

music we'd like to hear

Saturday 23 April 2022

Richard Emsley

Still/s (2002-19)

From my very earliest work I found it fascinating to place together what I thought of as 'blocks' of simple materials – usually a single note or chord – and delight in the momentary collisions of their attacks, continuations and releases, playing with how they interact. My main concern as a composer is to draw in the listener to that momentary experience, to narrow down and intensify their focus on the minutiae of the timing of the materials. In practice my composition also adopts a broader scale of approach, one which juxtaposes contrasting 'flat', static passages designed to suggest a series of infinite continuations.

My inspirations come from nature and its sounds, especially their rhythm, never strictly periodic. For instance, on a camping holiday in the Cévennes I remember being kept awake right through the night by the sound of two dogs barking at a nearby farm, the uncertainty of that developing 'duet' made an impression. I also refer to environmental sounds such as the cultural sound of bell ringing – as a child we visited my grandmother in Acomb, York at weekends. An abiding memory is of waking up on Sunday mornings hearing the local church's bells – again never periodic, but this time that's already a considered part of the deal.

Prior to working on the *Still/s* compositions I was regarded as a composer associated with 'New Complexity' and ensemble works, but the production of a long series of solo piano pieces brought me to thinking about how big works are made up of smaller ones whose interrelations are subtly variable. This informed the approach to working on the *Still/s*.

After writing a solo cello piece which arose from a correspondence and collaboration with Joan Key, I decided to use the extra material from the collaboration. A selection of five different instruments suggested the organisation of a series of groupings that could explore specific sonorities and timbral relationships. *Still/s* then developed into a cycle employing different combinations: solo, duet and trio. At some point it occurred to me to compose the cycle out of all the possible combinations of the five instruments for which I designed an order.



The cycle of 24 works is structured according to their instrumentation so that each half of a concert starts with a solo piece, the instrument of which continues for the next two pieces but is silent in the next three pieces. In this way the cycle falls neatly into four quarters with six pieces in each. In selecting sounds there is much use of harmonics, breath tones, double stops, microtones and resonances. The title of the sequence, *Still/s*, was agreed at the outset of the project but it proposed a context of delicacy and fragility that continues throughout all the compositions.

Richard Emsley

Apartment House

Mira Benjamin *violin*
Anton Lukoszevieve *cello*
Heather Roche *clarinets*
Nancy Ruffer *flutes, piccolo*
Kerry Yong *piano*

CONCERT 1 4 pm

<i>Still/s</i> 1	cello	8.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 2	clarinet in Bb cello	8'
<i>Still/s</i> 3	violin cello	7'
<i>Still/s</i> 4	flute clarinet in Bb	12'
<i>Still/s</i> 5	piccolo clarinet in Eb piano	8'
<i>Still/s</i> 6	flute/alto flute piano violin	7'

[interval]

<i>Still/s</i> 7	clarinet in Bb	8'
<i>Still/s</i> 8	clarinet in Bb violin cello	5'
<i>Still/s</i> 9	flute clarinet in Bb cello	6.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 10	flute piano	9'
<i>Still/s</i> 11	piano violin	7'
<i>Still/s</i> 12	piano violin cello	6'

CONCERT 2 8 pm

<i>Still/s</i> 14	violin	8'
<i>Still/s</i> 13	flute violin	7.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 15	clarinet in Eb piano violin	10'
<i>Still/s</i> 16	alto flute cello	9.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 17	clarinet in A piano cello	3.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 18	bass flute piano cello	7'

[interval]

<i>Still/s</i> 19	flute	5.5'
<i>Still/s</i> 20	flute clarinet in Bb violin	8'
<i>Still/s</i> 21	flute violin cello	4'
<i>Still/s</i> 22	clarinet in Bb piano	7'
<i>Still/s</i> 23	piano cello	7'
<i>Still/s</i> 24	clarinet in Bb violin	8'

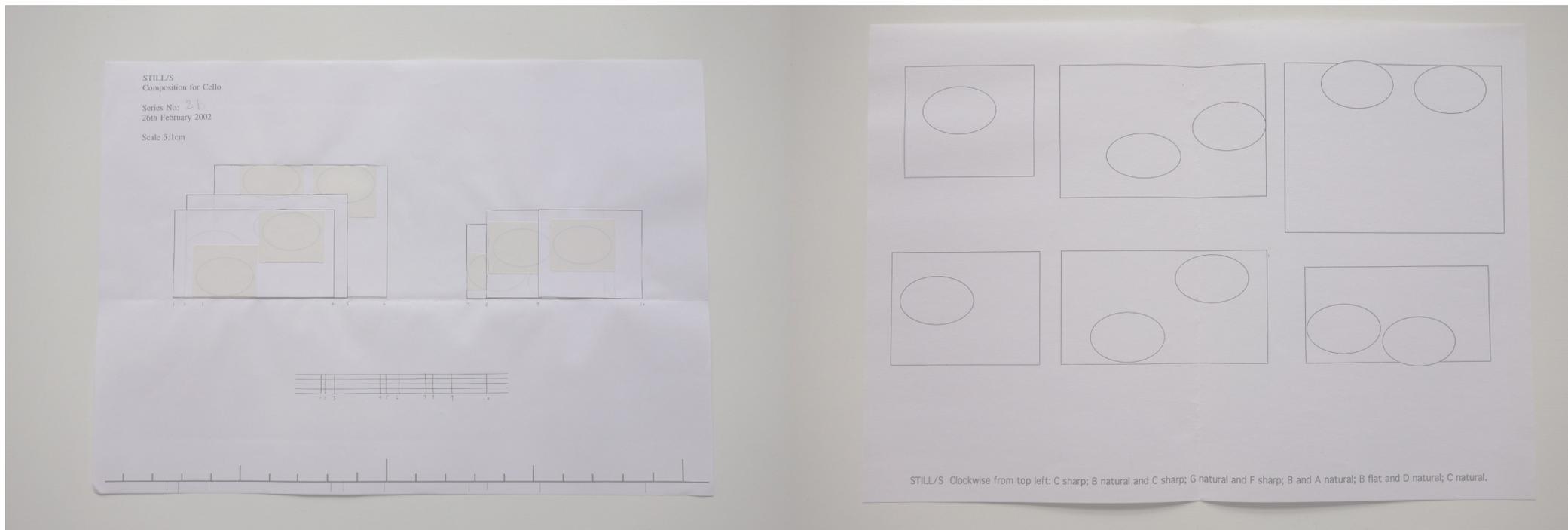


How a score or performance might be varied through interface with the materialities of drawing and painting was often a question of differentiating geometries. It was also a way of reconsidering what might form the memory of a painting, as potential sound. The Still/s project, for The De La Warr 'Colour White' exhibition, provided the opportunity to experiment with that differentiation, constructing through painting a white silence that made reference to the sensation of an excluded sound.

Although there is a long history of composers making reference to colours and images, or interpreting graphic scores, there remains a sense in which painting's essential stillness means nothing to music. This place, meaning nothing, became a source of invention. In discussions with Richard Emsley, we have considered experiments with how attention to painterly geometry, its relation to the timing of looking at painting, can be translated into musical form. Mirroring and symmetry are clearly important, but also asymmetries, such as the sense of dislocation between irregular paired triangles that seem to imply flight and a twist into surface. We are currently thinking about spirals, how that coiling form tracks inward or outward, between extension into void and an innermost intense point.

Still/s originated in a random resource of six found rectangles, shapes of canvases which in themselves suggested different kinds of subject matter. Each canvas entered into relational tension with the repetition of a flat oval shape of fixed dimension. This already suggested sound and linear timing. Richard and I re-arranged the canvases as a variable sequence of relative positions in which a single 'half-note' was painted out at each change in sequence. Although the act of deletion becomes part of the work, a processing of dimensional relationships rather than durations, the measurements of spacings and overlays were mapped as a form of score that could be elaborated into composition. The final stack of blank canvases conveyed the end of work but retained some resonance, an implied after-effect of sound in the silent paintings. It was this after-effect that was to be verified by the record of a sound emerging, one that could finally be performed.

Joan Key





Born in 1951, Richard Emsley's formal musical education was at Cardiff University where his tutor was Arnold Whittall. While at university he was a frequent participant in Peter Maxwell Davies' composition classes at Dartington International Summer School of Music and was a co-founder of the Cardiff Composers' Ensemble.

In 1979 Emsley co-founded with composer James Clarke the ensemble Suoraan, one of the first British groups to promote the music of Xenakis, Finnissy, Ferneyhough, Dillon and Dench. He composed six works for the ensemble including the extended music theatre piece The Juniper Tree. Following his time with Suoraan Emsley fulfilled commissions for The Fires of London, the harpsichordist Jane Chapman and the now-defunct Inner London Education Authority. In 1988 the publication of an article on Emsley's work in *Tempo* by the composer Richard Barrett led to an invitation to participate in the Composers' Forum at Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik.

In 1996, after a period of creative silence and experimentation, Emsley began to explore a seam of gaunt solo piano writing in the works finnisys fifty and the extended for piano series. Subsequently performed by numerous pianists and twice selected for ISCM World Music Days in 1999 at Bucharest and 2001 at Yokohama, three pianists in particular have been associated with these works: their initial proponent Ian Pace, who performed for piano 2 in Bratislava, Cologne, Heilbronn, London and Dublin during 1999; Philip Thomas, who commissioned the 42-minute for piano 13 for an Emsley portrait concert which he curated in Sheffield in 2003; and Jonathan Powell, who commissioned the latest in the series, for piano 15, an extended meditation of 40 minutes recently discussed at length by Arnold Whittall in "Expressionism revisited: modernism beyond the twentieth century" published in *Transformations of Musical Modernism*.

In 2002 Emsley began *Still/s*, a cycle of 24 solos, duos and trios written for all the combinations of a five-instrument reservoir. Exploring even more drastically pared-down material than the piano works, this series sprang from a collaboration with the visual artist Joan Key and the cellist Anton Lukoszevieze, commissioned by the iconic De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill. Further pieces from the cycle have been commissioned by Carl Rosman and Mark Knoop of the Libra Ensemble, violinists Angharad Davies and Darragh Morgan, clarinetists Ian Mitchell and Andrew Sparling and the London concert series *Music We'd Like To Hear*, under whose auspices the ensemble Apartment House performed *Still/s* 1-6 as a concert-length event curated by Tim Parkinson in 2008.

A portrait CD of Emsley's music performed by pianist Ian Pace, guitarist Alan Thomas and the ensemble Topologies, conducted by Mikel Toms, was released on the Divine Art/Metier label in 2002, and three of Emsley's piano works are included on *British!*, a recent CD release by the German pianist Steffen Schleiermacher. In 2011 a joint 60th birthday concert with the British composer James Erber was given in London.

Recent projects include the inception of a series entitled *Cast* for live instruments combined with a tape part treating the voice of mezzo soprano Loré Lixenberg; the completion of three orchestral works, *Strange Attractor*, *...des tactiques de lenteur...* and *The Uncertain Life of the Brain*, the former being commissioned by the BBC and first performed as part of Glasgow Tectonics by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ilan Volkov; the completion of a 2-hour electro-acoustic piece *Music for Pretend Orchestra*; the completion of the 3-hour chamber cycle *Still/s*; and in 2020/21 the completion of for piano nos.16-22. and a Piano Quartet.

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Joan Key is a painter, writer and lecturer who lives and works on London. Key has worked with musicians and composers to develop practical ideas about composition and text as a source within painting and music. This has led to designing scores, and event-scores, for use in performance and as soundtrack for animated film.

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Richard Emsley portrait courtesy of Gill Vaux
Still/s images courtesy of Joan Key studio
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