

THE WORLD IN PIECES

THE COMPOSER AARON EINBOND

by Tim Rutherford-Johnson



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Beginning with the recorded sounds of nature, the city, and political demonstrations, and connecting them with the individual playing style of particular musicians, the composer Aaron Einbond – born in New York and living in London – has developed his personal take on compositional transcription, transforming even the noisy, not-typically-musical sounds of the outside world into music in which timbre is the characteristic parameter.

■ The sound of the real enters – unmistakably, unexpectedly – at the end of Aaron Einbond's *Resistance* (2012) for bass clarinet and electronics. It is the sound of protest: recordings of marches and political actions made in 2011 in New York (during the Occupy movement) and Tahrir Square, Cairo (during the so-called Arab Spring).

The sound is real but not specific: no words can be heard, so the sounds cannot be attached to any particular political cause. Although Einbond has acknowledged the source of his recordings,¹ there is no intention that their origin can be heard. Yet the sound is instantly recognisable: the timbre of the voices and the dense polyrhythm of chants, whistles and shouts identify it as

political protest. These are voices on the march: not the homorhythmic swell and fall of the sports crowd, nor the bubbling chatter of the café or the street. These are voices with an unmistakable sonic signature. What is surprising is that they arrive at the end of a piece for bass clarinet: a musical abstraction. That music makes use of relatively familiar means: breath tones, key

**Composing with recorded sounds
beyond notes | Aaron Einbond**

slaps, harmonics and multiphonics, some instrumental preparation (squares of paper, plastic and aluminium foil attached to the clarinet's bell). What, we wonder, does it have to do with the protestors that we hear at the work's end?

Aaron Einbond was born in New York in 1978. He received his compositional education in the US (Harvard, University of California, Berkeley), the UK (Cambridge, Royal College of Music) and France (IRCAM), and his teachers have included Mario Davidovsky, Julian Anderson, Edmund Campion and Philippe Le Roux. He currently teaches music composition, sound and technology at City University, London. He is interested in applications of technology within instrumental music, and almost all of his works combine electronics and acoustic instruments. Since 2007 – beginning with his piece *Beside Oneself* for viola and electronics (first performed by Ellen Ruth Rose), composed while studying at the University of California, Berkeley – he has also used audio analysis and retrieval software to transcribe recorded sounds into instrumental notation.

Einbond's interest in phonographic transcription connects his work to that of a number of composers of his generation, including Patricia Alessandrini, Joanna Bailie, Richard Beaudoin and Cassandra Miller. (It also finds precedents in a wider musical interest in forms of transcription that one can find in the music of composers as diverse as Peter Ablinger, Luciano Berio and Michael Finnissy.) What makes Einbond's work distinctive is his focus on timbre as a musical parameter, rather than more abstract or easily quantifiable values such as pitch.

Since *Beside Oneself* Einbond's particular method of transcription has remained relatively consistent. He has described it in detail elsewhere,² so I shall present just a summary here. He begins with a recording. Often this is a field recording: the sounds of rain, snow, frogs and cities all feature in his music. This recording is named the 'target'. Alongside it, Einbond records samples of the musicians for whom he is writing the piece, playing in ways that create a large array of timbres. For *Without Words* (2012) for soprano, eleven instruments and electronics, for example, Einbond recorded the

soprano Amanda DeBoer Bartlett improvising with a number of vocal 'preparations', including a kazoo, a whistle, a cardboard tube, a teapot, and a spring drum. From this database of samples, he conducts a 'concatenative synthesis' with the target recording (using the *CataRT* corpus-based concatenative synthesis system developed at IRCAM by Diemo Schwarz in collaboration with Einbond and others). This involves cutting the target recording into a series of small pieces – while retaining their original order – and drawing units from the database of performer samples that most closely match these in terms of timbre. The result is an 'audio mosaic' of those performer samples that closely matches the sound of the original target recording, but is of course created not from the sound of frogs or melting ice, but from acoustic instruments and human voices. The final stage of the pre-compositional process is to load the audio mosaic into *OpenMusic* or *bach* software packages which creates a notation out of those sounds – a notation that with some further compositional intervention can be given to the performers to play.

In *Resistance* the source material that is being represented is clear: the sounds of protest. It also – unlike the sounds of natural phenomena used predominantly in his earlier works – carries a lot of potential meaning. This is one of the challenges of the piece: the way in which the defiant, 'real' world appears to intrude on the somewhat rarefied and specialist sounds of the musical avant garde. The idea for it arose in the summer of 2012, when the protests in New York and Cairo were still very much part of the global discourse. Einbond attended two festivals that summer: dOCUMENTA 13, in Kassel, and after it the Darmstadt Ferienkürse. Moving from one to the other it became clear to him that the world of art, at that moment, was intensely engaged with what was happening in the wider world: the theme of dOCUMENTA that year was 'Collapse and Recovery' [Zusammenbruch und Wiederaufbau]; part of the event was staged in Cairo, where it was directly affected by events there. By contrast, to Einbond the world of new music appeared insular, especially in reference to Occupy and the



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On the trail of Jack the Ripper | Aaron Einbond (right) with The Riot Ensemble during the video recording for « Kate Frankenstein » (2018) in East London

Aaron Einbond: «Kate Frankenstein» (2018) for ensemble, excerpt

Arab Spring. In *Resistance* he sought a way to draw attention to way that sounds that have nothing to do with the concert hall might be brought into that space, and be heard within a musical context, through their similarity of timbre. *Resistance* represents, therefore, ‘an extreme contrast between timbral, sonic similarity and semantic dissimilarity ... it’s forcing us right into that conflict’.³

The choice of target recording is clearly important within Einbond’s compositional process. Just as important, however, is the other half of the synthesis process: the recordings of the performer. *Resistance*, for example, was made in collaboration with the UK-based clarinetist Heather Roche, who supplied the sample database of clarinet sounds. In *Without Words*, composed in the same year, Einbond became aware that the sample database he recorded with the soprano DeBoer Bartlett was not just a collection of raw materials, but a docu-

ment of her work, made at a particular moment and in a particular place – a sort of field recording in itself. Adapting Richard Barrett’s term ‘radically idiomatic’, a reference to Barrett’s practice of engaging ‘as intimately as possible with the musical resources at the conjunction between performer and instrument’,⁴ Einbond refers to the way in which the recordings of DeBoer Bartlett at a specific time and place create a sort of ‘radical personalization’ within the piece.⁵

DeBoer Bartlett’s presence goes beyond the commonplace instance of a performer who has provided a set of mannerisms and techniques from which a composer has drawn inspiration (one thinks, for example, of Berio’s *Sequenze*, Liza Lim’s music for the ELISION Ensemble, or Rebecca Saunders’ works for musikFabrik). Through the process of recording, synthesis and transcription, DeBoer Bartlett’s unique personality, the grain of her voice and her

repertory of sounds have become part of the score of the work. Einbond makes a comparison with popular music: that the character of a given song belongs as much to the character of its performer – Patti Smith, for example – as it does to the song’s chords or melodies. This is the basic principle of the ‘cover version’. Anyone who wishes to record a Patti Smith song themselves must not only learn the notated parts of the song, but also enter into a relationship with her vocal performance, either adopting, rejecting it, or developing it somehow. In any case, Smith herself retains a ghostly presence; often the interest when listening to a cover version (let’s say, Morrissey’s cover of Smith’s ‘Redondo Beach’) lies in the creative tension between the current performance and that ghost.

Performers of new music have features of their playing styles that are just as recognisable as those in popular music or jazz. DeBoer Bartlett now occupies a ghostly

role within the ongoing performance history of *Without Words* (just as Roche does for Resistance): Einbond considers that any future soprano will have to approach his piece as though it were a cover, bringing their own particular style into productive tension with DeBoer Bartlett's. The interest in the particular qualities of an individual performer – rather than the abstract notion of 'a soprano' or 'a string quartet' – is a product of recording. Recording, whether that is in popular music, classical music, or jazz, has made it possible for us to become familiar with and distinguish the grain of particular performers, and it is recording that has introduced the phenomenon of the 'ghost' performer into contemporary music: Einbond's practice in this respect bears a relation to Nono's use of recordings of Gidon Kremer in his *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* (1988–9).

Einbond's most recent pieces extend this idea of grain beyond the sound of the performer and into their personalities. To do this he uses the ability of timbre (explored first in Resistance) to evoke real-life contexts that are not only interesting in themselves, but that also carry a personal meaning for the performers he is working with. He sees this as an extension of his existing practice of site-specific recording and sampling of those musicians: 'I would go year after year to record performers', he explains. 'I would turn on the recorder; listen to them demonstrate the sounds of their instruments, their virtuosity, their particular sonic universe; and then turn the recorder off and ask them about their lives and how their families are doing, what restaurants they've been going to and so on. And I thought, isn't that incredibly artificial, why do we do that as artists?'

For *The kind of problem a city is* (2016) he decided to leave the recorder on, to capture some of these other elements of his performers' personalities that weren't expressed only in their playing style. In this way, the very particular form of 'field recording' explored in *Without Words* becomes a form of musical portrait of his players. *The kind of problem* is written for the New York percussion and keyboard quartet Yarn/Wire, with whom Einbond has had a close personal and professional relationship for several years. This is his second piece for the group; the first, *Passagework* (2010), featured on their debut recording and was also Einbond's own first professional release.

The compositional process of *The kind of problem* remains the same; it is the range of source materials that is new. The piece starts, unexpectedly, with a laugh – as though we've just caught the end of a joke shared between friends; perhaps something said between recording takes; perhaps something that shouldn't have been on the recording at all? It is followed by percussionist Russell Greenberg repeating the question 'What is your second favourite place in New York?' He decides that it is the barbecue area at the Brooklyn Bridge park, and the music begins. Using recordings made around the city, from places described by each of Yarn/Wire's players (the sounds of barbecue coals, subway trains and so on), Einbond constructs a map of New York made up of individual locations, chosen by the lives and personalities of the four musicians. In *Le cabinet des signes* (2010), Einbond had already used field recordings made in a city (in this case Tokyo). In that case they were used to create 'a sonic map of the city with timbral features as a guide', an aural landscape; in *The kind of problem*, the city is used as a way to create a sonic portrait. In his most recent works, Einbond has pursued this idea still further: *Kate Frankenstein* for the UK's Riot Ensemble, for example, includes video footage of the players performing at a location in East London connected to the history of Jack the Ripper. (Here there is an element of autobiography: Einbond's great-grandmother once lived in this area, and mistakenly believed that a relative of hers had been one of the Ripper's victims.)

Einbond's music is a product of the postmodern *performative turn*, as well as a turn towards recordings rather than notation (or scripts) as the primary artistic medium. This is a wider cultural process that extends far beyond the reach of new music; in work like Einbond's it places the performer at the heart of the work, but also the world that they inhabit. One of the lessons of field recording, and one that Einbond has learnt himself, is the extraordinary ability of timbre to evoke single locations or moments. It is a powerful medium by which to arouse memories of or associations with times and places. This explains the entry of the real in all its messy, angry, passionate vitality at the end of Resistance. It is no wonder that it has taken Einbond's work so far beyond pitches. ■

1 See, for example, Aaron Einbond, 2013, 'Subtractive Synthesis: Noise and Digital (Un)Creativity', in A. Cassidy and A. Einbond (eds), *Noise in and as Music* (Huddersfield: Huddersfield University Press), 57–75.

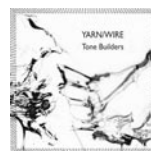
2 Ibid. See also Aaron Einbond, 2016, 'Musique instrumentale concrète: Timbral Transcription in What the Blind See and Without Words', in J. Bresson, C. Agon and G. Assayag (eds), *The OM Composer's Book* (Paris: Editions Delatour), 177–171.

3 Conversation with the composer, 21 March 2019.

4 See, e.g., Richard Barrett, 1996, 'Standpoint and Sightlines (provisional) 1995', in Nina Polaschegg, Uwe Hager and Tobias Richsteig, eds., *Diskurse zur gegenwärtigen Musikkultur* (Regensburg: ConBrio Verlagsgesellschaft): 26.

5 Einbond, 'Subtractive Synthesis', 68.

INFO



CDs

- Yarn/Wire: *Tone Builders*, including Aaron Einbond: «Passagework», Carrier Records 2010.
- Aaron Einbond: «Without Words», Ensemble Dal Niente, Carrier Records 2014.
- Aaron Einbond, Matilde Meireles, and Yarn/Wire: *Cities*, including «The kind of problem a city is», multi.modal / NMC Recordings 2019

Webseite

- <https://aaronleinbond.wordpress.com/>
- <https://www.editiongravis.de/>