



## Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 2019 for Rebecca Saunders

### Le son, c'est moi!

Five Essays on Rebecca Saunders, by Björn Gottstein

1. At the foot of the Picos de Europa mountain range in northwestern Spain, about two kilometers from the sea, there is an ancient Asturian cottage cut into the rockface of a mountain. To its side, a forest with a river. When you close the windows you are shut off from the world, and when night falls it is the darkest, most silent place imaginable. There are no animals except for dragonflies, drifting noiselessly. The air is incredibly damp and absorbs all sound: no movement, no birds, no insects, no rushing water, no wind – "just dense blackness and absolute emptiness." (Saunders)

It is an eerie place with archaic architecture and full of witch's paraphernalia: pictures, dolls, and numerous artifacts to ward off evil spirits. As Saunders recalls, this utter stillness had something lifeless – almost deathly – about it, as if the house were a coffin. It was only when she put in earplugs and isolated herself acoustically from her surroundings that she heard something: the fingerprint of her circulatory system – her beating heart pumping blood through her body. Sounds of life.

When Saunders recounts this experience in Asturias, there is a sense of awe in her voice and, listening, one feels how much it impacted her – not only because she has lived in cities almost her entire life, but also because it taught her something regarding the meaning of silence, about "its weight and darkness." (Saunders)

Of course, this contains parallels to John Cage's famous description of his experience in an anechoic chamber, where he discovered that, even in the stillness of an environment mechanically devoid of sound, he still heard something, namely, two tones: a deeper one, his circulatory system, and a higher one, supposedly his nervous system. Cage's account of this event has become something of a modern legend within the world of New Music. Many have offered interpretations, usually concluding that there is no such thing as complete silence.

In many ways, however, Saunders' experience in Asturias is almost the polar opposite of Cage's. After all, she wasn't deliberately seeking out an artificially constructed room, but rather encountered silence in a natural setting. Silence found her. "Disquieted by this absolute silence, I put in my earplugs in order to comfort myself with the sound of my blood rushing through my veins." Thus, she was able to experience not only Cage's audible sensation of the sounds of the body but also what Cage believed impossible: complete silence. With this realization, Saunders deconstructs the legend around John Cage's experience, which is not to say that she wishes to refute or disparage Cage – she aims merely to observe and enquire. In doing so, she has shown that silence is infinitely more than the absence of sound.

2. Saunders grew up in Brixton, a "loud and extremely lively" inner-city London neighborhood, though she now lives in Berlin. Two pulsating metropolises with highly developed sound worlds. Such surroundings were very important to her: "The energy and sounds of a city environment still make me feel alive. I like to focus and re-focus my ear, playing with my perception of sonic events and surfaces of sound in the cacophony of a sonic city landscape, and to sense the potentially deafening white noise around me."

Silence is therefore an exception rather than the norm, creating something unrelated to our daily experience. It is the condition for us to be able to perceive sound as music or as art, for us to be able to sink into our acoustic sensations and enter a place different to that which we normally inhabit. "Silence is the canvas behind the sound," writes Saunders. "It frames the sound." By supporting and framing sound, silence assumes two functions that have less to do with the work itself and more to do with its context – music unfolds within the confines of canvas and frame.

In New Music discourse, silence has become an over-loaded term and is rarely a central focus today. In Rebecca Saunders' works, however, silence is essential, as her music often germinates and develops from within silence. Many musical gestures start with the expression 'dal niente' ('from nothing'). Saunders draws music out of silence. For her, silence is absence seeking a form of presence. It is not sacred, but rather a dialectical category.

In the past few years, a key contradiction is increasingly manifest in Saunders' works, a productive contradiction that gives her music both an acoustic and structural identity. On the one hand, there is a certain instability that emanates from silence – static, reduced, skeletal – while on the other hand, there are abrupt, explosive gestures that Saunders has associated with states of anger, with drive and aggression. "I'm fascinated with creating an extreme musical tension (...) an acoustic landscape that represents a charged, unmistakable form of energy comparable to wrath." This contradiction surfaces most clearly in Saunders' piano pieces after the turn of the millennium. Pieces such as *Choler* or *Crimson* rely wholeheartedly on this stark contrast – the static, unmoving, reserved stagnancy pitted against the aggressive and the volatile. At the end of *Choler*, a simple, melancholic melody hints at a way out of this unresolvable struggle. This contrast is no reconciliation or salvation but rather a reflective moment, underlining the intensity of anger. Such moments can often be found at the end of Saunders' early works, where music boxes or vinyl records are used to break the acoustic conflict.

This contradiction is intensified in pieces that unite both worlds into a single central sound fragment, occurring, for example, in a number of recent works for strings: in the cello concerto *Ire*, the string quartet *Fletch*, the violin concerto *Still*, and in *Solitude* for cello solo. In these works, a double harmonic trill assumes a central role, creating an unstable sound. It glissandos, obscuring its identity, with heavily gesticulated up-bows, giving the sound energy, volume, and direction, while the mechanical movement of the trill itself creates a manic atmosphere. It can be played on a low-tension string, veiling its articulation, or sharpen its sound on a high-tension string. The sound is always fragile, yet also aggressive and unrelenting. Such a sound – already marked by an inherent contradiction – is possibly the most evident characteristic of Saunders' dialectic, out of which she constructs her entire sonic universe.

3. Saunders' works regularly reflect emotional states and temperaments such as anger or melancholy. In pieces such as *Choler* and *Fury*, this is stated outright. Such sentiments often relate to strong bodily emotions and express themselves in physical sound gestures.

For Saunders the physicality of expression is always clearly manifest, although her music cannot be reduced to this singular aspect, since the vast range of meaning in her works is too richly layered. A cursory glance at the physical aspect of her music will reveal its operation in all three areas – composition, interpretation, and listening – most notably however in the area of interpretation. Saunders concerns herself not only with the phenomenon of pure acoustic sounds, but with the bodily movement that produces a specific sound, gesture, or sonic fragment. Prior to composing a piece, she frequently collaborates with performers to research sonic material and to establish a close connection with their playing. This intense correlation between a performer's movements and the sound produced in Saunders' music is clearly evident in her relationship with trumpeter Marco Blaauw (for whom she wrote the pieces *Blaauw*, *Alba*, *White*, and *Neither*), with violinist Carolin Widmann on *Still*, with cellist Séverine Ballon on *Solitude*, with the clarinetist Carl Rosman on *Caerulean* and *Aether*, and with the soprano Juliet Fraser on *Skin*. In these projects, Saunders aimed to reveal and explore sounds specific to the performer and their playing, as well as to "experience the raw physicality of sound production."

In an early critique of Saunders' music, Robert Adlington wrote that "it sounds how it's played," i.e. that there is a particular correlation between the sounds and the movements required to produce them. Saunders likewise describes the relationship between physical and musical gestures, in particular in her work *Choler* for two pianos, which contains traces of a choreography for the pianists: "the swaying upper body, the release of sound through the physical gesture, the choreography of the 4 arms, palms, wrists, the joints and fingertips of the 2 players." Unique to *Choler* is that Saunders was able to test all the sounds on the piano during the composition process. "The relationship between the players and their instruments is critical. It is a very physical piece to play, to listen to, and to observe." Even the presence of a pianist sitting at a piano evokes an aesthetic moment: "It's pure theatre. It's beautiful."

4. "I need very little impetus to write," explains Saunders. "A trace of a fragment of sound which arrests me, a single gesture embodying a wealth of potential and significance, a particular timbre and its transformations, a single word."

Sometimes, you get the feeling that Saunders doesn't just use her ears for hearing, but also for reading, seeing, smelling, and tasting. The source of her works often comes from beyond the world of music – books, films, and pictures. Paintings by Mark Rothko and films by Derek Jarman have left traces in her works. *Chroma*, a spatial collage for multiple pieces of chamber music originally conceived for the Turbine Hall of London's Tate Modern, named after Jarman's *Chroma: A Book of Colour*. Another example is the uninhibited, unashamed internal monologue of Molly Bloom, which appears at the end of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. This monologue makes appearances throughout Saunders' oeuvre, initially as a poetic brainstorm for a instrumental works such as the collection of pieces called *Molly's Song*, in which it is portrayed from a multitude of angles: in *O*, in *O Yes & I*, in *Flesh* and especially in the large-scale musical collage *Yes* for soprano, 19 instrumentalists, and conductor.

And how does Saunders listen to music? She grew up in a musical family: her grandfather was an organist; her grandmother and parents were all pianists; and there were four pianos in the home on which both classical music and jazz were played. "As a very small child I remember drawing pictures while sitting against the wall in my father's study while he practised or coached a singer. And also lying under the piano soaking in the resonance of the instrument." The raw physical nature of the listening experience was, for Saunders, apparent at an early age. She played the violin, with a particular affinity for the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. It was during a trip to the USA as a young composer that she experienced the music of Morton Feldman for the first time, witnessing viscerally that music could enable an alternative interpretation of time and space – and that an entire world can lie hidden within a tiny detail or fragment. Her encounter with Wolfgang Rihm's *Chiffre* cycle paved the way for the cultivation of Saunders' own compositional voice: "For me, his music possesses a deep sensuality and a tremendously complex and fascinating approach to tone color. The life-affirming power of his music also appealed to me immediately, and I knew: I must go there. Soon thereafter, Saunders moved to Karlsruhe to study with him.

Saunders would later describe the day that Rihm brought a CD of Galina Ustvolskaya's *Duet for Violin and Piano* into their seminar. It was an overwhelming experience – an epiphany for Saunders: "I felt numb, breathless, as the piece ended, having been drawn into a sonic state to which I could at that time find no comparison. The extreme focus of intention, the clarity and purity of musical expression; an unashamed passion and obsession." One can see in Saunders' music those elements of Ustvolskaya's music that so enthused her, including the enormous physicality, the sheer force of the music itself, and the acute directness of expression.

5. Saunders' relationship with the works of Samuel Beckett borders on the obsessive. One could even say that Beckett's thoughts permeate her work, or at least that Beckett's texts are echoed in Saunders' music. "Beckett weighs each and every word and its shadow, its echo," writes Saunders. His texts are "unrelentingly direct and exceptionally fragile." The narrator's lines from Beckett's TV drama *Ghost Trio*, which Saunders uses in her piece *Skin*, are a prime example. "Dust is the skin of a room," says a voice. In a typical manner for Beckett, he refers to a viewpoint that normally evades our senses. He places something in the spotlight that we only normally interpret in passing, if at all. If dust is the skin of a room, then that makes skin permeable, unstable, and porous, which contradicts our standard perception of skin as something encapsulating and protective, that which hides an object's inner workings. In Beckett's hands, such boundaries dissolve and it is precisely there that Saunders undertakes her sound research. Were one to craft a metaphor from Beckett's observations, one could say that Saunders' piece *Skin* converts a permeable, unstable, and porous surface into a musical form. Dust can only be seen as a surface when one pays great attention to detail, and this characteristic can also be found in her music: the meticulous precision, the almost scientific approach to researching sound, is central. Tones are researched and examined. Here, another trait of Beckett's work comes to the fore, namely the reduction of text to its bare essentials, stripping the language down until it is on the cusp of existence. Or, in Ulrich Pothast's words: "Beckett is the retreat of the spoken into the unspoken." Here, Saunders' preoccupation with Beckett is perhaps most strongly evident: Saunders also strips the music down to a skeletal form on the edge of its existence. Silence is always a starting point for her writing and listening, and yet the resultant music is far from silent. The attempt to say nothing leads – in both Beckett and Saunders – to something being said, to "an essence being articulated."

Other terms important to Beckett's work likewise find a role in Saunders' output: for example, the titles of pieces such as *Stirrings Still*, *a visible trace*, *Stasis*, *murmurs*, and also *Void*, which is a concerto for two percussionists and orchestra. The equivocal term 'void' contrasts with the emptiness its meaning reflects: a primordial emptiness, a beginning, a hole, a hollow, an absence; and as a verb: to cancel, to invalidate. Silence hides the existential," says Saunders. Conversely, this implies that we can only approach the existential in music through silence. *Void* attempts to experience and articulate something of this nothingness through a continuous shifting of perspectives, through changing the compass and depth of focus on the sound. That this process leads to such incredible power, that the music can at times rear up so fiercely, may seem like a contradiction, but it is precisely this unbridled energy that is required to penetrate into the terrain.

It is surely telling that the author whose output many composers have declared to be impossible to set to music or – as Paul-Heinz Dittrich said – would require the invention of a whole new kind of music is central to Saunders' work. She has deliberately sought and developed her sound world step by step, daring to take additional, ever more exploratory steps in each new piece she writes. The result is the sort of unique, new form of music of which Dittrich spoke, one capable of engaging with Beckett's contradictory, self-effacing body of thought. It is a music that is able to erase itself and to encapsulate the potential as well as the conditions for its own evolution.

Translation: Robert Jacobs/Mark Barden