

# Musical Instrument Building and Improvisation

Workshops with Manfred Bleffert

by David Adams

The second-annual workshops in 2009 at the Summerfield Waldorf School in Sebastopol, California, with German musician, composer, visual artist, and instrument maker Manfred Bleffert almost didn't happen. Tim Allen, who was organizing the two five-day workshops (as well as a third week on music in education) had to withdraw a couple of months before they were scheduled to begin. Fortunately, Roger Lundberg was able



to step in and take over the considerable challenges of organizing these events. I, for one, am most grateful that he did, although I was only able to attend the first of two workshops. The five days (July 26-31)

were surprisingly packed with challenging ideas, new experiences of intense listening and feeling, and group bonding through playing music and constructing instruments together.

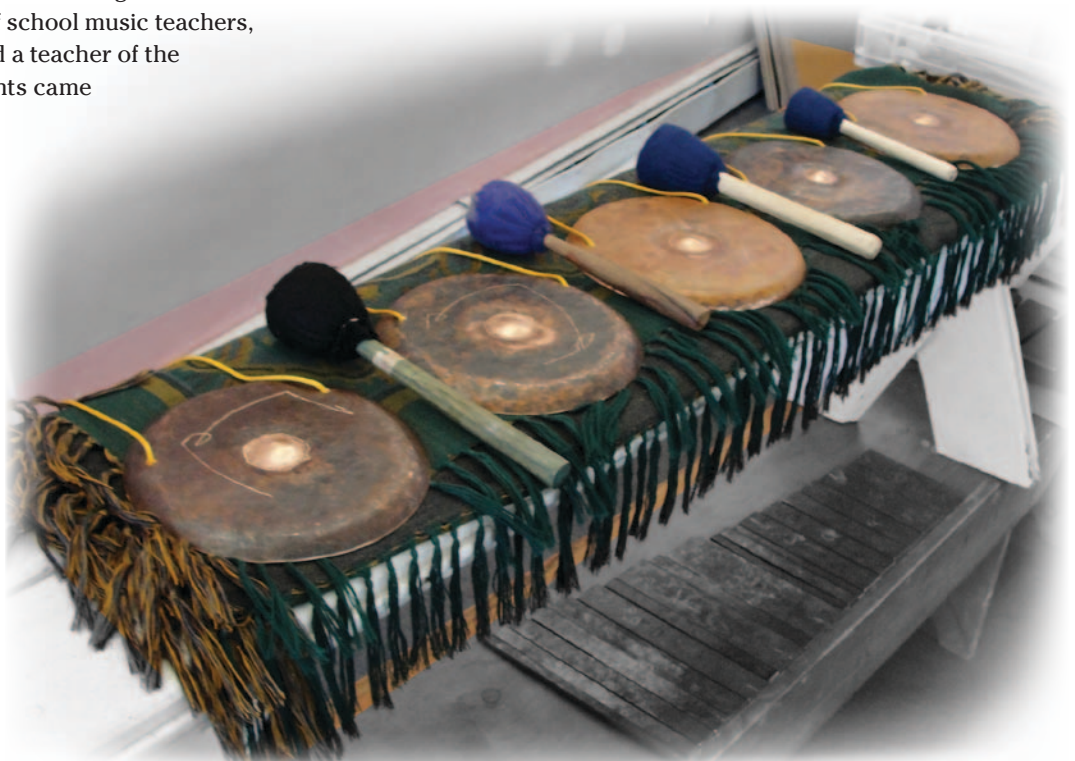
The 2009 workshops were designed to build on the previous year's work (and included a number of repeat attendees), but also to welcome newcomers like myself. Among the twelve or so of us, there were several Waldorf school music teachers, a music therapist, a eurythmist, and a teacher of the Werbeck singing method. Participants came from up and down the west coast, from Canada, Midwestern states, Texas, and, farthest of all, Nepal.

Last summer's larger groups worked over eighteen days primarily to construct xylophone-type instruments in iron and wood as well as pairs of iron rods hanging by fishline (a new kind of instrument) and gongs. The unique instruments, their tuning, and the processes of making them have all been worked out over more than thirty years by Bleffert. As during the previous summer, this year's workshops featured lectures, improvisation exercises in new tonal awareness with the group of twelve playing and listening to both new and tra-

ditional instruments, and much hands-on experience constructing the instruments. There were also a couple drawing exercises and, particularly during the second week, exercises with the visual arts as a way to develop a new form of musical graphic notation and compositions (related, I think, to the graphic notation developed by New York composer Morton Feldman in the early 1950s). Many bits of advice for the Waldorf music teachers were also scattered throughout the course.

Actually, I had originally decided to attend the workshop mostly as a kind of vacation or retreat from my usual work. However, I was surprised that these workshops were far from any kind of escape. In fact, they offered a remarkable visionary deepening to my ongoing interests and activities, although the real depth of what Manfred was bringing crept up on me only slowly. By the end, I felt I had acquired a grand new vision not only of the rich future possibilities for music but also for the future of humanity.

In its rural location integrated with lovely biodynamic gardens and pastures, Summerfield was an idyllic enough setting for a retreat. As you drive into the school, a huge black-and-white mural of Rudolf Steiner greets you from the side of one of the several generously distributed school buildings, mainly designed by architect and parent Steven. Actually, Steiner's name was seldom mentioned during the workshops, but the deepening influence of anthroposophy underlay almost all of the work we did together.



The first evening began with some words by Manfred (spoken, as always, very extemporaneously) followed by a concert that he played, which consisted of a kind of compressed history of western music played mostly on three glockenspiels composed of alternating iron and copper bars (combining and linking selections from Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy, Bartok, and Stravinsky).

Manfred expressed his hope that our work together might be able to translate something of the being and destiny of America into music, which is one of his key interests. He referred to both the traditions of the Native Americans and to the more modern musical innovations of Edgard Varese, John Cage, and others. Humanity has crossed a threshold, and the European tradition of music-making must change. He referred to an ancient Chinese legend on the origin of music that related more to thinking, whereas the European tradition related more to feeling. In America, it is the will that lives most strongly, looking toward the future. One tendency of America is constant movement, a feeling of being "on the way" to somewhere. In America we must look to go into the (musical) future out of will impulses, which can also manifest in music as a mathematical or somewhat mechanical rhythmic element (for example, in the work of contemporary "minimalist" composers like Terry Riley and Steve Reich).

That first night we also began the numerous, ever-changing group-improvisation exercises that would mark the beginning of each morning and each afternoon, culminating in a final evening concert attended by local friends. Fortunately, we were able to use the many Bleffert-designed instruments constructed during last year's workshop, particularly the uniquely resonant twelve iron xylophones, each tuned to a single diatonic (planetary) tone over its seven, variable-width bars ("as if seven voices are singing one tone," explained Manfred). After a couple of exercises with four players creating individual rhythmic ostinato patterns in concert on the wooden xylophones, we briefly began working on bronze finger cymbals with the descending sequence of four tones (BAED) that Steiner called the "TAO" (or Tau) and gave as an "esoteric exercise" for eurythmists (see the end of lecture 5 of *Eurythmy as Visible Music*). Gradually we sounded all four tones together. Steiner says it is necessary to go back to the ancient civilization of China to understand this "eurythmy meditation." In this sequence, said Manfred, we can experience something through which our human being finds or comes to itself in a healthy way as well as something of the original incarnation process of music as a gift of the gods to humanity (echoing a November 16, 1905, statement by Steiner).



That first evening Manfred also showed us a series of painted and drawn "abstract" images he created from contemplating the views out of the window of his airplane as he flew from Germany to California. He uses such drawings as a kind of graphical musical notation or a "musical geography" (which was to be a central subject of the second workshop) The first images related to Greenland as a kind of threshold between Europe and America, a place where the only meteoric iron mountain in the world exists. We then viewed images of the Atlantic Ocean and different parts of the American continent, considering the different kinds of forces or qualities of each region. As Manfred later explained, most of the pictures feature an established central cloud-like form with new movements entering into it from the periphery, joining together like multiple tones. Manfred hoped our work

together will help recreate a free space within the older cloudlike space where something new can develop.

The next day Manfred told an ancient Chinese legend about the origin of music. As the emperor's music master was meditating under a tree in the north, two singing phoenixes ("firebirds") appeared in the sky singing of the love between male and female. While there already existed an ecstatic kind of music that drew one out of oneself, this music master as a result was the first one able to take the music inside himself. The emperor ordered him to make from his experience twelve bells and twelve bamboo pipes (filled with rice). Using these (placed in a circle?), the music master then made music for each of the twelve months. The heavenly music became more earthly and the tones were also related to the four directions.

This legend describes how the heavenly order of the twelve tones was given to human beings through the firebirds. Although the ancient Chinese music used a pentatonic (5-note), whole-tone scale (to which around 1000 B.C. two more tones were added to make seven), it appears they altered the beginning tone of the scale for each month of the year to make twelve variations. Manfred explained the generation of these twelve



pentatonic scales using a diagram of sequential alternating falling fifths (from female to male) and rising fourths (from male to female).

Manfred stated that in the alternating pattern of singing of the male and female phoenixes was an alternation of types of tones, equivalent to the differentiation between the qualities of male and female, yin and yang, and, in substances, iron and copper – the very materials we would be working with. (The Chinese name for the phoenix, a heavenly messenger who is different from the phoenix of Middle Eastern and Greek lore, is the compound term Fèng-Huáng, with Fèng meaning male, yang, and solar and Huáng meaning female, yin, and lunar. Ancient Chinese music divided the twelve tones into two groups of six.)

We engaged in a number of experiential observations of the varying natures of iron and copper (the metals of Mars and Venus). Improvisation exercises contrasted playing of copper gongs in an inner circle with an outer circle playing iron glockenspiels and concentrated listening exercises compared the fading tonal resonance of struck copper and iron bars. In the latter we noticed that the “harder” tone from the iron bar seemed to continue straight outward, while the “softer” copper tone seemed more rounded and warm in its tonal radiance. The natural musical interval between an iron and copper bar of the same size turned out to be a fourth – “the interval that lives between men and women,” commented Manfred. One day we also experimented with



male and female voices separately singing scales as played on a lyre (tuned, it turned out, to certain ancient Greek modes), trying to notice what is “given” and what is “received” in each case. Manfred also related this duality to the major and minor scales, to the black and white keys of the piano, and to a similar kind of division of the twelve tones in the music of Debussy and Bartok.

Historically, once human beings were able to take inside the twelvefold cosmic order of music, we could come to feel like creators within the music instead of only imitating the cosmic music. Eventually, everyone came to be making his or her *own* music, but since the end of Kali Yuga in 1899 we must now find the way to lift music again up to the heavenly sphere. Each people of the world has carried over a musical tradition from this ancient time, and today many musicians attempt to create new directions by combining aspects of these traditions—playing a digeradoo with a violin and saxophone, for instance, or African

rhythmic patterns with western chromatic tuning. Today we are coming to the end of these ancient inspirations, and something really new is needed. The emphasis on a twelve-tone sphere in the music of Schoenberg and Webern was a signal of this new situation, in which we are all still like children.

In between Manfred’s short talks on more theoretical and historical aspects and our various musical improvisation exercises, we spent many hours each day in diligent and sometimes tiring labor, most of us constructing copper and iron glockenspiels or copper gongs. This involved cutting the various metals to shape and seemingly endless hammering of them on anvils to temper and form them. We could clearly hear the difference in quality between the rounded, warmly-resonant tone of a metal bar that had been hammered and the flat, rapidly-fading tone of one that had not.

I constructed a large wooden xylophone, hand-sawing eighteen wooden bars and using a Japanese hatchet to rough out undulating, organic shapes and finishing them with a plane and several Japanese draw-knives. For the final stage of tuning the instruments Manfred trained us to listen to the full sounding of a tone: how it arises, how it fades away, and what it leaves behind in the silence. Most of the learning we engaged in during the workshop was of an experiential or phenomenological nature. While this occasionally left certain aspects unclear, it also ensured that all of our content remained in a very living form. “You can’t make music out of theory,” cautioned Manfred, “only out of life and mood.” In fact, our very activity of hearing affects

the tones and opens them up for something new.

Manfred stressed the role of the will, both as related particularly to human beings on the American continent and as the unconscious source of the spiritual future. We must divide our will forces into a part that acts, explores, and experiences, and a part that consciously observes all of this. Through these parallel will activities we can avoid losing ourselves and create a guiding or inspiring direction for our work. In this vein we often took time to reflect on our improvisation exercises.

One often-repeated exercise during the first half of the week involved playing the four descending tones of the TAO (“incarnating from above”), usually on the iron glockenspiels arranged in a large circle. The first tone continued sounding, even as each additional tone was added to the continuously sounding mix. Then we tried adding a fifth, lower note found spontaneously. This lower note, played by a group of more traditional instru-

ments—cello, bass flute, guitar, and xylophone—established a kind of ground or lowest incarnation point. We then played the same TAO tones as a *rising* sequence, and this time the traditional instruments had to find a new tone (or tone cluster) above the final note of the TAO, a note of the future. Although these additional tones above and below were often a dissonant sounding of multiple instruments, in this context they were full of “future feeling” and often quite beautiful or moving in an unfamiliar way.

Soon we expanded this exercise to several variations of playing on the iron glockenspiels the seven tones of the diatonic (planetary) scale in place of the four TAO tones, both descending and ascending, but still adding the “extra” improvised or “discovered” tones/tone clusters above and below on the traditional instruments (to which a soprano flute was added). Repeatedly, we used different sequences of tones, improvised each time, not to create a linear melody but to build up a “community” or “tower” of tones as the seven “voices” (some doubled) felt the way to sound together. We strove to feel the tones streaming outward in each particular sonic gesture as well as the ever-changing connections between the players. We were encouraged to make the gentle joining together of the new and already sounding tones feel and sound like two clouds merging. As each tone arose on the uniquely resonant Bleffert instruments it was as if a new spiritual presence had joined the tonal community, each of which changed the quality of the whole. Then gradually the tones faded out into silence, one by one. All of these (and



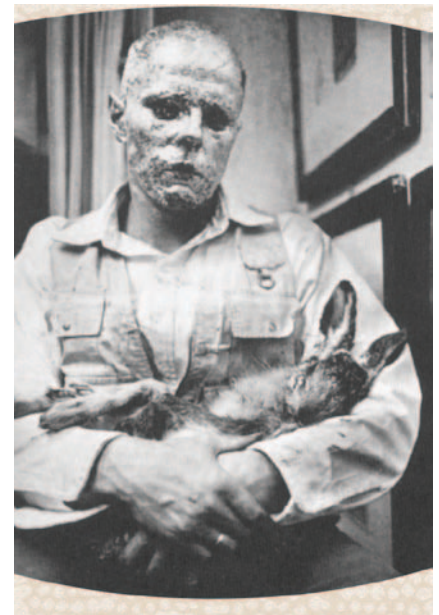
many other) mostly simple exercises were both fun music-making and concentrated group spiritual research.

From the eleventh to the twentieth centuries, Manfred explained, human beings were gradually concluding and losing the original musical inspiration given to humanity during the Old Indian Epoch. John Cage’s famous (and very American) 1952 premiere in Woodstock, New York, of “4 minutes, 33 seconds” (or “4’33”), in which the pianist simply sat at the piano for that length of time, was a sincere gesture, to focus human beings on what is happening now in the present space, the present silence. Manfred encouraged us to try to feel the future coming toward the present silence. The real tonal system we have today is the silence (the title of a famous 1961 book by Cage), the silence of the earth. The earth itself was created out of the heavenly “harmony of the spheres,” and it can be the prototype for a future development of the arts. At this point I want to simply quote Manfred’s eloquent description:

The earth has everything the human being will receive and attain in the future. For example, consider iron. Previously the earth had it, but now the human being can take within himself the qualities of iron. The earth is much older than the human being, who is the youngest being in this world. In the future we will learn from the earth – but not directly, which is materialism. Rather, human beings must change the material being of the earth into their own creations. . . . This silence is our ground, the foundation to our music. We are the beings of silence, and out of this silence bring music into this world. If not, we would be mere imitators, like the animals. Music is dying in us, and we have to resurrect every tone in us, to take them out of the great silence and make them living. . . . We must explore each tone that arises like the original creation of music. We will proceed anew, moving more into what a single tone can be in the future, and gradually we will find connections to other tones, creating something like a new system. . . . Feel the joy of the eternal creation of music coming originally from the heavens. Feel how the “birth” of each tone changes the world, like the birth of each new child.

When I heard Manfred speak this way, it occurred to me that these words could almost have been spoken by the late German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986, photo below). I had heard a couple of days before the conference that Manfred was interested in the work of Beuys, so I had brought along a bunch of slides of Beuys’s artworks “just in case.” The second-last night I gave an evening slide talk

as an introduction to the varied and unusual creative work of Beuys, mostly inspired by his studies of Rudolf Steiner and other anthroposophists. Beuys, too, phenomenologically explored the qualities of different substances of the earth, but more within an avant-garde visual-arts context than a musical one. He also was aware that the past traditions in culture are coming to an end and new



ways must be found. This is one explanation for his unusual work exploring the qualities and expressive potentials of such mostly untraditional art materials as honey, fat, beeswax, blood, felt, chocolate, and, yes, also iron and copper – as well as new forms of visual art arising in the 1960s including performance art, earth art, and installations. For example in his 1965 “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare” in Düsseldorf, Beuys sat and walked through an exhibition of his work in an art gallery, explaining his pictures to a dead hare that he cradled in his arms or let touch the pictures with its paw – all the time with his head covered with honey and gold leaf and his feet attached, respectively, to an iron and a felt sole. In brief, this was a reference to the qualities of living, warm, sunlike thinking (gold as metal of the sun) that Beuys felt humanity needed to develop to move forward in evolution, using also the hare as an animal connected to the living forces of nature who digs into the earth.

It turned out that Manfred had known and even occasionally collaborated with Beuys, and that his wife Ulrike even grew in the same small German town of Krefeld as Beuys. Along with my talk, I had Manfred play a short composition he had composed and played as part of several Beuys coyote-related events, "The Song of the Coyote." The most famous of these events took place in New York City in 1964, where Beuys spent three days and nights in the Rene Block Art



Gallery interacting with a live coyote, as a representative of the wild and Native American aspects of this continent. Manfred's "Song" was composed of ghostly whining, whistling, sighing sounds generated by dragging a hard-rubber mallet tip sideways along the surface of the carved wooden xylophone bars – more of an inner gesture than the actual outer cry of a coyotes. Manfred also volunteered to play a longer, partially improvised piece by Beuys titled "The Siberian Symphony, First Movement," which was part of Beuys first major performance (or "Action") of the same name in 1963 and played on a Cagean prepared piano (that is, a piano with various pieces of wood, metal, or glass or small objects stuck among the strings to make them sound differently). Manfred, who began to use the Beuysian language of images from that point on in the workshop, began this piece with an additional short section on the wooden xylophone that he titled "The Coyote Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare," adding that gradually all the animals will join in the music. Manfred had carefully prepared the piano with numerous wooden pegs inserted into the strings, making some keys sound more like gongs or percussion instruments than piano tones. Manfred spoke of "Siberia" as representing a threshold land (like Greenland), a realm of silence where "The Siberian Garden of Music" might arise. I began to realize that just as Beuys sought new visual images and actions to represent supersensible realities, so Manfred sought for new aural processes and improvisations (and the instruments to support them) to represent those same supersensible realities. And both men focused on attentiveness to the qualities of the substances used.

The next, final morning Manfred declared the workshop part of the

Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (founded by Beuys and author Heinrich Böll in 1974) and pondered the problem of musical form in improvisation. He urged us to create a free, "movement space" between polarities to give new voices a new space in which we can freely accompany and form their development. This worked with Beuys's "theory of sculpture," whereby form is developed by movement that takes place between more fixed polarities, such as expansion and contraction, form and chaos. He then related this to Schiller's description of the artist freely playing with the polar forces of form and matter and, further, to the polar influences of Lucifer and Ahriman. He stressed that we needed to bring to this task the gestures of both living within the material and generating conscious form. We need both the earthly and heavenly poles, the worlds above and below; in fact, at this time the path to the higher worlds must pass through the beings of the depths, including, as Beuys also recognized, the forces of the minerals, plants, and animals. He summarized: "Why are copper and iron like they are? Behind them is a great evolution in the earth. The earth will be an example, resource, and guide for the human being in the future. There lie the answers to all of our questions. We ask them upward, and the answer comes "down" from below. We can have an impression here like Rudolf Steiner's sculpture with the figures of Lucifer and Ahriman, or of Beuys's use of honey and gold as polarities to create a center between, or of John Cage's "silence" with the original Tau descending into the earth. We have to lose and find our meaning with an experimental approach, by listening deeply. . . . With Lucifer above and Ahriman below we have a whole human being. Lucifer and Ahriman are present only *for us*. We need these forces that are the start of our conscious going forward from now on. . . . We can only develop living form from out of the heart and soul of the human being."

In addition to the Beuysian turn, there were numerous other surprises during the workshop. For example, the final morning Manfred announced that we were going to gather wood (especially oak), build fires, and put the copper and iron bars and gongs we were making into the fire (above and below). After about twenty minutes, we would then put both the heated



metals and the glowing embers into holes we dug in the earth, leaving them there for three hours before digging them up. This was part of the “curing” process of making these instruments, and this giving our work over to fire and earth needed to be accompanied by a wakeful consciousness, for it would indicate how the work on the instruments should be finished. When this was done the gongs and bars often emerged from the earth with marvelously multicolored surfaces in striated, marble-like patterns (photo at right). After this process yet more hammering (below) was required to brighten a somewhat dulled but also deepened sound the metals had acquired. Manfred spoke of our entering into the substances we used (like Beuys) and compared all of our work in hammering, playing, listening, and tuning the metals to different healing “skins” of warmth we were placing around them (again related to the way Beuys used felt and fat and other means to accentuate the warmth element that he felt our coldly intellectual society much needed for balance).

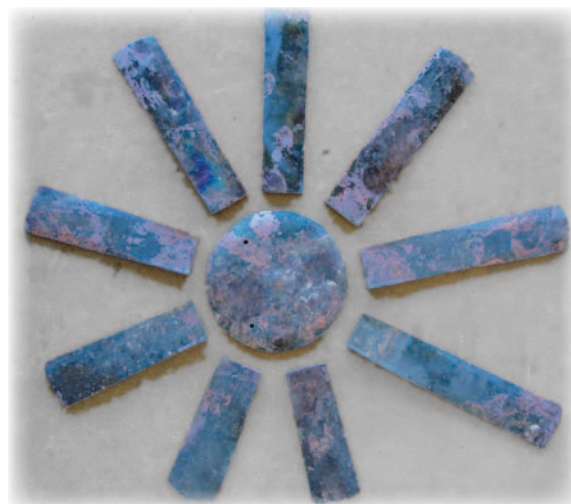


With our world growing ever-more electrified and digitalized, it was refreshing to connect directly with the qualities of specific natural substances, reminding us how essential that is. Manfred's intensive process of working, transforming, and “warming” the metals helps to free the tone sounding from them from its heavier, more material aspects.

Manfred titled our concluding Friday evening concert “Tower Works.” With another surprise relating to the first work on the program titled “Granite Clouds,” we each found ourselves furnished with a small, rough slab and smaller round piece of Alaskan granite, which we were instructed to “play” by dragging the small, smooth stone across the larger, rough one, “like the moving of a cloud.” We then moved on to a somewhat less heavy, but still “earthy” substance for the piece titled “Wooden Earth,” each playing a rhythmic pattern on the wooden xylophone bar we held in our laps, as we sequentially moved around the circle and gradually faded out one by one. Then we moved on to the “TAO” piece, as described earlier with the added traditional instruments. Manfred concluded the concert with two pieces. The first was a long recapitulation with changes of his opening concert on the glockenspiels with alternating iron and copper bars (right), moving through the history of music from ancient China to the middle ages to later western music up to Debussy (copper) and Stravinsky (iron). Finally

Manfred concluded by playing Bartok's “Cantata Profana” (1939) on the prepared piano, commenting that Bartok has much to offer the future of music. This was a modified “interpretation of the Bartok piece, which was originally inspired by a Romanian fairy tale, “The Enchanted Deer,” that Manfred also told.

In the story nine boys are turned into deer in the forest and, when found by their father, cannot return home to their mother because their antlers no longer fit through the door of their home. This seemed a story about exile, foretelling the soon-to-come exile of Bartok himself in America and of so many in Europe as well as the exile of the nine-membered human being in the earthly world. In Manfred's version, the nine deer tell their father they cannot come home because they now belong to the animal cosmos. Manfred also indirectly related it to a large Beuys installation from 1982, titled “Lightning with Stag in Its Glare” featuring 35 clay “primeval creatures.” He stated that the deer are struck by lightning and split into many parts. He added that the coyote, which has a special task for America, appears in his music as a song of two coyotes (like the two phoenixes), both male and female, referring once more to his opening theme of finding the new music for America, a music not suggested from Europe or borrowed from the Orient. The Cantata itself I found to be a fantastic version of Bartok's piece (originally written for double chorus, soloists, and orchestra), integrating the soulful, sensitively expressionistic qualities of Bartok with the adventurous sonorities of the musical avant-garde.



A couple of days after leaving Sebastopol I sent Manfred three quotations that I felt embodied the spiritual bases of his musical research, as follows:

Every something is an echo of nothing.  
Not one sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. And no  
silence exists that is not pregnant with sound.

– John Cage

... the moment in which God dies is the moment in which Man  
attains his freedom. It means that God now resides within us.  
And since God now resides within us, we must now be the  
creators of the future. ... In spirit, and also, let's say, in culture,  
every single individual on the face of the earth is unique and  
has his own unique forms of creativity, his own unique creative  
needs. Each individual forms his own world.

– Joseph Beuys

I will to feel the being of Christ.  
In matter's dying it awakens spirit birth.  
In spirit thus I find the cosmos  
And know myself in cosmic becoming.

– Rudolf Steiner

I then heard that Manfred was using these “verses” for improvisation exercises during the second week's workshop and was also composing a musical piece based on them that he would play on the organ in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco at a concert on

Sunday, August 9 (below). I was able to go to this concert, where Manfred also added a fourth section (“movement”) based on Bartok and told me that in the third, “Steiner” section he also worked with St. John's imagination of the woman clothed with the sun. Grace Cathedral is a huge, stone, Gothic-style structure filled

with stained glass windows and having its organ pipes on four different walls. In his concert Manfred made full use of the spatial potentials of tones arising from one end or the other of the cathedral and moving, crossing, or weaving with tones arising from pipes on the other walls. Throughout the concert mighty organ tones would rise and radiate outward, grow ever more varied and complex, be joined by new tones, and then gradually fade away. As had previously occurred to me during some of our improvisation exercises, I imagined each new tone rising up as a forceful spiritual presence, joining other lofty spirits at the original creation “breathing over the face of the waters” – or perhaps anxiously surveying the state of their human creation in the 21st century. Yet at both the organ concert and the exercises



this did not feel like a “flashback” view into the ancient past but rather an improvised new birthing, tone by tone, out of the self-conscious human spirits assembled together.

I realized that, unlike traditional music, one does not experience Manfred's music so much in time as in space. Tones build up personality-like structures and presences and even relationships and then fade away. This strong spatial, visual quality reminded me of Steiner's statements about how in the future music will become more like the visual arts (and the visual arts become more like music). Although during our exercises we played what we have learned to call the “diatonic scale” notes, these tone-beings seemed somehow different than that. They were not ordered in the usual sequential scale and each had a very independent presence, mingling together “conversationally” as much in space as in time. With so much emphasis in Manfred's approach on the richness and presence of the single tone (almost to that future stage of music Steiner mentioned as being able to hear a melody within a single tone), I also wonder a bit whether the essential experience of the interval between the tones becomes a bit too lost. Yet this is also still there in a different way in the “community” of tones sounding together.

I find that the musical work of Manfred Bleffert represents a new step forward in musical research arising out of anthroposophy and, moreover, is a work that others are welcome to join. Another set of workshops is planned for next summer in Sebastopol as well as in several other parts of the country in 2010 (Harlemville, Chicago, San Diego).

For more information, consult [www.manfred-bleffert.net](http://www.manfred-bleffert.net) which lists these US dates:

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- » **ANAWME: “Changing Times – Changing Music”:**  
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- 7/26/10—7/30/10**  
Sound Research & Instrument Building  
**8/2/10—8/6/10**  
Music: Work with New Instruments and Voice  
**8/9/10—8/13/10**  
Visual Art & Its Development through  
Musical Processes