

Foreword

Michelle Fillion

Professor Emerita of Musicology, University of Victoria

The articles in this issue originated in a graduate seminar in musicology at the University of Victoria directed by myself and my husband, the composer Gordon Mumma, in Spring 2015. The seminar was a co-celebration of Mumma's 80th birthday and of my final year of teaching before retirement. Its subject, the composers, visual artists and theatre designers who found a rich source of creative inspiration in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, exemplifies the power of collaborative interaction as a stimulus to artistic and intellectual pursuits. Over fifty composers contributed music to choreographies by Cunningham throughout the lifespan of the Company from its inception in the 1950s to the early 21st century. Among these were some of the most innovative composers of American new music for instruments and electronic media, including David Behrman, Earle Brown, Gavin Bryars, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Gordon Mumma, Conlon Nancarrow, Pauline Oliveros, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, and many others. Together with artists in visual arts, lighting, costuming, and stagecraft, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, and Beverley Emmons, they created a lasting artistic legacy.

In the context of the seminar Gordon Mumma proved a generous, genial teaching partner and an inexhaustible font of personal experience, engaging anecdotes, and information on music and dance in the Cunningham circle. He was invited to join the Cunningham Dance

Company for the European tour of August 1966, and remained with the Company until 1974 as a musician, composer, and electronic wizard, sharing the pit with Cage, Tudor, Behrman, and others. During that time he also composed the music for two Cunningham choreographies, *Place* (1966) and *TV Rerun* (1972), and collaborated with Cunningham for *Loops* (1971) and with Cage and Tudor on the interactive creation of the music for Cunningham's *Assemblage* (1968), *Signals* (1970), and *Landrover* (1972). He also took part in at least eighty Cunningham *Events*, one-time choreographic works that were often combined with live-electronic music. During that time he became a skilled reader of the physical syntax of Cunningham's choreography and its implications for the musical composer. Cunningham's originally radical dependence on chance operations to generate choreography and his aesthetic of total independence of choreography and music – conceived separately and coming together with lighting and stage and costume design – is now central to the field of modern dance. Yet chance did not extend to the dancers, whose movements were the result of meticulous, disciplined rehearsal of a preconceived choreography (chance is a source of physical danger to a group of high-flying dancers careening across a stage).

The circumstances of Mumma's invitation to join the Company say much about the creative environment around Merce Cunningham. A commission for the music for a new choreography – the eventual *Place* – was finalized shortly afterwards in a memorable phone conversation with Cunningham that Mumma recreated in his classic essay on his years with the Company, "From Where the Circus Went":

"I'd like it if you could do something for David Tudor to play."

I agreed, and asked about the title of the new dance.

"I haven't decided yet."

"How long will it be?"

“Between twenty and thirty minutes.”

“I wonder what else I should know, maybe how many dancers?”

“Eight dancers, and we perform it at Saint-Paul de Vence, in France, on the 6th of August. It’s beautiful there.”

That was all. I now attempted to accumulate enough information to compose a work for them in two months. To meet the deadline, I decided to recast the elaborate composition that I was already preparing for Tudor and his bandoneon [his ensemble work *Mesa* for bandoneon and cybersonic console].

Though the information that Cunningham had given me was minimal (I didn’t have the presence of mind to probe further), his matter-of-fact tone was reassuring. I doubted that he knew any of my music, but I had the feeling that he trusted me, or at least seemed comfortable taking the risk. In the ensuing years it became clear that this initial encounter was representative of much of the Cunningham Dance Company collaboration. The best and worst aspects of “grapevine” communications and telephone arrangements, the minimal specifications between choreographer and composer, the blended sense of freedom and responsibility, and a pervading ambiguity about details and commitments were nourished by Cunningham’s immediate trust in his collaborators and his invitation to artistic risk.¹

Mumma frequently talks about the fundamental importance of Cunningham’s example to his own work and to that of many other composers. Most often cited are his model of artistic freedom and his respect for the individual in collaboration with others. For Cunningham’s composers the choreographer’s willingness to trust his associates and embrace the unexpected opened the door to a flowering of musical creativity unparalleled since the Diaghilev years. For the members of the seminar, students, instructors, and guest speakers

¹ Mumma, *Cybersonic Arts: Adventures in American New Music*, ed. with commentary by Michelle Fillion (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 109-10.

alike, Cunningham's spirit of adventure seemed to hover over our proceedings, serving as a constant goad to work communally, embrace the unfamiliar, and explore the unexpected. The four essays that follow are devoted to three significant composers in American new music, Cage, Tudor, and Wolff, and a brilliant stage designer, Beverley Emmons, who provided the innovative staging for the Cunningham–Mumma collaboration *Place*—and with them four perspectives on the creative ferment of the Cunningham milieu.