Landscape/Music

Abstract

*British composer James Weeks discusses the evolution of visuality in his work, from emulation of the abstract painting of Antoni Tàpies to more recent, ecologically-oriented scores. The entanglement of our sensory stimuli leads to a fundamentally multimodal experience of space and landscape, explored in Weeks' work through engagement with the art of the Dutch Golden Age (*Schilderkonst*, 2003-4), and later in ecologically-themed installation pieces including* Bee Haven *(2017). The development of multimodal ecological paradigms is of primary importance to our future art, a commitment to which Weeks' most recent scores, including* Weatherworld Quartets *(2022-3), aim to speak.*

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As we move through the world our senses are at every moment entangled. I hear a sound, but I am also looking around the space in which it resonates, feeling and smelling the air through which its wave vibrates, touching the surfaces off which it bounces. I am fully there, with the sound, in my body and with all my senses, in that place and in that moment. And because of this, how can we say that the sonic imagination is purely sonic, or the visual imagination purely visual?

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I understood this early on. Since Kandinsky, Klee and Schoenberg, composers have been attuned to the multimodality of experience through developments in visual art – particularly painting, whose canvas can seem analogous to time in music, as the ground on which the epistemologies of our respective media play out. It was this analogy, filtered through his experience of Abstract Expressionist art, that seduced Feldman into redefining the temporality of his music as a kind of space[1]; in the curriculum of today's composers his work often acts as a gateway, opening up profound questions of time and of musical material – in other words, of medium itself – for minds weaned on the inherited linguistic models of music.

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[1] Feldman, Morton. "Between categories", Contemporary Music Review, 2:2 (1988), 1-5

What is opened up is not necessarily a hybrid realm between the visual and the sonic – though many have taken that approach, from graphic scores to the 'New Discipline'[2]: for composers and sound artists, acknowledging humans' natural visual dominance, and allowing visual experience into our creative imaginary, can lead to a deeper engagement with the material reality of sound in time and space: in other words, to dig deeper into our own medium and transcribe a more holistic sensory experience into sound. As a student this discovery had the force of a revelation for me. I became preoccupied with the paintings of Antoni Tàpies, attempting to translate his rough, gouged, scorched surfaces and tactile graffito symbolism into instrumental music. I didn't understand much of its context, the society it came from and of which it formed a commentary, but it unlocked my music and my feeling for sound through its highly sensual intermingling of visual and haptic registers, giving me permission to experiment with a similarly visceral sonic palette.

Through my twenties I continued to use visual art as the foundation for music. Chief among these was the triptych *Schilderkonst* ('Art of Painting', after Vermeer's masterpiece, 2003-4)[3], which I intended as a *summa* of my preoccupation with visuality to date. The three pieces which comprise it interrogate different aspects of seventeenth-century Dutch art. The first work, *Saenredam,* attempts a very detailed analogy of the eponymous painter's spacious church interiors, and the affect produced by his treatment of light. The second, *Low Country,* is a string quartet which takes off from the idea of 'genre' painting, such as the courtyard exteriors or street scenes of Pieter de Hooch and others; the third, the piano solo *Duinland* ('Dune land') evokes the empty, 'tonal' landscapes of Jan van Goyen.

Looking back to this early work, I see that the key to my 'translations' of Dutch art in *Schilderkonst* was spatiality: how we experience space, how light defines and confines it, and how we frame and light the spaces of our memory, in the mirror-world constructed by the artist. I attempted a kind of musical recreation of the spaces of Saenredam, de Hooch and van Goyen, such that a listener could almost disappear into the music and wander around freely. In *Saenredam* I created a condition of

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[2] Walshe, Jennifer, "The New Discipline", MusikTexte 149 (May 2016), accessed online 11/10/22 at https://musiktexte.de/WebRoot/Store22/Shops/dc91cfee-4fdc-41fe-82da-0c2b88528c1e/MediaGallery/The_New_Discipline.pdf

[3] All works by the author discussed in this chapter are published by University of York Music Press, accessible at https://www.uymp.co.uk/composers/james-weeks/. Further information and links to currently-available recordings can be found at www.jamesweeks.org. Accessed 11/10/22

stasis, not on the surface of the work, which is full of movement (the shifting of the light), but on the macro-structural level, dividing the sixteen-minute work into three panels 'framed' by near-silences. Within the panels the harmony remains essentially motionless, allowing the listener to focus in and out on the soft, fast-moving foreground figuration, shifting attention freely between the three instrumental groups.

Schilderkonst revealed a deep urge in my work towards creating space – not necessarily an empty space, but a space to dwell in, to inhabit, arising from and in some way embodying a holistic, multisensory experience of the world. I have returned to this idea repeatedly in different ways in the last fifteen years, both in concert works and in installations. Installations offer the most literal way of creating a musicalised space: in *Radical Road* (2014), singers are positioned with stones and gravel on staircases or walkways to evoke the construction of a famous Edinburgh footpath[4]. In *Bee Haven* (2017), string players are dispersed throughout a large space creating an ambient texture of apian humming through which the audience wanders or lies down. The second part of the Gerard Winstanley setting *The Freedom of the Earth* (2011) asks the ten-strong ensemble to move into the audience space to enact a musical 'digging', as Winstanley's Diggers did on St George's Hill near Weybridge in the 1650s.

All these scenes explicitly reference the visual as well as the aural, but they are not cinematic: there is no attempt to create narrative or to 'direct' the experience with a specific sequence of pre-selected 'camera angles'. The audience provides its own narrative experience by choosing where to walk and what to listen to. They are *tableaux vivants:* we have walked into a picture and are free to look and listen around. Many recent concert works, though not installations, explore similar situations. *Walled Garden* (2015) contains three views of a medieval *hortus conclusus* each under different conditions of light. Here it is not only the listener but the players too who wander through the temporal 'space' of the work, constituted visually as an arrangement of musical materials on the page (fig.1).

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[4] "Radical Road: The forgotten history of Edinburgh's Radical Road as it faces permanent closure", Edinburgh Evening News, 21/4/22 (https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/people/radical-road-the-forgotten-history-of-edinburghs-radical-road-as-it-faces-permanent-closure-3663026), accessed 11/10/22

Figure 1: James Weeks, *Walled Garden*, section 1, violin part. The performer moves around each of the six areas freely, tracing a visual path through the space of the score.

Once again, almost nothing 'happens' in these pieces – the intended effect is static and immersive. A very similar space is opened up in *Siro's Garden* (2018-20), named after the Epicurean philosopher and structured around a distended recitation of a passage from Vergil's *Georgics*. Here as elsewhere in my work, the texture unfolds on multiple levels moving at different speeds: a very slow, drone-like electronics track; regular pulsations of chords from three independent instrumental duos; and free-floating, irregular paragraphs of material played by two Celtic harps. The whole thirty-minute tableau (or frieze?) is co-ordinated by stopwatch.

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In both *Siro* and *Walled Garden* there is a twin concern with freedom (to wander) and enclosure. These are spaces of safety and therefore of respite or refreshment, an archetype that reaches back to the Roman *locus amœnus* and the *hortus conclusus* (both allegorical and actual) of Middle Eastern and European traditions. Most importantly, they are gardens: spaces where nature too flourishes and finds safe haven.

Seen from the viewpoint of our rapidly-collapsing civilisation, the walled garden articulates a powerful psychological paradigm. Since the late eighteenth-century the expression of our deep need for solace in nature and an escape from the speed, stress and effluence of urban industrial society has been a commonplace in art and literature. But it is a commonplace we urgently need to invoke and update to preserve our sanity and hope in a world that is daily slipping beyond the point of climatic no-return, where war and societal breakdown are edging closer. In the walled garden we gain respite but also control: the garden is not threatened, whatever may be outside it; we can breathe here and be at peace, however briefly, among the natural world.

This is the condition of our age. In the past ten years I have found myself more and more needing to create this kind of space in my art, a psychological breathing-room but also (because I am not temperamentally dystopian, cynical, escapist or – yet – defeated) an image of hope.

To create hope for ourselves we need to look to our way of being in the natural world. My most recent work has focused increasingly on a deeply embodied relationship with nature, drawing on

ecological and anthropological theory and phenomenological philosophy. Most of these pieces begin, as previously, with the image of a space. The experience of this space, or landscape, is multisensory: it has visual and auditory but also haptic identity. It has height, depth, distance, light, colour and sound but also temperature on the skin, wind, material textures on the hand, face or feet. To begin work I need to feel all of this, to understand its relationship to the music into which all these diverse stimuli will be sublimated.

The first work to address this directly was an hour-long piece for violin solo, *winafell* (2017), written for the Canadian violinist Mira Benjamin. I had an image of the violin surrounded by space and open air: on top of a hill, high-up and remote, played only by the wind. On this 'wind fell' the breeze moves over the instrument's surfaces, sets the open strings in motion; leaves brush across the strings as the wind catches them: a sounding-out of the instrument, its body and materials, by the natural environment in which it rests. The presence of the human performer brings other dynamics into play – between player and instrument, and between humanity and the world which surrounds and permeates us and 'in whose flesh we live', as Merleau-Ponty says. In the second half of the piece the violinist sings and plays simultaneously, binding herself to the violin – and by extension the natural environment which it articulates and which articulates it – through her voice as well as through the action of her hands.

In this act of binding-together, I see *winafell* as pointing towards an 'ecological music' – that is, one which tries to place its inherent human-ness within the larger ecosystem of the world, albeit in a symbolic way. The American composer John Luther Adams has written that

'The great learning of our time is of the endlessly complex and subtle interrelationships between places and organisms, between everything in nature from the subatomic to the cosmic. With characteristically radical elegance John Cage defined music as "sounds heard". The idea that music depends on sound and listening might seem as self-evident as the idea that we are an inseparable part of nature. But both these simple truths challenge us to practice ecological awareness in our individual and our collective lives.'[5]

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[5] Adams, John Luther. *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press (2012), 9-10

Adams parses his statement in terms of sound only, inviting us to consider the music we make as part of a larger ecology of sound and listening. But I would go further, for sound is only ever part of the complete sensorium, inseparable from the other senses in the way the world reaches and interpenetrates us, and in making music we are also concerned with the visual and haptic at the very least, from the sources of imagination of the musical material itself to the act of writing-down on paper and to the complex, multimodal acts of performance and listening. In a recent installation, *The wind is its blowing* (2021), titled after a line in anthropologist Tim Ingold's essay "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather", participants assemble in an outdoor space and arrange themselves in a grid, like turbines in a wind farm. They perform actions including breathing; softly vocalising the rise-and-fall of the wind as they feel it on their faces and hear it in their ears (I call this 'wind-tracing'); and describing slow circles with their arms. The intention is clear: by listening, feeling and seeing, participants are brought into an awareness of the profoundly immersed relationship with the world described by Ingold in his article, which draws heavily on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty:

To inhabit the open is…to be immersed in the fluxes of the medium, in the incessant movements of wind and weather. Life is borne on these fluxes which, felt rather than touched, permeate the inhabitant's entire being. In this weather-world there is no distinct surface separating earth and sky. Life is rather lived in a zone in which substance and medium are brought together in the constitution of beings which, in their activity, bind the weather-world into the textures of the land…

…To feel the wind and breathe the air is…to ride on the wave of the world's ongoing formation – to be forever present at the 'continued birth', as Merleau-Ponty called it, of both persons and things.[6]

The wind is its blowing is something of an outlier in my work in the literal contact it makes with the 'world outside'; in the subsequent *Weatherworld Quartets* (2022-3) I explore the same subject-matter within a set of six string quartets intended for the concert hall: a large-scale landscape across six panels. Here the sounds and feel of rain and wind are pervasive, and inseparable too from our visual experience of them: the patterning of droplets on leaves or a window-pane, the movement of tree branches in the wind.

To return to van Goyen, the notion of landscape is crucial here: its etymology, convoluted from Middle English and Dutch, implies a 'tract or region of land'; thus, when adopted by the Golden Age

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[6] Ingold, Tim. "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather" *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 2007, Vol.13, Wind, Life, Health: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives (2007), S19-S38

Dutch painters, 'such part of the land that can be encompassed in one single view'. There is no landscape without a viewer – or, I would add, a listener, feeler, taster, smeller, *embodier*; it is this enlarged conception of a landscape that lies at the heart of my attempt to achieve an ecological music.

Just as any visual landscape would have to be sketched, if not painted, *en plein air*, my ecological music necessarily originates outdoors, and in this attempt I feel a strong kinship with the Scottish writer Nan Shepherd, whose classic of nature writing, *The Living Mountain* (1977), is an account of her years of walking in the Cairngorms. Her writing has been described as a kind of informal phenomenology: she observes her environment with crystalline precision – its weathers, terrains, animals, birds, plants – and explores minutely its effect on her as she traverses it. By the close of the book she has identified herself completely within the mountain world:

I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.[7]

This is very close to Merleau-Ponty, devotee of Cézanne, when he says

As I contemplate the blue of the sky, I am not set over it as an acosmic subject;…Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it "thinks itself in me." I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.[8]

My response to Shepherd came in the form of a fifty-five-minute work for voice, piano and tape, *Plain Air* (2021), which focuses on the multimodal way Shepherd experiences the mountain, through meticulous attention to the interactions of weather and light on how the mountain appears, to the sounds of birds and water, the feel of plants and rocks against her skin, and the smell and taste of flowers and berries. The singer alternates recitations of Shepherd's text with free vocalise; the piano and tape parts combine to create the space of the mountains, with slow-moving drones outlining a sense of sky and horizon, and trembling or repetitive figures on the piano analogous to changes in light or air-texture in the mountain world.

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[7] Shepherd, Nan. *The Living Mountain.* Edinburgh: Canongate Books (2011) 106

[8] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge (2012) 260

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So there is landscape, but there is also room for intimacy in the new age of ecological art. We see, hear and especially touch in close-up as well as across distance. Nan Shepherd gazes across the Cairngorm plateau but she is equally attentive to the 'teasing of gossamers, the delicate tickle of a caterpillar, the scratchiness of lichen…' These are the sensations closest and most intimate to our body, just as the infinite tenderness of a *pianissimo flautando* violin bowstroke heightens the sensory awareness of performer and listener alike. And an analogy between the textures and movements of foliage and the movements of bows and fingers across strings and of breath through wind instruments has given rise to a further exploration in my recent music.

In *winafell,* the violinist imitates the brushing of leaves across the surface of the instrument; in the string quartet *Leafleoht* ('Leaf-light', 2018) the imitation of foliage under different conditions of light and air becomes the subject-matter of the work. But I searched for a way to find a closer connection between plant materials and instrumental music, and in *weedweaver* (2021) I took the first steps towards this. This piece, written for Prague Quiet Music Collective, asks the four players – any two string instruments, a guitar and a bass clarinet – to find ways to play their instruments with weeds: that is, any plant they might designate as such. Guitarists and string players twine weeds among the strings or brush them across other resonant surfaces; the clarinettist passes them across an airstream. The music is organised so as to accommodate the high degree of fragility of the plant materials, and the result is – like weeds themselves – messy, unpredictable, entangled and various. Further experimentation for the solo cello work *among the mycelia* (2022) has revealed the subtlety to be achieved from using fern *pinnae* as a bow. In works such as these I attempt to direct attention to parts of our world-experience closest to the eye and touch and thus often overlooked, as Dürer does in his own weed-assemblage painting, 'Great Piece of Turf' (1503).

Music is, and always has been, multimodal and multisensory. It was never just about sound, either in creation, performance or reception, any more than human beings take in the world piecemeal, one sense at a time. Radical art, music and philosophy of the twentieth century pointed the way back towards an understanding of our holistic sensory indwelling in the world; but it is the work of our present age to integrate these fully into an art that reflects and sustains the ecological imperative that will define our future on this planet: to find a way to live again within, and not apart from, nature.