

Title: The 42 Mirrors Of Narcissus

Subtitle:

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

The fluid manipulation of the archive is central to the work of turntablist and composer Mariam Rezaei. In her compositions, multiple, live reworking of the material is a central concern, raising questions around the validity of the fixed score, the audio/video document, or - dare I say it - the written word.

The 'physical' archive of my work is in two places; my notes, notations and recordings made for compositions waiting to be realised, and the recordings of completed interpretations of compositions. Both of these archives are made with considerable effort and intention, and hold within them an 'aesthetic' archive, an archive of the musical development of the turntable as an instrument. Turntablism - particularly the hip hop strand of turntablism - comes from a long history of memorising works which have been recorded on to analogue formats with a small distribution, a large proportion pre-dating the growth of online video platforms. Turntablism is unique in so many respects, most especially in that its history and future are both so volatile. Initially designed as studio equipment, later made for home listening, the turntable was transformed into a solo and ensemble instrument, now existing as both a hardware instrument and extended via software. The possibilities in sound making are virtually limitless, however we can gauge the technical and virtuosic prowess of the turntablist with knowledge pieced together from a partially archived history of performance techniques in hip hop DJ competitions *and* experimental art.

I do believe that the recording and sharing of recorded music is very important, however, I don't think that this archive alone embodies enough to preserve, develop and mark the importance of the turntable in music history. Sharing a knowledge of the turntable is important to me to communicate to both audiences and composers of all instruments. If we can successfully share skills and communicate the sophisticated possibilities of this unique, tactile instrument, I believe it will continue to be pursued, develop, thrive and contribute to a wider development in music.

Works for turntable, in any ensemble formation, are still quite new when compared to the legacy of other instruments. How we record and archive these works is important to me as a composer, performer and improviser. It is important that we spend time developing repertoire so that the turntable is no longer seen as a gimmick. Beethoven wrote multiple piano sonatas. Shostakovich wrote multiple string quartets. Oliveros wrote multiple works for open ensembles. For me, developing a repertoire is partly about establishing a physical archive which, through time, trial and happy accidents, will innovate and develop instrumental technique and musicianship.

In my archives, I focus on both the compositional development of the turntable, and the musical innovation of the turntable as a solo and ensemble instrument, with and without other instrumental/electronic ensembles. For me, one cannot be extrapolated without the other. In the experimental side of turntablism, there is generally an emphasis on the resulting sounds of turntable technique. On the hip hop side of turntablism, there is generally an emphasis on the development of turntablist techniques, given the history of DJ competitions and technical developments linked to this. I live in both of those sound worlds and always have. It is difficult bridging the two worlds in some respects, however, I think that there may be an advantage found in the old adage; knowledge is power. In the development of a turntable repertoire, I don't think there are any real errors, only learning. There are no real successes yet, only developments. Such things can be said of an instrument still its infancy; of an instrument with only a short history and a small army of performers across the globe. The turntable is no longer a novice or gimmick and anyone that attempts to work with it in such a way will be proven otherwise.

There is a strong, explicit narrative in all of my compositions, often connected by a series of extended metaphors and allegories with differing interpretations. The narratives are developed through both compositional technique and turntablist performance technique. For me, they are intrinsically bound and as a composer, I am looking for a 'new sound'. In some works, the emphasis is more on turntablist technique and in others, on compositional form or structure. For example, *iCon* is a piece written for two turntables and a 5 channel looper that focused on developing compositional technique for that instrumental force. The work was commissioned for SPARC, a sound-symposium focused on the environment and recycling at City, University of London. I wanted this piece to be the third 'recycling' of a 4 second-long sound of a hummingbird chirping and flying. This sound had initially been recorded, then uploaded online which in turn, I ripped from a video. [1]

Through the use of digital vinyl system, Traktor, I was able to micro-loop sounds on two turntables so that the palette of materials on the turntables varied from bird chirps to percussive beatings, electronic-sounding drones to white noise which were all manipulated live and recorded into a 5 channel looper pedal. With an added filter and basic EQ settings, I was able to layer and create new sounds. As a composer, this piece was an exploration into two musical ideas: how much could be drawn from one, short sound, with and without the looper, and the development of the *turntable synths* technique. This is a technique where a sustained sound at one constant pitch is looped, with the turntable motor switched off and needle on the record, the record is pushed by fingers with an emphasis on the resulting pitches. This technique is a combination and extension of instrumental tones skatching, the baby skretch, the pause skretch and turntable looping.

In an effort to develop turntablist technique into new territory, I wrote *Wolf's Tail* for HCMF 2019. The piece is for four turntables and solo performer, using the ultra-pitch Vestax Controller One turntable, and more specifically, utilising a 4-turntable beatjuggle. [2]

For this piece I used several recordings including oscillators, speeches by Mhairi Black, Margaret Thatcher and saxophones from the brilliant Tony Bevan. Using the Vestax Controller One, I played oscillators and saxophone loops to build a palette of tones, playing the ultra-pitch midi settings on the turntable like a keyboard. Later in the piece, I phased, layered up, unsynced, backspun, resynced, delayed/echoed, paused, chased, broken chased, repitched and ultra-pitched a longer recording of Bevan on baritone saxophone across four turntables as a beatjuggle. [3]

I think that the paths through these different archives will have to cross over and I think that they should. At this point in turntablism's history, I would ask – why do you want to make a path through one archive and not the other? Learn as much as you can. Now is a time for us to persevere with this instrument and we need to do it as a collective effort.

In my lifetime, I would like to see a repertoire that supercedes genre or style. Does the term ‘repertoire’ also imply the regular performance of work if it not notated or recorded? I worry that, with what feels like slim pickings, isolating one turntablist or composition over others will stigmatise an idea or person, which would be detrimental to our collected efforts. Not everyone can perform the world champion winning battle sets of DJs such as DJ Qbert or DJ Craze. The sketches and ‘mistakes’, the abandoned turntablist routines and ideas they have made are lost. I worry that with limited numbers of performances of works and limited access for audiences to those performances, that development is being held back. We need to share our collected learnings and performances as freely as possible and to as wide an audience as possible for the turntable ‘repertoire’ to be fully established.

Footnotes:

[1] The overarching narrative of the piece is to emphasise that the Earth will survive without the human race, however, humans cannot survive without Earth. I borrowed ideas from hummingbirds co-evolving with flowers, character development from the ancient love story of *Layla and Majnun* and the normalising of everyday narcissism and iconography in social media. This was then tied into a violent history of suicides in tech factories from over-pressure to produce smartphones and the fact that only 20% of e-waste is actually recycled but is used as advertising propaganda in the western world.

[2] The explicit narrative of this piece was an exploration of the, then, upcoming 2019 UK General Election. I borrowed ideas from the mythological ‘Dawn’s Left Hand’ and the scientifically proven ‘Wolf’s Tail’ phenomenon – where the first moment of light rips through the sky at dawn break; a moment where anything is possible. I borrowed ideas from the self-healing properties of starfish and other echinoderms, where, when threatened with extinction, their biology changes and they adapt through error propagation and self-healing. There must be a change for British society to survive and future generations to thrive.

[3] I initially borrowed ideas of phasing from Steve Reich, however, I am an impatient musician and during the performance, I wanted to break the musical precedent I had immediately set. I improvised within the piece, putting an emphasis on timbre/spectrum of sound and rhythm, playing to the atmosphere of the room and audience. Whilst performing, I realised that changes were needed to really achieve the sound that I wanted to hear, so I went ahead and improvised as I saw fit.