

A mist is a collection of points. But every point has the mist as a context.

In this piece a point (i.e., a note) does not occur in a vacuum. It is let loose in an environment in which it can rebound (i.e., resonate) to varying degrees. The work is essentially about the morphology and topography of this resonance.

Michael Pisaro is a member of the Wandelweiser collective, an international organization of musicians which he has defined as “a particular group of people who have been committed, over the long term, to sharing their work and working together.” Its members have shared an interest in John Cage and experimental music, and extended durations, indeterminacy, and silence have featured in many works they have made; but Pisaro is quick to point out that the members of the collective have a far from uniform aesthetic stance. Their musical pursuits contradict any possible statement of a “Wandelweiser aesthetic.”¹ Pisaro’s work over the past decade bears little surface resemblance to the pieces made by other members of the collective apart from a commitment to experimental music and to deeply collaborative processes. Many of the recent trajectories of his work intersect in *A mist is a collection of points* (2014).

A mist is a collection of points, while a grid is an organized collection of points. There is the unspoken tension in this work between regular and aperiodic, solid and vague, artificial and organic, order and sprawl. This interplay takes place from one section to the next, and also in the interactions between the parts: between the pianist (Phillip Bush), the percussionist (Greg Stuart), and the sine tones (by Michael Pisaro). It affects the melody and the resonance, the timing and the coordination between parts. The intermingling of shadow pitches and extended resonances creates effects that are at least as vivid as any articulation. Before launching into a narrative of the work, it will be useful to consider the types of behaviors that are brought about by Pisaro, Bush, and Stuart, as well as by Joe Panzner, whose expert and subtle mastering of the recording is crucial to your home experience of the weirdest fragilities of this piece.

Timing: The piano attacks in the opening sections of parts I and III are notated spatially and realized without periodicity. They take on the character of naturally accumulating densities, rather than any pulse-like or proportional scheme of relations. Neither Pisaro nor Bush makes an attempt to mask the piano’s clear points of articulation, and yet the attack is only half the story. The release of each note in the piano is controlled both through the keys and the pedal, and is utterly vague throughout. While the liberal use of the pedal has a major effect on harmony and resonance, to ignore its impact on the temporal aspects of the work would be to miss at least half of the story. The points become part of the mist. Sounds appear abruptly and dissipate imperceptibly, masked by sustained resonance and the onset of new notes. At the moment of articulation, the notes are prominent, but the resonance will soon inhale them.

The notes for the percussionist in Part One read: “actual duration and starting and stop points are at the discretion of the performer, within the one-minute time brackets given.” Similarly, in Part Three, only approximate start times are given. Stuart’s choices of when to begin and end each tone have a decisive impact on the topography of these sections. The onsets of the sine tones are also flexible within large blocks of time. This flexibility parallels the quasi-open time blocks of John Cage’s number pieces.

¹ <http://www.wandelweiser.de/texte/erstw-engl.html>

Harmony and Resonance: As the rhythms are overwhelmingly organic, rather than grid-like, harmonies are not drawn according to proportional relationships, but instead by proximity. Tones have shadows, made in the piano by the pedal and in the percussion part by sine tones. These shadows mix with the original and subsequent sound objects, forming clouds of resonance. Each note is “let loose in an environment in which it can rebound (i.e., resonate) to varying degrees.” Along with timing, resonance is one of the parameters of the work that allow for the greatest agency on the part of the musicians, including Pisaro’s preparation of the sine tone recording.

Melody is mainly presented by the pianist, with one co-appearance by the vibraphone. Both Part I and Part III present a gradual accumulation of the density of the melody, but in both cases it proves elusive. The registral differences make it difficult to track these successions of pitches as a melody. Part II is another matter, with its closer registrations and frequent repetitions. These repeated, seemingly broken fragments act as a demarcator between the other sections.

Gradual change is a feature of the entire work, on the most local scale (measure by measure) and on the macro scale as well. Timing, resonance, melody, register, and dynamics are all intertwined in these slow transformations. “The work is essentially about the morphology and topography of this resonance.” A faithful execution of the score will inevitably cause such resonance, but its terrain is shaped by every possible variable of the performance, as well as the acoustic conditions of the space in which the recording is heard. This recording, like the piece itself, best reveals itself when it is “let loose in an environment,” played on speakers rather than headphones, in order to continue to develop its shape.

Part I is a slow accumulation of a harmonic cloud. With the pedal depressed throughout, the pianist begins to populate the harmonic space, first very slowly, and gradually building up speed over the first twelve minutes. In the piano, the given notes are to occur within a specified period of time, but in Bush’s performance they are not counted, but seem to be intuited to fill that duration. They are not part of a grid, but organic outcroppings. “The musical line itself is an always incomplete projection of a background melody,” Pisaro writes. “The play is thus always haunted by melodic connection.” The sustained notes on bowed crotales are played over one-minute blocks of time, starting and stopping at the percussionist’s discretions.

The remarkable closing of Part I could be entirely missed with any diversion of the listener’s attention. From 12:00 to 13:00, a C7 crotale is struck once and allowed to resonate along with the decay of the piano tones held by the pedal. At each 30-second interval from 13:00 to the close of the section it is struck again, and its resonance mixes with a new sine tone that is placed near it. This crotale resonates around 2093hz. The sine tones are played at frequencies between 2073hz and 2093hz. These small differences create very subtle yet effective shifts. Following each articulation, there seems to be a moment when the sine tone and the resonance of the crotale quickly meet each other and interact, each time a little differently, and pull further back as the crotale sound fades. The juxtaposition of stability (sine tone) with instability (crotale resonance) brings about new perceptual opportunities with each iteration.

In the solo piano opening of Part II, the pedaling of harmonic major sevenths and minor ninths, as well as melodic adjacent semitones, create hundreds of tiny little mists as the resonances of these dissonances closely mix among the new articulations. Duration is explicit. The bar lines and assigned durations appear on the pages of the score to create a metric grid, but the properties of

this grid change rapidly. The measures serve as boundaries of each small phrase, but the size of each phrase differs from the previous one, with the exception of direct repetitions. The phrases pause and reflect upon themselves. The pedal controls the subtle shifts in harmonic topography, but the rhythm texture is also in flux.

At the 10-minute mark, there are four sets of four whole notes, each between Bb and D, with significant octave displacement in the last two sets. That grid of notes creates a demarcation within Part II. By the time the sine tones are reintroduced, the piano has tapered back to only a melodic presentation, though it is still blurred by the pedal. Each of the eleven sine tones eventually appears, first with some brief utterances with the piano, then without either of the instruments for two minutes, then concurrently with an audibly broken metric grid between the piano and vibraphone. Pisaro describes this relationship in the score:

In this final section, the coordination is *very* loose. It is not a real unison, but rather, played as if the musicians were in deep fog and only partial[ly] visible to each other. (One musician might be ahead or behind the other, but the relationship should not be stable.)

The “coming and going” of the sine tones is rhythmically organic, parallel to the way the piano loosely filled the durations of Part I. Meanwhile, Stuart and Bush, following the instruction of very loose coordination, are breaking any sense of alignment with each of the 53 articulations. If one of them were playing steadily and the other was always before or after the beat, the coordination would not be loose enough. The one exception is the second-to-last measure, performed alone and with regularity by Stuart, as if to show what that grid might have been if it were present for the rest of the section.

The opening of Part III in the piano is so registrally dispersed that it only suggests the dimensions of the mist, rather than any focused stream of activity. If there is a melody, it is out of reach, obscured by registral displacement. These pitches can be likened to points, and the quality of the mist derives from both their distance and the activity occurring in the other parts. Part of the playback is a low sine tone resonated by a bass drum and “traced” by other sine tones. What had been mixings of high frequencies in the previous parts now operates in territory that is felt, not so much within the ears, as throughout the body. The vibraphone is bowed within time intervals that are always changing, ranging from 30 to 70 seconds duration.

The piano is traversing both high and low registers in a rapid accumulation, “a light, if increasingly dense mist,” tracing a melody but finding instead “[e]mergent structures of kudzu resonance.” Kudzu is a vine that rapidly grows over trees and other objects. It presents itself in the shapes of those objects, rather than in a linear way. Despite the evident growth in harmonic and rhythmic density in the piano part, the bass drum reverberation comes decidedly to the fore, especially around the 7-minute mark. There is very little interference in pitch space between the recording, the piano, and the vibraphone. All of them are clearly audible. And yet there is the visceral interference of the recording. I suspect that even in a live performance, the mixing of these bass tones would perceptually submerge the roles of the instrumentalists.

Everything abruptly changes at 10:00. Low sine tone frequencies descend in small increments, with a new, slightly lower tone presented within each 40-second window. The piano’s melody remains diffuse in register, but becomes rhythmically regular as Stuart takes up handfuls of rice and lets them fall at varying speeds on the cymbals.

This motion refers back to the use of falling rice and other grains in a number of Pizaro's earlier pieces, mostly made in collaboration with Stuart: first *ricefall* (2004), then *nachtstimmung* (2007–8), *Four Pieces for Recorded Percussion (Il faut attendre)* (2008), *July Mountain* (2009), *Hearing Metal 3* (2010), *A drum acted upon by friction, gravity and electricity* (2011), *Living with the Death of Time* (2012–13), and most recently *asleep, wind, voice, poe* (2013), and *asleep, stone, clarinet, change* (2013). These grains are analogous to points. Sitting in a bag or a jar, they are innocuous and apparently silent. When they are brought into a percussive situation, they are agents of aperiodicity, evoking everything from subtle disturbance to torrential downpours, as in the case of the installation version of *ricefall*. Perhaps part of the attraction of the use of grains as percussive elements is the juxtaposition of overall control with the impossibility of localized control. Gravity, the weight of each grain, and the smallest physical variables involved in their release take over the greater part of the agency from the performer on the micro level. Certain aspects of the *ricefall* are specified in this section, including the speed, weight, and regularity of the stream, as well as the cymbal onto which it falls. The final, longest segment uses millet rather than rice, and “the rate of the falling grain is very gradually slowed to almost nothing, moving (at will) amongst the four cymbals.” Pizaro refers to this section from 15:20 to 18:00 as an evaporation, and the piece itself evaporates with it.

Any effort to relate this piece to Pizaro's other work is bound to be as kudzu-like as the harmonic formations of Part III. Linkages are apparent in every direction, but they are complicated by the fact that nearly every one of his many pieces and series presents a distinct way of relating to material. Many early pieces seem to be made of points only, without landscapes other than the surrounding environment, acoustic, or silence. The *mind is moving, here*, and *within* series include such examples. These points are clearly distinguishable as objects in themselves. Is that a fundamental change in Pizaro's musical thought, or is it just a different relation of composed to uncomposed presences in the work?

Some choices of instrumentation are familiar here: sine tones, bowed percussion, and the use of streams of grain on resonant surfaces have multiple precedents in his output. In this piece as in his other work, precise definitions of what is prescribed for performers (pitch and stopwatch times) and where there is latitude (resonance, internal timings) are clearly stated.

Clouds, vapor, mist, and greyness are featured in the titles, techniques, and actual physical materials of Pizaro's works. *clouds* (1996) is an early piece for orchestra. *All clocks are clouds* (2000) builds on a marimba roll “so soft that a listener might not even be sure it was there.” *festhalten/loslassen* (2013) includes an element named as “cloud:” “a harmonic texture like a very light haze, consisting of extremely soft sustained tones.”

Ascending Series (7) (evaporation) (2009–10) has a companion piece, *fields have ears (5) (vapor)* (2009–10), which involves “an ongoing, variable, shifting mass of soft noise,” within which are sections called “condensation.” The sounds of the 100 percussion instruments in *A wave and waves* (2006–7) are described as “single grains of sand (or molecules of water), which, being combined with other like sounds form larger patterns and collections.” The most literal representation of vapor is in the second part of *Sound demonstrations* (2004–7): “spray a mist of water drops in the air so that they form a small cloud and then fall on the sheet of paper. pay attention to the sound of the drops falling.”

Extended Grey (Grey Series No. 1) (2012–13), the first piece in the ongoing *Grey Series*, moves “from a diversity (and/or darkness) of sounds to a nearly uniform white noise over the course of the nine grey sections.” — *Grey (Grey Series No. 4)* is a 72-minute field recording at sundown, realized as *Kingsnake Grey* in the first part of the *Continuum Unbound* box set.

Pisaro has developed a rich vocabulary of techniques to explore this persistent set of preoccupations. *A mist is a collection of points* is a unique and richly developed response to this constellation of images.

—Jennie Gottschalk

Jennie Gottschalk is a composer and writer. She runs the Sound Expanse website (www.soundexpanse.com) and is the author of Experimental Music Since 1970 (forthcoming).

Michael Pisaro (born 1961 in Buffalo, New York) is a guitarist and composer and a member of the Wandelweiser collective, which has published his music since 1995. His work is performed frequently in festivals and in portrait concerts throughout the world. Recordings of his music (solo and collaborative) have been issued by Edition Wandelweiser Records, erstwhile records, another timbre, slubmusic, Cathnor, Senufo Editions, winds measure, HEM Berlin, and on Pisaro’s own imprint, Gravity Wave. Before joining the composition faculty at the California Institute of the Arts near Los Angeles, he taught music composition and theory at Northwestern University from 1986 to 2000. In 2005–6 he was awarded a grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. He was Fromm Foundation Visiting Professor of Music Composition in the Department of Music at Harvard in the fall of 2014.

Phillip Bush is a pianist of uncommon versatility with a repertoire ranging from the 16th to the 21st centuries. Since his New York recital debut at the Metropolitan Museum in 1984, he has appeared as recitalist throughout North America, as well as in Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean. He made his Carnegie Hall concerto debut in 2001 with the London Sinfonietta to critical acclaim, replacing an ailing Peter Serkin on short notice in concerti by Stravinsky and Alexander Goehr. A much sought-after chamber musician, Bush has performed and recorded with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and appeared at chamber music festivals worldwide. From 2007–2015 he served as Artistic Director of the Bennington Chamber Music Conference in Vermont. Bush worked for over two decades with the ensembles of composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and for fifteen years as a member of the Milwaukee-based new music group, Present Music. Bush is a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory (where he studied with Leon Fleisher) and is currently on the faculty of the University of South Carolina School of Music.

Greg Stuart is a percussionist whose work draws upon a mixture of music from the experimental tradition, Wandelweiser, improvisation, and electronics. An active performer, he has appeared at numerous festivals and notable venues presenting experimental music including MaerzMusik (Berlin), Café Oto (London), Cha’ak’ab Paaxil (Mérida), Issue Project Room (New York), the wulf. (Los Angeles), and Non-Event (Boston), among many others. Stuart has recorded for Edition Wandelweiser, Gravity Wave, Erstwhile, Cathnor, Accidie, L’innomable, Caduc, and Senufo Editions. Greg Stuart is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina School of Music in Columbia, SC, where he teaches experimental music and music history.

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MICHAEL PISARO (b. 1961)
A MIST IS A COLLECTION OF POINTS

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A mist is a collection of points (2014)

1. Part I 18:18
2. Part II 21:55
3. Part III 18:07

Phillip Bush, piano; Greg Stuart, percussion; Michael Pisaro, sine tones

TT: 58:20

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