

Conjuring Spectral Sonic Traces from Absent Places

By Stephen Davismoon¹

“The world has more than one age ... a blow at the teleological order of history”
(Derrida 1994, 77)

“Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it” (Fisher 2014, 17-18)

Through the words that follow I will discuss three current and upcoming releases on the new independent record label *Vinylselection: Ghost Music* by Jan Kopinski; *Stations of the Clyde* by Stephen Davismoon and *“Alpe Della Luna”* by Roberto Fabbriciani – in many ways three very different sonic offerings, but each are haunted by myriad layers of sonic traces from absent places: real, virtual, remembered.

Given the theme for the current issue of *The Drouth* is ‘informal’; I suggest here that the palimpsestic approach found in the layering of sonic traces in each of these works opens their forms up to a multiplicitous listening; promoting a phenomenological aural vantage point if you will, where there can be no general listening/reading but only a particular ‘informal’ one.

Vinylselection’s founder Colin Clydesdale works collaboratively (and informally – there are no contracts) with the label’s artists toward the creation of a musically diverse, high quality, audiophile, listening experience. Vinylselection is artist-centred, working with their featured artists to recommend other musicians, allowing the network to grow from the artists themselves. It should be pointed out that Colin Clydesdale takes great care with the artistic production of the sleeve and innovative artwork, painstakingly carrying out the unusual design in collaboration with the label’s artists. His fiercely independent standpoint is further demonstrated by a desire to not make mass-produced product, thus produces only short runs of 500 copies for each release. Listening to each of these works on vinyl (for the first time in a very long time) I found myself to be in deep accord with Mark Fisher’s observation: “...the surface noise made by the vinyl... Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint....We aren’t only made aware that the sounds we are hearing are recorded, we are also made conscious of the playback systems we use to access the recordings” (Fisher 2014, 21). Because there can be no illusion of ‘presence’ of the musicians through the medium of vinyl audio playback in the way that digital media pertains/ed to achieve, perhaps we become somehow even more conscious of the act of ‘listening to’ as a result of this acute sense of absence - this heightened occasion for aural informality? More information about the recordings and how to obtain them can be found at vinylselection.com

The relationship between landscapes and music is probably quite literally ‘as old as the hills’ or at least as old as that day when we started calling them hills. For almost as long as we have

¹ In the writing of this article I am indebted to the words and thoughts of Roberto Fabbriciani, Jan Kopinski and Luisella Botteon.

been able to sing, we have been telling tales of our homes, histories and collective memories. In many ways the Post-War eruptive thrust of musical Modernism (often as a result noble political reasoning – why would we want to create music anymore that was reflective of or connected to a culture that nurtured fascistic hate and the mechanistic carnage of the Second World War) more-or-less outlawed such folkloric presence (let alone a celebrated nostalgic absence of it) in music of the Avant-garde. Whilst this fantastically experimental phase of music history brought into being many undreamt of sonic textures for hitherto ‘unheard of’ expression, it somehow ruptured the presence of time and memory in musical discourse which had historically been of vital importance for its narrative structuring. As the 1960s wore on traces of musical pasts began to appear in music that was regarded as ‘new.’ Arguably, this musical Postmodernism was spearheaded by Bruno Maderna, Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio all of whom grew in strength - in their very different ways – to oppose the pervasive ‘Year Zero’ view of music. We might typify their stance by suggesting how might we learn from our histories if we attempt to disassociate, deny, distance ourselves from them? Ever so gradually (at an accelerated rate in the last decade or so) the past has been granted presence in music by way of a landscape’s ‘soundmarks’², the ghosts of its songs and memories of its celebrated idiosyncratic music instrument diversions.

Jan Kopinski’s *Ghost Music*

According to Jan Kopinski his album – the first to be released on *Vinylselection* - is inspired and haunted as much by visual imagery as by Slavic music and certain traditions of jazz. Kopinski in discussion on his release on vinyl describes the ‘open’ ‘informal’ listening experience that medium appears to offer:

“When I first started recording with left field jazz outfit, PINSKI ZOO, in the 1980’s vinyl LPs and singles were the obvious medium (also, later, cassette tapes). We always recorded in live ‘takes’, very rarely added dubs and the live feel was augmented mixing ‘on the fly’. I released many albums at various stages of new developments in recording methods. As digital emerged and computers dominated the whole process, more control, endless variability and spatial precision of the audio experience became possible. Fantastic, alluring and, well... why would you want to go back to the uncertainty and risky outcomes of recording on vinyl, and there isn’t any real difference in the sound, is there? I guess that’s what I thought too; except, when I heard the vinyl mix from stereo originals and subsequent audiophile pressings of *Ghost Music* by Vinylselection, I was stunned, and realised that not only does the aural blend make more sense of the music, (not so spatially specific and crystallised), but it relates directly to the music’s spontaneity. This was weird, because *Ghost Music*³ was my first solo album using acoustic and electric instruments, which combined live and multi-tracked compositions with dubbed improvisations. In comparison to the earlier CD version, somehow there was a veil lifted and the music became more direct and cohesive. Strangely, this brings me closer and more directly to the recorded moments.”

In further conversation with Jan Kopinski I asked if he might unravel a little for us on specifically what visual imagery had ‘haunted’ his musical journeying:

“Virtually all of the music recorded on *Ghost Music* was written for, or directly inspired by, visual imagery; memory of places visited in Poland; the feeling of suspended time in films by Tarkovsky; half-remembered dreams and from music previously commissioned to film, video or multi-media. I am not thinking here of synaesthesia or a direct musical codification of the visual experience. It is difficult to describe in words - and conceivably that is the point - it is a musical response with its own language. Perhaps the psychological associative state and resultant interaction inform - or even dictate - the musical response, along with notions of human empathy and personal expression (almost as ‘*déjà vu*’ experiences present themselves as convincing and understandable translations).”

In the case of moving image the duration and transformation was for me not so important. It is the almost vibratory resonance or timelessness behind a visual idea that I found most moving, like the emotional interaction with a painting or the charge of an icon or the meditative atmosphere evoked by the image. I related

² Refer to the writings of R. Murray-Schafer

³ Originally released in 1997

the images mostly to a melodic line, improvisation or sequence of sounds and the tonal/timbral qualities of the instrument.

“House” was written for a sequence in the BFI film ‘Salvation Guaranteed’ (dir. Karen Ingham 1990) - a woman’s journey with her lover to a Texan fundamentalist town. The film consisted of many locations with absent but intense actions, disappeared or removed.

A building given meaning by events or defined by circumstance beyond function, whether with small or terrifyingly large significance is a recurring theme for me in my work. Although the film was a journey it was often quite static. I tried to create hymns to the destination, reflective rather than descriptive.”

Several of the album tracks were composed for a ‘Nottingham New Works Commission’ entitled ‘*Music for Missing Places*’. The tracks *Cemetery*, *Station*, *Station East*, and *Roundfield* were all written with locations in mind ...memories and feelings associated with images ... historical overtones ... collected during tours to Poland in the 1980’s. For the album sleeve design I used one such image of a particularly mesmerising encounter in southern Poland.

Station and *Station East* were reflections upon the collection and transportation of people to the East throughout the first half of the 20th century in Poland, often with terrible consequences. The points or ‘stations’ with those dominating historical contexts are sometimes unbearably sad. I didn’t try to mirror that drama, but created simple, slow sequences with a sustained folk-like dirge, which turn into improvisations.

Cemetery is haunted by events of extreme human behaviour crystallised for me during visits to Powązki cemetery in Warsaw. The tombs and mausoleums with their dramatic and moving sculptures, amongst trees in a strange emotional landscape somehow seemed wholly natural. They appeared to me like a frozen metaphor to the landscape and historic events of the country.

I am often drawn to elusive images from dreams. *Marble Day Dream* was an attempt to capture that experience, where the dreamt image is mixed with the conscious state, leading into or from sleep, and becomes an altered perception. Sometimes described as hallucinatory, almost convincingly real, where the image is on loan from one’s dreams ... convincing, despite being perceived as a dreamt image ... the close head next to one’s ear like a Redon symbolist painting. I’d like to play the sound that we make talking to that image, sometimes deep or wavering from pitch as closely connected to the breath as possible.

Land Sleep is a piece I wrote for a sequence in ‘Earth’ (dir. Dovzhenko 1930) which presents the villagers at rest or sleeping in a soft, dream-like sequence wearing traditional Ukrainian peasant costume in odd icon like poses, harking to an older time, in tune with the land and religion.

The Russian film director, Andrei Tarkovsky was extremely particular in his choice of any accompanying music to his films and I find that his films have a profound affecting musicality, particularly those of place, people and buildings in a landscape, such as ‘Mirror’ and ‘Stalker’. The track, *Pool of Bells* (co-written with pianist Steve Liffé), has a rhythmic element based around Orthodox bell ringing and here I thought of some of the held shots in Tarkovsky’s films and inspired by the description he gave us of his own art form as “sculpting in time.”

I wanted our conversation to turn toward specifically which Slavic and other jazz music had ‘haunted’ Jan’s *Ghost Music* album.

Prior to *Ghost Music* all my released albums were with Pinski Zoo: a group I formed playing high-energy, cross-genre jazz. After several extensive tours in Poland in the early 80’s - shortly after martial law - I visited, and continued to return to, various places throughout that country which crystallized some of the feelings I already had about Eastern Europe. I also became more interested in the folk music of those regions with enforced ‘flexible’ borders throughout history: Poland, Byelorussia, Russia and Ukraine. The field choirs, with their open throated unison singing and ‘white-voice’ female choirs, with an absence of vibrato creating a powerful density of sound and where the closeness of the collective registers create an anthemic presence. I found those textures inspiring for writing for overdubbed saxophone and brought something of this approach, to the tracks *Station* and *House*. I hear a connection to those sounds in the vocal qualities of the tenor saxophone, and possibilities of timbral technique and choice of vibrato etc.

Another characteristic vocal style, the ‘Góraly,’ or highlander type of singing with high falsetto and vibrato and ‘white voice’ singing were often related to seasons, ritual or field cries, where it also served as communication across the open fields and mountainous regions. Hearing these in Zakopane, in the Tatry mountains and the evening freezing light led me to the short opening of *Roundfield* where I mixed overtones and polytonal techniques rather like falsetto and drones. In fact, I see overtone playing as evocative of the human voice it reminds me of the break in the human voice. Along with vocal choirs I was thinking of the ‘dudek’ or type of bagpipe and ‘trembita’, large alpine horn like instruments which have an immediate link to the lower registers of the sax. With the reverberation or echo of the mountains. *Bear*, a solo saxophone track from the later album *Mirrors*, is a longer and fuller piece which explores these ideas.

There is a characteristic description, which is applied to some Polish music, (notably to Chopin), and sometimes is referred to as an almost national trait, in the expression ‘żał’. A Polish word which has many nuanced translations such as ‘sorrow’, ‘regret’, ‘grief’, ‘resentment’, even. Not necessarily a completely negative

description and even in some ways a comforting reflection. I tried to feel this in the phrasing and delivery of line and tone, along with choice of tempi and pitch. *Black Earth* (a term referring to the fertile soil) is a sax/viola duet based on a folk song and I try to play with that feel.

In the late 1970's, I became interested in Penderecki's large works such as his St Luke's Passion and Utrenja in particular, which uses old Slavic language and dense percussion, as well as vocal parts very reminiscent of Orthodox church liturgy. Whilst the sparse nature of the music on Ghost Music is very different, again there are often liturgical music traces to be found in the overdubbed sax and sax viola combinations.

Station East and the second part of *Roundfield* are closer to a recognizable improvising 'jazz' performance. Connections between the music of John Coltrane, particularly his contemplative and sonic meditations (including those at speed) were often combined with characteristic 'zal'. Coltrane teaches us much about that, and not only in the jazz context...as do Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman.

When we got on to the subject of jazz performance I wondered if Jan could say something more about the 'live' approach that he took with each of his albums, since this might inform the multi-layered palimpsest-like artist that he had become.

When recording music with ensembles I've usually taken the approach to albums as being a captured moment in time. Much of the music is a vehicle for improvising and the interaction between musicians in real time seems essential to me. The group of musicians with whom I regularly perform and compose for, always play in an improvised style.

There is a compromise in the recording studio; trying to balance the technical requirements and the conditions for getting the best out of the group's performance, so we record the music in live takes. Rather than overdub or build up the tracks in sections, if required we simply played another take. Pinski Zoo and Zone K and Mirrors recordings follow this pattern. For many years in the jazz world the live take was normal before multi-tracking, and the ability to capture the session was key.

Several of my albums are recordings of live concerts and the benchmark for studio recordings is always that dimension of a live performance. I find it difficult with ensembles to record with overdubs and predetermined structures. Pinski Zoo's *Live in Warsaw*, *De-Icer*, *After-Image* and Kopinski & Konikiewicz's *Zone K* were all recorded on tours in Poland, Europe, New York and the UK.

The Pinski Zoo studio albums followed the same practice. Repeating takes until satisfied rather than overdubbing. With *Rare Breeds* and *East Rail East* we had, unusually, more time. Under studio conditions there is more emphasis on mixing and enhancing the live takes. With an improvising group ensemble sound, I spent less time on the saxophone tonal details, but more on group interaction and following the flow of the whole.

Similarly, sax/piano duets with long-time collaborator, pianist Steve Iliffe, were recorded in straight takes on *Ghost Music* and much of *Earth*. We have spent over 30 years in our musical collaboration including small and large group settings. Much of the material that we have played between us has been composed with shared experiences, for example Polish and European tours with Pinski Zoo and the silent film repertoire we have built together. This allows us to refer very quickly to hidden pieces, fragments or ideas that belong to different music we have played together and adds a compositional structure to our playing.

It is often difficult to say when an album is complete ... as the process is more of a search for the way of playing itself ... a snapshot or a time sculpture ... to find that sound.

The Italian musicologist Luisella Botteon has described **Roberto Fabbriciani's *Alpe Della Luna***

as a sonorous tale comprised of four pieces played without pause: *Fantastico brillante; Cielo basso; Corrente; Suono sommerso*, for flute and prerecorded tape composed between 2011 and 2015. The listener's mind is projected into a sonorous universe at times surreal and mysterious. The sound of the flute and the tape – pre-recorded by Roberto – is always iridescent and presents a multidimensional sense of form. *Alpe della luna* is a mountain located near the *Alpe di Poti* in the Tuscan Apennines, not far from *Caprese*, a village that gave birth to Michelangelo Buonarroti. A real place, where from time immemorial shepherds have accompanied their flocks. It is also a place that belongs to the childhood of Roberto Fabbriciani, representing a projection of his imagination and fantasy. Here we talk about a dreamlike sonorous dimension in which sounds soar in the heights and the depths, merge and chase themselves, creating a colorful universe of nuanced richness. This work is essentially a poetic description of the geographical landscape, with rolling hills and mountain peaks, steep cliffs and valleys with its melodic calls, echoes, voices of dogs and birds. The sounds are rich and varied, with scales and arpeggios, standard figures of everyday music creation with dynamic and tonal varieties. This is not a narrative music inspired by nature, since the element of reality blends intimately, seamlessly within our imagination of the matter that we observe. A dream both impossible and true that comes out of the beauty of a place and forms a unique *logos* with the psyche of the imaginary observer/listener.

Fabbriciani adds further on the points of these sonic ‘hauntings’ in the work:

Alpe Della Luna is an album of special compositions while related to my sound research work is at the same time a distant but significant autobiography, made of those colours, scents from my childhood (translated into sound with no certain code ... unequivocal and very personal) where I spent so many happy days during my school holidays with my Grandparents in their home in the Appennines, a location popularly known as the *Alpe della Luna*, located between Tuscany and Romagna, not far from where the Arno and Tevere rivers are born. This place of my childhood whenever revisit it I do so with joy. It is to/in those places that my imagination often returns.

The work consists of ancient and modern musics simultaneously (... of nature and antiquity, through to contemporary extended instrumental techniques all combined ... *out of time*). A universe of ancestral sounds combined with those that are experimental and unusual.

In the four tracks that make up the work on the disc I attempted to create multilayered textures for the listener related to the sonic traces of that absent, remembered place - the breath of the air, the wind, the sound of stones tumbling, those heard during walks in the forest between the chestnut and oak trees, in short, the reverberations of this magical natural location, with its birds – blackbirds and owls and many other animals dogs, cats, boars and cockerels.

The instruments that I used for the piece encompass the entire flute family from the smallest to the largest: piccolo, flute, alto flute, bass, contrabass as well the hyperbass⁴.

Stations of the Clyde

composed in 2014 was, for me, something of a ‘breakthrough’ piece. It was the first relatively large-scale ‘fixed-media’ electroacoustic, soundscape composition that I had realised for some 20 years – most of my works that I had composed from the early 1990s that had used digital technologies had been for live instruments or voices with live electronics. It also marks the first soundscape piece of mine that I would describe as being of a deliberately psychogeographic, hauntological persuasion – several works followed and continue to follow its model.

I made the location recordings for ***Stations of the Clyde*** on one particular day, while travelling to meet a dear friend of mine who was very seriously ill; my senses were somehow keener that day.

My ‘on the hoof’ recording session commenced from Platform 6 of Glasgow Central Station, with the capturing of train engine noises and air-pressure releases - then I focused upon the ghostly traces of the voices of announcements, passengers and passersby - along with their footsteps - within that magnificently cavernous resonant concourse of that historic place – imperial even - of arrivals and departures. It did cross my mind as to how many countless voices and footsteps had echoed around those walls, since its opening in 1879; how many greetings and farewells had they absorbed across all of those decades.

I then descended underground to the echoing footsteps, voices echoing, water dripping, turnstiles clicking and the splash of money dropping into the cash trays, the voices of the attendant and yet more passengers; then the noise of the approaching wheels of the metro trains, with the harsh metal on metal screeching as they approached and then pulled away again. Then, once inside, I seized the – almost - unbelievable noise levels of the ‘shake-rattle-and-roll’ heard from the interior of the carriages as they hurtled through the cozily dark and

⁴ The first instrument was designed by Roberto Fabbriciani and built by Francesco Romei

damp subterranean system of tunnels.

Latterly I resurfaced near Kelvingrove Park in all of its majesty and early Spring bloom (Winter was definitely defeated) and the River Kelvin (a strong tributary to the Clyde) at once greeted by birdsong and rivulets of rainwater - rain indelibly marks the character of Glasgow - running fast along the streets that I must walk in order to visit my friend.

When engaged in the gathering of location recordings, one gains a yet deeper awareness of the surroundings and its sonic ecology, even if one has traversed the locations many times before. I, by this time had had an association with Glasgow for some 20 years (through work and having had my home there) and had made this journey many hundreds of times, but had never listened to the environment in quite the same way before.

I fashioned the piece into a four movement structure that more-or-less followed my journey that day. I composed the work within an 'Ableton Live/Max for Live' environment. Each movement consists of only a very few, carefully edited samples, most of which are very short indeed – very often less than 300ms in duration. At the head of the DSP chain was a gate, which I altered very subtly during the looped phrases of the samples, often giving rise to micro-sonic levels of fluctuation in the sonic material. Where the sonic particles that were allowed through would cause acoustic fluctuation often less than 50ms. These micro-sonic grains that were allowed through the gate were then passed to a formant filter, which again I constantly subtly altered to cause micro-sonic fluctuation. This material was then passed through a further granulator and a spatialisation process, often set to cause yet further microsound levels of turbulence related to detail and location. All of these editing and processing techniques came together in the piece in order to create a 'collapsing of the space' between the listening subject and the sound object, in order to create moments of greater or lesser structural consonance and cognition, to assist the work's aural dramaturgy and to develop a phenomenological listening space. Given that the sonic fluctuations on many simultaneous levels are so small, the hope is that the work will 'live' for the listener even on repeated auditions; the aural spectres of the locations will quicken, so to speak for each individual observer.

Stations of the Clyde was composed for the 'Stations of the Green' exhibition curated by The Drouth's Johnny Rodger and Mitch Miller, focusing on Turner Prize winning GSA alumnus Douglas Gordon's demolished public artwork 'Proof' at the remains of Glasgow Green Station. The exhibition ran at New Glasgow Society 1307 Argyle St. Glasgow, 26th April – 17th May 2013.

The drones that persistently haunt the sonic texture of *Stations of the Clyde* are derived from the formant frequencies that make up the vowels found in the now largely disappeared location Glasgow Green Station.

Stations of the Clyde is dedicated to Patricia Donald, a true daughter of the Clyde.