

Conlon Nancarrow Was Never in Gurs

by Felix Meyer

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Conlon Nancarrow's close circle of friends included Trimpin, a sound sculptor and inventor of musical instruments. Born in Southern Germany in 1951, Trimpin emigrated to the USA in 1979 (settling in Seattle) but was working temporarily in the Netherlands when he and Nancarrow first met in June 1987, the occasion being a small-scale Nancarrow retrospective organized by the Holland Festival. The two men were soon engaged in several collaborative projects. For one thing, Nancarrow placed all of his piano rolls at Trimpin's disposal in November 1989 in order for them to be translated into MIDI information, thus making his music available for performance on instruments other than the player piano(s) for which it had originally been written. And Trimpin, in addition to presenting Nancarrow's Studies for Player Piano on regular pianos (by means of a computer-controlled *Vorsetzer*), also created arrangements of some of these works for his self-built mechanical instruments. The high-points of their collaboration included joint appearances at the New Music America festival in New York in November 1989 and at the first Other Minds Festival in San Francisco in November 1993. At the former, Trimpin presented works that included *Study No. 37* in a version for piano, xylophone and woodblocks; at the latter, he gave the world première of Nancarrow's *Contraction No. 1* (1993), which was dedicated to him and owed its title to an invention of Trimpin's for modifying the sound of the piano ('Contraction IPP 71512').

Trimpin's commitment to Nancarrow's cause continued after his mentor's death in 1997 and has brought him almost as much recognition as have his own, highly original artistic explorations in the borderland between music and sculpture. However, in his new 75-minute stage work *The Gurs Zyklus*, realized in collaboration with the director Rinde Eckert and given its world première in the Memorial Auditorium of Stanford University on 14 May 2011, Trimpin the multimedia artist brings Nancarrow into play in a manner that is at odds with historical fact, compelling us to contradict him. This work is Trimpin's monument to the prisoners of the infamous internment camp in the French village of Gurs at the foot of the

Western Pyrenees in the department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques. The French government created the camp in early 1939 after Franco's armies had won their final victory in the Spanish Civil War. Its initial purpose was to absorb the stream of Republican refugees from across the border, but it remained in existence for over six years and from 1940 onwards served primarily to intern German Jews and others persecuted under the Nazis. (Many of them, including several refugees from Trimpin's own home region of Southern Baden, died either in Gurs itself or were later deported to Auschwitz.) In *The Gurs Zyklus* Trimpin has recreated scenes from this camp by means of sound, speech, and video projections, using not only various documentary materials such as letters and drawings of former prisoners of Gurs, but also two of Nancarrow's Studies for Player Piano. The reason for this inclusion is easy to explain: it is Trimpin's belief – as he first made public in a profile published by *The New Yorker* in 2006¹ – that Nancarrow, who from the spring of 1937 had served in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (a unit in the 15th International Brigade of volunteers fighting for the Republican cause), was interned in Gurs after fleeing from Spain. However, this does not correspond to the facts, for which reason it seems necessary here to sketch out the story of Nancarrow's return from Spain using the sources currently available.

After the International Brigades were disbanded in September 1938, they were officially demobilized in Barcelona on 29 October in the presence of the Prime Minister Juan Negrin and other high-ranking Republican politicians. But unlike a large number of his fellow fighters, Nancarrow did not set out for home straightaway. Instead he remained in Spain for several months longer, though his reasons for doing so remain unclear. Stephen Schwartz has claimed that Nancarrow resisted the withdrawal order and joined a Spanish unit,² though he names no sources for his information. However, judging from Nancarrow's own, fragmentary reminiscences offered in an interview with Vivian Perlis, it would appear that he ended up in the Southern part of the Republican territory by mistake, spending his time there out of combat.³ Be that as it may, in January 1939 he finally managed to escape from Valencia to Barcelona in the hold of a freighter.⁴ While up to this point we have to rely largely on Nancarrow's own testimony, we have quite detailed information about his further movements in January and February 1939, thanks to the diary entries of his fellow fighter Sidney Kaufman. Excerpts from these were published in *The Volunteer*,⁵ the journal of the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and their content is confirmed by Nancarrow's own reminiscences as well as by other sources. (In the following account these secondary sources will be given in the footnotes.) According to Kaufman's notes, Nancarrow had missed an evacuees' train in Figueres and turned up on 26 January 1939 – the day that Barcelona fell to Franco – at the demobilization station of Cassà de la Selva near Girona. He and Kaufman then set off for the north on foot,

together with John Murra (later a well-known anthropologist) and other ex-Brigade members. Their initial intention was to cross the French border at Port-Bou, but their request for a *salvoconducto* was rejected because the French government, uncertain as to what to do about the surging mass of refugees from Spain, had first closed the border altogether and then, on 28 January 1939, had opened it up again for women, children and old men only. So Nancarrow and his group set off on another route that took them some 30 kilometers inland towards the mountain village of La Jonquera, chancing along the way upon a large cache of food stored in a military depot and sating themselves on it.⁶ The border having been reopened for troupes and men of military age on 5 February, Nancarrow and his group (now suitably stocked up with provisions) finally entered France via La Jonquera and Le Perthus in the early morning of 7 February 1939 – only two days after Girona had fallen to Franco’s troops. They then began their descent to the Mediterranean coast, guarded by the French police. Their goal was Argelès-sur-Mer; there, refugees from Spain were kept on a stretch of beach, surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by Senegalese sharpshooters, and mercilessly exposed to the cold and damp until wooden huts and barracks were hastily constructed to house them (see the photo on p. 15). The *Camp d’Argelès* was just one of several such detention camps in the department of Pyrénées-Orientales, but it alone was soon filled with tens of thousands of refugees, all of them struggling to survive in the face of catastrophic hygienic conditions and a precarious supply situation. Many of them died within days of their arrival, while others were imprisoned for months on end or were shunted off to other camps. Nancarrow arrived at the camp of Argelès on 8 February 1939, but was spared such a fate: as a US citizen his nationality was deemed “unproblematic,” and so together with a group of other internees including the journalist Robert Swire and his wife Lorna Wood Swire he was able to organize a car, borrowed from United Press, to get to the station in nearby Perpignan on 12 February 1939.⁷ From there he took the night train to Paris where he stayed for several days, recovering from the ordeal of his flight and celebrating his newly won freedom with others recently returned from Spain, including the journalists Robert Okin and Robert Allen. (The latter, like Nancarrow, later moved to Mexico City and became one of the composer’s closest friends in the early 1950s.) Nancarrow then boarded the *President Roosevelt* in Le Havre, crossing the Atlantic to arrive in New York on 25 February 1939.

Nancarrow was thus never in the camp at Gurs, which in any case was only set up in March 1939, by which time he was back in the USA. Instead, he spent five days – albeit five days under conditions of general deprivation – in the *Camp d’Argelès* at the other end of the Pyrenees.

It is a matter of regret that Trimpin was not aware of these facts when he conceived *The Gurs Zyklus*. For although the musical evocation of Nancarrow only plays a very subordinate role in *The Gurs Zyklus*, it has



Plate 1: Internment camp for Spanish refugees, Argelès-sur-Mer, France, March 1939, photograph by Robert Capa (Robert Capa © International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos).

served – not least through the various statements that Trimpin made in connection with the première of his work – to bring considerable new attention to the idea of Nancarrow’s supposed imprisonment in Gurs.⁸ And it is ironic that this fictitious story should have been revived in the context of a work that relies heavily on documentary materials and whose creator has attested to being motivated by an urge to establish historical truth in writing *The Gurs Zyklus*, more specifically by his “curiosity to find out what happened.”⁹ This by no means lessens the credibility of Trimpin’s primary concern, namely to use the example of Gurs as a means to keep alive the memory of the victims of violence and fascist persecution. But in future, the fate of Nancarrow will have to be considered differently from that of the prisoners of Gurs. Nancarrow’s participation in the Spanish Civil War was brave and honorable, but we must nevertheless differentiate between the progress of a man who for several days was caught in the wheels of an incompetent military bureaucracy and the veritable *via dolorosa* of innocent deportees who were wrongfully imprisoned for months on end.

All the same, Trimpin’s mistake is to a certain extent understandable. For the details of Nancarrow’s biography up to the early 1970s are anything but clear, especially regarding the years before his emigration to Mexico in 1940. For one thing, even before the drastic deterioration of his memory

after a serious health crisis in early 1990, Nancarrow's own recollections of these early years seem to have been quite sketchy. This, combined with his strong sense of privacy and the self-protective reticence of an ex-radical who had experienced political harassment both in the U.S. and later in Mexico, made him very reluctant to speak about his life, even to his close friends. (Trimpin has also mentioned this¹⁰ – and since he never said expressly that Nancarrow named the place of his internment, it seems likely that Trimpin drew an incorrect conclusion from an answer to what might have been a leading question.) Moreover, very few written documents from that period have survived in Nancarrow's personal papers, and so far not much biographically relevant material has come to light in other libraries and archives. But as the above summary of the events of his return from Spain may show, the situation is by no means hopeless, even if we grant that the existence of such an elaborate contemporary record as Sidney Kaufman's diary entries – which, incidentally, Nancarrow read when they were published in *The Volunteer*, and indirectly confirmed in his correspondence with his friend (and fellow veteran) Albert Prago¹¹ – may be an exceptional case. There is thus no need to indulge in biographical speculation. There is good reason, however, to suggest that Nancarrow studies, which up to now have focused primarily on analytical and technological aspects of the music, should make a stronger effort in future to engage with biographical matters and in particular to secure those early traces of the composer's biography that are as yet so scant. For it is not only through the works but also through the biography that we gain access to an artist's thinking, and there may well be closer ties between Nancarrow's life and his music than is generally assumed. The year 2012, when we shall commemorate the composer's 100th birthday, could be a suitable occasion to intensify a more historical approach to Nancarrow research.

(Translated from the German by Chris Walton)

¹ Jean Strouse, "Perpetual Motion: Trimpin's Sound Sculpture," *The New Yorker*, 8 May 2006, pp. 36–43, here p. 39; reprinted in abridged form under the title "Music of the Spheres," in: *Trimpin: Contraptions for Art and Sound*, ed. Anne Focke (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011), pp. 23–33, here p. 26.

² Stephen Schwartz, "The Spanish Civil War in Context," in idem, *Intellectuals and Assassins: Writings at the End of Soviet Communism* (London: Anthem Press, 2000), pp. 151–70, here p. 156.

³ See Vivian Perlis, Interview with Conlon Nancarrow, New York City, 18 April 1986 (Oral History of American Music Project, Yale University Library); typescript photocopy in the Conlon Nancarrow Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, pp. 31–32, here p. 31.

⁴ Ibid.; Conlon Nancarrow, letter to Peter Garland, 18 September 1979, Conlon Nancarrow Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation; and Peter Garland, "Conlon Nancarrow: Chronicle of a Friendship," in idem, *Americas: Essays on American Music and Culture, 1973–80* (Santa Fe: Soundings Press, 1982), pp. 157–85, here p. 182.

⁵ Sid Kaufman, "The Flight," *The Volunteer*, vol. 5, no. 3 (December 1983), pp. 13–15 and 24.

⁶ Nancarrow himself remembered this episode; see Garland, "Chronicle" (see note 4), p. 182. The story is also recounted in some detail in the reminiscences of John Murra; see Joe Doyle, "John Murra's War in Spain & France," *The Volunteer*, vol. 32, no. 2 (June 2010), online edition, <http://www.albavolunteer.org/2010/06/john-murras-war-in-spain-france/> (accessed February 21, 2012).

⁷ Regarding the car journey to Perpignan, see also Lorna Swire's letter to Nancarrow of 11 June 1985; Conlon Nancarrow Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. Lorna Swire had started a career as a pianist and writer before she went to Spain with her husband; she later made a reputation for herself as an author of children's books.

⁸ See, for example, Rebecca Wallace, "Instruments of Memory: The Artist Trimpin Visits a Painful Past with the Help of His Original Musical Instruments," *Palo Alto Weekly*, vol. 32, no. 1 (29 April 2011), pp. 40–41 and 43–44, here p. 41; Georgia Rowe, "Trimpin and *The Gurs Zyklus*," *San Francisco Classical Voice*, 3 May 2011, www.sfcv.org/article/trimpin-and-the-gurs-zyklus (accessed February 21, 2012); and Ivy Nguyen, "Trimpin Previews Upcoming Show," *The Stanford Daily*, 6 May 2011, p. 2.

⁹ Trimpin, quoted in Rowe, "Trimpin and *The Gurs Zyklus*" (see note 8).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Conlon Nancarrow, letters to Alberto Prago of 2 January 1984 and 9 October 1986; carbon copies in the Conlon Nancarrow Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation.