

Not Theory, Practice...

Frank J. Oteri visits the home of Edward T. Cone

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Videotaped and Transcribed by [Randy Nordschow](#)

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1. Composition as Criticism and Criticism as Composition

FRANK J. OTERI: I first read [your essays](#) almost twenty years ago when I was in graduate school. They were a great inspiration to me because my life has been a divided life—somebody who writes about music and somebody who also composes music. I came across a comment when I was going through all your essays again, recently, from your essay "Schubert's Unfinished Business" from 1984 where you said, "Criticism and composition are not necessarily distinct."

EDWARD T. CONE: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: I thought that was really interesting and I'd like to flesh out that thought. You're known principally in the world as a theorist. All your life you've also been a composer.

EDWARD T. CONE: I don't call myself a theorist by the way. I call myself a writer on musical topics. I don't consider what I do [theory](#), I mean, in the sense that theory has become something very esoteric, very precise, and of a self-enclosed world. I'm not interested in that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, there's an interesting thing in labels. [I hate the word critic](#). In our society today "critic" implies negativity. You criticize something...

EDWARD T. CONE: It shouldn't be. For me to be a good critic is a term of high praise. The best criticism isn't necessarily negative. I consider what I do criticism. When I write, let's say, "In Praise of Schubert," I call that criticism.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's the original meaning of the word. It's a shame we sort of lost that word in our common usage in English at this point. Whenever people hear the word "to criticize" they say, "Oh, he hates criticism." It means he hates being criticized....

EDWARD T. CONE: Negative criticism, of course!

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes! To get back to this original question, you've written about music but you're also a composer. You've written over eighty pieces of music, according to the booklet notes [on the CRI disc](#). That disc is a few years old, so there are probably a few more pieces now. How do you identify yourself primarily?

EDWARD T. CONE: As a musician. I mean, I'm also a pianist and started out as a pianist. I try not to categorize myself any further than that. It's making music and talking about it. To get back to your original question—or original reference to what I wrote about composition and criticism not being necessarily opposed to each other—a composer has to be a critic. If he isn't the most devastating critic of his own music, he's not a good composer. Every compositional decision you make is a critical decision. You have to choose among several alternatives and you obviously negatively criticize the ones you don't choose.

2. Writing About Music vs. Writing Music

FRANK J. OTERI: In terms of how you divide your time—writing about other peoples' music and creating your own music—do those two streams fuel each other? Do you feel if you're writing about [Schubert](#), let's say, does that inspire you to then write a piece of original music, or vice versa?

EDWARD T. CONE: I would say more the vice versa. That is, my own music inspires me to look at someone else rather than writing about Schubert inspires me to write music. That would be less true, of course, of contemporary composers. For example, when I wrote about [Roger Sessions](#) that would often give me ideas. Not so much the writing about it, but the fact that you have to really study the music very closely to write about it that would give me ideas and inspiration of my own, but much less so in the case of a classical composer.

FRANK J. OTERI: You literally have to get inside the head of another composer to really write about that music. A choice is made a certain way, but it could have been done all these other ways; these are all the other paths that could have been taken. So I guess my question then is, when you're writing a composition, if you're so immersed in studying someone else's music at some point, are you then in your pieces taking the paths that weren't taken, that you would have taken, had you written the music you're analyzing?

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes, but you see, usually when I'm writing words I'm usually not composing, and when I'm composing I'm usually not writing words.

FRANK J. OTERI: So there's never an issue where you are working on a piece of music and there's a deadline for a composition and also a deadline for an article? There's never been an example where those two things are going on?

EDWARD T. CONE: Well there may have been, but I don't recall.

3. How Music is Born and Popular Recognition

FRANK J. OTERI: I came across a very interesting statement you made about how your music comes into being. You were talking about pieces you had written, not commissioned because you said that implies a fee, which was rarely ever involved. Pieces are often willed into existence by forces other than the composer. Someone gets asked to write a piece for certain forces, and then they get a fee, and then the piece happens, and often times that piece will be written for the commission and it will never be done again. It's a strange way to midwife a piece of music. I wonder if there's something wrong with the way that we give birth to music nowadays?

EDWARD T. CONE: From my point of view there never has been a really healthy relationship between music writing and the calling forth of music writing, the commissioning of it, since the days that composers were paid to be composers—as [Haydn](#) was paid to be a composer, as [Bach](#) was paid to be a composer, as in quite a different way that [Beethoven](#) was eventually paid to be a composer. From then on, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the composer became more and more set adrift. Let's face it, this is the situation that we've been in for many, many years and I don't think it's going to be changed. If you are asking about the health of the situation, I think Bach's and Haydn's situations were much healthier as far as composition is concerned.

FRANK J. OTERI: To take a look at it from another angle, I'm a composer and Randy is also a composer, and I don't have commissions from orchestra X, let's say, and I have rarely written for orchestra. The things I have written for orchestra have never gotten played. You've written over eighty pieces, and I know this [one disc on CRI](#), there's some music on it that is extraordinary. Your Serenade for Flute and Strings is an amazingly beautiful piece.

EDWARD T. CONE: Thank you.

FRANK J. OTERI: The disc has four pieces on it. What about the other 76 plus pieces of your music? I've never heard them, and most people have never heard them. I imagine that you wrote them because you wanted to write them, which is why I write the pieces I write, and my music rarely gets heard. But isn't there something somehow wrong with that? All that work and nobody reaping anything from it...

EDWARD T. CONE: As a matter of fact most of the pieces on that disc were "called for," as I said, I won't say commissioned because they weren't paid. They were called for, but as you said, they were played once and then they sort of disappeared. But let's face it, wasn't that what happened to Bach and Haydn, too? The only difference is that when Bach wrote a cantata for one week, he didn't expect to play it again because he wrote another cantata for the next week. Haydn just kept churning out the quartets and the symphonies because each one replaced the one that had come before. Now, let's say you get asked to do a string quartet. The quartet that asked for it will play it once. They won't play it again and they won't ask you for another quartet, they'll ask someone else for another quartet.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. I guess what's happened though is those pieces that were written in the past that were assumed to be one time performances, kept the composer writing new work. We're now in a situation where there's all this repertoire that was created in the past that performers turn to first, rather than turning to the work of a living composer. Certainly, even in your own writing about music, a good bit of it, if not most of it, is concerned more with the music of the past than the music of the present. Is it so healthy for us to have such a focus on the past at the expense of the present?

EDWARD T. CONE: No, I don't think it is. The point is when you say "at the expense of the present." I would equally say it would be bad to focus on the present at the expense of the past. Certainly, we're much more conscious of the past today than people of another period were. In the first place, we have reproduction, which they didn't have, and the music of the past is much more available to us than it ever was before. I think in that respect we are now getting more like the situation in other arts, such as architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, where the works of the past were always around, when they were always visible or readable, and now we're getting to that situation. I think it may be unfortunate that this has come just at the moment when contemporary music became much more disassociated from the public than it had been before. So that this is when you get to focusing on the past at the expense of contemporary music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Fault is probably too strong of a word here, but what caused that disassociation and is it reparable? Should it be reparable? Should the living composer be a more public figure in society?

EDWARD T. CONE: It depends on what you mean by public figure.

FRANK J. OTERI: Certainly, you think of [Liszt](#) as someone who was a public figure. [Beethoven](#) was a public figure. [Wagner](#) was a public figure.

EDWARD T. CONE: Well, [Leonard Bernstein](#) was a public figure.

FRANK J. OTERI: Very true.

EDWARD T. CONE: Perhaps more as a conductor than as a composer. I doubt that he would have been a public figure if he hadn't been such a successful conductor.

FRANK J. OTERI: And also a composer for Broadway musicals.

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes. Who else is a public figure? Would you say [Stravinsky](#) was a public figure?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, to some extent Stravinsky definitely was. Stravinsky was also very visible as a conductor of his music and a frequent lecturer. I guess the closest thing we have to a contemporary composer at this point who is a public figure would be [Philip Glass](#) or [John Adams](#), who are very visible, but really not quite in the same way.

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes. It seems to me that what is really the question here is the whole situation of music in our culture. Let me give just one personal example, which seems to me to illustrate what is wrong. And I say this not because I'm unhappy about it, I just observe it and think it's interesting. I happen to have won the [ASCAP Deems Taylor Award](#) twice for books that I've written, and a third time for a book that I edited. I've never seen this in any public organ, I mean non-musical organ. If anyone won a literary book award once, it would immediately be reported in [The New York Times](#). If you won it twice it would especially be reported. If it were three times it would get a special article.

FRANK J. OTERI: What amazes me is that pieces win the [Pulitzer Prize](#) in music and are not recorded and are unavailable. [Lewis Spratlan](#) won the Pulitzer Prize two years ago for [Life is a Dream](#) but there still hasn't been a staged production of the work nor has it been recorded. I think we're at a point where, certainly with the media, concert music is extremely marginalized. There's a whole generation of editors who aren't even aware of it. This is [why we created NewMusicBox](#), to create a venue to be able to spread the word about new music in America because the radio outlets don't play contemporary concert music. For the most part the classical stations avoid it. The non-classical stations don't know what to do with it. The newspapers hardly cover it. [The New York Times](#) is one of the few exceptions, but their coverage is on again off again as well.

4. On Music Theory

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to get back to something you said at the very beginning of this conversation about why you don't consider yourself a theorist. You were talking about how it had become such an area of specialization. I want to tie in the notion of how music theory came into being and whether you feel it has helped the appreciation of music or has hurt the appreciation of music?

EDWARD T. CONE: When we talk about musical theory, we are talking about two distinct things. One is included in what we'd call undergraduate theory courses. As [Sessions](#) often pointed out, theory courses were not courses in theory; they were courses in musical practice. I don't know where they got the word theory course. I know when I was in high school they used to have courses in theory and harmony. And it turns out that theory was simply how you construct scales, and harmony was how you put chords together. Theory was simply the background for learning harmony, which was always taught then instead of counterpoint. The point is, whether it's harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, or whatever, it's not really theory in the sense of "theory." It's musical practice. That is certainly not detrimental to music, but absolutely necessary to music. I think one of the unfortunate things today is the fact that a lot of institutions don't seem to be stressing it enough, instead stressing pure creativity without any basis in practical exercises. However, what is now called Theory with a capital "T" is really an abstract exercise of trying to build systems or categorizing systems that are already built. The great example of a theorist is, of course, [Schenker](#), who took the practice of tonality and made it into an all embracing theory, a very narrow theory, but no less one that he felt embraced all possible works in tonality. In the same way theorists like [Babbitt](#) have worked with [the twelve-tone system](#). When you read someone like [Perle](#) and Babbitt on their system constructions, you feel that it has less to do with the writing of music than in justifying certain approaches. I wouldn't say this is detrimental to the actual production of music, but I think it's something quite different from the actual production of music. Most successful music had been written in the spirit that [Ralph Kirkpatrick](#) expressed when he told [Arthur Mendel](#)—while they were discussing what you do about the rules of ornamentation in [Bach](#)—Kirkpatrick said, "I think what you do is learn all the rules and then play it as you feel it." It seems to me that theory in its proper use is a guide to practice. It's learning the rules, and then composition is forgetting them.

FRANK J. OTERI: That Kirkpatrick remark is very interesting... You mentioned Babbitt. I don't know if you're familiar with the pianist [Martin Goldray](#) who did a disc of Babbitt's piano music for [CRI](#), I guess about a decade ago?

EDWARD T. CONE: No, I don't know that one.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a wonderful, wonderful disc. The playing is rapturous; it's joyous. [Ingram Marshall](#) told me about this interview with Martin Goldray. He'd never studied the theories behind Babbitt's music.

EDWARD T. CONE: He hadn't?

FRANK J. OTERI: No, he learned the notes and he played it, and brought into this music so many insights that probably, if he got so bogged down in the theory behind it, he would have been terrified to do what he did with it. The notes were right. He wasn't changing anything. It's a wonderful recording that begs the question, should performers always be well-versed in the theory behind the music they're playing?

EDWARD T. CONE: I think it entirely depends on what use they make of it. For example, I've played some of Babbitt. When I did, I would analyze it as closely as I could, sometimes with help from him. Then in playing it I always felt that this had to be simply submerged and become completely in the background, and that I would then play as if I were playing Beethoven.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's [a wonderful disc](#) of Roger Sessions's piano music performed by [Robert Helps](#) where I almost feel like he is making Sessions's music sound like [Chopin](#). It's wonderful. I guess the theory came back in when I was rereading your essay on Sessions's sense of the melodic line and I had gotten that from that performance. But until I reread your essay again—I had forgotten because I read it almost twenty years ago—I never had gotten that from any of the analysis I've read about Sessions, but it was clearly there. In a way, performing a work is making some sort of statement of the analysis; it is a form of criticism of the composition. It is a way of showing the world what you feel is in that piece.

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes. I've written an article you may not have read because it came out in England in a book on piano playing, "The Pianist as Critic." In it, I went into this whole point of view that any performance is a criticism of the work. It seems to me that a performance should be a criticism of the work, but should not be an analysis of a work. The analysis should have been done. The performance is not the analysis.

5. Is Anything Beyond Analysis?

FRANK J. OTERI: To take the question to the next level, I've also recently read this essay you wrote called "Beyond Analysis." I'd like to talk about music that can't be analyzed.

EDWARD T. CONE: Well, such as what?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, is there music that can't be analyzed?

EDWARD T. CONE: [laughs] I suspect I would have to say that if ultimately the music can't be analyzed, then it fails as music. That doesn't mean to say that we can analyze it. It may take another generation to analyze it. For example, I've never felt happy about the third of Schoenberg's *Three Piano Pieces, opus 11*. I can't analyze it. That doesn't mean that someday somebody won't analyze it in a way that I would find perfectly convincing, but I haven't seen it yet.

FRANK J. OTERI: There was a charge levied in the 19th century that Beethoven's fourth piano concerto was somehow beyond analysis.

EDWARD T. CONE: You see, we now know that's not true. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: But what about the [indeterminate music](#) of the '50s and the experiments of Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, people like that, and the more experimental things in electronic music in the '60s and early '70s? Is that music analyzable, and to what end?

EDWARD T. CONE: Take indeterminate music. You can certainly analyze it from the point of view of figuring out how it was produced and what the rules were by which it was produced, but it seems to me that's quite different. Analyzing the way the music was written is quite different from analyzing music from the effect that it has on the hearer, or that the hearer can grasp. That's the only kind of analysis I'm interested in. I'm not interested in how, except intellectually as a sort of puzzle to see how the thing was arrived at. What I am interested in is how it sounds. That's the thing, it seems to me, that separates Babbitt's music, for example, from let's say Boulez's when he was writing strict twelve-tone music. Boulez's music is very easy to analyze from the point of view of learning the rules by which he wrote it. I mean, he's specified those and you can trace it very easily. The problem comes in trying to make sense out of your impression of the piece as you hear it. In the case of Babbitt, it's also equally easy to learn what the rules are by which he wrote it. But when you try to analyze it in terms of what you hear you get much more of a reward because, as he has always said, there was no substitute for close listening to everything thing that you're doing. I have a feeling that the indeterminate people, on one hand, and the strict twelve-toners, the very strict ones on the other hand, come together in this. That is, neither one of them has any interest in what the ultimate product is going to sound like. Whereas Babbitt can point to construction strictly posited as Boulez or any other from that crowd, yet his final decisions are always dependent upon what his ear tells him. Therefore when you listen to it your ear can find some sort of sympathy with his ear.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's so interesting that you say that because in general, the common perception is that Babbitt is one of those guys.

EDWARD T. CONE: I know, but this is quite wrong.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes, I think so, too.

EDWARD T. CONE: [Perle](#) is the same way.

FRANK J. OTERI: [Carter](#), as well.

EDWARD T. CONE: Yeah, but Carter, of course, was never a strict twelve-toner.

6. On Performances

FRANK J. OTERI: We featured a webcast on NewMusicBox of the [Pacifica Quartet](#) playing all of [Carter's string quartets](#). In that performance, there was stuff in that music that never jumped out before—it dances, it's joyous. Many people's common perception is, "Oh this is scary, frightening, complicated modern music." I guess if it isn't given enough care in performance, it can sound that way. I think a lot of the more complex music, the more chromatic and rhythmically complex music that was written in the 20th century, gets the bad rep that it has because a lot of the time it just gets played really badly, and people can't separate the composition from the performance. Which takes us back to our earlier discussion, how do we birth pieces? If a piece is only going to get done once, how can you ever have a relationship with that piece if you've only heard it one time?

EDWARD T. CONE: I know, and that performance may not have been a good performance.

FRANK J. OTERI: And talking to Babbitt about this with orchestral pieces, it's been a disaster.

EDWARD T. CONE: I'm sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: He's almost never gotten a satisfactory orchestral performance.

EDWARD T. CONE: Really? Not even the last one, when [Taub](#) did the last piano concerto?

FRANK J. OTERI: With [Levine](#)...

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: That was the exception, of course.

EDWARD T. CONE: I would think so.

FRANK J. OTERI: In general, he even said that he has gotten better performances out of the [Juilliard Orchestra](#).

EDWARD T. CONE: Better than the professional orchestras... I remember the first time I heard [Sessions](#)'s Second Piano Sonata and it was [Andor Foldes](#) playing it. And it seemed to me absolutely incomprehensible. And it was only later that I realized that it wasn't the piece that was incomprehensible, it was the performance.

7. Is Analysis and Criticism Always Necessary?

FRANK J. OTERI: This leads us to another area. Is there music that needs analysis in order to be appreciated? You said that you don't like the 3rd piece of the [Opus 11](#) of Schoenberg because you were not able to analyze it.

EDWARD T. CONE: Well, no. I wouldn't say I don't like it because I couldn't analyze it. I tried to analyze it because I didn't like it. And I failed. [laughs] I wouldn't say that my disliking it is the result of not being able to analyze it, I'd say my not being able to analyze it is a result of my not liking it. My attempt to analyze it was because I didn't like it and felt I didn't understand it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is there music that you treasure and love but have absolutely no interest in analyzing?

EDWARD T. CONE: It depends on what you mean by analyze. Obviously, I can't take the time to analyze every piece that I listen to and like. Let's put it this way. Most of the music I like, I wouldn't say all, I know when I hear it that if I tried to analyze it that it would be something I could successfully do. For example, I've recently been looking at some piece by [Debussy](#), which rather baffled me for a long time. These pieces baffled me simply because I did not know why they went tonally where they did. So, on the other hand, I liked them enough to want to approach them and find out why they worked. There are a number of pieces like that that I just don't have the time to look into that would be rewarding if I did take the time as I found out in the case of the Debussy pieces. It's very rare that I find pieces like the third Schoenberg piece. I tried and I failed and I'm sure the failure is mine. Well, actually, I'm not sure the failure is mine [laughs], but I'm willing to accept the possibility that the failure is mine.

FRANK J. OTERI: When I have a negative initial reaction to a piece, my first assumption is that I somehow didn't get it because, after all, someone brought this forth into the world. The composer made a series of choices that he or she believed in, and who am I to say this is wrong? Which reminds me of something else you wrote in your essay "Schubert's Unfinished Business:" the essential act of criticism is appreciation not judgment.

EDWARD T. CONE: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's an attempt to figure out why something's good, not why something's bad or to cast dispersions. But the perception of [what constitutes criticism](#) seems to have changed in our lifetime.

EDWARD T. CONE: Well, that's too bad.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you read newspaper reviews of concerts?

EDWARD T. CONE: Oh, yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: What are your thoughts about the writing?

EDWARD T. CONE: In general, it seems to me that first of all the emphasis is usually on the performance rather than the composition. In either case, it's always based on generalizations or on specific points with a remarkable lack of evidence. For example, you'll read that a performance lacked energy. How do you specify that? What does it mean that it lacked energy? Does it mean that it wasn't fast enough? Does it mean that it didn't have enough rhythmic precision? It doesn't mean a thing to say that the performance lacks energy!

FRANK J. OTERI: That's interesting. I was at a performance recently and all the people I spoke with in the audience agreed that it lacked energy. How else could it be said? Everybody on stage seemed to be just going through the motions. They didn't seem to believe in the music. Now that's a very subjective reaction but it was one that everyone I spoke to shared. How could any of us know what was inside the minds of these players? Maybe they did believe in the music, but for some reason they were not making me or anyone else believe in it. And the same is true for writing about music. If you're bringing that enthusiasm, there's something missing.

8. Teaching and Liberal Education

FRANK J. OTERI: You taught for many years here at Princeton...

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: What did you see as your principal goal as a teacher?

EDWARD T. CONE: I would say that the principal goal was to get them to listen closely. Whether teaching them appreciation or history or composition or just plain counterpoint, it's really to educate the ear so that they're listening precisely and intelligently.

FRANK J. OTERI: You had a real mentor for this in [Roger Sessions](#).

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes. That was always his point of view, I think.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what has been Sessions' chief legacy to you as a musician, using that word once again as a general term to describe everything you have done in your life?

EDWARD T. CONE: First of all, purely in technical terms, he taught me the importance of sheer technique. As he put it, technique means being able to do whatever you want to do. And his idea of going through the drills of counterpoint and harmony and strict composition were exactly that: to give you the opportunity to try many things and experimenting in all of them but always with the intention of finding ways to do what you want to do. That, of course, is something that I can never thank him enough for. Because when I went to him I had all kinds of ideas, but I didn't know what to do with them.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, Sessions was a major force on the music department of this university for well over a generation. Is that influence still there?

EDWARD T. CONE: I couldn't say. I'm really not close enough to the department to be able to say so. But certainly there's no personal influence there because the generation he taught is now gone.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you keep up with the music department at Princeton?

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes, but only at a distance. I feel it's not a good idea to interfere once you've retired. I give a lecture occasionally. And I occasionally go to lectures, and most of the concerts, but I can't really tell you much about the day-to-day activities that go on.

FRANK J. OTERI: At the beginning of our talk you said that you did not want to be described as a theorist because theory is so specialized. I still remember being in graduate school almost twenty years ago and in the middle of reading all these hardcore analyses of pieces, your essays were a breath of fresh air. In the middle of a discussion about a [Brahms Intermezzo](#), you'd bring up [Sherlock Holmes](#), or you would talk about painting. The study of music has

become so rarified and specialized, and the general public doesn't understand it. But this goes both ways. Many of the people who are studying music do not understand the general public.

EDWARD T. CONE: That's one reason why I think it is important for musicians to get a good liberal education and it's one of the reasons that I didn't want to go to a conservatory. I think it's very important that musicians learn what's going on in all the other realms of artistic endeavor and cultural life in general. That's one of the things again that was very important to Sessions. I've just been reading this [new biography](#) by [Frederik Prausnitz](#) and it makes it clear how so much of his earlier life was spent in Europe in the company of artists of all kinds and intellectuals of all kinds. I think that's very important. And it's too bad if the current generation is getting away from it.

9. The Point of View of the Practicing Musician

FRANK J. OTERI: I wanted to talk with you about the duality of being a composer and someone who is an advocate for other composers. For me, the most interesting writers about music have always been composers. And ironically enough, the most interesting composers are the ones who have also written about other people's music. I always like to respond to people who say, "[Schoenberg](#) killed contemporary music" by asking, "You mean [Harold](#)?"

EDWARD T. CONE: [/laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: The idea he promulgated about practitioners having a conflict of interest if they are writing about music, which is still widely believed in critical circles, seems antithetical to really insightful writing. It seems to be a conflict of interest if you're not a practitioner.

EDWARD T. CONE: Which is why of all the critics that we've had in the 20th century in this country, the one who was always the most interesting, even though you disagreed with him on many things, was [Virgil Thomson](#). I'm talking about professional critics, not people who write occasionally about music. Of all the professional critics, he was the one who always brought the point of view of a practicing musician.

FRANK J. OTERI: So are there negative aspects of being a composer and a critic?

EDWARD T. CONE: I think one thing that one has to constantly guard against is making generalizations and then feeling that one ought to apply them to one's own music. If, for example, I had been writing about contemporary music at a certain period in my life, I might well have taken an anti-twelve-tone stance and then I'd have cut myself off from a very important influence on my own music because at a certain period I became aware that there was a lot that [twelve-tone composition](#) had to offer me and I began to use it in my own way. Although I never became strictly a twelve-tone composer and haven't used it for some time now... Nevertheless, it was very important for me. But had I been writing too much before that, I might well have taken a stand on twelve-tone composition. And once you put it in words, in print, it's very hard to go back on. [/laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: It's an interesting thing, getting to your own music now. You've written quite a lot of music but only a tiny bit of it is available on one CRI recording, [the status of which](#) is up in the air now...

EDWARD T. CONE: Yes...

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's out there in the world, and presumably it will be out there again at some point as an imprint of [New World Records](#). So in a sense your music becomes a part of the larger music history, which you've been writing about your whole life. Where do you see your music in this history?

EDWARD T. CONE: I couldn't answer that, really...

FRANK J. OTERI: Where would you want to see it?

EDWARD T. CONE: That's another question! [*laughs*] I would like to see it as contributing to trying to make sense out of the huge number of styles that became available in the 20th century and trying to put some sort of order into them, making connections between the best music of the past and the best music of the present. And I would like to hope that I've made some contribution to that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, certainly, that Serenade for Flute and Strings is a gorgeous piece...

EDWARD T. CONE: Thank you. There's one you see that was "commissioned" and yet the Contemporary Music Ensemble has never done it again.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, other ensembles should be doing it! It should be promoted to all the groups that attend the conference of [Chamber Music America](#).

10. How to End?

FRANK J. OTERI: In your essays on musical form you talk about the beginning of a piece and the end of a piece, and how do you ever know how to begin or end something? It is the most elusive question.

EDWARD T. CONE: As a composer I think it's easy to know when something begins. I don't think I've ever had the experience of getting a musical idea and feeling that it belonged in the middle of something. I've always been able to think fairly consecutively, so when I get a musical idea it begins something. How to end something, that's more difficult. I think you tell how difficult it was just by listening to the music of [Dvorak](#). Have you ever noticed how difficult it was for him to end a composition? You think it's over and there's another coda tacked on to that coda. Then you think that's it and then there's another little bit tacked onto that. The poor man never seemed to be able to come to an end. I think it's a problem that all of us have, but at some point we have to stand back from it and say that's it, I've said what I needed to say. It's finished. I don't know how you do it; you just have to know. That's probably what makes a really successful form successful, where it ends.

FRANK J. OTERI: On that note, Thank you.

EDWARD T. CONE: Well, thank you.