

Sound Explorations: Windows into the Physicality of Sound

The invitation to be a guest editor for a special section in this issue of *LMJ* gave me an opportunity to ask five composers whose work and ideas I find stimulating and important to open a window into that work, to convey how they are currently thinking about it and about the path of their explorations over time. Here is a brief introduction to each.

Éliane Radigue writes at a significant time in her career, when her exploring path has taken her into new terrain—the sound world of acoustic instruments—in *Naldjorlak*, a cycle of three works composed from 2005 on for cello solo, two basset horns and, most recently, all three instruments. *Naldjorlak*, as she explains, refers to the motion of all life toward unity. The complete work premiered in Bordeaux early in 2009 and will be presented in Philadelphia in March 2010 [1]. This is the work to which she refers in her paper “The Mysterious Power of the Infinitesimal.” It was a thoroughly collaborative exploration, paralleling her lifelong search for the smallest sound grain and for the “imperceptibly slow transformation” that generates her electronic music—a continuation and not a breakaway from practice, and yet a fresh journey that she describes (in program notes for the cello solo) as being

as if we were digging into the depth of the essential nature of the cello, down to its roots. The score became the whole body of the instrument. . . . The aim being to follow the natural flowing of overtones and to respond to the games of the harmonics all the way up to the threshold of their disappearance beyond the limits of human hearing [2].

The cellist, Charles Curtis, describes the process by which the cello solo emerged most interestingly in his CD liner notes for this part [3].

Radigue’s paper draws one deeply inside the multidimensional apprehension of sound and flow from which her music arises, in a form that I experience as an analogue to her music and a composition in itself.

Sensitivity to the physicality of sound pervades the work of all these composers, but it is particularly intense in Cat Hope’s explorations of the body and infrasonic frequencies in both performed works and installations. Infrasonics have long been a resource for many musicians, but usually as a component in a mix, whereas for Hope and her collaborators in the group Abe Sada, they are often primary material, as in “Abe Sada Redux,” a “very low Hz piece for 25 basses in a locked gallery, the audience outside,” which she described in a recent e-mail. I experienced one of her earlier solo infrasonic works in 2005 at the 7th Totally Huge New Music Festival in Perth, Australia; it pulled me into a completely physical world in which I became intimately aware of the sound waves moving through my body—collaborating with my body, I felt—and of the power of this involuntary collaboration, reminding me how wide the range of human aural perception actually is—the whole body hears.

Liz Phillips’s installations work with sound, space, light, motion, the natural conductivity of the human body, fish, spaghetti, water, paper and echolocation devices to create a subtle interactive sounding-web of connection—spatial and physical. It is very like a web in fact: The system is as sensitive to even slight movements by people within the space as a spider is to vibration in its web. The technical sophistication and complexity of the system is transparent and not the point thereof. That it is one’s natural movements and sounds that shift the sound space (which is interface-free for the participant) is satisfying and tantalizing; there is never any direct cause-and-effect connection to be made; rather, one dances with the space.

Behind that fluidity, “Voltages (potential energy changes) will first reflect movement near

objects; then can be made to react to speed, change in direction, and save information about presence and nearness of audience/participants,” she explains. “This information can then activate sound events, shift their pitch, timbre, and duration and amplitude. . . . An illusion is created in three-dimensional space in the context of time space. An illusion is formed from events and memory” [4]. It is interesting to contemplate what she might create by accessing such huge systems as the wind and ocean currents, as she is considering.

Acoustic ecology, encouragingly, is an explosively developing field. Around the world, artists, scientists and thinkers are entreating us to refocus our ears, take the earbuds out and let the sounding world around us (already flooding into our bodies involuntarily) into our ears. Whereas wind and ocean soundscapes are often welcome input, the intensity of the industrialized soundscape is much less so of course, especially now that we are beginning to recognize the damage it is causing to ourselves and to the non-human environment. Thus O+A (Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger) ’s proposition that city soundscapes are musical is radical; it is also pragmatic. Recognizing that elimination of fossil-fueled noise pollution is a long struggle, during which we continue to be exposed to it, they suggest that we can absorb it in a different, more contemplative way, without the stress of resistance.

This approach has been realized in more than 24 collaborative installations, many employing the “tuning tubes” described in o+a’s paper to transmute ambient urban noise in real time into a harmonic spectrum within which ears and body can be released from tension. I think of this as digging directly into the sonic soil itself and believe it can influence our urban ears and reconnect us to our shared acoustic commons. In a small example of this, they have changed the way I listen to skateboards ever since I heard skateboarders trigger a bright spray of harmonics in *Elevated Harmonies* (New York, 2007). Now I savor them even in raw form, unmediated by a 14-ft tube. This is a form of adaptation by the receivers, rather than by the generators and transmitters of noise, so it is good to see O+A’s strong and sustained advocacy for a thoughtful, humane approach to the reality of sound generation in urban design and its effects on us.

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Born in New Zealand in 1939 and resident in the U.S.A. since 1973, Annea Lockwood is known for her explorations of the world of natural acoustic sounds and environments in works ranging from sound art and installations through text-sound and performance art to concert music. Her music has been performed in venues including The American Century: 1950–2000 at the Whitney Museum, De Ijsbreker, the Other Minds Festival (San Francisco), the Walker Art Center, the Los Angeles County Museum, Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room, the Westdeutscher Rundfunk, CNMAT, the Asia-Pacific Festival, the Stadthaus Ulm, Donau Festival, Krems, the Totally Huge New Music Festival and Ruined Piano Convergence—Perth, The Kitchen, the Ear to the Earth Festival, New York, and the Annual Florida Electroacoustic Music Festival. She was recently a recipient of the 2007 Henry Cowell Award.

References and Notes

1. “Three Days: Éliane Radigue,” Bowerbird, Philadelphia, PA, 26–28 March 2010: festival of performances, workshops and discussion with composer-in-residence Éliane Radigue <www.bowerbird.org>.
2. Éliane Radigue, *Naldjorlak*, program notes.
3. Charles Curtis, “Naldjorlak pour Charles Curtis,” Shiiin 3 CD, 2007, liner notes.
4. Liz Phillips, <www.lizphillips.net/biography.php>.

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