Birdsong for Prisoners

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***Birdsong for Prisoners* explores the ways in which we interpret sound, recalling memories of chords and phrases that trigger new stories and challenge our perception of a world where sound is only available with accompanying still and moving images. Created from a variety of sources including birdsong, improvised jazz and the creative use of piezo mics to record the rarely heard sounds of the human smile, *Birdsong for Prisoners* presents an opportunity to explore how listeners react to, and interpret, an original composition that places sound at the centre of an audience response.**

Interpreting Sound, Internal Narratives, Memory, Digital Composition, Digital Archive

1. INTRODUCTION

Birdsong for Prisoners explores the ways in which we interpret sound, recalling memories of chords and phrases that trigger new stories and challenge our perception of a world where sound is only available with accompanying still and moving images. But what if we are deprived of sight or choose to close our eyes and listen? How does this change our understanding of what we hear? Does it emphasise our ability to interpret what we hear, without seeing? Does it mean that we are more likely to understand the importance of silence, of emphasising the need to pause between notes, to create tension, mood and emotion? Or, do we always create a visual response to sound, whether our eyes are open or not?

Intended to visualise ideas and concepts through sound and digital performance *Birdsong for Prisoners* is an original composition specifically created to consider the relationship between what we “see” and what we “hear” when we listen to sound and is informed by my research into *The Art of Sound* and the work of John and James Whitney, Bill Viola and the abstract expressionists.

Informed by conversations with prisoners and working with deaf and blind communities throughout Europe, *Birdsong for Prisoners* is a metaphor for escape: based on the assumption that the ability to see, interpret and hear cannot be defined or controlled by an imposed structure. Place a prisoner behind bars and they will still hear birdsong. Even in solitary confinement or in a soundproofed room they will never live in silence: silence is a condition that rarely exists: even the deaf may not live in a completely silent world.

But what does a prisoner hear? Whether their status is political, criminal or one of conscience they are still capable of listening and responding to sound. It may be a remembered fragment of chords, a rerun of events or a bird singing beyond the wire but they still hear and individually interpret what is heard. And perhaps it doesn't matter that this sound may only exist in their head, the fact that a specific sound is heard at all can only be because it wants to be heard. And, conversely, it may only be heard if the listener has time to hear it (Viola, 1978).

2. COMPOSITION

The concept that a composition can be created over a period of time is not new but digital technologies give a creative freedom that was not apparent in the past. The methodologies used by musicians tended to revolve around the use of manuscript paper in association with formal instrumentation, often using the piano or guitar as a source of inspiration and experimentation. The idea that a composer could choose to work on location collecting sounds that may contribute to a final composition only became apparent with the development of portable recording technology. Initially used to record musicians in the field, the development of cylinder, disc and reel-to-reel tape recorders were, in effect, attempts to provide the studio engineer with the capacity to record beyond the studio walls. The primary purpose of these recordings was to create an archive of music and musicians who were unlikely to write and record using studio facilities. While recognising that the development of *The Library of Congress Archive of*

Folk Song by John Avery Lomax, Ruby Lomax and Andy Lomax is beyond the scope of this paper these early recording pioneers were instrumental in showing that on location recordings could provide an alternative to the formal constraints of the studio (Lomax, 1993; Gray, 2007).

2.1 Creating an archive

It may be argued that *Birdsong for Prisoners* began with a title written in a black notebook on 8th September 2010 accompanied by the phrase 'missing the silence of cities I pause between security alerts' (Osmond, 2010a) but, in reality, it was a natural development from an archive that evolved from recording street musicians in European cities from 2005. The ability to capture sound using small digital devices led to a number of projects that showed the potential of creating an original composition from working on location. The developing methodology, in association with improvements in the quality of digital recording technology and the sustainability of rechargeable batteries, led to the creation of an archive that eventually consisted of a huge variety of sounds that could be sampled and used to create new compositions. From a single note played on a blues guitar at Waterloo Station to the rumbling of tube trains and the sounds of footsteps in the London Underground, this archive has provided a unique source of inspiration in the composition of this work.

Many of these recordings were as a result of chance encounters that were further enhanced when uploaded and replayed on a desktop computer system uncovering a range of sounds that digital recorders seem to capture that go beyond the normal range of what the listener is aware of hearing when travelling between places. These "surprises" or accidental recordings contributed to the creation of the final composition and to the development of strategies that recognised the importance of using "found" sounds as compositional elements.

2.2 Recording on location

But there is more to *Birdsong for Prisoners* than elements of chance and following the decision to create an original composition using this title I began to record on location with the primary intent of capturing specific sounds. This particularly applied to birdsong that was recorded at dawn or dusk on calm days and included buzzard, blackbird, robin, treecreeper and wren: all birds whose songs were higher pitched than other ambient sound in the surrounding environment. The idea that birdsong could in some way find its way through walls, security systems and into the subconscious came from these recordings,

informed by the number of mornings that I was woken by dawn choruses that seemed excessively loud.

But the nature of this composition meant that further sounds were needed that could reflect the link between birdsong and prisoners: the constant rhythmic sound of police helicopters monitoring student demonstrations in London in November and December 2010 recorded in association with the mechanical pulse of textile machinery in Tilburg (NL) provided an appropriate and informal percussive rhythm to this work that could be rendered in the studio.

2.3 Studio work

The nature of digital recording technologies meant that an original composition could be created using a variety of location and studio based recordings but the intention of *Birdsong for Prisoners* was not to try and replicate sounds that occur naturally in rural and city environments. The idea that birdsong could be reflected through improvisation has been inspirationally explored elsewhere (Sheppard, 2006) so the use of formal instrumentation was limited to producing cadences that could provide a structure to the composition through the imposition of a repetitive sequence of notes. These sequences were played on a soprano saxophone and digitally rendered using a range of effects including echo and changes to speed and pitch. An underlying and reflective rhythm was produced using the same techniques but played on an acoustic guitar using alternative tunings, harmonics and the percussive qualities of a natural wood soundboard: the ability of digital microphones to capture the guitar's unique resonance qualities, used in association with editing software meant that the sounds recorded could be subsequently multi-tracked and edited as the composition developed.

Unlike the techniques used by the early field-recording pioneers, the opportunities for digital editing meant that a greater degree of control could be exercised, reflecting the seamless nature of composition in the digital age. ie: the dividing lines between recording, rendering and composition rarely exist in this context as the composer is also the recording technician, editor and musician, allowing compositional decisions, including the use of pause, pace, timing and the inclusion of silence, to become an integral feature of the production process.

2.4 The human smile

During the development of *Birdsong for Prisoners* it became apparent that so many sounds remain unheard and, informed by processes developed as part of the *BodyTalk* exhibition (Osmond, 2010b), I

decided to include the sound of the human smile. This was in response to thoughts arising from conversations with people whose memories and experiences of imprisonment included trying to visualise the emotional absences of wives, lovers and children using phrases such as 'I tried to remember her smile and the way her eyes creased when she cried.' To recreate this effect would have been impossible but by attaching a piezoelectric contact disk to a friendly face I was able to capture the sound of the human smile and integrate it into the final composition.

2.5 Digital multi-tracking

The accessibility of digital software systems ensures that *Birdsong for Prisoners* could be produced in a number of different versions, each one exploring the nature of sound and the tone of the final composition. By multi-tracking a range of effects it was possible to arrange, rearrange, edit, cut, paste and re-record the composite elements of the composition before finalising the soundtrack although it could be said that this piece will always be a work in progress as it is possible to revisit and produce an alternative version of *Birdsong for Prisoners* at any time in the future.

3 VISUALISING BIRDSONG FOR PRISONERS

Whitney's theory of *Digital Harmony* (Whitney, 1980) was firmly based on the assumption that to achieve a true complementarity of music and visual art, harmonic structures should be applied equally to images in sound and motion. In reality, this would lead to the development and acceptance of a methodology that was based on a fully integrated compositional and visual system. But the potential to compose using improvisational and archival strategies, moving away from a reliance on mathematical programming and notation, would be lost if composers and developers continued to maintain the numerical status quo. Arguably, this could result in the imposition of a metaphorical straightjacket that may have seemed appropriate in 1980 but is largely irrelevant today.

While accepting that Whitney could not have envisioned the speed of digital development or the integrated possibilities presented by the latest hardware and software, it seems to me that while the quality and potential of systems associated with the moving image have continued to create almost limitless opportunities for realising the visual imagination, the development of sound software and its potential has been stilted. ie: to even suggest that sound could exist independently of the moving image in an environment beyond the isolation of earpiece and smartphone can result in varying degrees of negativity although it may be argued that by listening to music through

headphones, the listener is already engaging in creating their own imagery, if only as a secondary result of wanting to avoid communicating with other travellers.

So, in search of an alternative to Whitney's theory I made a decision to explore the nature of sound and its relationship with an audience while considering whether the absence of a sequence of moving images places a unwelcome demand on the audience to sit and listen to a newly composed soundtrack without watching a continuous flow of shapes and colours that may distract or intrigue the viewer. The need for reassurance: so often provided by a synchronised or sympathetic sound and visual track, is only lost when one or the other is removed. But should a composer try and meet this need by resorting to projecting a series of images or place the emphasis on the audience to develop an individual visual narrative that seems to be a subconscious reaction to listening to sound?

It seems to me that by ignoring the convention of providing images to run alongside *Birdsong for Prisoners* creates a degree of tension that may not always be apparent when synchronising sound with the moving image. Unable to rely on using the interaction between sound and image to cover up any weakness in the composition means that it is left to the listener to entirely focus on the sounds produced. Conversely, without sequential images, an audience should be able to engage with a composition in a way that is rarely experienced in the digital age.

3.1 The absence of movement

So, why choose not to include an abstract or figurative moving image when creating *Birdsong for Prisoners*? In many ways, this composition has been developed to encourage listeners to explore the nature of sound in a shared space without the aid of a cinema screen. In some ways this recreates the idea of radio but by choosing to transmit this composition to a group who share the same space, unlike a radio audience that is, by and large, solitary, it is possible that listeners will be able to immediately interact with each other and with the composer. The delay in responding to this work will be minimal when compared to discussions that often take place some time after an event when members of an audience share their views in the workplace or at home. Conversely, this choice of methodology may inhibit listeners who prefer not to engage in an immediate response but there is always time for further reflection beyond the confines of the performance space. And, as often the case, a soundtrack may be revisited over a period of time, if not by repeated listening but through the ways in which we process and recall particular sounds and experiences (Sacks, 2008).

And in this, it is apparent that the absence of movement creates an opportunity to continually focus on the composition, enhancing the ability to hear and respond to previously “unheard” sounds in a new way.

3.2 An internal narrative

It seems to me that the desire to provide a multi-sensory solution to listening to sound has meant that audiences may not have the freedom of hearing soundtracks that are isolated from the composer's desire to control their response through shared visual imagery. The pressure to create both sound and sequential images has meant that a composer who doesn't have the expertise or desire to create a sequence of moving images to be viewed in association with a soundtrack may be drawn into working in collaboration with others. Ideally, such a relationship could be seen as a positive interaction between sound and the moving image but may result in an outcome that fails to meet the expectations of composer or visual designer. For instance, a designer's interpretation of a specific soundtrack may bear little resemblance to the composer's visual narrative that naturally develops as the composition is created over a period of time. Phrases such as ‘when I hear this, it reminds me of...’ or ‘I remember recording this at...’ are as familiar to a composer as they are to the listener although it becomes much more difficult when trying to visualise these emotions or to describe them to a designer whose experiences may be completely different.

However, the idea that sound is only accessible through the interaction of memory, familiarity, and the moving image may be challenged when listening to *Birdsong for Prisoners* although the fact remains that a listener always creates their own visual narrative, even when the composer and/or performer supply their own images to support their work. And, even in the absence of traditional percussion, by engaging in melody, rhythmic patterns and harmonies, this composition still produces sounds that may be termed as musical although the internal narrative and subsequent dialogue is entirely based on the listener's response to what they have heard.

And by entitling this piece *Birdsong for Prisoners* it is also apparent that the listener will associate this title with a visual image, a condition that may predetermine a response that may reflect former experiences of imprisonment or literature that explores relationships in a prison location. In this event, the composition may trigger emotional and intellectual responses that are personalised, providing an entirely unique reaction to the work. And, in many situations, the listener may also try to identify specific sounds in an attempt to

contextualise what is heard: drawing comparisons with other sounds, structures and musical phrasing in an attempt to link what is heard with known or familiar sounds. The idea that we approach each new experience with an entirely open mind is a cliché that can be rarely met as the search for familiarity or appropriate reference points may be seen as an important feature of how we relate to new sounds or experiences.

3. CONCLUSION

The intention was to create a conference demonstration that explores the uniqueness of sound as a means of expression and individual interpretation. The concept that all sound should be considered in isolation from the moving image may not be taken for granted but this composition seems to benefit from remaining free from imposed imagery. Created over a period of time it should be considered as contributing to a body of work that is constantly in development. This work has included further practical and theoretical research into the nature of harmonic improvisation in jazz, the continuation of recording and archiving birdsong, as well as the practical development of strategies to capture the “unheard” sounds of the human body.

It should also be noted that the creation of this work could not have been possible without the development and accessibility of digital recording technology. The ability to record using easily transportable equipment and to create and constantly update a digital archive without resorting to using expensive commercial recording studio time has meant that this composition has been able to develop organically. The limitations formally imposed by analog recording technology and a studio engineer have been replaced by readily available software and hardware. This has meant that recordings can be rendered at a fraction of the cost previously associated with studio production. This has given the composer a degree of flexibility that could only be dreamed of when John Whitney explored the potential of *Digital Harmony* (Whitney, 1980).

In the final analysis, *Birdsong for Prisoners* has been composed to be listened to: providing an opportunity to consider if we always create a visual response to sound, whether our eyes are open or not.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Birdsong for Prisoners used a variety of digital technologies to create the final composition. These included on-location recordings of birdsong, police helicopters and other ambient sounds in London

(UK), Hampshire (UK) and Tilburg (NL) using *H4 Zoom* and *DW90 Olympus* digital recorders. Additional recordings were made at the composer's studio in Hampshire (UK) featuring an *Arbiter* soprano saxophone, *Tanglewood* six string and *Hudson* Acoustic Bass guitars. Further recordings were completed with a *Marshall MXL* microphone linked via a *Tascam US-122 USB* Audio/MIDI Interface to a PC: the smile was created by taping a small *piezo* microphone to the face and recording the outcome. The final composition was produced in association with *Cubase* and *WavePad Sound* to create an MP3 soundtrack.

5. REFERENCES

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