SIBYL JOHNSTON

Very Precise Relationships: Two Interviews with Ben Johnston

In 1981, I interviewed my father, Ben Johnston, for *Century 2,* the student journal I then edited. It was a little daunting since I'm not a musician. So I consulted him about how to frame the most fundamental questions that it would be possible to ask on the subject. We wanted to talk about the nature and meaning of music itself and his music in particular. Until now that interview, published under the title "A Sacred Cow Should Be Trounced at Least Once a Day," never made it past the pages of that limited-circulation journal.[1]

In 2006 *American Music* asked to reprint the interview along with a new version, in which I would repeat the questions I posed to my father twenty-five years ago. As one might expect, his responses were somewhat different this time around, beginning with his objections to the original interview's title (which referred to the controversy over *Knocking Piece,* explained below). My father has never been very interested in following prescribed or predictable routes and during much of this second interview he didn't—in fact, he mostly didn't allow me to ask questions. Rather, he anticipated them, responding to the explanatory statements that I made as I prepared to ask them. He also suggested that I read two essays from the recently published book of his essays, *Maximum Clarity,*[2] so that he could comment a bit on those. After we finished, as a sort of postscript, he responded briefly to most of the original questions. In

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Figure 1. Ben Johnston at his home in De Forest, Wisconsin, January 2007. Photograph by Mie Inouye.

addition, he commented on these topics at length in a more general way and on his own terms.[3]

Here they are, both interviews:

Interview 1: 1981

SIBYL: What is the use of music? What are its functions?

BEN: I think there are two functions. One is social and the other is psychological. The social function varies a lot. I'm afraid that in this culture the social function of music is primarily entertainment and ultimately no more than amusement. That's commercially what makes music go. The psychological function of music is something else. I will try to say something about it, because as hard as it is to talk about, I think it's important. Music is an art, and it addresses itself, as all the arts do, to rather basic interests in the human being. There's a really good four-volume series by Joseph Campbell called *The Masks of God*, in which there's a discussion I've found very useful. Campbell discusses the

existence in the human being of vestiges of animal instincts, and the function of these vestiges within the much more complex nervous system of the human being. He points out that animals have set patterns that they know before they are born. Birds know how to migrate. Many animals know how to handle their bodies without having to learn. They don't have to learn to walk—or the equivalent—or anything like that. He points out that human beings also have these set patterns built into them, but they're not compulsory behavior. They're not built in to such an extent that we have no choice about them. But they do represent basic forms of activity, basic forms of perception, basic forms of reaction that the species has. If these are stimulated, they create a very profound response. It is the stimulation of these things that is the stuff of art. It is the stuff of myth. The reason mythology is important is that the knowledge of myths is the knowledge of these basic forms of perception; and if one is to know anything, he has to know it through these forms, which transcend language and cultural differences. You find the same kinds of myths occurring in remote societies that could not easily have influenced each other. So it's this type of thing that we're dealing with when we talk about art.

Music, I think, deals with these things in a far more abstract way than any linguistic art. Musicians, therefore, are dealing with the basic emotional forms, the basic forms of feeling, as Susanna Langer put it, that the human being finds important. So when time structures, patterns in time, are created, which approximate the time patterns of these internal reactions that we associate with mythic themes, then one gets a response. And that's what music deals with. So its psychological function is to stimulate these mythic forms and to give us an experience of these things. One can use this. One can take advantage of it and make music make statements about religion. All the great religious works of Bach, for example. are examples of that. He used music to make statements about his religion. Communist composers use their music to make statements about society in Marxian terms. All these things are possible because in dealing with anything as important as the behavior of society or the content of religion, one has to deal with basic human forms of perception. One can evoke patriotic emotions with music. One can evoke religious feeling with music. One can evoke love. But it is not a didactic type of thing, because it is not verbal and it has no denotative content. You can't say whether a certain piece of music is true or not, but you can certainly say whether a certain piece of music is convincing, and what it convinces you of. What it convinces you of is that a significant experience of this basic formal sort has been stirred in you and you respond, "Yes, it is that way." You know already what the experience is potentially within you, even if it's never occurred. Therefore, you can respond.

SIBYL: What distinguishes contemporary music?

BEN: I think there are several things that you could single out. The vocabulary of contemporary music includes pretty much the whole world of sound. This is partly due to the existence of recording and the possibility of making tape compositions which don't require performance. It's not the absence of the performer that is important; rather it is the ability to record whatever you want and to treat that in special ways—electronically, if you so desire. So there is complete inclusiveness as far as the materials of music are concerned.

And also, the existence of a really exhaustive knowledge of the past was never the case until the last two or three generations. We have very easy access to a huge repertory of music going all the way back to its origins, and you can study fourteenth-century music just as easily as you can nineteenth-century music if you want to, because we have good recordings of it and the music is now available in score and in modern notation. Formerly, people couldn't know that music; it was lost to us. It was there, but only for researchers. This has created a completely different situation. Never before has it been true that the majority of music played was not of that time.

We also have the phenomenon of expanded communications on a global scale. Which means that there is an interaction of many different cultures to an extent that we have not known until now. This is gradually transforming music, because the influence of musics other than the European tradition really does affect a great many people, almost more than did what used to be regarded as music. I think that many of these influences come in first through the popular musics of the world. You get more influence of other cultures more quickly in that way than you do in concert music.

The result is that concert music has become something of a refuge for conservatives and for people who resist all this change and would prefer it not to happen. So very little support for any sort of new music, popular or not, comes from that group of people. Ultimately, what this means is the death of the traditions that they prize, because they are actively preventing the ready acceptance of any creation of a continuance for that tradition. There is little new repertory in that way because there is little incentive to make it; and such new repertory as there is moves in other directions. I think, therefore, that within a generation or so that will be, as it already is, a matter of museums.

SIBYL: So do you think that the so-called serious music is on the way out?

BEN: In a way. In a way that's true. There's always room for a distinction between music which is intended for very large audiences and music that isn't, just as there is between books which are intended for a very large audience, and the better literature. There are certain great works of literature that will never have a very wide audience. And there are a

few which, although they are great works of literature also, appeal to a wide audience at one time or another. That was true of Dickens. It was true of Dostoevsky, who had a great popular following. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* first appeared as a magazine series and was apparently widely read. It can be read on the simplest level as a detective story, and it was, I suppose. But it has other depth. Shakespeare is the same way. He appealed directly to people who came in off the street, who sat in the pit. There was plenty of action in the plays, plenty of the sort of things that they wanted to see. Plenty of pageantry and a lot of obvious circus attractions, but also a great deal more. So that type of artist is, we hope, always with us. But you also have highly specialized artists. The later works of James Joyce, for example, will seldom be read by very many people—they are much too difficult. But they remain great works, and I think probably will always stand in a certain esteem because of their very beautiful construction. And there are works of music of the same sort. There is music that will probably never have a very large audience.

SIBYL: What is your music? Would you call it contemporary? Avant-garde?

BEN: There are huge varieties of musics being made today, and there are tremendous differences between people, all of whom could be called avant-garde, or all of whom could be called contemporary—differences not only from one part of the world to another, but even within the same locality. This period of time has no common practice. It probably will not have for a very long time, the reason being the amalgamation of world culture. As long as we have—as I hope we will continue to have—very strong cultural differences between groups of people, and nevertheless large amounts of communication, then we're going to have a tremendous variety in the kind of art that is produced. So, in the middle of all that, I think some people have opted to identify themselves with one particular thing and stay with that, while others have tried to broaden themselves and do a variety of things.

To some extent, I have taken the latter path—I have tried to do a large number of different things in different works. I do have an area of specialization with which most people associate my work, although it does not describe some of the work, and that area is the use of experiments with tuning and recasting the structural use of pitch in music. The term *microtones* is sometimes associated with that. Microtones too easily are associated with the mere use of lots of subdivisions of the usual musical steps, but that's not my reason for using these things, nor is it the effect of my music. What I'm doing is going back to simple acoustical tuning. European music before and during the Renaissance was primarily vocal. That means that it was sung, and frequently without instrumental accompaniment—that is, only with the accompaniment

of other voices. You can pitch by ear whatever you want. There's no limit to what you can do—only what you're able to hear, and the control you're able to gain over your voice. But when instrumental music came in, with keyboards and frets on the strings, that limited the number of pitches you could have and the adjustments that could be made to those pitches, and then these limitations became an important factor. Then it was necessary to decide how many pitches we were going to deal with, and which ones. And if you take one little group of pitches, then that makes all sorts of other things impossible or ugly; and if you take another group, that makes still other things impossible. So what was finally done was to take something which made all of the things a little distorted, but none of them so badly that people would object. What we ended up with was a compromise way of dealing with pitch. I don't like the sound of this myself, and I would prefer to have a huge number of tones to deal with—not because I want a huge number of tones, but because I want precise relationships. In getting that, I find that I am dealing with a huge number of tones. And indeed, I have used a great many different means to do that. But I found the one that works the best is to demand of instrumentalists what was demanded of Renaissance musicians—that the tuning be done by ear, regardless of the instrument. The instrument must then be made to adjust, and the performer must control it to that extent.

I write a lot of string music—string quartets, that sort of thing—because string players can do this much more easily. The design of the instrument makes a big difference. The trombone, for instance, having a slide, can simply adjust the distance on the slide. That's no problem. But with the trumpet, you have a problem. You have to have all sorts of different fingering because of valving. The same kind of problem exists with woodwind instruments—one has to go into what are new fingerings. My approach to this is to work with the performers and to find out what they have to do to achieve what I want. So I am trying to point out that our standardized way of tuning is no longer an advantage to us, and that we don't need it anymore. We don't need it because the problems these limitations were intended to solve no longer are problems. We have electronic means for controlling sound production, and we don't need to rely on purely mechanical ones, and so we don't need the compromises that were necessary before.

SIBYL: You mentioned your search for precise relationships. What do you mean by that?

BEN: Well, if you want, for example, to get a perfect fifth in tune, it's very hard to do that with electronic instruments. There's what they call a drift in the voltage control, and it's very hard to control that. You really need digital technology, which did not exist until fairly recently. You could get enough pitch to come pretty close to the twelve notes

that we used, but I wanted to get much closer to very pure relationships. I had written concert music as well as theatre music and dance music before, but I hadn't begun to do this kind of music that I've been speaking of until around 1962.

SIBYL: What are you working on now?

BEN: I've just finished a piece for flute and retuned piano, which I wrote for the flutist Ruben Lopez-Perez and his wife. Perez is a Puerto Rican musician who plays with the San Juan Symphony. The piece will be performed in New York, probably by Jack Fonville. I am also going to write a piece for Virginia Gaburo, part of a series of pieces she's commissioning called *Text Settings for Piano.*

SIBYL: A few minutes ago you said that music cannot be didactic, yet it can evoke feelings associated with ideas. What did you mean by that?

BEN: There are several things to say about that. You're forced to get the basics when you cannot be so specific as to get lost in detail. You're forced to look at the forest because you, in effect, are not able to single out the trees. You cannot deal, then, with matters of theological doctrine musically, because it can't be that specific. You are driven to deal with basic human responses, which have something to do with the content of religion. You can deal with reverence. You can deal with a feeling of pervasive love. All those things are so basic that it would be impossible to have any sectarian arguments about the content of the music. The content of the music is simply not that significant.

Christianity deals with a certain type of basic human experience, and music is transferable. Music by Bach has been used by Catholics. The music of all the Renaissance composers, who were invariably Catholic, has been used in every kind of religious situation. And it doesn't even stop there. Christianity has so much in common with all sorts of other religions—and I don't just mean Judaism—that plenty of non-Christian music is usable in Christian situations, and vice versa. The texts often bias the music somewhat, and one would not be likely to use a text that was specific to a particular religion outside that context. But that is really not a musical problem.

SIBYL: Okay—music is not in itself didactic. Yet the Nazis, for instance, exerted quite an influence through it—as have most religious groups. Is it possible for a religious person to abuse the art?

BEN: Sure it is. In the first place, anybody can do that. There are several ways to do it. One of them is to err by being ineffectual. If you're not very good at what you do, and you try to deal with something difficult, you might fall on your face. You get some wonderful examples of this which unfortunately have been widely adopted and praised. The popular religious objects of the nineteenth century, for instance, are pretty gruesome—all the sentimental pictures of Jesus, all the sen-

timental little stories for children about the things of the Bible, and so on. They really distort badly the basic content. Jesus is made to seem, for example, some sort of a namby-pamby person. You get the feeling that religious love is a kind of feminine sentimentality. This is because the artists who produced that work made that mistake—a love that means you will sacrifice your life is scarcely sentimental. But the artists associated sentimentality with religious love, and so that is what's portrayed. Most such people are very well meaning. There's nothing *evil* about them—nothing *vicious* is there. They're not attempting to pervert or destroy. But they do, just because they don't understand. That's all they see. So I think that's a mistake, and that it's a mistake due to being ineffectual. Another danger related to that is that your propaganda purpose may entirely usurp the artistic aim, and what you've really got is an attempt to convince people of a set of points of view without any real insight into those points of view. Then it's like a sales pitch—you've got an elaborate commercial.

But another basic danger, not to belabor that one too much, is that it's very hard to produce art when you're trying to tell the Muse what to say. You can't do that, really. If you do that, you're going to get a very forced and phony kind of effect. You're mining. It's like discovery. You don't know until you find it what you're trying to find. So to try to make a work of art say a particular thing is the wrong way to go about it; you have to deal with a certain thing and then see what it says. So you might be better advised to produce a lot of works of art and then examine them to see what they say, and see whether they are or are not useful for a particular purpose. Plenty of art, then, which was not produced for that purpose will turn out to be useful. For example, I think the movie *Ordinary People* is very useful in that way, yet I doubt that that was one of its reasons for being produced. It makes very interesting and I think probably quite orthodox statements about family life, like the importance of taking the responsibility for other members of your own family on a deep level when it's proper. There is one other type of error an artist can make, and that is a really deliberate distortion and possibly a real perversion. It is possible, for example, to make really dangerous concoctions out of mixtures of human possibilities. You can get music that stirs people up to violence. I think a good deal of rock music has exactly that aim, and it does it, too.

SIBYL: So is there immoral music?

BEN: I think to that extent. It's very hard to say moral or immoral, ethical or unethical, because those terms deal with concepts that are very specific, while music deals with these basic big mythic themes. But you can take an idea, and by a simple distortion of it you can make real poison out of it. And the more powerful the idea is at bottom, the more virulent the poison will be.

I'll give you an example: the idea of the self-transcendence of the human condition. It's there in Christianity—we have the whole idea of rebirth, and the whole idea of repentance and starting over. Now, if you take that at its most profound level, what it indicates is a further evolution of human possibility. But if you take that idea of evolution and self-transcendence and you say, "We're going to simply take all the human traits the way they are and blow them up into the grand scale"—then you're dealing with the idea of the superman. It's an idea that Nietzsche put forward. Now, even Nietzsche distorted the idea of self-transcendence, but in the hands of the Nazis it was *really* distorted. It was associated with a specific racial heritage; it was associated with a specific cultural set; it was associated with an a moral point of view. In other words, the human being, in self-transcending, would not put behind him violence, for example, or any of those things. It's possible, then, that that idea of the super race, the master race, and so forth, be elitism. It's a very poisonous idea when it takes that form—and it took just that form under the Nazi propaganda effort. So I think there is an example within recent history of a perversion of an idea. That idea, however, is just as *true* as what we would *not* call a perverted idea. So it's not a question of true or false; they're both true, but one is perhaps desirable and the other not.

These are indeed religious subjects, because religion, more than any other aspect of endeavor, has dealt with these questions. Philosophy is not really going to tell you what the basic purposes of life are. It may tell you what the issues are, but it's not going to make the choices. Religion deals in addition with the consequences of various choices.

SIBYL: You are a convert to Roman Catholicism. How does your religion affect your music?

BEN: I have written some works which specifically deal with those themes—my *Mass,* for example. This is a very specific liturgical piece. The String Quartet no. 4, which is a theme and variations on "Amazing Grace," deals with that tune, and the associated words are not irrelevant. The use in my String Quartet no. 5 of "Lonesome Valley," another folk song that has religious significance, as a tune deals with some of those themes. I wouldn't really say it's true that every piece of mine has a religious meaning or connotation, but a lot of my pieces do, to one extent or another. They deal with one or another of those things. But the works may deal with those things without having specific reference like that, and they often do. I was talking with a priest, in fact, about this question, and he said that really, any piece of music is essentially an affirmation of life, and consequently a praise to God. And so, in effect, you could never really escape that. You may praise God at various depths. If you praise God for not letting it rain today, it's not quite as profound as for various other reasons.

SIBYL: Do your beliefs imply any kind of artistic responsibility?

BEN: I think I take rather seriously the responsibility of not making any poisonous concoctions of myths. I'd just as soon my pieces didn't start riots, the kind of riots that might be due to people getting upset over one of their sacred cows being mistreated a little. There's a famous incident that happened at the University of Illinois. A piece for two pianos by Lejaren Hiller was performed there. During the piece the pianists have to bang on the pianos violently, and eventually stand up and shout and scream and jump around, and so forth. It sounds funny—and it is, in a horrifying way, but it's too heavy to be funny. It's satire, but it's rather bitter satire—rather black. This piece was played, and one of the faculty wives whose husband is a pianist went to the back of the stage, and while the composer and the two pianists were taking their bows she began to throw music stands onto the stage. She really got violent—she was throwing public property around and making a big disturbance. She was trying to stage a protest against this music and the mistreatment of the instruments. She got herself arrested and almost charged with disturbing the peace. Eventually, they simply calmed her down and took her away and it didn't amount to anything legally, but if the audience reaction had been violently either pro or con, she could have started a rather unpleasant, violent scene.

This has never actually happened to me, but my *Knocking Piece* does involve banging around on the inside of a piano, and it can be done destructively if people are irresponsible. Much depends on the discretion and care of the performers. The piece has been performed under circumstances where people were so upset that they tried to demonstrate. Fistfights started in Rio de Janeiro when it was played, because the performers misunderstood the audience's reaction and thought they wanted to hear the piece again—and it wasn't that! (I only heard about that; I wasn't there.) This probably happened because that particular performance was done very theatrically, which is not necessarily in the score. The performers dressed as surgeons, so they appeared to be operating on the piano. There was a rhythmic strobe light coordinated with the thing, and it suggested that this was an attack on the piano. While the piece has that in its meaning, it's much better that you don't lay it on with a trowel. Especially if you really get people worried about whether you're damaging the instrument—they're not going to get anything else. So it's obvious that that's not the right way to do it, but to some people it isn't so obvious. So that's a risky piece. Part of the meaning of the piece is that a sacred cow should be trounced at least once a day.

SIBYL: Since so much of contemporary music involves trouncing sacred cows, will it inevitably be controversial?

BEN: In that way, I suppose. I don't know that so much of it does, really,

when you come down to it. Various things have been taken that way. The reason there were riots at the first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was the choreography. That choreography, which was Nijinsky's, not Stravinsky's, broke down traditions of behavior, not only onstage, but between audience and stage, to such an extent that it offended the very conservative ballet audience. A week later, in concert performance, the piece was a big public success. So you cannot attribute that to the music, really. There have been plenty of pieces that have created a negative stir to begin with because they violated one or another idea that people considered important. But I think that these are really pseudo-issues, and they disappear very fast.

SIBYL: What's in it for the average college student? Why should they listen to you instead of Blondie?

BEN: Well, I think they listen for different reasons. I doubt if you could get from either one of us what the other has. So it's largely a question of that sort. If you want music to dance to, if you want music or whatever it is that creates the mood people want to be in when they go to a rock concert, then you go to a rock concert, because that's where you get it. If you want disco music, you go to a disco. That's all not a part of the intentions of what I do, so you wouldn't listen to my music for that. If you want, on the other hand, my sort of thing, you could go, perhaps, and listen to my String Quartet no. 4 for that, but I doubt that you would find it at a rock concert.

SIBYL: Do you see any hope—or is it a hope?—for a music that is both serious and popular?

BEN: I think there already is some such music. The trouble with that is the commercialization process. When the motivation for making the recordings or concerts or whatever it is we're talking about is to make the most money possible, why then there are pressures—not only temptation, but real pressures. The booker will say, "If you don't do a certain type of thing I will not handle you." The recording company will say, "We want you to do just this sort of thing and nothing else." So you don't have a lot of choice. I think that as long as that is in the ascendancy, it will probably discourage any production which is both very sound on a popular footing and also profound and full of depth. You can see this phenomenon in New York City in the theatre: it is almost impossible for anything really serious and good to get produced on Broadway. And it's only the existence of off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway and such phenomena as Joseph Papp's theatre that make possible something else. Papp does go in for things which have an immediate appeal, a huge immediate appeal—but they are also much more than that. So one does have the creation of countertrends. Movies are a good thing to look at in this respect, too. When the focus is on making a great deal of money, it's very difficult. When

you spend millions of dollars making a movie and you've got to make all that money back, you not only can't take chances, but you can't aim your product at a limited audience because that defeats your necessities, not only your wishes.

SIBYL: A lot of people have a hard time listening to contemporary music. Do you have any prescription for them?

BEN: This sounds like you're taking medicine. I think it would help if people would suspend their ready judgment—not think that all art is about is whether they like it or not. You can understand a work of art without ever raising the question of whether you like it or not. A lot of contemporary art, and not just music, is about aspects of human life which nobody likes—terror, violence, destruction. If the work of art is really about those things, and it successfully says something about them, then you probably aren't going to like it. But it may be very valuable, because it may give you some rather important insights into things that people do have to live with. *Apocalypse Now* is an example of that. I don't think such art is likable, and it's not meant to be. You may like it in the sense that you admire it; that is, you can see how well made it is. But it's not likable in the usual sense of the word; you're not going to be able to listen to it just to enjoy. You won't go to such a movie just to escape or to have fun, unless you're sort of weird.

SIBYL: So how do you listen to it? How do you appreciate it?

BEN: For one thing, I think if you don't try to approach music right at the crest of what is new, but are willing to go back a ways, you will probably find that those artificial issues that might get hold of you where customs are stepped on are no longer really big issues. Stravinsky's pretty easy for most people to listen to right now, and it's not going to create a sense of rejection just because it is what it is. You may or may not like it very much, but it is not too difficult to listen to. Very gradually, Schoenberg and Berg and Webern are getting that way. Berg's opera *Lulu* was recently broadcast for the first time in this country, and magazines like *Newsweek* talked about it in the same tone of voice as they would a new production of Puccini. So it's getting to be that palatable.

I think it does people a lot of good to read John Cage, also. It does more good to read it than it does to listen to it.

SIBYL: Why?

BEN: Audiences don't always understand what's going on with Cage. It has a lot to do with radical attitudes toward art. One of the radical attitudes he has is, in effect, that art is in the mind of the beholder. This is Marcel Duchamp's attitude: If you pick something up off the street, it's art if you want to look at it that way—and he encouraged people to do that. So Cage, in setting apart four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence as a composition of music is saying that whatever happens in that four minutes and thirty-three seconds is the content of the music,

and that isn't controlled by anybody—it just happens. And if you turn your attention to it in that way, it's a work of art. He's concerned with a kind of anti-expression—that the art work is not there to express what the composer or anybody else wants to express; it's simply an action that is gone through in order to produce an experience which will be whatever each person makes it. That's a very different point of view from the nineteenth-century idea of art as expression. When the artist simply not expresses at all, it's an experience that you either accept or don't accept, and it may be interesting to you or it may not be interesting to you. The artist is not concerned, basically, with whether it is or not. It is difficult to talk about it within the usual sets of terms that people use to talk about that sort of thing.

SIBYL: If you were twenty-two years old and in college, knowing what you know now, what direction would you go?

BEN: I really don't know. For one thing, it's not that easy to get into the frame of mind of another person in another time. In this country, art music, serious music, has for a long time been mainly associated with educational institutions. Now, I'm not at all sure that that's a permanent state of affairs, and I'm not at all sure that it's the present state of affairs. So I don't know. It would have been true twenty or thirty years ago that your best bet for getting anything done in serious music would be to get a job teaching in an institution of learning, preferably on the university or college level, and then do what you do in association with that. That might not be true now. It's not as true now as it was a few years ago that in order to do anything serious with music you have to bypass the commercial establishment. It's still true to some extent. It's very hard to run it; it's awfully easy to be run *by* it. So if you're writing music for movies or TV or rock groups or what have you, you're not dealing with that. You're apt to be swallowed up by it, and I think you have to have a lot of motivation because certainly, nobody's going to support what looks antifinancial, what looks like the opposite of good sense. It may nevertheless be good sense.

SIBYL: How do you feel when you hear your own music?

BEN: It depends on who's playing it and how well. I like to listen to it mainly with other people, because I can get a perspective on it when I'm with somebody who's hearing it; I can hear it through their ears. Otherwise, it isn't particularly interesting to listen to.

SIBYL: Because you've heard it so much?

BEN: I know what's happening. There's no surprise.

SIBYL: Why do you compose?

BEN: A combination of reasons of the sort that we've been talking about already. I guess it's a type of activity that I don't regard as superficial. I suppose it isn't a necessary human activity in the same way

that producing food is, but it's a whole lot closer to that than most people would begin to admit. The reason I say that is this: If you don't stimulate those mythic sources in yourself, as a human being you dry out—and practically nothing in contemporary life but art does stimulate those sources. For most people, religion does not function in that way; it could, but it doesn't. People don't let it. The form in which it's given to them doesn't invite that. It's a sort of social activity which is relatively innocuous; it doesn't help or hurt very much. Unfortunately, that's all it is to a lot of people. Any religion can suffer that kind of degradation—it doesn't matter what the doctrines are. It just gets that kind of an attitude from people. People don't get that kind of stimulation from being at social occasions, either—parades don't do it. There isn't anything that does—or very, very few things. Emotional education does not occur in public school, it does not occur for the most part in Sunday School. For the most part, the only place you do get mythic stimulation is in the arts. Most people don't even get it in the home—or many people don't—which is awful. But you can't really deal with art unless you deal on that level. I think the greatest value of art is that it demands participation on a sensory and therefore physical level, on an emotional level because of the content, and on an intellectual level. All those things. And there aren't too many human activities that demand everything like that.

Interview 2: 2006

BEN: "A sacred cow should be trounced at least once a day." Well, yeah—all right. But that's not mainly my point. It's not "The piano is in the way, let's make fun of it and let's portray it as being destroyed" and all that kind of thing. Sure, *Knocking Piece* got that image because of the way it was presented at the 1965 Warsaw Festival. In that context it looked like the ultimate statement, you know. It was ten minutes or more of systematic attack on the piano. And if you try as they did in Darmstadt, to beat your feet in time to it so as to drown it out, you can't because it changes tempo.

I said during an interview in Poland that I was much more interested in the other side of things—that I had had a very different idea in coming to the festival but when the original piece, String Quartet no. 2, didn't fit that, I adjusted to what did fit. And the interviewer said that she thought the pieces were extremely effective and that *Knocking Piece* was one of the most effective. I said, "Well, thank you but it really isn't being understood the way I intended it." And she said, "Well, how did you intend it?" And I said, "Well it really is a restatement of the same thing that Stravinsky used in *L'Histoire du Soldat*, which is a retelling of the Faust story with a musical performer in the role of

the Faust symbol." It was at the same time a setting of patterns, and the patterns were what interested me much more. In other words, it was abstract, like an abstract painting in differentiation from political paintings or a political cartoon. So it definitely had a meaning, but not the one they were attaching to it.

SIBYL: You said something earlier about how you chose to use the piano in that way because it was the only way you could get the effect you wanted, not because you wanted to make a statement about the piano.

BEN: Right. Well, it does make a statement about the piano. If you care about the tuning, this is not the piece to deal with because you're not going to be aware of it. You're going to be aware of the sheer sound. On the other hand I was very much concerned about the tuning and I wanted it to be tuned exactly a certain way. And ultimately that's what I did with *Knocking Piece*. And people haven't always done it, but you're supposed to retune the piano so that if you ever do hit any ordinary-sounding things they won't sound ordinary. In some versions of it, people have just gone to town, beating on the piano, because they thought that was the whole thing, and it's not. So this approach with the title "A Sacred Cow . . ." etc., is accepting a politicized interpretation of the piece and saying, "Look, this is *Knocking Piece* and that's what you're famous for—what have you got against the piano?" Well, what I said in the article that I wrote about it was that it was a ritual attack upon a symbol of tradition. Well, that's rather different from saying, "Attack a sacred cow." It's precisely, a *ritual* attack—not a real one.

SIBYL: What is the use and function of music?

BEN: Well I'd say that music, ideally, ought to teach us what it is to put the vibration structure of life into some sort of order. And that means that all the things that are going on inside our bodies are very much part of this—especially the electrical parts, that is to say, most of the brain activity. And I would emphasize that at this point.

Certainly music functions in several ways. It has social functions and it has an egotistical function, it does give something for people to do that they can attach their name to. But it seems to me that these are the trivial parts. The really important part is what we can learn from having done it. And I'd say the most direct value of music is that connection to the vibratory life of the whole organism. And I would say also that people who mainly do music to join a club, whatever club it is, including fads and fashions in style, are missing the main point. And awards that are given to people who do mainly that are, I think, a bit wrongheaded.

SIBYL: What distinguishes contemporary music?

BEN: Well I guess the main thing that does is that life has become very,

very complex with overpopulation and many, many other aspects as well, but particularly that one. And we are not any longer dealing with a small audience. You can't really count on doing music for just a small invited audience, unless you're already so successful that you don't care. And in that case you can pretty well do what you want to anyway, from that point of view. But as I say, I don't believe that's the point to music. And so I believe that people who are that successful have got a liability up against them because they are apt not to get to the real point, which is learning from the process. And they'll get lost in this whole thing of in-groups and out-groups and fashion, and all that.

SIBYL: Do you think that the so-called serious music is on the way out?

BEN: Well, in this country you begin to wonder because there's so much emphasis on popular music of different kinds. And even when you're dealing with extraordinary performers and wonderful music—as I think Sting is good, very good, so I wouldn't put his music down just because it's in a certain kind of idiom—I would say, however, that there's good music and bad music no matter what the style, no matter what technique you're dealing with. And the difference between good and bad is in this area what I was saying: Does it teach you something valuable about living or is it just fun? Nothing wrong with fun, you understand. But there is a lot of difference.

SIBYL: What is your music—would you call it contemporary? Avant-garde?

BEN: I suppose people would call it avant-garde, but I see it as a type of music that I discovered for myself by wanting to undo some of the historical wrong turns that were taken in various developmental aspects of Western music. And the most obvious of those and the most relevant in what I do as a composer is temperament, the altering of the pitches, so as to make it possible to deal with multiple shades of meaning in music with only a limited number of notes. So what I've done is to eliminate that last and we have an unlimited number of notes. And that's *very* hard to handle. So the only way you *can* handle it is to say that what we're dealing with here are certain relationships which you have to learn—it's not the notes, it's the relationships. And so if you have absolute pitch and you can remember all the notes, that won't help you. What you have to remember is the relationships between the notes and you have to be very precise about that. You have to be able to be very precise in order to distinguish between a blend of various degrees of simplicity and other blended but much less simple ways. And that means that we can deal with various levels of simplicity in dealing with the music and it doesn't all have to be on the same level.

SIBYL: You mentioned a search for precise relationships. Could you talk more about that?

BEN: Well, I would say there are various ways to organize sound, and certain aspects of sound cannot be organized beyond a certain point. For example, loudness: you can have "louder than" or "softer than," but that's about it—you can't say, "so many degrees louder than" or "so many degrees softer than." If you start trying to test a person, you're not accurate a bit about that—it's simply that greater or less is about all you can perceive there. Then there are other aspects of music that you can make a scale about—in other words, this is a certain way, and this is a little more so. Alternatively, it's a scale of equal degrees, supposedly, so you can measure how close the relationship is or how distant the relationship is. And that's very good for purely melodic music. But when we're talking about music that depends upon the interaction of many melodic elements, or music that depends on chords, then we're talking beyond that, and it's necessary to have relationships as a basis. If in performance the relationships are clear, and if you have a limited number of relationships, you can have an infinite number of notes and you still won't get lost. Because it's the clarity of relationships that counts. So you keep the relationships straight and you have all these notes, lots and lots and lots of notes, which would mean they're closer together, necessarily. And that would be microtones.

SIBYL: What are you working on now?

BEN: Well, currently, my whole focus on music is quite different, and there are three reasons for that. One is that at this time of life, I only have a limited amount of time left and I want to do what needs still to be done—that is, what I feel hasn't been done by most players as adequately as I would like. What still needs to be done is working carefully on precision and therefore on clarity in the performance aspect of the music. I'm much more concerned about that than I am about turning out some new pieces. So that's one.

Another aspect of it is that I'm at this point in my life taking care of my wife who's not well, and so I have a great deal of demand on my time. I simply don't have the freedom to be that kind of creative. That sounds like mostly a negative thing—I don't think so. Because I have learned a great deal from this, and I think whenever I have anything to say, it would gain enormously in depth—because *I'm* different. Then the third thing—and this is the one that interests everybody more than the others, I think—is that we can learn from the music. And I'm very, very anxious to have the music done correctly so that what we learn is not some kind of approximation. If we can learn very precisely, so much the better. And that means that there needs to be a performance element involved and I need to be in there working hard with the performers to make sure the performance element of it is up to the standard that it can be. That's what I'm doing now. I'm working hard with the Kepler Quartet in particular, and any other opportunities

that turn up—I try to treat them in the same way. When the Ciompi Quartet wanted to play the "Amazing Grace" quartet, they would have been able to learn it from the available recordings of it because there are more than one. But I didn't want them to do that and they didn't want to either. So what happened was that I went to rehearsals with them and I made sure that they understood it the way I wanted them to hear it. So we were working together the whole way and therefore there was a feedback between us on the level of performance practice. So if they were not doing it exactly right, I said to them, "I'd rather you didn't do it that way." "Well then what *do* you want?" So then the whole question would come up, how *do* they do it, and what do they have to do differently? It works very well. But since we wanted to prove something by it—namely that if you do music this way it'll be different—we didn't feel that it worked really well until we had worked together over a period of months. Then we dealt with a very polished result.

SIBYL: In the first interview you mentioned that music couldn't be didactic and yet it could evoke feelings associated with ideas.

BEN: Well, I would say that music as everybody knows has an emotional effect on people and not just an intellectual effect. In other words it isn't okay if all you do with music is analyze it. It needs to move you. It needs to get to you, and if it gets to you honestly, then it's going to be hard to even put it into words. It's just that it has to awaken something, it has to make you feel. And my discovery was that the better the music is tuned, the more that happens.

SIBYL: Could you explain more about the relationship between composition, pedagogy, and performance?

BEN: Okay. To my way of thinking, the relationship between the composer and the group needs to be like a coach dealing with a team: you've got to help them to do what they have to do to win. And "win" in this case means making meaning out of something that starts out as half-there. So all right, you've finished the composition. The composition is not complete until you finish performing it. That's what I mean by saying the performance practice is every bit as much a part of the music as any other aspect and that I didn't want to do something as radical as what I demanded (with all that tuning and the conception of the way music works) without dealing with the performance aspect of it, even in depth. So the question is then, *how* do I deal with the performers? And I didn't want to deal with them as a school marm, saying, "No, it isn't that, it's this! Now do this! And do it *this way*!" That's not the kind of pedagogy at all. It's rather like saying, "We have to find the answer to this. I don't know it and you don't know it. Let's find it together." And it all has to do with how you manage to make that happen. And it means, too, that you need a good relationship

on a personal level with all the people in the ensemble. That doesn't mean you have to know the ins and outs of their lives, that's not what I mean. I mean that you need to know them in the sense that they're real people to you and not just people who do things that you need done. They're not tools. So it helps if you really are in touch with them on various levels including the emotional level among other things.

When I found out that Breck, the violist, was having a bad time because his wife was dying of cancer and he was frantic to get some kind of solution to the problem that they had—what to do about the end of life—we all had to sort of stop and not do anything for a while in order to allow him the space to deal with that problem and to do so in the way that he felt he had to I tried very hard to help him in whatever way I could. And then also, Breck said, "Would you be interested in what I'm writing to all the people in my family and her family about all this? If so, I'll put you on my list." And I said, "If you don't mind, I would be honored to know." I felt that that might be what he needed—that kind of vote of confidence. And so I never wrote him anything about it except "Thank you for keeping me informed." I read every bit of it though. And I was very much affected by it. So that when all this clearly very parallel experience started happening to *me* I felt a *real* connection. And at that point I really began to communicate with him. He didn't know why until recently. But now that he does know why, we have a whole new thing going. His problem is all over now and he's gotten through it: she died some time ago and although that's over, the aftermath is not over, clearly. That gives us quite a lot in common. And we're very different people so that makes it particularly valuable. So that's one example.

There are parallel things with the other members of the quartet as well but that's the most outstanding. And the cellist is the youngest one and he's the one that lives here in Madison and it's a terrific relationship with him. I write very difficult music for the cello because I ask the moon from the cellist, I know I do. I like to use the very high range, and I like to use all kinds of stuff that involves his being extremely accurate to keep everybody on pitch. And so it's a crucial part. And he would complain at me, you know, asking, "I have never *seen* a piece that asks this much!" And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, is there anything I can do?" "No, *don't do anything* but don't expect the moon!" [*laughter*] And then he does an incredibly good job.

So there's a different relationship there with all of them. And that's right. So then the question is, when I'm putting all that together, if I take the piece that we just talked in so much depth about, what is the cellist's special role in that piece? What do I have to say to the cellist to enable him to do make the needed effort? And ditto for all the rest of them. The viola has a special role in all of them because it's the only

instrument that is sometimes playing with the violins, mostly in the high range, and sometimes playing with the cello in the low range. So it's definitely, so to speak, a hybrid instrument. And in the typical traditional string quartet the first violin has all the good stuff and the second violin is almost an also-ran. And I don't like that and I've never tried to write that way. So in all my pieces I've got solos for the second violin. So there are little issues like that.

SIBYL: Can you generalize at all about how you compose?

BEN: I try to see if I can set myself a problem that I need to solve on several levels. And then I want to work mainly on a particular level. Typically I work mainly and, so to speak, first on the intellectual/analytical level. But that doesn't mean it stops there—very far from it. The very next thing I do is try to discover as I go along what it is I'm saying, in the sense of, "What does this mean emotionally? What is this that I'm making?" Much as if you were an abstract expressionist painter and you were throwing paints all around like Jackson Pollack. Well, do you stop it at some point and say, "What is this that I've got here?" Or do you just go on letting chance operate? Well, Cage says, "Yeah, go on and let chance operate. You should get out of the way completely." Well, I don't think so. I would much rather it be a highly personalized experience—for *me*—that I *discover* what it is that I'm saying and then that I begin to see how that side of it can be developed. Then I want to—once I've got that impression, once I've got that insight into it—begin to mold the piece in that way and make it say that even more clearly and discover what else I need to do the next time I start. If I'm able to do that, then I figure that it will create sounds that people haven't been accustomed to hearing. And if I begin to discover the nature of those sounds, then I try to see if I can go back into the work and heighten that, make it more so—or less so, if that's necessary. But anyway, work on that side of it. That's what I mean by the actual sound.

And the other side of it—and that's what I'm into now, so that I'm not feeling free enough inside of myself to be composing—is what the performer has to bring to it, that is to say, the performance practice. What have I not written? What has still got to be worked out? Quite a lot, actually. So then, what is a really responsible way of going at this music? Respons*ive* is a better word than responsible. Because it isn't as though I'm holding the performer to the task. But it means: is the performer really into the music deeply and responding to it in every way? And that means, again, on all these levels. It means that they have to be aware of the structure and emphasizing that. It means that they've got to be sensitive to what's being said. It means in addition that with sounds that are being created, you have to say, "*Exactly* what kind of sound should I try to get? How do I get it? Can I get it? If I can't get it, what can I do instead?" And that opens a whole area

of creativity. And that means in the actual final version, "How do I produce this? What is appropriate here?" And then again, "What is going to have to be done with this piece to make it really connect to audiences? What do we have to do?" *Even*, "How do we look? Are we going to look like the Kronos Quartet? Or is that absolutely inappropriate? If it is, then how should we look? And how do we manage that?" Even what seems like trivia—but it isn't because it's part of the performance. That's something the Kronos Quartet has thoroughly understood and made use of. But it does limit what they want to say because they have a certain set of things that they bring to everything. My feeling is that it ought to be flexible—maybe not always flexible, but a lot more flexible than that.

SIBYL: Could you give an example of the creative process that you have described?

BEN: Okay. Let's see what would be the best. I could give one that would almost curl your hair. [*laughter*] The Tenth Quartet. When it was written I had no reason to write it except that I wanted to write a piece. Therefore, there was no commission and there was no expectation of a performance or anything like that. So in a certain sense I just wrote whatever I wanted to write. And that didn't make me freer. On the contrary it made me feel that there were elements absent that had been motivations in the other works. I found it hard to do. So I fell back on techniques that I had been using before I even began to do music in the kind of intensive way that we've been talking about. I don't mean I was a completely careless kind of composer, because I don't think I've been that since the very beginning. But what I'm saying is that I fell back on some neoclassic formulas and decided, "All right then: I'm just going to do that in a way that will be as well as I can." So I took certain types of models and I tried to make the absolute most out of them that I could. And in doing that I got four very different kinds of movements that had their conventional counterparts but which were completely differently done. And I left it that way.

Then Sylvia Smith, the publisher, decided to bring out all the quartets, and she included that one. And I said, "Okay, why not?" And then it got into the library at University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Eric Stegnitz is the young man who is the second violin and the manager of the Kepler Quartet now. One of his pleasures (more than it was a job) was to see if he could try to find interesting music and sell the present music director on the idea of doing that music. So this was one of the pieces that he thought it would be interesting to sell him on. So the director said, "Well, look into it and see whether we can do this." And Eric said, "Well, there are certain problems here. There's a strange notation that I don't understand and we'll have to figure that out." And so the head of the present Music Concert Series in Milwaukee said, "Call him and see

what it means—there's nothing like going to the source." So he called me up and said, "What does the notation mean?" And I said, "Oh, how do I explain this in a hurry?" And I started trying to say, "Well, it means this and it means that." And he said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't know what you're talking about. We've got to get at it more fundamentally because you assume I understand things I don't already understand." And I said, "Well it's going to be hard but I'll be glad to try." And he said, "Well, how best can we do this?" And then at that point he said, "Well, I'll tell you what we'll do first: you send me the best recording that you have of it with your comments." And I said, "Well, I can't." And he said, "Why not?" And I said, "It has never been played." He said, "*Oh?*" [*laughter*]—almost that way. So then negotiations started that they could have a premiere.

We got the premiere going and I was asked to come to Milwaukee to take part in it. So I told him I was able to go and I took the flight and went up there. And when I got there I was put out in the middle of the hall and asked to listen. But I was supposed to shut up and not bother them while they were rehearsing. And I did that. And at a certain point they got hung up over a notational problem and they said, "What does this notation mean here—it's ambiguous to us, do you know?" And so I looked it and I said, "Yes it means this and it means that. But if you play it with this in mind you'll find the pitch more easily." And they tried that and it worked. So bit by bit they started to want me to comment on the rehearsals and to be an active part of the actual rehearsal process. So gradually I was in a position where I was really saying, "Don't do it that way. Try this." And I was discovering things and they were discovering things and it got to be an extremely valuable process.

It went to another stage where they began to see that it had definite emotional meaning and they began to wonder how they could bring that out more than they were doing. So we began to talk about that. And I began to say, "Well, this movement is like a Bach piece but we're not dealing with what Bach was dealing with here. So don't think of it in terms of being pseudo-Bach. It's not pseudo-Bach. It's much stranger than that, and you have to deal with it in terms of its being, yes, a statement of not angst, but serious concern for the meaning of life, which is something Bach was dealing with all the time."

Now what happened during the series of performances was that they used the Bach model much too closely and managed to falsify the whole thing. And what had to happen was that they had to have help from someone—which turned out to be a recording, for rehearsal purposes only—of exactly the right pitches. "Don't deviate from these, don't make it more like Bach, don't in any way shape it. Stick to this.

But then use your vibrato, whatever you want—make it expressive." So we sort of approached it like that.

That only worked up to a point in that whole series of rehearsals. Then the next movement was a piece that was a lot like minimalist pieces they were working on because it was rhythms, three against four against five against six all happening at once—and it's very hard to do that. Then in addition they had to stay in tune all the way because I had made that very clear. Just getting the notes was what they were struggling with on that one. So the best thing they knew how to do was to treat it very much like the minimalist pieces they were playing. And it was too much like that so we had to work on that when we returned to it. And we still have to.

Then the next movement was the theme and variations. Well, the real theme was "Danny Boy." But I concealed "Danny Boy" totally by playing it upside down and backwards. [*laughter*] And turned it into a piece that starts stylistically with the Renaissance and comes up step by step into the present. Okay, that was the beginning of the piece. Well, what I wanted then was to, at a certain point, when we get into the extended variations where drastic things start to happen to the tune—it's upside down and backwards so we've now turned it upside down and backwards and there it is, "Danny Boy." And so when we got to that, they were going to play "Danny Boy" and they said, "This is so absolutely out of step with the rest of the piece—how can we get by with this?" And I said, "Well, try this. Forget about anything that I've said about playing it straight. Use all the vibrato that you could possibly want and really make this just 'Danny Boy' to the hilt." And they did it, and after it was over the first violinist said, "Is that *really* what you want?" And I said, "No! But I wanted you to discover what you shouldn't do." [*laughs*] So then the idea was, how do you play this with all the lush chords and everything without *ever* descending into that mode? Well, that hit them just right and they managed it quite well. Then the next question was, what happens to the next variation, what are you doing here? Because it's "Danny Boy" but it doesn't have any of the expressive qualities. And I said, "All right—what does that mean?" And I made them answer that.

SIBYL: You mentioned in your essay "Regarding LaMonte Young" that the composer can evoke emotional meanings that are as much discoveries for him as for an audience.

BEN: Yes. I think that you don't always know what you're saying as you write something. And if you're really open to discover then you stand a much better chance of writing something that could be called great rather than just good. Let's assume that we're talking about people who have the technique to be called good any old time. But this is more.

And it's a question, I believe, that if you know ahead of time everything that you're going to do, it's a little bit like saying, "I've thought about everything that I'm going to say to someone, so that when we meet, *I'll say it right*." You know? [*laughter*] It's such a closed book that you're not open to any kind of discovery in the moment. And I don't think that works.

NOTES

1. *Century 2: A Brigham Young University Student Journal* 5 (Winter 1981): 122–39. The original publication had a few comments in it that applied specifically to the interview's BYU context. Those have been removed in this reprinting.

2. Ben Johnston, *"Maximum Clarity" and Other Writings on Music,* ed. Bob Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

3. I have retained most of this second interview's actual structure, editing out some redundancies and splicing together one or two clearly related responses. I've left out some of the lengthier anecdotes and explanations, which are more appropriate in another setting. I have retained the points that my father wanted to emphasize, with special emphasis on points of digression from the first interview.