



MOVEMENTS OF A MUSICIAN WORKING: PHILL NIBLOCK (1933–2024)

Harald Muenz, Anton Lukoszevieve, Eleanor Cully
Boehringer, Walter Zimmermann and Phil Maguire

In February 2011 the Brunel Sound Series hosted Phill Niblock at Brunel University London, a memorable visit expertly orchestrated by our late colleague Bob Gilmore.¹ The occasion featured Phill's *Disseminate* and the premiere of his *TWO LIPS aka Nameless*, led by Bob. As an amateur clarinet player, in an ensemble made up of Brunel staff and students, I had the privilege of delving into the intricacies of Niblock's compositions. The event marked a significant chapter in our music department's history, with performances at Brunel University and, a day later, at London's trendiest club for hip contemporary music, Cafe OTO, in Dalston, leaving an indelible imprint on our students' musical journey, and not just theirs.²

Bob made sure that the Brunel presentation of Phill's expansive multimedia art was done properly. He made Niblock's notations more accessible by converting them into score form, and, in keeping with Phill's preferences, our Brunel performances included projections of some of his experimental films. Alongside the music, extracts from his monumental series *The Movement of People Working* were projected on to two giant screens. Niblock's videos have a documentary style: minimally edited, they show people going about their everyday tasks, presenting work in its most elementary form, in an overwhelming abundance of concrete images in saturated colours that, in our perception, become abstract, quasi-musical colour–rhythm sequences.

The collaborative spirit of these two performances made them extraordinary. Niblock's ensemble works mirror the compositional approach of his fixed-media pieces, and their immersive quality demands unwavering concentration from players, each note contributing to a vast, interconnected sonic tapestry. In the absence of traditional expressive gestures, Niblock's music invites performers to embrace a state of attentive calm, to become an integral part of the music itself. It was incredible how quickly our ad hoc ensemble melded together, absorbing and realising Phill's ideas. Their almost identical first names led to a lot of confusion at the time, but is it coincidence that Phil Maguire, who was one of our student performers, is now pursuing a career as a successful electronic composer?

¹ Bob Gilmore (1961–2015) was a musicologist, keyboard player and writer on music; from 2009 until 2013 he was a member of the music faculty at Brunel University London; from 2013 until his untimely death he was editor of *TEMPO*.

² Photos by Marie Roux of the Niblock performances on 17 February 2011 at Cafe OTO can be seen at www.flickr.com/photos/cafoto/5468283896/ (accessed 3 April 2024).

Phill's highly physical sound textures have changed many people's perception of and perspective on music. Musically he was self-taught, and the influences that led him to make his quasi-haptic music probably came from the visual arts. His drones derive their density from the superimposition of many, many, constantly changing layers. A mass of microtones causes familiar musical instruments to lose their well-known characteristics. Pitches and timbres are inextricably fused, harmony, melody, timbre and rhythm merged and suspended at the same time. Projected at a continuously high volume, they blend to such an extent that listeners feel they are standing in the midst of a powerful and impenetrable mass of sound. To heighten this sense of sound standing in space like a sculpture Phill wanted the audience to walk around the venue during his performances and constantly alter their perspective within the sonic space.

Phill's colourful, opulent, microtonal and minimalist compositions resonate in the ears and bodies of his audience in a way that defies categorisation. His music immediately fascinated me, too, not least because I had tried something similar in 2000 with my *BeethovEnBloc*, although at that time I had never heard of Phill. But not only is his music rich and intense, it also needs to be loud, very loud indeed. There were fears that he might overdo it at Brunel's Antonin Artaud Building (previously the university's boiler house), since he was known to want the volume ever higher over the course of a performance, but we managed to enlist Phill's trusted tonmeister, Johan Vandermaelen, to keep the volume at a high but bearable level.

Phill was a permanent fixture at festivals, but his influence extended far beyond his physical presence. With his unassuming manner, he was a phenomenon, present throughout the worldwide experimental music scene. His legendary place in New York's SoHo district was a haven for experimental music for over 50 years, hosting over a thousand events. I never experienced Experimental Intermedia at Phill's Central Street loft, but his generosity and support for others was universally recognised; it lives on through a space he established in Ghent, a kind of Belgian branch of Experimental Intermedia, with a gallery and performance space.

In 2011 I also helped to translate Bob Gilmore's article 'Phill Niblock: the orchestra pieces' into German for a focus on Phill Niblock in the new-music magazine *Musiktexte*. In the introduction to an interview with the artist that Bob had conducted in 2007 he wrote that 'In the revisionist history of new music that I'll write one day, Phill Niblock will have a prominent place.'³ Sadly, this history and Bob's planned Niblock book for University of Illinois Press were never finished.

Bob brought us together again in January 2014 for the premiere of Phill's *THREE PETALS* at Hamburg's Kampnagelfabrik. It was for Phill's 80th birthday, and Robert Engelbrecht and Jan Feddersen, the curators of the klub katarakt festival, had asked him to write a piece for three ensembles in three interconnected halls. The ensembles were Nelly Boyd from Hamburg, Ensemble neoN from Oslo and Trio Scordatura (Elisabeth Smalt, Alfrun Schmid and Bob) from Amsterdam. Directed by Phill, the score and playing instructions had been realised by the Belgian composer Guy de Bièvre, one of

³ 'Phill Niblock. Interview by Bob Gilmore, with Guy de Bièvre, London, 21 January 2007', www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/niblock.html (accessed 5 February 2024).

the people active at the Experimental Intermedia Ghent branch. Our rehearsals took place in Bob and Elisabeth's spacious Amsterdam home. Bob had wanted to have a mixed ensemble – one string, one keyboard, one voice, one plucked, one wind – and as an amateur clarinetist it was an honour for me to play with the fabulous musicians and friends of Scordatura and Guy on electric guitar.

The preface to *THREE PETALS* states: 'Ideally the performer has to accept the fact that he or she will be unnoticed in the totality. This anonymity is in fact the sign of a good performance.' Each of us recorded four different layers in advance, which were then placed on top of each other and used as a playback in the concert. We had a lot of detailed discussion about tuning details and how to make things richer by recording four different parts each, as opposed to simply using the same two parts twice. I had been a little embarrassed in the London concert that my lip stamina, even with a break in between, had only just been enough to get through two of Phill's intense pieces, but my embouchure survived 4×24 minutes of sustained forte notes. As well as useful score-analytical information, Bob also sent us a lot of helpful and 'historically informed' performance guidance. The last email read: 'Wear your coolest outfit.'

Always clad in his trademark corduroy trousers, Phill was so active that it seemed as if he would be around forever. He seemed to know everyone and everyone knew him. Yet despite our numerous encounters in Cologne, London, Berlin or elsewhere, my conversations with him were brief; Phill remained a figure who kept discreetly in the background. Whenever he was in Cologne (which seemed like every other month), Georg Dietzler organised large dinners for him with friends, colleagues and admirers. His 90th birthday party, which he celebrated in Berlin just a few weeks before his death, must have been eloquent testimony to his untiring energies. Phill, I missed you there, and I will miss you in the future, too.

Harald Muenz

I first met Phill sometime in 1997; he came and stayed at my house in London. We hung out and hit it off straight away; I think Philip Corner introduced us. Over the years we'd bump into each other around Europe at various festivals and venues, performing together, talking and drinking late into the night.

He'd sometimes fall asleep in our soundchecks, god knows how, it was so bloody loud. We often talked about recording his music, but we/I never did. Deep down I felt that his music was being well taken care of, as, in retrospect, it was. Phill connected people selflessly: he had none of the bullshit of so many 'official' people in the music world. He was kind, generous, funny, unpretentious, always there and made a real community of experimental artists. I will never forget his comment to me after Apartment House performed a particularly thorny piece of contemporary music at a festival: 'What the fuck was that?'

Anton Lukoszevieze

I was a student at Brunel University from 2010 to 2013 and we didn't have an orchestra as part of our music department. Instead, we formed bands and ensembles for all kinds of unique projects. I will never forget performing the music of Phill Niblock at the Antonin

Artaud Building on campus and at Cafe OTO in Dalston when I was in my first year.

I first encountered Phill in AA109, the main music room in the Artaud Building. He was being interviewed by Bob Gilmore. Bob had invited us with great excitement to meet one of his favourite composers, who had travelled all the way from New York. We listened to Bob's considered questions and reflections about Phill's practice and observed the nods, smiles or one-word answers that Phill gave in response. Extracts of his films were shown, accompanied by his music. This was music without melody, harmony or rhythm and my first experience of a microtonal soundworld.

Our ensemble performances of *TWO LIPS aka Nameless and Disseminate* were really exciting and memorable, featuring members of staff performing among us students, and Phill listening a couple of metres away. We'd formed a group of three flutes, a clarinet, two violins, a Stroh violin, a cello, vocals, a bass guitar, a keyboard, a midi-controller and several laptops. The scores presented long notes in a grid-like form, with arrowheads for how many cents flat or sharp to bend. I can't say I had developed much of a reference point for tuning my flute in cents at the time, but I played this music with real curiosity and open ears.

Eleanor Cully Boehringer

My first encounter with Phill was in NYC when we had concerts at Soho around 1980 with my *Freunde* songs. We even stayed overnight in his studio. I remember that he had many vitamin pills piled up in his bathroom. His back problems came from extensive motorbiking in the early 60s. Then he came to my Beginner Studio several times for concerts and films, with Jon English walking around the audience with his trombone, commenting on the drones from the film soundtrack. I was always fascinated by Phill's close-up filming of working people from all over the world. And the drone music focused it magically.

Nanne and I visited him in the 90s, eating together in Chinatown – razorblade mussels which were no good. We drove along the Hudson River next day and my stomach revolted. Then we stayed two nights in an old-fashioned New England Hotel in Stockbridge, where Ives had written the third of his *Three Places in New England*, 'The Housatonic at Stockbridge'.

Our paths crossed several times in Berlin. Last time I met Phill was at a concert in Cafe OTO last year. He was already in a wheelchair but as ever good humoured. I was not so convinced by the singing to his drone music, remembering Jon English being so focused on the drone. Now the singer took off with a free-jazz style of yodelling around. I think Phill just accepted it, but it had quite moved away from the more concentrated early instrumentalists' comments. How aptly Feldman said it: 'When a man gets old, his sins become charming.'

Walter Zimmermann

In 2011 I was a young bass guitarist, bored and disillusioned with my instrument. As I was searching for a new line to draw and follow, my professors Jennifer Walshe and Bob Gilmore invited Phill Niblock to Brunel University in London. We played a couple of shows (at the

university, accompanied by *The Movement of People Working*, and at Cafe OTO) as a large staff and student ensemble.

The almost overwhelming effect his music had on me as I heard it for the first time is imprinted deep in my mind. Those concerts changed my life and sent me down my own path of minimalism, drone music and, eventually, synthesis. I wouldn't be doing anything I'm doing today had Phill not come to Brunel to share his drones and films. There is nothing else like it.

Phill's generosity with his music meant that in 2017 I was able to arrange a quartet performance of *Disseminate* at FUSE art space in Bradford, and, as late as mid-December 2023, he was advising me on some pieces that could work for a guitar and synthesiser duo. I spent time with Phill on only a handful of occasions, but they are precious memories: dinner with Phill, Bob Gilmore, Elisabeth Smalt and Josh Trotter at Bob and Elisabeth's home in Amsterdam in 2012; catching up with Phill at various concerts in London in the years between. I was touched that he took the time to personally invite me to his London concerts in 2023.

Phil Maguire