

the program, and departed into the sultry Singaporean night. But, later, drifting into dream, a turtle on rollerblades, sporting mirrored shades, in the midst of a swamp (maybe the Everglades?) offered to rub lotion on my back, and that's where it fades. Probably just preemptive jet-lag again. Clearly should've stayed...

Interview Series

John Paul Young vs. John Fariselli Young

JPY) Let's start with some background—can you describe how you came to a career in computer music? (Please accept this term as broadly inclusive of acousmatic, electroacoustic, etc.—maybe we can debate aesthetic vs. functional definitions later. ;-). If you could choose any possible career in the world, would this be it? Did particular epiphanies or formative experiences play significant roles, or was it more a winnowing away of other pursuits as you focused and refined your path? Were there particular mentors or idols that motivated you? Did you seriously consider some other discipline or direction in life that would not have related to computer music at all?

JFY) I gravitated to computer music through the opportunity to work in studios as a student at university, though there is some background to that. I had the usual interests as a very small child playing records, some classical, but mostly singing along to the whatever pop music my older sisters were listening to (like the Beatles or Cat Stevens).

But when I was 11 my father bought a portable cassette recorder (it seemed quite common at that time for people to send spoken 'letters' to each other and we had had a few of those). I became fascinated by the process of recording and playing back sounds around me—including the voices of family and, of course, myself. I'd record stories and string together 'scenarios' of different sound sources into little productions, and try to 'punch in' edits to these. Something about the whole idea of sound as a slice of experience being recorded and listened to as a mirror of that experience is still a large part of what sustains me as a composer. At about the same time, I suddenly started hearing classical music in a new way—listening with an understanding to the textures, the lines, the shapes (I mean suddenly quite literally, since it was actually the playing of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* from another room that one day literally stopped me in my tracks)! From then on I just started buying and hiring classical records, trying to absorb as much as I could—took piano lessons, started playing the trumpet, and composing. In my high school years, I was a pretty standard 'muso', aware of electroacoustic music, since we were taught at school that there were some good New Zealand composers working in that field, but without much of a feeling that it was especially what I wanted to do. On finishing high school I had no idea other than studying music and started

at the music school in my hometown at the University of Canterbury. Something happened then that was very special for me ... there was a composer working there, John Cousins, who was using the process of sound recording, often of very mundane events, as material in compositions. That brought me right back to those earlier years playing around with the cassette recorder, and a kind of very openly creative experience with sound. It seemed so obvious to me that this should be integrated into a broader concept of music, that one could explore the realism of recording, as a 'document' of real-world events, and 'dramatise' that document with transformations that the studio made possible. There were people around, some faculty, other students who questioned this approach as 'music', but to me it seemed a natural bringing together of the widest world of sound. John Cousins continued to be a mentor for me as a student since, apart from the fact that I liked what he was composing, I responded strongly to his approach to teaching and encouraging creativity—essentially that musical ideas should not be solely a spin-off of technical possibilities or speaking through style/pastiche, but from a message or sentiment that the composer finds within themselves. That approach wasn't without difficulty, but it resonated powerfully with a lot of the values with which I was brought up.

JPY) As I understand it, you grew up (and lived until recently) in New Zealand. To many of us, New Zealand has a very mythic quality—a far-away island, steeped in natural beauty, with a rich and mysterious tribal past leading into the present—like an entire world unto itself. Do you feel that your music has been perceptibly influenced by those physical and/or cultural surroundings, literally or otherwise? Or, to look at it another way, what connections might you draw between your music and your environment? Feel free to correct any common misperceptions those of us on the other side of the planet might have... :-)

JFY) Well, daily life there is not much different from many other places... but maybe the distinctive thing about New Zealand's environment is the mixture of strong geographical features in a small area, as well as its relative remoteness by being surrounded by so much sea—to which one should add the cultural identity issues that inevitably arise in a post-colonial society. That has certainly been a significant influence on the artistic environment there, though I wouldn't say that the response to that condition has been uniform amongst artists. Electroacoustic music in New Zealand developed from a quite deliberate project to relate environment and music by Douglas Lilburn, who was New Zealand's pioneer in the medium in the early 1960s, remaining active until the end of the '70s.

His approach was a cultural/environmental one in the sense that he felt in an isolated country it could be possible to create a distinctive 'voice' by using new technology devoid of the 'resonances' of centuries of previous practice. But I think it also provided, for better or worse, a way for him to retreat from the particular process of musical iconoclasm and renewal that was still driving the avant-garde. So he turned to natural sounds and the theoretically 'blank' canvas of the synthesizer as it was then, finding a private space in which to do 'new' things. I felt Lilburn's influence not directly but through the composers he had taught in the '60s, and it was a very important part of my developing interest in electroacoustic music to appreciate that there were cultural, musical and emotive reasons to work with electroacoustic sound, not just purely technological ones. As I said, my interest was initiated by a certain feeling about sound recording and its expressive potential, and there continues to be a strong connection between environment and music for me. I don't think it's a definitively or deliberately 'New Zealand' sounding one, but maybe New Zealand was a convenient place for that sort of interest to grow. As a New Zealander, I'm first-generation. My father is English, but emigrated to New Zealand as a child, and my mother was from Italy (my father fought in WWII and they met in Italy in 1944, with my mother moving to New Zealand after the war).

I think this 'first generation-ness' and a separation from what I knew to be my real origins created for me a sort of cultural dislocation and distancing—family seen through war photographs and my parents memories of meeting being intertwined with momentous social experiences and political events. Ultimately, this sense of separation made me want to leave New Zealand. There is a powerful sense in which I feel more 'at home' in Europe and that's really what led me to move with my family to the UK (my wife is half Swedish, so the move closed a similar circle for her). But musically, while the process of composing has always involved using sounds drawn from my immediate environment, I feel that the artistic imperatives I've developed are also shared elsewhere, and the UK is a particularly sympathetic environment. There's an intensity and seriousness about electroacoustic music here and it's very exciting to be involved in that. It may be ironic that another composer to have influenced me greatly is Denis Smalley, a very important figure in the development of electroacoustic music in the UK, who was also born in New Zealand.

JPY) Ok, after two heavy questions, I'll pitch you a floater. What's your favorite sport... to watch? to play? to make fun of?

JFY) Cricket... especially international 'test' matches... five days long and room for drama, tension, boredom, and wonderful statistics.

JPY) Electroacoustic music is often thought of as very abstract, in the sense of not telling a 'story', or having any particular 'message'. Periodically at EA concerts I ask myself at the end of a piece, "what was the composer trying to say?" Most of the time I can't even begin to speculate (although a few beers beforehand seems to help). Sometimes I get a sense of reflection on the role of technology, sometimes samples are so distinctive (i.e. gunfire) that concrete associations of some sort are inevitable, and of course inclusions of text give the game away to the extent they call a whole other cognitive framework into play. The late Beethoven string quartets, Schoenberg piano works, and Webern's most austere twelve-tone compositions (to choose a few of the more challenging areas of the traditional repertoire) speak to me much more clearly by comparison, and I wonder at the reasons why.

JFY) Well, I often wonder too! The whole idea that, with electroacoustics, one can do 'anything'—make any sound, even (especially) ones previously 'unheard', sounds fantastic and has obviously been used since the early days as a kind of promotional tool for the 'new medium'. But of course, it's also quite problematic ... what do you do with an unlimited universe of possibilities? So perhaps part of the problem is that pieces often depart from an individual composer's particular relationship with some sounds and a set

of tools, and maybe that contributes to the feeling you express of 'messages' that are in some way not universal enough to be comprehended. I think from a personal standpoint I have taken one view—that sound recording has opened up the possibility of reflecting on the world we know, by capturing and re-projecting it, creating montage, etc. But it also gives access to the sound itself as a 'plastic' substance, as one of my doctoral students recently put it ... so that we can use transformation processes to explore the limits of recognition, hybrid identities, and so on. I guess I do think that, at some level, compositional intention should be 'clear' and that one should hear a personality, some substance, expressed with a degree of sophistication and even, if you like, 'guts' some risk-taking. But these things can't be manufactured. I think also that with EA/computer it is relatively easy for a composer to be seduced by the technology and solving an interesting technical challenge that doesn't necessarily have a strong musical outcome.

JPY) Earlier in the interview, you said that you are deeply engaged by the 'idea of sound as a slice of experience'. I think this is a powerful concept, but difficult to reconcile with the common practice of EA (in my view above). There are the musique concrete and soundscape efforts to construct tableaux so real you can taste, but I would contend these generally

relate to experience in the same way that snapshots relate to memories—they are profoundly evocative only if you were there. To continue the analogy, only rarely does such an EA work reach the level of a stunning photograph—transcending representation to achieve metaphor. Is this because of the tools, the gatekeepers, or is it just that hard to compose good computer music?

I'd like to hear your reactions and perspective to this gauntlet I've tried to throw down. I've made numerous assumptions, so feel free to take exception to any of them with the following in mind: Do you try to communicate with your audiences through the medium of music, in either literal or subtextual terms? Do you feel the success of your work depends in part on whether the audience interprets your 'message', or is it enough that they find the experience of listening valuable? Does the electroacoustic aesthetic discourage conscious communication? Are there limitations of the language of EA as you see it, and if so, how do you grapple with them?

JFY) Well, I'd say that only rarely does a photograph transcend representation too! I think the main thing is that sonic 'representation' of this kind is in itself extremely interesting since it enables us to think about what we can experience through our senses and memory. And although for

many of us it has become a natural part of what we do compositionally, it's still a musically radical idea. One of the tricky things about composing electroacoustically is getting to grips with 'thinking in sound' (to borrow from a well-known book)! The world of the EA composer is not just concerned with an imaginative 'inward' ear and score-based representation, but with this totality of electronically manufactured and extended sounds that may never have been heard before. As musicians, most of us have been trained to 'hear' in an inward way but, because this usually relates to note-based structures, it's not always that much help in, for example, the disassembly of timbres or complex digital processing. The immediacy of the studio environment compensates for that to a certain extent, but in terms of the way I work in the studio I find the compositional process to be quite a complicated mix of responding to the intrinsic qualities of sounds, and then trying to figure how to manipulate them in the way that is 'right' to my ear. I often find that a certain sound will provoke an 'imagined' response or extension to it that I am then faced with trying to create. On the other hand the potential to work with processes independently of the sounds themselves can throw up unexpected results—like a signal processing structure that is constructed before sounds are put into it, or one that is fashioned to process one particular sound and is then used to process different ones. This can nudge

me into another whole way of listening to the material and the wider musical context that I'm trying to create because, basically, I don't think it's always possible to predict exactly how something will sound in the studio and so sometimes it's useful to use that unpredictability and see what can happen. But for me the decisive step in the creative process is the listening response to the material with the aim of finding a context for it in the piece, or not. That in itself involves a lot of judgements made about the sounds, some informed, some intuitive, such as the apparent gestural directions of the sounds, the layers and complexity of the material and how they hold my attention over time, how a particular sound identity might be heard to develop or transform over time, and where I am 'steering' the focus of the music between notions of 'reality' and 'abstraction'. Having an aesthetic stance, from a sound and music point of view, is essential, and work that suggests an interest purely in the mechanics of its construction is problematic for me. When you said at the beginning you sometimes wonder "what was the composer trying to say?"—that is probably the crucially significant way of thinking, that the composer has, at their disposal, a platform for imparting a 'meaning'. Personally, I've no difficulty with such an assumption. As long as we care to ask that question, we are musically alive!

So, as I said, the use of natural recognizable sounds (whether 'sound-objects' or 'electroacoustic photographs') can function as a grounding for digital transformations/synthesis—a reference that can be vicariously 'understood' and that for me is an important aspect of the conception and articulation of my pieces. For me the whole basis of composing extends from my feeling world and emotive reactions to things. But because a piece of music is finally going to need to stand on its own at some point, I think it's important to have some sort of objectivity—to be able to get the best understanding I can of the implications and requirements of the material in the most general sense possible. I genuinely want my pieces to be appreciated by the widest possible range of listeners, so I think I have a communicative imperative when I compose and I like to work with 'themes', 'sound images' and materials that have this base in the real world, which may relate to the listeners' lived experience in some way. Ideally, I think I do want listeners to have a sense of how I relate to the materials I use, but they find something for themselves too.

Ultimately I would like to think that if I touch a listener in some way, then that's what really matters, and if I can communicate something of the intense response I have to sounds, then I would feel that I've succeeded.

JPY) Do politics influence your music, overtly or otherwise? If so, please elaborate. If not, what is your perspective on the relationship between music and its social/cultural/political environment?

JFY) I think political thinking relates to my work so far only in the broadest sense—that I feel music has a social role and that its potential existence within a societal fabric is part of the motivation to do it in the first place. I relate to the idea of composing for 'myself and the hypothetical other', in which the core is having something to 'say' musically—so I'm not really into composing just to explore a technical possibility ... in the sense that first and foremost it has to work within a consistent frame of meaning for me, and that this will find a place in some wider context. In that respect the kinds of materials I work with (natural and recognisable sounds from the real world) have, I think, a grounding that might allow pieces to speak in some way to others. By projecting and manipulating familiar or ordinary things in new ways there's hopefully a common framework for reference and meaning. But I think music is an incredibly powerful vehicle for expressing need for social change, for protest or for reaction to social situations and I've huge admiration for artists who do that. Simple in surface structure as they are, the text-sound works of Ake Hodell fascinate me and, although it's overtly 'abstract', a work like Francis Dhomont's

Lettre de Sarajevo cuts immediately to something very primal and powerful.

JPY) With the holidays either upon us or just around the corner, everyone is thinking about family. How do you interact musically with your wife and children? Is it an important part of your relationship or something you pursue mostly on your own? Do you expose them to EA, and if so, what do they appreciate about it (or not)? Are you hoping your children grow up to be musicians, will you encourage them towards something more (cough) practical, or do you let them find their own road?

JFY) My wife understands and appreciates what I do really well, she's an extremely good listener and, although she doesn't work in the arts (she's a doctor), she is interested in everything artistic. So I get good straight feedback from her if I need it, which is reasonably often! My two daughters are 6 and 3 and know that I'm an 'electroacoustic composer'! The eldest often reacts with me to sounds I'm working on at home often with a touch of humour. We had a lovely interaction on one occasion with some deeply transposed voice samples I was playing with that sounded like resonant drums, following and mimicking the sound with actions. Both of them react a lot to music, at the moment especially Tchaikovsky's ballets, and it supports a whole world of play that they live out. They're also very close to my

sister in London who runs a touring opera company so there's a theatrical influence there too. In general, I think I benefit from a generally supportive environment, but in which I ultimately get on with things mostly on my own. I would love it if my children did something artistic with their lives, but in the end they'll do whatever they want to—wherever their abilities take them. I'd never force them into anything.

CD Reviews

**Natasha Barrett's *Isostasie*
empreintes DIGITALes
reviewed by
Maria Panayotova-Martin**

The term 'isostasie' refers to a condition or state in which pressure is exerted upon an object from all sides and implies a sense of equilibrium. This is a very apt title for the recent CD compilation of electronic works by English composer Natasha Barrett, who has since relocated to Norway, reflecting the influence of "acousmatic" technique (from her work at the Birmingham Electroacoustic Studio Theatre) and the stark beauty of the glacier-cut Scandinavian landscape. Barrett creates a cascade of sounds that seem to surround the listener, swirling around the virtual space created in their mind through the use of spatialization techniques. Nevertheless, the force of this often startlingly direct approach is continually kept in check by the composer's diligent attention to equilibrium in both the individual pieces and the overall collection. She achieves this balance by carefully combining natural sound samples with electronically derived sounds, cacophonous surges of noise with meditative stillness and a

constant consideration of the interplay of distance and familiarity in the handling of her sound material.

The first piece on *Isostasie* is called *Fictions (Northern Mix)* and is divided into three smaller pieces, each of them having a different subtitle referring to nature: (Track 1) In the Rain, (Track 2) Midnight Sun: Middy Moon and (Track 3) Outside Snow Falls. All the above share a specific sound world created using mostly concrete sounds from different and opposing natural environments. Presented in combination they form a unique style and show a different personal perspective on the world we live in because of the choice, placement and manipulation of sonic material.

The first subsection called "In the rain" makes use of, as we would expect, rain samples. The background of a weather environment is punctuated by close-up spatializations of the sounds of breathing and almost glissandi-like abstract sounds increasing in density. This culminates in almost pure tones, either chimes, birds or whistles and in a more meditative, low density and hushed volume. "Midnight Sun: Middy moon" opens with a crash of sound and more pronounced reverberation effects. It uses verbalizations, hard consonants and ominous howling, mixed with the concrete sounds of rustling and spoken voice, from which we catch bits of the title, such as the word "Middy."