

WORKSHOP OF THE WORLD

When German musicians Karl Berger and Ingrid Sertso established the **Creative Music Studio**

in Woodstock in 1973, they were inspired by Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, and encouraged by John Cage and Buckminster Fuller. **Howard Mandel** tells the story of a utopian educational outpost which has risen from the ashes to spread the message of universal music once more



The Creative Music Studio (CMS) campus, Woodstock, 1970s



The pied piper: Don Cherry with CMS participants, late 1970s

40 years ago, in bucolic settings around Woodstock, New York, the revolution against Western art and popular music conventions gained a tenacious if rather informally institutionalised foothold. The Creative Music Studio (CMS) was an outpost of radical musical ideas founded in 1973 by two German expatriates: Karl Berger, then a 38 year old vibraphonist, and his wife, singer Ingrid Sertso. They acted at the urging of that 20th century iconoclast Ornette Coleman, with encouragement from John Cage, Buckminster Fuller, Frederic Rzewski and George Russell, among other visionaries. Trumpeter Don Cherry was foremost among their active supporters.

Just a few years earlier, Cherry and Ornette had inspired Berger and Sertso to join their far-reaching, humanistic and universalist music crusade. "At that time we were real revolutionaries," Berger tells me, during one of a series of interviews conducted before and after performances, at his home and recording studio, driving around Woodstock, in its restaurants and also at Columbia University. "We weren't playing the changes," he adds, wearing an expression of ironic amusement.

Thanks to their association with Ornette and Cherry, the couple were identified with what had been dubbed free jazz, and yet CMS was never a jazz school, nor even geocentrically American – a hallmark of their revolution. The couple met Cherry first, in 1964 in Paris. At the time, the trumpeter whom Ornette once dubbed 'the Pied Piper', and who died in

1995, was steeping himself in music from all over the world, walking around every day wearing headphones connected to a shortwave radio. "Don often didn't know where the songs came from, but he incorporated them anyway into his music," explains Berger, who quickly became a member of Cherry's multinational mid-60s group. "Slowly but surely it clicked with me that there is a common denominator of all these musics that you can reverberate with in your own way. Basically that's the principle of Creative Music Studio right there."

From the start, the CMS doors were open to everyone: Indian bansuri masters and African drummers, radical refugees of the so-called classical world, and musicians who didn't fit into any defined niche. Even non-musicians were invited – they'd be put to work and probably turned into musicians before they left. Because music, in its most multifaceted, dynamic sense, was the focus. From 1973, when it held its first international workshop, until the mid-80s, CMS was something like Shangri-La for those who sought the essence of sound creation and manipulation. The intention was to uncover secrets of musical processes, not give rise to an identifiable vocabulary. Its ideology promoted the individual's freedom to experiment and find oneself. Its taboos were narrow-mindedness, dogmatism and dullness.

Every few weeks, questing youth (in CMS terms, not students but participants) arrived in Woodstock,

a modestly prosperous town nestled in the rolling Catskill Mountains about two hours' drive north of Manhattan. They came from the world over, eager to meet and learn from the most original improvisors and composers of the time (who were referred to as guiding artists). There weren't many rockers, folkies or pop stars; the majority were lifelong instrumentalists who chafed at limitations that represented a stale, privileged perspective. Defying the typical teacher-student hierarchy, guiding artists and participants together developed the CMS curriculum as a work in progress, experientially. By most accounts, everyone had a ball.

During the era when CMS was operating at full force, attendees (seldom more than 40 at a time) lodged in a long, low motel-like row of rooms. Two other buildings housed offices, a kitchen, a cafeteria and practice spaces. As often as possible, classes were conducted outdoors. Jamming was constant. At night there were bonfires, and at weekends public concerts. Everyone used the shallow swimming pool. Tai chi and yoga classes, theatricals and dances were held in open fields. It being the 70s and 80s, and these being musicians, there was a predictable amount of sex, drugs and drink. Some attendees found spouses at CMS. Dozens of the participants from 30 to 40 years ago are among the busiest and best situated (if lesser known) musicians in the US today.

Then, almost overnight, financial support for

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CMS, never secure or substantial, dried up. Its programme, on the verge of being bankrolled by a major philanthropical foundation, became the victim of political change and attendant cultural shifts. But the Bergers, their aesthetic and their constituents didn't disappear. Karl Berger is a resourceful man, and sustained a modicum of CMS brand recognition even while focusing on a diverse career which included composer/arranger credits for Jeff Buckley's *Grace*, Sly & Robbie's *Rhythm Killers* and Swans' *The Burning World*, among others, plus prestigious if short-term appointments at universities and conservatories. Nonetheless, CMS became a memory, and for most people under 30, not even that.

Cut to 2011–12: over an 18 month period, Karl Berger's Creative Music Workshop & Orchestra performs 45 times in New York City – first at the East Village recital room The Stone, then at the Jazz Gallery, the Upper West Side Latin American community centre El Taller, and once at the end of its run at Shapeshifter Lab, the avant garde oasis opened by bassist Matthew (son of Jimmy) Garrison in an offbeat part of Brooklyn. At these sessions, between 18 and 25 musicians – drawn from a pool of about 50 – outfitted with the usual brass, reeds and rhythm gear but also Fula flute, shakuhachi, mandolin, violin and euphonium, improvise suites from a few measures of melody they've only just heard. Berger, now aged 72 and looking a bit donnish, sings or demonstrates a lyrical phrase on piano or melodica. There is no sheet music anywhere. Everyone watches Berger, who conducts by thrusting his arms upwards, gesturing down with open palms, bending and stretching whether standing before them or seated at the piano. The ensemble members elaborate on his memorable, deceptively tricky tunes, making them kaleidoscopic and sometimes majestic. They seem to sway together, bonded by the pulsations of two or three basses, the complementary vocalisations of two singers (Ingrid Sertso and Mossa Bildner) positioned at the ends of the front line, and a pre-concert warmup in which Berger typically emphasises the importance of dynamics in music making.

Berger's message is simple. Musicians must listen closely to each other and to themselves. Rather than concentrate on scalar pitches, they should focus on the group blend. If there are newcomers at the open rehearsal he leads before each performance proper, he goes over a foundational rhythm practice he's devised called GaMaLa-TaKi. Often a cameraman prowls the close quarters between orchestra and audience. Edited clips are later posted on YouTube. Audiences are rapturous, and the musicians – offering their services in exchange for some Creative Music experience – return weekly, apparently happy to be involved. Things are looking up.

This month CMS celebrates its 40th anniversary with four days of "intensive master classes, presentations and exciting jazz sessions" at the Full Moon Resort in Big Indian, another Catskill hamlet. Trumpeter Dave Douglas, alto saxophonist Oliver Lake, keyboardist John Medeski, slide trumpeter Steven Bernstein, clarinetist Don Byron, bansuri flautist Steve Gorn and pianist Marilyn Crispell are signed up to serve as guiding artists. Meanwhile, the CMS archive, containing hundreds of hours of previously unheard concerts by members of Musica Elettronica Viva and The Art Ensemble Of Chicago, Olatunji and Cecil Taylor, Nana Vasconcelos and Pauline Oliveros, often in undreamed of combinations, has been acquired by Columbia University, and selected recordings from the archive are due to be released by the Innova label. In 2011 Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies staged a symposium with Berger, Sertso and a multitude of others who recalled a glorious past while also daring to look ahead. CMS is the subject of a scholarly oral history project, run by writer Brent Hayes Edwards and WCKR radio station director Ben Young. A new fundraising plan is in circulation, with a new development director collaborating with Berger, Sertso and their closest advisors on ambitious plans. It could be that CMS, for the past 25 years an underground redoubt of creative music, is regaining its role as a vital force after a period of relative dormancy.

But take nothing for granted. The CMS story is not only the tale of a German vibraphonist and singer, a place that was once a magic kingdom, a time when



Ingrid Sertso, mid-1970s

music seemed to be unfolding in ways that were wondrous but are not now considered unusual (though neither are they frequent). It is a saga reflecting four decades of American attitudes about arts education, funding, appreciation and expectations. So it's not always pretty.

Always, Berger and Sertso are heroically central, sustaining their personal and professional partnership through thick and thin, raising children as well as tending CMS minions who might act childlike, despite being chronologically mature adults. The narrative expands to depict how a community of musicians who shared few traditions and no common tongue convened and bonded; what drove that community apart or down; how it could be reborn if it observes and adapts to new circumstances. And how it never, ever gives up.

Like many American origin stories, the history of CMS begins elsewhere, among dissatisfied people who imagine something better. Karl Berger is a compelling protagonist. Born in Heidelberg, Germany in 1935, his father was a professor of languages. "He wasn't really interested in music, but his father was a professional choir director, so the impulse must have skipped a generation," he says. His mother played piano. He started piano lessons aged eight, entered a conservatory at 14, and was 19 when his teacher told him to decide if he wanted a concert career.

He didn't. By then Berger had discovered Cave 54, a small club where US military personnel (Heidelberg was the European headquarters of the US Army) and a few other curious Germans (such as his friend and fellow pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach) played jazz, specifically bebop, until dawn. When someone left a vibraphone there, Berger gave it a go. On piano he tried to imitate what he heard on Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk records. Gig pressures helped him learn quickly.

While curious, Berger's piano teacher was uptight about visiting Cave 54; the one time he attended, Karl says, the man had bundled himself up to avoid recognition. Jazz was still dismissed by 'serious' Germans, although it had its romantic attractions. Perhaps those worked their charms when Berger was

“We asked Ornette to come and do a workshop. He said: Are you kidding? Then people would think I know something”

Ingrid Sertso

called to sub for the pianist in a group backing the Munich singer Ingrid Sertso. She must have seemed exotic; her ancestry is mixed, French and Moroccan. Her parents being at odds, she'd apparently grown up wild and had left home as soon as possible to support herself by singing jazz. Chet Baker was her model; his unadorned phrasing, low-pitched delivery and poetic reserve remain aspects of her approach. "We met in 1959," Ingrid remembers of her first encounter with her future husband. "We met on the bus."

Despite such serendipity, jazz's bad reputation was reinforced in other spheres of Berger's education. While honing his jazz skills and getting hired to tour with Hans Koller, Germany's leading saxophonist, he had also embarked on an academic career, studying a mix of sociology, social philosophy, Marxism, aesthetics and phenomenology. His dissertation advisor was Frankfurt school critical theorist Theodor Adorno, famous for his dim view of jazz.

"I met with Adorno," Berger relates, "and said, 'Let me write the next book with you', because he headed the German Research Foundation and had funds available. I thought I'd be funded, could travel doing my music, and money would come in while I was writing. He said, 'That's all fine. I can support that. Just don't ever say that jazz is art.' I told him, 'You don't understand jazz. That's really what it is.' And he said, 'You're right, I don't understand it. But it's too late for me to change my views. Just don't say jazz is art.'"

"I didn't need to call jazz 'art' anyway," Berger shrugs, "because I had started to read [Arthur] Schopenhauer, who thought music and art are really two different things. That appealed to me. That's how I felt. Music is a dynamic expression that's not really related to 'art' at all."

Berger didn't finish his thesis, but plodded on. "I took a part-time job at the university, and every morning I went there Ingrid asked, 'Where are you going?' I would say, 'To the Institute.' And she would say, 'That's not where you should be going. You should be playing music.'" She was right, as he was convinced in 1964, when he brought home the album *This Is Our Music* by The Ornette Coleman Quartet. "Karl said, 'You've got to hear this,'" Ingrid recalls. "It blew me away. I said, 'We've got to find out where this music comes from, and go there.'" But first they had an engagement in Paris.

"We went to Paris," she continues, "and to the nightclub run by Buttercup, Bud Powell's wife. There was something happening there that evening, I can't remember who played. But I was looking at the crowd, and said to Karl, 'Isn't that the trumpeter who's on the cover of *This Is Our Music*?' He said, 'Yes, that's Don Cherry.' It was just magic. Karl walked over, introduced himself and me and told him what we do, and said, 'I would love to play with you.' And Don said, 'Come tomorrow. Rehearsal is at four.'"

That was the start of a musical friendship with wide-ranging consequences. "Ornette later told me he called Don the man with the elephant memory, because he could remember a song by hearing it once. The whole song," Berger marvels. "He expected all of us to be that way. At rehearsal he could come in, sit down at the piano, pound out three or four songs that he had heard on that [shortwave] radio. He expected us to follow him and then he would leave. That was it."

It was enough. The group rehearsed every day and played every night apart from Monday. Its members

couldn't communicate with each other directly because, as Berger explains, "Gato [Barbieri, the Argentinian tenor saxophonist] only spoke Spanish, and the rest of us [Berger, drummer Aldo Romano, bassist JF Jenny Clarke] spoke Italian, French, German, a little English." The language of music sufficed. They were installed at the Paris club Le Chat Qui Peche for six months, played the Golden Cyrkle in Stockholm for three weeks, Cafe Montmartre in Copenhagen for four weeks, then returned to Le Chat.

"We became very tight," Berger says, understating the case – live recordings from Montmartre in 1966, with Bo Stief instead of Clarke on bass, document their cohesion. Cherry returned to the US in late 1965 to record *Complete Communion* for Blue Note with Barbieri, bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Ed Blackwell. It is a fantastic example of high energy lyricism and playful interaction. The following year Cherry brought Berger and Clarke over to join himself, Grimes, Blackwell and Pharoah Sanders (on tenor sax and piccolo) on the two flowing suites of *Symphony For Improvisers*, a classic of multilayered, motivically organised spontaneity. Throughout the album Berger plays vibes with a light, fleet, vibratoless tone, and faultless rhythm and sense of timing. On Cherry's ballad "Manhattan Cry", he matches the pathos of the theme with a deeply blue piano solo.

"On the way back from the session I was riding in [producer] Alfred Lion's car," he recalls. "He said, 'I like your vibraphone playing. What would you say to doing a record in the Blue Note style with vibraphone, organ and guitar?' I said, 'That's not what I do.' If I'd said yes, I would have been a Blue Note artist. It might have been all right, if the organist had been Larry Young and Johnny McLaughlin on guitar."

If he didn't regard soul jazz or nascent fusion as options, Berger still wanted to stay in New York City. He and Sertso had been welcomed into the circles of both Cherry and Ornette, who maintained an artistic open house. With two daughters, the couple moved into a spare apartment in saxophonist Lee Konitz's house across the river in New Jersey. Berger signed up with a schools programme devised by drummer Horace Arnold called Young Audiences, which introduced basic music concepts to 11 and 12 year olds. "It was a very nice programme," says Berger. "These kids were into every note we played, and I could see their minds were completely pure. I realised the innocence of people being totally open to any sound, in any music. I learned there is an element in everyone that's open to sound, not confined to style."

Soon after, Berger read that John Cage had quit teaching at the New School in Manhattan, applied to replace him, and was hired to teach an improvisation class. "I remember clearly the first day, I told myself, 'Don't prepare. This is improvisation. You have to improvise.'" From parking my car until I walked into the classroom, I kept repeating, "Don't prepare. Improvise."

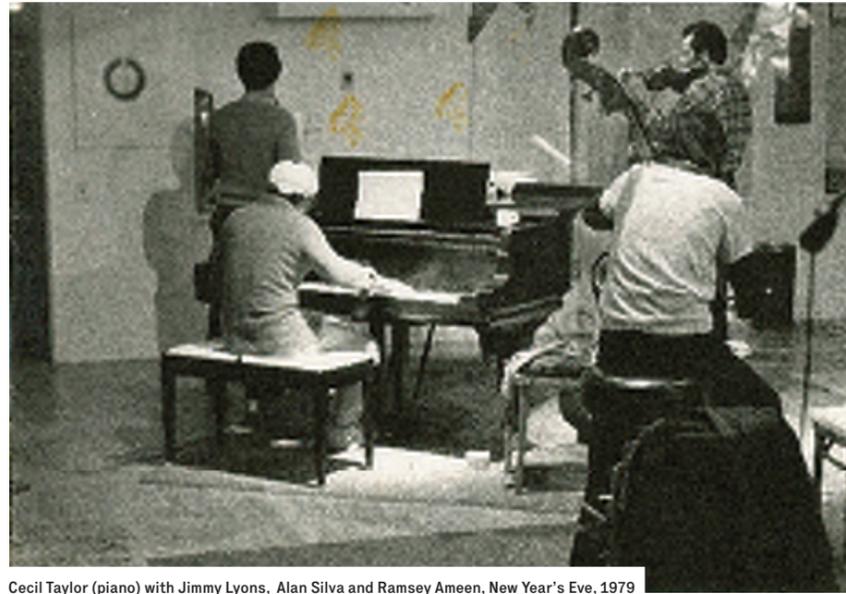
"I found I had a group of eight people who had absolutely nothing in common. There was one classical guy who wanted to learn to improvise, a rock guitarist who wanted to improve his skills, an oboe player from the opera. I had everybody play and found what they did have in common was a problem with timing. So I said, 'Let's do GaMaLa-TaKi.' That's where that started – at the New School."

Karl Berger (centre, with his daughter) with Dave Holland and Frederic Rzewski, 1973





CMS participants, 1977



Cecil Taylor (piano) with Jimmy Lyons, Alan Silva and Ramsey Ameen, New Year's Eve, 1979

Karl Berger conducting a CMS ensemble, 1975



Leo Smith leading a CMS ensemble, 1975



CMS participants, 1977



“GaMaLa-TaKi” was the title of a song Don Cherry had taught his group in Paris, based on something he’d heard on his shortwave radio. “It was probably from the Middle East, Afghanistan or somewhere,” Berger guesses. “I made a system out of it. The syllables add up to five. So two GaMaLas and a TaKi are eight. Two TaKis and one GaMaLa are seven. And so on. I learned that syllable training for rhythm happens everywhere. There are different methods in India, in Africa, in the Middle East, but the same idea.” GaMaLa-TaKi allows any metre to be broken into cells of three and two in order to be memorised, as singing syllables is more natural than counting. “My main thing was that you don’t want to go through your head, to intellectualise what you learn,” Berger states. “Instead you need to have the experience. Something you learn with your head, you’ll forget it, it doesn’t stick. But what you’ve experienced and have a strong, connected feeling about, that you’ll never forget.”

Teaching schoolchildren and mismatched adults gave Berger the elements of the CMS pedagogy. “That’s the only concept I had,” he insists. “I didn’t have a social concept, or a philosophy either. My ideas were all about music. It’s hard for people looking at it from the outside to give that meaning.”

It’s easy to understand how the Berger-Sertso ménage arrived in Woodstock, which they first visited in 1969, accompanying saxophonist Marion Brown on a break from congested urbanity. Berger was itching for a rural setting, with Sertso shocked by the hard conditions she saw even well-known musicians suffer in New York City, as well as the ugliness of Manhattan’s street life. They tried returning to Europe. “The first CMS workshops were in Heidelberg, my home town,” says Berger, “with Peter Kowald and von Schlippenbach in a gallery space.” But the US had captured their imaginations. They came back in 1972, determined to find a place “close enough to work in the city but with its own cultural vibe”.

Berger had also reached the conclusion that “the world arrives at all the music we practise without thinking of a particular style. We create our own impressions of what we get from anywhere. This is what led us to creating CMS. I was trained in the conservatory and I had to think this through. In order to do that I had to start these workshops.”

He had met Carla Bley and Michael Mantler, principals of The Jazz Composers Orchestra Association, who had introduced him to the ins and outs of non-profit organisations. “As a European, I was intrigued by the idea of going for grants, supporting things that way,” Berger says. “The money we made was never totally from the audience, we were used to government support and subsidies. At the time, that was a viable option in the US, too.” With help from Ornette Coleman – who offered moral, not financial support – and some lawyers, Berger incorporated the Creative Music Foundation as a non-profit organisation in 1971.

“Ornette was one of the most important founders,” says Ingrid Sertso, “but he never came up here and spent time. We asked, ‘Can you at least come up here and do a workshop?’ And he said, ‘Are you kidding? Then people would think I know something.’”

The Bergers were sure he did. “I talked to Ornette a lot,” says Karl. The saxophonist suggested they set up a high-level advisory board – one of his

recommendations was Buckminster Fuller, who Berger spoke to on the phone, winning his approval. He also had a meeting with John Cage at the composer’s New York home at which Cage told him, “I don’t like jazz but I like Ornette Coleman”, and agreed to participate.

“Cage really played. From the very beginning he came and did workshops and helped,” says Berger. But Cageian aesthetics were never central to the CMS way. “The principles I’d learned from Don Cherry, which Ornette called harmolodics and now calls sound grammar, addressed the problem that most people get involved in stylistic studies and don’t get a feel for the general field of music as a whole. You can study music independently of style. This is what I call basic practice. It’s what we did every morning at CMS, rhythm training and sound training, not relating to any particular style, not even using instruments. We used vocal and body sounds, things like that.

“Now I call the whole thing ‘music mind’. Rhythm is very easily conceptualised from movement. When you walk you have rhythm. Even when you talk you have rhythm, so I can even practise it sitting down.

“Melody and harmony are the result of overtones. Every note you play is a sound, not just a singular event you can repeat – in fact, you can’t repeat it, because there are thousands of sounds going on every time you make a sound. Don Cherry was my major influence about that. He would tell me, ‘If you play a note, you need to hear a harmony.’ There’s no such thing as an A – you need to know which A, if it’s a B minor A or an F major A or an F# minor A. They’re all different, and if you feel that, then you play different. You start to hear harmony. That’s something nobody teaches at any school.”

Musicians working on similar ideas had also begun to settle around Woodstock – besides Bley and Mantler, there was Dave Holland, Anthony Braxton, Jack DeJohnette and MEV’s Richard Teitelbaum. With the likes of Bob Dylan, Ed Sanders of The Fugs, Todd Rundgren, Paul Butterfield and John Sebastian of The Lovin’ Spoonful also living in the vicinity, a spirit of adventurous investigation prevailed. When the New School cancelled Berger’s class, he decided to continue teaching in Woodstock and put a note to that effect on a grocery store bulletin board.

A flautist named Ilene Marder saw it and, recognising his face, pensive and surrounded by a halo, from the otherwise black cover of his 1966 ESP-Disk’ debut album *Karl Berger*, she called him. In the course of their conversation, she offered her home as a site for his first workshops, which he taught in tandem with Dave Holland, who was fresh from Miles Davis’s group. Soon Marder had become Berger’s administrative assistant, secretary and extended family member. In the autumn of 1972 they began issuing press releases, which were picked up by *Downbeat* and *The Village Voice*, among other publications. One year later they offered the first Creative Music Studio semester. Word got around and a phenomenon was born.

For a painstaking chronology of the CMS heyday, Robert E Sweet’s book *Music Mind* is the source. It relates the comings and goings of numerous musicians running the gamut from Abdullah Ibrahim to John Zorn. Berger directed morning sessions in rhythm training, and there would be instruction in physical awareness. People ate lunch and

dinner together – Ingrid doing the cooking. In the afternoons, guiding artists would spend three or four hours introducing their music to participants, sometimes offering one-to-one tutorials. After dinner everyone was on their own, but usually so energised by the day’s activities they kept playing, practising, jamming until they dropped.

High points still celebrated by CMS alumni include The Art Ensemble’s week-long residency; Cecil Taylor’s 1979 New Year’s Eve concert; the formation of the CoDoNa trio by sitarist Collin Walcott, Don Cherry and Brazilian berimbau specialist Nana Vasconcelos; and the day the Turkish musician Ismet Serel refused to vacate the accommodation he’d been assigned for two weeks and negotiated two years of room and board with Berger in exchange for ongoing classes in Turkish music. “It turned out that Turkish music relates maybe the most to what we were teaching as basic practice,” explains Berger. “Turkey absorbed European elements, African elements and Indian elements, but simplified them, somehow, so odd metres and things like that became very easy to grasp.”

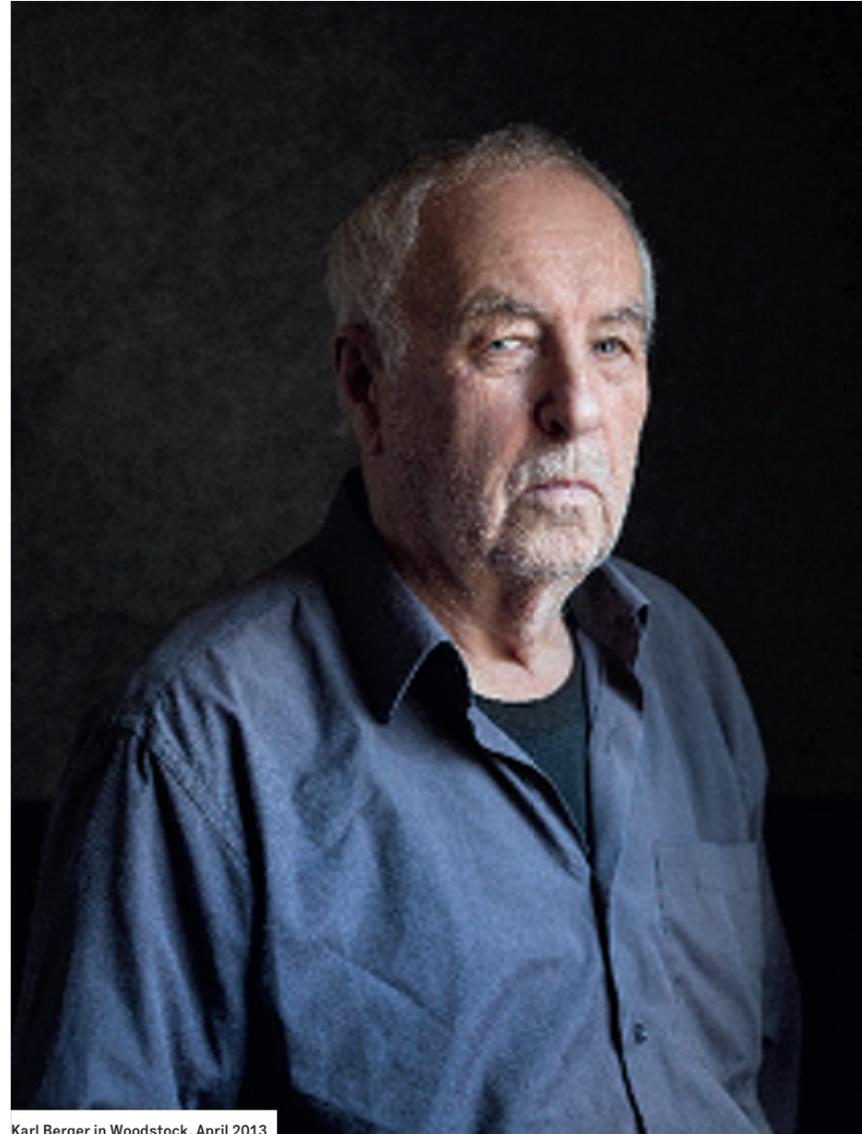
Berger was open to entrepreneurial ideas, launching a shortlived record company and taking CMS musicians on a European tour. He and Sertso were invited to hold workshops at the Naropa Institute in Colorado by the revered Buddhist figure Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. After several attempts, Berger persuaded the State University of New York at New Palz to give credits towards degrees to seniors who studied at CMS. Ilene Marder wrote grant applications, which were often accepted. Attending participants paid tuition; if they came from Europe and Asia, those fees were often picked up by governments who were more generous in terms of arts funding than the US has ever been.

In fact, the US’s antipathy towards supporting culture is what ended that early CMS era. “It was the re-election of Ronald Reagan in 1984,” Berger says ruefully. “He cut funds for the National Endowment for the Arts to a quarter of what was spent on the military’s bands. We had state grants, but they were not enough to keep things going. Our school of music certification was taken away. We weren’t regarded as valid for the issuance of student visas any more, so prospective participants from Europe or wherever had to lie at their consulates about why they wanted to come to America. We had a major grant under consideration by the Rockefeller Foundation, but in answer to Reagan’s cuts, the Rockefeller priorities changed and we didn’t get it.”

Eventually, CMS activities (and its debts) became insupportable. Berger returned to academic teaching and faculty posts at the Banff Centre in Canada, the University of Massachusetts and Dartmouth College, among others. Although he could be a deft navigator of interdepartmental politics, his positions often ended over inherent opposition by entrenched powers to his particular kind of music mind. He and Ingrid continued performing, somewhat sporadically, and he was always working for other musicians and producers. He doesn’t think of his arrangements and/or playing on *Grace*, *Rhythm Killers*, *The Burning World*, or Suzanne Vega’s *Closeup Vol 2: People And Places* and Buckethead’s *Giant Robots*, or in Bill Laswell’s *Material* and *Operazone*, as any different from his own *Peace Church Concerts* or his duet recordings with Ed Blackwell.

“When you get older as a musician, you grow. It’s not like sports. It’s much more interesting”

Karl Berger



Karl Berger in Woodstock, April 2013

“I’m not obsessed with a body of work,” he says. “If I put out a few really good pieces and people enjoy it, and it identifies me for what I do, that’s fine.” He’s being modest, downplaying the hundred or so compositions and arrangements he’s written for classical ensembles, jazz groups, fusion outfits, big bands and orchestras, and more than two dozen albums he has to his credit, on almost as many labels. His latest (both from 2010) are *Strangely Familiar*, a collection of 17 brief piano solo improvisations, and *What Do I Know*, a quintet session released under Ingrid Sertso’s name. He has also revisited earlier triumphs. In 2009 he and Ingrid put together an octet called In The Spirit Of Don Cherry, using material drawn from *Symphony For Improvisers*. The group were well received, prompting Berger to reassemble some CMS graduates and new contacts into an improvising orchestra. John Zorn agreed to let them run open rehearsals, followed by a performance at The Stone in Manhattan. Berger was surprised at the response.

“It’s been overwhelming. People love to be part of this. I had no idea when I started a year and a half ago it would be like this. I thought I’d do it two or three times, and it would fall apart. It’s the opposite. There are more musicians calling me, writing to me, that they

Mark Mahaney

want to play every week. I can’t accommodate them all.

“Maybe now young music professionals are looking for this type of approach. Maybe the reason has to do with space. In the 70s we had plenty of space, we could afford to live in lofts and play all the time. Now everybody in New York City lives in little cubicles, paying \$1500 a month, trying to get by, taking door gigs and holding two hour rehearsals because three hour rehearsals are too expensive. So there’s no getting together to play and just experiment. That’s what’s actually needed – for people to get together, be free in the open air, experiment and not worry about time and space for a few days. Our concept, for this period, is even more important.”

And so Karl Berger and Ingrid Sertso are at it again. George Lewis, the trombonist and computer music innovator who had been on the CMS board in the 80s and has since become a tenured professor, helped interest Columbia University in the CMS archives, which spurred Karl to look into the extensive tape collection and begin identifying sessions for release. The Creative Music Orchestra has revived Berger’s facility with spontaneous conduction, an approach to group organisation similar to that devised by the

late Lawrence ‘Butch’ Morris, whose own improvising orchestra for a period performed on the same night as The CMO, just a few blocks away from The Stone. The 40th anniversary workshop is booked to take place at the Full Moon Resort in Big Indian, just down the road from Woodstock, where Dweezil Zappa, Steve Howe, Butch Trucks and Oteil Burbridge of The Allman Brothers, and Medeski, Martin & Wood hold their annual group workshops.

Karl Berger couldn’t be more pleased. “Right now is a very productive period,” he reflects. “I write every day. When you get older as a musician, you grow – it’s not like sports. Everybody grows and plays better. I play so much better now, it’s much more interesting to me and, hopefully, to everyone else.

“Music is a lifelong study, you know? It never ends. Pablo Casals practised the day before he died. To me it’s a spiritual practice, because it’s about learning to connect with your spontaneous frame of mind. We are processing everything through our thinking mind, and our thinking mind is much too slow for music, you know? It’s not fast enough for music.” 🍏 The CMS 40th anniversary workshop takes place between 20–24 May at the Full Moon Resort, Big Indian, New York. creativemusicfoundation.org