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**The narrative of awareness in the listener's fluctuating experience: a portfolio of original compositions**

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## **Abstract**

Music is shaped by our experience of time; music, by its very nature, is a temporal art form that engages with the listener's awareness. These musical compositions alongside philosophical and musical reflections aim to expand the boundaries of how listeners engage with time and consciousness during the act of listening. Rather than curating a narrative within the music itself, this portfolio of compositions aims to provide a space for the listener's awareness to fluctuate, allowing personal narratives to emerge organically from their engagement with the sound. This practice-led research places my compositions at the heart of the inquiry, using them as a primary means to explore how compositional techniques can facilitate a narrative formed through the listener's fluctuating awareness. Inspired by phenomenological thought, but not bound by it, this approach seeks to engage with a deeper understanding of the listener's role in music creation, emphasising the experimental aspect of stasis, repetition, systems and minimalist approaches. My findings highlight the importance of creating compositions that engage with the listener's temporal experience, offering spaces where streams of individual acts of consciousness can navigate freely, promoting new perspectives on how music and acts of listening shape each other.

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# 1. Genesis of thought: a personal introduction

## 1.1. A personal journey towards time

"Music is the space between the notes" (Kooomey 2001), Claude Debussy once famously remarked, encapsulating the profound relationship between music and time. Time, an omnipresent and universal yet intangible phenomenon, serves as the canvas on which composers craft their works—the silent backdrop to every melody, rhythm, and silence. Every musical composition engages with temporal experience to some degree. Over the past four years, I have approached time not as a teleological structure or as a byproduct of the music itself but as a conceptual inspiration for my compositional practice. My focus has been on creating works that engage with the listener's fluctuating perception of time over the duration of a piece, using this as a foundation for artistic exploration.

This portfolio of compositions reflects this practice-based inquiry, presenting works that may be described on the surface as stark, austere, or lacking in conventional development and direction. These aesthetic choices are not ends in themselves but are intended to provoke a reflective engagement with time. Listeners may initially encounter feelings of tediousness or stagnation; however, these surface textures are designed to create space for deeper engagement. By encouraging the mind to drift between the sonic surface and the inner world of personal thoughts and reflections, the music seeks to invite a heightened awareness of temporal and spatial perception.

Rather than embedding narrative structures within the music, these compositions provide a framework for listeners to create their own narratives, shaped by their unique fluctuations of consciousness. As listeners attempt to discern patterns or structures, they may instead find their attention wandering, their thoughts flowing, and their perceptions shifting. In this way, the works aim to facilitate a deeply personal listening experience, where the narrative is not imposed by the music but emerges organically from the listener's engagement with it.

One may ask how this is different from other inquiries. I will argue that my compositional approach engages listener awareness by prioritising the organic and assumed fluctuations in perception and subjective engagement over traditional narrative and structural devices that inform things like expectation or teleology. Rather than embedding a predefined story or teleological process within my music, my works aim to create a reflective space where meaning emerges through the listener's interaction with the space, sound and silence. Techniques such as repetition, self-similarity and extended durations encourage the listener to oscillate between focused observations of micro-level details and a broader awareness of inner consciousness. This intentional ambiguity invites introspection, allowing listeners to explore their own perceptions of time and space.

## **1.2. Mental Health**

I grew up in a non-musical household, the only music heard was that of my mother's tape deck playing George Michael. Apart from frequent lessons on the electronic keyboard, I had no urge to peruse any sort of musical or artistic journey. This dramatically changed at the age of 14 which began my mental health journey. While writing this thesis, I have been an inpatient in a psychiatric hospital twice and suffered multiple bouts of psychosis. Before 2017, I did not feel that I had engaged with any listening practice or specific approach to listening to music. My relationship with music listening was somewhat superficial and disordered; I did not give listening much thought past what Daniel Leech-Wilkinson describes as "the music itself (or) the actual music" (Leech-Wilkinson 2020) The focus was on the music itself in contrast to my emotional investment in the music. However, during 2017, I had a mental health breakdown and was subsequently diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. The condition encompasses both the mood symptoms of bipolar disorder (manic and depressive episodes) and the psychotic symptoms of schizophrenia (hearing voices, seeing things, holding delusional beliefs, becoming confused and paranoid). I have been hearing voices on and off since I was fourteen years old, but it was only when I started at university that these voices began to impact my day-to-day life. They would shout at me when I was trying to listen, talk over me when I was trying to speak or tell me that "Today is going to be a bad day".

At the end of my hospital diaries, I wrote a short note to myself. It said, "You have got no choice other than to hear voices, but you can choose how you listen to them". Over the few years of psychological treatment that followed, many therapists seemed to echo the same thing; there is nothing you can do to stop the voices at the moment, but you can change how you react to them. Now, there is a parallel here between mental health and physical pain treatment. Suppose you suffer from excruciating pain in your elbow. In that case, you can become frustrated by the pain or focus intensely on the pain, noticing and being mindful of every element of the pain, how the pain may pulsate, or ache, or radiate up your arm. Focusing on the features that make up the pain can often help you dismantle the internal structures that cause your initial frustration and anger towards the pain. Now, for me, it is the same with hearing voices. I might be hearing a voice telling me that "You are worthless". It might be repeating that short phrase over and over again like a mantra or fire alarm. Nevertheless, instead of getting increasingly frustrated with the voice, I try and dismantle the individual elements of that sound. I will not hear the words as words; I will listen to the pitch, the speed, the texture, how it is articulated and pronounced.

As someone with schizophrenia, I felt that I could deal with voices better. Nevertheless, as a composer and musician, I still found listening to music difficult. Maybe if I listened to music, in the same way I listened to the voices, I might hear sound in a new way. At around this time, I came across phenomenologically directed listening practices and have used them ever since.

### **1.3. Reflective listening**

The influence of approaches to experimental music inspired directly by their listening practices have not been widely debated. However, some aspects of what may be described as phenomenological thought have been the growing principal concern of many composers today, such as Michael Pisaro and Jürg Frey. The British composers Bryn Harrison and Richard Glover have expressed concern with phenomenological approaches to consciousness in their compositional practice. Harrison argues that

his music accepts that there is an "inseparability of time and being (as) expressed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's seminal text *Phenomenology of Perception*." (Glover, Harrison, and Gottschalk 2018)

Alternatively, Glover argues, inspired by the philosopher Alva Noë, that "we should consider the role of our perception in terms of the sense of touch: a haptic approach to perceiving the world." (Glover, Harrison, and Gottschalk 2018) Both composers explore a human-centred relationship between the listener and the sound, rather than the music holding inherent and absolute meaning. Before Harrison and Glover, the American composer Morton Feldman engaged extended durations to disorientate the listener temporally.

Similarly, Tom Johnson and Howard Skempton engage with vast enumerating mathematical patterns and systems, producing lengthy immobile textures. Much less about endurance, experimental music became about giving the listener freedom to wander around the sonic space at their leisure, with little government by the composer. Although earlier composers did not directly quote phenomenological philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, the end of the century saw many composers using compositional techniques that transferred narrative as a structural device to a naturally occurring fluctuation in the listener's consciousness. The music of Johnson and Skempton may be seen as a compositional approach with phenomenological tendencies or could be seen post-listening through a phenomenological lens, because their works often invite the listener to focus on the fundamental qualities of sound and the processes that occur within their music. There is an emphasis on the immediate and momentary listening experience alongside the way in which phenomena unfolds over time, alongside surfaces which are quite often devoid of thematic narratives and larger developmental structures. This output aligns in a sense with phenomenological philosophy, which is concerned primarily with the structures of consciousness. It seems that often when phenomenological thought is present in a compositional context, or at the very least there is a focus is towards listening practices, the outcome leans towards music which is attentive to the unfolding moment rather than teleological progressions of harmonic structures. These composers whose work might be described as immovable and static are such because their music often eschew the goal-oriented movement of music of the Western classical oeuvre. The use of techniques such as stasis,

gradually unfolding processes and repetition invite the listener to perceive subtle changes within a static environment which focuses the overall experience on presence and perception rather than drama and narrative.

## **1.4. Franciscans**

### **1.4.1. Historical context**

Aside from my mental health journey, the Anglican Franciscan order has shaped the way I understand art and music. St Francis of Assisi (c. 1181 – 1226, Assisi) is the founder of the international community of Franciscans, consisting of the men's Friars Minor (Ordo Fratrum Minorum), the women's Order of St Clare (Poor Clare's) and the Third Order, which is a lay order. As a son of a wealthy clothing merchant, Francis fought in the 1202 war between Assisi and Perugia. He spent a year imprisoned when he was captured by enemy soldiers, at which time he began to receive visions of God. After his release, he became increasingly unwell and, in his hardship, turned to a life of solitude and prayer. Francis took vows of poverty and found a love of preaching the canonical Gospels worldwide. Those who listened were drawn to his way of life and eventually became known as Franciscan friars.

### **1.4.2. The Third Order of the Society of St Francis**

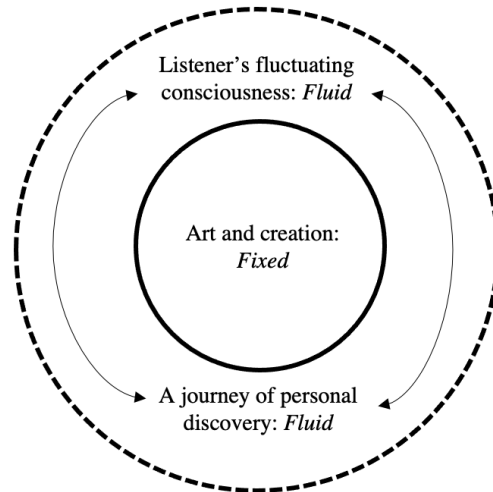
I am a tertiary Franciscan. The tertiaries, or Third Order of the Society of St Francis, is "a worldwide Anglican Franciscan Religious Order of men and women over the age of 18, lay and ordained, married and single...(committing themselves to)...leading their lives according to a Rule of Life, while living in their own homes, working in the community and caring for their families." ("Third Order, Society of St Francis" 2021). The three rules of life are based on preaching through positive actions rather than words, spreading love and harmony and living simply. The Franciscan movement is rooted in action rather than being a contemplative order, like the Benedictine order. Therefore, there is an emphasis on doing rather than reflecting. As a Franciscan, understanding spirituality must also encompass the study of lived experience or phenomenological experience. There is an emphasis on

living in solidarity with the impoverished and aiming to fight against inequality and injustice of any kind that tries to divide us as human beings. Prior to my thesis submission, I have been professed as a novice in the tertiary Franciscan order. I will take my commitment to a rule of life once fully professed.

### **1.4.3. Franciscan spirituality**

Francis saw creation as a mirror of God, believing that creation is an example of God's love being poured out into the universe; through the incarnation as the Word made flesh through Christ. Whereas at the time, Christians emphasised that humanity had been besmirched by original sin, Francis revelled in the joyous miracle of creation; he saw God in the pain and suffering of humanity in as much as the goodness. In his religious song *Laudes Creaturarum* (c. 1224), Francis refers to the wind as his brother, the water as his sister and the earth as his mother. He saw the universe as a united family and as the product of a miracle that should be rejoiced.

I see my compositional practise as a direct translation of contemporary Franciscan spirituality. It presents simple material inspired by the miracle of creation to which the listener can experience through a disparteness of positions, led by their fluctuating consciousness and attention span. My work may be seen as a fixed medium in which the listener is given the time to walk around the sonic space at their own pace, much like a personal journey towards the discovery of the universes miraculous and infinite beauty. In short, Franciscan spirituality is about acknowledging God in all His creation; by living simply, one can relish in the complex miraculousness of life.



**Figure 1: The relationship between the universe and humanity**

### 1.5. Defining key terms

Within the context of this thesis, I would like to define a few key terms which are necessary in understanding the both the context of my compositions and where my compositional and philosophical intentions lie.

- **Phenomenology:** In the context of this thesis, phenomenology serves as a conceptual lens rather than a methodology, inspiring a reflective exploration of human consciousness and perception. It emphasises the subjective experience of time, space, and awareness, offering a foundation for understanding how music interacts with individual listeners. By drawing on phenomenological ideas, this research reflects on the ways music can create spaces for personal engagement and introspection, without applying phenomenology as a rigid compositional framework.
- **Narrative:** Narrative within this thesis is understood as an emergent phenomenon, arising not from the music itself but from the listener's fluctuating attention and subjective engagement with the sound. It is the listener's consciousness that constructs meaning, weaving together moments of perception into a personal and dynamic storyline that unfolds uniquely for each individual.

- **Static:** In this context, "static" refers to a musical quality characterised by a lack of overt progression or teleological development. However, static music is not unchanging; it creates space for subtle variations and invites the listener to explore the interplay of repetition and texture. The apparent stasis provides a foundation for the listener's fluctuating awareness, allowing them to engage deeply with the present moment.
- **Aesthetic:** Aesthetic is framed as a reflective and subjective engagement with the sensory and perceptual qualities of music. Rather than adhering to traditional notions of beauty or sublimity, the aesthetic experience within this thesis extends to the contemplation of the ordinary, the repetitive, and the unremarkable, encouraging a heightened awareness of the listener's own consciousness and its interaction with the music.
- **Disorientation (of the listener):** Disorientation in this thesis refers to the intentional fluctuation of the listener's awareness, achieved through compositional techniques such as temporal manipulation, repetition, and ambiguity. Rather than causing confusion, this disorientation invites the listener to shift their focus between different layers of the music, encouraging introspection and a deeper engagement with their own temporal and spatial perception.
- **Temporality:** Temporality is understood as the subjective experience of time, shaped by individual consciousness. In this thesis, temporality serves as a central theme, exploring how music can create spaces where the listener's perception of time expands, contracts, or fluctuates, fostering a reflective and personal engagement with the unfolding sound.
- **Self-Similarity:** Self-similarity refers to the recurrence of similar patterns or textures within the music, creating continuity while allowing subtle variation. This concept encourages listeners to engage with both the familiarity and the evolving nuances of the sound.
- **Repetition:** Repetition is the recurrence of musical motifs, phrases, or textures, used as a tool to explore the listener's fluctuating awareness. In this thesis, repetition is not merely a structural device but an invitation for deeper contemplation of the present moment.

- **Awareness:** Awareness is framed as the listener's active and reflective engagement with the music. It encompasses the shifting focus between different layers of sound, moments of introspection, and the broader perception of temporal flow within the listening experience.

## **2. Phenomenological thought as inspiration**

### ***2.1. Defining Phenomenology***

Phenomenology itself is not a physical entity, nor is it a form of consciousness. Rather, the term is used to describe both a movement of philosophical thought and an academic field of study.

Etymologically, the term can be said to describe the study of the structures of consciousness, phenomenology deriving from the study of phenomena. These phenomena appear within our consciousness during experience and can be interpreted based on our recollections and anticipations. In this research, phenomenology serves as an inspirational framework, particularly when considering the first-person experience of time, space, perception, and duration in music. I engage with phenomenological ideas, such as epoché (the suspension of judgment to focus on the analysis of experience) and intentionality (the notion that consciousness is always directed toward something), as tools to inspire reflection on how listeners engage with sound, both in the pre-composition stage and post-listening. However, these concepts are not rigidly applied as methodologies in this research; instead, they provide a philosophical lens through which I explore the listener's subjective engagement with the music. While I may refer to these ideas in passing, I do not strictly align myself with their original formulations as they emerged in the twentieth century.

### **2.2. Phenomenological thought within compositional practice**

#### **2.2.1. An inspiration**

Phenomenology should not be seen as a prescriptive tool for composition, nor is it a physical entity that can be attached to an object. Rather, it provides a lens at which we might look at the structures of experience. In the context of this research, phenomenology offers a lens through which I delve into

the listener's and my own engagement with sound, time, and perception. It inspires questions such as: Where might our concentration lie? How might we perceive sound? What emotions might we feel? My main musical interests centre around how a compositional process, particularly one involving repetition and stasis, can create a space for listeners to subjectively experience time. Reflecting on my music, I have observed that its narrative does not reside in the music itself, a point discussed by Richard Taruskin, who critiques the concept of music as existing in a "decontaminated space" removed from cultural and historical context (Taruskin 1995). Rather, the listener's experience of narrative tends to unfold through the fluctuation of their perception, awareness and concentration. It should be noted that I will not provide listener feedback as, due to circumstances, this evidence would only be anecdotal. Rather, my research is focused on the practice and the evidence will unfold in a series of compositions alongside their respective commentaries.

This perspective invites an alternative to viewing music through what may be described as a semiological framework, where meaning is embedded within the "object" of the music itself. The Finnish musicologist Eero Tarasti writes about symbols in Bach's music, using the example of interleaving cross-shaped melodies, which Bach extensively used in his music, which "acted as a meaningful musical sign: it represented the cross and thus the Christ." (Tarasti 2002) However, indexical and symbolic signs are much more common. Indexical signs, as described by Terrence Deacon William, are "mediated by some physical or temporal connection between sign and object." (Deacon 1997) While semiotics provides valuable insights into how symbols, indexes and icons function in music, looking at my work through a phenomenologically inspired lens prioritises the listener's emotional responses and sensory experience as the foundation of musical meaning. For example, René Descartes highlights the fragility of sensory perception, noting that "perception...is an inspection on the part of the mind alone" (Card 1997). From this viewpoint, musical meaning does not inherently exist within a performance but comes into being through the listener's presence and engagement.

Engaging with phenomenology in the compositional process involves acknowledging that the experience of time is personal and fluid. While all composers inherently engage with aspects of time and perception, not all approach these elements as central to their practice. My compositions are inspired by the idea that narrative arises from the listener's fluctuating awareness, shaped by elements such as duration, repetition, and space. This approach aligns with Brian Ferneyhough's observation that music can transport listeners into a speculative time-space where consciousness detaches from the immediate flow of events. He states:

“When we listen intensively to a piece of music, there are moments where our consciousness detaches itself from the immediate flow of events and comes to stand apart, measuring, scanning, aware of itself in a 'speculative time-space' of dimensions different from those appropriate to the musical discourse in and of itself.” (Ferneyhough 1995)

Static music, in particular, provides an opportunity to explore this detachment, as it lacks teleology and transfers the narrative to the listener's momentary experiences of sound and space.

Bryn Harrison's music exemplifies this approach, as it actively engages with temporality in a non-teleological manner. James Saunders describes Harrison's work as exploring "the passing of time, exploring how it might operate in a non-teleological way, trying to slow it down, or suspend it momentarily." (Saunders 2008). Harrison's use of repetition invites listeners to navigate the structural elements of the piece at their own pace, emphasising their personal awareness of time. Harrison's work *Surface Forms (repeating)* engages with "the exploration of time through the use of recursive musical forms which challenge our perceptions of time and space by viewing the same material from different angles or perspectives." (Harrison 2015a) The Italian twentieth-century composer Aldo Clementi similarly engages with repetition, gradually distorting the perception of time by slowing the music down after each repetition. His 1977 composition for organ, *Sigla*, involves four melodic lines, which are rhythmically displaced in canon by four and five crotchet beats. The performer is then instructed to play the music for as long as they desire, gradually slowing down over time, with a minimum duration of approximately 10-minutes. It may be speculated that the idea of a gradual decrease in tempo comes from the physicality of the piece. Due to the congestion of the player's fingers on the keys, the player may experience a natural slowing down of tempo due to decreased

stamina. His music follows the logical inner narrative of temporal experience; arguably, the further time passes across a piece of music, the more fluid our distinctions between our different levels of perceptions. I must mention here that Clementi's oeuvre has made a huge impact on my compositional process, and I will return to his music later on in this thesis.

A semiological implication of repeating sounds is that context alters our perception of that sound, individual to the listener. In his book *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, the painter Wassily Kandinsky says, "frequent repetition of a word deprives the word of its original external meaning... Sometimes perhaps we unconsciously hear this real harmony sounding together with the material and later with the non-material sense of the object." (Kandinsky 1914) In simpler terms, Kandinsky is saying that when you hear or say a word many times over, it starts to sound less like a word with a specific meaning and more like just a sound. This sound, disconnected from its "external" or literal meaning, can resonate with us on a deeper level, allowing us to appreciate it in a different way—similar to how we might appreciate music. In psychology, semantic satiation is described as the phenomenon of words losing their meaning after repetition. Repetition for a phenomenologist raises the implication that the sound itself does not change, but the meaning does. It could be argued that this is due to a change in the context of the sound, something which is global to all listeners, or a change in approach and understanding the listener has to that sound. Either way, the music of composers such as Bryn Harrison suggests that repetition and actively engaging with the compositional process through a phenomenologically inspired lens would indicate an acceptance of musical meaning stemming from the inner experience of the listener rather than something inherent within the music.

There are times at which one may argue there is objectivity in the surprising elements of musical composition. As the American philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson says, "an essential ingredient in having a genuine experience (Erfahrung) is the element of surprise: it is precisely when we do not expect something that it affects us the most." (Benson 2003) However, the listener's perception of what is fortuitous is still affected by their experience and character. Furthermore, these surprises are always characterised as 'moments' which is problematic. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl talks

about "*immanent* time" (Husserl 1991), noting "the intuiting of a time-point is possible only within a nexus" (Husserl 1983). In short, Husserl states that a single moment of time is always perceived in the context of its connection with other moments. From this viewpoint, the experience of time passing is not only a subjective experience but unique to an individual, shaped by the person's characteristics and eccentricities. David Clarke suggests that this is in part due to momentary experience being ambiguous. He asks the question in the book *Music and consciousness* "how do we make a robust distinction between the moment of perception and the beginnings of memory?" (D. Clarke 2011) If a composer decides that they are to view the compositional process through a phenomenologically inspired lens, especially when investigating temporal implications of musical perception, it seems that time perception has an innate fluidity on any level. Each listener's level of perception may differ within a piece of music. Furthermore, even if a listener is fully engaged with a particular element of the music at a point in time, the perception of that moment may not be distinct due to the obscurity between the experience of the present and recollection.

### **2.2.2. A Heideggerian example**

I feel it important at this stage to describe a way in which philosophical inquiry can inform the compositional process (rather than be a methodology in and of itself). Martin Heidegger's hammer analogy, from *Being and Time*, states that:

The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific 'manipulability' of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call 'readiness-to-hand'. (Heidegger 1962)

In Heidegger's philosophy, the hammer is not perceived as an isolated object but as something embedded in a practical and teleological context. When a hammer is fully functioning (ready-to-hand), it fades into the background of our awareness; we focus on the task, not the tool. However, when the hammer breaks (present-at-hand), our awareness shifts, and we begin to perceive it as an object in itself. This duality of experience, between seamless immersion and heightened awareness,

draws a distinctive parallel to my compositional practice and how I think about the listeners awareness.

One may draw the distinction between seamless engagement and heightened focus within this portfolio. Ready-to-hand may describe when the listener becomes immersed in the repetitive and self-similar textures of my music. As this happens, their awareness drifts, allowing them to focus on their inner thoughts rather than the music as an object. In contrast, when moments of abrupt changes or unexpected silences occur, they bring back the listener to an awareness of the music itself, encouraging reflection on their relationship with the sound and environment. This idea can be used as both a mode of inspiration for structural devices, such as continuous repetition, and aesthetic choices, such as the repetitive and self-similar nature of the texture. The music may also be seen in this context as a tool for perception, a tool that enables listeners to engage with their own consciousness and perception of time. Like the hammer, the music isn't always the primary focus; instead, they facilitate a reflective process in the listener.

As you can see from this analogy, philosophical inquiry has not been used as a methodology, but rather an inspiration that informs compositional choices. I do not strive to create a compositional framework that is formally structured as phenomenological or, even broader, philosophical. Rather, I intend to draw from philosophical thought as structural insight, taking ideas and translating them into musical technique.

## **2.3. Musical influences**

### **2.3.1. Philosophical discoveries**

As stated from the outset of this thesis, my aim is to possess philosophical (especially phenomenological) thought as an inspirational framework for understanding and reflecting on my compositional practice. Rather than serving as a strict methodology, phenomenology offers a lens through which I explore the subjective experiences of time, space, and consciousness that arise in

music. Phenomenology argues that real-world phenomena are understood through human consciousness, focusing on “structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view”. (Smith 2018) Contrary to this, semiological theories explore an object's meaning as inherent in that object or that which is objectively accepted, often regardless of external perception, studying "meaning from the viewpoint of its communicability." (Dole 1991) Examples of semiotic devices in a musical context may be a rainmaker connoting rain, or the French horn solo (called the *Long Call*) from Richard Wagner’s opera Siegfried which connotes a hunting horn call. Contrary to this, within human consciousness, phenomenology focuses on phenomena which are dependent on entirely subjective human experiences, such as temporal and spatial awareness, attention span, intentional actions and emotional response. Although many European phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (respective of their birth dates) have often contradicted and disagreed with the specific way in which these concepts operate within the human consciousness, there is a shared agreement on the philosophy of experience; phenomenological thought is human-centred and is subjective rather than objective.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty formed arguments that would come to establish a broad definition of phenomenological thought. In 1913, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl published his writing *Ideen* (Idea), which sought to detach oneself from judgement and assumption to examine an object in and of itself. He defines the term *epoché* (also known as *Einklammerung* or phenomenological reduction) as "pure self-reflection, exhibiting the most original evident facts...(bringing)...into view in the outlines of idealism". (Husserl 1983) Husserl argues that phenomenological reduction is a way of restoring our experience of an object to its origins rather than stripping an object away from its qualities. A suspension of assumption is an essential part of conducting phenomenological thought.

In 1927, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger completed his work *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), which attempts to re-energise the concept of being (*Dasein*) as self-awareness of our existence, in contrast to the nothingness of society (*das Nichts*). Heidegger argues that we are often live our lives

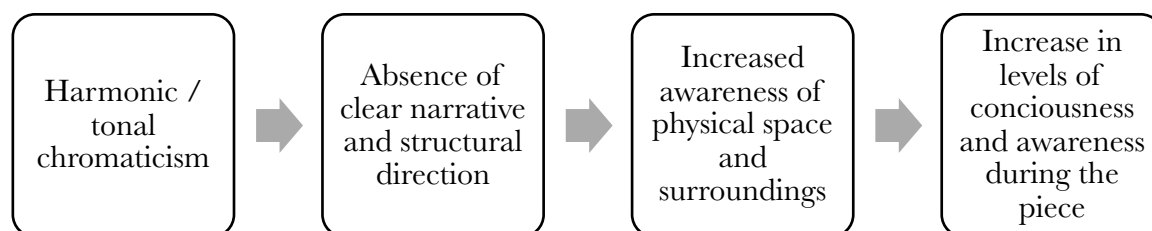
without self-awareness and are born into a world that distracts us from our consciousness. In a similar arrow of thought, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains in his 1945 writings *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Phenomenology of Perception). Merleau-Ponty describes the relationship between the mind and body as essential in gaining knowledge about the real world, arguing that "the body is our general medium for having a world." (Merleau-Ponty 1945) However, in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Husserl, it is clear that phenomenology seeks to use human consciousness as a way of understanding the world around us. The twentieth century saw a clear focus on the idea of Being as situated moments of consciousness and self-awareness; and that we should engage with the world around us as self-focused beings.

### **2.3.2. Erik Satie and the listener's position**

Phenomenological ideas such as temporal awareness and fluctuating attention, though central to the practice of many contemporary composers, can be traced back to earlier figures in Western classical music. While phenomenology as a philosophy focuses on subjective experience, in music it provides a lens through which composers might consider how listeners engage with sound, space, and time. This is not to suggest that composers inherently write with phenomenological awareness, but rather that some, consciously or unconsciously, create works that invite listeners into a space of introspection and subjective interpretation. The French composer Erik Satie, who described his music as *musique d'ameublement* or 'furniture music', wrote a piece for piano called *Vexations* (den Teuling and Kok 2012) in 1893. *Vexations* includes a short bass theme and accompanying semitonal chords, which are repeated 840 times, producing an entirely cyclical work of around eight hours long, leading the listener towards the emancipation of sonic assumption and harmonic expectation. *Vexations* was first performed by John Cage and a relay of pianists, including the co-founder of Velvet Underground John Cale. There is little research as to the reception of the performance, but the American musicologist Marc Thorman argues that Cage was influenced by this work, as "repetition (becomes) the main idea in *Letters to Satie* but Cage introduces new elements - superimposition, electronics and chance, both in the scores and in his extended performance." (Thorman 2006)

In my own compositional practice, I view Satie's work as pioneering within Western classical music for the type of listening space I aim to cultivate. While my approach develops these ideas further in relation to philosophical thought, key aspects of Satie's music—minimalism, simplicity, ambiguity, and a focus on subjective perception—resonate strongly with my compositional goals. His music's ambiguity, characterised by limited context and introspective focus, aligns with phenomenological principles that emphasise personal interpretation and the subjective experience of phenomena.

Within my compositional practice, I often use familiar and tonal harmonic structures. Historically, musical chronology has grown out of a dichotomy between tension and resolution. This chronology is defined by Fred Lerdahl and Carol Krumhansl as the contrast between "tensions as both sensory dissonance and cognitive dissonance or instability... (and resolution as) sensory consonance or cognitive consonance or stability." (Lerdahl and Krumhansl 2007) In Satie's music, although the harmonic language is not explicitly atonal (being the type of harmonic language the American musicologist Mark DeVoto refers to as "tonal chromaticism", (DeVoto 2022) he quite often stays in a state of unresolved dissonance, with no explicit direction except in final cadential moments, which themselves are often sparse. A state of constant tonal chromaticism may often naturally increase the levels at which one perceives the music, as demonstrated below in Figure 2. I note here that this is not always the case, rather the listening experience is entirely subjective. However, there is a strong possibility when listening to the music of Satie that this may occur.



**Figure 2 – The influence of Satie's harmonic language on levels of perception**

Tonal chromaticism generates a static harmonic plane, eradicating the tension between sensory and cognitive dissonance and consonance. The absence (or simplicity) of the musical structure, alongside

emancipation of diatonic narrative, will lead to an immobile aesthetic, inviting the listener to freely move around the sonic space rather than their attention be guided by the musical's intrinsic narrative. The most famous example of stasis in Satie's compositional output is *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888). Further exploration of this comes from aesthetic response research by Dale Misenhelter and John A. Lyncher in 1997. The pair tested the aesthetic response of students comparing Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies* to Chopin's more narrative-based composition *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat* (1841). They concluded, after a thorough Continuous Response Digital Interface (CRDI) experiment, that the students who listened to the Satie "indicated a rather flat response (whereas) results of the Chopin portion of the study group were considerably different, with substantial peaks and valleys noted across the entire time of the work that appear to roughly correspond with contrasts as related to the form, texture and dynamics of the *Ballade*". (Misenhelter and Lyncher 1997)

### **2.3.3. John Cage and the situated consciousness**

The phenomenological writings of Martin Heidegger, particularly *Being and Time*, explore the human desire for an affinity between being and the world around us. This relationship is inherently subjective, centred on first-person experience, and invites a reflective engagement with the world. The American composer John Cage, a contemporary of Heidegger, similarly sought to cultivate a relationship between sound and the listener's environment. In a 1937 lecture, Cage observed: "wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain." (Cage 1961)

John Cage was interested in the concept of music as object-based rather than narrative-based or, as Noël Carroll argues, "what we call music ought to be called sound" (Carroll 1993), emancipating musical semiotics such as structure from intrinsic or universal meaning. Object-based music situates the listener as the individual person that holds the meaning of the sound. Therefore, for the composer, there is an element of working with the unknown, so the composer becomes an experimentalist. Due

to the subjective nature of the listening experience, a composer in this instance must suspend any notion of what might or might not be heard, rather present a landscape of sound that is entirely open to interpretation. However, contrary to this theory, Cage initially rejected the label of an experimentalist, saying that "composers knew what they were doing, and that the experiments that had been made had taken place prior to the finished works." (Cage 1961) Cage rejected the idea that the process of composition was goal-orientated; the purpose of an experiment is to confirm or disregard a hypothesis. Instead, Cage felt that this concept was focused around semiological freedom, the composer letting go of the work and offering the listener absolute freedom in discerning musical meaning. It is not necessarily about the assumption of absolute freedom of discerning musical meaning, because this is arguably relevant to all musical experiences. However, when the music is written entirely about this subject, the listening experience becomes highly interested in the subjective nature of human experience and the music suspends any sense of semiotic enquiry.

#### **2.3.4. Morton Feldman and extended duration**

As early experimentalists such as John Cage and Henry Cowell strived to distinguish between the artist's intentions and the listener's experience of a work, later twentieth-century experimental composers began to use an experimental composer-audience relationship as a musical device. For the American composer Morton Feldman, extended durations and cyclical textures gave the listener the space to form their appreciation of the music.

In 1981, Feldman wrote *Triadic Memories*, an 80-minute work for piano that applies numerous devices that intentionally disconnect the listener from the assumed musical narrative. In the piece's opening (figure 3 below), Feldman asks for an extremely soft dynamic and half pedalling on the piano, which remains throughout the work. Furthermore, the bass line continuously alternates between rising and falling, co-occurring with the right hand, or offset by varying beats and shifts in rhythmic values. However, throughout the work, there is no harmonic or rhythmic process or system involved (this is not to say that Feldman employs many musical devices in his work, especially in terms of

duration, texture and repetition). Instead, Feldman's music is often a continuous stream of spontaneous moments within a static texture. For over an hour of self-similar material, for me, the work detaches my consciousness from the immediate relationship with the music and allows me to explore the sounds themselves, guided by freely by my fluctuations of consciousness. Furthermore, as the absence of an inherent chronology in the work disentangles the me from my assumptions, as I, as Heidegger advocates, become self-aware of my consciousness, acting as a primary agent of musical experience.



Figure 3 - Triadic Memories (1981) by Morton Feldman (Feldman 1981)

### 2.3.5. Steve Reich and phenomenological narrative

Contrary to the spontaneous stream of sounds found in Feldman's music, the minimalist movement in 1960s America sought to use process-led compositional practice both structurally as a teleological macrostructure and a device to manipulate the listener's temporal consciousness. The American minimalist Steve Reich is a composer who engages with phenomenological thought in both the temporal qualities of process and the listener's consciousness. Using an hourglass analogy, he says that his music is like "pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest; turning over an hour glass and watching the sand slowly run through the bottom; placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them." (Reich 2013) Reich describes his music in similar terms to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, as the listener seeks cognisant moments of self-awareness while experiencing music over time individually rather than collectively.

For Steve Reich, the musical process encompasses both the microstructure and macrostructure of a composition, where the process itself becomes the music. Reich describes this approach, stating that "the distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously." (Reich 2013) As the process unfolds, the listener is invited into a space where multiple layers of engagement become possible: the additive pitch or rhythmic patterns, the interplay between different voices, and the evolving texture shaped by the process. This openness allows the listener to experience the music on their own terms, emphasising subjective engagement with the sound. Rather than positioning phenomenology as a methodology for Reich's compositional process, it provides a lens through which we can understand the listener's role in shaping their experience of his music. Phenomenological ideas, such as the distinction between "marginal and focal or horizontal awareness" (Smith 2018) highlight how consciousness allows an individual to shift between different layers of perception, placing the listener at the centre of their reality. In Reich's music, the process creates a framework that invites the listener to direct their attention freely, whether to the micro-level details of pitch and rhythm or to the broader textures and patterns emerging over time.

Reich's musical process positions the listener as an active participant in constructing the narrative of the music. The meaning and experience of the composition are not inherent within the music itself but are shaped by the listener's awareness and engagement. By giving the listener full command over how they perceive and interpret the unfolding process, Reich's music reflects a perspective that aligns with phenomenological thought, emphasising individual consciousness and subjective experience as central to the act of listening.

### **2.3.6. The enumeration of a system**

Often in mathematically orientated musical structures, process has become synonymous with various approaches to composition, often with radically different aesthetic concerns. In Steve Reich's music,

the process is an audible unfolding computation such as addition or displacement. Intrinsicly, Reich's processes are dynamic. In John Cage's music, a process was not necessarily audible but defined the aesthetic outcome. However, many composers like Tom Johnson, Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons employed vast mathematical systems that would enumerate through patterns or permutations, unchanging throughout. Here, unlike Reich's processes, the musical narrative is static; each forward motion is predetermined and often expected by the listener.

In 1986, the American composer Tom Johnson wrote *Chord Catalogue*, a piece for piano which counts through all 8178 chords possible in an octave. Although the chords are ordered from dyads to a final dodecachord, creating an overall shift from a thin to dense texture, the piece embodies the mathematical system without compromise. The music is no more than the compositional process, or, as Tom Johnson says, "is not so much a composition as simply a list". (Johnson 1986) However, the blunt presentation of a system onto paper leaves the listener with supertemporal freedom to discern and explore a performance's sonic and aesthetic qualities. Matthias Entress describes his experience of *Chord Catalogue* as such; "resonances in the space, and excitations in the ears, caused sheer psychedelic perceptions, that well surpassed the simple combinations game." (Entress 1998) The absence of overt emotionalism and the use of a systematic approach unfolding over time invite the listener to engage with their own temporal awareness and fluctuating attention. This perspective prioritises the individual's subjective experience of the music, emphasising a personal and introspective engagement rather than a collective or shared experience.

The extended duration of this work is also notable. Similar to Erik Satie's *Vexations*, the performance of this piece exceeds an hour in length, providing listeners with an expansive temporal framework in which to explore its textures and structures. The work is radically self-similar in its aesthetic goals, maintaining consistent textural and harmonic principles throughout. Variations emerge primarily through the gradual thickening of texture and chord density, as well as intermittent tonal chords arising within the chromatic harmonic language due to the underlying systematic process. These

subtle shifts offer moments of contrast and resonance, inviting the listener to focus on different layers of sound as they choose.

There appears to be a strong connection between works that encourage reflective and subjective listening experiences and extended durations. This may stem from the need for temporal space to allow the listener to navigate the music at their own pace, constructing their own understanding of its form and meaning. Extended duration, in this context, serves as an aesthetic device, providing the listener with room for contemplation and engagement. I will explore this concept further in the works presented in the compositional portfolio accompanying this thesis.

### **2.3.7. Bryn Harrison and recollection**

Although thus far the composers mentioned have been discursively associated with this type of philosophical thought, the British composer Bryn Harrison overtly uses an incredibly loose definition of phenomenology when concerning his compositional output. He often describes his music as influenced by Feldman, Cage and the minimalist movements. Harrison is often concerned with "the exploration of musical time through the use of recursive musical forms which challenge our perceptions of time and space by viewing the same material from different angles and perspective" (Harrison 2015b). In an interview with James Saunders, he says, "I am interested in exploring these different levels of material density and the phenomenological responses that arise." (Saunders 2009) The textural depth of Harrison's compositional output directly engages with the phenomenology of consciousness; time, material and texture all play critical roles in human-centred compositional practice.

Harrison's 2008 piano work *to be (an ever opening flower)* demonstrates two phenomenological traits from the opening passage, as seen below in Figure 4.

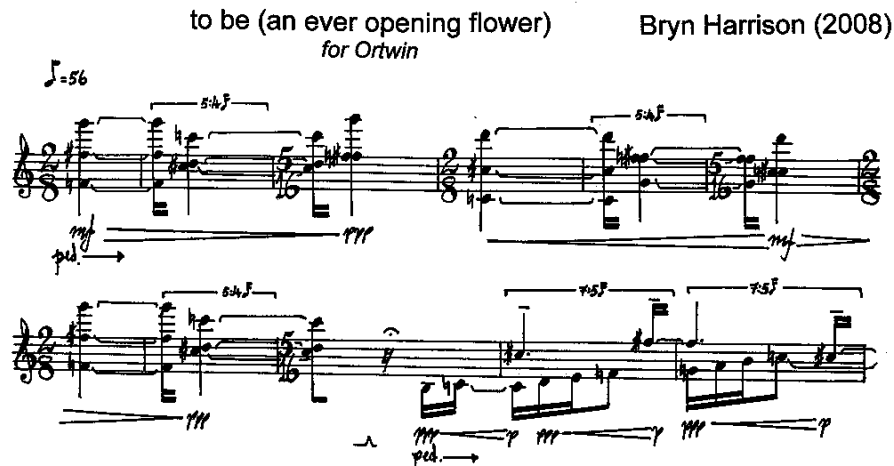


Figure 4 - *to be (an ever opening flower)* (2008) by Bryn Harrison (Harrison 2008)

This work reflects an awareness of subjective engagement by employing an accumulation of brief musical events. Each event is presented as an individual cell within the score, simultaneously capable of standing alone as a momentary gesture or developing within the larger structure. Conceptually, this mirrors a phenomenological perspective on consciousness, where experience is perceived as a sequence of discrete yet interconnected moments. Biswas describes this approach as "being responsive to all the relations that are conjured by each momentary sound." (Biswas 2001) Harrison distinguishes each moment by imparting a varying but self-similar character to the last. Cyclical and gradual dynamic changes, deviating between chordal and polyphonic movement and subtle rhythmic displacements all occur local to each cell, offering the listener a series of transitory but consistent moments of experience.

Harrison's compositional practice provides a framework that prioritises the listener's perception and engagement, emphasising the fluidity of time and consciousness. Rather than embedding meaning within the music, his works create a space for listeners to experience a sequence of transient moments, allowing meaning to emerge through their awareness and interpretation.

## 2.4. The Role of the Listener's Awareness

### 2.4.1. Participatory processes

My music is as much influenced by processes of music making as it is attitudes towards listening practices. Towards the end of the twentieth century, experimental music composers began to reflect on the role of listener's awareness as a growing concern of their compositional practice. The musicologist David Dun says:

I believe that Romantic Modernism is still the dominant aesthetic paradigm of 20th-century music—both popular and classical—but that there are other parallel paradigms that have existed and continue to thrive in the world today. One of the most important of these is an experimental tradition that bifurcated away from the predominantly European 19th-century belief that music must express "self" and "emotion." (Dunn 2008)

Similarly, Jenny Gottschalk argues that "the listener's focus is directed toward the behaviour of the sound itself under the given circumstances, rather than the decisions or expressivity of the composer." (Gottschalk 2016) The latter half of the twentieth century saw composers such as Max Neuhaus and Christopher Janney use the term 'sound artists', using spatialisation, site-specific performance and installation art to emancipate control from the composer and present the listener with the freedom to explore sounds in their field of consciousness.

The American-born composer Camille Norment created a sonic performance installation called Driftglass in 2000. The work includes a series of optical mirrors with sonic feedback, which produces intensifying shrill rings depending on the audience's proximity to the mirror, capturing the mirror's vanity. From obscure angles, one's reflection is completely distorted; only the observer can distinguish their reflection, at which point the sound is played. The ringing is designed to "frustrate the desire to locate an individual identity, while confirming a cultural perception that seeks to refute the individual as separate from the environment itself." (Norment 2004) Norment's installation art invites people into a physical environment where musical processes are often shaped by the observer's existence, character and consciousness. Furthermore, her works are centred around a direct engagement between the observer and their environment.

Similar to Norment, the American composer Phil Niblock describes immersive music as work which principally engages with the listener-environment over the composer-listener; as "a non-prescriptive form of phenomenological participation in which (art) maintain the seemingly paradoxical relationship of simultaneity and interdependence." (Kase 2012) In the context of immersive music, the environment-listener relationship can exist bilaterally (see Figure 5 below). In the case of Norment's *Driftglass*, the relationship is reciprocal; the anamorphic mirrors exploit the fragility of the observer's spatial consciousness, just as the listener's vanity alters the sonic output. The artistic expression is placed into the artwork, but the purpose of the art is to create a dialogue between the art and the observer through the listener as an individual observer. It is important to note that this schema is on a scale and is relevant to all art, however the relationship is thoroughly tightened when the art is designed to be directly about the listener's fluctuations of consciousness and their subjective experience.



**Figure 5 - The composer - art - observer relationship in immersive art**

#### **2.4.2. Pauline Oliveros and Deep Listening theory**

The listening attitudes of Pauline Oliveros have greatly shaped both how I approach my own music making as well as how I approach listening to and experiencing music both individually and in a group setting. At the centre of phenomenological listening practice, encompassing temporal and spatial awareness, self-consciousness, and the embodiment of sound, is awareness of fluctuating attention at which a listener engages with a piece of music. In 2005, the American composer Pauline Oliveros wrote *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice*, a practical guide to individual listening practice. Defining her term *Deep Listening* and the spectrum at which attention operates, Oliveros writes:

Deep Listening is expanding our attention. In Deep Listening we talk about two forms: focal attention and global attention. Focus is more like digital, in that focused attention needs to be

renewed moment by moment, in order to exclusively follow a stream of some sort. A stream of speech, for example, you have to keep renewing your attention to what is being said. Global attention is expanding to take in and listen to everything that is around you; inside of you. When we do this, and we can expand almost infinitely to include...everything that is possible to listen to. (Oliveros 2013)

At the heart of Martin Heidegger's philosophical thought is the human inclination toward moments of self-awareness and consciousness. Heidegger suggests that distraction by external narratives and the noise of the world can lead to a detachment from one's own being, leaving us preoccupied with what he refers to as *das Nichts* (the nothingness of society). Similarly, Pauline Oliveros' writings on attention and self-awareness echo this focus on introspection, proposing that heightened self-awareness allows for a deeper engagement with experience. Both perspectives highlight the value of turning inward, emphasising that conscious attention enriches our understanding of the world and ourselves.

### **2.4.3. Jürg Frey and momentary experience**

Philosophical perspectives on phenomenology often emphasise self-awareness of consciousness through situated moments, as encapsulated by Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. This viewpoint suggests that human consciousness can be understood as existing in either static snapshots or as a continuous flow shaped by memory, experience, and anticipation. Husserl supports the latter, by stating: "We find in each now,...if we focus reflectively on what is presently given in the actually present now...and if we reflect on it just as it is given, then we note the trail of memory that extends the now-point."

(Woodruff Smith 2013) Temporal consciousness, from a loosely phenomenological perspective, is therefore not only the immediate sensory experience of the present but also the continuity of human perception, unique to each individual.

The Swiss *Wandelweiser* composer Jürg Frey wrote his first string quartet (*Streichquartett*) in 1988. Built-up of unified moments of sound placed in between moments of silence as seen in the opening of the piece, the work epitomises Frey's momentary approach to compositional practice. Frey visualises the present in his music as binary, as either with or without sound. He says:

To have silence in sounds, one must let go of everything which gets in the way of this silence. This sound is a sound without the idea of what it can mean or how it should be used. This sound achieves a hint of permeability, which otherwise belongs only to silence. This sound is the Dasein (being there) of sound. Its presence and charisma make themselves felt in the composition. Silence requires one decision: sound or no sound. (Frey 1998)

In referencing Dasein, Frey explicitly draws on phenomenological concepts to frame his musical philosophy. At the beginning of *Streichquartett*, sound and silence alternate in a pendular rhythm, creating a structure that positions the listener's awareness within the interplay of presence and absence. This oscillation between sound and silence encourages the listener to move freely through the sonic space, engaging with time as a subjective and malleable phenomenon. The work is not merely about the duration of sound and silence but about the listener's personal perception of time as expanding and contracting, shaped by their temporal consciousness.

## **2.5. The Auditory Field**

### ***2.5.1. Listening and Voice***

In the American philosopher Don Ihde's book *Listening and Voice*, Ihde explores auditory experience through a phenomenological lens. The book draws philosophies of Heidegger and Husserl while also critiquing the dominance of visualism in Western thought. The work examines how auditory perception shapes our understanding of the world, language and self, and it addresses the role of technology in transforming auditory experiences. Central to Ihde's theory is the concept of auditory field, which he defines as the dynamic interplay of sound, silence, and voice. Idhe states that:

“The field is what is present, but present as implicit, as fringe that situates and “surrounds” what is explicit or focal. This field, again anticipatorily, is also an intermediate or eidetic phenomenon. By intermediate we note that the field is not synonymous with the thing, it exceeds the thing as a region in which the thing is located and to which the thing is always related. But the field is also limited, bounded. It is “less than” what is total, in phenomenological terms, less than the World.” (Idhe 2007)

Unlike the fragmented focus of visual perception, listening engages the whole self, fostering a more immersive and relational understanding of the world.

Ihde's emphasis on the relational and immersive qualities of listening resonates with my compositional aim to create spaces that prioritise the listener's fluctuating awareness and subjective

engagement with time. Ihde's framework challenges the conventional hierarchical structures of perception, arguing that auditory experience is not merely a supplement to vision but a primary mode of knowing. This idea aligns with the intentional stasis and repetition in works like *Greenland* and *Rock-a-Nore*, where the absence of teleological progression shifts the listener's focus to the immediacy of sound itself. The auditory field becomes a space for introspection, allowing the listener to oscillate between conscious attention and subconscious reflection.

One of Ihde's most compelling contributions is his discussion of "timeful sound." Idhe notes that sound manifests within time, saying that "Sound dances timefully within experience. Sound embodies the sense of time." (Idhe 2007) This notion underscores the temporal nature of auditory experience, highlighting how sound shapes and is shaped by the listener's temporal awareness. For Ihde, listening is an active, embodied process where the passage of time becomes both perceptible and meaningful. This perspective deeply informs my compositional practice, where the experience of time is central and the compositional process enriched by temporal thought. In my work, repetition and subtle variation are used to expand the listener's perception of temporality, encouraging them to move beyond linear, goal-oriented listening. My compositional portfolio that follows seeks to cultivate this presence, offering an open-ended framework for the listener to engage with time as a fluid and subjective experience.

### **2.5.2. Active Listening and Fragility**

An alternative view to listening, but within the same phenomenological field comes from the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. In his work *Listening*, he poses the question "If someone listens to music without knowing anything about it...is it possible that he is actually listening to it, rather than being reduced to hearing it?" (Nancy 2007) Here, Nancy makes a distinction between listening and hearing, emphasising that true listening requires a deeper engagement beyond passive reception or surface-level understanding. Listening, in this sense, becomes an active, interpretative, and reflective process that transcends technical or musicological knowledge. Within my compositional practice, I

aim to frame my music dances the line between both an active listening and a passive hearing. Like in my practice, Nancy argues that music is shaped as much by the listener's engagement and awareness as it is by the structure or form of the composition itself.

Furthermore, I explore in my work the idea that because of the deconstruction of the listener engaging with a traditional narrative, there is a lack of expectation by the listener to have the means to understand musical structure. Nancy argues that "Musical science or technique does not by itself imply the most profound, original, or convincing musicality." (Nancy 2007) Nancy critiques the notion that technical mastery or theoretical knowledge is sufficient to achieve meaningful musicality. Instead, he highlights the fragile and elusive nature of true musical engagement, which resides in the interplay between technique, execution, and the listener's perception. While my compositions employ rigorous combinatorial and permutational structures, these techniques are not ends in themselves but are intended to create a specifically curated aesthetic and an open-ended auditory space. Drawing on Nancy's perspective, my work prioritises the experiential and introspective dimensions of listening, allowing the listener's consciousness to shape the narrative in ways that transcend purely technical considerations.

### **3. Composition Portfolio**

#### **3.1. Rock-a-nore**

The first composition in my portfolio is Rock-a-Nore, named after an area in Hastings, England, that stretches from the Old Town along the East Hill cliffs. The coastline is characterised by fishing boats and huts where fishers historically hung their nets, alongside landmarks such as a funicular railway, an aquarium, and a fisher's museum. This piece originated during a moment of reflection while sitting on the beach at Rock-a-Nore, observing the cyclical motion of the waves. The ebb and flow of the water mirrored the way attention drifts in and out while listening to music, offering a conceptual

foundation for the work. Rock-a-Nore was first performed in London in 2021 by cellist Alice Ludington, to whom the piece is dedicated.

The compositional architecture of Rock-a-Nore invites the listener into a contemplative engagement with both its sonic textures and the philosophical ideas that underpin its design. As the work unfolds—if indeed it can be said to evolve—the listener is drawn into a reflective exploration of time and awareness. During the composition of this piece, I found myself inspired by ideas of temporal consciousness, particularly the interplay of retention, protention, and primal impression described by Edmund Husserl. These concepts provided a framework for considering how listeners experience time within the music: not as a fixed or linear progression but as a dynamic interplay of memory, anticipation, and present awareness.

Additionally, I was influenced by questions raised by the philosopher Daria Vitasović, which resonated with the reflective nature of this work. These questions prompted me to consider how music can create a space for listeners to navigate their own temporal perceptions, allowing personal narratives to emerge. In Rock-a-Nore, the cyclical nature of its musical material reflects the undulating rhythm of the waves, offering a space for listeners to engage with the music at their own pace, shifting between focused attention and a broader sense of temporal flow.

“Do we perceive the passage of time? How does this awareness come about? If we do perceive temporal reality in some manner, do we perceive it veridically or is its true nature impenetrable for us? It seems that we experience passage of time as a dynamic change, whether through objects, events, or experiences. But what generates our representation in this manner: our inner cognitive systems or the external world itself?” (Vitasović 2016)

The static and unchanging nature of Rock-a-Nore reflects ideas of temporal consciousness, drawing inspiration from Edmund Husserl's phenomenological perspectives. Within Husserlian thought, consciousness is not a series of isolated points but a continuous flow where the past (retention), the future (protention), and the present moment (primal impression) coexist. The cyclical nature of the music, mirroring the motion of waves and the drifting focus of attention, captures this dynamic continuum. The work's static personality, centred on repetition, creates a meditative and introspective

listening space, encouraging the audience to engage with their own perception of time as a flowing and interconnected stream.

In this composition, the cello's consistent two-note motif, distinguished by intervals of a 3rd or a 9th, offers a sonic representation of retention and protention (see Figure 6). Each note echoes the memory of the preceding one while anticipating what follows, embodying the duality of temporal experience that is always situated between the immediate past and the immediate future. This persistent interplay reflects the fluidity of time as experienced in the act of listening, where moments are interconnected and inseparable.

Similarly, the piano's four voices, arranged in a rhythmic pseudo-hocket, explore the multifaceted nature of consciousness. As each pitch transitions from one voice to another, the overlapping and interwoven lines evoke the interplay of memory, present awareness, and anticipation. This texture offers the listener an auditory metaphor for the complexity of temporal consciousness, where no single moment exists in isolation but is instead deeply connected to those that precede and follow it. By emphasising these interconnected layers, *Rock-a-Nore* invites listeners into a reflective engagement with their own temporal awareness, shaping their perception of time as an active and fluid process.

74

Vc.

Pno

(*rit.*)

R = Retention, P = Protention

**Figure 6 – Two-note figures in *Rock-a-Nore* representing retention and protention of a listener's momentary experience**

The extended duration of *Rock-a-Nore*, with its structured repetition, invites the listener to reflect on their perception of time. Rather than focusing on the objective passage of time, the piece emphasises the subjective experience of its flow. Through its persistently echoing motifs and patterns, *Rock-a-Nore* becomes an aural exploration of how memories linger, re-emerge, fade, and transform, reflecting the fluid and enduring nature of retention in human consciousness. By creating space for these reflections, the work encourages listeners to engage with their own temporal awareness, allowing their individual perceptions of time to shape their experience of the music.

### **3.2. Greenland**

In navigating the aural and harmonic landscape of *Greenland*, my second composition in this portfolio, the work invites an exploration of temporal awareness and subjective perception. Inspired by the oscillating water around Greenland Pier in Surrey Quays, south-east London—only two hundred feet from where I was living at the time—the piece offers a contemplative space for the listener to engage with their perception of time and space. Written during the covid lockdown in mid-2021 for bassoon and piano, the work was first performed later that year in the Lecture Recital Room at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, featuring Daria Phillips on bassoon and myself on piano. It was recorded shortly after the final restrictions were lifted.

*Greenland* presents a compelling juxtaposition: the static and unchanging texture of the music against the dynamic and bustling interactions of the pier. This contrast invites reflection on how consciousness interacts with an ever-changing world while maintaining an underlying constancy. The unchanging aspects of the work can be seen as reflective of the continuous flow of consciousness, where change exists within a framework of stability. The work becomes a space for listeners to navigate their own perceptions of time and identity, encouraging introspection and awareness.

A key feature of the composition is the bassoon's pointillistic notes, separated by rests, which create a unique engagement with temporal awareness. Each note may be perceived as a discrete moment of

experience, akin to punctuated instances of heightened awareness within the broader stream of consciousness. The silences between these notes allow the music to breathe, creating space for the listener to reflect on their own engagement with the present moment.

The piano part adds another layer to this temporal exploration with its tripartite texture. The inner voice, characterised by steady, arpeggiated phrases, suggests a continuous and steady flow of consciousness, akin to an underlying current. Meanwhile, the upper and lower voices punctuate this flow with individual notes that echo the bassoon's pointillistic gestures. This interplay of voices reflects the multifaceted nature of conscious experience, where layers of perception coexist and interact dynamically (see Figure 7 below). By presenting these layered textures, Greenland creates an auditory space that mirrors the complexity of temporal and spatial perception, offering listeners an opportunity to explore their own awareness as the music unfolds.

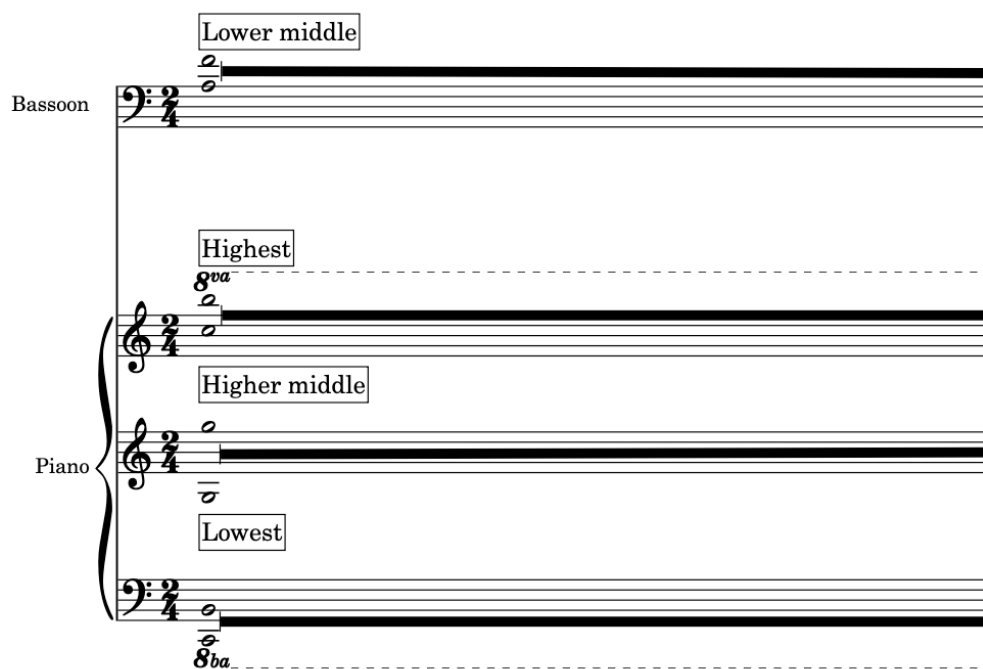


Figure 7 – Registral structure of *Greenland* showing the four distinctive voices

### 3.3. Sandalwood

The third work in my portfolio is a piece for piano and celesta. This work was consequential of the coronavirus lockdown as I only had access to a piano and celesta for my compositional practice during this time. I have subsequently been drawn to writing for celesta as you will see in this portfolio and have taken up professional performance engagements on the instrument, alongside organ playing. I recorded this work in central London in late 2021 myself as a multitrack recording, using a Yamaha baby grand piano and a Yamaha celesta.

The initial spark for my enquiry into the temporal experience of this work comes from American philosopher Sebastian Watzl:

“What makes the experience of temporal properties like change special and philosophically interesting? At least one fact that makes it special is that our experience not only represents temporal properties, but also has temporal properties. For example, not only do you experience changes but your experience itself is also changing over time.” (Watzl 2013)

My composition Sandalwood offers a blend of contrasting timbres within a static and unchanging soundscape. The instrumentation, comprising piano and celesta, is central to the work’s character and purpose. The piano, with its broad dynamic range and harmonic versatility, complements the celesta’s bell-like tone, creating a juxtaposition of resonances that invites the listener to engage with the subtle interplay of sonorities.

Structurally, Sandalwood eschews traditional notions of thematic development or sectional contrast, presenting a soundscape that feels suspended in time. While structural aspects such as repeats are rigidly defined, the work’s rhythmic and harmonic framework is governed by a systematic permutation of time signatures. Each time signature is paired with a specific rhythmic phrase that repeats consistently within its metrical context. The constancy of these rhythmic motifs contrasts with the shifting metrical landscape, creating a repetitive yet ever-evolving texture. Similarly, the pitch material cycles through permutations of short melodic phrases, with minimal fluctuations that provide subtle variations within the harmonic framework (see Figure 8 below).

This approach encourages a duality in the listening experience. On one hand, the repetitive and unchanging qualities of the music create a sense of constancy, offering the listener sufficient variation to maintain engagement. On the other hand, the open-ended structure invites moments of introspection and disengagement, allowing the listener’s mind to wander and reflect. This dynamic aligns with Watzl’s suggestion that the listener may oscillate between focused attention and broader temporal awareness, fostering a deeper connection with the temporal properties of their own inner consciousness. *Sandalwood* thus seeks to create a space where time feels both anchored and fluid, encouraging the listener to explore their perception of temporal flow within the music.



**Figure 8 – Repeating rhythmic phrases as seen in *Sandalwood***

The militantly static nature of *Sandalwood* may be seen as a metaphor for enduring values of charity and altruism as reflected in St Francis’ quote found in the programme note. Just as the music does not differ in its unwavering form, so do these militant virtues remain unchanging in their significance, just as what Francis gave up all of his possessions to live by.

### 3.4. (F/H)our hands

*(F/H)our hands* was conceived at around the same time as *Sandalwood* where, due to the coronavirus lockdown, I only had access to a piano for composition and recording projects. It was completed in the middle of 2021, just at the end of the final coronavirus lockdown and, although has not yet been performed, my friend and pianist Erin Black has been keen to find a place and time to record this work in its entirety. So far, our schedules have not met up due to her being located in Scotland, so I am presenting a MIDI realised recording for this portfolio.

The rotation of minor third relations by Igor Stravinsky created what is known as the *complexe sonore*, a sound which Stravinsky describes as something which is “in a perpetual state of potential symmetrical rotation by minor thirds under which the octatonic background scale is invariant.”

(Turskin 2000) My initial impetus for writing this work was the pre-compositional task of rotating chords based on stacked minor thirds, creating a sonic landscape defined by hocketing diatonic and whole tone sounds. Further to this, I was inspired by Bryn Harrison’s work *shifting light* from 2006 where, in the programme note, he says “It’s like looking at the hands on a clock...you can’t see that something is in motion but there’s an invisible transformation taking place. I wanted the shifts to be very subtle, for the listeners to arrive somewhere else without realising the journey they’ve made.”

(Harrison 2006) My ambition was to use these octatonic rotational sketches and create a piece which was rhythmically unpredictable and where change and development came only over an extended period of time; “We can only detect change (i.e. the movement of the second hand) when perceptual experiences cover a sufficiently extended interval of time in which these changing events happen.”

(Dorato and Wittmann 2019)

The resulting work (*F-H*)our hands is a combination of juxtaposed disjunct shifts in pitch, sporadically repeating notes, complex and unnatural rhythmic motifs and, in the overall structure, unexpected changes in tempo where the work rapidly slows down over time, a technique inspired by the decelerating canons of Aldo Clementi. At the heart of the pitch material is a middle C and an Ab a compound minor sixth above middle C. The eight sonorities (see figure 9) all include rotations of minor third intervals where the top and bottom note stay the same. These pitches are arpeggiated throughout the work and occur consecutively. The outer pitches act as a harmonic anchor which the listener may latch onto throughout the work.

**Figure 9 – Rotations of a *Complex Sonore* in *(F/H)our hands***

### 3.5. Ludions

In November of 2021, I was fortunate enough to put on a recital of meditative music with the Northern Irish soprano Anna Gregg, whom I had studied my undergraduate with at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. In this concert, we performed works by Erik Satie, Arvo Pärt and Morton Feldman, interspersed with short philosophical soundbites on the music the audience were about to hear. When organising this concert, held at First Presbyterian Church Belfast, I was keen to write a piece that brought together the introductory writing in this thesis and decided to base a work on Erik Satie’s *Ludions* set of short songs. During the concert, we ran both Satie’s setting of the French poems and my setting side by side and uninterrupted. The feedback from the audience was unanimously positive, many telling me that the concert gave them the time and space to just be.

*Ludions* is a set of five songs with text by the French poet Léon-Paul Fargue (1876-1947), the same poems which Satie used in his eponymous song cycle from 1923. Although it is important to mention

the context and meaning behind the text used, I do not feel that it is crucial to dwell on the substance and any narrative that may be present.

Having only encountered Fargue's writings on the surface prior to writing this work, I was intrigued to find that Satie would use Fargue's writings, which is associated with symbolism and truth, and opposed to a surrealist culture founded on illogical form and semi-phenomenological structures of consciousness<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the timbral qualities of Fargue's work are inherent to his writing structure. The Ludions poems are full of wordplay, onomatopoeia, non-standard spelling, and repetition, not like that which is found in the poetry of the Dadaist vanguards, but, when listening to Satie's setting of the text, the line between these two interpretations of words as sound is thinner than would have been expected. While Fargue may have not considered himself as associated with what became known as sound poetry, his work does show a preoccupation in the musical and sonic qualities of language.

In 1924 Satie collaborated with the poet Tristan Tzara, who was heavily involved in the Dada movement. Reconciling both Satie's clear interest in textural and sonic characteristics of language, and the setting of Ludions only one year earlier, one can begin to understand Satie's independent and eclectic approach not only to his compositional practice, but as how his music stood independent from the forms that it had grown out of. Satie's Ludions is not about expressing a narrative or idea that is found within the original text, his work stands alone as an independent entity, one that can be viewed from a position of consciousness more akin to a *tabula rasa*.

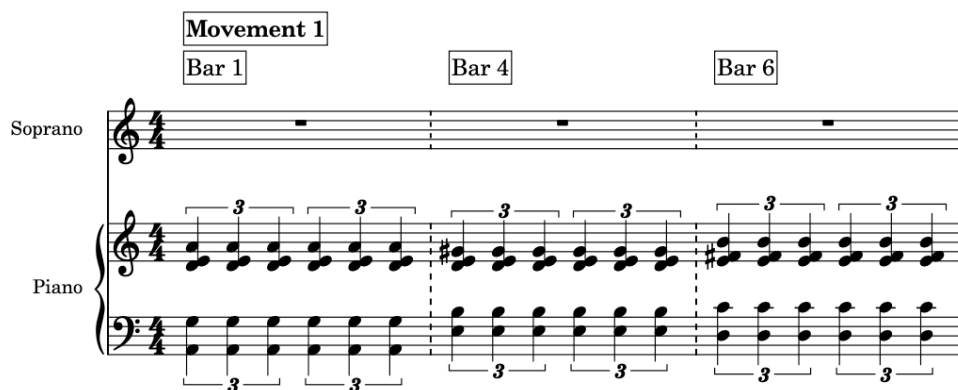
My intention, therefore, was to create something which, although was conceptually inspired by both Fargue's writings and Satie's music, led the listener in a direction which was both disassociated with its origins and overwhelming enough that the listening experience was consumed by my writing style

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<sup>1</sup> Both phenomenology and surrealism reject the idea that an objective reality is that which is experienced during an act of consciousness. Both concepts tend to lean toward a structure of subjective reality and individual human experience.

and not by the basis at which the work’s material was constructed upon. However, I still wanted to take fleeting elements from both works. Therefore, I did use Fargue’s text word-for-word and did not playfully incorporate his use of wordplay in a musical or inventive way. Similarly, I used some basic pitch material from Satie’s work at the very beginning of my compositional process. In spite of this, do not believe that this detracts from the primary aesthetic concern of the work.

My work, like Satie’s comprises of five individual movements which are designed to be sung consecutively. Each movement deals in a slightly different way with temporal and rhythmic perception, and structural anticipation. Rather like a 3-dimensional object that sits in an open space, the general form of my aesthetic goal remains unchanged throughout, yet I wanted to inspect that concept from a number of perspectives. For example, movement one consists of the same piano chords being repeated a number of times over a soprano line of process-defined short melodies (see figure 10 below).



**Figure 10 – The three repeating chords used in movement 1 of *Ludions***

When writing this piece, my mind had a clear focus on the duality of stasis and succession. The philosopher Phillip Chuard describes succession as follows:

“First, that we perceive not only objects but also events and processes. Second, it seems we can perceive some of the temporal relations such events and processes instantiate. Succession is a relation between at least two events, such that one event occurs earlier or later than another; duration can be thought of as the “length” of an interval separating its beginning and end; as for change and motion, they involve instantiations of different properties at different times, when the instantiation of one property succeeds another.” (Chuard 2011)

The first contention is that our perception is not limited to unmovable objects. Instead, we are also able to perceive occurrences (e.g. a note event) and ongoing processes (e.g. a cadential phrase). Further to just identifying or signalling an event or process, we can also discern how these events relate to each other in terms of time. For example, we are able to recognise the order of events. Therefore, change must be understood as a shift from one state to another, while motion involves movement from one location to another. In both change and motion, multiple states are experienced at different times. For example, a metric modulation from crotchet = 60 to crotchet = 80 is a change, and its transition involves experiencing different properties at distinct times. As all of these changes (tempo, harmonic, melodic, textural and rhythmic) are placed subtly within the piece, they should not be seen as individual events, but rather as a perceptual motion that grows within the listener's temporal consciousness. An example of this is the microscopic contraction and expansion in the piano accompaniment found in movement 4. The piano plays a series of self-similar arpeggiating chords which contract and expand by only two or three notes at a time. The result is subtle changes in the rhythmic feel of the work, slightly disrupting the motion and sometimes of indiscernible change (see figure 11 below).

The image shows a musical score for Movement 4, consisting of three systems. Each system includes a vocal line (Soprano or Soprano) and a piano accompaniment (Piano or Pno).  
 - The first system is labeled 'Movement 4' and 'Bar 1'. The Soprano part is silent. The Piano part features a series of arpeggiating chords. A measure change to 6/8 is indicated at 'Bar 5'. The Soprano part begins with the word 'de'.  
 - The second system is labeled 'Bar 17'. The Soprano part has the word 'C'est'. The Piano part continues with similar arpeggiating chords.

**Figure 11 – Expansion and contraction of self-similar arpeggiating harmonies in movement 4**

### 3.6. Slowing up and speeding down (2)

While wanting to write a piece for solo piano, I had been entranced by momentary experience. In my diary entries, something which I have kept for a number of years, I wrote the following prose:

*“Listening 'at this moment in time is much like a dog chasing its tail. When a listener hears and subsequently directs their attention to a moment, they are merely examining a memory. If one anticipates a moment and focuses on a time-point, they are merely pre-empting a moment. Many may describe temporality as linear experience; left to right, right to left, or a continuous line stretching to and from eternity. However, temporality operates in absolute parallel with spatiality. I see time as something which comes at and over you. Occasionally, you may be looking forward and observing a time-point approaching you. At other times, you may be looking behind you and witnessing a time-point fade into the infinite distance. The past and future are strong forces constantly fighting to grab your attention. Perhaps you could look up? Much like a cloud flies high above your head, the time-point at which the raindrop leaves the cloud compared to when it hits your head sits in a different place on the temporal spectrum. What may feel like the present is often the past and, if not, a murky anticipation of a time-point.*

*Although a real-world moment and a moment as a manifestation of our consciousness are different, what qualities does a real-world moment have? How do we interact with a time-point when we experience it? The primary stage of experiencing a moment in time is our delayed experience to a real-world time-point. We often use terms such as 'immediate' or 'present' to describe this. Real-world moments are indestructible, but often our consciousness is shrouded in time-points that these time-points present as decaying objects as time passes over us. There is a direct correlation between the distances separating us from our delayed experience of a time-point and the perceived decay of a time-point experience. This decay will eventually present as nothingness but a false nothingness. A period of temporal experience may follow where the initial experience of the time-point presents as nothingness but may appear again as a memory. This memory has very little to do with the fixed real-world time-point but is a false manifestation of the time-point experience. Both the time-point*

*experience and the memory are not bound by the real-world temporal spectrum and so cannot be classified as a moment.*

*Moments occur in the real world and are present as time-points, not in the consciousness. However, human consciousness acts as a barrier between the real world and our apprehension of a time-point. A moment in temporal consciousness may present as either a loose-fitting observation of a time-point approaching us, a decaying time-point experience or a severely injured time-point manifesting as a memory.” (Geer, 2022)*

The impetus for writing this work was to create a wholly static sonic landscape which invited the listener to ponder upon where they were in the music, to invite them to become lost in the unchanging landscape and repetitious nature of the music. Much like my previous compositions, I decided to add subtle structural jolts to the music in the form of tempo changes, which come at mathematically precise points (see figure 12 below). The concept was to, while the listener’s mind wanders and eventually returns to the music, place them in a different picture than where they started. I was further inspired by a quote by the philosopher Valterri Arstila who says, “according to the subjective-time view, the time when the experience of an event is neurally processed does not need to match the time when the subject experiences the event as occurring.” (Arstila 2016) The idea that there is a disconnect between the point of a moment and the point of an experience was a central concept in writing this work, as the militantly repetitive nature attempts to fuse together the experiential process between action, memory and expectation.

The image shows a musical score for piano, consisting of two systems of staves (treble and bass clef). The first system starts at bar 21 and ends at bar 27. Above the first system, there is a tempo marking: "rit. (3rd time only).....". Above the second system, there is a tempo marking: "Play 3 times". The score features complex rhythmic patterns with many triplets and septuplets. The tempo markings indicate a change from a slower tempo to a faster tempo. The notation includes various accidentals and dynamic markings. The first system has a tempo marking of 105 and the second system has a tempo marking of 115. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#).

**Figure 12 – Bars 21 – 27 of *Slowing Up and Speeding Down***

### **3.7. The Forgettable Foreground**

In 2016, I was fortunate enough to have a brief conversation with the British composer Brian Ferneyhough, known as a central figure in the new complexity movement. Ferneyhough's music is, in a similar sense to what I am primarily interested in, paradoxical. On the one hand, new complexity music often seeks to employ "complex, multi-layered interplay of evolutionary processes occurring simultaneously" (Boros 1994), that is, multiple lines of musical narrative happening at once. On the other hand, the listener is often presented with more material than they can fully absorb, at each moment and all the time. In a lecture at Darmstadt in 1988, Ferneyhough described the listening experience of new complexity music as follows:

When we listen intensively to a piece of music there are moments when our consciousness detaches itself from the immediate flow of events and comes to stand apart, measuring, scanning, aware of itself operating in a "speculative time-space" of dimensions different from those appropriate to the musical discourse in and of itself." (Ferneyhough 1993)

Prior to meeting Ferneyhough, I had postulated for a few months about my personal listening experience in the context of complex music. I wanted to formulate a question that was both about listening, but relevant to the core of his compositional technique. The question I posed to him was "where in the human consciousness do you see the placement of specificity and gesture?" I recall him smiling and telling me that this question is why he considers himself an experimentalist. Experimental music, in the broadest sense, is about writing music to determining an outcome. He told me that he was entirely interested at where a listener's consciousness sat during different moments of a music performance and giving the listener the most complex foreground provides them with the widest possible spectrum for their consciousness to focus in on. This had fascinated me for a while, but it would be six years later before I would attempt to put this on paper.

#### **3.7.1. A gestural approach to specificity**

When starting out this piece, I knew that I wanted to create a recognisable distinction between gesture and pitch. This wasn't necessarily for the listener, but foremost as a token to the music I had been near-continuously thinking about. The final impetus came from speaking to my father; neither of my

parents have any musical education but, nonetheless, champion my artistic work. When speaking to him about my music, he describes in broad terms how it made him feel, sections that he felt were interesting (and others that were uninteresting), how he felt things moved up and down, or louder and quieter. In specific terms, my music does not overtly ‘move’ anywhere; it often sits on a largely static plane. Nonetheless, the listening experience of a non-musical listener can be extremely helpful in discerning a gestural overview of a musical work, and how gesture informs a listener’s temporal or spatial consciousness.

In *The Forgettable Foreground*, I systematically erased (see figure 13 below) certain notes in the wind and string voices. Sometimes, I added a rest and other times I added a non-specific pitched note. My aim here is to experiment with the levels at which a listener experiences complex material as gesture or as notes in relation to harmony local to an individual voice. My suspicion is that it will often be difficult to tell the difference due to the complexity of the music. However, at points in the work, there are moments where a gestural note may stand out, which I find unbelievably interesting. This may especially occur when a listener’s attention is fixed to a specific instrument, which will only be playing five or six repeating pitches throughout. For example, an A# in a whole tone pentachord starting on G# may sound unaccustomed to a listener focusing on that line, but insignificant to a listener at a point of broad focus in their consciousness.

**Figure 13 – Bar 10 of *The Forgettable Foreground* where the large grey noteheads indicate erased notes from the final score**

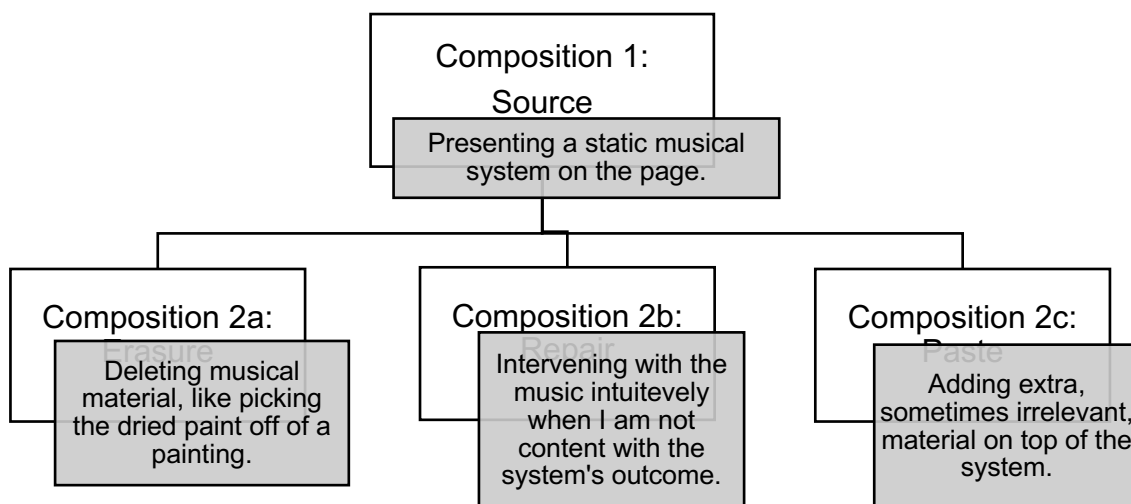
### 3.7.2. Different resonating chambers of the same work

I am often creating various versions of compositions, starting in my 2018 string quartet *Kameas* (see the extract in figure 14 below). As evident in my research so far, I am interested in combinatorial and permutational arrays, post-tonal theory (as a basis of musical composition) and, in the broader sense, systems. For this work, I began by writing a ‘source piece’, presenting the basic results of a musical system on the page. As a part of this process, nearly every musical element is the outcome of a system; time signatures, rhythmic cells, pitch material, polyrhythms and polymetric fluctuations. This may be seen as the most ‘pure’ version of the work, the fundamental enumeration of a system over time. When discerning what material to place into this process, I wanted to gesturally paraphrase the music of Ferneyhough. I came up with a variety of polyrhythmic cells (albeit ‘lighter’ than Ferneyhough’s) for each instrument and each time signature, which were repeated and then permuted through a process of erasure. In reference and continuity to this technique, the pitch material stems from simple stacked whole-tone scales, conceptualised as modes of limited transposition where all twelve tones occur within the piece, but some only in individual voices.

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet, consisting of four staves: Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Violoncello. The music is in 4/4 time and begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 160. The score is marked *ppp* (pianissimo) and *sul tasto* (fingered). The Violin 1 and Violin 2 parts feature melodic lines with some notes marked with large grey noteheads, indicating they were erased from the final score. The Viola and Violoncello parts provide harmonic support, with the Violoncello part ending on a *ppp* dynamic marking.

**Figure 14 – Opening extract from my composition *Kameas* for string quartet, written in 2018**

When studying the completed source composition, I decided to make a variety of interventions. This was important for me as the work was as much about writing about the act of listening as it was about experimenting with consciousness itself. I began by accentuating (through systems) different phrases, just like attempting to grab the listeners attention as their mind begins to wander. I added accents, staccatos, dynamic variations and used string playing techniques such as sul tasto to create a distinct hierarchy of sound at certain points. However, I quietly hoped that this variation in itself became obsolete, and, over time, the music would still lead the listener into a sense there being a self-similar texture. I did not make any technical changes to the system, other than through the erasure process. This decision was partly practical but foremost attempting to resonate with my vision of the overall aesthetic, one which was pointillistic and punctuated. Figure 15 displays an overview and hierarchy of this composition process.



**Figure 15 - A hierarchy of my composition process**

### **3.8. Kinderklaviermusik**

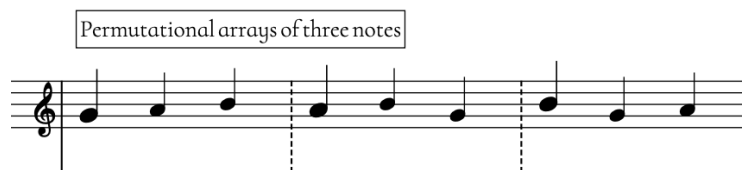
Having written a work short work for toy piano in 2019, I was enthused to attempt to write a new work inspired by what I had been listening at the time. This work was written in early 2022 and I recorded the work myself on a sampled 1930's toy piano using the Keyscape software developed by Spectrasonics. The recording was laborious as my aim was to retain metric rigidity in the recording, highlighted by the specific tempo changes, sometimes only by five crotchet beats.

Perhaps one may argue that *Kinderklaviermusik* is the most philosophically neutral work in my doctoral oeuvre. The overall concept and sound world are a direct fusion of deep listening to works by Aldo Clementi, Perotin and Leonin, finding an aesthetic parallel between the decelerating canonic works of the late twentieth-century and the somewhat relentless florid organum of twelfth-century Paris. I initially recognised a parallel in the rhythmic vigour of both musical styles and, in this work, have fused them together in a somewhat novel and neoteric fashion, not least by the instrumentation.

The work revolves around four hexachords (see figure 16 below) which are assigned to the four individual voices on the toy piano. For each hexachord, the work uses rotational arrays (in the style of Ruth Crawford Seegar’s later works) which are then ordered in permutations to create a prolonged series of self-similar melodies (see figure 17 for an example of permutational arrays in the works of Ruth Crawford Seegar).



Figure 16 – Chromatic chords which form the basis of the pitch material for *Kinderklaviermusik*



Although aesthetically unchanging throughout, the work's structure is based upon eleven decelerating phrases, with minor temporal jolts in between each tempo change. Although more forthright and unequivocal in its temporal structure, I was interested in honing my temporal ideas into a shorter work, pondering on the question of motion's role in our consciousness. Gruber, Montemayor and Block suggests that:

“Motion is divided into real and apparent types. Both are dynamic. Apparent motion refers to the illusory motion seen when, for example, two adjacent disks are flashed in quick sequence; the visual impression is that a single disk moving from one side to the other. However, the temporal experience of ‘real motion’, itself, is commonly considered to be an illusory percept for the following reason.” (Gruber, Montemayor, and Block 2020)

Both organum and Clementi's decelerating canon's have an apparent direct motion attached to their aesthetic contemplation, however even our experience of real motion might be somewhat illusory because of the way our brains process time and motion together. This implies that our perception of motion in real-time might not be a direct reflection of how things are actually moving in the world. To suggest that motion is a key element in this work is to accept the *a priori* facts of the score but raises questions on how we experience the work in relation to our inner consciousness.

### **3.9. Kalachakra**

When reviewing the compositional catalogue of a composer, one may often notice that the duration of a piece of music is reflective of its instrumentation; orchestral works are often shorter than piano works. Given the fact that most of my music is around the 45-minute mark and anticipating that I would not be able to sustain this duration for a small ensemble which included wind instruments, I set out my ambition from the beginning to write a work that felt longer than it was on the page. This work set out to become a single sonority which oscillated over time, punctuated only by mathematically calculated entries and minute temporal oscillation. I was interested in particular in the idea of creating a string of self-similar moments that happen one after the other, each with its own subtly distinctive qualities (based on pitch and rhythm) and understanding that the listener can notice each moment as distinct within the whole flow of our experience. As the philosopher Philippe Chuard says:

“these short psychological events instantiate some typically experiential—especially phenomenal and intentional— properties. One could of course label the successions of such short experiential

events ‘experiences’. Those successions, however, are just that: temporally ordered mereological fusions of their briefest temporal parts—a ‘continued train of distinguishable ideas’ in Locke’s terms” (Chuard 2020)

Coincidentally, at around the time of writing this work, I was staying in London and decided to visit the Tibetan Peace Garden in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park in Kennington, South London, near to where I worked as an organist for six years. In the peace garden stands a centrepiece statue cast in bronze, known as the Kalachakra Mandala (see figure 18 below), named after the symbolic Buddhist term used to describe the wheel of time. The Kalachakra philosophy is incredibly intricate and complex, but the broader definition encompasses the cycles of existence, from the cycles of planets to the cycles of an individual’s life to achieve enlightenment. These Buddhist teachings cover both the external and inner world as well as the spiritual world with a particular reference to higher forms of consciousness.



**Figure 18 – Kalachakra Mandala** (Dorcadion Team 2016)

It was the cyclical nature of consciousness that inspired me to write a work based on inviting the audience to ponder closer to their inner and outer experiences during a listening experience, how it

might affect their perception of time passing and what might happen to the tangibility of time within them when sitting through something which is extraordinarily self-similar and static in compositional aesthetic.

*Kalachakra* consists of a series of fragmented melodies, punctuated by silences calculated by a simple pre-compositional process. The work was envisaged as three populations of sound, the flute and clarinet being the first population, the second population being the piano and the third population being the violin and cello. Although they are rhythmically displaced, the three populations have their own distinctive character which resonates in different ways. The first population is characterised by its disordered harmonies, sometimes playing simultaneously and sometimes not, but always displaced rhythmically and overlapping. The piano is more pointillistic in nature, punctuated by either complex chordal sonorities or dyads displaced by one or two octaves. The third population is much more homophonic in nature, working almost like a series of dyads with cyclical suspensions that never resolve. The reason for creating three distinctive characters of sound was not just to symbolically emulate the three states of the inner, outer and alternative world, but to give the listener an opportunity to, when their ear is zoomed into the intricacies of the music, allow their attention to drift between the distinctive sound worlds created by the individual populations.

It may be considered that, in the context of a listening experience, this work is in a constant state of timbral oscillation. As the listener's ear hockets from one population of sound to another, their consciousness is punctuated by individual and distinctive moments of experience. However, when they zoom out to become more aware of the spatial resonance of the overall sound, they are trapped in a world which is wholly static and self-similar. Alongside the Buddhist philosophical understanding of human consciousness, I was also aware of my link with the paintings of Mark Rothko. As one stands far away from a Rothko painting, they may see a muted palate of self-similar colours which lie static on a canvas. However, as you slowly walk closer to a Rothko painting, your attention is drawn sporadically and randomly to individual populations of colour. The tens of paint layers which were

not visible far away become slowly visible and you can see the colour bleed of brush strokes in front of other brush strokes, as can be seen below in his work *Black on Maroon*.



**Figure 19 – Black on Maroon by Mark Rothko (Roberts 2016)**

### **3.10. Recordare**

I decided very early on that I wanted to write a piece of music with the imagery in mind of walking through a frosty landscape I saw growing up in the south-east of England. Given my fascination of consciousness, it is therefore not surprising to find in this portfolio a piece themed around the imagery of memories and motion. In writing this piece, I was interested to explore latterly how we perceive motion within the confines of a vastly static piece of music. It is important for us to understand what it is like to experience, see and hear things. However, if our experiences only present as a snapshot then we wouldn't be able to experience motion because we would only see consecutive still images.

However, since we do experience motion, our experiences cannot just be separate images, rather there must be a connection between them that allows us to perceive movement. The philosopher Jack Shardlow says:

“Consider seeing fallen leaves blowing in the wind, seeing a dog chasing a ball across a field, or—to stick with the traditional example in the literature—seeing the second hand of a clock sweep around the clock face. In all of these cases, we take ourselves to experience something in motion, where some appeal to motion is required if we wish to do justice to what it is like for us perceptually (for simplicity, I will continue to focus on the case of visually perceived continuous motion). If our experiential lives consist of a sequence of discrete experiences, each presenting something akin to an instantaneous state of affairs—such as a thrown ball at a position in its trajectory—it would appear to follow that we could not perceptually experience motion. That is, if

all we experience—all that is presented in experience—is a static state of affairs at one time, followed at a subsequent time by a subsequent presentation of a static state of affairs, we should not perceptually experience motion. All that would be experienced is one static state of affairs at a time.” (Shardlow 2019)

In *Recordare*, the piano acts like the “static state of affairs” (ibid.) that Shardlow mentions, with its quiet and repeated chordal structure perhaps symbolising individual snapshots with seemingly no harmonic or rhythmic connection between the preceding or succeeding chord. The horn, on the other hand, embodies the perception of movement through its sporadic one, two or three note phrases. These intermittent sounds introduce the element of change and progression, much akin to the motion and movement that we perceive visually. As the horn plays these short phrases sporadically, it disrupts the static nature of the chords, which inject a sense of motion into an otherwise static and self-similar landscape.

The pre-compositional process for *Recordare* started life as a simple permutational array of the time signatures 3/4, 7/8, 4/4 and 5/4 (see figure 20 below). I began with a simple blank manuscript only filled with time signatures, which I was to fill in much like a painter starting from the top left hand corner and painting in the style of a printer, down and up until they reach the other side. I had never attempted this approach to composition before, and it brought up some interesting questions on structure and narrative. Much as Morton Feldman would write one page at a time and not look back at what he had composed on the previous page, this technique made me think about the spontaneity of a composition as opposed to a direct link between the macrostructure and microstructure as the work begins as a high level conception and slowly works its way down to the finer details. Feldman says:

“One of the most important ways is that I write in ink. So if I begin to work and I see that I am crossing out all the time, I realize in a sense that I thought I was concentrated, but in fact I wasn't concentrated. So the writing in ink is an inner parameter to how concentrated I really am. And then I go ahead and write the piece, again using the ink as a parameter. And if I see that I'm crossing out, I just leave the piece and go to it at another time. So to me that concentration is more important than someone else's pitch organization or whatever conceptual attitude they have about the piece. That's a very underlying all important approach.” (Zimmermann 1976)

$3/4$   $4/4$   $5/4$   
 $4/4$   $5/4$   $7/8$   
 $3/4$   $4/4$   $7/8$   
 $4/4$   $5/4$   $3/4$   
 $5/4$   $3/4$   $4/4$   
 $3/4$   $7/8$   $4/4$   
 $5/4$   $3/4$   $7/8$   
 $3/4$   $7/8$   $5/4$   
 $3/4$   $5/4$   $4/4$   
 $4/4$   $7/8$   $5/4$   
 $3/4$   $5/4$   $7/8$   
 $4/4$   $7/8$   $3/4$   
 $5/4$   $4/4$   $3/4$   
 $4/4$   $3/4$   $7/8$   
 $5/4$   $4/4$   $7/8$   
 $4/4$   $3/4$   $5/4$   
 $7/8$   $3/4$   $5/4$   
 $7/8$   $5/4$   $4/4$   
 $7/8$   $3/4$   $4/4$   
 $7/8$   $5/4$   $3/4$   
 $5/4$   $7/8$   $3/4$   
 $7/8$   $4/4$   $5/4$   
 $5/4$   $7/8$   $4/4$   
 $7/8$   $4/4$   $3/4$

**Figure 20 – Time signature permutations as used in *Recordare***

As I usually write, ideas are developed and revisited over the duration of a compositional process. Here, there is no thematic development or variation as the work was conceived linearly and primarily with the thought of temporal awareness in mind. Furthermore, I was concerned that the piece might lack unity as well as an overall cohesion and balance. There was a risk with this compositional method as there was no ability to plan and adjust the structure after my initial harmonic ideas on the piano were laid down. The process took immense focus and I sat at the piano for a number of hours playing the same chords repeatedly to allow my mind to zoom into the harmonic nature and timbre of the composition.

### **3.11. Ordinary Time**

Throughout my doctoral journey, my compositional interests have been deeply rooted in exploring temporal consciousness within the context of permutational and combinatorial systems. I am particularly drawn to the ways in which individual listeners experience the passing of time in relation to their awareness, and how composers might engage with or subtly influence this perception. This short commentary outlines the philosophical context that informs this composition and describes how it serves as a foundation for my artistic practice.

The work, written for soprano and piano, was composed in the first half of 2023 for Northern Irish soprano Anna Gregg, with whom I am currently collaborating on a recording of the piece in the latter half of 2023. This subdued and cyclical 45-minute composition reflects my ongoing engagement with temporal perception and repetition. In this commentary, I will first outline the philosophical background that inspired the work before detailing the compositional techniques employed to shape its reflective and meditative character.

### **3.11.1. The aesthetic contemplation of the ‘ordinary’**

The realm of aesthetic appreciation and contemplation has long been associated with concepts of beauty, the sublime, and the appreciation of exceptional artistic works or geographical structures. However, philosophers and writers have increasingly sought to expand the boundaries of aesthetics to encompass the ordinary and the mundane—those aspects of everyday life that, at first glance, may appear unremarkable. By turning our attention to the seemingly insignificant and unassuming aspects of ordinary time, we can challenge traditional notions of aesthetic appreciation and reveal moments of beauty or sublimity within the mundane.

In contemporary society, the pursuit of novelty is often emphasised, driven by sensationalist media and consumerism. This focus on the extraordinary can lead to a devaluation of the mundane, causing us to overlook its potential for aesthetic engagement. In response, my impetus for writing this work was to explore a renewed appreciation for the everyday aspects of life that are often dismissed as lacking aesthetic value. In my compositional practice, I frequently engage with familiar objects in unfamiliar ways—whether through repetition, subtle transformation — to encourage a sense of defamiliarisation. This process mirrors the linguistic concept of semantic satiation, in which repeated exposure to a familiar word causes it to lose its meaning and become strange. This defamiliarisation, which sparks a fresh perspective on the ordinary, has been a driving force behind my interest in the aesthetics of the everyday.

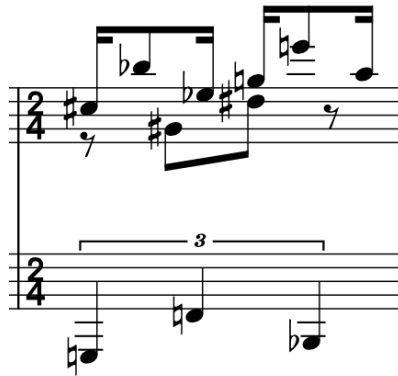
Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have laid important foundations for understanding aesthetic reasoning and contemplation. Central to this inquiry is the idea that the ordinary can be transformed into a heightened experience, revealing extraordinary qualities within the everyday. For example, consider the life of a fisher who engages in the daily task of catching fish from a boat each morning. For the fisher, this activity is routine and mundane, but for an outsider who fishes occasionally or for the first time, the act becomes a heightened aesthetic experience. In this way, aesthetic contemplation of the ordinary often intersects with themes of repetition and familiarity.

Over time, cultivating an aesthetic attitude toward the mundane can foster a heightened awareness that allows one to perceive the extraordinary within the seemingly ordinary. By engaging with the everyday through an intentional and reflective lens, we open ourselves to moments of beauty and sublimity that are often overlooked. This exploration of the aesthetics of the ordinary informs my compositional practice, which seeks to create spaces for listeners to reflect on the overlooked or taken-for-granted aspects of their own temporal and sensory experiences.

### **3.11.2. Pitch and rhythmic construction**

Somewhat secondary to the aesthetic contemplation of this work is the pre-compositional pitch and rhythmic calculations that were used to inform the pieces overall structure and duration. The pitch, rhythmic and metric material are all informed by permutations of tetrachords and triads, permutations of time signatures and rhythmic cells which slot into the time signatures, slowly pulsating back and forth of the duration of a bar. For example, in movement 1, the time signatures  $5/16$ ,  $3/8$ ,  $2/4$  and  $5/8$  are permuted, ordered in groups of 4's throughout the movement and placed in a random order of 4-bar cells, which informs the duration of the movement. Repeat markings occur in between the spoken aspects of the movement to inform the self-similarity and remove any sense of rhythmic pulse that a listener may pick up on; I want the work to be free-flowing and liberated from any sort of metricity.

The construction of individual rhythmic cells was a free choice and intuitively designed. However, it is always the case that these rhythmic motifs repeat in their relative bars. For example, in the introductory movement, the 2/4 bar always includes a triplet crochet motif in the left hand (see figure 21 below). This was to create a sense of remembering throughout the individual movements, but one which felt more like gestural repetition rather than a rhythmically defined pulse.



**Figure 21 – Reoccurring triplet crochet motif in the piano’s left hand at bar 12**

Overall, the main aims in my construction of the rhythmic and pitch systems were to foremost instil a sense of continuity and semantic satiation (especially in the rhythmic material), and to eliminate any sense of metricity where the permutations of the time signatures would define in the space of the listener’s awareness any sense of pulse.

### **3.11.3. The Listener’s Space**

Employing compositional techniques that engage with temporal perception allows for the creation of a conceptual landscape that challenges conventional notions of time. In this work, as with much of my artistic output, I have embraced an approach that could be considered extreme, using temporal manipulation to question the linear progression of time. Instead, time is presented as cyclical and interconnected, offering a fragmented listening experience that invites contemplation on the fluid and multifaceted nature of time. This approach encourages the listener to reflect on the broader concept of time itself, presenting a journey that is both introspective and abstract.

The piece also explores the relationship between physical space and the mental space of the listener. By manipulating temporal elements, the work creates a sense of disorientation that extends beyond time to include spatial perception. When listening back to this work, I often find myself losing track of any narrative that my ear might otherwise construct, blurring the boundaries between the physical reality of the performance space and the subjective experience of the music. This detachment from physical space invites the listener to inhabit a mental space shaped by the music's textures and temporal qualities.

Additionally, the non-linear temporal structure of the composition allows for multiple perspectives to exist simultaneously. This is reflected in the contrapuntal and polyrhythmic nature of the music, which creates a layered and multifaceted listening experience. Listeners may find their attention drawn to different elements—microscopic motifs, the overall aesthetic, or even the spatial qualities of the performance environment. This multiplicity of perspectives fosters a rich and varied engagement, encouraging the listener to explore the complexity of the music in their own unique way.

#### **3.11.4. Aesthetic contemplation**

In composing this piece, I have focused on creating a work that emphasises subjective, first-person engagement rather than aiming for a collective listening experience. This is achieved through the intentional manipulation of time, disruption of regular rhythmic patterns, and a sense of temporal fluidity that challenges the listener's perception of structure. From an aesthetic perspective, the primary goal was to explore and expand the listener's perception of time. Rather than offering a predictable or routine listening experience, I sought to challenge conventional listening habits and create a space where time could be experienced in new and unconventional ways. This expanded perception fosters a deeper connection with the work, encouraging the listener to detach from linear narratives and engage with the fluidity of time within the music.

A secondary but equally significant feature of the work is its emphasis on personal interpretation within the framework of individual consciousness. The intentional disruption of temporal expectations invites a uniquely subjective experience for each listener, independent of emotional or cognitive processes. This disruption serves as a catalyst for introspection, prompting the listener to reflect on their own thought patterns and inner experiences. By navigating the unconventional temporal flow of the music, individuals can explore how these patterns resonate with their personal mental states.

The deliberate structural ambiguity within this piece also serve to free the listener from predefined narratives. Listeners are encouraged to actively engage with the sound, exploring its complexities on their own terms. This heightened engagement allows for a deeper appreciation of the work, as it invites listeners to immerse themselves in the intricacies of time and structure, fostering a reflective and personal interaction with the music.

### **3.11.5. Philosophical implications**

Beyond the music itself, the disorienting nature of this work is intended to spark broader dialogue about the nature of art, time, perception, and human consciousness. Through discussions, such as those I engaged in with the soprano who performed this piece, I seek to explore new insights and perspectives on fundamental philosophical questions surrounding consciousness and perception.

The work's exploration of disorientation invites reflection on the fragmentation of reality. By presenting disjointed moments, non-linear progressions, and unpredictable rhythmic phrases, the music mirrors the fragmented and multifaceted nature of human consciousness and memory. These elements encourage listeners to reflect on the coherence and continuity of their own perception of reality. In doing so, the piece raises philosophical inquiries into how we construct meaning and navigate experiences that challenge traditional notions of linearity and structure. This connects to postmodern thought and, in particular, the writings of Jean-François Lyotard who explored the fragmentation and plurality of knowledge in his work 'The Postmodern Condition'. He says that "It is

our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.” (Lyotard, Bennington, and Massumi 1979) This suggests that the role of artistic expression and its various forms is not to directly represent reality but rather to create fragmented representations that may not have a direct or tangible manifestation. In this way, this work raises questions on the concept of the postmodern and how this work may fit into the portfolio of postmodern artistic dialogues.

### **3.11.6. Conclusion**

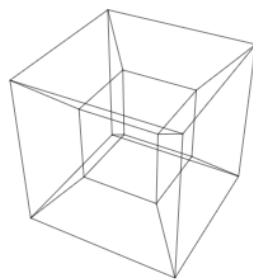
The primary focus of this work lies in two key inquiries: exploring the temporal dimensions of the ordinary and reflecting on the nature of human consciousness. In the Western world, everyday tasks such as raking a garden or making a cup of tea are often regarded as mundane, devoid of aesthetic significance. However, when such actions or objects are repeated indefinitely, their meaning shifts. They become less about their functional or semantic value and more about the way they interact with and are perceived by human consciousness. This transformation invites a deeper engagement, encouraging reflection on the relationship between repetition, perception, and the subjective experience of time. John Cage wrote in his book *Silence* that, in Zen, “If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.” (Cage 1961) It is clear that the aesthetic value of an object increases over time after repetition of that object. This work overtly attempts to put this idea into practice, both conceptually and from an aesthetic standpoint.

Secondly, *Ordinary Time* is designed to engage with the individual listener's experience, rather than focusing on a collective audience perspective. This is not to suggest that the work cannot be performed for a larger audience; rather, its intention is to situate narrative structures within the listener's fluctuating attention, rather than embedding them directly within the music itself. By doing so, the piece invites broader questions about the meaning of art, emphasising the subjective experience of the individual listener over the collective reception of a wider audience. Through this

approach, I aim to encourage reflection on the philosophical implications of individual listening experiences. I hope that *Ordinary Time* serves as a catalyst for raising broader questions about perception and the role of subjectivity in art, providing a foundation for deeper discussions about the nature of music and its connection to individual consciousness.

### **3.12. Tesseract**

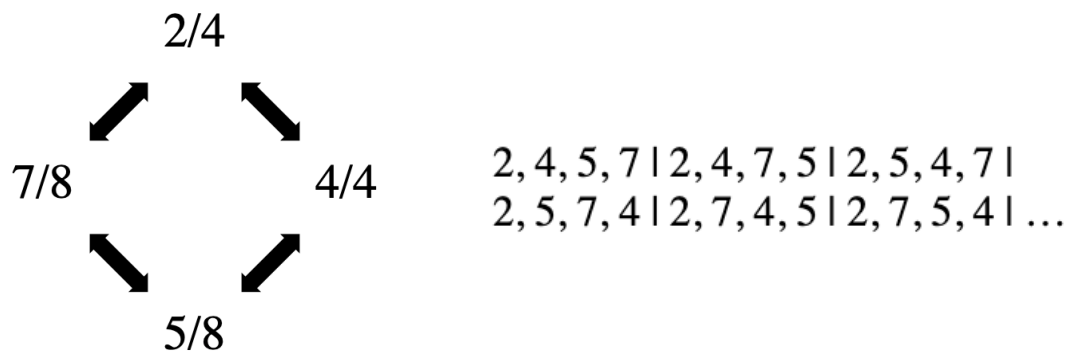
My work *Tesseract* for flute and celesta has emerged as both a musical composition and a perceptual phenomenon, a very ontological study in sound. It was written in 2022 for the flautist Rebecca Rouch, who I studied with at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. We had been discussing about recording a work for flute and celesta since 2020 and I decided to write this work for her in response to her interest in my music. The work is inspired by the mathematical and geometric concept of a tesseract, which is a hypercube in four-dimensional space (see figure 22 below). The work is inspired by challenging and augmenting our understanding of time through a hyper-static sonic plane, employing a multi-layered approach to time and duration, organised in an intricate tapestry of permutations.



**Figure 22 – A geometric ‘tesseract’, also known as a ‘hypercube’** (Weisstein, n.d.)

The time signatures,  $2/4$ ,  $4/4$ ,  $5/8$  and  $7/8$ , interact with one another not merely in a sequential manner, but more in a dimensional and intersecting fashion, much like the physicality of a tesseract (see figure 23 below). Each of these time signatures has been chosen to represent a layer in a four-dimensional construct, which is much akin to the four edges of a tesseract that meet at each vertex. In their

physicality, defining each moments duration, they engage in a nuanced interplay and are designed to facilitate an almost kaleidoscopic sense of time for each listener.



**Figure 23 – The cyclical structure of time signatures in Tesseract**

In terms of pitch material, both for conceptual and sonic reasons, I chose a simple octatonic scale to be the harmonic basis and foundations of this work. Derived from a pitch-class set that can be permuted and combined in multiple ways while still maintaining the harmonic aesthetic I was looking for, the foundational scale itself becomes a microcosm of the ever-fluid notion of temporal consciousness. It is like viewing a four-dimensional object from a myriad of different angles, much like walking round a room with one’s eyes permanently fixed on an object that sits in the centre of the room. It is not the object that changes, but the perception and dimensional position of the listener that redefines the same object at each temporal moment. I was careful not to allow the harmonic material to ever appear in its entirety, as I was interested in the listener being able to perceive the objects various facets but never to be able to fully grasp its totality.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I see this work as inspired by ontological studies into temporal consciousness. Each moment is infused with a musical character, foremost defined by the time signature that occurs at each bar. It is the succession of these individual moments that, when the listener zooms out and their attention becomes more broad and spatial, become an instance of experience. The philosopher Phillipe Chuard says:

“these short psychological events instantiate some typically experiential—especially phenomenal and intentional— properties. One could of course label the successions of such short experiential events ‘experiences’. Those successions, however, are just that: temporally ordered mereological fusions of their briefest temporal parts—a ‘continued train of distinguishable ideas’ in Locke’s terms” (Chuard 2011)

On the surface, this work may be perceived as a single, cohesive experience—a drifting and ambiguous soundscape of self-similar material. However, as a listener engages more deeply with the piece, their awareness may shift to focus on smaller details, whether bar by bar or phrase by phrase. Much like a tesseract—a multi-dimensional geometric figure—this composition is designed to offer a layered listening experience, inviting exploration on multiple levels. The work delves into the intricate dynamics of temporal awareness and perception, unfolding moment by moment as an ongoing process of discovery. It seeks to act as an auditory reflection of existence, where each layer of sound invites the listener to navigate the relationship between the music and their own awareness. By engaging with the piece, the listener is not simply encountering a unified whole but participating in a dialogue between the abstract structures of the music and their own subjective experience. This interplay highlights the tension between abstraction and felt experience, encouraging a deeper reflection on the complexity of perception and time.

### **3.13. Memento Mori**

The final work in this portfolio, *Memento Mori* (Latin for “remember that you have to die”), stands as one of the most contemplative pieces I have undertaken. Composed in 2022 for trumpeter Rebecca Toal and recorded in Northern Ireland, this work explores the ephemeral nature of time and invites listeners to become more attuned to the individual moments of consciousness that comprise a focused listening experience. The theme of mortality often disrupts our perception of time, encouraging a heightened awareness of the present moment. Meditating on death can shift our focus toward the virtue of our actions in the present, freeing us from the anxiety of what has passed or what lies ahead.

Inspired by Stoic philosophy, the work reflects the idea that time is regulated by the present moment and what is within our control, contrasting this with the uncontrollable past and future. By

concentrating on the moral quality of the present, one might experience time as less urgent and more fluid. The muted trumpet serves as a heraldic voice within the listening space, offering moments of false hope or finality through mathematically placed bars of silence. These silences act as poignant markers of endings—or false endings—and emphasise the transient nature of existence. The unpredictable hocketing between sound and silence mirrors two aspects of consciousness: the flowing continuity of awareness, represented in the fragmented, unfinished melodic lines, and the punctuated, event-based nature of life's milestones. Together, these elements invite listeners to engage with their own perceptions of time and mortality, encouraging reflection and a sense of peace with the inevitable.

The music itself is structured through permutations and combinations of two modes of limited transposition, creating a bimodal effect. This approach offers a sense of harmonic familiarity while preventing predictability, fostering a self-similar aesthetic that allows the listener to settle into the work and explore various layers of their experiential consciousness. Sudden changes in dynamics and tempo serve as momentary gestures for the listener to latch onto, but they are also designed to become laborious over time, encouraging the mind to wander and engage with the music on a reflective level. While the work may appear abrupt or precipitous compared to others in this portfolio, its frequent recurrence of sudden shifts ensures that these changes eventually become familiar. This familiarity invites the listener to engage with the music's unpredictability as part of a broader, immersive experience of reflection on time and mortality.

I wanted the punctuated silences to seem as important to the listener as the sound itself. My ambition was to create an atmosphere where the listener not only finds that the sound resonates further in the silence through their memory and anticipation, but the silences herald a unique character of their own. The composer Jürg Frey says, “In the silence a space is opened which can only be opened with the disappearance of sound. The silence, which is then experienced, derives its power from the absence of the sounds we have just heard. Thus the time-space of silence comes into being, and then comes the physicality of silence.” (Frey 1998) The subjective permeability of silence creates for the listener a

secondary layer to the music, acting not just as a punctuation mark in the music, but as a separate entity which has equal value in its resonance during the listener's momentary experience within time and space.

## 4. Conclusion

This portfolio of compositions and the accompanying thesis have sought to address the overarching research questions posed at the outset: how can the act of composition engage with the listener's fluctuating awareness of time and consciousness, and what compositional strategies can be employed to create spaces for individual temporal and spatial engagement? By adopting a practice-based research methodology, the works presented here aim to explore the potential of music not as a pre-determined narrative, but as a framework through which listeners construct personal narratives, shaped by their fluctuating temporal awareness and individual experiences.

The principal aim of this research has been to explore how compositional practices can foster heightened temporal awareness and reflective listening. To achieve this, the portfolio was constructed around key objectives:

- To utilise minimalistic harmonic and rhythmic material as a means of exploring the listener's fluctuating attention.
- To employ compositional techniques such as repetition, self-similarity, and temporal ambiguity to create an open-ended listening experience.
- To integrate combinatorial and permutational approaches that provide structural rigor while maintaining flexibility in engaging with the listener's perception.

These objectives are addressed throughout the portfolio. Works such as *Greenland* and *Rock-a-Nore* exemplify the integration of repetitive and self-similar structures, providing a framework for listeners to engage with sound on multiple levels of awareness. The intentional absence of teleological

progression in these works shifts the focus from the music's inherent narrative to the listener's experience of time and space, fulfilling the primary aim of fostering introspective engagement.

The findings of this research have implications for contemporary compositional practice and listener-centred approaches to music. By foregrounding the role of the listener's fluctuating awareness, the portfolio challenges conventional notions of musical narrative and structure. It emphasises music as a reflective space, where listeners are encouraged to navigate their own perceptions of time and consciousness. This approach underscores the potential for minimalistic and process-driven music to act as a catalyst for introspection. The exploration of stasis, repetition, and subtle variation demonstrates how compositional techniques can create an aesthetic of temporal fluidity, where listeners experience time as expansive and personal rather than linear or goal oriented. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how music can facilitate philosophical and existential reflection, positioning the listener's experience as central to the compositional process.

This research contributes to the field of practice-led composition by proposing a listener-centred framework for engaging with temporal perception. It advances a methodology where the act of composition is not merely about crafting sound but about creating spaces for personal engagement and introspection. The portfolio demonstrates how the integration of minimalistic techniques with combinatorial structures can produce music that is both conceptually rigorous and experientially open-ended. Additionally, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in musicology and philosophy about the relationship between sound, time, and consciousness. By drawing on phenomenological ideas as inspiration (rather than as methodology), the research situates itself within a reflective and conceptual discourse, offering new perspectives on how music can engage with broader philosophical themes.

While this research has achieved its aims, there are limitations that should be acknowledged. The portfolio represents a focused exploration of minimalistic and process-driven techniques, but it does not exhaust the possibilities of engaging with temporal awareness. For example, the works rely

predominantly on combinatorial and repetitive structures, which, while effective, may not encompass the full range of methods available for engaging listener consciousness. It was also mentioned in the thesis that open forms, drones and timbral approaches to music creation were not explored in this portfolio. Additionally, the emphasis on self-similar textures and stasis may not appeal to all audiences, potentially limiting the applicability of these findings to other genres or contexts. Another limitation lies in the subjective nature of the listener's experience, which, while central to this research, makes it difficult to generalise the outcomes. The reflective engagement proposed by this work depends heavily on individual perception, meaning that the impact of the music may vary widely between listeners.

There may have been other compositional avenues that I could have explored within my composition portfolio, however a decision was made to use event-based notation and to hold fast to my combinatorial and permutational methods of composing. While drones and timbral explorations offer compelling avenues for engaging with sound and temporality, my decision to exclude them was rooted in the specific objectives of this research. The primary aim of my compositional practice was to explore the listener's fluctuating temporal awareness through repetition, self-similar structures, and event-based gestures. I felt that these methods within process and system led composition rely on discrete, identifiable musical events rather than sustained textures or timbral variation, as the former provide clear anchors for the listener's attention to oscillate between focused engagement and introspective reflection. Drones and timbral approaches, while effective in creating immersive soundscapes, often prioritise a continuous sonic environment over discrete moments of awareness. This can lead to a more unified listening experience, which contrasts with my intent to emphasise fragmentation and the episodic nature of temporal consciousness. By focusing on harmonic and rhythmic repetition within event-based structures, I aimed to craft a listening experience that actively invites the listener to navigate their perception of time through distinct, punctuated moments. In this way, my approach aligns more closely with the philosophical goals of this thesis, foregrounding the listener's role in shaping their own narrative engagement with the music.

Furthermore, the decision to use event-based notation rather than open forms was driven by the need to strike a balance between compositional intent and listener interpretation. Event-based notation allows for a precise articulation of rhythmic, harmonic, and structural elements while maintaining the flexibility needed to facilitate a reflective listening experience. This aligns with my compositional goals, where the primary focus is on crafting a framework that supports the listener's fluctuating attention and temporal engagement. Open forms, while offering performers a degree of freedom, inherently introduce variability that can dilute the clarity of the compositional structures intended to guide the listener's awareness. In contrast, event-based notation ensures consistency in the presentation of musical materials, enabling the careful construction of patterns, repetitions, and subtle variations that are central to my exploration of temporal consciousness. By maintaining this consistency, I was able to foreground the listener's experience without relinquishing control over the compositional architecture, ensuring that the music remains a stable yet open-ended space for introspection and engagement.

Through this portfolio, I have aimed to demonstrate how practice-based research can offer unique insights into the relationship between composition and listener awareness. The works presented here illustrate a deliberate and reflective approach to engaging with the listener's perception of time and space, providing a framework for personal narratives to emerge. By prioritising the listener's experience, this research challenges conventional paradigms of composition and positions itself as a contribution to broader artistic and philosophical discussions.

As I look ahead, the methodologies and insights developed during this research provide a foundation for continued exploration. Whether through the integration of indeterminate techniques, the incorporation of spatial elements, or the expansion of minimalist principles, the questions raised by this study promise to guide future compositional inquiry. Ultimately, this research reaffirms the transformative potential of music to act not only as a medium of sound but as a space for reflection, introspection, and the exploration of human consciousness.

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