

There is No Such Thing as Genre: An Interview with Nick Roth

In this Colony interview the composer, performer and musicologist Benjamin Dwyer talks to Nick Roth, composer and artistic director of the Yurodny Ensemble, discussing Roth's background, attitude to genre labels, compositional aesthetics and more.



BD: As a performer, composer, producer, musical director, collaborator and educator you come to music from many different angles. Where did it all start, how did it all start?

NR: My mother, Joy Mendelsohn, is a music teacher. I don't remember at what age I started to learn the piano with her, music was something that was always there when we were growing up. She founded a big band with some of the other teachers from her school – Badje. They have been playing together for nearly forty years now, some of them. I used to be brought to rehearsals every Tuesday night. When I was still a baby, I was in a cot in the corner. As a toddler one of my earliest memories is of literally bouncing off the walls in the corridors of the Baptist church that led to the hall where they used to rehearse. Running and jumping. I remember thinking 'This is the loudest sound in the world!' and feeling like I was flying, or realising that I could fly. I always wanted to play the saxophone because it was at the front of the band and it was shiny. I started on clarinet when I was about six, and when I finally started the saxophone at nine or so I joined Badje on second alto. Later, I was a music scholar at my school, Merchant Taylors, where I was introduced to lots more music... Schubert, Poulenc, Glazunov and so on. At school I sang in the choir, I played in a band, that kind of thing. At that time music was just something natural for me, I was mainly interested in pursuing literature, and magic. I was hungry for experience; after school I travelled for a year, inspired by the beat poets and the open road. After the summer of '01, I came to Dublin to read philosophy and literature at Trinity.

BD: Why did you choose Dublin to study when you had so many other possibilities in the UK?

NR: I felt at that time that it was important to be independent, and my parents encouraged me in this decision. I suppose the strong legacy of Irish writers was an influence as well. I had been to Ireland twice before, once with my family and once with friends, both were great trips. In Ireland, the lines are drawn differently, it has a special atmosphere. It's a big factor in why you choose a place to live. I made a lot of friends straight away, and it was close to London, it was easy to travel back and forth.

BD: You came to Dublin to study philosophy, but you didn't pursue that path.

NR: I found out quickly that an undergraduate study of philosophy is something of a contradiction in terms. At that age you want to get to the bottom of everything, but you're handed 'determinism' on a sheet of acetate, and it was very frustrating for me. I did not feel that the teachers were really asking the hard questions...particularly in the philosophy department. In the last seminar I attended, on Descartes, I described him 'a man in a locked room re-arranging the furniture.' I certainly remember feeling that way. It was starting to seem that perhaps music was actually a more active way of pursuing a study of philosophy, and I could continue to read texts that I wanted to in my own time anyway. I never really regretted that decision.

BD: But you were always going to be a musician.

NR: I suppose that's true – I was always going to go there. There is only one way in the end.

BD: So where did you study music?

NR: I am still studying music. It's a full-time activity...everything feeds into it. I've taken a lot of different things from a lot of different places. I think this is the same for all of us, actually, we are all autodidacts ultimately, and that is the great freedom of life. Our teachers can be signposts for us, but ultimately we have to walk the road ourselves. Reading Nouritza Matossian on Xenakis, Ernő Lendvai on Bartók, Stockhausen in his own words, Stravinsky in his own words, Cage's *Silence*, Schoenberg's *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*: these books were big teachers. I read exclusively on music for about six or seven years: Persichetti's *20th-Century Harmony*; *Orchestration* by Walter Piston, Andriessen's *Stealing Time*, this kind of thing. I was approaching music as if it were philosophy, and just reading and reading and reading. But at the same time, I was trying to play as much music as possible, of all kinds, and to practise as much as I could.

I was very inspired by a workshop at the School for Improvised Music in New York in 2004. After this I took lessons in London from Gilad Atzmon for about three years from 2005 to 2008. He was a great saxophone teacher, and showed me a lot about the instrument. At the same time I was also studying in Dublin under Ronan Guilfoyle, through his weekly composition classes and later a degree in jazz. My year in Newpark were the first class in Ireland to receive a degree in jazz studies, that was 2006. During this time I also studied pedagogy and solfège in Hungary at the Kodály Institute, and workshops in Crete under Socrates Sinopoulos and Ross Daly studying Maqam and traditional Ottoman music. All of those were formative experiences in practical matters, but I still feel self-taught in terms of how I understand music. Music is like the sea, every part that you study is like a river.





BD: This is very different to the normal procedure where most students approach a subject in a very specialized way and then perhaps spread their interests outwards from a restricted focus, whereas you have approached the subject of music from the outside, through various different philosophical lenses.

NR: It certainly feels that way. And I was doing them all at the same time, so that when I was studying composition I was also studying performance, and vice versa. With jazz, you really study on stage – the graduations are live experiences. Suddenly everything was happening in real time; as an educator it was happening in real time; as a producer it was happening in real time – with just the desire to make things happen. In many ways, that kind of individualistic approach meant that it was in fact very pluralistic in the way that it was interacting with all the different fields at the same time.

BD: That comes across in your music, which is very eclectic: it ranges from free to more traditional jazz forms; you write notated contemporary music and incorporate traditional music into your language; you use a tremendous range of material in your work. Is your music jazz? Is it classical? Or is it that these genre distinctions make no sense to you?

NR: There is no such thing as genre. If I say my genre is jazz, the next question is: 'what type of jazz do you play?' It's like a fractal – Benoit Mandelbrot's images – the more you zoom in on them the more detail you find in them, and that detail represents the macro imagery that you started with. It actually becomes impossible to pin anything down. So I don't believe in the idea of genre. I think that music is one thing; all over the world, in every form, it's one thing. It's easier for me to understand it in that way than to try to find in verbal language what different kinds of music are, what those different labels mean. Why do we need to do that? Music is music.

BD: Is this eclecticism, or is it something else?

NR: I like to imagine that eclecticism is a path at the end of which is unity. In diversity I believe there is a unity – in trying to understand and encompass all things you can find one thing. Recently though I have come to think of this approach as 'diversicism'. The word seems less meandering, more purposeful.

BD: Many composers spend a lifetime trying to find a voice or a compositional signature that can in time be identified, so given the broad diversity of materials that you use, where does your signature appear? Or do you even believe in signature?

NR: The last three pieces that I've composed have been notated graphically. They have been more a way for performers to approach an idea through music than codifiers of specific musical information. By that I mean that even the same group of performers with the same understanding of the piece will play it differently on each performance because the work means different things to different people at different times. That's what I'm interested in actually; that liberation of the performer from the composition, or an empowerment of the performer to use his or her own voice in the performance. The composition is just the context – or as the Kabbalists would call the 'advantage of the land'. If that means, to a certain degree, sacrificing a sonic signature in place of a philosophical one, of course that is a sacrifice I would make gladly any day. I'm not seeking to have a signature compositional style as much as a singular compositional philosophy. That said, some of my scores are fully notated and have no improvised parts. In those scores particularly I find melodic fragments that repeat from work to work; these fragments which, when I close my eyes whilst writing and try to hear the next passage, the same root melodies, the same cells come up again and again. They come from the same place; so I'm sure it would be quite easy actually to identify in my notated music melodically or harmonically what that signature is. I don't know where it comes from – it is like a memory. Maybe someday I will look into that. But at the moment, I'm more interested in concentrating on defining a philosophical position.

BD: This compositional approach recalls those 'moment form' pieces by Stockhausen. Is there a direct influence there or have you come to this place through a different route? The whole notion of authorship is at stake here. Discarding authorship is quite an interesting position for a composer.

NR: Stockhausen's scores certainly had a big impact on me: you know this piece that instructs you to 'play the rhythm of your own enlightenment'? Something which is worth remembering about those pieces though is that Stockhausen wrote them for an ensemble that he was part of. Those instructions were his own notes for live work he was doing at that time with his group. He wasn't interested in authorship, he wanted to make music. Although recently I heard that Diego Masson, who was in that group, said that Stockhausen was quite particular about what everyone played. Perhaps it was more about the sound of the rhythm of his enlightenment. But that's fair enough, it was his band.

BD: They did work very closely together.

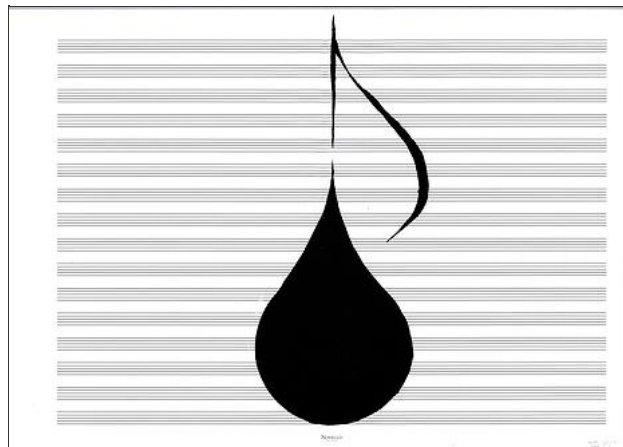
NR: And they also developed a harmonic, rhythmic and melodic language together through playing his earlier pieces, they shared a formative process. So those kinds of scores are the fruit of the tree – you can pluck the fruit and eat it straight away, but it is the growth on the branch that gives it flavour.

BD: Well, isn't that partially the problem with this process, as there is a real performance practice, perhaps even a performance tradition is required here just as there is with the interpretation of Baroque music or of, say, Renaissance music of a very specific time and even place? How do you guarantee appropriate performance practice of your music by others in the absence of a specialized group?

NR: I think that it is important to be clear what the purpose is. If somebody in a different part of the world wants to play your piece completely differently to the way to you might imagine it happening, you can't audit that, and I wouldn't want to. In a way, I'm just curious to see what would happen if somebody took my score and followed their own approach. There's no right or wrong. The success for me of a piece of music is the immersive commitment the performers make to understand and to play the piece. So if any group is working within its own limitations and the musicians really believe in the piece, then for me it's a great realization of the score. Music is always a good thing. I don't have a sonic map for how a piece should sound – I have a philosophical map for how it should be played. If the performers adhere to the rules within the piece, it's a successful performance. And in some regards, if they break the rules, it is as well. There's a great remark by the physicist Niels Bohr in conversation with Albert Einstein where he says that there are two kinds of truth: 'a relative truth is that which cannot be disputed, a deep truth is that whose opposite is also true'.

BD: Just taking *The Water Project* as an example: one of the instructions is for the performer to visualize the formation of a single droplet

of water. This is very much in the vein of Stockhausen instruction to create a 'moment' in some of his works. But can the audience participate in this essentially private musico-philosophical phenomenon?



NR: The issue of the audience is a much larger question: what is the role of the audience, what does it mean to listen to a piece of music? This for me leads on to a much greater query, which is to ask the meaning of what we call music in society today. I play a lot of traditional music, and I've always been drawn to tradition in a way. I learnt a lot of Eastern European, Middle-Eastern and European traditional music at source on various expeditions. The thing that draws me to this music is that it is not just for listening; this music is a fabric of a certain social function. Let's take klezmer as a specific example. The word klezmer comes from 'kley' meaning instruments and 'zemer' meaning music. We use it today to mean a 'genre' (inverted commas) but the word klezmer actually means the musicians themselves. They provided the musical element for a larger element of a social ritual, which might be a coming of age (Bar Mitzvah), a marriage or a death – certain life-cycle moments – which had significance for everybody in the community at the same time. The music was inseparable, firstly from the dances or processions, and secondly, from the meaning of those within the context of the ceremony. That, for me, is where it's at; that's music. Music that is just for listening is for me, in a way, an abstraction.

BD: You use aspects of klezmer in your work, specifically in the *Clarinet Quintet*. Does klezmer survive extraction from the ritualistic function for which it was originally conceived; can it successfully be removed and placed into a broader musico-philosophical event, which can be experienced on a stage or in a recital hall free from ritual and symbolic significance? Where does this extraction leave the essence of the music?



NR: The meaning of the music changed, and the social context changed – in America in the 1920s and again in the 1970s revival. By that time it was removed from Jewish daily cultural life, it meant something else now, represented something else. What is the future? The future for me is to create my own rituals, my own meanings. Composers today need to devise means for their music to be more than just something to listen to. Music needs to have a direct and real and life-changing meaning for them as individuals and for the performers playing it. It's up to the composer to ensure they weave the threads of our social fabric; that to me is the role of an artist.

A great example is the later work of Xenakis. The whole last period of his life was devoted to the polytopes, literally 'many things'. He tried to pull together all the different strands of art; not just music but theatre and drama and poetry and light and ritual and narrative – he was very influenced by Greek drama. He created these incredible works like *Persepolis* with school children carrying fire torches and the *Empress of Iran* standing there in the desert with three speaker arrays placed around the ruins and controlled lighting of fires. That piece was not just Xenakis' coming of age, but also for the state of Iran at that time, and it had a meaning greater than the notes or themes within the piece. It had a real social function, and that is something that we as composers have to strive towards. Playing pieces in venues for people who come in to sit and listen may of course have a profound effect on them as an audience but it's not enough to just do that; it has to be real, it has to mean something to your life and the lives of people who play it. Otherwise, you're failing to integrate yourself into the fullness of life, and music is just a small part of that life.

BD: Do you feel, then, that the direction of 'classical' music, for the want of a better term, has taken a wrong path, has it become some sort of bourgeois artifice?

NR: There are so many different composers of classical or contemporary music today, and I wouldn't feel competent to say that the field as a whole is going in this direction or that direction. How can you know them all? I think that it is fair to say that the general focus, where the attention is placed, needs to be updated. Any field of knowledge needs to be constantly rejuvenated and re-imagined to remain relevant. It's still very much based on the salon-style classical performance genre, which was for a social elite and which was a filtration in many cases of music that was bubbling up from the roots of a folk tradition. I'm thinking of the *gigues* in Renaissance music, for example. They take their roots in something that was happening outside the castle walls, but they were filtered and refined into something else and this mode of separation is still present in our society, it's linked to land ownership. What's really interesting in contemporary thinking right now is that the field has blown wide open, and anything is possible. In the 20th century there was an explosion of thought and a radicalisation of the imagination that we're processing now. Of course, there are still retrogressive tendencies at work too.

BD: Well the industry is in place, it's the industry that determines who the players are. In Ireland, for example, quite often, new music is only performed by the establishment because a controlled farce of 'democratisation' is built into the system. But you often sense that the performance of new Irish music is a burden on the orchestras and the industry and they're doing it because they feel obliged to. And that makes composers feel very dislocated from their cultural environment. Having said that, if composers are on the periphery, maybe that's

a good place to be because then they can critique society from that vantage point. Contemporary composition can then become a kind of underground resistance movement.

NR: I think it's really up to composers to devise their own life choices and musical philosophy. The composers I really admire are the ones who just went and did that. Harry Partch is a great example. He was a formally-trained academic composer who burnt everything he had ever written and went to live for years in the desert in New Mexico; he was a wanderer, essentially. He built his own instruments and people started coming to him, and he created a whole school of musicians who performed these pieces that were heavily ritualised on instruments that he or they created with tunings based on ancient systems but that were essentially their own systems. And they're performing these pieces, about twenty people playing for themselves, to themselves in the middle of the desert. That's the shit; that is where it's at for me – it's having the balls to say: 'This is the way'. Another great example is John Coltrane. Elvin Jones, Coltrane's drummer, said that every time they played (and they played pretty much every night for several years) they were all willing to die for that music. They played every gig as if it was the last gig they were ever going to play. That music had a very strong significance for all of them; it was more than the sound of the music, it was a dedication to this man and his message and to his fearless path. It was also significant for what it meant in America amidst the civil rights movement, what it meant to have a figure like that leading a movement, leading the way for musicians, critics and audiences to think about music in a certain way.

Coltrane is a better example than Partch because he not only did it musically, but he also did it within the social context in which he found himself. He didn't leave and go to the desert; he worked from within the system. Referring to your notion of the composer critiquing society: Partch is a good example of a composer who moves outside the circle and makes a comment on it from outside; Coltrane is a great example of a composer who just forces his way through. It's that drive, that intensity which creates a movement or a change in the system. But I'm also really inspired by Plato in The Republic where he writes that when there is a change in the modes of music there is also a change in the laws of the state. This idea that music can change the way society thinks about itself and regulates itself from within is powerful – it's the music that changes first, and then society reflects that change. That's a whole other thing.

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BD: So you're really talking about the power of sound. It's like the power of mantras, which you have to be careful about. The most famous mantra, Om, is in fact quite a dangerous mantra, because it creates isolation, it's for those who want to be removed from society. So those who meditate using Om should be prepared for remoteness in their lives. You're transferring the same notion to sound that can actually have a deep impact by altering the consciousness of the listener or the collective listener – society.

NR: Yes, that's a core idea. The idea of the infinite sensitivity of the human condition has not been fully appreciated. After Jung and the growth of the field in the last century, we have realised more of the sensitivities of psychological development in early years and its impact on later makeup, but perhaps we are now learning that there is not such a clear boundary between the child and adult life? Perhaps there are no lines in the air, only cycles. Everything that happens to us has a direct impact on our lives, is in fact our life, our wellbeing and our sense of tranquillity. We are not an inert substance that life happens to, we are what happens. Music adheres to those rules as much as anything else. A positive experience of music for a child or for an adult will have a positive effect on their life. This idea that we exist in a bubble is an untruth. Composers' works can have a transmutative meaning for the life of the composer and for people who experience the music, and of course this is expressed in the sound. But the sound can also be simply imagined.

BD: Taking this idea in relation to your music: have you written pieces that you feel have not worked, do not fulfill this very high expectation that you have suggested for music's function? What I'm getting at here is what Barthes called *punctum* – the thing in a work of art that actually moves us.

NR: A lot of my pieces incorporate improvisation, they provide the structure through which the players can move and be moved. It's not that different than fully notated music; it really depends upon whether the performers understand the piece, internalise the piece, and play something which begins at the score but goes far beyond it. It is this that creates a moment of *punctum*, when the performer 'pierces' the composition. A well-composed piece, whether or not it includes improvisation, provides the material and the environment for that to happen easily. The context of the music is as the air to the sound wave.

BD: Can we talk about some specific works then: *The Water Project*, for example? Water is such a primordial substance I can see the attraction for you in taking this on as a subject, but can you talk about the *raison d'être* of this ongoing venture?



NR: *The Water Project* and the *Flocking* series happened simultaneously, and they share many similarities, many cross-overs. In Ernő Lendvai's writings on Bartók he explores natural forms in his works. Bartók wasn't the first or the last to do that, but he was the entry for me into thinking in this way. His use of the golden section to define temporal durations in a piece, his use of the acoustic scale because it was built on overtones, which were fundamentally written into the sonic DNA of the music and matter itself, was fascinating for me. But more than this, Bartók saw traditional music as the natural expression of people, and that was a huge link to make. Nature isn't just trees and rivers and skies, it's also people, societies, and so traditional music coming from people is as much an expression of nature as the Section d'Or when it manifests in the petals of a flower. That was a powerful idea for me.

Then reading how Xenakis embedded mathematical and architectural concepts in incredible detail in works like *Metastasis* or *Pithoprakta* showed me how a composer could look to nature to understand patterns and form and then use music as a means of working out those ideas. That was very inspirational for me. So *The Water Project* and *Flocking* were my ways of looking to the world to find patterns and forms that I thought were beautiful; they were my attempts to express those ideas. Although they started from the same place they took very different paths. The *Flocking* series was inspired by murmurations of starlings and video images of this phenomenon. These murmurations are an incredibly beautiful expression of what I later found out was called emergence. Emergence is the expression of the micro in terms of the macro; it's the expression of a flock of birds that is made up of many individual birds but which create a unity to their individual movements. That unity, the flock, is incredibly beautiful to watch. For me, it expressed what I was talking about earlier about the diversity converging into unity because there are many hundreds of thousands of birds, but they form one flock. I was looking at this form, and I was wondering how I could express this in sound. Ligeti's use of microtones in his choral music is an expression of this in sound I think, but I wanted to find my own rigorous way of expressing a very fluid entity. So I spoke with a friend who works in the field of mathematical biology, Luke Colburn, and I asked him if he could give me datasets for the movement of these birds. He introduced me to Dr. Iain Couzin, who only afterwards I discovered was a leading figure in this research topic worldwide. He's based in Princeton and runs CouzinLabs, which has some two hundred and fifty post-doctoral researchers working across the world. Iain explained that they were

working on mathematical models: virtual flocks that obeyed flock principles. I told him that I had twelve saxophones and that I wanted a flock of twelve birds. My original idea was that I would map the X, Y, Z parameters of the movement of each bird to pitch, duration and dynamics. He sent me data streams, which were the coordinates of the birds' movements in different models. Now, starlings move at about twenty-six miles per hour, and they have a reaction time of about 0.026 seconds, so the data stream for their movements was incredibly dense. I took this data and tried to work it as accurately as I could into a realisation on the manuscript. But many things changed as I was working with this material. I soon realised that our notational system could not correlate accurately to the miniscule pieces of information the data provided – we cannot superimpose rhythmic subdivisions without common denominator in traditional score notation. So in practice, I diverged from the data when I thought it sounded better because I wanted the listener to hear the flock; that was the basis from which I started. In the end, though the data proved to be a lot of grist for the mill, the piece became more of a dialogue with the data. If at any point I thought it would sound better if I broke a rule, I broke a rule. That was something I learnt from Ronan – it's important to have a system, but if you think it sounds better another way – break the rule.

BD: This brings to mind Ligeti, who also worked on the Julia and Mandelbrot sets with Heinz-Otto Peitgen. He was very clear when he said that music and mathematics were deeply connected but that the relationship was one of correlation rather than computation, that they did not meet on the level of algorithm.

NR: Yes. It was a big lesson for me. I wanted simply to be the conduit for this to be expressed in music, but it's impossible to do that; there has to be a transposition of the idea through the composer, and that's what writing music is. So *Flocking I* and *II* were completely notated works, but I wanted to develop this concept further. The amazing thing about the flocks is that they are just like a flame – they are always and never the same. This is the defining characteristic of chaos; you can predict the type but not the detail. And so for me, in a way, the use of a completely notated piece was actually anathemic to the idea itself. What I wanted was a piece that was going to be different every time it was played. This brought me back to Bartók's idea that people are nature too, and I wondered then if the players could be made to behave like a flock. To solve that problem, I ended up going deeper into the mathematics of flocking, and into chaos theory. I read a lot of papers in order to find not just examples of flocking but the rules behind the phenomenon. I found that the birds reactions were governed by a principle of three zones – the inner zone of repulsion (where birds will instinctively move away from each other), the middle zone of orientation (where they align with one other) and the outer zone of attraction (where they will move towards each other). From these rules follow the principles of emergence – actually human crowds function the same way, cells and stock markets function the same way. So by their simultaneous negotiation of these zones the birds create these flocking patterns.

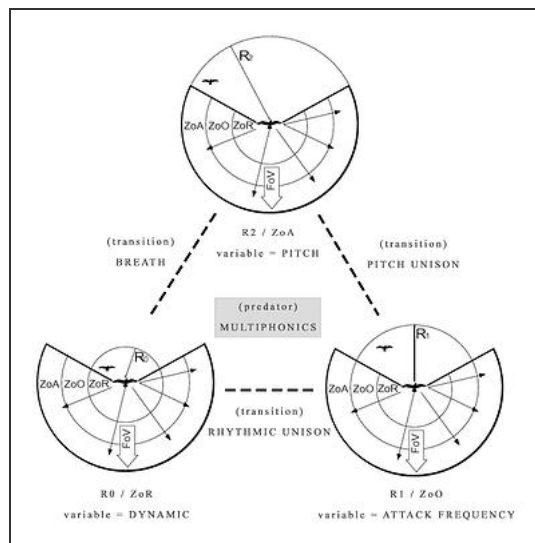
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AUDIO4 Flocking III

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BD: So you applied the concept of these three zones to the performers?

NR: Exactly. So for *Flocking III* the zone of attraction is applied to pitch: the rule here is that you move towards the pitch that you hear around you. Unison pitch is the trigger to move. The second zone is alignment, so each player starts with a rhythmic gesture but aligns with other gestures they hear around them: that brings about a unified sense of pulse, which triggers the entry of the third zone of repulsion where the initial behavioural characteristics are inverted.



BD: So with *Flocking III* you found a way for the musicians to adopt the behaviour of the birds, the phenomenon of the flocking process.

NR: Exactly. And this new approach was also influenced by work on *The Water Project*, which is not only my project actually but a collaborative artists' group. There are three core members: Keith Lindsay, Olesya Zdorovetska and I. We have worked in collaboration with many different artists from around the world. We were inspired by the sound of water and the incredible musicality that water has. There's a tremendous amount of musical information coming from water and we wanted to know how we might facilitate this to be heard. That enquiry has created a very complex dialogue, because although it's a primordial substance from which everything is created, water itself is inert. It only moves or makes a sound when forces work through it. This created a problem because in order for the water to be heard we had to do something to it. But then the work was becoming far too anthropocentric – it was becoming more about our interaction with water rather than the water itself.

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AUDIO5 Water Project Cistern

We constantly have this debate within the group, especially when we collaborate with others because they are often expressing themselves through the water, rather than allowing the water to be heard. It's the same when you go to events about water. They are not about water itself but about all the problems surrounding it. These questions led us to Theodor Schwenk's book *Sensitive Chaos*. Schwenk had these visionary ideas about patterns in water; he studied a lot of the natural environmental forms of water and made numerous drawings. He discovered that a pattern that is constantly recurring in water is the vortex, and vortices always occur in chains, and these vortex chains almost always correlate to Fibonacci sequences. He saw this form in many examples of things in nature - the growth of a fern or the human embryo, both processes that are also impossible without water. This was an important book for us because we were trying to discover the innate aspects of water, so that these patterns became important compositionally. The scores for Water Project I and II took a long time to develop. For an entire year I was trying to find a way to notate the ideas. At that point, I had never written a graphic score. Then I had a moment of epiphany in Kiev in Olesya's flat on New Year's Eve. She was playing that night, but I stayed at home and watched Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice*. The film affected me strongly. My friend Tom Arthurs had introduced me to *Sculpting in Time*, Tarkovsky's incredible book on the philosophy of art and life, and that fed into my ideas at this time also, as it would anyone who reads this work. *Sacrifice* was the last of his seven films, and also the last of his films that I had not yet seen. The moment the final credits came up, I sat down and started writing. I finished around 5am. That night changed the whole process of working for me. Since then I've been able to include the idea of a visual representation as the most accurate depiction of an idea, which up to that point I had never even really considered.

BD: Watching the performance of *The Water Project* is almost like witnessing a theatrics of alchemy; the performance seems to have a strange alchemical ritual attached to it.

Nick Roth (saxophone) and Benjamin Dwyer (guitar) performing Improv for Barry Guy [in italics] at Smock Alley, November 2014

NR: To use alchemical language, water is the true prima materia; it is the source of all life. Without it nothing can live. Working with it directly is a way of dealing with the elemental. Over the next century it will also become increasingly important politically. Our role however is simply to show the beauty in the transmutative power of water, in all of its forms. It is up to us all to understand our own relationship to it.

BD: I want to finish by asking you about the Quintet, which is clearly based on the notion of the wandering Jew; it's a powerful musical narrative of the perennial struggle that the Jews have had to endure. To what extent does your identity as a Jewish person underscore the entire raison d'être of your music, which you've described as deeply ritual and symbolic and inherently driven by a desire to cultivate change in the individual and cultural society?

NR: I had a difficult relationship with the notion of Jewish identity when I was growing up. A reform Jew in 20th-century London is so far removed from the cultural heritage of the religion that it is hard as a child to make sense of the pieces that are left over after the previous century...not just of Judaism as a religion or cultural practise, but even of the idea of religion itself. But later I looked back to Judaism as a point of reference because I was drawn to the music, and I longed to be part of a living tradition with a geographical point of reference. And there isn't really a vibrant living tradition of English traditional music; it's a little better now I think, but twenty years ago it was not easy to find. So that wasn't really an option for me. In Ireland, there is a living traditional music, but playing the saxophone did not make it easy to dive into it. A lot of traditional musicians there see the saxophone as a secondary instrument, lacking strong innovators or examples. It belonged to another world. I felt that I wanted a music of my own at that time. I was searching for identity. So it made sense for me to investigate Jewish music. That led to the study of other types of traditional music, and the more you play the more you see the relationships between them. And actually now having lived in Ireland for twelve years, I have worked with many amazing Irish traditional musicians and made many friends. And now I know a few tunes.

After I had started studying the music I also started to read Kabbalah. It is a slow process. Recently have begun to be able to find ways to understand more about the system through its parallels to the alchemical tradition and also through the *Sefer Ha-Bahir's* emphasis on the Hebrew characters and its clarity of explanation in terms of the Sefirot. The high Kabbalist writers had incredible powers of visual and contextual imagination. But to answer your question more directly - you've got to start somewhere; you've got to have a card in your hand, you've got to have some kind of identity to learn what identity is. Being Jewish was my initial card, and I played that card, and it led to investigations of other things. Now I am in the initial research stages of a new Quintet II for accordion and orchestra that comes directly from the Quintet, and it's based on the Islamic Muezzin and the call to prayer with its diurnal harmonic structure. So, in order to show the similarities between Judaism and Islam, which stem from the one root, I had to first investigate one of them. I always steered clear of attaching myself politically to being Jewish, and I still do. Judaism is nothing more than a doorway to the world beyond religion. I'm

interested in the history of the people and culture, but no more than my interest in say the history and culture of the gamelan or any culture that has something to say about the world. I'm unilaterally interested in humanity and its cultures, and a personal identity for me is



Colony Journal
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7 July 2013 (Eton Rise, Chalk Farm, London)



Photo by Brian Kavanagh

As a composer, guitarist and researcher, Benjamin Dwyer's creative and critical work extends from a broad base in performance and artistic practice. Dwyer's compositions are regularly performed internationally. He has been the featured composer at the Musica Nova Festival 2008 in São Paulo, the Bienalle of Contemporary Music of Ribeirão Preto 2009, the National Concert Hall's Composers' Choice and the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra's Horizons series. Dwyer's book publications as a researcher include Constellations: The Life and Music of John Buckley (Carysfort Press, 2011) and Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland (Wolke Verlag, 2014). Dwyer is an elected member of Aosdána and Professor of Music at Middlesex University's School of Media and Performing Arts.



Photo by Tony Carragher

Nick Roth's work explores the liberation of improvisation from composition, the impact of natural form on technology and the contemporary interpretation of traditional music. He is artistic director of the Yurodny Ensemble and a founding member of the Water Project. Nick is also a director at Diatribe Records, Ireland's leading independent record label for new music. His work is represented by the Contemporary Music Centre (CMC) and the Association of Irish Composers (AIC). For 2014 he is Artist-in-Residence at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris.



This interview is one of eleven others undertaken by Benjamin Dwyer with Irish/Ireland-based composers that feature in the book Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland (Wolke-Verlag, Germany), which is available from the Contemporary Music Centre Dublin (www.cmc.ie) or directly from the publisher (<http://www.wolke-verlag.de>).

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