

# Daily

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The eccentric orbit of avant garde vocalist and promoter

## Thomas Buckner

has taken him from the West Coast milieu of Robert Ashley to the heart of experimental music in New York. By Robert Barry. Photography by David Brandon Geeting

In the early 1980s, crossing Manhattan's Canal Street was a dangerous operation. "You'd take your life in your hands when you cross Canal Street," says Thomas Buckner. "The traffic was terrible." This, for Buckner, was unfortunate, since he found himself having to cross that road on a pretty regular basis to get from his new loft on Varick Street, a block north of Canal Street, to Robert Ashley's apartment, just one block south of the intersection. Ashley's mantra back in those days was "repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat. You'd finish doing this long piece," Buckner recalls, "and you'd hear, let's do it again." Only that way, Ashley believed, could the character of the music develop organically from the words. "So he and I would get together and work pretty often, trying to develop the style." A style, now indelibly associated with Ashley's music, that Buckner characterises as "singing – in a manner of speaking".

Buckner back then was in his early forties, recently divorced, knew almost no one in the city after decades spent on the West Coast. But he had just reached a decision. "When I was in the Bay Area, I was a general baritone. I sang oratorios and operas and things. But I decided it would be good to just sing the music of living composers. That was my project."

It was a conviction that would have profound consequences not just for Buckner himself but for the contemporary music scene in New York and beyond for decades to come.

His Interpretations concert series has now been running for 32 years nonstop, almost – the pandemic aside – with a consistently brave and adventurous line-up of composers and improvisors. He has released half a dozen solo albums and performed on around 50 other recordings with Joëlle Léandre, William Parker and The Arditti Quartet, among many others. He has also been a tireless commissioner of new works, with his annual solo presentation of all new pieces becoming semi-legendary in the city. Around 100 compositions have either been written for or dedicated to Buckner, including important works by the likes of Roscoe Mitchell, Annea Lockwood, Alvin Lucier, Phill Niblock, Wadada Leo Smith, Christian Wolff, Bun-Ching Lam, and, of course, Robert Ashley himself, with whom he collaborated for 35 years.

Buckner has played an important role especially in bringing people together. When the Macao born

composer Bun-Ching Lam moved to Paris, Buckner introduced her to Etel Adnan, an old friend from his days in the Bay Area who came to his very first concert. Lam and Adnan became firm friends and the former would set several of Adnan's poems to music. When Robert Ashley needed help upgrading from his old Gulbransen Palace Organ and getting to grips with MIDI, Buckner introduced him to composer Tom Hamilton, who became his assistant for electronics.

"I'm interested in the degree to which a composer chooses to allow freedom or chooses to impose strict ideas," he tells me via Zoom one day in February. "No solution that I've run into does not bear some interesting fruit. And it can go the whole gamut." Buckner's activities in the field of new music likewise.

Buckner and Ashley first came across each other while both were still out west in the Bay Area. By the tail end of the 70s, Ashley had been Director of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland for a decade, and Buckner had been running a concert series and record label called 1750 Arch out of a residential home in Berkeley for eight years. 1750 Arch had staged 100 concerts a year and released over 50 LPs, including important recordings of Conlon Nanarrow's player piano studies and the first compilation of electronic music by an all-female line-up. 1750 Arch's repertoire is pretty eclectic, taking in everything from modern jazz and contemporary ensembles from China and Japan to Elizabethan music by John Dowland and Thomas Morley. Only at the very end of its lifespan did they finally get a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to commission a single new work to be performed by The 1750 Arch Ensemble. They chose the man they considered "the most interesting mind in contemporary music": Robert Ashley.

"I was lucky," Buckner reflects. "I didn't know him out on the West Coast. Because we were both busy all the time doing different things. But luckily for me, he'd heard me sing and, instead of writing us an occasional piece, he made an arrangement for chamber orchestra of an aria from the opera he was currently working on, *Atalanta*."

The end of the 1970s was an uncertain time for Buckner. With his first marriage coming to an end and six kids under his wing, "it was a big mess", he sighs. Invited to attend the weeklong New Music New York

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Thomas Buckner at home in New York, February 2022

festival at The Kitchen, he packed the children off to stay with his mother, the philanthropist Helen Watson Buckner, while he spent the week practically camped in the performance space at The Kitchen, soaking up as much music as he could. "It really opened my eyes," he says of the festival, which included performances by Laurie Anderson, Tony Conrad and Julius Eastman, as well as future Buckner collaborators Alvin Lucier and Phill Niblock. "I heard so many interesting things and met so many wonderful people. I said to myself, if you're really serious about making new music your focus, maybe you should move back to New York where at that time there was so much more activity."

By pure chance and unbeknown to either of them at the time, the apartment Buckner found for himself in the city was just two blocks away from where Ashley himself had just moved, either side of that treacherous Canal Street crossing.

Ashley was not used to working with singers like Buckner. Having spent the 70s at Mills, he had grown used to student performers. "Nobody had ever really taken the trouble to really learn the pieces," Buckner says. But as someone who had trained with Benjamin DeLoache at Yale and Martial Singher of the Metropolitan Opera, he was incredibly dedicated. "I worked and I worked, learning that piece," he adds.

Every nuance of the speech rhythms Ashley wanted he had intricately notated and Buckner learnt every crotchet and every quaver, practising for hours at home, sometimes with improvised accompaniment from his flatmate at the time, the drummer Big Black (formerly of Dizzy Gillespie's band). When Ashley heard the fruits of all this work, "he was flabbergasted". He came out to Berkeley to watch the performance by The 1750 Arch Ensemble "and afterwards he said, would you like to come and join the band – our next performance is in Rome. And I did."

Buckner's first gig with Ashley's own ensemble at the Teatro Olimpico in Rome ended up on the Lovely Music triple LP *Atalanta (Acts Of God)*. He still sounds giddy just thinking about it. "I'd just gone to New York and been there for a few months and I was in the band! With Bob! It was incredible..."

As we talk via Zoom, I can see the sunlight streaming in through the windows behind him, giving Buckner a strangely beatific air. It's morning in New York and "an absolutely beautiful clear day. But it's cold," he says. The past two years have been tough. This is a man who built his life around concerts: attending them, presenting them, performing. Then the pandemic, a series of lockdowns, compounded by a kidney operation that he took almost a year to recover from, resulted in the longest break of his performing career. "But you can always keep practising!" he asserts with a smile. "I used to think it was the people who kept working when there was no opportunity to perform who would be the ones that would be interesting. Because you have to. You have to do it everyday. There's so so much to keep learning."

Buckner learnt about the importance of a rigorous practice schedule from The Art Ensemble Of Chicago. The year was 1968 and Buckner was working as a sort of gofer in the mathematical psychology department at Stanford University. He had come to California from his Westchester, New York birthplace at the start of the decade. "I didn't run away from home," he insists, but I get the feeling the trip was not exactly made with

his parents' blessing. Here was the scion of a wealthy New York family, the grandson of IBM founder Thomas J Watson, abandoning his place at Yale to work an entry level manual job at – somewhat ironically – an IBM factory (they had no idea who he was) in San Francisco, a city with a burgeoning reputation for impropriety and general licentiousness. "They knew I was leaving." They also expected him to return after one semester.

Living off the pay from his job, he shared a room in a boarding house with an alcoholic piano player who introduced Buckner to the city's nightlife and helped him get his first gig. He had always sung. Even when Buckner was a child, his father would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of him singing: "I would just sit up in bed singing." He sang Christmas carols at family parties and once made an appearance on the radio singing at a Salvation Army kettle. "But I didn't have any encouragement from them to go into singing as a profession. I was supposed to be a businessman."

In San Francisco, Buckner started singing in local jazz clubs, practising the standards in his head by day as he worked at the factory, with the repetitive churn of the machinery acting as an impromptu backbeat. After about a year of that, it became clear that he had no intention of going back to Yale. Instead he signed up at a co-educational university in Santa Clara (Yale was male-only until 1969). He composed the music for a college Shakespeare Festival and sang madrigals in the street to sell tickets. Upon graduation, he enrolled at Stanford to study linguistics, only to realise that everybody else in the department could speak seven languages ("I did not have a facility for languages," he admits). Dropping out in 1965, he found himself with a 1A classification (fit and available for military service) at the height of the Vietnam War draft (by chance, his number was never called up).

By the time he found himself working at Stanford, Buckner was clearly at a bit of a loose end. He found himself hanging around the psychology department in spare minutes, eavesdropping on the animated discussions of a group of young grad students. One of them was a man named David Wessel, formerly of the University of Illinois, later to become Director of Pedagogy at IRCAM. John Chowning, the inventor of FM synthesis who was his colleague both at Stanford and at IRCAM, credited Wessel for bringing "music to the scientists and science to the musicians". Buckner soon realised they had a lot in common. They started hanging out off campus, going in to San Francisco together for concerts by Miles Davis and others. One night they saw The Borodin Quartet play Webern's *Five Movements* and Buckner walked out of the gig thinking, "if music can do that, then I'm going to be spending my life in music – whether I produce it or sing it. Whatever it turns out I can do, I want to do that."

Wessel and Buckner started improvising together with a flautist friend, sending reel-to-reel tapes back and forth to Chicago, sharing their ideas with other improvisors Wessel had known in his University of Illinois days. One day some of Wessel's Chicago friends came down to California. He got them a place to stay – a basic room with a kitchenette along one wall and a bathroom – in a house across the street from Wessel's place in Palo Alto. When Buckner went round to his friend's place for dinner, he could hear music coming from the house across the street. "The

music was coming out the house all through dinner and all through the evening. And we went to bed with the music still in our ears. And we woke up the next morning to the sound of them practising."

After breakfast, Buckner went over there with Wessel to introduce himself and found Roscoe Mitchell with his percussion set-up and several saxophones, Lester Bowie with a bass drum and a trumpet, and Malachi Favors, bass in hand and a whole panoply of small instruments: bells, whistles, duck calls, and so on. "That's what they did," Buckner realised. "They came to California and they played. All day long and into the night. Every. Day. I said, I see! That's what you have to do."

A few days after our first conversation, I call up Buckner again. He seems a little distracted at first. I've interrupted his preparations for his upcoming concert at Roulette in Brooklyn, singing newly commissioned works by Earl Howard, Pauline Kim Harris and JD Parran, accompanied by Harris's partner in the group String Noise, Conrad Harris on violin, plus Kyle Motl on bass and Andrew Drury playing percussion. But pretty soon we're back to chatting about the many different composers he's worked with over the years – people like Annea Lockwood ("has the most amazing ear"), Roscoe Mitchell ("unbelievably thorough") and Pauline Kim Harris (a "wonderful violinist" and a "very interesting composer"). He keeps coming back to the pieces he's currently working on. It's clear he can't wait to get back on the stage at Roulette for another Interpretations concert.

His enthusiasm for the new is palpable. When he says, "Eventually music will come up with something that you won't accept," he sounds positively excited by the prospect. "You think of yourself as really openminded and interested in all the stuff that people are doing, but sometimes it takes a little getting used to. For example, I had trouble enjoying so-called noise music – until I didn't. But Roscoe told me that the first time he heard Ornette, he didn't get it."

Interpretations started back in January 1990. For a long time, after the end of 1750 Arch and his move to New York, Buckner had shied away from arranging a concert series. "I had no connections," he shrugs. "I just decided: I'll go to concerts and if I like the music I'll introduce myself and ask if maybe we can get together and make some music and see what comes out of it."

Meanwhile, he was touring with Ashley, as well as various excursions with a trio called Space formed with Roscoe Mitchell and wind player Gerald Oshita. Space operated according to a similarly intense schedule to the one Buckner had witnessed Mitchell, Favors and Bowie keeping to in Palo Alto: whenever they had a run of concerts coming up the three would meet, perhaps at Mitchell's place in Madison, Wisconsin or Oshita's in California and "rehearse all day every day" for a week or more until they felt ready to take it on the road. One day they were offered a show in Portland, Maine, and wanted to find a gig in New York around the same time. Buckner asked around and a friend suggested talking to Robert Browning, director of the World Music Institute, since they put on shows all over the city. It just so happened that Browning had a festival of improvised music coming up in June "and that was exactly the right time".

Space: (from left) Roscoe Mitchell, Thomas Buckner, Gerald Oshita

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Buckner had missed presenting his own shows. But at the same time, he had become so laser-focused on developing as a performer that he didn't want to give up the time. "It turned out the World Music Institute was extremely efficient and did a wonderful job. So I asked Robert and he agreed that he would co-produce that concert with me. By January of the following year, we were ready to have the beginning of the series." 32 years later, a few changes in venue notwithstanding, the series is still going.

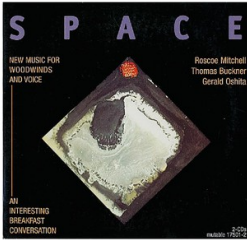
To some, it would seem as if Buckner has lived something of a charmed life. He's had what he calls "a small independent income" from his family's wealth. "I lived about half my life as if I didn't have it, and then I decided that it was a resource that could be used for new music – why not use it?"

As a result, he doesn't have to fundraise for his concerts – "I *present* the concerts," he says. Those concerts and the many commissions that came with them have been a gift to composers and to contemporary music at large. There are more than a 100 pieces of music in the world today that probably wouldn't exist without him – and some of them are amazing. The austere elusiveness of Lucier's *Music For Baritone* and *Slow Sweep Pure Wave Oscillators*, for instance, or the elemental weirdness of Lockwood's *Duende*.

"I have a hell of a lot less money than I was born with," Buckner says with a shrug. "And that's fine with me." □ Interpretations takes place at New York's Roulette until 12 May. [interpretations.info](http://interpretations.info), [thomasbuckner.com](http://thomasbuckner.com), [mutable.bandcamp.com](http://mutable.bandcamp.com)



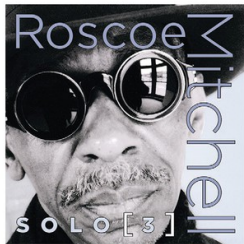
**Julian Cowley** presents a guide to some key recordings on Thomas Buckner's **Mutable Music** label, from unique composed happenings to heavyweight improvised encounters



### Space

*New Music For Woodwinds And Voice / An Interesting Breakfast Conversation*  
2×CD 2000

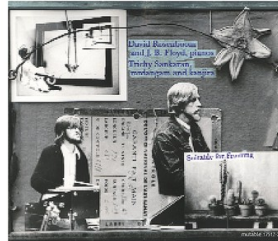
Launching his Mutable Music label at the start of a new century, Buckner delved into the archive of 1750 Arch Records, which he had founded in 1974 and ran for a decade. He opted to reissue the recorded legacy of *Space*, a trio featuring interplay of his own voice with a variety of woodwinds in the hands of Gerald Oshita and Roscoe Mitchell. The first set features compositions by the two horn players; the second is devoted to group improvisation. In terms of musical conception and favoured sonorities Oshita, who died in 1992, proved a stimulating match for Mitchell. Buckner, soon to establish his reputation as a superb interpreter of Robert Ashley's texts, here displays imaginative breadth and versatility, weaving wordless vocals into the music's fabric.



### Roscoe Mitchell *Solo [3]*

3×CD 2003  
While Mitchell's name remains inextricably bound to the ground-breaking music he has made over many years in the context of The Art Ensemble Of Chicago, the continuing development of his creative identity has received invaluable practical support from Buckner. *Solo [3]* is the expansive self-portrait of a visionary and multifaceted musician. *Solar Flares*, at the heart of the triptych, is a series of alto saxophone improvisations that radiate his characteristic blending of energetic spontaneity and purposeful clarity. It

is framed by a selection of overdubbed pieces, where this singular soloist channels multiple streams of invention, and by an extended articulation of his vision using the language of percussion.



### David Roseboom/JB Floyd/Trichy Sankaran *Suitable For Framing*

CD 2004  
One highlight in the 1750 Arch discography is a 1978 collaboration between composer David Rosenboom and synthesizer pioneer Donald Buchla. Six years earlier, Rosenboom visited London to demonstrate music generated by brainwaves, at the International Carnival of Experimental Sound. JB Floyd also participated in that festival, as a member of multimedia group Electric Stereopticon. In 1975, in Illinois, Floyd and Rosenboom recorded an LP of piano duets, including a structured improvisation initially written for and performed at ICES. Buckner brought that scarce document back into circulation through this reissue, with additional material. Accompanied on one track by Indian percussionist Trichy Sankaran the duo's dynamic pianism runs like a tidal surge through this music's interwoven intricacy. The overall impact remains joyously overwhelming. Floyd's later solo music has also found a home in the Mutable Music catalogue.

### Leroy Jenkins' Driftwood *The Art Of Improvisation*

CD 2005  
It was a concert of music by Roscoe Mitchell that prompted Leroy Jenkins to join Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, where he evolved a distinctively personal take on the expressive potential of the violin. On this fascinating quartet recording Min Xiao-Fen plays pipa, revealing a real affinity between sounds she draws from that Chinese lute and Jenkins' idiosyncratic approach to his own instrument. This is chamber music that eludes the clichés and conventions that term might suggest. As such it parallels the violinist's work alongside bassist Sironé and drummer

Jerome Cooper in The Revolutionary Ensemble. Mutable Music has reissued that trio's scarce mid-70s album *The Psyche*, and their concert recording *Beyond The Boundary Of Time* (2008), which is dedicated in memory of Jenkins. Cooper's solo work is also well represented in the label's output.



### Dan Joseph *Archaea*

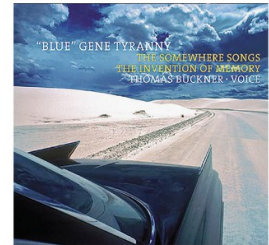
CD 2006  
*Tonalization (For The Afterlife)*

CD 2011  
Dan Joseph describes himself as an "unaffiliated" composer, an independent New Yorker now in his fifties, working outside academic and institutional frameworks. The context he has evolved for himself has taken shape through study with such luminaries as Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley and Alvin Curran. The character of his music hinges on the hammer dulcimer, his instrument of choice, regularly complemented in his ensemble by violin, cello, harpsichord and percussion. The compositions on these two releases, which form the heart of his slender discography, are appealingly nimble and lean essays in post-minimalist design. Grounded in the patterned chiming of an archaic instrument they offer an attractive synthesis of urban refinement with the communicative directness found in folk traditions.

### Thomas Buckner *New Music For Baritone And Chamber Ensemble*

CD 2007  
*New Music For Electronic And Recorded Media*, issued by 1750 Arch in 1977, offered a then all too rare opportunity to hear innovative work by seven women composers, including Pauline Oliveros, Laurie Spiegel and Annea Lockwood. 30 years later, Buckner recorded *Luminescence*, a song cycle he had commissioned from Lockwood. It's an evocation of Lebanon's Mediterranean coast, setting texts by Etel Adnan, and performed with atmospheric subtlety by the singer with members of Petr Kotik's SEM Ensemble. The programme

includes two other commissions: vibrant contexts provided by Tania León for a selection of Cuban poems, and an elegant composition by Kotik which successfully digests goblets of Buckminster Fuller's notoriously sinewy prose.



### "Blue" Gene Tyranny *The Somewhere Songs/The Invention Of Memory*

CD 2008  
The late Robert Sheff (aka "Blue") was an intriguingly tangential thinker. Translated into musical terms, his perceptual quirks made him an ideal contributor to Robert Ashley's projects. His own compositions, in words and music, are seductively enigmatic. Whether seamlessly blending environmental recordings with electronic sounds, as in *The Somewhere Songs*, or compactly scored for chamber group, as in *The Invention Of Memory*, they tease familiarity into strangeness. Buckner's polished baritone draws out the haunting glow encrypted within Sheff's imagery, his strong, clear voice – a storyteller's resource – catching flickers from what one text identifies as "*the Fata Morgana of the mind*".

### Jérôme Bourdellon/Thomas Buckner/ Dalila Khatir/Roscoe Mitchell *Kirilli Et Les Nymphéas: Hommage À Monet*

CD+DVD 2008  
Buckner's voice and Roscoe Mitchell's saxophones were heard together again in Paris in 2007, improvising with soprano Dalila Khatir, and the flutes and bass clarinet of Jérôme Bourdellon. The project was a collaboration with artist Alain Kirilli, who installed an ensemble of sculptural forms in a room at the Musée de l'Orangerie that also houses Monet's famous suite of paintings *Les Nymphéas (Water Lilies)*. The physical movements of the musicians were as integral to this event as their sounds, so in addition to its audio dimension this package includes visual documentation, in the form of a DVD and also a book of photographs, plus a reflective essay by philosopher Paul Audi. Eloquent testimony to Buckner's commitment to the formation of enduring collaborative friendships. □

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