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Transcript of lecture: David Lang

Skowhegan, 2011

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Introductory remarks (Craig Drennen, Dean, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture): Welcome to the twelfth in the Barbara Lee Lecture Series. And this also happens to be the Mellon lecture that we're finishing the series with tonight. What I would like to ask is everybody turn off or silence your cell phones, as demonstrated. And for you visitors who are here for the first time, if you need to exit, please exit through the back screen, and the restrooms are out in the library building to the left. So you can go out that way. So tonight's lecture we're going to have a lot of extra special events going on, first of which there will be a house band here that you're going to recognize. (cheers, hoots, applause) And second, tonight's speaker, Mr. David Lang, is going to be introduced by our own Sarah Workneh. (cheers, applause) (pause, laughter, chatter) Introduction of Speaker (Sarah Workneh, Executive Director, Program, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture): Exactly one year ago I was sitting on the porch of the office late one night researching David Lang's career for our yearly newsletter. At the time tonight's event seemed very distant and a little abstract. I'd barely scratched the surface of what Skowhegan is, and was only beginning to understand the important role

that the Mellon Fellow plays on campus. One of the things about this place is the extreme focus we are offered: the consistency of a shared dialogue, the varied perspectives within the set of a creative practice. One thing that might go unnoticed within that set is the diversity of voice, viewpoint and experience that we all bring here and offer to each other to expand our thoughts and practices. An artist once told me that you don't realize you are so inside a rhetoric until you're in a place like Skowhegan that goes beyond our everyday context. Each year the Paul Mellon Fellowship brings someone to campus to offer just that, a completely different voice and perspective from outside the visual arts who offers a different way of negotiating the world. David Lang explores the world through music. Like all of us, David is a contemporary practitioner, someone focused on innovation, someone committed to a practice of discovery, expansion, and questioning the traditional definition of music and musicality. He offers a language that is structured yet dissected through narrative instrumentation. Working in opera, orchestra, chamber, and solo compositions, David's works are multi-faceted, simple but often difficult to play, familiar in sound but completely new in form and structure. (pause)

LIVE MUSIC

(laughter, applause) David is one of America's most performed composers, including performances by the Santa Fe Opera, the New York Philharmonic, the Netherlands Chamber Choir, the Boston Symphony, the Munich Chamber Orchestra, and the Kronos Quartet. He has performed at Tanglewood, the BBC Proms, the Munich Biennial, the Septembre Musical Festival, the Sydney 2000 Olympic Arts, Lincoln Center, the Southbank Center, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Barbican Center, and the

Brooklyn Academy of Music. He is the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Rome Prize, the BMW Music Theater Prize, and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. And he is a 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner for **The Little Match Girl Passion**. While accomplishing so much within his own career, David is also one of the founders, along with Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe of Bang on a Can, an organization dedicated—and I quote—"to presenting and performing new music from between the cracks." You can read all about Bang on a Can's activities on their website, and I encourage you to do so. But I think the importance of what that organization has accomplished, and one of the things we all should take from David's visit here, lies in that funny little phrase, "new music from between the cracks." (pause)

LIVE MUSIC

(laughter, applause) When we all arrived on campus, now almost nine weeks ago, we took a step away from what is known. What we know about our practices, what we know about our communities, and in many ways what we know about ourselves and our everyday lives. While we may have abstractly understood this notion of leaving behind a skill set or a way of thinking, the move to come to Skowhegan presented an experience into the unknown. This change of orientation, so to speak, was what our founders sought to offer here, and what I hope we too are inspired to discover when we each leave here; and not unlike what David and his partners set out to do with Bang on a Can. To create a space where the unknown is intentional. Not a consequence, not a backdrop, but front and center. How do we find language to describe that which is uncategorizable?

Undescribable without being attached to its existing structures. What David and Bang on a Can have offered us is an experience in a space where all of that can and should exist without needing a name. What they have offered us is the example that when structures exist that don't address our needs, our manner of expression, our thought processes or practices, we can and should create our own. What we should take away from David's presence and our presence here at Skowhegan is accepting that by disrupting the things we know, by finding what lies within the cracks, and making the unknown our center, we are able to live with a different kind of authenticity, one that allows us to continually renew our relationship to our world, our community, and to the nature of a creative practice.

LIVE MUSIC

(cheers, applause) Thank you to Jules and to Ken for accompanying me tonight and playing a portion—and improvising a portion—of David's 2006 electric guitar duet, "Warmth." It is now my pleasure to welcome the 2001—2011— Paul Mellon Distinguished Fellow, David Lang. (applause)

DL: Thank you. Thanks. You did great. Thank you very much. Thanks. (applause continues) Hello. Hello. I just want to say that was really flattering. It's very nice to be introduced, but it's also really flattering because what you don't know is that that music was something that they found on my website and learned by ear. And I don't know if they know this, but it's really, really hard. And I'm really happy—I showed them the music, actually, before this thing because I heard they just took it down by ear, trying to figure out what the heck is that music? And, you know, I'm sure if you look at it you go, "This is impossible. It's ridiculous. It's insane." But actually they managed to figure it

out. There's something interesting to talk about there. So I'd like to say thank you very much for the introduction; that was very nice. The one credit you left off was the only one that my children care about, which is that I also got a Grammy award. And they really like that because, as opposed to all the other long-hair things that I do, that one actually goes to music that they really like, as opposed to the music that I do. So there are lots of things that I can talk about. I'm a college professor, so I'm used to filling up endless hours with blather…. But I think what I'd like to do is encourage you while this is going on to think of some questions, because I may not know what you are interested in, and if you don't tell me what that is, I might miss it. So I really hope that you'll be thinking this up. So here's what I'm going to do—just the format of this thing. I'm going to tell you a little bit about—I'm going to get away from that. I'm going to tell you a little bit about me, and what I do and what I think I do. And then I'll play you some little examples from a couple of pieces that maybe show you some things that I've done, or the way I think about things. I'm a classical musician. And I have to say, that sounds terrible to me. That sounds like the most boring thing on the planet. How could anybody possibly want to be a classical musician? When I started, I started writing music when I was nine years old. I discovered music; my family was completely unmusical in any way. And I discovered this thing and I thought, "Oh! Your ears, they're interesting. Things come in that way. That is cool." I got very interested in anything that came in through your ears: speaking, singing, performing any kind of music. So very quickly I started playing guitar in a band; I started playing trombone in an orchestra; I played horn in a band; I played—even, embarrassingly enough, I played tuba in my high school marching band. And I was the person who got to run around the orchestra in the spell-out

and dot the "i" for my high school's name, because yes, I am that nerdy. But the weird thing about it is that when I started getting really interested in pursuing all these kinds of music, I got very upset thinking that I had to choose one; because I thought they were all the same thing. And to me the real problem was the kind of thinking that I do about music, the kind of behind-the-scenes structural thinking, is something that we're used to talking about and thinking about in classical music; so that's where I located myself and that's where I got my training, and that's where I teach—I teach, you know, at Yale, which is as—It's the most august of the august of the classical music establishments. But I never really reconciled myself to the fact that that's it, that that's the size of my world. And so I've spent a huge amount of time in my life questioning what classical music is, questioning its relationships to other things, and trying to figure out: a) how I came to like this thing; b) why anybody would; and c) how it's possible to explain this message to other people so that it becomes more universal. The problem for me is that by calling it classical music, essentially what you're doing is you're saying that there's a body of knowledge which must be mastered and understood in order to be appreciated. I agree that there's a body of knowledge that has to be mastered and understood, but it doesn't have to be mastered and understood by everybody. Because I had to go through that ridiculous education doesn't mean you have to go through it. I did it for you. So you don't have to do it. So the weird thing about studying classical music, which is something that I've thought about the whole time, and it's something that's sort of like the background behind my examples that I'm going to play you, is that when you study classical music you learn how to do the things that you want to do, and you learn also to worship at the shrine of all the people who have done it in the past. It's totally fine for

me, but how that affects the general listener, how that affects the public, is that most of our training for people about how to listen to things is not about how to listen to the music, but how to make you into worshippers. So the whole thing is, there are two different things. There's the thing to be worshipped and there's the worship itself. Classical music is about saying we need you to worship it, but actually this thing is much more interesting. And so I try to do as many things as I can to think about this thing and get rid of that thing. The worship is ridiculous; it's the music that counts. So I'm going to play you a couple of examples and talk about them, from things that I've done. You know, as I say, I try to think about how people learn things and how I learn things and how we think about things and the things we take for granted. So one of the things we take for granted about a composer, when we think about music from history, is we take it for granted that composers are telling you things about themselves. That they're messages, and if you read composer biographies, people talk about Beethoven. And what do they talk about? They talk about his suffering. They talk about his deafness. You know, all these things. The story is really important about how to listen to the music. When you talk about Schubert you talk about syphilis. And early death. You know? When you talk about Mendelssohn, you talk about his family was rich, and they were Jews; so we can't be a good composer. You know? I mean there are all these stories which come up in classical music which are insane. But I started thinking, "What would it be like if you actually believed that music was like this? If this was really the story." What then are composers telling you? Is it possible to look back at the music that we like, and go, "What are composers telling you?" So if you think about music that's really expressive and really emotional, like Tchaikovsky: "1812 Overture," or whatever, you

know, music that has real emotion in it, one of the things that it's telling you is—by this narrative—is it's telling you that music is a vehicle for this kind of, you know, heart on your sleeve emotion. Another thing it's telling you, because of this composer biography narrative, is it's telling you that Tchaikovsky himself is telling you something about himself that he likes. He's telling you not just that music can be a home for this emotion, but "I'm really emotional." You know, when all these people are weeping, I'm weeping too; I'm crying too. But the other thing about it which is interesting is he's not just telling you that he's crying along with you; but he's also telling you he's proud of the fact that he's crying along with you. He's telling you this is a good thing, that I am this emotional, weepy kind of guy. So it's several different messages at once, if you believe this kind of biographic narrative. You know, if you think about all the really complicated, super-brainy music from the 1960s, you know, all the music that's really hard to listen to because the composers are really, really smart, you know, what they're telling you is, "Here's this music that's really hard to figure out and only smart people can figure it out." But the other thing they're telling you is, "I'm a really smart person." And they're also telling you, "It's good to be a really smart person just like me!" So these are all the kinds of narratives that you're going. [sic] So I started thinking, you know, if this is really the truth, if this is the level of how we talk about what composers are revealing about themselves. Can you control that message in classical music, and can you actually say, "I'm going to make a kind of music which is about something about myself I don't like."? Can I say, "Here's something that's not a universal virtue of something that I'm proud of, that I do better than you, that I put myself up in front of you as an exemplar for."? Is it possible to say, "Here's something I'm embarrassed by, that I

do really badly, that I'm ashamed by. And I give it to you and I feel really bad about it."? Can you make a kind of music with that narrative that focuses on the things that you feel really awful about? So I thought about it and I started—So I had this idea to write a piece of music called "Cheating, Lying, Stealing." And the whole idea was I was going to do these things about music that embarrassed me. So I stole a big part of it from a pop tune which I don't think anyone will ever find, because I very cleverly disguised it. But every time I hear it, I know it's not original. You don't know that, but I know I stole it. I do all these things in it that embarrass me. I do all these things in it that make me unhappy when I hear it. But it's a really enjoyable piece. I really like it. I'm not trying to tell you it's a terrible piece. But the thing that's really funny about it is I tried to get this idea of how to be unreliable in a piece of music. How do you do that, you know? Music is about making things so they all feel like they're in their right place so that you can count on them, so that you believe in them. And I am a kind of next-generation follower of the composers who are the so-called minimal composers. So what is minimalism? You know, there's a certain kind of dependability about minimalism. Right? When Philip Glass does something, you know you're going to hear it again. You know? It's dependable, right? That's what this music does. So I thought, "How, if you're really trying to highlight something about yourself you don't like… how would you make something undependable?" So I came up with this idea of how music would be constantly repeating, but it would never repeat itself exactly. And the weird thing about it in this section that I'm going to play you is, in order to make sure that I don't repeat myself exactly, I have to have little formulas and little games, so that I can keep track of the bookkeeping about how things are not repeating. This is again something along with

"Cheating, Lying, Stealing" that I always think is really embarrassing for me, because I spend all of my time doing these ridiculous pre-compositional formulas and structures which you will never care about, but take me months and months and months. So what you're going to hear in this little excerpt is the beginning of the piece; and you're going to hear this very complicated rhythm. And what happens in this complicated rhythm—It's not complicated, actually, but this rhythm—you're going to hear these things where it's this phrase that goes, "da duh, da duh, da duh." And eventually it's going to be, "duh, duh, duh, duh, duh, duh." But the way it gets there is every permutation, every combination of each of those rhythms. So it 's going to go, "duh, da duh, da duh." Then it's going to go, "duh, duh, da duh, da duh, da duh." So the first one changed long. Then the second time, the second one changes long, but the first one goes back short. So I worked out this unbelievably ridiculous thing. And there's one section in this piece which I'm not going to play you because it's six minutes long of head-banging repetition which I worked so carefully that it is mind-boggling to play, because nothing ever repeats the same, but nothing ever changes. This is what I waste my time on. So… anyway, here's the beginning of this piece.

AUDIO

Fade out. Okay. So I hope you're all thinking of really interesting questions, because I'm going to run out of stuff to say really soon. So… there's that piece. So again, you know, it's like… basically I really was kind of a problem student in my musical education; so I really try to look at every piece as an opportunity to sort of find a wound in my field and stick my finger in it. You know? I sort of felt like that was my job. And I think I learned how to do this—not like I'm trying to butter you up, because you're in

the art world, but I think I learned this from being around artists, because I have a lot of friends who are visual artists, and I went to Yale as a student; and I showed up as a graduate student, you know, the first day to the music school, and I went to a party at the music school and people were drinking ginger ale and playing Pictionary and charades, and smiling, you know, very shyly at each other. And then I went to a party at the art school at Yale, and everyone was drinking and having sex. And so I started hanging out at the art school. And I think I learned a lot from all of these people. I think I learned that music wasn't about sounding nice; it wasn't about trying to make something whose sole goal was to be something pretty or attractive or dramatic or whatever; but that music was the sound byproduct of some kind of thinking that you could do behind the scenes. And I definitely feel like I learned that from thinking about my own misconceptions about what I thought you all were doing. So I hope I didn't get that wrong. But again, you know, one of the things—I'm going to play you another example. I might play you the whole piece this time, because it will be nicer and kill more time, but also then you'll get to hear a whole piece. But again, you know, I'm sort of curious about how I learn things, right? How did I get interested in this? And how is the world divided? So, you know, Sarah was talking about Bang on a Can, one of the things that's really interesting about the world—and I don't know if the art world is this way, but the music world is definitely divided into little tiny categories. It's divided into Country Western, and Jazz, and New Age, and Experimental, and Opera; it's divided into these little categories. And it makes it very, very, very easy for you as a listener to know, okay, well this concert hall or this venue or this room in the record store is always dedicated—or this website—is always dedicated to this one kind of music. So it makes it really easier for you to find it.

But the really interesting thing is that's not the way, really, musicians think about what they do. Musicians don't really wake up in the morning and say, "How do I fit squarely into a box today?" That's not really what we do. You know, musicians go, "I want to think a thought and I want to follow it wherever it goes." And this really came home to me a little later. Bang on a Can did a project once where we made a live version of Brian Eno's amazing piece, "Music for Airports," which was—I don't know. I'm sure you all know it. It's something that he made as a purely electronic piece in his studio. And the idea, of course, was this very noble idea that background music should be made as carefully as the music in the foreground of your life. That just because it's ignored and in the background of your life doesn't mean that it shouldn't be made beautifully and carefully. That's deserving—The music you ignore has a right to be made as precisely and beautifully as the music that you pay attention to. Which is kind of a beautiful idea. So he made this in his studio because…. Well, for lots of reasons. But we decided we were going to make a live version of this. And we made a live version of it, and we recorded it. And we recorded it on Philip Glass's label, which was really great, because it was this major label with really great distribution, and my job—This was back in the days of Tower Records, down on Fourth Street in New York City, and I felt like my job as someone who had just put out this record was to go to Tower Records every single day and make sure that there was a copy at the front of every single row that it belonged in. So I would go into the record store every single day; and when nobody was looking I'd go underneath the stock and pull it out and put it out on the shelf. And if somebody else's record was there I'd put it down underneath and I'd put our record up on top. But the incredible thing about this was, Brian Eno, right? Of course. Legendary music

producer {unintelligible}, you know, basically discovered The Talking Heads…. I mean, he was just an incredible producer, right, producing lots of people—a rock star in his own right, an incredible collaborator with lots of different people. Also a composer and also an art school person and an artist himself…. I went to every single place in Tower Records where he had a bin, because everyone was divided by category. So I wanted to make sure that whenever somebody went in any of the sections, the place where he had a bin, that all they would see was our records. I would go around like this, you know; it took a really long time, because he was, of course—you know, this record was the first New Age record. So it--- you know, for better or worse, he was the grandfather of New Age music. So he had a bin in that world. He was in the Experimental world because of us, because of this record. In the classical department. He was in the Rock department. He was basically all over this record store. And it started dawning on me as I went there every single day to these different sections of the store, he doesn't consider himself to be compartmentalized. He has different parts of himself which lead him in different directions. And to give a true assessment of what it is he's doing, you need to actually have something that says a musician is a totality of experiences, not just, you know, these little kind of fragmented things. So the goal with Bang on a Can has always been to try to find these people who are so much between worlds that those categories which we use as a shorthand to make it easy to find them don't work for them. Because there are so many people who are trying to combine things, and they combine them in such a way that none of our categories like them. Or support them. Or make sense for them. And so we thought, you know, for all of these people who are essentially homeless in the category department, we should be their home. And that's been Bang on a Can's goal for twenty-

four years. So part of this—back to the piece I'm gong to play you a little bit now—has to do with a similar experience I had when I was young. Again, you know, it's like I go back through my memory trying to figure out how I found these things out about music that I liked. So I remember getting interested in classical music. I was in high school; I really thought I knew what all the musical worlds were like, and I was really proud of myself. I thought, "Okay, classical music, it's about honor; it's about love; it's about death. It's about all these incredible capital letter emotions which you find in classical music." And "It's about heroism." It's about all of these things which are kind of noble and on a pedestal. And I was playing in a band. I really liked pop music. And I thought I knew what that was about. I thought, "Okay, pop music. It's about driving in cars." "And it's about girls. And it's about dancing." And I thought, "Okay, this is really great. The world is divided in this way which makes it possible for me to have a musical life everyplace." And then I remember when I was a senior in high school I got the first Velvet Underground record. So the first—you know, the Yellow Banana/Andy Warhol/Velvet Underground record. And I remember thinking, "You know, this music is really terrifying. And this music is dangerous. It's really scary. And the text, what's it about? You know, it's not about driving in a car to the beach…." "It's about going up to 125th Street and getting too many drugs, you know. It's about dirt and crime. And sex—weird sex, right." "Venus in Furs?" That's one of the creepiest and most disturbing songs ever. And I remember thinking when I was a senior in high school, "You know, this is interesting, because I don't have a place for this emotion to go. I've never heard music before that's dangerous, in any category." So for years and years and years and years, I was trying to figure out what to do with this, you know. And occasionally I

would take a little stab at making an arrangement of one of these songs. I'd try to say, "Okay, well… I'm going to make my own version of this song." You know, I'd try to redo the music or whatever. And it wouldn't' work. It just wasn't working. And finally I got this commission from BAM to do a project there; and as part of that project I had an idea of how it might work. I thought, you know, maybe what I'm responding to, what I'm really remembering, is the power of those words. You know. And this is something that we do in classical music all the time. There will be a famous text, like Goethe. There would be a text of Goethe that Schubert would set; and because Schubert set this text to music, hundreds of other romantic composers felt it was now their obligation to set that text to music; because this text was full of meaning, you write this music, you set it to music, and now you're in dialogue with all these other composers and you're showing some aspect of this text that you found that someone else missed. There's a great tradition of doing this over and over and over again in classical music. And I thought, "You know, I'm going to treat Lou Reed like he's Goethe. I'm going to take one of his texts and I'm going to set it to music. So I did this; I sent it to Lou Reed; he called me up at eight o'clock in the morning, and woke me up: "David Lang!" "Yeah." "It's Lou Reed! I've been waiting my whole life for somebody to do this!" You know, he got just really excited because I was treating him like Goethe, you know? I think he liked that, you know? So anyway, what I did is I took part—what I'm going to play for you—I've done five or six of [these]—I've done six or seven of these songs. I don't know if I'm going to complete the whole project, for various different legal reasons…. But—which I won't go into unless you ask me later. But I'm going to play you my version of the song, "Heroin." So this is a song, of course, you know, it's about heroin. Right? So

again, you know, I am Mr. Squeaky Clean. You know, as Suzanne tells me all the time, you know, my nerd credentials are very high. I grew up in Los Angeles…. You know, I am squeaky clean. But I heard all this music about drugs and crime and sex and… New York; and of course, you know, that's where I live now. So I thought maybe I could deal with all of this by setting this to music. So I'm going to play you my version of "Heroin." What I did is I took three of the choruses; I rewrote the lyrics to correct his grammar. And then I set it as if it's a piece of classical music. And this is what you're gong to hear.

AUDIO

So that was "Heroin." It's very different from the original. So I think what I was trying to do was to sort of, again, do what romantic composers did with romantic poetry, was find a different meaning for what this text was. So the original meaning of the text is, "Take these drugs. You live on the edge. You speed up. You slow down. You have this incredible experience." But I took the few little verses and I corrected the grammar; and I changed it into something which was about my favorite subject, which is death. And that's what it became. So that's what I did. So I hope you're thinking up questions, 'cause I only have one more example. Okay. So on this topic of death, my favorite subject…. You know, in-- one of the traditional functions of music is that people use it to console people. People use it to console themselves. People use it to manage their own emotional lives. And I'm always curious about this because music has this incredible emotional direct connection to you. So there's a way in which this can be used for good, or it can be used for ill. So the fact that music can make a direct connection to you emotionally is the reason why it's so useful in trying to sell you a car; because it

comes into you unfiltered by your intelligence. You know? When you go to a movie and the emotional music sweeps up, the smart people cry and the stupid people cry; because the music has nothing to do with your intelligence. It has this kind of emotional directness to you which is a fantastic and amazing thing— (audience member sneezes) God Bless You! Gesundheit! So I always think about this. You know, we use music sometimes to manage our emotional lives in ways which I think are really silly. I mean I have a silly piece called "Sweet Air," which I wrote after taking—When our oldest child was really young we took him to the dentist. He had a cavity. And he had his tooth filled by the dentist, and the dentist said, "Don't worry. It's not going to hurt because I'm going to use this laughing gas. I'm going to give you this thing; it's called 'sweet air.'" So he put the nozzle over his face, and he gave him the sweet air, and it was flavored to smell like strawberry; and he got to take the little nozzle home with him and he was really happy. He came out of getting his tooth filled… and he came out and he said, "That was really fun. Can I do that again?" And my thought was, "That's not the experience you're supposed to have. You know, you're actually supposed to have a terrible time going to the dentist. You're supposed to be miserable. You're supposed to—you know—hate the drill, and hate that feeling, and it's supposed to be really painful; because sometimes what you need is to really feel things. Because that way your behavior changes, or that way you actually know what pain is or you know what your actions lead you to. You know what consequences are." So I thought this was really the wrong message for him, but I also thought that what was interesting is that's a lot of the way that we use music, is something terrible happens you put on some music and it massages you. Sometimes you actually need to feel terrible. Sometimes you don't

actually need to have somebody say, "Here's your catharsis. Here's your release. Here's your way through this horrible emotional trajectory which I've completely micromanaged for you through the five stages of – you know—whatever." But this is the way music works sometimes; it's like, you know, I'm going to have this kind of way of making you feel something, and then when it's over you'll feel better. Sometimes it seems to me like that's not a good way to feel. Sometimes I don't want to feel better. Sometimes I want to feel worse. Sometimes what I really need a piece of music to do, I think, and sometimes I don't have the chance to do this in my life, and so I think maybe music is the place where this can happen, is sometimes I just need to have the opportunity to think really deeply about something without being told what that thing is, to just say a piece of music is sort of like a little sacred moment, or like a contemplative object that gives you the opportunity to project on it whatever emotional experience you need to have at that moment. I don't know what that is. Most of you I don't even know. How could I possibly know what your emotional lives are like? So maybe it's possible to make a piece of music that could operate as an object that you could project your emotional life on however you like. So a friend of mine died. I thought maybe this would be a good opportunity to deal with this. And I thought instead of making a piece of music that would go, "Okay, well now everybody turn on the waterworks," you know, or "Everybody feel better now," what if it's just the opportunity to sit there and contemplate this object, a grief object. Maybe this would be an opportunity for people to say, "You know, it's really beautiful. I don't feel like grieving at this moment. I don't have any bad things, thank God, you know? I'm just going to sit here and listen to it." That's okay. Someone who feels maybe.... You know, people can project their own emotional

narratives onto this piece. So I had an idea of how to do this in a piece of music; and the idea I came up with was to make a piece of music that was one beautiful chord that changed imperceptibly very, very slightly. What happens in this piece is that it falls the distance of a fourth, and it takes forty-five minutes to do it. And the rule that I had for myself in making this was that it could never repeat itself, so no two measures could be exactly the same; it had to be constantly changing; but never get anyplace. And so I set up all of these rules, and I worked out—again, you know, I--what I spend my time on. You know, I spent eight months working out the plan for this piece, and I have to tell you, it's a thing of beauty. But the result of it is, is that I work very hard so that this experience is constantly changing, but in a way that you will not notice. And the only way to really perceive that it has changed is to start the CD over at the end, and then you realize, "Hey, wait a second. I got someplace. What a surprise." You know? I have a big orchestra piece I wrote last year which is called "Darker;" and the whole point of it was to spend an hour in this space which is introspective, slightly active, moody and dark. And in one hour it changes to introspective, slightly active, moody and darker. And it was really amazing, because it actually—You know, it's just like you feel like it's not a big enough change to give you goose bumps; but it's a big enough change to prepare you for the possibility of having goose bumps. This is a piece like that. So I'm going to play you five minutes of this. And it's a piece called "The Passing Measures."

AUDIO

So imagine that going on for forty more minutes. So… you know, it's for solo bass clarinet, women's chorus, and amplified orchestra; and everyone is told to play as quietly as possible, but everyone is amplified very, very, very loud; so that what you hear in the

hall when you hear it live is you hear everyone's fear about playing anything other than really, really, really quiet, because if they bobble, it gets projected through the whole space. So what happens is you end up feeling the tension of all of these people suppressing themselves to try to play this really beautiful quiet thing. So one of the things you will notice in the three pieces which I have played you is that they're all really different; so they do three very different things. And I have lots of different kinds of things I'm interested in doing. This is my leading up to my conclusion, so please have your questions ready. You know, when I was a student it was very clear from my teachers, for all of us in my field, how you were supposed to live your life as a professional artist. You were supposed to find something you were interested in doing, have a sound that you associated with the thing you were interested in, and never change that sound or style for the rest of your life. We were actually told, "This is what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to actually find the little area of art that's yours, the music that's yours, and live there forever. To make it into a schtick. To make it into essentially a commodity. " That way everybody would know what it is you did. You'd be able to have something that would be instantly recognizable as yours. And you would know what you were doing. Life would be easy after that 'cause you'd never have to ask yourself these hard questions about what it is you do. And if you think about all the composers that we know—I mean, if you imagine Philip Glass, for example, you know, can he write a piece without an arpeggio? I don't think—I mean, I know he can physically. I know he can musically. But he has an obligation now to the people who love his music to make music that reminds you of all of his other music. So that's the way we are all taught as composers. So when I was a young composer I thought, you

know, “That’s the way I’m supposed to do it. That’s the way everybody does it.” I refuse to do that. So I don’t want to actually say that the point of my pieces is to sound a particular way. I want to feel like my pieces are all made the same way. I want to know that they’re all made with the same kind of questions that lead me to making certain kinds of decisions about how each piece should sound. But I didn’t want to start from the point of view that the sound of the piece was the beginning and end of what it was I was doing as a composer. The sound is the byproduct of a kind of thinking that is related from piece to piece. And so that is how I have lived my life, and I really thank you very much for listening to me, and I am now prepared to answer your many questions. Thank you. (applause) And here’s one! We’ve got a live one.

Question: Hi. You’ve spoken a lot about kind of disrupting the kind of flow of—maybe of expectation between how this, like let’s say a biographical narrative would be communicated—whatever. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the relationship that exists within a performance situation. And when I think of classical performance I think of—I have certain expectations or certain rules that, you know, need to be abided by; and there’s a certain kind of hierarchical relationship the performers, the audience, and the composer. And I wonder if you want to say something more about that situation in particular.

DL: Yeah. I think—You know, for me that’s one of the really limiting things about the way we’re taught to appreciate classical music is we’re taught to appreciate it in a certain place, with a certain kind of format, certain kind of dress, and a certain kind of behavior. And I think all of those things are really fair game for questioning. So one of the things is—I mean, you can sort of look at those independently and see—You can blow the

whole thing up and you can say, "I'm going to get people who—I'm going to put this in a completely different environment with completely other people and completely…. You know, I'm going to change every little thing that I can possibly think of changing." Or you can actually be surgical about it, and try to say, "Well, is there some trouble to be made here?" You know, can you change where the music is done, or how it's presented, or who can do it. And sometimes I think that's a little more interesting than just saying, "I'm going to completely jettison everything." I think there's a power to some of these institutions, but I think you can sort of harness what's left of that power or recharge it by changing some of the parameters. So an example for Bang on a Can is, you know, we used to have an orchestra. We don't have an orchestra any longer, but we used to have an orchestra, and their whole thing was that they looked like normal people; they wore normal clothes; and they stood up. So you go to an orchestra, and you know, there's formal people, sitting, and they're over there. But what if you're around these people and they're standing right in front of you and you can see everything, and people are really close to you and they look completely normal? Sometimes that's just enough to be able to say, "Now we can hear this music fresh. You know, now something's been recharged." So I like— for me in my--personally in my work I like the idea of who can actually do this; because there are so many different trainings in music and so many different kinds of music that people have experience with, so…. I was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet to do an opera. Well, I was commissioned to do something with them, so—an evening-length project with them—and I said, "I'm going to make an opera for you, but it's not going to be in an opera hall; it's going to be in a theater. And it's not going to be with opera singers; it's going to be with a clash of singers. So I did it with

actors, theater singers, and one opera singer. And it was done in the Theater Artaud in San Francisco. And the idea of it was to say, "Here is something that really is partly opera, but it's not going to be performed in an opera context. And so without all of the trappings of opera, maybe you're going to be able to hear it as theater," which is really where opera should be but isn't. I'm doing a project right now where I'm writing a piece of my music that sounds like my music that is my music, but it's done by, you know, Indie pop people; so it's done—you know, Owen Pallett and Bryce Dessner from the National, and Shara Worden from My Brightest Diamond, and—you know—inside a little band that I've made out of these people. But it's not going to be Indie pop, because I don't know how to do that. So it's these people coming together doing my music. And what I'm interested in about it is the idea that by saying the kind of people who can participate in this world is larger than what we thought. Maybe that will make for a more expansive experience. I think the interesting thing about all these formal ideas…. There's a certain kind of person who really likes that formality, you know. And you know, to me there's something—I don't mind the formal rules, but I don't like the people who like them. If that makes sense, you know. I mean, I don't mind going to those things, but there are some people who actually can only perceive this music when it's done in a sort of safe and categorized and, you know, cleanly way. And to me, I think mixing it up is really interesting, so…. Did that answer that? (inaudible response) Okay.

Question: Hello.

DL: Wow.

Question: Last weekend I went to a place that was a lot like that—Kneisel Hall. There's this residency. I went out to the coast, and yeah, there's a residency for young classical

musicians. And it was pretty stuffy, you know? Pictionary and ginger ale and all that. And the faculty played a concert; they did chamber music. And it was really uninspiring until they played one piece; they played "Elegy;" and the cellist played incredibly well. And I say "incredibly well," not like technically—actually he messed up a couple of times. But it was really emotional, the way that the musician interpreted the work. And you could hear something of the musician himself in it. And I don't think that's something that's unique to classical music. I think that's something that touches on all live performance. And I'm curious when, you know, you played that last piece, where you instructed all the musicians to play as quietly as possible. It seems that [in] the tradition of classical music, there's this real distinction between the work and the interpretation of the work. Or the composition and the performance of the composition. And I'm curious about your relationship with the musicians, or how do you think that changes things, especially when you're doing something that's so unconventional, like such a long, gradual shift in tonality.

DL: That's a great question, because my field is completely collaborative. I'm not a performer. So I have been, but I'm not. And… I'm not right now. And everything that I do depends on someone else to do it for me or to do it with me. And so it's--how I relate to those people is really important. So I've done a lot of thinking about it, and what's interesting is… you know, something you said—You said something really great, which I really love, which is, you know, it's like, "Okay, that performance wasn't great, right? That performer messed up." Right? What's really interesting is if you think about how few opportunities there are in the world, you know, now that we have the Internet and we can sort of hear perfectly every piece of music played exactly right, perfectly recorded,

and perfectly mixed all the time, you know, we're completely surrounded by music which is played, mixed, recorded perfectly, all the time. So when you put a CD in your car and you drive along, it's perfectly made, right? It's perfect. What's left for live performance is imperfection. What's left is the struggle of someone trying to accomplish something. And because so much of what I do is based on live performance, I—You know, of course I love my pieces to be recorded, but I believe that live performance is the core of what I do. And so because of that I've developed a philosophy about… how what people really respond to when they hear a piece of music, or what I like about what people respond to is that they respond to the possibility that somebody may fail. And my job and a composer, then, is to set up opportunities in which someone may have—the foreground issue of the piece is the possibility of failure. And so a piece like this, it's impossible in this piece, in a live performance of that orchestra piece, for everyone to play smoothly, as quietly as possible, for forty-five minutes; it's not possible. There are also other problems in in this piece. For example, there's a solo bass clarinet part; and his line sometimes has notes that have to be held for four or five minutes… which is not possible, right? And his line is also doubled by other instruments so that when he runs out of breath you know that he's gone. And you know what he's not playing. So the issue of human failure is the foreground issue of this piece, as it is in a lot of these pieces. Now it's really hard sometimes to tell players, "What I'm really hoping will happen to you in this piece is that you will mess up." And players don't like that. But I have a piece, actually, for—that has, of all ridiculous things, a solo tuba part. And it has this very sad, high melody at the end of this piece that's really heartbreaking. And it goes higher and higher and higher, and you know, tuba is a very low instrument. They don't

practice playing high. They don't like to play high. But it's a really beautiful sound. But I once saw a performance of this that was the most beautiful performance I'd ever seen of this particular piece, where the player in the last movement had got higher and higher and higher, and the player's lips started cracking. And it was cracking, and he couldn't do it; and so he just stopped playing, and he put his tuba down, and he started crying on stage because he couldn't do it. And to me this was a really proper response to the piece, because what you need to see in a piece of live music is something that you can't get someplace else. Right? It has to be something that can only happen live. And the only thing that can happen live in our culture is that somebody can mess up. Someone can fail. Someone can struggle to overcome something, and may make it and may not make it. There may be the risk that something might go wrong. And then when somebody does it right, and somebody maybe plays everything perfectly, but at least everyone in the audience knows there was the risk of failure. When I listen to music, you know, on iTunes, there's no risk of failure unless, you know, I mess up my computer or something. Do you know what I mean? So I think for me what's interesting is that I actually have divided my life into the things which are recorded, and to the experience which is live. And to me they're completely different experiences.

Question: Do you think an audience needs prompting? Or do they need to know what to listen for? Because if they're not used to listening to a certain kind of music, then they might not know what failure sounds like.

DL: I think one of my jobs as a composer—I think one of the jobs of all music is to sort of teach people the rules of what the music is while it's going on. I don't think I need to go into the audience and say, "Here's what this piece does, and here's what you're going

to hear, and listen—at you know, two and a half minutes in the oboe goes 'tweet.'" And you know, I'm—There are people who actually think that's the way to listen. But I actually think one of the things that happens in these pieces—like in this piece that you heard, "The Passing Measures"—you heard five minutes of it—about thirty-five minutes into this piece the music gets slightly faster. And the way I look at it is—not so that you would notice it, but it gets slightly faster. And I always feel that the first thirty-five minutes of this piece are me changing the listeners' metabolism so that you'll notice that it gets a little faster. You know, so that you'll pay attention to it. You won't actually go, "Aha! It's faster." But something—You'll be able to sense that something is changing. And I feel like it's my job, in the music, not in anything other than the music, to let people know what the rules are by which they are listening. So…. I think these things—You know, actually you know, what I'm saying about people struggling is not different from when you see a… violinist play a really hard concerto or something. You know, it's like they're these really complicated things; and you know, what happens—this is an incredibly sleazy thing in classical music, but it's a known fact, when you play a stringed instrument and you're playing these things really fast, and sometimes strings break. And, you know, if your string breaks in the middle of the performance and they have to stop the orchestra... and you have to retune really fast and come out and play again, you get more applause when it's over, because people know you've overcome something. And I actually saw a performance by a cellist in a concerto who broke two strings in the performance; and that—the applause at the end of that performance was unbelievable. So this is a known fact. Anyway. But thank you for that question. So….

Question. Hi. Okay. I don't know how to phrase this question; it's more a personal question, I think… less formalistic. In all your pieces you have this…. It has this feeling of something very ritualistic—processions, like you open a door and you enter but you cannot go back. And I feel like it doesn't about your time. It talks about ancestors, about rituals. Very dark, you talked about death and pain. And I think you have this sensation to translate pain into beauty, because you also used those two words a lot. And you said you started to think about music since you are nine years old. So I was wondering since there is this ghost atmosphere, this jumping back in time, where you locate this pain, and which time you refer to to talk about; because it's not—I don't feel it's now. It's something very meditative and something very spiritual. And the other thing is like how do you relate in your life philosophically, because there's also this notion of God, or this question of truth or revelation... and is it possible for you, or do you think it's possible for a human being who has the sensation of emotions to believe that you can experience this revelation which you have in your composing in love or in dialogue with other people? Do you believe in that?

DL: Yeah. Thank you. That's…. (laughter continues) (applause) Yeah, thank you. Yeah, you heard the music very well. Thank you. You know….. This sounds very frivolous of me to say, and I don't mean it to sound frivolous. But the thing that I really like about writing music is I get to spend my whole time thinking about myself. And I feel like that's really what I do, is I feel like music for me is the tool to examine those things about myself which you heard very well. So I won't go into it, but I have, you know, sort of a long history of things which are—you know—not any heavier than everybody else has to go through; but they're something that I spend a lot of time

thinking about. I am fairly religious. So I do think that these things are fundamentally about—Well, this kind of communication, this musical communication, you know, again it's the deep animal emotional part of people, which can be conveyed only through this thing. The reason why it sounds religious is partly because music does the thing that religion needs it to do. You know, it's not that these pieces are religious, but it's that religion needs music to tell its message. So this way of connecting to something which is about all of our fears, all of our hopes, our emotional things which we use our intellect to try to keep us from paying attention to…. You know, music short-circuits all of that; music gets to this place that your intellect can't control. And so it's completely right that that's the way you hear it. It's also the way I think about it. And when I say this thing about death being my favorite subject, you know, I have spent a huge amount of time thinking about music's relationship to grief. So for various different reasons which I don't want to get into—but I will tell this really…. You know, I got a commission a few years ago to do this project which was like the project I was waiting for my entire life, which was I got a commission to do music for a morgue in Paris, which was amazing, because the doctors in this hospital got together and they thought, you know, "People come to this hospital; they die; their loved ones see them; and their last experience seeing their loved ones in this hospital is to see them with tubes in them and harsh lighting, and it's really terrible. And maybe we can do something about this horrible way people say goodbye to their loved ones." So they commissioned this Italian artist, Ettore Spalletti, to do a little chapel; and when someone dies in this hospital the person is cleaned up, and clothed, and put into this beautiful, blue, very soothing environment… and they commissioned me to make music for it, which was amazing, you know, because this is

the subject that I think about twenty-four hours a day. And I got into big trouble at the opening of this because the doctors said, "Oh, we've done this really great thing. You know, we've done this thing for grief." And I said, "Look, this isn't going to do anything. You're not going to be able to make this experience any better, because this is a horrible thing for everyone. What's great about this project is not that you're going to be able to lessen anyone's pain. What's great about this project is that you, the doctors, felt like you couldn't just sit around and make believe the pain wasn't there. You had to try something." So to me, I feel like this is not very far in the background of a lot of things that I do. But I also feel like other people use music for other things. This is not like…. This is something in my background that I'm interested in that has to do with what I do. So….

Question: Where does your belief come in? Like what do you believe in? Like when you deal like with death twenty-four hours, and you have this repetition, and it goes and goes, and it's like it's not suffering; it's suffering in a very beautiful way. Like it's amazing. It's amazing, and…. But in your life, how do you spiritually connect with a certain sense of vision, or of continuation?

DL: You know, I'm not sure exactly what the heck I'm doing with this. I mean, these are very heavy questions. So….

Question: Yeah, I know. And I'm [sorry]

DL: But I do think that what I try to do with these things, and is—again, you know, it's for me, you know—I feel like I'm trying to make a situation where I can actually be honest with myself about my fears and about my hopes and my family and my life. I think really—Again, you know, I really think that people use music to avoid looking at

themselves. And I feel like one of the things that's really possible, with my kind of music for me—I don't know if it works for anybody else, but for me, it allows me to sit in my studio and think about these things. And that is religion; that is the function of religion is to say, "I have a place for the fact that we are fragile and we'll be gone soon." You know? And basically the…. You know, what's the point of religion? Essentially the core message of religion is, "You will not die alone." That's essentially what religion is about. It's to say, "You are in connection with other people, and when you die you are in connection with them. With the ones who are alive now, with the ones who were alive in the past, with the ones who will be alive in the future." You know, that you will not have to go through this horrible thing by yourself. To me this is fundamentally musical, because music is about a connection and a communication between peoples. So music is about saying, "This is the group of people who are all thinking about this, with whom I am connected at this moment, thinking about how we will not die alone." And to me that's where it intersects with religion.

Question: Are you religious yourself?

DL: Yes, I am. So….

Question: Okay. Thank you.

DL: Thank you. Thanks for asking the good questions.

Question: Oh, this object. This is a lighter question. It has to do with the plan. So you've talked a lot about failure; and in order to fail you have to have a plan or you have to have a set of intentions. And I feel like you've exposed a lot of the intentions, and I want to know more about the plans and how they change, maybe with just one piece.

You know, if it's notated, written, if you talk to Suzanne or she talks to you. You know, the process.

DL: Well, okay. I studied music at a time when it was really kind of the high water mark of European modernism's influence in America. So you know, this is the brainy, hyper-intelligent ugly music phase of recent history, which I really enjoyed. I mean, I really enjoyed—I love the music, I love thinking about it. But the weird thing about this kind of thinking is the idea was all about planning, and all about numbers and graphs and equations and complications. And again, you know, it's like I got into music because I thought it was emotional, because I thought it was about revealing things to people. And what happens in a lot of that music is, I think the planning in that music, in the music that I was taught to do with my teachers, and the music of serial—the music that came basically out of Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen—you know, this idea—who are great composers, by the way. I'm not saying anything terrible about them, right? But I think what happens in that kind of music is that the planning exists to set up a hierarchy between the person who makes it and the people who listen to it; because that kind of planning, which is so complicated and so intense, basically says. "There's a rule and a reason and a pattern for all of this, and I know it and you don't." And so I understand the beauty of that, and again, you know, I'm well-educated in all of this, so I'm one of the chosen few who can listen to this music and figure it out. I mean, I've spent a life trying to figure out how to do this. There's this famous essay in American music history. I don't know if you know—this is sort of inside baseball story. But there's this composer Milton Babbitt, who just died, who was kind of America's best advocate for European modernism. And he wrote a really beautiful article in the Fifties about this kind of music.

And the name of the article is "Who Cares if You Listen?" And it's unfortunate that it's so confrontational, but what he's basically saying in the article is we've discovered something so sophisticated and so beautiful and so powerful that we have to do this really beautiful thing, even though there are only ten people in the world who can understand what it is. So I may not be in the ten, but I'm probably in the twenty, you know? So I—I love this music and it's very interesting to me. But to me, as I started getting older, you know, I have this love of planning and this love of numbers, but I started thinking that I didn't want to use them as a screen to say, "I am the person who knows something and you can't know it, because you haven't spent your life studying it." I have a much more direct emotional desire of what I want my connection to listeners to be. And so the way I internalized the struggle between my training and my desire for connection was that I was going to use all of that to build the skeleton that would accomplish something. I still believe that those things lead to a well-made piece. I still believe that it should be something that happens in a piece of music where you can go back and study it and analyze it and look at it and take it apart. I still believe that that's of value. But I don't believe it's of value to you. Do you know what I mean? Does that make sense? So a lot of these things—you know, "The Passing Measures," for example, again, you know, I took eight months to make the plan; and the way that worked is every single day I would make a formula or a plan or an idea, and I would work it out and I would write it out, and it would take a week to figure out each of those plans, and I would go, "You know, that plan didn't lead me someplace that interesting." You know? So I would throw it away. So actually it's sort of using this kind of structural way of thinking to help me be a trial-and-error composer. Sort of like what we were talking about today. You know, it's

like—It's trial and error, but it's with the planning. So what I'm left with when it works is something really nice. It just takes a really long time to throw out all the plans that didn't work. So…. Yes? I think you need a microphone.

Question: Yeah. I'm actually going to take issue with something that you just said music and the intentions behind this compositional strategies. [sic] The hierarchical problem that I see in music is not that of superior knowledge to inferior knowledge, but rather someone who's setting himself up as an emotional expert, saying, "This is my feeling; feel my feeling," and someone who's the absorber of that emotional content. And I think of those compositional plans and strategies as ways that those composers used to escape themselves, to be able to create an object that was outside of themselves that could be contemplated, and that it, at its root, has the same sort of motives as the embrace of chance. The ability to make something to spin away from one's own emotional center to have something that can be approached as if it were foreign, and contemplated as if it were like a rock you find in the woods or something. You know?

DL: Yeah, I think that is definitely what…. I mean, if you—in Boulez's essays in the Fifties, you know, like, he…. You know, like "Schoenberg is Dead" or whatever. Or "Blow Up the Opera House" or whatever. In those essays he's basically saying that we just had this horrible war; the world blew up because of excess emotionality. And now we are young, and we have science, and if we can make a music and if we can make an art form which depends on science and not on emotionality, then we can correct the wrongs of the previous generation which proved so disastrous. So I mean it's a really conscious effort to say, "We can use a kind of scientific thinking to avoid a certain kind of emotional reaction." And I think you're right. I think that sort of making an object

was one of the results of this. You know, those things really do become objects because they don't have the kind of inner life that you can pull apart emotionally easily. So…. But the thing that I keep thinking is, I remember—You know, this is music critic Greg Sandow, who used to write for *The Village Voice*, and now teaches this class at Julliard. And he plays music, you know, for his students, and he asks them-- So he had a class for people where just played them music from different periods and asked them what it made them feel. And he went to these people who were high school students who had no experience with music, and he said, "Okay, well… here's music from the Fifties. What do you think this is?" And he played them some (unintelligible, sounds like "Glez") and Stockhausen, and one of the high school students said, "This music sounds like people who are afraid of being blown up in nuclear war." And I thought that was actually really—It's actually—That's what that music is, in a way, about. It's a reaction to a kind of terror which is present in the world. So…. And it's using all your rational powers to try to stave off that terror. So I don't know if—you know, how overt to make that. But I actually think that that kid's reaction to that music made a huge amount of sense to me. You know, it's like, "Science… save us." So…. But again, you know, it's like you can hear the music lots of different ways; and I know when I talk about other kinds of music it sounds like I'm belittling it or something because I'm trying to make another point. But I'm not actually trying to do that. So I apologize if I said something that made you think I thought that music sucked, 'cause I don't. Anyway…. Any more questions? (pause) Yeah, since the microphone just passed by you, you might as well say something.

Question: How are you doing? Okay, my question was, while we were listening to "Heroin," you know, it was a very beautiful and interesting experience; but it was also pretty funny. You know, and people around—some people—not everyone, I think, had humorous thoughts, but a lot of people did. And I guess I'm curious to what degree that's a tactic—humor is a tactic you find yourself using in your pieces, or to what degree it's a byproduct of kind of [juxtaposing] or—I don't know—challenging an audience, and just some of your thoughts on that.

DL: I don't think it's funny so much as it's absurd.

Question: Sure.

DL: So. I mean, I think…. You know, again, it's like I try to figure out, "Where am I not supposed to go?" It's like very ill-behaved child; it's like, "Okay, don't—Whatever you do don't go there." It's like a dream, right? You know, it's like you have a dream, right, and you see, okay, there's a monster over there, and you think, "Okay," in the dream, "I'm never going to go over there. I'm going that way." But of course you always end up over there. You know? So I think I'm very curious to find out the things which lead you someplace else. There's something fundamentally absurd about that song, because if you know the original it's so completely different. So the lines come and you go, "Oh, that's ridiculous." But I'm not trying to be funny about it; I'm actually trying to get past that to something else. So. And maybe it's just because the song wears you down after a while, but you know, it's like you laughed--- people laughed in the first verse, but they didn't laugh by the second verse; because by the second verse it wasn't absurd. At least I hope. So I think some of the things that we think of as being funny are just out of place. But the interesting thing is that a lot of the things are in the places that

they are in because no one's ever asked where else they could be. And that's one of my jobs, I think. You know? So that's the answer to that question. Is that all right? Okay.

Question: Hi, David

DL: Hello.

Question: Can you please say something more about why death is your favorite subject?

DL: You know, maybe it's just because it's about…. You know, look. Okay, I come from a family of European immigrants. Their experience in Europe was not good. Right? So I grew up with a mother who was from Germany. She was very, very dark. Her life was terrible. She came to America, we heard all of her horrible stories about her horrible life; she had a horrible time. I would come home from school, she would—I would come in the door from school…. This woman had the darkest sense of anything. You know, I came home from school, she would go, "Okay, there's some milk and cookies on the kitchen table. Go do your homework." And then she'd go into her room and close the door. And if you would say, "Well, what—Can you come out and talk to me?" ---or whatever. And she would say, "I've been nice to everybody else all day. And now I'm done." You know. (laughter continues) So…. And this is the person in the world who I was the most close to. Ever. So this woman was great, right? But she was dark, you know. So I grew up in kind of this kind of dark environment. And the dark environment was that we were living in the aftermath of a tragedy. You know, my mother would say to me—We would be having a conversation and she would look up like she was startled, and she would say, "Why aren't we speaking German?" You know? "(exasperated sound) It's just an accident that we're not in Germany any longer, you know." My mother--her family, many relatives died in the Holocaust, right? So

we're Jewish, right? So her life was really dark and really terrible, right? And her experiences getting to America were really harrowing. I came home from college once and she had a new car; she had a Mercedes. And I said, "Mom! What are you doing driving a Mercedes? This is terrible!" And she said, "You need a good car." So you know— this is my background, right? So I grew up thinking that my life in America was in the aftermath of something really terrible that had not yet been resolved. And I'm sure that that had something to do with the fact that that's, you know, kind of like a fundamental issue in my work. So. Not about how great it is to be Jewish, how terrible the experience was that brought my parents here; here's my autobiographical opera…. Here's the story of my Mom, you know, that I'm making into a giant oratorio for six orchestras and ten thousand soloists. You know? But somehow this is the darkness which I grew up with, plus some other things which I don't want to get into. But… again, you know, it's like, if the point of this music is to reveal something that I think about myself, I have to think about myself. So if that's what music does…. You know, it's really interesting because—And again, I don't know what the correlate for art is, but in music we have popular music—You know, there is popular music, right? There is music that exists that's fantastic, that's really great, that everyone in this room knows and loves. And the point of this music is for the person who makes it to think about what you want to hear, right? I'm sitting here making pop music, you know, I'm thinking—You know, of course I'm thinking about what I'm interested in and I'm thinking about my experience. I'm thinking about it. But fundamentally, a lot of what I'm thinking about is, "What do you want to hear?" Right? What's noble about the other music that's not made like that? It's that the focus of it is, "What do I need to hear? What do I need to

think about? What makes me...? What's the opportunity for me to figure out what's really necessary for me to convey?" And then offer it. And that's my story. You know, somebody else is going to have something else. But I do also actually think that the message that people need to get from music is about this deep, serious, emotional message. And I do actually think that pop music, music about dancing and cars and sex, I do think that all of that music is also about death; because I think that's the music that you listen to so you don't have to think that music is about death. You know? So it's like, "Oh, please, can I find some music that will take my mind off the fact that all music is about death? Oh, yeah! I'll dance." Anyway….

Question: You keep bringing up this idea of, you know, this—music's direct access to like our own emotionality, or we receive it as this emotional trigger. And I was wondering, do you consider—

DL: God bless you! (response to sneeze in audience)

Question: This is actually something I think about a lot. Is this, in your view, something that—Is this a role for sound that we protect as a culture? Or is there something inherent in sound itself, or like the medium of music that accesses this better than other media, say like literature, or the plastic arts, or something like that? And then also, I have a question too…. Sorry to double these up. But it's about this idea of hierarchy, and so it's kind of connected, because you were talking about, you know, like Stockhausen as being… building up like these like extreme hierarchies between the composer and the listener. You spoke about this actually in somewhat negative terms, and part of this is because it maybe is not—it's refusing to access this emotionality? And I was wondering if it necessarily has to be seen in these hierarchical terms, or isn't there something about that

type of composition where, rather than reaching for some sort of like universalizing like connecting with all people at once, that there isn't—that that type of composition… contains like a real deep—it's something that there's like a—contains like a real deep hopefulness on their part, that if they compose in this way that they're interested in, that they just hope and aspire that there will be even just ten other people that enjoy this as well. And isn't that in some ways very generous? So I'm sorry. That's two different questions.

DL: Okay. The second question, I apologize if said something that sounded pejorative about those people. I was saying that there was a hierarchical distance between the composer and the listener. And Stockhausen's point—you know, he actually believed that he was a messenger from another planet. And so the hierarchical distance was light years. And you know, so I'm not actually trying to say that there's something terrible about that; I'm saying that that kind of hierarchy doesn't work for the message which I'm trying to engage. But obviously it worked for him, you know; those pieces are amazing. So—And you know, there are pieces of his like—Ah, there's this amazing piece that's real—Well anyway, I won't even go into it. But those pieces are fantastic, you know. "Gruppen," one of the great pieces of the Fifties, you know. Amazing. So what he is trying to offer, I guess one would have to ask him, which one can't do any longer; but it's definitely something else other than what I am trying to offer. So the first question about—I do think that each means of communicating, if there's literature or art or dance or poetry or music or simple conversation or, you know, slap fighting, or making out or whatever—I mean, every means of communication has a different specialty, right? Has a different kind of message that it's built for. So I think one of the interesting things,

maybe is trying to figure out how to mess those things up. So I'm not saying that things have to stay in the categories that you inherit with them. But I do think that sound has a special way of communicating to people, which no other discipline can duplicate. And I don't know, I'm sure this is cultural… and I'm actually completely quite uninterested in whether or not it's neurological or whether or not it's cultural. I'm completely not interested in any of it, because I don't want to know why it works or why it doesn't work or what it's good for or which synapses fire or did I learn it from this? I'm actually not interested in any of that. So… I'm interested in what I do, and what I think it does, and what I want it to do; and I don't care if it's cultural or physical or learned or ingrained or whatever. So… in a way—That also I think is religious; it's part of the religious aspect of it, is I think I'm interested in it because I'm harnessing something that I don't understand either. So I get to do these things and they work for me in a way which is just as inexplicable as it is for everyone else. When something moves me emotionally and I can't put my finger on it, that's what music is for. So when you read literature it's for getting a particular kind of message and accessing a certain kind of response from you which we have been trained by our language and background to accept. But I don't really want to know the neurological or the cultural basis of that either; so…. Which probably makes me really shallow or incurious. But I just really want to do what I do. And then make up a lot of stuff about what I think it is. Anyway. Have we done it, or--? Oh, okay. Okay, you're it! Okay.

Question: So it seems like there's a lot of desires to reverse or pervert maybe in existing musical structure, and I'm wondering if you'd find that the commercial jingle resists you the most—your own intervention in the commercial jingle.

DL: Commercial--?

Question: Jingle.

DL: Jingle.

Question: Have you tackled it yet?

DL: I've never written a jingle, but you know, a good jingle is really hard to do. It's really hard to do. There are people who spend their whole lives trying to do this, you know? And it's like my mother always would used to say, "Write one pop tune. Then you can do all the rest of this stuff." But you know, people spend their whole lives trying to do this stuff; you know, it's really hard. I don't have any problem with any other kind of music. I don't have any problem with commercial music. I don't have any problem with somebody saying that they intend to make a piece of music that will make everyone weep at the same time. You know, it's like everyone—I think what's really interesting is that you as a composer get to decide the size of your audience every single time you write a piece of music. You get to say, "Here's a piece of music for those ten people." "Here's a piece of music for a million people." "Here's a piece of music for every single person on the planet." "And here's a piece of music just for me." You know, you get to decide. And this is a silly story, but when I was young I wanted to play the piano. I'm not a good pianist, but I would try to play the piano. And I used to play the Chopin Preludes. They're really beautiful and they're really, really hard. But there are a couple of them that are really easy, right? Not really easy, but they're easy enough so that I could play them; I could fumble my way through. And you know, it's like one of them is so beautiful that it was used as the sign-off music for Wheel of Fortune for years. These are tunes you know, right? So—and I remember—you know, I'm in high school, you know,

I'm a terrible pianist, and I'm playing these things, and that one I can play. And a couple of others I could sort of play. And some of them were really, really, really, really easy, and then you'd get to like one little measure that was really hard, that I could never do. And I started thinking when I was in high school, "Okay, well Chopin has gone through this whole series of pieces and he's said, 'Okay, this one's really, really hard. Don't do that one. This one's easy; you can do that one. This one looks like it's really easy, but I put this one measure in to keep you out.'" "'Don't do it.'" And so I think about it all the time. I think, you know, you get to decide as a composer how big your audience is. What the doorway is. Who can go through that doorway. How easy it is to get through that door. And you decide through every single piece. So the thing about commercial music is it's made for everybody to go through the door. So…. And I don't have a problem with that.

Question: No, it's I—I mean it's just that I mean more specifically the jingle. Not commercial but because I think the jingle has—I'd be interested in how this—What is it? I don't know if we should call it a love affair with death, but how that could enter into the commercial jingle.

DL: How you could make… the death worshipping commercial jingle?

Question: Yeah. Exactly.

DL: Okay, well let's see. What product am I selling?

Question: Butter?

DL: (untranscribable sharp-pitched exclamation) Yeah, I get that. Okay, well I'm going to think about that. That's interesting. So…. I don't know if death sells. But if it did, it's a living. Okay…. (applause) Thank you. END OF RECORDING