



Interview of Nick Hoffman by Luciano Maggiore

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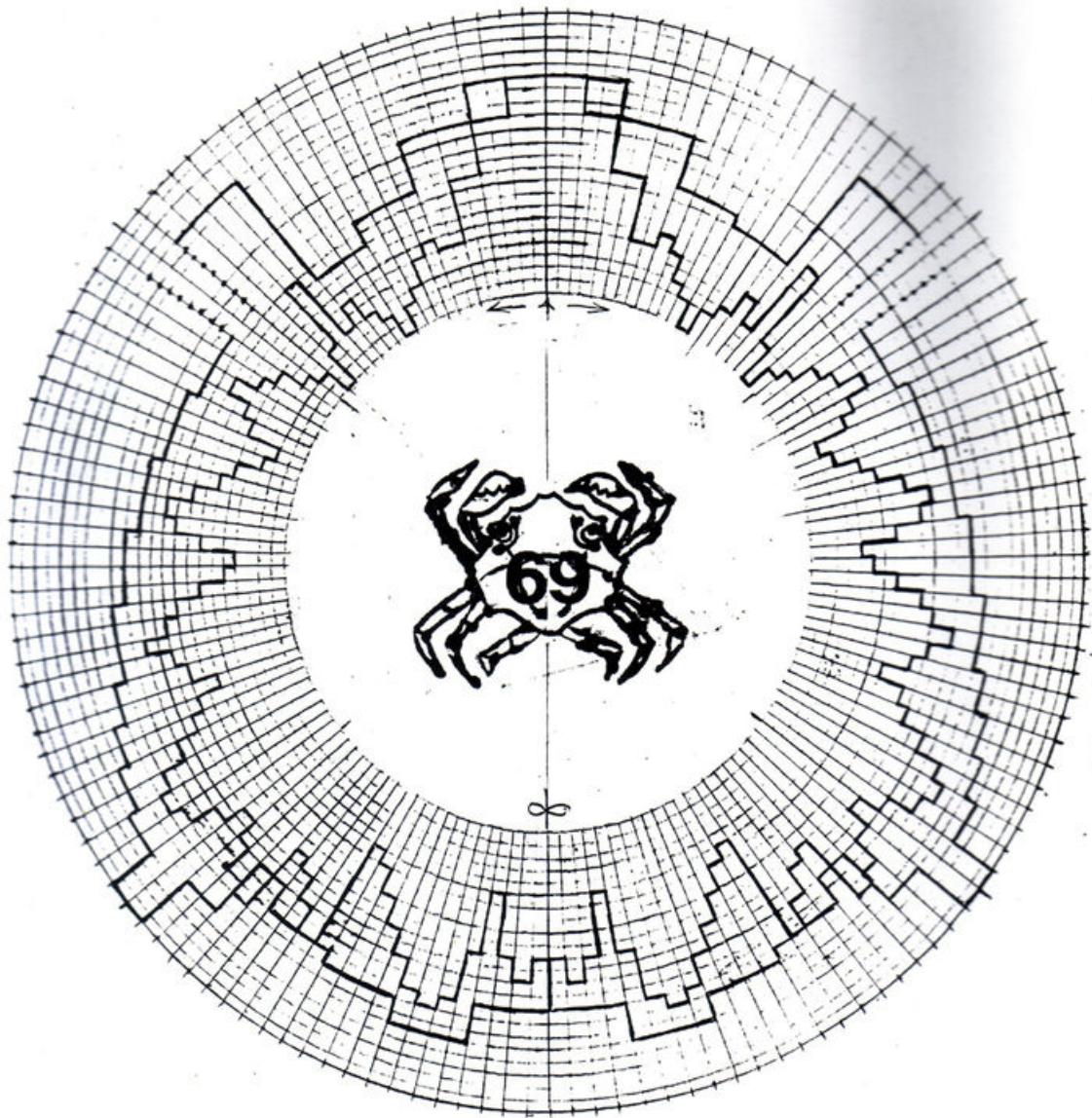
Luciano Maggiore: Hi Nick, I've been searching for reviews of your last 3 works on cassettes (Parvae Harmoniae, Baroque Classics and Parallel Bars) but I haven't found anything. I wonder if you avoid sending promos around or if people, like me, probably don't have the background to deal with the depth of your work, and the required knowledge for a reviewer to deal with it. It is strange to see something that somehow has more to do with the history of music (more than, for example, your "noise" releases) being avoided by commentators. I have the impression that in some way your passion for "antique music" is highlighting our lack of knowledge regarding traditional music writing and execution. What do you think about it? Is it something you were prepared for, or does it surprise you just as it surprises me?

Nick Hoffman: I'm not sure if it has anything to do with my work specifically or if you are just describing the reality of the attention economy. It does seem like the "release window" is collapsing more with every passing year, and after a week it's all forgotten. But I don't really want to speculate about what is happening with music critics. When I'm getting ready to publish new music I honestly have no idea what the reaction will be or if there will be a reaction at all. I work on a small scale and I don't have a PR person. Everything is surprising to me.

• I have always found fascinating to listen to an artist taking a new complete direction on their path, in your case moving from composing to performing other composers' music. I would say that your choice moves in the terrain of interpreting by merging with the taste of a given time in history (and this has probably always been the case for most of the written music). Is there a story behind your decision to move onto this terrain?

I started playing classical guitar when I was in high school — I remember playing Bach at a school assembly. This was before I knew anything about Xenakis or John Cage or Merzbow. So western classical music has always been somewhere in the background even as I was doing more experimental stuff later. There may have been a time where I wanted to distance myself from classical music, but I eventually got over that. I can see how it might seem like a big shift, but it's more just a decision to

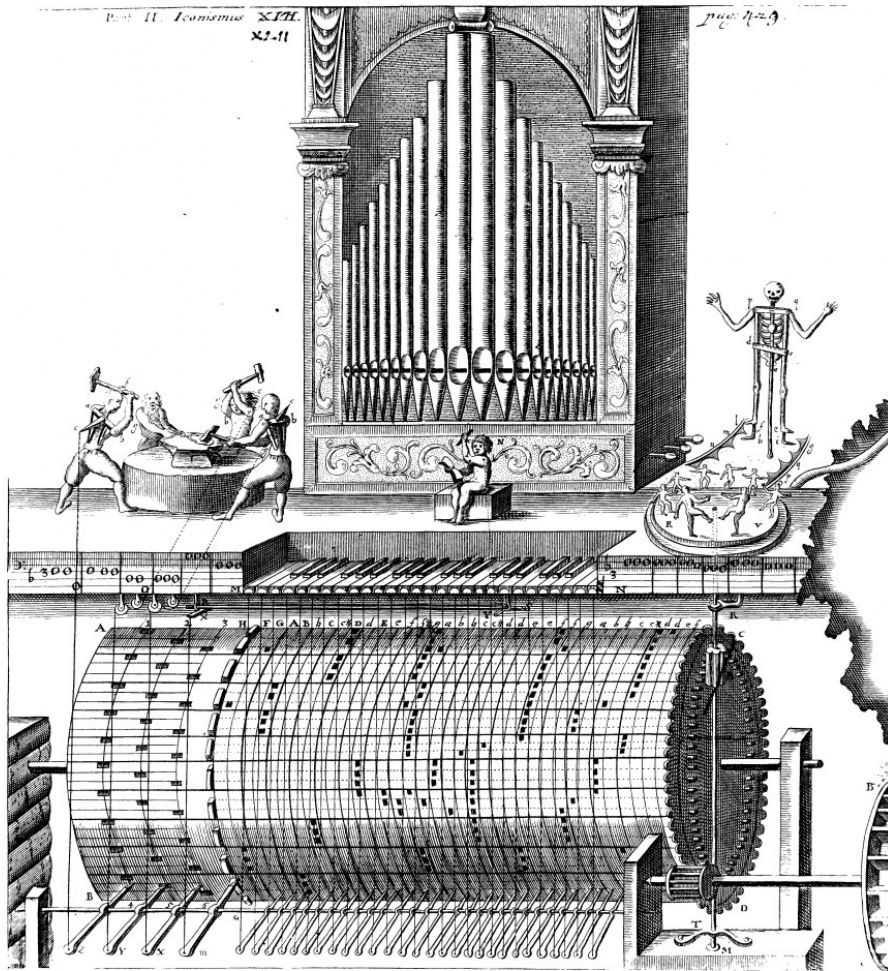
hit “publish” on something that was hidden before. For music to exist someone has to reenact it — there is still a lot of old music that has been completely forgotten. Recently I have been playing music from the French Baroque and it still sounds so fresh. It has not aged. I haven’t stopped writing though.



J.S. Bach Retrograde Fuge ; Crab Canon

- It strikes me seeing how this choice of yours exactly fits the world that with Pilgrim talk you are fencing. Jumping from one release to another one perceives a sort of coherence, and I imagine the characters or themes of your drawings being put as guardians/gatekeepers of these islands that you decided to be lands of your world. Do your drawings have a peculiar function in the music that you release with the label?

There is no real meaning to it. I like it when there is a funny contrast between the album cover and the music itself. For me the best album covers are on old punk and metal demo tapes. Void, S.O.B., Parabellum, stuff like that. You can tell when a band asked a friend to quickly draw something and put it on the Xerox machine. It's really pure. Sometimes I get nervous when I am making a cover design for someone else though. When I sent a cover draft to Takahiro Kawaguchi I told him "Let me know if it is too stupid and we can try something else". I usually try to give people options, but the overall strategy is something like a "serious joke".



- Coming back to your work with Classical music, something that emerges from listening to your 3 cassettes, actually mostly with Parallel Bars and Baroque Classics, is your use of little stratagems to compensate for the lack of physical space on the recordings. I'll try to explain myself better: for the little that I know of Classical music, it seems to me that composers in dealing with the writing of a piece keep in mind the typology of space where a given piece will be played, for example, the reverb of a church will strengthen the sound of an organ, or the architectonic characteristics of a given room in a palace will confer intimacy to a given piece for solo instrument or quartet. It looks like you are dealing with the problem of specificity of space in music using a very clever way of patching your material, surprisingly using a waveform or timbre after having used a set of waveforms or timbres that exclude it. These

interventions enrich the pieces with a sense of spatiality and emotivity, but they are so subtle that they move the listener in an almost subliminal way. Am I imagining everything I said?

Before I answer this I should probably explain what is going on in the music. The concept for Baroque Classics and Parallel Bars was to build something like a player piano, but with software. The music is created by feeding MIDI note numbers into a very crude oscillator. The oscillator can either be on or off — there is no dynamic expression, no filters, no envelopes, really no control at all. It's not even a synthesizer really; it's more like an old Ricoh sound chip. In the beginning it was monophonic and there was no "note off" function, so the final tone would just keep sustaining until I shut the whole thing off. The best strategy was to send it a stream of continuously changing note values, ideally without any rests. So what music fits this criteria? J.S. Bach. This was an idea that started out with me thinking "I bet that would be funny" but I really ended up liking it. The results surprised me. So that's how it started. I modified the oscillator a little bit to switch between different wavetables, but it's still really simple and really stupid. To your point about physical space/modeling: there are moments where the nasty-sounding oscillator is suddenly replaced by sine waves and I think this is what you are describing. There are no effects or filters or anything like that. I prefer a very dry sound for computer music. If you think of the speakers as an instrument, you want them to feel alive and present rather than clouded with artificial reverb. To me this is pure computer music.

• I see, very interesting, I really don't know anything about software and especially midi, so I was really guessing what the process behind those two cassettes was. And what about Parvae Harmonie, what is the story behind it?

Parvae Harmoniae started out as, I guess, a private project. I never really intended to publish those recordings. In 2007 I was studying early music and looking at different scores from that era. At that time recordings were not easily accessible and some of the music was really obscure. I started playing through some scores on my guitar just to get an idea of the actual sound and harmony of these pieces. Most of it is vocal music, motets, and the electric guitar obviously was a long way off historically. The original music is usually some variation on SATB, and I multi-tracked it so that S, A, T, and B all get assigned to their own channel. That's not usually how guitar music works, but it gave me a lot of flexibility when I was assembling the final recordings. Over the years I accumulated more of these "guitar motet" recordings, and maybe shared a few with some friends. People seemed to like it, and at some point I realized I had enough recordings to fill out a tape and I just did it.

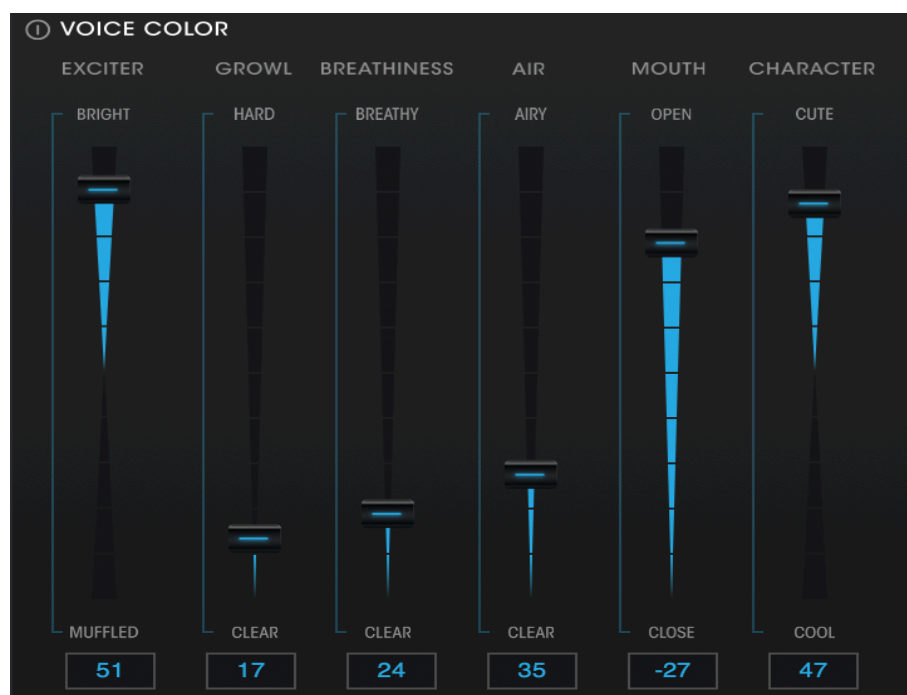
• I noticed that "Couperin Les Barricades Mysterieuses" has appeared in your work as well as often in Philip Corner's one, I was wondering if there is a connection in experimental music with this particular piece that I'm not aware of.

Probably nothing to do with experimental music. I think it's just a really charming piece and everyone falls in love with it.

• I would like you to tell me more about the use of vocaloids in Parallel Bars. Risking to sound naive, the first thing that came into my mind listening to that cassette was a famous cartoon (in Italy at least) that I used to love when I was

a kid "Alvin and the chipmunks". I remember very little of that cartoon but I do remember the feeling of finally having access to certain songs in a more suitable way for a child, and feeling a deep connection with the music just because somebody decided to pitch up the voices of some famous songs. Of course, I didn't have any grasp of this process back in the days but trying to analyze my feelings, I guess that what I've just described fits well what was happening. I think you are consciously using a similar semantic device in *Parallel Bar*, forcing a new generation of listeners to confront themselves with historical pieces of music otherwise forgotten, building a new bridge to connect our present with that past.

The vocaloid is a "singing synthesizer". There was a sort of internet craze about vocaloids a while back, but it seems mostly to have died down. The software itself is pretty amazing though. It's set up so that users have access to the basic synthesizer engine, but you can also buy add-on "voices" which are tied to these different animated characters. It's kind of like DLC in video games. I have not gone deep into vocaloid culture, but it seems like there are hardcore fans who obsess over the different vocaloid characters. I'm mostly interested in the technology behind it. For *Parallel Bars* I needed a vocaloid that could sing in English, and I also wanted a stereotypical "idol" voice — something completely disconnected from classical music. The vocaloid I chose has a fader for "cuteness". The idea was really just to make a sequel to the *Baroque Classics* release. Completely automated, completely computerized baroque/renaissance music, but this time with a "singer". I'm not strategizing or trying to predict how listeners will feel when they hear the music. Someone else mentioned the chipmunks and I am shocked to hear this. Pitched up voices ruin music for me. Some hip hop producers still do it, and I don't understand it at all. So just to be clear: there is no pitch-shifting on *Parallel Bars*.



• I think you wrote something on twitter some time ago saying that you would like to write music for Lute. Are you still thinking about it / working on it? I would be really curious to hear what your approach on the instrument would be.

I am working on it and planning to release new lute music sometime next year. It is tonal music — I'm not using "extended techniques" or anything like that. With all the pandemic gloom and being mostly inside for the last couple years, one bright spot was having time to get familiar with this instrument. When I first started with the lute I had this idea that it would be similar to playing a guitar. A lot of people seem to make this assumption about lute and guitar, and it makes sense — the instruments do look similar. What I quickly found out is that the playing technique is quite different, especially for the right hand. So I really did have the feeling of learning a completely new instrument. Like most things it was frustrating at first, but now it's fun.



• Have you ever thought of performing live the kind of material that you touched with the 3 cassettes mentioned before? Is playing in front of an audience something that you feel is important both for you and the kind of music that you do? Or do you see it more as an experience that the listener should have at close doors on their own? I really would love to listen to Parallel Bars projected from a big system such as the GRM acousmonium.

This question is reminding me that I have not played live music in about two years, and that is truly a bad feeling. If nothing else it's just nice to be in a room with other people listening together. I have missed that a lot. I have not attempted to do Parallel

Bars or Baroque Classics live, but it might be fun to try it on a large speaker array. French-style diffusion would be funny. Maybe something to consider... But yes, live performance is still important to me and I genuinely enjoy doing it.

- **A few months ago, I went for dinner to some friend's house and I saw in their kitchen one of your posters. I asked where and how they got that, and the reply simply was that they received it with some cassettes that they bought from you. How come they got the poster and I normally receive just some (lovely) stickers with my orders? (just kidding)**

Hah, I don't know!

About Nick Hoffman

<https://www.pilgrimtalk.com/HoffmanBio.html>