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Phill Niblock through the ages

The American experimental minimalist composer Phill Niblock was born in Indiana on 2 October 1933, making him 79, last Tuesday. I contacted him when I realised it was his birthday, and he seemed to take it in good humour that someone was giving a paper concerning his age!

To be clear, what I am describing in this paper is what I see as the remarkable, and unique, similarity in Niblock's musical output throughout his entire creative career. I will briefly describe his music, before going on to examine Niblock's recent reflections upon his own career, and how changing technologies have been subsumed into his compositional approach. I will consider his musical career alongside other composers whose own pathways bear similarities, before discussing his work in relation to notions of a 'late style'.

His music has become much more prominent since the millennium; many international festivals programme him (he often travels abroad from his two bases in New York and Ghent), and there is much more interest from the media in his work and working methods. Niblock also heads up Experimental Intermedia, a nonprofit foundation and performance space that has been presenting concerts since the early '70s and releasing recordings since 1990. It has hosted well over 1000 concerts featuring many international artists.

Niblock has been working in the area of sustained-tone composition since early experiments in the 1960s. His pieces consist of dense layers of microtonal drones played at very high volume, for 20 minutes or longer. The loud dynamic allows for the intense combination of many of the overtones to be perceived, creating beating patterns between close frequencies, alongside psychoacoustic combination tones in the mind of the listener, yielding a continuous, shimmering surface layer of auditory phenomena.

The tones are long sustained pitches played by acoustic instruments, often selected by the players themselves to ensure the purest, unadulterated sound of the instruments achievable. These tones are recorded on either multitrack tape, or digital sequencing software depending on which era of Niblock's career the piece is from. Sometimes, amplified live instruments play along with the tape, preferably with the performers wandering around in space.

[PLAY AUDIO]

Up until 2007 there has been very little written about his music, save for an article from Tom Johnson in the Village Voice in 1972. Sleeve notes written by either Niblock or the performers have appeared with new releases over the years, but scholarly writings were missing up until Volker Straebel's article in Organised Sound from 2008 exploring the technological implications of Niblock's music. This relative lack of exposure may well have allowed Niblock to work outside of large commissioning pressures, and certainly would have encouraged him to follow his own artistic path throughout his career independently.

Niblock does not excel at being forthcoming about himself, or his work. He rarely gives interviews: he very often *presents* his work on the international stage, but only occasionally will take part in composer discussions surrounding the performance event. Liner notes document the recording process, with little indication as to impulses behind the music's creation. This extends further: you won't find Niblock authoring a journal article discussing his 'recent approaches to composition'; the only documents outlining these tend to be interviews with the composer, and there is a strong sense that only a good interviewer with sensitive questioning will get any new information out of him, although his relatively recent celebrity status has forced him to open up a little more than in previous years.

He has been working in the same loft setup since 1968, when, at the age of 35 (a relative late-comer to music creativity), he began on his first work. Many sources concur with Straebel that Niblock's approach to music composition has remained basically the same until today. In his article in Organised Sound, Volker Straebel analyses four works, spanning the period from 1974 to 2003, and are all described in the introduction of the article as being 'dense, loud, and 25 minutes long'...a somewhat remarkable statement when you think about its implications: throughout 29 years of creating new work, the four pieces share these same attributes, right down to their duration.

Indeed, in an interview with musicologist Bob Gilmore in 2007, Niblock is asked the question "Do feel you're essentially working now in much the same way as in the seventies?", and his reply begins "Well... Yes I do". This answer speaks for itself.

Incidentally, this frank, candid streak is not out of keeping with his character; whilst not rude or arrogant in any way, he simply sees the way he works not in the light of others, but rather on its own terms.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal last year, Niblock said: 'I knew what I wanted to work with from the beginning, which is exactly what I work with now: masses of tones that are very close together in pitch so that lots of other harmonics are produced in space. I was interested in the nature of sound and creating a big cloud, to use sound as something architectural.'

Another Interview with Rob Forman includes Niblock stating that "I've really only made this one music...and I've only been interested in the one idea of close-ratio tones and getting it loud enough to produce a lot of overtone patterns". It's clear that Niblock, as Straebel, Gilmore and other writers do, sees his entire career's output as being one and the same thing.

"I try to make pieces that don't have development" Niblock states, and perhaps this is a metaphor for his overall career. Development of his musical language, as is often so important in composition teaching in the academy, is simply not a concern for him.

Occasionally his pieces do show some kind of simple movement from one state to another, which could be argued to be some form of development. For instance

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this is a graph showing the overall pitch movement in the 1993 piece *Five More String Quartets*
You can see a clear movement towards unison.
More often than not, though, we see scores such as these

[SLIDE]

from *3 to 7 - 196* from 1974, and *Harm* from 2003, both using cello recordings, where there is no clear overall teleological movement, but simply large clusters of close pitches.

There are two moments which Niblock points to when pressed about where this music originates from:

In an interview for the Paristransatlantic website, Niblock recalls "there was a series by Max Polikoff who was a violinist and a curator, who produced these things at 92nd Street in New York. He did a Feldman piece on one series – it was the time of *Durations*, so it would have been 1961 (Niblock would have been 28). And they did one of those pieces for ensemble. It was an incredible revelation, that you could have a piece without rhythm and melody, and these long tones. It really was in a way a permission to do music in a similar kind of way. I could work with that idea. Then I was very interested in the microtonal stuff."

Another story of a few years later has Niblock riding a motorcycle up a hill behind a large truck, and being mesmerized by 'the strong physical presence of the beats resulting from the two engines running at slightly different frequencies'.

Both events clearly helped to solidify his artistic purpose: Niblock knew what his approach would be when he started making music in 1968. He was 35, an age by which many composers are well into their compositional careers. He knew what he wanted to do, he did it, and he carried on doing it again, and again, and again, and again.

As Niblock obtained more advanced technological equipment with which to make his music, he was then able to create pieces which used more and more tracks. However, whilst there is some sort of development which the technical equipment allowed, there is absolutely no shift in the overall aesthetic ideal of the music throughout his creative lifetime. Any transitions in technology are, as Ibrahim Khider describes, 'not a big deal' for Niblock, as he is willing to embrace technological change where there is demonstrable improvement.

To summarise those transitions: in the early pieces, performers were provided with an oscilloscope, into which a calibrated sine wave and his own signal were fed. They had to match their own pitch with the calibrated sine wave, resulting in characteristic visual patterns that ensured very precise tuning. This technique was employed in pieces throughout the 70s and 80s, during which technological developments allowed for the use of greater multitracking facilities, until the early 1990s when Niblock introduced a technique in which players would simply match the pitch that they heard being fed into their headphones.

The advent of digital technology brought with it a significant ease of creation for Niblock. Instead of preparing a fixed score that designates the frequencies to be recorded, he could now simply pitch-shift any recorded sounds at will, rendering the creative process much quicker.

In the light of this, Niblock states that: “when you look at the stuff since 2000, it's getting very much denser, especially the thirty-two track pieces. The music on the last triple CD is thirty-two track material, so they're really quite thick.

Whilst the media through which Niblock creates his music has transformed, enabling more tracks to be included in the dense sound masses, his compositional approach, and his musical material have remained steadfastly the same. To consider the effect of this changing media, I would bring up again here Volker Straebel's remark to reflect upon, that four pieces, which span a 29-year period of Niblock's career from 1974 to 2003, are all

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'dense, loud, and 25 minutes long'.

Having worked with the Czech-American flautist and conductor Petr Kotik on the piece *Four Full Flutes* from 1990, Kotik invited Niblock to create an orchestral piece in 1998. Niblock, with assistance in the notation of the music from Volker Straebel, created *Disseminate* which ended up being the first of five pieces for large acoustic ensemble from the previous decade.

This is the global pitch structure for the orchestral piece *Tow for Tom* from 2005

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Instruments are instructed to play in the two lowest octaves of their instrument, to ensure a harmonic-rich timbre. The pitch scheme is not dissimilar to previous pieces created via tape, as we can clearly see a move towards unisons, and then expanding back out to microtonal clusters.

It was Kotik who initiated these orchestral pieces, so I view this strand of Niblock's music as merely an extension of his work, rather than as a separate lineage; you will notice that *Tow for Tom's* duration is 22 minutes, the same length as many of the electronic works, so in terms of framing the material, there is clearly little difference. The majority of the five acoustic scores include the instructions to create a 'thick and dense' sound, clearly emulating the soundworld of the tape pieces.

Whilst many artists from the first generation of minimalists retained a similar aesthetic for a number of years, Volker Straebel suggests that Niblock's almost stubborn restriction to this genre, however, is without comparison.

La Monte Young comes close, but has actually written few new works in the past 40 years, mostly performing raga, and his ongoing piano piece the *Well-Tuned Piano*.

Perhaps closest in their approach to Niblock is Eliane Radigue, a French composer who also operates within an experimental minimalist approach; her electronic drone pieces from the early 1970s and onwards were performed on the cutting edge synthesizers of the time, and she continued to make similar pieces through to the beginning of the 1990s. Interestingly, however, in 2001 she had a commission to write a piece for solo double bass - what would be her first piece for an acoustic instrument. It turned out to be a significant turning point for her, and it is because of these recent works that she has dedicated herself to writing solely for acoustic instruments, partly due to the enjoyment of working with other musicians.

She says that “it is what I was trying to do with electronic music, but I never succeeded; every piece felt like a compromise between what I wanted to do and what I could achieve.” The intensity that she achieved through her small number of electronic works between 1973 and the early 1990s has found a new lease of life through working with musicians in acoustic contexts.

So interestingly, Radigue talks about how she feels she 'never succeeded' in fulfilling exactly what she wanted to do in the creation of her electronic music - yet, she did manage to succeed with this in her late instrumental pieces, hence her lack of interest in working with electronics since 2001.

To contrast this, if we look at Niblock's output since his first orchestral commission in 1998:

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We can see that writing solely for acoustic instruments has not disrupted his output of other tape pieces, such that it is difficult to see them as part of a different strand of his creative output, as we clearly can with Radigue's instrumental pieces.

To very briefly touch upon the thorny issue of a 'late style', we can look at various writer's viewpoints upon how it relates to certain composers:

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Whilst these don't all agree on one clear idea of what late style is, you can see that they point to a noteworthy transformed approach for each composer.

You may well be able to predict my conclusion on Niblock's music in the light of this table: there seems to be no such shift at all with Niblock in his later years: he simply carries on what he is doing. Age is simply a non-issue.

I end with a quote from a text on Niblock by artist Rob Forman written nine years ago to celebrate Niblock's 70th birthday. He describes how Niblock's music defies being dated by the markers of history and culture, saying that:

"This quality washes back onto Niblock himself, so even as he turns 70 this month, one feels as if he has always been doing this art and always will be, even as the rest of us pass by.