

# **Spaced Out with Henry Brant**

**Friday, October 4, 2002, 2 pm.  
The Copland House - Cortlandt, NY**

Conversation with Frank J. Oteri  
Videotaped by Amanda MacBlane  
Transcribed by Molly Sheridan and Frank J. Oteri

- 1. Childhood Influences**
- 2. Formally Studying Composition**
- 3. Popular Music and Formal Processes**
- 4. Spatial Music**
- 5. On Orchestration**
- 6. Fitting Into The Tradition**
- 7. Ice Field**

## 1. Childhood Influences

FRANK J. OTERI: There's a lot of stuff to cover, but I thought we should start at the beginning...

HENRY BRANT: 1913?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

HENRY BRANT: Well, I remember the First World War... I was born in 1913, but in the next year, 1914, 1915, I asked my mother why the oatmeal didn't taste better and she said that the men who knew how to make the oatmeal were in France fighting the war and the men who are making this oatmeal don't know how to do it very well so we have to wait until the others come back.

FRANK J. OTERI: You were in Canada then.

HENRY BRANT: Montreal.

FRANK J. OTERI: But your parents were originally from the United States.

HENRY BRANT: Yes, both from the United States and I myself am an American citizen and have been from birth.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you were born and grew up in Canada.

HENRY BRANT: Montreal, until I was 14.

FRANK J. OTERI: Why did your parents move to Montreal?

HENRY BRANT: This is always interesting to me when I think of it. My father is from Savannah, Georgia. When he was about 12, he showed some ability on the violin and he'd been to New York. But his parents thought, "Our son, he should have the best." In those days, the best was in Europe, so he went to Europe and stayed there 10 years and studied with the best teachers at the time, including Joachim. He was one of the first American violinists I think to have done all this stuff. Ten years later, he came back to the United States and started looking for work and, of the various places he could go, Montreal seemed the most interesting to him. By that time, he spoke three languages fluently and he liked the idea that French was spoken there. He also liked the idea that it was a university town. So he went there and stayed 18 years.

FRANK J. OTERI: Did you grow up speaking French in the household?

HENRY BRANT: Because of the division between the French and the English Canadian communities, although the French always learned some English, the English community managed to avoid speaking French and I was sent to an English school. I heard it and spoke it a little, but never fluently.

FRANK J. OTERI: I once read somewhere that by the time you were nine years old you were already building your own musical instruments...

HENRY BRANT: I started to write down my intended music when I was eight. I also had piano lessons, but I was nothing special. There were children of four and five that were first class at that age, but I was just an average child playing indifferent piano. But I wanted to write music. I heard the orchestra at McGill University, which was my father's students, and also theater musicians who played in movie houses and the effects that they produced were very puzzling to me. So I asked my father to explain some of them to me and he said he couldn't! If you had better players, you could get different sounds. So, my first idea was that I wanted to write something that could be done by an orchestra like that, fifty players, no matter what they sounded like. I heard a lot of music in Montreal that interested me. There were especially Salvation Army Bands. They went all over the city. They played in hospitals and in schools and even in the prisons. I followed them around and I thought I wanted to write music for that too. Then we had excellent organ grinders, both the kind with pipes and the kind with piano strings. I enjoyed the sound of them very much. But I didn't know until later that it was the out-of-tune shape they were in which pleased me so much. I heard that and also my father's sonata concerts; he gave concerts of chamber music. There was one good professional string quartet in Toronto. Whenever they came, they practiced in our living room. At the age of twelve I wrote a string quartet that they played and that settled it. I was certain that writing music was superior to hawking a crate or other things that boys my age were expected to do. But this didn't happen often. It didn't happen every day. So I thought, we've got to have some way of doing this ourselves. So I got together with my friends in the neighborhood, some of whom played instruments, and for the rest I made things out of plumbing pipe and also stringed instruments made out of cigar boxes and other boxes. And that combined with a clarinet or two, sometimes a trumpet, was my first orchestra. Some of these boys could read music and some of them couldn't, so I found ways of explaining to the non-readers what to do. I still do this in something I call instant music. So the answer to your question is yes, I did make such things and I already explained what I felt was my need to have them.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do any of these instruments still survive from back then?

HENRY BRANT: I think it's been a long time since they've left this world!

FRANK J. OTERI: You were saying that some of your friends could read music and some of them couldn't. Would you write actual pitches for things like the cigar box stringed instruments? I imagine these had rubber bands for strings or something like that...

HENRY BRANT: For the people who could read.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you tailor made it for the people you were writing for?

HENRY BRANT: It would have been impossible otherwise.

FRANK J. OTERI: You mentioned hearing the orchestra at McGill University and you mentioned hearing music at silent movies. What other music were you exposed to growing up?

HENRY BRANT: Everything that came to town. Big famous virtuosi played in Montreal as part of their tour. So these were concerts we went to and one of them was a concert of the

Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Stokowski. I heard that and I thought if that's an orchestra, what do we have at McGill? And this enlarged my idea of what was possible. I heard that and I heard concerts by Rachmaninoff and Heifetz and Casals and other players on that level--Cortot was another one--and I considered it a point of honor. So after every concert I went and saw the great man and very few of them turned me down. Kreisler turned me down. He said, "I'm sorry my boy, I can't." Rachmaninoff just looked at me and said "...Right!" and I didn't know what he meant but I finally figured out that I should send him something. So I sent a card to his hotel where he was staying and sure enough I got it back with his signature. I still have this collection. I have some signatures that my father got. I have Joachim's signature. And some of them I got through older musicians. I have Ravel's signature. I forgot how we got onto this...

FRANK J. OTERI: We were talking about the people you heard growing up. The music you heard.

HENRY BRANT: It was pretty comprehensive.

FRANK J. OTERI: What was your first exposure to new music, to experimental music?

HENRY BRANT: Oh, yes. Well, one of the first was when the Hard Hats Quartet of Toronto came to our house. That same evening, the violinist Huberman was in town and my father persuaded him to come. So the first violinist of this quartet was Hungarian and he said, "You want to hear some music that you'd hear in Europe?" And so they played Bartók's first quartet to the amazement of everybody present. Now, Bartók was about the same age as my father and my father said that in the early 1900s--Bartók was working then and so was Schoenberg and Berg and Stravinsky--he'd merely heard their names. He had a library of sonatas for violin and piano written mostly by contemporaries of his, people with names like Sgambati... These were esteemed composers and they were considered contemporary composers. Of course, Strauss and Mahler were known to my father, too. He played in orchestras conducted by them. But nobody doubted that these other conservative men were the contemporary composers. My father thought so himself, and this Bartók, he never heard anything like that and nobody else there had either. So I asked him what kind of music that was and he said modern music. And I said I'm going to write modern music and that was my start. Then my father recalled a classmate of his, a fellow violin student, Ernest Bloch, was a composer. So we got his sonata, which we considered really rough stuff--far out, wild stuff at the time. Besides that, it sounded to my father and his colleagues to be very ugly and human. I heard that and we learned to play together and I thought that settles it. So the question then was what kind of education should I have so I could become a composer of wild modern music. The word was in those times, that if you wanted to be a great wild composer like Strauss or Mahler, you had to have a solid background. Once you learned how to write solid music, perhaps you try to write something else. And there were many solid teachers in Montreal. Mostly Englishmen, English church organists, all of them Doctor somebody. So my father said, "Well, you've got to do that first. Everybody does." He found out that Bartók had done the same, and as a teacher he taught strict counterpoint. So he said, "You'll be no place unless you do what all your heroes have done." So, it was textbook harmony and species counterpoint and I was terrible at it. I had three English teachers in turn and they all thought I was hopeless at it and I thought so too. My father was bewildered and he said, "How are you going to be any kind of composer, even the kind you want to be, if you can't do what every composer has had to do for the past 500 years?"

FRANK J. OTERI: This is interesting then because from what you've just said about the instruments you were building and the sounds you were interested in, you were experimenting with music before you ever heard any so-called experimental music. You were doing this on your own.

HENRY BRANT: I didn't think it was experimental. I wanted to write for a bunch of people, not just two or three, and I used what I had.

FRANK J. OTERI: So this idea of doing very large things was something that you had even as a child. Big, public music...

HENRY BRANT: That's true, yes.

## 2. Formally Studying Composition

FRANK J. OTERI: When you did finally study composition, you studied with some of the leading experimental composers at the time, people like George Antheil, Wallingford Riegger, Copland, whom you studied with informally... What led to you meeting up with these people?

HENRY BRANT: Henry Cowell was what made it possible. He came to Montreal in the mid-20s and gave one of his concerts in which he played with his elbows and played inside the piano and things like that. He played at McGill University and shocked and horrified everybody, but my father liked him and brought him to the house and he immediately took an interest in what I was doing. He spent a lot of time with me. One of the things I showed him was Symphony No. 1, nine pages long. I wrote this because I'd heard that sick composers usually wrote masterpieces during their illness. I had an ear abscess and the only treatment was to stick a needle through it, which meant a long convalescence, just the right time for me to write a symphony. I didn't have many orchestral scores, but I had a German dictionary that had the first page of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in score. My father got me a couple more scores and he had some from his student days so I thought, all right I'm ready to do this. Later when I showed it to Aaron Copland, he looked at it carefully and on one page he said, "There's something very strange about this page...It wouldn't sound at all bad if it were played!"

FRANK J. OTERI: This isn't the same Symphony No. 1 that was recorded at some point?

HENRY BRANT: It was nine pages of homemade, 12-year old writing.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is that score still around somewhere?

HENRY BRANT: No.

FRANK J. OTERI: You got rid of it?

HENRY BRANT: No, I didn't. In rattling around the country for the last 75 years, a lot of music disappeared.

FRANK J. OTERI: So Cowell introduced you to Wallingford Riegger?

HENRY BRANT: What he said to my father was, "Henry might amount to something. He's got some talent and ability, but in this town he will do nothing. He will disappear. If you possibly can, get him to New York where there are people who can help him." Now, my father took this very seriously and he said, "We're moving to New York." Just like that! That's how I moved to New York. Once I got to New York, things happened very fast. A friend of the family knew Aaron Copland's piano teacher, Clarence Adler, and I played for him. He said with piano playing I knew nothing, but with the kind of music I was writing I ought to meet a real modern composer and he'd arrange it. So he set up an appointment for me to see Aaron Copland and I played what I'd written for piano so far and he said right away, "You want to play this in two weeks at one of my concerts?" The Copland-Sessions concerts. After this, things happened quite rapidly, and I'd met most of the up-to-date, forward-looking, self-esteemed geniuses at the time. There weren't so many at that time--if you'd met fifty that was the entire modern music active group.

FRANK J. OTERI: In terms of your studies with these people--with Copland it was rather informal.

HENRY BRANT: Yes. I went to The Juilliard School at the same time. I was able to get scholarships throughout. I discovered that the way to exist was to write one kind of music for The Juilliard School, for my conservative instructors, and another kind for downtown where they really composed music. So I did these simultaneously and on one occasion, my Juilliard teacher, Leopold Mannes, met Aaron Copland and discussed me. And they discussed two pieces that seemed to be somewhat alike and Leopold Mannes said, "I prefer the one that he wrote for me." And Copland said, "Well, the other one is the one that gets my vote."

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, at that time, Riegger was one the first American composers, if not the very first, to embrace the methods of twelve-tone composition.

HENRY BRANT: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Was that something that was an influence on you at that time?

HENRY BRANT: No. I'll say two things. Riegger was one of the most active people in the so-called modern music establishment and my father was still worried about my lack of solidity, so he finally said to me, "Now, look, here's Riegger. He's no washed out radical as you consider others to be. He's really way out there." And I asked Riegger about this sort of thing and he said, "I studied the species counterpoint and I studied the textbook harmony and so has every composer I know of." So my father said, "Do me a favor; study this stuff with him." So I tried it again and it was a little different. It was German style. I preferred the French and Italian style that Mannes had learned in Italy and France, but once again, I was just terrible at it. So I finally consoled myself. I ran across the history of Beethoven's studies with Albrechtsberger and other people and, although he was anxious to learn it, he too was terrible. So I said if he could be terrible, so can I. So it was worth absolutely nothing at all to me. I had a solid background with half a dozen teachers and if they all could be around now they'd say unanimously that they'd never seen a worse pupil in their lives. On the other hand, when I tackled an imitation of a contemporary style it was very different. I easily won all the Juilliard prizes at the time. Nobody could compete with me. Nobody could write a symphony. I wrote one there; it was never played. And long pieces of chamber music that were a mixture of the more conservative contemporary styles at the time and for concerts downtown, I wrote music as experimentally as I could.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, Riegger never taught you twelve-tone composition.

HENRY BRANT: I want to talk about that. I'd heard of it and by that time I knew Schoenberg's earlier music, the middle music, and tone-row music and I made up my mind about several things. One of them was never to follow a trend and this seemed to me to be an obvious, superficial trend. His premises were dishonest because the music that was written never followed it in any case. Not only have I never written a tone-row piece, but at one time I had a standing challenge to any composer. I'd give any composer five bucks who could tell the difference between two pieces that I wrote: one tone row and one not twelve-tone row. I maintain that you don't have to go by the tone row to get music that sounds like that, just like Schoenberg didn't have to. And nobody ever took me up on it.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you never wrote those two pieces?

HENRY BRANT: I did.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, you did write a twelve-tone piece!

HENRY BRANT: Hopefully to show that it could be faked.

FRANK J. OTERI: How did you come into contact with George Antheil?

HENRY BRANT: I was studying with Copland and I reached a point where I was bringing him a symphonic movement fully scored every week and they were in a sort of international up-to-date style of the time, such that was played at symphony concerts and European music festivals. So one day I brought him what I think was my seventh or eighth such piece and he said, "Your problem is that you don't have any musical problem. Everything's too easy for you. There's nothing that you can't do. You can write a symphony piece in a week and you do it all right. But there's something missing and that something missing is that there's nothing that's really internally experienced." So, the next week I tried to write something that was internally experienced. And he said, "I can tell that there's the effort to experience something internally, but it's not really there." So I said, "How am I going to get this thing?" And he said, "You must live. It's clear that you haven't had a personal life at all. And what composer can write without something personal that he puts into his music." This had never occurred to me, and I said, "What do you suggest?" And he said, "Well, go off for a year and learn about life." So I left his presence and thought, I'm a composer but I've got to learn about life whatever life is, and I bumped into George Antheil whom I'd met on previous occasions and who was very encouraging. He said, "What's up with you?" So I told him that I'm about to learn about life and stop composing. He wanted to know how I arrived at that and I said, "Well, a mutual friend of ours, a composer, so advised me." So he said, "You're a composer. Your life is composing. How can you live if you don't compose?" And I said, "I don't know." "How many pages could you write in a week?" And I said, "I don't know. Maybe twenty-five orchestral pages." "Could you write thirty-five?" "I think so." "Come and see me next week and bring me thirty-five pages!" After, he became my teacher informally, and the idea was to write a lot—"Never stop writing, there's no time to stop writing, you don't know enough."

FRANK J. OTERI: Now I find the connection to Antheil very interesting because he was somebody who was very interested in the idea of a musical composition as an event, certainly with a work like the *Ballet Mechanique*, and so many of your compositions much later in life are these big events. At the same time, Antheil was very influenced by jazz and a lot of your earlier music is influenced by jazz...

HENRY BRANT: So is my Pulitzer Prize piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's true.

HENRY BRANT: Well, I got many things from him which were extremely valuable to me. And one of the things was in order to manage with composing in difficult times--and this was the Depression now--was to be able to write in many styles, both popular and formal and classical and the method of doing this I first learned from Copland. At the first meeting I had with him I think he said, "You must be very fond of Scriabin's music." And I said, "I never heard the name,

what is it?" And he said, "Go to the library and get as much Scriabin as you can carry and play nothing but that for a few weeks." That was the method. I found if I wanted to learn any style the thing was to get hold of the printed music and spend time with that and that alone. That was my method and I still recommend it. And that was before there were many recordings and before the things we have and I recommend it to composers now, but none of them will. It's a lot of work to do that. Antheil also impressed me because he was a great pianist. What a player, especially of his own music. I was studying piano with James Friskin and I've never been sorry for it because he taught me the music I wanted to know about: the German classics. He said once, "Sit down and play something for me." And I said, "What?" And he said, "Some piece you like." So I played part of the Hammerklavier Sonata. And he said, "It's good. You're a musician but that's not enough. You have to play like a devil. You're playing like a good boy. You have to play like a bad boy otherwise the audience won't listen." So I thought this over and he showed me very often what he meant. I'd have a few pages of something and he played them and then continued the piece impromptu, improvising the rest, and it was tremendous piano playing, showing what he meant by the bad boy devil side of playing and this I understood. I hadn't understood the learning about life thing, but something mean and nasty and getting an audience upset, this became clear to me by the way he played. Now, jazz was something else. At first, I had my parents idea that it was sort of an evil practice that led to disease and debilitation and even death and only people who were either foolish or depraved had anything to do with it. And also I knew that it was something that existed in sheet music on upright pianos in parlors, but when I was fifteen I was sent to a summer camp and all the boys had scratchy little phonographs on which they played various kinds of jazz, mostly the sort of country-club, easy-going stuff, but also some Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and when I heard that I thought I've got to learn how to do that. It's just another style. It wasn't so easy because the best kind of jazz wasn't notated. Nobody knew how to notate it and what was notated, classically-trained musicians didn't know how to read. Eventually, I solved this and now I can write things for a symphony orchestra and without telling them anything, just having them play what's there, some jazz will come out. I don't think I got this from Antheil. What I got was his violent way of playing jazzy parts in his own music. Violent, but not random, every time he played he hit something he wanted.

### 3. Popular Music and Formal Processes

FRANK J. OTERI: It's so funny now to look back at a time when jazz was considered evil music because now jazz has even moved into academia. The role that jazz had then is a role that rock music doesn't even really have anymore in our society. I think that nowadays most musically trained people accept rock. I think the only thing that comes close is maybe rap music, hip-hop. A lot of people, including classical and jazz players, harbor negative feelings about rap. I don't know what your feelings are about recent popular music.

HENRY BRANT: My view of it is quite different. I think that popular music in its instrumental form is in a crisis that the musicians don't know how to solve. It's evil is the evil of all pop music that we know, that you mentioned. The harmony is the dregs, the refuse of European music from fifty years ago and until they throw that out, every Goddamned bit of it, it's going to sound like that. Also, although improvised jazz, especially its earlier form, did have something contrapuntal about it, most of what you hear now has none. It has harmony and the harmony is the harmony of corpses in my opinion. That's its real crisis and for that reason, I take none of these styles seriously. And it's serious because our so-called classically trained musicians learn nothing about jazz. There ought to be the best jazz performers teaching at Juilliard and everybody ought to learn that just like they learn Beethoven, Bach, and Chopin. And the inability to do that means the people who are the most gifted instrumentalists and conductors are embarrassed when they're confronted with something that's in a popular idiom of any kind and that is a serious matter.

FRANK J. OTERI: Juilliard recently started a jazz department.

HENRY BRANT: Well, there's another side to it. Jazz musicians know nothing about how to construct. They construct as far as a chorus and then another one and another one. What they do is, when they learn how to make big kind of melodies, usually they abandon their jazz material. They're intimidated by the tremendous weight of this formidable tradition and they don't write jazz. The boys that do know the constructive thing never play in a band and never learn to perform really well. They don't take it seriously; they don't even take their own kind of performance seriously, which is one of the things that I think is sort of a suicide. Many young composers don't practice. Other people perform our music. If you don't practice it means you lose the sense of what it means to make a note and make a sound. Well, there are some of my prejudices. In 89 years, I've accumulated a good many and they get more bigoted as time goes on.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, since you say that popular music is stifled because it can't get past an outdated harmonic vocabulary, are older forms and instrumental combinations still valid for music being created today. Do you feel that there's no point in writing a concerto or a string quartet? Could new things still be said in those tradition bound forms?

HENRY BRANT: It's a very complicated and far-reaching question. For one thing, I feel that what is called "form" in music, very pretentiously, is very arbitrary. The whole tradition is based on absolutely nothing. The idea of writing 100 movements all of them in sonata form can be explained by musicologists who can explain anything. But you can make an arbitrary form and if you're Stravinsky or Bartók or Beethoven or Bach you can make it just as convincing as the sonata form. I've made that test many times myself and, for what I am doing now, what makes the form is the room where the piece will first be played because that place will show where

the groups of instruments can be. There are only certain places where they can be and that already dictates the continuity of the piece. It already says something about the way the piece is going to sound and that's what I do. I go into the hall, look around, ask the stage manager and somebody from the fire department where I'm allowed to put players and I decide--already there are eight groups consisting of this or that type of players. That's the form before anything else has happened, because those are the ingredients. Now, if you want to be sure that you will know exactly what's going to happen then just have them all at once it is doesn't matter where they are. But the whole point in placing them in certain locations is they should be able to articulate materials more sharply, more clearly, because of their position. Out of that will then come, "Well this one will be first and that one further along the line and then maybe there'll be these three sections together, and that is form. All that form means is continuity. My hearing and memory are no worse than probably the average person. If I tell you honestly what I hear when you play me a ten minute symphony piece, whether old or new, I'll tell you I don't remember anything beyond the first two minutes. My mind wanders. Now if my mind wanders in that way, possibly other people's do too, both people who are educated musically and people who aren't. But you hear nothing about this. What do you remember about a new piece? You remember the beginning and you remember the end because they stop playing and it got louder there or softer there. That's the form that most people remember; they do not remember the third variant of the fourth tone row in retrograde and its reverse form was hinted at. Nobody hears that; don't let anybody kid you! I don't hear it and it may be that I've got rotten perception but it probably isn't worse than most people's.

#### 4. Spatial Music

FRANK J. OTERI: The notion of music existing in space as well as time was a very radical notion when you first started doing this. Were there precedents for you?

HENRY BRANT: Yes, there were and I will tell you how I came up with it. I like music that is complicated. I like a lot going on because you have some chance of remembering it if there's more stuff to remember than the alleged manipulations of material. In ordinary life it's never simple. You're aware of so many things and music has the advantage. It's temporal, like ordinary experience. Well, I've never been a great fan of the simpler, cut down music with fewer things. It seems to me that's arbitrary. It just isn't true in ordinary life. Even now, look at the amount of things that are happening in this room both known and unknown to us and things that each of us is aware of. Why should music (I've figured after a long tortured cogitation about this) cut itself off from the experience of the most ordinary kind of life? It seems to me that since many different things happen, they should happen. My first experience was writing a very complicated texture and they were on the stage playing it all together. Well, to tell the truth, with more than ten linear parts, I didn't know what was going on. I assumed they were playing the right notes, or approximately the right notes, but something was the matter here and the answer is: Don't be simple; be pure. Abase yourself. One note is good enough... I don't like that kind of thing. That is my temperament. So I thought there's got to be some way to make complicated music intelligible. So that's the whole thing. Now, usually the word form is given to you as the thing that makes music intelligible. I think it's the thing that makes music unintelligible in the case of most music. And then, three things happened in about a year. I heard the Berlioz Requiem in Paris in the place where it was first performed. There were four brass choirs in the corner of the balcony and there were sixteen timpani in the middle of the floor and a symphony orchestra to one side of that and a chorus on the other side of that and I began to see that there's a lot going on. He's doing it harmonically because he despised counterpoint. That was one thing. Then when I was teaching at Juilliard, somebody told me about the music of Gabrieli which used to be played in St. Mark's. So I got hold of it and saw that he writes for two, three, four groups of instruments, mostly brass, sometimes with voices too, and it is known that they were placed in different parts and I thought he put them in different places because he wants them to be identified in a different way. It's not the same as Berlioz. I spoke to Stokowski about this about twenty years before all this. He'd been there in Venice and his idea was to try to play some of this Gabrieli in St. Mark's and was told we can't do this; the building has to be repaired. The police won't allow it. This stuff is so out of date anyway; nobody listens to it. But he finally got permission to do this and he found out one thing which solved the one puzzle. All those Gabrieli pieces end with a place at the end where all of those choirs perform all at once and you hear a time lag every time, and what's supposed to be sublime is sublimely out-of-tune harmony, a sublime messy ensemble. He found that no matter where you placed the groups, there was a time lag. So, I'm beginning to get some of this through my dull head and then I got a collection of Ives and it had a piece called *The Unanswered Question*. It said there were actually three pieces being played at once in different parts of the hall by different instrumental groups and I didn't believe it, so I played it with my students. Then I got a commission to write an orchestral piece. So I said I'll do it. I waited all this time without knowing what I should do and then it became clear. All music is space music. Every piece of music is situated in some space where it's being played and it couldn't be played otherwise. There has to be a space for you to play your trumpet and a place for me out in the audience to hear it and for the sound waves to move and space for them to reverberate in the hall. Space is a convention. It's set up in such a way that the performing part

is over here and the listening part is over there, but it's just as much space music as anything else. It then occurred to me that it might be possible to use the space more expressively, and that would be a much more natural way and so I wrote my first spatial piece. Before I wrote it, my gifted student Teo Macero, whose name is probably known to you, succeeded in producing a jazz concert at Juilliard for the very first time. He asked me if I'd mind if he'd do a special piece for five jazz orchestras, separated, each playing something different, improvisation as well as written music. So I said, "Teo, if you can make that thing go, go ahead and do it but I don't see how you're gonna do it." [laughs] He did this. He brought in this piece and performed it. So that, I would say, is the first spatial orchestral piece along the lines I worked. Mine followed that by about six months and had no jazz in it.

FRANK J. OTERI: When you're writing a piece like that, you mentioned going into a room and experiencing it before working on the piece. That's very different from the notion we have of a composer creating music out of his or her head and completed on paper. There's a real connection to the physical world in what you're talking about that there really isn't in the standard, abstract *tabula rasa* idea of how a work is created.

HENRY BRANT: That's very true.

FRANK J. OTERI: So do you always write a piece keeping in mind the place where it will receive its premiere? And if so, how does that translate if the piece is ever done somewhere else? Are these all one-time deals?

HENRY BRANT: Fortunately, I've had a very practical musical life. I've had to do things that have got to be ready tomorrow and they've got to be playable. So I realized that that was what I want. I didn't want to write complicated music that would require a lot of rehearsals and never get played. I admired Ives but I didn't want to produce music in that manner. So it occurred to me that in order for it to be practical, the spatial aspect had to be transferable, within reason, to any hall and all my pieces say in the prefatory note, "If you can't do this, then don't play the piece. Do not attempt or presume to play it all from the stage." This is very difficult to convince conductors of.

FRANK J. OTERI: When you're working on a piece, you're obviously not in the hall, so your memory of having been in the hall before you started working is what shapes the music. So, let's say, if you're thinking of a piece that has a flute over here in the left corner and a group of trombones in the right corner and maybe a piano hanging from the ceiling and a group of percussionists in the back of the hall. I'm just making this up...

HENRY BRANT: That's O.K.

FRANK J. OTERI: Or maybe there's a flute on the left side and another flute on the right side...

HENRY BRANT: No. I don't do that. That's like music in airports. That's confusing. You never know where it's really coming from.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you would always group the same instruments together in one location? You never have the same instruments in more than one location?

HENRY BRANT: No. That's asking for trouble. If what you want is clarity and the directionality gives you that clarity, then you'd wipe it out. That's the fault of Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, which he claimed was the very first spatial piece ever written and he didn't know that I did the second one eight years before that and performed it.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs]

HENRY BRANT: That's the trouble with spatial pieces that you may hear. I've written 112 for big and little combinations, up to as many as 400 and down to as few as 3. It takes a long time to learn how this thing works. You have to write a lot of pieces and make a lot of mistakes. Many composers give up after a few, half a dozen. They say it's no good. You can't make it work. Well, they can't make it work. So, let's take your spatial piece that you've given me. The next question is what should those trombones play so there's a reason for them being in those places. First of all, they must be highly individualized so that they never play the same material. You don't toss material back and forth in the way you're supposed to with traditional orchestration. Keep the same material for each tone quality or the same kind of material. I've heard spatial pieces that were wrecked because the composer didn't know that. So, once you've decided those things you know a good deal about your piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: These pieces are designed to work theoretically in a variety of places even though the result might never be exactly the same as the result in the hall it was originally intended for.

HENRY BRANT: I'd say it should be 85 % the same plan. If the piece is written with enough care, it can stand that much punishment. But it cannot be changed so that there's only 50%. I've run into conductors who actually have the presumption to change the position of some of the groups. One of them, a well-known conductor, said, "Well, I can't hear this." And I said, "It's not for you to hear; it's for the audience to hear. It's for you to produce."

FRANK J. OTERI: This is a problem with preserving your music on recordings because almost all recordings put all sound onto two speakers. There haven't been a lot of recordings of your music. And, for better or worse, in our society today, recordings are the predominant way that music is transmitted and discovered. In fact, even I have to admit that most of the music I know I know only through recordings; most pieces I've never had a chance to hear live. You might say I don't really know those pieces...

HENRY BRANT: Well, you know who decides the spatial arrangement that's going to get on a recording. The engineer, not the composer... Who the hell is the engineer? Did he write the piece? Did he figure it out? Did he figure out a spatial plan? Did he participate in the performance? No, but he's at the top of the totem pole. He's very grand and the composer is some little worm that put this insignificant thing together. I apologize for the violence of my language but I'm long suffering. So, the first thing is this: My recordings of which you've heard, they sound good. They sound as good as anybody else's recordings for one reason: I know more about orchestration than most composers. I've had more experience. I made something that has a good orchestral sound even if you take the space away. Nobody's ever complained about how thin my music is on recording. Have you heard any of it live?

FRANK J. OTERI: Very little.

HENRY BRANT: Anybody who's heard a piece of mine live will tell you, although you may find it satisfactory in some ways when you hear it in recording, something comes to you when you hear it live that recordings don't even hint at. But without the recordings, I'd have nothing. At least with the recordings, there's some interest in my music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Of course, there are now new technologies out there that might better serve to document your music. I'm thinking of something like 5.1 surround-sound DVDs, for example.

HENRY BRANT: It's an engineer's concept that aims at a generalized diffusion of the sound. That's exactly the opposite of what I do. I want directional sound. I want it to come from there and nowhere else and I don't want the illusion where you're fooled into believing that something's coming from so many places when it's really only coming from one position. Also, the absolute insane disproportion between the role of the engineer and the role of the composer is to me absolutely destructive. A recording is, in my point of view, an engineer's creation.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you don't feel that surround sound would work for your music?

HENRY BRANT: I've heard the effects of it. There is some music--I was talking to Tilson Thomas about this--in which a generalized distribution of the sound all over is appropriate and there are some places where he told me he goes to some length to try to get that. This is a comparatively small area of expression in the western tradition.

FRANK J. OTERI: Using this same technology though, couldn't it somehow be used for a different end? Rather than having the sound come from everywhere in all the speakers, couldn't the speakers have more focused, directionalized sound so that, in essence the recording would be trying to recreate the spatial distribution you are doing in a hall?

HENRY BRANT: A recording could do that. The technology is fully capable of having sound coming from six real sources and not speakers picking up many sources mixed different ways. But it's neither a composer's concept nor is it commercial. Who's going to make a set-up of that kind that requires six speakers in your living room? If it fits six, it does not fit five or two or three. They are very different things and that difference is a very simple matter to a composer.

FRANK J. OTERI: I know that you've said that you dislike amplification and electronic sound.

HENRY BRANT: Well, first of all, a loud speaker is a musical instrument with a tone quality of its own—a very poor tone quality! What we're told is that it's even better than the original in some ways, that it lacks the drawbacks of acoustic instruments and the imperfection of human performance. This kind of thing I can't believe. Also, the organic constituents of the sounds that are electronically produced are vastly different, not a little different, but vastly, fundamentally different and they affect the nervous system in different ways. I'm sure that careful studies of this will show this and I think it's very much my business to think about such things. I don't have to think of them very much when I deal with live performers on acoustic instruments; I know I've got one thing and when I've got synthetically derived sounds I've got another. One is organic and the other one is not and you can taste it on your dinner table.

FRANK J. OTERI: So have you ever written for electronic instruments?

HENRY BRANT: Yeah. When I want microtones...

FRANK J. OTERI: You didn't feel you could write microtonally for standard acoustic instruments?

HENRY BRANT: I did and I still do, but if I want microtones, I want someone to press a key and play the note. I don't want a slide in between unless it's a whole concept that involves sliding. A friend of mine, a composer, told me, "We've got a Japanese thing here that will give you microtones, anything you want." "Well," I said, "all I want is quartertones to start with." So I wrote this piece and I heard my quartertones, but I realized there was something the matter because of the way they combined resultant tones, which is not the way music acoustically produced would. So I'm the worst possible person to talk to about any of the new magical solutions for sound, recording, composers, and stuff like that. I can't talk to many composers about this; they don't know what I'm getting so excited about.

FRANK J. OTERI: What do you think of this whole notion of making music on the Web? There are now musicians who collaborate from different locations, in different rooms, in different cities, by being hooked up through the Internet, which creates a whole new realm of spatial music...

HENRY BRANT: It's not very realistic. Who can hear music in different cities live?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, of course, they're hearing it through the speakers. [laughs]

## 5. On Orchestration

FRANK J. OTERI: What you're mostly known for is a heterogeneous music--different groups of people playing in different styles in different places--but some of my favorite pieces of yours are homogenous to the extreme, music for ensembles of the exact same type of instrument. I'm thinking of *Angels and Devils* scored for an ensemble of flutes. It's nothing but flute sound. And then there's *Orbits*, that 80-trombone piece!

HENRY BRANT: Nothing in my thinking is against music of one timbre only. Since writing *Angels and Devils* I've gotten the idea that, unlike the flute pieces which are only four and half octaves, the family should be extended with different instruments. My newest piece, the successor to *Angels and Devils* written 70 years later, has bass flutes.

FRANK J. OTERI: You were the first composer to get involved with the Violin Octet, which is supposed to be a real violin ensemble of eight identically designed instruments across the pitch range.

HENRY BRANT: It's a more rational string orchestra. Carleen Hutchins built these instruments at my suggestion to fill the missing gaps. For instance, the instrument between the viola and the cello should have been there a long time ago and she made one and she finally made a very good one. Also, an instrument an octave above the violin so that you're not playing the violin way up, so that things could be done with lower tension, and larger basses... With the trombones I was able to get four and half [octaves] at most. There I had all the sizes that are now made. It means that some of the most elementary things in music you hear for the first time—what harmony sounds with perfectly rational and natural layouts played in the same tone quality. Most of our music exists in five octaves, but mostly in the middle range.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, you're working on a book about orchestration, which you talked about with Molly Sheridan after you won the Pulitzer and I saw it on the table here. How is this book different than other books on orchestration?

HENRY BRANT: It's conventional in some ways. I don't take up spatial orchestra, which is so different a field and so elaborate that it wouldn't meet the immediate needs of most composers. Most composers need to find recipes so that what they've got will first of all be clear and secondly have a range of timbres that they didn't know about and a book that limits itself to that and says nothing about the mechanism of instruments and technique is going to be about five pages anyway. There are many examples, all of which I composed in a neutral style. Now, neutral style nowadays takes in a lot of ground. It has no quotes from any music of mine or anybody else's. There are things I've written down over the last 50 years--whenever I heard something that was unusual I made a note of it.

FRANK J. OTERI: This was all done with a typewriter.

HENRY BRANT: I can't even type I'm so far back in the Stone Age.

FRANK J. OTERI: You send email to people, don't you?

HENRY BRANT: Yeah, but it's put together by Kathy.

## 6. Fitting Into The Tradition

FRANK J. OTERI: As long as we're talking about this and tradition and having a connection to other composers, I want to ask you where you feel you fit in the tradition.

HENRY BRANT: Do I have to fit in?

FRANK J. OTERI: No [laughs] and I'm glad that you don't! But I'm curious about where you view yourself because I remember reading somewhere that you don't consider yourself a maverick composer. I thought that was very strange because I *do* consider you a maverick.

HENRY BRANT: Tilson Thomas says I'm a card-carrying maverick and that's suitable for musicologists or publicity, but when you get through it, what does it describe? I'll go a little farther. I'm a maverick composer, Tilson Thomas says so. Also, I can do a rope trick. How many other composers can do that?

FRANK J. OTERI: I play with strings too! [laughs] Well, when you talked to Molly about the Pulitzer Prize you said that you were just starting to figure things out and now that you've got that prize, you've reached a new plateau. That's quite an amazing thing for someone of your stature to say and for someone who's been writing music for such a long time.

HENRY BRANT: You figure the number of mistakes I've had time to make and after every one I know a little more than I did before.

FRANK J. OTERI: Since receiving the Pulitzer Prize, have there been more performances of your music? More recognition of your work?

HENRY BRANT: Not in any widespread way... There have been enquiries about the works. But the problem is still that there are rumors about my music that prejudice many people against it. It is said, for instance, that a piece of mine can only be played once, in the place it was written for. It is said that my music is so difficult and complicated that it can only be played once in a while. That isn't true. It's no harder than anyone else's music. If it were, it wouldn't be played at all. I wouldn't be the person really to answer that question. As a winner of a Pulitzer Prize, I'm not unique.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, the Pulitzer Prize has meant different things for different composers over the years. You know, Ives got it for a piece that he had written 30 years earlier and he didn't even want it and he didn't even attend the performance, whereas other composers get it earlier in their career and it really helped to establish them. Charles Wuorinen got it when he was quite young and Aaron Kernis got it in the last few years and he's still a relatively young composer and so that sort of sent those composers into different places in their careers. So what can the Pulitzer Prize accomplish for Henry Brant?

HENRY BRANT: I couldn't tell you. I think more curiosity about what that is. Before the Pulitzer Prize I was vaguely known, my name was, and I was vaguely known as a kind of minor screwball music. Now they say, "Well, let's look at this minor screwball music." That's about it.

FRANK J. OTERI: You told Molly that you were working on an oratorio based on the poetry of John Muir, that this is a project you've wanted to do for decades...

HENRY BRANT: Well, that one has been superceded by another project which is going to be for five choruses and two pipe organs, in a church which really has them, and also orchestra and I will be working with my old collaborator Leonardo da Vinci. I think the name is *Clouds, Wind, Water, and Air* and it's supposed to be about what's still left of the planet while I'm here to write it. It may not be possible to write such a piece in the future except about the past.

FRANK J. OTERI: And what about the settings of John Muir poetry?

HENRY BRANT: Well, I'd like to do that too. I can't do anything though unless I have a performance and a commission.

FRANK J. OTERI: I know I heard that you were interested in writing more pieces for the Real Violin Octet, the Hutchins Consort.

HENRY BRANT: Sure. I'd be delighted but it isn't so easy for a so-called "maverick" composer to find work, to find a market for his product, that is to say. Anybody who wants my kind of spatial piece, well you figure it requires a big outlay of performers and a venue where the audience expects the kind of product I make. I suppose if somebody wanted me to write a piece in a known style or a conventional style, I'd do it if the inducement were sufficient because it's easy for me to write in many styles, but it would be principally something to make life a little more comfortable and to make opportunities for other kinds of music that I'd be more interested in. I'd like to write film scores but the lowly and humiliating position of composers of film scores I know about through personal experience and at my age I feel that I'm not inferior to a producer or a director in what the music should sound like and the worst thing is that the editor has the power of turning the volume. He can say what the dynamics are. So it's not an optimistic time, I feel, for expressive music. I mean expressive music that's really good for the nervous system, that's not a sedative and not an addictive-sounding drug, but something that really feeds the nerves. Whereas there's a big market for sedative music of all kinds and as you know much effort has been expended especially in recorded music of new kinds and technologies.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I'm glad at least that the Pulitzer committee acknowledged the great contribution that you've made and it's wonderful that we got to spend an afternoon with you to talk about this music.

## 7. Ice Field

HENRY BRANT: Do you want me to indicate the space of arrangements for *Ice Field*?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes.

HENRY BRANT: It's a 20-minute piece for symphony orchestra and it has a pipe organ part played by me and improvised along certain carefully designed lines. Now let's say we're in the audience facing the stage and that end of the room is the stage (indicating opposite end of the room). So here's the conductor (walking forward) with a stage where the symphony usually is arranged and the strings are all there just as they usually are. Over here (walking to back stage right) two pianos and next to them two harps and the timpani player, that's a section. It's not very far away from the strings. This kind of a separation I usually don't take seriously but the music that they play is not going to be confused with what the strings play if I'm very careful with that. Alright, now the choir loft is around the symphony at that level and over here (indicates upper stage left) are the double reeds--the three oboes and the three bassoons--but against the wall behind the choir loft are the organ pipes so these double reeds will sound like a sort of nasal more human extension of the pipe organ and they did. All this happened as it was supposed to. All right. Now I'm the conductor facing the audience and in the second balcony up there and over here (indicates balcony, audience right) three piccolos and three high clarinets, so that's that sound isolated there. And on this corner here (indicates balcony, audience left) xylophone and glockenspiel. Now go back to the stage. Along this wall (indicates floor, audience right) in the audience--this had to be based on what Davies Hall in San Francisco could do and it's a hall that has been rebuilt completely because the acoustics weren't satisfactory--there are boxes right above the audience seating level. So about half way back low-pitched percussion instruments and here my wish to use families of instruments instead of just one of each were carried out. There were three orchestra bass drums in one box so you can get a sort of rudimentary melody and behind them but still not all the way to the back in another box, Caribbean steel drums which I use frequently. They're excellent, but only the biggest size the big oil drum size and they have pitches lower than the timpani but real pitches and I have four pitches in those instruments. Then three Chinese gongs, big gongs... So I'll see three bass drums, three Chinese gongs, and three of the lowest pitched steel drums. Sometimes the boss conductor, the principal conductor, has to turn around and cue these people up here (indicates balcony, audience right) and here (indicates balcony, audience left) and down there and one of the devices that I've used which I think is worth mentioning is non-coordinated rhythm. I realized very early if you try to coordinate in the same rhythm, in the same tempo, in the same beat, people who are all over the room will never get it. They can't hear each other. They can't keep together. So all I ask is that each group keep together with itself, though each group may be cued in sometime by the conductor. Well, it's written in such a way that he's doing something over here and he can turn around. It's written so that this is possible (demonstrates). So everything is there except the second balcony and in this corner (indicates balcony, audience left) so that's halfway here. And in this corner are the brass section with a few extras, 12 players and a jazz drummer, and a separate conductor and they play my idea of jazz which has no conventional jazz harmony but a lot of strange discordant polyphony in it. And now the organ pipes are up there but I have the console here (indicates stage right) so that I can see the principal conductor easily and he can cue me and also signal me in various different ways. The sound, of course, came from up there. So what have I got? I've got strings, double woodwinds, pipe organ, and this pipe organ has a thirty-two foot stop which means it has pipes thirty-two feet long and I used those without anything else very often.

They create a sound that usually isn't heard in the concert hall. I was told they had a 64-foot stop and I thought, 64 feet, that's the height of a five-story building or something like that. They didn't have anything of the kind. They *simulated* the sound with a mixture of other pipes and it wasn't the real thing at all and just didn't use it. Someday I'll get 64 ft. I understand that they have such things. So that's it. It's my only piece for this combination.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow, thank you. I wish we had the orchestra in here to hear it!