

Breathing Silence. An interview with John Palmer

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John Palmer has been recently awarded with the Medal of the President of the Italian Republic at the «Città di Udine» International Composition Competition. He has accepted to talk to us about his musical poetics, especially regarding his work with electronics.

C. S.: Which composers and which musical works did you look at when you started writing music with electronics?

J. P.: First of all, I should mention that in the 1980s I was not particularly fond of electronic music. At that time I was living in the German-speaking area of Switzerland and the electronic music I heard was much in the German tradition of *Elektronische Musik*. I disliked much of it: the synthetic sounds, which I found rather cold and aggressive, the heaviness of what I perceived as essentially pitch-based music, and its rigid structural thinking behind it.

In 1990 I attended a course in Computer Music given by Gerald Bennett at the Conservatory of Lucerne, in Switzerland. I remember him talking about his compositional procedures using an ATARI computer and the Composers Desktop Project. Both devices were displayed on his desk together with many cables and other pieces of hardware. At some point Gerald played some examples from a work he had written for voice and tape and I remember my sense of wonder when I listened to those sounds. I was very intrigued by the transformation of the voice he managed to achieve with the CDP. That was the first time I heard a kind of electronic music that was different to the one I had heard up to that point. In retrospect, I can tell the difference was very simple: Bennett's music was dealing with sound and sound transformation. *Timbre*, rather than pitch.

When I returned to London in the summer of the same year I started looking around for new music, especially with electronics. Meanwhile I was doing postgraduate studies in Composition at Trinity College of Music. I chose an option where I could do both acoustic and electroacoustic composition and I studied in the Electronic Studio with the American composer Glen Morgan for one year. This is the time when

I began to open up to electronics. I remember pestering Glen with all sort of questions about the aesthetics and makings of electronic music. I gradually began to discover the electro-acoustic tradition and London was an ideal place for that. The content of our studio sessions were left entirely up to me, so we discussed and practiced a lot. This was the time where every electronic studio in London was equipped with an AKAI sampler and I remember doing my first sound transformations on that machine. I also remember how much I hated the small display of the AKAI instruments and later on switching to the Audiomedia Card and Samplitude on Mac computers.

I used to bombard Glen with questions of all sorts, especially of aesthetic nature, and asking for names of good composers I should listen to. He pointed out some composers' names which at that time were unknown to me, and then one day he said to me, «John, you must listen to a composer called Jonathan Harvey: I think you'll like him». I became acquainted with the work of Stockhausen and Pierre Schaeffer, but also with the music of Barry Anderson, Roger Smalley and others. But the real breakthrough came about during a visit to the SPNM offices in London where I saw the full score and CD of Jonathan Harvey's *Bhakti* and I bought both on the spot. This work was a revelation for me. I was so captivated by the music that I must have entered a state of trance: I remember not eating for two days such was the degree of enrapturement I experienced. It was the subtle transformations of acoustic and electronic sounds and their interaction that captivated my imagination so strongly.

Following that experience I decided to intensify my research in the electroacoustic repertoire and decided to continue my doctoral studies at City University which at that time was one of the most important music departments of electroacoustic music in the country. Simon Emmerson was teaching there and organizing regular concerts of electro-acoustic music. Dennis Smalley joined the Department in those years as well. In 1992 I also met Jonathan Harvey at the Summer School of Dartington where I was studying with Vinko Globokar and from 1992 to 1996 I studied with Jonathan while at the same time I transferred my PhD research in Composition from Royal Holloway & New Bedford College to City University.

The early nineties have been a time of discovery of great music for me. From Simon Emmerson and his live-electronics – particularly his work *Sentences*, for soprano and live-electronics – and Alejandro Viñao through to the acousmatic music of Jonty Harrison and the BEAST composers of Birmingham, Dennis Smalley, Pierre Henry, and other works of Harvey such as *Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco*, *From Silence*, *Valley of Aosta*, *Madonna of Winter and Spring*. It is through the music of these composers that I also discovered older masterpieces such as Stockhausen's *Mantra*, *Kontakte* and *Gesang der Jünglinge*, although I cannot say these have been as influential as the ones I have mentioned earlier perhaps because right at the onset of this musical adventure my ears had been 'spoiled' by digital sound quality.

The early nineties is also the time when I began my first compositions for acoustic instruments and electronics – live and pre-recorded – although my initial predilection was for live-electronics. As a pianist, I expanded my repertoire with electro-acoustic music and performed in the UK, USA, Austria and Switzerland, organizing concerts myself and playing together with other musicians in what I used to call “electro-acoustic cham-

ber music". In my concerts I also advocated music by other composers such as Andrew Lewis, Stephen Montague, and other British and American composers. I also included music by older composers such as Stockhausen, Harvey, Bruyner, Cage and others.

C. S.: Did the friendship with John Cage have an influence on your work?

J. P.: I came across the music and aesthetics of John Cage in 1985 or 1986. For me this was the first big gate to a 'different' kind of music and, especially, musical thinking. It was completely new to me. I heard his music and read about his thoughts as much as I could. I also wrote a dissertation on the aesthetics of John Cage for my music history degree in 1988 when I was studying at the Lucerne Conservatory and I met John in a concert in Wetzikon, near Zurich, in 1989. I met him again in Zurich two days later. He invited me to visit him in New York, which I did two months later and we corresponded for about three years. Yes, the friendship with John was very important for me at that time. He would always answer to my questions and discuss anything in a most natural way. He would discuss music and any other issue with me on the same level, although he was much older than me, and ask for my opinions to anything he was talking about. Being taken so seriously as a young composer was for me very important, of course. I remember him showing me his *Freeman Etudes* in 1990 and telling me about the forgotten procedures he had used on his early cycle and the difficulties he was having in finishing off the piece. At the same time he would ask me to look at my scores and would discuss them with me with the same spontaneity. John's music and ideas were certainly the most revolutionary thing I come across at that time. His influence on me was both musical and philosophical.

C. S.: Which aspects of Cage's work have been most influential on your musical activities?

J. P.: Well, the impact John had on me has been enormous, really: I was fascinated by his aesthetic and artistic consistency and courage. It was also through Cage that I discovered Zen and Japanese traditional culture. I had already been close to Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan school, but Cage opened the door to Zen philosophy and Japanese music. This has been a major influence on my music ever since. In Cage I found a perfect marriage of art and philosophy, intellectual commitment and ethical stance, adventurous thinking and uncompromising musical practice. Both his personality and artistic work represented the ideal unity of philosophy and art that I was very much looking for, as I have always felt that music should not be detached from a philosophical stance, a spiritual search, or ultimately from the human experience of daily life. I was also very interested in his chance operations. I had studied and consulted the I Ching since the early 1980s and that gave me a first-hand understanding of what he was trying to do. I also experimented with indeterminate procedures in composition and performance, although my goal was ultimately to find a balance between the two practices: an art resulting from equilibrium between freedom and discipline, as I used to say in those days.

C. S.: You have traveled a lot and have also visited Japan. Eastern culture must have influenced your music since the early works such as *Renge-Kyo*, for piano and electronics, whose title refers to Buddhist philosophy and the notion of causality. How did you deal with this concept in the piece?

J. P.: Indeed, the concept behind the music of *Renge-Kyo* is the principle of causality. I was intrigued by the interaction of cause and effect taking place at any level of life: from the most tenuous occurrences in daily life to large-scale events that have shaped, and continue to shape, the history of the world. I had been a practicing Buddhist of a Japanese school where this interaction of cause and effect was studied and practiced rather thoroughly. In Buddhism the word *Renge* (Japanese for lotus flower) symbolizes the simultaneousness of cause and effect (the flower and the seed pod simultaneously) and the ability of self-purification (the blossoms in the muddy swamps). The Japanese word *Kyo* means both Sutra (teaching) and Sound as vibration; it represents the thread, the continuity of all things. I associated the cause with the piano and the effect with the electronics. The two instruments are continuously interrelated in an asymmetric alternation of actions and reactions constructed upon two superimposed musical layers. In the first version of the piece the interaction took place in a 'chronological' order. After the first performance I changed that and shuffled the sections and some interacting events of the two instruments. By so doing I created a less obvious form and unfolding of the musical events.

The image shows a page of musical notation for the piece *Renge-Kyo*. It consists of three systems of staves. Each system has a piano part (left) and an electronics part (right). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are also performance instructions in English, such as "change timing slightly" and "don't slip the sound (sustain) by changing pedal." The time signatures are 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4. The piece is in G major and 2/4 time.

Extract from the score of *Renge-Kyo*, where piano and electronics interact as in a cause-effect game

Renge-Kyo ends with a cadenza where the pianist and the electronics improvise on, and extend, the previous material. The piano cadenza is played live, while the electronics cadenza is fixed on a pre-recorded tape part. In order to allow the pianist a certain degree of freedom in performance, the score is written in space/time notation. This means that the note values are relative and must be interpreted within the corresponding phrases and time indications.

There is a curious background concerning the theme of *Renge-Kyo* which is linked to what I said earlier about my explorations of indeterminacy in the early 1990s as a result of my studies on Cage's music: I wanted to have a main motif, indeed a theme that would not reflect my own musical taste. So I created an alphabetical chart of letter-pitch association based on a one-to-one procedure from which the word *Renge-Kyo* generates the notes E, A, F-sharp, B, D-sharp, C. This short thematic phrase occurs at 2'07" and generates all the other pitch units of the piece. I laughed when I heard it, not only because I 'liked' it, but also because of its strong resemblance with Japanese scales and music!

C. S.: *Renge-Kyo* is included in your first solo CD released by the British label Sargasso in 1997...

J. P.: Yes, the CD includes only electroacoustic works written in those years: *Vision*, for harpsichord and electronics, *Beyond the Bridge*, for cello and electronics and the two synthesizers works *Phonai* and *Spirits*.

C. S.: You have released four other solo CDs with the same label...

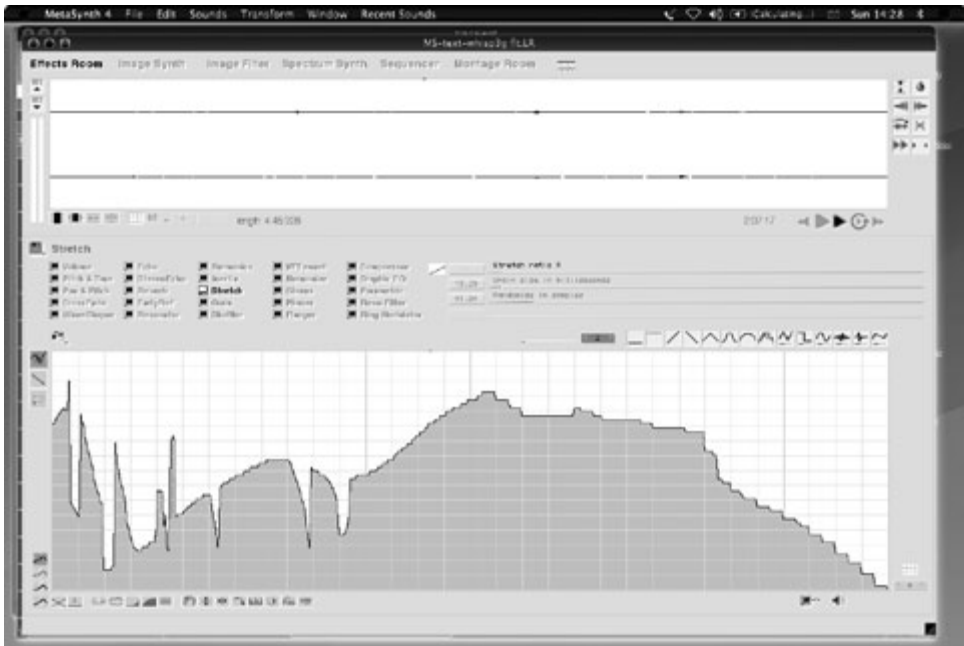
J. P.: Yes. In the other CDs you'll find a mixture of acoustic works for solo instruments, chamber music and ensemble, and electroacoustic pieces including acousmatic. My acousmatic piece *Present Otherness* is included on another compilation CD by the same label.

C. S.: Buddhism and the East have been a constant source of inspiration for your musical poetics up to these days. Your latest CD 'Inwards' includes works based on an atmosphere of silent meditation. I am referring to *transient* and *Inwards*, both based on breathing...

J. P.: The CD includes only works based on breathing; breath revisited in some of its cultural facets, particularly the psychological, spiritual and social. *Transient* and *Inwards* are definitely the most meditative pieces of the album.

Transient is based on a text written in 1988 in memory of a friend of mine who had passed away. I wrote the music in 2008 and scored it for soprano, prepared piano and two electronic sources. The latter consist of live processing of the voice, and recordings of breathing and of the text spoken, whispered and sung by the soprano. All these sounds are then transformed in the electronic studio. Breathing is imagined as a surreal metaphor of life after life. The unfolding of the music is based on a relational system where

a word, a phrase, or even a concept of the poem is associated to a specific pitch. By so doing, syntactic relations between pitch and word, as meaning, are converted into musical phrases articulated in six sections corresponding to the six verses of the text. Apart from its original instrumentation as a trio (voice, prepared piano and electronics), it is also possible to or perform it as a duo for voice and electronics, or even diffuse it as an acousmatic “tape” work, although my preferred combination remains the original trio.



Granular time-stretching and pitch-shift example of an excerpt from the whispered text used in Transient from 0'01" to 2'09" (original transposition in semitones: -1.62; modified speed value: 35.41). This time-stretching has been repeated twice, each time with a different grain size and random value

C. S.: What about *Inwards*?

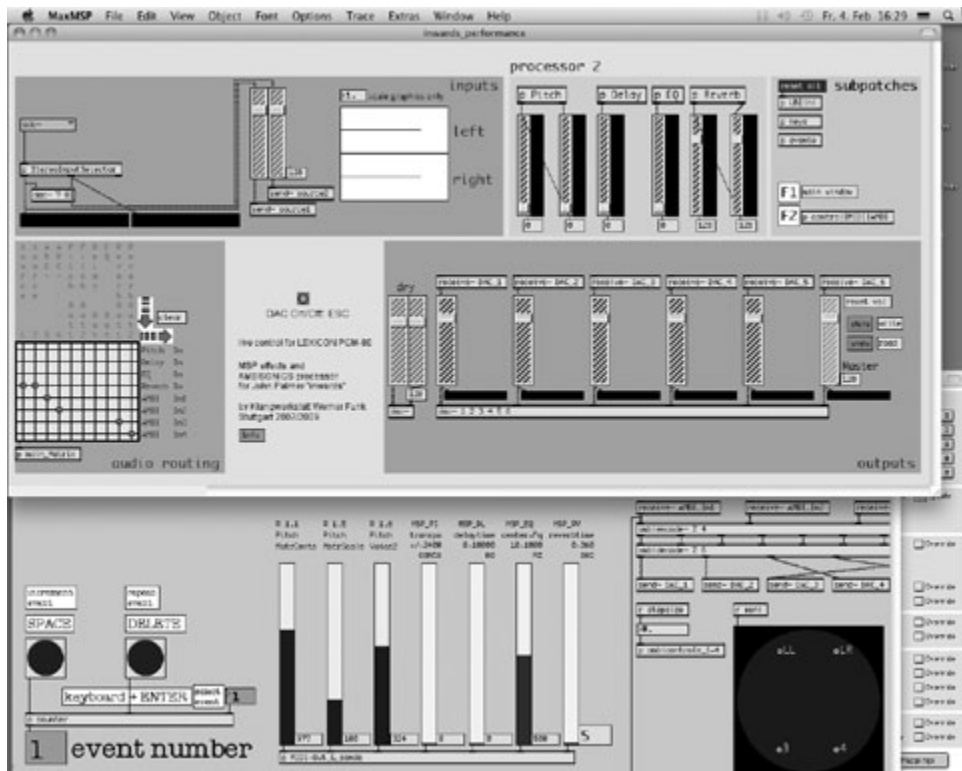
J. P.: I wrote *Inwards* in 2004 for bass flute and live-electronics. It was conceived as a musical Gestalt deriving from, and always referring to the act of breathing. It is a music that should be played *inwardly*, I mean with a strongly focused attitude as in Za-Zen or Yoga meditation, always emphasizing breathing as a dialectic and musical force. The sound of breathing into a bass flute is explored as a symbol of the expression of the divine on the mental plane. I was inspired by the symbolism of breathing in the spiritual traditions of the world, particularly the Hindu and the Judeo-Christian. For example, in the Upanishad you read: «The sun is the outer self, the inner self is breath. Hence the motion of the inner self is inferred from the motion of the outer self». You

find a similar concept in the Genesis: «And (God) breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul».

Space plays a very important role, too. The sounds of the *breathing* bass flute are projected onto six different points in space surrounding the audience. The sounds move in circular and directional motion, but they are also projected from one specific place in the hall to another.

C. S.: Tell me a little bit about the electronics you used in *Inwards*.

J. P.: I created the spatialisation of *Inwards* on the *ambisonics* software that a friend of mine, Werner Funk, integrated for me in the max/msp patch following the first performance of the piece in Stuttgart where I did everything manually! I must say I still love the physical feeling of controlling and projecting sounds on the concert hall out of a mixing desk and a stand-alone hardware with my own fingers; it's the same feeling you have when you play the piano. But at the same time I know only too well the limitations of this now old-fashioned *modus operandi*. I still remember the first performance of *Renge-Kyo* in 1993 when I played the piano and at the same time triggered the entire live-electronics from the piano via three MIDI pedals. All in all, I controlled



Max/msp patch for *Inwards*: main window (above), control MIDI and ambisonics window (below)

six pedals under the feet while playing the piano, and although the performance went well, I swore to myself I would never do it again because of the ridiculous amount of pressure you put on yourself and of course the risks you take during the performance.

Back to *Inwards*, I programmed all the spatial motions in *ambisonics* in order to achieve a precise control of the movements I wanted and being able to concentrate on other musical issues in during the concert.

The max/msp patch also triggers a Lexicon PCM-80 effect processor, initially via a MIDI controller, although a newer version without the Lexicon is being prepared. Indeed, with the establishment of max/msp worldwide I have had to gradually transfer all the old live-electronics onto new software that is compatible with it. This has been an ongoing, and so far rather painful process because I am finding hard to renounce the refined algorithms of the Lexicon processors. The quality of virtual spaces is very important for the music I write and I can spend days and weeks before I find the right reverberation quality for a single phrase or passage. This is surely a reason why I have been very late in this updating process.

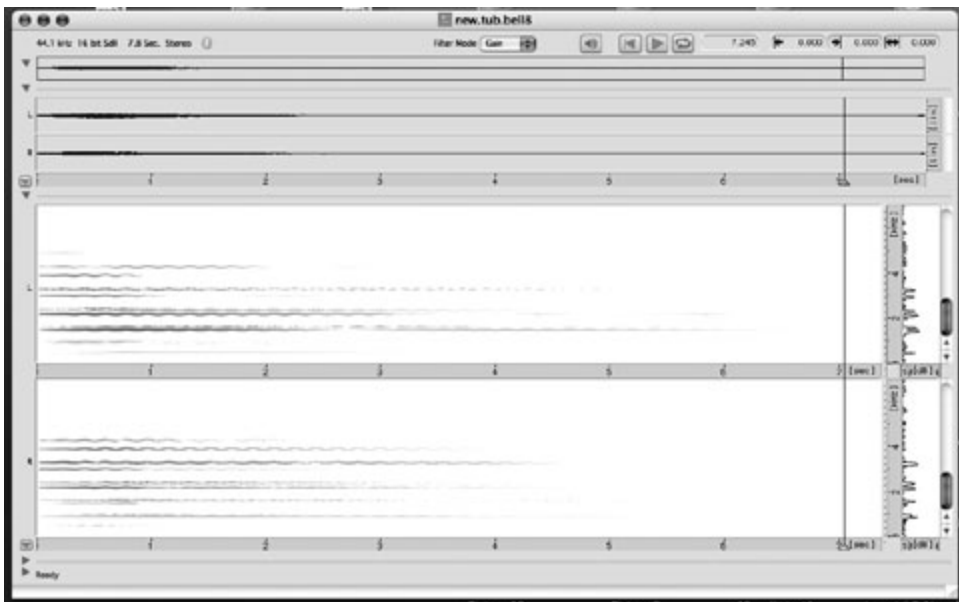
C. S.: Japanese culture comes back rather powerfully in your acousmatic work *I Am...*

J. P.: I wrote *I Am* in 2002. It was commissioned by DeutschlandRadio Berlin. All the works they commission for their Experimental Hörspiel Department must be about 52 minutes a long; a quite substantial work. The idea of writing *I Am* came to my mind during a visit to Japan in Autumn 2001. This work reflects some aspects of my perception of reality as a search for spiritual transcendence and self-realization. To me, timbral and spatial transformations of sonic objects often suggest subtle perceptions of the spiritual, as if resembling a journey where the physical and the metaphysical go hand in hand. In *I Am* I propose a travel taking place on two levels simultaneously: the physical trip to Japan and the metaphorical voyage into self-realization. The journey to Japan is based on sonic references of that country while the inner journey is represented by sound transformations based mainly on Japanese, more specifically Zen, literary texts. The texts I have used for the realization of this work are extracts from Buddhist writings (in Japanese and English), descriptions of Zen temples in Kyoto (in Japanese) and fragments from short poems I have written in 2001-2003 (in English). All the remaining sounds have been collected in Japan and may be divided into two categories: sounds with spiritual reference (e.g. temple bells and chanting) and secular sounds taken from everyday life, including Japanese traditional instruments (sho, shamisen, shakuhachi and koto) and nature (seashore, rain, birds).

C. S.: A sensation of the sacred is also very strong in your second DeutschlandRadio commission, another very long work, called *In the Temple*. In this piece I seem to hear fragments of prayers or mantras appearing and disappearing throughout the piece. At times I have the impression that the listener loses the sense of time. I hear oasis of space where sound flows in an atmosphere of profound meditation. There is also a sense of stasis resulting from prolonged layers of sound and one has the feeling of

being immersed in a kind of motionless dizziness. The listener is projected onto a metaphysical dimension...

J. P.: *In the Temple* is a complex work in many ways. Similar to *I Am*, it portrays another inner journey to the self, I mean a search for the real essence of what we (the human kind) are. In this sense, I found Dante's opening of *The Divine Comedy* «Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / che la diritta via s'era smarrita» (I dare not quoting the English translation!) the most appropriate description for this kind of inner journey. In this work I have tried to express the sensations I experienced when visiting a subterranean temple at the feet of the Italian Alps. As I plunged into the cave I descended into an underworld of halls and corridors, luminous spheres and light reflections on esoteric paintings and sculptures carved into the rock. Intense perfumes in each hall would emphasize a truly multi-sensorial experience of astonishing beauty. I found myself initiating a journey into mystical knowledge and a lost heritage. The concept and form of the work are connected to the architectural and spiritual structure of the temple itself: seven halls, one labyrinth and interlinking corridors. Each space being built according to mathematical, acoustic and spiritual laws where architecture becomes a medium between the spiritual and the material. A cathedral of esoteric knowledge, where architecture and mathematics merge with colours, light and sound. *In the Temple* is 52 minutes long and consists of nine movements linked by a *Leitmotif* of footsteps and a gentle surge-like sound associated with the corridors and the act of entering each hall. Obviously it is a very personal experience that I have tried to portray in sound.



Spectral analysis of a bell sample using Audiosculpt for the work In the Temple

C. S.: How were both works born? Is there a precise genesis or did you just compose them intuitively, based on the sensations of the moment?

J. P.: Both, I would say. There is a precise plan about what I wanted to achieve. I do have my conceptual and compositional sketches at the beginning of each work I write. In this case the very sounds I collected in Japan, for *I Am*, and in Italy, for *In the Temple*, are themselves idiomatic and constitute the main sonic material, the themes if you like, of the music.

Each sound I recorded carries a psychological connotation and a meaning in the first place. For example, in all spiritual traditions of the world the sound of the bell is linked to a sense of the spiritual, the sound of water is linked to the concept of purity, and so forth. So I am very careful about the choice of the samples I take. The situation of *In the Temple* goes even further in that I measured the acoustic qualities of each hall with a special electronic device and recorded the same set of instrumental sounds and voices in each specific hall of the temple in order to exploit the acoustic quality of the subterranean spaces. Obviously, I wanted to retain the acoustic characteristics of each space in my music.

Of course there is a lot intuition and meditation behind the compositional process of both works: for example the fifth movement of *In the Temple* is a musical portrait of the Labyrinth. In this hall you see the paintings of 29 divinities taken from different religions of the world, from Aphrodite through to Amaterasu. Such divinities are proposed as containers of specific energies. I meditated a lot on the primordial essence



Filter techniques in Metasynth used for the Poseidon divinity sound in In the Temple

of each divinity and tried to sense what kind of energy each of these spiritual symbols may contain also in relation to those cultures they are related to. I have therefore tried to 'interpret' each divinity with a specific sound and I interlinked all of them with a recurring drone, a kind of common denominator, and a thread that unites them all into a large context. But I must confess that, generally speaking, all the techniques I use reflect my perceptual interpretation of the sounds I am working with. I think it is my perception of that particular sound that enhances its intrinsic potential and enables me to transcend it. A tiny pitch change or spectral deviation I undertake, for example, may imply a big perceptual shift in my mind and change the semantic meaning of the very sound. I am extremely pedantic when it comes to accuracy of timbre and space, even within a 'simple' stereo image.

C. S.: Is there a score of these two works?

J. P.: Yes and no. Surely not in the traditional sense of the word. There is a kind of compositional diary for each of them where I wrote everything that was going through my mind at the time of composing the works: from the most conceptual to the most technical, from the detailed organization of outer and inner form to the most technical procedures I used in order to shape the new sounds.

C. S.: There is another work of yours commissioned by harpsichordist Jane Chapman and the Arts Council of England where you deal with a symbolic unification of eastern and western cultures. In *Encounter*, the electronics seem to unify a dialogue occurring between the harpsichord (the western instrument) and world percussion (the eastern instrument). It is a quite particular and courageous sonic combination. Don't you think so?

J. P.: You are right about the symbolism of the two acoustic instruments and the electronics representing an attempt to unify the two different realities. I wanted to confront two different ways of feeling, thinking, writing and performing music, two dissimilar approaches to music making: the intuitive and ritualistic tradition of the East (represented by the world percussion) and the precise, yet passionate and daring attitude of the West (represented by the harpsichord). At the same time I wanted to transcend them with a third instrument that would connect them, both symbolically and sonically. The electronics was the ideal instrument for that: I took several samples of both instruments and tried to create sonic references to both acoustic instruments. Obviously, I played a lot with sonic ambiguity such as merging the spectra of the harpsichord and the udu-drum, the Indian tabla, or an imaginary sitar that never appears on stage, for example.

C. S.: Here again, the piece ends with a ritual of some kind...

J. P.: Yes, I love rituals. *Encounter* ends with a ritual in that after the joint cadenza of the two acoustic instruments, the electronics take over their virtuoso improvisations

projecting them onto an extended space. During the electronics cadenza the main lights on the stage go off while the two musicians walk to the middle of the stage, each with a Tibetan bowl in the hands. At the end of the cadenza a spotlight slowly lights up the central location of the stage where both musicians are now standing in front each other and bringing out as many harmonics as possible from the Tibetan bowls by hitting them first and then let the beater gently go around the bowls with a circular movement.

C. S.: Which electronic equipment do you usually compose with? Can you give me a short history of the electronic instruments you have used from the very beginning?

J. P.: I built up my first serious electronic studio in 1991-1992. This included an Apple Mac computer, Sound Designer (the father of Pro Tools), the Audiomedia card, Samplitude, the Akay sampler I was telling you about earlier, the Yamaha SY-77, a Yamaha MIDI keyboard, two or three effect processors (a Boss SE-70, an Alesis Quadraverb and the Lexicon LXP-15 and a Digitech harmoniser). I remember when the first version of Pro Tools was launched in 1991. It had 4 tracks and was very expensive. As soon as the price began to go down I bought myself Pro-Tools III, I think that was in 1993 or 1994, and have used this digital audio workstation ever since. I have always done the recordings, sampling and CD productions myself. I also worked with a Panasonic SV-3700 DAT machine until 5 years ago, and I still own two Schoeps microphones and a Focusrite 8 pre-amplifier which I have used for all my recordings so far. Although I was initially focused on live-electronics, from 1991 to 1995 the Yamaha SY-77 synthesizer was the main source of the tape parts of my early electroacoustic works. For example, the tape part of *Renge-Kyo* is made entirely on the SY-77. I never felt at ease with software like C-Sound, for example, where you had to wait hours before you got a sound processed. I have always preferred the immediate result and the possibility to fiddle with a sound and transform it in real time. In the middle of the 1990s I gradually left this kind equipment and moved onto software such as the GRM-Tools and Modalyser, although I continued to use effect processors such as the Lexicon PCM-80 and later also the t.c. electronic units. (As I have already said, I still love the quality of the Lexicon processors). Since the late 1990s for the acousmatic works and the tape parts I have used mainly Metasynth and Audiosculpt in combination with the Lexicon and t.c. electronic. Occasionally I have used other software. In recent years max/msp has become indispensable in every sense of the word for live-electronics, but I always like using hardware whenever I perform the electronics myself. Apart from the sound processors I have mentioned earlier, I am particularly fond of a Moog Ring Modulator which I use on the grand piano, next to the laptop, for the performance of *after silence 1*. Again, I like the feeling of the analog instrument under my fingertips.

C. S.: You mentioned you have always done the recordings for your pieces yourself. How important is this for you?

J. P.: Very important! Before beginning with the studio work, I think it is essential to be able to work with a good recording technique. Already at this early stage one

can emphasize certain spatial nuances which may turn out to be crucial during the studio work. A specific sense of space is often captured through a careful recording technique. I believe spatial design may depend a great deal on the listening space you capture in your recordings. I made the most striking experience when recording the same instruments in the different halls of the subterranean temple or when recordings sea-water in Liguria for *In the Temple*, just to mention one example.

C. S.: What about multi-channel spatialization then?

J. P.: This is a big issue, of course, and there is a lot of interesting work going on in this field. I do think it is possible to create a great deal of depth in the stereo format. When I work in my studio with two or four loudspeakers, I instinctively work with space in a way similar to a Schenckerian middleground, foreground and background, yet multiplied and more refined. For example, in *nowhere*, for clarinet, piano and electronics, I have used thirteen multilayered and superimposed spatial characteristics compressed, if you like, in a traditional stereo field. I don't think the listener will hear them consciously, but I do think the attentive listener will notice a spatial nuance that keeps changing throughout the piece. Of course, the studio is not the concert hall. Once you have left your private listening space you are no longer in control of your listening environment and you often have to find different solutions to the spatialization of your music. You have to make compromise with different spaces and you must be able to make quick decisions sometimes under enormous constraints.

When I work with electronics, I always imagine small and large spatial dimensions on which to project a sound, may it be one note, a chord, a phrase or any other acoustic event. In this context, I like to think of a theatre of sound-organisms projected onto spaces of dissimilar qualities. This is certainly one reason why I am extremely selective when working with reverberation of any kind. On a more psychological level, I believe the creation of 'other' spaces (call them virtual or digital) is strictly connected to specific images of the mind and the meaning we, more or less subconsciously, assign to them. For example, the same note projected on two dissimilar spaces is no longer the same: its musical meaning changes according to the space it is listened in.

C. S.: ...*as it flies* has been your first work for tape. It was commissioned by the Electronic Music Foundation of New York and dedicated to Luc and Brunhild Ferrari. Can you tell me something about the samples and the equipment you used in this work?

J. P.: I recorded the sound sources in my studio in London (at that time I was still using the Panasonic DAT machine) and then transferred the recordings onto Pro-Tools. I should mention that the only sound source of the piece is a female voice reciting the poem *Eternity* by William Blake. A friend of mine, Marianne Hall, recited the verses. The poem is really short. It goes like this: «He who binds to himself a joy / does the winged life destroy / but he who kisses the joy as it flies / lives in Eternity's

sunrise». I deliberately wanted to use only a voice reciting those words. I didn't record any singing or any pitch-based sound.

We recorded several interpretations, intonations and accents. The only equipment I used to transform the voice was IRCAM's Audiosculpt and the Lexicon PCM-80. I have to stress this, because when giving a lecture on this work at IRCAM in 2001 I remember Andrew Gerszo finding it difficult to believe that I only used Audiosculpt. But it is so!

C. S.: this is the only eight-channel work you have written so far.

...as it flies was born as a stereo work by necessity, I should say, although I had envisaged a quadraphonic spatialization of the piece at an early stage of the composition. The deadline of the premiere was approaching and I was running very late, so I flew to New York with a stereo version in my luggage. There is always going to be a contradiction of some kind between the space I can create in the studio and the space of a concert hall, and as soon as I take my stereo work into a concert hall, I will try to adapt it to the new space and make it sound as 'multichannel' as possible, if I may use this expression. I have often achieved interesting spatial effects in this way and I do enjoy enormously the live element of diffusion for the reasons I mentioned earlier. When you know your piece well and you know what spaces you have in mind, you can really make a stereo diffusion sound spatially very differentiated on many levels.

For the premiere of ...as it flies in New York, I had the privilege meet Jody Elff one day before the premiere at Engine27 Sound Gallery. Within one day and one night we managed to turn the original stereo file into a clean eight-channel piece. And I think the reason why we managed to do that in such a little time was that we could 'hear' those eight-channels in the stereo version already.

For me sound diffusion may be compared to an extended form of chamber music in terms of interaction between two or more performers, two or more spaces. It is a performance practice that involves an element of "interpretation", i.e. you have to interpret the way the sounds relate to the space where you are projecting them. What I mean is that the sound diffusionist, the electroacoustic performer, or call him as you like, will have to deal with similar interpretation issues as a pianist or a violinist would when playing solo or in an ensemble.

C. S.: your refined investigation of timbre makes me wonder whether you feel any affinity with the spectral music of some French composers.

J. P.: The first example of *spectralism* I heard was that of Jonathan Harvey, not Murail or Grisey. I discovered the French composers through Harvey. I did not even know their names in the early 1990s. I was what the jazz pianist Bill Evans would call a "late-arriver" in the contemporary music circuit. I started composing before I knew many works of the most influential composers of the 20th century. In any case, it was mainly the British and to a lesser extent the Canadian tradition that had the first direct impact on me, rather than Continental Europe. Before I became acquainted with

Murail or Grisey I was already familiar with the work of Pierre Henry, Luc Ferrari, François Bayle and Daniel Teruggi in France, Francis Dhomont in Canada and Dennis Smalley, Barry Anderson and Jonty Harrison in the UK. Although I have never been a 'pure' acousmatic composer, these people had a much stronger impact on me in terms of sound culture. Of course, when I discovered the music of Murail and Grisey I felt a lot of affinity to their preoccupations, and I love much of the music they have written, but again, these were not major influences for me. In any case there has always been much more affinity to the French composers than to the German ones, for example. The reason for that is that we share a common passion for timbre.

C. S.: On your latest CD there is a work entitled *Transfiguration*, an important collaboration with the renowned composer and trombonist Vinko Globokar.

J. P.: Vinko was my teacher in Lucerne (1988) and Dartington (1992). He was the first "established" living composer I met and work with. His lectures and workshops opened the gate to contemporary music in my life and studying with him was a very rewarding experience on both occasions. We became friends in Dartington. Years later we met again and I proposed to write a piece for trombone and electronics. He agreed immediately and offered to record all the extended techniques he mastered on the trombone. When he came to London in 1998 we recorded a complete catalogue of sounds and techniques on the instrument. Following that session, I studied his virtuosity carefully and composed the trombone part of the new work, without the electronics. By 1999 we recorded the trombone part of the new piece, which I later called *Transfiguration*, at the Electronic Studio of the Technical University in Berlin. The electronics was produced much later in 2005/2006. The complete recording with Vinko playing the trombone was released on CD two years later. The piece was specifically written for Vinko's amazing virtuosity and expressive power. Meanwhile he did no longer perform music by other composers and the premiere took place at the Elektronische Nacht in Stuttgart in 2006 with Patrick Crossland at the trombone and myself at the electronics.

Transfiguration deals with the problem of war in general and the Balkan wars in particular. The link with Vinko was obvious since he is of Slovene descent. He was the perfect performer for the piece I had in mind. The piece was conceived during the 1999 KlangArt Congress of Music and Technology in Osnabrück, Germany. It was born out of my anger and incredulity in front of the social and human tragedy that had affected the countries of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Throughout the Balkan wars I would find myself questioning the absurdity of war and despotic regimes. The interaction between the trombone and the electronics is a constant tenant of the work. Electronics have been exploited as a sonic expansion of the trombone part, more specifically the articulation of breathing, phonemes and words within a disintegrated language, and an imaginary theatre as in the acousmatic tradition. Like my older work *Epitaph* (1997), *Transfiguration* is an uncompromisingly dramatic piece. The electronics consist of live-electronics and a tape part. The tape part was originally conceived for quadraphonic playback, but so far I have not had the time to do this, so I still end up using the stereo playback and doing a lot of spatialisation myself at the mixing desk.

C. S.: I know it is very important for you to create a strong artistic relationship with the performers you work with. How does such empathy affect the performance of your works? I am referring to performers like the harpsichordist Jane Chapman in *Vision* and *Encounter*, the cellist Neil Heyde in *Epitaph*, Zoë Martlew in *Beyond the Bridge*, the pianist Carol Morgan in *Renge-Kyo* and others.

J. P.: This is a very important issue for me. I have always loved working together with high caliber performers. It is a privilege I dearly treasure and it has been a constant feature in the past 20 years. I see collaborations of this kind as an experience of tremendous value, both on the human and artistic level. I love writing for the virtuosity of specific musicians, each of them being first of all a unique personality. I always try to bring out the best of their musical potential and to include the latter fully into the music I write. Right now I am experiencing this with a series of short instrumental pieces called *trans-solo*.

C. S.: Are you planning any new work with electronics?

J. P.: I have to complete my *after silence* series for piano and electronics. I am considering adding the electronics to a new work for ensemble commissioned by the Modern Art Ensemble of Berlin for 2013. I will soon start working on a new piece for organ and electronics for the Italian organist Marco Bidin. This will not be easy because I actually dislike the classic organ sound with full registers. But I decided to take up the challenge and I am beginning to think more and more of a 'breathing' organ projected onto different spaces or something in those lines.