

harmonics. A fixed-pitch instrument, the piano is not often used by Cassidy. Its clusters, polychords and scampering runs fit in with the rest of the group. In the middle section, it dominates the others, only to be upstaged by saxophone and trombone once again. The juxtaposition between microtones and piano clusters serves to have two different pitch systems going on at once. The effect can be dizzying. The last section of the piece finds the group erupting followed by a long decrescendo led by an ostinato bass pattern.

A Way of Making Ghosts: Self-portrait, 1996 is performed by Ensemble Musikfabrik: Helen Bledsoe plays piccolo and alto flute, Christine Chapman horn, Carl Rosman contrabass clarinet and E-flat clarinet and Dirk Wietheger cello. Once again, Cassidy conducts. A forceful first section has piccolo and horn taking up a duel under which the strings play pressured glissandi. A spate of glassine harmonics delineates a second section. The horn rejoins, playing fast peregrinations between stopped and unstopped notes. The players move adroitly between their doubling instruments, adding to the colours found in tutti passages. Fortissimi are succeeded by delicate sustained strands, interrupted with progressively greater frequency by horn attacks. And for a moment, rest, a space of silence rare in the music. Pianissimo filigrees are sporadically interrupted by furious interruptions from contrabass clarinet, piccolo and a repeating figure in the horn. A cry from contrabass clarinet momentarily slams the door shut on the passage, only to have it resumed. Penetrating piccolo and fleet gestures from clarinet and cello are taken up, only to be interrupted once again by a forte multiphonic from the clarinet. Not to be denied, cello glissandi and delicate piccolo resume their lines again, only to have the clarinet push the proceedings, with a flurry of activity coming to an abrupt close.

Cassidy's music is innovative, but not for innovation's sake. Instead, he strives to allow musicians to embody his works on a visceral level. This is also true of the forms he creates, which may surprise the listener but, in retrospect, display a firm sense of design. Can he go much further in this direction? One is eager to find out.

Christian Carey
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Bryn Harrison, *A Coiled Form* Saviet. Another Timbre, AT201.

Violinist Sarah Saviet originally commissioned composer Bryn Harrison to write a short solo

piece of five minutes, but the open-ended approach to repetition which emerged in the collaborative process of composition quickly led to the formation of much longer performances: 20 minutes for the London premiere, 40 minutes in Berlin, and for this new CD release a vastly extended version which lasts for more than 50 minutes.

At its heart, this is a work which deals with repetition and our relationship with repeated sound, taking Saviet's violin through nearly an hour's interrogation of the same simple musical phrases. Harrison (quoting the story about stepping into the same river twice, often attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus) states, 'You never step into the same river twice. The water is always flowing, always changing. And it's the same with music – even if you're repeating a phrase or a pattern, it's never exactly the same twice. He adds that when repeating musical thoughts there are '...repetitions are never exactly the same – there will always be slight differences'.¹

This creates a listening process of continual, obsessive re-examination of the same musical material – a direct reflection of Harrison's comments on his own compositional practice: 'I'm never satisfied with anything that I do, and I'm always re-examining and trying to refine it. It's a very obsessive process for me' – and his ongoing attempts to distil his own distinct twenty-first-century take on minimalism to create something that is as perfect as possible. The title – *A Coiled Form* – aptly describes the experience of listening to this piece. Since Saviet seems to 'uncoil' and 're-coil' Harrison's short phrases with widely varied numbers of repetitions, and that these sets of repetitions then form larger blocks, which themselves are repeated, sometimes immediately, sometimes much later, we form the impression that the music is somehow 'nested' or coiled inside itself, and that we, as listeners, are turning it over in our hands, rotating it and viewing it from different angles.

This multifaceted viewing of the same musical object generates the underlying form of the piece: a continuous span of concentrated rapid violin figurations, many of which are as short as three or four pitches. These figures are often immediately repeated, sometimes with slight variations in timing or emphasis, but generally in forms much like their original

¹ <http://www.anothertimbre.com/vessels.html> (accessed 31 May 2023).

appearance. Sometimes a figuration is repeated 30, 40 or more times, sometimes fewer, occasionally more. The pattern or rule which determines how many repetitions occur is impossible to determine from listening – as soon as the listener feels that they can anticipate the movement from moment to moment, Harrison's score surprises them. In the context of this piece, repetition is a way of creating a kind of friction, a tension between what is expected and what actually happens. This tension is evident throughout the work, as the repeated patterns gradually change and evolve over time. This lack of predictability is a defining feature of Harrison's mature style, even though his music seems to be based on doing the same thing over and over. In fact, one of the most impressive aspects of the piece is the way in which Harrison can create a sense of forward momentum despite the repetitive nature of the music. There is, even on repeated listenings (another coil of repetition drawn around Harrison's existing spirals?) something intoxicatingly unpredictable and mercurial in this music. The vast span of time is filled with continual streams of notes, endless repeated phrases, which paradoxically suddenly end without warning or signal, and which then might (or might not) return later in the piece – a few bars later, or perhaps 30 minutes later. The whole teleological basis of the piece seems designed to eliminate its own existence, a carefully planned and logically time-structured series of musical events which somehow overcome their own relationship with the regular process of time – reflection Harrison's fascination with '...the whole notion of time in music and, in particular, by the ways in which repetition and change may occur...' and the shift, '...away from a dialectical time towards a less goal-orientated way of construction'.²

Like much of Harrison's mature work this piece draws on the practices of minimalism, but the listener is drawn in by the music's intricacy and detail; there is much more occurring than the simple repetition of musical patterns, or the phase-based audible processes of Reich et al. The particular features of the soundworld created in this piece are the complex, deliberate and distinct variations introduced into the timbre of Saviet's solo violin, utilising the parameters of bow placement and pressure to create subtly shifting graduations of timbral fluctuations. The

slow, methodical transitions from sul tasto to an extreme sul ponticello position (almost playing on the actual bridge of the violin), effected while repeating the same note sequences, are immediately striking, and the shimmering spectrum of overtones and harmonics revealed create endlessly fascinating auditory phenomena. In addition to this, Saviet demonstrates a wide range of bow pressure, from airy flautando through to an almost pitchless overpressure. This fine attention to timbral detail and gradual change over time is a hallmark of Harrison's music, and even without studying the score, the intellectual consideration behind the construction of this piece is clearly and instantly apparent.

The fact that Harrison is fortunate to be well served by such a champion of his music cannot be understated. As the commissioner and the performer of the initial shorter versions of this work, as well as the much longer version heard here, Sarah Saviet has demonstrated her commitment to this piece – a commitment which is more than matched with playing of unrelentingly sustained focus and intensity throughout the entire span of the recording, revealing a remarkable level of physical and emotional stamina. There may be one or two invisible edits, but this performance carries the conviction and direction of a single, extended recording take. Saviet's playing is never less than precise, absolutely packed with intention and authority. When listening, the stark beauty of her playing, and the range of timbral variations she draws upon are the shades of light and dark which Harrison has used as his palette for this elongated version of the piece. *A Coiled Form* is a work of remarkable beauty and complexity. Harrison's attention to detail and his innovative approach to composition make for a piece that is both hypnotic and engaging.

Florence Anna Maunders

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Michaela Gleave, Amanda Cole, Louise Devenish, *Cosmic Time*. The Sound Collectors Lab, Bandcamp.

Cosmic Time is a new work for percussion and electronics created by visual artist Michaela Gleave, experimental instrumental and electronic composer Amanda Cole and contemporary percussionist Louise Devenish.

Originally, the work was developed for live performance with four percussionists, each representing a different 'spirit' of the universe,

² <https://www.james-saunders.com/interview-with-brynharrison/> (accessed 31 May 2023).