

# Reynolds, Roger (1934-): Overview of Writings

Among American composers, Roger Reynolds is surely one of those to have most formalised his thought, which he has done in numerous writings produced throughout his life. Since the late 1960s, he has felt drawn to relate his reflection on compositional practice to broader subjects of American identity, the composer's role in society, and the place of art in the world. His early scientific education, moreover, led drew him to research in the fields of informatics and perception. While many of his writings derive from his academic career, attached since 1969 to the Department of Music of the University of California at San Diego, some originated from his numerous stints in the United States or abroad as a composer-in-residence or visiting professor. Thus Reynolds wrote his first work, *Mind Models* (1975), at the University of Illinois, *A Searcher's Path* (1987) at CUNY/Brooklyn College, and *Form and Method* (2002) while serving as Randolph Rothschild Guest Composer at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University. The articles published in French derive from residencies at IRCAM ("Réaliser une expérience musicale", 1985; "L'ajustement de la sensibilité à un ensemble de contraintes", 1981).

Reynolds's writings can be grouped into four broad categories: a) essays devoted to expounding his compositional techniques and analysing his own music; b) essays of a more general scope; c) essays, interviews, and exchanges on or with other composers; d) retrospective and autobiographical essays.

In the first category, *A Searcher's Path: A Composer's Way* (1987) holds a special place, for in it Reynolds affirms for the first time his identity as a composer-researcher (as opposed to a composer-maker) who devises for himself a repertoire of strategies and methods designed to guarantee aesthetic coherence in the work and to enable, as he puts it, "the intuition to take flight". With the aid of sketches and preparatory diagrams, Reynolds meticulously unveils his compositional procedures, many of them updated during the conception of *Archipelago* for orchestra and computerised sounds, composed during a residence at IRCAM in 1982-3. His second book, *Form and Method: Composing Music* (2002), constitutes an in-depth reflection on his works of the 1990s, during which time he was broadening his sources of inspiration and compositional processes. His reflexion focuses especially on the relation between writing and perception, by way of questions of integrity, coherence, structure, process, and expressive intent. This first category also includes articles linked to a specific source. Thus, in "Compositional Strategies" and "Epilogue: Reflections on Psychological Testing with *The Angel of Death*", published in a special issue of the journal *Music Perception* (2004), the composer reviews his compositional choices in light of the results of behavioural studies conducted in laboratories and concert settings in which the stimuli came from the named work.

The texts of more general remit cover very diverse subjects, including indeterminacy ("Indeterminacy: Some Considerations", 1965), musical time ("It('s) Time", 1968), spatialisation ("Thoughts on Sound Movement and Meaning", 1978), musical informatics ("Réaliser une expérience musicale", 1985), the learning of composition ("Thoughts on Enabling Creative Capacity", 2012), and the relation between art and science ("The Evolution of Sensibility", 2005). Reynolds, a keen admirer of Japanese culture, also organised and edited a collection of articles entitled "A Jostled Silence: Contemporary Musical Thought in Japan". Published in the journal *Perspectives of New Music* in three instalments (1992-3), he gives voice to three Japanese composers (Toru Takemitsu, Yuji Takahashi, Joji Yuasa). His collaborations with psychologists in the project *The Angel of Death* led him to co-author various scientific articles on perception and the remembrance of thematic materials and form. *Mind Models: New Forms of Musical Experience* (1975) had a great impact in the United States when it first appeared. Besides capturing the stylistic pluralism of the music scene in the

third quarter of the twentieth century, Reynolds offers a glimpse of his own creative development and compositional preoccupations. Taking by turns the observer's viewpoint and the practitioner's, he approaches a vast range of questions from the angle of trends and developments in technique (musical material, notation, morphology), technology (contributions of informatics and spatialisation, EEG, biofeedback), science (contributions of psychoacoustics) and culture (sociology of the listener and public).

The third category encompasses essays, interviews, and exchanges with or about other composers. *Mind Models* already includes analyses of works such as Xenakis's *Metastasis*, Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, and Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer*. In the subsequent years, Reynolds continued to write on other composers, most of them belonging to his circle of friends (Ives, 1977; Varèse, 1984, 2013, 2017; Takemitsu, 1987; Erickson, 1988; Martirano, 1996; Finney, 1998; Xenakis, 2002, 2003; Ashley, 2014; Oliveros, 2017). Also belonging to this category are several reviews, notably one of François-Bernard Mâche's *Musique, Mythe, Nature* ("Seeking Centers", 1994), as well as interviews with Cage (in 1961 and 1977, published respectively in 1977 and 1979), Nancarrow (in 1975, published 1984) and Takemitsu (in 1990, published 1991 and 1996).

The retrospective and autobiographical essays begin to emerge in 2007 with "Ideals and Realities: A Composer in America". This essay, divided into three parts, moves from the general to the particular. The first part, *Origins*, is a memoir of his formative years in the United States and his seven years travelling in Europe and Japan (1962-9) with his wife Karen. Reynolds questions himself on what it was that forged his musical and American identity. In the second part, *Features in My Landscape*, Reynolds reflects on two pillars of his aesthetic via examples from his own oeuvre: text, language, and voice (*Compass, Whispers Out of Time, last things, I think, to think about, The Red Act Project*) and space (*The Emperor of Ice Cream, Ping, VOICESPACE, The Red Act Arias, Transfigured Wind II, Watershed IV*). The third part, *Features in the American Landscape*, contains reflections on the American musical landscape via six themes dear to Reynolds: originality, timescales, multiplicity (superposition and flux), collaboration, liberty, and technology. Quite recently, Reynolds published a work entitled *PASSAGE* (2017) based on nine performances realised since 2009, in the course of which he read texts out loud and interacted with pre-recorded materials (spoken texts, sounds, performances) and images, all of it assembled, superposed, and spatialised. *PASSAGE* collects the 82 texts currently finished and the numerous images incorporated into his performances. In the book, the superposition of auditory and visual streams is necessarily absent, but its effect is evoked in the superposition of text and image, each possessing its own visual density. Even if the book cannot recreate the live performance, therefore, it achieves a certain performative nature by way of the reader's eye seeking out its path on the page.

Whether introspective or turned onto the contemporary world, Reynolds's writings complement each other in a particularly significant manner. Collectively, they offer a deep dive into the complex and multiform thought of one of America's most influential and individual composers.

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31/05/2018

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### Further reading

Reynolds, Roger, *Mind Models: New Forms of Musical Experience*, New York, Praeger, 1975 ; revised edition, New York, Routledge, 2004.

- *A Searcher's Path, a Composer's Way*, I.S.A.M., Monographs n° 25, New York, 1987.

- *Form and Method: Composing Music*, New York and Londres, Routledge, 2002.

Lalitte, Philippe, « The Unique Aesthetic Character of the Music of Roger Reynolds », in Stephen McAdams et Marc Battier (Eds.), *Creation and perception of a contemporary musical work: The Angel of Death by Roger Reynolds*, Paris, IRCAM-Centre Georges Pompidou (DVD), 2005.

To quote this article: Philippe Lalitte, "Reynolds, Roger (1934-): Overview of Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 01/02/2023, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/person/34084>.