

Ann Cleare – Composers’ Prize Winner 2019

Is it Music at all?

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Ann Cleare’s music is so bold, so direct, so clear in its expressive intentions that it begs the question: is it music at all? Or is it something else, an altogether different artform that draws from musical traditions, but pushes against and beyond them, articulating something that is at once about sound, but that is equally concerned with energy, motion, space – and the world itself? Like many of the most fascinating composers of the last century, Cleare, an Irish composer based in County Offaly, seems happy to dwell in this undefined space, which is nevertheless a space of new and exhilarating possibilities. We hear some of these possibilities take shape in *teeth of light, tongue of waves* (2017–18), a work for soprano, bassoon and strings, in which the soprano sings into a bamboo chime. Since the soprano is always heard together with an undulating bassoon, it is easy to imagine that the voice lives underwater, perhaps a nod to the composition’s theme of paleoceanography, the study of primordial oceans. Cleare’s detailed notations leave little doubt as to how the soprano should operate the bamboo chime, itself seemingly plucked from a distant past. And yet, as with many of her other compositions, this precision in notation is balanced by a sense of freedom that is also imparted by the score, and Cleare’s clear sense of trust in performers. Cleare’s scores are akin to an intimate, profoundly elaborate language known only to a privileged few. In *moil* (2013) for string quartet, a score dense in sonic detail is peppered with expansive instructions that guide the performer’s imagination: “Abrupt, wave-like”; “Two pockets of unending, complex energy”; “From the Past: Another Place”; “A light coming closer and closer”. Just as the performer’s imagination is thus carefully moulded, the listener’s imagination is ignited and revived through Cleare’s music. *eöl* (2014–15) for percussion and chamber ensemble takes inspiration from the character Edward Scissorhands, the artificial human who has blades for fingers. In *eöl* these hands are reimagined as metallic percussion instruments that a percussionist wears on his or her hands and arms. The effect on the listener is at once sonic and haptic. We hear and simultaneously *feel* what the percussionist feels, imagining ourselves as inhabiting the percussionist’s body, a body reconstituted and extended through these strange and beautiful metallic appendages.

The physicality of Cleare’s music is part of what makes it seem like a new artform, something that resides between music, physics, electricity, and sculpture. Her 2016 composition *On Magnetic Fields* features two ensembles, what Cleare describes as “two kinetic whirlwinds” which are connected by two violin soloists. The way Cleare conceptualises these violins gives us important clues as to how she understands her craft. She sees the violin not as a musical instrument in the usual sense, but as an energetic medium. She writes that the violin “acts as an

electric current, a wiry voice that magnetically charges the electricity of the ensemble that surrounds it. The electric voice of each violin ignites an electromagnetic spectrum, with each of the surrounding ensembles wrapping layers of various sonic materials around the violins, providing an electric cloud for the evolving electricities to speak from." In this way, a violin, typically imagined as a *sonic* tool to be compositionally deployed, becomes something else: a spark, a medium, a charge. It is notable that, in realizing her idea of music-as-energetic-sculpture in this composition, Cleare does not rely on electroacoustics, apart from amplification. Instead, she uses acoustic instruments and human performers to embody ideas of electricity, motion and magnetism. Again, her score guides the performers along these energetic worlds: "Like an electrical surge coming to life"; "Like a stream of energy inside the ensemble motion"; "Turbulent changes prompted by violin..."; "Perturbations"; "flickering into"; "funneling"; "floating".

A similar impulse underlies *I Am Not a Clockmaker Either* (2009), a work for keyboard instrument and electronics. Here, Cleare creates in sound what the visual artist Cornelia Parker creates in sculpture: an object is exploded into countless fragments and subsequently re-assembled in such a way that each individual piece or shard can be newly appreciated. In Cleare's composition these sonic shards are transformed and propelled through myriad energetic fields. She evokes "a motion that breaks, ruptures, diverts, convolutes, and coils up on itself so that [sonic] fragments... are pulverised together, swirl around one another like clouds, rotate, implode or turn themselves inside out." This is music that lays bare the inner workings of the physical universe and makes them newly available for listeners to appreciate. Although the composition takes its title from the writings of Morton Feldman, its historical references seem to reach even further back in time, to Luigi Russolo's 1913 'Art of Noises' manifesto. Cleare achieves the Futurist dream of a true noise-music, a music rooted in energy, force, dynamism, motion, and power. In *Earth Waves* (2017–18) this music-borne-of-energy is brought to life by a solo trombonist and six vocalists who carry small loudspeakers, and whose movements are precisely choreographed by Cleare. As with many of her compositions, Cleare indicates where the performers should be located, and how and when they should move in the performance space and in relation to their instruments. Her scores can thus be seen as carefully prepared experiments in sonic energy: they set the conditions that enable certain kinds of energy to exist or dissipate.

To return to the question that Cleare's work begs, is this music at all or is it something else: an art of energy; an art of shaping space through sound and motion; an art of connecting imaginations and consciousnesses; an art of the poetry and history of time? Of course, it is all these things and more, and as such it enables us to understand music in these new but fundamental ways.