

PHILIP

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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

Philip at his 91st Birthday celebrations, Albinea, Reggio Emilia, Italy, April 2024





**\*MARFAVOURITE musician Eleni Poulou of Honey-Suckle Company makes her return to these pages, this time as part of ETUDE [Ensemble Treffen Um Die Ecke]- a new ensemble dedicated to playing music by Philip Corner, known for his experimental sound. Philip has just turned 91, Eleni together with her boyfriend and musical partner Hilary Jeffery performed the trombonist's compositions as part of his 91st birthday celebrations. Eleni and Hilary spend a beautiful, sunny day with him in his Italian hometown of Reggio Emilia, chit-chatting through the slow hours\***

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



Organza Ray (Hilary Jeffery & Eleni Poulou) performing *Two Geese Flying*  
Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava



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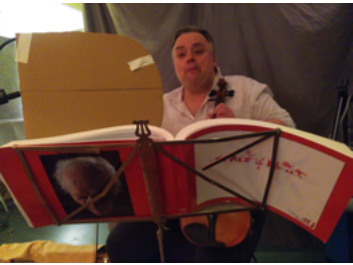


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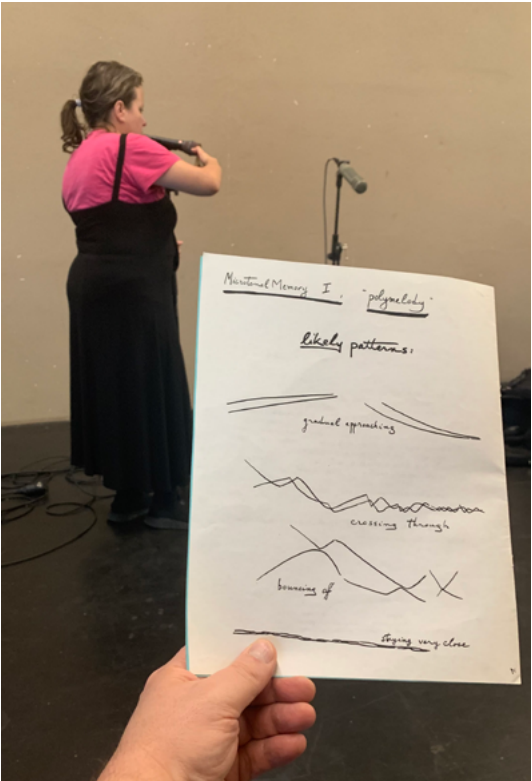
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1. + 6. + 7. Philip Corner at home in Reggio Emilia 2.Saxophone player: Simon Rose at Tanzhalle Wiesenburg, Berlin 3. *Nut Music* 4. Viola player with Philip's book: Zsolt Sorés at Nadel Eins Studio, Berlin 5. ETUDE after performing Philip's compositions in Albinea 8. ETUDE Ensemble at Tanzhalle Wiesenburg, Berlin 9. Eleni Poulou with the score for *Microtonal Memories* at Tanzhalle Wiesenburg, Berlin



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 REPERTOIRE  
ANYWAY»













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 it 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





