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Gavin Bryars:

Greeting from Knoxville, Tennessee, for the EMC² Festival

Recorded phone message, 24 March 2017; shown at the interval of the Experimental Frontiers concert, EMC² Festival, 25 March 2017

Video on the experimusic channel of YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTWtFEf2i4A>

Hi VIRGINIA, I'm sorry I haven't been able to get in touch. I've been full of a dense schedule here in Knoxville [at the Big Ears Music Festival, Knoxville, Tennessee, 23–26 March 2017]. It's now Saturday afternoon and I had a concert last night; I have one this afternoon, a rehearsal, and then a concert tonight and two more tomorrow. I hope things are going well, but I promised I would try and beam in if it's not too late, to talk about the Experimental Catalogue and what was going on.

I got involved with experimental music in London more directly when I came back from America in the summer of 1968. I'd been in touch with Cornelius [Cardew] before that. I wrote to him in 1966 when I was trying to find contact with any other composers with a similar vent outside London.

I was in Sheffield at the time. He wrote back and with his characteristic knowledge of geography outside London, said there was Howard Skempton in Chester, and Laurie Scott-Baker in Newcastle, which wasn't that close to Sheffield! In fact, Laurie is probably further away from me than Cornelius was in London. Anyway, I wrote to them both and I was in touch, and I also sent some music to Cornelius to see if he thought I was doing was any good. And before I went to America, where I was working with a dancer on a project where I wrote some music for him, I'd recorded this music, which was for two pianos, six hands, at the London Music Club, with John



Gavin Bryars in Knoxville, 25 March 2017

[Tilbury]. This would be the end of 1967. I'm not quite sure how I got in touch with John, but we recorded this music. The other pianist was Bunny Thompson. Thompson was a jazz player I played a lot [with] in Sheffield, who had lived in London. He played at the Playboy Club on Park Lane. We recorded this piece. I remember it uses two pianos, six hands: Bunny played the left hand piano and John played the right. I played in between, so my left hand was the top end of the left hand piano, and my right hand was the bottom end of the right hand piano—not a very obvious way of doing it! We did this piece in America and then I came back. I met Cornelius when I came back and he gave me the music I'd sent him and said what I was doing I was on the right track, which was nice. But I became involved and I started working a lot with John Tilbury. We did a lot of duo things where I did electronics and he was playing keyboard. And we played in Italy in 1969 and we did various things in the Purcell Room.

I was around the Scratch and its formation, but I was never a member. But in 1969 Chris Hobbs started the Experimental Music Catalogue, which became very important—not big scale but I think it had a really unique impact. As I understood it, the basic idea was that we wanted to disseminate a lot of things especially that John Tilbury had. People had written a lot of music for him; he had acquired a lot of music from people like Terry Riley, Terry Jennings, La Monte Young, and we wanted to make them available, so we had this simple principle, which was we simply photocopied them, and they were obtained from the Experimental Music Cat library more or less at the cost of photocopying. There was no real publishing going on in a sense of royalties, rights or anything like that. The address to get them was from Victor Schonfield's address in Avondale Park Gardens in Notting Hill. Victor handled all the concert organisation for us [through his agency Music Now]. He was the one that fixed my concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1972. He arranged a fantastic concert for John White and Cornelius playing John's *Cello and Tuba Machine* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, which I think more or less broke Music Now, I think it bust their budget completely, but Victor persisted and he was terrific. And his address was the mailing address for the Catalogue. So Chris really put things together, made a catalogue, an initial list of works, which were available at cost. There was one item in there which wasn't an existing piece. Chris and I made this offer that we would realise a piece on request, so if someone wanted a piece from us we'd give them this piece I think for £25, which was actually quite a lot at that time. And this piece was called *See the Whitening Harvest Languish*. If anyone wanted a piece, we would do that piece for them. Nobody ever asked us for that, but it was there as a hypothetical publication!

And this went on for a while until around about 1972 when it became more complicated than it had been and the work became a little bit too much, and so we tried to rationalise it a little bit. We met at Michael Nyman's house. I had moved to Ladbroke Grove by then, in 1972, and Michael was a couple doors down from me. And we met with Chris, Cornelius, and a few others, to decide the future of the EMC. Cornelius offered to take it over and to do it, but he needed a salary to do that and there was no income to give him a salary. He saw that as a kind of job opportunity and it simply wasn't there. We decided there would be a three-man team: Chris would carry on, and myself and Michael Nyman would be co-editors with Chris. For ease of correspondence we used my address, which was 208 Ladbroke Grove. I had the space to store things and that became the mailing address from then and for the rest of the EMC's life until it was more or less winding down in early '82 after the death of Cornelius in '81. So we also decided to rationalise the printing of these things; we put these into groups of pieces. We reasoned that maybe someone would be more likely to get the piano piece by an unknown composer out of our gang if it was one of a compilation rather than one piece in isolation

which they didn't know. So we put together a *Keyboard Anthology*. We did several anthologies: a *Rhythmic Anthology*, which were basically percussion pieces or systemic pieces involving rhythmic permutations; we had a *Verbal Anthology*, which involved text pieces, where the notation were just all text. We also did things like handle George Brecht's *Water Yam*, cards which John Gosling put together and had reprinted. We did Christian Wolff's *Prose Pieces*, Tom Phillips' pieces and Tom did a lot of printing for some of the more beautiful works. The rest were done at a photocopy centre just quite near Victoria street near the Houses of Parliament, where I used to take them down and print them up. They'd collate them and bind them and put them together. We used to get about fifty done at a time.

We had the Catalogue printed and it was made available and we sent it round to people and other people got the Catalogue itself and eventually the thing had a life. Little by little we were selling things. I'd get lots of letters from abroad and it became a centre of correspondence and information. I remember in late '72 or early 1973 young John Adams got in touch. I had a very extensive correspondence with him when he was finding his way and wanting to know what was going on in England, what people were up to, and what we had. I had about a year of correspondence with him, handwritten letters. Eventually, in early 1974 I went over and worked with him. I was guest composer at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. We did a mixed programme of things by Cornelius, we did *Jesus Blood*, we did *Titanic*, we did some of the things by members of the Portsmouth Sinfonia, by James Lampard and Robin Mortimore, from the Majorca Orchestra, which is one of the offshoots of the Sinfonia. We did some things of Chris's and John White's and we did play those in San Francisco and also at Mills College in Oakland. I then went down also to San Diego, I gave talks. I did the same thing, in Wesleyan, where Alvin Lucier was located. I also gave some talks at Harvard while I was travelling around there. So in a way the works of the EMC got disseminated all over the place. And people from time to time corresponding from abroad. If they were in England they'd even come round and see what we had and talk. People from Australia, from Canada, and a lot of friendships were developed that way, and kind of cooperation. It was through those kind of links that most of the music that Michael Nyman and I were able to recommend and suggest for Brian Eno's Obscure Records came about. So I was first in touch with Harold Budd that way and Harold sent me some material which I passed on to Brian. That was the cause of Harold being recorded on Obscure and that kind of career with some of his work with Brian. Some of the scores were printed, as I said, by Tom Phillips. At that time Brian Eno was actually a kind of assistant printer to him out in Camberwell where Tom lived.

And it went on, even though the musical ethos changed around it. The split with the Scratch, the political and nonpolitical division, but that didn't prevent us carrying on issuing the works. We published the *Scratch Anthology of Compositions*, *Nature Study Notes*, *The Great Learning*, those were all within our remit which we continued to publish when Cornelius was repudiating them. And later we published some of Cornelius's subsequent songs and piano pieces and his versions of Irish traditional revolutionary songs and so on. We did all that and I kind of stayed, personal friendships have stayed, and that all went on in spite of the fact that there were, if you like, aesthetic differences. John Tilbury and I would go to Queen's Park Rangers every Saturday. I started watching QPR with John from 1969 onward—well, late 68 when I came back from America. When I moved to Ladbrooke Grove Michael Nyman came along also. So for many years until I left London in the mid-80s, we were there on our season ticket places at QPR every Saturday. Sometimes John would bring along someone from his musical world. I remember him once bringing along Harrison Birtwistle and his wife and Birtwistle was baffled; he didn't really

realise what was going on. He couldn't really understand our emotions. Tom Phillips' wife came once. I remember she laughed when Rodney Marsh missed a penalty. I drove her home to Camberwell and didn't say a word on the whole way back. She couldn't understand this, how she'd been cut off in this way.

So we stayed on like that until Cor's death and after that it just fizzled out. So we took everything from the EMC to the British Music Information Centre and gave them permission to make copies of it for anyone who wanted it for performance or research at cost. And that's where it remained. Later, I then handed some of my own publications, which later became published by Schott, because I started doing larger scale things. But I maintained this respect for the EMC. It was where I started and a lot of us started. It's a part of a musical world, an artistic climate, that informed my work completely. I still say when people ask me what kind of music do you write? Well, I come from an English experimental music background and that informed me and which, with Cage, and these colleagues like Chris and John, Michael Parsons, Howard Skempton, those are my roots and even if the music sounds a little bit different these days its intentions its ethos comes from that and I still maintain that huge respect for it. It's great that in the more recent past Chris and Virginia have reinvented, restarted, and re-energized the EMC through their work in putting together publications and research documents, and all kinds of things, so that's all available again now. It's getting the kind of respect it deserved. It always did have respect in some circles. I remember the French music critic Daniel Caux, who died not long ago, three or four years ago, he was very active in promoting that music in Paris, and a broadcaster, too. He said at one time that for him in the post-war world there were three major new musical forces that happened. One was the work of Cage, which emerged effectively after the war. The second was the American repetitive music composers, so-called minimalism. And the third was English experimental music. Those, for him, were the three important new things that came after the war, which didn't exist before, which hadn't been predicted before. He didn't include the kind of European avant-garde because their seeds and their ethos had come from that pre-war avant-garde period, of the post-Webern and so on, where they kind of lost their way eventually. But we stood on a true and noble path and still do. And it's great that Chris and Virginia are still doing this and I salute them and love them dearly. I hope this is of some use and I'm sorry I'm late. I'm a bit knackered, but never mind: life goes on. Okay? Bye bye.