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Contemporary Music News

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This Is a Score. This Is Another. This Is a Third. Now Form a Band.

by Robert Barry(<https://www.soundslikenow.net/author/robert-barry/>)



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At a certain point, over the last year or so, I started to think that the contemporary classical music scene in London was experiencing its punk rock moment. It may have been between watching Timothy Cape (with Edward Henderson and Josh Spear) perform his work *No New Ideas* – a frantic scrabbling around involving toy instruments, woozy sing-a-longs, shouted interjections and synchronised groaning – in a bomb-damaged ex-almshouse. Or it might have been seeing Jack Sheen lead the group An Assembly through a performance of Laurie Tompkins’ *Dear Dope* by screaming at the top of his voice and insistently thwacking a hammer against a wooden board.

Cape, Henderson, Spear, Sheen and Tompkins are all part of a new generation of young UK composers who long ago stopped waiting to be given permission, taking a leaf out of the DIY playbook of cult bands such as the Desperate Bicycles and the Buzzcocks, to create a performance infrastructure of their own – sometimes raucous, sometimes unruly and always on their own terms.

In an essay for *Tempo* magazine published last year within weeks of Cape’s performance of *No New Ideas*, the composer Leo Chadburn wrote of a newfound ‘vibrancy’ to the London new music scene that would have been ‘unimaginable fifteen years ago’ when Chadburn first left music college. He attributed this renewed vigour to a new ‘norm for young (or “emerging”) composers and new music performers to take opportunities into their own hands’. Scarcely a month after writing those words, Chadburn himself was put in charge of the concert series at City University in Clerkenwell, programming a consistently interesting run of events dominated by young composers and performers (including the aforementioned An Assembly concert earlier this spring).

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But among the composer-led series emerging over the last five years, Chadburn’s concerts at City are an exception. For the most part, the new concert curators favour informal, non-traditional venues; work largely outside of any official affiliation; are motivated by concerns that are neither academic nor strictly commercial; and present their work with an attitude informed by irreverence, independence and experimentation. Bastard Assignments, ddmmyy, WEISSLICH, and 840 are just some of the more prominent new collectives dragging contemporary composition out of the concert hall and into the streets. In the process, they have been radically rewriting the relations between performers, composers, audiences and sites of performance, using influences from the worlds of pop music and performance art to reframe contemporary classical music as a set of immersive encounters and unstable situations.

Cape and Henderson have been challenging audience expectations ever since they met as students at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire in 2012. The first concert they collaborated on punctuated a suite of *Waiting Room Music* by Cape himself with an invitation to the audience to pass one-by-one into a ‘shower’ room full of meat and bones from the butchers, with flashing lights and abrasive music blasting out of the walls. Since then, their Bastard Assignments series has seen them occupying spaces,

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including police cells, derelict mansions, the back of a truck and the Thames tunnel shaft at Rotherhithe. In each case, the choice of location reflects their determination ‘to think of the whole event creatively’, as Cape put it to me, ‘like a piece’.

‘I think we both like things that are very direct’, Henderson explains of the aesthetic criteria that motivate their programming, ‘and the most direct thing is just if someone gets up and does something themselves. There’s no instrument. There’s no big load of scores. There’s no conductor or anything like that. It’s just them.’ Both Henderson and Cape perform their own (and each other’s work), whether at their own events or when invited to perform elsewhere, and the tendency gives them and other Bastard Assignments regulars like Josh Spear, Caitlin Rowley, Andy Ingamells and Neele Hülcker (all composer-performers themselves) the appearance of a tight-knit collective – almost like a band. ‘We want to just do it ourselves, in our own way’, Henderson told me, ‘and then, you know, fuck ’em, basically’.

The organisers of ddmmyy may be less confrontational in their approach, but no less pragmatic. ‘I think it’s just about trying to make something happen’, Tom Rose muses of the series he has run with Sheen since 2012. ‘Just putting music on, on your own terms, without having to have a concept crop up which is dictated by something else.’ The same attitude extends to the choice of venues they use – whether that’s a bar, a cafe or a theatre. ‘They’re a means’, as Rose puts it, ‘to an end’. And even to the name of the series itself: ‘we just called the first gig 090212’, Rose explains, since that was the date of the show. ‘It’s direct and clear’, he says, ‘and it didn’t pin anything onto it’.

It’s telling that both Rose and Sheen refer to their events as ‘gigs’. Both have a background of playing in jazz groups while still at school and cite rock bands like TV on the Radio as early influences. In some ways, there’s something almost jazz about the way they put their concert programmes together. ‘It’s the conversational part of it that’s important for me’, Sheen maintains. ‘I always approach artists asking, what do you want to do? Starting things off with questions rather than answers.’ Their concerts place their own work side-by-side with pieces by contemporaries and friends (like Laurie Tompkins, who co-runs the record label Slip Imprint with Rose and visual artist Susie Whaites), as well as older contemporary composers such as Laurence Crane, Bryn Harrison, Jürg Frey and Jennifer Walshe. ‘The group of artists which ddmmyy focuses on is always expanding’, Sheen points out, ‘and once that connection is made I endeavour to make it the start of something rather than the end’.

Both ddmmyy and Bastard Assignments have benefitted from Sound and Music’s composer-curator scheme, a programme of support for ‘entrepreneurial artists from a range of disciplines looking to create their own opportunities by curating their own events.’ As Sound and Music’s director of programmes, Richard Whitelaw, explains, ‘There are areas of work that Sound and Music supports that have always had a very strong DIY work ethic (improvised music being a very good example) and areas where it has grown. One of the things that we noticed was that, in parallel to the changes to the funding landscape that have unfolded over the last 10 years or so, DIY has burst through in every area of the work that we represent. We really wanted to get behind this work and create a programme of support where the curation and production would be led by composers.’ But as Whitelaw admits, when the programme first began in 2013, it was less a case of Sound and Music seeking to stimulate something new, more a matter of ‘noticing a few things and moving towards them’.

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‘I like to think’, Whitelaw adds, ‘that we caught up with artists, rather than imagined something new’. Certainly one can find a number of high-profile composer-led projects in London going back at least to the beginning of the new millennium. Gabriel Prokofiev started the first Nonclassical club nights in 2003 – a seemingly natural move for a composer with a background of playing in bands and (as Gabriel Olegavich) of producing for grime MCs. The following year, Mark Bowden, Emily Hall, Christopher Mayo, Anna Meredith and Charlie Piper began organising shows at the Crypt in South London, calling themselves Camberwell Composers’ Collective (or ‘C3’). A year after that, John Lely, Tim Parkinson and Markus Trunk began their Music We’d Like To Hear series at the Church of St Anne and St Agnes on Gresham Street, near St Paul’s Cathedral.

By the time Thom Andrews and Dimitri Djuric were putting together their book about the scene, *We Break Strings*, Sam MacKay of the London Contemporary Music Festival could comfortably claim that, ‘The small DIY thing is almost a normalised part of London’s nightlife now, even though there are still clearly people who come for the first time and are taken aback by how odd and interesting (or uninteresting) it seems.’

In his preface to that book, Andrews described making his way down from Cambridge to attend his first Nonclassical club night in 2010. ‘I don’t know quite what we’d expected’, he recalls, ‘but it didn’t really matter. The *idea* of Nonclassical had already had a massive impact on us.’ I suspect similar sentiments could be voiced by several of the collectives I spoke to for this piece – whether about Nonclassical specifically, or Music We’d Like To Hear, or some other such series. They made that DIY approach seem possible, graspable and appealing. And no doubt, as some interviewees in *We Break Strings* point out, even they surely weren’t the very first composer-led groups to bring composition out of the concert hall and into more informal settings. There’ll always be someone ready to pipe up with some neglected prior example.

In the end, though, I’m much less interested in those jaded voices saying they’ve seen and heard it all before. I went to those Nonclassical gigs at the Macbeth and the Horse & Groom in the mid-00s and it *felt* fresh and fun and exciting, and that feeling will always be worth more than anyone’s cynical oneupmanship. But while Nonclassical and C3, in particular, undoubtedly did important work in bringing composed music to new audiences and knocking some of its stuffing out, I remain convinced that the newer collectives represent something qualitatively different – not just ‘classical music in a pub’, but the beginning of a radical rethinking of the relationship between a work and its audience.

It’s a small thing, but Bastard Assignments’ shows tend to eschew any form of seating. What this means is that, at the Peckham Asylum in December 2015, Edward Henderson’s *I Did and I Didn’t* could begin, unannounced, with the performers suddenly breaking

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into song while still mingling amongst the audience in the middle of the space. The singers were dressed like everyone else and had nothing particular to identify them, so until the moment the piece began – and even, later, during pauses in singing – there was nothing to separate the singers from those to whom they sang.

At a ddummy concert at the Yard theatre in Hackney Wick in the spring of 2016, Matthew Sergeant's *[Kiss]* consisted of four hours of almost complete silence for a solo violin strung with twine instead of horsehair, such that the strings were not so much excited as brushed. Spectators would come and go, staring and straining to hear for a while, puzzled but somehow gripped, before doing their best to make a subtle exit. But much of the dramatic tension of the piece derives from a note in the programme: 'At a non-predetermined moment within its duration, a passage of music to the absolute contrary (bold/wrought) will sound. Either through absence or innocence, most of you will miss it.' The upshot being that nobody present knows for sure if the contrary passage is still to come, has already passed, or is never to arrive at all. The work becomes a bet between patience and curiosity.

It's not just the fact of growing up in an era when pop music – and the whole transformed dynamic between performer and spectator that entails – is a normal, inescapable backdrop to daily life that prompts such re-evaluations of the performance situation. As the quasi-sculptural timescales involved in *[Kiss]* imply, it's just as much a question of ideas seeping out of art galleries and trickling into the content of concerts. Subsequent ddummy shows would involve the visual artists Dori Deng and Meta Drčar, and when I met with Rose and Sheen, they spoke enthusiastically about collaborating with visual artists and with composers interested in building sound installations instead of time-based performances. Bastard Assignments' Edward Henderson went even further, insisting that gallery artists such as Martin Creed and Tino Sehgal are already composers. 'That's music!' he insisted of Sehgal's constructed situations. 'That's what I do!'

The same attitude is explicit in the work of another London-based concert series – WEISSLICH. Taking their name from a work by Peter Ablinger that was performed at their very first concert back in 2014, composers Michael Baldwin, Louis d'Heudieres and David Pocknee started putting events together in 'an attempt', as d'Heudieres explained, 'to get performance art and other stuff outside of new music and to present it along with more musical works in a context that was accommodating for both'. In a move that would set the template for the series, that first show took place in the basement of an art gallery, juxtaposing works by the three curators with historically established Fluxus pieces by George Brecht and Alison Knowles. The event came to a close with a group performance for several combs.

Meeting through mutual friends while Pocknee and Baldwin were studying at Huddersfield, the WEISSLICH team were drawn together by a shared desire to, in Baldwin's terms, 'just put on a thing'. The informality of that gesture may account for some of the eclecticism of their programme so far, embracing one moment the ultra-minimal near-silent music of Antoine Beuger and Michael Pisaro, the next the theatrical maximalism of Neil Luck and Jennifer Walshe. 'The one thing we don't do', Pocknee told me, 'is straightforward concert music'.

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But if there is something that unifies their curatorial mission it's the urge towards a certain physical proximity. 'One of the comments we received after our very first concert is that there was a real intensity to the moment', Baldwin said. 'We are interested in works where the live experience of it is really critical. That sense of needing to be there to experience it.' It's a feeling which all three relate to the experience of attending performance art events. But as Pocknee granted, seeing 'a really energetic, well-played New Complexity piece in a small bar' can provide just as intense a live experience. WEISSLICH makes room for both – often side by side, and up close.

One of the exciting things about these otherwise quite diverse groups is the sense that, in combination, they constitute a real 'scene'. Though each collective has a different focus to their activities, works by composers such as Walshe, James Saunders and Laurence Crane might well pop up in any one of them. D'Heudieres's and Rose's music has been performed at Bastard Assignments, while music by Cape and Henderson has been performed at WEISSLICH. And works by composers associated with all three of the aforementioned series has been performed at 840.

The youngest of all the collectives mentioned so far, 840 was conceived in the late summer of 2014 when Alex Nikiporenko met Nicholas Peters at a composition summer school in Cheltenham. In January 2015, they arranged their first concert at St James's Church in Islington, taking their name from a note attached by Erik Satie to the score of his *Vexations*: 'In order to play the theme 840 times in succession', Satie wrote, 'it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, and in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities'.

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'We think that the music we play often very much fits that little description', Nikiporenko explains when we speak over breakfast in a North London greasy spoon, 'because lots of it is very quiet'. Peters and Nikiporenko were already fans of Music We'd Like To Hear, but it was Bastard Assignments that made doing something themselves feel somehow graspable, feasible. 'I think that Bastard Assignments are quite different from what we do', Nikiporenko argues. 'But the fact that I knew that those things existed also made me more encouraged. When we first started 840, I was literally just out of university. So it was one thing seeing Tim [Parkinson] do that, and another thing seeing people who were more my age.'

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Alex Nikiporenko (left) and Nicholas Peters (centre) at 840, April 2017, photo by Justyna Wichowska

Born in Yekaterinburg, Russia, Nikiporenko came to the United Kingdom to study at Chetham's School of Music, aged 13. A composer since early childhood, it was meeting composer Matthew Lee Knowles (whose own work has been performed at both Bastard Assignments and WEISSLICH) that sent him in a more experimental direction.

Today, Nikiporenko is interested primarily in pitch and process – but his interest is concerned as much for the way such things change the listening situation as anything else. 'Because you know what's going to happen', he says, discussing process-based works by Alvin Lucier and others, 'you stop listening out for surprises and just end up appreciating the sound as it is'. As well as appearing regularly on the programmes of his own 840 series, Nikiporenko's music has been performed in the past at both WEISSLICH and Bastard Assignments.

Arriving at an 840 concert in mid-June of this year, it might've seemed at first glance like the least punk rock thing ever – a programme of mostly tonal music, performed by a single pianist dressed all in black, enjoyed by a silent audience seated in the pews of a church, and even introduced by the local vicar. But then came Nikiporenko's own contribution to the programme. *I Love Nature and Everything Around Me* is an arrangement of a track by Swedish rapper Yung Lean, produced automatically using Ableton software's 'convert to MIDI' function. Inevitably, the system's lack of sophistication produces some peculiar results – a work that, at any given moment, in any given chord, could sound quite conventional, even trite. But in combination, over time, the notes conspired

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to produce an effect that was deeply unsettling. For reasons that were hard to put one's finger on, the whole thing just sounded deeply *wrong*.

'That's the stuff that sounds the strangest now', Nikiporenko enthuses. 'It's this stuff that sounds somewhat tonal, but in a really bizarre way. It's almost like a machine.' In a sense, he's right. After decades now of noise music and atonality, of extended techniques and unconventional instruments, all such gestures increasingly just amount to signatures of a particular authorised version of what it means to be 'avant-garde'. In such a context, the truly radical gesture might be to take something seemingly totally conventional and subtly subvert it from within. 'So much of my music asks, what if a machine were to try to write a classical piece?' Nikiporenko muses. 'It would fail. That's the kind of sound I'm interested in.' The wilful pursuit of failure as an artistic strategy. What could be more punk than that?

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