

SPATIAL IMAGE AND ACOUSTIC IMAGINATION

Andrew Byrne's *White Bone Country* and other pieces

When the Fluxus artist George Brecht died in December 2008, a tribute from Ben Vautier circulated in the Internet that recalls a description of him by George Maciunas:

*He blinks or just shakes your hand or closes a door
or even just leaves a chair in a corner
you can't tell if it is a work of art or just a chair.*

Such small or unlikely actions and perceptions point to a vast adventure that has been part of the last hundred years of Western music, in which composition is imagined as a kind of inhabited space, rather than a projected statement framed by silence or the noise of the “real world.” The dichotomy throws some powerful light on musical experience, but also on the experience of space itself. Both as container and contained, it is perceived as inseparable from sound and hearing in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, where “geometric echoes” and resonance are central to the study of poetic imagination at large.

The adventure of spatial as against projective composition has led to large-scale musical movements under many titles, each with its claim as a moment of innovation—among them, minimalism, post-minimalism, and sub-dialects; ambient music and various kinds of pre-minimalism; the sculptured forms of Edgard Varèse or Henry Brant; the ritualized fabric of pianos and percussion in Stravinsky's seminal *Les Noces* (*The Wedding*), which provided a new context for human solo and collective expression.

New practices of rhythm are a major factor in the wealth of less narrative-oriented forms and styles that were inherited in the early twenty-first century. Many of these grow from the American experimental tradition of poly-metric thinking in Charles Ives's scores and Henry Cowell's book *New Musical Resources* of 1930—but also from expanding awareness of traditions outside Western art-music. The pre-tonal past of Pérotin's large medieval organa or Gabrieli's early-baroque multi-directional theaters also resonated. And even the works of common-practice tonality offered changed viewpoints: exploring J.S. Bach's understanding of *invention*, the scholar Laurence Dreyfus analyzes the concrete workings of a score in “mechanist” rather than “organicist” terms, imagining the music as a “residue of human thoughts and actions.”

Maybe as important as its actual sounds and rhythms, three further shifts from older paradigms have resulted from music of the last half century, bearing on both its production and perception. The first is a reorganized thinking about recorded as against live-performed sound—whereby the former has its own integrity, forms, and locations, and the latter had much to consider about its normal concert-culture. The second shift involves a changed understanding of the listener's role, freer to range internally within the sound but often determining the external situation of the music as well—in Brian Eno's words: “You fit it into your world.” Thirdly, the act of playing is distanced from a sense of personal expression, and live performance enters a domain that can manifest other images of life.

It is clear that these three shifts are closely interrelated, but the new focus on the listener has a special relevance here. If a second dichotomy can be risked in relation to recent musical composition, it might lie between music that is written for advanced hearers in a given style or grouping (sometimes almost as an application for membership in its ranks) and music that specifically invites the listener in, offering no less richness of experience but plainly apparent rules for the material at play. Again, it is interesting to reach back into the past to consider the resonances of this possibility. J.S. Bach's *Musical Offering*, despite its external address to an absolutist ruler, offers the interpreter and listener systematic guidance through a path of canons, showing how time and musical space can be experienced in ways beyond the prosaic progression from A to B. Or Charles Ives, in his dense orchestral layerings, addresses the hearer with familiar aural materials whose combination offers not just a fantastic heterogeneity but also an entry into the unknown of a new composite harmonic world.

Continuities from classical art-music are remote from Andrew Byrne's preoccupations in the works of this recording. The prevailing image, after all, is the Australian desert! Yet the musical terrain that is laid out across the fourteen pieces of the CD connects with each of the broader issues outlined above. At the outset the listener encounters modest sounds in plain patterns, where changes are as small or unlikely as the blink of an eye or closing of a door. ("Is that a work of music or just a new note?") From here the recording unfolds as a series of environments—music experienced in spatial forms and in varieties of shape reaching inwards to the interplay of patterns as well as outwards to define a horizon and foreground. In the process, the listener discovers a kind of necessity of his/her own presence—attendance in both senses—for the shapes to gain their life. And novel reflections arise about the nature of playing music, and on how the actual sounds of instruments themselves can become "performers" in the materials at play.

Fundamental to the language of all Byrne's pieces are pulsations, from which varied melodic motives and overlaid rhythmic meters can be drawn. In this respect his approach differs from other landscape-orientated music based on drones and evolving fields of sound, along with their opposite, flurries of irregular disjunct rhythms. Atmospheric scene-painting is generally not aspired to here. One of the pleasures of this recording will be to experience the different kinds of ideas that can emerge from regular reiterations. The musician familiar with performance of minimalist polyrhythmic music will be able to visualize the written scores: modules of measures bookended with repeat signs, which vary in their number of repeats, in length, and in degree of transformation in relation to their neighbors. But the listener's image will be altogether different, of something like static sound environments where certain motives "stay there," are held in focus while they interact with other similarly persistent elements. Byrne describes these small bits of material as "inert," but the hearer may disagree, as ears are made agile among the details, and the elements assume a form of life, possibly akin to the enigmatic character of the desert itself.

Andrew Byrne was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1966, and has lived and worked mostly in New York since the early 1990s. From the outset as a graduate student at Columbia University he was drawn to the sounds and surroundings of the downtown musical environment, and the great and continuing story of American experimental music embodied in Morton Feldman, Robert Ashley, Phill Niblock, and many others. Finding himself living in an old synagogue in Lower Manhattan, he organized his own concert series there, with a broad lineup that included the ensembles of John Zorn and Michael Gordon.

His own music developed quickly towards a sharp rhythmic focus, taking its cue from the polyrhythmic traditions that extended from Henry Cowell and Conlon Nancarrow through Philip Glass and Steve Reich to the post-minimalism of many groups and composers in the 1990s. The busy rhythmic counterpoint of Byrne's characteristic style, up to such works as *Six Dances* for solo piano (2002), used pitch and melody largely in subservient roles, to clarify the rhythmic objects and the processes of their evolution. The present recording goes some way to reversing this process again, with a new emphasis on the sounds themselves as shaped by rhythmic patterns. Byrne relates these pieces to a somewhat different post-Cowell lineage, of Lou Harrison, Peter Garland, and John Luther Adams—"to their concerns with polyrhythms in a reduced meditative sound world, suggestions of strange folk musics, depiction of landscape . . ."

This recording is also part of a wider process in Byrne's output, of discovering what kinds of larger formal environments his polyrhythmic materials could create. Earlier extended works for combinations of voices, instruments, and electronics remained in the fully scored format of normal concert presentation. Increasingly, he has adopted a modular approach to composition, where individual pieces are scored, arranged, and recombined in more open formats and performance contexts. Polyrhythmic materials thus became mobilized themselves. In *Whispers and Cries* (2008) groups of singers and players form changing configurations, sometimes in motion, in the performance space. Other dimensions of space are thematized in *Lines Towards Another Century* (2006-9), developed with the Australian visual artist Tom Nicholson as a collaborative action/display in various international cities, intoning a vast list of national boundaries created in the twentieth century.

This tripartite CD has its own open-mobile character, working entirely with a fabric of piano and metal percussion in changing manners and images, all of them remote from the duo relationship of conventional chamber music. The central work *Tracks* is also the earliest one (composed 1998, revised 2006), and presents the solo piano in its most "normal" sound and interaction with the player—a kind of journey, as the title suggests, within a dense and accumulating polyrhythmic expression. The two surrounding groups of pieces extend from this in two different directions—the opening *White Bone Country* (2006) towards reduced sound-reveries in processed piano and small metal percussion, the succeeding *Mirages* (2007) into pure sonic fantasies made from sampled sounds of prepared piano. Constructed "as if being played," the mirages evoke specific memories of the landscapes in the first part of the recording. There the skills of the two performers were fused into a kind super-instrument, "as if not played" by them. Taken as a whole, the CD thus mirrors the idea of an "inhabited space" as distinct from a linear projection—one that emanates from its center and invites movements of the hearer to and fro across its tracks.

The Australian desert is not an object of attempted depiction in this music, although Andrew Byrne cites a sentence by Australia's great landscape painter Fred Williams: "To see the desert is like peeling the skin off a landscape." Williams and other artists found original ways of response to the desert in painterly terms, but it became a meeting place for other modes of language as well. Two voices from an Australian Radio National broadcast in 2007, also titled *White Bone Country*:

An archaeologist, Mike Smith: *The way I think of the desert is as a whole series of different deserts and they're stacked one on top of the other in time, and there are remnants of earlier deserts that in a sense poke through the fabric into the present and are incorporated in later landscapes. So there's always to some extent a memory in the landscape . . .*

An Aboriginal elder, Yami Lester: *You know, a lot of people say it's just a desert, but it's a certain type of area to us. The apu area, which is rock or mountain, a hill, we call that apu area. And you find different kind of things like ilis growing, and that kupata, round there, and these rock holes and euros, yeah, wallabies. Then away from the rock we call puti . . . which is karukaru, that's where the kangaroos live in the watercourse way . . . then you come to pila where spinifex grows and different growth of things. And you can burn them . . . and when the rain comes, bring in new growth and bring new animals. . . .*

The writer Nicholas Rothwell, in a new book, describes traveling with a kangaroo shooter, Charlie Firns: *It was he who brought me closest to the desert's logic, the system at its heart, which is no system, but renunciation: order destroyed, the better to be reborn . . . a kingdom to be . . . explained, if at all, through tone and bearing, not in some easy, transparent narrative . . . "Out here, the desert only has one lesson: life's the way it seems, and when you can't see the hills for the mirages, it's the mirages you have to steer by."*

The desert emerges as a spatial image whose experience is non-obvious and elusive. Its multilayered qualities, however, have a strong suggestive power for this recording's venture in non-pictorial acoustic imagination.

White Bone Country

Nine musical landscapes for piano and percussion

Music pared back to its bare bones; all feeling of forward motion is gone, as are traditional piano and percussion melodies and textures. . . . A sonic geography, an inner landscape full of moving shapes carved from time. In each of the nine pieces, a musical snapshot is captured and sustained through circular melodies and rhythmic processes. . . . A sparse and delicate musical world emerges to the ears. (AB)

The opening desert cycle is grouped in three sections, whose titles indicate not so much different sonic materials as three kinds of perceptual focus:

- Terrain:** the “lie of the land” and the inanimate objects that define it;
- Life:** growing and breathing forms in semi-hidden corners;
- Weather:** transformational forces moving across fixed topographies.

Such modes of listening are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but work together as the listener enters the nine short pieces, each with its own mechanics of rhythm and sound.

Part I: *Desert Terrain*

1. for processed piano and percussion

In this first piece and three others of the cycle (Nos. 5, 8, and 9) the piano and percussion no longer have a clear-cut boundary with each other, but are rhythmically fused into a composite instrument with its own sonic palette. The source and identity of the playing therefore has something enigmatic about it, a sense that is strengthened by electronic processing of the sounds.

The piece takes its formation from a fixed, multi-metric rhythmic grid, five measures in length, whose components gradually accumulate from the opening and then stay unchanging. Once complete, it is the pitches which set the grid into further motion, one by one deserting their posts for lower octaves, creating new motives as a result and later re-forming into other melodies. It is as if the ear shifts its “gaze” around the fixed terrain set up by the rhythm. Shorter motivic units seem to pick out details of foreground objects, while perception can still take in the continuing layers behind them in the middle distance.

2. for solo piano

Notated on a single staff in the bass clef, this piece is based on the continuous rhythmic attacks of a hushed piano tremolo between two notes. Far from forming a blur in the traditional tremolo fashion, however, the composition opens up multiple layers within the sound. The most evident is the surface melody that grows from shifts in one of the two notes, taking on the character of a mysterious incantation with its three-fold repetition across the piece. Secondly, there is the shifting interval space between the two notes, and third, the revelation of the tremolo's pent-up interior rhythmic energy—by gradual diversions of single notes to other pitches below and above, which create their own rhythmic and melodic intrusions. Finally, even with the finest level of human player, such as Stephen Gosling, the tremolo is not mechanically continuous: there are the small irregularities and “poppings out” of individual notes, creating their own micro-world.

3. for solo crotales

The high metallic sound of the crotales, rarely if ever heard on its own, forms a world for this piece, in structure as well as in color. Here, in a way, the blur *is* the message—the long after-ring of each note creating what Byrne calls “a sonic stain expanding, like an approaching cloud or storm or . . .”

Set into the unbroken succession of notes, however, is another precise and ingenious polyrhythmic patterning. Initially two background tones set up a constant “rubato” wave effect, with acceleration and deceleration of note values. Within this wave, four new notes are progressively introduced, each at accelerating rates of recurrence and hence creating an “overlay of rubati” until six pitches of a modal scale are present.

A second phase of the piece dips to a lower pitch zone, where the “cloud” of after-ringing seems to separate acoustically from the sound of the mallets' attacks. The return to the higher register runs backwards through the accumulations of the opening.

This first group of pieces has been described in a little detail to show something of the variety of possibilities that emerges from a basic premise of polyrhythmic composition. One general feature important to the composer in all nine pieces was a reduction to a single idea in each one, free of contrast or conflict, though not of contrapuntal energy.

Of special interest, however, is the force exerted by pitches. Their changes in register and groupings act on the fixed polyrhythms to change the sense of spatial order. Time seems to be held at a standstill while aural attention moves over different objects, and establishes perspectives of foreground and further away. John Luther Adams, whose Alaskan music landscapes and lucid writings resonate in many aspects of this recording, speaks in one essay about “vertical time” as against “horizontal time,” and quotes a telling sentence by the tonal theorist Victor Zuckerkandl: *Even where there is nothing to be seen, nothing to be touched, nothing to be measured . . . where bodies do not move from place to place, there is space . . . the space that tones disclose to us.*

Part II: *Desert Life*

4. for piano and gongs

In this, and in Piece No. 6, the piano and percussion separate their sonic identities to exist on different planes. The gongs, marked soft and “serene” in the score, define a fixed terrain through a repeating motive in one hand of the player while gradually revealing the life of an expanding/contracting rhythmic cell in the other hand. The piano is marked loud, “restless and violent” and ranges in the lowest part of the instrument

with growling chords of irregular spectral character. Despite their seeming independence of spirit, the chords are directly linked to the start of each growing/receding cell in the gongs. Shortly before the end, they abruptly soften and move up an octave, where their gong-like character is exposed, seeking a harmonious co-habitation with the percussion.

5. for piano and bells

Functioning as a brief interlude, this piece again fuses the respective right and left hands of pianist and percussionist to create a composite instrument in two elaborate polyrhythmic layers. An irregular, multi-melodious wind-chime effect arises from the overlay of myriad loops.

6. for piano and knocking

In a maybe unexpected display of variation, this piece revisits the environment of Piece No. 4 with an exact rhythmic repetition, interpolated by pauses. The piano chords, now marked “bell-like,” have continued their upward path from their previous register among gongs, while the percussion rhythmic cells (still “serene”) have now moved to knocking sounds inside the piano. In that new interior space they set off resonances at the low end of the instrument that was once the domain of the growling chords.

Part III: *Desert Weather*

7. for solo piano

This piece represents the ultimate reduction in topography, formed of a single reiterated chord. As in Piece No. 2, the focus is on piano sonority, now animated by irregular pulses akin to the constructed rubato of crotales in Piece No. 3. The score’s marking of “luxurious” is an invitation for the listener to bask in the gently shifting sound.

8. for piano inside and out

Both players are now located at the lower end of the piano, where the percussionist applies mallets to the strings, signaling each start of a contracting melodic cycle, sounding as a canon in the low piano at the outset. Marked in the score “like an approaching storm,” the piece gradually thickens and slows down. As the units shorten, the boom of the percussion is heard to be drawing nearer (a reversal of the roles of piano and percussion in Pieces 4 and 6).

9. for piano and crotales and glockenspiel

Marked “like a toy piano,” the final piece recalls previous elements of the cycle. The fused sonorities of crotales, glockenspiel, and piano in highest register continue their exploration from Piece No. 5. Melodies are quoted from there, along with memories of the oscillating incantation of Piece No. 2.

Tracks

for solo piano

A circuitous voyage through a land of varied topography . . . a movement in ever tighter concentric circles.
(AB)

As already discussed, this earlier work for solo piano generates a dynamic sense of traveling through its rhythmic environment, rather than contemplation of a single scene. The two “opposing” motives heard at the beginning each carry an independent momentum (different speeds in an 8:9 polyrhythm)—and are heard time and again re-entering the music in ever more complex surroundings. Using elemental rising motives and chords, a memory bank is built up of materials flowing at different speeds, and in fluctuating

densities of overlay and alternation. Their climactic simultaneous combination triggers a dramatic change of harmony and expression for the final stage, an extended moment of dispelled rhythmic dissonance—nearly a chorale, nearly a coda, but neither!—maybe a continuing state of resolution from which the listener can depart.

Fata Morgana: Mirages on the Horizon

four pieces for prepared piano

A static shimmering figure appears on the horizon and then just as suddenly is gone. . . . John Cage’s hybrid invention, the prepared piano—straddling the tuned world of the piano and the untuned of the percussion—seems an apt instrument for these four fata morgana images . . . disembodied fragments of a long-lost folk music. (AB)

These four “mirages” are not played by any human hand, but assembled from the sounds of prepared piano. They surround the listener with a different kind of space where illusions, of little bands of musicians and strange instruments, meet allusions, to cultures of drumming and dancing, as well as to the recalled soundscapes of *White Bone Country*.

The *First Mirage* is a distant echo of Piece No. 5 from *White Bone Country*—sharing the same elaborate 8:9 polyrhythm under a smooth dancing surface. The traditional drumming sound follows a simple formal design of repeating verse and chorus. The *Second Mirage* unfolds as accumulating coloristic interferences around a fixed cell of two notes, bringing it into a state of flow. The *Third Mirage* is described by Byrne as the most “obsessive and disembodied” of the four. It uses Piece No. 2 as a point of departure, creating changes in melody out of alternating two-note figures in the highest register. To this is added a lower, bell-like sonority, which speeds up and slows down in its own independent plane. The *Fourth Mirage* returns to a number of processes in *White Bone Country*. As in Piece No. 1, an unchanging rhythmic field is constantly reorchestrated with alternating melodies, to release different sound objects to the ears. Here at the last track of the recording the listener may feel an accumulated sense of being able to hear sideways, or diagonally or even backwards through the dancing forms.

The listening environments of this collection never rely on vague or imprecise sound design. It is part of Andrew Byrne’s particular gift and personality as a composer that he belongs firmly to a craftsman tradition of composing. He will speak of actions applied to his materials in preference to grander, mystique-creating generalities. The actions can still push towards the strange and the extreme, and the results leave the listener with a richness of simplicity and complexity to enjoy, and with a sense that the ears can and should also be active in “moving chairs” around the space. Alertness is all. In the words of Gaston Bachelard: “. . . images are incapable of repose. Poetic reverie, unlike somnolent reverie, never falls asleep. Starting with the simplest of images, it must always set the waves of the imagination radiating.”

—John McCaughey, Melbourne, June 2009

John McCaughey has been Musical Director of Melbourne’s Astra Chamber Music Society since 1978.

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Andrew Byrne is an Australian composer based in New York, who has written works for film, dance, theater, and the concert hall. His music, which always betrays a fascination with polyrhythm, is influenced by American experimental music and non-Western music traditions. Over the past couple of seasons his music has been performed by L'arsenale (Venice and Treviso), Media Art Bath (Bath and Venice), Astra Choir and Speak Percussion (Melbourne), by Brake Drum Percussion as part of the Sonic Fusion Festival (Edinburgh), Elysian String Quartet (Bath), and Either/Or as part of the MATA Festival (New York). Other recent performances include *Dragnet* at John Zorn's The Stone in New York, *A Ringing World* by Either/Or in New York, *23.01.1901/12.07.2005* at the Endgame Festival in Melbourne, and *When Worlds Collide* (commissioned by Ethos Percussion Group and the Lark Quartet) at Scandinavia House in New York. *[in]visible voices*, a documentary by filmmaker Gideon Boaz, for which Byrne wrote the soundtrack, has been shown on Israeli cable television and has been screened at film festivals in Canada, the U.S., and Brazil.

Byrne is also very much involved with concert programming and currently works on the artistic programming staff at Carnegie Hall with responsibility for large-scale festivals. He has also organized the Synagogue Space Music Series in New York with John Zorn and the Michael Gordon Ensemble, among others; Opera Raw for Chamber Made Opera in Melbourne; and Speculum Musicae in New York.

Pianist **Stephen Gosling** enjoys a varied career as a soloist and chamber musician with a particular focus on the music of our time. He earned his Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees at the Juilliard School, where he was awarded the Menmin Prize for Outstanding Excellence and Leadership in Music and the Sony Elevated Standards Fellowship, and was featured as concerto soloist an unprecedented four times. Mr. Gosling is a member of New York New Music Ensemble, Ensemble Sospeso, American Modern Ensemble, Orchestra of the League of Composers, and Ne(x)tworks. He has also performed with the New York Philharmonic, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Dutch Radio Philharmonic, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Orpheus, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Bang on a Can, and Speculum Musicae, among many others. His work has garnered consistent critical acclaim and he was profiled by the *New York Times* in October 2005.

David Shively has appeared as a soloist and chamber musician throughout North America and Europe. As a performer on instruments ranging from traditional percussion to Hungarian *cimbalom* to microtonal inventions, he has collaborated with artists across a broad scope of contemporary music contexts. A member of Ethos Percussion Group since 2005, with whom he tours nationwide, he is also the co-director of Either/Or, a New York-based experimental music ensemble. Guest appearances include Collegium Novum Zürich, the Del Sol Quartet, Gruppe für neue Musik Baden, and ICE, as well as solo performances for Other Minds 13 (San Francisco), Wittner Tage für neue Kammermusik (Witten), ICMC (Thessaloniki), and Schwerpunkt: Strom! (Zürich). Stage musician credits include *Prima . . . ins innere* (München, Stuttgart) and *The Persians* (National Actors' Theatre). He has recorded for CRI, Einstein, Mode, New World, Quecksilber, Traditional Crossroads, Tzadik, and other labels in addition to numerous works for film and radio broadcast.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

In These Great Times. The ByrneBand. CD 001. (available from www.andrewbyrne.com)

Six Dances. Included on *Broadway Boogie*. Michael Kieran Harvey, piano. Move Records MD 3315.

Mixing and Editing Engineer and Producer: Anthony Burr

Recording Engineer: Joseph Patrych

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

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ANDREW BYRNE (b. 1966)

WHITE BONE COUNTRY

Stephen Gosling, piano

David Shively, percussion

80696-2

White Bone Country (2006) 28:16

Nine musical landscapes for piano and percussion

Part I: Desert Terrain

1. for processed piano and percussion 5:30

2. for solo piano 3:57

3. for solo crotales 4:40

Part II: Desert Life

4. for piano and gongs 2:39

5. for piano and bells 1:09

6. for piano and knocking 2:36

Part III: Desert Weather

7. for solo piano 1:33

8. for piano inside and out 3:02

9. for piano and crotales and glockenspiel 3:09

10. *Tracks* (1998, rev. 2006) 8:54

for solo piano

Fata Morgana: Mirages on the Horizon (2007) 17:45

for prepared piano

11. First Mirage 3:33

12. Second Mirage 3:57

13. Third Mirage 5:23

14. Fourth Mirage 4:40

TT: 55:06

All compositions published by the composer.

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