

Notes on Turning 41

One day, around 14 years old, a kid in near-constant anxiety, I was walking to my harp lesson – I was usually late, underprepared and stressed, but this time I was early – I sat down under a maple tree to kill some time, and leaned back and looked up. The sun was shining through the leaves in that mottled slow-moving way and I was suddenly filled with that shocking wonder that comes of its own volition. There's nothing else about that moment, just that, a memorable second. After that I kept looking up in trees trying to find that feeling again, but needless to say it wasn't in the tree.

Phase 1: Wonder in the moment

In my early 20s I went to church, sang in the choir, etc. I had a good friend there named SS, a 50s-something man who knew, before it was cool, about the cross-relations between Buddhist thought and Christian mysticism. We spent a lot of time together and he was a real talker. I fancied him a bit, so tried to take in his personal sermons on the matter wholeheartedly. One day I got it – and for a whole week I could refocus my mind each few minutes on the truth: the past is gone, the future doesn't exist yet, there's only now. And I felt it. I was the only one who could say who I was, and everything I had built up about myself, all identity, was temporary. If I was aware of the moment, I could will identity away, see right through it. I saw SS again a week later, he asked me how I'd been. I said, "blissful" – to which he replied, "It's possible you haven't understood what I've been saying" – so I sort of dropped it.

But I was a new composer at that time, and that experience of now-ness had a big influence on my music. I tried to find a way to embed this awareness-possibility in sound. I wrote a piece then called *one word*, which is a long string of eighth notes, one gets lost in the lack of repeating pattern but mesmerised and bored by the regular rhythm, and then in the middle, a very brief pause, and then continuing as before. During the performance at university, in the middle of the piece a couple friends in front of me looked at each other impressed by the surprise, and I thought, ok, I've got something.

I keep trying to recapture this particular type of moment, and you can follow this thread through my creative life. *O Zomer!* is also about this type of aware-experience – this time about an instant on a summer night where awareness hit, and the terrifying wonder of it – I took this moment and stretched it into a seven-minute experience, a slow-motion filmic image of my memory of that split second.

The end of *Bel Canto* is somehow the same, the last moments of *A Large House*, and many other pieces in different ways. I became interested in the way Morton Feldman erased memory as his music continued in time, and was greatly influenced by Martin Arnold's sense of wandering: anything that pointed to the possibility of a musical space where a listener might, on her own, stumble across even a dust-particle of

enlightenment, of being present. The act of composing became like planting a maple tree so that someone might sit there, lean back, and find what I'd lost.

Phase 2: Submersion

In my early 30s, after returning to Canada from a master's in Holland (with all the alcohol, occasional drugs, and omnipresent not-knowing-which-way-was-up of a master's degree), I found myself to be the shell of my former wonder-seeking self. As a type of healing, I found comfort in music that always sighed downwards. It was like a search for a lullaby, and at the same time it was a way to descend into my subconscious, to explore the oceanic world of my dreams that seemed to represent an iconic submerging. A falling-into-myself.

My first piece like this was *A Large House*, and then *Bel Canto*, and those who know my work know there were countless more, everything always descending. This also was the start of my interest in a particular kind of repetition – one involving layers or large canons (influenced by Aldo Clementi and especially by Bryn Harrison). It was a kind of repetition one could get lost in, lose oneself, or at least one's sense of time or place. Again this was about turning/falling inward, I felt that the type of trance-like meditation that came from listening to repetitive music was somehow both magical and comforting. But I never really let go, never really meditated, never explored actual tracing, I simply liked the idea of downwards inward-facing lullabies. Like enjoying the view of the River Styx without any urge to get on the ferryboat.

Phase 3: The body

I moved to England three years ago for doctoral studies, and there I met AG. The opposite of SS, she isn't a talker much at all, but a maker, and her work itself is more direct than any explanation could be. AG quickly became a huge influence on my thinking/being. She's a visual artist making drawings, videos, little models, roughly a thing per day. The improvised paintings she used to make in a performance setting perhaps influenced me the most. From her I learned about making art where the *process* of making it was the artwork itself, and I learned about a type of direct relationship with the impulses of the body. In addition to making a lot, she eats a lot, exercises a lot, has a couple of playful meaty dogs, and a friendship with her is something like an invitation to impulse-release: let's be animals and see what happens.

I started to be embarrassed about the prim nature of my notated score-writing, and incredibly frustrated at the length of time it would take me to make anything. I was suddenly aware of being an animal, and aware I hadn't moved in years, sat down in front of a computer with this cerebral lump weighing me down, with all this anxiety about the result (the artwork as product) holding me still, like a leash around my neck.

As a novice in the animal world, I set out to see if I could make music in a process-oriented way, and started singing while carrying out a body-scan meditation, recording it and working with it, and asking collaborators to do the same. The first time I tried it

myself I just bawled my eyes out. There's so much pent-up stuff in there just waiting to come out (this is also part of this story, somehow: a history of trauma; how one has difficulty connecting to one's body after trauma; how my 41st birthday is a quarter century to the day since the last (of 3) times I was raped; how I feel a kind of justice by letting myself be depressed by these crimes now, by anything for that matter, for letting my art-spiritual questing come to a standstill). This singing practice was for me a way to connect to my physical self – to explore how my creative work could be embodied, and simultaneously to explore how it is that music sounds so great when singers or performers are grounded and alive in their own bodies – to use this creatively somehow.

This brings me to the present day. This body-connection exploration is somehow just the beginning of a story, one that has much further to go. I daydream about performing live solo shows without any clothes. Singing, wailing, out of tune, with some big epic chords on speakers to either side, and me sitting naked in a big chair, like some sort of boss.

Stopping

I'd hoped that writing about the last three big spiritual phases to my work would reveal a path to a fourth. It certainly hasn't. It's something of a mystery to me that these three lines of inquiry have each stopped, or somehow ossified. Each still exists – but not as an immediate or current experience – rather, as a tool, something I can draw on because I more or less know its features, a memory of a living phenomenon.

Moreover, I started writing this note because I was trying to figure out why (even though I can clearly remember the motivating forces at the heart of my creative will over the years) I'm so frickin bummed out about making music now. Bummed out probably isn't the right word. Pessimistic, depressed. Turning 41 has not been a pretty time, absolutely everything has ground to a halt. But inside that pessimism there's a kind of lightness: I keep listening to music, hearing its patterns and puzzles, and am as delighted as I ever was.

At 41 I'm a kind of failure. I can no longer access this now-ness that I did in my 20s. My subconscious (and descending into it) just doesn't seem that interesting anymore. The dream of having a positive, fluent relationship with my body's sensations seems like an absurd notion. In all, it seems I've been me for four decades now, and I'm quickly losing interest in any hope of changing myself.

It occurs to me though, as I write this, that this is possibly part of ageing. That the fascination with changing oneself can fall away with time. Or even better, that the fascination with oneself at all can fall away. Perhaps this is what's happening. My creative practice was based on introspection, and I'm just not that interested in myself anymore. And perhaps what's left is music: the actual play of patterns that delights my brain, and nothing else, no spiritual goal, no insight, no ideas but in things. Finally.