

Armed with an echolocation device, circuit-bending composer **Nicolas Collins** finds his bearings during a performance of Alvin Lucier's *Vespers*



At Wesleyan University, Connecticut, May 1976: Nicolas Collins and his mother Christiane, with Alvin Lucier (centre)

One of the peculiar charms of American universities is their warm embrace of the clueless applicant. As I understand it, admission to British higher education is predicated on one's having a pretty clear idea of a specific course of study. American colleges, by contrast, have a fondness for the applicant who avows passion for physics, poetry and pottery in equal measure. I was one of those typical confused 18 year old souls when I arrived at Wesleyan University in 1972. Alvin Lucier's *Vespers* saved me.

On an April day midway through my second semester Lucier presented his composition *Vespers* as part of his class "Introduction To Electronic Music". He handed four of us blindfolds and flashlight-shaped electronic instruments called Sondols, then dimmed the lights. We shuffled awkwardly through the darkness, the Sondols emitting streams of sharp clicks. Aiming the instruments around the room and listening to the sounds reflect off the walls and furniture, we were told to navigate across the space by echolocation, in emulation of bats. We could switch the instruments on and off, and change the speed of the clicks, but the output of the Sondol was otherwise unvarying and, to be honest, musically unpromising. Listening carefully, however, I found that the echoes coalesced into a richly detailed, ever changing, immersive cloud that hung in the air – a stippled sonic portrait of the architecture in which we stood. Most of the electronic music I knew came from a pair of loudspeakers – *Vespers* came from everywhere. This was more than just the weirdest, coolest music I had ever heard; it changed all my assumptions of what music – and composers – could be.

A native New Yorker, I was no stranger to the avant garde. My mother waxes nostalgic about taking me to Stockhausen and Ives concerts when I was a tot, though I displayed a consistent lack of musical talent

from grade school recorder classes through teenage flirtations with electric guitar. I was, however, a fanatical music consumer – mostly pop, blues, some jazz and 'World Music' – and at age 17 I bought a secondhand Tandberg reel-to-reel tape recorder to dub radio broadcasts and my friends' records. As it happens, this machine contained a hidden, undocumented switch that, when thrown, induced delicious, semi-controllable swoops of feedback. I was smitten by the siren call of electronic sound.

A Moog was way beyond reach, but a simple oscillator could be had for the cost of a soldering iron, an integrated circuit from a Touch-Tone telephone, and a copy of a hobby magazine. I gradually picked up enough electronic technique from books and magazines to accomplish the engineer's equivalent of ordering a beer in a foreign bar. My understanding of Serious Music, however, was hobbled by the fact that I still felt more comfortable at the Fillmore than the Philharmonic. Bach, Bartók and Berio lived on the other side of an ocean, they spoke another language, and I knew I was missing their nuances and jokes. I simply didn't have the intuition for European classical music that I had for the rest of my audio world. So while I worked hard to learn as much music theory as possible, I worried that at 17 I was already too old to become truly fluent.

Thus my first year at Wesleyan I studied archaeology, linguistics, history of science, studio art, geology and tabla. This academic smorgasbord was an accurate portrait of my mind at the time. My advisor encouraged me to enroll in Lucier's class, promising "he makes music with bats and porpoises". I signed up.

It was my entrée to the work of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, David Tudor, Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Pauline Oliveros, The Sonic Arts Union – serious

non-pop voices from my side of the ocean. Even for a smart-ass kid from New York this was an ear-opening experience. But nothing quite prepared me for *Vespers*.

To perform *Vespers* is to experience sound as survival rather than as entertainment. At the same time, in its engagement with fundamental acoustics, the piece evokes the kind of ineffable axiomatic musicality I associate with strict species counterpoint. Earlier in the semester Lucier had introduced Glass's *Music In Parallel Fifths* as a "return to the year zero" in Western music: going back to the first rule of counterpoint, violating it and seeing what kind of music would evolve along this new branch. In *Vespers* Lucier reached back even further, to a pre-hominid time before the divarication of music from all other sound, and he invented something that reconnected music to physics, architecture, animal behaviour and social interaction – subjects that had intrigued me since childhood, but that I had never directly associated with music. *Vespers* seemed to tell me that I could make music 'about' anything, not just some finite set of concepts handed down the European classical lineage; that composition was not an activity bound by five lines, but a more amorphous 'glue' that could hold together my disparate interests.

I went on to study with Lucier for six years. Other works of his (most notably *I Am Sitting In A Room*) had a profound influence on my own style, and I could not have acquired a more thorough grounding in post-Cagean avant garde than I did in his introductory class, but *Vespers* was my watershed. From that moment on, the fact that bats excited me more than Boulez vanished as an impediment. I could be a composer. □ The remastered version of Nicolas Collins's *Devil's Music* (1986) has been reissued on CD and LP by EM Records