

Other Minds Presents: An Interview with Rhys Chatham



Identifier

OMP.2013.06.08

Description

Charles Amirkhanian interviews composer Rhys Chatham before a select audience gathered at a private residence in San Francisco on June 8, 2013. Chatham was visiting the Bay Area to attend a special preview event held on June 7, 2013 during which several of his compositions for guitar ensemble were presented, and which served as a teaser and fund raiser for the then upcoming performance of his “A Secret Rose,” a work scored for 100 guitarists.

Chatham was born in New York City, the son of two writers. His father was also a serious amateur musician specializing in Early Music. Influenced by this upbringing Chatham grew up to study with a famous harpsichord builder and eventually became a respected harpsichord tuner. He shares a number of humorous stories about this vocation, including one having to do with re-tuning an instrument for the famous pianist Glenn Gould while an entire orchestra of highly paid musicians were forced to wait. Through his job as a harpsichord tuner Chatham had to learn a number of different tuning systems, and despite some early difficulties in even hearing overtones he eventually incorporated such varied tunings in a number of his own works.

Chatham also studied with a number of noted avant-garde composers and performers including Morton Subtnick, who encouraged the young man to expand his horizon by reading great literature and philosophy, as well as introducing him to the beauty of counterpoint. However the most important influence in Chatham’s musical career might have come about when he attended early punk rock performances by The Ramones and Patti Smith, as well as taking lessons from the minimalist composer La Monte Young.

Since then Chatham has produced a string of impressive compositions, many of which are for a variety of guitar ensembles. His “A Secret Rose,” excerpts of which are played during this interview, represents perhaps his greatest such endeavor requiring as it does an orchestra of 100 guitarists, who not only need to be assembled from interested locals musicians but also trained in the performance of the piece, no small feat as most do not even know how to read music.

Throughout this interview Chatham comes across as an absolutely delightful and unpretentious personality, and will likely leave the viewer in eager anticipation of the November 17, 2013 performance of “A Secret Rose.”

Musical Selections

A Secret Rose, for large ensemble of electric guitars, electric bass, and drums [excerpt, 2nd movement] (2006) (1:53) / Rhys Chatham -- A Secret Rose, for large ensemble of electric guitars, electric bass, and drums [excerpt, 4th movement] (2006) (4:39) / Rhys Chatham

Artists

Other Minds (Organization) (features)

Amirkhanian, Charles (features)

Chatham, Rhys (features)