An Interview with Earle Brown

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The following is an edited transcription of a telephone interview the author conducted with Earle Brown on 23 June 1997 (she was at her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan; he was at his home in Rye, New York). Questions have been removed to allow more fluid reading. The stories he tells here largely reflect the nature of the interview questions, which focused primarily on Brown’s (and Morton Feldman’s) professional activities and reception in West Germany. This particular interview with Earle Brown was the very first of several dozen interviews the author has conducted with composers and musicians in Europe and the United States, interviews that form the foundation of all of her historical research. She has always felt lucky that her first attempt was welcomed so graciously by such a generous, patient and light-hearted subject.

Keywords: Pierre Boulez; Earle Brown; DAAD; Darmstadt; Morton Feldman; Ferienkurse; Graphic notation; Bruno Maderna; Karlheinz Stockhausen; David Tudor

Brown: My connection to Europe started as early as 1952. Pierre Boulez came to New York in 1952, and I met him then. Morty [Feldman] did, too. John Cage and I were working on the electronic music project and Pierre stayed in John’s loft, and that was 1952. Pierre liked what he saw of my music. He didn’t like the graphic stuff, but he liked the precise twelve-tone stuff, and he said when I get to Paris, be sure to look him up—which I did. This is me getting started in Europe.

[I first went to Paris in] 1956. The first person I looked for in Paris was Pierre, and we spent a lot of time together, and talked about all kinds of things, and we argued about my open form and various other things. I think he learned a lot from it because his music sort of opened up and softened up a little bit after those conversations, and that’s when, after I was there in Paris, and we had all those talks, he did Aléa, the article.¹ So anyway, that was fantastic and we had a long time together in Paris and Pierre wrote—I was making a tour of Europe to introduce my music to various people, and I knew Luciano Berio, but I didn’t know many other people—and Boulez wrote five letters of introduction for me to very important people: Hans Rosbaud the conductor, and Otto Tomek, Universal Edition, and William Glock in London…
anyway, five letters, and that really started me off. That was a fantastic thing for Pierre to do, and it was very important. But in my starting off on the tour, one of the first places after Paris—I think it was the first place—was Milano to see Luciano. I spent four or five days with Luciano and one evening we had dinner and he had invited some students and friends to meet me, and one of them was Bruno Maderna. That was a key, key thing in my whole life. Bruno immediately loved my music. He couldn’t speak English and I couldn’t speak Italian, but Bruno immediately understood and very much liked my music, and immediately started promoting it really, at that point. And right up to Bruno’s death in 1973 we were very close, Bruno Maderna is probably the closest musical friend I ever had (Figure 1). And Bruno was married to a German woman [Cristina], and lived in Darmstadt, and he did a great deal of conducting in Germany.

But let me go back a little bit. Before I ever went to Europe, but after Pierre Boulez was here and I met him, David Tudor, I think, did his first trip to [Donauueschingen] in 1954, and whenever David was first in Darmstadt [1956], it was a key event. He played my early piano music and Morty’s and John’s and Christian Wolff’s, and other people maybe. In 1956 I went over myself. I was working and making a living as a recording engineer for Capitol Records, what in Germany they call Tonmeister, I was what you call a Tonmeister for Capitol Records. And in two or three different years I sort of resigned, I said, ‘I’ve got to go to Europe. I’ll come back: if there’s still a job for me, I’ll take it. If there isn’t, I won’t’. But they always had a job for me when I came back. But I left for two months at a time; I just had to do something about people knowing about my own music. So my first performances at Darmstadt were David’s—the early piano music and also my early open form work, which started an

Figure 1 Bruno Maderna and Earle Brown during the 1959 Darmstadt courses. Photograph by Hella Steinecke. Courtesy of the Earle Brown Music Foundation.
influence of open form in Europe culminating in Piano Piece XI [1956] of Karlheinz Stockhausen and the Third Piano Sonata [1955–] by Pierre [Boulez]—both influenced, I'm quite positive, by a piece called Twentyfive Pages which I wrote in 1953, which was about seven years before they did their stuff [obviously, Earle’s memory is slightly in error here, as three or four years is a more likely figure – Ed.]. Anyway, that was the first introduction by David. And then I guess David met a cellist, I can’t think of his name at the moment [Earle is referring to Siegfried Palm], he was quite a well-known cellist there at that time. And he wanted me to write a cello piece, and in America, so did Seymour Barab. He was a very good cellist at the time, and composer, and he’s still around. And I wrote this and it turned out to be in a brand new notation, what I call time notation, and he couldn’t quite figure it out, and besides, he didn’t have very contemporary ears anyway. But he was the stimulus for my writing the Music for Cello and Piano [1954–1955] (Figure 2), three short pieces in a completely new notation and a new way of performing.

Anyway, I wrote that piece and David said to send it to this cellist in Germany, so the first live performance of my music apart from David in Darmstadt was this Music for Cello and Piano. I can almost think of the man’s name.4

While I was still working for Capitol Records I met David Soyer, who is now the cellist for the Guarneri Quartet. And he was doing recording dates, string backgrounds for Sinatra and stuff, and so I got to know David very well, and so a concert came up with [Edgard] Varèse and Cage and other people and they wanted my Cello and Piano music, and I didn’t have a cellist and somebody said, ‘Well, ask David Soyer, he’s a terrific cellist’, and he did it! And he loved it. And he recorded it. It’s a brilliant recording even now; it’s been recorded many, many times since then.

Anyway that was the first. Music for Cello and Piano was the first music in Germany, in Darmstadt; it was a relatively new piece. I wrote that in 1954–1955. Then I got a commission from Luigi Nono, who asked me to write a piece for Christoph Caskel, David Tudor and Severino Gazzelloni, which turned out to be a piece called Hodograph [1] (Figure 3).

Gazzelloni was a very, very fine, compatible and experimental [musician]. He played standard flute repertoire, he was a great friend of Maderna, so we were all good friends together. Anyway, I wrote the trio and it was definitely for Severino, Tudor and Caskel—and that was the third piece of mine, I suppose. And that led to them commissioning me for Available Forms I in 1961. That was commissioned by the city of Darmstadt [for the festival] as a result of liking my previous two premieres.

I wrote a piece [in 1958], Boulez wanted a piece for the Domaine Musical and I wrote him a piece [called Pentathis] (Figure 4) in standard notation and normal conducting practice. I had already done a lot of experimenting with graphics and new notations, but I wrote it in standard notation because, number one, I wanted to go back to it and see if I liked it still, or again, and I didn’t want to drop the new notation on Pierre at that time. It was for nine solo instruments, and was first conducted in Germany by Maderna. Boulez was supposed to conduct it, but he was terribly busy that year, and so Bruno inherited the conducting of it, that was
September 1958, and that resulted in the commission for *Available Forms I*—eighteen instruments, and Bruno conducted the premiere of that in 1961—the first open-form orchestral piece (Figure 5).

In Darmstadt [1958] we were working together: there was no aesthetic split; well, there was an aesthetic split, but there was no personal split. We were very good
friends with each other. I was good friends with Karlheinz, Pierre, Luciano, and Maderna—they were the key people—Ligeti, etc., and we had no animosity whatsoever. It’s funny because I tell this story very often: because I’m American, and I don’t write music the way they write it, I could be friends with everybody. But I would be in Cologne and Karlheinz would say, ‘I heard you were in Rome talking to that stupid Nono’—and I would go to Rome, or Venice, and Nono would say, ‘I heard you were talking to that terrible Stockhausen’. They had things between themselves! I was kind of a neutral party, because I was doing a kind of music that was not a threat to them; it was not in Boulez’s style, it was not in Karlheinz’s style—they actually came into my style. So, anyway, I don’t think you’ll find that there was any animosity—there was an aesthetic difference, but...I wrote an article for Darmstadt that I delivered there in 1960-something, on [open] form in new music. And before that was notation, new notation in contemporary music, new notations, and stuff. Anyway, I wrote that and I began the notations lecture—I was invited to lecture on these things at Darmstadt—I began the notations lecture by saying that
this is one of the most exciting times I can imagine, because as in the days of Schoenberg and Stravinsky—which was a very exciting splitting off in two aesthetic directions—now we have the total control versus flexible control, or something to
Figure 5 Available Forms I, p. 5. Courtesy of the Earle Brown Music Foundation.
that effect. And I considered it a very positive thing, and in my experience, everybody did. They all were very good friends of mine—and still are.

[My open form] affected [other composers in Europe] a lot because my open form pieces sounded as clear, precise and beautiful—or not beautiful—as their very precisely figured-out twelve-tone serial pieces. And the success of my music sort of undermined the fact that they thought they needed all these rules and regulations—and I wrote twelve-tone serial music myself for a couple years. [But] my background was jazz, so I found that complete total systematic control of every note and nuance was sort of contrary to my nature.

[Hans G. Helms and Heinz – Klaus Metzger] first saw my music in 1957. I became a good friend of Helms. Whenever I was in Cologne, years after that, I stayed in his house when I was working with WDR [Westdeutscher Rundfunk; West German radio station in Cologne]. But what astonished me, and astonished Morty too, ultimately, was the fact that they read my action as political, you know, America the Beautiful, freedom for everybody, because of my Folio works, primarily, the graphic pieces, which are the most extreme, [and which] allow individuality, wild freedom! I only did that for one little year, in 1952. . . . Unfortunately, there are still some articles coming out now that just love to print the score of December 1952, as if I didn't do any real writing! That really makes me very angry sometimes.

I met Metzger and Helms in Cologne in 1957, at the end of my trip, and I was very surprised, and didn’t understand it quite, but they considered Morty and me and John, our activities were basically politically motivated, and I kept saying, ‘Well, that’s very nice of you, but it wasn’t politically motivated at all’. It shows my interest in human performance potential, and it shows my interest in multiplicities of beautiful effects from the same material. Because I was influenced by [Alexander] Calder . . . and you see a Calder mobile and it’s gorgeous, and you see it five times in a row on different days and it’s still gorgeous. Form is a function of the object itself, and that process is what I was trying to work with—and I did work with. Anyway, Metzger and Helms studied with Horkheimer and Adorno. And the other thing was, they didn’t like Karlheinz at all in 1957, they were very angry at Karlheinz and they considered [him] very fascistic. So we were almost used by them. . . . Europeans surprise me. Europeans, for the first time I discovered this, they put a political cast on nearly every action, activity. And you can imagine, coming out of a war and all of that, they would tend to look for something liberating. And we happened to hit it! But Helms, and both of them, have given me very good reviews, write-ups, and everything else, but I kept trying to convince them that I did something because I thought it would result in a beautiful piece, not because it was a political statement. [But the idea of democracy in action] came up right then when I was there for the first time in 1957.

[In Darmstadt in the 1970s] Christian and some people from London, Cornelius Cardew and John Tilbury, put a very political cast on their work. And their actions were sort of anti-elitist because they considered the kind of work that I was doing, and Pierre, and other people, was only for the elite. So they wanted to write music that The People would like, despite the fact that The Beatles already had. I always
thought that was rather a misbegotten concept, to write music that The People would like, because The People didn’t like Debussy either.

[There’s a bigger audience for my music in Germany than in America], there’s a lot of activity and recordings and stuff. I think I’ve just lived long enough for them to realise and look into it, and to pay attention. You know, last year at Darmstadt was [the Ferienkurse’s] fiftieth anniversary and it was the thirty-fifth anniversary of the premiere of Available Forms I. And they wanted me to write a new piece, but I held back and resisted, because I wanted them to do a new performance of Available Forms I, and I dedicated the performance to the memory of Bruno Maderna and Dr [Wolfgang] Steinecke, who commissioned it: Steinecke commissioned it, Bruno conducted the first performance, so I just wanted to make an homage to those two people. And last year—it sounds very immodest – but a lot of students came up to me and said, ‘Gee, that’s fantastic! We haven’t heard any real music like that in the festival yet!’ So there’s a dissatisfaction over there.

[So the piece has become a real classic of the postwar era.] I came out on stage and there was an ovation! I didn’t know that this was happening. [There haven’t been any performances of that piece in America recently.] America is another problem. I was so successful in Europe that the Americans were furious with me. No kidding… It’s the academicism of American power politics in music… because it’s interesting to note that neither John nor Morty nor I ever completed a conservatory or a university; I went to Northeastern University but then I went into the Army Air Force because of the war, and when I went back, I went back to music school; so the fact is that none of us, Morty, John, or I, had any degree or anything, we never worked for [universities]. Morty did finally, and I’ve done uncountable numbers of visiting professorships, at USC, and Berkeley, and Indiana, and all over the lot. So eventually some liberal-minded types at these universities started hiring me furiously for three-day residencies.6 When it came to [Milton] Babbitt, he would badmouth us completely! And Elliott [Carter]: I know him, but I heard he said something disparaging about my music one time. It’s just that mentality. I don’t understand it. But you know very well that European composers do not make their living in the university, very few of them. They go out and be musicians.

That, incidentally, is a very important story. When I was in Europe a lot, I spent a lot of time in Paris, in the 1960s. After the premiere of Available Forms I in 1961, I stayed most of the time in Paris. I didn’t particularly like living in Germany, but I did most of my work in Germany. Anyway, while in Paris, all I had to do was to call up Boulez or write him a note or something and say, ‘I have a new piece for chamber orchestra’—and he was directing Domaine Musical—and he would write back or call back and say, ‘Well, when do you want to do it? You want to conduct it? Or you want me to conduct it? Or what?’ You know, like, no question, immediate! Then, over a period of time, I used to argue with him about Varèse, too. He said Varèse was too napoleonic. Anyway, I once asked Pierre, ‘Why is it you play works of Cage and me, and you don’t play any works by Morty or Christian?’ I don’t think in the whole Domaine Musical did they do a work of Morty’s, unless it was played by David. ‘How
come you don’t play Morty or Christian?’ And Boulez said, without any hesitation at all, ‘Well, they’re not composers! Feldman works for his family, and Christian Wolff is studying the Classics. They’re dilettantes’. Because Cage and I . . . always I’ve made my living as a recording engineer, which is a distinctly musical job, and John just didn’t ever do anything but write music and starve. But it’s a very interesting point of view. And Pierre’s comment—‘They’re not composers, they work on the side, they work for their families, Morty works for his family, and Christian is studying Classics at Harvard’—that’s a very French attitude.

[And Feldman], he was anti-Germany, being Jewish. But I figure it’s more than that. He was frightened of Boulez because Boulez didn’t react to his music in New York at all. And Feldman, he’s a very contradictory character, and he would put down the university. Varèse would do this, too. Varèse used to run Lenny Bernstein into the ground like crazy, until Lenny did his work. Morty had the same vulnerability. Morty’s just knocked the academic world sideways and upside down until he got a job there. He was very subjective and paranoid in that way . . . . Morty was in analysis for paranoia all his life, and I discovered that the hard way by arguing with him about mathematical compositional techniques, and he thought I was defending Boulez against him, which I was not. I was just talking about my tendencies, and Boulez’s tendencies, and some other tendencies. It had nothing to do with knocking Morty, but he didn’t speak to me for three years! And John was there and he said, ‘You don’t realise what you got yourself into last night, because Morty is very, very, very, very sensitive and he thinks that you don’t like his work’. It had nothing to do with his work. But he was very vulnerable.

After a certain point, he went to Universal Edition before I did, and I sort of followed him to Universal Edition, after him coming from [Edition] Peters and my coming from Associated Music Publishers. And then, the DAAD [Berlin artists-in-residence programme] thing. I was in Berlin for a year and I get a letter from him saying, ‘Hey Earle!’—he was always asking my advice—‘Hey Earle! Do you think I could stand it in Berlin? If I come to Berlin, can I stand it?’ I wrote back and said, ‘Of course you can. By all means, come, it will be a good way to live here, and to introduce yourself to Europeans’.

They invited me to apply for the DAAD; I was invited by the director, Peter Nestler. They have their sources, and long before I was there, Elliott [Carter] was there, [Frederic] Rzewski was there as a student of Elliott, not as a real DAAD person. But I don’t remember applying. I remember getting a letter saying, ‘Will you come?’ [I was an artist-in-residence; I didn’t have to teach at all.] I could have if I’d wanted to. And I gave lectures once in a while, and there were performances frequently. But there were no strings attached whatsoever and I had a fantastic apartment on Meinekestraße, right near the Bahnhof centre just off [the Kurfürstendamm] . . . across from that fancy [Café Kranzler]: number six Meinekestraße, and it was later taken over by [Edward] Kienholz the artist, the sculptor. And he turned it into a mess, but when I went in, the apartment belonged to the Dutch prince [Bernhard] von Lippe—this has nothing to do with anything! [But it’s] another funny story
because when I got there, they were very conciliatory and they were very concerned about my pleasure and comfort, and so they showed me all these places out in the boondocks because it was quiet, and I didn’t like any of them, because I lived and wrote in New York on Third Avenue for years. Anyway, they said, ‘We have a place right here on Meineckestraße, but it’s terribly noisy, they’re building a garage across the street’. And I went to see it, and I immediately said, ‘Yeah’! It was a big, big, fantastic apartment, belonging to the Prince von Lippe (Figure 6).

[The musical climate in Berlin was very different from Darmstadt.] Darmstadt was definitely a centre, I mean we spent every day with each other in Darmstadt, it was concentrated like mad, and every night we went to the Schloßkeller and had this wild concoction of chili con carne and Chinese food—it was the only thing to eat at that hour in Darmstadt, in the Schloß. And they played music, and I remember Ligeti dancing like crazy, and Bo Nilsson was there, and Bruno and I were there; it was an after-hours hangout. [But in Berlin], there was not the same number of people, there were some composers, but no one that I knew before I got there. There was Carlos Roqué Alsina, the South American [Argentinean] composer who we got to be good friends with; I went skiing with him one time. And I had contact with Erhard Großkopf a lot, I liked him and we were good friends. And... I didn’t know him at the time, but the flautist Eberhard Blum...I don’t know if he was there at that time, actually.

I remember one of the things that I was working on while living in Berlin. It was commissioned by the Domaine Musical for a festival in France in St.-Paul-de-Vence, but I wrote that in Berlin. I have photographs of myself working on that score, so I

remember that. I’ve always had good public reactions. You know, *Available Forms I*, when it was premiered—I mean last year [at the fifty-year anniversary of the beginning of the Ferienkurse in 1996] was a miracle of reception—but when it was performed, the public liked it. But my music has always infuriated musicologists because they can’t figure out how it happened. I’ve got some marvellous quotes from critics in Stuttgart, Munich and other places, and they’re completely baffled, and one of them said about *Available Forms II* [1962]—for big orchestra, two conductors, ninety-eight instruments—the critic literally said, ‘It sounded fantastic! It sounded like a fantastic piece for orchestra, but how can I judge it if it’ll never sound like that again?’ He was obsessed with judging, and I was writing music that was different every time it was played, and so that sort of undermined and hurt me. But the people loved it! The audiences always liked my music, in my experience. [And other composers as well.] Karlheinz said one time, it was after an *Available Forms I* performance, he came up to me immediately afterwards, looked me in the eye, pointed his finger at me and said, ‘I learned something very important tonight’. And I think as a result of that, it influenced somewhat *Momente* [1962–1964].

I spoke with Stockhausen last summer, but he’s gone off on such a weird toot, with the operas and also in his private life . . . and he’s just as maniacally egocentric as he always was. I was always able to get through to him, and especially one-on-one, we had a tremendously warm, good relationship. I made a record with him, and he and I edited it together at midnight, and we had marvellous times, I’d go back to his house and we’d have bacon and eggs, we had a great time. But he, in a group of people, he sort of puts on his chief costume, the guru of all times. Anyway, I still like him; we were friendly last summer.

You want me to tell you a story? I think the first time that Morty ever went to Europe, I drove him there from London. I was living in Paris. I’m not sure exactly what year it was; I think it was after 1965. I got a Guggenheim in 1965 and I bought a French car. I think I had it in London, and Morty and I were both seeing our publisher [Bill Colleran at Universal Edition]. Anyway, I introduced him to a lot of friends of mine in London, and I was going back to my apartment, back to my hotel, that is, in France, and I talked him into—or he wanted to go, I can’t remember—but we got in my car one morning and drove to Paris, and I think that was the first time he ever did it, that he was ever on the continent. And we drove from Calais to Paris and I decided to stop at a very old and French-looking kind of château restaurant and we had lunch there, and he was very impressed with that, we had a nice time. And then we drove on to Paris, I think we got to Paris about nine or ten o’clock at night. Morty was not sleepy, and I was not sleepy, so I took him to La Coupole. Anyway, La Coupole was a hangout. It was a big barn-like restaurant, it has fantastic food, even now, but it was a hangout especially for American artists—painters, and musicians—and I knew that and so when we got into Paris, I immediately drove to La Coupole. We went inside and had a fantastic dinner, and when I decided to go there, I thought it would be the one place we would meet somebody that he would know and that would know him. Well, we had this fantastic dinner and then, as I expected, along
came two composers, young composers: Serge Tcherepnin—his father [Alexander Tcherepnin] was an old Stravinsky compatriot; very nice guy—and [French composer] Gérard Masson. They came in, and I have photographs of the three of them sitting in the booth at La Coupole (Figure 7).

We had a marvellous conversation and they loved Morty, he’s so engaging, and I was already good friends with them. And so we talked until midnight or until the damn place closed! And when it closed, or at one or two in the morning, Serge said, ‘Let’s go to my house’. Serge’s family had a marvellous, big apartment on Place Furstenberg, and so we went there, and one of the first things that happened was that Morty took a bath with his felt hat on. They just loved him, he was so bizarre. Morty was in the bathtub with his felt hat on, and then afterwards at some point Gérard Masson asked to hear some music of Morty’s, so Morty played a tape of something which lasted about thirty minutes. It was very sparse, very quiet, very slow, and it seemed interminable to me. And at the end of it, Gérard said—and this is one of the cleverest things he could have done—he said, ‘It’s too short!’ And Morty said, ‘Oh yeah! It’s too short!’ Anyway, we stayed in Serge’s family apartment, Place Furstenberg, and I think La Coupole closed between four and six, so at six o’clock we went back to La Coupole, the four of us, and I guess we had breakfast or something. Then I took Morty to somebody who he had met in London who said, ‘Come and stay with me’. It was a girl—but she didn’t mean it! So I take him to this place and go back to my hotel, and I get a phone call, ‘I’ve been sitting outside the door, she won’t let me in!’ So anyway, that was his first move to Paris, as far as I know, and I introduced him to people like André Boucourechliev, Betsy Jolas, Gilbert Amy, [Iannis] Xenakis, and radio composers. And then later, I think it was the same

**Figure 7** Serge Tcherepnin, Gérard Masson and Morton Feldman in Paris, 1965. Photograph by Earle Brown. Courtesy of the Earle Brown Music Foundation.
trip, a few days later, I think, he had borrowed the de Menil château outside of Paris, so I drove him out there, and he installed himself there, and I guess there was a maid... it was a tremendously wealthy family, and Morty taught their kids harmony or something, they got to be good friends. They had a château just a little way outside of Paris, and I took Morty out there and he stayed there, and then I’d go and pick him up and bring him in town once in a while or go out to visit him. That’s where he wrote Rothko Chapel. I know, because there was a mutual friend of ours in Paris and he gave her the sketches for the damn piece. They would be worth a fortune [now]. He gave them to her; I don’t know what she did with them. But that was a very extraordinary thing, and I think it was the first time Morty ever appeared in Paris and was introduced to all these people.

... I’m a little vague about how Morty... I drove him to France, but I’m vague about what his connections were that got him into so much performance. I think it started with London to some extent, and I know that a person named Marcello Panni, the Italian Marcello Panni, was very instrumental in helping Morty in the same way that Bruno was with me, perhaps... that was in Italy. His presence there is what did it, because the music... you look at the music and it doesn’t look impressive at all. But when it’s played well, it’s gorgeous. And it took that transition period to get there, for people to realise that it is gorgeous. I remember distinctly him writing and saying, ‘Do you think I should come over there [to Europe], Earle?’ And I said, ‘Sure, because they will love you’. He was afraid of it, I think, he was afraid of the intellectualism of the compositional world. It’s not that he wasn’t intellectual. It’s that his music, because of his eyes or whatever it was, and his poetics, he just didn’t want to write complicated music. Later he used standard notation and made metric changes that are mind-boggling, but I don’t think that was a very serious thing, because they were unnecessary. He said a great thing: I asked him once why he was writing these four-hour string quartets, and he says, ‘It’s a career move!’ He was very conscious of painters, and career, and being a success, he really wanted it, without making any bones about it. And he was very dramatic, wearing his Verdi felt hat, and his coat over his shoulders like a cape, he had a real way of being... an artiste...

I think [Feldman’s music] was very personal. I wrote so much complicated music and I experimented through a lot of different compositional techniques, and he said to me one time—it shocked me—he said, ‘You can write all this stuff, you can do all this complicated stuff. My eyes won’t let me do that’. And it was his eyes, to some extent, that simplified his work. And that surprised me. But also I think it was his [manner], he was kind of vulgar, and when people first met him, women especially, he’d charge after them. But once they knew him, they loved him, he had a very sweet inner self, very sweet. My first wife was a dancer with the Cunningham company for twenty years, and she and other dancers in the Cunningham company just thought he was fabulous because once he got to know you, and he’s not going to attack you or anything, he was very sweet, and that’s true.

I think [in Europe Feldman’s music] was something new, it was something they needed. I introduced Morty to Giacinto Scelsi also, and his music is like Morty’s to
some extent, and now we have Arvo Pärt—and I think [Europeans] were just looking for something, the New Simplicity as they called it, and I think Morty filled the bill, and his was totally unlike anybody else’s music, and that’s what happened with our performances. We were performed, John and I and Morty. I was performed tremendously much in the 1960s and 1970s. We were performed so much because we didn’t write like the Europeans, and they were curious and they were somewhat influenced by us, quite a bit influenced by us. It just represented a completely different point of view. And then Morty was able to develop acolytes—it was crazy! People would really get to love him because he spoke in kind of abstract terms, poetry, and all of these things, and he really charmed the pants off of people. He was very connected to German philosophy: Rilke, and Heine, and those things. He was also kind of mystic, he was this big, blustering character who has this inner thing that is very sweet and gentle, sometimes, and unaggressive, but then at times, he was very aggressive verbally, about what he didn’t like. But he got along pretty well. I don’t think Karlheinz liked his music, really, but he got along very well with Karlheinz. But Boulez scared him to death! He was always knocking Boulez.

... A lot of people didn’t go back to Darmstadt [for the fifty-year anniversary in 1996]. Luciano and Pierre stick their noses up about it—or they’re too busy, let’s give them the benefit of the doubt—but they didn’t return, and Bruno’s dead, and Karlheinz and I were the only two really there from the really old days. So I don’t know, but when the students come up to me and fall all over me because I’ve written a real piece of music, you’ve got to know that something has changed. They’re dissatisfied.... Anyway, I think the climate has changed a lot.

... I can’t imagine my music without Europe. We were all writing piano music for David Tudor in the early days and finally I was writing an orchestra piece and John said, ‘Why are you doing that? Who’s going to play it?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, I’ve got to write it anyway. Someone’s going to play it, maybe someday’. I’ve always had what I call orchestral ears, and I just had to go to Europe. I had so many performances of big orchestra pieces, and that was my main poetic, sonic image. Even down to chamber orchestras. I wrote a lot of chamber orchestra pieces because Europe had a lot of commissioning projects which were for twelve instruments, things like that. [So the commissions produced the repertoire.] I’d go over there and I’d conduct for the WDR and they’d pay me. I conducted a piece of mine with Lenny Bernstein, Available Forms II for two conductors with the [New York] Philharmonic [on 6 February 1964]—they didn’t give me a nickel. You know, they just think our music is completely weird, or they thought so. I’m sure they’re getting shaken up now.

Gordon Mumma did my December 1952 once [at the ONCE festival in Ann Arbor]. He sent me a tape, and one of the interesting things that strikes me is that if he hadn’t written on the box December 1952, I wouldn’t have known what it was! That piece is completely anonymous, you know, and it’s very unique in my oeuvre. I didn’t write a whole bunch of those pieces—that would be stupid. I didn’t do much graphic music at all after 1952. I did new things by incorporating graphics into my scores. Well, I did some graphic pieces later—which have been recorded, as a matter
of fact. But I did it [December 1952] to bring performers into realising that they can make interesting sonic conditions, and it’s done by student groups. It turns to be a strange teaching tool, as well as a possible good piece of music when it’s done by, say, the Philharmonic.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] Boulez’s Aléa was delivered by Heinz-Klaus Metzger at the 1957 Darmstadt courses and was then published in the Darmstädtter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik 1 (Mainz: Schott Verlag, 1958).

[2] During our conversation Brown did not recall the specific chronology of Tudor’s first performances in Germany. I have provided the correct dates here.

[3] Brown’s importance as a sound engineer and music producer (of 18 records between 1960 and 1973, including works by 49 different composers from over a dozen different countries) for Time-Mainstream Records’ Contemporary Sound Series should not be underestimated.

[4] Brown’s Music for Cello and Piano was premiered in Darmstadt by Werner Taube (cello) and Aloys Kontarsky (piano) on 27 July 1957.

[5] Brown is referring to his Darmstadt lectures ‘Notation and Performance of New Music’ (1964) and ‘Form in New Music’ (1965), published respectively (in translation) as ‘Notation und Ausführung neuer Musik’, Darmstädtter Beiträge zur Neuer Musik 9 (1965), 64 – 86; and ‘Form in der Neuen Musik’, Darmstädtter Beiträge zur Neuer Musik 10 (1966), 57 – 69.

[6] From the 1960s on, Brown enjoyed composer-residencies at a variety of educational institutions, including the California Institute of the Arts, UC Berkeley, Peabody Conservatory, Rotterdam Kunststichting, the Basel Conservatory of Music, Yale University, Indiana University, the American Academy in Rome, Aspen, and Tanglewood.

[7] The work was commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil in memory of painter (and Feldman’s close friend) Mark Rothko, who committed suicide in 1970 shortly before the completion of the chapel he designed for the Menil Foundation. Feldman completed his piece in 1971 and it was premiered in the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

[8] ‘New Simplicity’ (‘Neue Einfachheit’) was a term used to describe a WDR Musik der Zeit concert series in early 1977 for which Wolfgang Becker commissioned a new work (Elemental Procedures) from Feldman.