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An Interview with Jordan Nobles

Sasha Koerbler

Vancouver composer Jordan Nobles writes spatial music.¹ Inspired by the architecture of a specific public venue, he utilizes its acoustic qualities to produce a motion of sound that will surround the audience—immerse it in music—and enable its members to freely move within it. Having composed almost a hundred works, not all of them spatial, he has mastered a technique of “hearing” the acoustic potential of a specific venue and crafting a composition that will effectively infuse its architecture with music.

The original sound of Nobles’s music, as well as the openness and accessibility of the public venues attract large audiences to his concerts. Many Vancouver venues have hosted performances of his music, among them the atrium of the Vancouver Public Library, the Rotunda of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the WOSK Centre for Dialogue, the Blusson Spinal Cord Centre, and the Pendulum Gallery located at a branch of the HSBC bank on West Georgia Street. Nobles’s music has also been performed throughout Canada, the US, Europe and Asia, engaging symphony orchestras, choirs, chamber ensembles, and soloists.

At the age of 42, Nobles has been commissioned over twenty times, and counts over fifty performances of his works per year, some of which have led to CD recordings. He is a co-Artistic Director of the Redshift Music Society and has been organizing and presenting concerts of new music for the past ten years. On November 5, 2011 the Society presented a concert at the atrium of the Vancouver Public Library.² The concert was part of the “Vertical Orchestra” series, conducted by Leslie Dala. It featured two compositions by Nobles, *Hive* and *ather*, the latter receiving its premiere.³

¹ <http://www.jordannobles.com>

² <http://www.redshiftmusic.org>

³ See the composer’s website for a video excerpt of that performance: <http://www.jordannobles.com/Video.html>.

Jordan, *æther* was created specifically with this venue in mind, and its performance by such a large number of musicians, the Vancouver Bach Choir, the Vertical Orchestra and the Negative Zed ensemble, must have necessitated a number of unusual decisions.⁴ What were they?

The atrium of the Library is architecturally unique, because its eastern wall is seven stories high and cavernous, full of interior balconies. I wanted to create a big wall of sound by placing as many singers and instrumentalists onto as many balconies as possible. The Redshift Music has presented many concerts in here, all performed by only ten or fourteen musicians. This time, however, we were able to add the Vancouver Bach Choir to an already enlarged instrumental ensemble, and, under the direction of Leslie Dala, the imagined wall of sound came to life.

The original, earlier version of *æther* is an open-form composition, consisting of dozens of short melodies in G minor, scattered over just one page. The idea behind the open-form approach is to have performers choose their own phrases and play or sing them at will. For this performance, which involved some 120 musicians, I decided to write out the score in full, however, so that a conductor can cue in entries of phrases, and structure a performance. So, both the atrium and the number of performers involved definitely made me rethink certain previously made decisions.

⁴ <http://www.vancouverbachchoir.com>

The Negative Zed new-music ensemble operates under the auspices of the Redshift Music Society.

Spatial music is not a novelty. Throughout history there have been composers who utilized the acoustic features of a venue to trigger spatial effects. One thinks of not only Willaert, Tallis and Gabrieli, whom you had mentioned in your article,⁵ but also of Monteverdi's many works for San Marco's cathedral in Venice and his *Orfeo*,⁶ of Mozart's *Notturmo* for four orchestras (KV 286),⁷ of Berlioz and his *Requiem*,⁸ and then of Ives, Stockhausen, Xenakis, and Cage,⁹ particularly his composition *A Collection of Rocks*.¹⁰ How did your interest in spatial music come about?

I like standing in the middle of a performing ensemble, to be immersed in music that is happening around me, and I wanted to bring that experience to

⁵ Jordan Nobles, "Music's Fourth Dimension: Spatial Music and Guerilla Concert Tactics," *Musicworks* 100 (Spring 2008): 41.

⁶ Joachim Steinheuer, "Orfeo (1607)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, edited by John Whenham, 119-140 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 125.

⁷ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Notturmo* for four orchestras, KV. 286 (269a), in *Neue Mozart Ausgabe Serie IV/12 Band 5* (Basel: Barenreiter Verlag, 1981), 123-166. The orchestras are to be located in different parts of a venue, to produce an echoing effect.

⁸ Nobles, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ John Cage, *A Collection of Rocks* (Frankfurt: Edition Peters, 1984). This composition was performed at the 1985 Music Biennale Zagreb, Croatia, at the "Vatroslav Lisinski" concert hall. More information can be found in: Naima Balic, "Yugoslavia," *International Journal of Music Education* 7/1 (May 1986): 47. <http://ijm.sagepub.com/content/os-7/1/46.citation> (accessed Nov. 21, 2011). Also, there is some more information available here:

<http://www.johncage.info/workscage/collectionofrocks.html>

an audience. I used to listen to compositions of Morton Feldman on multiple stereos in my house: each room had some form of a stereo, so I played a different composition in each room, sat in the middle of the house and listened to the interaction of all the different pieces. They were all very sparse, “non-busy” pieces composed for piano, or small chamber ensemble, like *Rothko Chapel* for instance, and somehow they all fit together. I started imagining using that technique for a live performance. But I didn’t write music like Morton Feldman. I wrote like me.

Then, as my interest grew, I also started to research spatial music more, coming across Henry Brant¹¹ and R. Murray Schafer.¹² I became familiar with Brant’s rules for spatial composition, but I did not follow them, because I did not want distinctly separate compositions simultaneously going on. I wanted to have a single composition, an “organic” body of music surround my audience.

Also, Brant’s scores are written for a large ensemble. They are all conducted, and, at times, by a number of

¹¹ Nobles, 40, 42-43. Other related articles are: Henry Brant and Frank J. Oteri, “Spatial Music and Orchestration: From ‘Spaced Out with Henry Brant,’ in *Orchestration: An Anthology of Writings*, edited by Paul Matthews (New York: Routledge, 2006), 194-202. Also, Maria Anna Harley, “An American in Space: Henry Brant’s ‘Spatial Music,’” *American Music* 15/1 (1997): 70-92.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3052698> (accessed Nov. 01, 2011)

¹² Nobles, 43. The related works of R. Murray Schafer are, for example, *Music for Wilderness Lake* for 12 trombones, *Credo* for 12 choirs, as well as various sections from *Patria*.

conductors.¹³ I find, however, that conducting does not always work in a spatial performance: sometimes musicians are too far apart to see the conductor, so I have used some other methods.

Comparing scores of some, perhaps, more site-specific compositions that you have written over the years, one notices that your techniques for inducing spatial effects change with a venue. What part does the architecture play in your compositional process?

Well, I always want to have my audience immersed in music. That's my goal. So, I spend a lot of "listening" time in a given venue and develop site-specific techniques. *Coriolis*, for instance, was written for a conference room of the WOSK Centre for Dialogue.¹⁴ This room is in circular shape with a

¹³ In his article "Music's Fourth Dimension," Nobles points out that Brant "often employs multiple conductors in order to juxtapose distinct timbres, tempos, and themes played simultaneously and with no synchronization among separate groups or ensembles. Brant has even required no less than six conductors for his piece *Northern Lights Over the Twin Cities* (1985)," 42.

(The practice of employing multiple conductors is not a 20th-century invention. In her article entitled "Rejected Traditions," Donna M. Di Grazia discusses the 19th-century performance practice: including numerous choral and orchestral seating plans as well as engravings of concert performances of compositions by Berlioz and Liszt, she explains that multiple conductors had to be employed due to an extravagant number of performers.) Donna M. Di Grazia, "Rejected Traditions: Ensemble Placement in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *19th-Century Music* 22/2 (1998): 190-209, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/746857> (Accessed Nov. 21, 2011)

¹⁴ Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue is located at the Simon Fraser University in Vancouver: <http://www.sfu.ca/dialog/>

centrally placed sitting area. It also has twelve points around the centre, like a clock, which I thought would provide a perfect spot for each of the twelve singers of Musica Intima.¹⁵ So, for the first time, I composed music with motives dancing around on the “outside rim” of the sitting area, “around the clock,” and it worked really well: the music spun around in one direction until the climax of the piece, and then in reverse direction in the second half of the piece.

Processional, written for choir, piano and string ensemble, was composed for the Blusson Spinal Cord Centre.¹⁶ Blusson Centre has a nice, big atrium, but because it is a spinal cord research facility, it also has a peanut-shell-shaped, wheelchair-accessible ramp in the centre of the atrium. It is some 600 meters long, going three stories up. The descent is very gradual and, in my mind, it created an image of singers walking down the ramp while reading music.

As a result, the *Processional* is eight minutes long, and, due to the oval shape of the ramp, its performance required six conductors! Placed on the main level, the string orchestra and the piano resonated throughout the atrium. Members of the audience, seated on the main level, and surrounded by various levels of the ramp, were hearing the singers walk pass them, behind them and around them.

¹⁵ Musica Intima is a choir based in Vancouver:

<http://www.musicaintima.org/>

¹⁶ Blusson Spinal Cord Centre:

<http://www.mcmparchitects.com/portfolio/6>

The concert was performed by the Vancouver Cantata Singers, directed by Eric Hannan.

Which of your compositions was most extravagant in terms of employing a conductor?

I think it was the *Periods*, composed for the “Pendulum Gallery”.¹⁷ The four-storey long pendulum, swinging back and forth in the atrium of the HCBS bank became the conductor of the Standing Wave ensemble!¹⁸ I timed the swinging of the pendulum and it came to something like 15 on the metronome. I decided to split the Standing Wave ensemble into two trios, each performing at the opposite end of the swing, and getting a downbeat from the pendulum. There was a lot of other stuff going on in the music, but, most of the time, the pendulum cued the beginning of phrases. It was the tallest conductor anyone has ever had!

How has your desire to write spatial music influenced various elements of your compositions?

Due to the nature of large spaces, I have to assume that my music is not necessarily going to be played “in sync.” So, I write music that can blur a lot, music that is not rhythmically elaborate and does not require “in sync” approach. My phrases are “cells,” short musical fragments that can come in and move at different times and at different tempi. The audience does not necessarily hear their individual content, structure or

¹⁷ The “Pendulum Gallery” is located at the HSBC bank, 885 West Georgia Street, Vancouver.
<http://www.pendulumgallery.bc.ca/home.html> The pendulum, i.e., the multi-story kinetic sculpture created by Alan Storey, could be seen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MSFPyTQhJs>

¹⁸ Standing Wave is a new-music ensemble based in Vancouver:
<http://www.standingwave.ca/>

point of entry ... it just hears them merge. As mentioned earlier, my original version of *ather* is an open-form composition: it allows performers to make their own selection of phrases that are provided, repeat them in any order, as often as they wish and whenever they wish, and at any tempo between metronome markings of 60 and 90. In such an open-form version of the score, being even 30 seconds out would not really make a difference.

I have dealt with issues of steady tempo by using the pendulum, the conductor or a soloist, stopwatches, or even click track. A specific venue required a specific solution. I will not be using stopwatches any more: some of my compositions require as many as 35 of them, so they just simply do not get performed. Also, using a click-track has proven to be a challenge: I have had musicians standing all over a venue, relying on a click-track feed in their earphones. This required hundred-foot-long cables to provide the feed, which was inconvenient. The only accelerating and decelerating pieces I have written since are for non-spatial performance.

In terms of the pitch content, I like having my harmonies evolve slowly and parsimoniously: a note of a chord would change after a while, then another note, and then another. It means that if a musician is a second behind, his/her entry is not going to clash harmonically with the sounding chord.

The dynamics are a lot more difficult to achieve in large open spaces. Also, I want people anywhere in the hall to be able to hear the music that is happening. So, I do not have a lot of dynamic change ... it is all played forte. In terms of instrumentation, I don't get to use strings much, because in a big space they do

not project as well. I tend to use winds, brass, and percussion. I also prefer not to use text, because the articulation gets lost in the venue. In *æther*, the Vancouver Bach Choir sang “oo,” “ah,” and “oh” vowels, with some humming at the beginning.

Finally, tuning is an issue at times: when musicians are far apart, they can only hear themselves and cannot quite tell if they are in tune with others. That is why I often use percussion instruments, because their tuning remains constant during a performance. Although the appearance of my scores might give an impression that amateur musicians could easily perform the music, the tuning challenges imposed by spatial realities require the ears of professional performers.

Your scores look quite unusual: they consist of short music fragments, or cells, as you call them, sprinkled on a sheet (or two) of paper, implying a form of aleatoric approach to their performance.

I love the open-form approach. I also love one-page scores. *æther* is an example of that, but so is *Simulacrum*.¹⁹ It provides only cells of a composition that is to grow into its embodiment during a performance. In *Simulacrum* a soloist leads the unfolding of the composition by initiating a new phrase and thus cuing the rest of the ensemble into the next section. However, nobody has to be rhythmically in time in *Simulacrum*, which makes it largely an open-form composition.

¹⁹ *Simulacrum* was composed in 2010, and premiered on May 15, 2010 by six ensembles in six different cities across Canada. All six concerts shared the same program and printed-out program notes. Since then, it has been recorded on numerous CDs, all listed here: <http://www.jordannobles.com/Discography.html>

What are the main challenges to performances of your works?

In terms of venues, rhythmic coordination and ensemble playing are the two main issues facing performers. I often circumvent them by not having rhythmic coordination required. *Simulacrum* is an example of that: as a player you get the cue from the soloist, but you do not have to play in time with the soloist. In terms of the ensemble playing, I am working on musicians being comfortable in a huge space and feeling like they are playing together regardless of independency required by the open-form approach.

In terms of my site-specific compositions, a challenge might be getting a second performance. I am not worried about that. These compositions are getting played around the world regardless, but mostly in a typical choral or stage-based layout. While the spatial element is lost, the music is still being performed for other reasons.

***Simulacrum* has been mentioned a couple of times now, and I am wondering whether or not it represents an “apotheosis” of your efforts at this point?**

Simulacrum has all the elements that I like: it has solo lines that are singing, it has my harmonic aspirations, it moves through keys quite quickly, it is non-rhythmic, spatial (but doesn't have to be), full of variety, and no two performances of it are ever the same. And the score looks good: it has four one-page sheets, it is in open-form, which also means that performers get to determine its length. I like that. I also like the way it sounds. I would like its performance to be spatial and reverberant, and I would like it to be played by at least five or six instruments, but those are all options. Any one is good. *Simulacrum* is the piece that, at this particular stage in my life, I am the most proud of. ■