

Iridescent Seclusion / Samuel Andreyev

While primarily a musician, my engagement with poetry predates my earliest acknowledged compositions by at least five years. Poets have often helped to shape my attitudes as an artist, with vast consequences for my music. I remember asking my parents for a copy of Rimbaud's poems when I was twelve years old and receiving it for Christmas that year. The stimulatingly bitter sensation of being forced to confront my own ignorance is still fresh in my mind: what did this impossibly exotic language mean, and to what end had these poems been written? Often, a gift is something held just beyond reach; the meaning that manifests, that is beyond possession, nevertheless illuminates the world.

To give two specific examples of works entirely shaped by a confrontation with poetry, I would like to focus on my two cantatas, composed in 2012-17 and 2021-22, respectively. While different in important ways, these works have much in common: both are scored for soprano and ensemble, both are based upon texts by a single poet, and both alternate vocal and instrumental movements. Moreover, the two poets I have chosen are English and are of the same generation. *Iridescent Notation* (2012-17) is an homage to Tom Raworth; *In Glow of Like Seclusion* (2021-22) sets recent work of J. H. Prynne. As of this writing, the latter remains a work in progress. It will be premiered in June 2022 by Ensemble Proton in Bern, Switzerland, with Peyee Chen singing the solo part and Luigi Gaggero conducting.

Setting these texts was less a matter of choice, than of answering to a compulsion. I felt I had a debt to both poets, and the best way to settle it was to see what sort of musical response their work might elicit. These projects were so difficult I wondered if they could, or should, be done; not all poetry is intended to be read aloud, let alone sung, and some is so dependent on the compositional field of the printed page as to be unthinkable in any other form. Raworth and Prynne, two vastly different poets, nevertheless both confront us with glittering objects—Iridescent Notations in Raworth's phrase. Raworth offers a ceaseless multiplication of sparks that refuse to coalesce into a flat, manageable image; Prynne, an elegant latticework of linkages that braid together seemingly quite disparate fields of reference. Such texts resist summarization, putting starkly clashing perspectives into energetic confrontations. Setting such poetical texts could mean unwisely forcing them into settled configurations, at least for the amount of time it takes to listen to my pieces; I was concerned to avoid this, but not at all certain how to proceed.

Here is a poem by Tom Raworth that appears in *Iridescent Notation*:

There are Forty-seven Pictures of her Walking out of Central High

anemone gloam and i'm walking (time) survival
kit survives 'droves of them leaping every night to the coast'
head aches (the delicate poem to express my grief escapes me)
being them to know and nobody RED EAGLE comes to break
the formal CRIES THE clarity of time
the women i love DREAM still three monkeys lean
back and towards one white one black one brown
down the stair trip (them) pulsing with the day
a fraction second lag is how you know you built the bridge

The quality that jumps out here is that of quickness, or alacrity. As is characteristic of Raworth, this poem does not render its greatest effects when approached ponderously. It should be read, as the poet

always did, quickly and drily. The reader may then find that the meaning of individual fragments eludes them, because the context flickers and jogs; the experience is one of rapid, deft changes of tone and reference, sometimes breaking off in mid-phrase—an aesthetics of interruption. The poet seems to be in a great hurry, rushing through a vast field of competing perceptions, unable to pause over any insight, as there are so many things glimmering in his consciousness.

Among the many ways this manifests in the poem, there are parenthetical remarks:

(the delicate poem to express my grief escapes me)

quotation:

‘droves of them leaping every night to the coast’

interpolation:

RED EAGLE / CRIES THE / DREAM

enjambment:

three monkeys lean / back

The poet periodically steps into his own poem, self-reflexively musing on its highly fragmentary nature:

nobody comes to break the formal clarity of time

even as this phrase is itself repeatedly interrupted. While present, meaning as such is subordinated to sensation, and one is left with the poem and its effects, which depend, as is always the case, upon the skill of the poet, and the projective powers of their imagination.

Once one has gotten accustomed to Raworth’s characteristic lightning-quick jolts, an underlying unity often reveals itself unexpectedly. It can be helpful to scrutinize the contexts suggested by the poet’s use of language. In this instance, the poet refers to anemones, gloaming, the coast, walking, and bridges. A clear enough framework for interpreting the many sudden digressions that characterize this poem. There are also overwrought, faux-romantic plaints: his head aches, and ‘the delicate poem to express my grief escapes me’.

Setting this poem required me to confront many daunting technical challenges. The solutions I came up with still find echoes in my work today. To begin with, the various forms of interruption leap off the page when the poem is read, or even just looked at; but when shorn of its typography, the effect is diminished. I had to find a way to reconstitute this ‘discontinuous continuity’ musically, integrating functionally independent materials within a coherent compositional project.

In the resulting work, the soprano line continuously changes character, in keeping with the mercurial nature of the poem itself: by turns lyrical, virtuosic, declamatory, intimate, casual and melodramatic. The instrumental substance of the piece was composed entirely apart from the voice, on separate sheets of manuscript paper, jump-cutting between 5 unrelated texture-types, with neither transition nor forewarning:

1. flickering, rapid figures in piccolo, glockenspiel and celesta;
2. tutti passages with homophonic chords, alongside unrelated harmonic material played by E-flat clarinet and piano;
3. viola pizzicatos in rhythmic unison with six clay flowerpots, accompanied by an oboe d'amore obbligato;
4. Swarms of microtonal string pitches, forced into the constricted space of a minor third, and played *legno tratto* (with the wood of the bow);
5. Solo cello passages played in harmonic glissandi.

These changes in instrumental texture do not always coincide with the shifts of character in the soprano line, such that when superimposed, the two layers provide a continuous array of asynchronous layerings. A schematic illustration of this principle might look like this:



In addition to the text-settings in *Iridescent Notation*, there are two instrumental movements that mirror and amplify the character of the poetry and serve as a proxy for the voice. The first, *The Inventor Projected*, is an overture, written in a deliberately exaggerated, comic opera style. This movement is replete with briskly-paced gestures, and is intended to introduce the overarching mood of the work as a whole. The second is titled *Pressing, Turning*. This movement consists of two superimposed, yet functionally independent layers. There is a virtuosic violin solo that begins with disjunctive lines before gradually assuming a more linear shape; and a harmonic accompaniment, which presents a recurring cycle of variously-orchestrated chords played by a small ensemble of bass flute, celesta, vibraphone and cello—parallel, independent trajectories that, I hope, collide in interesting ways. The titles of these movements, as well as that of the work itself, were drawn from a Raworth poem published in the collection *Eternal Sections*.

Now here is a short poem by J. H. Prynne, selected for my new cantata:

TO EYE APART

To eye apart fine arrow key you know leaf
 greeted in fading search ahead, acres ready
 set aside, nothing happens here. Eye-brow
 lucid to miss low density, synthetic honey
 spread remember within walled crannies: fork
 up paint both hands, manner graft to pack
 by willing sips, stand up, nocturnal at beat
 first. As besides termly will either, neither.

If there are poems that can be read at different speeds depending on one's mood and inclination, *To Eye Apart* appears resolutely jammed on the slowest setting. If one understands the act of reading as a form of participation in a shared sense-making enterprise, with agreed-upon conventions of syntax, form and genre that facilitate comprehension, this process, when dealing with Prynne, is always provisional. I had to parse these texts dozens of times, trying and discarding countless glosses before I could tentatively imagine I had read them. In common with Tom Raworth's poems, meaningful units are terse; but in Prynne, conventional syntactical structure is itself frequently undermined. What's more, the poem is tightly packed and seems to point to many things at once. Locating anything like a stable theme, or even group of themes, let alone a consistent authorial voice, is not a straightforward matter.

Whereas the Raworth texts were drawn from many published sources, spanning decades of Raworth's publishing history, the Prynne poems were taken from a single collection: *Or Scissel*, published in 2018 by Shearsman Books. The poems of this book are thematically unified, but the themes are multiple, and their interaction is dialectical in nature. Yet, in an approach that resonates with my own music, these dialectical oppositions are not resolved through some sort of a higher synthesis; they are laid out before us, bare, projecting an intense, incandescent energy. The reader must navigate abruptly contrasting expressive registers and vocabularies: commerce ('purchase revenue'; 'how swiftly & gainful it could be done'; bucolic revery ('in air passing and lifted / besprent with dew'; industrial manufacturing ('shiny packing', 'link alignment', 'press-stud variant'); and repeated exhortations to *pay attention* ('see further'; 'light the way). Throughout, the natural and the artificial, the profoundly intimate and the hopelessly remote, are made to confront one another.

Prynne makes frequent use of vocabulary that is either highly technical or obscure. The reader may need to check on words such as *pantile*, *absterge*, *welkin*, *estoppel*, *condign*, *finnick*, *pinchbeck*, *tappet*, *debenture* or *coverlet*. The title of the book immediately signals the richness of the author's vocabulary and breadth of technical reference: *scissel* is the perforated scrap material left behind when coins are punched out of a sheet of metal. While the book certainly invites the reader to jettison old habits of reading, forcing us to reconsider what reading itself might involve, the result is exhilarating, a corrective to the dead, manipulative or deceitful language characterizing so much of everyday public life.

While setting *To Eye Apart*, I was immediately confronted by a welter of obstacles. First, its relationship to temporality. While short on lines and words, it is dense in the extreme, every word simultaneously implying multiple perspectives and pushing away from them. A few complete and transparent statements dot the text, and these immediately stand out: 'nothing happens here', 'acres ready set aside', 'within walled crannies'. These, along with the title, are suggestive of a concentrated, sequestered apartness. 'Eye-brow lucid' seems to point to patience and clarity of vision. The word 'termly' implies an academic context.

Identifying the different fields of reference, specificities of vocabulary and rhetorical disposition can take some time, before one can begin to imagine how all of these things are interacting within the poem. While the impatient reader might see in this a needlessly torturous poetics, burdening the reader with more agency than they have asked for, Prynne nevertheless sets a most compelling trap: the surface qualities of his verse are so elegant, so extraordinarily beautiful, that the glow of the text's significance draws one in, and one is invited to peer deeper.

It seemed to me as I began writing that amplifying these surface qualities through correspondingly terse and elegant music was perhaps not a bad strategy, and that if I did so successfully, the question of sense might take care of itself. While my own reading of Prynne's poems was intense and searching, the music I ended up writing was highly instinctual; in every case, the essential musical idea came in a flash, even though the working-out of the material may have required many drafts. For *To Eye Apart*, I ended up composing a quite lyrical setting, one that for the most part traces the rhythmic curves of the poem itself. I adopted an unhurried tempo, without attempting to make everything clear, nor indeed to illustrate the poem through word painting or other figuralisms that would have been quite incongruous here.

Before writing a note of music, I paid scrupulous attention to the formal articulation of the texts, and to the patterns of stresses in the words. I also determined which words I might wish to underline musically, and how to place them within the phrases I would be composing. The result is, I believe, rather transparent, without ornament, only the briefest melismas, and a mostly syllabic setting of the text. It is also notably continuous in its phrase structure, and in this sense, very different from the disjunctive approach I took to Tom Raworth's poetry. Counterintuitively, Prynne's allusive, rich poetry has led to some of my most approachable music.

Together, these two cantata projects have significantly deepened my sensitivity to what I would call musical dramaturgy. I take this concept to be distinct from form. Dramaturgy results from the energies released when opposing musical ideas/forces interact, and it is the ways in which these interactions play out over the course of the whole work that define its qualities. In the Prynne and Raworth texts, albeit in quite different ways, such oppositions are embedded within the fabric of the language itself, rather than being laid out in sequential, narrative fashion. Thus, the forces at play in the work, their energetic collisions and their intimate braidings, are dynamic and generative in nature; they are not *natures mortes*. This has no doubt accelerated a shift in how I approach my work. Earlier pieces tended to be articulated more through particular sonic qualities and their eventual transformations; today, I consider the material as a vehicle of sorts, but one that must be invented in tandem with a trajectory, an energetic disposition, such that the sonic reality of the piece, and its kinetic forces, are inextricably intertwined.

More generally, these texts attracted me in part due to the productive and stimulating resistance they offer. They do not give up their secrets unbidden, yet are so compelling in their viscera that one is drawn to interrogating them more deeply. Along the way, familiar habits are of necessity disrupted; the open reader will find this an exhilarating experience, in which one's own self can, in the most vital sense, be reconstituted and refreshed. It is my ambition that my own music might do that as well, at least some of the time.

I cannot imagine what these cantatas might mean to a listener, nor do I know how successful I have been in attempting to give a musical form to the sensations inspired in me by these poems. Yet, I do know quite precisely what these scores mean to me; through the entirely new continents of expression revealed to us by these poets, I have been stimulated to solve musical questions, thus expanding the range of what I can do in music.