

Places, spaces, encounters.

A conversation with Ewa Trębacz by Anna Niedźwiedź

Listeners are now holding a CD of your works. It is a record of an important part of your artistic activity over the last ten years. What is art – for you?

In a sense, art is my personal place, the place where I live. I identify myself much more strongly here than with any physical or geographical location. It is my haven, where I feel free and have nearly unlimited freedom of action and decision.

When you describe art as a place, it would be hard not to mention your fascination with space. In a majority of your works space plays an important and active role.

Yes, indeed, I've been intrigued by the nature of human perception of space for a very long time. In my early works I made some rather naive attempts to introduce sound spatialization, for instance by locating musicians at various points in the concert hall. Such actions were intuitive but not based on any fully conscious or original approach. However, in recent years I have been pursuing the subject with a much deeper insight. This major shift took place when I was introduced to several techniques for the recording and reproduction of spatial relations in sound. Since the production of *Minotaur* in 2005 I have been continually working with ambisonics, which allows me to register sound as a three dimensional object, preserving the acoustic properties of a particular space.

I have an impression that such a pursuit is based on something much more profound than just a sheer fascination with technology.

Human interactions, bound to a specific place and time, have become an extremely important element of my work as an artist. Such interactions are by their nature elusive and absolutely unique. We can never repeat the same experience of being "here and now" with another human being or reproduce the same creative energy resulting from such interactions. At some point I began to register these unique moments that resulted from the very nature of the collaborative process. I started to seek out these moments rather than simply record sounds.

And yes, the technology helped a lot, because it gave me tools to create acoustic images, which act as physical representations of spaces along with all the events enclosed in them.

To construct my soundscapes, I often superimpose several instances of a presence in the same space. They are compounds of time and space. Even if we return to that specific space with the same musician, it will not be exactly the same space and will not be exactly the same person. It will not be the same sound image.

Almost every artist working with sound experienced at some point its uniqueness and its physicality, its relation to one's body, emotions and space.

Working in acoustically inspiring spaces turns musicians into part of a larger instrument. The entire space becomes an instrument and the musician no longer performs just notes. Space becomes an extension of one's instrument or even one's body. In such moments one can experience creative energy that would be impossible to achieve otherwise. This is why I rarely record in a studio. I miss that direct physical interaction between a musician and the space in which he or she is enclosed. When I work on my projects, I often travel in search of new spaces which are non-standard and acoustically unique.

When I visit a previously unknown space, I know within a few minutes if the space is inspiring or not, just by watching the reactions of the musicians I bring along. If the place is interesting, the musicians immediately start playing with it – making noises, running around, playing with the reverb, or simply just fooling around. The space needs to “possess” the musicians right from the beginning in order to provoke interesting interactions.

Let's take as an example the underground Cistern at Ford Worden in Washington State. You realized several projects in that space.

The Dan Harpole Cistern at Ford Worden is an absolutely unique space, with a 45-second reverberation time. It is a large underground space that has no electricity or lighting. The entire construction is supported by numerous irregular concrete columns, which results in unexpected trajectories of sound. In order to enter it, you need to squeeze through a narrow, unfriendly looking hatchway and descend a ladder. You need to bring your own source of light. Transporting and operating all of the equipment down there is not that easy logistically. When the hatch closes above your head, you are engulfed by that underground space, completely enclosed within it. With only a spotlight source such as a headlamp it becomes hard to estimate the size of the Cistern, and you can only do so by observing the trajectories of sound, which bounces off from



a column or the ceiling and re-appears in the most unexpected places.

This CD includes three works that utilized this extraordinary space: *things lost things invisible*, *Errai* and the most recent one *ANC'L'SUNR*, in which I used recordings with a vocal and a horn. In the latter piece, the Cistern recording has been interwoven with the orchestral parts, becoming the fundament of the spatial construction of the piece, but it is only in the very last sequence that it fully emerges and appears to the listener as it is.

You also record in interesting buildings, including churches. One could say you are collecting spaces and sound events initiated by you.

I also did quite a bit on field recording in outdoor open spaces. It is of course more difficult technically due to environmental sounds. But I accept these environmental sounds like birds singing, water dropping on the floor in an underground moist interior, someone's footsteps, door slamming...

Frequently I leave these sounds intact in postproduction. After all, they also belong to the "here and now" of each unique space I attempt to register. These sounds then become a formative aspect of the entire soundtrack, especially when a musician starts to actively listen to them and interact with them. For instance, during such a recording session a horn player started to respond to the noise of a low-flying airplane. The airplane was no longer a problem – when you start playing along with it, it doesn't sound like random noise anymore.

How much freedom do you leave to the musicians you collaborate with and what is the role of improvisation in your projects?

That depends largely on the specific features of the project. For instance in the case of orchestral works, such freedom has to be limited. One could say that the role of improvisation is inversely proportional to the number of musicians participating in a project. For instance in *Minotaur*, which is a work for horn and surround sound, the soloist is given a lot of artistic freedom. Of course, the musician must be familiar with the score, which needs to be memorized before attempting any improvisation or ornamentation. But later in the process of preparing the piece, the musician is expected to enrich the material in the score in creative ways. Also, each performance hall is different, and every instance of interaction with an audience is completely unique. This CD includes a recording of *Minotaur* with the

horn player for whom and with whom this piece was created. The recording is far from clinically clean. It contains lots of “random” sounds from the concert hall – however I can still hear that amazing energy that resulted from the instrumentalist’s direct interaction with the audience.

So during a concert performance we have a chance to revisit spaces used for the recordings but at the same time we are participating in a specific instance of “here and now” into which you – as an artist – are pulling us.

In my art I value the element of human interactions very highly, considering them as an integral part of a work of art. I always long for that magical moment in time – a point of contact between the sound coming from the stage or speakers and the audience enclosed in the resultant soundscape.

Art for you is also a place of meeting with other people. It is a place where you cross some borders, perhaps your personal limitations, a place where you can pose questions on human perception, and also an area of experimentation. How does this relate to your other great love – mountains and rock climbing?

Besides art, mountains are my other personal haven, a place of ultimate freedom, and a place of some truly extraordinary encounters. Climbing is also a creative process. Like art, it often resembles balancing on a fine line between being completely alone and being with other people. The feeling of being present in a specific space and time can be quite striking. Mountains offer you ways to experience spaces directly through the effort of your own body and through its physical limitations. Climbing requires that extreme attention and focus on the “here and now”, which also happens to be my on-going quest in art. In the age of constant distractions and pseudo-multitasking, I find such intense well-defined moments especially precious.