Aurora Forum

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Trimpin: Coincidence, Music, Memory, and Meaning

Trimpin and Paul DeMarinis with Mark Gonnerman

Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director.

Thank you very much for being here this evening for our conversation with Trimpin and Paul DeMarinis on "Coincidence, Music, Memory, and Meaning." We want to get right into the discussion. I'll do some brief introductions and then we'll start talking about these themes although, as you know, in Aurora Forum conversations, once the conversation gets started, you never know exactly what's going to happen because conversation is itself a spontaneous and creative art. What we'll be doing is talking here on the stage for about forty-five minutes and then we'll open up to audience questions and comments and that will keep the conversation going for another thirty or forty-five minutes.

We're very grateful to have our two guests with us here tonight. I'll first introduce Professor Paul DeMarinis, who is a professor of art and intermedia studies here at Stanford, where he's been since the year 2000. Since he was a child, he's been making noises with wires, batteries, and household appliances. His work poses questions about the world we have created and explores the ways technology has woven itself into our personal relationships, our understanding of the physical universe, and our ideas about possible futures. He has been in residence at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, where he has presented several path-breaking works. He taught at the San Francisco Art Institute and has received many prestigious prizes and fellowships and was, last year, a guest of the Artist-in-Berlin Program at the DAAD. There's a new book about his work called *Paul DeMarinis: Buried in Noise*. It was interesting to me that when I met with Paul last week to discuss our conversation tonight, he didn't even mention this book once. I think he said, "Well, we're here mainly to hear about Trimpin's work." But once I got this book in my hands, I couldn't stop reading it. It is absolutely fabulous as both a discussion of the evolution of experimental music and as a catalogue of the work Paul has done over the years, and I hope we'll talk more about this as we get into our conversation.

Paul earned his MFA at Mills College, where he studied with Robert Ashley and David Tudor, and the music we heard in the house as you were coming in is a piece called

"Beneath the Numbered Sky," which is from his 1991 CD called *Music as a Second Language*.

Trimpin is a Seattle-based kinetic sculptor, sound artist, musician, composer, and inventor. He's a recipient of a MacArthur award (the so-called genius award) and has combined these various disciplines into an extensive body of work, which he has been creating since the 1970s. His kinetic sculpture installations often include the production of sound through the inclusion of mechanically or computer-driven instruments or entirely new sound sources. I think we're very fortunate that both of our guests tonight are extremely inventive and creative people who imagine things that don't yet exist and produce them. I think there's a lot of magic in their work. This year, Trimpin is an artist in residence here at Stanford, where he's been collaborating with students, faculty, and the campus community to prepare for his new work, *The Gurs Zyklus*, which is going to be performed on Saturday, May 14, right behind us on the stage of Memorial Auditorium at 8 p.m. We'll certainly talk about this tonight. The story behind this work is fabulous and the work itself is fascinating. There are cards in the lobby with details about the performance, and I urge you to pick these up and, if you don't already have tickets, get tickets for yourself and share the news about this with your friends. We hope to see you then. Tonight's conversation really is a way for us to begin to engage with Trimpin's new piece.

Among the many great quotations I came across regarding Trimpin in my preparation for tonight, my favorite was, "His music has to be seen to be believed." Then I saw in Paul's book that someone talked about Paul's work under the rubric of "sounding visions."

So I'd like to begin our conversation tonight talking about genre. What is the genre of your work? Paul's book is titled *Buried in Noise*, and I've heard your work discussed as *sound art*, but there is also this category of *music*. Are these different things, and how do you define the work you do? Either of you can begin talking about the category. What's the category of art we're talking about when we think about your work?

Paul DeMarinis: Well, I think it gets contextualized differently depending partly on the place. For instance, my work is much more central … it kind of belongs at the periphery of music in Germany, whereas in the United States, where music is much more closely defined, my work tends to be more identified in visual arts. So, some of it is cultural. Nonetheless, I think this whole area of sound practices, which you can't avoid…. Thirty years ago, I think, when Trimpin and I were starting to really exhibit work, this work didn't fit anywhere, and there were people who had come out of music, people who had come out of theater or radio, people who had come out of visual art who were all doing these things. It was kind of an empty meeting ground. It was a place where all of us who were kind of on the edges of different things met and had a lot of common interests. I always liked that kind of situation – this being at the crossover of many different camps.

Trimpin: There was a network. I remember applying for a subsidy for grants, so I would send in my sketches, my notations, and of course they wouldn't be granted because the letter came back saying, "You applied to the wrong department. [Laughter]

You have to apply to the visual department." So I said OK, so I did. Then a letter came back: "No, you applied to the wrong department. This looks like music." So it was always hard to find this category. Not until, I think, New Langton Arts in San Francisco and Renny Pritikin…. He, in the early eighties, was already starting this interdisciplinary approach of getting the different genres accepted in this kind of environment, like a gallery. But there are only a few around.

Gonnerman: Both of you: How do you think of yourselves in relation to institutions? Paul, you're here at Stanford University, and it's good to hear that you teach intermedia studies, which is itself recognition of the evolution of the kind of art you've invented. Trimpin, you have your own studio and you're very independent as an artist. Both of you work with museums quite a lot, more than with galleries, isn't that correct?

Trimpin: Galleries would dictate what you should produce after the first show. They say, "Oh, this sells very well. Let's make a few more of these things." I say, "No, I have to move on. I don't want to repeat the same piece." That has kind of limited the spectrum of where the work will be more accepted – mostly installations as in a museum or for a certain festival or music festival, but then it's always a one-time event or installation, a one-time kind of project because, acoustically, you have to adapt to the environment so you cannot just pop it in any kind of place without doing certain modifications.

Gonnerman: Paul, you've been associated with the Exploratorium.

Paul DeMarinis: Yes, public art venues are one possible outlet. Museums, certainly, that can have sound in them. If they so choose, they can devote a gallery to things that make noise. Galleries, to some extent, but always – and I don't think it has anything really to do with the nature of sound work itself, but maybe my own work – galleries often carry some artists that they're interested in who don't necessarily sell. True, they're often pieces that people don't want to live with in their houses, but galleries will have loss leaders, so to speak, to use the marketing term – something that will draw people in, that will get cross-over audiences, that people like but nobody wants to buy.

Trimpin: But more in Europe, I would say.

DeMarinis: Maybe.

Gonnerman: This is very interesting to me because without an obvious institutional home, the two of you have just persevered and gone forward and done your work. I'm wondering, at what point in your life, Trimpin, did you say to yourself, "I can do this. I can make my visions into sculptures. I can make sounds that I hear so that other people can hear them, too." Have you always felt that you could just do this work, or was there a moment when you realized that this is possible?

Trimpin: I think it started quite early, like you mentioned Paul starting as a young child, experimenting with this sound. That's how I started: stacking up old tube radios and

taking everything else off and connecting all the dials with one big dial so there was a big noise coming out of ten or fifteen tube radios. But you were a person who interacted with this kind of apparatus. It was almost like a synthesizer, but it was just a found object because people would throw away these big old radios. As a child who was starting to experiment this way, to listen to what was coming out of this box, I probably from an early age on always had a fascination for experimenting and listening and moving on. So there was never probably any point where I made a decision that I wanted to be an artist – never. But nobody told me that I was an artist.

Gonnerman: You just had curiosity and then eventual knowhow, or was it intuition? You could see the machine and you could hear it. How did you understand how to, say, make that knob that would change the volume and all the channels?

Trimpin: Trial and error – just figuring out how to make it different, how to make it different so it doesn't look the way it normally looks. What's coming out should be something different. That was always a curiosity to see what could be made different and how would it sound different. I remember that my grandfather taught me how to put long antennas – just copper wire – over several houses to receive some shortwave stations. It was only high-pitched sounds, but when you start to move everything, it was like synthesizers from the 1960s or '70s. There was always some kind of interesting sound coming out.

Gonnerman: Your grandfather was an inventor?

Trimpin: Not really, no, but when he was twenty years old, he was building his own tube radio. When I found this, as an eight- or nine-year-old boy in the attic, it had these big coils with headphones. It was this big kind of thing. My parents told me, "Never plug it in in 220 volts. It might explode." [Laughter] Of course, as soon as there was a way, I plugged it in, and amazing sounds came from this apparatus. That's how I slowly started to want make more, to stack them up, because one loudspeaker wasn't enough. It had to be polyphonic, you know?

Gonnerman to DeMarinis: You had a look of recognition when you were hearing Trimpin.

DeMarinis: Oh, yeah. I had a lot of those experiences, and I think part of it is generational, but there were these old creatures with glowing tubes in attics then that have long disappeared.

I was just thinking, in answer to your question about the confidence of feeling like you could actually do this, that in my case my period of self-doubt is pretty evenly distributed through my life at two-thirty in the morning when I wake up in a cold sweat. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: You like loud sounds and, Paul, part of your childhood was spent near a nuclear test site …

DeMarinis: Very loud sounds!

Gonnerman: …in Nevada. You have a piece about that. Could you talk a little bit about that experience?

DeMarinis: Well, I think a lot of works kind of gather as you move through your life, and I never made works that were overtly autobiographical. But there are certain experiences you have, like seeing the end of the world, which – anybody who's ever seen an atomic bomb go off has a feeling of what that is – act as magnets, somehow, in your life and attract other ideas. Things get connected to these. I'm sure there's a psychological term for it. They kind of build; they act as centers for other images. In my case, a lot of things about radio, the sounds of the desert, natural sounds, and the sounds of these old tube radios came together in that work – together with texts from other people who shared that experience.

Trimpin: Even visually, on these old tube radios there was one tube on the front. When you tuned it to the right station, in German, it was called the *magisches Auge* – the magic eye. It was almost like a small TV tube, and that was, for me, the other fascinating part: to put a whole bunch of them together and see what kind of images you can create by just turning … because they would just change color. It was more or less a green color, only with black, but it made rings and it was almost like creating a visual image by experimenting with the sound and the visual part. Unfortunately, the newer transistor radios never had this kind of magic eye anymore, so after the tube radios, I stopped with electronic sounds and never used it again until a few small installations. But this was kind of my end of working with electronic sounds.

Gonnerman: One of your first pieces of note, Paul, is *The Pygmy Gamelan*, which has to do with making a radio.

DeMarinis: Yes, it is based on this idea that we're surrounded by electrical fields, and these electrical fields are the things that come the power lines, from lights, and from radio stations and stray wireless network signals, but also from distant galaxies. We're in this electromagnetic space, and so an early piece I made reads this – it's kind of a bottom feeder of the electromagnetic world – and picks up all these stray signals and organizes them. It was a little hybrid analog-digital synthesizer, and it improvises musical phrases in response to this. My idea was that it would be a replacement for the car radio – that you could drive along and kind of come into different places and hear this sound kind of audified. I tried to sell it to Detroit in the early 1970s. It didn't go.

Gonnerman: Well, I have an idea because I was just in the Tesla showroom on Santana Row the other day talking to a Stanford grad who is working there. I think it would be the perfect radio for the Tesla! Have you invented other things that might have commercial interests?

DeMarinis: Well, I think that's the only time I took it seriously. I actually went and met with Detroit executives about it.

Gonnerman: I think it would be a good time for us to take a look at a video clip from the Experience Music Museum in Seattle, where Trimpin created a sculpture called *Guitar Tornado*, also known as *If VI Was IX*, after the Hendrix song. I think if we watch this – it's about five minutes long – we'll get a good sense of how you go about your work.

"Guitar Tornado" segment of Peter Esmonde's *Trimpin: The Sound of Invention* (participant observer, 2009) is shown:

Trimpin: I think it was like seven or eight months left to the opening when I got a phone call from the curator to come up with a proposal representing somehow the history of American string music.

Jacob McMurray (curator): At the time, it's like I met him like once and I was just like, "Who is this weirdo?" I was like, "Oh, my god, I don't know how this is going to work." It's not just a piece of sculpture. It's not just a bunch of guitars that are playing randomly, then separately. It's one complete cohesive instrument.

Trimpin: So this initial meeting with Paul Allen was where I presented my idea, my proposal. And of course he immediately came up wondering, "Who is tuning the guitars up there?" And at that time I didn't have any details of how I would technically do everything. I just told him, "Well, they'll tune themselves." It's the first time he looked in my eyes and said, "Wow." Of course, at the same moment, I thought, "God, what did I say?"

McMurray: I asked him how it was going and he was like, "You know, I just can't imagine spending a hundred dollars on a single-string pick-up. It bugs me" (even though we were paying for it; it wasn't really coming out of his pocket). He said, "I went down to Boeing Surplus and I got a bunch of wire and some magnets and I made my own single-string pick-up for, like, two dollars." That was kind of like the theme of the whole project.

Troy Swanson (assistant): The way the picking mechanism worked was really … that was tricky. It took four months out of the six months, probably, just to get the pick to pick.

McMurray: It's one thing to come up with a scale model this big with a bunch of Lucite guitars glued to it, but to make something where there are going to be several tons of guitars hanging sixty feet up in the air you need to make sure the guitars aren't going to fall down and kill little children.

Trimpin: When I did the prototype, I knew I needed at least 500 guitars. The main part was that I wanted to use guitars that were used already; they shouldn't be new guitars.

Video Concludes [Applause]

Gonnerman: When I watch that, I think of a number of things, but especially about your resourcefulness: recycled guitars and going to the Boeing scrap yard. I read somewhere that you said that you actually came to the United States in 1980 because our junkyards are better. Please tell us more about this project.

Trimpin: The Experience Music Project first hired a lot of different graphic design companies to come up with a centerpiece, and they spent a fortune just on the proposal – on very slick kinds of proposals from these companies. One was a silhouette of Jimi Hendrix with a race car hanging upside down, and stuff like that. They got $60,000 - $80,000 paid for these proposals – coming up with a nice booklet. So they based it…. It was several months, and every time they got these proposals I was like, "Oh, no, it looks terrible." So then they had the idea: "Let's get a curator and let's ask our kids because they'll do it for free and they don't charge for the proposals." Of course, when you're a finalist, then you will get paid for making a model, description, and so forth. So I applied for it and I was one of the finalists. Every time, you had to bring your paperwork, your samples, and in this particular piece there was a big Frank Gehry plexiglass model of the whole Experience Music Project. They told all the finalists that their models had to fit right in there to see how it looks in space. I made tiny guitars – about 500 – made photocopies from a guitar book, reduced the color copies to be this big – and cut them out (the whole family was cutting guitars for days [Laughter]), and glued all the tiny guitars together. So it fit right into the Frank Gehry model. And that's where we had this meeting. There were basically about ten lawyers, Paul Allen, me, and the curator.

That's when you are just a finalist. You don't even know if you'll get the job, so you don't think too hard when the check is not in the mail. I had the concept, and then Paul Allen himself is a guitar player so he knew what happens when they go out of tune, and stuff like that, so that's the reason a few specific questions came. But then they decided to use this piece. Then the hard work started because this was November and May was the opening, and nothing existed at this point. Let's just say, when I asked what the budget was, nobody knew. "Just do it," whatever it costs. Of course, I had to go to Boeing Surplus to get the coils and everything. So that was kind of the process to learn to come up with this tuning question. How do they tune themselves, because they are way up there and nobody can go up there and tune them? So then the next day: How can you make this? It's actually quite simple. It wasn't hard at all, but you have only six months to make a prototype. Then this prototype has to run day and night for the next weeks to make sure everything is working and not falling apart. So I had some assistance, but not really, because who can you tell, "Make a self-tuning guitar"? It was more like the work had to be done just as an individual. Later there was help, of course, to set up everything because we had to collect all these used guitars. We don't even know how many there are up there. We had 700 brackets made and they're all gone, so there must be probably 700 guitars.

Gonnerman: Do you have two-thirty-in-the-morning moments of doubt – the kind that Paul described? You say, "Sure, I'll make a self-tuning guitar" and then you say, "It's really not that difficult."

Trimpin: I'm so tired at eleven o'clock [Laughter] that I sleep solidly until the next morning.

Gonnerman: How did the idea of a self-tuning guitar come to you?

Trimpin: Well, I was desperate at that moment. [Laughter] I had to come up with it. I couldn't say, "I don't know."

Gonnerman: But I'm wondering, as a style for work, do you often set yourself an impossible task or goal? Do you do that to motivate yourself?

Trimpin: Well, it is frustrating sometimes, of course. You work on an idea: I did once a liquid percussion piece – a piece in which water drips very precisely so you can play it. It was called "Liquid Percussion," which will also be used at *The Gurs Zyklus*. I knew that when you push a key on the keyboard, one particular drip has to come down, and when you press three times, three drips have to come down. So when one would be missing, it wouldn't be a musical instrument when there's a note missing or just like one drip missing. So sometimes it was very frustrating to make this kind of particular equipment so it's reliable and works every time. I figured out that the problem was when the drip was falling down, first it was very nice but then it was kind of falling apart so it wasn't a nice drip anymore, like ten feet lower, because the air somehow split the water and it shattered into small particles and not a nice drip anymore. This wasn't perfect because the impact of the water should play the drum skin very precisely. I remember not getting closer and then I actually had a frozen vodka bottle in my freezer and I poured a drink and I realized, wow, the viscosity of this liquid is completely different from water. So I put frozen vodka in the drip and a beautiful drop came down. [Laughter] But then I knew that I couldn't have an installation working with vodka. First of all, it has to be frozen, or cold. But then the next day, you think, OK, it has something to do with viscosity, like how can you make this different. Then you learn why this water is falling apart. Then you learn there's a certain resistance, or whatever. When I would sometimes ask physicists, I would say, "Look, I'm stuck. Can you help me?" They tried for the next few days to find it somewhere in the books and they couldn't, so you can only learn on the job when you do this kind of work because you have to try it over and over to make it to the point where you are satisfied. When the drip is falling apart then you'd better move on to do something different. But with the guitar installation, it was a little bit different because I knew how to make some parts work. The challenge was: how do they play ten years later? And they're still plucking.

Gonnerman: And they're still in tune.

Trimpin: That's right. But the only problem is that there's some commercial equipment that's part of it. The sound is amplified and processed, so it sounds sometimes like a

punk rock band or it has sort of a blues guitar sound. They're the kind of amplifiers that shape the sound in a certain way. They are slowly stopping to work and you cannot replace them anymore because the manufacturers don't exist or they've stopped this model, and that's my biggest challenge – using commercial equipment in artwork – because when you make it yourself, you always can replace it and restore and rebuild it, but with any commercial equipment, when it fails and there is no replacement, then the artwork is basically history.

Gonnerman: Do you have anything to add, Paul? You have your own studio.

DeMarinis: I think that every artist has a way of working experimentally, I suppose. Even if you're doing figurative painting or something, you learn things. You learn them by observation and by doing them, and they become part of your repertoire, so you have an idea that something could work. Then you open your mouth when you're making a proposal and you get the commission and then you have to actually make it work. But you have a feeling. And I think there are some things…. You know, probably there is still something about art practice that goes back to a very long time ago before the era of patent disclosures and everything, and teaching these things and being open about them – these kinds of, not secrets, but just things that you know how to do, things you know how to get out of materials because of this experience. And I don't know how you could even describe it. I think the problem…. I have hardly ever had an assistant because it's very hard to impart that knowledge to anyone. It's not a knowledge that can be formalized.

Gonnerman: It's craft knowledge.

DeMarinis: It's craft knowledge, yes, and I think every artist has something in the hands or in your repertoire.

Gonnerman: When I arrived at Memorial Auditorium this evening, I went to the stage and there was Trimpin: trial and error, tinkering, "thinkering," solving problems. Let's talk about *The Gurs Zyklus*. We'll get to what you're creating on the stage, but what's the story? I understand you've been working on this piece for fifty years and it's another piece that emerges out of an experience you had as a child.

Trimpin: Well, I didn't plan to do a piece starting at this point, this moment, but it started fifty years ago when I tried to comprehend what happened around my hometown. Basically what happened is that I stumbled on a place that was completely overgrown but there were some stones sticking out and they had certain inscriptions that we boys couldn't read and this was a curiosity: what are these stones? It turned out it was a former Jewish cemetery and these were Hebrew inscriptions. When I came home, I wanted to know what this meant. So slowly I learned that there was, in this town I grew up in, a Jewish community, but they disappeared in 1940 and were sent to this place in the French Pyrénées, and the name of this town was Gurs. At this point it was starting to be curious – the deciphering process: why couldn't I read these inscriptions? What did they mean? And what is Jewish? What does it mean? I'd never heard this before. In this town, either you were Catholic or Protestant. It depends on the town. My father

came from a town that was Catholic so by default he was Catholic. My mother came from a Protestant town. When they married, he got kicked out by the Catholics because he married a Protestant woman. From that point, I didn't grow up religious, but I was baptized because I was in a Protestant village. Later, when you're eighteen years old, basically, you can resign from whatever it is. You had no paperwork because you never signed up for anything, but you have to resign. Otherwise, you would have to pay taxes. But I didn't resign for tax reasons; I just resigned because I never had anything to do with it. But I was curious about this religion that I didn't know at all. There was never any teaching in school. There was religious teaching, but only about the Protestants, or there was religious teaching about the Catholic church. So when this came up as a young boy, there was always a block: "Oh, we don't know what happened." It was kind of taboo to talk about. I never could let go because I had to learn more about it, being curious. This was a whole lifetime … all these incidents like in the graveyard - stumbling on something else. Suddenly this came back: "Oh, they ended up in Gurs," or "This happened in Gurs." So this name always came up.

Gonnerman: People you would meet would mention it.

Trimpin: Right. And even then in the 1980s when I worked with the composer Conlon Nancarrow, who lived in Mexico City, one time he was starting to talk about being interned at the same camp. Of course, Nancarrow had fought with the Lincoln Brigade in Spain, and whoever survived fled into France and then they were interned. They couldn't get paperwork to go back to the United States. So these coincidences always came up. And I knew from quite some time as a young child, that I couldn't really talk or write about it. This visualization was much stronger to somehow express what it means when this name comes up. So always in the back of my mind I had to express this difference. Throughout the years since the mid-eighties and when Nancarrow talked about it, I was looking into what happened much more because by then there was way more literature available.

Then a few years ago I actually traveled to this place and through other coincidences…. Somebody was reading an article in a magazine and a journalist asked me, "What is your next project?" This was about four years ago. I said, "Well, hopefully this Gurs project will be next, but so far there's no commitment of funding, so I'm not sure yet, but I hope this will be the next project." Somebody on vacation in Greece reading the magazine realized this artist comes from this town where my mother was born but they fled in 1936. His whole family – his mother and father – were deported to Gurs, so he wrote back and asked if I would be interested. He had all this correspondence from this camp. So from coincidence to coincidence, all this kind of material came together and suddenly these friendships and collaboration were developing more and more in the last ten years.

Even last year when Lively Arts was putting *The Gurs Zyklus* in their program for the next year – for the year 2011 – Lively Arts got a phone call from somebody living in Menlo Park saying, "I was on this train to Gurs. I was in Gurs when I was ten years old." We immediately got in contact and this person, Manfred Wildmann, is now eighty years old. He also had sixteen drawings he made as a ten-year-old boy in this camp in Gurs

that survived. He only survived because he was under fourteen years old, and the younger kids got sent to an orphanage. That's how everything survived, but his parents and his brother all ended up in Auschwitz. They were in the internment camp two years and then they were sent to Auschwitz.

So, again, throughout these years, more and more material came together. Then Lively Arts was the only institution…. I was presenting this idea in New York with the organization Creative Capital, and only Lively Arts…. Jennifer Bilfield was there and she immediately focused and said Stanford might be interested in this. More than a year later, here we are and this will be premiered here next Saturday.

Gonnerman: It was not really optional, then, was it?

Trimpin: No. Throughout these years, certain instruments, certain kinds of sounds, I especially had in mind. The fire organ started many, many years ago. The sound itself is a very pleasant sound but then also it's fire. It could be an oven; it could be anything. This was a part of the idea. This instrument is definitely a part of it because it has certain associations. A flame could be a very warm, welcome object, but here it's both: it's warm and horrific. So many other parts in the piece are dealing with these issues. Nancarrow's biggest complaint was being buried in sand for weeks and the rain and the mud and everything. Water was the worse enemy. In the winter months there was only mud and rain and you hardly could walk. For the piece, water was an important issue.

Gonnerman: So you have a water organ and a fire organ.

Trimpin: Right. Water is used to make sound. There's fire. But the water is also…. When I talked before about creating water drips, I could also, instead of playing a percussion sound with water, like *dum-de-dum-de-dum*, when it drips down, you can also spell names with water. Part of the piece, which I installed last year in Germany, and last year was the 70th commemoration day of the train ride on the 22nd of October, 1940, when over 7,000 people were sent in one train convoy to Gurs.

The town of Breisach commissioned me to do this water-dripping piece because again, as a young boy, it was important for me to decipher, being curious. So I did this piece where water is dripping down but it's spelling names, it's spelling letters, so all the victims from these towns were spelled with water. Sometimes it's a little bit complicated to describe, but if you want to spell an *h*, for example, you have eight water valves up there and you start dripping number one and number eight so there's some water coming down, but then you turn all of them on very shortly and you have the bar formed on it. It's like a dot matrix printer. You basically print a letter not on paper, just with water. So you can actually see how a letter is falling down. Then you hear it – the impact of the water falling into the water.

In Breisach last year, I had an installation called *Pour Crevé*. That's a French word. It's hard to translate it: to have an awful death; to die very brutally. The philosopher Hannah Arendt was interned in Gurs as well. She was asked once by a journalist, "What do you

think was the reason you were sent to Gurs?" She answered, "*Pour crevé*," – to die a miserable death. I called this piece *Pour Crevé* and it was installed for a week in this town. Young people came and they were furious: "What is dripping here?" First, you don't even see there are actually letters falling down. Slowly they learned and had to decipher this process and asked, "What are these names?" "Where are they coming from?" This will also be the same dripping mechanism that will be used in the piece at the last. It's one of the end pieces.

I always have to say that this piece is also in collaboration with Rinde Eckert. Rinde and I are collaborating on this whole piece. It's a collaboration. At the end, you actually see the names falling down of the victims in these letters – of the Rosenberg family and the Wildmann family. And when the water falls down, originally it was planned to fall on hot, heated metal plates so the impact of the water would create steam. Then we would use old slides from the victims and you would project on the steam so the pictures of the victims would also evaporate. Unfortunately, we cannot use fire. Bunsen burners were supposed to heat these plates, but since we are on a stage, there are certain restrictions, so we might have to use some kind of a hazer to create this kind of steam image-like haze to actually have the pictures projected on the haze.

Gonnerman: You're still making it up here.

Trimpin: Right. And that's always a great way to work. Nothing is set. Of course, there are certain things that are definitely set. There's a script. Rinde was working on the script. And through our meetings, on numerous times we worked out the sequence of the piece. But each segment has a specific kind of meaning in terms of what sound is used and how the sound is moving around.

Nancarrow told me once that he went to Spain because slowly all the intellectuals were killed. In 1938, Frederico Garcia Lorca suddenly was dead, and this was his kind of motivation to go there to fight against fascism. Throughout this research, I tried to get some poems from Lorca built in, but the Lorca estate is very…. It's very difficult to get any permission to recite or to use any of Lorca's poems. But then I learned that the secret code to get rid of Lorca – to kill him – was from one general to another general sent via Morse code, and the secret code was "Give him coffee – plenty coffee." This was the signal for "Let's get rid of him." I actually use Morse code. It's kind of like when I was a kid hearing Morse code from short-wave radio stations. I had to learn Morse code because I couldn't stand listening to something that I knew was in code. What does it mean? So as a very young kid I actually learned it. Everybody thought, What a weird guy; why is he learning Morse code? But now, like *da-da-di-di-di-di-chi-da-da-di*, I transformed this information. Also, Lorca's favorite instrument was the castanet, and so there are eight castanets and they play *da-da-di-dum-di-dum-dum-di-dum-dum*. They play through the room the whole "Give him coffee – plenty coffee," like the Morse code.

So each part of the piece is always related to whatever happened. It's not something you build in because it looks cool or it's trendy or it's whatever hype. Every piece, and in working with Rinde, we went through all of these stages: what would fit there? Also, the

music of Nancarrow will be used. Nothing was really changed. Everything is 100 percent Nancarrow's composition, but there might be certain voices that are separated so they're playing on different instruments in different locations. Everything is pure acoustics except for two teeter-totters like two loudspeakers running up and down a track. When I was traveling to Gurs, one letter was describing the twelve cities they went through like Mulhouse, Lyons, Besançon, and Toulouse and all these other places, so I made recordings at each station, like track recordings, because I followed exactly the same route the train took seventy years ago. I did all these recordings but then I thought, somehow these recordings have to be presented in a way so the audience would think that a train is passing by, so the sound will actually travel on these tracks. You get these kinds of acoustical movements – simulated in the theater.

When I arrived in Gurs, there's not much of a memorial place but there were these old-growth trees that I knew had been there since at least seventy years. They had these incredible colors – incredible pink, blue, orange parts of the bark because of the oxidation of the wetness. When something is green like moss, it turns into a purple moss. It was just incredible, these colors. So I took pictures of parts of the bark and this will now be used.

Another project that I have not yet mentioned is this year-long residency here at Stanford, especially in the last quarter, starting in January, working with students on this project – working on ideas – how to translate this bark from a visceral image into a musical image so you can…. Like a player-piano roll, it's a very graphical kind of notation and this will be used, using the bark from Gurs, so there's a musical part developing out of this image out of this bark.

In all these projects with the teeter-totter, with the rolling loudspeaker, with the cameras, with all these different things, with the sculpture department we were working on the water harp and the dripping devices, this was all, again, a collaboration with the students here which, for me, was very important to be exposed to other minds, to other groups, especially young people. Usually I'm just working on my own. I don't have any assistants, usually. I just like working totally quietly – no music, nothing. It's great to be in an environment for a while to be working with different minds, different ideas. This definitely made it much more complete – the whole "Zyklus." "Zyklus" means cycle, and everything was a cycle, even the internment. Still today we have internments. We're still going through these cycles. We never learn anything.

Gonnerman: I can feel your excitement about this, but I also feel your concern, not only about whether or not we are able to learn from the past but also, are we remembering the past? Is that a motivating force for you in this – to commemorate, to remember, to recreate a place, an experience?

Trimpin: It was definitely a healing process for me. Before, it was very hard to talk, to get in a conversation, but through this way, I approach it from a different way and have this communication and these developing friendships, and it happened only through this project. It wouldn't have happened otherwise, and that, again, is the cycle that has to

come back. This kind of healing process was very important for me, being German, having this baggage, having it happen in your own culture, in your own village. It was very important to go through this process.

DeMarinis: I don't mean to draw us too far away, but in going from these marvelous, wonderful sculptures that make sound to a spectacle that has a beginning and an end, a proscenium theater, and the way the sound works – so many of your pieces you can move around and just marvel at them. Here, you're taking it into the realm of the time-based spectacle. It's going to be a presentation with performers who will presumably have some amplification. How do you think about blending these different sounds together in the time and space of the theatrical spectacle? How do you arrange it?

Trimpin: Well, it's always difficult, let's say, in a commercial environment in this way because it is artificial. You create a certain kind of light to create a certain kind of scene, but that's the only way you can present this kind of work. Do you mean from this perspective?

DeMarinis: How do you actually work with using those kinds of sounds in that kind of space? How do you mix those different sounds that are spread out all over the place – very unlike, let's say, an orchestra in a pit with a group of singers who rehearse very tightly with that. You have these kinds of robotic, almost, things that are doing something and you have a live performer. How do you think about blending those different kinds of sounds together?

Trimpin: Well, there are four vocalists as well – soprano voices – and they are all part of a soundscape. They will also, of course, recite parts of the letters. They will sing. They will be a part of this whole sound environment. And the interesting part right now actually starts next week on Monday when the whole company and everybody is here. Then we have a whole week to explore the space – exploring what we can do in terms of what kind of visual images or visualizations could actually be added to this piece on stage, because we are limited in certain ways as to what can be done in terms of certain ways to get things like the steam going. But then there are other aspects we explore in using this space because all over this space there are different groups of instruments. There are ninety-six recorder flutes hanging around. They are bundled together, but they are creating this kind of soundscape. Nobody knows yet how it will sound. [Laughter] We will know on Monday – starting rehearsal on Monday – and everybody will learn through this process how to work together in this short period of time.

When I was asking for the theater space at Stanford, Dinkelspiel was the usual venue, and we walked in there and said, "Oh no, this wouldn't work." Then there was this alternative, and it is way better because here we also have way more time to explore the space, experiment. The sad part is always that when you go somewhere and install and have a performance, you have about three days or two days you are performing and then you are gone. In any kind of sound installation, you have to learn the acoustic requirements somehow. You have to be in the space, you have to work with the

acoustics, and this takes times to get there. But then all these voices – I see it more as voices from the different instruments coming together, and I don't know yet.

Gonnerman: We'll all find out when we're there on the 14th.
Let's take some questions and comments to move the discussion along.

Question from the Audience: Since most of the German Jews were deported to Gurs, was the cemetery and your village located near Baden?

Trimpin: Yes, on the Rhine River on the Swiss and French…
It's closer to Basel. There were only a few Jewish villages, like Breisach, Freiburg, Sulzburg, and Kirchen, and that's where I grew up.

Question from the Audience: How old were you when you discovered the cemetery? Prior to that, you were not aware of the Jews living there. Is that right?

Trimpin: When I went to fourth grade, I remember the history books – and this was 1958-1959 – the pages of the history books were gone from 1933 on. They had to rip them out because no books were printed at this time, and even in my first three grades, we were writing on slates. There was no paper so we were writing on slates. Then in the third grade, we got paper but then in some history books after 1933 the pages were missing. Nobody talked about or mentioned the Holocaust, and this only came in the mid-sixties more in the public discussion and in schools and in educational facilities. Before, it was a complete taboo. When I talked to American friends and asked about internment of the Japanese, nobody knew this in the sixties or seventies. Of course, this cannot be compared with what happened in Germany, but again, somehow this was completely repressed. Even in France, in the town of Gurs, there was never anything mentioned until … and still today they are reluctant to talk about it. And the German cities had to lease the cemetery in Gurs to keep it in shape. The French wouldn't even take care of the cemetery.

Question from the Audience: Are there some other instruments that you've revised for the program?

Trimpin: Part of the fire organ will be accompanied by some reeds. The fire organ has the very same sound structure as the human voice. It's also limited to about a three- to three and a half-octave range. You really can feel the lower tones like a vibration. You see the flame and you feel the warmth at the same time that you can feel the vibration. There will be about twelve units of some reed from pump organs that will be used to create another layer of this acoustical environment. Sometimes you don't know where the sound is coming from because they might be played together simultaneously or they are sometimes a few milliseconds apart, so you create these other kinds of movements. So there also is in this piece a kind of a harmonium up on the balcony and, as I mentioned, the recorder flutes. Everything is acoustically generated except for the rotating loudspeakers. Those are the only electronic or amplified instruments. Nothing else is amplified. Everything is pure, and there are no musicians – not one musician. All

the instruments are making their sounds through the mechanical apparatus, but everything, of course, is played from a laptop. All the compositions and everything is programmed like the images, the projections – everything comes from a laptop. So there is, of course, the newest technology used, but all the sounds you will hear actually come from a mechanical instrument. Air is used, water is used, fire is used, and these are the elements of making the sound.

Gonnerman: Is it important to you to have acoustic music because of the vibration – the experience of feeling it with your body?

Trimpin: Well, when the record player was introduced in the 1930s, the whole industry of building mechanical instruments collapsed. Since then, nothing has been produced or created. I always felt that acoustical instruments have a different kind of impact on your perception. Even when I worked on the guitar piece – and this was my first piece after the shortwave radio using amplification – I was surprised at the first moment: Wow, there are hums; why is there a hum? In nature, there is no hum. So how to get rid of the hum, like an interference? Is there bad engineering, or why is the industry not interested in getting rid of hums? [Laughter]

DeMarinis: Why shouldn't we have more hums? [Laughter]

Trimpin: It's the bad hums that bother me because when it's absolutely quiet, you hear this *zzzzzzzzzz* – these 60 hertz kind of bobbles that …

DeMarinis: My favorite sound. [Laugher]

Trimpin: That experience was quite interesting – that we are accepting these sounds like loud vacuum cleaners. Why do we have to vacuum with this painful sound? But then I use vacuums to make other sounds.

Question from the Audience: Do you want to have this piece performed again or are you OK with the possibility that we'll hear it once?

Trimpin: No, from the beginning there was the idea that it cannot be done just once. But the whole concept, also from the beginning, was that the piece was designed and the concept was made so it can also be installed in a museum or in a gallery where people are interactive to all the different elements of the installation – of the musical instruments. They can touch, they can do certain things to generate certain ways to get this, being curious: How can we decipher this and what is this all about? But it will be in Seattle in May of next year. The performing arts organization there will have it on their program. Then, of course, the main idea is to get this to Germany because it has to go over there. But Stanford took the risk. Stanford was the only institution that actually took the risk, and as soon as it's performed here then probably other places will want to have it as well. But you always have to get the stand first and then, when this is accepted, suddenly there is more interest. That's usually how it works.

Gonnerman: You know, there's a humanist in the German and languages department here, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has written quite a lot about what is essential in the humanities is riskful thinking – to do exactly what we're doing here. I will put Jenny on the spot because Jenny Bilfield has taken this risk. You went, you heard the talk, and you were the only one who showed interest. I'm wondering why. Why take this risk?

Jennifer Bilfield: Because it had to happen. There was just an absolute and total inevitability that this project had to happen and had to happen at Stanford because of the way this community supports new work. There are very few places that really live and breathe the notion of the mind disciplines. It's also such an essential part of Trimpin's life and story. At the root of all great art there is such a powerful point of connection that uses a personal journey and a personal experience to the right work in such a powerful way. So I couldn't imagine any other environment that would appreciate the qualities of imagination and poignancy in such a fertile way. In fact, the students and the faculty here have been so thoroughly engaged so, even more than I'd hoped we would find, this has materialized. So this is a project that is loved and supported and has been embraced by this community in a way that is very rare. I'm grateful that from the week that I took, that Lively Arts took, the investment, and everybody's time, that we have the great pleasure of seeing this work to fruition.

Gonnerman: I think we should all applaud riskful thinking. [Applause]
We have time for a few more questions.

Question from the Audience: Can you use any other venue in Seattle or is it always in Paul Allen's Pavilion? [Laughter]

Trimpin: Well, logistically you'd like to move these instruments around and find a certain venue to install them. It's not to simple. Also, financially, it's quite expensive to move an installation like this around when you have to house four, five, six people who are part of the whole collaboration. So the logistic and financial parts are the most difficult ones. There are a lot of different institutions who would probably be very interested in it, but just financially, it would probably be impossible for them to do this.

Gonnerman: When you decided to come to the United States, did you think about the ways in which art is funded by the government in Germany and not funded by the government here?

Trimpin: Well, everybody actually asked me, Why are you moving to a place where…. As an example, the city of Vienna spends culturally more money than the whole United States spends, like the NEA. Over there, it's also drying up, of course. They are also more and more cutting the arts as well. But there was still always more support and funding in Europe. I think in our field, it's a different group of artists. When there is a certain kind of festival about kinetic artwork, there's a whole different community. We are also working closer together than other artists' groups. Composers never talk to each other, or they don't work with each other in the same way that the people do who are in our field.

DeMarinis: Yes, there's a community here.

Trimpin: Right, and especially for this artwork, there is actually some funding still available because it's art and technology so it's always like a bridge – the educational part could be dedicated in there somehow financially as well.

DeMarinis: It's somewhat constrained by area of the country, but the West Coast, and the Bay Area in particular, has a lot of private funding. There are a lot of people who philanthropically support artists and there are grants for artists on the order that just don't exist in Europe, where everything is centralized with the government. So there are opportunities. I think, unfortunately, there are large parts of the country where that doesn't exist, and that's where a program by the government, like the NEA, really was able to step in and support arts happening in other areas: the South, the Midwest, and so on.

Question from the Audience: To do something one time – to work and create this and then it's over: is there a process of mourning, a sense of loss?

Trimpin: The idea was also that this kind of piece and information and subject, whatever it is, has to move on. It has to be brought more into … especially for the younger generation. In Germany, for example, the younger generation is very numb when they see images from concentration camps. They always would say, OK, that's our grandfathers' problem; we have nothing to do with this. But when they are exposed to some of the interactive parts (when you go in to this installation you can actually use your iPhone to activate certain kinds of parts), the younger generation is already then more familiar, using their kinds of tools, to get this information. It depends on what group of people you are approaching.

Gonnerman: You expect that it will continue so you don't have a sense of loss; you have a sense of expectation.

Trimpin: Right.

Gonnerman: My understanding is that on Friday the 13th at noon you will be showing people around the stage, which is a tremendous opportunity. So if you're able to come and join us for that, you can see how the pieces fit together and watch problems be solved even on that day, I'm sure. Then there's the performance the following day, Saturday. We're very grateful to both of you for being here in this conversation tonight and we look forward to seeing all of you again for the performance. Good night. [Applause]

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Trimpin, **Artist in Residence at Stanford**
Trimpin is a Seattle-based kinetic sculptor, sound artist, musician, composer, and inventor. A recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" Award, he has combined these varied disciplines into his extensive body of work since the 1970s. His kinetic sculpture installations often include the production of sound through the inclusion of mechanically or computer-driven instruments or entirely new sound sources. As a Stanford artist-in-residence this year, Trimpin collaborates with students, faculty and the campus community in preparation for his new work, *The Gurs Zyklus*.

Paul DeMarinis, Professor, Department of Art & Art History, Stanford University
A professor of art and intermedia studies at Stanford, Paul DeMarinis has been making noises with wires, batteries and household appliances since the age of four. His work poses questions about the world we have created and explores the ways technology has woven itself into our personal relationships, our understanding of the physical universe, and our ideas about possible futures. A new book about his work, *Paul DeMarinis: Buried in Noise*, has just been published by Kehrer Verlag.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

For information about Peter Esmonde's *Trimpin: The Sound of Invention* (Participant Observer, 2009), visit http://www.trimpinmovie.com .

Comments?
We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu

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