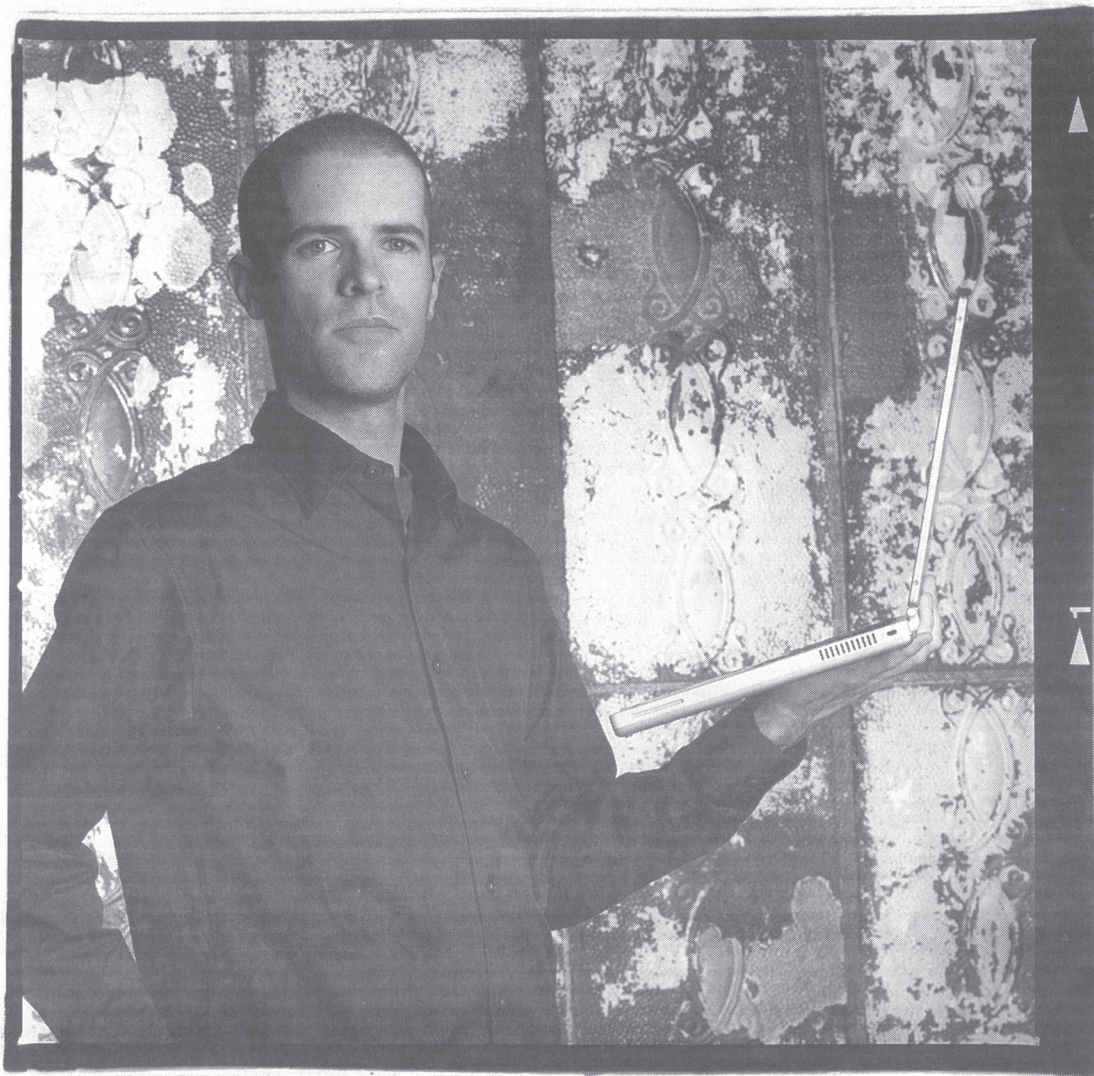


RICHARD CHARTIER'S MIDTOWN apartment is a neat freak's midcentury modernist dream. The cozy abode of the Baltimore-based sound artist and graphic designer is almost gallery immaculate, though not ascetic. It doesn't contain much, but what it does looks handpicked and well cared for. The abstract paintings hanging on his walls look placed by someone who cares *how* and *where* paintings are hung. Items on tables and countertops look placed just so, compositional elements on horizontal canvases. It's the sort of space Mies van der Rohe would go to kick up his heels.

Such stylish spartanism is exactly the living area you'd expect from an artist who, since 1998, has explored the almost imperceptible area between silence and sound in his works. Lumped into a late-'90s electronic minimalist cache along with Bernard Günter, Taylor Deupree, Carsten Nicolai, and other electronic composers, Chartier's ascent from relative newcomer to respected peer was quick and thorough. His debut proper, 1998's *direct.incidental.consequential*, came out on the relatively small electro-acoustic label Intransitive Recordings, but it spawned later albums on Deupree's label 12k (1999's *O/r*), Japan's minimalist benchmark imprint Meme, and Günter's label Trente Oiseaux. Chartier's fourth release, 2000's *Series*, was awarded an honorable mention in digital music at Austria's esteemed Prix Ars Electronica festival in 2001. His work was exhibited in the Whitney Museum of America Art's 2002 Biennial, he's performed at such lauded electronic music festivals as Montreal's Mutek, and he's played clubs from Tokyo to Berlin and Washington, where he was co-founder and resident DJ for Blue Room's weekly Filler night from May 2001 to June 2003.

And his stock is still rising. This year alone Chartier has released a new album, *Two Locations*, on his own Line imprint (a subset of 12k), as well as reissued a remastered *direct* and an odds/ends compilation *Other Materials* on his own 3particles label. His



SAM HOLDEN

It's Oh So Quiet . . .

RICHARD CHARTIER BREAKS A NEW SOUND BARRIER WITH HIS NEAR-SILENT ELECTRONIC ART

BY BRET MCCABE

sound work was included as part of *The Moderns* exhibit at Castello di Rivoli in Torino, Italy, and he recently returned from Japan, where he and Deupree completed a collaborative sound installation at Tokyo's InterCommunication Center, a museum of contemporary art. This fall, he travels to Europe for a number of festivals—Sightsonic in York, England, the Dublin Electronic Arts Festival, and the Observatori Festival in Valencia, Spain. Not a bad résumé for somebody who has been working seriously in his medium for less than a decade.

Do not, however, assume that Chartier, 32, is an arrogant, pretentious fustbudget. This wiry man with close-cropped hair looks most comfortable in casual slacks and a T-shirt, not the track-suit-qua-H&M fashions of the club DJ or the downtown chic of the gallery parvenu. And though well versed in both esoteric electronic music and contemporary art, he comes across neither as navel-gazing as the former or as haughty as the latter.

In fact, he's humbled by his accolades—especially since he's not entirely sure *where* his work fits into the contemporary arts community. "I'm not a musician," Chartier says, in a crisply enunciating voice that could

garner voice-over work should the fancy strike. "I've never considered myself a musician. I'm not trained as a musician, I'm trained as a visual artist and graphic designer. But I work with sound. I guess I'm a composer.

"Of course, composition brings with it the idea of somebody who writes down music," he continues. "So 'composer' has a very musical connotation to it. 'Designer' has a very functional, industrial association with it, a plastic art. I'm somewhere in between, I'm not sure what you'd call it. It's a weird position, and I think a lot of sound artists find themselves in it, somewhere between the art world and the music world, between the gallery and the club. So sometimes I don't know what I am."

THOUGH THE MODERN IDEA OF SOUND as art dates to Italian futurist Luigi Russolo's 1913 essay "The Art of Noises" and has gone through numerous permutations since—from the Dadaists adding sound to visual works to John Cage's compositional chances to Philip Jeck and Christian Marclay's anything-goes sonics—"sound art" as an entity is a fairly recent development. And as practiced by Chartier, it has more in common with

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video installations than pieces of art that make noise or sound as art per se. Chartier’s installations are conceived as time-based environmental spaces; you don’t just look at something and move on. And just as video art needed about 20 years to carve a niche for itself in contemporary arts, sound art is still in the process of becoming.

Chartier’s path started with music. “If you go way back, I started out listening to electronic music” he says. “There was a time in high school when I was totally against guitars, drums, ‘natural’ instruments. I just wanted Kraftwerk and synth pop and then, later on, ‘zoviet*france: and Hafner Trio and people who were working with sound but making it really abstract. It was not song-based. It was more about the experience of listening to it. So I started making music around that period.”

Born and raised in Northern Virginia—“I grew up in Springfield, Fairfax County, attended James Madison [University], and lived in Arlington before moving here last year”—Chartier dismisses most of that work now and calls his collegiate experiments with abstract sound collages his first sound work proper. As an art major at James Madison, however, he started concentrating on his painting more than music and stopped making music altogether when he graduated in 1993.

“When I stopped making music, I stopped because I thought everything I wanted to hear was being made,” Chartier says. “I thought, *I don’t really have anything to add to this right now.* I didn’t get involved, and I just listened.”

He was painting all the while and didn’t think about making music again until encountering new computer software in 1995. “The guy who I was dating at the time had a computer and downloaded this shareware program,” Chartier remembers. “And he told me I should check it out. So I started using this program, and that night I created three pieces. [Creating music] was much more tangible to me on computer, because it’s no longer about sitting there and scrolling through menus and twisting knobs to get the right sound, which to me didn’t have any visual association with it. Here I had sound files that are wave forms that I could see, and it enabled me to understand sound, understand what it’s doing. From there, cutting it up and reconfiguring things made more sense.”

Music-making soon overtook painting, as Chartier discovered he was more adept at transferring what was in his head into sound. An admitted fan of certain examples of midcentury art—from abstract expressionism to conceptual and minimalism—Chartier was searching for his own nonreferential, non-narrative vocabulary in both mediums, and the learning curve was quicker on computer.

“I felt like I could achieve what I want-

ed to create through sound much better,” he says. “It was also a broader palette for me—though when I started out my sounds were very limited at the time. And when I went all digital [right before *Series*], my work really opened up. Sound wasn’t going out of the computer into a minidisc or a tape deck or a whatever, and then being mixed from that. That’s when I was so happy because I had finally got to manipulate silence—absolute silence. And that’s what I wanted. I wanted to incorporate that into it at the time, and get rid of my enemy, hiss. I wanted to do things that were very, very quiet.”

Chartier’s work since going digital sounds like the volume is progressively being turned down, what is there becoming so soft you wonder if anything is there at all, requiring headphones, louder volumes, and focused concentration to discern what is going on. But that deep, intense listening is an integral part of encountering Chartier’s works, and why his sound art works so well in gallery installations. It’s also why the “minimalism” tag really doesn’t apply to Chartier at all.

YOU CAN GET A SENSE OF WHERE Chartier’s sonic dynamics are coming from by watching him in a noisy room. Sitting for a Saturday lunch at a bustling café, Chartier catches every little audible quirk that pokes through the rustle of piped-in music and background chatter. A dropped piece of silverware sends his eyes in its direction. A loud, sharp laugh causes a quick smile. The kitchen bell ringing for a pickup receives a tilt from his head.

Like anybody else, he doesn’t notice the regular everything around him, but he’s highly tuned to the irregularities inside it. “We all block out our environment,” he says. “Like [at my apartment], the light rail goes by all day long and I no longer notice it. But I do notice how one driver rings the bell differently than another, or that a stop takes longer than usual.”

The idea of such inconsequential sounds becoming more significant than mere ambience is reproduced in his work, only not toward some minimalist end. Musically, ‘60s-era minimalism typically refers to short melodic fragments repeated over long periods of time, turning the repetition of sparse note sequences into hypnotic endurance pieces. Taking Chartier’s work from *direct to Other Materials* to *Series* to 2002’s *Of Surfaces* as a continuum, what marks his progression is not a stripping down of elements. If anything, his sonic palette and structures have become more sophisticated. What he has lessened is obviousness, the textural shifts between elements on *direct*’s “Kompakt Lo” or “Tonetint” are smoother on *Materials*’ “Herein, Then” and are imperceptible on *Surfaces*. This work is about subtlety at its most acute.

The disarming thing is how spacious his

work sounds. Despite the sonic subtlety infused in silence, which could feel as monochromatic as white on white, Chartier’s pieces display a startling amount of textural contrast. His work has never had a pronounced rhythmic element, but it unfolds with an understood pulse—as if your mind projects a beat onto the silence. And the effect of listening to his works on headphones at high volume is like wandering through a house in the dark and continually encountering new rooms, having to trust other senses for the information the eyes typically provide.

An almost architectural sense of place is all over *Two Locations*, his most “there” recording since his 1999 collaboration with Nosei Sakata, *o/r. Locations*’ two, 20-plus-minute pieces feel like a painter who had previously worked on small, intimate panels moving to large, 12-foot-square canvases, an indication of the artist’s rising ambitions and confidence. It’s also one of Chartier’s more accessible outings, which is in part due to recent changes in his own tastes.

“Now I’m kind of going back to warmer things,” Chartier says. “Right about 1999, everything started to get really cold. Glitch was cold. I was cold, too. But I feel myself wanting something more organic in what I do, and I think warmth is part of that. And I think that’s the whole shift in electronic music right now. People are incorporating guitars and processing acoustic instruments and doing things that are a little warmer.”

He attributes his own temperamental shift to working collaboratively with other musicians—which takes him out of his insulated personal norm—and his own change of scenery, from Arlington to Baltimore and his particularly particular apartment, where he’s been listening to more modern classical music, especially Toru Takemitsu and Arvo Pärt.

Additionally, Chartier has really only been working in sound art for less than a decade, a drop in the bucket of an artist’s life. He’s still discovering his medium and his vocabulary, which makes the prospect of him eventually figuring out what and where his sound art fits into the creative spectrum—the gallery, the club, the festival circuit, or all three—look virtually unlimited.

“I don’t work with the latest software or latest whatever,” Chartier says, admitting he’s still using the shareware program with which he first started creating music again in the mid-’90s. “I don’t care about all that stuff, because it really doesn’t limit you to explore whatever you want to explore mean, [software is] just like paint. It’s the same when you start with it. You make the software do what you want it to do.”

For more information about Richard Chartier visit www.3particles.com.