

Noticing a Landscape: Historical Instruments, Ecology, and Digital Media

John Butt concludes his survey of the historically informed performance movement (HIP), *Playing With History*, by relating HIP to broader heritage movements, in particular architectural conservationism. He observes a quickening of the rate of preservationist tendencies in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concluding “the faster the rate of obsolescence, the quicker things qualify for preservation”.¹ This, Butt notes, reflects a broadening (cultural) realisation in the Anthropocene: “As we begin to perceive the limits of the earth’s resources a culture of recycling becomes vital for our future survival... the notion of linear progress becomes less obviously advantageous”.² For the twenty-first century artist (working ‘post-HIP’), questions remain: how can new music made with historical instruments meaningfully intervene in ecology and conservation? How might our increasingly digitised cultural landscape aid or impede exploration of these ideas? And what futures might these creative interventions imagine? Written for the Icelandic Baroque quartet Nordic Affect, my recent composition *Quartet for a Landscape* approaches these questions. Consisting of sparse music for Baroque strings and harpsichord, recorded live at a concert in Reykjavik, the work was installed as a single-speaker installation in the Peak District. The film of this installation combines recorded music with field recording to occupy a liminal space at the intersection of the natural/cultural, contemporary/historical, and digital/material. In making the work, I drew on an ethos espoused by Anna Tsing et al, that “Living in a time of planetary catastrophe... begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the world around us. [Only then] can we repurpose the tools of modernity against the terrors of Progress to make visible the other worlds it has ignored and damaged”.³ This paper will outline my methodological approach in making *Quartet for a Landscape* (supported with audio-visual examples), drawing on the above-quoted literature and autoethnography to explore what insights have flowed from practice, and how these insights might contribute to broader debates in HIP, ecological (sound) art, and new music.



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Benjamin Tassie is a composer of electronic and acoustic music. Often writing for Renaissance instruments and analogue synthesisers, Benjamin is interested in how ancient instruments, forms, or tuning systems can be co-opted to transcend traditions of genre and concert performance. Recent commissions include a filmed installation for the National Gallery in London, *Solo for Computer and Tape*, and new music for performance at Tate Britain responding to the gallery’s 2020 exhibition, *British Baroque: Power and Illusion*. Benjamin is recipient of the PRS Foundation/Jerwood Arts Composers’ Award 2021. He is PhD candidate at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire under the supervision of Professor Joe Cutler and Professor Jamie Savan. His doctoral research project is funded by the AHRC Midlands4Cities doctoral training

¹ John Butt, *Playing With History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p 169.

² *Ibid.*, p 170.

³ Anna Tsing et al (eds), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p M7

partnership. Recent publications include 'Post-HIP: New Music for Old Instruments in the Twenty-First Century' published in TEMPO (July 2021).