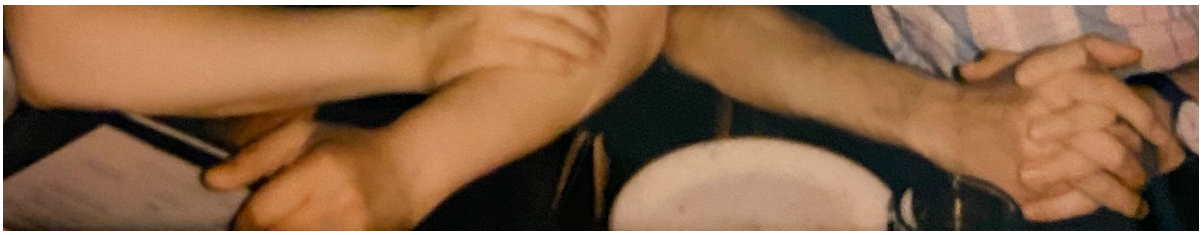
# Chris Cerrone and Timo Andres on Musical Economy

BY ANNA HEFLIN – 18 JUN 2021 – VIEW ONLINE →



**What role does economy play in music? And how is the language that we use to talk about music linked to our own musical values and preferences? For composers Chris Cerrone and Timo Andres, economy is a cornerstone that influences the entire compositional process from concept to concert. For those unfamiliar with Chris and Timo who are looking for some background information, Seth Colter Walls from *The New York Times* wrote a wonderful feature article on them yesterday.**

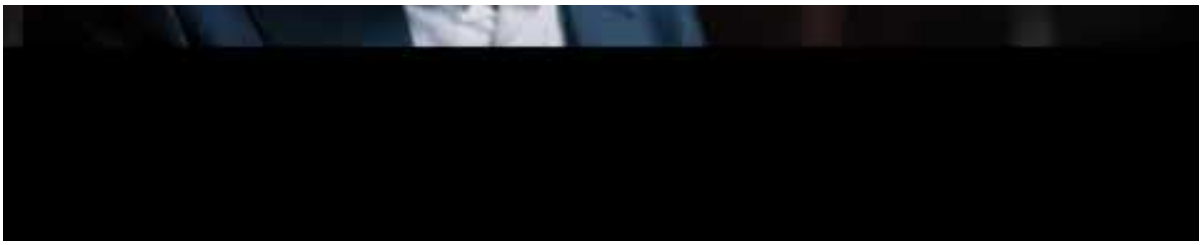
I had only met pianist/composer Timo Andres once before, but I remember it vividly -- Chris and Timo together are quite a hoot. Their banter and the insights that they glean from each other's music after years of friendship add a new perspective when considering their music. That energy was also present during our conversation over the rainy Memorial Day weekend in NYC, when we met at Bowery Road to discuss *The Arching Path* (In a Circle Records), Chris's latest release. Timo is featured on every track as a soloist and in chamber pieces alongside Ian Rosenbaum, Lindsay Kesselman and Mingzhe Wang.

When it comes to music, Chris and I seem to always disagree -- it's quite fun. I often walk away with either more clarity or another viewpoint in

mind. I'm not particularly fond of the term "economy" in regards to music, there's something about that word that irks me and I think that the language here matters. But economy in its various guises was the theme of the conversation, and my knee jerk reaction to that word has given me food for thought. If applied to this piece, for example, I could have been economical and cut out a lot more of the dialogue. I cut a bit, but I kept some of the quibbles between Chris and Timo because I feel like the value of this piece lies in hearing them work through an idea in conversation. So, without further ado, here is my uneconomical transcription from my conversation with Chris Cerrone and Timo Andres about economy in music, the challenges of aleatoric music, the drama inherent to Chris's compositions and loungewear.

Anna: Can you tell me a little bit about how this album came about?

Chris: I feel like a lot of times albums have a lot of forethought to them. This one was weirdly spontaneous, as Timo was learning *The Arching Path* in 2018. It's a beast of a piece so since he had it worked up, we wanted to record it.



Timo: It’s one of those things, you need a couple of weeks to get it up to speed.

Chris: I looked up one day and thought, ‘Let’s do this album now!’ in a way that usually involves an inordinate amount of forethought and financial planning. This album wasn’t that expensive, as it was for four musicians who were willing to invest in the project for less than they deserve. Mike Tierney (the producer) and I had this thought that if I wait to raise the money for this album, I’m only going to release an album once every five years. And I had this idea that I’m going to try to release an album every year from now on.

Anna: Why?

Chris: Because I write a lot of music, so I should record it!

Timo: I think that’s a good way of working. There are a lot of musicians that I admire who do that.

Chris: I have at least two more full albums of material ready to be recorded at this point.

Timo: Making an album as a musician of any sort is almost always a money losing endeavor. But I will say from experience that a single best way to get a piece out into the world is to launch a good album. There’s a visible dividing line between the pieces of mine that are professionally recorded and the number of orders that they have. My pieces that don’t

have as polished of a recording have fewer performances and scores sold.

Chris: Oh, definitely.

Timo: To put it in commercial terms.

Chris: I think just being at a time in my life when I'm marginally less poor...

Timo: You could afford to invest in your own career.

Chris: Well my other two records have like 25 people on them.

Timo: You could not have paid for those yourself.

Chris: No, they're well into five figures. But I can afford four people. Also, I've developed a relationship with the producer, Mike, and wanted to work with him. And I feel weird saying this, because I feel proud of my prior records, but you do learn a lot of lessons. I mean you just made a record Anna...

Anna: Yes, I learned a lot!

Chris: Yes, and every time you make one you think of all these things that you'll do differently. This is the first one of mine where I felt like all of my intentions came to fruition. I think to make a record that sounds natural and organic you have to depart from any notions of a successful classical performance. It's funny Timo, I described you as having played on *Double Happiness*...

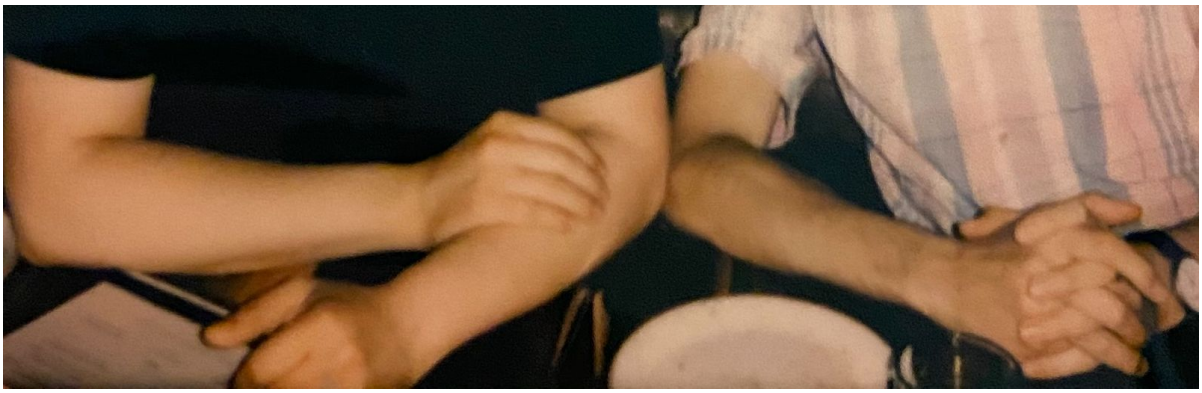
Timo: Yes, well I recorded some *pizzicati* in the wild and Chris copied and pasted them into the right place. Your way of recording is very much in

line with your way of composing, which is more like a pop producer or someone who's working in a Digital Audio Workstation. I feel like you're thinking about the final recorded product during the compositional process. The job of a classical recording engineer is very different from how we think of producers. But I do think that in the case of Mike, he is really a producer in a pop producer sense.

Chris: Absolutely. I think we were co-producing it in terms of strategizing it.

Timo: But he knows your music and how it's supposed to sound. This is what I always say to people: there is an electronic component to your works, even the purely acoustic works like *The Arching Path*. There's a lot in the structural process of Chris's music that is like someone slowly moving a fader from one position to another.

Chris: That's very well said.



Polaroid of Chris and Timo at Bowery Road, PC Anna

Timo: Almost think of Chris's crescendos as someone turning up a volume slider. Not like a classical music crescendo like you'd have in Brahms or Beethoven.

Chris: It makes me frustrated. I feel that there are certain composers where performers could pick up a score without any reference to anything else and that doesn't seem possible for my works.

Anna: Which is interesting because your works are relatively straightforward.

Timo: Hard and straightforward are different.

Chris: Well, I don't think that classical music performance practice is straightforward. This isn't a value judgement. It's just that when I work with performers who are less into contemporary music, they just add a bunch of *ritardandos*. And I ask, 'but why'? There's nothing eternal to this, it's just a habit.

Timo: But as with any composer with an individual voice, it helps to know what that voice is comprised of. What are the things that went into Stravinsky to make him sound like Stravinsky?

Anna: For a lot of Chris's piano works, I'd imagine that the answer would

Anna: For a lot of Chris's piano works, I'd imagine that the answer would be you, Timo. Even if he didn't write them for you, didn't you talk about them while he was writing?

Timo: We're constantly talking. In general I'd say that there is not a piano part that Chris has written over the past 12 or 13 years that didn't cross my desk at some stage.


Chris: I didn't write the last piece on the album, *Hoyt-Schermerhorn*, for Timo, but he gave me a lot of feedback on it. At first, it was partially indeterminate and partially written out.

Timo: Aleatoric. That's what I was saying about the straightforwardness. I think the straightforwardness of your scores has come over the past decade or so of working with more straight-ahead classical musicians who aren't as acclimated to looking at graphic or aleatoric scores.

[illegible]

Chris: But even you, Timo, you quietly frown disappointingly upon this.

Anna: Why would you frown?

Timo: I knew he was overthinking it in the original version that had this aleatoric score. He wanted the piece to have this quality of openness or indeterminacy coalescing into some degree of surety. But it was at the expense of clearly indicating that to the performer, who may have not been along on the train of thought while he was writing the piece.

Chris: There are people, including you Anna, who write music that has these aleatoric things.

Anna: The aleatoric elements in mine are very specific now, but that could change. Usually in my work, the aleatoric elements are actually just giving the illusion of choice, as they will always sound a specific way. But I'm interested in pieces that are more open too.

Chris: It sounds like we went on the same journey of thinking you wanted to be open.

Anna: Wanting that feeling but hearing something and realizing it's not happening in the actual open versions.

Timo: I think that's exactly what happened.

Chris: That's my most Feldman-esque piece. Feldman wrote those pieces and realized that he actually wanted to write it out. And Timo told me, "Okay, now that you've written this out I'll play it."

Timo: There's still a degree of indeterminacy to the piece, as there's

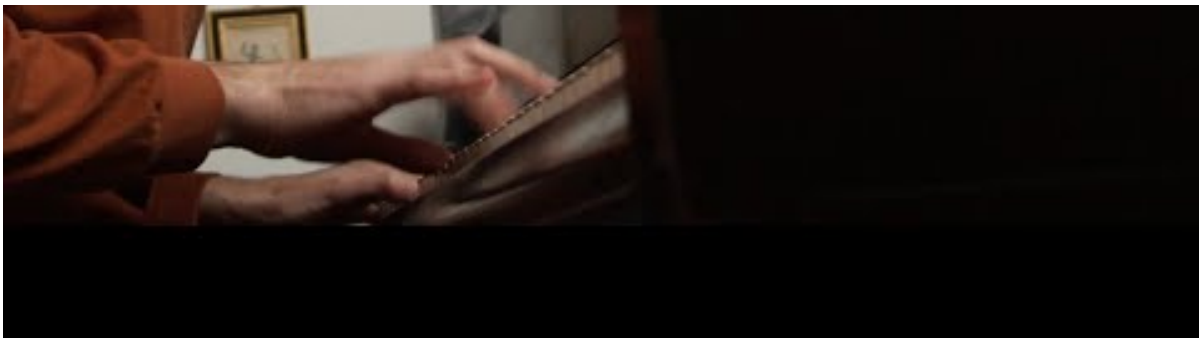
independent unmetered lines that will always line up in different ways depending on who's playing it.

Chris: I do remember a pianist wrote it all out, it felt overly simplified. The spontaneity of it is the whole point. But to go back to your first question, these piano pieces needed a definitive recording.

Timo: There's something about these pieces that aligns with something that's important to me as a composer as well. I feel like there's a real prejudice in our field for works that are huge statements, operas or large orchestra pieces that last for half an hour. These things that take a lot of work, time, money, and are performed very rarely. Those are the things that win composers prizes and get written about. But the things that actually get performed, that are useful to working musicians, are the chamber and solo pieces that are 5-15 minutes. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be ambitious...

Anna: But why isn't a solo piece ambitious? It's much harder.

Timo: Exactly. Writing a successful piece for solo piano is something that so many composers fall down on. That is a real test.



Chris: I always love that there's a Feldman piece called *The Possibility Of A New Work for Electric Guitar*. (laughs) It's almost like the possibility of a work for solo piano. But to cycle back to my first point about this, when I write for piano my concerns about the color and resonance of the piano are very grounded in my mind.

Timo: I think the reason that you're a more natural piano composer is because the piano is the only instrument with reverb built in. (everyone laughs) And reverb is an important part of your music. Your early pieces will often add reverb. It's the reason a piano sounds good, you can modulate with such control.

Chris: And I do the garish version of that by adding a vibraphone.

Anna: Okay, I want to make sure that we talk about the dramatic aspect of these pieces. I feel like the financial constraints of creating the album and wanting to work with Timo made the album really cohesive. The songs make the album as a whole feel very dramatic, which isn't something that I always hear in your work.

Chris: It's funny because I think that dramatic component always comes out in the full works that I do.

Anna: But here I can hear it in the piano works as well. The vocal works reframe the solo piano pieces to be more sentimental to my ears. There is

a story-telling aspect to the album as a whole.

Timo: Well I always say, and I think I've written this in a note or two, I do think the bel canto style is one of those important components to Chris's music. It's one of the big chunks that informs his style. There's a reason I think Chris is a natural vocal composer, which is his innate sense of the voice as not just another instrument but another character.

Anna: And the instruments as characters too!

Timo: Yes, and I think it translates over. I'd say *The Arching Path* is a very dramatic piece.

Chris: I remember being in grad school and one of the most important things that Martin Bresnick, who Timo and I both studied with, said to me was, "Ultimately, your music is going to be about this intersection of drama and process."

Timo: That is it.

Chris: Correct. I think of my vocal works as incubation works where I generate material. I'm writing an opera right now, for the first time in ten years, and I'm going back and revising because you can't rely on previous materials as much. Whereas I feel that *The Arching Path* is the third or fourth iteration of a simple idea in several pieces. I had this idea in my head that the last piece of my last album would continue seamlessly to the first piece in my new album. (Timo laughs) There is a descending diatonic line...

Timo: This is *The Branch Will Not Break*?

Chris: It uses the same notes in the same way with different results.

Timo: I think if you look at the music of any working composer, the end of the last piece feels like it goes into the beginning of the next piece. I define a working composer as someone who writes music for a living, and I think of that as a specific thing, as opposed to an academic composer who has time to reinvent their language between pieces. I know that for Chris, and the same is true for me, we turn in a piece and start the next piece the next day.

Anna: Chris writes so much, I'm always shocked when he tells me how much he's writing.

Timo: But that economic necessity means you're always picking up on a tail end of an idea that you had in another piece.

Anna: I think composers can do that on longer scales of time.

Chris: I guess it almost feels like we're inherently being a bit defensive here. Picasso wouldn't have had a Blue Period if he just made one Blue painting, he had to make a bunch of Blue paintings.

Anna: You're working something out.

Timo: You're doing it in different formats across many pieces. Maybe some of those will be more successful and some less; you'll figure out the best way to add that thing to your permanent toolbox.

Chris: One of my favorite writers, Kazuo Ishiguro, does this: writes the same book over and over again about a man who doesn't have access to his emotions slowly gaining access to his emotions. But then he wrote *Never Let Me Go*, which was different but kind of the same.

Timo: It's the reader who's gradually realizing something instead of the

Timo: It's the reader who's gradually realizing something instead of the character in the book.

Chris: So he managed to shift his thing a little bit. But you have to work through things a bunch. Lately I feel like I've hit a point where I've got it and need to do something else.

Anna: So what are you working through now?

Chris: Well Timo and I just wrote pieces for the cellist Inbal Segev, who commissioned 20 composers to react to 2020. Strangely, this year composers were in demand because everyone wanted a pandemic piece.

Timo: It was so weird! I had like no commissions in 2019 and then 2020 rolled around...

Chris: Suddenly a lot of people had nothing to do and wanted to find a way to react to the time, and so a lot of people wanted new pieces. So it was just a six minute piece that I wrote for Inbal, and what I was trying to work through in that piece was having a lot of sections in a piece, which I generally don't do.

Timo: It's kind of like a double binary form.

Chris: It's ABCAC, right?

Timo: I think you're over complicating things....

Chris: I'm not over complicating things!

Timo: But it's a very monothematic and economical piece. Another concern that we share in our music is economy and making the most from as little material as possible. Chris's concern for economy in music

from as little material as possible. Chris's concern for economy in music goes down to the beat level. He thinks that one extra beat is dead weight. The end game for Chris is that his music will change super rapidly because he will have cut out all the repeats. (Chris laughs) So it's just idea after idea.

Chris: I think it's like when someone tells a story. The longer any story gets, the more potential it has to get boring.

Anna: And having more elements adds potential for that as well.

Chris: Exactly. My piece for Timo and Inbal starts out ambiguously.

Anna: Wait, is Timo playing on all of the pieces with Inbal?

Chris: No, he suggested my music to Inbal, who really liked it, and since we know each other really well we all decided to make it a collaboration. It's always the goal to rope your friends into whatever you're doing.

Timo: I think this is something true of most working composers. You have a group of trusted interpreters that you add around the year. I think of people like Ian Rosenbaum for you Chris, or Lindsay Kesselman. Basically all of the people on this album. I think that you can look historically and very often the people who commission pieces are not the people whose interpretations are remembered.

Chris: Do you mean all of the people who commissioned you and then you just play the piece? (laughs) I would never commission a piano piece from you because you could play it better than me!

Anna: Do you get commissioned for a lot of piano works? I've heard a lot of your piano works, but I don't know the background of those pieces.

Timo: I do, yes. Especially in the past year when it was one of the only things that could be done. It's not like my recording is the definitive recording but I do think that there's this aspect of classical music which is strange. Because we have these separate roles of composer and interpreter, it often takes more than one interpreter to really have a piece hit its stride.

Chris: Well, the definitively cool thing about being a composer is that a piece is not fixed, ever. Someone can buy your score and do something completely new. Wouldn't it be the coolest thing in the world if in 30 years someone plays your music way better than you do?

Timo: Oh, I expect that to happen. And sometimes people come up to you after concerts with their interpretation and it's something totally off the mark, saying that they saw water lilies and all that.

Chris: Well, leaving it open to interpretation is a sign of art.

Timo: Yes, but I think this is a concern that we both share. Given a span of time during which an audience will be subjected to music, are we going to make them feel like their time was well spent?

Chris: I can't agree with you more. The audience is giving you this generous gift of their attention and time.

Anna: This concept of economy is something that you've both talked about twice now. It's part of the musical material and comes back full circle as viewing the audience's time in terms of economy. Is it wanting to give them a pleasurable experience?

Timo: Pleasurable is so different for different people. I would say the better way to describe it is that I don't want the audience to feel like their

better way to describe it is that I don't want the audience to feel like their time was wasted.

Anna: I'd agree with that!

Chris: I'd take it a bit further. We have what is called an attention economy, time is money. I don't want to participate in that but I acknowledge that in the world we live in, if someone took some time to listen that's an act of generosity. I'd like to acknowledge that generosity in my composing.

Timo: For better or worse, we work in a time based medium.

Chris: The number of times when I've been at a concert and I've....

Anna: Chris, I've sat next to you at concerts. (Chris and Timo laugh)

Chris: Exactly.

Timo: Chris has one of the shortest attention spans of anyone on planet earth. But I think that's why he's going back to a piece he wrote in 2014 and cutting three beats out of it.

Chris: I think my threshold for boredom is very high so I want to give everyone the benefit of the doubt that they might have as short of an attention span as mine.

Anna: First of all, I'd say your music is very successful at keeping my engagement as a listener. But it's interesting that you don't bring in other elements in your music, because contrast can also help with attention span.

Chris: No but that's a fallacy! The rate of change is the thing that keeps

things interesting. Things that change constantly are incoherent.

Timo: This is something that I talk about with my students constantly. They'll reach a point in a piece and they don't know what's next so they just introduce a new idea.

Chris: After the first couple of times you tune it out because you don't know the rules of the universe.

Anna: But it can be a universe where you have a ton of things and that is the universe. That's different than your universe where you have one thing.

Timo: The composer I think of when thinking of a universe with a ton of different things is Mahler.

Anna: That's a great example.

Chris: Or Ives! They're kind of the same thing in different ways.

Timo: I think their music has a lot in common where it's about the butting up of different things against each other that's creating dramatic tension. Because they're good at articulating a dramatic form, their music still works.

Anna: That's what I wanted to get at.

Timo: They are both composers whose music I really love. (looks with squinted eyes at Chris)

Chris: It's not that I don't like it, it's that I struggle with it. It's a little different. They're both at their best at their most economical, I'll say that.

Anna: Oh my god. (Timo laughs) This is so funny to me because it's been a thread throughout the entire conversation. From making the album, to writing the music and how you imagine the audience's ear.

Chris: I'll just say that *Kindertotenlieder* is my favorite Mahler piece.

Timo: Big emotional punch in a small package.

Chris: Exactly!

Anna: What else could you want?

Timo: Well what we've been saying over the course of this conversation about music and composition makes it sound like we agree on most fronts.

Anna: It doesn't sound like you agree! You always add something in after he says something.

Timo: I'm much more articulate, it's true. (laughs)

Chris: It's really funny because I had this tweet that got me in a lot of trouble that was like, "I don't understand Elliott Carter's music but I expect it's something to do with virtuosity". There were all these responses blaming me as a composer with a platform.

Timo: There's a sort of desire with the next youngest generation of us for art to be this very healing practice where everyone is supporting each other and everyone likes everything. Except for the things that we all agree are bad. I just don't think that's a very interesting thing to build.

Anna: Well, I don’t agree with Chris a lot of the time when we’re talking about music. But that’s the fun of it.

Timo: I think it’s part of building a community as an artist. Finding the things that you do have in common and agreeing to disagree on the things that you don’t. And also being simultaneously open to fair criticism that’s offered in a friendly spirit.

Chris: Well, I think it’s more interesting when you hang out with smart people who you don’t agree with. It’s just not that interesting to agree with people all of the time. Maybe this just says more about me as a person but the only thing I don’t like is when an idea or viewpoint is off limits. There is a limit to that worldview that I’m aware of, you don’t just want to play devil’s advocate 24/7. But if someone has an interesting worldview that’s different from yours, to me that’s valuable.

Anna: I want to mention one final thing that’s off topic. Timo, it was when I first met you at the Hollow Nickel with Chris after a Roulette concert. You walked up and Pat Swoboda said, “He’s always dressed like he’s ready to shut down an orphanage”. (everyone laughs)

Timo: I remember that, I even remember what I was wearing.

Chris: All black.