third as being happy, and a minor third as being sad. In the essay you said that there are 3 other possible thirds that you can have in the quartertone system, and these could convey additional emotions. Anybody's who's familiar with blues has some understanding of what a neutral third sounds like, which is somewhere in between a major and a minor. It isn't happy or sad, it's sort of expresses a resigned state ... it's almost like the pitch equivalent of the perpetual present tense of ebonics: "I be here. I be doing that." You know, which is a sense of tense that exists in non-Western languages, in western African languages, or in Chinese, in a variety of languages that don't really conceive of time the way the Western world has up till recently. It's a curious parallel considering that other cultures have been using smaller intervals for millennia.

JOHN EATON: Yeah. Absolutely. And the way that I got involved with microtonal music was, frankly, through jazz. I supported myself all during my 20's as a jazz musician, or rather, as a performer, of both contemporary music and jazz. And they're just so expressive there. I mean, the 7th, the flat 7th which approaches the 7th harmonic, very often comes off sounding like the cry of a frightened child. It has a kind of purity, a kind of, also, anguish involved, you cannot get in any other way. You ask why quartertones? Well, actually, I think quartertones are intervals that almost every performer I've met hears, and hears as distinct intervals. And I use microtones very often as a point of departure, that is, sometimes I will want something being a quartertone flat just simply to bring people down to the pure 7<sup>th</sup> harmonic, so that I create a sheet of sound, a solid sheet of sound, which the pure 7<sup>th</sup> chord is. Again, purely for expressive

reasons, this is a very, very powerful sonority to have in your armament, to be able to use, it expresses things that nothing else that I can think of does.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in terms of your experience as a jazz musician, what instrument were you playing?

JOHN EATON: I play piano, and then I did some jazz things with early synthesizers. I played the SynKet. But mostly in jazz my instrument was the piano.

FRANK J. OTERI: Which is an instrument that doesn't really use microtonal intervals. It's fixed in terms of the intervals it can play, although anybody who's listened to a Thelonious Monk record knows that most of the pianos he played on were not perfectly "in tune." That's one of the things I enjoy the most about his records, that slight irregularity of the intervals which is a harmonic parallel to his irregular rhythmic phrasing.

JOHN EATON: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: There was a recording a couple years back of the piano rolls of Jelly Roll Morton that had been mastered and done up, and they did it on this perfectly in-tune piano. It sounded wrong to me. I doubt he would have ever had access to such a perfectly tuned piano, so it wound up sounding like something was missing. There's a flavor, a nuance, and certainly, you know, people who are in the period instrument movement will tell you there's a real difference when you perform Baroque music in mean tone, or you when you perform Bach in Werckmeister III tuning. There's a whole degree of nuance that's completely gone when you're stuck in 12-tone equal temperament.

JOHN EATON: When you modulate from C to E major: it's like the heavens opening up, it's so totally different.

FRANK J. OTERI: Which was part of the way those people were conceiving of music. Now, we're talking about quartertones, it's so interesting, because I think the notion of quartertones in the equal tempered scale grew out of this, this notion of extending chromaticism. In the early 20th century, quartertones were the path not taken. We'd reached this point where chromatic tonality reached a threshold, and Schoenberg had this idea that you would go into atonality and then serialism, well he hated the word atonality; he called it "pan-tonality." But there was also this other possible path. Alois Hába had this idea that the future of music lied in extending chromaticism beyond the 12 notes. And Ivan Wyschnegradsky in Russia, who was a disciple of Scriabin, said that if you take these chords that Scriabin used in the *Poem of Fire* and you do quartertone alterations to them, you'd get some really interesting extended harmonies. You're opened up this whole other palette. And Julian Carrillo here in North America, in Mexico, you know, was doing stuff, calling it the "Thirteenth Sound" as early as 1895. And certainly Charles Ives was coming up with some of these same ideas during his backyard experiments with Hans Barth in Connecticut. But none of this ever took off as a movement in music the way that 12-tone music did.

JOHN EATON: Well, I think the reason that it never took off, if I can say so, is that as gifted as all these composers were, for them, they were dealing not so much with necessities as with possibilities. And I think now, for many composers, myself and yourself included, the use of microtonality has become a necessity. We need it to express what we hear. We need it to express what we feel. We need it to capture the energy of contemporary life. And I don't think that that was true, I mean, in the case of Hába, yes, he was really just trying to extend chromatic possibility. I think that's true of Wyschnegradsky, too. With the exception of, I mean, Carrillo, I feel that he was very interested in the part of the overtone series where it goes to a whole tone scale. And most of his early music is involved in with sort of tuning up whole tone scales, out of impressionism. Ives, to me, the most interesting microtonal piece I know is the 3rd of his quartertone piano pieces, actually, because in that, he really begins working with microtonal scenarios.

FRANK J. OTERI: And the harmonies of those chords are just glorious. In the first piece the quartertones seem mostly ornamental and the second piece is really just playing off the fact that there are 2 pianos tuned a quartertone apart. They really become one in the third piece. Yeah.

JOHN EATON: It really has a microtonal sonority. It's interesting, when I began working, and for years I was working with quartertones, I didn't know any of the music of any of these composers. I knew them as names, I'd read about them, but the access to their music was very limited. For instance, the three quartertone pieces of Charles Ives, I had just finished writing my Microtonal Fantasy, and I played it for the music librarian at Yale. And he said, "Oh, do you know the Charles Ives microtonal pieces?" And I said, "No, not at all." And he sent copies of them over to me, and I actually did the European premiere with another pianist, of the Charles Ives quartertone pieces on the same program that I did the Microtonal Fantasy.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

JOHN EATON: So I got to know those pieces, so to speak, after the fact.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then, who was the model?

JOHN EATON: There was no model except jazz.

FRANK J. OTERI: But who was using quartertones in jazz except for Don Ellis?

JOHN EATON: Well, all performers were inflecting pitch.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: Not actually using quartertones. Why I hit on tuning the 2 pianos a quartertone apart, I don't know, except to say that I've always used quartertones as a point of departure. I want to open up all sorts of doors. Well, you know yourself in the symphony orchestra there's as much of a difference between a G# and an Ab as hopefully

in my music I want there to be between an A quarter sharp and a B flat quarter flat. The B flat quarter flat might imply, for instance, the 7<sup>th</sup>, the pure 7<sup>th</sup> harmonic.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. So you're not thinking in terms of a rigid 24 equal-tempered system.

JOHN EATON: No. I'm thinking in terms of a point of departure, a field of action for performers to express an expressive need of mine which hopefully the context of music would convey. I remember a performance of my Concert Piece for 2 clarinets tuned a quarter of a tone apart, 2 oboes tuned a quarter of a tone apart, and flute, which, you know, which at least in 1964 or so when I wrote it; the flute was the instrument that was most adaptable to the playing of quartertones because of the work of Gazzelloni and various other people... The first performance of that was done by my good friend William O. Smith at the University of Washington. And he called me up after the first rehearsals and said "We're using these tuning devices and we just can't seem to get passages right." I said, "No, look, don't work on it that way. Play it. Play it over and over and people will hear what the pitches are supposed to be doing."

## 2. Writing Microtonal Music and Practical Realities

FRANK J. OTERI: You know, it's interesting, when Hába wrote his quartertone opera, his one quartertone opera...

JOHN EATON: *The Mother*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes, *The Mother*... He had special quartertone clarinets built. There were special instruments that were built which had extra keys and did certain things. But since the '60s, with Bruno Bartolozzi's book *New Resources for Wind Instruments*, there are fingering systems for quartertones for the flute, for the clarinet, for the oboe, for the bassoon, every woodwind instrument, for saxophone... Every woodwind instrument in the orchestra can play quartertones if the musicians would learn the fingerings.

JOHN EATON: However, I have to correct that a little bit by saying that some of the quartertones, unfortunately, some of those fingerings change the color substantially of woodwind instruments. Also, there aren't nearly all of them – a few quartertones which are just not, which are just really difficult to get. Usually they can get them by lipping or something of that kind. But, so, for instance, the work that Robert Dick did in getting the quartertone flute is very, very valuable. The idea of adding an additional valve trigger to the trumpet is something that's really needed.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, a trumpet can't do it otherwise. In fact, I noticed in your scores that you'll have quartertones written for the woodwind parts, but there is a score written for French horns, and you have 2 French horns that were tuned so that one of them is playing the quartertone difference – the other 12 notes – one was a 12 equal and the other was a quartertone apart.

JOHN EATON: Well, even in *The Cry of Clytaemnestra*, I really went out on a limb but it was on the advice of one of the greatest horn players in the world, Phil Farkus, who was teaching at that time, we were both teaching at Indiana University. And I tuned the F division of the horn a quarter step lower than the Bb. And boy, did this ever set up a whole bunch of possibilities. And I found a few horn players who were willing to take on that challenge. And who did actually tailor the fingerings that they used to which horn they wanted the note to be played upon.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

JOHN EATON: And of course it produces all kinds of runs that wouldn't otherwise be possible, trills, tremolos, it really was great fun. [laughs] Of course, I must say, that's one of the things about getting involved with microtonality and other experimental techniques is the fact that you're working with performers, and on the whole, performers are really great people. They love to accept challenges, and extend challenges. They'll say, "you know, you did this, but you can also do this."

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: Just the same, you know, as I've said, Phil, meeting in the hall one day and saying, you know, I love the way you use the horns in but you know, you could also just do the same thing with one horn. Of course, that's an idea that wouldn't have occurred to me in a thousand years.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's the positive end, but then there's also the negative end. You write a piece, you send it out into the world. And then all of a sudden you hear it back, maybe you didn't get to work with these musicians, and not everybody has experience playing with these intervals, and not everybody understands the notations, there's no accepted norm for how to approach this music. What do you do?

JOHN EATON: Well, I think of the late quartets of Beethoven, people were sort of playing them at half-speed, not really understanding what Beethoven was after, probably for years, you know. In fact, I sometimes wonder if we still do. [laughs] But, that's part of the fun. You also will occasionally get a performance back that's so stellar and that's better than you had imagined yourself, people have really applied themselves. Because, let's face it, any clarinetist who has worked very, very hard on his instrument, or any bassoonist, knows much more about their instrument in an intimate and expressive way that I ever would, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: You said that there were certain quartertones that don't work on woodwinds. Have you ever written things and then have the player come back to you and say, well, that's just impossible?

JOHN EATON: Well, it happens all the time and usually it isn't. [laughs] Usually, it's just a question of they haven't worked on it hard enough or in the right way.

### 3. Audience Perception

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, we talked quartertones: I know that in *Myshkin* you also used sixth-tones.

JOHN EATON: Uh huh.

FRANK J. OTERI: The 36-tone system was used to convey the moments of delirium. And, if my memory serves, those intervals were used mostly in the electronic parts. Were they used by the rest of the orchestra as well?

JOHN EATON: They were occasionally, and occasionally there'll be a sixth-tone in a vocal part. *Myshkin* was an outgrowth of an idea I had of contrasting sixth-tones, which give you a pretty pure 7th harmonic, with quartertones. And, you know, it's bound up with the whole poetic idea of the opera. You know, Myshkin himself, the main hero of *The Idiot* of Dostoyevsky, never actually appears on stage in the opera.

FRANK J. OTERI: Instead the audience... we are Myshkin.

JOHN EATON: Instead, all the action takes place within the mind of Prince Myshkin. And when he's in the state of idiocy, it's a very pure, very naïve state, which is, actually written in sixth-tones... Delirium is a misleading term, it's more to capture this sort of simplicity of vision, this naiveté that Myshkin in this pure state has, and then as he gets involved in reality, I use the harsher dissonances of the quartertones.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: And the two forms, that is, the sixth-tones and the quartertones, weave in and out of each other. The electronic music and the instrumental music, depending on Myshkin's state of mind, depending on whether he's an observer, or generally a kind of troubled observer of things that are occurring outside of him, hence I use legitimate staging and, or more ordinary staging, and quartertones, or whether, as I say, he's in this very pure state, in which I use the sixth-tones and use kinetic lighting sequences, things bathed in light, and so on. And so the reason for using the sixth-tones in *Myshkin* was very, very much an expressive one. I had also used them in *Danton* with the harps: the harps were tuned a sixth of a tone apart. And that came from a piece of mine called *From the Cave of the Sybil*, which was for flute and 9 harps, tuned in sixth-tones, three on each, three normal, three a sixth-tone higher, three a sixth-tone lower, and flute, which again was playing quartertones... When I lived in Rome, there was a sound I heard when I crawled in by the back entrance to the cave of the Sybil. I was with the archaeologist Frank Brown, who is a wonderful human being and a great friend of mine. We suddenly came into a huge chamber, and one could almost see the Sybil there, in this case holding a flute. One heard this incredible sound in this cave, and of course, it was the lapping of the Mediterranean on the cliffs. And it was a sound that I tried to capture for years after that, and finally, I think that I got it in this particular combination of instruments with this particular tuning. Most of the way through the piece the harps are playing with eraser brushes... Nevertheless, you hear it in this movement of slowly changing intervals.

FRANK J. OTERI: When you're writing a piece, do you compose with an instrument in mind, and are you hearing all these intervals?

JOHN EATON: I hear in my head what I write, but I always play things out very, very slowly on two pianos tuned a quarter of a tone apart. And sometimes I'll test things electronically.

FRANK J. OTERI: With the sixth-tones?

JOHN EATON: With the sixth-tones I do test things electronically. The SynKet had three keyboards, so it fit very naturally in that. But you can work that out very easily on modern synthesizers.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you feel audiences can hear it?

JOHN EATON: Oh, yeah. I want the audience to be so involved in the sweep of the music. Because after all, music, of all the arts, is that that most begins with the fundamental basis of the universe itself. It begins with energy. And it begins with the very tissue of human and even natural experience on every level. I find, for instance, in teaching, I find when my students get off, it's normally because they're forgetting that fact, you know, that music is and has to be totally involved.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, do you do ear training with students?

JOHN EATON: No. I don't have any students who are microtonalists. Well, there are a few who have used it occasionally, but if they don't feel the same necessity to use microtones that I do, they shouldn't be using it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do they at least get to learn to hear those sonorities?

JOHN EATON: Oh, sure, if they're interested, you know, I let them into my studio all the time and they mess around on the pianos. At least they have great fun doing that.  
[laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, I remember an incendiary comment I read years ago by Donal Henahan, who's long since retired as the chief music critic of *The New York Times*, who was ranting against doing unusual operatic repertoire. I think it was a column in response to some performance of a piece that hadn't been done too frequently, and he wrote something like: "What's next? Are they going to dig out the operas of Hába? Goodness knows, we hear out-of-tune singing in Verdi and Puccini all the time over there." And at the time I thought, this is exactly the wrong perception of what this music is trying to be. But to some people who hear it, who don't know what it is, they say, oh, this is out of tune. Of course, it's even more in tune, it's more aware.

JOHN EATON: Let me pick up on that in a moment. First of all, I want to get back to the audience. I want the audience to be so swept up in the human experience of my music, or spiritual experience that I feel my music is involved with, that they don't notice microtonality per se. In other words, I think that if an audience listens to something as an

experience of how in tune it is or something of that kind, that the whole point is somehow being missed, and the music has failed. Of course, in opera, you involve the audience so much with action and with what's happening on stage, that the music is the center of that action. Nevertheless, one doesn't have time to think, oh, well, this is a quarter tone sharp, or flat.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Well, in terms of hearing structures, the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara, whom I met when I was in Helsinki a few years back, said something that I've really taken to heart ever since. He said, I use 12-tone rows here and there, but I don't want you to hear them. That's the skeleton of the piece. You look at people: everybody has a skeleton. There are too many pieces that are walking around that are skeletons parading as people. These things are very under the surface, and if somebody wants to go probe and find them, that's all well and good, but if music doesn't strike you as an emotional experience, then it's not working.

JOHN EATON: Yeah. I really write for people, as I said at the very beginning. I've never been very interested in the systematic development of microtonality for the simple reason that it's not important to me. It's not important to me to found a school; it's not important to me to have disciples. What's important for me is to communicate the vision that I have in sound with the audience that's hearing it. And it really seems to. My music really seems to do that, if left alone. Not if somebody is lecturing people on what they should be hearing! Of the things I've found that performers can seize upon, hear and reproduce immediately, one is quartertones. Almost every performer I've worked with hears them as distinct intervals after a little bit of exposure. The second is just intonation, because when they go directly to just, it's just a question of sort of removing beats and having pure intervals. And any performer can do that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you work with just intonation?

JOHN EATON: Oh, in *Danton and Robespierre*, Robespierre's music is constantly in the just intonation system. And Danton's music, on the other hand, is in a quartertone system where each note has the most possible relationships. In other words, each note has a multiplicity of function, to use, I guess, Brahms' term that comes from this very rich palette. Whereas the music of Robespierre is meant to be just the opposite. It's meant to express a very pure vision, which, the more it becomes involved with reality, the more dissonant it becomes. Just as, when you modulate away from C, in a just intonational system, the triads become more and more out of tune. It howls.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. And you have to keep adding additional pitches if you want to have the chords stay consonant...did you restrict yourself to just 12 pitches?

JOHN EATON: Well, in *Danton and Robespierre* I imposed a 12 limit. I used a scale which was tuned so that the further it would move away from C the more dissonant it would become.

FRANK J. OTERI: Howling wolves.

JOHN EATON: Yeah. Just like Robespierre's vision before he becomes involved with reality, the more, the more of a monster he becomes.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's such an interesting application of just intonation, a real contrast with someone like Harry Partch, who I think is a very interesting person to contrast with what you do, because so much of what he was concerned with was the stage. And I want to get back to Partch when we talk about the notion of the Eaton opera with the musicians and singers all being one on the stage. This is a notion that is very new but has an antecedent to some extent, I think, in some of the things that Partch was doing in the '50's and '60s, where the actors, the singers, the dancers are all one.

#### 4. The Dangers of Simplicity

JOHN EATON: Well, you know, I have the greatest respect for Partch as a human being. We sometimes think that the only virtue that matters for the artist is courage. And certainly had no one had more courage than Harry Partch. On the other hand, I have to say that there is a kind of rhythmic, and textural and orchestral simplicity about Partch's music that sometimes seems utterly banal to me. I seemed to me to be kind of like 'a thinking man's Orff.'

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah. Well, you know, that's a very interesting analogy, and I think what both Orff and Partch were doing, and to an extent, what the minimalists have done in the last 30 years, there's this one notion of looking at the future of music and saying, okay, this is an evolutionary process, we're going to go to the next step with this. And then there's the other notion of being an iconoclast or wanting to return to core roots, believing that things have gotten too out of control, too complex, too alienating, we need to go back to the source. And these two notions are very different approaches to being avant-garde. Partch, with his 43-tone scale and all the instruments he built, was not trying to extend European notions of harmony and melody, but to overthrow them. [laughs]

JOHN EATON: That's the bright side, and I can see that. But do I dare to introduce the dark side especially as far as Orff's music is concerned. And that is, the thing that was so unsettling, I mean, I was in my teens during the Second World War, but the thing that was so unsettling about the Nazis was the fact that they were so involved with the banal, simplistic vision of life. And Orff, of course, was a favorite of the Nazis, Orff and Werner Egk.

FRANK J. OTERI: His music I really don't know at all...

JOHN EATON: I once heard an interesting argument between Sessions and Dallapiccola about who was the worst composer of the 20th Century. And I probably got this wrong, but I think that Dallapiccola said Orff and Sessions said Egk. Maybe it was the other way around, but anyway, they brought up examples of the 2 people's work and, in the course of the conversation, they changed sides! [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs] That's interesting. You know, there are tons of great composers and great artists who have nefarious political associations throughout history. I mean, certainly, you know, Wagner, who's at the other end of the scale, is quite far from being saintly in his views. Or Mussorgsky...

JOHN EATON: But I think that the kind of banality and primitivism that is being espoused is something that, as I said, has a great deal in common with fascism. And also has a great deal in common with the worst parts of the corporate society that we live in here in the West, which I tend to say I'm not a great fan of. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: You know, one thing I will say, though, and I see a common thread between Partch and Orff, and your own work, and I want to get into this notion, because I want to talk about opera, this notion of music as a ritualistic celebration, and certainly, you know, I think Orff's strongest works... you know people only do *Carmina Burana*

over and over again... but his strongest works were the operas he was writing late in his life: he did an opera based on Antigone, and another opera based on Oedipus, and they're extremely effectual pieces of ritual theater. Partch was also very interested in Greek mythology and reinterpreting the important primal myths for our time as ritual theatre. You yourself, with Clytaemnestra and *Antigone* and the Androcles story, these are all ritual topics based on Greek myths... The ancient Classical tradition is a very strong interest of yours as well.

## 5. Communication Through Opera

FRANK J. OTERI: You've said that contemporary subject matter doesn't really interest you that much in opera. What do you see the role that opera has as a communicative tool to an audience?

JOHN EATON: Well, opera began with an intent to resuscitate Greek drama, that is, modern opera as we know it. And, of course, the other root would be out of the ritual dramas of the church. And I wish that we had the capacity with our operas to do what Aeschylus did in the *Oresteia*, for instance; it was really establishing trial by jury. He was making a fundamental statement about the very basis of communal life. And I think that opera, because of the power of music, and because of opening up (...oh, this sounds corny...) both sides of the brain, has the ability to affect people with the vision, has the capacity for bringing a society together that is not found in any other art form. However, like the ancient Greek dramas, I want both sides of the brain to be open, you know, I want it to be a full experience.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's so interesting you bring up the *Oresteia*. The first two plays in the trilogy, *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, are very much like theater as we know it with action, suspense and linear plot scenarios, but the third play, *Eumenides* is almost like a church service; it really isn't like theater in the sense that we know it nowadays. It's very much a sort of call and response between one character and a chorus, which is in fact a much older kind of thing. And I think that's why probably there are so many productions of *Agamemnon* and not the whole Trilogy, because modern audiences would have problems with the last part... I saw a wonderful production of *Agamemnon* a number of years back at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park that Joseph Papp did, that I thought was really interesting because they did all the choral stuff in the ancient Greek and didn't bother translating it. At first, I thought, God, you know, this is terrible, but it was wonderful because it functioned as ritual instead of functioning as theatre which is the hybrid form that Aeschylus was working with. The theatrical elements were there but so were the ritual elements, and I think that this hybrid ritual theater that we've lost can only be brought back in opera.

JOHN EATON: And of course, the Greek dramas were so involved with music, so much more involved with music... If you look at the timing of many of the Greek dramas from the theatrical point of view, it's all off, and I think the reason for that is that music played a very important part. Dance played a very important part. The choruses used to have to practice for hours, you know, just to get something right. And I'm sure there was a certain amount of pitch inflection involved as well. There's a classicist who's a friend of mine who pointed out to me that when the Spartans had taken Athens, the Athenians performed certain choruses of Euripides, and the Spartans were in tears and they decided to save Athens, he said, "if you look at those choruses and read them, you know, they're not that moving, they're not that much. There must have been something else involved."

FRANK J. OTERI: It was the music.

JOHN EATON: I'm sure it was the music. We know that there was a great deal of choreography involved in the performances, and we know that there were instruments involved.

FRANK J. OTERI: And we also know that they used quartertones.

JOHN EATON: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs] Which is a part of it, too.

## 6. The Classics vs. Popular Culture

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting, you know, looking at the topics that you've chosen for your operas. I certainly haven't seen all of them at this point, but I'm making a valiant attempt at it...

JOHN EATON: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: Of the ones that I have seen, I've noticed that the topics are by and large inspired by Classical sources. There are the Greek myths, and then *Let's Get This Show on the Road*, which is based by the Book of Genesis in the Bible. And then there are works that are based on later texts that have become part of a canon, like *Don Quixote*. *Peer Gynt* is part of the canon to a lesser extent; I don't think as many people are as familiar with the story. Nor is *Myshkin* which is based on Dostoyevsky. But there's also a Shakespeare opera, based on *The Tempest*, and you said in your essay, the Kenyon Review essay, that it was really important not to have a new plot, an unfamiliar plot, because it's very difficult to perceive the dramatic part of what opera is if the plot is unfamiliar, because of hearing texts sung instead of hearing it spoken is already a sort of a comprehensibility problem. I'm going off on a tangent here, but I really enjoyed *Golk*, which was the only opera of yours that I'd seen that was based on a contemporary theme.

JOHN EATON: Well, I definitely felt, and still do feel, that the subjects that you use have to be things that are familiar to an audience. I'll get to *Golk* in a minute, but as far as my using Greek drama and my using a Biblical story and my using Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky, I've tried to take things that the audience would identify with and would understand, because that gives so much more potential to an opera composer to manipulate dramatic intent, thematic elements, to make your particular point. I wrote an opera based on Jonestown, the Reverend Jim Jones, which was something that, at least at the time, was a story that everyone was familiar with. I mean, you know, we had been exposed to it constantly. I don't know, now we've gotten so far away from it, I don't know how effectively that opera would fulfill the criteria that I'm setting up here.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting. Before we jump in to talk about *Golk*, I remember a press conference that John Adams held with Peter Sellars when they were doing *Nixon in China*. And they were essentially saying that the story of Richard Nixon's visit with Mao Tse Tung is essentially a heroic myth of today; everybody knows who these protagonists are the same way everyone in Ancient Greece would have known who Hercules was... The so-called 'CNN operas' evolved out of that, you know, all these operas based on famous figures, everyone from Malcolm X and Harvey Milk to Marilyn Monroe...

JOHN EATON: You know, it's a curious thing, I had started an opera called *Nixon*, which I discussed with Peter Sellars in 1985, I think it was.

FRANK J. OTERI: That was 2 years before! [laughs]

JOHN EATON: I started it, but I sort of gave up on it just because I thought that, frankly, it would be bizarre to have Nixon singing.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs]

JOHN EATON: It shows how wrong I was, I mean, I think that *Nixon in China* is a fine work. It does what I think opera should do. I think it's a very important piece. But with *Golk*, television is something, and television game shows and...

FRANK J. OTERI: ...*Candid Camera*...

JOHN EATON: Yeah, *Candid Camera*. This is a scenario that people are familiar with, and therefore I think you can use it. I think a lot of composers get into trouble just making up a plot and expecting an audience to follow that. People that go to an opera will spend the first time they see it trying to figure out what's going on. And then later, if they have the patience to see it again, they can later begin to, you know, add other features.

FRANK J. OTERI: You said that you definitely sense the different audience reaction to *Myshkin* from the people who read Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, and people who haven't.

JOHN EATON: Yep.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, I've read *Crime and Punishment*, but I haven't read *The Idiot* yet, so I'm one of the people who hasn't read *The Idiot*, and certainly as we're reaching this era, everybody decries the lack of standards, the falling away of knowledge, you know, there are tons of people in America today who know nothing about Shakespeare, who know nothing about ancient Greek dramatists. There are probably people who really don't know Biblical stories, although that's ingrained more, I think, because people who are religious will be reading that no matter what, or will at least know something about it. It's permeated our society. But Shakespeare is kind of falling off, and the classics are falling off, and really the thing that everybody gets the references to now are, you know, television sitcoms. I don't get those references, but most people do. I almost never watch television but the other night I got drawn into this program called *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire*; my wife had it on...

JOHN EATON: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: We're watching this thing, and there was a question about what the *Mona Lisa* was painted on: wood or canvas or shellac... That was one of the questions; it was a good one I thought so I kept watching... But then after that question, one that was worth even more money, listed four TV characters, and the question was "Which one of these sitcom characters is not a single father?" I didn't even know who any of those characters were! But the whole audience did. These are the references that people are getting. And you might say, like you said with Jonestown, well, maybe, you know, 50 years from now, no one's going to know what that means. The classics won't be gone. And, you know, hopefully 20 years from now, everybody will forget these sitcoms. But I don't think that's going to happen.

JOHN EATON: Well, nevertheless, I think the classics are still part of our cultural heritage. And they're still something that are more generally known, those stories are

more generally known, than something you might make up out of yard cloth, you know. And so I think they are still usable. Certainly most people who have seen *The Cry of Clytemnestra*, have responded to it knowing at least the rudiments of the story, not to the extent that Aeschylus's audience would have known the story, certainly. Or maybe not to the extent that the audience in the United States would have known it 50 years ago. Still, I think that these stories are so deeply ingrained in our psyche. They're almost ingrained in the fabric of human experience, the way we live, the way we react to each other, the way we think. There's something archetypal about them, which I certainly want to use.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's so interesting. To get back to *Golk* again, you know, this was based on a novel that was written in 1960. I mean, it's 40 years old at this point, and you said it was inspired by *Candid Camera*, which was a very popular show on television, it certainly isn't on television anymore. But I looked at this thing, I looked at it before I did any research about it, like learning more about the novel. I knew *Candid Camera* as a little child. But *Candid Camera* wasn't what popped into my head. What popped into my head was Bill Clinton.

JOHN EATON: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm watching this thing, and there's a scene of the President of the United States being caught with his pants down, and I thought, I really relate to this, because this is what's going on in the world today. And I thought that *Golk* must have been a brand new novel that was inspired by what's going on today, and then I looked it up and, lo and behold, it was from 1960.

JOHN EATON: Well, let me remind you that there were lots of people caught with their pants down before Bill Clinton, and I mean, it seems a common feature. That whole world of television is a kind of mythical world, and that's what I was evoking, or trying to evoke in *Golk*. The way that Richard Stern, the author, and myself condensed the novel, was taking precisely the elements that have an almost mythical world, aura, rather, to them. I think the composer and production staff of an opera have a real responsibility to use visual elements of all kinds to make clear to the American audience, at any rate, exactly what is going on. That is, I mean, if this were the best of all possible worlds, yes, I mean, let's have opera without supertitles because they are somewhat distracting. But in this world we live in, supertitles are a wonderful blessing, and I'm sorry that I've never, until very recently, had any of my operas done with them. I always wanted them to be used, because, after all, if they're done tastefully, so that people can take in the words that are being sung as well as what's happening on the stage, it really does a lot to communicate to both sides of the brain. And I've had wonderful directors, for example, Gerald Friedman who did *The Cry of Clytemnaestra* in San Francisco, knew how to make that story vital by what was happening visually. This wonderful director who worked with the New York New Music Ensemble... Mike Philips, who did the same thing with *Don Quixote*... He showed slides which brought people into contact with some of the more arcane stories of *Don Quixote*, which, of course, is a huge book. This kind of thing, you know, has to be done as much as possible and can make up for deficiencies in classical education, and so on.

FRANK J. OTERI: I find this so interesting as a younger audience member who came to concert music as somewhat of an outsider. You know, I grew up in a family that didn't really care much about classical music, and they didn't really expose me to it for the most part. I had one relative who did, you know, but mostly what I heard was pop music on the radio, not even good pop music – bad pop music. You know, lite FM, whatever was playing, that was what I heard. So I came to all this as an outsider. I started going to operas, I went to the operas in the park, and I really enjoyed them. And then supertitles came in, and I really got the sense of it. But it amazed me that people for years would go to these operas, these productions of things from another culture from a different time period, from a different continent, in a different language, and sit there and watch this thing and not understand a word of it. And I have a friend who's a big opera fan who said, "Well, it's a good thing, because the librettos are so wretched."

JOHN EATON: [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: So, you know, he was an opera fan, and, you know, he'd go hear *La Boheme*, you know, again and again and again, and I really didn't get it. I still don't get it! And, you know, the Met resisted having the titles for years, and now they have this wonderful system...

JOHN EATON: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: But I can't understand how you could possibly get young people, or people who are outside the loop of the tradition, interested in this stuff without having it be comprehensible. It makes no sense to me at all.

## 7. American Audiences

JOHN EATON: In Italy and in Germany, when a new opera's being done, people will go the week that it's being done, and they'll buy the libretto... By the time the opera performance they attend takes place, they've really kind of absorbed that libretto. American audiences won't do that.

FRANK J. OTERI: No. [laughs]

JOHN EATON: I mean, you know, for instance, I think *Clytemnaestra's* had over 20 performances, and I would be surprised if, in all those performances, more than 200 libretti were bought. I mean, they just won't do it.

FRANK J. OTERI: I also think that we have another notion about theatre, that's very different from thinking of theater as ritual or educational, and that's thinking of theater as a suspense spectacle. Think about the things that are important in American culture; think about a baseball game. No one wants to go to a baseball game if they know who's going to win.

JOHN EATON: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: You know, everybody gets really upset when a boxing match turns out to be rigged. They feel cheated. Or wrestling... When wrestling was exposed as being a theatrical thing that was rigged, everybody was really upset. I mean, did it really change the experience? No. But all of a sudden everybody felt lied to. And, certainly people go to movies for the surprise element too... I remember this movie a few years ago, some critic had revealed how the movie ended and everybody was outraged because, how dare this critic tell the end of the story? He spoiled it for us. But, you know, this is the opposite notion of wanting to read a libretto before seeing an opera. I don't want to know how it's going to end, I want to, you know, I'm American, I want to go to this thing, and I want to be surprised to find out at the end that *Clytemnaestra* kills Agamemnon. Uh oh – gave it away. Sorry, folks. [laughs]

JOHN EATON: On the other hand, think of what occurs to me is *Columbo*. You know, where you always know beforehand who the villain is and you get involved in watching how *Columbo* unravels it. There's suspense on one level, and hopefully people could read a libretto and go see one of my operas and the music does enough that there would still be suspense, the music and the stage action do enough that there would still be a great deal of suspense, because, really, a libretto, I think Dallapiccola said it, is just the punctuation of an opera. It shouldn't tell you everything. Maybe it shouldn't even tell you the essential things. But, again, I have to go back to the fact that nearly every plot that Verdi or Puccini chose was something that was something the audiences of the day were familiar with because it had been a popular theatrical piece, or it had been a popular novel, or something. They certainly worked with stories that were familiar. And very seldom did they make anything up out of, you know, yard cloth.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Well, nowadays, what are the things that people are familiar with? We've talked about sitcoms, but certainly so are motion pictures, and I know, or I

know when they did the opera of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that André Previn wrote a few years back, I was so amazed because I thought, you know, I'm looking at this thing, and already I have my notion so preconceived about this thing, I'm looking at Stanley and Stella and I couldn't erase Marlon Brando from my brain. It got in the way for me. You can't compete with that image. That image is indelible. And there were things that were very effective about the opera. I thought Renee Fleming was a stunning and convincing actress. But we know too many of the details of the myth, as opposed to, you know, these other ur-myths like those in the Greek dramas where people knew the plot but we didn't have a specific visual image of the characters associated with it. It's getting much harder to have these kinds of myths nowadays and, as audiences get more fragmented and marginalized, it's getting harder to have any plot that a large audience would all already know.

## 8. Opera and the Vernacular

JOHN EATON: Well, you know, there's another thing that enters in to these kinds of plays and so on, taking place in opera. And that, to me, is the form of the Broadway musical. I admire the musical enormously. It's a terrific art form. I tried to write musicals when I was a kid: they were a flop, completely. But the fact is, though, that it's a very different thing from opera. And it's very different in terms of what the music is expected to do. I mean, the music in opera really is the embodiment of the drama, of what you're watching. And it's involved with the drama being expressed by vocal gesture. In musical comedy, this just isn't true. People sing in a way to make the words clear, absolutely clear and stand out. So that something which is in America, a popular American theater piece, does much better with a musical comedy setting, or with some kind of hybrid, you know, than it does as a purely operatic experience, it seems to me. First of all, there are too many words, usually.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Yeah.

JOHN EATON: And then, as I say, the singing, the notion of singing is so totally different. I mean, in opera we go to have the exciting experience of a beautiful voice expressing very musically internalized drama in vocal gesture. And we just don't do that in musicals.

FRANK J. OTERI: This is an issue that really strikes to the core of what I do as a composer. You know, you listen to Puccini and you listen to Verdi, and these singers are singing bel canto and it works because it was a style of singing created for the Italian language. Those vocal techniques were designed for European languages, and so it works for European languages. I don't really know if it works in English, especially not American English. I don't think it works for me at all as a composer, and when I work with a singer who has operatic training, I'm always terrified... I set a lot of poetry to music, and I want those words to come across very succinctly. And the "aesthetically good vowels," and the way consonants are sung, I think destroys English syntax...

JOHN EATON: Well, I think many English diction coaches have let us down in not paying as much attention to English diction as they have to, you know, proper pronunciation of Italian or German. I mean, I think that English is an exceedingly singable language, and always has been. I mean, look at Purcell, look at Handel, you know, it can be and should be sung. It's just simply that, yeah, people falsified the vowels, and they shouldn't.

FRANK J. OTERI: Or they roll the r's. I can't stand that!

JOHN EATON: There's also a lot of bad text setting, in that composers don't give, on high notes, you know, open vowels, nice vowels to sing on that open the throat. They don't use those kinds of vowels for melismas, you know. And, I think it's a really involved question. Now, I don't want anything that I've said to be construed as thinking that I don't think that there are lots of other possibilities. Like an amalgam of musical comedy and opera.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, certainly, I've heard that in some of your more recent pieces, certainly the Genesis opera, and also in *Golk*, where there are elements that are coming from musical theater or from cabaret singing. And I think it's very effective, because it really works.

JOHN EATON: Yeah, although more from, I think, probably more from jazz, if the truth is noted. Jazz singing, and so on. But, oh yeah, absolutely it, I mean, it will work. But I think that just straightforward presentation of the text, without involving other musical genres and so on, works as well.

## 9. Opera on Television

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, the new type of opera you're working on is certainly very far removed from bel canto and very far removed from the whole tradition of opera as we know it. But even more you came up with the idea of "the Eaton opera," you worked on an opera for television, *Myshkin*. The entire notion of opera on television is another approach to the whole idea of alternative venues. You know, for the most part when we see *Great Performances* on PBS we get standard repertory. Every now and then you get lucky, and you get *Nixon in China* or *Streetcar*. But even these works were conceived for the operatic stage. *Myshkin* was actually conceived specifically for television...

JOHN EATON: Uh huh.

FRANK J. OTERI: ...and it allowed you to do certain things that don't normally happen in opera. Strangely enough, television is more intimate, even though it's this disemboweled, disembodied screen. The fact of the matter is, that the person watching it is *Myshkin*. When I watched it, I was *Myshkin* and the characters were singing to me. You can't really get an audience involved quite the same way on a stage.

JOHN EATON: I think our culture lost a great, great opportunity when it didn't do more with opera for television in the early years. I mean, commission composers to write operas specifically for television. After all, one of them, well, the most popular opera by far, was originally commissioned for television, which was *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. I mean, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* has had ten times as many performances as almost any other opera Schirmer has in their catalog, or anybody else, for that matter. *Amahl* is done by church groups, by educational groups, so on and so forth. But one of the earliest operas that tried to use television was a little-known piece also by Menotti, what is it, Help, Help, The Globolinks?

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, yeah, yeah, that was recorded... Newport Classic did a recording of that.

JOHN EATON: It really used the media in interesting ways. A lot could have been done at one point, it seems to me, with opera for television. But after the enormous success of *Myshkin*, which won the Peabody Award, the Ohio State Award, it was shown for several years on national TV and all over the world, really, after that, believe it or not, I was unable to get another commission to do an opera specifically for television. People were just afraid. And I think it's a pity; it's a great pity. Sort of like architects talking about the greatest challenge of the 20th century, almost completely ignored by builders, was building an airport. You know, it took years before we had any kind of sensible plan for any airport, which I can tell you, having arrived at 4:30 last night in Kennedy, and walking...

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs] The single most unwelcome, unpleasant place to land in the entire world, is JFK.

JOHN EATON: Having so little to do with the spirit of JFK himself.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah. [laughs] It amazed me no end. I have equally abhorrent feelings about the now-renamed Reagan Airport in D.C., which is well named... well, let's not go there. [laughs]

JOHN EATON: But in any case, the opera on TV. There are so many things one could do if one just spends a minute, as we tried to do with *Myshkin*, thinking about the medium and how it could be used. It's the ultimate expressionistic medium.

FRANK J. OTERI: Hmm. It's so interesting. I've been reading Marshall McLuhan recently. And, you know, he died before the Internet existed as a phenomenon in our popular culture. And he's talking about television having so much more power than books. And having so much more power than film. And he was one of the few people who wasn't horrified by television. Everybody thought, oh my God, television, you know, nobody's going to be able to read anymore, it's destroying the young, you still hear this. And it's not television that's doing this, you know, it's the crap that's on television.

JOHN EATON: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: But the medium's great.

JOHN EATON: Yeah. Well, exactly. That's true of all technology.

## 10. Humanizing Electronic Music

JOHN EATON: I think one of the greatest enemies in the use of technology, however, is the idea that if you use the technology you have to throw other things out of the window. I remember, for instance, with electronic music, that in the first days, when I was first experimenting or working around with it, the idea was, you put things on tape, you could finally get perfection. And this created so much absolutely dull, lifeless, electronic music. Because the fact is that music can only be made, it seems to me, by the total engagement of a musical sensibility, a very highly trained musical sensibility with musical materials in a way that there's resistance. And, of course, this involves, to a certain extent, I think, by necessity, performance. It involves a trained sensibility capturing completely the materials that one is using and absorbing them, and then being able to use them as a performer and as a composer. The same thing was true of television. People felt if you did something for television, you could never show a human face, you know, unless it were somehow being constantly modified or so on. Not that one shouldn't use all of those technical advantage, but the essence of what's being communicated shouldn't be technology.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: It should never be technology. It should be something that involves the human spirit in a varied and profound way, I think.

FRANK J. OTERI: One of the great tragedies of electronic music is this very notion: the technology keeps changing and therefore, there is a perception that anything that isn't the latest thing is obsolete. And, you know, I love analog synthesizers a lot more than I love digital synthesizers. And I like the sounds on them and I like playing around with them. But, you know, if you write pieces for an electronic instrument... I've talked to a number of composers about this, and a lot of composers are reluctant to write for electronic instruments if they are getting works performed that their own ensembles are not doing, pieces that are going out into the world, because chances are that 5 years from now, someone's not going to have that instrument, and then what do you do?

JOHN EATON: Well, that certainly happened to me with the Syn-Ket. There's a whole body of my work that is fundamentally, at the moment, unperformable. Although, if this new instrument that I worked on with Robert Moog has all the sensitivity of the Syn-Ket, and more, and that can certainly do it. But the approach with those early analog synthesizers, whether you work directly with the sound, and even though it was sometimes very awkward, you did things like turning dials, which is the most unmusical gesture I can imagine, you know, It's like trying to thresh wheat with a surgeon's scalpel. Even though that was the case, nevertheless, one could deal with any element of the sound that you wanted to much more than you can with most commercial digital synthesizers... You know, you have so much sensitivity, so much control over the sound, and you can only put that control to certain very rudimentary places. You can't get into the very core of the sound itself. Now I think that's going to change, and I think it's going to change very, very quickly.

FRANK J. OTERI: Last year I went up to Cambridge to hang out with Tod Machover at the MIT Media Labs. And one of the big things they're doing up there is trying to develop more expressive interfaces, whether it's a jacket that you can rub and play music on, or a ball that you touch in different areas and you get different expressive things coming out of that. We've been so busy trying to make electronic interfaces that operate the same way as acoustic instruments, we've rarely questioned that there might be better interfaces for electronic instruments than the ones that work best for acoustic instruments. We've been stuck with the keyboard interface but maybe that's not the best one for electronic instruments.

JOHN EATON: Well, let me see, I can think of 12 places where the human body comes out in something that can command human nuance. The mouth, the tips of the fingers, and, well... [laughs] There's a reason why there have always been keyboard instruments. And that is these wonderful points where the human body comes out. You know, ten of them, and a whole technique is already there of being able to use them. Whereas most of the stuff, when you put on a jacket or put on a glove, you're using muscles that you've never used for any purpose like that. And they're not trained, and they can't be trained, I don't think. There's a reason why acoustical instruments were built to engage with the embouchure or built to engage with the tips of the fingers. And that is because of the way the human body is made. It has nothing to do with the difference between acoustic instruments and electronic instruments. If music is to embody human nuance, and is to involve itself with any kind of depth of musical expression, I'm afraid, you know, we're stuck with certain kinds of designs.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you know, it's interesting, though, because, to me, still, the single most expressive electronic instrument is the theremin.

JOHN EATON: But that again is using the hands.

FRANK J. OTERI: But in a very different way than...

JOHN EATON: But, you see the way Clara Rockmore articulated phrases. She used her fingertips.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right, right.

JOHN EATON: I don't think the theremin has ever gotten the kind of expressive potential that the violin or that the piano has, which the ondes martenot in a funny way, has, you know, simply because, on a theremin, you're not meeting any resistance.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: I've often thought if they build a theremin so that you felt shocks if you moved into an electronic field, you could gauge where you were better, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Hopefully not painful shocks...[laughs]

JOHN EATON: It requires a lot of effort, and as a result, you can't get the kind of complexity that you can with an ordinary musical instrument. I mean, there's, there's... I don't think I've ever heard double or triple stops on a theremin.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, no. It's monophonic, you can't.

JOHN EATON: And it can only be monophonic, because there's no resistance, there's nothing you can fit. These very sensitive points where the human body, you know, reaches out to the world, let's say. There's no place you could, you can put those, you know, nothing that you can feel their engagement.

FRANK J. OTERI: So given this notion of the imperfection, the limitations of nuance in electronic instruments, what made you get involved with electronic instruments? It's certainly a very important part of your significance in our musical history. You were one of the first composers to work with synthesizers, and you were a sounding board for Robert Moog.

JOHN EATON: I can't take that kind of credit. I think I was first to do live performances on a modern electronic sound synthesizer. I've looked and sort of found that that was the case. But Moog had worked with other composers before we met.

FRANK J. OTERI: I think Alwin Nikolais was the first to buy one of his synthesizers.

JOHN EATON: I know that Donald Erb wrote an early piece for a microtonal electronic keyboard.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, wow. A Motorola scalatron?

JOHN EATON: It was a scalatron kind of keyboard. But, as I remember, it didn't have the potential for responding to human touch that even the Syn-Ket had.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, getting back to this notion of human touch, you know, what made you get involved with this?

JOHN EATON: Well, I wanted to become involved with the humanization of electronic music, because I was always interested in the question of performance and of how one could use electronic music to express what human beings wanted to express, rather than being about the medium itself. To say that I was the first to do this is ridiculous because I'm sure other people were trying, Oskar Sala for instance...

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

JOHN EATON: But I've never heard a note that he's played. I've always wanted to do that, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: A new CD of Sala's mixtur trautionium music just came out this year.

JOHN EATON: A lot of that was just unavailable. But it seemed to me that what was very important was to make instruments that could receive human nuance from a performer, and therefore get composers involved with that side of things. So the ultimate vision was this keyboard that I collaborated with Moog on for something like 30 years, which reads out the precise extent the key is depressed. That is, it could be used for velocity like a piano keyboard. It could also be like a tractor organ, whereas if I applied the volume you could make crescendos, diminuendos, and so on. And of course it doesn't have to be applied to the volume at all. It reads out your front-to-back position of the surface of the key. So it gets involved with violin kind of technique. There's also a large area on the side of the keyboard in which you have more room to exercise that control, more range to exercise that control. It reads out your front, your side-to-side position on the surface of the key. It reads out the amount of area your finger will cover. And finally, it reads out the pressure you would put on a completely depressed key, after touch. So these five parameters are completely different for each key, or can be completely different for each key. You don't have to use all five at the same time, which is a real tour de force of performing. I can't think of any kind of performing that quite has that kind of complexity. Each figure of each hand could be playing a different volume level, I mean, it's extraordinary what you could do, and how you could change things also by moving around, like a clavichord, which is where Ketoff got the idea of doing the sideways motion for the Syn-Ket. But there's also the front and back motion which gets you involved in string technique. So it's very difficult to play, but I think this is a very, a big advantage of it. I think instruments should be difficult to play and difficult to master, because in mastering musical materials, by overcoming difficulties, you're involving yourself with them, and you're making them your own, in a way that almost can't be done, well, in any other way that, for the moment, I can imagine. The Eaton-Moog Modal Touch Sensitive Keyboard is a project that still isn't finished because there are 2 more to come. One's been made. And then, of course, I've got to get it interfaced with something that allows me to really get inside of the sound, to really work with the sound in interesting ways. Everything you do is human nuance. I once put a MIDI scope on it, and saw that it took me 10 minutes to read out what I had done in something like 2 or 3 seconds, you know. And of course, the voice, in singing a Verdi opera, somebody once said, is communicating something like 6,000 bits of information per second.

## 11. A New Type of Opera or Romps for Instrumentalists

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to talk a bit about concerts, concert life and the static nature of going to a concert and watching people just play instruments, and how this sort of developed into your notion of the Eaton opera, and the productions you've been doing with the Pocket Opera Company in Chicago. What are those operas trying to do and how effective have they been with musicians and with audiences?

JOHN EATON: O.K. Well, it turns out there was another Pocket Opera Company in San Francisco which does completely different kind of things, which I was unaware of when I gave it this name. But nevertheless, it expresses so well what we do that I wanted to keep the name, and so I just made it "of Chicago." But at any rate, for years I went to concerts of new music, and I saw performers sweating to get each note, each nuance, right in scores, in which they had absolutely no comprehension, it seemed to me, very often, of the human dimensions trying to be expressed. And so I thought, one way of bringing this about would be to write... I wouldn't so much call them operas, because operas are so involved with singing, which these pieces aren't so much. Some of them are. Some of them bring that in almost as an added dimension. I'd rather call them something very unpretentious like Romps for instrumentalists, you know, because they give instrumentalists the chance to be involved with a human context or the difficult music that they're playing. And that was the whole basis of what you've called the Eaton opera, what I was trying to do. I mean, there certainly were precedents for it. *L'histoire du soldat*, you know, would immediately come to mind.

FRANK J. OTERI: And when I was watching these works I actually thought of Partch, as I've already mentioned, because of the multiple role of singer, the players are also the singers, they're also the dancers. It's a holistic approach to performance that goes against the Aristotelian notion of, you know, one person, one function.

JOHN EATON: Right, right. Well, this, again, I have to say, I didn't know, I'd never seen a performance of one of the Partch operas when I undertook this. So I think they're less involved, or many of these pieces are less involved with narrative than what I wanted to try to do, because I really did want to get the performers involved with story elements, with acting, with being somebody. And so, in that sense, calling them dramatic works for instrumentalists comes close to it. Again, you know, I wanted to keep a non-narrative approach to theater involved as well. But, again, I sort of feel that there's a tendency to throw the baby out with the bath too often, you know, people think that electronic music can't have anything to do with the long traditions that have been established. Both vocal music and instrumental music, just as many people in Bach and Handel's time thought one had to write instrumental music and forget about all these vocal values, now that the strings had really matured as a section, and so on. But composers like Bach and Handel knew we were working in a total continuum, and were willing to do whatever got the job done which, like I was saying at the very beginning, is a more practical approach. This is what got the idea going, and I found that I needed some real subjects, because if people... or subjects which were on a kind of extended plane of reality, because then you could accept, as you used to in the singspiel, the fact that people went from song to speech...

FRANK J. OTERI: And an audience could also accept somebody whipping a horse and that horse is really a cello if the story is *Don Quixote*.

JOHN EATON: [laughs] Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: And, yeah, I mean, Don Quixote's deluded, you know, he could very well see somebody playing the cello and think that. [laughs]

JOHN EATON: Yeah, yeah. So I have tried to choose subjects which are on a kind of surreal plane of reality. And *Peer Gynt* being the first of these... I mean, the choice of *Peer Gynt* was really deliberate, because it never fit into the canon of realistic drama. In fact, Ibsen intended it to be read, not really done as a stage play...

FRANK J. OTERI: And it's in verse. It's the only one of his verse plays, in fact, that still is performed widely nowadays.

JOHN EATON: Yeah, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, you know, the idea of having a play in verse, you know, is so rarely done now in modern theater, and that's, you know, one step further away from the notion of theater as ritual. And in a way, these pieces, operas, or dramas, or romps... whatever you want to call them, bring the ritual element of theater back. Because it's not so much about method acting as it is about a sort of incantorial acting; it's symbolic acting.

JOHN EATON: Well, you know, I remember... something that's always stuck with me, a statement by probably my most influential teacher outside of the realm of music, which was the poet/critic Richard Palmer Blackmur (To whom I dedicated in memoriam the "Songs for R.P.B., the first piece to my knowledge to use live performance on a modern electronic sound synthesizer.) He said once that Dante was the greatest poet in Christendom because he took more disorder and brought it to order. And I feel that the question of scope is a terribly important one in music, especially today. We need to open up the future. We also need to keep everything valuable from the past. We need to have as broad a range as possible, because life itself has that kind of range. We no longer live in simple villages in Germany, with a small plane of reference, like Bach did. And yet, the human values that Bach's music embodies are still vitally important. So, to me, it's a question of not being afraid to embrace the tradition but also not being afraid to dive into boiling oil on occasion. [laughs]

## 12. Absolute Music vs Music with a Social Function

FRANK J. OTERI: So much of your music is concerned with that extra element. Because instrumental music is abstract and you can't really put a direct meaning to it, so much of your music is operatic, or at least vocal in orientation, or has a narrative. I know that you've also written symphonies, you've also written completely abstract music... Do you feel that when you write completely abstract music that the standards are different? I mean, the audience has to latch on to it in a different way.

JOHN EATON: Well, I don't know. Well, the very best operas are the ones written by the very best composers. Without question. Which doesn't mean that a great composer can't write a bad opera, if he has a bad enough libretto, you know, or if he sort of wanders in. I mean, that happens again and again. But nevertheless, it's music ultimately that matters in opera, and opera is a piece of music reaching out as a vision in sound reaching out to the world. And that's what these operas that I've written, these romps for instrumentalists, were. I want to give them fun, you know, but I wanted them also to get vitally involved with what they were doing on every level of their being, not just on the level of musical and technical competence.

FRANK J. OTERI: But a symphony certainly can't have that outreach. It's much more rarified... Being able to listen to a symphony requires a certain level of attention. I think it's harder to experience than an opera because an opera is engaging your eyes as well as your ears. Opera is also engaging your sense of comprehension. You've written a Mass, in fact you're one of the few experimental composers of our time to have written a Mass, which not only engages the eyes, the ears, and meaning, but it is also participatory, in fact it is part of a religious ceremony. So, ideally, the audience is doing more than listening. What has been the response to it?

JOHN EATON: Well, it's been very interesting, especially the Credo. In the Credo, there are three different elements. There's a soprano soloist who takes the part of the Credo. First of all, the problem with the Credo, for every composer is there're all those words. You know. Bach splits it up into a large number of sections. Stravinsky just gets through the words as fast as he can, you know, by using a kind of rhythmic recitation in that part of his Mass, which I think has always been my favorite piece of Stravinsky. But, the point is, there were all those words to deal with. So the approach that I took was that the singer would take only the words which would be important, or would be significant, at least in my eyes, to a individual today. Not necessarily totally involved, but an individual who wasn't necessarily totally involved with religion. Like, for instance, "I believe in one God." Or "Christ was crucified." You know. The parts of the Credo that are really key to us today...

FRANK J. OTERI: And the rest you left out?

JOHN EATON: Of her part. Then the clarinetist intones the entire Credo in Latin. I mean, this is a dogmatic part, into the clarinet. And it sounds with echo, so it sounds like it's coming from a large medieval cathedral. This is the, again, the dogmatic part of the Mass. Then I have the audience actually, or the congregation, read the Credo. But as

they do it, this was first written in 1970 or so, so the way I got a loop was have 2 tape recorders, one of which played back, and one of which recorded. So the audience's voices come back at them in this endless loop, and they realize, as they're reciting the Credo, how devoid of meaning it is for them anymore, and it mocks them, in a way. It says, do you really believe, it posits, do you really believe what you're saying, you know? Or is this just something you go through, you know?

FRANK J. OTERI: Going through the motions.

JOHN EATON: And the reaction to that, when it was performed, it was performed in the National Cathedral in the electronic version in Washington. It was performed here in St. Peter's Church in New York before they built Citicorp. And it was performed in Christ Church in Boston. And the reaction in New York was the most interesting. Somebody came back and actually tried to strangle me because of what I did to him in the Credo. I mean, it was, it produced a very, very violent reaction on the part of the audience, when they became part of this musical piece, a direct part of it. The performance in Boston was one of the finest performances I've ever had of anything in my life. People were totally involved in the piece in a positive way. And the performance, unfortunately, in the National Cathedral was riddled by the fact that our singer had developed an allergy to cats, and the doctor gave her cortisone, which stimulated the vocal cords.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yikes.

JOHN EATON: It was terrible.

FRANK J. OTERI: Considering you've gone back to the piece again recently, and you're reworking it, or you've reworked it...

JOHN EATON: For vocal ensemble, soprano soloist and clarinet again.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is there a performance coming up sometime in the near future?

JOHN EATON: Well, there's a CD which is coming out this spring by the Contemporary Vocal Ensemble of Indiana University, who have done it several times in Chicago. They've also done it in Bloomington, and in Israel, where it was very, very well received.

### 13. Getting The Music Out There

FRANK J. OTERI: One thing that I believe has been unfortunate is the dissemination of your music. I've known *Danton and Robespierre* for a number of years, I have the CRI LPs, and I have an old Turnabout LP with the Concert Piece for SynKet and Orchestra, but I have very little else, and knew of very little else until recently, and certainly, you know, you're in a very, very good position vis-à-vis, you know, the thousands of composers in America today in that you have music represented by one of the major publishers of the world, which is great. It's enviable to a great number of composers. But there haven't been a lot of recordings of your music that have been available, and I think it's a crime. *Danton and Robespierre* isn't even in print anymore, it needs to get reissued on CD, and so much of this music is not available, so what do you do? This is a problem facing every composer. How do you get your music out there?

JOHN EATON: Well, my music is difficult. Very difficult. Much of it. And it requires, you know, really dedicated performers. For that reason, I haven't run after recording companies constantly to record. I wait until something is really in the shape that I want to make it as a permanent record, because I think of recording as a permanent record. However, yes, especially as one gets older, you know, you really hope that your music will become more generally available, even though some of the performances might be riddled with faults.

FRANK J. OTERI: One of the aspects of recordings that we sometimes forget is the value they have as a rehearsal tool for future performances. I recently had the luxury of having a piece that I wrote performed again by an ensemble that was completely different from the one that had originally performed it. Having a recording of that original performance saved so much rehearsal time. Of course, this should be completely obvious for any composer but I bring it up here with you since your music contains microtonal intervals that may not be second nature to many performers and if these performers could only hear more recordings of your music, they would have so much more understanding of it than if they were playing it cold.

JOHN EATON: Well, I can't agree with you more, and I really wish every piece of mine were recorded, and I wish I had spent more time trying to pursue that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, let's hope all the folks at the record companies will see and hear this interview and your phone will not stop ringing with offers to record all your music!