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Proximity to the Notion of Fusion

An Interview with Alex Mincek and Eric Wubbels of the Wet Ink Ensemble

Ryan Dohoney

The Wet Ink Ensemble is a composer/performer collective based in New York City. Founded in 1998, the group has become one of the most prominent new music ensembles in the USA. Its current line-up features a group of core composers/performers (Alex Mincek, Eric Wubbels, Kate Soper, and Sam Pluta) as well as a number of New York's most accomplished musicians. In addition to presenting their own music, they have devoted themselves to the performance of European composers little known in the USA. They have championed the work of Peter Ablinger, Mathias Spahlinger, Beat Furrer as well as recorded the music of Swiss composer Katharina Rosenberger.

Alex Mincek is co-founder and current artistic director of Wet Ink.¹ He also serves as the group's saxophonist and bass clarinetist. His music is characterized by unique timbres, dynamic textures and various forms of repetition. Mincek's music has been performed at many major music festivals, including the Strasbourg Musica Festival, Voix Nouvelles at the Abbaye de Royaumont, Festival des Musiques Démesurées, the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt (IMD), the Contempuls Festival in Prague, and the Ostrava New Music Days. Mincek's collaborators include Les Percussions de Strasbourg, Ensemble Cairn, Orchestra of the SEM Ensemble, the Janacek Philharmonic, Talea Ensemble, and the Jack Quartet.

Eric Wubbels currently serves as the executive director of Wet Ink and is also the group's pianist.² His music is often rhapsodic and ecstatic with a focus on the physicality of performance and the collective action of music making. His music has been played by Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin, International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), Yarn/Wire, Left Coast Chamber Ensemble, Manabe/Moriyama Duo (Japan), and The Knights String Orchestra. He is a Fall 2011 MacDowell Colony fellow. The interview took place on July 12, 2011 on a video conference call between Portland, Oregon and New York City. In our wide-ranging conversation we discussed their similar yet divergent musical aesthetics, approaches to musical form, and uses of repetition in non-minimalist music. We also discussed their work with Wet Ink more broadly and the kinds of collaboration it affords in today's new music environment.

Ryan Dohoney: My idea for this conversation came from an initial feeling that your music was very similar, but was complicated with a more recent intuition that it's completely different. What do you think you have in common with one another and how do you perceive the differences?

Eric Wubbels: The first time I heard a piece of Alex's was in 2003 and I had just moved to New York City. I ended up involved with Wet Ink in the first place because it was one of the first times I had encountered a music that I wished had existed. It confirmed something I had already been interested in and had

thought about, but had heard only in little moments here and there. It was exciting to run into it in a form that was successful in an artistic and social way. Over the years of being associated with the group and with Alex, I've definitely been influenced by the things he and others have been working on. In the end though, each of us has different goals in what we want to do. The things we have in common are more related to the style, language, or surface of our music.

Alex Mincek: We both share a strong sense of harmony, meaning that we're interested in the possibilities of combining instruments designed to resonate. That's something we share, which may seem obvious. In today's fragmented new music world, that's not such an obvious similarity to have. Another thing we share is a certain interest in formal unfolding, which is also one of our biggest differences. You could say we think of form as organically leading from one thing to the next, or abruptly switching from one thing to another, rather than thinking of it in a more singularly monolithic, static way. Our differences are in how we navigate those forms and combine instruments. The way in which our materials evolve is the biggest difference between us.

RD: Alex, how would you describe Eric's approach to form?

AM: Over the pieces I know best, it's changed. Pieces like *Shiverer* [for flute and piano] and something more recent like *This is This is This is* [for two alto saxophones and prepared piano] have similarities but stark differences. Some of Eric's earlier music is more process-based with incremental growth in an additive way with an organic expansion. More recent works aren't throwing the organic process away but are containing it with a more boxy approach.

RD: Eric, how would you describe Alex's approach to form?

EW: He seems to think about form as a dialectic between organic and mechanical material explored with different kinds of repetition. Alex mentioned “unfolding” as a formal strategy that isn’t taken for granted anymore. One of the things I like most about Alex’s music is the capacity for real surprise.

AM: This maybe gets to a difference of approach but a similarity of surface. When I approach form I might find myself writing a smooth transition from one block that slowly mutates to another. Once I notice that this type of transition is banal, I might split the transition into many small parts that each

1 or 2
A. Sx.
in Eb

Prepared
Pno.

A. Sx.

Pno.

[39x] $\text{♩} = 144$ 160 [low Bb - C]

[21x] $\text{♩} = 126$ 132 [C5 \sim]

[2x] [C5 \sim]

[30x] *air*

15^{ma} p very airy, blended w/ Pno.

[19x] *secco; little pitch*

[11x] f mf f mf

[39x] ff sffz ff f

[30x] ff p ff ff ff

ff on 30x

loop, so that the transitional function is completely annihilated by repetition. But it still functions as a transition far back in one's perception. It's a game I play. My impression is that Eric is thinking of those things less playfully from the start. I start with a particular sound and then realize various ways that sound functions within the form. I then start adding and playing with all of the various functions. It's a difference of approach. I think sometimes our sound worlds end up sounding pretty close, even though we each have our own language.

RD: You're both talking about repetition. Alex, you seem to break up form with repetition for a more discontinuous surface. Eric seems to use repetition to create a massive amount of energy that breaks through form. It's creating form for him and it breaks it down for you, Alex.

AM: Well, yes and no. First, the uses of repetition I have mentioned thus far only narrowly account for all of the ways repetition is used in my music. Next, every piece creates a form. For me, breaking down familiar formal devices and then reconstructing them is the most authentic way of creating something truly unique, because it requires an understanding and constant dialogue with the ideas you are trying to improve upon or supplant. The absence of this type of dialogue leads to many musical versions of reinventing the wheel.

RD: You describe your approach to form in opposition to a static ideal, and it seems contrary to how we think about repetition in minimalism or some other similar style. You want it to have an affect that it otherwise wouldn't.

AM: Eric and I were recently discussing Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* and I was attracted to how he took a handicap of speech and, by using a very directional process, smoothed it out. I find my affection for old forms at times rewarding, but at other times it feels like a handicap. Repetition helps re-channel these affections. For example, sometimes I write clearly unfolding forms which repetition makes more static. There's a contradiction that I'm using repetition to mediate.

RD: I was interested in your use of the term "organic." What is organic about your forms?

AM: I usually don't start with forms but with gestures. For me, organic gestures appear or disappear and seamlessly grow smoothly between unrecognizable points such that you can't perceive any single points of change. Organicism is something where structural points are hidden but you know that something has happened. You know that there's a starting point and other components, but you can't tell where they are. The word I use for it is "smooth" music, versus mechanical music where you can find every point of change. It's very striated and perforated.

EW: A piece like *Shiverer* is pretty concerned with an organic metaphor. It's a form of repetition in which each time the performers pass through the material it changes in some way, step by step. That's the only time I've used that formal or gestural strategy. In terms of organicism as a model for devel-

opment, that's not my go-to strategy, although I may be more inclined to use a transition in which things more clearly morph from one thing to another on a local level. In terms of using repetition as a structure, in a piece like *Viola Quartet*, it's more of a Beethovenian idea of unifying the very local detail with the largest structure. That's very much the strategy there. You have repetition in terms of tremolos and repeated notes at the absolute micro level and then every phrase, every system is an articulated repeat. Then the entire piece is basically a large AA' form. It tries to unify the different time scales with an articulation of pulsed time scales.

RD: How do each of you go about notating these repetitions? I've seen you each use a modular style in which each block is marked off by repeat signs with the number of repeats indicated above the staff, as in Morton Feldman's late pieces. How do performers respond to your various ways of indicating repetitions?

AM: One thing I've noticed as a performer and composer, both in performing my work and handing it off to others, is that writing out repetitions versus signifying them within a repetitive loop elicits completely different reactions even if it's, theoretically, the exact same thing. That influences how I notate music. Sometimes there's music that on larger formal levels I won't mark off with repeat signs. I'll just write out the whole of the music. Performers and people perusing the scores don't perceive that things are being repeated. However, when I do the exact same thing within the piece at the same structure level, but with a loop—it jumps out at them. The way you choose to mark the structural repetitions in a piece does have a relationship to how people perceive it and interpret it. I use both to create difference within the redundancy of repeating things. As a performer, if I'm playing something I just want to see what I have to play, yet sometimes that's tedious. I'd rather see the music, even though I know I'm playing the same thing over and over again. I approach the exact same sound with different ways of writing it down for the sake of contrast.

RD: How do those differences result in a different realization?

AM: This gets into a deeper subject—the idea of difference and repetition as in Gilles Deleuze's philosophy.³ Some repetitions are obvious. Others are not. Sometimes the composite textures in my music obscure the repetitions of individual parts. As the composer, I know when something is looped and when something isn't. However, for the listener it is perhaps not always so easy to identify certain types of repetition. To me, it's interesting then to see how people judge the appearance of the non-looped repetitions while not even realizing that it's simply a loop within in a complex texture, rendered with different notation. When I do the same music in looped form, the repetitions are visually obvious and lead people to ask why I write all this looped music and yet they don't realize that what came before was also repetition, only notated differently. We're talking about two different things—what the music is versus what people looking at it judge it by. The people privy to the score or

the performer's part do have strong opinions on how repetitions are notated. It has a lot to do with people's values in relation to what people might perceive as laziness. "This is just an easy way to generate more music. You put something between these beams and there you have it." I think there's greater value to having written it out. They're judged differently even though they sound the same.

RD: I was feeling something like this when listening to your "String Quartet #3." Does a performer interpret a loop as a sort of mechanical cycle, whereas he might interpret the repetitions differently each time if each repetition were written out?

AM: Yes, when something has been written out, the performer approaches it more organically—it's something to move through instead of overcome. They're buoyant with it. They shape moments rather than merely replicate them. When you get someone in a loop, they often feel stuck. It's something to be overcome.

EW: Isn't that a temporal thing, in the way that you approach it psychologically when you're playing? If you don't see the bar?

AM: It's a psychological relationship to time. Even though the written out version and the looped version might last the same

amount of time, it's something that needs to be overcome because it's visually within the repeat signs. I usually use that type of loop in transitional music where the music that I'm obscuring is forward-moving music. I turn it into its exact opposite. I turn it into the most claustrophobic kind of repetition. While with more monolithic repetition, I'll write it all out even though it might be various lengths of looping; it's not transitional. There's also the sense of polyphony in these things, which is a notational problem, too. If you have things looping in different orbits you have to write it all out, you can't use the loops just because of the way things synchronize. You mentioned the third string quartet: When everyone is doing something together, I can use repeats. When four people are looping in different phases I have to write it all out so there's a sense of shared time.

RD: Eric, what's your approach to notating repetition?

EW: Alex and I end up doing a lot of similar things on the page but we have very different ideas about what it is and what it feels like, the kind of experience it provides, and what it means. To get back to the difference between a page of music repeating versus one little box, I think it does have something

Alex Mincek, "String Quartet #3" (excerpt). © Alex Mincek (unpublished)

to do psychologically as a performer with your conception of what the present cognitive task is. When you see it in that little box, you know that this is my job, just this little thing. It shrinks the moment of attention to a focused point.

AM: Or turns it off.

EW: Or turns it off, but if you have something that is extremely difficult, very short, and repeated a number of times that is difficult to count, then the psychological effect for the performer is that you can't really think about what's coming next because you have to focus so much on the task at hand. That's something I've found to be a rewarding experience. My piece *This is This is This is* is an étude in being able to feel that way. That piece uses extended repetition, with individual loops repeated 39 or 45 or up to 77 times. It's something I haven't done before or since. It comes directly out of this band Orthrelm, which is one of Mick Barr's projects, a guitar and drums duo with Josh Blair. It's a band Alex turned me on to. They have one album ["OV"] that's 45 minutes long and it consists of loops, most of which are repeated for two minutes or so at a time. The loops themselves are between half a second and two seconds in duration. They might repeat something 214 times before going on. That's a different psychological experience and one that I've always enjoyed in minimalism, but you almost don't want to say it out loud because it's become co-opted by a certain New Age-thing with a connection between concentration and focus on the one hand and trance on the other. They are both by-products of repetition and very close together. I like the possibility of switching back and forth between those particular modes of listening and experiencing music. I wanted to investigate it a bit more.

AM: I think you really hit the exact point where our music is the most different in terms of repetitions. We're both extremely sensitive to how much something repeats based on what the material means to the instrumentalist, what it means to the listener, and what it means structurally to the piece. We're both into that but our goals are completely different. Mine is to always generate something that repeats beyond what can be associated with other familiar uses of repetition. For example I try to avoid the short structural and long formal repetitions of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, but I also want to avoid the repetitions that could be considered trance-, ritual- or folk-based. I'm trying to find something in between. It must be too long to be the type of repetition in Beethoven, but not enough to cross the boundary into a hypnotic minimalism or some kind of chant-like music. I want to find the length that exists inbetween.

RD: I wouldn't immediately associate your music with ritual, but do think about Eric's in those terms somewhat. Alex, your music breaks up one's attention. If I find myself grooving on something I know it's not going to stick around very long. You're going to knock me out of it. But Eric's repetition pushes me along to something more absorbing.

EW: A word like "trance" falls into the category of things that I want to draw from, but I want to reject a lot of the baggage that goes along with it in a musical context.

RD: Both of you have talked a lot about cognition and attention, and Eric you even described a unit of repetition as a "cognitive task." Alex, you've described events as physical gestures, not only ideas. How does the physical aspect of your music play into what we've been talking about?

AM: Physical gesture is the kernel of everything, creating an interconnected network between instruments that produces different ways of sharing. I want them to come together and unify while also retaining some kind of individuality. Once you start seeking those things you find a richness both of shared space and individual space that I find great. I tend to think about it as the task of doing something and the task of sounding—there's a physical action and a sound that comes out of it. For two different instruments you have to decide what the point of connection is. If I want two instruments to sound the same, there might be drastic physical tasks that are taken by each instrumentalist to share a space of sounding. Vice versa, I might want people to do the same thing and the sonic results will be drastically different. This is constantly the conversation that's going on: how people can intersect, what space is going to be shared at a given time, the physical price paid for sharing that space, and the reward for that effort. I'm interested in choosing the point of concentration for a moment and how people are going to get there. This is what I'm most focused on when beginning a piece—those moments when it's more about sound or more about behavior. These things go through permutations in a piece. It's directly related to performing our own music.

EW: What Alex said starts from a premise that a lot of people wouldn't necessarily accept, be aware of, or value whatsoever: the idea that an instrument is not bound to a historical sonic conception but rather has a broader field of possibility. There's this idea that when you work with a group of instruments you're creating a new set of metaphorical instruments based on the interaction between them. There are passages in Ligeti's *Hamburgisches Konzert* where the horn is playing very unidiomatic music, but it's music that would be very idiomatic to the violin. It's as if the horn is trying to be a violin in this bizarre way. I've found this to be a very productive spur to creativity for individual instruments or an ensemble context. I'm a little less of a dialectical thinker than Alex is in exploring these oppositional qualities; rather I'd like to find just one field. The building block of what I focus on is unison, both rhythmically and pitch-wise. Any time you're working with a heterogeneous timbral situation, I want to find interesting ways of creating unisons, which means examining instruments physically, gesturally, from their technique, so you can find ways of matching them, find intersections in space. Anytime I'm starting out on a piece I sit down with a player and try to find a lot of idiomatic gestures for their instrument. So if it's a saxophone I'll get together with someone and work out these things that are very easy to play, that sound great, that make the instrument really resonate and then I'll try to translate them to another instrument. Like you're making a "bad copy" of them. So you put those two things together and you get this comparison that's illuminating. This is what Peter Ablinger's

Voices and Piano is all about. What is the voice and what does making a reduced “copy” of it for the piano shed light on, both itself and when it’s matched together? It becomes this other thing.

AM: Unison assumes there’s a distinction between the one and the many, that people can perceive all the parts versus the combination of the parts. We’re always going in and out of focus, with things signifying collections of parts or singularities—even though that’s never true. Things are always some kind of collection. It’s a question of perceptual proximity to the notion of fusion.

RD: This brings me to your idea of transcendentalism in your work, Eric—a pushing forward into something new as a unity or as a kind of machine, a materialist transcendence. Both of you are interested in ensembles that don’t disguise the fact that they are collections of individuals. You’re grounding music in an experience of working parts built from gestures, built on the bodies of performers. That’s something that differentiates your notion of transcendence from something more ideologically retrograde. You talk about the effects you want lying somewhere between classical form and ritualistic trance. You’re not relying on some ethereal notion of “the work”—we hear/see the machinery working in front of us. It doesn’t hide the labor involved.

EW: That’s so present in the sound, and it’s something that has turned some people off. They don’t understand what all the hysteria is about. To me the hysteria is about the fact that it takes a certain amount of exertion to burn off whatever sense of everyday life there might be and to set it apart in some way and say it’s about something slightly different. I hate these words, but ritual at least as it pertains to the concert experience is something culturally valuable since we have so few other rituals at this point. It can be something special. As a performer, I’ve had peak life experiences participating in that. I think it has to do with the collective attention, focus, and physical exertion on the part of the performers. We find it more seldom outside of that situation.

AM: It’s weird to be old enough now to see a few actual waves of interest within New York. When I first got to New York, it was all about getting out of the concert hall. But I agree with Eric that I’d like to get back in it. When I got to New York, there used to be nothing more dreadful than having to sit in a seat and watch someone for two hours. Now that seems like a very attractive idea. There’s a kind of focus and attention that I don’t find as confining as others in the recent past have.

EW: There’s still baggage that goes along with the concert situation that you can take or leave, but if what’s special about that is that particular social experience, I’ll fight for it. It’s a valuable one.

RD: Perhaps you can talk about the kinds of focus and attention that you bring to the concert situation. What demands are you making on performers, especially as performers of each other’s music?

AM: It’s a difficult question. There’s a sense of viewing the per-

former as an interchangeable part that can be very useful and also has extreme limitations. On the other side, one might treat every instrument as an individual personality with very specific sets of abilities. I’m constantly mingling these two concepts. If I’m writing for a specific ensemble that I don’t know at all, I try to get to know them as best I can to get to the more individual side of what can be done on each instrument. Working with my own group, we know each other quite well and it’s more about writing for individual players, not an abstract idea. I’m not writing for the piano or the flute, I’m writing for Eric Wubbel and Erin Loesser [the flutist in Wet Ink]. When I first started Wet Ink with Sam Hilmer a long time ago, I definitely thought of it as this kind of Duke Ellington approach to composition—not writing for instruments, but writing for the people. Writing for Johnny Hodges instead of writing for the saxophone.

RD: So how do you go about that? How do you write for Eric?

AM: It doesn’t always mean a translation into the sound of the instrument. It could mean a dedication to a concept. When I write for Eric, even though he’s a ferocious technician, I don’t feel a need to convert him to the music or satisfy some craving for a certain type of music. There’s a dedication he has to doing challenging things that have a very subtle result. He gets that and knows why they’re happening. I might be less inclined to write in that way for another instrumentalist in the same situation. That runs across all the instrumentalists in the group, not only knowing what they can do, which is the first step, but knowing their motivations and boundaries of interest.

EW: When I go from this situation with Wet Ink to working with another group, what’s clear is that there’s an implicit trust that we have as a group now. When any of us writes for the group there’s a baseline of goodwill.

AM: There’s also this idea that people want something new and that we as composers want to find something new as well, but there’s a catch—if you try something new and it doesn’t work, a performer won’t take you seriously. When working with people you know, with trust, if there are things that don’t work, it’s not an indictment. It’s something that needs to be adjusted because they were trying something. It’s a hard relationship to have with people who don’t know you well because they might think you don’t know what you’re doing. I’m probably guilty of that when I work with composers, I don’t know.

EW: It allows you to get past the first draft of an idea, whether it’s a large-scale ideal or a very technical idea. That allows you to take risks and it mitigates the sense that you have to be risk-averse and do the same thing that you’ve always done because you know that it works when you’re fulfilling a commission. Otherwise you won’t get work. There’s this laboratory aspect to it that is extremely productive. I can call up any of these folks any given week and meet for an hour and a half and play around with some stuff and they’re happy to do it, we have a great time and I find out all these things that I couldn’t have imagined would work just sitting here at my desk.

AM: I mentioned that it’s important to be sensitive to any performance situation and the one we’re talking about regarding

our own group is the one we find most attractive. But more and more, I find that I'm writing for ensembles that I have very little personal history with and there's something really attractive about that as well. If you have both, you can really get into each. The danger is really only having one, because you're limiting yourself. Having the Wet Ink situation where we're working closely with one another has also oddly had this positive effect on that more abstract level of contact.

EW: The institutional forces on aesthetics are so strong, though. Obviously, there's something so valuable about our particular situation, which is why we continue to invest time and effort in helping each other out, not just pursuing our own things. Having a group identity is a valuable thing. I enjoy working on the behalf of something that is larger than the individual. The experience of composing is an isolated and isolating one, the experience of being a performer is inherently social. It's nice not to have to choose.

AM: Can you imagine a large orchestra having an hour rehearsal just on multiphonic fingerings? In our rehearsals we spend 30 minutes figuring out one sound on one instrument. The resources of time have a huge result on aesthetics. There are so many things off the table with large groups that work in such fixed ways.

RD: Eric you mentioned that you like the aspect of having group identity with Wet Ink. Beyond the aesthetic interests that you and Alex share, how would you describe the larger group identity?

AM: While we identify as an ensemble, there's a composer collective aspect to this. But this already tells you something

about the performers who aren't composers. There's a shared trust with doing new music not already validated by some broader cultural force.

EW: We share a faith in our individual taste. In a lot of cases we're on the same page about aesthetic things and that's a force for cohesion. We're not shy about our own opinions and the value we place on our ability to find things that we think are really good and advocate for them.

AM: I've found that there are composers and performers that identify as American composers and often limit themselves to exclusively working with ensembles here and in a prevailing aesthetic that basically rejects most of the more experimental offerings of the last 50 years. Then there are Americans disgusted with that identity, so they leave to become expatriate composers in Europe. We're trying to be neither and both, to be open to what's happening outside of the States but not avoid an American identity. We want to re-define what it means to be a composer/performer in America. The goal is to create a more open, and certainly more creative environment for making music here and now.

- 1 Mincek's recordings can be found at www.alexmincek.com. Information about Wet Ink is available at www.wetink.org.
- 2 Wubbels' scores and recordings are available at www.wubbelsmusic.com.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994).