PHILIP CORNER in conversation with ELENI POULOU & HILARY JEFFERY from ETUDE
Photographs ETUDE's photo collection by Šimon Lupták,
Polina Slobodchikova & Alexandra Gordienko
Thank you Phoebe Neville, Theresa Patzschke, Simon Rose
& Deborah Walker
Location Albinea, Italy



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HILARY Philip, how old were you when you started playing the trombone?

PHILIP Well, I started very late, I didn't start the piano until I was 13. There was a school, which used to be called the High School of Music and Art in New York City, now it's known as LaGuardia. By the time I was a sophomore I wanted to go there, so I took the exam and I was accepted. At the time, they had three orchestras and everybody had to learn an instrument. I was assigned the trombone.

ELENI How were the orchestras?

PHILIP There were no problems with the string sections as the kids came in having played the violin since they were five years old! But they needed all the other instruments, and they were assigning the brass instruments. I wanted to do French horn, but I got the trombone partly because I had long enough arms to do the slide. It turned out to be a mitzvah, a blessing, because who plays French horn in modern contemporary music?

ELENI I feel there's been a recent dumbing down in the colleges and music schools,

where the teachers think, «Oh, they like pop music», and they don't teach anything about music basics or history. Do you feel that way?

PHILIP It's gone that far?

HILARY Some teachers want to engage the youth, so they do something they think youth can relate to, which I understand, because you've got to get them into music somehow. They do some pretty bad arrangements... maybe, some of it is okay, such as film music, but I miss the classics. I've been teaching Renaissance music with some of the younger kids playing brass, which is super and they like playing it.

PHILIP Well, I would think that, let's say for brass players, if you play Gabrieli - its a gas, you know?

HILARY Exactly! It's fun.

ELENI They can do it, and when it's simple enough, they feel motivated, but if it's too difficult and a child doesn't learn as quickly, they just give up.

HILARY Did many of your students become musicians later?

PHILIP No.

All three musicians laugh

ELENI What did the rest of them end up doing?

PHILIP Some of them became visual artists, some of them teachers or sculptors or doctors. I had a class - introduction to Non-Western music - which gave birth to a rock band called The Rhythm Method who did all kinds of gamelan stuff in the clubs. It reminds me... years ago, there was once



















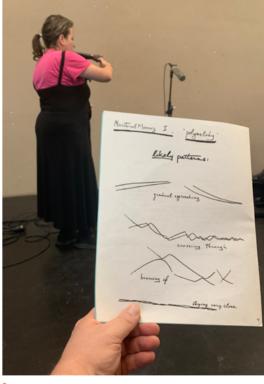














this guy who joined a music course of mine. It was interesting as he was a real reactionary, an opera singer who took the course as a kind of a provocation. There were people who would take the course because they thought, «Well I hate modern music, but I hear that the course is good, so I'll take it». Anyway, I remember him being gently provocative about 20th century music and how awful it was. He started talking about opera, and I probably said some not so great things about opera too. I said, «Look, you can like whatever you like, and you can do whatever you want, but you know, if you totally reject music of our time and you're only doing 19th century music, it's necrophilia».

HILARY Yeah, it is!

PHILIP So he said, «I don't wanna be a necrophile!» I didn't have any contact with him after that, but a couple of years ago, I got a message from him: «Remember me?» Turns out he had a career as a failed opera singer.

Eleni sits up, flapping the skirt of her navy polka dot dress before sitting back down. She doesn't want it to get creased

ELENI Do you like opera?

PHILIP Me? I love Baroque. Give me Vivaldi, Monteverdi, Rameau, Purcell. Absolutely. There's an opera radio channel here, sometimes I turn it on, hear two notes and turn it off again! I can't abide Richard Strauss, and I can't abide his orchestral music either! There's a few exceptions, like the last operas of Verdi - Falstaff is a gas. I like Carmen, too, but they do spoil things with that forced vocalising and excessive vibrato.

HILARY And any others?

PHILIP The two operas of Boito, some

of Wagner, *Der ring [des Nibelungen]* Oh! You've got to love The Destruction Of Valhalla! You know what Hector Berlioz said about Wagner's *Tristan [und Isolde]*? He said it's one long chromatic moan!

HILARY I like the beginning of *Rheingold*.

PHILIP Oh yes, the beginning of *Rheingold*, the first five minutes...

Philip sings the Rhinemaidens chorus, «Rheingold! Reines Gold!», in an operatic falsetto

PHILIP And the end of *Götterdämmerung*... so there's a few monuments, but basically, I have to say, as a genre I don't feel it.

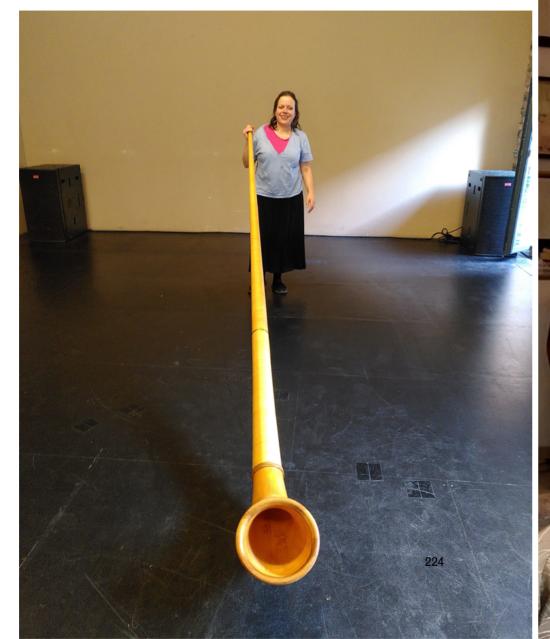
HILARY I don't like all the vibrato they do.

PHILIP While we're at it, scotch all those recent repetitive popularities. My God, I heard a performance recently of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* with two sopranos who were wobbling all over the place as if they were doing Strauss!That was really awful.

ELENI That's like a fake emotion.

PHILIP For the 19th century, I love *The Tales Of Hoffmann*, all the operas of Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov and *Don Giovanni*, of course, although that was a bit earlier. Closer to our time, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, but I cannot stand Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, neither the music nor the idea. I have never come close to doing an opera myself. I have done quite a few vocal things, and over the years some ideas have been built up into the dream of doing something on Ninon de Lenclos. I'm not that hot for the classical repertoire anyway. To finish with the 19th century, I can pick out other composers who I really like, such as Berlioz, Schubert and

«I'M NOT THAT HOT FOR THE CLASSICAL PROPERTY OF THE CLASSICAL ANYWAYII







Schumann! I don't really like Beethoven. I can appreciate it and its historical importance... even understand on an emotional level what he's trying to do. I just feel like he's beating me over the head, you know?

ELENI Mm-hmm!

*Philip sings the main motif from the second movement of Beethoven's ninth Symphony, mimicking drama and explosions, and the group continue chatting about their favourite composers over a shared pot of tea. The conversation shifts, and Philip begins discussing his piece *Big Trombone* which is played on an original Baroque instrument, and Hilary recalls a programme note he wrote for a concert they did together in Slovakia*

HILARY You wrote about a dream you had about a big trombone. I've got it somewhere, it's very good.

PHILIP Oh, I don't remember that!

ELENI Do you write scores based on dreams sometimes?

PHILIP No, I'm not a big dreamer. I know I dream, but I've never been into that.

ELENI I actually saw this piece by an artist who asked lots of people to send in their dreams for a project by the BBC, where they made Artificial Intelligence videos out of them.

HILARY That's horrible!

ELENI It looked so wrong! Don't you think that dreams should be private? Why would you send your dream to a BBC programme, what is that to them? They shouldn't know, it's your dream.

PHILIP I think that there's a time and place for communicating dreams, but not at the BBC with Artificial Intelligence!

ELENI We started a new project which Hilary coined *Natural Intelligence*, it'll be an ongoing thing...

HILARY And Philip, are you still writing music?

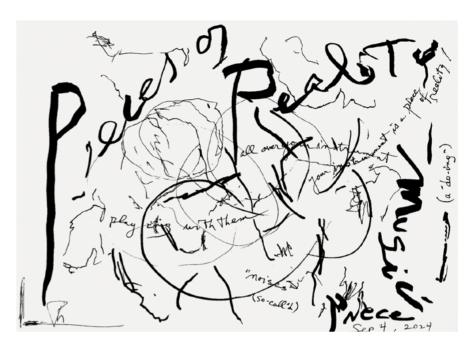
PHILIP Me? No, I'm not writing anything now. It's funny, even before I went into the hospital, when I was coming to the end of the Art of No-art, I just had the feeling like I was emptying my head over the last few years. In my house, I have a wall with shelves up to the ceiling with CDs and cassettes - complete operas, oratorios, Arabic music and dozens of tapes that I brought back from Bali and Java. Recently though, I am hardly listening to anything.

HILARY Wow, okay...

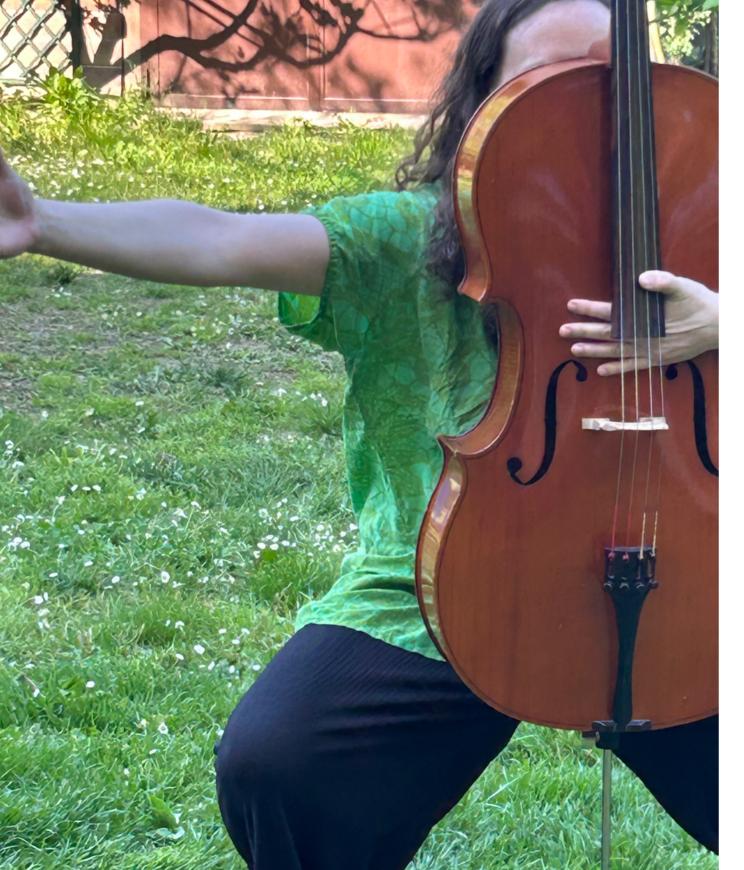
PHILIP I haven't even been reading, and it has been happening with everything - I just felt like it was all falling away. My wife, Phoebe, said, «Your head is full up. There's no room for anything else!» I didn't want to put anything else in it, and I felt that way with composing, that there was nothing more to write any longer.

ELENI And this changed?

PHILIP Yes, the Art of No-art hit me by surprise. Obviously, it came out of the same intellectual ideas a lot of my pieces are based on - the polarity, the high and the low in conjunction with the soft and the loud, and then relating these to duality and extremes. But there's also the trinity, which is the extremes at either end and the middle. When writing the Art of No-art, I just had the









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feeling that I was emptying my head. It was just coming to my mind, and I was thinking to myself, «All right, I can do that». It just kept coming!

HILARY How long did it take you?

PHILIP The process lasted three years, and I kept saying to myself, «Turn if off, I don't want anymore!» I didn't ask for it, but it just kept accumulating. Some things would just stay in my mind, mostly at night, and I thought «This is too good not to write». So I would write it down in the dark and fair copy it out in the morning. That's just how this happened. As it was coming to the end, I could kind of feel my head emptying, and I said, «I'm not going to write music anymore». There was nothing more to write, I just didn't have a compulsion to, and then I got sick. Somehow, being in the hospital, I felt the need to write again.

Philip voices a melody

ELENI And what happened?

PHILIP It was so surprising, that I think I understood religion for the first time. If you look at it rationally - it's ridiculous, everything in the Bible. The Old Testament seems to me to be one stupidity after another! Rationally I still think that way, but there's another dimension in which I could understand, whatever you live for, what's it all about, what happens afterwards. Whether it's true or not, you've got to believe something. And I could imagine myself converting to Catholicism, not that I was going to do it. At the same time, though, I could hold in my mind everything that I was ever interested in, like Buddhism, meditation, the Tao and everything, even Judaism. I could imagine why people believe in something like that. How powerful it is. I touched something on a deep, personal level. At the same time, I felt, and I still feel now, like I've



given up judging. I realised I've spent a lot of energy and a lot of mental turmoil, judging - you know?

HILARY You said earlier in the restaurant that you don't really relate so much to your past work, but we could still play older pieces by you in the future, whatever we have.

PHILIP Absolutely, yes. I mean, in a way, that's the whole purpose of compositions - they are meant to be played. Otherwise, you'd just improvise, right?

ELENI We have the Wiesenburg Tanzhalle concert planned for the summer. It will be in Berlin again, in a derelict former asylum which they've done up beautifully with gardens and stages and stuff. We are going to present some of the work from the Art of No-art and other compositions you created specifically for ETUDE, such as Liebesvögel, if that's okay with you?

Liebesvögel translates as Love Birds, a duo piece written by Philip specifically for Eleni on the synthesiser and Hilary playing Philip's old alphorn

PHILIP You're asking me?

ELENI Yeah!

PHILIP I've never heard of such a thing! You don't have to ask permission to play the piece, you've got the score! If I said no, you could do it anyway.

Philip gives the pair a puckish smile. He's reminded of Hilary and Eleni's recent playing of the duo piece in a nearby garden filled with his sculptures and paintings in Albinea. The concert featured a live bird accompaniment as well as dogs barking off in the distance