

SARAH HENNIES (b. 1979)

SPECTRAL MALSCONCITIES

Bearthoven / Bent Duo

80824-2

- 1 *Spectral Malsconcities* (2018) 31:28
Bearthoven: Karl Larson, piano; Pat Swoboda, bass; Matt Evans, percussion
- 2 *Unsettle* (2017) 33:34
Bent Duo: David Friend, piano; Bill Solomon, percussion

TT: 65:02

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sarah hennies spectral malsconcities

FIRST AND FOREMOST, MUSIC COMES FROM EXPERIENCE. To create is to engage a process and a subset of life, and the results are a microcosm of the human journey and a gain in knowledge about the world. In 1934, American educator and philosopher John Dewey published his tract *Art as Experience*, containing essays about the merger of art and life in service of actions that fulfill our need to learn as we go, testing our reality and shaping perception. In modern experimental music, and especially among a number of musician-composers emerging in America during the Sixties, a fixation on process and awareness became a structural hallmark, exploring the gradual change of sonic materials, built environments, and the human body. Though much maligned as a term by its practitioners, figures like Steve Reich, La Monte Young, Philip Glass, and Terry Riley were among these “minimal” composers; askew of them were electroacoustic explorers like Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, and David Behrman. In recent years, composer Sarah Hennies is forging new paths of reduction and expansion.

It makes sense to delineate the idea of process or process art/music from “work,” and this distinction is particularly apt when it comes to Hennies’ compositional world. Music that investigates the slowly-shifting tonal relationships between sounds and one’s gradual perception of that shift, à la Young or Reich, is quite different from Hennies’ toothy marathons. After all, if one performs within a rigorous set of parameters a handful of times, it might be an investigation into that material’s aesthetics, but if one performs that action 300 times or 3,000, it can become a task or a job, wearing the actor and testing their endurance—at least until it develops into some-

thing beyond. As the composer put it in a recent interview, “the reason that I’m using repetition so much right now is that doing the same thing over and over again seems to develop over time, and I think that’s happening over a perceptual and acoustic level where the way you hear something after one minute is very different from the way you hear it after seven minutes. On a general level that’s one of the reasons I like working with repetition because I like using an economical approach to making material. I don’t want to write too many notes. I’m trying to do as little as I can to make the thing happen that I’m interested in.”¹

Hennies’ arc as a musician-composer has been consistent and rigorous in new music since the early 2000s, when she settled in Austin, Texas, performing as a drummer and vibraphonist in improvised and experimental music settings as well as the coiled, folksy jitters of slow-core rock band Weird Weeds. She maintained a strong presence in the Austin New Music Co-op, where she performed major works by Arnold Dreyblatt, Cornelius Cardew, and Morton Feldman. Emerging as a solo performer on snare drum, vibes, triangle, and woodblock, what was particularly striking at that time was her ability to cause an elemental shift in one’s understanding of how certain percussion instruments sound through repeated and intense action. For example, in the composition *Psalms 3* a methodical, staccato attack on different parts of a woodblock opens up vistas of rich echo and grainy overtones, certainly far from what one might expect from the lowly-seeming percussion attaché. It is also stiff and repetitive, drawn from movements that fatigue the arm and wrist. In an interview around the time of that work’s release on CD (the Lucier-rooted *Psalms*, Roeba 8) in 2010, Hennies’ response was “everywhere I go, people

¹ Interview with the artist conducted July 16, 2020. Unpublished.

are like ‘I can’t believe that woodblock.’ I actually don’t understand some of the physical aspects of what occurs during that music. What you hear is a combination of properties of the instrument that people aren’t aware of and the acoustics of the room you’re in. More alive rooms allow it to be more interesting, but in general one thing that these pieces do is make a sonic profile of the room you’re in and the way things echo.”²

But instruments are played by people and the sounds that result come from humanity. In most of Hennies’ earlier pieces, she was the sole or core performer, though her participation in the trio Meridian (with percussionists Greg Stuart and Tim Feeney) and pieces like *Reservoir I*, *Lungs*, and *Expenditures* have involved ensembles. Often it has been difficult to separate her compositions from the literal sweat and blood that make up her performances—exhaustion-inducing instrument/implement juggling as in *Falsetto*, for example, or the athletic regularity of *Psalms*. Relocating in 2013 to Ithaca, New York, her music has taken on greater meaning and scale. In 2016, Hennies wrote *Orienting Response* for Chilean guitarist Cristián Alvear, which was her first work specifically written for another performer. Evolving from a series of taut, evenly-paced thwacks, the piece settles into a meditative, breath-like jog amid nylon-string harmonics and slow accretions of simple material, shifting in gentle, albeit craggy sections. Hennies states in a 2020 interview that *Orienting Response* marked a shift in her mode of working, namely that “it’s just made it so I can do more—I always wanted to write for other people because at some point you start to feel like you need other options. When I wrote that guitar piece,

² Interview with the artist conducted May 2011, published at <https://www.cliffordallen.me/interviews/an-interview-with-composer-and-percussionist-sarah-hennies>. Retrieved August 8, 2020.

I did it for one thing because I got asked but also I did it because I wanted people to realize that this was something that they could have. I don’t know if they realized I could do something other than play percussion or if it hadn’t occurred to people. I really love writing for other people because I get to do stuff that I can’t otherwise do.”³ In a sense, it is a practical thing, offering an expansion of both palette and circumstances, but it is also a way *in* for other people, allowing them to share Hennies’ world of sonic experience.

In 2017 and 2018, Hennies composed *Unsettle* and *Spectral Malsconcities*, chamber works for trio and duo, both of which were commissioned by the performers. The pieces feature musicians deeply entrenched in the New York new music community: Bent Duo (David Friend, piano; Bill Solomon, percussion) and Bearthoven (Karl Larson, piano; Pat Swoboda, contrabass; Matt Evans, percussion), each navigating their way through approximately thirty minutes of life-affirming and complex areas. The members of Bearthoven became interested in working with Hennies after seeing Bent Duo perform *Unsettle* as part of an Evenings for Creative Music concert in Buffalo, New York. Larson discussed the circumstances in a recent interview: “I heard Sarah’s piece and was just like, this is amazing—it was in a big church and I remember this blend of vibraphone and bells and piano created an overtone above your head, way up in the apse, and it was such a bizarre and profound sonic effect that I was enchanted by it.”⁴

Though Hennies often composes for smaller ensembles, which generally feature strings and percussion (she has written one piece for brass, *Monologue*, performed

³ See note 1.

⁴ Interview with members of Bearthoven conducted August 4, 2020. Unpublished.

by trumpeter Nate Wooley, and one for flute and voices, *Reservoir 2: Intrusion*, performed by Claire Chase and Constellation Chor), the instrumentation of *Spectral Malsconcities* is curious, at least in the chamber realm: The piano, contrabass, and percussion framework is associated primarily with jazz, towards genre-defining results from pianists as diverse as Bill Evans and Cecil Taylor, or McCoy Tyner and Howard Riley. As Larson notes, “Our trio looks a lot like a jazz piano trio if you see it set up on stage. It’s almost like the instrumentation is an entryway for the listener; say you don’t listen to as much out-there music, our trio is kind of a familiar thing. What we’re interested in is having a composer take this prompt, the familiar timbres or colors of our instrumentation, and project their own voice onto it. Sarah’s music occupies this liminal space between notation and improvisation. She has such a succinct mind for it—it’s great to hear those worlds combine in a Bearthoven piece. I feel like her music is welcoming me and my approach into her world.”⁵ Workshopped by Bearthoven in residence at Avaloch Farm Music Institute in New Hampshire, the piece was first performed publicly in Buenos Aires in November 2018 at Ciclo de Conciertos de Música Contemporánea, followed by a performance in April 2019 at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

Spectral Malsconcities consists of six linked and varied sections; it is constructed in a way that ensures the musicians are never completely in sync, and in fact they generate sounds that continually destabilize the standard ensemble goal of togetherness. As Hennies put it recently, “this piece is an example of performers elevating something beyond what I thought it could be. I wrote a piece that I thought would intentionally create mistakes. You ask somebody to repeat a very different

⁵ Ibid.

polyrhythmic contrapuntal page of music 25 times, and it is going to fall apart at some point and then come back together. However, the musicians are so good that they played it exactly as it was written, which is better than what I thought it would have been if they were messing up. Speaking aesthetically, I had an idea for this situation and the criteria composed the piece—three players only kind of get together and it becomes more frustrated before fading away. I wanted to take advantage of these guys being really good at their instruments and being really good at playing complex music. I want to take advantage of people’s strengths; it would seem like a better piece if I can write to the strengths of the performers instead of going off somewhere and crafting a piece totally out of my head.”⁶

Spectral Malsconcities begins with thick pizzicato bass rejoinder, tumbling toms, and an elegiac piano melody teetering on muted strings—there is a folksy quality in this music, not unlike aspects of the Weird Weeds, or if avant-garde piano trio the Necks performed Dreyblatt. Each player is independent, unified in tough, parallel orbits just out of one another’s reach. An added snap below the bass’s bridge, wood on taut strings, appears five minutes in, the rattle of glass on piano wire and lurching chains accentuating Swoboda’s rickety vamp. The aggressive repetition recalls a motion in *Falsetto*, where Hennies utilizes a stamp as though marking bills in accounts receivable. After a brief interlude of wood and horsehair wisps, the percussionist lays into a piece of sharply bowed metal, high-pitched and ricocheting off the kick drum’s force, while Swoboda plucks below the bridge in response to partly-muted notes emanating from the piano. Evans experienced it this way: “Sarah writes the breakdown of this model, the collapse of mastery, into the music.

⁶ See note 1.

Each of us is asked to do something we can't do and the **subject** becomes the act of striving to accomplish a musical task and failing or exhausting oneself in the process. What I like about Sarah's approach is that it's not about translating material that is more than human, it's about translating something human that is still somehow inhuman, the struggle against expectation."⁷ Swoboda adds that "a lot of the piece is living in these different discomforts, and some of the feedback I get from people, both who are very in-the-know about this kind of music and those that don't know it at all, is that it is something where they can go through the journey with us. They're hearing and discovering things in the music but they're also watching us go through it and they're empathizing with how painful it can be."⁸

Unsettle was commissioned by Bent Duo shortly after their inception. Taking its cue from a two or three player-one vibraphone piece called *Settle*, which was composed by Hennies in 2012, *Unsettle* is a spare and summarily weighty composition that finds space monolithic and driving. The pair came into contact with Hennies after she moved to Ithaca, where David Friend was doing his doctorate at Cornell. In his words, "[Bill Solomon and I] were committed to number one, that piano and percussion writing is somewhat underserved [now], and number two, we were both interested in performing works that really pushed aesthetic and performance-practice boundaries, and that was something we weren't getting a lot of in our other ensembles. So that was a priority, and as queer artists we also have an interest in queer theory, queer representation, and queer aesthetics. It made sense that Sarah

was one of the first people that we were excited about approaching."⁹ Bent Duo have performed significant works by Alison Knowles, Simone Forti, and young experimental composer Casey Anderson, all of which have strong performance art or "extra-musical" requirements, while *Unsettle* is far more traditional in its scope. The score is economic, taking all of two pages to spin out 33 minutes of music. It begins with *una corda* fluttering, the passing of time held in single E notes bent at the edges and limned by vibraphone haze, gradually augmented by rumbling clusters and brassy, clanging bells. The inflection and increase in density among otherwise apposite events creates an extremely intense landscape of tension without release, though powerful as well—the closing minutes of pedal movement, muted piano strings, and bell clatter (à la Iannis Xenakis' *Bohor I*) lead into prepared twang and supple metallic accents. Ditto the shock of vibraphone and muted clamor at minute twenty, carrying enough distorted overtones to defuse one's skull.

While there is a narrative-adjacent, part into part structure to *Unsettle*, repeating something numerous times affects how and what one hears. Even with slim notation and a limited instrumental framework, the intensity of delivery and content vaults the piece to significant heights. Following the premiere in Buffalo, Friend notes that "after the concert some of the players in Ensemble Signal came up and asked if we could explain the 'electronic setup' or the amplification, of which there is none. I thought I was hearing all this cool stuff but the extent to which that effect happened with some of the best listeners in the world, that it could land so profoundly really surprised and tickled me. In terms of the way it's impacted my relationship to sound, I always have this fundamental belief that what the performer hears and

⁷ See note 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview with Bent Duo conducted August 3, 2020. Unpublished.

what the audience hears are not necessarily the same thing—if you are the performer you don't know what the audience hears and you never really will. Playing Sarah's music in which these sonic things are so important underscores that. The piece is succinct; there's not a tremendous amount of complication or black magic, and yet the impact of the score is **total** black magic.”¹⁰

Sublime and utterly physical, explosive and statuesque, *Spectral Malsconcities* and *Unsettle* are complementary works that display another rich stage of Sarah Hennies' practice. That practice is ever-expanding, now encompassing video (*Contralto*), sculptural installation (*Come 'Round Right*, with her wife, artist Mara Baldwin), and movement (*Passing*) in addition to wide sonic imprints. Her world of creativity is welcoming, but like all art of significance, you have to do the work in order to share in the experience. At the end, and wherever that end is, the rewards will be great.

—Clifford Allen

Clifford Allen is a performing arts archivist, historian of experimental/improvised music, and occasional concert promoter living in Brooklyn, New York. <https://www.cliffordallen.me/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Spectral Malsconcities

for Bearthoven

Sarah Hennies

♩ = 80

Piano

Contrabass

Percussion

med. hard timpani mallets

p

f

sfz... sempre

pizz... cont.

x20

Unsettle

for Bent Duo

Sarah Hennies

The musical score for "Unsettle" is written for piano and vibraphone. It consists of eight measures, each with a time stamp in a box above it. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 80. The piano part is in treble clef and the vibraphone part is in bass clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (pp, mf, mp, ppp, mf), and performance instructions like "very soft mallets" and "hand bell (let ring)".

Measure 1 (0'00''): Piano part has a half note G4 with a fermata, marked *pp*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 2 (2'00''): Piano part has a half note A4 with a fermata, marked *pp*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 3 (4'00''): Piano part has a half note B4 with a fermata, marked *pp*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 4 (5'00''): Piano part has a half note C5 with a fermata, marked *mf*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 5 (7'00''): Piano part has a half note D5 with a fermata, marked *mf*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 6 (8'30''): Piano part has a half note E5 with a fermata, marked *pp*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 7 (10'00''): Piano part has a half note F5 with a fermata, marked *mp*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Measure 8 (12'00''): Piano part has a half note G5 with a fermata, marked *mf*. Vibraphone part has a whole rest.

Sarah Hennies (b. 1979, Louisville, KY) is a composer based in upstate New York whose work is concerned with a variety of musical, sociopolitical, and psychological issues including queer & trans identity, love, intimacy, psychoacoustics, and percussion. She is primarily a composer of small chamber works, but is also active in improvisation, film, performance art, and dance. She presents her work internationally as both a composer and percussionist with notable performances at Le Guess Who (Utrecht), Festival Cable (Nantes), send + receive (Winnipeg), O' Art Space (Milan), The OBEY Convention (Halifax), Cafe Oto (London), ALICE (Copenhagen), and the Edition Festival (Stockholm). As a composer, she has received commissions from a wide array of performers and ensembles, including Bearthoven, Bent Duo, Cristián Alvear, Claire Chase, R. Andrew Lee, LIMINAR, Thin Edge New Music Collective, Two-Way Street, and Yarn/Wire.

Her ground-breaking audio-visual work *Contralto* (2017) explores transfeminine identity through the elements of "voice feminization" therapy, featuring a cast of transgender women accompanied by a dense and varied musical score for string quartet and three percussionists. The work has been in high demand since its premiere, with numerous performances taking place around North America, Europe, and Australia and was one of four finalists for the 2019 Queer Art Prize.

She is the recipient of a 2019 Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists Award, a 2016 fellowship in music/sound from the New York Foundation for the Arts, and has received additional support from New Music USA, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Community Arts Partnership of Tompkins County. Sarah is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at Bard College.

Bearthoven ['bâr-toh-vən] is a piano trio creating a new repertoire for a familiar instrumentation by commissioning an aesthetically diverse body of work. Formed by Karl Larson (piano), Pat Swoboda (bass), and Matt Evans (percussion) in 2013, Bearthoven quickly established themselves as a forerunner in the New York City contemporary music scene, consistently presenting innovative new works on local, national, and international stages. *Spectral Malsconcities* is the trio's third album, preceded by *Trios* (2017, Cantaloupe Music) and *American Dream* (2019, Cantaloupe Music).

Bent Duo is an experimental NYC-based project investigating the limits of contemporary chamber music and the exciting innovations that happen at the outer fringes of this repertoire. Founded in 2015 by David Friend (piano) and Bill Solomon (percussion), the duo is equally committed to works that exploit the performers' virtuosic instrumental technique as to those that are developing new performance techniques entirely. In collaborations with other artists and their own creative work, they are especially interested in investigating queer modalities in music. They have performed in the United States and Europe in a wide variety of venues. www.bentduo.com

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Embedded Environments. Blume 012. (LP)

Gather & Release. Category of Manifestation KIND 3.

The Reinvention of Romance. Astral Spirits AS 138. (2 LPs)

Reservoir 1: Preservation. Black Truffle BT 053.

Sisters. Mappa MAP011. (LP)

Producer: Sarah Hennies
Engineered and mastered by Matt Sargent
Mixed by Sarah Hennies
Recorded at Bard College, February 2018 and January 2020.
Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC
Cover photo: Andy Futreal
Design: Jim Fox

Both works published by Sarah Hennies (BMI).

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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File Under: Classical/Contemporary/Hennies, Sarah

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