

The personality of space

Ewa Trębacz interviewed by Justyna Rudnicka

What is space to you?

Concrete places where something happens. Space for me is not something abstract, it is always connected with an emotional experience and the people I work with. And on the technical side: you know that sound always functions in space. It's up to the composer whether he wants to actively use it.

So, your experiments in capturing surround sound are not just about capturing the unique acoustics of a given space, but rather about recording a specific event?

I call it capturing magical moments – unique situations frozen in a given time and place. I sometimes compare my work to photographing nature, where you have to wait for hours until something comes out of the proverbial forest. Our recording sessions are similar. With our musician friends we go to different strange places, we improvise and wait. And finally, there is some kind of accumulation of energy and this magical moment happens. I capture it, refer to it, and then recall it during a concert performance – with different people, in a completely different place. Then the space becomes a catalyst for a particular event. These strange places you record in include the desert, the Cascade Mountains, and the underground cistern at Fort Worden. I wonder what influence your fascination with space had on the landscapes of Washington State, where you settled after leaving the beautiful, but probably somewhat stuffy, city of Cracow.

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Cracow has a lot of very interesting sound spaces – churches and various nooks and crannies that are sometimes very hard to get into. It's a bit like a multi-story cake made of different layers of history. I breathed in the specific smell of this history for twenty years of my life. At the time, I worked with space only intuitively, for example by coming up with unusual ways to position instruments during a concert. When I moved to Seattle, I was impressed by the geological and geographical diversity. As you drive through Washington State, you can see almost anything from desert to mountains to volcanoes to rainforest. There are vast areas where you can drive for hours and not see a trace of civilization. Mountains have always been important to me: when I lived in Poland I belonged to a mountaineering club, and the mountains here have a scale that cannot be found in Europe. There are also places with a unique personality, such as the aforementioned cistern, where twenty years before me Pauline Oliveros and her collaborators recorded for the famous Deep listening project. It's a huge, underground building with forty-five seconds of reverb. Thanks to the dozens of columns inside, the sound travels along some amazing trajectories.

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To record these acoustic journeys of sound, you need special technology. For several years you have been using so-called ambisonic techniques. What do they allow you to do?

Simply put, Ambisonics is a set of tools that allow for very precise recording of sound in its three-dimensional form, preserving all spatial relationships. After all, sound propagates as a sphere in all directions, while most sound systems are abstract creations that have little to do with the natural way of sound propagation. Thanks to ambisonic techniques I don't have to think about loudspeakers, because I work on a model that is a kind of „black box” and is not assigned to any system. Only later do I unpack it for a particular sound system. So first I record the sound with special microphones, and then I do various spatial manipulations on it. It's a bit like in a camera: you can zoom in or focus. It is the same with the Ambisonics sound – you can, for example, focus on a certain part of this sound sphere, you can rotate everything. Because I have a sphere at my disposal, I can do all kinds of mathematical manipulations on such a model. However, I will admit that I am not particularly attached to any technology. In fact, I use Ambisonics because these techniques allow me to record with maximum precision the magical moments that I can work on later, and combine them with live performances during concerts. But I realize that ambisonic techniques are also a certain label which has been attached to me in Poland. I think this happened because of the *Minotaur*, a piece of mine which was presented at the Warsaw Autumn Festival in 2005. When I started my attempts at recording three-dimensional sound, the equipment for such activities was very expensive. I succeeded because, as a PhD student at the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media at the University of Washington in Seattle, I simply got my hands on it. Now this equipment is much more affordable and in common use.

When I listened to your pieces, such as the aforementioned *Minotaur*, I had the impression that there was a strong integrality between the electronic layer and the live soloist or orchestra part – I couldn't always immediately identify the origin of a given passage. Is trying to achieve a certain coherence between these two layers some kind of programmatic intention in your work?

Indeed, when I combine instrumental sounds that have been recorded in a particular space with sounds that are performed live, I am looking for the best place to connect the two realms. If this place of connection is unnoticed, I am very happy. Often when I listen to various pieces of electroacoustic music myself, I get the impression that there are two worlds in them, between which there are no points of contact. I, on the other hand, work in such a way that I create a certain sound image with which the instrumentalist establishes a dialog during the performance. There is then an interaction between what is happening now and what has happened before, often played by someone the performer has never met. Then there is a great need for some common point that becomes a bridge between the past and the present, and between different musical personalities. When creating a sound image, I use instrumental sounds, which, however, I modify by computer, sometimes quite significantly. A certain „naturalness” of their sound means many hours of work on recordings. In fact, I haven't really developed one special theory of composing. Every project is a little bit different. Sometimes I think of it as a plant. I find some magic moment and the rest grows out of it.

The processuality (growth, expansion) of composition is extremely important in your approach to creation. This can be seen even in your vocabulary, as you often use the word „project” instead of „piece”. We can also talk about gradual growth in the context of *Ligeia*. How did this project grow?

For *Ligeia* I engaged two of my friends with whom I constantly collaborate – it is impossible to talk about this piece without talking about them. Anna Niedźwiedz is a soprano from Cracow who teaches ethnography at the Jagiellonian University by day and sings early music as a hobby. Because she does research in many parts of the world, she participates in all kinds of rituals, often on the borderline between theater and religious ecstasy, and her non-musical experiences bring an extremely interesting perspective to our projects. Then there's Josiah Boothby, a horn player whom I met in Seattle and with whom I've already done many projects, sometimes starting by going out together and recording completely without any plan. We were in two different countries when we started working on *Ligeia*, so at first, we sent each other different recorded material. Then we

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recorded material after each session. From these recordings I created a soundscape, which is the starting point for the live instrument parts. Ligeia was commissioned by the Seattle Modern Orchestra, in which Josiah was a horn player, so he also participated in the performance. Anna, on the other hand, never appears live. She is a siren song in the background, a ghost that exists somewhere, yet becomes the driving force behind the piece.

In one of the interviews, you said that the interaction between people occurring during the performance of a piece is extremely important to you. Do you facilitate these interactions during your concerts?

It all depends on the space in which the performance takes place. You have to get to know it and respond to it. There are spaces that have an inspiring personality, and there are spaces where you have to evoke that personality. I have a collection of reverb models from various acoustically interesting places. I choose one of these models and process it live, bringing it into the reality of the concert hall. The important thing is that the audience, along with the performers, is covered by the speaker system, and other things are based on the reaction to the space. And that's what it's all about: the piece lives its life and changes from performance to performance. The aforementioned Minotaur is a classic example. It has already been performed in different ways. Sometimes the horn player moved among the audience, and sometimes they played from the stage, sometimes with lights, sometimes in total darkness.

ERRAI - a piece you performed during the Warsaw Autumn Festival in 2009 – includes stereoscopic animations. How do you treat the visual component in the context of the reception of your music?

It's the same as with acoustic space – the visual aspect of performance is always there, but it's up to us to decide if we want to control it. The viewer is also a spectator and must decide if and what to look at. I have indeed managed to do a few audiovisual projects, although I don't feel I'm any kind of specialist in it. I usually control what is seen, mainly by means of light direction. And here I also have to react to the space, because a lot depends on whether the room is visually interesting. I don't really have any ready-made formula for any piece – each performance is something new. I try to direct them in some way.

Interaction is also a good term to describe your work with musicians. You give them a lot of freedom, invite to co-create, expect improvisation. Does this rather risky model of work always work?

It works, but only when I work with a small number of musicians. In the case of an orchestra, such a model is virtually impossible to apply, which is why the orchestra part is usually strictly written down in my pieces. However, when I just start working on a piece, I like to have direct contact with the musician. The very work on the sound material is born out of interaction and improvisation, things that have always been at the heart of music, and which for me are its essence. This is also how I worked on the Metanoia violin concerto. I started by recording improvisations and various metal objects in a nuclear reactor building. When I processed this material and enriched it with algorithmically generated sounds, an electroacoustic layer was created, which became the backbone of the concerto. I have some suggestions for the violinist – I wrote down some moments, but it's up to him whether he wants to use them. I will watch his actions with curiosity. The element of improvisation does indeed permeate the electroacoustic part itself, but it is also crucial in the part of the soloist. Only in the orchestra is this improvisation absent.

You often participate in this initial improvisation not only as a composer, but also as a violinist. What was it like to write a concerto intended for the instrument closest to you?

My history with the violin is full of breakups and comebacks. I graduated from music school in violin, and although I later went on to study composition, I continued to play. When I came to the United States, I played primarily in orchestras for the first year. But at one point I had to put the violin away for a few years because I was hit by a car and broke my spine in several places. Getting back into playing helped me to regain control of my body.

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It was very difficult because I had to completely change my playing apparatus – I had to learn basically from scratch. I was helped by professor Ilkka Talvi, who completely changed my approach to the instrument. Now playing the violin has a completely different meaning for me – it's a part of me that I lost and could regain. That's why writing a violin concerto, especially with an improvised part, was a very personal experience for me and I am very much looking forward to performing it.

When you talk about music, you very often refer to specific people – masters, regular collaborators. Is Boguslaw Schaeffer, with whom you studied composition, among the people who have had a significant influence on your way of creating and listening to sounds?

Bogusław Schaeffer was a huge personality. I didn't have very close contact with him because of the age difference between us, but it was to him that I owed all my basic training as a composer. He was an encyclopedia of instrumentation and technique. He was regarded in the community as an experimenter, but in the field of teaching, he maintained exceptional discipline and focused on thorough work. Had I not bumped into the professor (quite accidentally, anyway), I don't know if I would have become a composer at all. But the professor not only trained us in the craft, but also encouraged his students to seek their own paths. He did not accept stagnation in any form. It was during my studies in Cracow that I made the decision that everything I would do in composing must have a personal and emotional meaning for me. And this is what I have stuck to.

Thank you for the interview.