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*Within The Invisible Shifting of Sources and Their Material Qualities..*  
*on Sonic Fiction, Aural Drama, and Ruin*

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Bachelor's Thesis

## **Abstract**

It is particularly interesting to think how sound formats the horizon of our perception. Electroacoustic pieces demonstrate a certain instability and tension and bear strong imaginative powers, often immersing the listener into strange realms inhabited by sounds. My research is an investigation of the conditions of this emerging perception, formulated through the notions of sonic fiction and aural drama.

Weaving a thread of inspiration from the experimental theatre practices, I will outline parallels between their mechanisms to those in electroacoustic sound situations, along with traces of that in my compositional practice. At last, I will speak of a ruin - an intriguing concept in the context of musical form in how it assimilates in relation to time structures; what it suggests about the presence and materiality of sounds. The ruinous as an embodiment of the musical aesthetics of fragmented space, disruptive processes, and noise will be discussed as a material metaphor, a speculative strategy for composition.

*What does it mean to compose ruins?*

*How can an architectural ruin become a metaphor for a sonic material?*

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## Introduction

Throughout the past many years, I have found myself persistently drawn to all kinds of art forms, the more transitional, alienating, and surreal, the stronger my fascination manifested itself. My background in contemporary arts, where it all began, shaped the way I think of sound and compose, the inclination towards visual thought pertaining until today. Having discovered the world of sound, what drove my curiosity further was the vastness of approaches that sound entails and at the same time the fleetingness and ephemerality of its experience. That there is always more to it than we can outline, that it escapes defining, always touching on the elusive, the poetics.

I have engaged in working with sound in various ways, creating music and sound design for film, installation, choreography, and performing live, engaging with listening practices, and, even earlier, field recording. However, my main focus in Sonology remained multichannel composition. The encounter with fixed media music was a complete and overwhelming takeover. I found myself in the concert hall suddenly with eyes closed, gifting my whole existence to the listening state, a state with undefined boundaries that surpass the limits of reality and expose vast spaces for imagination. Listening to sound coming from all directions in this somewhat synthetic, multichannel, environment, within the invisible shifting of sources and their material qualities, I was fascinated by the elusive powers over my perception unfolding at that moment. Unable to see anything but directing the gaze inwards, I let my mind dissolve in the textured mass of sound. Witnessing the emerging sound forms and their spatial movement as if acquiring agency, I felt as if I were continually hovering in some desolate landscape or underworld. I gradually realised that what fascinated me in the visual arts has found resonance in my pieces. It is the promise of another reality not tied to the quotidian, the unpronounceable and ineffable presence to it, the sense of wonder and surreality. Composing intuitively up until the realisation of that aspiration, I began to contextualise this pursuit and its influence on my music. That formed the ground for this text.

I have developed several multichannel works during my studies in Sonology, two of which I will discuss: *Sarid* (2022) and *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time I-III* (2023-2024). These pieces are the core of my compositional endeavour and an active part of the research and thinking process. Through them, I revealed the aspects I aspire to explore. The present text unfolds these aspects as a web of deeply interconnected, cross-referencing articulations and is structured in two chapters.

In chapter I, I reveal the fundamental thread weaving through the entire research - the relationship between perceptual instability and imagination. One of the tools I employ for accessing it is theatre discourse. Both music and theatre immerse the audience in the spatial unfolding of events and call for the unique interpretation by each spectator-listener. In section one of chapter I, inspired by the works of Romeo Castellucci in particular, I outline the relationship between reality and fiction that is characteristic of many experimental productions. I discuss the notion of multistability introduced by theatre scholar Erika Fisher-Lichte and talk about distance inspired by the writings of Heiner Goebbels. In section two, I draw parallels between these theatre mechanisms to those in sound situations and introduce the notion of sonic fiction. Section two brings up a discussion on the role sound sources occupy in music perception through the writings on the acousmatic situation of Brian Kane and the spectromorphological thought of Dennis Smalley. I introduce a discussion on the material aspect of sounds and give examples of the related music pieces. It could be said, that, in a broad sense, chapter I deals with the framework of space. Summarising intersecting ideas, I discuss my most recent composition *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time*, with the focus on its first iteration.

Chapter II unfolds the temporal plane of thought and introduces the second fundamental thread in this research, formulated through the notion of aural drama. Developed from my interest in dynamically unfolding composition, it is discussed in relation to the dualism of gesture and texture as formative

musical elements. In sections one and two I focus on the gesture and a sense of drama inherent to the interior structure of sound morphologies. In section three, I talk about texture and review its relationship with sonic materiality. Section four follows with an exploration of drama that emerges from the change in morphology, behaviour, and sound interactions, and describes the resonance of it in my piece *Sarid*. Following in section five discussion on processing tools presents a poetic reading of noise sound and distortion. It presents contemplations on perception and technology as a specific method of creating a situation of destabilisation. Lastly, in section six, expanding on all the above considerations and weaving a thread of inspiration from architectural studies, I talk about ruin. The silhouette of ruin is employed in this research as a case study and the concluding metaphor for thinking about perceptual instability and sound. Ruin presents a mysterious dimension where past, present, and future, remembrance and prediction are interwoven. Melding the theoretical framework together, the notion of ruin is treated as a speculative strategy that addresses material, spatial, and temporal planes of thought and exists in parallel to my artistic work.

I conclude this text with a description of the two extended versions of my composition *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time* in more detail. The piece, whose composition process took an entire year and taught me so much.

## Chapter I

### *On theatrical gaze, sonic fiction, and imagination in electroacoustic music*

#### 1.1 Positioning theatrical thought

Theatre is a multifaceted and highly relational term, the discussion of which often spreads in various directions, that is why I will first briefly introduce several readings of the theatre along with the key related terms.

The word theatre, as derived from the Ancient Greek **θέατρον** *théatron*, a place for viewing, largely refers to spatial relations of seeing and is primarily understood as a physical space of performance happening (a building, a concert hall, a stage), while in dramatic arts, theatre is referred to as a form of art that, uniting various media, is almost exclusively concerned with performance. At its broadest, it is occupied with the ordering of perception through the organisation of elements on stage with the aim of producing a desired effect or meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Theatre has a strong historical link to Greek city environments, where familiar and actual to citizens, social and political situations emerging in city contexts often found their way to the stage. This lineage of ancient Greece demonstrates ties of theatre to the representation of reality. An action was designed to create a coherent and significant sense of drama, or as a critical narrative that would evoke a new reading of the situation. In the light of the theatre's aim to translate a desired effect, some connections are intentionally made more apparent, often overflowing their 'real' appearance. That leads to another interpretation of the theatre, which includes an appeal for exaggeration and artificiality: theatrical as a behaviour that is extreme and not sincere, one that is intended to attract attention.<sup>2</sup>

#### Theatre's proposition of 'the other' narrative

*Artificial is too artificial. There are no doubts in it. Doubt emerges in the reality.  
Reality - is a provocation of a viewer.*<sup>3</sup>

Being a complex art form, theatre operates by taking borderlines into account, like those of 'art' and 'life', and is characterised by a tension between reality and fiction.<sup>4</sup> As performance takes place in real spaces while signifying various fictional spaces; it is real time that performance occupies while not being identical to the time represented; and it is phenomenal bodies of actors that portray stage figures, characters.<sup>5</sup> Taking this process of oscillation between reality and fiction, with its fluidity and gaps, as a base for further elaborations, theatre can be formatted as a space of destabilisation. I am accessing the stretching as a suggestion of immersion into fiction (a mind's construct), where perceptual instability serves as a trigger

<sup>1</sup> In this definition of theatre, I rely on several sources: Britannica, Theatre <https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art>; Hamilton, James R., *Philosophy of Theater*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/theater/>; and the writings of theatre researcher Lehman, Irene in *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*. Wolke Verlag, Hofheim, 2022

<sup>2</sup> The Britannica Dictionary, Theatricality, <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/theatrical>

<sup>3</sup> See Vlaskin, Kirill: 'Casluctelci's art differs from the art of most other directors in its close contact with the real. The creations of the artist do not try to pretend at all and constantly declare to everyone: Artificial is too artificial! There are no doubts in it. Doubt emerges precisely in reality. Reality - is a provocation of a viewer.', in Strasti-mordasti, or the theatre of trust by Romeo Castellucci (from the notes of a sub-atheist)[Страсти-мордасти, или театр доверия Ромео Кастеллучи (из записок недоатеиста)], my translation /, Syg.ma, 2020 <https://syg.ma/@kirill-vlaskin/strasti-mordasti-ili-tieatr-dovierija-romieo-kastielluchchi-iz-zapisok-niedoateista>

<sup>4</sup> See Lehman, Irene: 'When taking borderlines into account, like those of 'art' and 'life', it becomes clear that theatre is no simple art form and, so much more than some glitter and a dramatic gesture, deals with the border between fictitious and 'real', in *Regarding Listening. On the theatricality of experimental listening situations*, *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, pp.119

<sup>5</sup> Fischer—Lichte, Erika, *Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre*, *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 84–96.

for imagination provocation. To bring my main thesis to the surface, adopting the position of philosophy researcher Joaquim Braga, imagination bridges sensory dimensions that are absent from perception.<sup>6</sup> Or, to paraphrase, to be more precise within the established confines of this research, imagination bridges sensory dimensions that are uncertain or unstable in perception.

Theatre scholar Erika Fischer—Lichte in the essay *Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre*, refers to this transgression between the fictional and the real as perceptual multistability, which occurs in situations 'where perception shifts between figure and ground', like those of an actor's real body and its character. Utilised in the essay, her illustration concerns a production of Carl Zuckmayer's *The Devil's General* by the director of Berlin Volksbühne Frank Castorf. Having invited two actors of different genders to play General Harras in two subsequent acts of the play, he used cross-casting as a way to challenge the viewer. By confronting the audience with a different, and further, physically opposite, female 'body' in the portrayal of the general in the second act, he created a powerful tension for the comprehension of the tangible, as well as a richer critical stratum to the broader meaning of the play. According to Fischer—Lichte, in cases where we cannot pin down a reason for such a shift and when the other perception is not yet established, the moment of passage leads the perceiving subject into a state of instability, an in-betweenness, where one is confronted with a matter of emergence. In the example of Castorf's piece, the emergent perception was shifting not only between the physical presence of the actor's body and that of a character's representation but also between the feasible and the impossible: how can a female portray a male figure? What arises out of such multistable flux is the fluidity between various layers of possible relations, a perceptual 'stretching', an instability.



fig.1-2 *Inferno*, Romeo Castellucci, scenes with dogs and a boy

Recent developments on European stages emphasise the tension between fictitious and real. Bringing in another example, early pieces of Romeo Castellucci are considered rather extreme for the reason of such perceptual destabilisation, in particular his assiduous exploration of reality and what constitutes it. During the performance of *Inferno*, a pack of dogs attacks a character played by Castellucci (fig.1)<sup>7</sup>, confronting the audience with the question of whether it is real, or part of the play. Later in the same piece, a boy plays with a basketball ball, and each time it strikes the floor, a sound appears seemingly from the massive facade that is behind him (fig.2)<sup>8</sup>. The sound is of a similar envelope but of a drastically different source. The boy, mesmerised by this occurrence, continues to explore the sound materialising somewhere behind him, at times getting alerted by what he evokes - sounds of falling bricks, weird growls, and suddenly a light appearing in windows, wildly moving with each hit of the ball, accompanied by the eerie rumble, noise, and earlier sounds. *Inferno*, going beyond the confines of the traditional drama theatre, reveals an obscure experience of nonsensical yet functional within the established reality causalities. Castellucci provides the viewer with a new framework within which to access that reality.

<sup>6</sup> Braga, Joaquim, *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Imagination*, Volume 1, 2019, Introduction

<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 depicts the scene at minutes 12-14 in *Inferno*. When writing this text, the video documentation was available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3JFExgZD5iw>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 14:44

Leaving many open spaces for interpretation, he opens gates for the imagination to actively construct this new 'fictitious' reality that breaks with the logic of familiar expectancy. And, following the words of Fischer—Lichte, 'the more often such a shift occurs, the more the spectator becomes a wanderer between the worlds, between two orders of perception, between fictitious and real ..'<sup>9</sup> Both examples of *Inferno and The Devil's General* demonstrate an important aspect of theatre, namely, how it questions reality and exposes its inner logic, providing the viewer with ways to relate to it. To put it more concisely, theatre organises perceptual means towards reality.

Another theatre director and composer, Heiner Goebbels, similarly to Castellucci, creates conditions for the active engagement of imagination but does so through slightly different means. He creates situations where various media forms, each with its personal trajectory and manifestation, coexist, united by shared space and time, however, avoiding creating any hierarchy of their interaction. Making sense of his performances requires enacting the logic of connections, composition, and associations. Standing in opposition to the active intentional composition of Castellucci, who predetermines the unstable relations on micro and macro scales, Goebbels's defining is only present at the level of the inner structures of mediums involved: scenography, music, objects, performers, and other elements, while the bigger whole left open-ended to the spectator's mind. Goebbels's way of navigating the quest of theatre creation is through the notion of absence. It is the production through 'lack' and negation, a gap asking to be made sense of. He draws our attention to how presence and absence are intertwined, similar to how highly visual nature of theatre in that it implies spatial relations of seeing always contains its opposite, the unseen. Following on this idea, another theatre scholar and researcher Irene Lehman interrogates theatre's involvement with the 'negative space': the 'invisible' in her book *Sounding Fragilities*, describing how a production revolves around structuring the aspect of representation, regulating what is seen and what is not.<sup>10</sup> Taking the negativity as a starting point, she notices how 'with the suspension of the 'normal' concert or theatre situation, the fringes of the art forms come more in focus, into the questions'.<sup>11</sup> In his writing, Goebbels demonstrates this mechanism at play, inspired by a quote from a French painter, Nicolas Poussin: 'There are characters in the front of the picture, all tragic. But in the background, it's all very peaceful, gentle and friendly.' Poussin reveals how the contrast between the perspectives makes us doubt the 'tragic' appearance or the peacefulness depicted on the stage. Engineering in this way the gaze and the perception of the spectator, the infused difference of the two layers creates the necessary space for doubt in reality to happen, and thus a sprout of a new 'reality' gets planted.

What both Castellucci and Goebbels reveal is another important mechanism of theatre in action, namely distancing (or spacing). Distance seems to be a particularly helpful concept since it can be used as a tool for both analyses and composition on various scales and towards various forms. Castellucci revealed the connotation of distance as the detachment of 'essences' of objects (references, meanings, functionalities) from their representation(1) and contextual links(2) - thus, distancing from the 'norm' of reality, or, rather, from the established conception of the audience of what reality is and how it functions. With Goebbels, distance accommodates a more spatial implication. His way of working is less about conceptual/epistemological links between objects and actions but more about their unity, provided by the common space of the performance.

Thus, we attained an overview of the two possible means employed in creating ambiguity (perceptual destabilisation) amid the amalgamation of media and storylines in theatre: reading theatre as a form that operates through multistability and distance. In opposition to multistability, where the physical body of

<sup>9</sup> Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre*, pp.87

<sup>10</sup> Lehman, Irene: 'The word theater refers largely to spatial relations of seeing; the theatron as the space where the seeing takes place is its primary characteristic. This is why the theatrical assemblage always contains its opposite, the invisible', in conversation with E.Schimana, P.Paalme, and S.Kogler *on the fragilities of music theatre* in *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, pp.69-70

<sup>11</sup> Goebbels Heiner. *Aesthetics of Absence. Texts on Theatre*. Routledge, 2015, pp.11

the actor and the portrayal of the character (or the coexistence of the real and the fictional time-space relations) happen simultaneously and therefore produce fluidity in reception, 'distancing' pertains to contrasting elements to the extent of separation, alienation from, of furthering away. Exposing the differences between distance and multistability, it is important to note how intertwined both mechanisms are. Incited by a rapture, by a discontinuity, distance can appear in a variety of ways, which I began to outline in the paragraphs above. Focusing on deepening understanding of distancing as a tool, I will address the three possible planes of how it is present in theatre situations in the following paragraphs. Those concerning perception (spectatorship and recognition) and representation.

### Mechanisms of Distinction.

#### On perception: the role of the spectator and recognition

In my attempts to bring clarity to how distance can become a tool for compositional work, I have looked at such terms as (1) aesthetic and (2) conceptual distance. Aesthetic distance is considered to be at the core of the formation of an artistic piece. It constitutes a psychological gap between what the audience perceives and what they take to be reality.<sup>12</sup> In *Sounding Fragilities*, Lehman recalls an emblematic theatre definition of a maker Peter Brook, who marks how even an ordinary action can become a performative act through the presence of a spectator: '*Theatre emerges from the situation where one person is performing an action, which can be as simple as crossing a room, yet which needs another person co-present who is watching*'.<sup>13</sup> Vision naturally implies distancing, since, by observing something, one is never an equal participant in the situation, for the observer does not feel the touch of the performer, does not feel the light, smell, or sound in the same way, nor does the passage of time. Violation of the enchantment of immersion into the fictitious reality of an artistic piece, reminds the subject of the actual reality, leading to one's confrontation with the medium and thus its deconstruction. The spectator's role emphasises the possibility for a detached critical assessment of the happening exactly through this inability to re-live the act in an identical to the performer's way. Thus, following Brook, distance is at the core of theatre, foremost due to spectatorship, which reveals the crucial role perception plays in comprising the theatrical.

Perception is subjective, as it depends on the cultural background of the perceiving subject, the state of the mind and body, memory, individual capacities, and ways to engage, and will stay beyond the reach of this text. However, this thought is important for me, and in the scope of this research, I extend it to music perception, namely that our perceptual ways organise listening. In the listening process, one deals with the imaginary and fictional, with which the organisation of reality takes place. How does it happen? I will draw on some of its mechanisms and outline how they can be useful for composition.

According to the American writer and artist William S. Burroughs whose work is often considered to be of an erratic and startling quality, illusory reality has the power to produce our social reality. Drawing on Burroughs's *The Invisible Generation*, Russian poet, electronic musician, and philosopher Nikita Safonov writes in his article on the *Politics of Noise and the Philosophy of the Sounding* that we rarely realise that all the rhythms and methods of representation in one way or the other construct our thinking.<sup>14</sup> Safonov points out that representation constitutes perception, and, recalling Brook, perception constitutes reality. Both form a perpetual loop of influencing each other; it is impossible to draw the line where one finishes and the other begins. It is thus important to mark that there are two sides participating in the perceptual organisation - in the constitution of something as an artistic piece as well as comprehension of its meaning:

<sup>12</sup> See Cole, Daniel, Aesthetic Distance in Theater | Definition, History & Application, 2023, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/aesthetic-distance-definition-application.html>

<sup>13</sup> See Lehman, Irene, *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, pp.120-121 with reference to Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, Simon & Schuster, 1968, pp.9

<sup>14</sup> Safonov, Nikita, *Politics of Noise and the Philosophy of the Sounding*, *Syg.ma*, 2017 <https://syg.ma/@safonov/nikita-safonov-politika-shuma-i-filosofia-zvuchashchiego>

what the object projects and what is being perceived. The way an object or event manifests itself is treated in this text as a matter of representation. An 'objective' fact of presence. I will talk about this manifestation mainly through the terminology of origin or essence - which, in search for a better term, is understood in reference to the fundamental nature or intrinsic qualities that define the identity or character of an object. Standing on the other side of representation, one perceptual mechanism I look into in this text is recognition. What does the perceiving subject recognise as the essence or origin of the object, what intrinsic attributes does one distinguish? For the sake of easier referencing in the future unfolding of ideas, I refer to these two planes, representation and recognition, united under the term mechanisms of distinction. For their discussion, I find it useful to address the second term encountered in the field of cultural studies, conceptual distance. Used in design, conceptual distance is described as a function of the degree of structural similarity and surface similarity. It might be helpful to think of the space between these two scales: in what concerns the intrinsic structure - the inner capillaries of an object (an essence, its representation) and the context as the wider plane, through the notion of distance, since the resulting perception relies on their linkage. Thus, I propose to think of the distance-tool as a bridge between representation and recognition. A tool that helps to navigate the question: how far is the perceivable object from the familiar and the symbolically avowed? From the spectator's conception of what it should be? How does the object manifest in outer space?

Since conceptual distance allows one to think within the scopes of the intrinsic and the contextual, the breakage with reality can happen through disturbing connectivity between the layers in various ways: (1) through disturbance of the intrinsic referentiality of the object to its 'essence' (ball-ball sound) or (2) through the breakage of contextual connections with other present elements, with reality at large (the ball and the light diegesis). Such, a form that doesn't bear a straightforward connection to the represented context creates a gap in its contextual reading, therefore becoming another gear driving the perceptual fluctuation. We have seen how, put centre stage, Castellucci's *Inferno* demonstrates this rupture in action. The scene with a ball is one example of distancing in operation: there's a feasible gap between the actual sound of the ball (which the audience doesn't hear) and the resulting sound. By inserting this 'spacing' between the two epistemological displays of the sound, Castellucci is playing with our imagination, evoking possible future scenarios. The sound of the fallen stone bricks, coming from the facade but being provoked by the boy's play with the ball, has a potential promise of the collapse of the building - and therefore alerts the boy. The whistling sound invites a different narrative - perhaps there's a creature and something otherworldly (the boy gets curious and alerted at the same time). Or the sound of voices, humanly and not - perhaps people are waking up because of the noise (the scene takes place during the night). When the light first appears, it almost confirms this connotation, but Castellucci quickly breaks with this logic to jump to another relationality - the light moves so fast it cannot be caused by a human actor; the facade itself almost begins to appear as an awakening creature. The audience is once again left hanging in this uncertainly, constructing possible interpretations. When the distance between the represented object and its reception is little or negligible, it is an example of stability. For instance, if the sound of the ball produced the expected and familiar sound of a ball hitting the floor. We would consult our memory and knowledge (culturally formed) of the materials of the ball and the floor; recall how both sound when collided, and compare with the heard in the theatrical act. Presented with a rapture of normality, the encounter with the ball functions according to the rules not known, and makes one doubt whether one's knowledge of reality and its operation could be faulty. Imagination plays a crucial role here, and if not floating entirely freely, is getting gently navigated by Castellucci's revealing and obscuring causalities, through perpetually establishing and destabilising different conceptions of what is real. In other words, doubt crawls in as soon as the distance between the represented and the recognised is stretched. We see the mechanisms of 'spacing' at the play of the director's hand, and how detaching modes of representation and their significations result in a rather unstable experience of the piece.

One could prescribe Castellucci's works a surreal quality for the reason of this intricate interplay with the recognisable and 'known'. Surreal emerged as an adjective to describe illogical scenes where not-related elements were constructed together and is characterised by the tension between the real and the impossible. In surrealist paintings, we can easily comprehend what we are seeing and even distinguish the elements, but, at the same time, the space depicted is beyond belief.<sup>15</sup> In modern language, the term 'surreal' finds its place to imply a sense of strangeness, often eeriness. According to the writer Mark Fisher, who analyses the modes and relations of the weird and the eerie in his essay *The Weird and the Eerie*, both share a preoccupation with the strange, and both 'have to do with a fascination for the outside, for what lies beyond standard perception, cognition, and experience.'<sup>16</sup> To phrase this captivity by the unknown differently, the weird and the eerie emerge from the instability of reality. Processing the inside from the perspective of the outside. In the difference that Fisher draws between the two terms, the weird is that 'which does not belong', bears a quality of 'real externality'<sup>17</sup>, while the eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions of agency, existence and non-existence.<sup>18</sup> I will return to the interesting relationship between the inside and the outside in the later section on acousmatic sound. Thus, my predilection for surrealism and the weird is in that they both could be said to entail disengagement, detachment from the current or actual attachments or urgencies of the real. <sup>19</sup> Surreal appears out of the clash of stable elements that, when merged, result in instability. Something entirely abstract would likely not create the necessary doubt, hence, surrealism depends on the link to the real or the referential. This is a crucial point: instability and stability are inextricably linked; instability is a relational notion, that requires the presence of a stable 'backdrop'. With surreality and Castellucci's methods, these stable elements are objects or relations taken from reality: the familiar ball, the expected relationality of the light turning on as a signifier of a human operator, etc.

Recalling the multistable shifting of Erika Fisher-Lichte, it is an oscillation between not only reality and fiction but through the stable and unstable, between the represented and the recognised. Anthropologist Victor Turner has called this transitional state of theatre being-at-the-threshold liminality.<sup>20</sup> Relating to Turner's terminology, I would like to suggest that surrealism is symptomatic of the state of 'betwixt and between'<sup>21</sup>, in that both imply a sense of transitional alienation and the otherworldly. Liminal comes from the Latin word for 'threshold'. While the surreal merges into one space the disconnected elements, both liminal and surreal bear a sense of the threshold and tension of its crossing. The richer the complexity of layers and the meaning, and the more the method of distancing is used, the more such work serves as a generator of weird juxtapositions and opens up vaster spaces for something else to emerge. Perceptual instability is thus a shared ground of the liminal, surreal, and imaginary. In the words of a close to Lehman's research composer Liza Lim, theatre's instability acquires a poetic accuracy, as she writes on theatre's relation to imaginary fictions and the strange: '..where meanings are ambitious and open up a rift. Something arises in that rift; it is there that we find extra presences that compete to be heard'.<sup>22</sup>

Having outlined some of the conditions that disturb perception from the actuality of the norm, I showed how such instabilities activate imagination with the example of theatrical pieces. I believe these ideas can be applied to music as well. Taking the above discussion as a base for further elaboration, the following deliberation emerges from a tenuous speculation: that a sense of liminality is present in the music-listening

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<sup>15</sup> I present a definition of surreality combined from a number of sources: Arzate, Ben, The Surreality of Liminal Spaces, Babou691, 2022 <https://babou691.com/2020/10/07/surreality-of-liminal-spaces/> and Collins Dictionary, Surreal, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/surreal>

<sup>16</sup> Fisher, Mark, *The Weird And The Eerie*, London: Repeater Books, 2016, pp.8

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp.10-16

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp.12

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp.13

<sup>20</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969)

<sup>21</sup> Bigger, Stephen, *Victor Turner, liminality, and cultural performance*, *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 30(2):209-212, 2009, pp.1

<sup>22</sup> Lim, Liza, *Rifts in Time. Distortion, possession and ventriloquism in my operatic works*, in *Sounding Fragilities*, pp.203



experience. Decontextualizing the proposition of liminality to the terrain of my compositional work, I am interested in the sonic realm of dynamic transitions. The aim of this research is, therefore, to investigate music that accommodates the thought of instability, music that could be said to be surreal and touch on the liminal. What makes the perceptual instability of sound a viable idea, and through what exactly can music be considered unstable?

## 1.2 On Listening - Imagining.

### On multimodality and the transient nature of sound

What we hear is always in the past, as the apprehension always takes place 'after' the sound; upon comprehension, the sound has already faded and transmuted. This fleeting nature of sound formats the journey as permanent transience and transformation. Further, sound takes on similar perceptual fluidity to theatre's multistability, as we as listeners are constantly navigating between various listening modes. Just as Irene Lehman writes that 'theatricality includes the possibility of shifting from an object's quality to a certain mode of perception'<sup>23</sup>, listening grants freedom in shifting the focus from the material quality of sound, reference to its source, or localisation to the technical realisation, or the provoked imaginary world. Returning once again to *Politics of Noise and the Philosophy of the Sounding*, Nikita Safonov marks how the experience of listening to Burroughs involves a special type of thinking because we can think both in terms of the visible and invisible and in terms of the audible and inaudible.<sup>24</sup> Sonic multimodality thus also concerns the integration of various senses, such as the audible itself along with its visual and physical forces, to name a few. For example, whenever we see someone speaking or playing an instrument, the sound we hear is experienced as integrated with the movement we see, but one can also disregard this fusion by occupying a different perceptual and listening mode. Following Burroughs's wording, the reception of sound is a complex process of navigating between the audible and the inaudible, present and absent, represented and recognised. While compositions can emphasise and prefer specific modes, our perceptual construct inhabits a perpetual shifting. Perception happens on the threshold, in between the states and senses. In my proposition, sonic perceptual instability is found exactly in its multimodality, or multistability, to use Fisher-Lichte's terminology.

Taking a few steps aside to contextualise my thoughts, I refer to the results of such sonic perceptual instability under one speculative term - sonic fiction. The following segments serve the aim of outlining what I mean by this term. Establishing an explicit theoretical framework for such an abstract notion as sonic fiction is difficult. Instead, I explore its challenging openness and introduce the outline of its conception in connection to my artistic practice.

#### Sonic Fiction

Recalling Liza Lim's words on the extra presences and meanings competing for audibility, I call on this ungraspable - *imagination* - *sonic fiction*.

Within the scope of this research and my artistic practice, I propose the following definition:

*Sonic Fiction* - a singular sound or sequence of events that create an abstract narrative. Emerging in the process of perception, it oscillates between stability and instability, the real and fictitious.

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<sup>23</sup> Lehman, Irene, *Regarding Listening. On the theatricality of experimental listening situations*, in *Sounding Fragilities. An Anthology*, pp. 117

<sup>24</sup> Safonov, Nikita, *Politics of Noise and the Philosophy of the Sounding*

Shifting between various listening modes, the listener is presented with a succession of changes as sounds transpire and decay. These spatial and temporal relations unfolding in a musical piece can be perceived as an abstract narrative. The general definition of the narrative is an account of an occurring series of connected events.<sup>25</sup> In a musical situation, the connectivity of sound events into a series and hence the construction of narrative is formed by the perceiving subject. Due to individual aspects and cultural implications, this process is never stable nor definitive and is further affected by the transitory nature of sound earlier described as multimodal.

Listeners actualise the sounding through focus and distinction. Presented with an ever-changing stream of sound forms, their further perceptual organisation is complex and, among other processes, involves imagination. It is my belief, that sound always draws on the imaginative, and I consider it a fundamental part of the listening process. The resulting emerging perception of the flux of sounds is a projection, a virtual narrative constructed from the relations between the musical elements encountered in a piece mixed with the imposed or substituted ones. Formed through associations and joined by memories, all of which are individual perceptual processes, the meaning one affixes to a sound is marked by subjectivity. But also it is composed through the sounds' manifestation of its qualities, earlier referred to as 'representation': spectral features, behaviour, placements in the space of a musical piece etc. Sonic fiction emerges from this tension between reality and fiction and thus relates to the unknown and the unstable. That which does not sound but which follows along, such as the symbolical links, personal bodily evocations (the mind's constructions, physical sensations, emotions), and histories of sounds. On that account, I consider sonic fiction as a mind's response to the perceptual unstable, an attempt to make sense of the sound, with a highly poetic dimension to it.

For instance, the methods and materials used by the composer pull their contexts: references to a sound source and its locale, be it physical or synthetic conditions, intrinsic material and physical aspects such as its texture. Echoing the words of electronic musician and mastering engineer Rashad Becker, a certain presence of narrativity in music comes out through these choices.<sup>26</sup> In creating a musical piece, the composer decides on the microphones and their placement in the process of sound recording, which predetermines a particular perspective; the type and amount of reverb that forms a desired space; the sound material, which implies a certain context, atmosphere, and aesthetics. Having combined all these factors into the whole, the projected narrative perpetually feeds back, affecting the further perception of a musical piece and its elements. We have seen the example of this iterative process in the theatrical piece by Romeo Castellucci described earlier. Narratives could be therefore said to give meaning to experiences. One can ask, does any music form a narrative? Would any music be an example of sonic fiction? I would respond that yes since all music touches on the imagination.

To conclude, sonic fiction exists on various scales. It is a realm that forms off mutable series of sound events with their poetic connotations, but it could also be understood as a suspension of meaning in one moment, the sonic fiction of a singular sound. As a challenge, one could try to map the contexts involved in a musical piece, similar to how dramaturgy or analyses of a theatre piece reveal interplay with its contexts and symbols. For example, one instance or a segment of a musical piece can be taken to discern the present and absent links to sound's sources, their materialities, the placement in space or the space itself - what kind of locale it suggests, the software used for its production, emotion, or the imagery it induces. The succession of these sound contexts and personal meanings is an example of sonic fiction. The tale that sound discloses.

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<sup>25</sup> See Wikipedia: "Narratives here are considered to be part of human mental activity and give meaning to experiences.", *Narrative*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative#CITEREFRandom\\_House1979](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative#CITEREFRandom_House1979) with reference to Spencer, Alexander, Fehler in der internationalen Politik, 2020, <https://forschung-sachsen-anhalt.de/project/fehler-internationalen-politik-20930>

<sup>26</sup> Rashad Becker talks about narratives and creatures in his music in the talk on Mixing, Mastering and Composition, Red Bull Music Academy, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6UBJniOynM>

It is worth noting that while the concept of sonic fiction was formulated in my research in response to the process of imagining through sound and is related to both listening and composing, there exist other bifurcations of the term. One account of that is encountered in the writings of German sound studies scholar Holger Schulze, whose sonic fiction emerges as an elaboration and extension on the book *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* written by Kodwo Eshun in 1998. In *On Sonic Fiction*, Schulze weaves a multidimensional philosophical account of the terms' many repercussions and offers their extensive reading in relation to science fiction and the music of Afrofuturism, the fields to which my conception of sonic fiction has little relation. I introduce the concept in this text because it helps me treat emerging imaginative projections as a cohesive yet ephemeral whole. Sonic fiction provides me with guidance along with constant motivation and provocation to decipher its scope and repercussions. I will outline a detailed example of sonic fiction through a discussion of the sound source in the later paragraphs, and its affinity to my compositional work in chapter 2.

The focused state of listening to music often requires staying attentive in a special way, or rather, occupying a special listening mode. The thought of sonic liminality appears to be especially relevant to the acousmatic state, which is a liminal listening state. In fixed-media situations with no support for visual sensing, such a heightened listening experience can be peculiar and intense. My suggestion of liminality as an inherent quality of electronic, fixed-media, electroacoustic (acousmatic) pieces is grounded in the idea that such music obstructs reality not only from the gaze but by erasing the stability of other aspects that constitute its belonging to reality, including the source, the material, along with the spatial and temporal tangencies. I have marked the temporal sonic instability, which contributes to the evocation of sonic fiction and serves as one argument for sonic liminality. Further, if we compare listening to the described music with habitual listening in environments or even listening to music, where emotion finds heightened resonance and immerses into a trans-state, liminality is relevant to the acousmatic since it breaks off reality foremost due to its unstable in-betweenness. In the following text, I expand on the other perceptual instabilities of sound that theatre's discourse helped me uncover. Namely, I approach the aporia at the heart of the acousmatic sound through the extensive writings by Brian Kane in *Sound Unheard*.

### Mechanism of Distinction: recognition and the source

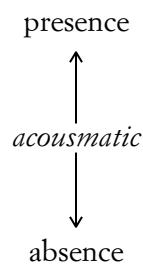
A genre of the Western art music scene that originated in the middle of the 20th century, electroacoustic music is characterised by the use of technology to manipulate the source material, often that of acoustical sound, along with the incorporation of electronic sound production into compositional practice.<sup>27</sup> Since the tradition of electroacoustic music listening bears variable degrees of acousmaticity, for instance, multichannel fixed media pieces are often presented in a dark concert hall with a following invitation for listeners to close their eyes, which underlines conditions for the presentation of my compositions, I see the importance of addressing some of the discourse of acousmatic sound. Further, listening, one could say evolutionary, concerns the pursuit of source and its localisation as a means to navigate in space and for survival reasons. Such ambition still underlies the creative contexts of music listening: auditory experience draws on recognition and association in the effort to grasp the patterns, to discern meaning and the milieu/circumstances of the sound. The disclosed in earlier paragraphs mechanisms of distinction that extensively concern the question of the recognition of the origin or 'essence' - brought me to the question and discussion of the sound source. The acousmatic situation perhaps demonstrates the case of its identification and the corollary material tension, sparking imagination, most clearly, and was one of the prominent concerns of the academic discourse of the past century.

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<sup>27</sup> See Lexicon, *Aesthetics of Electroacoustic Music*, [https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/international\\_lexicon\\_of\\_aesthetics\\_item\\_detail.php?item\\_id=15](https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/international_lexicon_of_aesthetics_item_detail.php?item_id=15)

*L'acousmatique*, in the musical context dating back to the origins of *musique concrète* in the late 1940s, was developed in association with the concepts of reduced listening (*écoute réduite*) and the sound object (*objet sonore*) by Pierre Schaeffer. Disengaging sound from its source, Schaeffer's theory directed attention to the sound itself, shifting the listening away from the context and towards listening to a sound for its musicality. An extensive scholar of the acousmatic, Brian Kane works with a model of sound that has three important components: source, cause, and effect. For example, 'the interaction of a source (cymbal, string, vocal tract, or a table surface) with a cause (rosined bow, moving air, raindrop) produces audible effect'. He formulates a proposition: 'Every sonic effect is the result of the interaction of a source and a cause.'<sup>28</sup> While reading the Schaefferian *objet sonore* as acousmatic due to the underdetermination of the source and cause [citing Pierre Schaeffer, and others: "Acousmatic, adjective: a sound that one hears without seeing what causes it"]; Brian Kane argues for the enigma of the source to be a central feature of an acousmatic experience<sup>29</sup>. Kane points out the crucial role of a sound effect, which in acousmatic experience often undermines both the source and the cause. According to him, 'the autonomy of a sonic effect is constituted only when the gap between the effect and its source or cause is disregarded... Bereft of its source and cause, a motivation occurs to reify the sonic effect'.<sup>30</sup> Clashing with a listener's ambition for establishing connections, who impregnate the autonomous sound with a new virtual source and cause, 'acousmatic sounds thus encourage the imaginative projection of a sound body'.<sup>31</sup> This leads me toward a proposition: failure to recognise the source or where it came from, results in perceptual instability and, reveals a similar tension as the one theatre produces between reality and fiction. As in the example suggested by Kane, the tension of recognition results in the provocation of an imaginary mind and construction of a fictional narrative: of the sound source, or its cause, or in the interpretation of an effect; creation of a new identity. This eidetic intuition (visual guess) of the sound object is one example of sonic fiction.

Kane writes that an acousmatic sound is unsettling because it depends on a structural spacing of sonic source, cause, and effect that is fundamentally insecure<sup>32</sup> and calls listening to acousmatic sound a state of anxiety. He marks, that it is 'not overcoming of habit that is unsettling, but rather a structural feature of acousmatic sound that is disturbing, namely, that the sound object is never quite autonomous', and that there are various degrees to which the sound's source or cause can be ascertained.<sup>33</sup> His main critique is directed towards the rigid dichotomy of acousmatic ethos where claims either stress the complete erasure of the source (P. Schaeffer) or an absolute coupling with the context (R.M. Schaffer). What Kane suggests is to see the acousmatic as situated exactly in between the two sides, which I could outline in the small diagram, where acousmatic comes out of a relationship with the absence and presence of the source.



It is precisely the spacing or distancing of the auditory effect from its source or cause that grants the *acousmetre* and acousmatic sound their strange power<sup>34</sup>, rendering tension and uncertainty as its defining

<sup>28</sup> Kane, Brian, *Sound Unseen*, pp.7

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, pp.6

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp.8

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, pp.8

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, pp.157

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp.148

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, pp.148

aspect. In sound, where the point of reference is clearly given there is no need to guess; to stretch in the attempt to decode what the environment or object sounding is. In the opposite situation of complete instability, an 'absolute fiction' with no references to reality, be it objects or relations (we could think of a fairy-like world), there is no tension or enigma either. The listener experiences no need to speculate since such an immersive experience doesn't make him doubt - everything is obviously and assuredly unreal. What the discussion on Kane demonstrates is that for the conception of acousmatic enigma both stability and instability are needed, both the knowledge of the presence of the source and the gap that facilitates an attempt to conceive it.

We find a similar model in Denis Smalley's spectromorphological thought. In *Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes* he refers to the process of increasing remoteness as gestural surrogacy and describes its various degrees. First-level surrogacy is awarded when the source and effect are recognised. Second-order already exhibits certain detachment, for example, in its physical manifestation but doesn't not project a doubt yet. Third-level and remote surrogacy I consider the most interesting in his theory due to their suggestion of perceptual instability. Both refer to the gesture inferred and imagined in music; the latter, to the extent of inability to make any guess: 'source and cause become unknown and unknowable as any human action behind the sound disappears'.<sup>35</sup> Assuming this process and the theoretical frameworks of Kane and Smalley, the degree of perceptual tension and sonic fiction varies depending on the degree of source recognition, or surrogacy.

Delving deeper into the domain of the source and its enigma, the perceptual instability comes not purely from the lack of reassurance of other senses, such as visual focus in the case of the acousmatic. One might be able to remember coming across a sound whose source is visible yet undeniably surprising, even doubtful. To understand the tension that happens, I suggest the return to Kane. He marks the chiasmic swap, the reversal of the inner and outer that occurs as a function of sonic underdetermination.<sup>36</sup> With the literary examples of Franz Kafka's and Edgar Allan Poe's stories, he demonstrates an often occurring confusion of the location from which an acousmatic sound is produced. In the two stories, the main characters struggle to distinguish whether the sound is produced by their bodies or the outer environment. Further confusion can be amplified in situations of tinnitus, psychoacoustic phenomena, and hallucinations in psychosis, and Kane speculates on some of these cases to possibly be the sound sources confusing the characters. We can recall Mark Fisher's address of a related quality of 'real externality' as crucial to the weird. Building his definition on the literature of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, he invites to read Lovecraft as a writer of fiction in which, not the impossible but the outside destabilises perception. Fisher writes: 'Worlds may be entirely foreign to ours, both in terms of location and even in terms of the physical laws which govern them, without being weird. It is the irruption into this world of something from outside which is the marker of the weird'; '...an irruption, through time and space, into an objective familiar locale'<sup>37</sup>, '...which often ends in breakdown or psychosis.'<sup>38</sup> According to Fisher, Lovecraft maintains the reality effect in his tales by only showing tiny fragments of the outside. Here, I refer to the inside as the established knowledge while the outside - that which does not belong and therefore needs to be explained. The fragmentary quality makes it believable yet allows for confusion on the ontological level. The construction of the narrative in Lovecraft happens through the difference between the terrestrial-empirical (the sense of what one considers as real), as Fisher formulates it, and the fictional. The reversal of the inside and the outside depends on the degrees of otherness an object exhibits and one's confidence in the inner. For instance, when the otherness of the outside overweighs the knowledge of the laws of reality, one might begin to doubt. In this situation, the outside can potentially substitute the inner knowledge, including the outer as a new formative norm. Hence, in moments when the tension and

<sup>35</sup> Smalley, Dennis, *Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes*, *Organised Sound* 2, no. 2 (August 1, 1997): 107–26, pp.112

<sup>36</sup> Kane, Brian, *Sound Unseen*, pp.159

<sup>37</sup> Fisher, Mark, *The Weird And The Eerie*, pp.20

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.16

uncertainty are large, a chiasmus can occur and alter the previously established balance into the imaginary, weird, or surreal.

With the discussion on the inner-outer relationship, I aim to shed light on the two levels important to the listening process introduced in the earlier text - form's manifestation and its perception, which are interconnected and in perpetual feedback. I emphasise this mechanism to bring a better understanding of my conception of sonic fiction and its scales. An element appearing as weird inflicts a reassessment of one's experience, memory, and knowledge, which sometimes results in its inclusion in the 'inner', thus forming a new iteration of the object's conception. This idea also serves as a helpful insight into possible ways to destabilise the perception of sounds, namely, through the breakage of their connectivity. Not only one of the effect to its source but also that of sound with its environment.

While Brian Kane's focus in *Sound Unseen* lies precisely in the exploration of the historical and cultural practice of acousmatic listening, which is not limited to the introduction of the term, my approach lies in an artistic and aesthetic domain. Whereas the question of the source in the mechanisms of distinction is a constant, it does not come at the forefront of perception and therefore seems to be of less importance in a musical experience. Instead, it renders itself as one of the many layers in the complex, multimodal apparatus of music listening, one plane in the production of sonic fiction.

Smalley refers to a similar to Kane's idea of virtual projection under the name source bonding, which can be both actual and imagined.<sup>39</sup> He defines source bonding as 'a natural tendency to relate sounds to supposed sources and causes, and to relate sounds to each other because they appear to have shared associated origins'.<sup>40</sup> He writes: 'Bonding play is an inherent perceptual activity'. Looking at a wider context, it might be more relevant to think of music in regard to sonic materialities, textures, and spectres rather than the source. Following Kane's conception of sound, and partially inspired by Smalley's description of spectromorphological archetypes, I would like to restructure and propose the following logic: the source and cause to be considered as the 'stable' elements - for example, an attack of a sound - a reassurance that accumulated the primal energy and main properties (spectral, material etc.) of the original source; wherein the effect - as the sounding of material, a trace of its belonging to the source, however rather unstable. Smalley distinguishes three structures (archetypes): *the attack alone*, *the attack-decay*, and *the graduated continuant*.<sup>41</sup> Both the attack-decay and graduated continuant bear a wider temporal scope, in which we can encounter the resonance unfolding.<sup>42</sup> I hence read sound effect as a decaying resonance of a source and a cause interaction. In the scope of this research, I consider materiality as a manifestation of the sonic effect.

Yet, not only do the sounding materials not always reference their sources and conditions of appearance in a clear way, facilitating 'bonding play', but quite often what we perceive of materials and what they actually are is diverse. Therefore, it is important to talk about the perceived sonic materiality. The tension it suggests is especially relevant to electronic and electroacoustic music since it is music where sound sources of both natures, synthesised and recorded, are presented. An additional complication in the dialogue about the source and materiality arises when the processing of sound is involved. What is a source in that situation? As Smalley writes: 'The wide-open sonic world of electroacoustic music encourages imaginative and imagined extrinsic connections because of the variety of ambiguity of its materials, because of its reliance on the motion of colourful spectral energies, its emphasis on the acousmatic, and not least through its exploration of spatial perspective'.<sup>43</sup> Smalley's words hint at the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp.110

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp.110

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp.113

<sup>42</sup> Resonance here is Smalley's terminology, see *Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes*, pp.113

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.110

importance of both interior as well as contextual connections to the apprehension of perceived sonic materiality.

To illustrate, in the opening minutes of *Spopalatore*, a musical track of the Italian musician Valerio Tricoli, we hear a variety of sounds, all of which have a distinct perceived materiality. Some of these sounds are breath and animal-like growls, listening to them one can imagine creatures or a human actor, these sounds have a point of reference that belongs to the real. However, listening to *Spopalatore* does not necessarily reenact a scene between an animal and a human in the way one could stage a theatrical action; rather, a listener encounters an obscure space, where these sounds coexist and interact, breaking expectancy of the familiar/reality. This obscurity is heavily supported but the other types of sounds: low and rattling in the first minutes, and richer textural ones later that have a strong perceived materiality, yet don't refer to the known source. These textures construct a new and different understanding of that reality, sometimes playing with an expectation of its origin but never providing reassurance. One could say that these perceived materialities carry a trace of instability. This is perhaps even more elicited in the music of Bjarni Gunnarsson, whose textural space is tactile yet doesn't aim to mimic real physicality. For example, in his track *Aukera* from *Processes & Potentials* (2013), the textures seem extremely realistic in their physical/acoustic properties and the precision of the inner details. Listening to this track, one can certainly imagine a space. It is not a real space, but a space taking qualities of the real and suggesting its own unfolding. Thus, having tension at its core, this music immerses into sonic fiction. Similarly, Valerio Tricoli constructs a fictional realm whose abstract narrative unfolds as a series of interactions between these ambiguous/unstable sounds and those that vaguely link us to reality, establishing one scene and mutating into the next one, and so on.

Concluding this chapter, I will demonstrate how the established theoretical framework finds resonance in my music.

### *Al Niente. A Song from a Past Time*

*Al Niente. A Song from a Past Time* is a piece for cello and precomposed sound material diffused through 8 loudspeakers. I conceived *Al Niente* while doing the course of Music Analyses and Mixed-Media Composition guided by Gabriel Paiuk in 2022-2023. The class presented a possibility for scoring for an acoustic instrument, which I longed to explore. Relating to my ongoing interest in a dynamically unfolding composition, I imagined weaving a gestural sound world where a string instrument would be playing along fixed-media material. The main investigation behind the piece was to bring the sound of the cello in and out of focus by scattering its timbral, temporal, and spatial qualities in acoustic space.

There were at least two compositional ideas that had informed the methods of working with acoustic and recorded sound material of the cello in this piece. One of them being the idea of creating the interplay of materialities, thus ambiguating perception of the source. The acoustical instrument allows for a different texture and ranges of quieter dynamics that sound from the speaker does not reach, proposing different listening *into* the sound in space. The other intention was therefore to explore and express contrast in the dynamics and textures of the mediums through their coupling in space. The title expresses these few fundamental ideas in reference to the theoretical framework of temporal and material instabilities. *Al niente* can refer to the delicacy of sound materialities and their fleeting nature. A characteristic of appearing and disappearing, of decay, and the question of the material register of spaces. As Maryanne Amacher poetically wrote, '...finding places where there is a kind of space and dimension to the sound ..., where I can hear the approaches of things far away. .. to really observe distance and distant sound, as well

as close-up sound...; careful displacement of acoustic images.'<sup>44</sup> *A Song from a Past Time* refers to the temporal plane: to the passage of time, the 'history' of sound, and the listener's memory of it.

Composition of this piece took an entire year, with three existing versions. The process of working on the first iteration of the piece can be described as follows:

*Al Niente I*  
(12ch) Liza Kuzyakova for Diederik Smulders

(spring 2023) 6'



fig.3 Diederik Smulders, concert in spring 2023

- (1) Setting the terrain of ideas and the sound realm;
- (2) Recording (guided) cello improvisation as a response to the gathered information;
- (3) Processing of selected sound segments;
- (4) Arranging the electronic part in time and space;
- (5) Composing cello part on the base of electronic;
- (6) Adjusting during sessions with the musician;

The piece started from a few recording sessions with Diederik Smulders, who improvised on the instrument in response to the initial ideas and prepared composition fragments. The latter mainly consisted of the spectrally processed, saturated sound of saz strings. The electronic part was composed out of the selected segments from the recordings, both in their initial state and modified, after that, the cello part was scored.

### **Trace: the veiled source and interplay of materialities**

One of the fundamental notions guiding and providing a structural framework for the piece was the idea of trace. It influenced all composition processes, from the collection and manipulation of sound material to temporal and spatial arrangement. Trace signifies to me something that is not there, and yet it is, an ephemeral presence and absence at the same time. One of the resonances with the theoretical groundings of perceptual instabilities is expressed in this piece through material interplay and the veiled source. That was reached in several ways: composing with various degrees of roughness and grain with particular attention paid to noise/clarity blend in the texture of sound elements; processing the source for the precomposed part; and through spatial binding. While preserving certain qualities of the source samples, the piece establishes a realm oscillating between the presence and absence of the larger body and the source.

The processing of cello recordings for the electronic part was aimed at obscuring the sonorous identity of the cello and producing material of varied qualities. It was important, however, not to break off cello sound entirely, instead maintaining some of its qualities such as frequency components, dynamics, or

<sup>44</sup> Amacher, Maryanne. Maryanne Amacher: Selected Writings and Interviews. Edited by Amy Cimini and Bill Dietz. BLANK FORMS EDITIONS, 2020, pp.142; 191



behaviour. Transposition, pitch-shifting tools, saturation, overdrive, and distortion were employed for spectral alteration to enrich and degrade the sound. I extensively experimented with granular processes to get textures and behaviours on various scales, from individual grains to smeared, bigger planes of sound.

Scoring the acoustical cello part was extensively done in response to the electronic sound, aiming at creating continuous-discontinuous movements in doubling the fixed media, special attention was given to the textures produced. The shorter, percussive sounds as well as the tone movement were chosen to be obscure, those that would not reveal the classic cello sound or emotion. In the first iteration of *Al Niente*, the cello plays continuous tones (ex. artificial harmonics in high register, mainly on C and D strings) with varied degrees of noise/clarity balance, jete and breath-like sounds (dampened A&D strings) among shorter gestures, and noises of various kinds. I was particularly interested in how space binds together various textures, how it arranges focus, and unbinds the natures of all musical elements (recorded cello, processed cello, acoustic cello) at other moments. For example, the cello would play a slightly or extensively deviated tone from the electronic cello sound, thus complementarily binding or diverging in space, as can be heard at 4:20 - 5:00<sup>\*45</sup>. Reaching thicker density, the materials would thus construct a bigger sounding body together. Aimed at creating an effect of masking and ambiguity in the perceptual material register, bound together in space, the tension in discerning what is the source of the particular tones and noises, the cello on stage, or the precomposed material, would arise. For instance, this is achieved by the interplay of recorded and acoustically produced crackle sounds at 1:17-1:38.

### **Temporal Trace: Fragmentation**

Another layer of tension is reached through working with the temporal aspect of sound materials and the form of the piece at large. Inspired by Francois Bonnet, who wrote in *A Sonorous Archipelago*: 'The trace of sound - that which harbours and reveals a past presence by continuing to manifest it'<sup>46</sup>, and, further on trace as something that is always threatened with disappearance, 'a destabilisation of uninterrupted sonorous field', I imagined approaching temporal trace through the ideas of cyclical unfolding and fragmentation.

Initially, the piece was composed according to a duration limitation of 5 minutes, and consisted of two sections [see Appendix 1]:

00-2:35 *section 1*

2:35-6:10 *section 2*

At the core, both sections are constructed out of the same material, presenting it in different ways. Section 2 was arranged first, and I worked my way 'backwards', composing section 1 out of material that would come later in the piece. I imagined the beginning to consist of traces and veiled sources, with the fuller image being constructed as the piece unfolds, forming what I refer to as a cyclical unfolding. The process can be described as follows: taking the sample from section 2 - slicing it into several shorter segments - manipulating (equalising, filtering, granulating, or transposing into the lowest and highest possible registers) - arranging them in a fragmentary way to construct one of the bigger segments with a *dal niente-al niente* envelope (from nothing to nothing). In addition, I thought of the combination of recorded and acoustical cello as an oscillation of the present and the same cello playing from the past, echoing in the name of the piece as a song from the time that has passed. I could rearrange the elements, produce a better mix, or leave some things out, but there is always a relationship between something that is live and real and something that has already happened - recorded, in this case. For more details on the structure:

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<sup>\*45</sup> Timecode corresponds to the recording 'Al Niente I - MAMMC Concert spring 2023' in the sound example folder

<sup>46</sup> Bonnet, François, *THE ORDER OF SOUNDS: A Sonorous Archipelago*, FALMOUTH: Urbanomic Media Ltd, 2016, pp.7

### section 1

To support the perception of sound materials as traces, I chose to work with shorter time scales: granular processing in the electronic part, short gestures scored for cello, and fragmentary behaviour. Section 1 was initially composed to unfold as fragments with accent-like sounds; noisy and unstable in their character or percussive with contrasts in their presence. Practically, in the first version of *AL Niente*, the first minutes are arranged out of material that is obscure, often indicated in the score as muted, revealing the sonic qualities of the cello identity only partially. For example, continuous tones of a very limited frequency ranges veiled by the granularity of noise, often of low amplitudes and trembling behaviour, such as noisy and high pitch sounds [00:20-0:40]. Gestures were composed to convey a sense of fleetingness - short and with expressive dynamics to unfold the contrast of quiet-loud: exponentially growing and decaying, with sudden pressure and sudden releases and no full movements present, sounds that do not translate a sense of a body yet. The only material introduced in full is shorter percussive gestures, indicated to be played fast and with various degrees of noise and speed. Both electronic sounds and acoustical cello were conceived to hint, promise, and evade. They present my implementation of perceptual instability in a variety of planes: through material, spatial, and temporal behaviours, dynamics, and amplitudes.

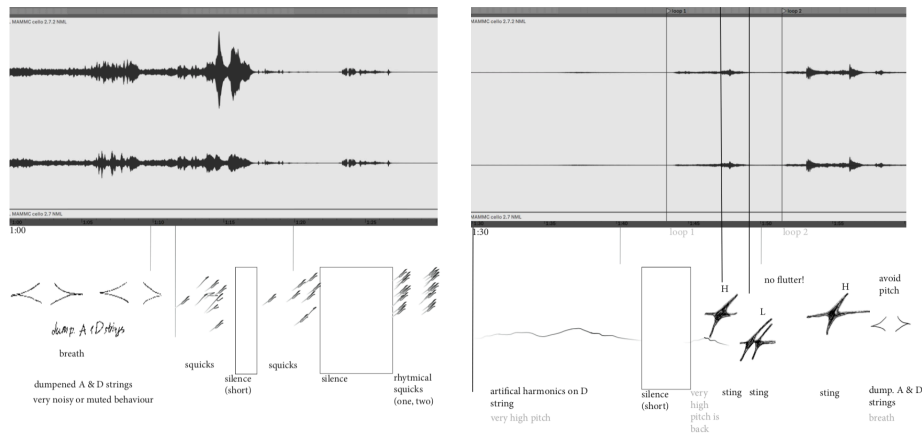


fig. 4 Excerpt from the score of *Al Niente I*, segment 1 [1:00-2:00]

### section 2

Relying on and recalling in memory already established spectral hints and other gestures, section 2 continues to further build sonic fiction on top of this past. It was conceived to acquire a stronger sense of direction, of 'becoming', building the fuller image of the body of the realm. The flow in section 2 is less ragged but continuous, revealing tension fluidly, with the undulating layers of sound seamlessly weaving in and out of each other within a range of related speeds. The acoustic cello tonally and dynamically doubles and oscillates along the electronic part [4:20 - 5:00]. They are no longer broken with pauses, instead forming a stream, the gestures occupy larger time spans and have a bolder, firmer presence - they are louder in dynamics, and cleaner in tonal sounding. The timbres of acoustical cello contain more low sounds, with the electronic part occupying a wider spectrum and density, both form a fuller spatial and more recognisable image of cello sound. The electronic part now contains not only timbrally obscure, veiled, and dispersed planes of the cello sound from the previous minutes but clearly distinguishable and energetic recorded gestures of the cello.

## Contemplations and Concerns

Many challenges were posed by the presence of an acoustic source. Working with an acoustic instrument requires more preplanning, but also study - experimentation - and always listening in real-time, including how it propagates in space and due to the human factor of playing, which presupposes slight variations with each repetition. Employing a physical source made the musical relationship arising from its use with

electronics in different spaces more fascinating. It introduced a deeper awareness of materials and textures. While working with the electronic medium allows for infinite possibilities in the manipulation of timbres, dynamics, and behaviour in space, in comparison, the acoustic instrument presents a limited range of sounds. That poses the possibility of working along the axis of identity and its metamorphosis. It allows for its destabilisation, perceptually distancing the ways it manifests itself and shaping the recognition process as abstruse. This idea is at the core of *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time*. Another challenge was building a densely gestural sonic realm with the simultaneous playing of the instrument and fixed-media material. It required working with the details of source propagation in space and their synchronicity in time. Having found a new approach to structuring the musical elements, I realised the need for remaking certain fragments and the transitions between them. I imagined developing the piece into a bigger composition. It was important for me to investigate the implications of the dynamic unfolding of elements, the perceptual result of what, among other relations, I refer to as bearing dramatic sense. This resulted in the second version, *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time II*, which will be discussed at the end of chapter 2.

## Chapter II

### *On Aural Drama and Sonic Ruins*

In the previous chapter, I have outlined in detail how the tension of the sound source is formed, with references to the writings of Kane, Schaeffer, and Smalley. The conceptions of reduced listening and *l'objet sonore* introduced by Pierre Schaeffer free sound from its source and direct attention to the sound itself, shifting listening away from the context and towards listening to a sound for its musicality. Smalley's spectromorphology concentrates exactly on the reduced listening approach in that it delves into the inner dynamics of sound rather than focusing on the extrinsic links. One of the critiques of Schaeffer's theory, and it could be extended as limits of the discussion on the source and materiality presented in the previous chapter, is formulated through their missing an important durational aspect of sound. Turning to the other research, in *Toward a Sonic Materialism*, philosopher Christoph Cox recounts that our perception is closely tied to the qualities sounds exhibit over time; therefore, they are not static objects but temporal events.<sup>47</sup> The link to time is crucial to sound phenomena, listening, and the conceptual framework of my compositional process. Thus, the focus of this chapter lies more in the temporal plane of thought. In this chapter, I discuss the details of material manifestations and their perception, taking gesture and texture as formative elements of composition. I provide elaboration on my use and conception of aural drama with examples of my music. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of ruin. Its poetic contour unites the discussion of many ideas in this research.

### 2.1 Gesture

Focusing on the intrinsic plane - the inner dynamics of a sound event - I would like to return to Smalley. Smalley defines gesture as 'an energy-motion trajectory which excites the sounding body, creating spectromorphological life'.<sup>48</sup> In his thought, the musical gesture is inextricably linked to the physical gesture of its production, to sensorimotor and psychological experience, where the linking cause to a source relates to the act of applying energy to a body through tension and relaxation of muscles. This process allows Smalley to specify the gesture as tactile, visual, aural, and proprioceptive. It serves as ground for the further interesting proposition in Smalley, that a sound gesture has directionality defined through its energy-motion trajectory, revealing the spectral history of the gesture's spectromorphology.<sup>49</sup>

Relating to Smalley, I see several key moments in discussing musical gestures: the link to the source; the gesture's energy or force; and its propagation in time and space. Smalley's words on spectral history contained in a gesture resonate with my belief in the relational nature of sound. Each sound event and each gesture is identified by a representation of its past through spectral characteristics and often through its interaction with a context. I revealed the consequences of their rapture in the previous chapter. For instance, the resonance of a glass struck by a metal object solely sounding in acoustic space, with the attack and decay of the physical gesture that caused it being cut off, and with no visible glass object present, can still be recognised by some listeners if they are well familiar with the sounding spectre. In other instances, when the spectrum is perceived as abstract, the context can help with its recognition as a potential glass material. Specifically, through demonstrating behaviour in time (the presence of the attack and decay) or interaction with other sounds. If, in addition to or after the sustained resonance, the listener hears the liquid being poured into a solid material or the more symbolic sound of a cork leaving a bottle, one might assume their connection and decode the abstract spectre as one belonging to a glass surface.

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<sup>47</sup> Cox is proximate with Kane in conceiving sound as having a three-fold structure of source, cause, and effect: Cox, Christoph: 'Sounds are not only events but effects, results of bodily causes (i.e. the sound of a violin) yet having an independent existence of their own, recurrent, forming relative invariants', in *Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism*, Journal of Visual Culture 10 (2), 2011, 145-161, pp.34

<sup>48</sup> Smalley, Dennis, *Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes*, pp.111

<sup>49</sup> Ibid pp.112

Smalley writes that the energy-motion trajectory of gesture is therefore 'not only the history of an individual event but can also be an approach to the psychology of time'.<sup>50</sup> It has to do with gesture's structure and behaviours - what Smalley refers to as a structural function - and what I began to outline through the mechanisms of distinction in chapter 1. Smalley writes that structural functions are concerned with forming expectations when listening: 'Like other musics, electronic music has its expectation patterns. .. During listening we attempt to predict the directionality implied in a spectral change. We might ask ourselves, for example, where a gesture might be leading, whether a texture is going to continue behaving in the same way..'.<sup>51</sup> In the same manner that one can uncover the source and cause through spectromorphology, Smalley argues for the reversed situation of deducing gestural activity from spectromorphologies to source and cause - back to the proprioceptive and psychological experiences - to be a natural process as well.<sup>52</sup> He follows by saying that gestural music, then, is governed by a sense of forward motion, linearity, and narrativity and depends on the structural functions that gestures exhibit.

## 2.2 Aural Drama: Morphology

My engagement with gestural, dynamically unfolding multichannel composition directed my attention to the relationships sounds demonstrate over time, how they interact among themselves, in and with the space. Inspired by the theatre's staging process, I embarked on researching what role time-space relations play in the formation of a sense of drama. What makes a gesture perceived as dramatic?

Drama is traditionally understood as a mode of fiction represented in performance in a theatre (or on radio or television). The more appropriate meaning in the context of this research outlines drama as a state, situation, or series of events involving an interesting or intense conflict of forces.<sup>53</sup> The term drama refers to a sense of anticipation or conflict within relationships. Drama and tension are concomitant, they are aspects of one phenomenon. Drama bears a strong relation with temporality and expectation and often a defining relationship with force and energy to which an expectation is directed - in the way certain catharsis, and intrigue happen through tension and the release of energy. This allows me to define drama as being signified by a temporal change where a sense of tension is present.

Drama and this tension can happen in various ways and proportions. In the previous chapter, I have drawn the parallel of sound's unfolding as a series of events. I described an occurrence of tension in music through the contact and clash between stability and instability, specifically in relation to the sound source and the interplay of materiality. I consider the inner structure of relationships (dynamics) in a sound gesture, what Smalley calls structural functions, to be one of the levels on which the sense of drama can be conveyed. It can be achieved by manipulating the energy distribution in the temporal dimension of a sound event with tenuous dynamics or behaviour (growth patterns can be an example). One of the techniques that allows for such manipulation is *figures composites* introduced by composer Bernard Parmegiani, whose gestural music, in affiliation with *musique concrète*, has influenced me at earlier stages of composing music. *Figures composites* is a technique where sounds are sliced for their attack-sustain-decay and these elements are then rearranged with one another. It allows to construct movement inside the sound by rearranging spectral energy and duration. When the transitions from attack to sustain and decay components, resulting in the process of combining the spectres of various sources, are done within short periods of time, due to the rapid changes, raptures, and interruptions in the source's energy flow and its life, *figures composites* present dramatic gestures. For example, in two of my compositions, *Yesh me'Ayin*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid pp.113

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pp.114

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 111

<sup>53</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Drama, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/drama> .

(2021) and *Sarid* (2022), this technique is used on a selection of recorded and processed samples of string instruments, metal objects, and trains<sup>54</sup>. Arranged in broken and uneven rhythms, the composed gestures are spatially distributed as an interplay of movements in diagonals and between the front and back speakers. In addition to the dynamics of their inner structure and behaviour, a further sense of drama is reached through the multiplicity of layers.

### 2.3 Texture

The dualism of gesture and texture is known in musical discourse. In the scope of this research, I think of texture and gesture differences in that they suggest perceiving a sound event on slightly different time scales. Kerry Hagan, in the article *Textural Composition and its Space* discusses gesture/texture duality through the definition brought by Raymond Murray Schafer. Schafer marks their difference in terms of the number of events and the focus of attention both suggest.<sup>55</sup> He follows Pierre Schaeffer's definition of gesture as a unique event and sees texture as consisting of innumerable events. According to Hagan, drawing one's attention to the texture sacrifices the other qualities to which one can attend. She notes that the texture would be destroyed if the elements yielding it were separated into individual items. Focusing on textural composition, she writes: 'It is crucial that the space facilitates texture's dominance as the central musical material while diminishing the influence of other attributes'.<sup>56</sup> What I find interesting in Hagan's thought is how the notion of texture is treated as an intermediary between sound object(s) and the plurality of them without boundaries. In my view, this can refer to the matter of scale: texture formed of many gestures or texture of an individual sound event, as partials of which this gesture is comprised. I propose to think of texture as a type of sound that exposes the micro-scale of the inner dynamics of a source and comprises the perception of materiality. Regarding the latter, Hagan marks: no texture exists alone; it is a physical quality.<sup>57</sup> This relates to the discussion initiated in the previous chapter. On one hand, there is the sounding effect, which is a manifestation of the source-cause relationship that comprises actual material the sound can allude to. On the other hand, in destabilised circumstances, the listener would engage with a fictional projection of materiality that might differ from the actual source or cause. In this oscillation between reality and fiction, stability and instability, there is, however, a constant relation to physicality. Hence, texture refers to the perceived physicality/materiality of an object.

Smalley introduces textural music as one that 'concentrates on internal activity at the expense of forward impetus'.<sup>58</sup> Both Hagan and Smalley mark the perceptual shift that happens when encountering texture-sound, namely, the shift of focus to internal movement. While gesture, according to Smalley, implies directionality through its energy-motion trajectory; movement into or inside the outer space of other sound elements, texture can be understood through its suggestion of an internal space with an inherent movement. What I want to emphasise with this discussion is that texture and gesture imply disparate ways of listening. Texture implies not only morphological difference but secures its perceptual autonomy through a distinctive temporal unfolding, or flux. It proposes listening on a different to gesture scale, and a different time.

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<sup>54</sup> *Yesh me' Ayin* and *Sarid* can be found in the sound example folder. The example of *figures composites* appears at 2:49 and 6:43 consequently.

<sup>55</sup> Hagan, Kerry, *Textural Composition and its Space*, Proceedings of the 5th Sound and Music Computing Conference, SMC 2008, 2008, pp.4

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, pp.3

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, pp.4

<sup>58</sup> See Smalley, Dennis, *Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes*, pp.114

## 2.4 Aural Drama: Metamorphosis

Expanding on the earlier definition of drama as a tenuous temporal change, the discussion on gesture and texture reveals another way for the sense of drama to occur. Kane describes the process of listening to sound as a continuity of changing perspectives: 'The dramatic sequence constrains the imagination. You witness events; departures' stops.. '<sup>59</sup> Each sound event, when passing, establishes its own stability-instability relationship in the context of a musical piece. Binding with one sound, then another, morphing into a textural form, and vanishing in the background. The listener navigates through perceiving continuously in one temporal mode (of gesture), then switching to the next (of texture), and further, through the various hierarchies of sonic layers and events. Thus, the other way to approach the sense of drama is by working with a change on a wider scale - by constructing interactions between sound events and their relations in the structure of a piece.

I refer to this temporal shape-shifting - metamorphosis. One example would be shifting between the morphologies of sound events, between gestural and textural. Metamorphosis can also refer to the motion between figurative and non-figurative, referential and abstract sound events. In both cases, tension arises from the interplay between the ways of listening, transferring the focus through their various aspects (directionality in a gesture, internal behaviour of texture, reference to reality, or suggestion of fiction). I would like to propose an alternative definition of aural drama as an emergent quality of motion between various temporal planes of sonic fiction, between sounds of diverse identities, and perceived materialities.

*Sarid*, a fixed media piece I was commissioned to create for a concert on the 14-channel sound system at BUDA BXL, Belgium, in June 2022, demonstrates such a dynamically unfolding metamorphosis. There is a similarity between *Sarid* and *Al Niente* in the use of materials of acoustic and digital nature: recordings of physical objects (saz, monochord, cymbal) and synthesised audio signals. One of the distinctive features of the piece is its textural sound. The selected fragments of string and cymbal recordings, which have been subjected to multiple stages of manipulation, and therefore have absorbed artefacts from various processing tools, present a series of textures. Some have abandoned their reference to original materiality, while others retain an altered likeness. Another set of textures was synthesised using sine and noise generators, reverberation, and delay. These suggest a particular kind of aesthetic and space, one that can be perceived as sharp, clean, and colder in comparison to the recorded sound. In *Sarid*, there is a ceaseless transition from evoking in perception the real gestures and materials (bowing a string instrument, a cymbal being struck) to textural planes of abstract behaviour. Succeeding each other in the arrangement of the piece, these sound materials form foreground and background that pull in different directions [1:20]<sup>\*60</sup>. This happens due to the drastic difference in nature and narratives between them. For instance, at 2:16, the density of textural layers bursts open. Initially, there is a vigorous gestural behaviour that gradually approaches stasis: wider temporal planes of sound with calmer energy-motion trajectories. The latter models the shift in the perception of layers predominantly as a texture. Soon, the behaviour reinstates the dynamism of gestural activity, once again redirecting the focus from the partials of the texture to the trajectories of behaviour in space and time and the interactions between layers. This motion does not always exhibit the structural framework clearly. Quite often, there is an ambiguity of oscillation between gestures and textures, simultaneously having dynamic behaviour and strong textural qualities. The sense of drama arises out of the interactions between morphologies and the related listening modes and from the tension of sound's occupation of both textural and gestural domains. The clash of elements along their temporal and spatial identities, materialities, and connections with reality, transpiring, is immediately bound by the space and the perceiving subject through imagination. Thus, the construction of sonic fiction is also in constant motion and development, transitioning from confrontation to inclusion.

<sup>59</sup> Kane, Brian, *Sound Unseen*, pp.20

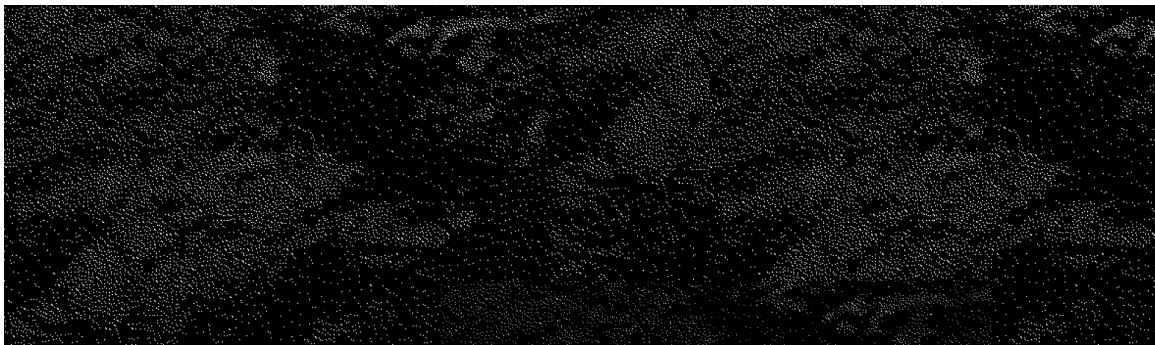
<sup>\*60</sup> Timecode corresponds to the recording 'Sarid 8ch\_Ambix\_Discussion Concert 20 09 22' in the sound example folder

Another distinctive feature of *Sarid* is its physical, almost tactile sound. For example, at the beginning of the piece at 0:12 and 0:40, the high frequencies produce an effect of extreme proximity to the ear, almost physically touching it. I presume that happens due to the extreme phasing. This phenomenon introduced another kind of physicality, different from the materiality of objects. A further spatial oscillation was created between sounds that appear very close and far away in other instances, quieter in amplitude, and spatially dispersed to appear more plane-like. Manifesting in the graduation of mutations, the drama in this piece is thus achieved in multiple ways. There are shifts in distance not only from recognisable string sound and its gestures to abstracted textures, but also shifts in distance, from dispersed textural planes to the tactility of individual grains.

## 2.5 Aesthetics of fragmentation

### Contemplations on Noise, Distortion, and Processing Tools

Noise plays an important role in obscuring the source material (saz, monochord, cymbal) in *Sarid*. In this text, I talk about noise as a type of sound, a texture. Noise as an abstraction, the dissolution of form, opposite to a sound that refers to a physical object. In this trajectory, I propose to view noise as a substance that triggers the imagination and speculate on it being potentially the most perceptually unstable, tenuous sound. Without a doubt, noise always comes from somewhere, it has a source. There are degrees of abstraction in various noises. I suggest stepping away from the noise's source into the vicinity of poetics. Composer Liza Lim writes on noise sound in *Rifts in Time. Distortion, possession and ventriloquism in my operatic works*, in *Sounding Fragilities*: 'For me, there's a basic truthfulness in noise, particularly the high-intensity full spectrum kind, and the way it disrupts norms, the way it invades the body and blurs boundaries, the way ecstasy creates its own time and space and physicality. Noise creates force fields with which and within which one can conjure up presences'.<sup>61</sup> The noise that Lim speaks of appeals to me with its capacity for imagination provocation. It proposes a space of power, an intense sonic mass carrying everything away and submerging into other, fictional realities. It is this quality I was aiming to achieve with reconstructing and synthesising textures in *Sarid*. Distortion, overdrive, and extreme magnification of a noise factor in spectral and re/synthesis tools (SPEAR, CDP processing by Trevor Wishart) were extensively employed to obscure the string and cymbal sound, extract their altered characteristics, and facilitate destabilisation. Saz's timbral characteristics were nevertheless often maintained. The fundamental relationship between frequency components in certain bands was left untouched. Noise synthesis often stemmed from the frequencies present in the source material to establish a connection. The resulting material therefore did not diverge from the source entirely.



<sup>61</sup> Lim, Liza, *Rifts in Time. Distortion, possession and ventriloquism in my operatic works*, in *Sounding Fragilities*, pp.206. Lim describes noise as a type of sound and mentions the importance of it as sound quality for her composition process. For example, she mentions bowing techniques with high degrees of pressure.



Destabilisation of a sound, particularly in terms of recognition of its source, in my compositions is reached through extensive use of processing tools. Processing, in general, implies obscurity of the source and multiplication of the selected qualities. Viewing the process of formation of the resulting sample as fragmentation of the initial source, processing operates on the basis of partials and traces (that is, the frequencies that characterise the timbre aspect specific to the object/instrument) and results in the aesthetics of balancing between the essence and distortions of the source material. I refer to the described idea as the *aesthetics of fragmentation*. In *Sarid*, I specifically contemplate on distortion as a tool smearing the clear presence of a sound source - hiding it under the layer of an incomprehensible sonic mass of noisy texture. Liza Lim formulates the essence of distortion quite beautifully: 'In the music, distortion is the destabilising, liquidation energy that enables movements between states of being.'<sup>62</sup> She continues: 'Distortion is almost a default state in my music. It comes from a fascination with emergence, the sense of something arriving. I say 'pushing aside' because with distortion there is distension and compression. That deformation suggests to me a trace, the evidence of invisible presences squeezing through into our space-time field. Distortion brings strangeness, alien-ness, divine or demonic energies, shock, repulsion, awe and other signs of the sublime into view.'<sup>63</sup> A distorted sound thus acquires a fictitious aura, marking the beginning of a maze into the ambiguated repercussions of the physical source. Although directed by the composer's choice, in the process of altering the sound's identity away from the clear material reference, the resulting sound inevitably acquires traces of the other materiality - artefacts of the technology employed. The resulting sample becomes a combination of two identities, two sources: the distorted presence of the original or initial physical object and cause that produced the gesture, but also the presence of the other, disparate 'voice' of the technological tool used. Technology and sound processing can play a role in the appearance of sonic fiction.

I understand and suggest listening to a processed sound as an affair of excavation of the initial condition through the sounding history - traces of the source, for instance, its spectral components (a band of frequencies or the relationship between them), dynamics of behaviour in time or distribution in space - as the past of the sound and the technological artefacts as how that past developed in time. With the example of distortion, I described how processing tools can be regarded as a way of altering the perceived materiality of sounds. To conclude, in a fixed media music situation, the projection of the sound source (Kane) often transpires by means of technology, where technological artefacts occupy an important role in the construction of perceived materiality.

## 2.6 The Metaphor of Sonic Ruins

Through the discussion of noise, distortion and the related aesthetics of fragmentation, we arrive at the concluding metaphor of this text. The one of sonic ruins.

A ruin is an intriguing concept in the context of musical form - thinking about how it assimilates in relation to time structures, what it suggests about the presence and materiality of sounds. In the following paragraphs, I will conclude the discussion on perceptual sonic instability by employing ruin as a case study. Ruin became for me a material metaphor and a speculative strategy for composition, and I draw its parallels to sound in three ways:

- as a temporal ambiguity and ruin's relation to memory, the past, and its traces;
- as a material instability through the process of decay and disappearance;
- ruin as an inspiration towards spatial architecture; the dispersal into fragments, grains.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pp. 206

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. pp. 203

My starting point could be pictured as a crumbled building. Its metal structure and the fallen ornament of stones stand still, in the liminal space between the past and the present, presenting the eye with a state of decay. In the scope of this text, ruin is understood as a process of dissolution of form, the form itself, and formlessness at once. The presence and the representation.

Ruin's material decay led me to reflect on the material perceptual instability discussed in chapter 1 in relation to the erasure of the source through processing. The words ruin and destruction are etymologically linked. Wandering from the Latin *destructionem* and its stem *destruere*, where *struere* 'to pile, build' and the prefix *de* 'un-, down' are combined (from PIE *\*streu-*, an extended form of root *\*stere-* 'to spread'), there is a reference to ruin - derivative of *ruere* 'to rush, fall violently, collapse'. A process of getting away from, down from, out of - something that is built; physical obliteration. The silhouette of the ruin formed in my mind when I was composing *Sarid*. *Sarid* (from Hebrew סָרִיד) describes something that remains after destruction and that resembles the existence of the whole. A trace of something disappearing or no longer existing, with the textures of strings falling apart, it leaves only reminiscences, fading echoes of the sources. Incessantly morphing into something else, the piece presents a perpetual construction and decay, an oscillation between the absence and delicate prominence of saz and cymbal sound. For instance, at 2:17<sup>\*64</sup>, the narrow-banded in high register sound of strings is interrupted by a mass of noise, dynamic, and speculatively alluding to the process of crumbling at first, it gradually degrades in behaviour and amplitude. Similar material devastation of the source was also achieved at the earlier stage of gathering sound material for *Sarid*, where the high pressure of the bow on the strings resulted in a highly textural, compressed sound quality. Literary historian Sven Spieker writes about destruction in the introduction to a series of essays on contemporary art: 'Its creative potential often lies precisely in its incompleteness, in the lingering references to what is being decomposed or dismembered, or, more generally, in the vestiges and traces destruction leaves behind.'<sup>65</sup> I suggest that the figure of ruin lingers in the traces of the source, unveiling its imaginative potential. In particular, when utilising granular techniques and those aspiring to noise and fragmentation. In the earlier discussion, I demonstrated how distortion can be seen as one tool for altering materiality into a deceased form, feasibly, that of a ruin.

A widespread term in the field of contemporary art and architecture, ruin doesn't come with the clarity of an object being one. Instead, it calls for the supplement of further reading, further syntax. A ruin carries its own archaeological layers and facilitates discussion on the origins. Behind the romanticised image of a survived structure, uncovering material traces of belonging, ruin reveals a plethora of histories and times. Brian Dillon, Walter Benjamin, and George Simmel, among many other thinkers on the ruinous, suggest - when we look at a ruined building, what we see is the passage of history. Brian Dillon writes in the introduction to a collection of essays on the notion of ruin in contemporary art practices: 'Ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. The ruined building is a remnant of, and portal into, the past; its decay is a concrete reminder of the passage of time. And yet, by definition, it survives, after a fashion: there must be a certain (perhaps indeterminate) amount of built structure still standing for us to refer to it as a ruin and not merely a heap of rubble. .. Perhaps the most enigmatic aspect of the time of ruination is the manner in which it points towards the future rather than the past, or rather uses the ruined resources of the past to imagine, or reimagine, the future.'<sup>66</sup> What Dillon designates is an inherent perpetual tension of the ruin's image, namely its temporal ambiguity. Ruin is a phenomenon of the semiotics of time: in its retrospective aspect, ruin refers back to its initial state and the strike that caused its metamorphosis, while in its prospective aspect, it refers to the course of (further) obliteration. Both temporal aspects of the past and the future are crucial for the perception of a ruin in the present, and mark a strong relation to

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<sup>\*64</sup> Timecode corresponds to the recording 'Sarid 8ch\_Ambix\_Discussion Concert 20 09 22' in the sound example folder

<sup>65</sup> See Introduction by Spieker, Sven, *Destruction*. WHITECHAPPEL edition. Documents of Contemporary Art. The MIT Press, 2017, pp.15

<sup>66</sup> See Introduction by Dillon, Brian, *Ruins*. WHITECHAPPEL edition. Documents of Contemporary Art. The MIT Press, 2011, pp.10-19

memory. An artist Robert Smithson in his writing reminds us that ruin is always dynamic and in process.<sup>67</sup> This temporal ambiguity echoes complex multimodal and multi-temporal perception of music, as well as the transience of sound at large. One can begin to see parallels with a dynamic unfolding and shapeshifting through gesture and texture in my compositions, *Sarid*, as well as with the fragmented cyclical unfolding of segments 2 and 3 in *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time*. In the latter example, the structure of the piece corresponds with the process of remembering and forgetting what has already sounded before and building on that flickering past. I will describe how the temporal conception of the ruin metaphor influenced the structure of the final version of *Al Niente III* in the later segments of the text.

Lastly, I utilise ruin as an inspiration towards spatial architecture. The decay and destruction of the mineral surface and the holding structure expose the insides of a ruined building that over time emanate into outer space. Concomitantly with the previously solid borders of walls and the ceiling falling apart, the outside creeps in and inhabits the interior. Weeds and moss gradually dwell in the crevices of rotten and decaying matter. Undermining spatial integrity, there is another change at play. Writer and poet Susan Stewart writes about ruin in her book *The Ruins Lesson. Meaning and material in Western culture*: 'What should be vertical and enduring has become horizontal and broken'.<sup>68</sup> The spatial disintegration of a ruin therefore occupies all dimensions. Stewart advances: 'A ruin confuses the interior with the exterior and the transparent with the opaque as it also shows the interrelatedness of this aspect of perception.'<sup>69</sup> I translate the spatial instability of ruin into the musical plane along the duality of gesture and texture as signifiers of two different conceptions of space. A dissipation of sound that could be previously recognised as an object or material into the formless, textural domain, or the reverse process of building a sonic plane, a form, from the unevenness of tapered individual grains, from stultified, abstracted matter.

Further, I will discuss how the research into drama and the ruinous form found resonance in the composition process of the extended and reworked versions of *Al Niente. A Song from a Past Time*.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pp.14. Dillon mentions that entropy is one of the key concepts of Smithson's work. Referring to Smithson's essay 'A tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' in the same edition, Dillon writes how the idea of a dynamic ruin gives rise to what Smithson calls a 'dialectical landscape'

<sup>68</sup> Stewart, Susan, in *Introduction: Valuing Ruin, The Ruins Lesson. Meaning and material in Western culture*, The University of Chicago Press, 2019, pp.1

<sup>69</sup> See Stewart, Susan: 'When a cover vanishes and an interior is revealed, what was opaque no longer resists our view. We come to realise that the perception of transparency and actual transparency - in kind of allegory of their own terms - are quite separate. ... we believe transparency is greater when we see 'beyond' more clearly, when the transparent layer is less visible, and when what is beyond is less altered by the superimposition of the transparent object.', Ibid, pp.37-38 Transparency - opaqueness can serve as an additional interesting parallel between the ruinous and sonic material instabilities.

## *Al Niente. A Song from a Past Time II-III*

*Al Niente II*

(autumn 2023) 12'

(8ch) Liza Kuzyakova for Sigrid Sand Angelsen

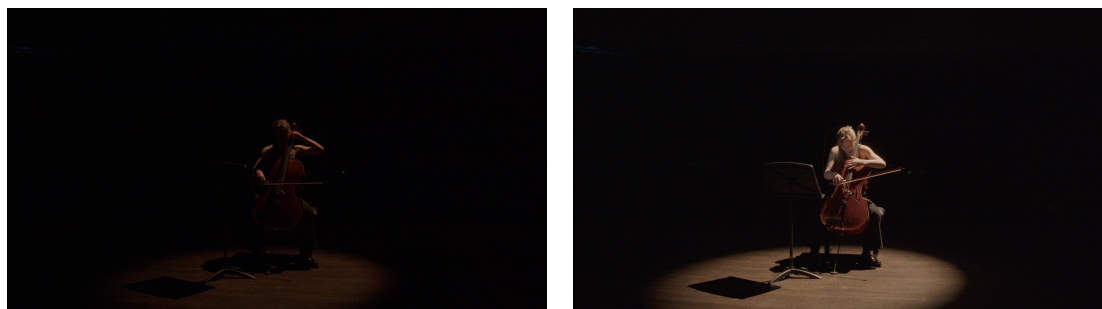


fig.5-6 Sigrid Sand Angelsen performing *Al Niente II* in autumn 2023

*Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time II* is a piece extended from *Al Niente I*, reworked for the 8-channel sound system. It was presented in a concert at the Koninklijk Conservatorium Concert Hall in October 2023. Due to the busy schedule of Diederik, I began to work with a different cello player, Sigrid Sand Angelsen. Since the intimate relation of the electronic and acoustic parts was a fundamental concept for working with the material and space, the change of the performer influenced the piece in several ways. Each instrument and performer have an authentic identity. There was a difference in the instrument's sound and the technique of playing the score. While the 'sharper' playing of Diederik allowed for a higher degree of contrast (an exponential growth and decay of gestures, quieter amplitudes), Sigrid articulated the sustained tones and jete sounds less abruptly. In addition, the sonic articulation in the recordings made during the supplementary improvisation sessions with Sigrid disclosed material of different qualities. Building on top of the sound gathered with Diederik, a continuation of composition with Sigrid resulted in the shifting of the sound of the cello's character in the entire piece.

Two additional electronic sections were composed for the beginning and the end of the piece, forming a total of four sections [see Appendix 1]:

|  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| <i>section 1</i> - Entering the realm; encountering first traces | <i>electronic</i>         |
| <i>section 2</i> - Fragmented interplay of materialities; traces | <i>electronic + cello</i> |
| <i>section 3</i> - The unfolding of drama                        | <i>electronic + cello</i> |
| <i>section 4</i> - Fragmentation after the drama                 | <i>electronic</i>         |

The process of working on *Al Niente II* can, therefore, be described as:

- (7) Composing new material for electronic parts: sections 1 and 4;
- (8) Reworking electronic material in section 3;
- (9) Adjusting cello part in sections 2 and 3 during sessions with Sigrid;
- (10) Rehearsing the piece in its entirety with the implementation of final adjustments;

Section 1 was conceived as an entrance into the sonic realm of the piece, akin to a gradual descent into a cave. The aim was to introduce the space and its elements, gradually immersing the listener, thus creating the foundation for further perception. The section consists only of the electronic part. It brings the focus to the details of the electronic, 8-ch material and makes the listener familiar with sounds and their behaviour in space. It was composed to be played in darkness, to enhance the mystery of the source, which is attained by the distanced appearance of sound events and through their veiled form. The cello remains largely absent, with no clear spectral or gestural quality present but a faintly reminiscent (processed)

timbre subtly emerging at 00:08<sup>\*70</sup>. The sound material is characterised by low frequencies and elusive, noisy texture, fleetingly exposing qualities and hinting at future developments. Consequently, the piece opens with a rumbling space and evolves into gestural spatial interactions of sound events of varying durations.

The somewhat animalistic quality of the gestural sounds plays an important role in establishing sonic fiction in *Al Niente*. Drawing on the expressive potential of string sound, I envisioned an envelope of tonal dynamics vaguely reminiscent of growls and cries - calling to mind voices of creatures and animal-like behaviour, such as flapping wings through fluttering sounds. This speculative familiarity, while tenuous enough to avoid explicit referentiality, oscillates between reality and fiction, fostering abstract imaginative projections of the creaturely. Spatial strategies further support this idea. The localisation of sounds and their movement in space follows the logic of the real-perspectival space. Depth and dimensions - foreground, background, and perhaps even a horizon - are created, with higher frequencies attenuated with distance and movement occurring in all directions around the listener. Drawing on the writings of architect Bernhard Tschumi, theatre and performance scholars Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx elicit structural coherence between dramaturgy and architecture, in that both involve the 'deliberate deployment of structure in order to provoke or enable live events'.<sup>71</sup> By situating sound events within the confines of the virtual space in my pieces, I see parallels between music, theatrical, and architectural thoughts, which results in the evocation of what I previously referred to as the habituated realm. In section 1 of the piece, I aim to stage this realm by using distance as a tool and treating sound events as beings that morph and interact with one another and the space around them.

Section 2 begins with light coming on, revealing the instrument for the first time. The section remains unchanged from *Al Niente I*, beginning with a dramatic gesture reminding of the sound of a bouncing ball with metallic resonances and cello playing. It proceeds in fragments, building 'blocks' of the piece's body.

Section 3 opens with noisy gestures on the cello and electronic material, growing dynamically into a bouncing ball gesture similar to the one in section 1. Aspiring to explore and convey the sense of drama more expressively, slight structural variations were implemented using the sound material from version 1. The rearrangements were aimed at building the plato of drama with a continuous flow in the fusion of the electronic and cello parts.

Section 4 is the most significant addition to *Al Niente II*. I was preoccupied with how a ruin can serve as a metaphor for sonic material, which formed the fundamental idea for composing this section. The section uses interruption as a means to break the continuity of elements; extensive textural sounds, intense amplitude and densities, and degrades the spectral identity of the cello through distortion, granulation, and extreme spatial fragmentation. I envisioned section four as the most dramatic part of the piece, leading into another, after-space - a fragmented scenery, a ruin, simultaneously signifying a potential new beginning of the spectrally lingering space of saz strings.

### Spatial approach

Multichannel setting encompasses complex perceptual experience and invigorates creative use of space. Maintaining focus on multichannel composition throughout the several years of my studies in Sonology, I

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<sup>\*70</sup> Timecode corresponds to the recording 'Al Niente II - Discussion Concert 2023' in the sound example folder

<sup>71</sup> Inspired by Turner, Cathy, and Synne K. Behrnt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 19-25, who refer to composition as the 'internal fabric' or 'texture' of the performance event, Merx and Nibbelink note that staging and dramaturgy are instruments useful in switching focus, in opposition to the idea of them being entirely different concepts. Referring to the writings of architect Bernhard Tschumi, they note that dramaturgy, like architecture, involves the 'deliberate deployment of structure in order to provoke or enable live events', Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth, and Sigrid Merx, *Dramaturgical Analysis A Relational Approach*. *Herfst* 28 no.3, 2021, pp.7-8

shaped a spatial strategy that is based on the combination of three methods. All of them were employed in the creation of the *Al Niente*, as well as in the earlier piece, *Sarid*. These methods are:

- (1) Direct one-to-one mapping: placing sounds in mono or stereo speaker sets. I employ this method as a gestural tool, aiming to compose distinctly localised sounds and clearly defined trajectories of movement in space. This method comes in the closest relationship with the real physical space of the concert hall when arranging movements in between the speakers since it does not impose a virtual space with synthetic reverberation but relies on the existing acoustic properties of the environment.
- (2) Utilising immersive audio tool E4L (Envelop for Live) which allows for the dispersal of sound into plane-like atmospheric surfaces. This Max for Live device proved to be especially effective for establishing unified spaces, with a possibility to reach further distanced quiet sound events that appear to be decentralised, scattered, and dispersed. This tool was used in the opening minutes of *Al Niente* to achieve a sense of realm, approaching immersion.
- (3) Multichannel expansion and panning algorithms in supercollider is the third technique. Synthesis or processing is done for numerous speakers, permitting sound design and composing movements directly in space. In comparison to the other methods, supercollider provides an extremely high definition of sound quality. Working particularly with noisier and granular sounds results in highly sharp sounds, bordering physical sensation. It was extensively used in section 4 of *Al Niente*.

Mixing the three approaches, I produce a multitude of textures with which rich in density and dynamics spaces are composed. For example, the variety of their combinations is presented in the beginning and development of section 4 and fragments in sections 2 and 3. It is important to note, that I arrange sound material in time and space directly on multichannel systems. Hence, spatial unfolding is an indivisible aspect of the pieces and an important tool for sound design.

#### Incidental Dramatic and Theatrical Aspects

Introduced by the space of the concert hall during the presentation of *Al Niente II*, the question of amplification, volume, and balance in the bigger space led to an unexpected layer of theatricality. The incidental drama was uncovered by moments of inaudibility of the cello in the thick mass of louder electronic sound, accompanied by the visible movements of the player. The ventriloquist instrument that is spoken through the voice of 'the other' - processed and recorded sound projected by the loudspeakers. I thought of it as an interesting feature and planned to maintain it.

#### **Contemplations and Concerns**

While *Al Niente II* demonstrates a further exploration of coupling acoustical and sound from the loudspeakers, I couldn't fulfil the original ambitions fully. The piece required further adjustments in arrangement to convey a sense of drama without overloading the listener with the perpetual gestural activity. That resulted in the composition of *Al Niente III*.

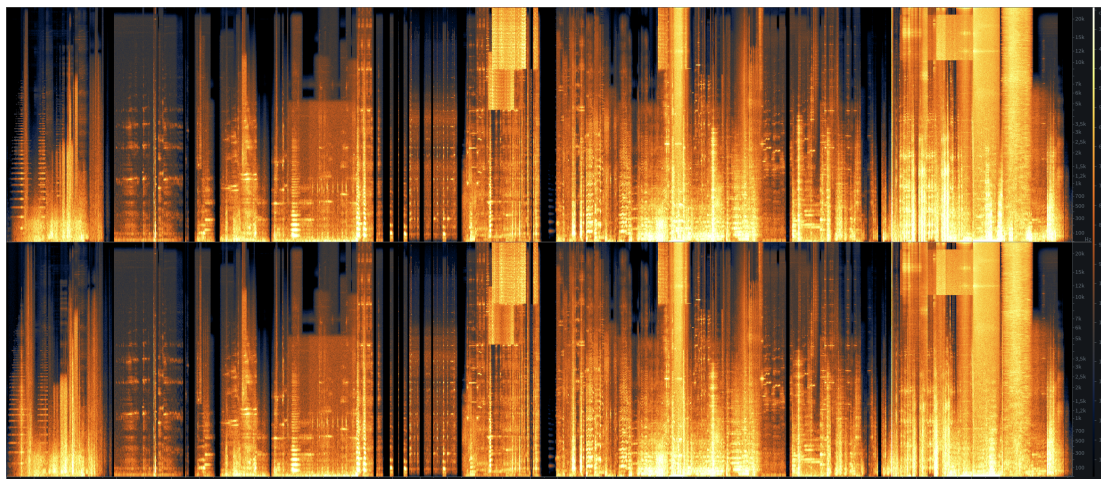


fig.7 Spectrogram *Al Niente III*

*Al Niente III* is the final reworking of the piece. It has grown out of many iterations and presents a different sound realm to that of *Al Niente I* and *II*, nevertheless sharing the foundation of the same ideas and motivations. For as long as I was working on the piece, I have been entranced by the beauty of acoustic and electronic sound junction in space; the myriad of textural shades and shapes the two sources can produce. I have faced the challenge of creating a balance between cohesion and continuity and fragmented, interrupted flow; between stasis and dynamism; softness and expansivity. Formulated with the previous versions, the ideas that navigated the final piece were to maintain the interplay of materialities and to express the divergence of their sonic character and presence in space. The further exploration of drama was another fundamental aspiration.

#### On drama and tension in the quieter realm

At the time, I listened a lot to Mica Levi's music, in particular her albums *Under the Skin* (2014) and *Monos* (2019). I also rediscovered pieces by Luigi Nono, whose musical world and thought had a profound effect on me in the first years of my studies in Sonology. I drew a lot of inspiration from his instrumental piece, the string quartet work *Fragmente - Stille en Diotima* (1979-80), which I had the pleasure to listen to live at the Echonance Festival (Amsterdam Orgelpark, 2024). What fascinated me in *Fragmente - Stille en Diotima* was the sharpness of the material coexisting with continuity, which resulted in gentle, and at other times intense, anticipation. Listening to this piece gave me a thrill. I felt how this piece and Mica Levi's music urge and encourage a special type of listening, which I describe as listening *into* the space, to sounds at the threshold of audibility. The precision of elements in Nono's piece intimates an immense focus, facilitating a state where the listener stretches to grasp and hear both the roaring and the inaudible. I realised that what I wanted to reach with *Al Niente* was a similar feeling of stretched time and perception, and I saw the idea of instability as a potential method to approach this state. I realised there is another extremity of aural drama expressed in fragility. Drama is not only about louder explosions and drastic changes, it can also be encountered in gentle trembling, quieter yet tenuous presences that stretch the confines of stability. Describing one of the pieces by Vincenzo Bellini (prelude to *Il pirata*,) in a conversation with Enzo Restagno, Nono says: '..where the dramatic, highly explosive moment of the storm is given by the pauses ..' and refers to a similar situation in Verdi's *Otello*: 'The storm does not arise so much from loud sounds, but rather from silences that scream, that shriek, that rage..'.<sup>72</sup> Nono's and Mica

<sup>72</sup> See *An Autobiography of the Author Recounted by Enzo Restagno*, 1987 in Nono, Luigi. *Nostalgia for the Future. Luigi Nono's Selected Writings and Interviews*. Edited by Veniero Rizzardi and Angela Ida De Benedictis. California Studies in 20th-Century Music. University of California Press, 2018, pp.47



Levi's works gave me the courage to explore the quieter dynamics in *Al Niente III*, which I realised were absent in my compositional practice before.

While the pauses between fragments were already a part of *Al Niente I* and *II*, in the final piece silence occupies a more prominent role, inspired by *Fragmente - Stille en Diotima*, where silence becomes a fundamental material. Each sound element, texture, and gesture requires time to unfold. This new awareness resulted in the composition of longer time spans. The use of silence and a larger temporal distance between fragments allows the material to fade in and out of further distances and urges the listener to follow its decay. Space unfolds tensions present in a singular sound in opposition to being overtaken by the drama of density and intensity, thus leaving an indelible mark in the listener's memory. In section 1, noises disappear in space at 1:07<sup>\*73</sup>, reaching nearly inaudible rustling at 1:12. Section 2 proceeds with fleeting dynamics. Eerie high tones with various degrees of noise are played by the acoustical cello and the loudspeakers, gradually introducing the first gestures: soft jete, variety in the attack and decay, and sound events of quivering nature [1:10-2:16].

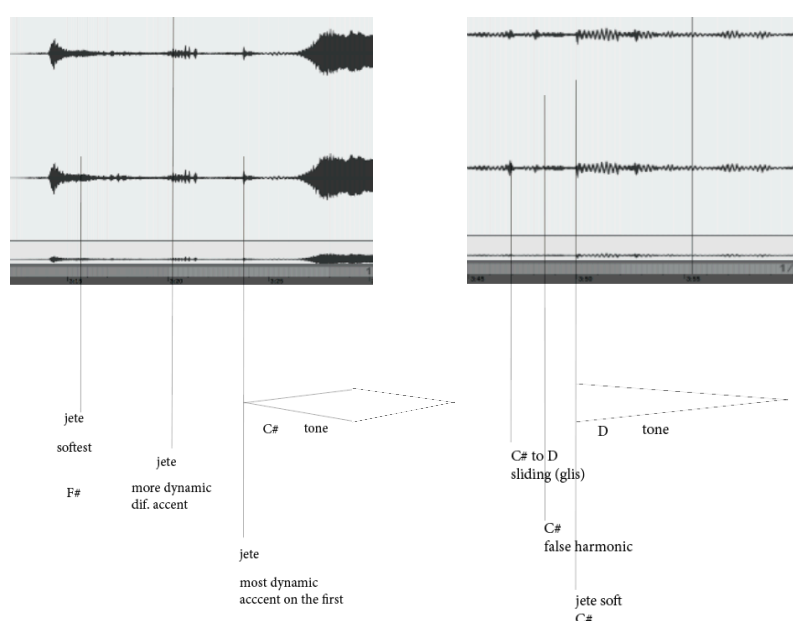


fig.8-9 Excerpts from the working score, *Al Niente III*, segment 2 [3:12-3:30 (on the left) / 3:45-4:00 (on the right)]

Building in behaviour and amplitude, section 2 in *Al Niente III* unfolds as fragments in continual transformation (fig.8-9). There are relations between these fragments that introduce multiple perspectives and new materials, the interaction between fragments that rise and others that recede is established almost as breathing waves. Perpetually pushing the energy of physical gestures played on the cello further, to the degree of inaudibility or the full expressive potential of forces of higher intensity, the piece obtains its gestural, dynamic flow. The sense of drama in this work thus appears in a variety of ways. It is present in individual gestures, which acquire a tenuous feeling due to the pitches used, veiled by degrees of noise, and interactions with other sounds. It manifests as interruptions in volume, spatial trajectories, temporal flow, and in the oscillation between the stability of reference to string sound and the instability of fictions provoked within the abstracted material.

The sections of the final versions follow a similar structure to *Al Niente II*, but on an inner level are significantly recomposed [see Appendix 1], largely abandoning the conception of sections as such. It is intended for the work to begin in complete darkness, with the light turning on in section 2 and revealing

<sup>\*73</sup> Timecode corresponds to the working file 'Al niente III. In progress 2024' in the sound example folder



the cello [1:13]. The light fades away after the completion of the third section, which dissipates as a gradual transition [10:15], leaving only the sound from the loudspeakers to resonate and roar in the concert space, sweeping everything away. Allowing myself some poetic license, the organic unfolding of the structure of this work can be depicted as a construction of form and its further ruination, into the next scenery. An afterspace that bears memories, perhaps. The spatial movements, contrary interactions between creature-like voices, perpetual shifting of layers in their surroundings, build-ups in horizontal occupation of space, and vertical density of spectre, reflect the idea of sonic fiction in *Al Niente* as an emergent quality. The oscillation between the formlessness of technologically altered sounds and the form of the distinguishable sound of cello, the mode of placing intact and broken elements together, adds to the great depth of field and feeling of movement in the composition and recalls the poetic projections of a ruin's shadow.

To give an overview of the process of remaking this composition:

- (11) Recording cello improvisation as a response to the new set of instructions;
- (12) Processing with a new set of tools;
- (13) Entirely reworking section 2, first the electronic, then the cello part;
- (14) Adjusting parts 1 and 4;
- (15) Entirely reworking part 3, first the electronic, then the cello part;
- (16) Rehearsing the piece in full, adjusting.

Steps 11-15 were accompanied by periodic sessions with Sigrid, where new material was tested, rehearsed, and adjusted. They point to the critical role of the feedback process when engaging with the performer for the entire composition.

The cello in *Al Niente* is conceived to be unamplified, and I envision the piece benefiting from presentation in a space with dry acoustics. Lack of amplification is crucial for realising the contrast in dynamics, amplitude, texture, and spatial distribution between the sound materials. However, this poses certain challenges for the audience, as described by the inaudibility of the acoustic instrument in *Al Niente II*. In addition, time-space relations between musical elements change with the transfer of music from a studio situation into the larger space of a concert hall. A bigger space results in larger distances between the speakers in the multichannel setting, with drier acoustics contributing to further perceptual separation of sound emitted by them. The compositional space expands, and to accommodate the challenges this poses, I chose to work in an environment similar acoustically and in size to the presentation space. This allowed me to compose transitions and spatial interactions between elements with higher precision and even quieter ranges.

### *Contemplations and Conclusions*

At the beginning of this research, the trajectories of thoughts and the related ideas existed as a vague spread into a multitude of directions. The excavation of their interconnectivity was an intense and rewarding process and a precious opportunity to reflect on my practice, process my inspirations, and articulate the compositional ideas that developed over the last four years. The perceptual mechanisms encountered in experimental theatre productions provided me with tools for analysis and composition. Thinking through the duality of reality and fiction equipped me with a method for noticing perceptual tensions in a range of creative fields. The process of composing *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time*, in particular, has taught me to listen more attentively to space. Having revealed the fascinating beauty of acoustic sound, I formulated strategies for working along the challenging conditions it poses in the situation of simultaneous playing with the electronic material. Pursuing drama and higher sonic contrast, I discovered a nuanced way of working with time in composition.

Working on this text and music, the growing awareness of the importance of theoretical clarification continually motivated me towards deeper thought and analysis. In the process, I discovered vast theoretical dimensions. Some still call for further expansion and will continue to reverberate in my artistic practice in the future. Embracing a certain degree of poetic abstraction and openness, this text is meant as an extension of musical thought and vice versa, the described ideas to be read in parallel to compositions. It resonates with my deep belief in perception as being marked by the synthesis of acoustic reality and its subjective shadow, where the processes of listening and composing are in a perpetual loop of influencing each other.

*List of enclosed music material*

*Yesh Me Ayin* (Mastered Stereo Version, 2021)

*Sarid* (Recording from Discussion Concert, 2022)

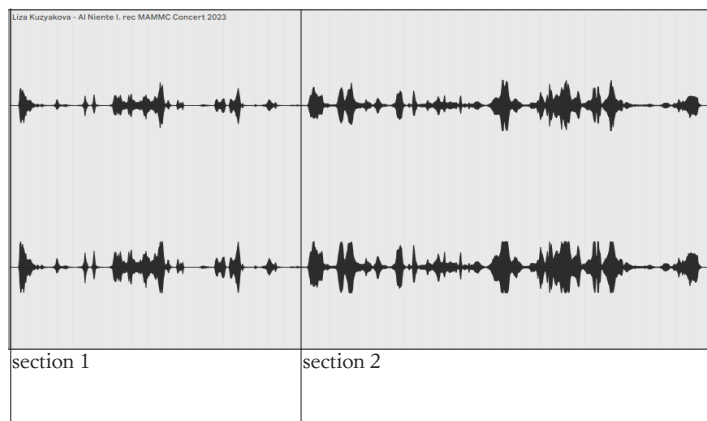
*Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time I* ( Video Recording from MAMMC Concert, Spring 2023)

*Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time II* (Video Recording from Discussion Concert, Autumn 2023)

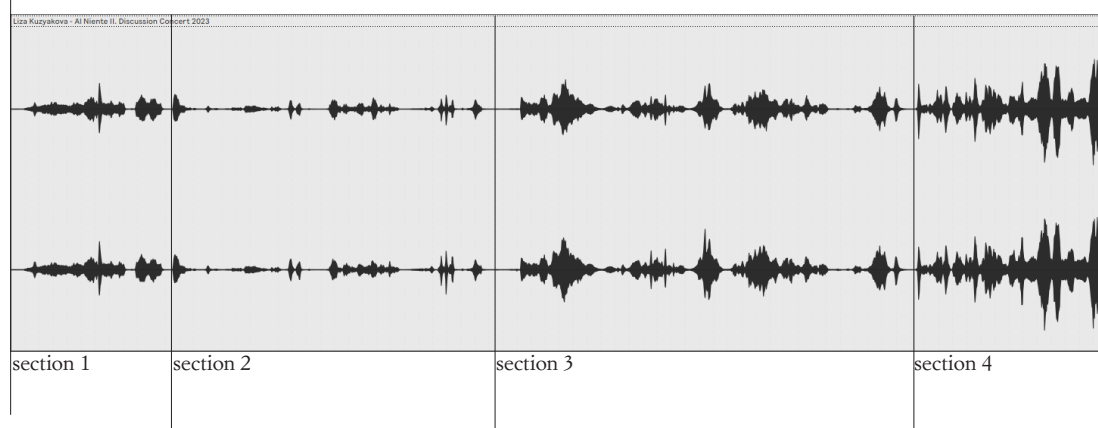
*Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time III* (Stereo Bounce in Progress, May 2024)

## Appendix 1

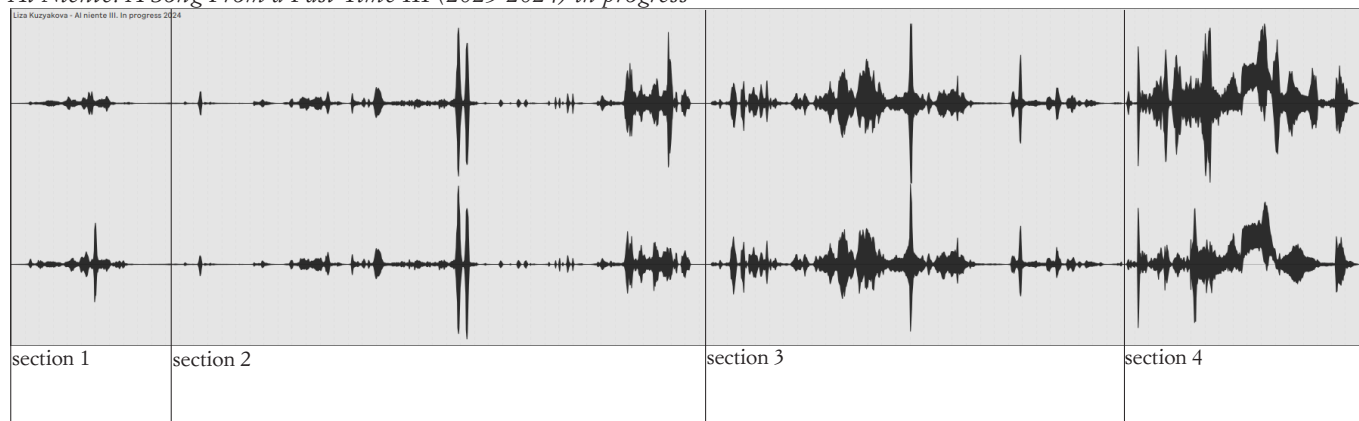
### *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time I (2023)*



### *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time II (2023)*



### *Al Niente. A Song From a Past Time III (2023-2024)\*in progress*



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