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Recomposing the City: A Survey of Recent Sound Art in Belfast

Gascia Ouzounian

In the global arena, Belfast is most frequently recognized as the epicenter of the Troubles, the name given to the decades-long armed conflict in which local communities were pitted against one another, with divisions formed along a combination of political, religious, socioeconomic and geographical lines. Loyalist or unionist communities, who are predominantly Protestant, maintain allegiance with the United Kingdom and typically identify as British. Republican or nationalist communities, who are predominantly Roman Catholic, seek the reunification of Northern Ireland with Ireland and typically identify as Irish. It is possible for a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland to hold two passports—British and Irish—even as the country remains constitutionally part of the United Kingdom.

The violence that characterized the Troubles has profoundly diminished since the signing of the Good Friday agreement, the 1998 treaty that established Northern Ireland's current governmental structure and signaled a sustained truce. Still, there remain signs of sectarian divide within Belfast, which is otherwise described as a "post-conflict" city. As recently as December 2012, tensions flared as conservative and radical elements within the Loyalist community protested a decision by the local city council to fly the British flag at Belfast City Hall only on designated days instead of the entire year. As some of these protests became violent, counterprotesters staged a 1,000-person "peace rally" at City Hall. Organized by local artist Paul Currie, this gathering invited demonstrators to make any kind of noise for a few minutes, suggesting, "The peaceful silent majority needs to be heard too" [1]. The chaotic soundscape that ensued—a boisterous melange of hand-clapping, shouts, hollers, horn blowing, drumming and laughter—served as a stark contrast to the sounds most frequently associated with public gatherings in Belfast: the fife-and-drum tunes of Protestant marching bands that wind their way through the city during marching season each year, regarded by some as a demonstration of cultural pride, and by others as a triumphalist and threatening gesture.

Within this larger context of a steady but imperfect peace, Belfast has also been home to a virtual cultural Renaissance over the last decade. For a city whose population falls under 650,000, there are a remarkable number of art institutions and initiatives. These include established institutions such as Crescent Arts Centre, Waterfront Hall and Ulster Museum; alternative and artist-run spaces such as Black Box Belfast, Catalyst Arts, Platform Arts and PS2; contemporary art galleries such as Golden Thread Gallery and Fenderesky Gallery; and grassroots initiatives such as Delawab, Household Belfast

and Quiet Music Night, all of which have operated out of the homes of artists and curators. Numerous festivals, including the Belfast Festival at Queen's, Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and Sonorities Festival of Contemporary Music likewise provide national and international forums for contemporary performance and art.

The presence of sound art within this scene has become increasingly prominent, owing in part to the establishment of the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast in 2005, which, along with the University of Ulster, is a principal site for research and creation in sonic arts in Belfast. There is also a growing understanding of the relevance of sonic arts within the wider arts community in the region. In 2010, the Turner Prize, the most prestigious award given to British artists, was awarded to a sound artist for the first time in the award's history. Susan Philipsz, a Glasgow-born artist, was recognized for such works as *Lowlands* (2010), a sound installation that featured a layered, multichannel version of the artist singing a 16th-century Scottish lament. The decision to award the prize to a sound artist was predictably controversial. One detractor wrote, "Never before in the 26-year history of the Turner Prize has it been won by an artist who had nothing to show for her £25,000 prize money but sounds fabricated by her own voice" [2]. A BBC article quoted a conservative

ABSTRACT

This article introduces examples of recent sound art in Belfast, a city that has undergone radical transformation over the past decade and is home to a burgeoning community of sound artists. The text investigates the ways in which sonic art can redraw boundaries in a city historically marked by myriad political, socioeconomic, religious and sectarian divisions. The article focuses on sound works that reimagine a "post-conflict" Belfast. These include site-specific sound installations in urban and public spaces, soundwalks, sculptures, locative and online works, and experimental sonic performances that draw upon traditional Irish song and music.

Fig. 1. Pedro Rebelo, Rui Chaves, Matilde Meireles, Aonghus McEvoy and Max Stein, *Belfast Sound Map*, interactive website, 2012. Screenshot of *Belfast Sound Map* showing Kevin McCullagh's recording "Beechmount RPG Avenue." (© Rebelo, Chaves, Meireles, McEvoy, Stein)



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See the References and Notes section for links to supplemental files associated with this article.

art group that announced, “the award should not go to a ‘singer.’ . . . ‘It’s just someone singing in an empty room. It’s not art. It’s music’” [3]. Conversely, supporters embraced the decision as a boon for sound art, with one prominent critic characterizing the win as “a shot in the arm for sound art” [4]. The same critic explained, “you can even study courses in sound art at a handful of art colleges around the country. So the momentum’s already there. The high-profile win for Susan Philipsz might just build this up to the tipping point needed for sound art to really take off” [5]. Whether positive or negative, the decision brought signifi-

cant attention to sound art in the region, and served as an educational moment. One reporter introduced Philipsz’s work by explaining it was “[art] so intangible it can’t even be seen” [6].

This article introduces recent sound art works created in and for Belfast, giving special attention to works that reimagine the city, offering alternatives to the dominant images of a “post-conflict” Belfast. I am especially interested in discovering the ways in which sound—a medium characterized by impermanence and invisibility—can bypass or even bridge the normal barriers, whether physical, social, political or cultural, that exist in this city.

Many of the artists whose works are mentioned here are under 35, a sign that the nascent scene will continue to develop. Some were born and raised in Belfast, while others have relocated here in order to pursue education and work opportunities. All, however, share the common purpose to contribute in unique ways to the cultural life of a city whose image can, and is, being redrawn through art, even art so intangible it can’t even be seen.

In both metaphorical and actual ways, the projects mentioned here can be said to “recompose the city”: They position the city not as an object or collection of objects, but instead as a resonant idea that is cocreated by, and shared among, its inhabitants, visitors and, most especially, its listeners. Through these sound works the city can be newly understood as a collectively generated, unstable and unfixed, imagined and experienced, lived and living composition: one that can be continuously heard and sounded—and, when filtered through the dynamic matrix of sound, art and environment (physical, social, cultural and political)—recombined, reoriented and recomposed.

Fig. 2. Fionnuala Fagan and Isobel Anderson, *Sailortown* multimedia installation, 2012. Detail showing the listening station for Isobel Anderson’s song “The Ghost of Sailortown.” (Photo © Fionnuala Fagan)

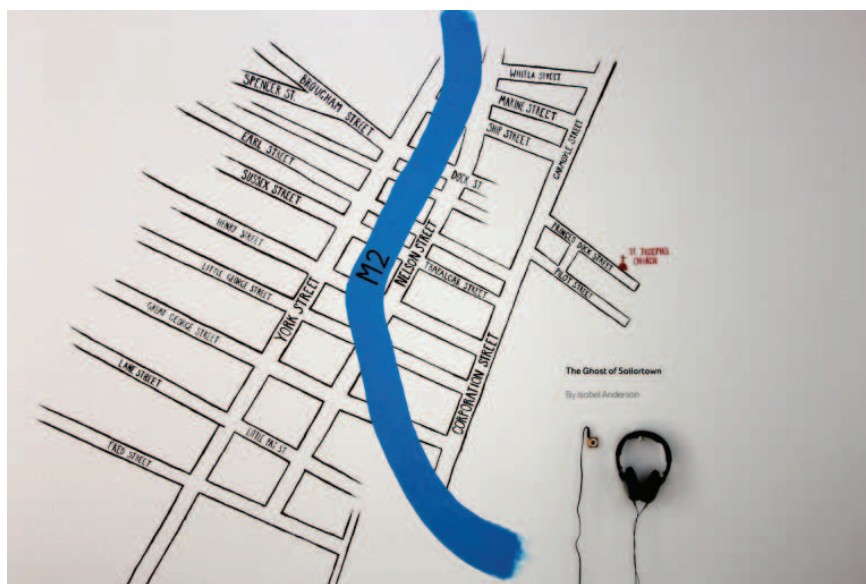
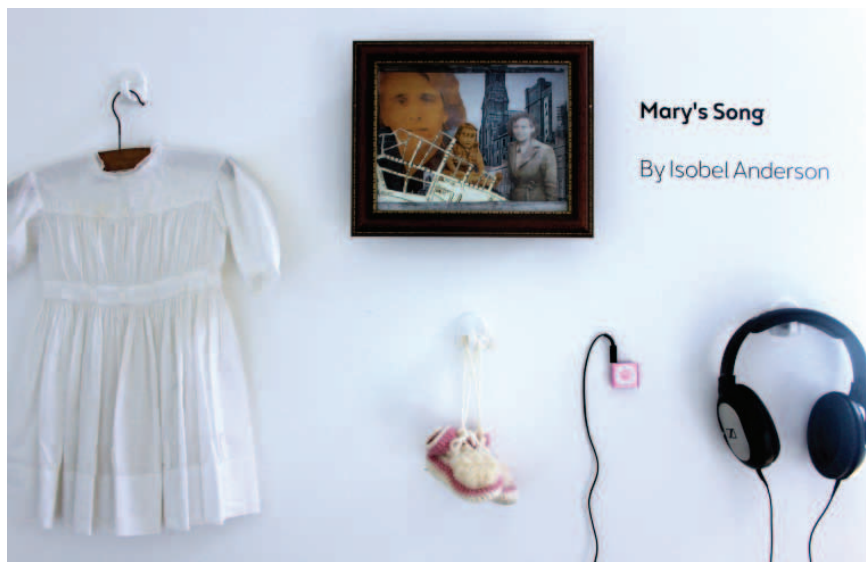


Fig. 3. Detail of *Sailortown* showing the listening station for Isobel Anderson’s song “Mary’s Song.” (Photo © Fionnuala Fagan)



SOUNDS AND STORIES OF THE CITY

On 20 April 2012, the Metropolitan Arts Centre (MAC), an £18-million building, opened its doors in Belfast with the aim of becoming the region’s premiere interdisciplinary arts center. The first Artist-in-Residence program at the MAC was a sound art program that featured the work of researchers from the Sonic Arts Research Centre, and one of the MAC’s first exhibits, *Sounds of the City*, featured the work of sonic artists Pedro Rebelo, Rui Chaves, Matilde Meireles and Aonghus McEvoy. Over a 4-month period this group developed five sound art projects, working in partnership with participants from the Tar Isteach and Dee Street community centers [7]. Among these projects were *The Walk Home*, a sound installation in the MAC’s corridors wherein the sounds of visitors’ footsteps merged with “the sound of footsteps made by thousands of shipyard workers returning home,” described by the artists as “an iconic aspect of Belfast’s aural identity”; *Call for Work*, in which factory horns evoking Belfast’s industrial past—created in collaboration with community participants who recalled these ubiquitous soundmarks—were installed in the gallery; and the *Belfast Sound Map*, an interactive, online platform that allows users to upload field recordings as well as com-



Fig. 4. Details of *Sailortown* showing the listening station for Fionnuala’s song “The Harbour Lights.” (Photo © Fionnuala Fagan)

mentary about the Belfast soundscape [8]. The latter, designed in collaboration with Max Stein, co-creator with Julian Stein of the *Montreal Sound Map* (2008), features several dozen recordings that visitors can browse by searching their location on a virtual interface powered by Google Maps [9,10].

Listening to the recordings featured on *Belfast Sound Map*, it is striking to note the extent to which a city’s unique character and identity can be described in sound, whether through local accents and speech patterns, the sounds of everyday business and leisure activities, traffic and transportation, or natural and environmental soundscapes. Perhaps inadvertently, the project has entered the realms of acoustic ecology as well as social commentary. One user, Kevin McCullagh, has updated a 1:45 recording titled “Bog Meadows,” which he describes as “the sound of what remains of the bog meadows in West Belfast, a nature reserve that is being encroached upon by the ravages of commercialism and expanding urbanization.” The same user has also posted “Beechmount (RPG) Avenue,” a 2:12 recording accompanied by a photograph of a mural that depicts a soldier in the Palestine Liberation Organization and a soldier in the Irish Republican Army joining forces above the caption “One Struggle” (Fig. 1). In his description of this recording, McCullagh quotes a local resident as saying, “I dreaded the mural on the side of my house being repainted as it inevitably meant a visit from the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] in the dead of night. I would be

woken by the low rumble of land rovers and the house shaking from the impact of the paint bombs.” The recording is described as “an approximation” of this resident’s “sound memory,” leading the visitor to *Belfast Sound Map* to imagine the complex sociopolitical histories that inflected these particular sounds and their hearing.

As an offshoot of the *Sounds of the City* program, two local sound artists who are also both singer-songwriters, Fionnuala Fagan and Isobel Anderson, proposed a sister exhibition, *Stories of the City* (7–20

May 2012). For this exhibition Fagan and Anderson developed the project *Sailortown* in collaboration with members of a local community that has been particularly impacted by urbanization in Belfast [11]. Once a bustling dockside village of thousands located inside central Belfast, Sailortown was, for over a century, home to seamen, merchants and industrial workers who manned the city’s mills and shipyards. Urban development and modernization projects in the 1960s led to a controversial decision to demolish the town in order to make way for the M2 motorway. Residents were promised relocation, but developers failed to deliver on this promise. Surviving members of the community continue to be connected through the Sailortown Regeneration Group, a community development organization whose mission includes archiving the cultural and architectural history of the vanished town. Upon approaching this group, Fagan and Anderson discovered that they were not entirely welcoming of outside interest. Fagan writes:

The community agreed to meet with us on the premise of exchange—they would share the stories of Sailortown and we would then document their words and experiences, using song and installation. I had expected the community to be excited by the prospect of this, but in actual fact, they were quite suspicious of our motives—mainly as a result of their previous negative experience of artists. . . . During our initial meetings, it became clear that the Sailortown community saw us as prospective users [12].

Fig. 5. Ryan O’Reilly, map designed for *Resounding Rivers*, a site-specific audio installation and multimedia exhibition by Matt Green, 2010. (Map © Ryan O’Reilly, Rinky Design <rinky.org>)



Still, the artists continued to meet with the Sailortown community over a period of several months and ultimately found that, “through listening, sympathizing and repeatedly expressing our genuine interest in their stories and in the history of [Sailortown], we finally began to break down some barriers” [13] (Fig. 2).

For the *Sailortown* exhibition, Fagan and Anderson turned their interviews with Sailortown community participants into verbatim songs that comprised the words and stories relayed to them by the participants. They performed these songs at the MAC, and installed recordings along a series of “song shrines,” listening stations that also featured objects loaned to them by the participants (Figs 3 and 4).

Upon hearing their stories turned into song and sound art, the Sailortown community participants expressed surprise and appreciation, not expecting that the exhibition would reflect their experiences so effectively. One participant commented, “[The exhibition] blew me away. I didn’t realize my story was so interesting” [14]. The artists were similarly impacted by the project. Anderson tells me:

Living as a student in South Belfast, you rarely spend much time outside of those streets and student social circles. I feel incredibly lucky to have been given the opportunity to hear the Sailortown community’s stories of this area of Belfast. Otherwise, the M2 would still just look like the M2. The docks would still be a concrete expanse with a couple of industrial sized ships and the streets that remain would just be car parks and offices under flyovers, between barbed wire fences. Now, this area is Sailortown. That feels like an amazing privilege [15].

In a poignant way, *Sailortown* provided an opportunity for a community tied together by a shared experience of dispossession to communicate with an audience that had either been unaware, or else was willfully ignorant of, their plight. For many community participants, the simple act of “being listened to” and “being heard” was in itself a powerful experience, contrasting sharply with the silence and invisibility that had characterized Sailortown’s presence within the larger Belfast community for decades. In this way, methods that are inherent to sonic arts—listening, hearing, translation, interpretation and recording—can be understood as providing a route towards cultural exchange that confounds traditional barriers, in this case barriers that included socioeconomic, cultural and historical ones.



Fig. 6. Matt Green, *Resounding Rivers*, site-specific audio installation and multimedia exhibition, 2010. Poster announcing *Resounding Rivers* in Belfast’s city center. (Poster © Ryan O’Reilly, Rinky Design <rinky.org>. Photo © Matt Green.)

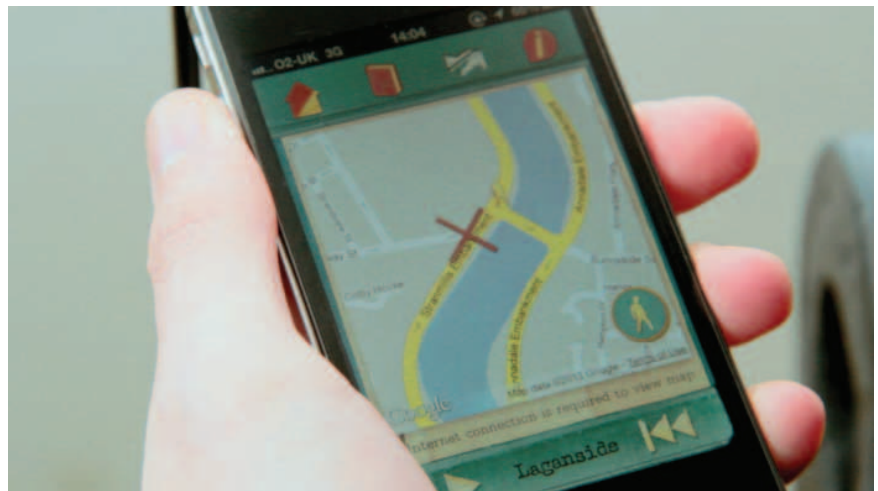


Fig. 7. John D’Arcy, *Laganside*, location-activated sound poetry app, 2012, in use on iPhone. (Image © John D’Arcy)

WATERWORKS

From 6 May to 5 June 2010, PLACE, the Architecture and Built Environment Centre for Northern Ireland, hosted a large-scale exhibition that similarly aimed to uncover elements of Belfast’s lost or forgotten history using sound. *Resounding Rivers* (2010) was a site-specific sound installation by Belfast-based sound artist Matt Green, who installed loudspeakers in six public spaces within Belfast’s city center. The loudspeakers projected soundscape compositions created by Green that evoked the sounds of rivers that once flowed through those

urban sites, but that literally had been driven underground through processes of industrialization and modernization. These “hidden rivers”—the Blackstaff and Farset Rivers, and portions of the Lagan River (which continues to run along the length of the city, but which has been significantly curtailed)—today flow underground in a series of massive pipes. Green discovered this little-advertised fact while studying old maps of Belfast, which showed rivers in places where buildings now stand. For Green, this discovery represented the sheer force of urbanization and the forgetting that can

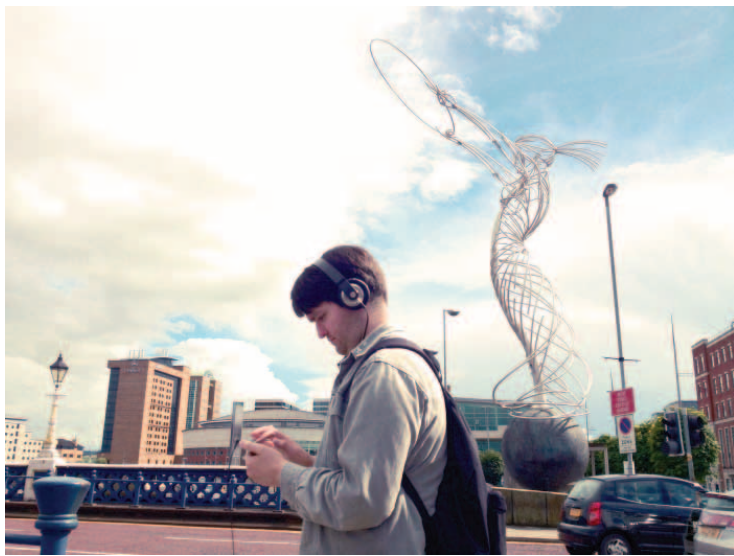


Fig. 8. Listener with John D’Arcy’s location-activated sound poetry app, *Laganside* (2012) near Belfast’s Waterfront Hall. (Photo © John D’Arcy)

Fig. 9. Caroline Pugh, *Photo Ballads*, multimedia performance, 2012. An image of audience members taken via pinhole camera is projected onto a screen in the premiere of *Photo Ballads* at Black Box Belfast, 25 October 2012. (© Caroline Pugh. Photo © Simon Howell.)



sometimes accompany it. He told a local reporter, “Something as powerful as a river and it can just be put aside and forgotten. . . . You’d never know without reading these books or looking at the map that there was a river under your feet” [16].

For *Resounding Rivers* Green installed loudspeakers outside a variety of venues: three popular pubs, the Waterfront Hall, the BBC Broadcasting House and PLACE. The graphic designer Ryan O’Reilly devised a map for visitors that showed where each installation was located and included short descriptions of how the recorded sounds related to each site (Fig. 5):

BBC Broadcasting House

When the Blackstaff River was diverted in the late 1600s it was brought to coursing along Ormeau Avenue and directly over the land on which the BBC now stands. Here, the River was bound in order to form Joy’s Mill dam which powered the nearby Joy’s Paper Mill. In the 1800s the dam was replaced by a circular reservoir, used to store and distribute fresh water.

Sound to be heard: The flow of small rivers, and the water wheel and mill race of Wellbrook Beetling Mill, Co. Tyrone [17].

For the 4 weeks during which *Resounding Rivers* was exhibited (Fig. 6), Belfast audiences had the opportunity to hear Green’s elaborate waterscapes merge with the sounds of everyday city life, and contemplate a process the artist describes as “the past flowing into the present” [18].

The Lagan River, which today has replaced the Farsset River as Belfast’s most important river, has inspired a number of artists to create site-specific sound works. In 2010, Rui Chaves, a Belfast-based sound artist, presented *walkwithme*, a soundwalk and performance that took place along a popular stretch of the Lagan. For this work, Chaves invited small groups of listeners to join him while walking for approximately twenty minutes along the river. The participants wore headphones and, using MP3 players, listened to a prerecorded soundscape created by Chaves, who led the group through the site while simultaneously performing actions along the river. The journey was an intimate one that recalled a love letter by a forlorn wanderer; at one point listeners could hear Chaves saying, “I imagine you, loving me/I imagine us, having a swim in the ocean/I imagine playing you all my favourite records/I imagine hearing you breathe. . . .” [19] Chaves arranged prerecorded sounds such that they would merge in uncanny ways with real sounds



Fig. 10. *Photo Ballads*, Caroline Pugh performing with tape recorder and electronics at the premiere of *Photo Ballads* at Black Box Belfast, 25 October 2012. (© Caroline Pugh. Photo © Simon Howell.)

Fig. 11. Phil Hession performing with custom-designed record lathe in *My heart is always trembling, afraid I might give in*, multimedia performance and installation by Phil Hession, 2012. (© Phil Hession. Photo © Simon Mills.)



and real events, heightening mundane occurrences and creating an altered, sound-augmented reality. For the brief moments of the event, the stretch of the Lagan footpath—an everyday haunt favored by joggers, cyclists and rowers—was transformed into a lyrical, poetic realm.

More recently, Belfast-based singer-songwriter and sound artist John D'Arcy launched *Laganside* (2012), which he describes as “a mobile sonic poetry experience at Belfast’s River Lagan” [20] (Fig. 7). This location-activated sound work, which functions as an app for smartphones, was inspired by the epic poem “Laganside” (2006) by Northern Irish poet and critic Alan Gillis. A listener with the app can freely roam the length of the Lagan and hear electroacoustic compositions by D’Arcy that complement a reading of “Laganside” as well as poems by Belfast-based poets Andrew Jamison, Ben Maier and Sinead Morrissey. The app invites the user to “Immerse yourself in augmented, real and surreal soundscapes that reveal themselves at key spots along the River Lagan. Listen to these musical backdrops as accompaniment to the reading of ‘Laganside’ to experience the poem in new ways” [21] (Fig. 8).

One user describes his experience of *Laganside* as a powerful reminder of the striking transformations that have defined Belfast in recent years:

The meandering cadence of the poem, which describes a man’s walk along the regenerated riverfront with his “better half,” gradually builds towards an understated yet profound climax. “*Leaving me to find our way back to the streets, knowing I’ll never leave here, or come back again.*” Fighting back the lump in my throat, the words resonated so strongly. From the grit and filth of the late eighties Belfast has surpassed itself, moving so fast the city is at times hard to recognise. The Laganside area is the embodiment of Belfast’s decline and regeneration; a city which never fails to impress and disappoint in equal measure [22].

SOUND ART AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC

One of the distinguishing features of recent sound art in Belfast lies in its intersection with traditional music. There exists a rich history of traditional song in the region, transmitted orally from generation to generation and kept alive in the public sphere through trad sessions in local pubs, radio and television programs, competitions and concerts. In merging the language of traditional music with that of contemporary art, several artists have creatively incorporated new



Fig. 12. Phil Hession performing with custom-designed polygraph device in *My heart is always trembling, afraid I might give in*, 2012. (© Phil Hession. Photo © Simon Mills.)

and arcane technologies in their work. At the 2012 Belfast Festival, the Belfast-based vocalist and sound artist Caroline Pugh (Fig. 9) premiered *Photo Ballads* (2012), a multimedia work in which she photographed audiences using a pinhole camera and sang traditional songs inflected by experimental and improvised music techniques for the duration that it took for each photo to develop [23]. A BBC critic described *Photo Ballads* in terms of the “heavily postmodernist” approach Pugh undertook “warping [the traditional song ‘Lord Randall’] beyond recognition by way of looping via tape recorder” and “reproducing/re-imagining melodies and tales otherwise swallowed by the passing of time” [24] (Fig. 10).

The Belfast-based vocalist and artist Phil Hession has similarly repurposed existing technologies in creating sound art that reconfigures traditional Irish song. In Hession’s *My heart is always trembling, afraid I might give in* (2012), the artist recorded the street ballad “The Rocks of Bawn” using different recording devices: a custom designed record lathe outfitted with a large crank, an SLR camera and a polygraph machine (Fig. 11). The devices were themselves amplified and

recorded, and these recordings were broadcast in performance while Hession sang the tune live, his performance further manipulated by sound engineer Christian Cherene (Fig. 12) [25].

In re-interpreting traditional songs using such experimental techniques, artists like Pugh and Hession take genuine risks. Unlike the contemporary art world, the local traditional music community does not necessarily privilege or reward originality or innovation. Rather, there are pressures to conserve traditional song within “authentic” musical settings, as the tradition has historically evolved through repetition and imitation rather than invention. Úna Monaghan, a Belfast-born traditional harpist and concertina player, composer and sound engineer, writes:

Traditional musicians had no desire to depart too far from the normal tune types. New music was written, but it always adhered to the structures already in place of specific types of dance music, songs, or airs. Composers wanted their music to be noticed for its beauty, not its originality or innovation [26].

Thus, the works of Pugh, Hession and other artists who extend the language of

traditional music into the realm of contemporary sound art commit multiple cultural transgressions, creating works that rewrite a musical tradition steeped in conservation, while simultaneously introducing older traditions into contemporary genres that are typically preoccupied with newness.

In 2012, Úna Monaghan collaborated with Belfast-based Irish traditional music scholar, sociologist and fiddler Martin Dowling to create *Owenvarragh: A Belfast Circus on the Star Factory*, a multimedia realization of John Cage’s 1979 composition ____ *Circus on* _____. Cage’s score, previously realized only by the composer himself, invites the interpreter to create a performance from the contents of a book. Through a labor-intensive process, the interpreter creates a tape part from the different sounds and places mentioned in a book, compiles new texts for live recitation by performing complex chance procedures on the original text, and chooses “relevant music” to include in the performance. Monaghan and Dowling’s version was based on Belfast-based novelist Ciaran Carson’s 1998 book *The Star Factory*, considered an ode to Belfast [27]. It was

presented in the Sonic Lab, a two-story auditorium in the Sonic Arts Research Centre equipped with an acoustically transparent floor and an elaborate multichannel audio system. *Owenvarragh* featured a tape part Monaghan created from hundreds of original field recordings, digital projections of images that related to the novel, Carson as reciter, and an ensemble of five musicians including Monaghan and Dowling, who performed traditional Irish music at moments of their choosing. A review of the event described it as

an aural recreation of the soundscape of Belfast during a particular period in time, imbued with the cadences of Carson's poetry and the music and song of past and present generations floating like ghosts through the ether. It was at times like being in a multi-dimensional hologram, close to an out-of-body experience [28].

Monaghan tells me that her connection to the city held particular meaning for her in preparing this project, and that the feedback she received from audiences drew out the emotional valence of contemplating place through sound:

A lot of feedback I got [on *Owenvarragh*] was about how the project struck chords of memory, reminiscence, familiarity with people. Sometimes of sounds they wouldn't think to listen to, but when presented in the context of the project were very moving, and evoked vivid memories or stories or personal experiences, or reminders of aspects of the city that were no longer available to be experienced (either to them, or in general), but that they hadn't noticed slipping away [29].

For Dowling, working on *Owenvarragh* changed his understanding "of the nature of [Belfast] and all places." He writes:

Carson's work shows how places are nothing more than places of the imagination. They may be modernised, their infrastructures (both physical and cultural) preserved and renewed, but they remain in a sense impoverished without active imaginings and re-imaginings. Carson is a master of this imagination of place. Cage gave us a vehicle for re-imagining Ciaran's imagination of Belfast in *The Star Factory*. A prose narrative became poetry, and its recitation noisy, musical, and visually enhanced. We experienced Ciaran's imagination of Belfast in a new way [30].

CONCLUSION

Sound art has particular resonance in Belfast, a city that has historically been marked by conflict and division and that has recently undergone rapid and radi-

cal transformation. The sound works discussed in this article have reflected this transformation in meaningful ways: by inviting people to document and observe the changing soundscape of the city; by performing acts of historical recovery; by communicating the experiences of marginalized communities and exposing socioeconomic, political and cultural barriers; by providing opportunities for people to form new relationships to everyday sites through creative acts of listening; and by bridging the divide between timeworn and contemporary musical and artistic traditions. In different ways, each of these projects enriches Belfast through its "active imaginings and re-imaginings" of place, employing sound as a medium that can preserve, mark, transform and reconfigure place, and, in doing so, exposing the city as a resonant, shared idea that can be composed, and recomposed, through sound.

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