



With a friendly disposition and unassuming personality, Barry Truax would hardly be thought of as a trailblazing radical.



But this soft-spoken composer and teacher is a groundbreaking Canadian icon. Not only did Truax pioneer granular synthesis with the PODX computer music system, he is viewed the world over as an electroacoustic compositional guru. At sixty-three years of age, he's not just resting on his laurels. When I spoke with him, he was preparing for two portrait concerts to be held in his hometown of Vancouver in the fall of 2010. The School for Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University—where Truax was a faculty member for many years—would present one evening of his music, and Vancouver New Music would present another. The second evening would include, among other works, *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (1997), a music-theatre work for double bass and tape, and the specially commissioned opening and closing scenes of a new opera, *Enigma: The Life and Death of Alan Turing*. What distinguishes these two works from many other new-music pieces is their exploration of homoerotic themes, a topic that rarely finds its way into new-music concerts.

For Truax, the process of integrating his sexual identity into his work by using homoerotic themes was as gradual as his own late coming out at thirty years old. In the world of music he feels relatively safe, partly because he is now a senior composer. He also questions whether he could have written these pieces thirty years ago. His has been a natural evolution that can be traced back to

his simple refusal of the heterosexual norms in the texts of work that includes vocal parts.

I sat down with Truax recently to discuss the role that sexuality plays in his art and the new-music community at large.

JERRY PERGOLESI: *What comes to mind when you think about gender and sexuality in regard to new music?*

BARRY TRUAX: The mainstream for new music—as far as concerned—is that gender is ignored. Whether it's straight gay, it's generally ignored. Gender, if acknowledged, is biographical and extra-musical.

JP: *New music does have very little place in the gay community, doesn't it?*

BT: Yes. Here we have the ghetto in reverse. New music has no place within gay community. You're either an opera queen or you like musicals: those are two stereotypes. I feel as isolated from the gay community artistically as I feel isolated from the mainstream.

JP: *Why are there so few gay-oriented works in new music? In other forms, the identity of the artist is embraced and often integrated into art making.*

BT: There are some obvious reasons, such as representation. In all of the representational art forms it is taken for granted that there will be some sort of gay-oriented work. As soon as text and drama are involved all those real-world things come in.

One distinction to make is the difference between the instrumental world—where gay and lesbian composers are quite commonly found—and electroacoustic world. In the instrumental-music community almost everybody knows who's who, but it's not part of the public persona unless the person makes a point of it—like Lou Harrison and others. And then there's speculation about others as far back in history as you want to go. Electroacoustic music is different in two respects. From my experience I know less than ten electroacoustic composers that are gay or lesbian—lower than the public average and way lower than instrumental music. There isn't a critical mass. Secondly, as long as you're dealing with abstract sound synthesis, there's no "gay sound spectrum;" but as soon as you start dealing with representing the real world in sound, as in soundscapes or composition, you have more opportunity to write a gay-oriented work.

ON THE CD: *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (excerpt), and *Song of Songs—Evening*

JP: *Do you feel a responsibility as a gay composer to integrate your sexual identity into your work?*

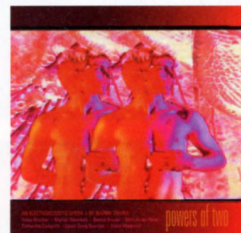
BT: If no one ever communicates about gender issues or homoerotic issues, if there's a total absence across the whole field, then one gets the impression—in particular in the context of younger gay artists—that those issues don't exist in this world; and by extension, maybe you as a gay artist have no place in this world. An article I published in the music and technology journal *Organised Sound*, entitled "Homoeroticism and Electroacoustic Music: Absence and Personal Voice," was probably the first time the terms *electroacoustic music* and *homoeroticism* had been used in the same sentence. Since then, four or five young composers have expressed gratitude to me for raising the issue: someone had finally said something about it. They had felt a huge silence either implicitly or explicitly. If you always assume the heteronormative attitude you implicitly deny that there's another possibility. If you don't make heteronormative assumptions it doesn't have to be any more explicit than that. If you don't do it in your discourse, then you won't do it in your work.

JP: *Do you take on the role of mentor or role model as an "out" composer?*

BT: I'm not trying to be a role model, but I think as soon as you are public about it then inevitably people can treat you as an example; and I'm very happy about that. I also enjoy the mentoring role with my students at Simon Fraser University. Most of the time sexuality doesn't come up but it has been included in some courses where it's appropriate. In my soundscape composition class there are two weeks devoted to gender issues because we are talking about real-world context in music. Contextually based work such as soundscape composition is one place to bring sexuality up. We look at pieces that deal with gender issues. When I was teaching the history of electroacoustic music, where I felt composers were out, such as Jack Body, I'd work it into the conversation. On the other hand, when composers who I happen to know are gay but don't make a public statement of it, I don't out them. I'm not activist enough to be outing people.

JP: *Some composers state that they never consider their sexuality when creating music. As a gay composer, how do you feel about the fact that John Cage referred to creating musical situations as analogous to desirable social circumstances, but also went on to state that he never takes sexuality into consideration when he creates music? On the other hand, Lou Harrison, who often collaborated with Cage, was very open about his sexuality and active in the gay community.*

BT: Both Cage's and Harrison's positions were valid on a personal level. I wouldn't criticize anyone ex post facto for being out or not being out. The general issue here is, to what extent does any composer bring anything personal into their work? Is the self-referential sonic allusion self-indulgent or is it going to communicate to someone? One of my pet peeves, although it's not terribly serious, is composers who bring the sounds of their children into their work. Childhood and innocence are symbolic archetypes and anyone can relate to that. So where do you draw the line? You have to be careful when you are turning personal choices into artistic choices, and when you are dealing with the real world you have to think about how it's going to communicate to someone else, and not just



TOP: A still from Truax's video version of *Androgyne, Mon Amour* with Walter Kubanek, dancer and Robert Black, double bass.
ABOVE: CD covers of Truax's CDs: *Powers of Two* and *Twin Souls* released on his label Cambridge Street Publishing.

From "Homoeroticism and Electroacoustic Music: Absence and Personal Voice"

Art is said to mirror society, but if you look in the mirror and see no reflection, then the implicit message is that you don't exist . . . The twentieth century has seen not only a highly visible presence of gay artists and writers, but also the proliferation of gay themes in their work. Homoerotic poetry, novels, films, dance, and theatre works are numerous, even commonplace, and much of the public focus is on the extent to which these influences are "invading" mainstream television and cinema. Within the arts community a gay presence is a given . . . Gender and sexuality seem to be some of the trickiest issues to deal with artistically, particularly musically. It is not difficult to see why most composers have avoided an engagement with them. On the other hand, these aspects are at the centre of our lives and our ways of being in the world, and we ignore the energy they provide at our peril if we exclude them from our creative endeavours. —Barry Truax

Program Note for Skin & Metal

Skin & Metal (2004) is a music-theatre work designed for a performer dressed as a “leather man” playing only drums and metallic instruments, using skin and metal—that is, bare hands, leather, and metal objects—to activate the instruments. The subtext of the work is the demimonde of S&M, and evokes the eroticism associated with it. Although the performer dominates the instruments, he or she can also be dominated by the equally powerful tape component that is constructed from transformations of the same instrumental sounds. While intended for a male performer, the work may also be performed by a female percussionist, if she can adapt her costume and persona appropriately. In the case of a male performer, the suggested costume is entirely leather and metal, including vest, trousers, belt, boots, cap, dark glasses, chest harness, gloves, and wrist and neckbands. No shirt is worn.

The work was commissioned by Contact Contemporary Music, and is dedicated to Jerry Pergolesi, who first brought it to life.

—Barry Truax



base it on highly personal idiosyncratic impressions or self-indulgent audio postcards.

On the other hand, I deal with soundscape composition, which is sometimes about very specific places. Do I rely on my references to something specific or do I try to find something that will communicate more universally? I always try to go for the latter, whether it is something specific or whether it is highly idealized and may not be a real place but an imagined place that has symbolic qualities, such as in *Island*, *Prospero's Voyage*, or more recently *Chalice Well*.

JP: Can you talk about your process in regard to your work that deals with homoerotic themes?

BT: The process is so evanescent and fleeting—that's why I playfully call program notes lies after the fact. In the context of soundscape composition I ask myself, How can I integrate things more meaningfully? That's a big influence on my process. Working through how to do that in soundscape composition in general, and then the gender

asoundscape composition is about something in the real world and about the listener's relationship to that thing

		Time Line				
TT = Tam-tam	MS = Metal Sheet	D = drums	MD = metal drums			
X = major hit	x = minor hit	L = left hand	R = right hand			
Live.	X mf	X f	X mf	X f	X ff (drops)	
Tape: 0:00	0:20	0:30	0:40	0:50	1:00	
	cresc Peak	peak	peak	peak	big peak	
Live.		reappears	chains (L/R): x x / x x/ (offset to tape)			
Tape: 1:00	1:16	1:31	1:45			
	Bowed x	x	tightening wire: x x / x x / x x			
Live: (same)	x x			XX (in synch)	free	
Tape: 2:00			2:30	2:39	2:52	
			x x / x x / x x / x x / x x / x x / x x /	XX / XX / XX / XX		
Live: (L/R hits on metal drums, grouped in 2, 4, 6, 8 hits) -> faster					X (unwind & drop)	
Tape: 3:00					3 56	
				Rhythmic metal drums, resonated, getting denser	X fade	
Live. D:	Fast hand drum rolls	Xx	Xx	Xxx	Xxxx ... fast syncopated	
Tape: 4:00	4:09	4:38	4:40		4:50	
	Drum rolls	X	xxxxx	xxxxx xxx	xx x fast tempo	
Live. improv using hands, following shifting tape tempo					to mallets (ad lib)	
Tape: 5:00		6:00			7:00 7:05	
				Fast drum sequences punctuated by stretched, resonated metal hits	X MS	
Live: include metals				back to drums, build ->	X fff on MS	
Tape: 7:18	7:28	7:34	7:49	8:00	8 27	
	X	X MS	X	MS 18 rep's of loop ->	X MS - bowed	
Live: MS. X	stagger	X	stagger	X	stagger	same on other MS
Tape: 8:30	8:44		9:00	9:12	9:24 9:40	
	Bowed	X MS	X MS	X MS	x x x	
Live. to TT	X ff		collapse		rising x x x (drop)	
Tape: 10:00		10:14	10:18		10:44 11:18	
	X TT	tightening	MS "scream" tightening	TT	X x x fade	

LEFT: Still from the video version of Truax's *Androgyne, Mon Amour*.

ABOVE: A page from the performance score of *Skin & Metal*, a music-theatre piece for percussionist dressed as a “leatherman.”

parts in specific, is an avenue that explains how this can be done meaningfully. It's exactly the same issue if you are dealing with environmental sounds and real-world context. Inspiration is only part of the process and it doesn't really affect the outcome. A soundscape composition is about something in the real world and about the listener's relationship to that thing. This relationship between the real world and the listener's relationship to it is a very important aspect of the process and had a profound influence on how I approached composing in the representational forms. My interest in real-world composition, that I call soundscape composition, that's been a big influence on how I deal with gender issues.

JP: Can you speak about how you have integrated aspects of theatre into your work in order to contextualize sounds, and in particular with reference to homoerotic themes?

BT: My music-theatre piece *Skin & Metal* for percussion and electroacoustic soundtrack is a good example of setting sounds in a particular context—eroticism associated with the world of sadomasochism (S&M). There really isn't anything else like it, but it's a piece that just had to be done, because percussionists are

people who go around hitting things, and they use implements made of skin and metal, so the connection wasn't all that forced. It was just bringing out something that was latent in percussion.

JP: The piece calls for a performer dressed as a “leather man.” Of course the piece can be played without the theatrical elements as simply a piece for electroacoustics and percussion, but when you add the theatrical element it takes on a whole other aspect.



Stills from video version of *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (2001), Cambridge Street Publishing. Walter Kubanek, dancer; Robert Black, double bass

BT: All musicians are doing theatre but don't realize it. They all have ways of standing and moving, and they just think of that as their performance technique. If you get them involved from a theatrical point of view, then everything from their dress to their expression has the potential of being theatrical. So it's a very fine line. I just took things percussionists use and gave them a context.

JP: *You are the librettist as well as the composer for your new work, Enigma: The Life and Death of Alan Turing. Is the story of Turing personal to you? Do you feel that you are the person to tell the story?*

BT: It's a great story and I do think I am a good person to tell it. So much of his life story was hidden, up until his death, because of war secrecy. He lived at a time when homosexuality was illegal in Britain, and he was gay. He played a significant role in the creation of the modern computer and I write computer music. The writer of Turing's biography, Andrew Hodges, made a point of making his personal life explicit, so I'm musically doing what Andrew did with the biography. I'm not being too heavy-handed about the political aspect of the story, but I am using it as the groundwork for two scenes that will be presented in November 2010 at a partial premiere of *Enigma*.

JP: *Where are you deriving your text from?*

BT: The vast majority of the piece is based upon Andrew Hodges biography, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*. The *enigma* of the title refers to the wartime decoding of the German military communication via The Enigma Machine. The two scenes, which I am working on now, are from the beginning and end of Turing's life. The first deals with Turing as a teenager, when he had a crush on a young boy, Christopher, with whom he had a science-and-mathematics-tinged relationship. Christopher is a brilliant light in Turing's otherwise black-and-white world, and Turing was totally bereft



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Libretto excerpt, Barry Truax, *Androgyne, Mon Amour*, based on Tennessee Williams' poetry.

I. You and I

Who are you?

A surface warm to my fingers,
a solid form, an occupant of space,
a makeshift kind of enjoyment,
a pitiless being who runs away like water,
something left unfinished, out of inferior matter,

Something God thought of.
Nothing, sometimes everything,
something I cannot believe in,
a foolish argument, you, yourself, not I,
an enemy of mine. My lover.

Text copyright © 1979 by Tennessee Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

by Christopher's death from tuberculosis. To bring poetry to this scene, I used Tennyson's masterpiece *In Memoriam*—a work that I thought would be appropriate as a commentary on the death of Christopher.

The second scene to be premiered is the last scene of *Enigma*, set in the early '50s at the end of Turing's life, when he is arrested for having an affair with a lower-class working youth. In the penal philosophy of the day he can avoid jail by undergoing estrogen hormone treatment—chemical castration—which he accepted. At the time this happened, it wasn't known that he was a war hero and that he had such a pivotal place in WWII, because it was all still top secret. He was known as an academic involved in establishing the mathematical basis for the modern computer, but he wasn't such an iconic public figure as we now realize him to be. In this scene, I went to Katherine Philips—a favourite poet of mine—who wrote beautiful poetry to her female friends known as *The Society of Friends*.

JP: *In Androgyne Mon Amour, you specifically chose to use homoerotic poetry by Tennessee Williams.*

BT: In his plays homoeroticism is always just beneath the surface. The poetry is much freer and certainly explicit enough. I put together poems that did not have a narrative but could be placed into a loose narrative, and they had a homoerotic interpretation. In the opening and closing poem "You and I" the gender is not specified, but it's pretty obvious. I wrote *Androgyne Mon Amour* for Robert Black. I specifically asked him if he would be interested in a homoerotic music-theatre piece, and to my eternal relief he said yes. And now a straight bass player can perform it without losing its context.

The presence of "the same sex other" is a powerful image. It's not about explicit sex. It's much more about the imagery of "the same sex other" that is more important. It's not about having a sexual relationship but about the relationship itself and how that figures in a homoerotic sensibility.

JP: *Some might say that's a bold thing to do. We see heterosexual imagery quite often but seeing the imagery as same sex might be shocking.*

you could argue that I now have a lot less to lose. on the other hand, I never really felt all that threatened

ANDROGYNE, MON AMOUR
music by Barry Truax for Robert Black text by Tennessee Williams

BT: The majority of young people don't find this shocking at all.

JP: *You bring up an interesting point in regard to attitudes held by younger generations in a widespread sense. However, do you find that people are more accepting in urban and academic communities?*

BT: In terms of the art world, it is relatively safe, in part because I'm a senior composer. Would I have written the pieces that I am doing now thirty years ago? I don't know. On a personal trajectory I went from being a composer who came out quite late, and for whatever reason I was also slow to incorporate this into my work. It was a gradual awareness, going from a composer who happened to be gay but not seeing it as being central to my work, to eventually having it become an integral part of the work. I'm not going to become stereotyped, because in all of my pieces it would be a stretch to say there was any homoerotic element in it; but it now is a significant portion of the work. You could argue that I now have a lot less to lose. On the other hand, I never really felt all that threatened.

In the art community, you get a high degree of acceptance and tolerance and you're insulated. Maybe that makes one feel a little bit of responsibility you want to take it on, I'm not saying one should, but it does mean that it's an environment where you don't actually have a lot to lose, and if you don't take on maybe you're self-censoring. So it was a natural evolution for me.

JERRY PERGOLES is the artistic director of *Contact Contemporary Music Toronto*. Since its inception *Contact Contemporary Music* has presented concerts celebrating queer artists and queer issues as part of its annual concert activity.

FYI: For more coverage of Barry Truax's work, see Randy Raine-Reusch's article, "Stretching Time Stretching Sound" in *Musicworks* 79.