

BEN RICHTER (b. 1986)

REWILD

80847-2

Rewild (2022) 49:37

GHOST ENSEMBLE:

Margaret Lancaster, flute; Sky Macklay, oboe;
Ben Richter, accordion; Chris Nappi, percussion;
Lucia Helen Stavros, harp; Martine Thomas, viola;
Tyler J. Borden, violoncello; James Ilgenfritz, contrabass;
Kyle Motl, contrabass; Carl Bettendorf, conductor

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ben richter rewild ghost ensemble

IN THE FIELD OF CONSERVATION BIOLOGY, *rewilding* is the term used to define a form of ecological restoration aimed at increasing biodiversity and restoring natural processes. One principle that sets this model apart from other restoration-oriented ideals and practices is that *rewilding aspires to reduce human influence on ecosystems* [emphasis added].

“I’ve been inspired throughout my life by the human role in nature—and how strangely it seems to have developed,” **Ben Richter** says, easing into the start of an interview concerning *Rewild*, the uncanny 50-minute work the composer completed for Ghost Ensemble in 2022.

The development of technology in contemporary civilization happens at such a state of continuous acceleration and seeming omnipresence that we typically take for granted things that would have constituted miracles and wonders within the brief span of our lifetimes. Case in point: Richter, 37, is sitting in a Berlin apartment, speaking with a counterpart located in New York City. Richter exists six hours in my future, but via a video call conveyed on a high-speed internet connection, we occupy the selfsame now.

It’s a trivial observation, perhaps, but illuminating; temporal shifts are a preoccupation of Richter’s. “I’ve been inspired by a lot of longform compositions over the years,” he explains, “and I really like the potential of durational work to play with time perception. And I have been more and more interested in the idea of how orienting time perception can also seem to orient our sense of self, or non-self, within the world.”

Music is a time-based discipline, requiring the designation of two points in time—

a beginning and end, essentially—as the boundaries that define what is contained within as a work of art. As humans, our conventional basis for perceiving and measuring temporal phenomena is our own physiognomy. That most of the music that floods our everyday existence, consciously or intrusively, is defined by a clearly perceptible rhythmic pulse has much to do with the way our bodily receptors are wired.

In envisioning and then activating an alternative to that paradigm, Richter becomes part of a continuum of estimable composers whose music deals in time scales and rates of perceptible change that challenge conventional human perception. “Any occurrence of an oscillation, temporal regularity, or repetition in any part of the body, whether voluntary or not, can be thought of as a clock against which other body clocks and sensory input is gauged,” the composer Cenk Ergün noted in his 2020 dissertation, “Flux and Stasis in the Music of Feldman, Radigue, & Young,” its title referring to three creators closely associated with pushing at the boundaries of quotidian perception.¹

Like those composers, Richter in *Rewild* envisions a music untethered from human corporeal and circadian imperatives. But in several instances recently, he takes the additional step of explicitly linking his large-scale conceptions to natural models too slow and vast for human apprehension.

For example, in *Panthalassa: Dream Music of the Once and Future Ocean*, a prodigious 2017 triptych for five prepared microtonal accordions, Richter derived inspiration from the vast paleo-Pacific superocean of the title, which encompassed Earth some 250 million years ago. The title doesn’t imply a structural strategy based on ocean currents or plate tectonics, but rather evokes such processes, in all their vast, unknowable might and span, in the listener’s mind.

¹ Ergün, Cenk. “Flux and Stasis in the Music of Feldman, Radigue, & Young.” Princeton University dissertation, 2020.

In taking as his formative leap the time scale of trees, ecosystems, decline, and renewal with *Rewild*, Richter sets himself into community and conversation with a select group of creators working toward similar objectives and effects. He cites as especially influential the sound artist Stephanie Loveless, whose work is driven by exploring the “boundaries between human and nonhuman subjectivities,” as she described it in 2012. Speaking to fellow sound artist David Dunn about her work, Loveless said:

I could never know what it is like to experience as another species. Still, in the distance between the attempt and the impossibility, I hoped to stretch myself—for the good of my own psyche, for the good of my creative work, and mostly because it is the kind of empathic cross-species and cross-person practice that I think is urgent.²

Loveless’s work in turn is rooted in the musical philosophy and practice created and espoused by Pauline Oliveros, Deep Listening. Richter came to know Loveless while both were studying with Oliveros—a fundamental role model to Richter for her extensive work with the accordion, and for her expansive view of the extra-musical dimensions intrinsic to a group of people making music together with sympathy and common cause.

Richter also cites as a crucial influence on *Rewild* the German bassist and composer John Eckhardt, whose composition *Forests*, an arresting piece for four acoustic basses, amounts to a wordless, holistic appreciation of the wood from which his instrument was constructed. (A recording issued in 2015, with all parts played by Eckhardt, was distributed on a wooden USB stick that also contained 200 arboreal photographs,

² Dunn, David with Stephanie Loveless. “The Voices of the Others.” Liner notes for Audience Editions 002, September 2013.

packaged in a clear box lined with moss, lichens, bark, twigs, and other organic materials collected in a Swedish forest.)

One model Richter cites is a piece by Michael Pisaro-Liu, a composer who has worked often and extensively with field recordings captured in natural settings. The work Richter singles out as especially meaningful to his conception of *Rewild* is *Achilles, Socrates, Diotima*, a 2018 composition in which Pisaro-Liu atomizes a 27-piece orchestra into a panoply of tiny gestures and fleeting impressions. “That is entirely for an instrumental ensemble,” Richter notes, “but it sounds in parts like a field recording.”

What Loveless, Oliveros, and Pisaro-Liu promote, in their different ways, is a listening experience rooted in different considerations of time, pace, and durations, rooted loosely or explicitly in the notion that existence is more vast and inclusive than the limited sensory tools we customarily bring to the task.

With *Rewild*, Richter joins their number, suggesting as did these forebears that the listener contemplate a different standard of perception. His goal isn’t just intellectual but visceral, a rewilding of perception: a plea for a broader conception of the world’s interconnectedness, and our place, role, and responsibility within it. The writer, poet, and scholar John Charles Ryan states the proposal explicitly in an essay Richter uses to preface his *Rewild* score:

How might we access the multilayered temporal terrains of the more-than-human? How might deeper understanding and acceptance of time in its complexity help us appreciate all life and interact better with our fellow creatures? These questions underlie *Rewild*, a composition that sonically evokes a view of time as interthreaded and mediates an immersive encounter with time as an intricacy.

For, to *rewild* is not only to revitalize denatured habitats but also to nurture temporal justice, ensuring the integrity of ecologies and their time(s). To rewild is also to entrain ourselves to temporal plurality—to attune to the varied timescapes beyond our everyday horizon.³

In his own prefatory essay, also printed in the score, Richter seems to be issuing a call to action:

Rewild is an effort to make visceral the relationship between our own lives and the manifold periodicities of deep time. Inspired by the perspectives and timescales of nonhuman beings and distant orders of magnitude in the universe of life, *Rewild* seeks new strata in musical parameters, exploring the uncanny zones at which pitch becomes rhythm, harmonic interval becomes beating rate, and timbres morph over time. Like a giant body or ecosystem slowly breathing, *Rewild*'s constantly transforming sound-world orients temporal perception toward global listening. By offering an aural metaphor for the interacting gradual processes of natural and ecological systems, *Rewild* aims to auralize the vast and infinitesimal timescales we do not experience in everyday life.

That viewpoint, transformed into artistic action, positions *Rewild* in response to, and also as a consequence of, our Anthropocene age—to conjure that hypothetical geological era that commenced when the actions of humankind began to have a discernible and potentially irrevocable impact on our planet, its inhabitants, and their habitats.

³ Ryan, John Charles. "Time as Plenitude: Attuning to More-Than-Human Temporalities," 2022.

The challenge posed by such an undertaking is considerable, since humans are hard pressed to comprehend and embrace time scales other than the one we experience somatically day in and day out. The currently dominant human conception of time requires denial of the interconnectedness among other timescales and lifeforms, Richter notes. Rupturing the normative construction of time challenges our way of functioning, much as Deep Listening challenges the focused listening of tuning in to conversation and filtering out ambient noise.

In considering the musical techniques fundamental to the working of *Rewild*, it's necessary to step back and view how its genesis and evolution resulted from an earlier initiative: the founding of Ghost Ensemble in 2012. The group comprises a core of 10 musicians on flute, oboe, accordion, harp, percussion, viola, cello, two contrabasses, and conductor. Richter formed the ensemble to explore music-making that involved fully notated composition and extensive group improvisation, and has composed several of his major pieces for it.

In his work as a solo artist on accordion, Richter uses techniques including just intonation, detuning preparations, and sliding register shifts in order to, as he states it, seek intermediate zones between pitch and rhythm, alter the instrument's pitch/noise spectrum, and stretch time perception. With Ghost Ensemble he pursues those same goals writ large, abetted by virtuoso players whose extensive technical facility provides an extraordinarily large palette from which Richter and fellow composer members can draw.

Nascent in the ensemble's foundational DNA was an aspiration toward something other than mainstream human comprehension. A statement Richter wrote in 2018 for *We Who Walk Again*, a Ghost Ensemble album featuring his 2016 composition *Wind People*, is illuminating:

We traverse these waters because there seems something magic in them. Many of these works share a meditative practice or an inclination toward altered consciousness or metaphysical exploration. Intuitive processes, fragile and liminal sounds, and fluctuating or non-predictable pitch relationships combine to distort our time perception and foster rapt, engrossed attention in the present moment. By expanding our horizons and perceptions and encouraging immersive experience, by renewing our spirits, this music demonstrates its potential as a real healing force.

Also featured on that album is *60 Degree Mirrors* by Sky Macklay, the group's oboist and a composer of considerable stature. That the group's members are sympathetic to Richter's compositional aspirations was evident when Macklay was asked about the group's name in a 2023 radio interview:

Because we are interested in music that affects perception and consciousness, and deals with perhaps ephemeral small sounds in addition to very gut-moving big sounds... I think all of these things are sensations that you might associate with the supernatural or ghosts.

Completing *We Who Walk Again*, meaningfully, is *Angels and Demons* by Pauline Oliveros.

The group continued its engagement with Oliveros on its second album, *Mountain Air*, which included her *Mountain Air (Arctic Air)*—a 2013 realization of a 1993 work which assumes a new title and character in each location where it is performed—alongside works by Marguerite Brown and Teodora Stepančić commissioned expressly for the ensemble.

When *Rewild* first began to coalesce, Richter had been working closely with Ghost Ensemble's tightly knit core of musicians for nearly a decade, and had come to know intimately their personalities, inclinations, and capabilities. After completing *Wind People* in 2016, he had begun to gather together a variety of sketches, which, he says, "it eventually became clear could become a large piece, in the form of a journey through different landscapes and dimensions."

By 2019, Richter had determined that the various notions and fragments he'd compiled would indeed cohere into a single piece, his longest for the ensemble to date. He continued to work with the sketches during the long isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, shuffling their order and rejecting some options. "We workshopped the material in the fall of '21, spring of '22," Richter recalls. "I did a lot of listening to our recordings of various sketches in different orders, listening to how they communicated with one another, and the piece grew into the current form."

What resulted was a 48-page score for a 50-minute work marked *mezzo piano* at its most demonstrative moments. Much of *Rewild* is marked pianissimo, and numerous passages are even quieter. The implication is clear: Just as the natural processes of ecology and evolution that inspired Richter are too slow, spacious, and complex to command most human attention, so, too, does the resulting music exist in a space that might be imperceptible, unless listeners made a concerted effort to listen deeply and hear differently.

As in the natural world, that attention is rewarded with the apprehension of something uncanny and marvelous. Though *Rewild* is never overtly imitative, it's not difficult to translate the infinitesimally quiet cloth-rubbed instruments, breaths exhaled through instruments without producing notes or tones, and seemingly random punctuation of discreet, woody pops and thumps as a forest evocation.

The effects Richter achieves throughout the composition come as a result of his intimacy with the members of Ghost Ensemble and what they're capable of doing on their instruments—including microtonal subtleties, multiphonics, and physical alterations and distortions. Richter approaches the accordion with a similar expansive view toward changing what the instrument can do, in part by tinkering with its innards in ways many lay listeners might not even know are possible.

"The accordion has different registers, like organ stops," Richter explains. "The way these are selected on most accordions is by sliding a thin metal sheet across the little windows that open into the hundreds of reed chambers. If you click the register switches on or off, the way they are designed to function, you're going either all the way open or closed on those little windows. But if you take off the grill and do a little bit of preparation on the register-switch mechanism, it becomes a spectrum with infinite gradations between fully open and fully closed—and that is my special sauce as an accordion player."

Yet even if Richter, like Pisaro-Liu, creates passages that sound uncannily evocative of the natural world, *Rewild* is not meant to be heard as a literal replication of some idealized arboreal setting, but rather a gathering of discrete yet interconnected elements functioning together in balance for a long, slow span of time, suggesting multiple layered and interacting timescales. Put more simply, the music isn't meant to sound like a forest, but instead to evoke to a listener the depth, breadth, and interdependence of a wild ecosystem's very being, as well the amount of time such actions take to evolve—and, perhaps, how fragile and precarious the system actually is.

The music is meant to heighten awareness and provoke contemplation. But Richter stops short of framing *Rewild* as an example of ecological activism. "I don't think I've got the right to claim that," he says. "Activists are working so hard every day, going out into the streets and organizing people. But the work I create emerges from what I find most meaningful, and the themes that inspired *Rewild* are some of the things I care most about in the world."

Even if Richter doesn't frame *Rewild* as protest, the work emerges from a conviction that altering perspectives can foster positive change, and its reorientation of listening can function as a subtle form of persuasion. To that end, there could be no better benediction than the one Richter provides in his preface to the *Rewild* score:

Perhaps the more we are able to listen as plants, mushrooms, rhizospheres, ecosystems, the more we can learn about being human, seeing ourselves not just as individuals or as a collective humanity, but as blood cells in the higher-level organism of the biosphere.

—Steve Smith

Steve Smith is a writer, editor and storyteller based in New York City, and senior copywriter for the Brooklyn Academy of Music. He has written about music for The New York Times and The New Yorker, and served as an editor for the Boston Globe, Time Out New York, and NPR.

Ben Richter (born 1986, Pittsburgh, PA) is a composer-performer with roots in the experimental music communities of New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin. Inspired by nonhuman consciousness, Richter's music often explores the interactions among gradual transformations and perceptual thresholds to orient toward the expansive timescales of geologic and ecological systems. As an accordionist, Richter harnesses the extended microtonal and timbral potential of the instrument in compositions on the recordings *Aurogeny* (2023) and *Panthallassa: Dream Music of the Once and Future Ocean* (2017), both released alongside ensemble and electroacoustic works. The founding Artistic & Executive Director of Ghost Ensemble, for whom his previous compositions include *Healing Ghost* (2012), *Star Maker* (2014), and *Wind People* (2016), Richter has also served as music/sound curator of UMass-Amherst's Y3K and Futuring Lab exhibitions and has taught at CalArts, CUNY-New York City College of Technology, and as a Deep

Listening facilitator in the tradition of early mentor Pauline Oliveros. In addition to Ghost, Richter's collaborators include Loadbang, House on Fire Trio, Music For Your Inbox, Hudební Současnost, Capella Ornamentata, Koan Quartet, SEM Ensemble, Wild Rumpus, Nomi Epstein, Phill Niblock, Jeonghyeon Joo, Daniel Costello, Margaret Lancaster, William Lang, writers Edie Meidav and Margot Douaihy, and intermedia artists Lei Han and Kyoung eun Kang.

Ghost Ensemble is a mixed chamber ensemble dedicated to experimental music that expands perceptual horizons to foster individual and community transformation. Established in 2012, the ensemble conducts long-term exploratory workshops with a broad range of composers and creators to nurture adventurous new music over multiple seasons, commissioning, germinating, premiering, and touring music that moves beyond boundaries of genre, style, and scene. Collaborators have included Elizabeth Adams, Marguerite Brown, Somna M Bulist, Laura Cetilia, Kyle Gann, Assaf Gidron, Liisa Hirsch, James Ilgenfritz, Catherine Lamb, Sky Macklay, Miya Masaoka, Phill Niblock, Pauline Oliveros, Leonie Roessler, John Rot, Andrew Christopher Smith, Teodora Stepančić, Lester St. Louis, Cassia Streb, Yasunao Tone, Chaz Underriner, Lucie Vítková, and Kristina Wolfe.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ben Richter

Aurogeny. Infrequent Seams IS-1058 [2 CDs].

Panthalassa: Dream Music of the Once and Future Ocean. Infrequent Seams IS-1013 [CD].

Dissolution Seedlings (with House on Fire Trio). Sawyer Editions, forthcoming [CD].

Ghost Ensemble

Mountain Air (music by Pauline Oliveros, Marguerite Brown, & Teodora Stepančić). Indexical INDEX-8 [CD].

We Who Walk Again (music by Sky Macklay, Pauline Oliveros, & Ben Richter). Indexical INDEX-4 [LP].

Catherine Lamb: interius/exterior. greyscale, forthcoming [LP].

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Engineer: Joseph Branciforte

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), In Memoriam

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