During the 1940s, when I was growing up in music, there were very few alternatives if one wanted to be a composer. Music was either more or less tonal, or more or less atonal, or more or less something in between, like Varèse. Electronic music was conceived but not yet born. Popular music was another world, though Milton Babbitt wrote a lot of popular songs on the side and Mel Powell started off playing the piano with Benny Goodman. What new music was heard with the major orchestras coming to Carnegie Hall were Hindemith, Stravinsky, Copland, Prokofiev, Shostakovich. When they performed Bartók, it was considered far out music. In the late 40s Mitropoulos brought to the New York Philharmonic, the exciting early works of Darius Milhaud and important compositions by Schoenberg and Webern.

As late as 1950 you couldn't buy a score of Webern anywhere in town. I remember seeing Seymour Shifrin copying out Webern string quartet music from the library and photostatting copies for his friends. There was also very little modern music on records. In fact, I would say there was very little interesting music of an experimental nature being written anywhere. The war had a lot to do with this and we all had a real fever about what was going on in this country as well as in Europe.

Unlike today, there were no far out concerts in Greenwich Village churches. Varèse only lived in Greenwich Village. He wasn't played there or hardly anywhere else. One pianist, [John] Kirkpatrick, made the Concord Sonata by Ives known to us. After that, a decade later, one unknown pianist, David Tudor, made Boulez famous with his unbelievable and unforgettable memorised performance of the Second Piano Sonata at a League of Composers Concert. It's interesting that this took place with The League, which represented the tonal faction of contemporary music. The ISCM, the International Society for Contemporary Music, the rival organisation, by and large performed twelve-tone music. There weren't many League concerts after this one, which now seems more symbolic than just coincidence. The League and ISCM merged for a time but that didn't seem to work out. The League is now non-existent and the ISCM hasn't really been active in New York since the late 50s.

All this is important in realising that New York was certainly not the place to compose experimental music. Actually, no place, during those years, was the right place, mainly because there was very little precedent for it. You either thought tonally, or twelve-tone, or somewhere in between, like Varèse. It was this 'in-between' world that attracted me or rather captured me. It was Varèse, with his dictum of organised sound and not an organised system of sound, that I then began to explore. I realise that the term 'organised sound' is ambiguous. Someone I know kept asking Varèse for years what it meant. He never got an answer. I think what's implied is that sound is given sole emphasis in a musical composition and that everything else is subservient to it. Varèse's contribution, outside of the music itself, was that he was the first contemporary composer to evolve a musical process empirically.

Recently I heard a knock-out performance of the Hammerklavier [Sonata] by a young Australian, Roger Woodward. The work suddenly sounded very open to me. I use that word in terms of much of today's music, in terms of Varèse. The reason for this, I feel, is not because of Beethoven's foolproof musical system or even an uncanny progression of musical thinking that makes the music so overwhelming.
Rather, it seemed more the suspension of logic or the patched-quilt flights of intuition where the physical fact of its sound takes precedence over everything else.

This evening I selected three compositions spanning eleven years: the first called Two Pianos dates from 1957; the second, The Swallows of Salangan, 1961; and the last, False Relationships and the Extended Ending was composed in 1968. But before we begin, another brief introduction on how these works came about.

In 1950 I began writing a music that gave the choice of pitches to the performer. The music was written on graph paper indicating time and register, though I allowed the performer to choose whatever pitch he wanted in a given register and, in a few compositions, the dynamics as well. His rhythmic possibilities were pretty much controlled. What I want to emphasise is that my conception of time was still very much limited still, very much related to a steady beat or pulse. The directions to the player told him to enter either on the beat, represented by a box, or off the beat. The metronome markings were consistent throughout each of these compositions.

This aspect of my graph music always disturbed me. I couldn't understand, and still can't, how I could give up all control of pitch and not the rhythmic frame that it takes place in. During all this, I was also composing precisely notated music. The problem here was similar, being that the rhythmic placement of my sounds never seemed just right. It was years later that I realised that it was again this aspect of trying to set something into a steady pulse which seemed so contradictory to the music I was writing.

It was not in thinking this out that I arrived at any solution. Whatever ideas developed happened after a concert of the precisely written two-piano piece I wrote for David Tudor and John Cage. I went up with them to Harvard for a performance. The pianos were pretty bad. During the run-through before the concert, it was decided to ignore some of the strict rhythms and just cue in each other instead. When I got back to New York, I began to compose sounds independent of its rhythmic progression, remembering a distorted performance that in actuality did nothing to take away from the nature of the music.

At first, as in the two piano piece we will soon play, the sounds, though not written in any rhythmic sequence, are still distantly related to slow, uneven beats. With The Swallows, perhaps because of the density of its scoring, it is less apparent. False Relationships adds a new factor: many of the sounds are held far into its decay before going to the next one. Two instrumental groups are used. They begin together but, after the first sound, are independent of one another. The Swallows of Salangan is scored for large chorus, 5 flutes, five trumpets, 2 tubas, 2 vibraphones, 2 pianos and 7 cellos. All the pitches you'll hear this evening were chosen by the composer. Thank you.