

An insight into the music and sound world created for Last Shelter

Tian Rotteveel (composer) and Anna Seymour (Candoco dancer) on music and sound in Last Shelter and beyond. This is an edited capture of an informal WhatsApp conversation between Tian and Anna during the making of Last Shelter.

Anna: I'd love to talk and explore more about our experiences with the mythologies of music and dance. I want to ask you all about the music you have created for Last Shelter, I want to feel the music and locate where and when it happens in the piece.

You have said a few things that really hit it for me and made me cry once or twice! What you said about pursuing desire and dancing not only because we love it but because we have to.

My first question for you - how would you describe the sound for Last Shelter?

Tian: So, this is a direct description of the sound from beginning to end of what I hear when listening to the music for Last Shelter. I just let associations and sensation come up while listening to it.

The first 3 minutes I wonder in silence - there are no artificial sounds coming from the speakers. I see though on each side there are 2 speakers hanging at around 5 metres high and a large subwoofer box on the left side of the stage. Meanwhile I hear people moving and walking with chairs, tables, stands and amongst themselves.

I hear wood, plastic, metal touching skin on bodies, barefoot footsteps and skin on hands touching materials, each person has a different characteristic of sound while walking or moving between objects and each other in the room.

There are quirky stops in the sound sometimes when the performers change their decision making or direction. You can actually *hear* Jeanine's movement practices of continuity and making choices along the way in the sound as well. But it is subtle, enough to feel something fishy is going on here. Why are they moving these things around so randomly and at the same time is it so precise?

Then the first sounds come in. An odd harmonic wind that moves from left to right within the space. There is an odd, almost Indonesian gamelan melody repeating, but also reminiscent of sounds from a children's electronic keyboard. However, the sound doesn't appear ethnic nor nostalgic. It creates the sense of something moving around in the room. Like when you see a bag

moving in the wind, you know there is wind. Like feeling something happening but not noticing the protagonist of that movement. I also hear static and white noise in the sound, like an antenna picking up sound.

It is pleasing to simply hear things moving around in the room but it has an odd, uncanny feel to it. Still, the melody is comforting, like a small flute playing the same melody pianissimo.

Shortly after, I hear small bells tickling in different high pitches, like wind chimes in the breeze, but played by a percussionist who touches it like they are fumbling around with it. There are no musical codes in it, it comes and goes. The sound is pleasing and intimate.

Then around 5-minutes in, I discover a spinet instrument which plays a dissonant chord in different ways. The spinet is a 17th century harpsichord sound. But it's the baby harpsichord which sounds more like a mix of acoustic guitar and someone plucking piano string with fingers. The plucking of this dissonant chord is irregular but comes every 2 breaths or so.

The music is now 7-minutes in, more sounds appear, I hear an alarm in the background, nothing large, but it creates some attention. It's a single note alarm, like a door buzzer, but could just as well be a single duration note being played by a viola.

Then, at around 10 minutes, things are starting to roll, all described above is present simultaneously in increasing regularity. I heard then, for the first time, the subwoofer, creating kind of a morse code, like an irregular beat, but spacious.

Then I hear a faint piano which becomes clearer and plays a broken chord, which sounds like a mix of jazz and contemporary modern music. The sound is *that* nice that it could repeat over and over, and that's what it does. Shortly after that I hear trumpets, weirdly mimicking the piano notes. The trumpet sounds similar to the wind sound at the beginning and mimics that same sense of moving in the space.

Now, we have a whole ensemble playing together, it's as if all the sounds are on a wheel. Everyone has its part on the wheel; the piano, the bells, the neo-gamelan wind melody, the trumpet and horn sound, the alarm and the subwoofer notes. So, it's now a ball that keeps on running, say at around 120 beats per minute. Moderate tempo.

It keeps moving slowly, from one side to the other. Like a phasing effect with the instruments. So, the ball doesn't move forward but swings from left to right. This continues quite steadily and transforms with some harmonic progressions. It feels spacious and mythological at the same time because of the open piano chord which neither feels resolving nor affirmative, more of a

contemplative feel, but then there is grit in the sound, and a kind of odd groove.

At 16-minutes there is a break and I hear a flute whistle, like announcing something. But the wheel keeps going and now we hear drumming percussion, the rhythms feel polyrhythmic. This means rhythms of different length that vary over each other. Like the floor is shifting, there is no centre, but the sound is moving along. The music feels as though it is played by an ensemble. Someone is playing subwoofer, a contemporary pianist, a horn player makes soft staccato notes, an alarm player spinning a hand crank alarm, a percussionist and a keyboard player on a toy keyboard trying to play ethnic tone-scales. At 20-minutes the music starts to get feedback sounds, like when the microphone starts to amplify itself. This happens to the music as a whole and at some point, we only hear the feedback of the music for about a minute and then it's silent (for about 4-minutes).

Then, the first sound I notice in the room at around 26-minutes is a low rumble. It's percussive but it's highly electronic, like sub frequencies being tethered in the room with a quick pulse, kind of an elastic pulse of low frequencies. A minute after that, a high sound enters the room, a sound like an electric alarm. Rather disconcerting, dissonant, penetrative but not annoying, more stimulating. It's mimicking the low sound, which feels like all heartbeats of a group of 20 people in the room being audible. So, you can hear these different quick patterns appearing from different rhythms and coinciding. But what you can hear is strictly artificial so there is an odd effect to it. It affects the way I look at the space because there is a rumble in my view.

The higher notes are changing frequency like machines. This keeps on going for several minutes in different ways. Then at 28-minutes suddenly English horn instruments play a triad chord. Almost filmic, heroic, changing between major chords and minor chords, where one chord creates a sense of relief and accomplishment then the minor chord creates something more unsettling. These horn chords move along in the room like a Doppler effect. This is the effect you hear when an ambulance passes by. Even though the siren of the ambulance is the same note, because of its velocity it sounds like it changes pitch. It moves around your centre and you perceive that as a change of pitch. The horns stop, and suddenly the storm is laying low, but still the low sound rumbles in percussive ways. I hear an airy sound at around 32-minutes. It's a major chord but made of very breathy whistles.

After a minute this turns into a piano line. It's a very light piano groove. Almost something like light jazz, but more spacious, and leaves space open for different interpretation. It's a great groove that you could sing to. If someone started to sing in the space, it wouldn't be surprising. The low frequency rumble goes and we hear, for the first time, a double bass instrument feeling the whole low register of the room with a harmonic root note.

We hear now a duo playing piano and bass. Then sometimes we get the feedback again like we did at the beginning, so it distorts, but it feels nice in the harmony. Then, the feedback breaks through and silences everything with its penetrative sound for a minute before it is suddenly vacuumed away leaving an odd silence. After that silence, we hear a real song being played with melody and chords played by piano and bass. However, the song is too short and only played for 2 cycles and then it's gone, unfinished business! But I'm feeling rather stimulated by all the sound that has been in the room. So, feeling traces of the sound in my hearing and also observing how it feels to look at a silent stage.

42-minutes have passed.

It was nice to describe the sound to you.

I still have to write about how I created and thought about the sound and the effects in the room.

Can I ask you a question about your hearing impairment? I'm curious about one thing. But don't how you feel about being asked about it.

Anna: Yeah, ask away, I don't mind.

By the way it's deafness not hearing impairment :)

Tian: Were you born with this condition or did you experience a time in your life able to hear? Yes, deafness. Sorry.

Anna: I was born profoundly deaf. No idea why. No one in my family is deaf, it's just me. I wasn't sick, my mother wasn't sick. The doctors think it's genetics but we don't know of any deafness in my family history but maybe it wasn't recorded back in the day.

My mother suspected something was wrong when I was about 6 weeks old as I wasn't reacting to my older noisy brothers who made a lot of noise and I didn't wake up.

My mother would make a lot of noise like banging pots and calling my name. It was confusing because I would respond sometimes but that was probably me responding to the vibrations rather than the sounds.

After more hearing tests, it was confirmed that I'm profoundly deaf. My parents were very, very, very upset. They knew nothing about deafness and thought they had to look after me for my whole life!

My family is pretty awesome. They learnt sign language. I love being deaf. I have never experienced 'normal' hearing. I had hearing aids but I hated them. It was just amplified, muffled, static noise.

Quite drilling.

That's my long answer!

Tian: Wow, thank you... the question arose, because of writing down the sound for you and knowing certain references contain sounds. But then I wrote them down anyway because I guess you can still hear in different ways. I can imagine you feel a lot through vibration.

Anna: The more descriptive references, the better. I love having sound described to me, it's a certain kind of poetics.

It would be good to feel your sound after reading your descriptions to see what I can feel and what I don't. But I think my body experiences everything even subconsciously and somehow my body just knows.

Tian: Exactly, I think it's also a collective experience of sound that is not only limited to a single body...

Anna: I experience sound through other bodies. But I think others can experience sound through my bodily experience too.

What drew you to working with music and sound?

Tian: Good question. I only recall the moment when I was young not feeling so at home in my family and surroundings, feeling in the wrong place. Then I had this little keyboard and was playing with the volume outside in the garden with the birds and something clicked. I found, in sound, a connection with an environment which is not human. I remember the simple sound I made and changing the volume like I was under hypnosis. It was striking to me as a young kid. I found it fascinating to be so sucked into a quality of sound that you forget about the narrative or the meaning, and go into a state of hyper-listening. Also, a state of kind-of happiness, or self-resonance where there is nothing to complete or solve, and to just listen to that quality of sound. Like amplifying "being".

Later, I started learning piano, which is also a lot about fingers and coordination. Funnily enough, sound doesn't start in the fingers, but starts in the body. The sound is already made within the body before it even touches the instrument. That part fascinates me.

It's also about intention, sensation in the body before it actually becomes something.

Therefore, music is not only about its audible capacities but also about music making as an activity on its own within the body and imaginative mind to stimulate music effects. For instance, the human singing voice is fascinating. I was, for a long time, occupied by the singing voice. Its use as a somatic practice to move with rather than to make sound with. The body builds a temporal instrument to be able to sing a certain tone or quality, using gestures

or positions of the body to make certain sounds. I was interested in leaving the sound behind and simply using the singing body as a somatic practice to move with. Before people start to sing, so much happens in the imagination of the body, the nervous system of the body, the preparation, and so on.

Anna: Wow, I love this so much...thank you. This is one of the most satisfying conversations I have had about sound. I love how you talk about being in a state of hyper-listening, and how you need to let go of narrative and meaning to be able to enter that amplified state.

I am going to write all of this down. It always frustrates me when people ask me how I dance when I can't hear the music. I feel sad that a lot of people have such limited thinking about dance and music. Dance is simply a study of the body and movement and you don't need to be able to 'hear through the ears' to move and study your body and others. I rely a lot on patterns as a survival strategy in everyday life.

Tian: Totally agree. For me music and sound making is not only about its audible results. The singing of a tone simply resonates with my nervous system and keeps me calm. If I don't make music, I get grumpy after several days.

I love how my hands play piano by themselves.

I love how my electronic instruments do things by themselves.

Making music is also just following my body and how it is listening to my hands making music.

Often the low frequencies tell me more about sound than the higher frequencies. I mostly like to work with the very low sounds and the very high sounds because I sense them more deeply. The midrange for me is too naive and recognisable. For me sound is something that lives and, therefore, moves. A low frequency is moving the room, it's not sound from one static place. It's the same for high frequencies, they bounce around the acoustics in the room. Every time I come into a new room, I love how just the acoustics are a musical phenomenon, how the sound bounces around and makes pathways of echoes.

Anna: I just read your sound description.

I'm now seeing the presence of sound in Last Shelter more. I love the visual references such as a bag blowing in the wind. The wheel of sound. How sound is moving around the space. The heart beats of 20 people. I love this writing so much.

I like 'sound healing' where I can just lie and sit and sink in rhythmic sound and meditate.

Now I reallllly want to do a Last Shelter run!

I might do my own mini run tonight with your sound descriptions in mind.
(delete these two sentences?)

Tian: I love moving sound. Sometimes I can get entirely hooked on just listening in the street to a bus driving by, hearing the rubber on the tarmac, all that weight transporting and moving from my right to my left, and just observing that mass choreography of mass moving around. Suddenly all this daily-noise becomes a fascinating phenomenon.

Also, how sound creates attraction. Sometimes you are attracted by something you hear. You don't know what it is and want to know, it creates abstract attraction.

Then at other times, I recognise a sound and know what object it is, but still one needs to scrutinise how and what makes that sound.

It's interesting in sound practice that one is continuously questioning: how do we treat what we know and how do we treat what we don't know?

I love that listening is an experience of a map of sensations rather than perceptions of facts that we know.

I love birds just as much as I love a noisy public bus.

Anna: I'm fascinated with how people move in patterns and how much people actually move in tune with each other more than they realise.
That's how animals move. Precise choreography.

Tian: I enjoy going to a discotheque and close my ears with plugs and just feel the vibrations and the vibrational connections that the bodies in the room make. It's an intimate way to connect with others and feel that we are a bigger body together, we sense together.

Anna: Abstract attraction...interesting. When that happens, I wonder what the relationship is with desire and how much we listen to that or not.

Exactly. There is so much we don't know that we know. Our bodies know. And how do we reveal and tap into what we don't know?! A bit off track but I love the phenomena of coincidences and chance encounters.

Yeah, this is a deep human ritual and the need to connect. Or, to escape.