

PROFILE: CATHERINE LAMB

Catherine Lamb was born in 1982 in Olympia, Washington State, US and currently lives in Berlin. She is an active composer exploring the interaction of tone, summations of shapes and shadows, phenomenological expansions, the architecture of the liminal (states in between outside/inside) and the long introduction form.



Catherine Lamb

How did your compositional practice evolve?

My compositional practice has always been self-guided, since my early teachers weren't interested in what I was writing. When I was 11 my piano teacher kicked me out of her studio because I was spending too much time composing and not enough time practising. I'm grateful she rejected me: I learned about the pleasure of getting lost through experimentation and openness. The discovery of that creative, sacred space where time is lost, devoid of the need to please anyone except for myself, was perhaps the most important lesson I learned in my musical life. All my subsequent teenage music mentors were similarly uninterested in my creative process (perhaps the invisibility of growing up as a girl in that time and place), so I was able to protect myself. An older friend showed me how to develop jazz chords to Thelonious Monk tunes and I listened to and played a lot of music; that was how I learned theory, not from a composition teacher.

This self-direction has continued to guide me. It's why I went to India at the age of 21 to study Hindusthani music, in spite of my teachers telling me the music was less sophisticated. That is certainly not what I was hearing on Ram Naryan and N. Rajam recordings, and my intuition was correct. For nine months I lived with a brilliant sitarist named Jyoti Thakar in Pune, my first true music mentor. She took me to hear Uday Bhawalkar, for instance, my introduction to dhrupad music, and what she opened for me forever changed *how* I listened. This shift of listening is how I found my way to James Tenney at Cal Arts, as well as Michael Pisaro and various inspiring and brilliant peers.

The third compositional shift was when I turned my focus towards the study of rational intonation. Unfortunately, Tenney passed away when I was 24 and at that time I was just starting to utilise ratios in my compositions, and so I dove further into an idiosyncratic practice on the subject, solidifying my focus. The experimental filmmaker and dhrupadi Mani Kaul became my mentor at that time, but he was mostly back in India, so this consisted more in the form of long telephone conversations around philosophy and art, certainly influential to what I was trying to do but in a parallel stream.

The fourth shift was around 2011. When Mani Kaul passed away, I left my life in Los Angeles, was at grad school and a bit lost. I started to incorporate some electronic elements into my music and was focusing a bit inward on more soloistic pursuits. Then I moved to Berlin in 2013 with Bryan Eubanks and since then have been finding myself in a

community here. My compositional practice since the move to Berlin has been a gradual shift from a very inward, closed state to a more and more expanded, outward state. The past few years I feel like I've been going through the fifth shift, where I've become most interested in humanistic relationships, the interaction of beings. So this discordance between inward and outward searching is very realistic for me at this moment in time.

Your work often involves a very beautiful marriage between familiar modes of music-making and quite unfamiliar tuning systems. Can you say something about this 'marriage'?

One element that has consistently interested me in recent years has been to redefine for myself what the role of harmony and melody are (not to even get to rhythm, which I use more as vibrancy/perceptions around time and forward momentum). I became interested in the manner in which a melodic phrase can highlight or alter the harmonicity that is sounding, so that melody is not above harmony but rather integrated inside a total structure. The melody places attention on the edges of the shapes, helps to build a frame around the total thing we are listening into. It also helps to initiate changes, and I'm very interested in changes. It creates a pathway through time that makes sense out of a conglomerate interaction – however, only if it is integrated in the sense that it is not overpowering but rather servicing a greater image and functionality, always directing the attention back towards harmonic space.

You've compared your involvement in the interactions of tone with the *Interaction of Colour* in Paul Klee and Bridget Riley. In Riley's work there are sometimes interactions so radical that my eye seems to be pushed away from them; is an aural equivalent to this something that interests you?

I stole Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color* and replaced 'colour' with 'tone', not only because of how this phrase emphasises tonality *in interaction* but also because I love the dichotomy of playful/serious, or the manner in which collective learning around phenomena was conducted in his experimental classes. With Paul Klee my inspiration comes more from his sense of kinetic motion between vibrating planes. I am still trying to comprehend how Charles Gaines has explicitly superimposed numbers on physical reality (like his *Numbers and Trees* series) through segmentation, tiling or repetition.

Bridget Riley's work most willingly explores dimensionality through converging elements or magnetic propulsions from planes meeting, creating moments of discordance in those in-between spaces – from a triangle becoming curved or colours clashing in parallel, she accesses expanded perspectives. Related to the phenomenal experience Riley is interested in, I am constantly returning to this Arnold Schoenberg quote: 'dissonances, even the simplest, are more difficult to comprehend than consonances. And therefore the battle about them goes on throughout the length of music history... The criterion for the acceptance or rejection of dissonances is not that of their beauty, but rather only their perceptibility.'

For me, there are two important aspects of consonance/dissonance in relation to the phenomenologist (listener/viewer). One we can describe within our known and tested physical reality, and the other is the unique disposition and psychological perspective of the subject

experiencing the phenomena in action. These two aspects can often become confused. For instance, I am often surprised by others' descriptions of my own use of sequential harmonic motion because it tends to be so different from how I would describe what is happening. Not that it is incorrect, but just that the subject is entangled in their own experience when listening, different from mine. At the same time, I do believe that there are inherent universal harmonic functionalities simply because of their vibrating principles, like how you suggest Riley is very aware of the vibrancy formed between two colours in interaction. I think moments like this can be acknowledged through physics, yet always through the lens of the evolving neurological pathway, or the narrative arc, of the perceiver. For instance, since my work employs harmonic space as central focus, it will always cognitively clash with the monster that is European Harmonic Theory and the subjects (humans) deeply versed within it.

The Harmonic Space Orchestra was begun in 2019 and, presumably, was paused during the pandemic. What are your plans for the group?

My plans may be different from the others' plans! Our intentions are to acknowledge the pluralistic natures of the individuals within the group and to respect the collective desires or drives towards what is to come. It has been an experiment in collectivity thus far, which has undoubtedly led us through various challenges but has also opened up much potential and humanistic beauty, some of which we are only starting to witness. This requires a great deal of patience as well as holding on to idealistic principles in action. There were many unofficial happenings before 2019, but in 2019 we gave ourselves a name.

In 2020 we produced a large-scale festival around the work of James Tenney and then immediately went into lockdown. Since then we have been very active but perhaps not so apparent to the public eye. For instance, over the last year and a half most of our efforts have revolved around internal weekly sessions. Rather than rehearsing repertoire, we have been investigating harmonic space as a group of people with different instruments and subjective experiences. This work is necessary simply because, to my knowledge, I do not know of another large ensemble conducting such artistic research. We will soon emerge more publicly again with some informal series as well as spring '23 collaborations with Ellen Arkbro and Tashi Wada. For me personally, the internal work we are currently doing is the most radical and important, so that when we approach old and new compositions again, there will be an even deeper engagement on all aspects (interpreter/composer/improviser/listener).

Do you think being a string player has influenced your interest in intonation?

Certainly, being a violist has influenced my relation to harmonic. The inner voice – being the one to determine where to place those pivotal thirds or enjoying the vantage point of the orchestra from a central position. The ability to sustain with the bow and listen to those complex timbres. . . I have thought of the sound like a vacuum fan. . . it both fans out as well as collects in everything around it, fusing with other timbres so readily that interactions quickly become confusing and complex and integrated. The viola is a quiet initiator – it glues everything together subliminally – and its fingerboard is a continuous plane to research pitch-space, so it invites one to forget Western harmonic theory and enjoy a more true-to-acoustics pathway of musical development.