Apr 16

Interview:
Nathaniel Bartlett

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art (/?category=performance+art), music (/?category=music), sound engineer
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Nathaniel Bartlett is a sound engineer, musician, composer, and
software developer, among other titles. For the past decade,
Nathaniel has been traveling across the U.S. performing solo
marimba and his specially-engineered electronic marimba
performances. Nathaniel has performed in museums, universities,
underground venues, and concert halls, offering a unique
spatialised listening experience. Read more about Nathaniel's
practice below, and visit his website to see his entire repertoire
(http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

LEB: Tell me about the musical work you create.

NB: In the simplest terms, I would describe myself as a composer,
performer, and technologist. I compose pieces for myself to play,

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and also for others to play without my involvement. Personally, I specialize in playing the marimba. In terms of technology, I develop my own software to advance my work. And in terms of sound, I like to focus on the nuances and inner details of different sounds: the sounds you have to reach out to rather than be presented with. My recording system allows me to present these variations in a specialized sound environment, where it fully engages a listener's brain. This becomes a three-dimensional listening experience which fully engages a listener. Normal surround sound systems utilize a handful of speakers in a leveled circle; my system uses uniformly-spaced speakers surrounding the listener on all sides, including at different heights for truly three-dimensional sound. I control how the music is distributed through the speakers with a computer so the sound flows seamlessly around the listener. With the added parameter of spatialisation, the listener is able to hear more of the work and have a deeper understanding of the piece.

LEB: Do you think that someone can have the same listening experience with the use of headphones, rather than being physically in a constructed audio environment?

NB: It's definitely possible to gain a very good listening experience through headphones. The caveat is that there are so many headphones that can't render all the sounds correctly. But headphones can do specific things that are impossible to do with loudspeakers; for example, when you're wearing headphones, your left and right ear can hear something entirely different which doesn't cross over. With headphones, you can actually experience different versions of 3D but the spatialized sounds shift according to your head's position and your body's movements.

LEB: How do you integrate technology in your compositions when you're physically playing an acoustic instrument, like the marimba?

TRICHOTOMIC ECOLOGY // EXCERPT 1 // NATHANIEL BARTLETT
from **Nathaniel Bartlett**

04:27

From the album *Trichotomic Ecology*, composed by Nathaniel Bartlett. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com (http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

Nathaniel in his spatialised sound environment. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com (http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

NB: I do this in three main ways. Firstly, I'll manipulate the marimba in real time, so the listener is hearing what I'm playing but it's manipulated into sounding different. Secondly, I'll alter the sound of the marimba on a computer and play it back at a later time in the piece. It can be so heavily manipulated that it isn't obvious where each of those sounds were derived. Thirdly, I can use the marimba as a control interface for the computer. I can program computer software to convert certain types or arrangements of sounds into something entirely different, and not just the obvious

one-to-one shifting of sound.

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LEB: When you perform, do you compose the whole concert beforehand? Or do you just base the performance on the understanding of your technology, and go from there?

NB: I consider my performances to be part composition and part improvisation, but it really depends on how I design a specific work. I would say most of my compositions are flexible frameworks for a piece of music. For example, when you write a piece of music and commit it to paper, you often have to decide between two equally good options for how the piece will turn out. This doesn't mean that one of those decisions is better and the other worse; they're just different. But, on paper, you have to decide. When composing something via computer software, it's less committal than paper. You can take a step back in that compositional process and create different versions of the piece that are essentially the same composition. For example, I created an album called t*imeSpacePlace*, where the whole point was that I made two versions of each piece, calling one version *A-Side* and the other *B-Side*.

IMPULSE RESPONSE // RECORDING + SCORE
from **Nathaniel Bartlett**

07:01

From the album *Spectrum*. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com. (http://nathanielbartlett.com/)

LEB: Tell me about your most recent album, *Spectrum*.

Nathaniel on marimba. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com (http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

NB: *Spectrum* is comprised of a number of acoustic compositions, either for soloists or small chamber ensembles. This album is made of a collection of different compositions, all working together to form a coherent program. Central to the album are three interpretations of a composition titled *Cronometro*, which I wrote for my friend Payton MacDonald 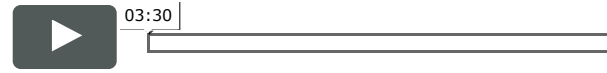to perform while riding the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route, which is a solo biking route from Mexico to Canada. The route crosses the continental divide 30 times over 2500 miles, and he would play a newly-commissioned composition every time he crossed the divide. He is a percussionist and vocalist, but beside his bike, he only brought a pair of mallets and would otherwise use found objects to perform these pieces. They had to be very flexible, and could be interpreted in a number of ways. I designed the score for him to watch on his smartphone as he biked. The score utilized a time meter and a system of icons to indicate what kind of sound he should perform. One version of *Cronometro* was performed by Fred Bugbee, a professor at NMSU, who limited the sounds he recorded to his local environment, using everything from a container filled with rocks to pools of water to plastic bags. He

even amplified the sound of plucking a cactus' spines.

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LEB: What projects are you working on now, and what do you plan to create in the immediate future?

NB: I recently finished a piece as part of an international internet broadcast project. Composers and musicians from all over the world performed 30 minute improvisations, which in total would last a full 24 hours. I created a piece which used real-time computer manipulation to alter the high pitched metal sounds of the glockenspiel to sound like large church bells. I'm currently in the process of

▶ 03:30

Interactive installation version of *(((clang)))*, composed by Nathaniel Bartlett. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com (http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

moving to Madison, Wisconsin, but before that I'm finishing a piece called *Solar Sequence*, for four glockenspiels. It's the last in a series of works I've written based on the New Mexico landscape and the air and light that are so unique to the state. It will be a part of my upcoming album *Luminous Machine*.

LEB: What is something you want a listener to notice about your work?

NB: For a lot of people, like myself, everything surrounding them is constant noise and busyness. Music and sound can be an escape if they're performed within a certain environment. In a space that's completely silent other than the sounds you're engaging with, you can become completely focused on what you're hearing, to pick out every different part. You escape to a different world where all you do is listen to different things in a particular and focused way. I always try to create the best version of my work and to perform in the best quality possible to achieve my aesthetic vision and to show respect for the audience. ✶

▶ 07:56

Nathaniel performing t*imeSpacePlace*. Experience more of Nathaniel's work on his website: nathanielbartlett.com (http://nathanielbartlett.com/).

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