

## GRAINS AND SOUNDSCAPE

Octophonic Works from Vancouver by Barry Truax

UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

December 4, 2018

*Riverrun* (1986-87; octophonic version 2004), 8 soundtracks, 19:50

*The Wings of Nike* (1987), 8 soundtracks and computer graphic video, 12:25

*The Shaman Ascending*, (2004-2005), 8 soundtracks, 15:45

### INTERMISSION

*Chalice Well* (2009), 8 soundtracks, 14:20

*Earth And Steel* (2013), 8 soundtracks, 11:00

*The Garden of Sonic Delights* (2015-16), 8 soundtracks, 11:10

*Riverrun* creates a sound environment in which stasis and flux, solidity and movement co-exist in a dynamic balance. The corresponding metaphor is that of a river, always moving yet seemingly permanent. From the smallest rivulet to the fullest force of its mass, a river is formed from a collection of countless droplets and sources. So too with the sound in this composition which bases itself on the smallest possible 'unit' of sound in order to create larger textures and masses. The title is the first word in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

The fundamental paradox of granular synthesis — that the enormously rich and powerful textures it produces result from its being based on the most 'trivial' grains of sound — suggested a metaphoric relation to the river whose power is based on the accumulation of countless 'powerless' droplets of water. The opening section of the work portrays that accumulation, as individual 'droplets' of sound gradually multiply into a powerful broadband texture. The piece also captures some of the awe one feels in the presence of the overpowering force of such a body of water, whether in a perturbed or calm state, and as such it seems to create a different mode of listening than does conventional instrumental or electroacoustic music.

*The Wings of Nike* is a collaborative work between two composers, Theo Goldberg who created the images with the aid of Vax and Amiga computers, and Barry Truax who created the music with real-time granular synthesis. The work is in three sections. The visuals are based on a 'sampled' visual image of the famous statue, the Winged Victory (or Nike) of Samothrace, and the music is mainly based on two sampled phonemes of vocal sound, one male, the other female. Despite the brevity of the source material used for *Nike* (i.e. two phonemes), very rich textures and complex rhythmic patterns were obtained from it through the technique of granulation.

*The Shaman Ascending* evokes the imagery of a traditional shaman figure chanting in the quest for spiritual ecstasy. However, in this case, the listener is placed inside of a circle of loudspeakers with the vocal utterances swirling around at high rates of speed and timbral development. The work proceeds in increasing stages of complexity as the shaman ascends towards a higher spiritual state.

The work and its title are inspired by a pair of Canadian Inuit sculptures by John Terriak with collectively the same name, as well as Inuit throat singing. All of the vocal material heard in the piece is derived from a recording of the Vancouver bass singer Derrick Christian.

Chalice Well is a holy well situated at the foot of Glastonbury Tor in southwest England, thought to be originally the island of Avalon from Arthurian legend, and the site where Joseph of Arimathea placed the chalice known as the Holy Grail. According to legend, the Tor, a masculine symbol, is hollow underneath and the entrance to the underworld, guarded by the Grail. The well, on the other hand, is a symbol of the feminine aspect of deity, and its waters are believed to possess healing qualities.

This work *Chalice Well* takes the listener on an imaginary journey down into the well, passing through several cavernous chambers on its descent, filled with rushing and trickling water, including the chamber of the feminine spirit. The journey continues to the glass chamber, then to the gates of the underworld, only to be confronted by the image of the Grail, and finally comes to rest in a space where wind and water, the masculine and the feminine are combined.

*Earth and Steel* takes the listener back to a time a century ago when large steel ships were built in enclosed slips, and rich metallic resonances rang out. These larger than life sounds reflected the sheer volume of the ships themselves that dwarfed those who were building them. However, just as the piece progresses and ends, these soundscapes now have become increasingly distant memories, only to be re-imagined in museums, such as the one at the Royal Naval Dockyards in Chatham, Kent, where the work was premiered in 2013.

*The Garden of Sonic Delights* invites the listener to enter an imaginary soundscape (one that Murray Schafer might describe as a "soniferous garden") richly filled with sounds that may remind us of the actual sounds of water, wind, insects, animals and birds. Our visit will take us through the afternoon until the next morning, hopefully leaving us delighted and refreshed.

**Technical Note:** Original recordings from the World Soundscape Project Tape Collection, with sound processing realized with Soundhack convolution, the composer's DMX-1000 software for granular synthesis, Chris Rolfe's MacPod software for granular time stretching, with spatialization created by Harmonic Functions' TiMax2 Soundhub matrix mixer.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Barry Truax is a Professor Emeritus in the School of Communication and formerly the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University where he taught courses in acoustic communication and electroacoustic music. He worked with the World Soundscape Project, editing its *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*, and has published a book *Acoustic Communication* dealing with all aspects of sound and technology. As a composer, Truax is best known for his work with the PODX computer music system which he has used to create tape solo works, music theatre pieces and those with live performers or computer graphics. In 1991 his work, *Riverrun*, was awarded the Magisterium at the International Competition of Electroacoustic Music in Bourges, France. Truax's multi-channel soundscape compositions are frequently featured in concerts and festivals around the world. In 2015-16 he was the Edgard Varèse Guest Professor at the TU in Berlin.

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