



School: Bath School of Music & Performing Arts

Researcher: Dr Matthew Sergeant

Project Title: Meeting the Universe Halfway (composition for instruments and three custom-made apparatuses)

UOA: 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

Research Questions

Meeting the Universe Halfway (2018) is a composition for flute, saxophone, electric guitar, cello, and three custom-made instruments, called apparatuses¹.

The primary research questions explored in the composition considers problematizing and re-examining human/nonhuman relationships in musical performance (e.g. the relationship between body and instrument) through a new materialist lens in order to derive a new compositional strategy.

The recent Twenty-first Century 'material turn' (Barrett & Bolt 2013) in critical theory has radically expanded understandings of the material world. If this 'new materialism' holds any internal consistency, it is that '[M]atter is no longer imagined [...] as a massive, opaque plenitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. One could conclude accordingly that matter "becomes" rather than matter "is"' (Coole & Frost 2010: 10). A key facet within such thought is explicated in the work of Australian philosopher, Jane Bennett, in her notion of 'vibrant matter', by which she means '[T]he capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.' (Bennet 2010: p.viii). Such work re-evaluates the material world as sometime active and dynamic, imbued with an agential ability to act, interfere, and co-mingle with any human agency operative in the world.

Acoustic instrumental performance in music has yet to fully consolidate the implications of such ideas. Instruments are generally seen as passive material vessels through which the will of their human operators pass unimpeded. This project will explore such implications multi-dimensionally, building a compositional approach designed to foreground the agency of sound-making things as an active and discursive part of its syntax.

What form might a musical instrument take if it were to foreground the agency of its material component over that of its human operator/performers?

How might such instruments (as speculated above) be integrated into musical discourse with more conventional instruments? How might a compositional vocabulary be designed to achieve this?

¹ The term 'apparatus' comes from philosopher of science Karen Barad, which emerged as a useful descriptor for the custom-made instruments created for the project through the research process (as opposed to being part of the input research questioning. Barad says *[A]pparatuses are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering*; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Apparatuses enact agential cuts that produce determinate boundaries and properties of "entities" within phenomena, where "phenomena" are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components' (Barad 2007: 148. Emphasis retained).