

Phill Niblock is a happy person. There are many reasons for this.

For several decades he has created and published audio/visual material he is proud of; he tours 12 to 15 countries a year, presenting installations of his work; he presides over arts panels, and with what time remains he divides between his homes in Brooklyn, New York and Gent, Belgium.

In his 70s – an age of decline for most – Niblock is at his creative peak, composing for labels including Touch and his own XI recordings. Though he may not have achieved outstanding commercial success, he has made some of the most noteworthy if not beautiful 20th and 21st century drone works.

Phill Niblock began making music since the late '60s, when he was 35, originally to soundtrack performance art pieces he organized. Since he could not find music he wanted at the time, he simply made his own. He has continued to do so ever since, in relative obscurity, until lately: the world is starting to catch on. It is difficult to get Phill Niblock to discuss his music outside his dry, matter-of-fact manner. His discourse on composition is as minimal as his music.

Since the '60s, Niblock has witnessed many technological advances in the recording process. Among the more significant changes was the switch from analogue tapes to digital recording via computers. This transition for Niblock was not a big deal, as he is willing to embrace technological change where there is demonstrable improvement. In particular, the improvement was embodied in Pro Tools, a software program that he is enamored with.

Phill Niblock: "I used to work with multi-track tape recorders and record directly onto tape, and build the pieces by multi-tracking that material onto multi-track tape. Most of those pieces were eight channel pieces. It's very analogous. Pro Tools is simply a multi-track tape recorder; the same way with tape as with computer.

"Now it is possible to do 32 tracks, so we have an incredible number to work with. You simply get more tracks and the sound quality is extraordinarily good. (The process) didn't change much except one thing; instead of prescribing the exact pitches and recording them with the musicians I simply record the tunes and I make the microtonal intervals by manufacturing new sound samples which are a different pitch by using a pitch shifter. So that's the difference. But I'm also recording directly to disk through my computer to a hard disk."

Niblock creates his layers through specific instrumental solos and combinations, such as baritone saxophone; bass clarinet and basset horn and Eb clarinet; piano; cello and bassoon; cello and bassoon and contrabassoon and contrabass; hurdy gurdy, and even the human voice.

The sounds are dissolved in layering so as to render the source instruments unrecognizable; this results in new tone combinations. Thus each composition is a potent solution, converted into textures that brush against the ears like so many yards of exotic fabric. The textures are reminiscent of the hum of electrical wiring on a summer day, the buzzing din of honey bees or a group of monks engrossed in their Om. A cursory listen reveals an indecipherable din; prolonged listens reward with a trove of overtones and chord changes. These revelations occur with the gradualness of dusk, ever so subtly. Considering the intensity and duration of these pieces, it is surprising to learn that Niblock produces his music fairly quickly.

"Usually I work very fast, particularly in Pro Tools. Pro Tools is really great, once you get going it's really fast. Instead of making a score laboriously dubbing from one recording to another onto multi-track the score for Pro Tools is actually as you make the piece, after the fact rather than before. So that's really great and can work anywhere I set my computer. So I can make a piece easily again for if I have a fairly decent set of monitor speakers. For instance the Hurdy Gurdy piece, I made that in a day and a half, including listening to the samples and deciding what to do. I had a concert, and it was to be played, and I had two days to do it."

In addition to the advance from analogue to digital, Niblock has witnessed the widespread digitization of cultural artifacts wherein recording platforms for music can now be downloaded via peer-to-peer internet file sharing (not to mention rampant home CD-R duplication, which despite spreading music rapidly, have caused record labels to suffer considerable revenue loss). File-sharing and piracy has affected Niblock's music in an interesting way.

"I visited some guy in Poland at a party and he had this incredible wall full of five hundred experimental music CDs, including three or four of mine, and they were all burned. Somebody in town would buy a CD, and everybody would burn a copy of it. A fantastic array...I didn't see any published CDs on his shelf – it would be nice if he bought the CDs just because the quality would be better – but on the other hand, he's got the music and he's listening to it so that's an amazing idea, that that stuff is out there. The idea is you want the music to be out and around. If it's out and around it's better than no one ever hearing it. So you would sell fewer CDs, but you wouldn't sell all those CDs to the guy anyway, because he wouldn't buy those CDs anyway, because he wouldn't spend that kind of money.

"CD sales are probably a little less affected in this area of experimental music than they are anywhere else. You're only selling a couple of thousand CDs in the lifetime of the CD. You still sort of sell 2000 CDs, but [at least] the music is out there. Everything that is out there is issued from a dozen different places as MP3 files. If you want to hear my music you can just go sit at your computer and download the stuff from someone.

"What the net has made possible is that many more people, in having CDs out, many more people know of me and of my music than...it wasn't at all possible before 1995. Really it's astounding, in ten years, how much the stuff is out. I would see a few people through LPs in the '80s but they were relatively few people, so it makes a huge difference in getting gigs. I'm not a particularly popular composer but people know of the music. That's because CDs are out and that's because this whole internet technology of publicity."

Niblock has had the distinction of having worked with the foremost musicians of his time, both well known and obscure. Among the better known are Jim O'Rourke, Thurston Moore and Lee Renaldo of Sonic Youth. The fact that these musicians are popular could not be of less interest to him, as Niblock avoids pop music. When given a choice, he prefers to listen to jazz, which to him was about avoiding mainstream music. The fame of musicians he works with is strictly incidental.

"Jazz is something I like to listen to. Early Jazz – I like Ellington for instance. I photographed the band for about three years in the early '60s. It was a lot of fun; I was listening to music that I liked as well. There was constant talk about doing something with those photographs. There are many people, both from the swing era and later, like Dolphy, Mingus does some really fantastic writings, and Monk. There's a fairly big range of stuff I listen to."

Though not jazz or rock, one musician he worked with has received posthumous fame, the late Arthur Russell. In fact, Russell's long lost gem, World of Echo was re-released the year of this writing, as a CD-DVD package on Audika. The DVD portion features intimate video footage of Russell filmed by Niblock himself, who recorded a mere five feet away as per Russell's request.

"I knew him for quite a few years. He was very quiet and a sweet guy, quite shy. He was the music director of the Kitchen [in New York City] for several years. A lot of people knew him because of that. I knew very little of the whole pop music scene that he was part of. So it was kind of surprising because I wasn't interested in that scene at all.

"He had done a concert here. I liked the weirdness of what he was doing in the concert, and we decided to this video shoot [in Niblock's studio]. I think he did two or three altogether over the years before he died. After the concert, I proposed to him that we do this collaboration where I would shoot video and we would set up about the same set up as the concert and so we did. He had designed this very inexpensive but weird lighting system to use, so what you see in the background is this lighting system. Some [lights] were colored and some were aimed at a length of one meter wide mylar, and the guy who was running the lights using a simple dimmer ward, changed the intensity of the light and turning off and on the different colors. He also twitched a string tied to the mylar so it shook. That's what was causing the patterns on the wall. We did two shots on two different occasions, and the first one didn't work so well, and that's actually what's on the DVD after the film itself, which I didn't like nearly as much.

"The music from World of Echo came mostly from that session. I liked that music. We made separate recording on PCM digital in the old days when you were recording digital music on video tape. Arthur had track stereo tapes from the PCM digital and he made the record (World of Echo) out of that material. This thing was just issued and it was shot in 1985 – it's already twenty years old."

Niblock is alert, attentive and keen for someone his age; his demeanor is suggestive of someone decades younger. This could be attributable to his philosophy, which he claims is nothing organized, but sums up in one tidy word, "work." More music and DVD releases are slated for release, as well as more collaborations and tours. In fact, when he spoke for this interview, he was in the midst of a world tour, as he enjoys traveling. Wider acclaim for this composer and no doubt finer works are yet to come, thanks to his longevity and willingness to embrace change.

Ibrahim Khider | Jun. 19, 2005