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Post-sonic Perspectives on Socially Engaged Compositional Practices: Composing 'after sound' and beyond music

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This article addresses the precedence given to sound in musical analysis and argues that socially engaged composers might reconsider the importance they place on sonic output and instead pay greater attention to how we critically engage with the subjects that stimulate our musical practice. G. Douglas Barrett's theorisation of music 'after sound' is established as a crucial methodology, one that provides an important discourse around critical engagements that have largely been neglected in favour of investigations into abstracted sonic materials. The vocabulary provided by Barrett is, in this article, used to meaningfully appraise the impact of a situated musical performance and its dialogue with society. Specifically, the three authors collectively explore the implications of Barrett's writing for the conception, formation and evaluation of their own socially engaged compositional practices. Subsequently, this discussion also illustrates the methods by which Barrett's approach is instrumentalised as a compositional device for socially engaged composition, rather than as an analytical tool for already completed works. Finally, the authors conclude with an alternative exploration of what ultimately lies beyond a 'music after sound', one that problematises the notion of a specialist composer today.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of experimental composition has provided recurring and reassuring points of contact between contemporary music and the society in which it is situated. Whether through inviting the sounds of everyday objects into musical works, framing a social interaction as a sonic event, or shepherding concert music out of the concert hall, the post-Cagean tradition has offered successive generations of composers the opportunity to pay closer attention to the wider implications of their compositional practices. Meanwhile, influential theorisations of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud [1998] 2002) and socially engaged art (Bishop 2004) have added a critical edge to these new-music endeavours that has helped shed light on the importance of approaching socially engaged art critically.

As three socially engaged composers, we combine literature from the social turn in the gallery arts with historical or contemporary music practices from the post-Cagean tradition to locate our own compositions. In this respect, our approach is uncommon within our field. However, without doubting the intentions of a socially conscious community of composers, or the relevance of the existing literature, we found a number of issues in our work that were peculiarly musical. Subsequently, we have gravitated towards the writing of G. Douglas Barrett, an interdisciplinary artist and theorist, who resituates these discussions within specifically musical contexts. Barrett's expanded reading of music 'after sound' concludes that music is ultimately a 'revisable art form that, when radically conceived, exceeds any strict adherence to specific mediums or material forms including sound itself' (Barrett 2016: 6). Barrett's writing has provided us with a critical framework for our own socially engaged compositional practices that had already begun decentring sound. We have, therefore, written this article to illustrate the relevance of Barrett's writing to socially engaged compositional practices in particular and to signpost the value of critical frameworks that bridge the fields of experimental composition and socially engaged art.

We illustrate how Barrett's framework contextualises our own compositional practices that are primarily concerned with the psychological and political impacts of making music, the social relationships and communications afforded by musical experiences, or the criticism of neoclassical music practices. This article provides a discourse for how composers might instrumentalise Barrett's post-sonic aesthetic philosophy to aid socially engaged music practices. In particular, we outline strategies for implementing his framework as a compositional device rather than an analytical one and include an exploration of the implications of working in this way. Specifically, Barrett's themes of discursivity and interpenetration in performance are important to our own works, and these themes will be addressed with more clarity in a discussion presented in the second part of this article.

However, although we see the benefits of Barrett's framework for our own compositional practices, we question his desires for the future of music and his

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hope for novel measures of criticality. Subsequently, we reconsider what could feasibly come 'after sound' for socially engaged composers whose works are already explicitly located at the intersections of musical and non-musical fields, and whether Barrett's writing in fact signals an altogether different exit from art, rather than only a decentred or more reflexive music.

2. MUSIC 'AFTER SOUND'

In *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music*, Barrett (2016) questions the disproportionate emphasis placed on sonic materials in the construction of Romantic-era 'absolute music'. This tradition proposed that its works provided a consistency of communication across disparate performance sites and interpretations,[1] since meaning ultimately lay in the musical score as opposed to a musical performance. Rather than only challenging these assertions, Barrett traces their impact into contemporary musical analysis. Primarily, he identifies the inheritance of a critical perspective that is ill-equipped to deal with non-sonic musical materials. Barrett continues to advocate an alternative critical approach to music, one that drastically relegates the importance of sound and instead focuses on the sociological, political and art-historical implications of musical performances. Throughout *After Sound* the musical examples that Barrett pursues uniformly reject sound as the primary focus of the work.

In some respects, Barrett's notion of music 'after sound' represents the cumulative act of experimental music's passage through conceptual art, postmodernism and performance art, before its arrival at a critical socially engaged compositional practice. Barrett contextualises John Cage's *4′33″*, the Wandelweiser collective and Pussy Riot (among others) through the lens of contemporary art, continental philosophy and global politics (Barrett 2016: 1). Additionally, he dismisses a variety of common musicological assumptions that have generally informed readings of these works. For example, he problematises the *werktreue* concept in relation to Cagean silence (ibid.: 19–38), and the ejection of language from post-Romantic music in relation to Peter Ablinger's practice (ibid.: 96–115).

At the centre of Barrett's framework is a hyper-awareness of the context within which a work, or perhaps more appropriately a performance of a work, is situated. Moreover, as well as the site of a performance, Barrett explores the forms and precedents that mould a work and subsequently shape its meaning. As such, it is of little surprise that the author repeatedly draws attention to the fact that every musical act is grounded in a time and a place. The physical and historical context of a musical act bleeds into a musical work at the same time as that work bleeds into the site of its performance. Barrett formulates the term 'materialist conceptualism' as a label for his aesthetic philosophy, which he defines as 'the notion of a conceptual art that acknowledges the inherent discursivity of artistic practice while taking into account the material impact language and ideas have on the real' (ibid.: 3). He supports this aesthetic approach with reference to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Pussy Riot, one that the philosopher sums up with the capitalised statement –'IDEAS MATTER'.

[1]Barrett also argues that sound art is essentially indistinguishable from absolute music in this respect (Barrett 2016: 5).

3. 'THE LIMITS OF PERFORMING CAGE'

A brief description of Barrett's opening analysis goes some way towards tracing his critical framework and flags its relevance to conceptions of our own socially engaged music practices. The focus of his first case study is John Cage's *4′33″*, arguably concert music's epoch-defining iteration of Anglo-American post-war avant-gardism. Specifically, Barrett explores the contingent politics of Cagean silence by comparing disparate performances from both the 1960s and 2000s and uncovering the impact each context had upon readings of the work.

As one example, Barrett begins by summarising Benjamin Piekut's analysis of Charlotte Moorman's performances of Cage's indeterminate composition – *26′1.1499″*. Owing to the sexual nature and absurdity of her performances, they were renounced by Cage who claimed Moorman had 'murdered' his composition (Barrett 2016: 32). Barrett argues that Cage's reaction to these performances illustrates that although *4′33″* was intended to liberate performers from the tyranny of a composer and the authority of their score, the piece fell short in its pursuit of any emancipatory aesthetic. Instead, early performances of Cagean silence ushered in another stifling performance practice. An aesthetic was therefore established that reinforced the particularities and preferences of Cage himself.

Essentially, Barrett uses these readings of Cage's work to illustrate that no piece exists in a vacuum, and context will always invariably bleed into a work even if a composer tries to deny this fact. Subsequently, with respect to our own compositional practices, Barrett's analysis implies that removing a number of author functions from our working processes can paradoxically result in work that more successfully fulfils our intentions. These ideas make apparent the contradictions present in the simultaneous generation of significant or successful work, alongside the construction of the image of ourselves as significant or successful composers.

Barrett is dubious about the success of Cage's indeterminacy project in relation to Cage's own desires for the work. However, the author is more sympathetic to the political power of Cagean silence. He explores the political implications of these supposedly 'passive' works through the writings of Jonathan Katz, who argues that silence was not passive for a gay or bisexual composer in McCarthy-era America. In fact, mute works ensured their survival and, in the context of Cage's composition, silence was not silence at all, it was the *performance* of silence. Barrett acknowledges that Katz's interpretations are somewhat speculative – suggesting that 'the political thrust of Cage's work may even be understood as running *counter* to [Cage's] own stances on his work' (Barrett 2016: 34). These contradictions only serve to further reinforce the weight Barrett affords to the particularities of a situated performance, which can assume prominence over and above any abstracted notion of compositional intent. He reminds the reader that *4′33″* is the performance of silence within a musical space, and the work's 'socio-political force' is entirely dependent on its context. Specifically, Barrett refers to Caroline Jones's interpretation that Cagean silence may be understood as a kind of *proto-critical music* – one that is 'critical of itself in its very form'.[2]

Continuing his focus on context, Barrett then analyses performances of Cage's *4′33″* subsumed within AIDS literacy workshops delivered by the activist art collective Ultra-red. During these workshops, Cage's composition was deployed to advance a series of recorded statements on the AIDS epidemic. While analysing this work, Barrett argues that:

> The collective use Cage's silent composition as an immanent temporal container, crossed with the iconicity of silence. As such, silence in this context represents the undermining of valuable information that saves lives, the negligence and unwillingness of governments in responding to the epidemic on a public and global level, and an index of the violent effects of stigmatization exacerbated by the constant threat of criminalization faced by people living with AIDS. (Barrett 2013)

Ultimately, an analysis of this iteration of *4′33″* illustrates how the meanings attached to its performances are wholly contingent upon the *physical* contexts in which the work is deployed. Or, as Cage's composition opens a listener up to the world around them, this world around the piece inevitably seeps into the world of *4′33″*. Barrett argues that this discursivity also encompasses the *forms* that a musical performance deploys and concludes:

> Ultra-red's work opens *4′33″* onto a critical confrontation with the present … because, at the same time as Ultra-red's appropriative gesture (the transportation of a concert-work into a politically-charged gallery setting) simultaneously provides a critique of Cage's composition and historical music practices,[3] the performance also draws parallels referencing historical AIDS activism strategies.[4] (Barrett 2013)

Subsequently, Barrett similarly highlights the importance of a work's historical context, as well as its physical context, in the generation of its meaning.

We believe that the physical and historical implications of a musical performance are as pertinent to composers as they are to analysts, and we use them to consider where we deploy our work and in which form. These themes are also reminiscent of Christopher Small's provocations, particularly his argument that 'no matter what message the composer may *think* [they are] conveying, the act of performance within the structure and the conventions of the concert hall or opera house carries its own message' (Small 1987: 354). Whereas Barrett highlights the importance of a performance's context for the *analysis* of music, Small explicitly assigns the responsibility of these implications to composers themselves.

Throughout Barrett's analysis, the author implicitly uses these comparisons between various interpretations and performances of Cagean silence to illustrate that every performance is porous, and that interpenetration between a site and its subjects are inevitable. Furthermore, Barrett implies that even if this interpenetration is not instrumentalised by the author of a work, we would do well to at least pay it greater attention.[5] Over the course of *After Sound*, Barrett points to several similar considerations in musical performance that often become buried or forgotten when too much attention is placed on abstracted sound. For us as composers, Barrett's writing repeatedly points to a series of often-obscured nodes that we can connect to construct a more efficient practice.

To briefly summarise, Barrett provides a radical and perhaps necessarily exaggerated analytical perspective from which to engage with the act of music. He proposes a post-sonic approach that we believe is especially relevant to the construction of interdisciplinary compositional practices and works that

[2]Which is itself a redeployment of Debord's definition for a Surrealist *détournement* (Abbate 2014).

[3]Barrett argues that 'appropriation *frames*: it reconstitutes and reconfigures historical substance' (Barrett 2016: 22).

[4]Such as ACT UP's slogan 'SILENCE = DEATH', and their performance-installation *Let the Record Show…*, as well as Gran Fury's reappropriation of advertising techniques and graphic art in the collective's *Kissing Doesn't Kill* images.

[5]Barrett also uses this opportunity to expand upon his criticism of any arbitrarily defined 'historical authenticity' (*werktreue*) or faithfulness to a score. In Ultra-red's work, Cage's composition is realised precisely and sincerely from a sonic perspective in Ultra-red's performances, yet these performances occur in contexts laden with references towards sexuality which the living composer frequently chased fervently away from *4′33″*.

explicitly accommodate aims that are often arbitrarily considered extra-musical. In the next section of our article we will more explicitly uncover the implications of Barrett's writing for the *composition* of contemporary music practices and how they shape conception, formation and evaluation in a discussion of our own work.

4. DISCUSSION[6]

Oogoo Maia: What I consider having read Barrett's book is actually that there *is* such a thing as absolute music, but I agree with him in the sense that this universality has very little to do with sound. His writing made me think about deconstruction, and if you disassemble the process of making most music, it can be split into writing, performing, advertising, standing in front of an audience, relating to music, remembering and recalling it, learning it and learning about it and many other things. And through this deconstruction you discover this incredibly complicated concept, and to reduce this concept to sound seems like a poor fit. So, if we're talking about music in a way that encompasses all these elements, then there is the necessity for a historical lens, a cultural lens, a sociological one, a pedagogical one and many, many more. And, although we can't untangle all of these threads at once, it seems insincere to give up entirely and to only concentrate on abstracted sound, or to discuss music in a way that presents it as being untethered from everything that is always already happening around it and in it.

If we *are* going to reduce music to something, and attempt to locate some universality within all these various elements, then I think it would be more appropriate to reduce music to the relationships between people – as Christopher Small (1998) and Nicholas Cook (2013) have done. Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to reduce music to the making of sound, rather than the sound itself.

Even better, would be to disassemble these elements down to the physical embodied experience of hitting things, blowing into things, shouting things, putting up posters, typing on a keyboard, or speaking. Because, whatever we do in music it is always filtered through the experience of having a body, and that is common to all of these gestures. This remains the case in electronic music too, because, even when we experience loudspeakers, it is always mediated by the presence of having a body in the world. And in that sense there is something universal and absolute about every aspect of music, regardless of our culture or language or gender: there is always a body that travels through space, in time.

[6]This dialogue is edited together from a series of semi-structured conversations which were held over the course of 2020–21 in the Open Scores Lab at Bath Spa University.

Aaron Moorehouse: This is an interesting starting point. Especially because it seems to me as though all music is invariably socially engaged (although maybe not always Socially Engaged). As soon as we locate a performance in a body, it becomes easier to recognise this fact. Whereas it's easier to dodge this conclusion when we locate a performance in sounds detached from bodies.

But this universality of the body, when it's so self-evident, how do you translate that into creative practice? And how do you keep the body tied up with music when the fundamentalism of the body is shared with every other lived experience?

OM: I was exploring these things in my collection *Games for Musicians and Non-Musicians* (2020) – 64 text-scores that explore how we communicate with each other when we're in a performance situation. So, an exploration of communication through sound, but also communication through language, facial expressions, the shapes we make with our bodies, the effort we put in and how people are arranged. What are all of the things that are involved in the communication process beyond sound, even past the action of making sounds? Outside of these boundaries, what else is relevant to the generation of meaning in music, specifically.

Harry Matthews: I've performed some of these scores, and the construction processes are quite clear, so this deconstruction you've just been referring to quickly becomes apparent.

As an example, I remember performing 'I Want To Know Who You Are' (Maia 2020) from this collection. Six of us were arranged into two groups of three, positioned in two lines stood opposite each other. To begin, the two groups were instructed by the score to stand motionless without doing anything. Then, after a short moment, the first group had to verbally explain what the person in front of them was doing with their body, and this observation was sent to the person next to them and they had to re-enact the verbal explanation. And so on and so on. It reminded me of the *Telephone Game*, where children stand in a line and whisper a message that quickly becomes distorted. However, Oogoo's performance makes use of microphones and headphones so that the audience aren't aware of the content of the messages being communicated. So, from the perspective of the audience, these gestures quickly become absurd and exaggerated, like a feedback loop.

AM: It provides a nice illustration of the generation of meaning latent in a gesture or stance that is produced to intentionally appear meaningless. So in a way, it becomes a metaphor for the construction of meaninglessness in other situations too.

I think this work could be read as a recognition of the meaning of the aspects of our practices that we don't often talk about, or aspects which we try to

diminish the importance of, or try to deny, or cast adrift. Essentially, the meaningless we construct, either consciously or otherwise.

Then in Oogoo's piece, there's also this element of coding, and how we code movement into language and vice versa, which seems relevant to how we code anything into sound because it's a similarly distanced translation.

HM: Exactly – this exploration of what we can code and what the code can't handle. It's like converting a WAV file to an MP3, except the compression in this performance doesn't discard information, it disfigures it and alters its form and meaning. It makes the piece. So it comes back to Barrett's analysis of Peter Ablinger's *A Letter from Schoenberg* (Ablinger 1996) actually, where the message of Schoenberg's letter to his publishers is transcribed as musical pitches which are reproduced by a player-piano.

Barrett references how music practices from the nineteenth century ejected language from the pre-modern tripartite conception of music – *harmonia*, *rhythmos* and *logos* – that was inclusive of language. Whereas, Ablinger recodes language back into a musical work through the voice of a canonic composer. So here, the sounds don't communicate by referencing language, the language communicates through sound.

AM: This idea of a code outside of sound is relevant to my quasi-therapeutic works, too. A post-sonic perspective clarifies the aims for my compositions, and facilitates the implementation of therapeutic models (that derive from outside of Music) to evaluate the success of my participatory works. In other words, these models code the impact of my work, and I think their efficiency would be obstructed if I were simultaneously trying to squeeze sound into any particular form.

For example, there's a community music therapist called Brynjulf Stige who developed an evaluative framework for participation, through observation of an accessible music festival in Norway (Stige 2010: 130). He identified five distinct 'styles of self-presentation' by monitoring the impact a participant's actions had on the rest of a group. So, his categories begin with 'non-participation' (which is an absent participant), then 'silent participation' (which is a participant being present but not joining in), 'conventional participation' (which is participating in an orthodox manner), 'adventurous participation' (which is participating in a manner that challenges the course an activity takes and is subsequently accommodated by the group), and finally 'eccentric participation' (which is transgressive participation that disrupts the course of an activity in a way not accommodated by the group). Throughout, Stige emphasises how close the relationships are between each classification and the ease with which a participant can move between many different styles of self-presentation during a single activity. As well, his observations illustrate that there's no requirement for this movement to be linear, either.

This model is great at evaluating the instantaneous impact of an action, rather than seeking to describe the form that an action takes. So I use Stige's frameworks to evaluate engagement in most of my participatory works, and I think it works well as a means of quantifying engagement in socially engaged practices.

Currently, I don't think these post-sonic analyses happen enough, even when well-being benefits are used implicitly to justify the 'social turn' or the value of socially engaged music practices. And fundamentally, after thinking about these practices 'after sound', it seems illogical to try and discuss the impacts of socially engaged music practices through a conversation about sound. Again, it's about how we code what we're doing, and the meaning of the work. Because, there always has to be a code by which you evaluate work, and there's always meanings, effects, and implications attached to performances. But lots of these things only fall into reach when you put certain frames around what it is that you're doing.

OM: In some ways, I feel that this preoccupation with the experience of the audience (or participants) is an omission from Barrett's framework. In his book, a lot of attention is rightly focused on how a musical event (a score, a performance, a recording, or a report) articulates itself within wider society. Or how it feeds from and informs the sociopolitical – historical context of its own being – often displaying an awareness of Nattiez's analytical approach (Botstein 1992: 129–45).

Nattiez's approach divides the reception of musical situations into three levels: the Poietic Level – the composer's intentions; the Neutral Level – the object itself and what we see and hear; and the Aesthetic Level – how the thing is experienced and read, and the meanings ultimately created by the audience.

Yet in Barrett's framework, hardly a word is written about how musical events exist at those three levels in-situ. That is, how such events communicate with the immediate environment where they take place: with the individuals in the room, with the sounds and smells that invade the performance space, with the time of day, the season of the year, or the weather outside. In essence, all the things that can't be generalised at all from performance to performance. Yet, these elements also affect the experience of an audience, and fundamentally, the meaning of a performance.

Of course, because these elements of a performance are so esoteric, it makes less sense to talk about them in a book. But, it is with those immediate and very real, very present entities (in particular the other humans in the performance place) that I want music to be critical,

to question its own existence. Whereas I think Barrett neglects this line of thinking.

But, if we do need to develop a new language to critically discuss making music, let it be about the event of music-making first, and only later about the waves and ripples that radiate from that event into the world around it. The initial foundation stone seems to be missing in Barrett's writing, and by extension his analysis is a few steps removed from the immediacy of experience itself. And, against his disapproval of a musical analysis built upon abstracted sound, this omission feels a little contradictory as it still depends upon an abstracted performance.

However, although there is this omission in Barrett's writing, it feels logical and perhaps necessary that these areas of engagement become more prominent when we discuss his framework as a compositional device, rather than as an analytical one. And I think your work and the therapeutic frameworks that they accommodate begin to hint towards this conclusion. Barrett's writing doesn't engage with these areas, but for socially engaged composers these areas are arguably the most important in which to be critical and self-aware. Saying that, I can appreciate that Barrett is writing about a music which is socially engaged by a different definition, and it's valuable that his writing starts these kinds of conversations.

HM: This also brings into question how we deal with the expanded environment around our work, and how we frame this environment.

AM: Yes – themes of interaction, and interpenetration, and discursivity, and what you allow into these conversations. These are really important things to consider from Barrett, too. But even just registering what we say about our work, and how we say it – these things are implicit in Barrett's writing.

My last piece was titled *Where Are We Going? and What have we Done?* (Moorehouse 2021), and for this work I went through every composer listed on the *British Music Collection*'s 'Composer Index'. There are approximately 5,000 composers in total, but a good chunk of them are no longer living. Elgar and Vaughan-Williams are listed, for example. Anyway, eventually I emailed each composer that still seemed to be active, and for whom I could find an email address or reach them through their website. It took a long time, but I asked as many people as I could what their music had 'done'.

This was intentionally quite provocative, but primarily it was intended to be rhetorical, and it was really interesting to read how each composer approached the question and where they located the impact of their work. It was also interesting to then put lots of these responses next to one another. Because as well as composers advocating certain measures of impact, there were lots of instances of composers referring to, and then distancing themselves from, another measure. So it becomes an exploration of how we evaluate compositional practice, and an exploration of who composers are (as a lot of responses were autobiographical). But also it becomes an exploration of what composition is, through what this label precludes and what it accommodates. And bringing this back to Barrett, this meets his definition of 'critical music' (critical of itself in its very form), because this piece questions the forms of music-making and fundamentally these dialogues provide the materials for the work itself. Suitably, it was one of the first pieces I worked on after finishing his book.

I'm doing a similar project with music therapists now: asking them the same question about what their music has done? And whereas a lot of the composers primarily explored (or took issue with) an evaluation of what their music had *done*, the music therapists haven't been concerned with this at all. Instead, they've all been interested in defining what *their* music is (in terms of the variety of musical experiences that they feel are their own, not just the music they have performed or composed), and what *music* is. Whereas, they're quite comfortable talking about the impact of what they do without making lots of justifications and clarifications of the terrain. So it's illuminating to discover where these blind spots are, for whom, and how we navigate through them (using language), and past them (in our future practices).

HM: This piece seems to reinforce the idea of a performance as a site, rather than as an object. And thinking about things in this way casts a performance as a stage, rather than as a work (although of course a work can be situated on this stage). This metaphor opens things up temporally and spatially – it grounds performance in a time and a place. Additionally, it reconnects a performance to history, through time's relationship with the time that has come before.

These ideas provide a particularly useful lens for considering the impacts that historical ideas and inferences have on the present, and what we present. To put it another way, if we think about concert music as an example, or the conventions of classical music more broadly, there's this whole chronology of how these conventions were formed and why. Essentially, what they meant during the nineteenth century. But when we redeploy the forms of these historical practices today, we're not importing these forms stripped of their historical meanings, and we're not even re-inscribing these historical meanings. What we're doing is redeploying these forms both *in* the present, *and* against the backdrop of their own histories, and I think this means something different entirely.

I've used these ideas to compose too, specifically in relation to Žižek's reading of Pussy Riot. He frames their work as conceptual art even though it's often primarily spoken about as activism. And then Barrett

takes this further. He raises this idea of proto-criticality again, and argues that Pussy Riot's protest is conceptual *music* since the meaning and materials of their work (singing a feminist punk prayer at the altar of Russian Orthodoxy) are so contingent upon the history and significance of the space in which it is situated. He then makes a similar argument regarding the impact of the Russian liturgical music which is traditionally associated with this space, even if this music is absent when Pussy Riot charged the altar.

And this is tied into my own practice. I'm certainly interested in boundaries and crossing over, and interpenetration, as well as an audience becoming aware of an environment, and reacting to it. And within that, I am also reacting to the political implications of being subjected to an environment, and finding up-to-date ways of talking about our environment.

I think there's currently a lack of vocabulary for these discussions. Or at least, we lack ways of having these conversations without borrowing romantic notions of representing an environment, or coding environmental damage into a sonic object which is then commercialised. This technique of using emotionally charged traditional means of making music to evoke the *sensation* of being environmentally aware doesn't sit well with me.

Instead, my work is always about the relationship between the person and their environment and how they engage with that, rather than providing a representation of an environment and signalling that this is good and this is bad, and this is how someone should feel about it. Ultimately, I think that when you're interacting with a work in a way that's autodidactic, you're doing something culturally significant. So my work is very much about removing that idea of an 'environmental music'. Instead, looking at where you are, parts of your environment, or how you contain this conception of your environment. Or, in relation to sounds – how they interact with other people and why that's important.

OM: Rather than seeking out sounds for their character, or their topography, or their value. So is this post-Cagean, too?

HM: Yes, to greater and lesser degrees. I suppose Cage was hesitant to portray his silent works as an invitation extended to 'active' listening. When I read his writing he always comes across as being more intent on revealing the presence of an ever-present unconscious constructed listening (much like the reflexes that were illuminated by Duchamp's urinal). So the difference between Cage's work and mine is that in my work all listening is directed. David Dunn's *Purposeful Listening in Complex States of Time* (Dunn 1997–98) is another example of this. So rather than the focus being on illuminating conventional ways of listening to music, I use those same listening modes alongside listening modes that we would use to navigate our daily lives. Furthermore, there is also an element of combining those things to question what a sound is to a person – what it means and what it signifies, politically and personally. So it's very much evaluating an experience of sound rather than prescribing or providing an experience of sound. Although, there are still links to Cage through the self-evaluation (or recognition) of a way of listening.

AM: So this is in contrast to some of Annea Lockwood's work – *From the River Archive* (Lockwood 1973), for example. As a reference point, those works are about seeking out sounds, and seeking out specific kinds of experiences (which contain similarly specific sounds). Whereas your work is less directed in that sense, but more directed towards finding out what's there without trying to make the argument that it's necessarily beautiful or of value. It's more about trying to uncover what the implications of these sounds are. Like acousmatic listening?

HM: Very much in the sense that my work is not focused. At least not in terms of the sounds it seeks or prescribes. It's more about how a sound is perceived and negotiated, and the contingent relationships it represents, as well as the relationships it fosters between people and how all of these things are contained within the perception of someone's immediate environment.

I often use acousmatic sounds in my work, but normally this is simply stripping away sounds from their immediate environment (which Murray Schafer would call 'Schizophonia' – Schafer 1994: 88). Whereas, the primary focus in my work is on the relationships between a listener and their imaginative interpretation. I try to set up situations that tempt out a certain reaction, generally by reconstructing soundscapes, and I take these presuppositions and challenge or distort them in some way.

OM: And you've explored this in a recent work?

HM: Yes, in my most recent piece – *The Other Side of the Sign* (Matthews 2021) – I've used binaural field recordings of fairly typical rural environments. I obtained these recordings through acts of trespassing, and I play these to audience members through sets of headphones. This sets up a personal and immovable barrier between their ears and a series of live sounds provided by a group of musicians onstage. Essentially, I sideline live performers, distancing their sonic impact on the audience, and I foreground environmental sound. In this way, the piece is an inversion of how we normally listen to concert music. The central idea that surrounds this piece looks at how trespassing can be used to manipulate experiences and, by extension, the attitudes we hold about trespassing. There's a conflict between sounds from these sources, and between these ways of listening that isn't present in *4′33″*, and this falls back onto

notions of trespassing – which is associated with violence.

The performers quote poetry by John Clare and music by Elgar, alongside sustained consonant drones that reference the English countryside in a kitsch way. Therefore, during the first half of this piece, the audience is misled with regards to the intentions of the work. This is because I'm using acousmatic listening as a tool to evoke a kind of response that I'm critical of – that of representing an 'ideal' environment through music and sound.

Initially, I only hint at the idea that the audience are involved in an act of trespass, and this invites queries into how I sourced the field recordings that they're listening to. However, this all changes quite dramatically in the second half of the work, where the performers (who up until now have accompanied the experience) begin shouting at the audience with accusations of trespass. These accusations are fairly benign at first, but eventually they become more violent. Then, as this almost outrageous moment passes and things gradually return to the previous material, the audience is left in a rather different headspace compared to where they were just a few moments ago, even though they are returned to the material at the beginning of the piece: the field recording in headphones, and the performers playing drone material.

So as you can probably imagine, the acousmatic listening mode is no longer the way they experience the situation. Instead, the audience is now more likely questioning the situation they've been put in, and whether they are ethically okay with this?

What I'm trying to achieve here is two things: first, to bring to attention the idea that most of our knowledge of environmental crises is delivered through the lens of others who own land, or have been granted permission to make records of environments. And second, I want to illustrate how easily situations can be manipulated so that we experience them in a certain intended way. So this piece teaches an approach to exploring an environment and defining your relationships with space, which hopefully brings about alternative ways of listening or evaluating the spaces we inhabit.

But also, it comes back to Barrett's idea of interpenetration and performance as a site. However, whereas he talks about a context bleeding into work, I conceptualise this with a different metaphor – trespassing, with a re-enactment and exploration of the politics of these gestures within a musical performance.

AM: So it's primarily political, the work? And it channels its politics through music simply because politics always necessitates a form. In other words, the work exists as a political object, rather than it being the case that the politics of the work are being used to stimulate a musical object. Or else, why *this* piece? And why not a string quartet that people sit and listen to.

Similarly, my works are primarily therapeutic, or musicological, and they take the form of musical works. But this question of form is secondary, and forms are only assessed on how they accommodate the primary purposes of the piece. So there's a clear hierarchy here for both of our practices. Yet, even though the conventionally musical elements of the works are secondary, we still refer to our practice as composition. Similarly, I don't refer to myself as a therapist or a musicologist, and you don't call yourself an ecologist, or an activist.

And this is where I lose faith in the idea of 'critical music', especially when we speak about this music as though it will be something better than what we already have. Because, if we already know what we'd like to achieve through our practice, and it's not built upon organising sound, then why do we embed ourselves in a community that holds different expectations for their work. Because we designate what we do as composition, we end up as composers addressing composers. And I think this leaves us as cynics, which is perhaps fine on some levels. So long as we recognise that how we situate our work simultaneously limits our work, because there's only so much growth you can acquire through negation.

And so, these labels become important, and self-defeating. For example, people who photograph food don't call themselves chefs, and I don't see what we gain by calling ourselves composers when we spend so much of our time disinterested in sound. It's why I feel uneasy with how Barrett leaves his framework, even though I appreciate the steps he takes to reach this point.

5. MUSIC AFTER ART

> All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art. (Barrett 2016: 166)

Barrett concludes *After Sound* by briefly alluding to the possibility of a post-sonic music that ultimately raises itself to a music 'beyond contemporary art'. To illustrate this, the author points to an impending demise of art and new-music institutions through recourse to a number of texts published in 2013. These texts variously prophesied the disintegration of the art-world through either self-destruction or mass-exodus. During this discussion, Barrett affords particular prominence to the ideas of the theorist Suhail Malik, and his series of talks that were book-ended by the quote reprinted as the epigraph to this section.[7] Five years on from *After Sound*, with the social-boom

[7]This quote also heads the introduction to Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (Bishop 2012: i).

reverberating through another generation of composers, it is worth revisiting these sentiments.

Whereas Barrett seemingly desires a *tabula rasa* enacted and subsequently colonised by preordained musicians and artists (a process which inevitably bears all the hallmarks of modern professionalisation, if not its name), we are occasionally more pragmatic. At times, our practices defer authority to non-musical research, and the post-sonic practices illustrated previously allow for the implementation of frameworks and perspectives from sociology, ecology and therapy which would otherwise be impeded by a primary focus on sound. However, this approach still retains an air of insincerity.

For post-sonic music practices that replace the aesthetic manipulation of medium with the pursuit of extra-musical impacts, the only effect of an artistic designation for such work is arguably to excuse either a clumsy implementation of relevant research or ignorance of this research entirely. Therefore, to reconcile this criticism, the subsequent rotations of the social turn logically leave these practices facing the question of what artists *become*, rather than imagining what *becomes* of the art-world. As such, for our own compositional practices to become more effective, we believe it would be beneficial for each of us to further shed our artistic and musical self-identifications. Instead, our practices would benefit if we were to situate them more securely within the fields of activism, ecology, sociology, pedagogy and therapy – fields whose perimeters our practices only presently patrol. While this need not necessarily prohibit musical or creative gestures within these confines, this recontextualisation for our practices would arguably provide a fitting conclusion for a post-conceptual tradition which has determinedly decentred both material and medium in the years since the Second World War. Or, to return once more to conceptions of music after sound: if sound becomes an unsatisfactory material to work *with*, at what point does music (even a critical music) become an unsatisfactory medium to work *in*?

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