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I COULDN'T MAKE A PIECE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THAT: A CONVERSATION WITH ALLISON CAMERON

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Abstract: The composer Allison Cameron (b. 1963) lives in Toronto. Her music has been widely performed at festivals such as Emerging Voices in San Diego, Evenings of New Music in Bratislava, Festival SuperMicMac in Montréal, Newfoundland Sound Symposium, New Music across America, Bang on a Can Marathon in New York, New York, and Rumori Dagen in Amsterdam. A dedicated performer of experimental music in Toronto, Allison co-founded the Drystone Orchestra (1989) and the Arcana Ensemble (1992). She has been improvising since 2000 on banjo, ukulele, cassette tapes, radios, miscellaneous objects, mini amplifiers, crackle boxes, toys and keyboards, in collaboration with Éric Chenaux, the Draperies, Ryan Driver, Dan Friedman, Mike Gennaro, Kurt Newman, John Oswald, Stephen Parkinson and Mauro Savo, among other musicians. In that same year she became Artistic Director of Toronto's experimental ensemble Arraymusic, a position she held for five years. In 2007, she founded the Allison Cameron Band with Eric Chenaux and Stephen Parkinson, and in 2009, the trio *c_RL* with Nicole Rampersaud (trumpet) and Germaine Liu (drums). Allison has experimented with graphic and notational scores that will soon be gathered and published as a collection. Additionally, she is the winner of the 2018 KM Hunter Award for music in Ontario.

Allison Cameron's music beguiles. It asks. It opens into the sides of sounds, delighting in toyful extras, and things left behind. It is a warm, personable and curious music, sure in its lengths and swaths, in its lined spaces, and elongations of melody. It waits itself into small entanglements, seeping inwards and outwards, beside and along, and yet it never completely fills the middle. In this way, listening to Allison's music is an invitation to fall, and there is a dedicated group of listeners and musicians in North America and Europe who have been falling for years.

Allison's music is affected by ideas of ornamentation. She is interested in the ways that folk songs change when they move between groups of people in very different places. Additionally, she speaks about the impact that the Scottish Highland bagpipe practice of Ceol Mor piobaireachd had on her and Martin Arnold when, as

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young composers, they would travel outside of Toronto to listen to bagpipe competitions on numerous occasions. Particularly, Allison looks for ways in which ornamental variation can be reconsidered – not as embellishment, but as the point of the work itself. As Martin Arnold wrote in the liner notes to her CD *Ornaments* (2000):

> To need the ornament, to make its particularity – its detail – the focus of attention, is to celebrate the extraneous, the tangential, the deliriously digressive ('delirium' coming from the Latin 'to swerve from a furrow').

I met up with Allison Cameron at Array Space, Toronto's experimental music hub, in January 2018. While we were talking in the lobby, we were accompanied by George Stimpson tuning the piano for that evening's concert of new works. Array's House and Production Manager, Kelly Mitchell, came in to change the garbage bags. Former Artistic Director and percussionist, Rick Sacks, rushed in to investigate a leak at the back of the studio. Later, Artistic Director and composer Martin Arnold arrived to begin loading in equipment.

Anna Höstman: *Where did you grow up?*

Allison Cameron: I grew up in North Vancouver, right at the foot of Grouse Mountain. My backyard was Lynn Canyon park. My Mom always wanted me to be a pianist but it just wasn't my thing and I really got hooked on composition when I was a teenager – I had a very good music teacher in high school, Lloyd Burritt, he's a composer. Eventually I heard about this programme in Victoria so I applied to get in for composition and they accepted me.

Was that while Rudolf Komorous was there?

Yes, but my first composition teacher, officially, was Michael Longton. And then I studied with Rudolf for the last two years I was an undergrad. I think I got there in 83 which might have been when Martin (Arnold) came. And then John (Abram) came, and then Stephen (Parkinson) came, and so it was a nice time because, for some reason, it was a great connection with us and we did a lot of stuff together.

What kinds of things were you influenced by?

I really became completely devoted to listening and that happened because there was a great library at UVic (the University of Victoria). All of my colleagues and teachers listened to music a lot and they knew composers I'd never heard of: Jo Kondo (now who had heard of Jo Kondo in 1983, nobody! but he'd actually been at UVic), and Henryk Gorecki before he was famous. Rudolf was very well-versed in his work. The library had recordings/LPs of all his stuff.

And then the record collections of John and Martin were phenomenal. And Martin was great, he just shared everything, not only with us but with the school. He would bring records in of all the Dutch stuff and the whole Hague school. I would borrow their records and tape them all! I still have some of those tapes, believe it or not. Knowing them, and having those kinds of teachers and colleagues was very important and I feel really lucky that I was able to have that, because I don't think everybody has a community. It was also a performance school so people like Eve (Egoyan) were there. That

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was really good because we could get our colleagues to play our pieces all the time.

Were there specific musical elements you were exploring at that time?

I was very interested in really honing out things that were kind of simple ideas, and exploring timbres. That was something I was into right away. And then when I heard some of this Dutch music, especially Louis Andriessen … but also, it was around that time, I think 84, that everyone had rediscovered John Cage's *String Quartet in Four Parts* and people were going mad about it. It uses time in a really interesting way, in the way he chops things up and then stretches them out. And it's an unusual piece of his because he never really did anything else like it, you know? So those things had a big impact on me.

Michael was very good for technical things: form, and how to lay out your stuff if you were struggling with something. And Rudolf was just great because most of the time I would bring something in and – I'd say I wrote this piece for trumpet and it's really high, so the trumpet player asked me to put it down an octave. And Rudolf said, you know I think it's going to sound really good up the octave (laughing) … so okay, I'll leave it up.

And then did you do a master's degree?

No, I went off to the Hague and studied there for a couple of years. Well, it was an interesting time. I got to meet all my composition heroes, you know, Louis (Andriessen) and Henryk Gorecki and Per Nørgard.

Which years?

It was 87 to 89 I was there so … the Iron Curtain was still up. I remember moving there and the headlines on all the papers in Holland, and I guess probably Germany, were, if there's another world war it's going to happen in Europe (laughing) … great, I just moved here! There was a certain element of paranoia, and I think it was because Russia was disintegrating economically. Chernobyl happened, and that was kind of weird.

I met Per Nørgard in Utrecht and I was a big fan of his work back in Victoria because, again, I was exposed to a lot of his music. I wrote him a letter and sent him my music and I didn't know what he would think. My work, at that time, was certainly coming off as super-naive in some ways, and he was just so sweet when he wrote back. So eventually I went to Copenhagen and he introduced me to the whole Danish avant-garde! Poul Ruders and Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen and Hans Abrahamsen. One of the most memorable times I had was just hanging out with Poul Ruders and listening to music. I felt really amazing when that kind of stuff happened. Which I didn't, a lot of time, feel very good at all when I was in Holland. I had never been to Europe, so it was a big shock. And I think the best thing coming out of it for me was just making friends. I made a lot of really nice friends. For ten years after, when I moved back home, I went there about three times a year.

Three times a year!

Yeah, I used to go really often, and I think almost every ensemble in Amsterdam and the Hague had played one of my pieces. I had a lot of stuff commissioned there.

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What made you decide to permanently move back to Canada? It sounds like you really found a home there.

I think I just liked being somewhere where nobody really cared about what you were doing (laughs).

The anonymity of being Canadian?

Yep! You know what that's like, right. You can be very well known somewhere and nobody knows at home. It was partly that and partly … I just didn't want to be in Europe anymore. I felt it was too cynical and there was too much competition that I wasn't capable of being a part of. Although I have had very good friends there. It's hard. When you leave a place you leave your friends, right? And so for that next ten years I solidified all these friendships and then, I haven't been back since 2005. It's sort of like saying goodbye to everybody.

I used to hate living in Toronto. It took me ten years to like it. You know you're coming from the west, it's hard to get used to the weather and the way things look. I don't know if I read it somewhere or if somebody suggested, why don't you just take up a winter sport? I'm not really into sports but I thought well, I should probably learn how to skate. So I taught myself how to skate. Someone said I should play hockey, and I thought they were nuts. And they bought me a helmet for Christmas and that was it, I was a hockey player, and I still am! I play in a league a couple times a week. I did play competitive for one year and I just couldn't do it. Some of those gals are really rough and I kind of like …

A more gentle approach to hockey? Is that even possible to say?

No! because even in the amateur leagues, people get really chippy sometimes. I played in a very skilled league this last summer, and although we got creamed every game, it was really great because you were playing with people who were so good, and it really taught you how to play. These were really good players – varsity, university level – and they just skated around us like we were pylons!

Like pylons (laughing)…

That's a term … 'pylon' (laughing) … you should know that! But yeah, I never thought in a million years I would be playing hockey. But that's how I started to get through the winters.

The winters here are long.

And if you're from B.C. (British Columbia), they're too long and you get kind of … and I understand how people here get crazy too. It's not just people from B.C. who get crazy.

So it's interesting that you went to a residency in the Arctic,[1] *and had an even more extreme winter experience. What drew you to that?*

Oh! It was sailing on a ship. Ever since I was, I don't know how old, I've wanted to sail on a ship in the ocean. And I never thought it

[1] In 2013 Allison travelled on the tall ship *Antigua* to Svalbard, where she recorded the underwater sounds of icebergs.

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would take that form, but when I read about the residency I thought, I'm applying to that.

What was it like?

I had never sailed before. Well, maybe on a little ship, but I didn't actually learn the knot-tying or anything like that. And this was a big, tall ship, so a 15-sail ship. It's an artist residency, so there were 26 of us that went, and – you know I'm saying they teach you how to sail, but they just do that because if you're going to sail a big ship like that you need a lot of people! It's not like we could really do the job if we had to. But sometimes there were as many as ten of us having to pull on the ropes for the sails.

I didn't realize you were running the ship itself!

Just a few times. It's an incredible experience when you shut off the engines and sail with the wind on a ship. I mean, it's an incredible feeling when the wind is just taking the ship. So when there was an opportunity to sail, the mates would come in and say, hey everybody we think we can sail right now. A bunch of people would run out and help with the sails. All I can do is describe it as magical. I never felt more at home in a place that probably shouldn't feel like home.

A lot of people get seasick. We had to sort of race up north to the top of the archipelago and it was at night that they decided to do it. They warned us, they said it was going to be rough. You think you know what rough is. We had things on shelves and they just went flying across everywhere. Nobody got any sleep.

How long was the trip?

Two weeks was the sailing time, and then there was about a half a week on each end.

Where were you at each end?

Longyearbyen, which is the main town in Svalbard, on Spitsbergen, which is the main island.

Is it Norway?

It's Svalbard. It's Norwegian territory, sort of, because there's also Russian territory there. So if you decided you wanted to mine on Svalbard, you could buy whatever you needed to do that, and stick a Canadian flag where you were, and it would be Canadian territory, even though it's Norwegian. Norway is the sovereign, so it's their laws, but Russia has two cities there: Barentsburg is active, and Pyramiden is an abandoned mining town. It was just an incredible adventure and I would do it again in a heartbeat if circumstances were right. It's quite expensive to go there, but it's an incredible residency.

What particularly stood out to you?

Just experiencing how special the north is. The sound is different; the light is different. As one of my colleagues put it, it's an assault on your senses when you get there. You don't quite realize it because when we landed in Longyearbyen it was four degrees (which is what it was in Toronto). And it's four degrees because of that gulf stream

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current, right? So I was thinking, well this is interesting. But you're also in a town that you can't go outside, because you can only go outside if you're armed and know how to use a weapon.

Why?

Because there are 2,500 polar bears on Svalbard and that outnumbers the people. And they have very strict rules. You're not allowed to engage with them at all. But you have to be armed in case you get a surprise. So you have a gun and you have a flare gun and your object is to scare them, not shoot them. But you still have to know how to shoot them, and where. So they have a little pamphlet on this stuff: if you're going to shoot them with a flare you have to hit them in the chest kind of thing. I don't even know how to shoot a gun so that's not going to work for me (laughing). But the thing that was interesting is that everyone had guns. It's not like everyone is walking around with a gun but, if they're coming in from out of town on their snowmobile – cause people take the glaciers as sort of highways to all the other towns (well there's not that many). Or you would see a whole bunch of guns lined up, because the store had said no guns in the store, or something like that.

It really made me want to go to the Canadian North, because the other thing that's odd about Svalbard is that there's no indigenous culture ... zero. It's all European. There were no people there when there were people in our north, and Siberia, or any other northern Polar country.

Did you learn a little bit about this history?

It's just been an exploited island, ever since it was discovered. You can sort of imagine why no people settled there because if you imagine the earth ten thousand years ago, it was all frozen. And you probably have ten thousand miles between Svalbard and the next piece of land. It didn't really get used until people started to whale. Every day we would go to land somewhere and it would be a whaling site and some of them had graveyards. You can't walk on these areas anymore because with permafrost, it keeps pushing things up. So I guess they have to keep pushing them back down again.

It's also incredible because the pace of change up there is so slow. This is why they didn't want us to walk in certain areas. If there was a bunch of moss somewhere and you put your footprint in it and you did that four years ago, it would probably be there still, and it would be there for another 80 years because it's so slow, the rate of change. And that, combined with the amount of garbage that heads up there, you can understand how it really affects everything to the macro level.

Climate change must be on everybody's mind.

Oh yeah ... for example, one of the fellows who went with us went a year or two later, and places where there was snow, there was no snow. And this is amazing because it was later on in the year. We went in September/October. The most piercing cold was the wind. Unfortunately that was the day, the one time I could do my outdoor project. My outdoor recording project with people playing little instruments and stuff, and it was just insanely windy.

But yeah, there's remnants of all this European activity. They tried to launch zeppelins from there to go to the north pole. Because when people first tried to get to the north pole, they thought they could fly

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there. There were three different explorers that were competing with each other to fly to the north pole. None of them made it, but they would put all this junk up there and then just leave. So there's tons of that kind of stuff from really early times. And I think it was in 1970 or something like that, the governor of Svalbard said anything pre-1950 you can't touch on these islands. So it's just there.

It's like a historical document of all this activity.

Yeah, because people were rummaging around and basically destroying these sites and taking things away. I wish the Canadian government would listen to some things they are doing. The 'don't touch anything' policy should be also Canadian. And this whole thing about not – because people do those cruises on those big ships. They go through into the Northwest passage and they'll do some sort of site exploration and just ruin areas. And people think well nobody's going to know, but of course people are going to know and . . . scientists know.

Do you think you'll go to the Canadian North?

I really want to because it's going to be so different. Just to understand the culture there a bit. Because I love hearing stories about when they found the Franklin expedition ships. The only reason they found those was because of the Inuit people! They had a story, an elder's story, that was about location. So when they were doing their walking around – cause they'd walk and run and dogsled, if they had dogs, back in those days – they would have points of reference in the landscape. And there was a ship that was frozen in the ice for decades and that's what they used as a point of reference. And that was the ship! But of course this is from the 1800s, so eventually the ship sank and it wasn't there anymore so nobody talked about it. Until these fellows came and said, well do you know anything about it? I mean all you've got to do is talk to the people who live there! (laughing)

Another reason why it's so important that languages are preserved. Within language there is this understanding of the land . . . it has been mapped before.

I really wish we could bring that back, you know. I started reading old books of explorers in the Canadian North and it's interesting how they went about what they were doing. Whenever they found something, like a waterfall they hadn't seen, it's already been named for thousands of years by someone else, right? By an aboriginal tribe. But they just go and rename it, and then it becomes so-and-so falls and so-and-so river. They don't use the First Nations names. And I would like to see somebody just bring all that back. They're doing it slowly in different areas.

Yes, the government is trying to do that; I'd like to actually see a list somewhere of all those original names because I think there is something that gets lost kinesthetically . . . if we had a way to connect with the original names, I think it would allow us to feel more of a sense of place.

Yeah. I'll see if I can find the name of this book I had out from the library. The explorer had drawn maps and on some of the maps he has the original names. But the reason he renamed everything was because he had these people who had sponsored him back in England. He went around collecting money from all these people so

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he could actually do the trip. Like crowdfunding! Crowdfunding 1830! It was such a fascinating book because at the end of it he had a list of everyone who had given him every single penny for his trip. Some of them it was like, Lady, 5 pounds. But obviously there were bigger benefactors. And he felt the way to pay tribute to them was just to name this stuff after these people. I mean I get it, but he also wouldn't have been able to make that way through. And he says it throughout his book. He's referencing the people who were already there, the tribes. And if they didn't connect with them, they wouldn't even have found the river, for God's sake, in the first place.

I think the best thing that can come out of this reconciliation effort is to get closer together, and to understand each other, our stories, better. Especially their stories. Because they've been so completely buried. I'm just completely drawn into all this stuff and it's hard though, because it's very sad. There's so much sadness.

But there's also a way of life that … I don't understand, I've never been a hunter, and I don't know if I ever could be. I've been a fisher. My Dad used to take us up to Bowren lakes when I was a kid and we went fishing there. You know, I can't even fish anymore I don't think. But people who are hunters have a different way of life. When we go and see our friend's farm in Tweed in hunting months … we're starting to get a little bit used to it, hearing guns. But for us in the city that's just a foreign thing. But for everyone else, which is a lot of Canada, it's normal, it's every winter, every season. Yeah, I couldn't get used to that but it's a huge part of life, or it was.

You were a performer at a very young age. Do you still perform?

I sort of came back to it. I wasn't really ever interested in being a classical pianist. I love some of that repertoire, because when you grow up with it how can you not, right? But I was never disciplined enough to really practice a lot and I sort of kick myself for that sometimes. But I still love playing the piano. I learned how to play guitar, and I learned how to play percussion, and in different situations I played drums. And then I started improvising which basically opened up a whole new world for me in terms of making, creating sounds in a musical way with anything, any kind of object. And that was really fun. So that got me back into performing. I actually have Martin (Arnold) to thank for that because I hadn't really improvised at all and he asked me to do an improv gig! (laughs) I think I'd played with him and Stephen (Parkinson) a couple of times before then? Martin started this Rat Drifting series, the year that … The year that I became the Interim Artistic Director at Arraymusic was the year Michael Baker was ill.

Which year was that?

2000. And so everyone was prepared that he was going to come back, even me. I was just under the understanding it was interim, but Martin had wanted to do this concert sort of thing, and of course it was fine with me, and we talked to everybody about it and it was all good. So he booked me and Ryan and Stephen to play together. That was one of the first … Yeah, I was quite nervous. All I had was a little plastic radio, and a contact mic, and a little amplifier! But it was great, and things have really gone all kinds of different places since then. We have such a special community in Toronto. So many incredibly talented musicians. All of them not very well known, sadly. Even when I was Artistic Director, I did pieces by

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major European composers and they would come and go, nobody in Europe's played my music this well. I thought wow, if there was just a way we could get some of these musicians on the map because they're so good and they work so hard. But Toronto's a funny place. It's always been a conservative city. And rock 'n roll's been sort of entrenched … and traditional jazz. When our mayor talks about not worrying about all the venues closing cause there's new ones opening up, he's missing the whole point! The new ones only want commercial music! It's the small ones that do the more experimental stuff, even if it's experimental pop music. It doesn't have a place and so things are getting pushed out.

And that's always what Array has been, a harbour.

Array has been incredibly important for this community, more than I ever thought it would. So sadly, Michael passed away and then I took on the job, and during that time more people were using the Array Space. The improvised music scene was really charging along. But at that time you didn't really foresee that all these other venues were going to close. There were … lots of little holes in the wall where people could go to neat gigs. But that's really become more rare and it's tough. That's why I'm happy to have a series at the Tranzac. I have a monthly there.

Oh, what's that?

I just call it Allison Cameron Presents now because I didn't know what else to call it.

Is it your own improvising ensemble or are you curating?

So one month I have a group, and I try to have different people do stuff the second month, and just alternate that way. But actually sometimes I feel I don't need to play that much and so I just book other people. But I am happy to have a place to play and really, if you're a performer, you need a place to play and that's the bottom line, right? And this place, moving here (leasing a studio at the Array space), has been so great because I did my first show here not that long ago, at the beginning of the month I guess, and it was just really nice. It's really important to this community.

The Canadian Music Centre's actually doing a really good job now too, thanks to our wonderful Matthew Fava, the regional director, really getting different stuff happening and kind of bringing a reality check. Composition isn't just classical chamber music anymore. It's everything, everyone who writes, it's creative music, it should be the Creative Music Centre.

Are you writing chamber music as well? Or are you mostly doing improvised music and performing.

It's a bit mixed. I didn't think it was going to be such a big thing for me. I play a lot now, and I've done a lot of recordings now, and I did a couple of national solo tours actually, which was sort of surprising given that it's really wacky music. But there used to be a little community, and I think there still is, where you could apply for tours to do this thing called 'the circuit'. It was groups in various cities across Canada that supported improvised music. There was always a place to go in Rimouski (Québec). You could play there, a great improvised music community there, it's six hours north of

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Montréal, no, is it that far? It's just on the Gaspé. So as you're driving around the Gaspé peninsula, you can take the 20 highway and just keep going on it. It's a wonderful drive because you get to go through all these little towns that are 300 and who knows how many years old on the Québec – the south shore of the St Lawrence, and it's just amazing.

And they have an improvising series?

Éric Normand runs it and he's kind of it up there. He's the one who organizes and does a lot of things up there but there's a great community. And then there's Norman Adams out in Halifax, who's a symphony player who's run an improvising music series called *Suddenly Listen*, forever. He's actually coming here in April so I booked the space for him. I made connections in Fredericton (New Brunswick), there's a little space there, and Montréal, Ottawa, Québec City, and Kingston, of course, with Matt Rogalski. He's doing some really interesting things, and his wife is doing some really interesting things. It somehow involves acoustics, and sound, and geography.

As Canadians, our idea of geography can be so different in how we think about sound, how we think about writing.

What I find interesting and probably the common denominator between people who were here before us, our cultures, is that everyone has a relationship to the land, although a different one. In some ways I wish the English never won the war, versus France, because the French were somewhat more amenable to the Indigenous cultures. Indigenous cultures had this way of relating that was really intertwined with nature. People were so close to nature. There's no wonder that these heady Europeans had no concept of what was going on. Especially the British were just like the worst (laughs). Cut that out of there! Everybody was, so I shouldn't say one particular . . . they are our ancestors I guess but . . .

Would you ever say you find yourself affected by landscape? Or is it too urban in Toronto.

Oh yeah, what made me really feel it was coming back from the Arctic. I couldn't talk to anybody for a week. In the cab coming from the airport I just wanted to turn around and go back. It was hard getting back into this is where I live, this is my life, because I didn't identify with it after these three weeks. I once heard a story of a fellow, a young man they brought from Nunavut into Toronto, and he just freaked out. And I thought, well that makes sense, I'd freak out too if I'd never seen all this crap here, you know, because it's overwhelming, it's a different kind of assault on your senses. But you're not aware of it until you go somewhere else.

I found this book that a couple wrote – because there have been a lot of people who know this Arctic experience now. In some Inuit cultures they call it going inside, because it's like that. So every year this couple goes up north for several months. You just get addicted to it. It's disappearing, and there's nothing like it on the planet.

Did it come out in your music at all?

I really wanted to record icebergs, underwater, and so I got to do a bit of that, but it wasn't super-satisfactory. I'd like to go back just to do

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that. And maybe also stick a kind of mic inside a glacier. People have done this kind of thing before but I just found I couldn't believe the sound that you would get from these bergs in the water.

What kind of sound do they make?

It's like popping bubbles, and if you don't slow it down it almost sounds like running water. I'll never forget this one time – you know, we would go into these fjords and sometimes you'd just be surrounded by ice and the water, and the whole atmosphere was just this crinkling ice. It was all around you. And you can't record that (laughs), you know?

Visually they seem so static, these huge mountains of ice.

They're full of energy. They're always moving and they're always changing. And that's the thing about almost everything up north. You would walk along the beach with these huge chunks of sculpted ice, and think, I couldn't make a piece as beautiful as that. It's just gorgeous. And there it is. That happened a lot. The glaciers were incredible, how they calve is just a phenomenal event.

I don't know what that is.

So the glacier hits the edge of the water, and then chunks start to fall off. When we get those big huge ones, those are the big ice shelves that come down, but they've essentially broken off and they're on their way. It's a real life and death sort of scenario because these icebergs are eventually going to completely disappear, right, no matter what size they are. I know why they call it calving, it's like our own life cycle is in that thing. We have this one way track our whole lives – we're born and then we die. It's the same thing with the iceberg, and you get to see that, you get to see it come off. There's quite a huge reaction in the water when that happens.

Can you talk about your interest in folk music?

When I had my band with Eric and Stephen, we were listening to a lot of British and English and Scottish folk music. And I wanted to know a little bit more about how it worked. Also the concept that, a lot of these tunes might be anonymous but they've been played over and over and over again. The idea you can't really figure out where a tune is from because you might know a Scottish version, but then there might be a Caribbean version of the same tune, and where's the origin of that tune?

One of the most obvious examples for me was when Waterson: Carthy, the English folk group, did a version of a tune called 'Good Night'. And then I heard a version of that tune done by a Barbados guitar player, Joseph Spence[2] and it was his family singing it. And it was the same tune, but done in a different way. I thought, oh that's so cool how he heard that tune from England, but no! It was the other way around (laughs). It was Waterson:Carthy who heard him sing that tune, and so they took it back and made it this English folk tune, cause the way they sing it is with all this heavy English folk culture. So I wonder how many stories there are about these tunes that just kind of go back and forth between America and

[2] Joseph Spence is actually from the Bahamas.

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England. Like 'My Bonny'. Is it an English folk tune? Is it an American folk tune?

So the idea that you could take something that's basically a map of a piece, and just remap it or retrace it some other way was how I was thinking about these tunes. I would take some tabulature from a folk tune and then change something about it, or use it as a basis for another piece.

I've always loved Scottish Highland bagpipe stuff. When I was in Nova Scotia a while back with Stephen, we got some music books that talked about the style of pibroch playing, and wrote it all out, and said these are the ornaments. There's one style of ornamentation that's actually called Cameron, which I didn't know about, and another style – you know, they all have different names. MacCrimmon is another one.

These are ornamentation styles?

Yeah, I didn't get that it was a composition style, but it's almost like they're the same thing. Compositional/ornamentation. I could be wrong about that but because the ornamentation is so much a part of the piece … So when you're playing your pibroch, it's a division form right? You would have this one part and then you would be playing another part that was a division of that part but it would be more ornamented and then you would just kind of go along in these various divisions of the piece, getting more and more ornamented, and then go back to the head.

We used to go to these Highland games – because they do have a lot of this Scottish culture here still. One of the things that people do when they immigrate is they hold onto their culture in a more traditional and conservative way than they ever do where it came from. The diaspora is usually much more conservative, in terms of what's happened with whatever music language, than it is in the original country that it came from. It's not surrounded by its own culture anymore. There must be lots of reasons, I'm not an ethnomusicologist, but I do understand that whole concept, and the whole notion of this very conservative culture of Scotland happening in Canada so much. It became interesting because we would get up at seven in the morning and drive out to wherever the games were. And at 8 o'clock they would have the pibroch competition. So you would hear the best bagpipe players in Ontario, sometimes in Canada, and sometimes from America too, playing pibroch. You were in a field; and the field was full of all these bagpipe bands practicing so you'd be sort of over in this area, and you'd be listening to the pibroch. But then if you walked around the place you would hear this clash of all these bagpipes all over the place.

Where was this?

Georgetown is one place that has them. Fergus. They used to have the pibroch competition indoors there. It was better outside… for me, anyway.

Is that your family's heritage?

Well no, my background's mixed like anybody else. But I have a Scottish name – you can't get more Scottish than that. Allison too,

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is a Scottish name. My Mom's side is all German, Russian, Prussian. And my Dad's is obviously Scottish. But no, I didn't grow up with anything. I just got into it in university. And then when we moved here, Martin [Arnold] found out where all the games were, and so we'd all just drive up together. We were a real clan, I think. We were clannish in how we used to hang out together, you know. It was like a big family.

That's what is such a phenomenon in Toronto now, this cluster of composers.

For me, it's been there all along. It's not like Martin, John, Stephen and I stopped appreciating each others' music, or being colleagues. It's just that we live in different places now.

You are interested in graphic scores and instructional notation, and some of these might be published?

Probably the first significant instructional score I did was called *Gossamer Bit*, which was originally for the Maarten Altena ensemble in Amsterdam. That was the first piece that really changed my whole way of thinking about making pieces in that way. It was a fantastic ensemble in terms of what those musicians could do. They were all excellent score readers and excellent improvisors and they knew all kinds of different genres. They could pretty much just do anything, you know? I gave them the simplest things to play and they would just make this stuff out of it.

I guess the thing that really got me with that piece in particular – I had a limited amount of time to get it done so literally I was still finishing it on the airplane over there. Maarten was really nervous about it because they were trying to get this show together really quickly. And I brought it in, they played it the first time, you know after sort of looking at it, reading the stuff, and I thought, wow that is the most perfect performance of this piece that could ever be (laughs). I wonder if you could get performers to play stuff they actually hadn't rehearsed. Of course it's very difficult to get people to do that, and almost impossible for professional musicians to do that, because there's just so much at risk. When I told them that they played it really great and didn't need to do anything they didn't believe me. So somehow it was just a miracle to me that it could be put together so simply.

But the other thing was that they were so skilled. Every time they play it, it sounds different, but it's the same piece. And they just really understood, almost from the beginning, that it wasn't about a linear objective, it was a … shape objective. So you're not just playing this part because you're going to be in harmony with that part. You're thinking of the whole shape of it, the whole space that that time takes, and that space of time that your part takes, and how you can fit into it. And they really just seemed to get that. It's because of them and that experience I really started changing the way I was thinking.

[Martin Arnold walks in.]
Hi. We're having a little chat.
Martin Arnold: What are you chatting about?

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Right now about Gossamer Bit.

M: Why are you chatting about that? Hey! Am I being recorded?! (laughter) Hi Mom! Oh no … forgot you're dead! (more laughter)

A: That is good, that's a good one, Martin!

M: Will it ruin things? I have to run the elevator to bring up things for the show tonight. Are you coming tonight?

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