



Beating Bounds, the Limits of Failure: the Music of Mark Barden

Mark Barden's work represents a staging of the failures that occur just before and just beyond the limits of what the body can hear and what it can enact, but where the failure itself is always palpable. The sounds of this music are, by turns, dense, visceral, and febrile; the tangibility of the performer's loss of precise physical control is mirrored in the listening experience. The listener senses, just barely, a loss of themselves in this moment of shared vulnerability.

The aesthetics of failure are hardly unknown territory for contemporary music. Much of the music of the so-called New Complexity relies intimately on a literally un-reproducible sonic surface, as measured against the virtual music betokened by a score. Indeed, much of the pleasure of the encounter with such musics is derived from seeing a virtuosic performer one knows, with surety, is operating some way beyond the limits of the possible, struggling to reproduce faithfully impossible demands. Yet, if this is a sort of alienating failure – and in particular a failure where the human subject figured on the musical stage is necessarily isolated, turned inwards, even if (perhaps) heroically – the sorts of failure, and its limits, in Mark Barden's music are quite different.

First, their concern is not with heroic self-transcendence, not with the singular modernist subject at all, but rather with 'us', with failures that 'we', in listening to and sensing this music, are directly engaged with. *a tearing of vision* (2012) contains an essentially static, unchanging solo piano line throughout, consistently exploring the same material in the same way, but presented within an increasingly dense orchestral texture. In this context, the changing orchestral density causes the listener to hear the piano line changing, *even if* that listener is also rationally aware that this is not the case. In *Chamber* (2006–07), the overall soundworld is dominated by the sound of voices singing *just beyond* the top of their range. Even in this context, it is a recognisable sound. Indeed, it is a recognisable *experience*, not least from the moment of discovering that one has begun to sing some popular tune – or 'Happy Birthday' for that matter – just slightly too high, a discovery normally made when it is rather too late to correct the error. Similarly, at the opening of *die Haut Anderer* (2008), the pianist is directed to depress keys only with a single finger on each hand, beginning silently and gradually moving towards sounding notes. Even at a regular, more or less languid pace, anyone who has ever touched a keyboard remembers tangibly those first moments—for some people the only contact with a piano they may ever have—when depressing keys produces no sound or merely *some* sound and when the sheer immensity of the keyboard is overwhelming. These gestures are ones recognisable, sympathetic; it is possible to share in them. Yet *these gestures* are chosen because their particular fragilities are, too, graceful, lush, sometimes luxuriant.

Second, they are concerned with the limit itself, with the boundary conditions of failure. They ask not, in fact, what happens at the limit, nor what the limit *is*, but explore the limit of limits. If failure represents a limit, what are the limits of failure? Barden's music recalls, in metaphorical guise, a sort of beating of the bounds, recalling the practice, before maps had become commonplace, of a community walking together, on foot, around the very edges of a territory. The physicality of this question – how far can a

limit go? – was, then, highlighted by the physical beating of boundary markers with bundles of birch or willow or, sometimes, the bumping of the heads of the boys of the parish on those same stone markers. Now, such great stones appear, hardly surprisingly, in Barden's *Five Monoliths* (2014). These monoliths are not the smooth, glassy, modernist surfaces of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. They are, instead, just as the name suggests, massive, primeval stone-like objects, gently hinting at the overwhelming force of the nineteenth-century sublime, while undercutting that by the realisation that these immense standing stones have been magnified such that their brittle, fragile, highly textured surfaces become palpable. Perception is central here, as in the fourth monolith where, beneath the ensemble, a bass drum sounds out a heartbeat, at intervals precisely on the edge of the point, almost always between 7 and 8 seconds, where it becomes difficult to assess relative durations, the fluctuation between what might be pulse and what rhythm *sensed* rather than strictly perceived by the listener. It should be hardly surprising that, in the third monolith, two sine waves mark out the boundaries of the pitch material the ensemble performs, but fluctuate microtonally, producing irregular beatings. The same beats – which is to say, the close proximity of events one to another – appear on the temporal level in *flesh/veil* where instrumental duos are asked to perform in *near* unison, mimicking the effects of delayed auditory feedback, where a user hears an echo of their speaking voice a fraction of a second after they have spoken. At some delays, the process can help those with stutters; at others – round about 175–200 milliseconds – mental stress is provoked, leading in some cases to induced muteness. On a more everyday level, just this delayed auditory feedback is a commonplace for anyone using a cellphone or VoIP service: again, the listener recognises, if here dimly, that they too have experienced *just this* near muteness. Such moments in the score are impossible to perform in a literal adherence to the score not because of the hyper-virtuosic demands of the notation, but instead because of the implicit demands and needs of *others*. This shared failure, the vulnerability held in common between performer, listeners, and, to be sure, composers too – and the responsibility which comes with it – is staged, represented, made *tangible* under precisely the boundary conditions Barden consistently explores.

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