Conversation with David Claman

> Tom Moore

Composer David Claman is presently professor of music in the Department of Music of Lehman College of the City University of New York. Recent commissions include music for The Da Capo Chamber Players and the CYGNUS Ensemble. Claman studied composition at the University of Colorado at Boulder and at Princeton University.

We spoke via Skype on January 29, 2010.

**TM:** We met when you got to Princeton, but I know you had many musical experiences before you got there. What sort of musical experiences did you have when you were growing up? Were there musicians in your family?

**DC:** My dad is a good amateur pianist, so I heard that. I grew up in Denver, Colorado, and they had the local classical music station [on] every day at breakfast. To be honest, I didn’t notice it that
much - it was almost like Muzak to me at the time. I assume that I absorbed a lot of musical information, but I didn’t listen to it actively - I ate my cereal and went off to school. I did take piano lessons when I was in elementary school, and then studied the French horn in junior high and high school. That is what got me hooked - playing the French horn. I had a teacher who was a mentor figure for me - his name was David Kaslow. Paul Lansky knows him, since they both went to The High School of Music and Art in New York. He did something which I have since learned is typical for horn players - he made me play long tones, for a couple of hours a day. Take a breath - baaaah.....

**TM:** **OMMMMM....

**DC:** That’s the thing - it was really kind of meditative, without it ever being explicitly stated, and it made me really listen to every note. Really listening, and paying attention to how it felt and how it sounded. Of course, what you are trying to do on the horn is develop a beautiful tone, which is the most significant feature of the instrument. That weird experience got me hooked. My parents weren’t very happy about it. They could hear me practicing, and said “but why doesn’t he have you play some music?” I would say, “No, no, no - he’s onto something here.” I wasn’t sure what it was, but it seemed deep. It seemed important, and though to be honest I wasn’t a very good horn player, wasn’t so successful at it, and ultimately gave it up, that is what made me want to be a musician. In my previous music lessons, I would practice a piece for a couple of weeks, and the teacher would put a check mark at the top of the page and go on to the next one ....it seemed trivial to me, and I didn’t know that it could be different.

**TM:** **THE THING ABOUT PLAYING A WIND INSTRUMENT IS THAT THE PIANO ALREADY HAS ITS TONE, BUT ON ANY OTHER INSTRUMENT YOU CAN’T EXPRESS ANYTHING UNLESS YOU HAVE THE TONE AS THE BASIS. YOU HAVE TO BUILD IT FROM THERE – THERE’S NO USE IN PLAYING A ZILLION NOTES IF THEY ALL SOUND BAD.

**DC:** Yes, although there is a countervailing tendency in horn playing, which my teacher was working against, which is that it so easy to miss notes on the horn, to play clams, and so a lot of horn players put a premium on accuracy, but they don’t always have nice tone. He was trying to convince me to think about the tone, rather than just get the notes.
But of course I was listening to rock and roll music the whole time....

**TM:** **YES, PLEASE TALK ABOUT THE ROCK AND ROLL THAT WAS MEANINGFUL FOR YOU AT THE SAME TIME THAT YOU WERE PLAYING THESE LONG TONES.**

**DC:** This was in the early seventies, and I was just caught up in the youth culture of the time - I liked various guitar heroes - Duane Allman, Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead.... Jerry Garcia. It was part of just being a teenager. It was hard to connect those two parts of my life. I would go to a rock concert, and then to the symphony the next week. I think that is easier to do now - people are more comfortable, but at the time it was awkward. You didn’t want to tell your friends that you liked classical music, and you weren’t sure you liked it yourself, because it was so square.

**TM:** **AND THE PEOPLE ON THE CLASSICAL SIDE OF THE FENCE THOUGHT THAT ANYONE WHO LISTENED TO ANYTHING BUT CLASSICAL MUSIC WAS SOME KIND OF WEIRDO.**

**DC:** Or just some immoral person who was doing drugs. One thing I have noticed that has still not changed much - I have just finished teaching a course at Lehman College to master's students in music education, who are trying to get certified to teach in the schools. Many of them have been practicing professional music, whether jazz or classical, for many years. They are coming back to school because they want a steady income. I taught an electronic music course to them, and it’s amazing how little they know about contemporary music. Most have never heard of Steve Reich. They went to music schools in the last ten or twenty years, and they have heard of Philip Glass, but it stops there. I was surprised by that, but for a lot of music schools, twentieth-century music is still an elective, after you have done your two years of music history, which stops at the Rite of Spring.

It’s hard - I talk about music from the seventies and eighties. After that there is so much out there - what will I tell them to listen to?

**TM:** **TO RETURN TO THE SEVENTIES — WERE YOU LISTENING TO JAZZ FUSION AS WELL?**

**DC:** We all thought that would be the next big thing - Mahavishnu Orchestra, Billy Cobham, Return to Forever, Weather Report... even Frank Zappa seemed to fit in there.

**TM:** **WHAT DIRECTION DID YOU SEE YOURSELF GOING IN?**
**DC:** It was very uncertain for many years. I wasn’t a good player - I didn’t have good hands. I worked hard, but didn’t have the natural aptitude, and it didn’t occur to me until I was in my later twenties that I could be composing. I studied Indian music - Carnatic music, from South India - for several years in college - that was fascinating. I still love the music.

**TM:** You were at Wesleyan?

**DC:** Yes. I played the vina - a fretted string instrument related to the sitar. It is very virtuosic. As much as I liked the music, I couldn’t really hang with the virtuosity, plus I would have had to start when I was three to be as good as they are.

**TM:** Could you say a little about Wesleyan? World music seems almost mainstream now, but in the seventies or eighties Wesleyan was almost the only place where this was taking place.

**DC:** Yes, and I didn’t know that when I went there. I went to Wesleyan because John Cage’s book Silence was published by Wesleyan University Press, and I thought “this must be a interesting school if they’ll publish a weird book like this.” When I got there, I found there was music from all over the world, there were visiting artists, and you could study with them as an undergrad - you could study with the greatest Indian musicians in the world. It was kind of bizarre, actually, that you could do that. There were musicians from Japan, Indonesia, South India and Ghana while I was there. It changed a bit over the years.

**TM:** How did that get started?

**DC:** It relates to the Cage issue. I don’t know the history in detail, and don’t know if it’s been written yet. I heard that Cage was quite instrumental, in that he worked on Silence while he was an invited guest at Wesleyan, around 1960. He became involved with the music department there, when the chair was Richard Winslow, who was a counterpoint...
teacher and choral conductor. Even though Cage was not per se interested in what was called world music or ethnomusicology, I heard that Cage opened Winslow’s perspectives, and he started inviting people.

It was an interesting environment in which to be studying music. There were lots of concerts to go to.

**TM: You were beginning to say that you played bass in a rock and roll band after college.**

**DC:** The whole time I was studying these other kinds of music I was thinking “I always wanted to play in a rock band” - since the time I was a teenager - a common fantasy. When I came back from India in 1981, I wanted to be an American, since there were extreme cultural differences over there, something you become aware of when you live in another country - you realize “I really am an American.” Not a citizen of the world, or whatever the expression is these days. I wanted to play something American, and everyone said “why don’t you pick up bass? There’s always a shortage of bass players.” So I had a great time - I played in bands in Boston - typically unsuccessful, but I learned a lot about music, and that is actually where I realized that I wanted to be a composer.

In the bands I was in each member tried to improvise their own part, and a lot of times what we came up with was a mess. And so I would start taking the role of an arranger, telling people what to play. The people in the band would say “We think we sound better when you tell us what to play, but we don’t like you telling us what to do.” [Laughs]

That’s when the light bulb went off in my head to go and study composition. It hadn’t really occurred to me before. It wasn’t an option at all. When I was a kid, being a musician, growing up in Denver, meant playing an instrument well. That’s how you got noticed, got praise, and the idea of writing music just wasn’t on the map. Maybe in a place like New York it would have been on the map for a young person, but it wasn’t even something that I was aware of.

**TM: Where we go depends on where we start – it’s path-dependent.**

**DC:** Sometimes I think “I wish had grown up in New York” - or LA or Chicago, someplace with a more sophisticated musical culture. But I like to think that all those other experiences I had along the way have made me a more interesting composer than if I had done more traditional compositional training.
TM: You mentioned playing in Boston – was that the punk scene?
DC: Punk/underground was what it was called at the time.

TM: What were the clubs that you were playing?
DC: One of them I think is still there - TT The Bear’s, near Central Square. The big underground club at the time was the Rat, in Kenmore Square, which isn’t there anymore. I [also] played in a reggae band up there - that was pretty funny.

TM: Did you ever hear the Mindless Fucks?
DC: No, I don’t remember them [laughs]. There were some pretty outrageous names.

TM: They played at the Rat.
DC: It was a lot of fun - a self-contained scene, a lot of original music, all these college radio stations in town that played local music. It was pretty neat.

TM: Do you still have tapes?
DC: You’ll never hear them...

TM: But do they still exist?
DC: I might have these cassettes that sound terrible...it was another one of my unsuccessful musical ventures. It’s amazing that I stuck at it so long. All these things I kept trying didn’t really work.

TM: What year did you end up getting to the doctoral program at Princeton? Or had you done a previous graduate program?
DC: I did a master’s degree at the University of Colorado, starting in 1990, and then started at Princeton in 1993.

TM: How was the program in Colorado?
DC: It was very educational, I learned a lot - I had a couple of very good composition teachers - Richard Toensing and Luis Gonzales, who are both retired at this point. I was a theory teaching assistant for several years, which was a really good experience. There wasn’t a lot of contemporary music being performed at the school at the time. It has since improved a lot. You had to really get out there and meet the performers,
go to their concerts, make contacts. There wasn’t a contemporary music ensemble, so you had to search out the performers who were interested in contemporary music.

**TM: Good training.**

**DC:** Exactly. It’s the kind of thing you have to learn how to do. I got some very good performances from some first-rate performers, some of whom I am still in touch with. Unfortunately, it’s isolated geographically. What’s the next big town? Cody? Salt Lake? And those are hundreds of miles away. There are just not a lot of people coming through. On the East Coast, if Louis Andriessen comes to New York for a performance, he is more than happy to come out to Princeton on the train, or to Penn or Curtis, but it’s a lot harder for him to come out to Colorado. That was the most wonderful thing about Princeton, that all of these people came through, and you got to meet them and hear their music. Some people got to know some of these visitors well, and ended up studying with Andriessen in the Netherlands later on. It’s a lot more alive -you are actually meeting these people, rather than just hearing their recordings. And that’s pretty vital.

**TM: How did you decide on the Princeton program?**

**DC:** It was a bit of a fluke, actually. Richard Toensing suggested that I apply to Princeton, and I was a little bit surprised, because I thought I would be required to write twelve-tone music, because of Milton Babbitt. Milton is one of my favorite composers - I love his music - but I knew that wasn’t the direction that I wanted to go. I didn’t know that there were other kinds of composers at Princeton - word didn’t travel to Colorado - the web was in its infancy then, and so I didn’t know that Steve Mackey and Paul Lansky were there. I am very thankful for that suggestion from Dr. Toensing because it really turned out to be the right place for me in just about every way, one of the high points of my life, musically.

**TM: At Princeton, people either do silicon or carbon-based music.**

**DC:** They say that a lot. I did both, and I still do both. There were a few people who crossed over, and I was one of them. When I got there, I didn’t know anything about computer music, and there were all these other people - Christopher Penrose, Matt Wuolle, Stan Link, Peter Velikonja, Curtis Bahn - who were pretty deeply into it, experts, guys who were writing code, and all the computers in Woolworth were Next computers on a network. If the network crashed, which it did several times a week, sometimes several times a day, then all the computers crashed. I crashed the network a lot, doing all kinds of stupid things. And everyone was really nice to me about it. When I crashed the computer, everyone had to stop working for a half-hour, until the whole system booted up again.
They were all supportive and understanding. That was the best thing about Princeton - the faculty was very supportive of the students, and that’s very important when you are trying to be creative. It’s not easy. It’s easy to get discouraged and stepped-on, and afraid to try things.

Thinking more about that silicon-carbon dichotomy, there were a lot of people who were crossing over when I was there. Matt Wuolle did both, Peter Velikonja did both, Stan Link did both - Penrose only wrote computer music, and Michael Oesterle only wrote acoustic music. Dave Sanford only wrote acoustic pieces and Juliet Palmer did both. It was encouraging for me, because at a lot of places there is this strict dichotomy.

**TM:** I look back at Princeton as a very libertarian place – you do your stuff, I’ll do mine, and we’ll agree to stay out of each other’s way.

**DC:** There was a live-and-let-live atmosphere, which sometimes involved ignoring other people in strange ways. But in other ways it was very accepting of other people.

**TM:** Please talk about studying with Steve and Paul. Steve also came from a rock and roll background.

**DC:** I felt like we had a common background as far as our esthetic interests. He’s a real guitar player, which I am not. My first year at Princeton I said to Steve and Paul that I didn’t want to take any composition lessons, since at my previous school I had to have a weekly composition lesson, which I found claustrophobic. The teachers meant well, and I learned a lot, but it wasn’t working for me at the time. I wanted to be left alone, and Steve and Paul [said fine]. I got there in September, and said “I’ll see you guys in May.”

Later on I was open to what they had to offer. Steve is very intense, and can really focus in on something. He was great at looking at scores, and seeing what you were doing, spotting things that could be improved or changed, and usually had interesting and surprising suggestions. Not the standard things that composition teachers would say, which is part of what makes his music so interesting - he does the things that you don’t expect. There’s a lot of focus when you are composing a piece on timing and pacing - having the “right thing” happen at the “right time”. He planted the idea of having things happen at the wrong time. A great idea, because if your piece sounds too perfect, and too inevitable in terms of how it flows, that could be boring, so I was working on a piece with percussionists. Normally you get to the climax, have some cymbal rolls...but he planted the idea of having them come in at the wrong time. As if they came in wrong and strong. It really opened the piece up, and allowed me to do some other things that were more
unpredictable, wilder and more interesting than the way I had been proceeding before. Paul was different, more like a Zen master. He would listen to recordings of my pieces after they were done, and then just make a small, seemingly trivial suggestion, which would turn out to be key in improving the piece.

**TM: Is there a piece that you would think of as being typical of your years there?**

**DC:** Yes - a piece of computer music called “70”, which was my first computer piece, and a piece for three electric guitars with sustain, called “Loose Canons”. Both of those were something new for me.

**TM:** “Loose Canons” refers to Ockeghem. Where did that come from?

**DC:** I had always liked his music. It doesn’t get as better, as far as I am concerned. Unfortunately, you don’t hear it very often.

**TM:** It’s hard.

**DC:** It’s hard, and it’s hard to find groups that will take the time. It’s a lot better than it used to be - there are great recordings. I heard an all-Ockeghem concert in New York about five years ago by Pomerium, at Cooper Union. At the end of the concert, Blachly thanked the audience, which I had never seen before, and said “we could only do this in New York”. People were standing, on their feet, screaming, it was so incredible.

I had always been interested in his music, but had never had the time to study it. For our general exams, at the time, they would ask us to pick a piece, and write a piece of music that responded to it, and I thought “Oh goody! I can study Ockeghem for eight months!”. And so I did. I got familiar with all his music, and the history, did my best to learn to read mensural notation from Apel’s book. And so I thought “Hmmm. A prolation canon. That would sound pretty cool on electric guitars with sustain devices. I was trying to draw this connection. If you are trying to respond to a piece from the fifteenth century, what are you going to do? I didn’t want to write a piece of fake Renaissance music, so I thought about what an interesting way would be to react to it.
**TM:** And so it has a unique sound.
To connect up a few things - you played long tones on your French horn, you played Indian music with its drone – would you say that there is an overarching esthetic for you that is related to these?

**DC:** Sure. Although it’s hard to articulate - it’s more like important elements in the mix that are always there to various degrees, whether in the foreground or in the background. Other people have noted this - they say “I can hear the Indian music”, even though I don’t explicitly use talas or ragas. More recently I have been doing some melodic ornaments which are the kind of thing you might hear in Indian performance, but again not in the context of a drone or raga.

**TM:** Please talk about To the maps. Where does that come from in terms of style and technique?

**DC:** I was trying - this was in 2005- to write in a more straightforward style, with few or no extended techniques - just notes and rhythms. It was a piece where I was trying to become more comfortable writing for those instruments, technically. It’s a Pierrot-ensemble piece, and I wanted to get better at writing for flute and clarinet. I have written a fair amount for piano, but it’s different in an ensemble. I wanted to have all the instruments be clearly heard, with interesting parts that interact.

It was a look backwards. The reference for the title is an underground band from the 80s, called the Minutemen, often characterized as a post-punk band...

**TM:** On SST Records.

**DC:** Exactly. They had very interesting lyrics, which they would shout - nobody sang in the traditional sense - they would bark them out. One of the phrases that stuck in my mind was “Back to the maps! Set a new course! Journey backwards!” So I was trying to set a new course and journey backwards in terms of technique, to teach myself more about traditional instrumentation and orchestration. There’s a tendency among composers to feign omniscience. That may be true for some people, but a lot of us are still working things out and figuring things out. To me that’s what keeps things interesting - I am still learning about every instrument that I write for. I was trying to have a piece that was rhythmically active and spoke clearly for each instrument. Very traditional - no real extra-musical reference.

**TM:** Your piece for piano four hands, Unpact Keypunch,
SEEMS QUITE DIFFERENT IN STYLE. MORE MINIMALIST, PERHAPS?

DC: There are some minimalist sections, and some more outrageous, really dense, with people pounding around on the keyboard. There were a couple of things happening. A large part of the opening asks the Primo to play essentially four-voice chorales. Two parts in the right hand, two in the left, but really fast. The octaves are displaced like crazy, so it’s moving all over the keyboard. If you were to do a reduction, you would see that the voice-leading is all there. That was a response to teaching harmony all the time. I spent so much time teaching harmony and Bach chorales, and what you teach starts to influence what you are hearing and what you are thinking about. I was playing around with that.

There was an oblique influence from Ives’s piano sonatas. Ives’s music has fascinated me since I was in high school. The transcendental rhetoric aside, there are parts of the Concord Sonata that are transcendent and I can’t explain how he does it. As a composer, you know how things are done after a while, so one of the most interesting things is when you hear things, and you don’t know how they’re done. That’s interesting. I am not quite sure how he did that, so I was trying to capture some of that feeling in parts of that piece. The other interesting thing about that piece is that it was commissioned by my first composition teacher, John McDonald, who teaches at Tufts. He’s a mentor figure, a wonderful guy, great composer-pianist. He asked me to write the piece and said “Make it really hard!” [Laughs] There are some really fast complicated sections.

TM: CURRENT PROJECTS?

DC: I wrote a piece, almost ten years ago now, for the Cygnus Ensemble here in New York, which is William Anderson’s group - William Anderson and Oren Fader on guitar, Tara Helen O’Connor on flute, Robert Ingliss, oboe, Susannah Chapman, cello, Cal Wiersma, violin. It’s five short moments, and they recorded it and played it a lot. Bill asked me to write some songs that can be inserted between these movements. It’s the most culturally sophisticated thing that I have dealt with for a while, because there is a theme for the
concert - all of the songs will have an Abrahamic connection - the texts will all be from Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. It’s been interesting to look for some interesting texts. Currently I am working on a song that uses the final section from the book of Daniel, and it’s in Tamil (I read Tamil). So there’s an Indian Christianity theme, and another song which will be the Lord’s Prayer in Malayalam, since I know some Keralan Catholics here in New York. Although it might be in Aramaic, since that is how Christianity first came to South India - through the Syrian church, which was still using Aramaic. There will also be a song in French - there’s a pseudo-Veda that the Jesuits wrote in imitation of a Sanskrit Veda, in an attempt to convert people to Christianity.

It’s been fun - I have spent a lot of time reading all this interesting material, and not so much time writing notes... The musicians keep asking me, “Where are the notes, Dave?” I say, “I’ll get them to you this weekend, don’t worry....”

It’s been an interesting intellectual project in the same way that the Ockeghem was. I love stuff like that - if I have all this cultural/historical material to chew on, it really gets the neurons firing.

**TM: What are the upcoming projects for next year?**

**DC:** There are people waiting for projects - two of the musicians in the Da Capo Chamber Players are waiting for a bass clarinet and piano piece. They are phenomenal musicians - Blair McMillen and Meighan Stoops. The Dither Electric Guitar Quartet, which is a wonderful group here in town, is waiting for a quartet. There’s a young group of [terrific] players who went to SUNY Purchase, the Cadillac Moon Ensemble - flute, percussion, cello and violin - who have asked for a piece. I am honored to be asked. No complaints - I just need a 36-hour day, and everything will be fine. A 36-hour day, every day.

**Tom Moore**  
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