

Darcy James Argue Interview Conducted By Stuart Nicholson: 5 July 2009

Q: The institution of the big band has been around since the 1920s, what impresses me is that you seem very clear about the legacy of the big band but you have also re-conceptualised it within the 21st century and I wonder if you can talk a little about how you reached your vision for what a big band can be in the 21st century.

DJA: A lot of people when they try and make contemporary music with the big band seem intent on calling it something else, like “The Jazz Orchestra” or “The Large Ensemble,” something that makes it clear that it is not necessarily directly connected or in the genre of what people think about when they think of the big band music, the Swing bands of the 1930s. Calling it something else seems to me a bit pretentious, a state of denial, it’s a big band, right? Whether we want it to be or not, it is obviously going to be connected to that legacy. To me what is interesting is that for a while the big band completely dominated popular music in the 1930s, whenever you heard anything on the radio, whether it was “jazz” or just “jazzy,” whether there was a singer on it or it was instrumental, it was always a big band that was *the* vehicle for popular music for a good solid decade, and of course times change and people change with the advent of electronic amplification you didn’t need that many horns for a big sound, you could have that big sound with a smaller band but I was always fascinated by the incredible popularity of the big bands, and so a lot of the music I write comes out of imagining an alternate history of popular music where Elvis was always backed by a big band, David Bowie was always backed by a big band, and all the way down the line and if that had been the standard unit of popular music, what would that music now sound like? That’s like an interesting game for me, because with that many instruments there are a lot of possibilities, a lot of sonic and coloristic possibilities that are not there with smaller jazz groups, so some of

the effects and some of the devices that I use are a conscious attempt to try and incorporate some of the techniques that are more part studio production techniques trying to replicate something similar using acoustic instruments, with a big band it's possible to actually do that and it's something I find really interesting to re-focus those devices for jazz, and re-appropriate them into a jazz ensemble.

Q: I find this a fascinating aspect of your music, because for me, jazz loses the link with popular culture at its peril. Can we talk about how you have renewed this link in your music, how it relates to the current times

JDA: There is the extra musical context for some of my music, on the CD [*Infernal Machines*] there is a piece called "Habeas Corpus," which is dedicated Maher Arar, who was a Canadian victim of extraordinary rendition. It is serious to be tortured, and that reacting to things happening in the world at large is something that is impossible for me not to incorporate influences of the music of today. I wouldn't say it was programmatic, I'm not trying to engage in sound painting, or anything quite so literal, but it is definitely inspired by my personal reaction to a very – the Maher Arar story hit home particularly because he is also a McGill graduate, he is just a few years older than I am, and it is impossible not to think what if this happened to someone I love, or what if this happened to me? The larger context of it is just so horrifying because the reason he was sent to Syria in the first place was because he was named in one of these torture interrogations, his name was fed to someone who was being water boarded – like, tell us about Maher Arar, no, we know you've had dealing with him, we know he's a bad guy. And of course when someone is being tortured they will say anything to make it stop, and the thing to make it stop is to tell the interrogator what they want to know, what they want they want to hear. Then you see Dick Cheney on the TV saying these interrogation techniques are what keep us safe, it's so absurd. It's absolutely maddening and it is obviously something that has been eating at me ever since it came to light that this was what was being done in our

name. In the tradition of Mingus it seemed impossible not to respond to that in some way in music.

Q: Can we turn to specific musical devices and sounds which you have incorporated into your music that reflect elements of contemporary culture.

DJA: The record opens with a piece called "Phobus" which has our drummer John Wilkan is playing a very old, traditional folkloric instrument called the *cajon*, we have taken that sound, which has very rootsy sound, and electronically processed and turned it to something unrecognisable it opens with something very earthy, and the effect we apply is very un-earthly. What I hope is that people put it on and when they hear it they say, "I thought this was going to be a big band record." And so gradually we manage to weave some things in and it establishes a mood, it established a way of listening to the album. It makes its intentions known from the start that this is going to involve technology, the sound itself comes out of Aphex Twin and Stereolab and that kind of sound, using the tools of the recording studio in a way that maybe be a bit unusual for a jazz ensemble.

Q: Can we talk about another example, "Red Eye," which uses loops.

DJA: On "Red Eye," which is the earliest piece on the record, it begins with a very simple acoustic guitar loop, that's a very specific sound and a lot of people are building a whole performance on that technique, will sample one thing and layer another loop and another loop and another on top of it, so I wrote this thing in 2003, it's not nearly as elaborate as that, just one simple loop and the rest the band is used on top of that, I have the luxury of having all these musicians so I don't have to do it with one! It's a bit of nod in that tune and that world, and there is a lot of commonalities between that additive way of building up loops on top on one another, that way of making music, that's straight out of Mingus - "Haitian Fight Song" or "E Flat Ah Flat." Adding and adding each cycle adding a new line to it, so I think there is a lot more productive dialogue that can and should go on between jazz and really creative pop music. It goes in both directions too, there are a lot of indie rock groups that

would really love and could benefit from some of the stuff that jazz musicians can offer. That kind of erosion of genre boundaries, as I see at this festival is very much the future. There is a venue in New York we play from time to time called the Poisson Rouge where you'll have classical solo piano recital, Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians live there, they'll do that, and then you'll have punk rock bands and bands like Deerhunter, and it's not a classical venue or a jazz venue or a rock venue, or any of those things but a place for people with a taste for art.

Q: Can we turn to composition, and how you approach it, and by this I mean do you see composition as a utility to present the soloist or as a thing in itself

DJA: For me the end is to be expressive to present music that is emotionally compelling, that tells a story and has a narrative arc to it, now I'm not really interested in music that is only about a particular compositional device or exploring a particular technical cell, or whatever. That's not interesting, at least not for me. The sound of it, the emotional effect and the communication with the listener is something that is always first in my mind, so I want music that is expressive and tells a story, whether there is an extra musical association to it or not, there is some sense of an arc to it. As far as dealing with soloists and improvisation, the most important thing is that they understand the arc of the music as well and that they are able to operate within those kinds of parameters. There are a lot more constraints on what people can play and what is appropriate for them to play in a big band context because in a way it's on rails, the piece is on rails and going in a certain direction and they need to assist that rather than fight against it. But it always gratifying when I present music to people in the group, and most of the music I write is written specifically with those players in mind, so when I present something to them and we read through it for the first time, as a composer the best thing in the world is when somebody "gets it" intuitively what they need to do and it might be something different from the way they play in their own small groups, and I try and create and be clear enough in the setting that I have created its obvious for them how to continue telling the story

in their solo, and if it's not we have to have a discussion about it [laughs]. But I am very lucky that the people who play in this band are all players who are interested in storytelling, musical storytelling, and in fitting what they do within a larger musical context rather than play like a show stopping solo, that's something I'm really not interested in, it's all about trying to create a context where the solo is integrated into the fabric of the music, that's what all the great jazz composers have always done and what I try to do myself.

Q: I agree, I have always had a problem with big bands that split an orchestration in half as a soloist or soloists jump in with something that may, or may not, relate to the thematic material at hand, and go on so long that the opening orchestration becomes a distant memory — I've called it the Toshiko Akyoshi Syndrome as everything stops for a long solo by her husband Lew Tabackin on tenor or flute....

DJA: Right, it's incredibly dangerous to open up space for improvisation without having background figures and so on, it requires an element of trust with the musicians to carry form the momentum you have established with the written music when you get to the improvisation. What I try to do is find ways to shake people out of their normal habits of the way they would normally play things. The first piece on the record "Phobos," has a tenor solo and there is a period when a chord lasts an indeterminate bars, and I'll cue the next chord always, it gives me some way of shaping the solo section, the only marks are slashes and chord symbols, it allows me to figure out structurally and informally, "Well I need seven measure of this chord and six of this one and what not, and rather than leave that up to the soloist, it's an just like an interaction between me and Mark Small, who is playing the solo, of hearing what he is doing and when I cue the next chord it maybe not what he was thinking of but it's allows me to keep my hand in the game a little bit.

Q: In many ways the heights the soloist can conquer have now been mastered technically, and the challenge is not so much the solo as a

thing in itself but the originality of context within which the solo functions and how the soloist responds to that context

DJA: I can think of one exception to that rule, but your point is well taken, I feel the most interesting jazz has been involving players who were about more than virtuosity, virtuosity by itself is incredibly boring, but for me it has always been incredibly boring. There are people – I’m going to get into trouble for naming names – who would prefer to believe that Oscar Peterson is a greater artist than Thelonious Monk, and to me that is insane and indefensible! I’m Canadian and can say that; due respect to Oscar and I’m not slagging him but Monk was incredible genius, such a complete artist, the whole package and always very conceptual and it was the music first and foremost rather than any flashy or any kind “standard soloist” approach where it has nothing to do with the thematic material. Monk would always bands that played his music and improvisation always came out of the music he wrote for his groups. The way he would comp really kept everything focussed and to the point and that’s why Monk’s bands are so special. You get the same thing in Mingus’ bands, you get the same thing in Duke Ellington’s bands and those are the groups for me the groups closest to my heart. Everyone is on the same page, there is a real vibe to the music, as opposed to “Well here’s one solo, and here’s another solo and it’s going to be completely unrelated what the previous has done.” That to me is a very schizophrenic way of listening to music, and relating to it, more of a jam session kind of approach, that kind of approach is not something that has ever spoken to me in the same way as a conceptual composition

Q: You studied with Bob Brookmeyer, a jazz great and a legendary teacher as well, and I wonder what areas you worked on with him? Perhaps you could describe what you got from his input

JDA: Sure, Brookmeyer was a fantastic teacher and he originally had me to come and study with him at New England Conservatory – we had corresponded a little on line and he asked me to send him some music and he listened to it and said I’d like you to come down. How can you turn down an invitation like that? At that point I had

no intention of going to Grad school or getting into the big band business at all, I was a jazz pianist in Montreal, I was writing, but I was writing for my small group, and that detour really sent me on this curved path of big band music and big band composing.

Q: And when was this?

DJA: I went to New England Conservatory in 2000, I was 25 when I started with Bob. It was interesting, because when I first started taking with him, he didn't actually say very much and it was curious. At New England Conservatory there was a student big band that played exclusively student compositions, it met every week and you could bring in fragments of things, or works in progress and hear it and get the experience of conducting and rehearsing the group yourself, and learning to manage time. Bob would be there, sitting in the back, and occasionally he would say a few words, but he was really there to sit back and observe. He would listen to the music I was writing and I would bring it in for lessons and he would just nod and encourage me to keep writing, and for a while I thought is he ever going to say anything? But what he finally told me was he knew that this piece I was writing, which is actually something we still play today a 20 minute blow called "Lizard Brain," in 13/4, and he knew this was something new to me, I came in there and I guess I thought I had something to prove, so I really wanted to write something I didn't know if I could pull off, to stretch my abilities as a composer and he thought that was happening and thought, "Okay, let's see where this leads him on his own and at the end of it we'll go over it and we'll pick it apart when it's done." He had the ability to see, okay, here's someone who's growing, we'll let that happen and I'm just going to see where it ends, but I don't want to interrupt something in progress and bog him down with the specifics of voicings or what not. After all his years of teaching he's able to do that and when it was done we got into the guts of the piece, how to structure things a little bit better, that led to something that's my usual practise in now, when I'm writing, it's very hard, but I try not to get bogged down much in the detail, get as much as possible finished and at the end sort of figure out maybe this section goes on a little bit long or maybe this transition needs a little more finesse,

or clip the order, that kind of thing. That's always difficult because your inner critic is always saying I could finesse it now, so it's really difficult to put off that and keep the momentum going when you write which is why deadlines are fantastic!

Q: How long did you study with him?

JDA: I studied with him two years, I did my Master's program at New England Conservatory, and after that I spent one extra year in Boston because my girlfriend was finishing her degree, but I started in the BMI the Jazz Composers Workshop which at the time was directed by Jim McNeely and Michael Abene, so I would be hopping on a bus, they had this really cheap, at the time \$10, Chinatown to Chinatown express buses from Boston to New York and back at that time they were not totally legal to use, you'd go down to Chinatown, buy a ticket in a Chinese bakery, look around on the street corner there would be no bus for a while, and someone from the bakery would say, "Okay, everyone for the bus follow me!" and we'd follow him around the corner, and the bus would turn up and we'd get loaded up in about 30 seconds! The BMI Workshop was all people out of school and I guess wanting to refine their voice so it was really great meeting a lot of like minded people with different approaches to music, and a whole different set of aesthetics and also you'd get feedback from Jim McNeely and Mike Abene, and the reading sessions every month you could hear what everyone else was up to and look at their scores and that sort of thing, and there I met Joe Phillips, who is a fantastic composer in New York, J. P. Stanford and a lot of young composers, hearing them at the BMI Workshop, that really planted the seed, I was still living in Boston figuring out what to do with the rest of my life, whether it was completely insane to move to New York and try and form a big band – it is, but there were a lot of other people doing it so it seemed okay! After a year of doing the weekly commute, four hours on the bus and back, I said alright, let's move to New York and see how it goes. So my girlfriend and I got a place in Brooklyn, and I started calling some people to do some reading sessions at the Union of some of the music I had written, some things I had written in the BMI Workshop and some new things I was trying out. The great

thing about New York is that everybody wants to play, and I had this big list of phone numbers that I got from a friend, I would call people, “Hey, you don’t know me, I’m a composer, I’m new in town and I’m having a reading session at the Union, I can’t pay you and the music is extremely difficult.” And there was like, “Great, sign me up!” or “Sorry I can’t make that, but please keep me in mind, I love playing hard music.” There is just a real great attitude in New York, there is a lot of people if they can possibly make it they’ll never turn down a chance to play music or read music, even if there is no money involved. So somebody who was new its really helpful to a young composer to exploit that and try out some different people, I did that for a year and a half, I was working as a music copyist primarily, I had some grants from the Canada Council, I had a grant to study with Maria Schneider, I was also working as a film and Broadway music copyist and so I would have these reading sessions every couple of months, whenever I had new music to work on, and finally Ingrid Jensen [the trumpeter] took me aside after one session and said, “You should get us a gig!” It was like, “Alright, you gotta point!” So I got us our first gig at CeeBeeGeeBees when it existed, there was a Sunday night jazz series, all kinds of crazy music, that was our first gig, in the CeeBeeGeeBees basement.

Q: It is hard enough to survive in the jazz economy as a soloist, but you have a whole big band to consider, so I guess trying to generate an income stream in order to do what you want to do is difficult.

JDA: Well.....yes! And it continues to be, the story is that you go into an enormous amount of debt trying to sustain your big band habit, you can’t pay the players nearly what they are worth, it ends up being a really insulting amount of money for these gigs and I feel incredibly fortunate to find players who were in it for the music and were willing to put up with that and still willing to rehearse, and devote their time and personal practice in rehearsal and conceptual frustrations of working with music that makes demands of the players they don’t face in the normal course of events, it has been a long hard slog to get to this point. I am really fortunate to find a group of players who were willing to trust that something would eventually come of this, obviously the response to the album was

fantastic. When I started the band I never imagined we would be doing a European tour, we played the Bimhuis two nights ago, that was our first European gig, the Domicil in Dortmund last night and performing at the Moers Festival tonight, that would have been incredibly unrealistic. This is our first set of dates outside New York, and after we get back we're playing our first domestic gig outside New York in Philadelphia.

Q: Can you cast your mind back to your early studies, and how you began to think in terms of a big band

JDA: Sure, I grew up in suburban Vancouver and I was lucky to have a very good music program where I was, I started on trumpet and got really frustrated with it whereas a piano seemed much more attractive, if I wanted to hit a Bb I could do it 100% of the time, so I switched over. I had piano lessons as a child, and got frustrated with that too, and in order to get into the High School band. And for whatever reason it was very easy for me start listening to jazz and I found right away things that I liked, my first jazz record was that Clark Terry record *In Orbit* with Thelonious Monk, that was instantly appealing, Wynton Kelly on *Kind of Blue* – instantly appealing. In the High School jazz band we played a drastically simplified version of a Thad Jones chart, I really liked that in the library they had the vinyl of the original recording of it, I got that out. And at 12 or 13 really fell in love with the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis band, so probably that was the seed of the interest in big band. But I don't think I imagined I would start my own, and I went on to Montreal, where I was a jazz piano major at McGill, and I had a range of classes there and the opportunity of writing for a big band. I heard a few things that started the fire, one was back 1994 a group of us went down to the IAJE in Boston and there I heard Bob Brookmeyer for the first time with the Danish Radio Big Band and they played his arrangement of "St. Louis Blues," and that introduction really stuck with me and I knew I had to get that and then the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis box set came out on Mosaic, and I was able to get that, that had previously unavailable, and Maria Schneider's first record came out, *Evanescence*, and our arranging teacher played "Wrygly" in class and that completely floored me,

well here's someone who's on the cutting edge of great new jazz and its almost incidental that it happened to be a big band, this is like something that is really fresh and interesting and current and unlike any jazz I had heard, it's not like big band is notoriously unhip and behind the times often, hearing that it was almost like Maria was taking a leap beyond all the small groups in terms of conception and how well everything was integrated structurally, just the vibe of it that was hugely influential and exciting.

Q: You later studied with Maria Schneider, of course, so perhaps you could expand on her influence on your conception

JDA: Being able to study with Maria was obviously a dream come true, I've taken lessons from a lot of different people but with Bob and Maria I felt like we were on the same wavelength and when Maria would make a suggestion it was always, "OK. Yes, exactly." If I had the experience, that was what I was hearing, I wish I had thought of that, it was like she could read my mind and improve on it! Bob was very much the same way, so much of it is about the structure and the narrative and the flow of the piece. You get a lot of teachers who get bogged down a little bit in the nitty-gritty of voicings, and that of course is incredibly important, but I think I basically had that stuff down so it is important to move beyond that as well because it doesn't matter how beautiful your voice leading is, if the structure of the piece isn't satisfying to a listener it doesn't matter, it's all ultimately in vain. So a lot of our lessons, both with Maria and Bob, were just figuring out how to make things more clear, how to tell the story of the piece in a way it's going to make more sense for the listener, so they can follow the dramatic arc of the piece and that might mean another bar and half of this before going on to here, or, this transition here, I think you should sneak in the new material a little earlier, see if you can get more of a cross phase between the ideas rather than a jump cut, or sometimes it would be, what would make this more exciting if you launch into this new section a bar earlier than expected – that kind of thing without falling into repetitive structures or here's the 32 bar AABA form I'm working with. That gets very boring very quickly, so being able to manipulate the structure of the piece to guide expectations

was something that was really important to my studies with both Bob and Maria. When we got into the nitty-gritty of details it was always in service of something larger, if we treat this voicing it's going to help the whole arc of the piece rather than just examine every single voicing for the hell of it. It was very clear why we were working on things and why there was a microscope on certain details – because these were the key details that were going to unlock the rest of the piece that would make it more expressive, or more communicative, or more mysterious, or whatever the vibe of the piece was.

Q: There was an interesting posting on your website about the so called “jazz wars.” I wonder if you could talk a little about this and expand a little on what you wrote

DJA: Sure. I think the museum approach to jazz is something that has been ultimately disheartening and destructive to music. I understand why the people who were responsible for that took that route, and getting funding and getting respect and getting institutional support for jazz is a noble goal, but at the same time putting it in that sphere of music that is to be appreciated, rather than music that kicks your ass is a horrible mistake and having the focus be all the time be education rather than communication is something that overlooked great music has a power of its own, it doesn't need to be explained or educated, someone doesn't need to have studied jazz or harmonic progressions or the history of the music to “get” a record like *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. You just get down with it, and instantly whether someone is a jazz fan or it's the first jazz record they have ever heard, it's very clear what it is. It has a power to it and to say “You shouldn't start with that record, you should go through the history of the music,” is weird. It's a lot easier to get people interested in music if it is not presented like medicine, so that's one aspect of it. The other is jazz has a connection to popular culture all through its history up until the 1980s. When Coltrane covered “My Favourite Things” from *The Sound of Music* it was a new show, it had been on Broadway for something like 6 months when he went into the studio with that. It was a pop song, and having that disconnect of the repertoire, we're

going to freeze the jazz canon at this particular point in time and these are the standards, and nobody knows the original versions, even jazz musicians don't know the original versions of "Like Someone in Love" or "Autumn Leaves" or any of these standards, they know the jazz versions, and the original point about these being some kind of common vocabulary that people going to a jazz club would know the song and understand the improvisation, that context somehow got twisted into something different, something very codified and the point of doing a standard shifted from something that was accessible reaching out to the people who are in the culture and doing something current and something that had a symbiotic relationship with popular culture, it went from that to something incredibly isolated, something that only a small group of diehard people know, like "the jazz repertoire." So having those barriers imposed on them meant creating this firewall between jazz and the people who really love music and have an open minded attitude towards discovering new music is incredibly destructive and telling those people, who know better, that their music, the music they listen to and they love, like Polytones, like Louis Love Animal Collective, oh that's pop, that's crap, there's no value to that, you should listen to art music, jazz, it's not just wrong, its offensive and so counter productive because the person knows you're bullshitting and there is just so much cultural baggage associated with the idea of jazz as high art, as classical music, and popular music as low brow. The people who make those claims make we wonder if they have ever listened to popular music in the last twenty years, like *really* listened to it. I suspect not. But the other infuriating is the kids who are really intense about music, the kids who follow all the indie rock blogs, those are the people who are out there like really getting excited about music, and when a record leaks ahead of time, like the new Grizzly Bear record, there's a flood of interest and activity, so these are the people who are really fascinated by new music and their tastes haven't ossified yet and so is a really important part of their lives and there seems to be a lot of people in the jazz world who are trying to make it as difficult as possible for those people to come to what they do. Which is why walking around Moers, people, young people, are really excited about the music here, that's why I am really looking forward to

performing here. I don't want to hit on the jazz audience per se, the hard core people, because obviously they are helping to sustain the music as well, but there is a facet of the jazz audience that is incredibly conservative and incredibly set in their ways and in their tastes and what they want is music that is incredibly similar to music that has already got the official stamp of approval and is very close to what happened in the jazz canon. But what made Mingus and Coltrane and Miles obviously, what made them great was that their music resonated with the times it was made in and it had a connection to the popular culture, and it was a product of its time and that's what made it timeless and for people to take that as a template for making music today seems to be missing the spirit of those artists and the spirit of jazz generally.

Q: I very much agree with you. I believe when jazz cut its umbilical with popular culture in the 1980s, not only was the music the poorer for it, it became increasingly self-referential. Finally, I would just like to ask you about the power of the internet, and how you increased Secret Society's profile. I wonder if you can talk about this in the context of today's financial climate where on your blog, for example, you have written about "dwindling freelance opportunities" and "world class jazz musicians fiercely competing for the privilege of playing pass-the-hat gigs."

DJA: It's an incredibly difficult problem. I can say my music would be better if I could devote myself to it fulltime. Currently it is still not possible for me, I would like to get up in the morning and write all day or practice conducting, any of those things, that's not possible the rent has to be paid and there are other things I must do to finance my big band habit. Adversity breeds creative solutions, so you have a lot of people financing their records by soliciting funds from the fans in advance, which is something which is becoming a lot more prevalent of late, a lot more people trying to circumvent the traditional record label model, which is completely failing, and putting out their records themselves, or putting them out on a label like my record label which allows you to own it. The positive aspect of that is that you get to control your music, but the negative aspect is you don't get any money in advance to record, or anything like

that. So I think a lot of people are trying ways of trying to connect the record to fans, twitter and what not, to build more of a communication and more of a direct relationship with fans, a part of that is very sincere in wanting to reach out and to be open and have those relationships in the hope that those fans will actually pay money for the CD. Or perhaps make a contribution to help make the CD, music technology is a double edged sword, on the one hand sure the record industry as we know it is doomed, the model of record labels having the whole apparatus of scores of managers and A&R people is almost completely gone for all but a handful of artists now. But on the other hand, when we first started and I recorded all our live shows, from the very first one, just with a digital recorder and converted them to MP3 files and uploaded them to the website, and it took us four years to make a studio record but in those four years people from all over the world heard what we were doing in small New York clubs. When Guillermo Klein [Y Los Gauchos] was playing in Smalls in the nineties, there was no document of that, if you weren't there in the club, you missed it, it was legendary and really influential for people who were living in New York at the time, it was a very underground thing. A fantastic composer and a thirteen piece group, Argentinean-born composer who now lives in Barcelona, but in the nineties he lived in New York and his band was playing, I think, every Monday night at Smalls. It became a legendary regular thing, you had to be in New York to hear about it, whereas with Secret Society we just put it up on the internet and people from Japan, Australia, the UK from all over writing in and sending donations to help me make a studio record so the technology takes away some things but empowers people to do other things. I do also feel strongly that I would not be in this position without the support I was able to get being Canadian from the Canada Council for the Arts, they subsidised my studies with Maria Schneider and John Hollenbeck and I recently got a grant to study with Derek Bermel, who is a fantastic classical composer, and just through accident of birth I was able to get these grants, there's nothing like it in the United States. And I have been fortunate to get some small grants from organisations that are still there and still persevering, like American Music Center and Meet the Composer, but the level of public support for the arts in the United States is

dismal, I think especially now the market is failing that there really needs to be a cultural investment in sustaining non-commercial music because it feeds everything, it works in interesting ways – it keeps pop music alive, the experimental stuff that people are doing at festivals, this music gets incorporated and used by the producers who are doing advanced pop, but putting a glossier finish on it, this is a font of people coming up with new ideas and experimenting with music and trying new combinations that it the well spring for everything, and that well spring needs public support, and its for every one's benefit, and that might not be instantly clear for someone who is mystified by something that's very abstract or experimental and seems very different from the music as they understand it, but they benefit from that existing and the experiments taking place and the best of it filtering through to the culture at large. I really think it would be tremendous for the US, American popular music basically conquered the world, the whole Afro-European fusion that happened there, that melting pot, became such a great talent and the combination of groove and harmonic richness and grit – there's really nothing like a New York rhythm section – and that power of that music is at odds with the value in which it is held in America, which is really frustrating that there is more desire, I think when it comes down to it musicians are going to have to get better and organising and lobbying – we have to stand up for ourselves because nobody is going to stand up for us – and be able to try and collectively advocate for support for the arts and support that filters down to the lowest level. Jazz at Lincoln Center is one thing, but it costs them tens of thousands of dollars to turn on the lights in that building, whereas took that ten thousand dollars and gave it as a grant to an emerging composer or even a thousand dollar grant to ten emerging composers you would have great work happening from the bottom up. The top down perspective represents a problem, the funding that exists is all top down and is “Let's fund the elite institutions” rather than give a grant to say, Mostly Other People Do the Killing, so they can afford to make a record or go out on tour, that kind of thing.

Q: Well, sobering thoughts to end on – thanks so much for speaking to me

DJA: Thanks very much, it was my pleasure, a lot of fun!
Darcy James Argue's Secret Society website can be found at <http://www.secretsocietymusic.org/#&panel1-2>