

COMPOSITION IN NO-MIND'S LAND:  
A PORTFOLIO OF ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC

by

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## ABSTRACT

This PhD thesis comprises a portfolio of electroacoustic music and a written commentary. The portfolio consists of ten acousmatic compositions, two of which are collaborative works, and one video recording of a live electroacoustic improvisation.

The commentary discusses the creative processes behind the works and their most pertinent aesthetic concerns. The usage of varying bottom-up and top-down methodologies in the different pieces is investigated, with a workflow termed ‘improvisatory composition’ being the most prevalent. Pursuing a mind-set of unselfconsciousness and mindfulness is fundamental to all of them, and this is illuminated with the concept of no-mind and Zen koans.

Aesthetically, evocation of enigmatic, elusive, indefinite and nonconceptualisable moods and emotions is central to the works. This is termed ‘incorporeal evocation’; it is paired with the concept of ‘corporeal evocation’, which relates to the notion of ‘permeability’. The repercussions of different degrees of self-consciousness in self-expression is also examined, as well as the concept of ‘betweenness’ and the idea of ‘enigmaticism’ in music. Finally, Iain McGilchrist’s recent theory on the hemispheric differences of the human brain is introduced to give another layer of meaning to these viewpoints, and the importance of the nonconceptual nature of music is argued for.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

My PhD consists of ten acousmatic compositions, two of which are collaborative works, and one video recording of a live electroacoustic improvisation<sup>1</sup>. This accompanying commentary is intended to clarify both the aesthetic ideas informing the works and the working methods behind them.

A chief aesthetic concern of my work has been the evocation of indefinite, subtle, ambiguous and enigmatic moods and emotions. Since they have an ineffable and inexpressible quality, I have concluded that they are not directly available to the rational intellect or conceptual, taxonomic thinking. Hence a compositional approach that has clearly delineated compositional ideas, easily described in words, which are then decisively investigated and developed with a sense of certainty would be at odds with many of my main concerns. Consequently, although the working methods used in the pieces of the portfolio vary, a common factor has been the attempt to work unselfconsciously and with a mindful, thoughtless present-moment awareness that is attuned to the emotional resonances of the sounds.

I have adopted as my principal compositional approach a methodology that I call 'improvisatory composition', which is based on fast, intuitive bottom-up composition. I

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<sup>1</sup> Acousmatic pieces: *Hermit's dream of mountain ash*, *Minoiki Tephra*, *From the Incommunicable Mass*, *Objects that skim the surface* and a selection from *Translucent Poems*: (1) *Glowing in Silent Light*, (4) *Nocturne*, (5) *Pavilion of Hexagonal Mirrors*, and (8) *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs*.

Collaborative acousmatic pieces: *Aphotic* with Constantinos Kontos and *Texto 610* with Josué Moreno.

Real-time improvisation: video of solo set at MuteFest 2015.



am also an active free improviser, which has fed into the genesis of that compositional workflow, but which continues alongside it as its own methodology. One work of pure, unedited solo free improvisation with Malegra, the electroacoustic instrument I have designed for myself, has been included in the portfolio, as well as one piece that is based on a semi-improvised performance, but which has been edited after the fact. I have also experimented with indeterminate top-down compositional methodologies, and one piece demonstrating this approach has been included in the portfolio.

Due to the relative brevity of this document, I have chosen not to include an exhaustive description and analysis of each piece, but instead proceed more thematically, dividing the body of the text into the broad topics of workflow and aesthetics. The chapter on workflow examines the different kinds of creative processes and methodologies I have employed in the making of the portfolio – dealing in turn with improvisatory composition, improvisation, top-down procedures and collaborations – and the pieces are referenced accordingly.

The chapter on aesthetics considers primarily the issues of evocation, emotional expression, ‘enigmaticism’ and ‘betweenness’, and, again, specific pieces are mentioned where most relevant. Concepts of corporeal and incorporeal evocation – as well as the related concept of the permeability of the sonic surface – are introduced, and my stance of placing central importance on incorporeal evocation is articulated. In self-expression, a difference between self-conscious and unselfconscious expression is distinguished, the latter being central for sensitivity to incorporeal evocation.

All of the works in the portfolio are mentioned in the text, but some are discussed more briefly than others; I trust the reader can link the pieces with what I have written, even

when the connection has not been explicitly drawn. Also, the commentary is not extensive enough to deal with all the aspects of the pieces, my workflow or my aesthetic interests in their entirety – I trust that a reader familiar with electroacoustic music is able to fill in the gaps from what I have written, from the sounding end result of the pieces and from a general knowledge of established working practices and aesthetic concerns in the field of electroacoustic music. Formal, structural, syntactic or discursive considerations are less prominent than is perhaps typical in a commentary of this kind, but this is a logical consequence of my emphasis of unselfconsciousness and nonconceptuality in composition: I view form as the accumulating impregnation of the indivisible present moment, and I do not believe that this can be meaningfully captured in architectural taxonomic thinking.

I have supplemented the discussion of my portfolio with two non-musical perspectives: the viewpoint of mindfulness, nonduality and Zen Buddhism, primarily referenced in the chapter on workflow; and Iain McGilchrist's recent neuropsychological theory concerning the hemispheric differences of the brain, primarily referenced at the end of the chapter on aesthetics. I believe that both of them provide sufficient insight to my work to warrant being included in this commentary; even though my discovery of the writings of McGilchrist post-dates the composition of most of the submitted works, I found in it strong echoes of my own experience and a certain corroboration of my praxis.

## II. WORKFLOW AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

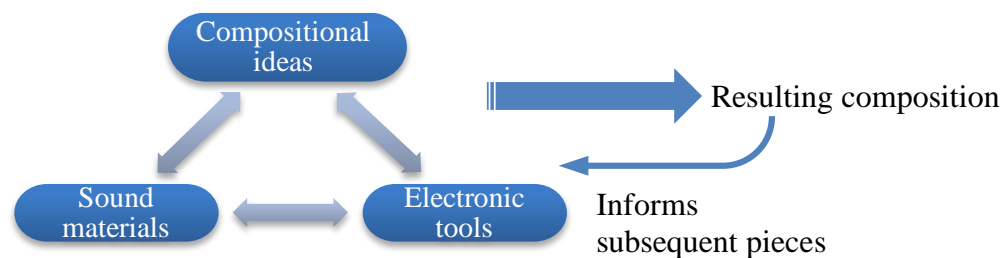
One of the principal concerns of my PhD project was to examine my compositional workflows and consciously experiment with steering them in different directions. In some of the experimentation I simply allowed the tendencies towards which I was already intuitively gravitating to become amplified or exaggerated by going further down the paths they already indicated. I therefore allowed the light, unselfconscious, sculptural composition method that I call improvisatory composition to become even faster, more unrestrained and more agile. However, I was also interested in more top-down<sup>2</sup> composition, and enhancing my earlier practice in this direction required more conscious effort.

Indeed, the continuum from bottom-up to top-down workflows can be seen as a plane of reference for my workflow experiments: on one hand, I was interested in the extremes (making my bottom-up workflows even more bottom-up, yet also experimenting with heavily top-down methods), and on the other hand experimenting with some grey areas in between, for example injecting some pre-planned elements or after the fact compositional manipulation to my improvised performances. Collaborative work was also useful in giving further twists to these investigations, and so two examples of that are included in the portfolio.

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<sup>2</sup> “[B]ottom-up works [...] are] based on materials [...] composers] have assembled which they subsequently manipulate and place in sequences to form structures. [...] Top down [...] works are made] from a given structure that in turn is filled with sound.” (Landy, 2007:34) Landy suggests that most works of acousmatic music are made from the bottom up. These also mirror Simon Emmerson’s concepts of abstracted vs. abstract syntax. (Emmerson, 2000:20)

One way of viewing the workflow of acousmatic composition is to see it as an interactive feedback network between the compositional ideas, sound materials, and the tools (see Figure 1). Since technology is never neutral but directs its user in a variety of ways by which actions it enables and encourages, viewing composition as a one-way flow from compositional ideas to a piece is problematic, as the compositional ideas are not just translated into a piece via the neutral mediation of technique. Instead, both the sound materials and the tools used affect the compositional ideas at every stage of the process – changing and transforming them, and creating new ones. It is moreover possible to start a composition without any overt compositional ideas – as I am often inclined to do – and in my own work I tend to try to keep the compositional ideas implicit, nonconceptual and ‘thoughtless’, rather than explicit, thought-based and verbally expressible. This will be discussed later at greater length.



**Figure 1: A visualization of the interaction between compositional ideas, the materials and the tools**

Furthermore, a continuum can be outlined in the use of the sequencer timeline in contemporary acousmatic composition: on one end a workflow where the sounds have been entirely edited and processed before sequencing, where sequencing is purely the placement of pre-prepared sound objects; and on the other end a workflow that happens entirely on the sequencer timeline, with no pre-preparatory stage. In practice, very few workflows are close to the extremes: in the first case, at least the addition of some subtle

processing and volume automation is likely to happen, and a pure exemplar of the latter case is only truly possible when automating synthesis – as, when working with recorded sounds, *something* has already been prepared, even if not with the present composition in mind. Yet I find this dichotomy useful, as it outlines a difference between a position where the bulk of the improvisation and trial and error happens in the beginning and generates a compositional plan that is then executed, and a position where substantial experimentation and improvisation can happen at any and all stages of the sequencing. The first approach is most familiar to me from the workflows of Jonty Harrison and Constantinos Kontos (Harrison, 2013:318; Kontos, 2016:26); although I have also experimented with it, I tend towards the latter approach, which is essential for the workflow of improvisatory composition, where the materials should retain malleability and an emergent quality to the end.

As might be clear from listening to the portfolio, and as will be discussed further in the next chapter, underpinning all my works are some very prominent and personal aesthetic concerns that can be seen as the lifeblood of my music and so are in some ways non-negotiable. Hence none of the workflow experimentation was arbitrary, but was always driven by – and was in a sense subservient to – the aesthetic pushes and pulls that are foundational to my music.

## IMPROVISATORY COMPOSITION

*No ideas but in sound.*<sup>3</sup>

Some seven years ago I was becoming frustrated with aspects of my creative process that I found cumbersome, and so set out to guide my workflow towards a lighter, livelier and more fluent and effortless ‘touch’. This happened over many years, partly naturally by itself and partly by conscious direction, and is still ongoing – at first I called this workflow ‘slow free-improvisation’, but later settled on the term ‘improvisatory composition’. In addition to weariness of excessive perfectionistic fine-tuning and problematizing, a crucial stimulus for the genesis of this compositional workflow was my involvement in electroacoustic free improvisation (both solo and group-based), some of the feel and attitude of which I wanted to bring to non-real-time composition. At the time, I was also starting a meditation and mindfulness-practice, which influenced my view on the role of conceptual thinking in composition, and which gradually developed into a deep involvement with nondual<sup>4</sup> spirituality.

I was also starting to listen to more acousmatic music from outside academia<sup>5</sup>, which often sounded to my ears more effortless, fluid, unrestrained, and unselfconscious. This

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrasing W. C. Williams’ line “no ideas but in things” (Williams, 1964).

<sup>4</sup> “Nonduality is the philosophical, spiritual, and scientific understanding of non-separation and fundamental intrinsic oneness. [...] Duality, or separation between the observer and the observed, is an illusion that the Eastern mystics have long recognized, and Western science has more recently come to understand through quantum mechanics. [...] Nonduality is the understanding that *identification* with common dualisms avoids recognition of a deeper reality.” (Science and Nonduality, no date)

<sup>5</sup> Particularly composers such as Lionel Marchetti (Marchetti and Capparos, 2009), Kevin Drumm (2010); Thomas Köner (2012); Graham Lambkin and Jason Lescalleet (2008); Annette Krebs and Taku Unami (2010); and, Keith Rowe (2007).

implies a relationship between the workflow and the aesthetics – apart from the qualities I mentioned, this music also sounded to me fascinating and enigmatic in a way that I felt touched on something profound and transcendental, and I also wanted to move towards this aesthetic direction in my work. I must have felt an intuitive connection between the perceived workflow and the ensuing aesthetic, feeling that there was something in a micromanaging craft-heavy workflow that was in opposition to – or at least unlikely to bring forth – these aesthetic qualities. Indeed, as my thoughts on evocation developed, it became clear to me that a certain degree of unselfconsciousness and mindfulness is necessary for sensitivity to subtle and indefinite moods and emotions, and since the evocation of these is a crucial aim in my music, the cultivation of the related frames of minds is necessary.

It is perhaps worthwhile to expand slightly on the relationship between my compositional and improvisational activities. I had been involved in electroacoustic improvisation since around 2007, and became much more so in 2010 when I started designing my own electronic instrument, Malegra<sup>6</sup> (a usable instrument within a few weeks, but which is still in development to this day), joined Eddie Prevost’s weekly improvisation workshop in London and discovered like-minded improvisers through it. One of the active propositions of the workshop was that “the relationship between musician and instrument (sound source) is fluid and capable of far more responses than can be imagined” and that imagination itself is stimulated – ignited – by practice (Prevost, 2009). Hence “the musician is urged to try and search with an open and

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<sup>6</sup> Markov-Lehmer granulator, built in Max; so named because in it granular synthesis is controlled by both Markov chains and Lehmer’s linear congruence formula.

expansive attitude of investigation without specific objectives and even without hope or expectation of finding anything”, which can paradoxically lead to “undreamt of results” (ibid). This echoes the sentiments of Cornelius Cardew, which also seem relevant to acousmatic music: “We are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them” (Cardew, 1971).

These sentiments fit into the way my compositional ideas and my creative process were beginning to develop and fuelled the developments further. By working quickly, intuitively and with a clear mindful concentration, I wanted to tune the interactive feedback network between the compositional ideas, sound materials, and the tools mentioned earlier (see Figure 1) into maximally natural, effortless, and unselfconscious operation. It could also be said that I wanted to retain within compositional activity a similarity to the stimulus-response characteristic of free-improvisation, in which the player receives unexpected input from both the instrument or other sound source used and from the other players, and reacts to these in a continuing process of back-and-forth navigation.

When improvising with an acoustic instrument, one might, for example, take a brush and place it on the strings of the instrument. Before the act one does not know exactly how it will sound, but upon the contact, a new ‘undreamt of’ sound world opens up that now offers different kinds of directions for investigation. One might become fascinated with some sonic detail and try to exaggerate it, and on doing so, new possibilities open up again, and so on. At the same time, one is trying to let something more than just sonic surface emerge – perhaps, consciously or unconsciously, playing with the



emotional ‘responses that attach to the sounds’ – and in the case of group improvisation, other players both feed into and feed from what you are doing. In this way one can see different kinds of interactive feedback-networks working on several simultaneous levels, guiding the music forward, without the music being ‘thought up’ beforehand.

Hence in my improvisatory composition workflow I allow the music to emerge as freely and ‘thoughtlessly’ as possible from the “betweenness” (McGilchrist, 2009<sup>7</sup>) of the moment-to-moment encounter with the sound. As I wrote in the program notes for my piece *Torque* in 2010: “I wanted to work with the lightness and speed of an abstract expressionist painter – throwing paint on the canvas, generating ideas on the fly, painting over previous ideas, maintaining a primitive intuition and avoiding over-craft”.

What this has meant in practice could be summarised into the following loose guidelines:

1. Compose quickly, lightly and effortlessly.
2. Start without overt compositional ideas and allow the form to be built moment-by-moment
3. Avoid over-thinking and maintain unselfconscious mindful awareness – ground decision-making as much as possible on intuition rather than thinking.
4. Avoid over-craft or getting stuck on refining a particular section for too long.
5. Work primarily on the sequencer timeline, start composing from the beginning of the piece and progress linearly<sup>8</sup>.

By starting pieces without explicit compositional ideas, and by trying to maintain a mindful, nonconceptual, focused concentration throughout the composition process,

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<sup>7</sup> The kindle e-book version used does not contain page numbers that would match the print version. This is the case with all the books where page numbers are not given.

<sup>8</sup> While this is in practice usually the case, it is also completely possible to compose with this attitude while working in a more modular manner.

compositional ideas do not necessarily become verbal, or explicitly thought-based at any stage of the process; in Morton Feldman's words, "having the sounds continually appearing as a physical fact wakens me from a sort of intellectual daydream" (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:206). Although elements of this thinking can be perceived in all of the pieces in the portfolio, the clearest examples of this workflow are *Hermit's dream of mountain ash* and the *Translucent Poems*.

### **Workflow of *Hermit's dream of mountain ash***

*Hermit's dream of mountain ash* had its beginning when I started to feel I had unnecessarily repressed my fascination with reverberation in recent years, and simply threw some firework recordings on the timeline and ran them through a very long artificial reverberation. I then added, impulsively and semi-arbitrarily, without too much thinking, many other different kinds of materials from my library to the timeline, to see how they would react to each other.<sup>9</sup> This is typical of this workflow, and it bears a resemblance to the element of surprise in improvisation from both other players, and from not knowing exactly how a performing action will sound or fit into the overall sound-world.

By working like this, I also gravitate towards a heterogeneous and eclectic use of materials that does not reveal any musically meaningful properties when examined conceptually – *Hermit's dream* contains, for instance, fireworks, hydrophone recordings, different kinds of hums, urban ambiances, jumpy synthesisers, radio static,

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<sup>9</sup> As is typical to improvisatory composition, these materials were not particularly prepared for this piece, and ranged from edited or unedited field recordings and sounds processed for some other (or no particular) end, to different kinds of improvisations.

creaking trees, stuttering granular synthesis from Malegra and piano recordings. This is partly an aesthetic issue, relating to the enigmatic character I am fascinated with, but it is also a factor for workflow: I believe that solutions that ‘look good on paper’ can give a sense of false confidence on the emergence of musically significant meaning or consistence on conceptual grounds, and by avoiding those I am keeping myself on my toes, forcing myself to continually determine the emergence of musical meaning on emotional or intuitive grounds.

Some of the materials I experimented with were short samples, but most of them were longer, unedited recordings with their own internal morphologies, the overlapping of which created happy accidents that I could then isolate via editing. I then reacted to the interplay of the materials by keeping or removing them, editing or moving them and so forth. Quite soon the interplays of the materials were starting to generate a piece-like identity, including a mood and an emotional ‘rhetoric’, and I let the form be built moment-by-moment by cutting and phrasing the materials, guided by the different kinds of tensions, “pregnancies” (Bayle, 1989:165) and “psycho-gravitational pushes and pulls” (Olewnick, 2006, cited in Kuoppala, 2013:21) forming between them. And so, for example, the marked formal rupture at 2:33 was not motivated by any structural plan, but was an intuitive response to the tension and pregnancy accrued into the dense stratified texture – like bursting a balloon. That the piece ended up having a form resembling A-B-A’-B’ was therefore simply an outcome of moment-to-moment improvisation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 2: B for a screen capture of the piece’s Reaper project.

Because maintaining a momentum of unselfconsciousness and mindfulness is important for improvisatory composition – and hence speed is a factor –, most of the processing I do while composing is fairly simple (such as changing the playback speed of the material – usually slowing it down), and is generally done to create material with the kind of mood or emotional character I am seeking. The kind of thinking related to theme and variation, in which source material is taken on a journey (via changing, often automated, processing), is not so typical of my workflow and my compositional thinking – perhaps because I am more interested in moment-to-moment emotional resonance (and view form also as moment-to-moment accumulation of it) than in discursive musical syntax or architectural thinking. In a longer piece such as *Hermit's dream* I will inevitably have to create new material and also process material in order to move the music forward, but I try to do these as quickly and lightly as possible, as they can slow down the workflow and dissipate the momentum and concentration it requires.

When working in this way I can retain in non-real-time composition some of the heightened sensitivity to the mood, pacing and timing that I feel in real-time free-improvisation. However, it requires a sustained mindful concentration – especially as I try to remain hypersensitive to the emotional resonances of the sounds – and this can be psychologically taxing. Either my compositional workflow is not yet fast and effortless enough, or my mindfulness practice needs to deepen, but currently I tend to find it more difficult to remain ‘in the zone’ the longer I work on a piece. Consequently, with a full-length piece like *Hermit's dream*, intellectual problematizing, perfectionist tendencies

or other self-conscious<sup>11</sup> elements tend to creep in at some point, reducing the spontaneity of the workflow.

### ***Translucent Poems***

Partly for this reason, I set out to cultivate the improvisatory composition methodology by creating short and quick compositional etudes. Initially, I set to finish each piece in less than a day, but I soon relaxed this condition – however, all of them are done quickly, in no more than a day or two each. Taking the improvisatory composition workflow as far as I was able was one reason for starting the project, but I had also notable aesthetic motivations – primarily to investigate evocation of moods and imagery without being overly restrained by formal considerations – due to which I named the series *Translucent Poems*. I have composed ten of them to date and have included numbers 1, 4, 5 and 8 in the portfolio.

The first of them – *Glowing in Silent Light* – was indeed completed in less than a day. Its compositional process was extremely straightforward and economical, being almost exclusively based on selection of material, editing and timing<sup>12</sup>. The material is based on a recording done in a reverberant cave in China – containing background ambience, claps, metallic clunks and a single female yell, all with natural reverberation – and a synthesised bass note, always playing the same pitch. The introduction of the

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<sup>11</sup> In this commentary, I do not use the term ‘self-conscious’ in the sense of being excessively aware of being observed by others, but in a more general sense of individualistic self-awareness, where an identification with our “self-referential internal narrative” (Weber, 2014) – consisting of our plans, ambitions and stories about our ‘self’ – affects our decision-making, rendering it contrived. This contrasts with uncontrived unselfconscious action, where a divisions between subject and object, and internal and external blurs in an absorption in the present action.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 2: A for a screen capture of the piece’s Reaper project.

synthesiser to the cave recordings conjured a clear mood, after which finishing the piece was a simple affair. After separating the different elements of the recording, I then set the ambience to be constantly in the background, edited the voice and the claps and clunks – sometimes slowing some elements down (lowering their pitch) – and timed the elements to create the kind of mood I was after. The only processing done was noise-reduction, some additional reverberation and the aforementioned changes in playback speed. I suspect doing more would have interfered with the poetic and evocative character I was seeking.

The fourth etude – *Nocturne* – had a very similar workflow. I started working with some close-miked cicada recordings I had made in China and, due to their uncannily mechanical quality, I had always had at the back of my mind the idea of trying to combine them with some similarly stuttering synthetic materials, which I did using no-input mixing board recordings, digital feedback and synthesis. I then set the mood with some subtly undulating sine-tones. In both of these two *Poems* a simple and economic idea emerged very quickly in the work, and so, after the initial creative moment, neither piece features very prominently the process of improvising on the timeline by, for example, throwing materials together to see how they interact. The two later *Poems* are better examples of this.

*Poem 5, Pavilion of Hexagonal Mirrors*, is one of the most light-hearted and uninhibited pieces in the portfolio, and contains plenty of relaxed improvisation on the timeline. The piece originated in a similarly laid-back context: I had just moved to The Hague for a short exchange at the Institute of Sonology, and was staying at the home of some local undergraduate students I had met only the previous day. We had spent the

evening with several friends, watching experimental films and listening to experimental music, and when the other two people staying in the room had gone to sleep, I took my laptop out; without moving from the couch I would be sleeping on, I spent several hours of the night with the computer on my lap composing the *Poem*. I threw together very disparate materials – some amusing, some ominous – somewhat giddily, and felt a child-like joy in hearing and feeling the gravitational pushes and pulls emerge. The extemporaneous way the piece was composed reminds me of the way a poet might take out a notebook and write a poem while sitting in a café – quite a different attitude from working 9-to-5 in the high-fidelity environment of a studio. To round off the erratic life of the piece, a few weeks later my laptop was stolen and, not having backed up my work in between, all that remains of it is just a render I had made earlier.

Some of the sources used in the piece were samples from old video game music<sup>13</sup>, different kinds of field recording ambiences, gestural activity with wooden logs and ambiguous sound objects generated with a Max patch I made that I call ‘*The Enigmatic Object Generator*’<sup>14</sup>. It randomly edits an inserted sample – I normally use pieces of music – into sound objects of 1-10 seconds’ length, with randomised fades, playback speeds (with possible glissandos), randomised filters and in some cases randomised distortion; some of its more prominent occurrences in the piece are the snippets of music at 0:21, 0:57 and 2:31. I also used a feature in Reaper called ‘reposition items’<sup>15</sup>,

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<sup>13</sup> Most prominently the amusingly spooky and ominous haunted house tune from Super Mario World for Super NES (Nintendo, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> The name was inspired by Jean-Christophe Thomas describing certain sounds in Francois Bayle’s *Erosphère* as “enigmatic objects”, that have surprising “magic power”. (Bayle et al, 2010)

<sup>15</sup> Added with the SWS extension.

which adds a fixed time interval between the selected items on a single track. I had placed a cluster of already edited log-gestures on a track, and simply used ‘reposition items’ with a ~10 second interval to set a log-gesture to occur regularly at every 10 seconds – then, while composing, and according to what kind of interactions happened with the other materials, I changed them by hand.

The use of the Enigmatic Object Generator and the ‘reposition items’ function give two good examples of how I sometimes might use indeterminate, formalistic, or otherwise apparently top-down methods in the middle of a heavily spontaneous, improvisatory bottom-up composition. Indeed, viewing any dichotomies between bottom-up and top-down composition too rigidly can give a wildly inaccurate view of the abundance of creative solutions available in the composition process that can in reality flow fluently between seemingly disparate methods. As far as I am concerned, in a free-improvisation situation too, there would be no rule against, for example, spontaneously generating a random number and waiting that many seconds before playing a sound.

*Poem 8, Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs* is similarly uninhibited, but features a more drawn-out process of non-real-time improvisation on the timeline, resulting in a workflow that seems extremely convoluted when viewed retrospectively. I started experimenting with field recordings done in the highly reverberant Greenwich Tunnel in London, but did not find anything that piqued my imagination, and so continued to subject the material to more and more subversive processing, such as feed-back distortion and, especially, GRM Shuffling with a large fragment size and very low density. I also added other materials, such as improvisations done with Malegra or with a no-input mixing board, and created complex behavioural interactions between the



materials by using different materials as external sidechains for gating each other. Due to the randomised nature of GRM Shuffling, each playback of the piece was different until I bounced down the tracks that used the plugin. In this case, then, I was largely not starting from the beginning of the piece and progressing chronologically, and the composition was not based on editing and timing, but on using interconnected processing for creating a sonic environment that was partly composing its own moment-to-moment evolution.

In this way, the piece illustrates a further twist in the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy: the creation of a sonic environment using partly indeterminate means would normally be associated with top-down compositional strategies, but in my case I was constantly working intuitively on the timeline, creating the interconnected network of processing spontaneously and constantly listening to the sounding result. The process reminds me of a scene in *The Mystery of Picasso* (2003) in which Picasso is improvising on the canvas in real-time: first he draws some flowers, then a fish around them, then changes the fish into a chicken and finally in the colouring stage covers all of these with a big black face, so that only glimpses of the flower-fish-chicken remain (see Figure 2). Clearly, at the beginning he had not decided where he would end up.

Similarly, only vague glimpses of the original Greenwich Tunnel recordings remain in *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs*. However, I would never have ‘thought up’ a piece like this; it is vital that it *emerged* from free, unreserved play. This unreservedness relates to the swiftness of the *Poems*’ workflow, which had an emboldening and liberating effect: a piece that has only been worked for a day or two is less likely to get enmeshed in self-

conscious thoughts, perfectionism or hesitancy that could plague a more 'Major Work', as there would not be so much to lose even if the work got ruined.



Figure 2: Picasso's flower-fish-chicken changing into a face (The Mystery of Picasso, 2003).

The way I have talked about the speediness and casualness of some aspects of this workflow might give an impression of haphazardness, but I believe this to be inaccurate. Even though I might throw materials on the timeline semi-arbitrarily and make choices about it quickly, there is its own kind of deep care to this selection. I am trying to tune my intuition and emotional receptivity to maximum sensitivity and focus, but avoid making thought-based choices: thinking is slower than intuitive and emotional reactions and so when working quickly, it does not have time to catch up and take over. I tend to trust these intuitive reactions – when they happen from a state of unselfconscious, mindful concentration – more than thought-based ones and, as mentioned, the elusive enigmatic moods and emotions to which I am drawn are poorly available to rational intellectualisation. For those concerned with value judgements,

features such as time spent working on a piece,<sup>16</sup> quality of mixing, technical level of craft or other indicators of professional skill are sometimes used to suggest a higher value for the music. For me, however, these are secondary considerations, as my chief consideration in evaluating art is the subjective and ‘unstandardisable’ sense of how deeply it mines the ineffable and transcendental aspects of the human condition.

## **IMPROVISED AND SEMI-IMPROVISED WORKS**

### ***Objects that skim the surface***

The portfolio also contains two works that have been largely created in real-time, both primarily with Malegra. *Objects that skim the surface* is based on performance I did at a BEAST concert in February 2013. Typically, I am used to improvised performances that are framed as separate sets, before and after which the audience has a small break – I think this is conducive for both the performer and the audience to sink into a relaxed, immersive and open concentration. In this case, however, the performance was framed as one piece within a concert of otherwise fixed acousmatic music, some of which I could expect to be relatively muscularly gestural or otherwise assertive. As a result, it did not feel natural for me to do a fully improvised set in a subtle and slow-building manner, which I would have otherwise preferred, but decided to partially pre-plan the performance.

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<sup>16</sup> As Feldman has said: “Work is used to justify art – give it some degree of legitimacy.” (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:78)

The first aspect of this pre-planning was to create some material in advance, rendered as two audio-files I would then trigger at approximately pre-planned moments in the performance.<sup>17</sup> The second aspect was that I had planned a sound-world and a very approximate form and did several rehearsals of the set. Since Malegra has a large number of physically controlled parameters which have no preset functionality, this rehearsing could only ever be approximate: I could decide the beginning fairly precisely, but the further the performance proceeded, the more it would be improvised. I had decided that since the performance was situated amidst possibly quite gestural acousmatic pieces, I would not try to build an ambiguous and delicate mood, but would play fairly gesturally myself. Malegra outputs in eight channels, and I could guess that its precise and fast-moving granulation diffused through the BEAST system could sound quite impressive and sonically satisfying – in a sense I compromised my deeper interests in enigmatic and subtle music for sonic fireworks.

The performance worked reasonably well, but as a recording, I preferred one of the rehearsals. However, on repeated listening I felt it too could benefit from compositional intervention, and so I edited it down from 17:06 to 11:52, turned it into a stereo-version by running the four stereo-channels through different convolution reverbs to create some sense of depth, and tweaked it otherwise. The result of this is what is included in the portfolio. Due to the numerous compositional interventions, particularly the after-the-fact work on the timeline, I would in the end regard it as a fixed-media piece.

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<sup>17</sup> The first of these consists of a short improvisation done with Malegra of high skittering self-feeding (no-input) distortion – stylistically abstract and not far removed from the granular material I performed in real-time that most of the piece consists of – appearing in the piece at 4:55-6:30. The second one starts with this same material (7:31-8:03), before changing to a static synthesised pad sound (8:09-10:30).

Although I was satisfied with it at the time, the more I have listened to it, the less appealing I find it. Perhaps I was too self-conscious and calculative in its creation, resulting in a flatter and more superficial piece.

### *MuteFest set*



Figure 3: Photograph of my performance at MuteFest 2015.

Conversely, the performance from MuteFest 2015 is pure Malegra-based free-improvisation with a minimum of pre-planning. The only preparation consisted of setting the initial state of the instrument: the slowed down piano and the granular flutter (appearing first at 0:38). This, however, ended up being a fairly substantial ‘compositional’ decision, as these materials set up a strong but delicate mood with far-reaching implications: due to its delicacy, the mood would be disrupted easily, so I had to tread carefully in maintaining and developing it.

I also had to tread carefully because of the piano-material. Even though I had designed Malegra largely around granular synthesis, there are in fact many kinds of granular

textures I find tacky – particularly when randomising grain pitch – and these risky areas are exaggerated with pitch-based material. Therefore I considered randomising grain pitch of the piano sample to be out of the question, especially taking into account the restrained mood that was building up. One of my two main granulators was then pinned to playing the piano samples with a very restrained set of manipulatory possibilities, and since I was highly aware of the mood-altering effects of different kinds of performance gestures, I had to be very focused with each sound I played with it.

A detailed discussion of the workflow of the set would require a lengthy introduction to Malegra, which is out of the scope of this paper. However, workflow-wise the main aspect I want to highlight is the kind of concentration I tend to enter when playing a set like this. Performing improvised music – particularly in front of an audience – is one of the situations in my life where my concentration is most heightened, and in which I can stay unfalteringly focused for very long periods of time; moreover, the focus tends to remain mindfully in the present moment. Hence I could say that when improvising, I almost automatically attain some of the mental qualities I am aspiring towards in my compositional workflow. However, some self-consciousness and judgementality still tends to surface from time to time, so the nonconceptual, thoughtless, unselfconscious state that I aspire towards still emerges only momentarily.

## **TOP-DOWN PROCEDURES**

### ***Minoiki Tephra***

The use of some more top-down oriented techniques was mentioned when discussing the *Translucent Poems*, but they were still embedded in a framework of fundamentally

bottom-up composition. However, the portfolio also contains pieces where the overall compositional process has a clearer top-down methodology: to a small extent, *Minoiki Tephra* and, to a greater extent, *From the Incommunicable Mass*<sup>18</sup>. Although large aspects of the workflow of *Minoiki Tephra* fall under improvisatory composition, it has one crucial difference: this time I had an uncharacteristically strong compositional idea at the very start of the piece. I had become fascinated by the demise of the Minoan civilisation, particularly the ‘post-apocalyptic’ final decades with their imagery of wrecked coastal villages, ruined harvests and the sky dark with volcanic ash<sup>19</sup>. The story had instilled on me a strong mood of confusion and hopelessness in a state of limbo, and I wanted to compose a piece exploring that mood.

However, it is important that I did not start to compose the piece until the mood would naturally turn into sound. That is, I did not want to try to artificially force the mood I felt into a piece, but had filed the idea away and decided to get to it only when I would spontaneously encounter some sound that somehow expressed the mood. This happened some months later when I was experimenting with slowing down contact mic recordings of a creaking metallic fence: their sighing had a longing melancholic quality that reminded me of the idea for the piece<sup>20</sup>. Now that the idea had materialised into sound, I could start composing the piece.

Initially I did not proceed with my usual improvisatory compositional workflow. Since I had an unusually vivid compositional idea from the start, I wanted to experiment with

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<sup>18</sup> As well as the collaborative piece *Texto 610*, which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

<sup>19</sup> See longer description in the programme notes in Appendix 1.

<sup>20</sup> These are the slow wailing melodies that happen prominently at e.g. 0:22-2:30 and 9:40-10:45.

the compositional workflow of first fully preparing and processing the materials outside the sequencer timeline, and then using the timeline for simply sequencing with essentially finished sounds with very little processing. I generated a substantial amount of material by setting some key mood-building sounds to loop in the background while processing other materials in the foreground. This workflow also necessitated planning the structure to a certain extent beforehand, which I did. When I thought I had done enough preparation I moved to the timeline, and assumed that the timeline-phase could be quite simple, fast and tidy.

However, I soon realised that this would not be the case: it became clear that my musical imagination depended heavily on the mood being sculpted ‘orchestrationally’ in context, with all the accumulated tensions and pregnancies influencing the musical materials at every moment – that is, the emergent mood and emotional character being a gestalt of the whole piece. Hence I ended up generating more material and processing on the timeline, with the final project being fairly complex and messy, with 76 audio tracks and plenty of effects and automation. The bottom-up sculpting was still guided by my initial compositional ideas and formal plans, and so the overall composition process ended up being something between improvisatory composition and more top-down approach.

### ***From the Incommunicable Mass***

Apart from the compositional idea of *Minoiki Tephra*, I also had interest in exploring more formalistic top-down procedures, stemming primarily from my fascination with the music of John Cage and the Wandelweiser composers, particularly Michael Pisaro.



Specifically, Pisaro's *July Mountain*<sup>21</sup> had piqued my interest in the creation of an open score for an acousmatic composer (myself) for the composition of an acousmatic piece: that is, the compositional process would be divided into different kinds of pre-planned steps, outlined in the score with varying degrees of performative freedom. Embarking on this process led to the composition of *From the Incommunicable Mass*.

I decided that the piece would consist of different sonic layers ('instruments'), each alternating between sounding sections and silent sections, the timing schemes of which would be generated using varying – often indeterminate – means. The layers would consist of: 1) recorded rotating objects, 2) hums recorded in the 'field', 3) synthetic semi-noisy/harmonic hums, 4) beating sine-tones, and, 5) dry, abstract rustling (generated with Malegra)<sup>22</sup>. I also planned that the layers would be realised on the sequencer timeline in this order (for example, the rotating objects layer would be completed before moving to the hums), so that the sounds of the previous layers would influence the sound selection of the next one, but not vice versa. The rotating objects I would have to record before starting anything on the timeline, but the other layers would be realised on the timeline – for example I would select the field recording hums from my library while working on the timeline and while listening to the finished rotating objects layer.

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<sup>21</sup> *July Mountain* is an open score for field recordings and percussion that results in a fixed media piece. (Pisaro, 2009; Pisaro and Stuart, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> I am here giving only a very brief description of my 'score' – in actuality I was imagining a more detailed sonic world than these descriptions imply and also wrote down lengthier plans and descriptions.

I chose to enable more improvisatory bottom-up influence by leaving different kinds of freedoms for the sonic realisation. I could decide whether the sounding sections start and stop abruptly or fade in/out; I could automate their volumes and so even silence them; and I could process them in any way I wished and slightly adjust their timings if necessary. Since I was relatively inexperienced in this method of composition, I also remained open for the necessity to loosen up any of the instructions at the timeline-phase.

I then proceeded to create the timing schema. For example, in the layer for the rotational objects, a new sounding section would always start 30 seconds past a minute (i.e. 0:30, 1:30, etc.). Their durations would gradually lengthen, starting from ten seconds at 0:30 and going up to 131 seconds at 9:30, which I decided would be the last rotating object event, the end of which would mark the approximate ending of the piece. At 7:30<sup>23</sup> for the first time one rotating object event follows another without any silence in between, and I decided that this would mark a formal change in the piece, after which all the layers would have a long simultaneous sounding section, resulting in a dense wall of sound.

I continued to create the timing schema for the other layers utilising varying mechanisms, often using weighted randomisation in Max to determine the starting points or lengths of events – sometimes these related simply to the overall length of the piece (e.g. 10 randomly distributed events throughout the length of the piece), sometimes to the events on other layers (e.g. starting +/- 0-10s from the end of the last

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<sup>23</sup> These times are not accurately reflected in the finished piece, as in the end I tweaked the timings by hand. The formal change that was originally at 7:30 is at 8:09 in the piece.

event on the previous layer).<sup>24</sup> The process was rather improvisatory, but this time I was improvising with algorithms, numbers, processes and systems, rather than directly with sound material. Yet in designing for example the bounds, weighing and mapping of the randomisations, I could estimate what kind of pacing, density and hence mood they would give rise to. I had no conceptual interest in the schemas as such – their only justification was in the sonic end result that was likely to follow.

What I have described so far could be considered the ‘score’ of the piece, as it was all schematic, did not involve any sound materials, and could be passed on to another composer for a different realisation. After this, I proceeded to realise the plan in the sequencer – the ‘performance’ of the piece. Very soon I started taking more liberties than I had initially outlined. For example, after creating the first two layers (rotating objects and recorded hums) according to the score, I felt that the piece could do with additional layers of field recordings, so I added two more layers – one of resonant hums and another of rain – by first creating their timing schema and then realising them on the timeline. When realising the layer of beating sine-tones, I felt the events were too short, so I simply tripled all their durations. I even added another layer consisting of quiet electromagnetic interference completely improvisatorially without any timing schema as I felt the piece could do with this kind of ‘glue’. Finally, I elongated some silences and static moments to give the piece some breathing space.

Being so unsystematic in the realisation of a piece like this might seem strange, but it can be partly explained by noting that I was interested in this working method purely as

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<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 2: C for an illustration of the piece’s timing schema.

a means to a sonic end rather than from some conceptual or philosophical perspective<sup>25</sup>.

Even syntactic or formal considerations were not a priority: I had merely noticed that indeterminate or open score techniques can be used to conjure a certain kind of alien impenetrability – a different kind of enigmatic mood than what tends to emerge from my improvisatory composition workflow – and that I would most likely need to use such techniques to create this mood which fascinated me.

This workflow could alternatively be thought of as ‘constrained bottom-up composition’. All of the compositional choices were made with the objective of creating a particular kind of sonic universe and mood, and on the timeline I was trying to coax this out by sculpting the materials in a rather improvisatory manner; only the means available for this shaping were severely restricted. The sounding end result balances between two different kinds of worlds as both the top-down methods and my improvisatory composition habits had a strong influence on it. While something was gained by the bottom-up shaping, something of the foreignness was also lost, and in the future I am also interested in creating pieces like this by upholding the top-down instructions more systematically. However, I probably need more practice in this manner of working before I can create the kinds of sonic atmospheres I am interested in with less sculptural shaping.

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<sup>25</sup> Just as my interest in Cage’s music is not in any way conceptual, but is based on how his pieces sound and what kind of moods and atmospheres they conjure and mental states they encourage.

## COLLABORATIONS

### *Aphotic*

The portfolio also contains two collaborative works – *Aphotic* with Constantinos Kontos and an excerpt from *Texto 610* with Josué Moreno – which provide unique perspectives to the experimentation with compositional workflows that is central to my PhD research. *Aphotic* was born from a period of relaxed and unconstrained sonic experimentation with Costis that included recording objects, ‘jamming’ together in real-time and working together on the sequencer timeline. We played a number of jams where I used Malegra and Costis played sounds and plugins from Logic. These sessions were very casual and were not intended to generate ‘improvised sets’ that would be satisfying by themselves; instead, what we were looking for were captivating piece-like sections, which we could redevelop in non-real-time. A preliminary version of *Aphotic* was one of these.

The real-time improvised section was already close to the eventual piece: almost all the material we used was there, as well as some of the formal developments, such as the movement from the synthesiser drone background to the water tank background (~4:03), as well as the section with the more ambiguous looping background at 5:50-7:14. However, we thought it was too long, too aimless, and had a too constant foregrounded gestural activity, so we decided to redo the piece in non-real-time. Costis recreated the materials he used in Logic while I edited my materials from the multitracked recording of the improvisation, after which we did a few transformations of each other’s materials and started working together in Reaper.

With *Aphotic*'s workflow we successfully did what I tried to do with *Minoiki Tephra*: we did not generate any new material once moving to the sequencer timeline and the only processing was subtle tweaking with equalisation, compression and reverb. Hence our workflow was closer to Costis' typical workflow than mine, as he generally tries to compose without making new material on the timeline (Kontos, 2017). Consequently, the timeline-phase was effortless and quick<sup>26</sup>. Most of the time we were both sitting in front of the laptop, alternating who was operating it. This was beneficial for creative concentration: if the focus of one of us was faltering, the other one could take control or otherwise try to re-instigate the focus. This happened, for example, when occasionally I would gravitate towards experimenting with processing, and Costis would restrain this, keeping us focused on a simpler workflow. In this way, face-to-face collaboration proved to be another useful method for enhancing and upholding a mindful, creative concentration.

### ***Texto 610***

While *Aphotic* was done squarely bottom-up, *Texto 610* bears more similarity to *From the Incommunicable Mass* in that it is an open score realised as a fixed-media piece. We pooled our initial instructions for the score from Josué's brief text piece *Texto 28*, which goes as follows:

*Choose an object, an instrument, or any kind of sounding action.  
Repeat it 28 times; the repetition does not have to be accurate.  
You can play this in an ensemble situation or record it.  
If you are recording, record as many takes as you want, listening always to the  
preceding takes while recording the new one.*

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<sup>26</sup> In four days, we did both the preparation of the materials and the bulk of the composition on Reaper's timeline.

*In both situations, always listen to your environment while performing your actions. (Moreno, 2012)*

We decided we would take turns in recording the overdubbed takes; in each take we would improvise in real time 28 sonic events (of any length) during a 40-60-minute timespan, which we chose would be the length of the piece<sup>27</sup>. Each take would be done with one instrument or sonic source, the interpretation of which was kept flexible. If using an electronic instrument, we would record both the straight output as well as the ambience, and decide independently how we would mix these before sending the take onwards. When recording each take, in addition to listening to the previous takes, we would also individually decide on a “sonic exciter” – a “secret message” (ibid) – against which we would be listening and recording, which we would not disclose to each other. This might be simply the ambience of our surroundings or some detail of it, in which case it could be audible in the recording, or we might for example listen to another piece of music on headphones, in which case it would not. We also decided to keep the overall dynamic very soft.

With these instructions in place we set to realise the piece. I recorded the first, third and fifth takes, with Josué doing the second and fourth; although we were initially planning to do more, after the fifth take we decided that the piece was finished. The first and third takes I recorded with Malegra – in the first, using a microphone and its acoustic and digital feedback circuits with distortion; in the second, smooth granulation of low hums. In the fifth take I interpreted the instructions very liberally, automating the volume of a

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<sup>27</sup> These instructions were formulated through email exchange.

microphone placed outside my window and equalizing the previous take, both done in real-time.<sup>28</sup>

When improvising the takes, we had to focus on listening both to the previous takes and our ‘sonic exciter’, while at the same time counting each sound event in order to play exactly 28 of them. From Josué’s perspective the utility of this is that you are then “a little bit over your limit”, which “puts you in the mind-state of just reacting” (Moreno, 2017); this is desirable, because playing in this “survival mode [...] makes the inner musicality come out” (Moreno, 2012). I agree that there are advantages in straining the performer’s focus like this: while in my case it brought an element of struggle and frustration to the improvisation, it also created a certain kind of hyper-focus with reduced explicit thinking or analysis, perhaps since there was no bandwidth left for them. Hence the piece provides yet another angle to my pursuit of a music-making mindframe which is mindful and unselfconscious and devoid of judgementality and thinking. Perhaps this key aspect of what I am after with my workflows can be summarised in Feldman’s words: “it is the *concentration* you’re after and not ideas.” (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:207)

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<sup>28</sup> In the excerpt, my first take can be heard in e.g. some of the white-noise type hisses (e.g. 0:11 onwards), crackling noises (2:43->), microphone windshield handling noises (5:15->), some of the feedback-drones (e.g. 1:48->, 9:25->), and in general distorted or feedback sounds; the third take as low hums (e.g. the first sound of the take and 6:38->); and, the fifth take as the crow as 0:56 and the high-pass equalisation on 5:06-5:36. The high metronome-like pulsating pitches (3:37->, 11:43->) as well as the stuttering and glissading pitches (0:19->, 3:25->) are some examples of Josué’s sounds from takes 2 and 4. The ambience of my first take included a washing machine (e.g. 6:25->), and as a way to coordinate our quiet playback volumes, we decided that it should be barely audible when we record our takes.



## MINDFULNESS AND NO-MIND

*The beginning of freedom [from thinking] is the realization that you are not [...] the thinker. Knowing this enables you to observe the entity. The moment you start watching the thinker, a higher level of consciousness becomes activated. [...]*

*When a thought subsides, you experience a discontinuity in the mental stream — a gap of “no-mind.” At first, the gaps will be short, a few seconds perhaps, but gradually they will become longer. [...]*

*When [...] a creative solution is needed, you oscillate every few minutes or so between thought and stillness, between mind and no-mind. No-mind is consciousness without thought. Only in that way is it possible to think creatively, because only in that way does thought have any real power. [...]*

*All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness. The mind then gives form to the creative impulse or insight. Even the great scientists have reported that their creative breakthroughs came at a time of mental quietude. (Tolle, 2002)*

Part of the motivation behind my workflow experiments has been the realisation through my own work that thinking itself is not the best source for creative, poetic ‘unthinkable’ solutions, or for the creation of evocative moods. A fundamental aspect of my compositional practice during the last six years or so has been to compose less and less by thinking, and more and more from ‘no-mind’: sound is heard, emotional impressions are felt, hands move (click click), expression emerges. Like Zen Master Seung Sahn says: “the most important thing is, only *do* it. When you only do something, 100 percent, then there is no subject, no object” (1996b); “If you have no mind, everything will be perceived just as it is. [...] What’s important is to perceive the sound and become one with it, without separation, without making “I” and “sound.” At the moment of true perceiving, there is no thought, no separation, only perceiving sound.” (1996a)

Perhaps this is partly why I was keen to undertake my PhD under Jonty Harrison’s supervision – even without (to my knowledge) any connection to Zen or nonduality, in

tutorials, Jonty has always discouraged getting lost in the endless possibilities offered by intellectual speculation and instead kept the focus on the simple practice of *just doing it*, which in my own work has translated into trying to draw solutions from no-mind.

In Zen, the disruption of the linearly rational thinking mind and the consequent awakening of the no-mind or ‘don’t-know mind’<sup>29</sup> is sometimes facilitated by using enigmatic questions that defy rational intelligence and logic, known as koans. Imagine, for example, that you enter the interview room to sit with a Zen Master, and after sitting on the cushion in front of her, she holds up a bell and asks: "What is this?" How would you respond? Alternatively, the teacher might ask “what is the ultimately true nature of a cow?”, or pose a wordier riddle such as this: “A father and son were involved in a terrible car crash. Both were picked up by an ambulance and rushed towards a hospital, but along the way the father died of his injuries. At the hospital the boy was wheeled into an operating room, and doctors were called. A neurosurgeon arrived, took one look at the boy, and said, "I can't operate on this boy; he's my son!" Who was the neurosurgeon?”<sup>30</sup>

If you had answered “a bell” to the first one, the teacher might respond: “you are attached to words”. The reason is that “bell” is indeed a word or a concept, but what she is holding in her hand is neither a word nor a concept. The correct answer would be to

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<sup>29</sup> In Zen, no-mind is sometimes also called, with slightly different emphasis, “don’t-know mind” or “before-thinking mind” (Seung Sahn and Mitchell, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> My familiarity with koans stems primarily from personal interaction with Zen teachers, for example Zen Master Dae Kwan from the Su Bong Zen Monastery (Hong Kong). A reader interested in the topic could use the book *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* (Seung Sahn and Mitchell, 2007) as an introduction.

silently take the bell and ring it. The “ultimately true nature” of a cow is baiting the intelligence for going on a conceptual hunt, and conceptually one could spend a lifetime on a question such as this and come up with an infinite number of answers, but none more ‘ultimately true’ than the others. But non-conceptually, without thinking, an intuitive answer arises from what is sometimes called the ‘intelligence of the body’ or ‘gnosis’: Moooooo!<sup>31</sup> As for the neurosurgeon koan – astonishingly the thinking mind of adults tends to gravitate towards answers like ‘step-father’ or ‘the people in the crash were a different father and son’, thanks to the accumulation of conditioned thinking and prejudices that in Zen is sometimes referred as ‘consensus trance’. But since the father is dead, and everyone has a father and a mother, the answer is of course that the neurosurgeon is the mother – an answer which children tend to see much more quickly than adults.

The reason for mentioning koans while discussing my workflows is that in my own work I view compositional decisions like koans, in that they cannot be answered by algorithmic, systematic, rational intelligence – or thinking in general. Most of them are like micro-koans, in that they arise and are answered very quickly, without it becoming obvious that the answer was not ‘thought out’. In some cases, however, the piece is left to stand overnight or for longer, and at some point the solution has simply presented itself. If I am questioned, I might explain that I changed something in a piece for this or that reason, but this is simply after the fact rationalisation and, *in situ*, the solution could

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<sup>31</sup> It might not be evident why the answers I gave to the first two koans are the correct ones, but our scope here is not sufficient to bring full clarity to the issue – indeed, in some Zen-traditions, months of meditation and mindfulness-practice is expected before koan study is begun.

not be logically deduced from any factors.<sup>32</sup> When Feldman wrote that “I ask many questions when I’m working”<sup>33</sup> (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:173), and that he works with “non-ideas” – “let’s think about that which we don’t” – (ibid:177), his description reminds me of this kind of compositional koan concentration.

It seems to me that intuition can have different levels of depth, and I believe that it can be developed, on one hand by using it, and on the other by practising for example mindfulness and meditation. Learned mannerisms or knee-jerk reactions might be called intuitive, but these are still very close to the surface of the conscious mind. However, I believe that intuition can reach beyond these surface-oriented autopilots, to sub-conscious and unconscious levels, but perhaps even deeper than that, beyond conditioned programming, into some kind of nonconceptual or “foundational self” (Cantz, 2013:75). I will return to these notions when discussing self-expression.

In the introduction to Tao Te Ching, Stephen Mitchell has written:

*A good athlete can enter a state of body-awareness in which the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious will. This is a paradigm for non-action: the purest and most effective form of action. The game plays the game; the poem writes the poem; we can’t tell the dancer from the dance.  
[... T]he doer has wholeheartedly vanished into the deed; the fuel has been completely transformed into flame. [...] It happens when we trust the*

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<sup>32</sup> During my time in higher education, I have heard several composers and lecturers explain that ultimately, ‘composition is problem solving’. I have always passionately opposed this idea – even in scientific work, Csikszentmihalyi views “problem finding”, not problem solving as the “hallmark of creativity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014:156); and why is it that you never hear a poet saying that ‘ultimately, poetry is problem solving’? However, I would be willing to view it more favourably if we expand our notion of problem solving to include the way koans are solved from thoughtless and non-rational ‘don’t-know mind’.

<sup>33</sup> “What is needed in this piece? How much do I take out? What’s needed, what’s needed?” (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:173)

*intelligence of the universe in the same way that an athlete or a dancer trusts the superior intelligence of the body. (Lao Tzu and Mitchell, 2006)*

This description of “action of non-action” or “wu wei” (Reninger, 2017) could be seen as action stemming from a sustained no-mind state<sup>34</sup>. My psychological state when composing is still somewhat disjointed, oscillating between self-consciousness and unselfconsciousness, thinking and no-mind, absent-mindedness and mindfulness, but I try to ground my decision-making in the moments of no-mind. By going deeper into the practice of mindfulness, meditation and nonduality, and working on loosening the kind of attachments that bring self-consciousness into the composition process – for example considerations of career or potential reception of the work – I am hoping to extend the periods of no-mind and gradually move closer towards composition as non-action.

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<sup>34</sup> This bears a relation to what in the west has been described as ‘flow’ – “the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014:136). Some of the characteristics of flow seem to match the states of no-mind or non-action - the “merging [of] action and awareness” (ibid:138), the lack of distinction “between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future” (ibid:137), the forgetting of one’s “own separate identity”, “which may result in a transcendence of ego-boundaries and consequent psychic integration” (ibid:135). However, Csikszentmihalyi also describes flow to feature “a feeling of control over the environment” (ibid), which I do not relate to and view as contradictory: if there is no sense of ‘self’, who is there to control anything?

### III. AESTHETICS

As mentioned in the beginning of the previous chapter, ultimately my research into workflows as well as other compositional decisions are guided by some very particular aesthetic concerns. At the root of these can be seen a preoccupation with the evocation of enigmatic, elusive and inconclusive moods and mental states. In this chapter I will first discuss evocation, introducing the concepts of ‘corporeal’ and ‘incorporeal’ evocation – establishing the importance of the latter to my work – and the related concept of the ‘permeability’ of the sonic surface. I will discuss emotional expressivity and differentiate between self-conscious and unselfconscious self-expression. I will bring up the concepts of ‘betweenness’ and ‘semi-transparency’, connecting them to the notions of depth and ‘enigmaticism’. Finally, I introduce a recent perspective on the brain’s hemispheric differences, showing how it informs the viewpoints presented in this commentary.

#### EVOCATION

*Just as words can describe events we have not witnessed, places and things we have not seen, so music can present emotions and moods we have not felt, passions we did not know before. (Langer, 1948:180)*

*[M]usic sings to us of things transcendental. (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:109)*

The musicology of acousmatic music already has a tradition of looking at the power of acousmatic sound to *evoke*. In 1986 Simon Emmerson used the term “mimesis” to “denote the imitation not only of nature but also of aspects of human culture not usually associated directly with musical material” (2000:17) and contrasted mimetic discourse

with aural discourse (ibid). Smalley coined terms “indicative fields” (1996:82) and “source bonding” (1997:110); John Young has discussed the “reality-abstraction continuum” (1996:83), as well as the design of “sound images” (2007); Constantinos Kontos has discussed the evocation of place, “topos” (2016:8); and, Suk-Jun Kim proposed a quaternary framework based on sound-images (2010). However, most of the discussion has concerned itself with evocation of imagery or referential aspects, and the evocation of emotions, moods, atmospheres or feelings has received less attention<sup>35</sup>. It is these aspects that I am most interested in, especially those that are subtle, elusive and enigmatic – the “indeterminate emotions” (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:109).

I would like to suggest that evocation can be looked at in terms of its corporeality; that is, how concretely it can be imagined as something physical or material. From this point of view a sonic image is still fairly corporeal insofar as it triggers visual imagination, or a sense of materiality through olfactory, gustatory, somatosensory or auditory<sup>36</sup> modalities. However, evocation can stretch to more distant and elusive domains, where its sensory connection is more remote or blended, which seems to be the case with the evocation of moods or emotions, particularly those of a more elusive kind. This could be viewed as a continuum from corporeal to incorporeal evocation (see Figure 4).

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<sup>35</sup> Although Gary Kendall has discussed the “feeling blend” (2014).

<sup>36</sup> In my own listening experience, visual imagination seems to be the most prominent mode of corporeal evocation, and the evocation of other sense experiences far less common or likely. The possibility of evoking aural imagination while listening to music seems problematic and complex.

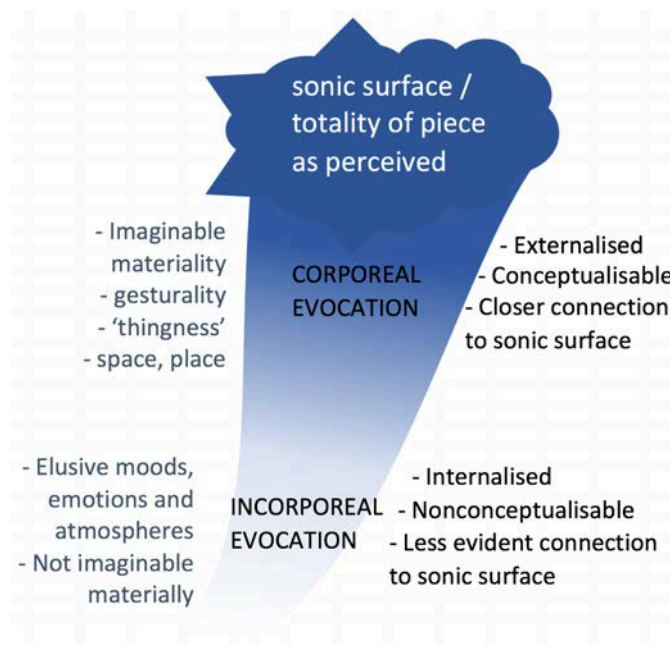


Figure 4: The continuum from corporeal to incorporeal evocation.

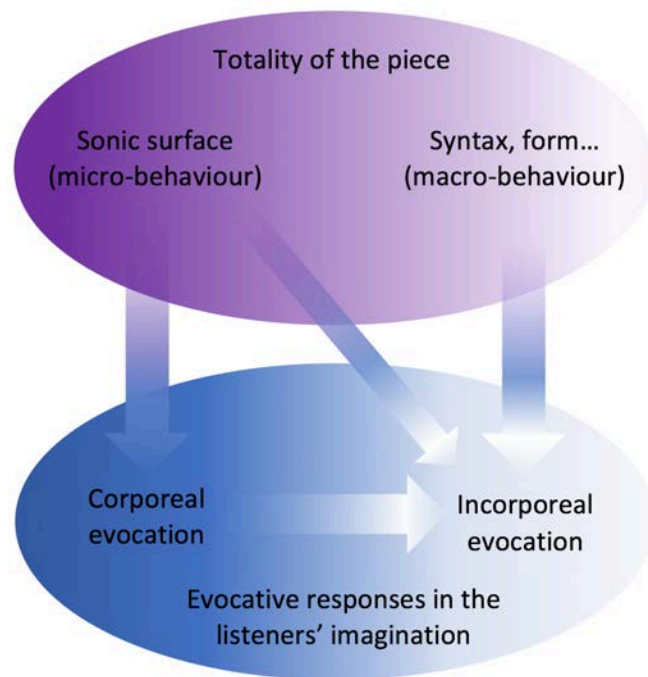
The more corporeal the evocation is, the more ‘external’ it feels – that is, it feels that we are imagining some physical ‘things’ – places, objects, situations – outside ourselves. The more incorporeal it is, the more difficult it becomes to externalise it, and hence it seems more ‘internal’ and subjective, and less ‘thing-like’, as in the case of emotions or moods. However, emotions that are perceived as overly familiar or formulaic might not be “adopted personally” and “incorporated into mood” (McGilchrist, 2009) – and so might be apprehended more conceptually and more externally.

External and internal evocation might seem like two qualitatively different categories, and that would be one way to categorise them. However, ultimately all evocation is internal – happening in our imagination – and so I see it as a continuum, rather than two distinct types. Though for convenience’s sake we often consider, for example, spectro- or spatiomorphologies (Smalley 1997; 2007) as objective features of the piece ‘out there’, even the sonic surface of the piece becomes something internal when cognitively perceived by the listener. Imagined experiences “of sense modes other than the aural are



implicated [...] in acousmatic listening” (Smalley, 2007:35) in for example the perception of gestures and sense of place. Moreover, spatiality and a sense of place in particular seem to be able to morph seamlessly from corporeal imagination to a sense of mood and atmosphere – as can happen in e.g. reverie and dreaming. The sense of spatial depth seems to be especially indefinite in this respect, and in my works I view it as a potent gateway between corporeal and incorporeal evocation.

Hence I perceive a continuum between listening to the sonic surface and activating ‘1<sup>st</sup> order evocation’ of gestures, spatiality etc. on the one hand, and sinking into other progressively more intangible and subjective evocations on the other. However, it is worth noting that while corporeal evocation seems to be primarily conjured by a piece’s sonic surface – that is, the immediacy of the sounds and their morphologies or behaviours on relatively small temporal scales –, everything in the piece contributes to the incorporeal evocation of moods and atmospheres. This includes not only the sonic surface, but also the corporeal evocations, the sonic materials’ larger-scale behaviours or morphologies (discourse, syntax, form etc.) and even the listening environment (see Figure 5). Thus, while corporeal evocation can be one gateway to activate incorporeal evocation, it is not the only one, and a piece can be corporeally evocative while being incorporeally ‘un-evocative’ and vice versa.



**Figure 5: The relationships between different elements of a piece and the imagined corporeal and incorporeal evocations.**

It seems to me that incorporeal evocations are connected to deeper layers of the listener's<sup>37</sup> psyche. Corporeal evocations are more accessible to 'everyday consciousness' – to the conceptualising, rational, logical mind – whereas more incorporeal evocations seem to touch more directly on sub-conscious, unconscious, nonconscious<sup>38</sup>, and other more subtle and elusive domains. The more incorporeal the evocation is, the less it is available to conceptual and taxonomical thinking, analysis and linear rationality, which is undoubtedly one reason why the discussion of evocation in acousmatic music has veered towards the more corporeal kind. Since I am especially

<sup>37</sup> When I speak of listening reactions, I am primarily referring to myself, while expecting that at least some listeners have similar experiences. I do not find it constructive to try to guess others' potential listening reactions while composing music.

<sup>38</sup> According to Paul Cantz: conscious: "necessarily explicit"; unconscious: "potentially explicit"; nonconscious: "necessarily implicit". (Cantz, 2013:69)

interested in incorporeal evocation, this gives further explanation for my shunning away from these mental dispositions in my compositional workflows.

I feel that firstly, all sounds are evocative, and secondly, they are evocative on several levels. When hearing the sound of a creaking door in a piece, multimodal imagination relating to doors, as well as – perhaps less consciously – the physical properties suggested by the sound (friction, material, size) are likely to be conjured – these I would consider as fairly corporeal evocation. However, at the same time, perhaps due to the different kinds of situations in which the listener has heard creaking doors, these sounds also carry personal emotional significance, the evocation of which I view as more incorporeal. This accumulated ‘emotional trail’ is likely to be very subtle, and so its evocation might not be noticed at all – yet I believe that all sounds trigger emotional baggage, even if very distant and subtle<sup>39</sup>. The listener’s awareness of this depends on many factors, including personal listening habits, her sensitivity to her emotions, as well as the way the piece encourages and discourages different kinds of listening modes. Although the composer can try to compose evocative music – as I do – ultimately the evocation happens in the consciousness of the listener<sup>40</sup>. Hence the listener’s habits of

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<sup>39</sup> As a more explicit – and unsettling – example of how this usually very subtle process might work, Andra McCartney started remembering forgotten traumatic memories when listening to samples of bells while composing *Learning to Walk*:

“When I began writing my piece and listening to bell sounds, I found myself remembering being in hospital as a child and hearing the sound of hospital curtains.” “I realized that I never had curtains or drapes in my house. That sound of curtains being scraped on a metal rod has always bothered me. [...] I have a suspicion that I was sexually abused in hospital and that this is bound up with the sound of those hospital curtains closing. To me, that’s the creepiest sound in the piece.” (Johnson, 2011:19)

<sup>40</sup> Or perhaps in some kind of “transitional space [...] between inner and outer worlds” (Winnicott, 1953:89).

listening, attention and concentration are crucial. Since the composer is also the first listener, the cultivation of these has been a key element of my compositional practice.

For me some of the deepest and most significant meaning of music lies in this domain of incorporeal evocation, and hence it lies at the core of my compositional thinking. In a sense, in my pieces the sonic surface, syntactic, narrative, and structural elements, as well as the more corporeal evocations of images, places and objects, are all intended ultimately to evoke something beyond themselves that is deeper and more elusive – ungraspable. In other words, while all these other elements have significance of their own, a major part of their meaning is in what kind of more subtle atmospheres or mental states they evoke. However, I do not believe that any meaningful formula can be outlined on how different kind of compositional techniques, material combinations or levels of abstraction or referentiality lead to different kinds of incorporeal evocations, and I see it primarily as a matter of nonconceptually and unselfconsciously attuning to these incorporeal evocations in the composition process.

In stressing the significance of incorporeal evocation, I find accord in the writings of Feldman, whose concept of “Abstract Experience” seems to correlate closely with deeper realms of incorporeal evocation:

*[The Abstract Experience] is not involved with ideas. It is an inner process that continually appears and becomes familiar like another consciousness. The most difficult thing in art experience is to keep intact this consciousness of the abstract. [...] It is an] inconclusive abstract emotion [...] a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating. [...] The Abstract Experience is a metaphor without an answer. [...] It deals with the same mystery [as the religious] – reality – whatever you choose to call it. [...] The Abstract Experience cannot be represented. [...]*

*The sense of unease we feel when we look at a Guston painting is that we have no idea that we must now make a leap into this Abstract emotion; we look for the painting in what we think is its reality – on the canvas. Yet the penetrating thought, the unbearable creative pressure inherent in the Abstract Experience,*

*reveals itself constantly as a unified emotion. The more it does this, naturally, the more distant it becomes from the imagery that it conveys. In this sense, it is not one painting that we are looking at, but two. [...] existing somewhere in the space between the canvas and ourselves. (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:74-76)<sup>41</sup>*

Although I have been stressing the importance of incorporeal evocation, more corporeal evocation is also prominent and important in my work. I feel that the evocation of places and spaces, environments, images or situations is a potent gateway to the evocation of more elusive moods and emotions – perhaps because these are powerful carriers of emotional associations, or because in any form of evocation, one is already surrendering to some degree to the flux of internal imagery. Whereas all music can deal with incorporeal evocation, recorded sounds offer vivid means for corporeal evocation, whose ability to lead to incorporeal evocation gives acousmatic music powerful poetic potential. However, because in my compositional approach to my works corporeal evocation is subservient to incorporeal evocation, the coherence or ‘organicity’ of the images or spatial sensations is often destabilised, subverted or ruptured, partly in order to create a more enigmatic or elusive overall mood.

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<sup>41</sup> Also, relatedly, in the words of Keith Rowe: “I have become increasingly preoccupied with atmosphere[. ...] When I am in the presence of a Rothko work (also after I have departed and later, upon further reflection), I'm struck not by "whew! what great brush strokes! what an incredible technique! what a painter!", but instead by a feeling of the surrounding atmosphere and its sensation. Somehow I wanted to move what I'm doing (intention) towards this notion of atmosphere, an activity where we're not aware of technique, of instrument, of playing, of music even, but instead as feeling/sensation suspended in space, perhaps what Feldman meant by music as time, energising the air, making the silence (unintention) audible”. (Rowe and Tilbury, 2003)

## Examples of evocation from the pieces

*Hermit's dream of mountain ash* prominently features several aspects of sonic imagery that are typical of my work: a great distance between faraway elements (“distal space” (Smalley, 2007:36)) and very close, dry, intimate and delicate elements (“proximate space” (ibid)) creating spatial depth (e.g. in the beginning the slowed down fireworks vs. the foregrounded clicking); the use of spatially and referentially ambiguous hums (e.g. 0:30-2:33); and, the use of semi-static or slow-moving highly stratified textures (e.g. 1:24-2:33). By employing recognisable field recordings or organically behaving materials, the piece gravitates towards the evocation of corporeal images and the creation with them of ‘cinema for the ear’, but this is restrained in different ways, for example by ‘orchestrational’ or ‘temporal’ disruption or destabilisation of the images. In the first case, some of the concurrently sounding layers do not cohere with each others’ images, creating ambiguous or contradictory evocations, as in the dense texture at 1:24-2:33 where the simultaneity of numerous sonic strata without easily discernible causal, behavioural or sonic relationships makes it difficult to imagine a holistic corporeal evocation. In the second, an image is abruptly and ‘inorganically’ cut – for example when a sense of place is briefly evoked, only to be breached a moment later as in the brief and sudden appearance of a recording from a public place at 4:24-4:28. The ambiguous and enigmatic ruptures of the corporeal evocations – alongside the totality of the piece, including its syntactic and structural elements – serve to evoke more incorporeal evocations, such as subtle, elusive and inconclusive atmospheres and emotions, which, however, are relatively inaccessible to conceptualisation and analysis.

With the *Translucent Poems* evocation was under explicit investigation: I set out to create something akin to the character pieces (*charakterstücke*) of romantic music, with each piece working like opening a window to a different sonic universe, with its distinct landscape and atmosphere. As Jonty Harrison has expressed, “[l]istening to acousmatic music”, one is “mysteriously transported to ‘other’ worlds” (2013); in these worlds, however, one gets a sense of merely being an observer, rather than engaging in a journey or adventure, as the pieces are formally relatively static. The sequence of pieces included in the portfolio starts by evoking fairly vivid corporeal images, but as the series progress, these images get more and more disrupted – or as I will establish, less ‘permeable’ – with *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs* maintaining an evocative tension by severely constraining the prospect of corporeal evocation.

In *Glowing in Silent Light* the evocative imagery is organic and almost realistic, with the piece evoking a clear sense of place that is only very subtly disturbed (e.g. with the abruptly cut clap at 0:55). Likewise, even though the semi-realistic environmental image in the beginning of *Nocturne* is soon joined by more abstract sounds whose prominence and dominance gradually increase towards the end, the sonic imagery retains a coherent and organic environmental feel.

*Pavilion of Hexagonal Mirrors*, however, presents a more destabilised imagery, closer to that of *Hermit’s dream of mountain ash* and achieved with similar means. While the recognisable, organic or spatially evocative materials are suggestive of a sonic image, the mixture of materials is eclectic and does not fully ‘gel’ into corporeal evocation. The lo-fi videogame samples are the most disruptive element, as they are spatially completely dry and cannot be situated in any image, yet – partly due to their extreme

naiveté – they resist being viewed as purely melodic or ‘musical’ elements, and obtrude as timbral sound objects. In addition, the humour apparent in them maintains an awkward awareness of the author’s agency, inhibiting the lucidity of the evocation. What results is a ‘semi-permeable’ sonic surface, where some aspects of the sound-world are pulling the listener into an immersive corporeal evocation, while the immersion is not allowed fully to take hold.

*Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs* is more extreme still in this regard: some of the materials have inbuilt spatial depth – such as the resonant watery clunks (e.g. 0:08-0:11) – but the almost ubiquitous distortion acts like a cage, binding them awkwardly to the surface, refusing the formation of spatial depth and corporeal evocation. An unresolved spatial tension is created and the sonic surface stays ‘impermeable’ – corporeally unevocative – despite the materials’ inclinations.

### **Permeability**

I am using the concept of ‘permeability’ to denote the extent to which the sonic surface encourages the imagination of corporeal evocation – a ‘permeable’ sonic surface strongly encourages it, whereas an ‘impermeable’ one makes it difficult. The four *Translucent Poems* could be seen as traversing a continuum from permeable to impermeable spatial imagery, where in the first two the listener is immersed in vivid corporeal evocation and in the last two the creation of corporeal evocation is obfuscated. This permeability of the spatial imagery is one angle from which the pieces of my portfolio can be viewed, where the two first poems and *Minoiki Tephra* can be seen to be most permeable, *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs*, *Texto 610* and *From the Incommunicable Mass* most impermeable, and the rest somewhere in between.



Costis described the evocative character of *Aphotic* as follows:

*It creates an imaginary ‘topos’, without any reference to materiality. There is nothing there to touch – even the water becomes an image that is untouchable. The piece has achieved a certain gestalt where I only hear the whole, not the parts. It is a flux of energy, a projection somewhere that does not reveal its identity. It is mysterious, because even though I know where my sounds are from, they have completely disappeared, they have no reference. Everything has melted into one. (Kontos, 2017)*

In other words, the piece’s sonic imagery seems to be less permeable than the sometimes recognisable materials (e.g. the dripping inside a water tank at 4:00-4:50) suggest<sup>42</sup>. Rather than evoking corporeal imagery, the materials seem to directly invoke incorporeal evocations.

Indeed, impermeability is no obstacle for incorporeal evocation. This is even more obvious in *From the Incommunicable Mass* and *Texto 610*, whose subversive, unpredictable, nonorganic and often abstract sonic characteristics severely impede the creation of corporeal evocation, as their abrupt, forced or causally unmotivated changes and the lack of evident temporal, semantic or sonic relationships between the materials restrain the formation of a holistic sonic image. Yet incorporeal evocation of an

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<sup>42</sup> In an interesting analogy, Brian Kane seems to suggest that, despite its materials, Luc Ferrari’s *Presque Rien* presents a surprisingly impermeable sonic surface: “If one listens closely to the mix, the listener may notice that everything is pressed up to the surface and presented with nearly equal audibility and clarity. [...] Ferrari’s mixing resists a realistic reconstruction of the environment, effacing the difference between foreground and background. Everything is selected, and hence nothing is selected. Flatness is foregrounded. Selection, differentiation, depth, hearing-in, spatiality, causality, signification—all must move beyond the auditory surface in order to generate adequacy between surface and projection. Perhaps attending to this flatness can help us hear *Presque rien* as a vestigial art that is right there at the surface. (Kane, 2014:131)

enigmatic, elusive, ineffable atmosphere – what I called earlier ‘alien impenetrability’ – emerges – not despite their impenetrability, but crucially facilitated by it.

## **EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIVITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION**

### **Notable expressive features of the pieces**

Incorporeal evocation has a natural connection to the issue of expressivity and self-expression, which provide another way of discussing the topic of emotions and moods in music. In my works, I veer towards expressive characters of understatement, delicacy, subtlety, fragility and inconclusiveness. Particularly the foregrounded sounds that imply human agency are often frail and restrained, and if there is some power, it is usually more distant, and of non-human scale.

For example in *Minoiki Tephra*, the sounds that transmit some sense of power also give a sense of vast size and distance (e.g. wails at 0:22-2:35), whereas the foregrounded scraping and slow footsteps (e.g. 2:47-3:40) are fragile and cautious. In this world, humans are left vulnerable among forces far greater than themselves. Likewise, in the *MuteFest set*, the forceful section dominated by a static low-frequency feedback (11:04-14:57) – which is among the most aggressive moments in the portfolio – does not give a sense of gestural, performative human-scale assertive power, but of something more indefinite and inhuman. *Objects that skim the surface* is to some extent an exception to this pattern, featuring prominently foregrounded, forceful, performative gesturality – this is possibly one reason why it has with repeated listening become my least favourite piece in the portfolio.

While the suggested performativity of my recorded sounds is often subtle – e.g. objects being moved slowly and carefully close to the microphones – the employment of abrupt cuts and other inorganic editing and composition techniques brings another level of performative agency into the pieces: a certain performativity on the sequencer timeline. Rupturing the organicity and causal coherence of the material by abrupt or otherwise clearly audible editing or processing techniques creates a certain audibility of “the hand of the composer” (Andean, 2016:198). This is often shunned in acousmatic music, perhaps due to a tacit expectation of organicity or coherence in the acousmatic images. For example Denis Smalley has said that in “technological listening [...] the listener ‘perceives’ the technology or technique behind the music rather than the music itself, perhaps to such an extent that true musical meaning is blocked” (1997:109) – suggesting that hearing ‘the hand of the composer’ is not part of the ‘true musical meaning’ – and that, consequently, “the technology should be transparent” (ibid).

In my works, however, this compositional performativity acts as an important expressive layer in the music, in addition to controlling the permeability of the pieces’ sonic surfaces. The abrupt cuts in *Hermit’s dream of mountain ash* are perhaps the clearest example of this – for example at 0:38, a noisy hydrophone recording is cut two seconds before the ‘true musical meaning’ of the critters’ clicking begins, directing attention both to the cut, and the audible hiss and hum of the recording. Although crude,

the cuts are expressively timed, which creates a subtle feeling of improvised performativity.<sup>43</sup>

Another notable expressive feature of my music is a preoccupation with depth and distance. When discussing Romantic art, McGilchrist argues that depth works as a metaphor for the ‘betweenness’ that links unity and separation:

*Vast distances evoked by visual depth, grand objects and perspectives, become of great significance, because of their metaphoric power to express a sense of ineffability, which is experienced physically and emotionally as much as conceptually. [...] The essential element in the sublime is not merely something large but whose limits, like a mountain top that is lost in cloud, are unknown. [...] The sublime expands and extends, not dwarfs, the being of the beholder. But the same depth that unites is also the evidence of separation. [...] Those who are in awe of any great object [...] feel something that is Other, certainly, but also something of which they partake. Because of the empathic connection or betweenness – of which depth here is a metaphor – they both share in the character of the Other and feel their separateness from it. (McGilchrist, 2009)*

That the piece in my portfolio with the most spatial depth and distance – *Minoiki Tephra* – is to my ears also the most melancholic, corroborates the idea that that depth could metaphorically express “separation and loss” (McGilchrist, 2009). There was indeed a strong intuitive inclination to use vast spatial depths when dealing with a topic linked with tremendous loss. In my music, depth is an important device in expanding corporeal evocation into the incorporeal evocation of ‘a sense of ineffability’. It is no coincidence that we use the word ‘deep’ as a synonym for ‘profound’ and I believe that both the sense of ineffability, and the related blurring of unity and separation, and inside and outside are related to this.

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<sup>43</sup> In this I have found accord in the music of Lionel Marchetti (e.g. Marchetti and Capparos, 2009), as it too features performative and abrupt cuts, ruptured organicity and an overall audibility of the ‘hand of the composer’.

I have sometimes used the word ‘rhetoric’ as the art of sculpting, developing and otherwise dealing with the inbuilt expressiveness of sound, where different kinds of archetypal figures could be seen as emotive-expressive rhetorical devices, perhaps forming a kind of rhetorical language of the music. This manner of thinking was typical in baroque music, but I have little interest in the codification and rationalization of these figures which is typical of the musicology of baroque rhetoric. However, I want to bring attention to the idea that, for example, a sound which is edited to have a perfectly balanced gestural shape and polished with diffuse reverb suggests something, while the same sound, dry and slightly distorted, and edited with crude abrupt cuts, suggests something else altogether – these could be seen as two different kinds of rhetorical devices.<sup>44</sup> The expressive features of the pieces of the portfolio mentioned so far – the understated fragility of my foregrounded sounds; the abrupt but performative cuts; the preoccupation with depth and stratification; the ruptured organicity and ‘cinema for the ear’; and the tendency towards inconclusiveness and unobvious causal connections – could be seen as key elements of the rhetorical language of my music.

### **Self-expression**

For some time I had conflicted feelings and ideas about the topic of self-expression. On the one hand I was attracted by the notion expressed by, for example, John Cage and Keith Rowe of getting beyond oneself and composing music that was “more like nature

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<sup>44</sup> In my masters thesis, I also suggested that different kinds of forms could be viewed as different kinds of rhetorical devices: “A clear, coherent form that has the expected high points and lulls, and which climaxes around the golden section with some material that has returned from the beginning and then recedes as if now fully exhausted, suggests something. A form where materials return or do not return in seemingly arbitrary ways, in which things happen with unclear consequences and which recedes with the feeling that nothing has actually been resolved suggests something different altogether.” (Kuoppala, 2013:22)

in her manner of operation” (John Cage: Journeys in Sound, 2012), “reflecting something about the world, rather than a personal viewpoint” (Evilpaul, 2006).<sup>45</sup>

However, at the same time I could not deny my attraction to emotional expression, and this seemed to create an unresolvable paradox.

In time, however, I came to see the contradiction as merely a conceptual one, and the paradox started to dissolve. I realised that the ‘self’ in self-expression could refer to widely differing things, and hence the desirability or undesirability of self-expression would simply depend on the adopted angle. I now perceive a difference between willed, self-conscious self-expression that is intimately tied with our conceptual sense of self, and unselfconscious self-expression that reaches deeper into unconscious layers and beyond, what I might call ‘nonconceptual Self’.

The conceptual, individualistic, selfhood consists of our thoughts about ourselves: our self-image, our plans, ambitions and desires, our ‘stories’ about who we imagine ourselves to be – our “self-referential internal narrative” (Weber, 2014)<sup>46</sup>. Self-

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<sup>45</sup> Calvin Tomkins on John Cage: “John’s idea was that chance was an opportunity - not to let your subconscious emerge in the work as the surrealists did - but to get completely beyond yourself, to really evict self-expression from what you were doing. And at the pace of music would be more interesting as a result - or more like life, more like nature in her manner of operation as he said.” (John Cage: Journeys in Sound, 2012)

Keith Rowe: “With the guitar in its conventional, normal position against your stomach, it was very much an expression coming out of your stomach about yourself – about ‘the I’ –, who I am, my personal experiences transmitted. And it was really to do with expression, the expression of sentiment. Whereas laying the guitar on the table, it was much more reflecting something about the world, rather than a personal viewpoint”. (Evilpaul, 2006)

<sup>46</sup> Which Gary Weber connects with the “default mode network” or “the blah blah network” (Warren, 2013) in the brain. Weber suggests that the self-referential internal narrative can be reduced with e.g. mindfulness practice: “A ‘control’ [...] network does the operational switching between the autobiographical/’blah, blah’ and the semantic/’tasking’ networks. Better management of this switching system requires a better development of the [...] control network] through meditation, self-inquiry, mindfulness, acceptance, etc.” (Weber, 2014)

consciousness – in the way I use it – indicates an identification with and an emotional attachment to this internal narrative<sup>47</sup>. In this state, the sense of individual personhood influences actions; hence self-expression that stems from self-consciousness might be seen as objectionable due to it being egoistic, individualistic or indulgent. However, I do not view this conceptual sense of self as very fundamental to our existence, and consider that our more fundamental selfhood is nonconceptual and more diffuse – this I refer to as ‘nonconceptual Self’ or “foundational self” (Cantz, 2013:75)<sup>48</sup>.

In my terminology, unselfconsciousness denotes a (usually temporary) absence of identification with the ‘self-referential internal narrative’ and the accompanying ‘conceptual self’, which I believe enables the holistic ‘nonconceptual Self’ to emerge with less hindrance. Without the gravitational pull of self-consciousness, action is uncontrived, and a division between subject and object, and internal and external blurs in an absorption in the present action. Thus the intelligence of the body and intuition beyond the conscious mind can shine through. This could happen when one is hyper-focused on a task – as in some kind of “flow”-state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) – but for creativity and composition, I view it as important that this unselfconsciousness is also extended to more restful states, where the self-referential narrative often takes over.

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<sup>47</sup> The terminology can be misleading – self-consciousness does not imply an *awareness* of this identification, and hence I do not see it as a particularly ‘conscious’ state, in the sense that a state of mindfulness could be viewed as ‘more conscious’.

<sup>48</sup> Cantz calls the conceptual self the “explicit, representational self”, which forms a “secondary [...] and qualitatively less “real” form of self-authenticity.” On the other hand, “the foundational self [...] represents the irreducible and ultimately unformulatable core of human experience” and “denotes a more holistic, more authentic mode of being.” (Cantz, 2013:75-76)

It is this restful, mindful, unselfconsciousness that I view as especially important to working with incorporeal evocation and emotional expression, and it is one of the things I try to facilitate with the workflow of improvisatory composition. For me, the epitome of this more sustained unselfconsciousness is the aforementioned ‘action of non-action’ or ‘wu wei’, stemming from ‘no-mind’. In deep unselfconsciousness, “everything will be perceived just as it is” (Seung Sahn, 1996a) – without the colouration of self-consciousness – and one “become[s] one with” the sound, “without separation, without making ‘I’ and ‘sound’” (ibid).

I believe that when self-expression of emotions or moods happens unselfconsciously, it can reach deeper into this nonconceptual Self, and becomes ‘more like nature in her manner of operation’ than a ‘personal viewpoint’, since the nonconceptual Self is not egoistic and individualistic in the same sense as the conceptual self is. Here too there are no hard and fast boundaries, and so I perceive it as a continuum from self-conscious self-expression to unselfconscious self-expression (see Figure 6). In practice, I suspect we alternate rapidly between self-consciousness and unselfconsciousness, but we can try to ground our compositional decision-making in our glimpses of unselfconsciousness.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The poet Mark Goodwin described poetry as “reverie refined through skill”, and I believe reverie’s connection to both unconsciousness and unselfconsciousness is relevant to the viewpoint (Goodwin, 2013).



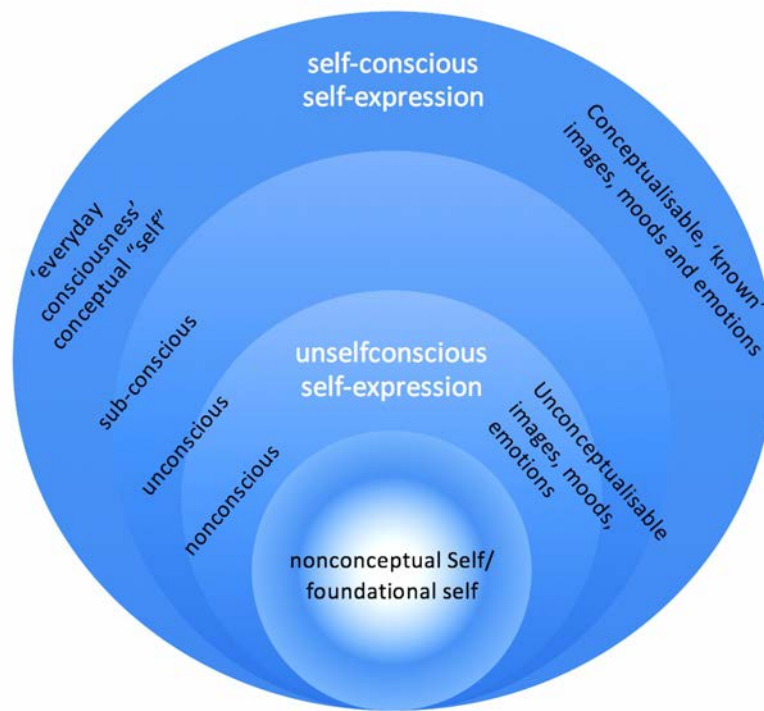


Figure 6: Continuum from self-conscious self-expression to unselfconscious self-expression, mining deeper from the artist's psyche.

When trying to conceptualise this issue one can easily end up in dead ends or paradoxes, and from one point of view, the artistic aspiration to avoid self-expression could be seen as an act of self-expression in itself. But when abiding in no-mind without self-conscious conceptual thought, this conundrum disappears altogether, and expression simply emerges. I now see no fundamental conflict between self-expression and composing music that is 'like nature in her manner of operation' – as Feldman has said: "If I want my music to demonstrate anything, it is that 'nature and human nature are one'" (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:18). This is one reason why, even though Cageian philosophy had originally influenced my interest in open scores and indeterminate methods, in the end I had no problem bending the rules I had set for myself in *From the Incommunicable Mass*. Hence I would say that self-expression continues to be important to me, but it is crucial that it emerges effortlessly and unselfconsciously.

All the same, I think that deliberate, willed, self-conscious self-expression is worth trying to avoid. Jasper Johns has expressed this well:

*When you begin to work with the idea of suggesting, say, a particular psychological state of affairs, you have eliminated so much from the process of painting that you make an artificial statement which is, I think, not desirable. I think one has to work with everything and accept the kind of statement which results as unavoidable or as a helpless situation.*

*I think most art which begins to make statements fails to make statements because the methods used are too schematic or too artificial. I think one wants from painting a sense of life. The final suggestion, the final statement, has to be not a deliberate statement but a helpless statement. It has to be what you can't avoid saying, not what you set out to say. (Johns and Sylvester, 1965)*

Particularly with *Minoiki Tephra* there was a risk of venturing into the territory of forced, self-conscious expression, as from the start there was a clear compositional idea that called for a rather precise mood. Perhaps it was due to an intuitive perception of this danger that I postponed the composition of the piece until the compositional idea would naturally find an expression in sound. I believe that this choice paid off, as in the end I found that the emotional expressivity of the piece was able to emerge naturally without affectation. My failure to pre-prepare the materials outside the sequencer timeline was perhaps for the better, as it seems that for me, sculpting the sounds in context facilitates the natural, unforced emergence of expression.

## BETWEENNESS AND THE ENIGMA

*The tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.*

*The unnamable is the eternally real.  
Naming is the origin  
of all particular things.*

*- Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzu and Mitchell, 2006)*

### **‘Betweenness’ and ‘semi-transparency’**

By emphasising that in my work I try to sensitise myself to ever more elusive dimensions of incorporeal evocation, I am proposing a stance towards music where the deepest attention is neither narrowly on the sonic surface, nor in conceptual thoughts about the music, but listening through the work to some of its distant resonances, to how it “enchants the air” (Dixon, 2011:116). McGilchrist proposes that to encourage this, the artwork should be ‘semi-transparent’:

*“In the process of creation, the artist's plane of focus needs to be somewhere beyond and through the work of art [...]. In viewing the art work, we too are carried beyond the work of art, precisely because the artist was not focussed on the art as such, but in something beyond it; [...] We come to see not the work of art, but the world according to the art work, as Merleau-Ponty says, necessitating that it is neither opaque nor wholly transparent, but ‘semi-transparent’.”*

*“Explicitness always forces [...] concentration on the surface, and the loss of transparency [...]. It is the analogue of the joke explained, the metaphor laboriously restated. In such circumstances, the mechanism of the joke, of the metaphor, becomes opaque and obtrudes. Metaphoric meaning depends on this semi-transparency, this being-seen-and-not-being-seen.”*

*“[Artworks] are, like people, and the forms of the natural world, neither just objective things, nor mere representations of things: they permit us to see through, and according to, themselves.” (McGilchrist, 2009)*

There is a tendency in acousmatic music towards explicitness and opacity, with attention focused primarily to the sonic surface or direct conceptualisations of it<sup>50</sup>, and in my own music I find it important to try to avoid this. Even though I previously discussed the works in terms of the ‘permeability’ of their sonic imagery, in all of them I still aim the works to be ‘semi-transparent’. That is, even in the more impermeable pieces where corporeal evocation is constricted, the attention should still not remain squarely on the sonic surface, and in the more permeable pieces the imagination of corporeal evocations is not an endpoint – in both cases the pieces’ particular means should lead to incorporeal evocations of moods and atmospheres. Personally, I find most of the pieces in the portfolio to be successful in this regard, possibly the only exception being *Objects that skim the surface*, which is to my ears the least incorporeally evocative and consequently the most superficial piece in the portfolio.

This semi-transparency implicates a sensitivity to what McGilchrist calls “betweenness” (2009) – the space between things, concepts, inside and outside, self and other – that is not neatly divisible and hence evades conceptualisation, and necessitates an open, holistic perception. I would argue that this “undecided zone between inside and outside, neither here nor there, and simultaneously, both here and there, both in and out” (Cobussen, 2008:7) is intrinsically connected to music’s possibility to reach “normally inaccessible realms of the psyche” (Cantz, 2013:69) which are implicated in spiritual or transcendental experiences. Feldman, a spiritually attuned composer, also seemed to be attracted to it:

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<sup>50</sup> Perhaps due to the youth of the art-form or its “technoscientific trappings” (Dixon, 2011:116), possibly also influenced by the priorities of academic practice.

*I then began to compose a music dealing precisely with 'inbetween-ness': creating a confusion of material and construction, and a fusion of method and application, by concentrating on how they could be directed toward "that which is difficult to categorize"(Feldman and Friedman, 2001:147)*

## **Navigating the intelligibility of the music**

‘That which is difficult to categorise’ is also a key interest of mine, and the degree to which aspects of my music give a sense of familiarity and recognisability necessary for categorisation and conceptualisation or appear confusing or enigmatic – how much of the “mountain top [...] is lost in cloud” (McGilchrist, 2009) – is part of my compositional technique. That is, the extent to which my music gives “something to hold on to” (Landy, 2007:26) could be seen as one of my compositional parameters. One of the ways this is navigated is by the formation and disruption of corporeal evocation – that is, by navigating the piece’s permeability.

The evocation of the recognisable, known, archetypal, palpable or imaginable – something which gives a sense of familiarity – gives something to grasp and hence seems understandable and intelligible. This could be familiarity-evoking sounds, types of sonic behaviour, technical details, structural or syntactic devices, or even familiar emotions. For example, if the music gives a sense of organicity – if it behaves like an organic, living, entity –, it gives us a known metaphor by which to make sense of it.

In my music the navigation of a continuum from organicity to ruptured organicity to inorganicity is an important device for handling its ‘intelligibility’. *Minoiki Tephra*, *Glowing in Silent Light*, *Nocturne*, *Objects that skim the surface* and *MuteFest set* behave fairly organically and coherently. I discussed earlier how in *Hermit’s dream of mountain ash* organic behaviour might start to develop, only to be abruptly cut a

moment later. This I could describe as ‘ruptured organicity’, which *Pavilion of Hexagonal Mirrors*, *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs* and *Aphotic* also display. In *From the Incommunicable Mass* and *Texto 610* organicity is hardly allowed to develop, and so I see their general character as ‘nonorganic’.

Permeability and organicity are connected, as organicity has the potential to evoke corporeal images. However, they are not directly proportional, and *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs*, *Objects that skim the surface* and *MuteFest set* are less permeable than their organicity suggests (see Figure 7). This is understandable, as organicity is only one facilitator of corporeal evocation, and, for example, if the materials are very abstract or non-referential, corporeal evocation beyond a vague sense of organicity might not form. This, however, does not preclude the formation of incorporeal evocation.

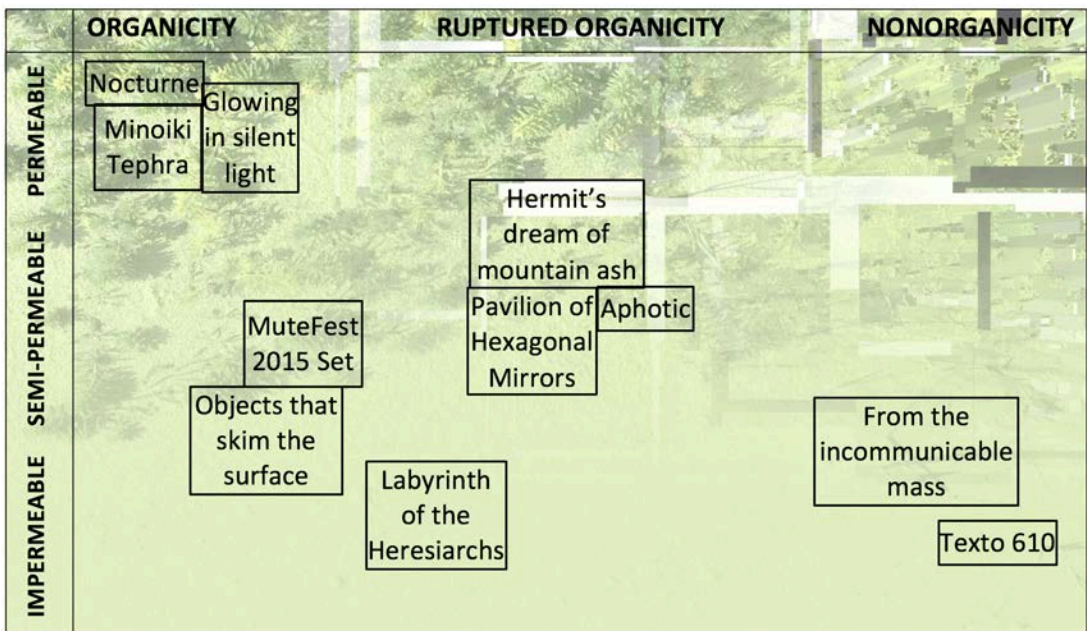


Figure 7: Permeability of the sonic surface vs organicity of the behavioural characteristics in the pieces of the portfolio.

## Enigma

When elements giving a sense of recognisability – such as organicity, permeability, or familiar structural or syntactic devices – are suggested, but remain elusive due to being ruptured, destabilised, disrupted or otherwise subverted, the music might give a sense of enigma.<sup>51</sup> For me, the most enigmatic pieces of the portfolio are *From the Incommunicable Mass*, *Texto 610* and *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs*. This is facilitated by their unpredictability, eclectic and in some cases dull materials, irregularity of causal connections, and abrupt changes; characteristics which are sometimes the result of pre-planned structures, sometimes of bottom-up improvisational sensibilities. In *From the Incommunicable Mass*, the formal disproportionality of the long static section, in *Texto 610* what Josué called “cheesy” (Moreno, 2017) sounds (e.g. 3:25->), and, in *Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs* the use of distortion also contribute to this. Similar characteristics are present in all of the pieces, and to some ears all of them might seem enigmatic.

A sense of enigma, ineffability, elusiveness or inexplicability is not a simple consequence of a lack of other, more explicit characteristics, but rather I would see it as belonging to the domain of incorporeal evocation. Likewise, even though I have tried to taxonomise some aspects of it due to the academic framework of this project, ultimately it cannot be formalised or conceptualised – otherwise it would not be enigmatic. The enigma must be ‘just out of reach’, or in “the shadows” (Feldman and Friedman,

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<sup>51</sup> Here, too, I find affinity with the music of Lionel Marchetti (e.g. Marchetti and Capparos, 2009), which I find enigmatically ‘just out of reach’, and in which I also perceive the navigation of the music’s permeability and organicity to be key compositional parameters. Likewise, Keith Rowe’s *The Room* (2007), Graham Lambkin’s and Jason Lescalleet’s *Breadwinner* (2008), and Annette Krebs’ and Taku Unami’s *Motubachii* (2010) also sound enigmatic to my ears, and these albums have been inspirational to my music.

2001:178). It is a delicate balance between recognisability and unrecognisability – a sense of the music being on the cusp of intelligibility, yet remaining elusive – that creates the feeling of enigma. If one gets a sense that ‘this is just some random noise’ or ‘this makes no sense’, then an enigmatic feeling is unlikely to be conjured, as one has in a sense already categorised the experience as something ‘known’. The enigmatic feeling – or Feldman’s ‘Abstract Experience’ – necessitates an open attention, a state of ‘betweenness’.

Previously I brought up Zen koans, such as ‘what is the true nature of a cow’ in relation to my workflows, and suggested that I view compositional decisions as comparable to koans. Also, from the point of view of listening, the enigmatic music that I am drawn towards can operate somewhat like a koan, in that its elements might bait the conceptual thinking for a “search for a law of organisation” (Delalande, 1998:59) or for taxonomic meaning, but this search is fruitless. Hence a listener who is drawn to “taxonomic listening” (ibid:26) might find highly enigmatic music unsatisfying, unless she is able to let go of the need for conceptual understanding. However, if this rational intelligence is not engaged and one relaxes into an open ‘not-knowing’ awareness, then the non-conceptual and even non-rational poetry of the music can shine clearly – ‘Mooo!’

Indeed, relaxed openness is critical for the appreciation of ‘enigmaticism’, and in this way this kind of music can cultivate surrender. Rather than trying ‘to hold on to’ conceptual meaning-making, the lack of graspable elements encourages the letting go of controlling and grasping tendencies, and the acceptance of nonconceptual, ungraspable experience as it unfolds, unable to be pinned down. This is encouraged in the music by



its elusion of neat conceptualisation and rationalisation and refusal to let the attention rest narrowly in any one place.

Ultimately, the enigma is enigmatic only to the conceptual mind. Like Feldman described of the ‘Abstract Experience’: “it deals with the same mystery [as the religious] – reality – whatever you choose to call it” (Feldman and Friedman, 2001:75). I would specify that it deals with the nonconceptual nature of reality – the ‘unnamable’ – which could be seen as the most simple and ordinary or the most mystical dimension of existence, but for the conceptual mind it is always elusive and ineffable, the ‘Other’.

## **TWO WAYS OF BEING IN THE WORLD**

### **Summary of McGilchrist’s theory of the hemispheric differences**

I have already referred to some elements of Iain McGilchrist’s philosophy of art, but his theory on the hemispheric differences of the human brain gives another layer of meaning to everything discussed in the commentary. In his tour de force *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009), McGilchrist suggests that researchers have struggled to formulate a convincing holistic explanation of the hemispheric differences because they have viewed the brain through the model of the machine and, consequently, focused on the *what* (what *functions* different hemispheres run), rather than on the *how* (what are the *qualities* of the world they bring to bear). He argues that, in fact, the two hemispheres present two semi-independent and radically different *ways* of “being in the world” (ibid), and although both hemispheres are involved in virtually every task or activity we undertake, “the

world we actually experience, phenomenologically, at any point in time is determined by which hemisphere's version of the world ultimately comes to predominate” (ibid).

A fundamental aspect of the division is the need to sustain two radically different kinds of attention at the same time, which creates two different sets of priorities and values.

We need on one hand a “narrowly focused attention to what we have already prioritised as of significance to us” (McGilchrist, 2012), with the intention of grasping and manipulating the world – for example, a bird needs to be able to pick out a seed against the background of grit on which it lies. On the other hand (in nature, for example, to avoid ending up as someone else's lunch), a “broad, open, sustained vigilance, without any preconception of what it is that may be found, be it [...] foe or friend” (ibid). The left hemisphere pays the narrow-beam attention which enables us to grasp and manipulate while the right hemisphere underwrites broad attention for whatever may be. What we call our consciousness moves back and forth between these modes seamlessly, drawing on each as required, and often very rapidly. (ibid)

McGilchrist points out that the right hemisphere (the ‘master’ of his title) is ontologically and temporally primary and provides our fundamental connection to the world<sup>52</sup>. Everything that is new arrives first at the right hemisphere – the world ‘presences’ to it as direct experience, and it perceives a world that is whole, undivided, alive, always in flux and in which ‘betweenness’ exists. The left hemisphere is its ‘emissary’, to which things that are already known go for intermediate processing. It is concerned with exercising manipulative power over the world, and in order to do this,

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<sup>52</sup> Contrary to the traditional view, which has seen the right hemisphere as the “minor” hemisphere due to its lesser involvement with conceptualisation.

we ‘experience’ a ‘re-presented’ version of our experience, “containing now static, separable, bounded, but essentially fragmented entities, grouped into classes, on which predictions can be based.” (McGilchrist, 2009) This kind of focus “isolates, fixes and makes each thing explicit by bringing it under the spotlight of attention”. While it gives us power to manipulate the world, it also “renders things inert, mechanical, lifeless” and so the results of its investigations must be returned to the right hemisphere to be integrated back into lived experience. Reason depends on both hemispheres, but linear rationality and logic are heavily left-hemisphere lateralised; in language, most literal and explicit syntax and vocabulary is left-hemisphere dependent, but the right hemisphere is crucial for implicit and metaphorical understanding (ibid).

We can “have, as personalities, characteristic and consistent biases towards one or other hemisphere” – a phenomenon known as “hemispheric utilisation bias” (ibid).

McGilchrist believes that these biases can affect entire societies, and although the cerebral hemispheres should co-operate, they have for some time been in a “state of conflict” in the cultural history of the West (ibid). The problem is that “the left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world that it has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful, but ultimately only able to operate on, and to know, itself” (ibid) - truth, for it, is *coherence*, whereas for the right hemisphere truth means being ‘true to’ something (ibid).

There is therefore a risk of getting lost in the “hall of mirrors” (ibid) of the conceptual “self-reflexive virtual world” of the left hemisphere. In the past, this tendency was counterbalanced by “forces from outside the enclosed system of the self-conscious

mind” (ibid), such as the arts and religion. However, the counterbalancing force of these has been compromised, either because of our alienation from them or since they too have largely given in to the left hemispheric ways of operation. And so “we have entered a phase of cultural history in which negative feedback between [...] the two hemispheres has given way to positive feedback in favour of the left hemisphere” and that we are currently “living in the West in a culture dominated by the take on the world of the left hemisphere” (ibid) – perhaps what Heidegger meant with “forgetting of Being” (Wheeler, 2011).

### **Relationship between the theory and my compositional thinking**

From the above description, the reader might have already picked up that the characteristics of the different hemispheres as described by McGilchrist have clear connections to the stance I have put forward in this commentary. I have been consistently favouring the right hemisphere’s world of alive ‘betweenness’, uniqueness and implicitness, a world of holistic, nonconceptual unity and flow, over the left hemisphere’s conceptually and taxonomically divided, linearly rational, explicit and mechanical perception that favours certainty and predictability. This is evident in, for example, my emphasis on the incorporeal evocation of nonconceptualisable and elusive moods and emotions, on the implicit, and on depth, as well as in my use of ambiguously stratified sonic surfaces that do not encourage narrowly zoomed attention. The right hemisphere is also more involved in the recognition and expression of emotions – except self-conscious, willed or forced emotional expressions, which are lateralised to the left (ibid) – which relates to my interest in unselfconscious emotional expressivity.

I also suspect that the ‘enigmatic’ music that I am drawn to compose and listen to discourages conceptual thought, linear rationality and a sense of certainty and hence encourages engagement with broad and open right-hemispheric listening. Without a sense of certainty and familiarity, some aspects of the listener’s preconceptions should loosen up in the listening moment in order to accommodate what is being heard. In fact, “the right hemisphere [...] is attuned to the apprehension of anything new”, while the left hemisphere “prioritises the expected” (ibid). This newness is not the inauthentic newness of novelty, which is a recombination of what is already known and hence belongs to the domain of the left hemisphere, but “seeing afresh what one thought of as familiar” (ibid):

*[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. (Shklovsky, 1917)*

Perhaps one reason for my attraction with the nonconceptual and the enigmatic is that I had intuited that I too had a ‘hemispheric utilisation bias’ favouring the self-conscious and analytical left hemisphere – I was largely ‘living inside my head’ – and music and composition has been one of my ‘saving graces’ providing the negative feedback necessary to balance the situation. Perhaps I have also unconsciously felt that the nonconceptual is the doorway to deeper – ‘transcendental’ or ‘profound’ – meaning, which seems to be intrinsically connected with the right hemisphere’s world.

## **Two different types of knowledge**

The two hemispheres also seem to be involved with different kinds of knowledge. The knowledge of the segregating left hemisphere is what we usually understand by the word – it is the general, impersonal, fixed, certain, repeatable, conceptual and

disengaged knowledge of fixed ‘things’ with an affinity with the non-living – knowledge that comes from putting things together from ‘*pieces*’ of information. This is “the only kind of knowledge permitted by science” (ibid). The right hemisphere, however, is more involved with the kind of knowledge we invoke when we say we ‘know’ someone. It is the way we naturally approach knowledge of a living being; it is personal, has to do with individuals and permits a sense of uniqueness and therefore cannot be handed on to someone else unchanged; it is not fixed; it is not easily expressed in words and the whole is not captured by trying to list the parts; it has to be experienced; and the knowledge depends on ‘betweenness’ (an encounter). (ibid) These ways of knowing are so different that in many languages other than English they are referred to by different words: in German, for example, the first by *wissen*; the second by *kennen*. Likewise in Finnish the expression of knowing John, when directly translated to English would be ‘I feel/sense/experience John’<sup>53</sup>.

McGilchrist argues that music is inherently a more right-hemisphere-dominant activity and that a piece of music “appears to require us to know it in the sense of *kennen* rather than *wissen*” (ibid). However, due to its personal, unfixed and indefinite nature, it can be seen as problematic for academic practice. Hence the musicology of acousmatic music deals almost exclusively with *wissen*: witness its emphasis on taxonomies, as in Schaeffer’s ‘sound object’ –categorisation (Chion, 2009) or Smalley’s spectro- and spatiomorphologies (Smalley, 1997; Smalley, 2007).

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<sup>53</sup> In Finnish: *wissen* (the left-hemisphere knowledge): ‘*tietää*’; *kennen* (the right-hemisphere knowledge): ‘*tuntea*’.

There are even elements of the machine-model in the language we use to discuss music – for example, we talk about ‘sound objects’ performing ‘functions’. This might not seem noteworthy, but McGilchrist argues that “[t]here is always a model by which we are understanding, an exemplar with which we are comparing what we see, and where it is not identified it usually means that we have tacitly adopted the model of the machine”, which “is understandable purely in terms of its parts”. (McGilchrist, 2009)

However, I believe that the idea that holistic perception or experience is arrived at by combining together identifiable smaller units should be questioned:

*We may think that we build up a picture of something by a process of serial scanning – putting the bits together – because this is the way our conscious, verbal, left hemisphere, when asked to work out how it is done after the fact, accounts for it. But in reality we see things first whole: serial attentional processing is not needed. In other words, we do not have to orientate our attention to each feature of an object in turn to understand the overall object; the features are all present without the need to combine the products of focal attention. (McGilchrist, 2009)*

The model that McGilchrist proposes instead for understanding both the brain and music is the model of a living thing, which, however, does not provide such handy metaphors for analytical manipulation.

Although I found the different taxonomies of acousmatic musicology inspiring when I initially encountered them during my undergraduate studies – and found that they helped me build a basic literacy towards acousmatic music – I now do not generally find that they help me uncover the kind of aspects of either my own music or the music of others that I find deeply meaningful. Hence I would say that in my research I am interested in accumulating the ‘silent’ nonconceptual right-hemisphere knowledge

(*kennenlernen*) of musical composition, rather than the kind of knowledge that can be neatly expressed in literal language.<sup>54</sup>

## CLOSING REMARKS

Like McGilchrist I have also noticed a societal ‘hemispheric utilisation bias’ favouring the conceptual virtual world of the left-hemisphere, and I consider it of utmost importance and urgency that art reinstates its position as a balancing force. For artists, this is imperative, as acceding to a purely rationalistic or pseudo-scientific notion of art might reduce it to nothing more than an ultimately dispensable nicety. This view was articulated by scientific materialist Steven Pinker who sees music as “auditory cheesecake” (Pinker, 1997:534), a simple “pleasure technology” like pornography<sup>55</sup> (ibid:525) – a position which I hope at least composers would see as not only self-evidently false, but also naïve. In McGilchrist’s words:

*I think we need, for one thing, urgently to move on from our current, limiting preconceptions about the nature of physical existence, spiritual life and art, and there are some small indications that this may be happening. Art and religion should not become part of the betrayal<sup>56</sup>. (McGilchrist, 2009)*

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<sup>54</sup> This could also bring another aspect to the recent discussion started by John Croft’s argument that “composition is not research” (Croft, 2015) – while I am sympathetic to his viewpoint, perhaps it could be said that composition could be research of the *kennenlerner*-variety. One of the very few examples of electroacoustic musicology that has attempted to convey *kennenlernen* has been Katharine Norman’s writings (2000; 2004; 2010), and these have been inspiring to me. However, I do not have her skill of poetic writing, and so I am stuck in haphazardly trying to point at right hemisphere’s nonconceptual, indescribable direct experience using matter of fact academic language.

<sup>55</sup> In a chapter self-confidently titled *The Meaning of Life*.

<sup>56</sup> The betrayal of the master (the right hemisphere) by the emissary (the left hemisphere).



I also see indications that this may be happening. For example, “contemplative modes of inquiry” (Burggraf and Grossenbacher, 2007) – including meditation – are slowly being welcomed as a part of academic research. In acousmatic music, looking at the contents of *Organised Sound* in the recent years, it seems like more poetic and spiritual angles have started to gain foothold from the dominance of taxonomic analyses (e.g. Dixon, 2011; Norman, 2010; Pedersen, 2011; Richard, 2000; Wolfe, 2014). Perhaps the musicology of electroacoustic music is coming of age, and it is now becoming more common and acceptable to look beyond the domain of taxonomies into the more ineffable qualities of music.

Personally, I see the arts as invaluable, not despite their elusive, nonconceptual and ‘unscientific’ nature, but precisely because of it. The arts and humanities do not have to feel inferior to sciences and try to model themselves on them - artists, too, are in the critical business of understanding the world and making sense of it, focusing on the aspects science cannot<sup>57</sup>. I view arts as a kind of ‘science of consciousness’ (a domain I believe regular science will never be able to truly enter), a preoccupation it shares with spirituality – hence I see the artist as something akin to a shaman, dealing with those things that elude conceptualisation, intellect or a scientific perspective. I believe that electroacoustic music – with all sounds available to it as material – has unprecedented potential in this, and working concretely with sounds lends itself naturally to a mind-set of unselfconscious ‘no-mind’.

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<sup>57</sup> In fact, neuroscientist Dan Lloyd notes that “fMRI activity is more similar to music than it is to language”, and invites us to consider the “mind as music”. (Lloyd, 2011:1)

## IV. CONCLUSION

In this commentary I have discussed my portfolio from the point of view of its workflows and aesthetics. I have discussed the importance of unselfconsciousness to my creative process – connecting it to my workflow of improvisatory composition and my thoughts on emotional expressivity –, and the way ‘no-mind’ and other concepts from Zen Buddhism or nonduality have informed my practice. I have also introduced the concepts of corporeal and incorporeal evocation – as well as the related concept of the permeability of the sonic surface – establishing that the incorporeal evocation of enigmatic and ineffable moods and emotions is central to my compositional thinking. This implies a holistic perception of ‘betweenness’, which is facilitated by the ‘semi-transparency’ of the work. I have also discussed how a recent neuropsychological angle on the brain’s hemispheric differences further elucidates my compositional thinking.

In general I consider my portfolio successful and am satisfied with all its pieces, although to a lesser extent with *Objects that skim the surface*. At the time I appreciated it more, but it is the oldest piece in the portfolio and indeed my perspective has ripened since then. Now I find that it has its charms, but see it as slightly superficial due to the poverty of its incorporeal evocation, perhaps caused by a greater degree of self-consciousness in its creative process. The other pieces are more incorporeally evocative in the way that I find important and meaningful. If I had to introduce the portfolio with one piece, I would use *Hermit’s dream of mountain ash*, as I find it illustrates in a balanced way many of the key elements of my compositional thinking. As a listener, I enjoy listening to the portfolio, but perhaps appropriately, with *From the Incommunicable Mass* I find it difficult to generate an opinion on the extent to which I

‘like’ or ‘dislike’ the piece – all I can say is that to me it does not seem trivial or superficial, but does *something* of interest and value.

The spiritual and mystical inclinations of my writing might seem atypical, and it could be seen that I have at times been ‘talking past the pieces’. However, this has been necessary in order for me to give the most honest appraisal of how I see them, as in a sense I am also ‘listening past the pieces’. Particularly the relative lack of formal considerations might seem unusual, but this, too, is indicative of my stance: thinking formally necessitates conceptual thinking – as one is actively trying to put together some kind of architectural map from units that are perceived to be separable – and is to some degree at odds with my pursuit of unselfconsciousness. For me, form is primarily the accumulating impregnation of the indivisible present moment. This does not mean that formal, syntactic or other conceptual thinking is completely absent in my work, or that I am trying to completely rid myself of them. However, they are of secondary importance, and I see them as tools in service of incorporeal evocation of moods and atmospheres, rather than ends in themselves. In this text I have presented the ideas that are most pertinent to my work, and so prioritisation has limited discussion of forms and structures.

During the four and half years of my PhD project many of my artistic dispositions opened up to new viewpoints and became gradually clearer and more specific. Often in the world of research, we now have to be able to say in advance what we are going to find, and so I am grateful that the practically focused framework of this PhD has granted me the boon of more free and open-ended research. Indeed a “search with an

open and expansive attitude of investigation” can lead to “undreamt of results” (Prevost, 2009).

In the beginning of the project I had a greater focus on investigating workflows, trying to understand what I was doing and why, what I could do differently, and what kind of relationship these different choices had with the aesthetics of the music. However, during the research, my inclination towards a nonconceptual, thoughtless and unselfconscious attitude of ‘no-mind’ in composition deepened and solidified. I noticed that directing attention to the workflow can be risky: although increased awareness can bring in new understanding and help in noticing possible mannerisms arising from the workflow, it can also bring in an unwanted level of self-consciousness. Indeed, the analytical stance often encouraged in academia – and needed when writing a text like this – can be at odds with my aspiration towards unselfconsciousness.

In fact, I can now perceive in my whole eleven-year path in the higher education a gradual progression from a strong and driven need to understand, to ‘hold on’ and to accumulate knowledge, to a slowly ripening acceptance and embracing of ‘not-knowing’, perhaps a subtle letting go of the need to grasp and control. It has been like a contraction and a relaxation – or the tension and release of music – and while the contraction served a purpose, it is the relaxation that consolidates. The sustenance and deepening of this ‘don’t-know mind’ will undoubtedly be central to the next phase of my personal artistic research, and although I do not know what will happen next, I am eager to continue the exploration.

## V. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: PROGRAMME NOTES OF THE PIECES

#### ACOUSMATIC COMPOSITIONS

##### **Hermit's dream of mountain ash**

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*9:36 / Composed between Aug 2013 and Jan 2014. Premiered in BEAST: Pioneers of Sound –festival on 31.01.2014 (Elgar Concert Hall, University of Birmingham).*

*a misty rain  
falling in withered grass  
midnight in the capital  
how many men  
are growing old in this wind?  
evening I get lost  
on small trails that twist  
through gnarled black oaks  
straight overhead the moon  
drives shadows back to their trees  
whitens the hills with false dawn<sup>58</sup>*

An elusive poetic reverie, a ruptured cinema for the ear that lingers between evocation and opacity, place and non-place, the human and the inhuman, emotions and emptiness...

##### **Translucent poems**

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*1. Glowing in Silent Light / 2:07 / Feb 2014*

*4. Nocturne / 7:07 / June 2014*

*5. Pavilion of Hexagonal Mirrors / 3:16 / Sep 2014*

*8. Labyrinth of the Heresiarchs / 6:02 / Feb 2015*

*Premiered in MTI Postgraduate Concert on 14.06.2017 (PACE Building, De Montfort University, Leicester)*

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<sup>58</sup> From Li Ho's Meditation (Young, 1990)

A series of acousmatic miniatures started in 2014, with eleven pieces finished as of July 2017, four of them chosen for the portfolio. I had two main aims with the miniatures: firstly, I wanted to focus on the poetic evocation of moods, atmospheres and unique sonic universes, unconstrained by formal considerations – in a way comparable to the character pieces (charakterstück) of Romantic music. This evocation becomes more enigmatic as the series progresses. Secondly, I used them as etudes to develop my workflow of improvisatory composition to be even faster, lighter and more effortless. In this way working on them has reminded me of a poet quickly and casually composing poems before the rational thinking mind has time to catch up.

### **Minoiki Tephra (Μινωική τέφρα)<sup>59</sup>**

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*15:45 / Composed between May 2014 and May 2015. Premiered in BEAST: Visions – festival on 30.05.2015 (CBSO Centre, Birmingham).*

One prominent theory for the demise of the prosperous Minoan civilisation (ca. 3650BC – 1450BC) speculates that a huge volcanic eruption on the nearby island of Thera caused a cycle of disaster, including a tsunami destroying boats and coastal villages and volcanic gases causing years of climate change, destroying harvests. The sea and nature the Minoans worshipped had dramatically turned against them, shattering the orderliness of their worldview, driving many to worship new gods and some even to cannibalism, resulting in religious hostilities and anarchy. These had left the civilisation in a state of chaos and demoralisation and unable to fight back against the Mycenaen invasion some 50 years later. This piece has been inspired by those bleak post-apocalyptic decades. Wrecked coastal villages, ruined harvests and the sky dark with volcanic ash – the Minoans must have lived for several decades in confusion and slowly creeping despair, an abysmal limbo.

### **From the Incommunicable Mass**

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*13:44 / Composed between Aug 2016 and Feb 2017. (Not yet premiered as of July 2017).*

A post-Cageian fixed-media piece realised by following a semi-open compositional score. The result is an enigmatic mobile of elements moving in and out of view, guided by a logic that is distant, impenetrable and alien.

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<sup>59</sup> The Greek title roughly translates to English as Minoan Ash

## Objects that skim the surface

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*11:52 / Performed in BEAST: Encounters –festival (Elgar Concert Hall, University of Birmingham, 15.02.2013)*

A mechanic-animalistic sonic entity roams the sonic space. Is it driven by animal instincts or unintelligible robotic programming? *Objects that skim the surface* is a semi-composed, semi-improvised piece realised with the self-designed granular synthesis and feedback based instrument Malegra.

## COLLABORATIVE COMPOSITIONS

### Texto 610

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*Collaboration with Josué Moreno / 15:28 excerpt / Composed between Dec 2012 and Aug 2014. Premiered as a live-adaptation at Vapaan Taiteen Tila, Helsinki on 14.12.2015*

A post-Cageian fixed-media piece realised as a long-distance collaboration by following an open score. Five improvisations constrained by rules given in the score were overdubbed in turn, resulting in a perplexing sonic world with both improvisatory reactions and indeterminate independence. The full piece is 51:54 long; an excerpt from 9:27 to 24:55 has been selected to the portfolio.

### Aphotic

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*Collaboration with Constantinos Kontos / 10:15 / Composed between Feb and May 2013. (Not yet premiered as of July 2017)*

A collaborative acousmatic piece that conjures a subtle and inconspicuous lingering image. It is like a mirage - in its phantasmal world even the tactile feels intangible and at a closer look places revert to non-places. Slowly it descends into the Aphotic Zone...

## IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

### **Solo improvisation at MuteFest 2015**

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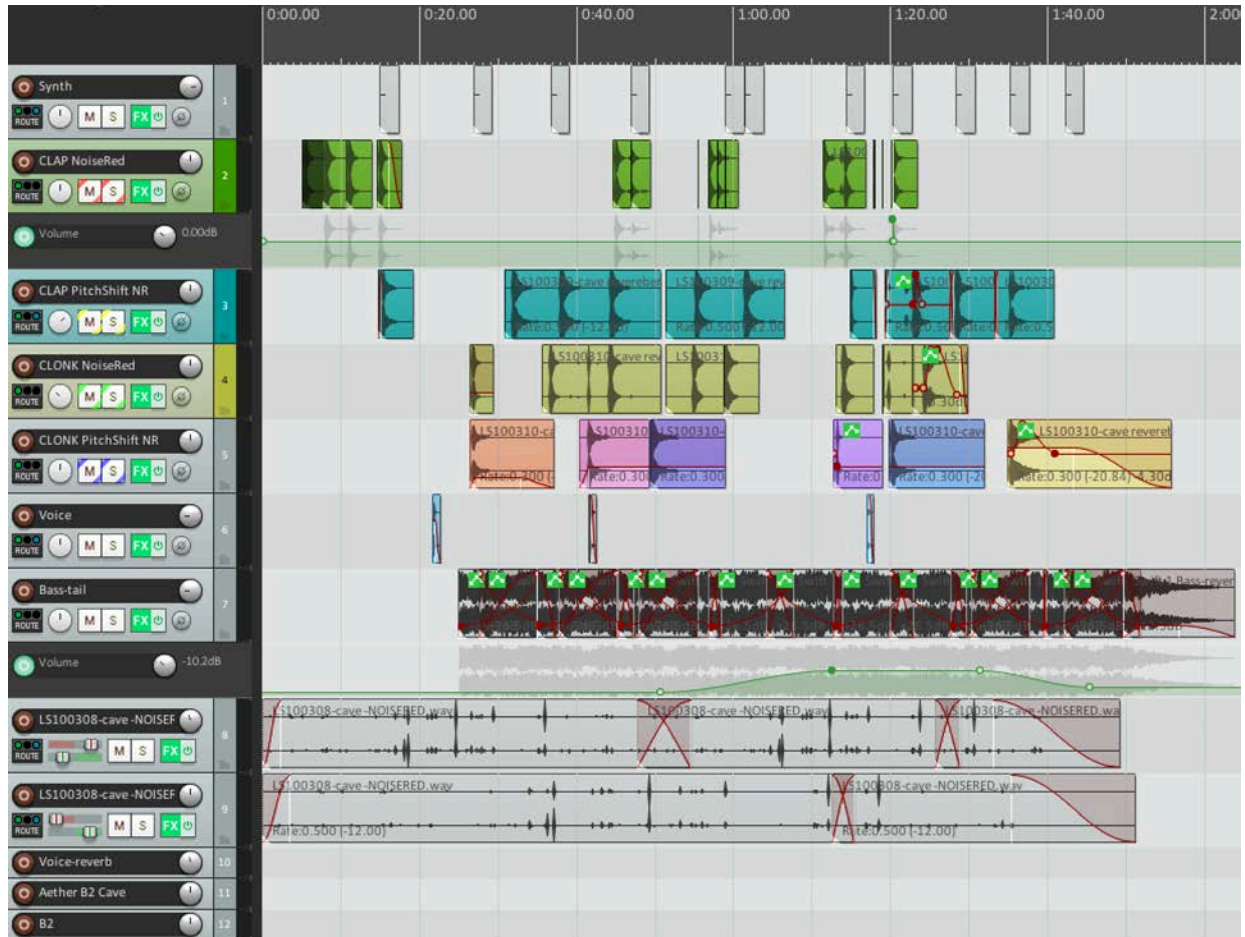
*18:20 / Performed in CMT Club Night of MuteFest 2015 (Vapaan Taiteen Tila, Helsinki, 17.11.2015)*

An improvised performance with the self-designed Malegra instrument, included in the portfolio as a video. Fragile piano-fragments, abstract but semi-organic flutters, and some more inhospitable forces intermingle in this crepuscular contemplation.

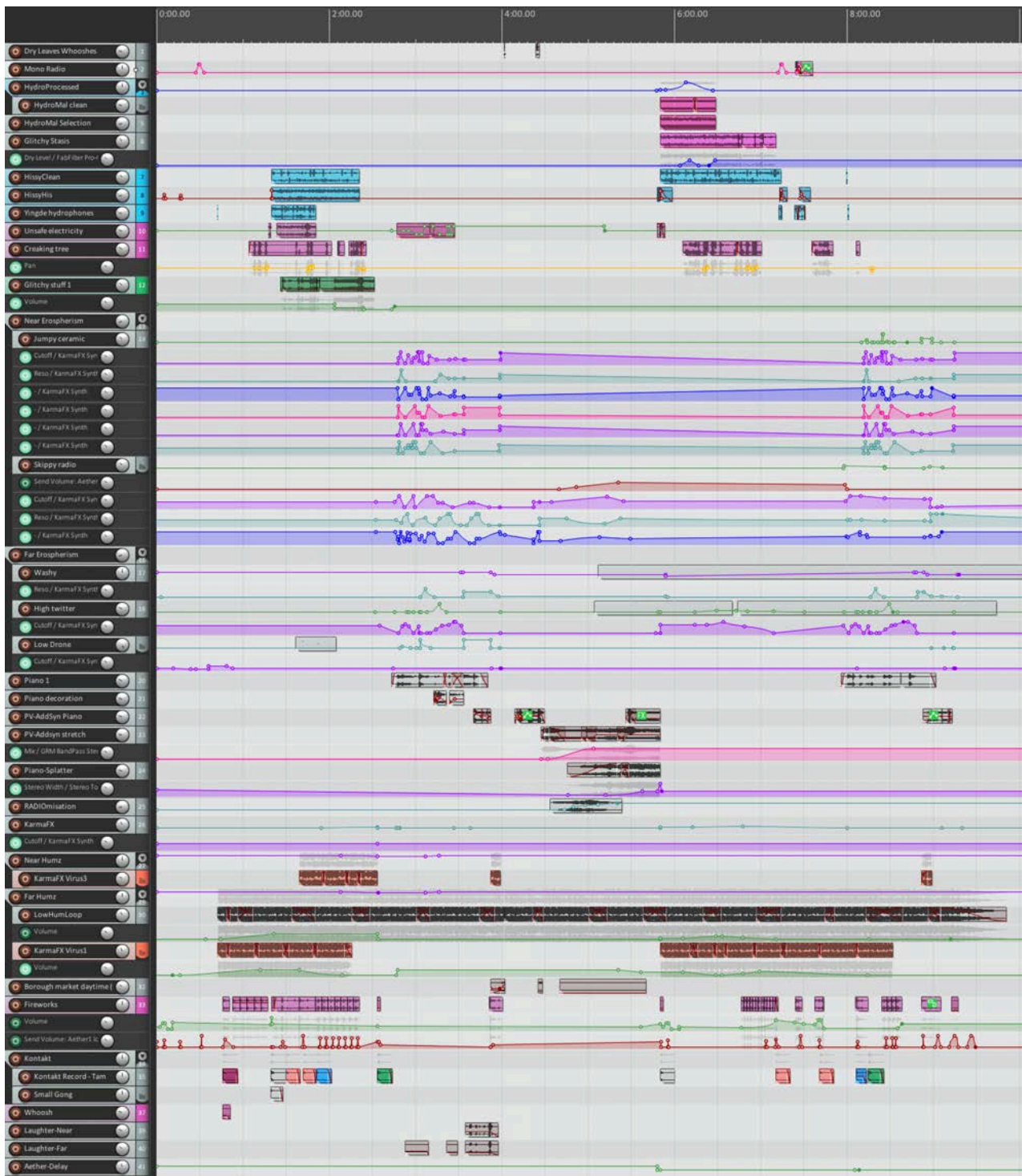


## APPENDIX 2: PROJECT SCREEN CAPTURES

### A. GLOWING IN SILENT LIGHT



## B. HERMIT'S DREAM OF MOUNTAIN ASH<sup>60</sup>



<sup>60</sup> To save space, muted events and tracks with no items have been deleted (including FX-send tracks without automation).

### C. THE TIMING SCHEMA FOR FROM THE INCOMMUNICABLE MASS



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