

INTERVAL

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Interval Interview With French Composer Pierre-Jean Croset and His Lyra

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by Jonathan Glasier



It happened as it has many times before: I receive a call from someone I've never heard of who turns out to be a dynamic force in the big picture of micro-tonal music. I received this call in San Francisco in November, 1984, where I had been Artist-in-Residence at the Exploratorium (see "Pentaphone: Unfolding Fives). Pierre-Jean explained in fairly good English that he had received a grant from the French government to come to the United States to study new instrument building and scale development. His first contact was Jean-Charles Francois, Director of the Music Department at the University of California at San Diego. Pierre-Jean called and we met. His work which grew out of a contemporary music background and a frustration with those forces and attitudes, led to the creation of the 18 stringed "Lyra" and a beautiful sound which emanated from the hundreds of harmonics on this instrument. The interview begins as we are traveling together to Northern California.

Interval: What did you accomplish so far in Southern California?

Croset: I did lectures, conferences and concerts at the Center for Music Experiment at U.C.S.D., then after I met you and read copies of your magazine, I realized that there is quite a bit of activity in instrument building and non-traditional scales. I saw the instruments of Harry Partch and Arthur Frick and visited Ivor Darreg at his place in Glendale. I feel that the San Francisco area will be an adventure. I know that there are many musicians there. Also you say that there are three new magazines connected with new instruments and Just Intonation (One/One, Experimental Musical Instruments, *Balungan*) in the area. I will be lecturing at Mills College, Berkeley, and at the computer center (CCAMA) at Stanford. I hope to do concerts in the area also before returning to France.

I: Is there also some activity on the East Coast?

C: I realize that there are many influences including La Monte Young (see interview) who is working on his well-tempered piano. Also Charlemagne Palestine is working on his Bosendorfer. I know about David Hykes and the Harmonic Chorus but I believe that just intonation is more popular in Europe.

I: When did you start devoting your life to the sounds of just intonation?

C: I began in 1972 to use just intonation in my music. I worked on studying all aspects of sound from 1968 and found that there are essentially two types of just intonation music: that of Harry Partch, that is, developing a scale and building instruments around the scale, and the second, which is using the overtones from the voice and strings and other natural harmonics. The way of Harry Partch is not used in Europe, but there is a great activity around harmonics.

I: Who are the main people that you know of who are utilizing harmonics?

C: In New York there is David Hykes, in Italy Roberto Laneri and in Germany Johan and Mikael Vetter, and what I do. We all began in approximately 1972. There is more connection with music around harmonics in Europe than there is here I believe.

I: Do you believe that there is more happening in Europe?

C: Perhaps. There is more success around this activity. There are more Harry Partch-type activities here on the West Coast.

I: Could we trace your development from the late 60's?

C: In 1968, there was a great dynamic in culture and many new ideas were being developed. At that time I was studying sounds and acoustics. But I wanted to use these ideas in my own music. I improvised with many groups and played contemporary idioms as well as free jazz and all kinds of experimental music with the guitar. We tried many combinations of sounds and tried to develop a new grammar for a new music. It was the post-John Cage influence in Europe.

I: How did this "new grammar" come about?

C: I worked on a new type of writing after I read the book *Notations* by John Cage, which showed

that the problem is not a strict structure. It showed that there were many different types of writing possible. I found that the key to finding the right music was to have the instrument that you need. That is how I realized that I needed a new instrument and to play.

I: And when did you start to play only harmonics?

C: In 1975, in the Museum of Modern Art, I played a guitar concert playing only harmonics. Then I thought that if it were possible to play this concert for one and a half hours, then I had to build an instrument that would be built only for harmonics. That was the last time I played the guitar and in the same year I began to build the first eighteen-stringed LYRA.

I: Would you describe the LYRA.

C: The LYRA is a musical instrument built with four elements. The first element is where you attach the strings. The second is where you tune with the keys. The third and fourth are two supporting columns. But more important is that the LYRA is a traditional instrument dating back at least thirty-five centuries. It has often been called the "musical instrument of the spheres."

I: So, your guitar was no longer able to produce the sounds you needed to develop your music. Did you go to a lap-steel guitar?

C: It is crazy to use a traditional instrument when your needs demand more.

I: I felt the same way, but I found an instrument that was able to produce new sounds. This guitar has thirty-two strings in four bands of eight strings. The tuning is an interwoven just system I call "just free," because I can play harmonics and also with a steel bar which is parallel, play just chords from anywhere on the string. Ultimately, though, without the best strings and pick-up, the instrument has its limitations.

C: On the LYRA I found that I could play with eighteen strings. No more because that is how many strings I can grab in one hand.

I: When did you play the first concert with the LYRA?

C: In 1977, in Paris. It was my choice to have a very long concert and to work on the way the time works inside the music. This larger framework of time I call the memories in music. The longest concert was about three and a half hours only using

improvisation. All the structure of the sound was built using prime numbers and the effect of beats and tuning was being developed in a new way. The life of the sound as I see it now is in the memories. This is the essence of my theory about music.

I: Will you explain the basic memories?

C: The first memory is all memories of all time before in this life and the second, running back generations into the past and when I am playing, I try to be aware of this. Not necessarily your genetic ancestors, but the ancestors who have a feeling about what you do. The third memory is all the concerts you have done from the first to the last one. Then I see the concert you have done is important. In fact, life is a long concert with different pauses where events take place which we call life. The real life is the concert itself, the other possibly is illusion. The ideas about the music are being developed in your brain and in your body all the time, so each new concert, you have new ideas.

I: We have discussed three of the memories . . .

C: The next is the memory of the last concert I have given. It is the most important for what is happening in the present. The fifth memory is the time up to the performance of the present concert. This memory concentrates the time to the present. The sixth memory includes the beginning of the concert up until the actual moment (time-0). At time-0 I am playing. The seventh is the memory of the imminent future or what I have to play until the end of the performance. Eight: The memory of the future events of your mind, your life and future lives. All of the memories work together at time-0.

I: Do you call your music experimental?

C: I don't like most experimental music. Experimental music is when you cannot find the way.

I: When you cannot find the way it's experimental?

C: When you have found a way, it is not experimental.

I: I find so much of the music in the last twenty years is trying to find the way and it seems like every piece says "I cannot find the way."

C: Ah, yes.

I: The musicians are fighting with each other.

C: Or with themselves.

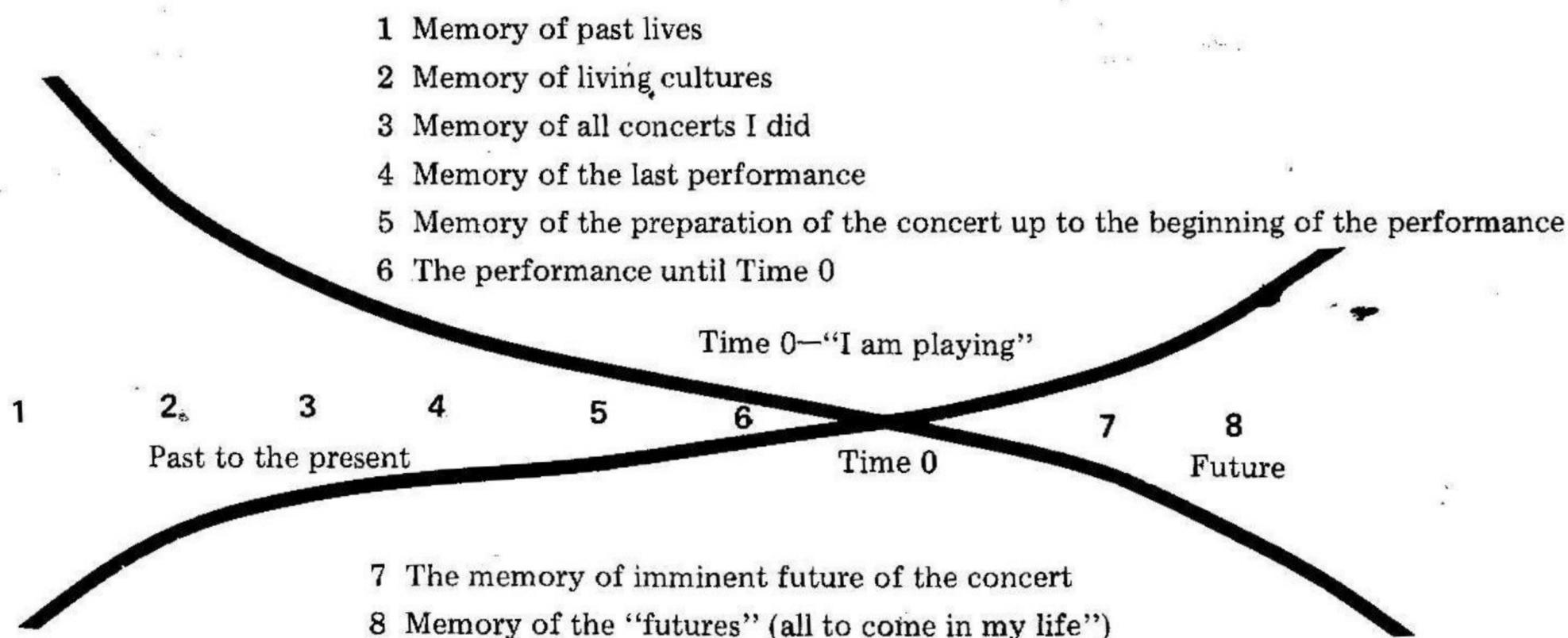
I: And I've often wondered what this fight is about. I know our society . . . I mean the Western civilization is not at rest and we are not only at war with ourselves but with each other, and I often wonder, "Why doesn't music show the way to peace?" And as I said in my last magazine, the way is not just war and peace but the key between war and peace is harmony, because "harmony" actually means "order," and if you just say, "Well, let's have peace," it's, then it's like it's against war.

C: And it's just the flip side of the same coin.

I: Rather than saying, "Okay, now what is the missing ingredient in the whole 'Peace Movement'?"

C: Yes.

THE MEMORIES



I: And that missing ingredient is harmony. We can't just say "No, no . . . we won't go." You have to show a new way.

C: It's exactly what I think and we need to have a new music to be happy. We need the music showing constructive ways. And to open the imagination of the public. Not to impose some pictures you have imagined already, and in my work there is an expression of balance. I think that a lot of music mirrors the stress in the society. We don't need this to be stressed more. We need the contrary. We need to be balanced and it is because of this you have to *tune* the ideas you use in music. Like you tune a musical instrument. You can't say, it is now like it was in the seventies: "We are free." There is nothing absolutely free in the world, though.

C: I think that what I am saying is stated in the book I am writing, *MUSIC-LANGUAGE FOR A CONSCIOUSNESS NEW*. I am writing about the idea of a new consciousness for music. The basic ideas around the philosophy of life and the philosophy of understanding music: What is "music," What is "public," What is a "musician," What is a "composer," and . . .

I: A redefinition of all of the old words.

C: Yes, and it is the responsibility of the book I am writing to be more clear about (what) we need to do. We can understand this with two experiments and I have two examples: one acoustic experiment and one social experiment. The first acoustic experiment is very well-known in India and absolutely unknown in Western countries, used by some composers in Western countries. It starts: We can only hear the just pitch of a tone if we hear this tone twice. Our ear and our brain don't know how to recognize a sound the first time it is heard except if you have learned for hours to recognize automatically a sound. But in reality the ear needs twice to hear the same sound to know exactly what is happening.

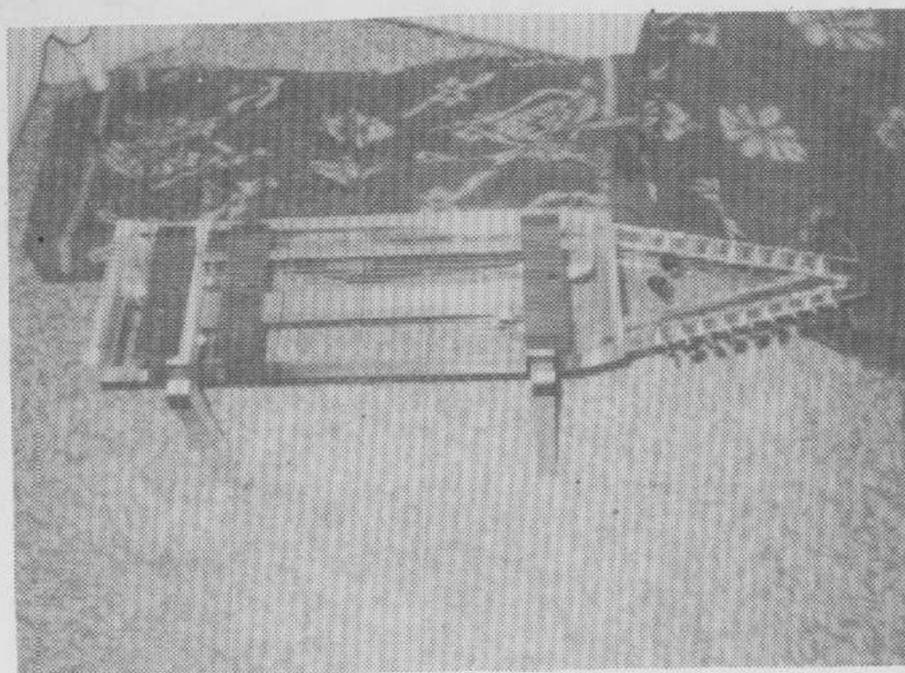
I: Okay, the acoustic experiment first in India . . .

C: In Indian music, if you hear a singer going from up scale to down scale to a fundamental, you hear a fundamental exactly, a singer goes just under a fundamental. He passes under the fundamental, he goes a little past and he goes up exactly on the fundamental.

I: And you hear only the fundamental.

C: The second example you have heard is very beautiful because you have heard for the first time and you didn't see this because the singer used this

knowledge very precisely and intelligently. And the second one is a Balinese orchestra which came to Paris. This is a social experiment only. This Balinese gamelan played in Paris and one day they were going to the French Opera, the famous Opera of Paris to hear a rehearsal of symphonic music of the Opera. They saw a lot of musicians with a lot of musical instruments they never had seen before. In a gamelan there are around thirty, thirty-five musicians—big orchestra—and the Balinese asked: "Why this paper with these musical instruments? For what is it?" And the man, the conductor of the Opera said: It is writing for music." And the Balinese said:



"What is writing? We don't use." "It is because there are many musicians and they need writing to play music." And the Balinese said: "We don't listen (read?), we are lost in our orchestra. We don't use writing." And the orchestra begins. A man comes for the direction of the orchestra and the Balinese said: "This man with the stick, what does he do?" "He is the conductor of the orchestra." "And for what is the stick?" "It is for the direction of the playing." "And for what he uses this?" "It is because he is the chief of the orchestra." And the Balinese says: "What is the 'chief'?" And so on.

I: (chuckles) Yes.

C: Because, if you hear a gamelon in Bali, when the gamelan starts, all the musicians start together. They don't need some of the tools we need in Western countries.

I: Right.

C: Then the conclusion is we can compare the kind of tools used by different cultures and perhaps we have to take some of this information to heart.

I: So this is part of the new grammar, comparing the tools of the different musical systems?

C: Yes. It is not only to use this in music, but years after years after many, many, many observations you can understand what we need exactly, what we can hear exactly, and perhaps we can integrate this new comprehension. And if you need writing or notes or stick, use them. But if you don't . . . don't use them.

I: Do you have another example?

C: For example, if a symphony orchestra played tutti the pitch comes up very quickly. The pitch changes and the singer can't sing exactly in the intonation. Another example is that bad sounds are very dangerous if they are not in good use and there is an experiment about this: the gong is used very strongly in western culture. Never is it used loudly in Asian music.

I: Gongs are never used loudly?

C: Never. Because it is so dangerous. The sound of the gong is considered to be magic. The gong is magic in all these cultures. In Indonesia it is magic. Why is this magic? Because the waves working with the gong are so loud and so powerful. The level of the bass which we can hear is so dangerous, they take care about and make only balanced sound with the gongs and the other instruments. Perhaps we can experiment to play loud gongs but the problem is not like this; it is to know if there are thousands of

musicians in Asia who are not working loud with gongs, there are some important reasons and we have to consider these.

I: Okay, so you have the social and the acoustic experiments and it is a matter of bringing all of these experiments and weaving these into a new grammar.

C: The new grammar exists. The grammar of a universe includes not only music but all arts, physics, chemistry, all sciences. All things are together and it is because of this that now there is some connection between arts and sciences but not like experiments but like observing. We work on the same things, on the same tools if you like, only at the level of the tools, in sciences and arts. The differences between the sciences and the arts is that in a very short time in art you can explore much knowledge about the universe you can't explore in normal situations. For example, it is very difficult without tools like art to have communication with nature around us. The interest of art is not the creation; I don't think that the creation in art exists, man can only discover what exists and show this with his life and show what he has discovered. We can show what we have discovered and this technique is called creation. But I think it is not a good word to use. We have to use this word because the media uses it. It is not true to use this word. It is not exact. An artist discovers what exists.

THE PENTAPHONE — UNFOLDING FIVES

JONATHAN GLASIER

For years I have been trying to tie together parts of my multidimensional musical self. The Exploratorium in San Francisco gave me the chance to do that last fall by accepting my proposal to build the Pentaphone. As a music educator, I've always fought to help the average person free himself from handicaps about playing music. Some people call me a proselytizer, but I believe that creating music creates the self and in creating ourselves we expand our consciousness. Anyway, to build an instrument without wrong notes, where people face each other . . . that was the task.

The Exploratorium gave me the task of building the Pentaphone through their Artist-in-Residence program funded by Rockefeller, Xerox, and others. Luckily there was a room already functioning for creative music making, but the instruments over the

years had been abused to uselessness. The Pentaphone would give form to the idea of playing music in a supportive environment. Since the 10 ft. by 10 ft. room is closed off from the loud ambience of the rest of the museum, focused playing is possible. I knew right away that I would use a pentatonic scale because of its simplicity, but I laboured over whether to use an equal five or a Ptolemaic five limit scale. I decided to go with the scale of Emperor Ling Lun (see *Genesis of a Music* by Harry Partch, Da Capo Press, New York) because of its ancient beginnings over forty-seven centuries ago, and it's easy to understand 3/2 scale generator.

For five months I researched, developed, designed and built the Pentaphone. That is the reason it was necessary to suspend publication of *Interval* temporarily after the Spring 1984 issue. I was living in San