

Phill Niblock
At Seventy
by Rob Forman (Weekly Dig, Boston)

As I enter the enormous loft in Soho that Phill Niblock has occupied since 1968, he methodically starts flipping switches, and the dark space awakens in a massive metallic but warm wail of sonic overtones. The large video screens generate the only light as they alternately display slow motion and looped images of Asian farmers and field workers. Niblock disappears and leaves me to absorb/experience the intensity for about 20 minutes before I notice him sitting in a smaller room engaged in some other activity. A pioneer in "overtone" compositions, having developed a unique approach in the 1960s in terms of both execution (multi-tracking live instrumentalists tuning visually or audibly to sine tones in real time) and presentation (playing back these recordings at very loud volumes, allowing the "difference tones" to act on the listener both bodily and aurally), his methods have remained constant. Each Niblock composition, preferably played or performed at the loudest volume possible whether it be for guitar, trombone, strings, or flute, results in stunning sound masses that swarm around and through the listener. Niblock celebrates his 70th birthday this month. While continuously productive over the decades, recent years have seen him become a tour de force, giving hundreds of performances a year throughout the world, and having numerous new and reissue documents made available on labels such as Touch, Extreme and Mokai. Niblock also heads up Experimental Intermedia (XI), a nonprofit foundation and performance space that has been presenting concerts since the early '70s and releasing recordings since 1990. Niblock began his artistic career as a photographer, taking photographs of favorite jazz artists in the late 1950s. "When I came to New York in '58, I was going to a lot of jazz things, classical as well, and there were these series around, and it was quite hard to distinguish the experimental downtown music from the more academic uptown music. The downtown stuff didn't have a center ... it sort of occurred where it occurred. Seeing John Cage and David Tudor at the Living Theater, for instance. I first heard Morton Feldman in 1961 and a piece with La Monte Young where he burns a violin on a music stand. The idea that this could happen!"

Though Niblock was not creating at the time, his hobby of photographing jazz musicians evolved into photographing actors and dancers. He met the choreographer and filmmaker Elaine Summers, with whom he eventually founded Experimental Intermedia in 1968. "When I began making film, I began making it much less as a standard filmmaker and more for performance situations. I worked with a lot of dancers who were using film. I had tried working with a couple of people in terms of making music, but I wasn't really interested in collaborating, and I knew what I wanted and was personally interested in. I made some pieces with modified sources (non-musical instruments) as well, but the first piece I made with these masses of sound was using a church organ. I made the first piece for a concert at Judson Church, which had film, live dance, etc. My first pieces were essentially very directly related to all of the pieces I have done since, and [those]

that I am doing now ... I've really only made this one music, and I've only been interested in the one idea of close-ratio tones and getting it loud enough to produce a lot of overtone patterns. I'm more interested in making architectural, environmental sound pieces, which one can think of as a big, full box. Within that box, there are many possibilities of things happening, so if you move around the space, the sound changes because of the standing waves. All of the pieces work with that kind of thing, and I vary the structure of the pitches I use from piece to piece. I'm not interested in a tuning structure but more of an architectural structure to create this environment."

Over the years Niblock has incorporated film into his performances. His films, of manual laborers in repetitive activity, provide what at first could be viewed as distracting from the non-referentiality of the auditory element but in fact enhance it with their slow dissolves. Niblock uses only a handful of simple images that are several minutes long, with no editing or jump cuts. The sequences repeat but do not evolve, and there is no narrative. As with the musical element, they erase the sense of time passing. His performances at XI often last as long as six hours, with four projections paired with the continuous mass of drones. The technical aspect of the space itself has evolved over the years to accommodate these performances. When Niblock travels, the concept is the same, but the technical reality of location provides unpredictability. "You still run into places that have sound systems for playback that are not the greatest, and it's always hard to find really good situations. Everywhere I play, my music sounds different, because the sound system is different, the architectural space is different, and sometimes even with very, very good sound systems, it doesn't sound particularly good, because the architectural aspect of the space is wrong. I've done things at other places where there was much less of a sound system, and it was fine, because the acoustics really worked. In general, the bigger and more echoic it is, the better. Cathedrals are especially fantastic."

Experimental Intermedia has hosted over 1000 concerts since the '70s with no sign of letting up. The series Niblock now curates consists of a month of concerts in March and December. While historically the performances usually featured other New York artists, the series has expanded to include composers, sound artists and improvisers from all over the globe, with a strong presence from younger artists. Niblock acts as a mentor for many of them, and in turn they have created opportunities for him to perform and release his music on their labels. The space, label and performances all creatively feed off each other. "The documents (LPs, CDs) came partly because of the history of the concert series and partly because it was interesting to do something that could exist beyond this place. I think artists should produce other artists. Elaine thought that, when she had the idea for the foundation. I think a lot of art activity happens because it's produced by artists, and that people who become known, become known because they get exposed first by this process, and that's an important aspect of art. I was always leery about records, but it was also necessary to get some stuff out that could be more widely disseminated than was possible in making concerts. And, in turn, the recordings made it possible to do more concerts."

Though his laconic and unpretentious style, and deliberate but industrious work ethic has always served him well (he is originally from Indianapolis after all), Niblock has now attained legendary status as an international sound artist and composer, and is incredibly visible and involved with many different movements in today's experimental underground. There is a timeless aspect to Niblock's music and art, in how it works on the observer but also how it defies being dated by the markers of history and culture. This quality washes back onto Niblock himself, so even as he turns 70 this month, one feels as if he has always been doing this art and always will be, even as the rest of us pass by. Recent documents include Guitar 2, For Four (Mokai), Touch Food (Touch) and the DVD The Movement of People Working (Extreme), a collection of early film and audio works.

Phill Niblock celebrates his 70th birthday on October 1 at Tonic in NY with a concert featuring Jim O'Rourke, Ryoji Ikeda, Lary 7, Brandon Labelle, Yasunao Tone and Ken Montgomery. <<http://www.experimentalintermedia.org>>www.experimentalintermedia.org

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--- sedimental: label(<<http://www.sedimental.com>>www.sedimental.com)

--- continuous drift/test pattern: radio (<<http://www.zbconline.com>>www.zbconline.com)

--- non-event: events (<<http://www.nonevent.org>>www.nonevent.org)

--- dalla terra: wine (<<http://www.dallaterra.com>>www.dallaterra.com)