

CHAMBERS (1968)

Collect or make large and small resonant environments.

Sea Shells
Rooms
Cisterns
Tunnels
Cupped Hands
Mouths
Subway Stations
Bowls
Shoes
Hollows
Caves
Suitcases
Ponds
Stadia
Water Spouts
Bays
Tombs
Conduits
Canyons
Boilers
Pots
Ovens
Barrels
Bulbs
Bottles
Cabins
Wells
Bells

Capsules
Craters
Empty Missiles
Cacti
Beds
Webs
Pools
Boats
Cones
Funnels
Bones
Stills
Gins
Draws
Tubes
Theatres
Cars
Springs
Flumes
Trees
Others

Find a way to make them sound.

Blowing
Bowling
Rubbing
Scraping
Tapping
Moving
Fingering
Breaking
Burning
Melting

Chewing
Jiggling
Wearing
Swinging
Bumping
Dropping
Orbiting
Creaking
Caressing
Bouncing
Jerking
Flipping
Levitating
Hating
Skimming
Ignoring
Talking
Singing
Sighing
Whistling
Walking
Snapping
Cracking
Snoring
Boring
Praying
Loving
Spraying
Bowling
Channeling
Freezing
Squeezing
Lying

Exploding
Poking
Screwing
Lowering
Shaking
Impeding
Dancing
Others

Sounds of portable resonant environments such as sea shells and cupped hands may be carried out into streets, countrysides, parks, campuses, through buildings and houses, until outer limits are reached where minimum audio contact can be maintained by a player with at least one other player.

Sounds of the outer environment encompassed by the players may be heard with reference to the sounds of the portable resonant environments carried by the players. Sounds of determinate pitch in the outer environment may be heard in simple or complex relationships to the pitches of the portable resonant environments. Sounds of indeterminate pitch in the outer environment may be heard to take on the pitch, timbral, dynamic, and durational characteristics of the sounds of the portable resonant environments.

Sounds of fixed resonant environments such as cisterns and tunnels may be made portable by means of recordings, or radio or telephone transmission, and carried into inner or outer environments. When carried into inner environments, such as theatres into beds, the sounds of the now-portable resonant environments may either mingle with or take over the sounds of the inner environment. When carried to outer environments, such as boilers into parks, the sounds of the now-portable resonant environments may be treated as original portable environments.

Mixtures of these materials and procedures may be used.

Increasing and lessening of any characteristics of any sounds may be brought about.

How did I happen to write the piece? Well, it happened in various stages . . . let me see . . . I remember a film of a Jules Verne book, I think it was a Jules Verne book, something like **Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea**, or one of those books. There's a wonderful scene where men have built an underwater boat, and to get from the shore to the boat, which is moored under the water, several of them are walking along the floor of the ocean with huge conch shells over their heads, as if filled with air. This was nineteenth-century science fiction and the image struck me as something wonderful, walking on the floor of the ocean with those conch shells. I thought of making a piece with instruments, tubas or French horns, in which the players would do something like that, just an idea. And then I thought of actually getting conch shells, huge ones which I could make into bass instruments, conch shells three or four feet high, bass shells, and the openings could be bowed.

About that time Pauline Oliveros invited me to San Diego to perform **Whistlers**, a piece in which I tried to get ionospheric sounds in real time with a radio receiver and antenna. There's something about California, being from the East, palm trees and all that, so I asked Pauline, "Can we get any conch shells?" and she answered, "Well, we'll see." Every day we drove along the ocean front, and we used to pass a funny little store that had a sign that said "Sea Shells." One day I asked her to stop the car. The store was filled with hundreds of seas shells of different kinds and sizes, and the man who owned the store said, "You know, people who live in the Islands have blown conch shells for centuries." Where did I just see in a film, someone blowing a conch shell?

Lord of the Flies?

Tibet! I heard a recording of Tibetan chants on which they played conch shells. Now how do they get conch shells up in Tibet? But that's one of their instruments anyway. So I thought it would be wonderful to make a piece using conch shells as musical instruments, either blown, or bowed, or struck. It struck me as very beautiful that the organisms that produce these gorgeous shells are somewhere down on the bottom of the ocean. What a wonderful origin of a musical instrument, to have it be made for a functional purpose, to protect some animal. When the animal dies, it is a remainder, there it is, it's left in the world, and it's such a beautiful thing it should be put to some use.

My first idea was just to have people blow them. I wouldn't compose it very much but would let the natural pitches of each horn, of each shell, be themselves, although for the sake of some change you could let the players vary the pitches a little by putting their hands in the shells, the way French horn players lower and raise the pitches of their horns. I remember that two of the shells that I bought were almost an octave apart but not quite, so they were slightly out of tune and produced beautiful beats, and I was perfectly delighted to let the chords or simultaneities that the shells produced when played together depend on the pitches of the shells themselves and not on anything I did. I thought of asking the players to spin slowly so that the sounds from the openings of the shells would be beamed out in different directions. Then I expanded that idea to have the players actually disperse.

When we first performed it in La Jolla, we did it outside without any announcement but in an environment with people going here and there. The players began playing in a circle, changing their pitches slightly, turning their horns this way and that, spinning around slowly, and then at a given signal, dispersing outward from the central circle to outer points in the environment, moving as far as they could from one another until they reached the threshold of hearing at least one other shell. At that point, the whole area through which they had moved had been described by the sounds of the shells. By the end of the performance, the players must have moved almost a half mile apart.

Later, when we did it in Steinway Hall in New York, we didn't have that wide open situation. We started inside and moved downstairs and went outside onto Fifty-seventh Street. And what I discovered was that by concentrating on the pitches and timbres of the conch shells, the environmental sounds—buses, trucks, people talking, other urban sounds—got perceived in terms of the sounds of those shells. For example, you're trying to hear another shell player who's aiming his or her shell at you or who's trying to keep in contact with you. Then, as you hear trucks pass, the sounds of the tires take on the pitch of the conch shell on which you're concentrating. It's the old idea of the percussion instruments in the orchestra. The bass drum will take on the pitch of the fundamental of a chord that the orchestra is playing. I was also struck by how space intrudes its personality on the sounds that you produce. We're all aware of that, if not consciously, subconsciously. When we talk here, our voices aren't the same as they are in other rooms—they just aren't—because the space

does all kinds of processing due to its dimensions and materials. I became very aware of that in **Vespers**, the piece I did with those echo guns in which you make the audience hear the acoustic characteristics of the performance space. Good performers have always known these things, for example if the reverberation time is such-and-such, it affects the speed at which you play.

When I was asked to write a score of **Chambers** for publication I decided to expand it. I wanted to make it bigger in the sense that it would imply more, so I extended it to include any resonant environment, large or small, that performers could use to produce or alter sounds in the same way that this room we're in alters our sounds. If a room can intrude its personality on whatever sounds occur in that room, then any other size environment can do the same thing, so for the sake of performing I decided that performers could collect resonant objects into which they could put sounds, and the acoustic characteristics of the objects themselves—shells, pots, pans and so forth—would alter the sounds with their own characteristics. I was making a lot of rooms, but bringing them down to a size with which you could perform. But I didn't say you'd have to use only those objects that you could carry into a performance; you could use environments that you'd find outdoors such as oceans, caves, and football stadia.

You know if you're at a football game you're always impressed by the sound. I used to play in the Yale Band, and we used to form ranks inside the entrance to the Yale Bowl. Everyone would be tuning up and of course the reverberation of that place! Then when we started playing and marched out onto the field, the sound situation changed completely. That experience later gave me the idea that

you can do almost anything in a performance of this piece as long as you think of it in terms of physical environments that alter sounds because of what they are.

When we did it at the Museum of Modern Art we used, as you remember, little pots, paper bags, suitcases, ashcans, all kinds of resonant objects; then the problem was to find portable sounds that you could put into them. We used small battery-operated cassette tape recorders, transistor radios and mechanical toys that would operate on their own power, anything that you didn't have to plug into a wall.

Did you feel as if you wanted to tell the audience about resonant environments? Was that a reason for doing the piece?

Yes! I want them to open up their ears to their environments, I certainly do, more now than before I did this piece. I hear a lot of reverbs now when I listen to TV or the radio, or listen to someone walking on the street. I perceive more now than I ever did, sounds coming from walls, the echoes from them, or when you walk down from the administration building here, how the sounds of your footsteps change when you pass, or when there's a tree or a wall and then you pass the wall and go into an open space, how your footsteps change because of the architecture all around.

Do you feel better about using . . . we used a teapot with a radio in it. . . .

What? A teapot?

We used a teapot in the performance.

Oh yes.

Do you feel better about using a found environment like a teapot, as opposed to something you could build, perhaps with specific characteristics?

Yes, I like found environments more. You can find teapots all over the place, and when you go to a town for a performance, you don't have to bring all your resonant environments with you. One could conceivably build an environment that would do something specific to sounds but I'm not interested in that. I don't want to change anything. I simply want to find out what these environments do to sounds, so it's to my advantage not to make them but to take what I can find, and in that way each performance will teach me something.

Do you feel any different toward the objects being used because this is happening in a concert situation?

Oh yes—your idea about a pot. The little teapot now becomes an instrument or part of an instrument, like part of an oboe. You now think of the teapot as something else.

How do you feel toward the audience in a piece using found objects; do you expect the audience to feel different toward the objects too?

Well, I like pieces that are odd, that do something that you don't ex-

pect them to do. It's extremely odd to hear a Beethoven symphony coming out of a little pot. You don't perceive all of it because the pot is so small that the low frequencies don't get played, but I like that situation very much. A Beethoven symphony implies a large space, the orchestra has a hundred players and it's tape recorded in a big hall, but when it comes out of a two-inch loudspeaker, it's very strange, when you think about it. On the other hand, to try to re-create an environment and put it into another one is like taking something that belongs somewhere and putting it somewhere else, so you make connections between things that you wouldn't ordinarily make. Doesn't an artist do that anyway? Well, some artists do, I don't know about all. Some of art is that you make connections between things that no one else would ever make.

But are you interested in making connections that only Lucier would make between objects? Or are you taking advantage of connections between found objects? For example, radios happen to fit into teapots

Right! That's the reason I used the radio, because it goes into the teapot.

But you probably wouldn't be tempted to reduce a Beethoven symphony to a little transistorized device unless it had been done before, or unless people carried around transistor radios.

I would never have thought of it, no.

Are you trying to tell the audience something beyond what they hear?

Yes, I'm trying to make them . . . it's just an extension of what you do when you're a little child at the beach and you put a shell up to your ear and hear the ocean. Then you stop. You don't do that as you grow older. Your ear stops doing that because you've got to think about other things, how to make a living and how to speak to people, how to communicate verbally. I guess I'm trying to help people hold shells up to their ears and listen to the ocean again.