

Theatre, Technology and Place in Composition

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Theatre, Technology and Place in Composition

This project is concerned with the relationship between theatre and technology, and the ways in which this relationship intersects with questions of liveness and technological mediation, landscape and folklore, performativity, and presence and absence in performance. An essential consideration here is how performance is situated: the way in which a performance space – be it a small room, a concert hall, a recording – presents a concrete manifestation of issues concerning an audiences' access to, and experience of, musical performance. In the six pieces that comprise this portfolio, the themes of theatre and technology are addressed in fairly broad terms. This approach has facilitated a varied exploration of the theatre/technology relationship, from the inherently theatrical use of extended techniques on the technology of traditional instruments, to the potential for pre-recorded media and live electronics to augment the perceived space in which a performance takes place.

The contents of the portfolio are as follows:

- *(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR* [Film] – solo performer and fixed media. (20' 00")
- *Dig Deep* [Score] – piano and bass drum. (10' approx.)
- *The Storm* [Score and film of performance] – 2 voices, viola, guitar, live electronics. (10' 10")
- *Rivers* [Score and recording of performance] – cello and live electronics. (18' 31")
- *Knockin Stane* [Tape piece] – violin, voice, melodica and guitar. (6' 56")
- *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support* [Film] – solo performer (voice, viola, guitar) and fixed media. (18' 39")

In this commentary, I shall provide a brief introduction to each piece, and then discuss their relationship with the concepts of theatre, technology, folklore and place. I shall do so in four sections dedicated to the following subjects: the theatrical use of technology in performance; performance spaces; words and music; and documenting music.

Introductions to Pieces

(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR

I.....	James McIlwrath
Bystanders (live performance)	Robert Bates
	Andy Blackwell
	Pip Booth
	Rebecca Burden
Sound (live performance)	Tom James
Camerawoman, Scene 6 (film).....	Jess Lloyd

(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR is a theatre piece for solo performer in which, crucially, there is no performance of live music. Originally written for the inaugural event of experimental performance platform A M O K (held in York, February 2019), it existed initially as a live theatre piece, before then being turned into a film. The film is the definitive version of the piece, and it is this that is included in the portfolio. *(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR* is concerned with the concept of technological mediation: the extent to which a person might become reliant on media technology, and the ways in which this affects their relationship with the world around them. Through the performer's interactions with the technological artefacts on

stage (a computer, a printer, a microphone), a dichotomy is suggested between the isolation of an individual absorbed in these devices, and the highly performative and carefully cultivated public personae that can be presented through media technology. The piece draws heavily on Samuel Beckett's *Play* and *What Where*, and specifically on the themes of immobility and repetition found in those plays.¹ (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR* applies these themes to the rhetoric which surrounded the 2016 European referendum and subsequent party-political debates in the UK: a rhetoric heavily reliant on soundbites and clickbait. The events of, and slogans from, these events form the basis of the text in the piece. The premise of (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR* is as follows:

A character called I sits alone in a room and does not leave. I is surrounded by a number of technological artefacts (four laptops, a printer, a microphone and a table) and interacts sporadically with them in a variety of passive and ineffective ways. I returns repeatedly to the computer screen in search of stimulation. The computers occasionally emit an overwhelming cacophony which is instantly halted by I. The only constant sound is the ticking of a clock, which gradually slows down throughout the piece.

The piece is constructed from very short repeated gestures, both physical and auditory. A laptop lid is closed, and then reopened, and then closed again. A melody is tapped out on a table. A printer is switched on but fails to work. These are treated as motifs which hang off the continual sound of the gradually slowing ticking of a clock. These inherently uninteresting gestures convey that in this claustrophobic space, nothing of the slightest importance will take place. The piece is made up of nine sections, described in the score as *actions*. These nine actions are as follows:

¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

- i: I enters
- ii: The laptops speak
- iii: I plays the piano in silence
- iv: The laptops speak
- v: I speaks
- vi: I unravels
- vii: I plays the piano silently
- viii: The printer works!
- ix: (no title given)

Structuring the piece in this way makes it fundamentally fragmented. Significance is attributed to motions that might otherwise be incidental and transitional by presenting them in such a fragmented manner. There is no consequence to, or connection between, any of I's actions: each of them exists in a vacuum. I does not open a laptop lid in order to use the computer; I simply opens the lid and then does nothing. Therefore, opening the laptop lid is a statement of I's relationship with the computer, rather than - as would be the case for the rest of us - a functional, unconscious act that precedes the meaningful act of using the computer. Similarly, the monologue in action v, when I finally speaks, takes the form of a repetitive, fragmented and tangential stream of consciousness: no issue is worked through, and no message is communicated. In short, this piece posits that, rather than *necessarily* enabling a greater dissemination of knowledge to better inform and empower its users, information technology can, in some cases, foster habits of isolation and become a vehicle for divisive and fragmented rhetoric, leading ultimately to a breakdown in communication.

Dig Deep

Dig Deep, for piano and bass drum, is a piece concerned with two issues; the first timbral, and the second conceptual. I have compared the timbral pallet of the piano and bass drum by exploring the extreme ranges of both instruments, and then by attempting to blend these sounds together. The second question explored is that of how compositional process relates to play. All the material used has been generated through improvisation, and the final score is for a performance in which the two performers playfully pass material back and forth between one another. Although *Dig Deep* still addresses the theatricality of using technology in performance, it is the only piece in the portfolio which makes no use of fixed media or live electronics. The technological artefacts in question here are the instruments themselves.

The Storm

Voice.....	Joel Benedict
	Henry Strutt
	Liv Muir Wilson
Viola.....	Henry Strutt
Cello.....	Rebecca Burden
Flute.....	Anna Palko
Vibraphone.....	Andy Blackwell
Guitar.....	Jake Adams
Sound.....	Tom James

The Storm is a setting of five poems from Orkney-born poet George Mackay Brown's collection of the same name.² It was composed through a process of scoring fragments of material, taking field recordings, and making recordings of instrumentalists, singers and actors (this process is addressed in detail in the final section of the commentary), and then incorporating these into a score for voices, viola, guitar and live electronics. It was performed by the Chimera Ensemble at the University of York in June 2019, and a film of the final rehearsal for that concert is included in the portfolio. My use of live electronics in *The Storm* is inspired by Philip Auslander's theory that "one can better understand live and technologically mediated performance in terms of a set of temporal and spatial variables."³ The performance of the piece plays on the disjunct between what can be seen and what can be heard: which performers are present in the auditorium and which appear to be heard from a different realm.

Mackay Brown's first published collection, *The Storm*, sets the poet's own relationship with Orkney against a backdrop woven from images of Orkney's people, its history, and the islands' landscape. Mackay Brown returns frequently to the themes of journeying, Orkney's history (Rognvald and Magnus – both Earls of Orkney – feature) and, of course, to images of a storm. For Kathleen Jamie, this first book is indicative of the "project and range" of Mackay Brown's future work, as she states in her foreword to *The Storm*:

Here is the now instantly recognisable repertoire of images and sources: the turning of the year, sea and sky and land, the wheel of life and death. Here is the historical

² George Mackay Brown, *The Storm and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Galileo Publishers, 2017).

³ Philip Auslander, "Live and technologically mediated performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 109.

sweep of his imagination. From the outset his *dramatis personae* are introduced: king and crofter, henwife and saint, tinker, drunk and dominie.⁴

This myriad of images and references, which are all connected to each other and – in some cases – relate to Mackay Brown’s own relationship with Orkney, are held together coherently by their being located in the same physical space. As a place, Orkney both contains and gives structure to the many themes explored in the poems. To mirror this structure, my settings of five of these poems are contained within a continuous piece of music, rather than being a collection of separate songs.

Rivers

Cello..... Rebecca Burden

Rivers, for cello and live electronics, examines technology’s capacity to expand the parameters of an acoustic instrument and also explores the concept of ephemera in music. The metaphor of a river is applied to the role of cello and electronic parts in a quite literal manner: the fixed parameters of the electronics provide an unmoving structure – in this case, a “riverbed” – through which the cello’s material passes. The use of short, repeated motivic cells and a flexible structure with which the cellist can improvise is intended to emulate the movement of a river: always repeating and yet never identical; always growing and yet never perceptibly altering. The second movement of the piece expands on the metaphor of the fixed electronics as land and the cello’s material as water by evoking the image of a dry riverbed. The melodic material of the first movement is replaced with

⁴ Kathleen Jamie, “Foreword,” in *The Storm and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Galileo Publishers, 2017), 9.

percussive sounds in the second, as the cellists abandons the instrument and takes up a series of objects from the natural world, the sounds of which reflect drought and lifelessness: dry twigs, pebbles and sand. The noises of these objects are amplified and altered by the exact same effects parameters as that of the cello part in the first movement. This is a piece inspired by environmental concerns, in which the music is removed from the piece just as water is removed from a river, depriving it of its essence. *Rivers* has undergone a number of re-writes in response to both workshops and performances, resulting in the recording presented. The Digital Audio Workstation file used in the final performance is also included in the portfolio, showing the pre-recorded audio and effects parameters used.

Knockin Stane

Voice..... Pall Brim Joensen

Violin..... Pip Booth

Knockin Stane is a tape piece for voice and violin – accompanied by guitar, melodica and percussion – which combines music traditions from Shetland, the Scottish Highlands and the Faroe Islands. Its starting point is two pieces of research from The Scalloway Museum (Shetland) and The Shetland Museum and Archives (Lerwick, Shetland): *Veeseks*, a form of Norn ballad, and the knockin stane. The knockin stane was a hollowed-out stone trough used in conjunction with a wooden mallet (the knockin mell) for de-husking a form of primitive barley.⁵ It was used in Shetland until the end of the nineteenth century, making it relatively unique to the islands, as it had been abandoned in most of Scotland by the end of

⁵ Wall text, *Knockin Stane*, Scalloway Museum, Scalloway, Shetland.

the Middle Ages. As an historical artefact exclusive to Shetland, I took the knockin stane as the point of departure for a piece which considers other aspects of Shetland's distinctive culture: its music and folklore. The main theme of the piece is a fiddle tune inspired by *piobaireachd* – traditional Scottish pipe music – which subsides at the mid-point of the piece, making way for the section inspired by the *Veeseks* tradition, based on chanting, clapping and storytelling. The origins of these traditions and my use of them in the piece are discussed further in the sections on “Space” and “Documenting Music”.

The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support

Colin McGee..... James McIlwrath

Additional texts..... James McIlwrath

Lucy Fourgs

Rosa Juritz

The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support uses the device of a frame story to explore the theme of performativity in music. The theoretical premise of this piece is that an abstract concept can be forced to become embodied in an unrelated object or environment, making it concrete and therefore malleable. In this way, any ideas explored in the work are situated in a physical realm. This approach is inspired by works by Beckett (*Happy Days, Play*) and in particular by Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*.^{6 7} In the case of this novel, the protagonist finds himself in a place that is very similar to his home environment, but in which the laws

⁶ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*.

⁷ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993).

of physics, the appearance of the landscape, and the behaviour of those around him is, in an undefinable manner, strange. It transpires that this character has died early on in the story, and this strange new land is in fact a form of the afterlife. In this way, O'Brien has taken the concept of death, a thing that no person can experience or describe, and quite literally put it on the map. Death is a small town in which buildings appear to be two-dimensional from the outside, the atoms between humans and bicycles exchange places, and light can be stretched until it produces the sound of a person screaming. This device is very reminiscent of fantasy and yet, perhaps contrarily, is rooted in the appropriation of everyday objects and places.

The starting point for *The Incredible Vanishing + Support* is to suppose that the performer's subconscious is housed, not inside his own body, but in the body of his guitar. This places the performer's mind in a concrete, physical environment that can be manipulated and become subject to the actions of the performer on stage. In this way, the artefact that is the guitar becomes a metaphor for the ego of the performer: a guitar is constructed to very particular specifications in order to work efficiently, to project its sound clearly and to look appealing. This is also true of the carefully cultivated public persona of the performer. Establishing a connection between the performer's subconscious and the instrument allows for vocabulary belonging to guitar manufacture to become a metaphor for the performer's state of mind and behaviour. The double meanings of words such as fret, stretched, polished and project are exploited throughout the piece. The conclusion of this is that any physical strain the guitar is placed under – the strings are snapped off and at one point the guitar receives CPR – is an illustration of the strain felt by the performer, and furthermore indicates that this strain is self-inflicted. These concepts are explored in the focal point of the piece: a tape piece that begins halfway through the performance.

The theatrical use of technology in performance

This section examines the function of technology in composition and the rationale behind its use. I am particularly concerned with how the use of technology can be theatrical – exploiting the disjunct between what can be seen and what can be heard, between who is present and who is absent in performance – and how the parameters of a live performance can be enhanced through the use of live electronics. Another important issue is that of agency: two of these pieces in particular (*The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support* and (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR*) pose the question of whether the performer truly has autonomy, or whether it is the technological artefact that is in control. The inclusion of pre-recorded performances and field recordings has the capacity to augment the perceived perimeters of a venue by transcending the limitation of the number or combination of performers that can be present in the same time and space. This is explored in *The Storm* and *Knockin Stane* in particular. The term “theatre” is not absolutely defined in this portfolio, as theatricality manifests to differing degrees and in a variety of contexts, from the conventionally theatrical set of (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR* to the theatrical use of instruments in concert pieces *Rivers* and *Dig Deep*. A wide range of technological artefacts has been used in these pieces, from live electronics to acoustic instruments, and they are presented in a variety of finished forms: scores, documented live performances, a tape piece and a film. Despite this wide-ranging approach, they are all unified by questions of what is absent, what is seen to have agency and which parameters are expanded by the inclusion of technology in performance.

The theatrical role of pre-recorded audio in (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR* is evident on both a macro and micro level. In macro terms, the technological artefacts in the performance have greater agency than the character, I. Every action I performs is technologically mediated and each action, however big or small, is treated as an equally weighted stimulus for a technological sound being emitted. Although I has no control over the sounds being

produced, there is still a strong relationship between the performer, the artefacts he uses, and the sound that those artefacts produce. These are thematically linked, but there is a creative leap in each stage of the process. To explain this relationship in more specific terms, the piece relies on the disjunct between the organic sound which can be produced by an artefact and the sound that the artefact is presented as being able to produce. So: tapping fingers on a table should not create the sound of a piano, but here it does. A computer keyboard should not be able to create a rhythmic loop in the background, and a clock should not be able to slow down at an event rate, but here they do. All of this makes *ECHO CHMBR* an inherently visual piece. Crucial to the composition is not the quality of the sounds we hear, but the way in which they are produced.

Even when I finally displays some semblance of autonomy, in the improvised middle section of the piece (action xi), the conceit is that this can only be made possible through his use of the microphone. The suggestion here is that the microphone is not simply amplifying the words coming from I's mouth, but in fact amplifying the incoherent, poorly articulated thoughts spilling directly from his mind. The consequence of this is that I is still shown to have no agency and, even though I has left behind the confines of the small flat in which the rest of the piece takes place, I is still trapped, still a slave to technological artefacts. The illusion that these artefacts have autonomy (exemplified by the laptops playing music spontaneously (actions ii and iv)) is the main contributor to theatricality in the piece.

As is the case in (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR*, *Dig Deep* is an inherently visual piece: it is essential that the audience not only hear the material, but see how it is produced. All material in the first half of the piece is presented in a series of one-bar cells. At each bar, a symbol (a large, black circle) indicates which player should begin playing. So: when player 1 begins a new bar, player 2 must spot this introduction of new material and move on to join player 1 in playing that bar. This makes for a semi-improvised structure that is created by

the interaction between the two performers. Despite this similarity, *Dig Deep* differs from (APT 2/3) *ECHO CHMBR* in two important ways. Firstly, the music in *Dig Deep* does not exist for the sake of its narrative function: the technological artefacts – bass drum and piano – are the sole focus. Secondly, the instruments are not only the sole focus of the piece, but also the only technological artefacts used: *Dig Deep* is the only piece in this portfolio which uses no electronics at all.

The piano part in the first section of the piece (up to bar 50) builds on a particular theatrical approach to the instrument: it is conspicuously underused. John Cage's *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* is an especially striking example of underusing an instrument, as the keyboard cover of the piano is not even lifted.⁸ Therefore, the expected use of such a versatile instrument is denied. Although the underuse of the piano in *Dig Deep* is nowhere near as dramatic as this, the principle remains the same: to ignore the great versatility, range and timbral potential of the instrument, and instead limit its parameters significantly.

Therefore, only the very extremes of the piano are used: the bottom two octaves and, towards the end of the first section, the top two notes. This strictly limited palette places the piano in the same timbral region as the bass drum, in an attempt to merge the tones of the two instruments. Conversely, whilst they share a similar range, the limited use of the piano is contrasted by an elaborate use of the bass drum. The percussionist is required to use non-traditional devices to produce sound from the bass drum; a child's wind-up toy, a superball mallet (also used by the pianist) and an upside-down, bowed cymbal are all used. This is intended to show the player exploring the timbral possibilities of their instrument in a playful and sometimes disruptive manner (bars 22-23). The movement of the players on stage also contributes to making the piece a visual spectacle. The two players briefly swap

⁸ John Cage, *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*. Words by James Joyce. *Voice and Piano* (New York: Henmar Press, 1961).

instruments part way through the piece, and both attempt to prevent each other from playing: the pianist by stealing one of the percussionist's sticks, and the percussionist by muting as many piano strings simultaneously as possible. The theatricality in this piece is derived from the timbres of two instruments being brought together: one through minimal use, and the other by elaborate and unconventional means. However, this relationship is disrupted at the end of the piece, as the sound of a bowed cymbal provides a backdrop to a simple, chorale-like piano passage that uses the middle range of the instrument. The piano writing here is particularly inspired by Martin Butler's *After Concord* and Howard Skempton's *Chorale* and *Postlude*.⁹

As stated in the introduction to *The Storm*, my use of technology here is inspired by Philip Auslander's theory of spatial and temporal co-presence: the issue of which elements in a performance share the same time and space, and – by extension – which aspects are removed from the space. This relationship can be exploited to great theatrical effect through the use of pre-recorded audio that blends with the material performed live, creating the impression of one piece existing in more than one realm simultaneously. The voice is presented in two distinct guises in this piece: sung, delivered by two live performers; and spoken, recorded by a different voice than those used live. The reason for this device of two categories of voice – one present, one absent – is rooted in my reading of Mackay Brown's poems. The sense of the poet feeling both a sense of belonging to, and of exile from, Orkney permeates the entire collection of *The Storm*, and so for this reason, one voice, removed from the performance space, acts as an on-looker, while the other performers provide a focus on stage.

⁹ Martin Butler, *Lucifer's Banjo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Howard Skempton, *Collected Piano Pieces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

All vocal parts in this piece are written for amplified voices. This ensures not only that the volume level of the live voice will not be overpowered by pre-recorded audio but also that all sounds in the performance space come from the same source. An unamplified voice (or indeed instrument) will interact with the acoustic of a venue, setting it apart from any recorded music used. However, if all voices and instruments are played through the same speaker(s), a consistent aesthetic space will be created within the physical performance space that is the venue. This consistency is crucial in order to create a fictional “place” in which the performance takes place. Amplifying the voice also makes it possible for the singer to use a wide range of techniques. In the case of *The Exile*, the singer transitions between speech, *Sprechstimme* and softly sung passages, all delivered in an understated manner that bridges the gap between the folk-like style of singing used in *The Road Home* and the pre-recorded speech of *Orcadians: Seven Impromptus* and *The Storm*. Digital effects are used to indicate the proximity of the performers to each other and to the audience, within the performance space. This theatrical effect is particularly evident in *Song: Rognvald to Ermengarde*. Here, the singer uses a microphone positioned at the back the auditorium (staging is discussed further in the following section), to which a heavy reverb is applied, suggesting that the source of the voice is far removed from those present on stage.

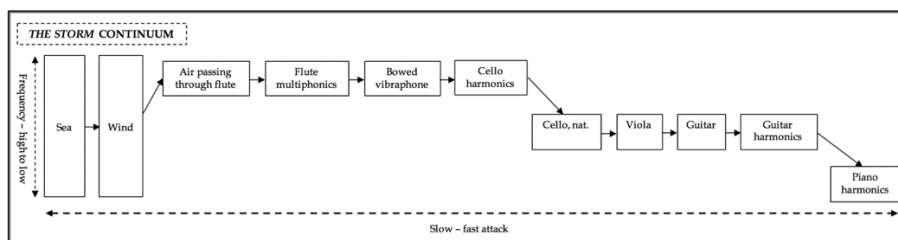
The juxtaposition between live and pre-recorded instrumental material does not rely – as the vocal writing does – on the visual disjunct between what is visible and what is not, but rather on expanding the timbral possibilities of an acoustic instrument electronically and then merging the live, acoustic instrument with texturally expanded pre-recorded audio. The instruments used in this piece are as follows:

- Viola
 - Guitar
- } Live instruments

- Flute
 - Vibraphone
 - Cello
 - Piano
- } Pre-recorded instruments

This merging of the live and pre-recorded is inspired in particular by Michel van der Aa's *Rekindle* for flute: "Rekindle integrates the play of changing perspectives between live and prerecorded sound, the two elements 'rekindling' one another's material."¹⁰ Whilst *Rekindle* combines the sound of a solo live flute with a recording of the same instrument, I have situated the live instruments in *The Storm* (viola, guitar) within a sound continuum comprising a larger palette of sounds, all of which merge in to one another. This continuum allows field recordings of sounds from the natural world to be merged with instrumental parts, both live and pre-recorded. The position of sounds within the continuum are shown in fig.1:

Fig. 1



¹⁰ Michel van der Aa, "World premiere of 'Rekindle'," *michel van der aa*, Jan, 2010, accessed Feb 13, 2020, <https://www.vanderaa.net/WorldpremiereofRekindle>.

This spectrum of sounds allows for a smooth transition between instruments, both live and recorded, and creates a similar disjunct between the sonic possibilities of the object seen by the audience and the sound heard by the audience, in much the same way as in (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR*. For example, the harmonic trill of the viola (fig. 2) is then taken on by the recording of a cello playing an almost identical part, electronically treated with reverb and delay. By combining these two parts, the timbral parameters of the viola are perceived to be greatly expanded. Similarly, the guitar harmonics in the opening of the piece, created by weaving a plectrum between the strings (fig. 3) are then mirrored by harmonics played in the bottom octave of the piano, thus causing a motif to travel from the live musician to the fixed media.

Fig. 2

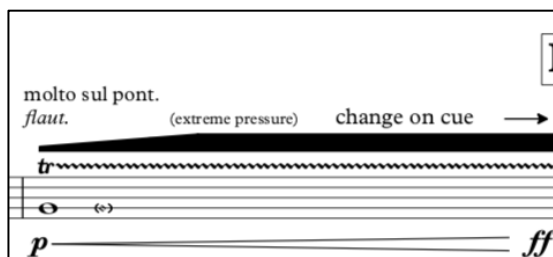
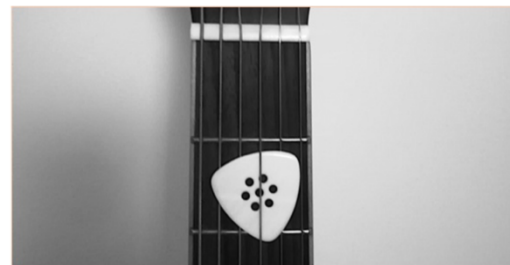


Fig.3



Of course, it would be entirely possible to simply score this piece for six live instruments, and apply the desired effects to instruments using live processing. There are, however, two important reasons for only having two live instrumentalists on stage. Firstly, the staging of the piece must be consistent with the idiom of the music. To have a large ensemble on the stage – particularly one comprising cumbersome instruments, the piano and vibraphone – would not be in keeping with a piece built around folk songs. A small number of performers on stage, playing easily portable instruments, is far more appropriate. (Furthermore, the flute recordings in the tape part are multitracked so many times that to replicate this effect live would take four flautists, expanding the ensemble further still.) Secondly, the inclusion

of instruments that are heard but not present reinforces the idea of multiple realms in the piece, between which the audience journeys.

In a similar manner to *The Storm*, *Rivers* considers the ways in which the use of technology can expand the timbral parameters of an acoustic instrument, whilst maintaining the integrity of the sound source. I also consider the relationship between technology, liveness and ephemerality, taking as my starting point Peggy Phelan on the ontology of performance. Phelan states that “[p]erformance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded [or] documented.”¹¹ Taking this claim into account, it would seem reasonable to assume that the inclusion of a fixed digital component, as used in *Rivers*, must necessarily compromise the ephemerality and so the “liveness” of a performance. However, I have sought to achieve the opposite effect here, by making use of pre-written digital effect parameters to expand the possibilities for an unpredictable performance outcome.

There is an element of improvisation in this piece and, crucially, it is the structure of the piece itself that is open to interpretation. The performer is instructed to improvise with the structure of the piece by inserting random numbers of repeat bars, and this improvised cello part is then pitted against fixed effects parameters, resulting in a piece that will not sound the same twice. The cello’s line, which will necessarily alter in duration and intensity from one performance to another, is fed through a series of effect parameters that remain the same. In this way, the image of fluctuating water passing through a riverbed – endlessly repetitive but never identical – is a serviceable metaphor for the relationship between cello and electronics. The signal from the acoustic cello is treated with reverb, delay, pitch-shifting and modulation effects, resulting in a blurred line between where the live instrument stops and the technologically created sounds begin. This blurring is enhanced by

¹¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

using extended techniques on the cello, such as harmonic trills, which create similar effects to frequency modulations such as phasing. The tape part for *Rivers* includes recordings of synthesiser, keyboard, melodica and field recordings of streams and rivers. The effect of adding these additional instruments is to create a chamber music environment rather than a solo performance with accompaniment. However, the fact that the cello is the only live instrument in the piece, and the only constant presence in the music, makes it clear that this is the focus.

Space

Two types of space are considered in this portfolio: one practical and one aesthetic. The literal space, in other words the venue or medium, forms a bridge between the work itself and the way it is accessed and experienced. By considering the venue, one can, in a concrete manner, approach issues concerning audience's experiences that can often be abstract. It is common for composers, performers and producers to speculate about audience members' expectations of a performance, or to discuss who their intended audience for a piece is. However, this is ultimately hypothetical. I can intend any audience I like, but I cannot ensure that those audience members will attend. Even if this were possible, I cannot know the mediating factors of an individual audience members' past experience or set of expectations.¹² However, a careful choice of performance space allows these issues – to some extent at least – to be considered in a concrete way. Who typically attends the venue chosen, and what type of performance is normally programmed there? If the piece exists as a recording, how does this affect the way it is accessed? For this reason, I have presented works in a number of mediums in the portfolio: concert music, folk and popular music,

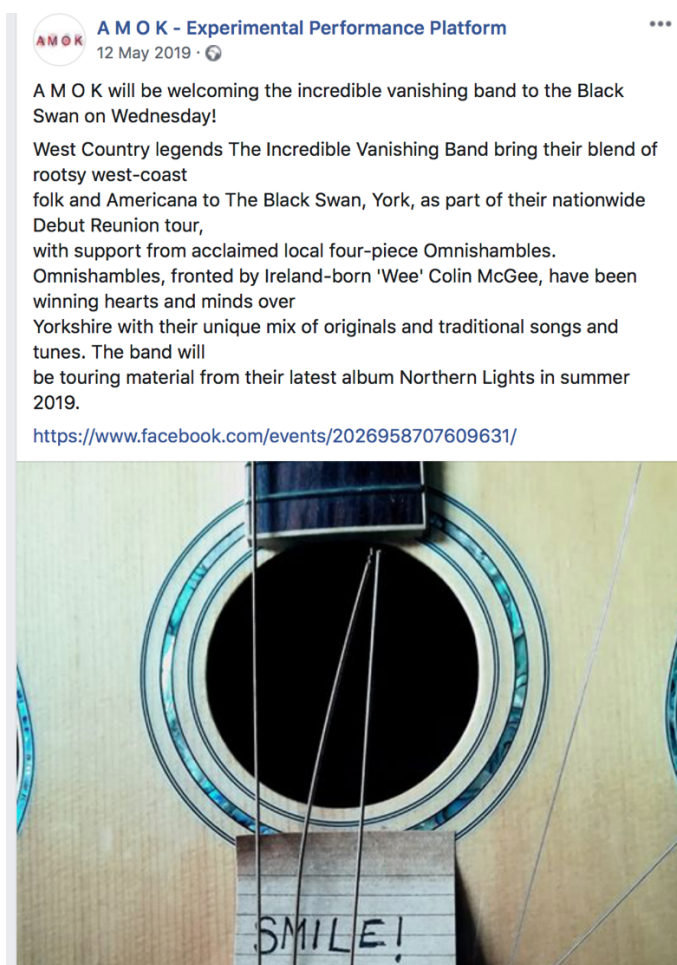
¹² For example, see Auslander, "Live and technologically mediated performance," 108.

theatre, film and tape piece. The second consideration – aesthetic – is concerned with the structure a piece is given (in the case of this portfolio, often theatrical conceits) and how this structure contains and affects the content of the work. So, in *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support*, we imagine the piece takes place inside a guitar; in *Knockin Stane*, we imagine that there is one landmass connecting the Hebrides, Shetland and the Faroe Islands and that this can be traversed, allowing us to hear different sounds; in *The Storm*, we are following a journey to and from Orkney, where a storm is taking place. These are fictional worlds that are created to house the music and texts in the pieces.

The central concept in *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support* is one of displacement. Everything in this piece is displaced: the performer's mind resides inside a guitar, not inside his head; his fellow performers can be heard but can't be seen; and most importantly of all, the technological artefact that is the guitar becomes the situation in which the piece takes place. The use of a frame story in *Vanishing Band* means that there are two distinct approaches to space in the piece. The first is the idea that the audience has come to attend a folk gig and not an experimental performance. This is reinforced by the use of an established folk music venue: a space that carries a number of associations and expectations for the audience. Furthermore, this space includes the audience; the audience is therefore complicit in the creation of the space, rather than observing it. The second approach, which is marked by the beginning of the tape piece halfway through the piece, is the exact opposite: to create a fantastical interpretation of space. This interpretation supposes that the performer's mind is contained inside his guitar, and when we, the audience, enter the story within the frame, we do so by entering the guitar itself and seeing what is housed there. Once this elaborate leap has been made and the conceit is established, everything that follows is rational, no matter how surreal it appears to be.

Both of these uses of space, contrasting as they are, serve as a metaphor for a comment on performative behaviour in popular music. In the case of the first space (the venue), the conventions of folk and popular performances – the way the performer speaks to an audience, the way certain conventions reinforce a constructed culture that has the illusion of being authentic – are observed and criticised. This pastiche was established from the outset, even in the way the performance was advertised (fig. 4):

Fig. 4



The audience, then, is led to believe that they will be watching a four-piece folk band playing a support slot for the headline act to follow. However, it is made clear from the outset that nothing quite adds up: although four instruments can be heard over the PA system (all music in the performance is pre-recorded, with the exception of the performer's

viola and voice), and although the band's frontman 'Wee Colin McGee' is present on stage, the rest of the group are absent. The presence of the band's lead guitarist – to whom McGee frequently refers – is indicated only by an empty microphone stand and, in between numbers, by the sound of a disembodied guitarist tuning up. The conceit that McGee had bandmates on stage became so effective in the performance that when he asked the audience to applaud a pre-recorded guitar solo by an imaginary live guitarist, they did.

An opening set of folk tunes (composed in the style of traditional folk music) is followed by an introduction by McGee, in which he advertises a series of guitar reviews he has recently recorded for a fictional YouTube channel. This establishes, early in the piece, the all-important connection between the performer and the guitar industry: an industry fraught with ego, meticulously cultivated personal image and highly performative behaviour. The tape piece that follows exploits this relationship.

McGee's introduction is followed by an arrangement of a traditional folk song, and it is during this song that the cracks begin to show in the performer's carefully polished persona.¹³ He stops the performance after just two verses, angrily complaining that the song is too slow and the guitar too loud. At this stage in the piece, it is the performer who has agency and the electronics that follow his lead. When he shouts "Stop!" halfway through the song, and the pre-recorded instruments falter, this creates the illusion of liveness. Given that a genuinely live performance is clearly out of the question, this pretence at liveness makes the performance all the more unsettling. During a second, faster performance of the same song, McGee drops his plectrum inside the sound hole of his guitar. He halts the song a second time, turns the guitar upside down, and shakes it vigorously in attempt to dislodge the plectrum. However, instead of succeeding in this task, his shaking disturbs the mind

¹³ "Banks of The Nile," *Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music*, n.d., accessed April 1, 2019, <https://mainlynorfolk.info/peter.bellamy/songs/thebanksofthenile.html>.

housed inside the body of the instrument. The voice of the housed mind cries out, signalling the beginning of the tape piece. The performance now clearly abandons any attempt to resemble a folk concert. The relationship between live performer and electronics (specifically who has agency, and who responds to whom) shifts at this point in the piece. From this point, the live performance is a mime choreographed to a tape piece. For the rest of the performance, McGee explores and slowly pulls apart the guitar in an attempt to reach the mind housed inside it: a mind he recognises as his own.

Just as in the opening of *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support*, (APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR makes use of a fairly literal approach to space. This use of space is necessary for the relationship between time and space to be exploited effectively. The piece is made out of very scant material, and is concerned with time: when things happen, and how long it takes these things to happen. (For instance, it takes I a very long time to decide to open the lid of his laptop, but he hurries to silence it when it begins to emit sounds.) For this to succeed, the environment must be consistent; the action must take place within one space – in this case, a small room. This space is not only established visually, but also through sound. So, a clock ticking tells us we are in a room. The fact that he's speaking very softly tells us that the room is small. In the live recording (fig. 5), four people were positioned at the back of the room facing away from him, performing very ordinary, unremarkable tasks, such as eating a sandwich or reading a newspaper. This was in place to suggest there are other people, also in small confined spaces, trapped in the same way as I.

This space is then broken down again through the use of sound. In the middle section when he's speaking down the microphone and there's a large amount of reverb on the signal, that suggests it's a very large space. A bigger space is implied and so he behaves in a more expansive manner.

Fig. 5. Premier of (APT 2/3) *ECHO CHMBR* at A M O K # 1, The Stained Glass Centre, York. Feb. 2019.



It is also through use of sound that this space is broken down in the middle section of the piece. When I picks up the microphone and speaks into it, a large amount of reverb is heard (this was the case in the original live performance as well as in the film). This implies a bigger space (reinforced in the film by the location of the scene changing too), and I's behaviour becomes far more expansive and disinhibited as a result of his new surroundings. Nevertheless, despite the fact that I has broken out of his confined surroundings, he still has no agency. It is through the technological artefact that is the microphone, coupled with the reverb effect, that the space changes.

The Storm makes use of space in a very different manner to either *Vanishing Band* or *ECHO CHMBR*. The structure of the piece seeks to emulate the way Mackay-Brown treats Orkney's landscape as a consistent space which contains the variety of images, characters and historical references evoked in this collection of poems. This is emulated musically by creating a consistent "sound world" built around the sound continuum introduced in the previous section. The five separate songs and poetry readings in the piece are held together cohesively by a backdrop of wind and sea recordings, dense vibraphone and flute chords,

aggressive viola and cello writing, and complex guitar and piano harmonics, containing many partials. This musical backdrop is consistent throughout the piece, and furthermore, the inclusion of field recordings suggests a literal space. The sound continuum in *The Storm* makes it possible for recordings of sounds in the natural world to be combined with the sound of live instruments and voices without the two seeming distinct. Sounds in the natural world and in the concert hall are melded together, so that there is no disjunct between those two different spaces. The staging of the performance of *The Storm* is designed to reflect the piece's central theme of journeying, of leaving and returning. At the beginning of the piece there are only two performers on stage, with a music stand, microphone stand and spotlight left unoccupied. On the mezzanine level towards the back of the auditorium is the singer. The first song that she sings from the mezzanine, *Song: Rognvald to Ermengarde*, is a poem from one high-status character addressing another, and is full of imagery of wind, stars and clouds. Both the character and these elements are "high," and so it was appropriate for the singer to be on a physically higher level. The same singer will then walk through the audience onto the stage during the last song, *The Road Home*. This signifies the journey that's being described in the text. There's a symbolic sense of movement and journey in the piece, but it's not literal – we're not literally imagining that the characters have gone from one specific place to another.

An imagined landmass is also established in *Knockin Stane*, albeit a fictional one in this case. Shetland has its own distinctive musical heritage, owing to its fiddle tradition, but its shared Scottish and Scandinavian heritage is also apparent. In addition to the knockin stane, I researched a tradition called *Veeseks*, of which there is only one account, published in 1879, from "the Rev. Mr William Archibald, Minister of Unst [Shetland]".¹⁴ Archibald reports that

¹⁴ George Low, *A Tour Through Orkney and Schetland* (Kirkwall: William Peace and Son, 1879), 163. I would like to thank Brian Smith at the Shetland Museum and Archives for drawing my attention to this source.

“a dozen or so form themselves into a circle, and taking each other by the hand, perform a sort of circular dance, one of the company all the while singing a Norn visick.”¹⁵

The tradition is summarised here by the Shetland Museum and Archives, Lerwick:

Shetlanders chanted “Veeseks” [Norn ballads], accompanied by clapping. A group of people stood in a circle with one person in the middle, saying the long verse from memory.¹⁶

In my conversation with Shetland archivist Brian Smith, he compared this tradition to Faroese circle dancing, prompting me to then incorporate into the piece a recording of a traditional circle dance song by a Faroese singer. I’ve also formed a link between the folk music of Shetland and *piobaireachd*, traditional music of the Scottish Highlands. The opening of the piece centres around a fiddle tune that’s inspired by the way in which *piobaireachd* is constructed. By referencing both *piobaireachd* and, through instrumentation, Shetland’s fiddle tradition, I use two very strong musical signatures within the same melody. By drawing on music from Scandinavia (Faroe Islands) – circle dancing – and combining that with *piobaireachd* from the Highlands, and combining those with aspects of traditional Shetland folk music, I’ve created one imaginary landmass through which the piece travels. The movement in the piece is not through thematic material, but through an imaginary landscape that houses distinct and distinctive musical sounds. The intended focus for this piece is on a journey through space rather than through time.

¹⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶ Wall text, *Song and dance*, Shetland Museum and Archives, Lerwick, Shetland.

Words and music

Four of the six pieces in the portfolio use text, in a variety of ways. These include recording and arranging traditional folk songs, setting poems to music, writing a play script and composing a graphic score inspired by John Cage's *Song Books*.¹⁷ These differing styles of text are unified by my chief concern in using text in music: to examine and bring to the fore parameters in everyday speech that are inherently musical, such as rhythm and metre, phrasing, and changes in pitch and dynamic. This emphasis makes it possible for spoken word to form the basis of composition, as is the case in *(APT2/3) ECHO CHMBR*, and in the second half of both *Knockin Stane* and *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support*. The consideration of a text's inherent metre manifests differently in *The Storm*. Here, my concern is with syllabic settings of poems that do not disrupt the original text, but set them to music unobtrusively, allowing the content of the original poems to be preserved. Prioritising the text in this way is particularly inspired by the work of Roger Marsh, most notably *Lullaby* and *Poor Yorick*.¹⁸ It is worth noting that the use of text in *Knockin Stane* is not covered here, but in the final section of the commentary.

In the whole collection of poems that make up *The Storm*, I identified a number of recurring key themes: journeying (both leaving and returning to a place), the history of Orkney (particularly the earls of Orkney, Magnus and Rognvald), the landscape of Orkney (interconnected to the history through architecture such as the kirks), Orkney's people (many characters of different statuses feature), and, of course, the effects of the elements on the landscape. There is also a sense in these poems that Mackay Brown is trying to work out

¹⁷ John Cage, *Song Books* (New York: Peters, 1970).

¹⁸ Roger Marsh, *Poor Yorick*, cmrc York, 2016, CD; Roger Marsh, "Lullaby," *The NMC Songbook*, NMC, 2009, CD.

where he himself fits within that, and that he is searching for a resting-place and sense of resolution – all within a turbulent landscape. I treat the last poem in the piece, *The Road Home*, as that resolution.

Just as the staging of *The Storm* reflects the sense of “coming and going” within the piece, so does the order in which the poems are arranged. The first poem is treated as a prologue: the disembodied, pre-recorded voice describes the aftermath of a storm that has claimed the life of an islander, accompanied by a series of flute multiphonics (again, in the tape part) that set it apart harmonically from the rest of the piece. The following four poems, beginning with *The Exile* and concluding with *The Road Home*, give the piece a thematic arc. The *Sprechstimme* in *The Exile* is performed by a live singer and bridges the divide between the spoken setting of the pre-recorded voice and sung setting of the live vocal parts. Even though there is some very scant accompaniment to *The Exile* in the tape part, the pitch of the vocal part is not set: it can be sung at any register that is comfortable. The result is that, although the melody is harmonically very clear, it has no fixed harmonic function in the piece, instead providing a dissonance when combined with the equally simple but unrelated tape part. The third poem, *Song: Rognvald to Ermengarde*, emerges through a dense texture created by an intense passage of harmonic trills played by viola, a heavily processed guitar melody and, behind this, the recording of a storm blowing loudly. This fragmented, repetitive song has the illusion of having no definite beginning or ending, instead drifting in and out of the texture beneath it. This texture intensifies as the fourth poem, *The Storm*, is introduced by the recorded, spoken voice, this time heavily edited with looping and delay effects, to the extent that some of the speech is unintelligible. This marks the climax of the piece, in which “the storm” takes place. As this passage subsides, leaving only the recording of waves and a drone, the final and most significant song in the piece is introduced: *The Road Home*. This is considerably the most substantial song in the piece, and the most melodically distinctive. The melody of this song becomes the source of the harmony of the rest of the

piece. There is no homophonic accompaniment to these songs: the viola, cello, guitar and vibraphone all play individual lines, the pitches of which are derived from the opening of *The Road Home*. The only bass instrument present in the piece is the piano. Harmonics played on the bottom string of the instrument not only provide the bass frequencies that the piece would otherwise be lacking, but have a bell-like quality which evokes the kirk of Magnus: a ruin on Orkney which forms the focal point of the final poem in the piece.

(APT 2/3) *ECHO CHMBR* comprises two very different pieces of text: one, a playscript, and the other, a graphic score. The script for *ECHO CHMBR*, which takes the form of a stream of consciousness, imitates linguistic features common to both the Brexit campaign and the two Beckett plays cited in the introduction: language that is repetitive and fragmented.¹⁹ In this regard, the playscript is structured in the same way as the actions that I performs throughout *ECHO CHMBR*: it is created from commonplace, unremarkable material, the significance of which is communicated purely by pacing, metre and dynamic. This is indicated in the script by very specific punctuation and formatting [fig. 6]. The repeated use of short phrases – “don’t worry,” “we agreed” and “I’m in” – reference the Brexit campaign’s strategy based on soundbites and clickbait. The text used in the graphic score in section xi of the piece takes some of the most commonly quoted phrases from the campaign, and then rearranges the content of these until they become nonsensical. This middle section of the piece, created in collaboration with the performer of the piece, is discussed in greater detail in the following section of the commentary.

¹⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*.

Fig. 6

and I wouldn't be seen **dead.**

We agreed.

We're in.

I'm in.

Control. Control. Control. Control.

Control!

The text used in *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support* also relied on collaboration with performers and writers. From research into guitar construction, I produced a list of key terms which were then used as the basis for two contrasting texts (fig. 7). The first was a script for the fictional YouTube videos alluded to in McGee's introduction. This script, which was the first excerpt of material to be recorded, forms the structure of the tape piece that begins halfway through the performance, and which forms the focal point of *Vanishing Band* as a whole. The second category of texts is a collection of three monologues, each written as a stream of consciousness. The three individuals who contributed these texts (and whose voices are heard on the recording) are all performers who were instructed to consider the ways in which the key terms might relate to the strains placed on a performer or artist. It is for this reason that collaboration was so important in creating the tape piece: the experience of more than one individual should be presented in the recording.

Fig. 7. List of vocabulary

	VOCAB	GUITAR	SoC				
1. Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stringed - Instrument - Strung - Steel - Body - Neck - Six - Fret - Metal - E A D G B E - Pluck - Pickup - Sound hole - Sound - Hole - Resonate - Magnetic - Pick up - Wire - Amplify 						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brace - Pull of strings - Vibrate - Construction - Tone - Softening - Wood - Water - Strip - Mould - Shaped - Curve - Clamped - Symmetry - Reinforcing - Crack - Hit - Binding - Moisture - Warp - Glue - Sealer - Bridge - Saddle - Strung
2. Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Neck - Warp - Pull - Tension - Temperature - Humidity - Join/Join - Body - Glue - Sliced in two - Sheets - Match - Sound hole - Back - Reflect - Waves - Brace/braced - Parallel - Left to Right - Length - Insert - Rod - One piece - Base of neck - Heel - Attach 						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Industry - Mechanized - Speed - Consistency - Tools - Work - Craft - Research - Testing - Flawless
3. Reinforcements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strutting 						<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - String/Strung - Tune - Tightened - Amplify - Lead
							<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pluck - Strum - Chord - Fingers - Hand - Pick

The tape piece is divided into six sections (this relates to the six strings of the guitar) and each section is given a title pertaining to distinct stages of manufacturing and purchasing a guitar:

- i. Features
- ii. Construction
- iii. Reinforcements
- iv. Mechanization
- v. Preparation
- vi. Playing

These titles, particularly the terms *features*, *construction* and *preparation*, also reinforce the fact that the construction of the guitar is treated as a metaphor for the construction of the performer's persona. Furthermore, the fragility of the guitar – demonstrated by its rough treatment throughout the piece – highlights the fragility of the performer's ego.

As the text in the tape piece moves towards the completion of a guitar's construction, the performer on stage unravels, resulting in two processes moving in opposite directions. The other disjunction – besides these trajectories – is that the content of the fictional YouTube video remains highly performative and polished, whilst the performer's behaviour and the content of the stream of consciousness recordings (which start extremely quietly and gradually get louder) increasingly unravel. The piece ends with three voices sounding simultaneously: one inviting the imaginary viewer to "click on the link below," another voice asking "can this stop?" and, thirdly, the sound of the performer breathing heavily and weeping. Even as the performer on stage falls apart, the relentless pace of the tape piece, the ever-present sense of salesmanship, and the layering of multitracked voices all clamouring to be heard serve as a reminder of the highly performative conventions of the popular music industry that are challenged in this piece.

Documenting, recording and scoring composition

During the process of composing the pieces in this portfolio, I have considered various methods and definitions of "recording" music. In some cases, recording has quite literally meant capturing audio and video recordings of musicians' performances, and in other cases I have recorded music by composing and scoring it. A combination of these two methods has facilitated an organic composition process, in which I have used scores and audio recording in cycles whilst collaborating with performers. A draft score is given to a performer, the workshop is recorded, and the score is edited accordingly. Or, conversely, a

field recording is taken, around which music is then composed. The importance of this is that music is physically played as part of the composing process, as opposed to the writing and performing of a piece being two separate acts. The ability to capture sound sources and pre-existing music, which are then incorporated into a composition, has called into question my role as a composer when collaborating with other performers and making use of improvisation in composition. The clear challenge when incorporating improvisation – both my own and other performers’ – is to ensure that the composer’s work remains intentional and original, and this is addressed in particular in the writing of *Dig Deep*, *The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support* and *(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR*. My solution is to treat improvisation as I treat the traditional folk material used: a sound source that is incorporated into a work. My role as composer is to organise sound in such a way as to convey an intended meaning. Traditional material, field recordings, spoken text and improvised performances are all part of the palette of sounds to be organised in the writing of a piece. The result of this exploration is that the pieces are presented, in their final form, in a variety of guises: score, film and audio recording.

The Storm was composed by collating recordings of actors, singers and instrumentalists providing small excerpts of material, all in isolation from each other. I regarded this collection of recordings as a toolkit, and it was from this toolkit that I created two versions of the piece – one a score and the other a tape piece – before settling on the final version for three performers and electronics. The composition of the piece evolved organically through a cycle of scoring fragments of material; marking recordings of these excerpts; editing this audio to create new sections of the piece; and then creating a new score incorporating those changes. The initial instrumental and vocal parts that make up the ‘tool kit’ are shown in figures 8 – 9. The phrases written for cello and vibraphone are derived from the opening line of *The Road Home*. The four-note chord created by this opening line is then transposed, giving eight pitches that are then arranged in short phrases, and this process is then

repeated for the following three lines (fig. 10). These were recorded by the cellist and percussionist using a variety of techniques, namely artificial harmonics, tremolo, varying dynamics and, in the case of the vibraphone, using mallets and bowing the instrument. These phrases also form the viola part in the middle section of the piece, in a free line that can be played at any tempo. This creates unpredictable dissonances with the pre-recorded cello part doubling it.

Figs. 8 – 9. The Storm tool kit.

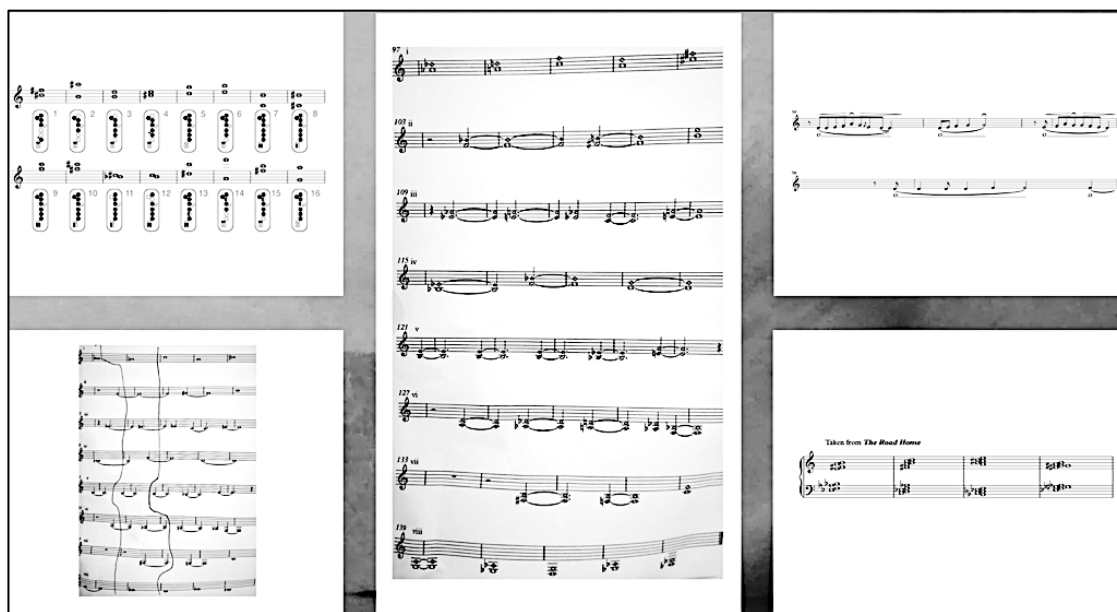
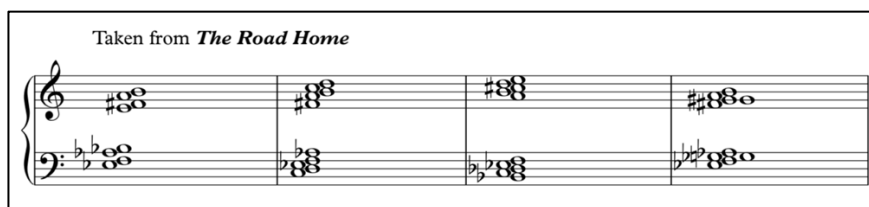


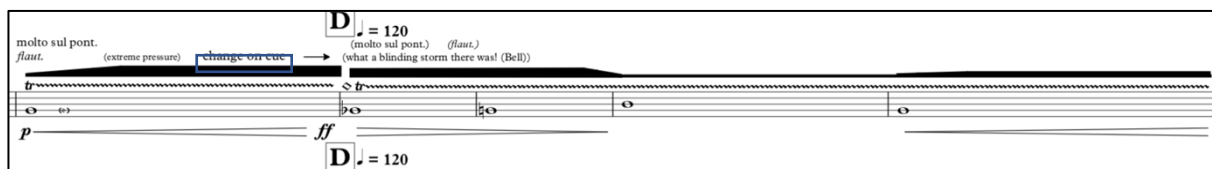
Fig. 10



The final score of *The Storm* contains implicit directions on how it should be presented in performance, particularly with regard to the two main features of the piece: the presence of fixed media, and the influence of folk music. There are no individual parts for the performers to play from; they all have the same copy of the score. In this score, cues are

clearly indicated between parts. This necessitates the use of eye contact and a degree of flexibility in responding to each other's playing, and this in turn has implications for the proximity between players on stage. The score does not contain any tempo markings, and in many places, there are no bar lines. Instead, there are a number of time cues that correspond to the length of the fixed media excerpts. To make this work in practical terms, there is always one instrument that clearly takes the lead in each section of the piece (this is usually the voice or electronics, but the viola at bar 107 is a notable exception), and the other instrumental parts that accompany this lead line have parts that are deliberately left open. This is achieved in two ways: firstly, in the use of short rhythmic cells, such as the guitar part in bar 7; and, secondly, in writing lines which have no clear trajectory or phrasing and can therefore finish at any time, such as the viola part shown in fig. 11. All of these factors result in a score that suggests a small group playing in a similar manner to musicians in a folk session.

Fig. 11



My criteria for generating material for *Dig Deep* was that it should come about sub-consciously through improvisation; that is to say, it should be written through playing and should not be in any way pre-meditated. As both a pianist and percussionist, it was possible to adhere to this rule in creating initial thematic ideas, which I then used to construct a skeleton score. However, it would ultimately be necessary to improvise further with another musician, so that the interaction between the two players would be born out of the same process as the raw material. In organising these ideas, I was inspired by John Cage's sound

gamut as a way of presenting cellular material.²⁰ Where my approach differed, however, was in using improvisation with another musician to structure and develop these themes, rather than chance procedures. My own gamut organised sounds into broad categories based on frequency, attack, dynamic and rhythmic complexity. In particular, the extremes of both the piano and the bass drum's ranges are favoured.

They are as follows:

- i. *Finger clicks/rim of bass drum* – quiet, high frequency, quick attack, distinct rhythm
- ii. *Superball mallet on string/skin* – quiet, low frequency, slow attack, no rhythm
- iii. *Bass drum accel.* – quiet with cresc., low frequency, quick attack, unclear rhythm
- iv. *Motif i: shuffle against (drum) against straight quavers (piano)* –
loud, low freq., quick attack, distinct rhythm
- v. *Motif ii: shuffle (drum) against straight quavers (piano)* –
loud, low freq., quick attack, distinct rhythm
- vi. *Motif iii: shuffle* – loud, low freq., quick attack, distinct rhythm
- vii. *Motif iv: shuffle* – loud, low freq., quick attack, distinct rhythm

My initial skeleton score gave a structure to the piece that has remained unchanged throughout the piece's development. The final "shuffle" motifs – motifs iii and iv – were scored precisely, and these formed the basis of the improvisations that contributed towards earlier thematic material in the piece. This skeleton score was the basis of a rehearsal with a percussionist, in which sections of the skeleton score were improvised around and played repeatedly until each idea was refined, and then familiar enough to replicate. This session was filmed, and the score then refined to capture the more detailed material resulting from

²⁰ David W. Bernstein, "Cage and high modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186 -193.

the session. The final score presents each bar as an independent entity, with symbols above the bar indicating which player should cue the other. Each bar can be repeated an indeterminate amount, and only ends when a player (according to who is cued by the score) moves on to the next bar. The other player's noticing this change and altering to keep pace gives the impression of the two players teaching material to one another. This inevitably results in a flexible duration for the piece, and the unpredictable transitions from bar to bar reflect the playfulness that is essential to the piece.

Rivers has followed the same cycle of scoring, workshopping and re-working as *Dig Deep* and *The Storm*. Written for, and in collaboration with, a specific performer, the original version of this piece was composed on a much smaller scale. Three substantial re-writes of this score have occurred, and these re-writes have focussed largely on the challenge of allowing room for improvisation at the same time as avoiding ambiguity in the score. This is made more challenging still by the fact that the majority of improvisation in the piece is structural: bars marked with repeats can be played as many times as the cellist chooses; boxed cells of music can be played in any order; and the tempo and duration of many sections of the piece are left fairly open. Some improvisation with pitch is included as well, indicated by the use of graphic notation. The topographical outlines of three rivers have been copied into the score, the contour of which should be followed in improvising with a harmonic glissando (e.g. bar 10) and with selected pitches (e.g. bar 39). This is, admittedly, an unobvious way of inserting the image of a river into the music, but it ties together the structure of the music, the line of the cello part and the visual presentation of the score thematically. It was necessary for the motivic material in *Rivers* to reflect the concepts of ephemerality and gradual progression on which the piece is based. Furthermore, as a piece based on a metaphor rooted in the natural world (water passing through a riverbed), it was important that the cello's material should be dispassionate and impersonal. Nevertheless, the main theme has a sense of line strong enough that it can be developed from the initial four-note

phrase to an extended iteration of the same motif (fig. 12). This balance between the creation of a distinctive line but the avoidance of a clear melody is achieved by building the material out of a series of intervals (a major 7th, 9th, minor 3rd and major 3rd), all of which relate to each other, rather than a line that moves in step from one close interval to the next, in a song-like manner.

Fig. 12



The solution to producing a score that allows for improvisation has been to limit the parameters of what can be improvised in each section and to provide great detail in all scored material. So, if the pitch of the cello part is left open to improvisation, then the duration of this section is stated. If the duration of the passage is not fixed, then pitch, rhythm, phrasing, etc., are indicated in detail. Ensuring that the cello and electronic parts can be synchronised at important points in the score is essential to the timbral and harmonic development of the piece. These improvised passages are contained within larger sections (indicated in the score by rehearsal marks), the cues for which are clearly indicated in both the score and accompanying DAW project. Otherwise, the constantly altering parameters of the tape part are left to run independent of the cello, so that the two parts will interact at different points within each performance.

After the initial live performance of *(APT 2/3) ECHO CHMBR*, it was reimagined as a film. Now the spaces that were suggested in the live performance – the small flat, the concert hall, the boardroom – could be literally presented. Furthermore, realising *ECHO CHMBR* as a film ensured that no detail was lost: such an understated performance as is given at the opening and close of the piece ran the risk of being lost in a large venue. The central concept

of the piece – that the technological artefact has agency – was maintained in the filming and editing of the piece. My approach to this was to imagine that I himself was operating the camera, and so the frequent, abrupt edits in the opening reflect I’s state of distraction. However, when I finally speaks (action v), only one shot is used. These two contrasting styles are inspired by Walter Benjamin’s statement that “[d]istracted and concentration form polar opposites,” and by his analogy of a man looking at a painting: “[t]he painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed.”²¹ The change in style from constantly shifting, roughly cut shots to a single take during I’s monologue is designed to convey this shift from distraction to concentration, from listlessness to rumination.

(APT 2/3) *ECHO CHMBR* is divided into three distinct sections. The first and last sections are strictly scripted and choreographed. Every action that I must perform, however small, is instructed. The spacing of these instructions on the score, and the large blank spaces left on the page, indicate the stilted nature of the performance and the silence that is instilled in the environment created on stage. Although I is only instructed to mime piano playing whilst sitting at a desk, the pre-recorded piano (which is heard in action xiii of the piece) is transcribed and given to the performer, so that both his miming and humming (actions iii and vii) replicate what is heard at the end (fig. 13). Additionally, cues in the score link I’s actions and the sounds emitted by the artefacts precisely, so that the pacing of the piece, and the silence within it, is controlled. However, the middle section takes the form of a graphic score that draws on Cage’s *Song Books*.²² Colour schemes and size of lettering/drawing were varied to give direction to the performer; otherwise it was left open to improvisation. It was

²¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 17 – 18.

²² Cage, *Song Books*.

necessary to leave this so open to interpretation to allow the performer's own voice to come through, thereby forming a sharp contrast to the claustrophobic outer sections. The release needed to come from the performer, rather than being scripted.

Fig. 13



As discussed in the second section of this commentary, the starting point for *Knockin Stane* was research into one historical artefact and one musical tradition from Shetland: the knockin stane and *Veeseks*. Having established the concept of a piece that references a number of musical traditions from, or relating to, Shetland, I carried out further research into these traditions, and began collecting and composing tunes that would form the basis of the piece. Having researched *piobaireachd*, “the classical music of the Highland bagpipe,” I composed the melody that opens the piece: a fiddle tune that makes use of the way *piobaireachd* is structured, and the ornamentation used.²³ A comparison of my score with a *piobaireachd* score is shown in figure 14. This contemporary take on the tradition of *piobaireachd* is inspired in part by Melinda Maxwell’s *Pibroch* for oboe.²⁴ This is played on solo violin, thereby combining distinctive features of Highland music with instrumentation synonymous with Shetland. All accompaniments to this melody are multitracked by the same violinist, with small guitar and melodica parts added. This is the first instance of a tape piece proving to be a more advantageous medium for this piece than a score. To recreate the

²³ Seumas MacNeill, *Tutor for Piobaireachd* (West Calder: Hugh K. Clarkson and Sons, 1990), 2.

²⁴ Melinda Maxwell, “Pibroch,” *British Women Composers. Vol.2*, Presto Classical, 1992, CD.

instrumentation of this piece with live players would require a section of six violinists, a guitarist and a melodica player, all of whom would be underused in performance and whose presence on stage would undermine the solitary nature of the opening motif. However, it is in the second half of the piece that *Knockin Stane's* existence as a tape piece is truly justified.

Fig. 14. *Knockin Stane* violin part and original *piobraireachd* (below).



This second section centres around two recordings made with a Faroese singer and actor. His rendition of a traditional Faroese circle dance song, “Sigmundarkvæðið,” dictates the tempo and key of all other music combined with this recording.²⁵ His second recording, a reading of a Shetland ballad entitled “King Orfeo,” is edited to fit with the same pulse as “Sigmundarkvæðið.” An echo effect, synchronised to the same pulse, is added to the reading of “King Orfeo,” thereby enhancing the natural rhythm of the actor’s speech. In this way the voice forms a rhythmic ostinato, a device inspired by Aidan O’Rourke’s *Tobar Nan*

²⁵ Pall Brim Joensen, conversation with author, June 20, 2019.

Ealain.²⁶ The *Veeseks* tradition involved a group forming a circle and then clapping rhythmically and chanting. Therefore, hand claps have been recorded several times, and the panning of these recordings altered to suggest a group moving round in a circle. Further echo effects are added to these claps, first a quaver delay, then a triplet quaver delay to mirror the rhythm of “Sigmundarkvæðið,” and finally a detuned and distorted echo, in which the other instruments will eventually be submerged. Finally, a jig composed specifically for this piece is introduced on guitar and violin.

The main device in *Knockin Stane* is to bring a number of distinct musical ideas in and out of focus as the piece progresses. These ideas – a fiddle tune, a Faroese circle song, a Shetland ballad – all appear as separate entities which are temporarily forced to cohabit the same place in time. This shifting of perspectives, coupled with the juxtaposition between the piece’s limited instrumentation and the dense texture achieved through the use of digital effects, is conveyed successfully through the medium of a tape piece. Imaginary spaces are suggested, and movement implied through a level of controlled detail that cannot be easily achieved in a live performance, and that would even suffer from the presence of performers on stage. For this reason, the score that accompanies the recording of *Knockin Stane* is simply a companion to the tape piece, and not intended for live performance.

The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support is the only piece in this portfolio for which there is no score at all. There are parts for the viola tunes, and chord and lyric charts for the opening song (these are included in the portfolio for reference), but otherwise the piece was developed through a cycle of recording and rehearsing. The recording of the tape piece was altered through the rehearsal process: the performer’s mime was based on the recording, the recording then altered to incorporate particularly striking moments in the mime, and then

²⁶ Aidan O’Rourke, “Tobar Nan Ealein,” *An Tobar*, Reveal Records, 2010, CD.

the mime updated to fit with the new recording (Section iii, “Strutting,” is a particularly good example of this synchronicity). This cyclical approach was adopted over the course of three rehearsals. To record the most constantly featured stream of consciousness, the guitar was tuned to resonate with pitch of the speaker’s voice (tuned to an open G chord) and then a microphone was placed in the sound hole (fig. 15). The guitar was then kept in that tuning for all subsequent recordings. The purpose of this was not to create a harmony for the piece, but rather to ensure that the sound of the voice and guitar resonating together is, at all times, a recognisable signature. Additional recorded guitar parts were not of the guitar being played, but of some of the mechanical noises which the component parts of the instrument are capable of making in their own right. These noises are often seen as the by-product of the desired sound of a guitar, but in this case are placed centre stage. Vocabulary in the stream of consciousness recordings is then coupled with these guitar noises. For example, the word “Vibrer” is combined with the sound of strings snapping at the end of the piece.

Fig. 15. Positioning the microphone inside the guitar.



As is the case in many of the pieces in this portfolio, *The Incredible Vanishing Band +Support* was written for a specific performer. His voice features heavily in the tape piece, and as a result we often see him mime along to his own voice, once again exploiting the relationship between technology and liveness. Additionally, the mime he performs was developed collaboratively in rehearsals with me as director, and the improvised dialogue at the beginning relies on both the immense skill of this particular performer and the clear understanding between performer and composer/director. There is no score or script that could guide another performer towards an equivalent performance. For this reason, the piece could not be replicated. This is clearly a drawback of dispensing with a score, but the methodological approach used here has resulted in an unusual piece that could not be written through any other process.

Conclusion

An absolute priority at the outset of this project was that all the material written should exist concretely: it should not simply be scored and never experienced, but should be played, performed and listened to. This is because an integral aspect to all of these compositions is the space, both literal and aesthetic, they inhabit, and the ways in which these considerations impact on the resulting work. (Even *Dig Deep*, for which only a score exists in this portfolio, was workshopped before the final edit.) Extensive use of recording technologies (studio sessions, field recordings), fixed media and live electronics has benefitted the work, not only creatively, but practically too: although most performances have, for logistical reasons, been given by small numbers of performers, additional recording sessions have made it possible to work with a larger number of instruments in a piece than is possible in any one place and time. (*The Storm*, for example, was performed live by four musicians, but makes use of ten instruments). I've carried out a varied exploration of the relationship between theatre and technology through a combination of film, audio

recording, scores and live performances, and found that common to all of these works are the concepts of displacement and absence: what can be heard but not seen (*The Storm*, (*APT 2/3*) *ECHO CHMBR*, *Rivers*), the inherently theatrical appropriation of technological artefacts (*The Incredible Vanishing Band + Support*, *Dig Deep*) and how space can be used creatively (*Knockin Stane*, *Vanishing Band*). The role of absence in composition and in performance warrants further examination, and this will be the focus of future works and research.

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