

TUBER, RHIZOME, TENDRIL AND CORM: ON THE MUSIC OF MARTIN ARNOLD

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Abstract: Martin Arnold is an experimental composer currently residing in Toronto, Canada. His unique approach to composition originates in the close relationship that he developed with Czech-Canadian composer Rudolf Komorous while Arnold was a doctoral student at the University of Victoria. Martin Arnold's desire to create music both familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown, generates paradoxical listening experiences that reside on the edges of things. In this article, the author explores a number of these edges and meeting places, especially as they occur within the composer's very singular string quartet, *Contact; Vault*.

The Canadian composer Martin Arnold desires to slip away from constructs like narrative, things that tell, express, that vividly capture the ear with clear shape and outline. Arnold sees art as a place of experiment rather than judgement, an opening into infinite sensibility, rather than an assertion of significance with its automatic detritus of inconsequentiality. In 1995, he wrote about these and other ideas in his PhD dissertation, a kind of treatise in which he maps out his interests as a composer on topics as varied as mediaeval polyphony, seventies progressive rock, jazz-lounge music, and Scottish folk music, as well as the works of experimental artists and writers such as Michael Snow, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ernie Gerh, Norman Bryson and Peter Gidal.¹ Though varied, these influences are not random, and Arnold writes at length on their significance in developing his creative thought, as exemplified in the 70-minute work, *Burrow Out; Burrow In; Burrow Music* (1995).

This substantial piece in two movements, alongside the composer's carefully considered theoretical and poetic analysis, marks the beginning of a singular compositional aesthetic which bears no close resemblance to that of any other composer currently writing music in Canada. It is an aesthetic that was considerably nurtured by the composer's close ties to Czech-Canadian experimental composer and musician, Rudolph Komorous, their relationship having been cultivated while Arnold was a student at the University of Victoria from 1983 to 1995.

¹ See Martin Arnold, 'Observations About, around and Beside "Burrow out; Burrow in; Burrow Music"' (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 1995).

Komorous (b. 1931) moved to Canada in 1969 and taught at the University of Victoria between the years 1971 and 1989.² However, while in Prague in the 1950s, he was aligned with the visual artists known as Smidra, a group who sought to create artistic works and experiences that evoked the feeling of wonder. Their works resided outside categories often used to organise art (high, low, serious, popular, etc.), confounding the listener or viewer with unusual codes and veils. In reflecting on this, Martin Arnold wrote that the Smidra group aspired to paradox and enigma, suspended somewhere between the known and the unknown.³ The desire to find that location, where the everyday tipped into mystery, required the creation of artistic works that were driving things on ‘their edge – on that edge when you cannot really recognise what’s serious, what’s not serious . . . , what’s true, what’s not true, what’s sort of from life and what is a sheer imagination’.⁴ Not a technique or style, and certainly not a method of teaching, the ‘aesthetic of the wonderful’ was more a working premise that the world is not limited or consistently familiar. Rather, there is peculiarity to be found in even the most usual places, a sense of infinite possibility. And perhaps it gave students of Komorous at the University of Victoria what Arnold calls ‘a skewed critical sensibility’,⁵ one that ‘could embrace any musical background or predilection, insisting only “that things should somehow be driven on the edge” of those predilections’.⁶

Martin Arnold currently lives in Toronto. He works as a landscape gardener, lectures at Trent University in the Department of Cultural Studies, and is an adjunct member of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at York University. He performs regularly within the city’s free improvisation and experimental jazz/roots/rock communities on melodica, hurdy-gurdy, prepared autoharp, real-time manipulated and processed CD player and banjo. He often uses some kind of electronic processing. He has improvised in conjunction with artists and musicians such as Allison Cameron, Eric Chenaux, Rob Clutton, Ryan Driver, Eve Egoyan, John Oswald, Stephen Parkinson, Michael Snow and Doug Tielli, and has also performed abroad with Josh Abrams, Matt Bauder, Lori Freedman, Andrea Neumann and Christian Wolff. He has played in Michelle McAdorey’s band and in the Ryan Driver Jazz Quartet. He has led, composed for, and performed with Marmots in free improvisation evenings in Toronto. He has curated the Rat-drifting performance series for experimental music, as well as led the new music ensemble The Burdocks. The ensembles that Arnold is part of seem to exist in the cracks between other things, a quality that he describes as critical: ‘One of the most crucial aspects of the wonderful is that it renders irrelevant the cultural construct of high versus low art, or elite versus popular art. That is the kind of duality that cannot be established when the “serious and the trivial cannot be distinguished”’.⁷

² Arnold was a composition student in 1983–85 (Masters of Music), and 1986–95 (PhD), during which his primary advisors were Rudolf Komorous and Michael Longton (composition), and Mowry Baden and Linda Gammon (visual art theory).

³ Martin Arnold, ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, in *Canadian Cultural Poesis*, ed. Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin and Sheila Petty (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006).

⁴ Rudolf Komorous quoted in Arnold, ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 306.

⁵ Arnold writes in the footnotes to his article that ‘there have been a few generations of Komorous students and many continue to be conspicuously active within the Canadian experimental music scene. They include: John Abram, Christopher Butterfield, Allison Cameron, Anthony Genge, Stephen Parkinson, Rodney Sharman, Linda Catlin Smith and Owen Underhill’, ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 320.

⁶ Arnold ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 307.

⁷ Arnold ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 307.

The Reveries, for instance, are a trio of musicians Arnold has played with who come from an assorted background of rock, punk, free improvisation and 'pre-jazz'.⁸ They sing and play the guitar and harmonica, as well as a collection of less-standard ('fragile and ungainly') instruments like thumb reeds (a piece of balloon rubber pulled between the thumbs and blown like a blade of grass), quasi-ruler bass (a metal strip pressed against table top and then plucked), nose flute (a toy that produces varied pitches through changing the 'air pressure and shape of the nasal cavity'), and bowed saw.⁹ These unusual timbres are wrapped around long, slow jazz ballads, slightly skewed by unsteady pitch, but also incorporating rich three-part harmonies.¹⁰ Additionally, there are layers of amplified sound-processing created with contact microphones and mouth speakers (causing sounds produced from one player to emerge out of the mouth speaker of another, for example). Because this happens in conjunction with the musicians already singing, 'the speaker signal is filtered in a wild array of wah-wah effects caused by the changing shape of their mouth cavity'.¹¹ Furthermore, the group might be mic'd and played back through a small home stereo during performance.

There is dislocation where this music settles – a contradiction caused by, for instance, the physical difficulty of playing with contraptions held inside the mouth or strapped onto the face (or body). Little energy is possible for mannerisms or demonstrative musical gestures: the players are just doing too many difficult things at once. Despite the required level of exertion, the musical outcome has very little variation, either within or between pieces; in fact, the music has what Arnold calls a 'mellow, lymphatic slackness'.¹²

One result is that the listener becomes bewildered. Another is there is an acute awareness of detail, reinforced by the music's non-narrative nature. The music is dense and without contrast, without tension and release (although players do solo and express their individuality within this intricate texture). 'The experimental listener needs to come to the music and work through the aural morass of detail. This quagmire is the only locus for experimental interaction that the Reveries offer since there is very little formal variation in their music'.¹³

Arnold compares the music of the Reveries to the eighteenth-century still-life paintings of Chardin, where every detail is treated equally and 'given the same degree of attention or inattention'.¹⁴ The music has no background, foreground, emphasis, or waste:

As with Chardin's still lifes, *the Reveries*, in building up their music, avoid priorities. Nothing has been declared unimportant. While the near-familiarity and pop-music worldliness of the repertoire gives *the Reveries'* project a dream-like coherence, these songs are not mere vehicles. Freed from the accoutrements and preconditioned codes of emotional manipulation, the specificity of each song is available to the experimental listener (if that is where her or his experiment takes her or him). There is an undefinable, strange sentimentality available with this music that cannot be held by words like happy or sad. It

⁸ Arnold describes the Reveries as working 'in a margin they have located between lounge jazz, psychedelia, and post-rock', 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 318. The trio consists of Ryan Driver, Doug Tielli and Eric Chenaux.

⁹ Arnold 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 318.

¹⁰ Arnold writes that 'all three musicians have sweet, pop voices and sing consummate three-part harmonies', 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 318.

¹¹ Arnold 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 318.

¹² Arnold 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 319.

¹³ Arnold 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 319.

¹⁴ Arnold 'Thinking the Wonderful', p. 319.

is the adventure of being at play with the mystifying, in the joy of experiencing the wonderful.¹⁵

Arnold draws these ideas from an essay written on ‘rhopography’ in the book *Looking at the Overlooked* by Norman Bryson. Rhopography (from *rhopos*, trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the study of those unassuming everyday things that lack significance – those things that are usually overlooked:

The concept of importance can arise only by separating itself from what it declares to be trivial and insignificant; ‘importance’ generates ‘waste’, what is sometimes called the preterite, that which is excluded or passed over. Still life takes on the exploration of what ‘importance’ tramples underfoot.¹⁶

Bryson tells how Chardin does this through cultivating a ‘studied informality of attention which looks at nothing in particular’.¹⁷ Put another way, his still-life canvases avoid placing more importance on one object or area than another. Backgrounds are not left blank, for instance, to draw the eye to an object, but rather the painting is filled:

... with incident, with mysterious flickers and sparks of colour that can be as engaging to the eye as any of the presented objects. No single square inch of the painting has been declared unimportant, and the objects are not intrinsically more significant than the areas between them ... Chardin undoes the hierarchy between zones of the canvas which the whole idea of composition traditionally aims for – the regulating and directing of the gaze from what in a painting is of primary to what is of secondary or tertiary importance. He gives everything the same degree of attention – or inattention; so that the details, as they merge, are striking only because of the gentle pressures bearing down on them from the rest of the painting.¹⁸

Martin Arnold experiments extensively with these ideas in his music, not only when performing with groups like the Reveries, but also in his composed works. Notated material is often manipulated through gating, feedback or other layers of processing.¹⁹ (*Leaf litter* for solo bass flute gating recording, and *Water Lens*; *Water Limbus* for trio and voice gating recording come to mind.) Improvisation is incorporated effortlessly, as are found materials such as sets of pitches or rhythmic phrases from early instrumental works that have been cut up and reassembled.

Arnold’s 40-minute work *Tam Lin (Drapearray)* was written for the Draperies (improvising trio singing and playing trombone, analogue synthesizer and electric guitar) and Toronto’s Arraymusic (clarinet, trumpet, melodica, two vibraphones, electric piano, piano, violin and string bass) in 2003. The piece layers ‘unnotated improvisation, full notation, verbal tasks, chord changes, and anything in between or around any of these’.²⁰ There is also a long, slow ballad sung in three-part harmony that is set on 23 verses from the Scottish folk ballad, *Tam Lin*.

His recent work *Thomas the Rhymer* is conceived similarly. Composed as a special project for his Snider Visiting Artist residency at the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus (Winter 2012), it

¹⁵ Arnold ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 320.

¹⁶ Norman Bryson quoted in Arnold, ‘Observations’, p. 60.

¹⁷ Bryson quoted in Arnold, ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 315.

¹⁸ Bryson quoted in Arnold, ‘Thinking the Wonderful’, p. 315.

¹⁹ These techniques were used extensively in *Burrow Out*, *Burrow In*, *Burrow Music*. To understand how Arnold imagines them in ‘the service of “convey[ing] a multiplicity” of listenings’, see his discussion on Instrumentation and Recording, in ‘Observations’, pp. 3–30.

²⁰ Arnold, programme notes for performance of *Tam Lin (Drapearray)* by the Array Ensemble, Array space, Toronto, 2012.

was designed to allow ‘musicians of all kinds and with any amount of experience to be involved’. As Juliana Pivato wrote on her website, it allows virtuosos to play alongside jazz musicians, laptop samplers, as well as amateur musicians or players wanting to experiment with ‘amplified rubberband, tinfoil pie-plate, crystal glass, or plastic tube in a band’.²¹ Resembling the construction of *Tam Lin*, this long piece of dense and slow-moving counterpoint contains an extended ballad telling the supernatural lives of fairy-folk and the thirteenth-century Scottish laird, Thomas the Rhymer.

Arnold also has a growing number of chamber works that are purely notated, which don’t incorporate real-time manipulation, improvisation, verbal instructions and so forth. How has Arnold found ways to ‘set things on their edge’ within the practise of notated composition? How does he use rhythm, pitch and structure to create a sense of bewilderment? How does he draw the listener’s attention to an experimental ‘morass of detail’ through intricate textures and piles of slow, slack melodies? How does he alter sound production, and submerge music beneath veils that transform standard ensembles into new instruments? I would like to engage in a close reading of his 1997 string quartet *Contact*; *Vault* in order to explore some of these questions.

Contact; Vault

It’s clear that I care about melody. I love melody: one on its own or two or more combined in any imaginable manner – monody, homophony, polyphony and heterophony. I love melody; but I’m not concerned with themes, subjects (first or second), motifs (especially of the leit variety), or phrases (at least when they display their Greek root-phrazein: ‘to tell, express, declare’). I am not at all interested in tracing narrative onto the movement of music and so I’m not interested in melodies that assert themselves as characters that develop. I care about continuation, not progression. I love music that continues; but, as my listening imagination moves through this continuum, it’s the detail that engages me, the specificity of how the melody meanders within the perpetual, continuing present; present because I’m not concerned with where things are going to go, what they’re going to become. And melody here isn’t just a succession of pitches; it’s texture-intentional and indeterminate-folding and unfolding. But I don’t want the detail to be declared-no quotation marks around anything, no underlining; I want to stumble on it on my sonic *dérive*.²²

In *Contact*; *Vault*, Martin Arnold transforms a long melodic line into slow-moving streams of sonic counterpoint. Although heterophony is the organising principle of the quartet (the piece being based essentially on a generated series of pitches), the composer opens this melody into variegated textures: canon, homophony, embellishment, and instances of oblique counterpoint. Significantly, the four players also use extremely reduced playing techniques throughout the work, such that the resulting fragility and quiet veils the melody.

Such extensive overlay and awareness of continuous melody – in so many of its possible forms – begins to push the very idea of it into dissolution. The lilting, often drifting quality of Arnold’s melodies unfold in cell-like variations, gently repeating, repelling and reflecting themselves, so much so that we lose track of their shape and outline. Submersion in quiet causes different textural elements to come forward. Solidity dissolves. Melodies lose their membranes, such that

²¹ Juliana Pivato, ‘Martin Arnold, the Snider Visiting Artist’, <http://www.pivatopraxis.org/000-news-and-announcements> (accessed March 20, 2012).

²² Arnold, liner notes to *Martin Arnold: Aberrare*, Quatuor Bozzini, CQB 1112, CD, 2011.

Table 1:

Contact; Vault: Instruments and Sound Production.

	bars 1–97	bars 98–124	bars 125–66	bars 167–202
Violin I	<i>col legno tratto</i> in low register			
Violin II	<i>pizzicato</i> : high register vs lower open strings	<i>arco</i> natural harmonics	<i>col legno tratto</i> in low register	
Viola	<i>arco</i> natural harmonics		<i>sul tasto</i> ; heavy practise mute	
Cello	<i>col legno battuto</i> ; some <i>pizzicato</i>		<i>arco sul tasto</i> ; heavy practise mute	

we fall into their insides, into sensation. As Arnold has written: ‘all kinds of lines-of-flight can erupt and spill out delirious associations and speculations’.²³ It is not the purpose of this article to guide you through your own lines-of-flight, or describe possible deliriums, for that I would urge you to immerse yourself in the composer’s sound-world firsthand; rather, I wish to explore the notated compositional techniques Martin Arnold turns to when he wishes to create his own ‘sonic *dérive*’.

Micro-heterophony

Contact; Vault primarily comprises a unison melody; however, each of the four players approaches sound production quite differently and for extended periods of time (see Table 1). Violin I’s *col legno tratto* creates a soft whistling sound for the entirety of the 18-minute quartet. The viola plays natural harmonics for the first half of the piece, followed by low register *sul tasto* with heavy apartment mute for the second half. The cello also explores two sonic characters, first using the wood of the bow (*battuto* rather than violin I’s *tratto*) as well as *pizzicato*, and then switching to *arco sul tasto* with apartment mute at bar 125, more than halfway through the piece. Because specific timbres are played for such long durations, the instruments themselves seem transformed into something new. The cello is not temporarily coloured by an extended technique, for instance, but becomes a different instrument altogether. As Arnold has commented: ‘I’ve tried to reinvent the string quartet, to turn it into a strange collection of quiet, insidious, and hopefully wonderful, discrete instruments’.²⁴

The gathering of these sonorities at the threshold of silence, noise and pitch creates a counterpoint of timbre. Look for instance, at the opening bars of the quartet in Example 1a. A blend of approaches sounds the strings: plucking, bouncing the wood of the bow off the string, drawing the wood of the bow across the string, and drawing the hair of the bow across the string. There is imprecision in note attack. Soft dynamics push at sound quality. Fragile instrument timbres and micro-variations in rhythm and pitch destabilise pattern

²³ Arnold as quoted in Eldritch Michael Priest, ‘Boring Formless Nonsense (or, On The Aesthetics of Failure in Recent Experimental Composition)’ (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2011), p. 114.

²⁴ Arnold quoted in Priest, ‘Boring Formless Nonsense’, p. 114.

(a)

violin I: *arco col legno* (no resin on bow or strings)

violin II: *pizz: match 1st viol. volume throughout - essentially pp*

viola: *match 1st viol. volume throughout - essentially pp*

cello: *battuto col legno; match 1st viol. volume throughout*

Tempo: ♩ = 72

Measure numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Annotations: *play grace-note on the beat throughout*

Example 1a:
Contact; Vault: bars 1–9.

perception. Register fluctuations pull at the melody line. Nearly 20 minutes of pianissimo dynamics challenge the performers physically and psychologically.

tendril . . .

*Man . . . projects his desire into infinity and feels pleasure only when he is able to imagine that this pleasure has no end. But since the human mind cannot conceive the infinite, and in fact falls back aghast at the very idea of it, it has to make do with what is indefinite, with sensations as they mingle together and create an impression of infinite space, illusory but pleasurable all the same: And sweet to me is foundering in this sea.*²⁵

Arnold also uses an approach to metre where subtle contractions and expansions of rhythmic cells simultaneously allude to and unbalance its stability. For instance, the common time signatures of 2/4 at bar 3 and 6/8 at bars 7–8 are preceded and followed by bars that have been shortened or lengthened by the value of a semiquaver, crotchet or quaver. This jostling of metre is achieved through small changes in note duration within rhythmic cells. In the violin I part below, extracted from bars 4–9, four rhythmic versions of the descending two-note cell can be observed: (1) triplet semiquavers and quaver tied to a crotchet, (2) semiquaver to crotchet, (3) crotchet to quaver, and 4) grace note (on the beat) to dotted crotchet. These variations fluster the regularity of the metre so subtly that musical pattern isn't undermined as much as it lifts off and floats. In this way, the composer explores a meeting place between the familiar and unfamiliar.

(b)

violin I

Measure numbers: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Annotation: *play grace-note on the beat throughout*

Example 1b:
Contact; Vault: Violin I, bars 4–9.

Heterophony: Melodic Ornamentation and Embellishment

Thus far we've looked at how sound production and metrical jostling have produced micro-heterophony in *Contact; Vault*. Register shifts, rhythmic variation, pitch subtraction, and snagging tones (i.e. temporarily repeating the same pitch so as to create a short passage of oblique counterpoint) also produce surface fluctuations and independence between players.

²⁵ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 63.

Octave doublings frequently orchestrate the composer's unison melody, such as can be seen in [Examples 2a–d](#). [Example 2a](#) shows a heterophonic passage beginning at bar 11 that contains a four-octave span between parts: violin II (pizz.) is two octaves above violin I; viola's harmonics are nestled in the octave between; and cello (batt.) plays in the lowest register. In [Example 2b](#), register displacements in viola fluctuate at a distance of one, two, and three octaves from violin I. [Example 2c](#) shows cello/violin I in unison, and viola/violin II doubling two octaves higher. This latter pair also contains its own registral oscillations. The composer so frequently explores variations of octave doubling throughout *Contact*; *Vault*, that one of the most striking features of the work's final passage, shown below in [example 2d](#), is that all four players finally come together, not only in melodic and rhythmic unison, but also in the same register.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: violin, violin II (pizz.), viola, and cello. It is divided into four measures labeled (a), (b), (c), and (d). Measure (a) starts at bar 11, (b) at bar 26, (c) at bar 52, and (d) at bar 181. The time signatures change from 3/8 to 2/4, then 7/8, and finally 3/4. Octave markings like '8va' and 'c.l. batt.' are present. The score illustrates various octave doublings and register displacements between the instruments.

Example 2a–d:
Contact; *Vault*: register variation.

Let us now turn to the composer's use of rhythmic variation. Two contrapuntal melodies emerge at bar 30 out of a passage of rhythmic unison (see [Example 3](#)). One melody is played by violin II/viola, and the other is played by violin I (with cello doubling in bars 31–33). In the case of the former, violin II harmonises the viola melody with a repeated high F# in rhythmic unison.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: violin, violin II, viola, and cello. It covers bars 29 to 34. The time signature changes from 3/4 to 5/16. The score features various rhythmic patterns, including triplets (marked with '3') and rests. The instruments play in a more complex, contrapuntal fashion compared to the previous examples.

Example 3:
Contact; *Vault*: bars 29–34.

However, occasional discrepancies can be observed. Unlike the viola, in the first beat of bar 30, violin II has a triplet rhythm. Nonetheless, they lock together immediately afterwards, such that the listener might perceive this inconsistency as just a performance irregularity. Similarly, they come slightly apart again in bar 34,

when viola moves into brief alignment with violin I from the other pair. There has been, in fact, a noticeable alliance between the pitches of viola and violin I throughout this passage, a relationship that rhythmically jostles back and forth in time. Note, for example, that in bar 30 the high E in viola lags slightly behind the E of violin I, then trace how the two instruments push and pull at one another through the ensuing series of matching pitches. As previously noted, the two finally come together at the octave in bar 34.

Reconsidering the opening observation that this passage is presented by two melodies played in pairs, we can now add that these pairs themselves also intermingle, sometimes on the level of pitch, other times rhythmically. In fact, *all* of the rhythms of this passage bear resemblance to one another, moving as they do, comfortably in and out of coincidence.

The tendency to drift into moments of player independence is not limited to the preceding example, but rather can be found throughout the work. I draw your attention back to [example 1a](#), where violin II ornaments the violin I melody in bars 3, 6, and 7; or similarly, where violin II repeats pitches against the more active melody line in bar 8. What is notable is the subtle nature of these fluctuations, and the fluidity with which shifting alliances occur amongst players. Even with a more embellished exploration of material, such as is found in the cello line of this same passage, the player still moves within and across the melody of the other three players. In bar 2, the cello meanders into coincidence with the others on their A; in bar 4, it flickers on D and G; in bar 5, there is rhythmic alignment; and by bar 7, a settling on repeated iterations of the note G, and so forth.

corm . . .

*. . . places where the light mingles, etc., etc., with the shadows, as under a portico, in a high, overhanging loggia, among rocks and gullies, in a valley, on hills seen from the shady side so that their crests are gilded the reflection produced, for example, by a colored pane of glass on those objects on which the rays passing through that glass are reflected; all those objects, in a word, that by means of various materials and minimal circumstances come to our sight, hearing, etc., in a way that is uncertain, indistinct, imperfect, incomplete, or out of the ordinary.*²⁶

Arnold also removes fragments of the melody from the cello part, thus using not only ornamentation but also reduction to affect colour and weight. (Examples of this are numerous but here is a partial list: bars 15–16, 18–19, 22–23, 27–30, 34, 37–40, 44–46, 49, 57–59, 65–68, 76–77, 100). Because the cello often roots the ensemble in its low register, these absences are noticeable, and their re-entrances prominent. This effect occurs despite the use of the more percussive *col legno battuto* playing technique in bars 1–125, (although this does de-saturate pitch).

Another technique the composer uses to create heterophony is that of ‘snagging’ pitches. For instance, in [Example 4](#) at bars 16–17, violin II plays a two-note rhythmic fragment on G# in triplet metre (semiquaver plus quaver) beginning in the second half of bar 16. The start of each triplet fragment is emphasised by either an accent or tenuto mark. This fragment comes out of a sustained minim in the other three voices (reinforced by a timbral change to *pizz.* in cello), and is repeated seven times until it rejoins the melody in bar 18. Like a tendril winding out at odd angles, this fragment briefly sets up its own

²⁶ Giacomo Leopardi quoted in Calvino, *Six Memos*, 57.

violin

violin II

viola

cello

pizz, molto vib.

Example 4:
Contact; Vault: bars 16–18.

temporary metre outside of the shifting detail of the unfolding melody before re-aligning with it. I will continue this discussion in the next section, by looking at other forms of oblique counterpoint.

Oblique Counterpoint

Some pitches get left behind while others keep moving. These notes might be snagged or repeated, or they might be sustained like pedal tones with harmonic and structural function. Notice violin II's single note snags in [Example 5](#): 1) the third semiquaver of bar 10, 2) the last semiquaver of bar 11, 3) the last quaver of bar 14, and 4) the third semiquaver of bar 15, among others.

violin

violin II

viola

cello

Example 5:
Contact; Vault: bars 10–15.

In [example 6](#), an even briefer appearance of snagging occurs in bar 24. Observe the second beat of the bar where all players (with the exception of the viola) begin by playing a C as an on-the-beat grace note. As viola sustains C, the remaining players move immediately to C#. This curious moment produces a micro-smear of musical attack, one so brief that the listener might wonder if it is merely a performance anomaly.

tuber . . .

When I first started to think about what I could do as a composer the real core issue became the development of a sense of continuity. I realized that I had to find a way to

violin

violin II

viola

cello

♩ = 72

Example 6:
Contact; Vault: bar 24.

make things just continue to flow – where all kinds of details could drift past your ears, but without being presented in a way that would make them easily graspable. I was primarily trying to keep things ‘wonderful’ – in the sense Rudolf talked about, where you don’t know how to prioritize things, where you don’t know what’s important. The special moments should never seem rarefied or elevated. For huge stretches you might be listening to something relatively pleasant, but you wouldn’t really have a clue why it was still going. It wouldn’t have a narrative coherence either. Things could seem to go on too long or too short, but the music wouldn’t give any clues to why this should seem to be the case. These are experiential conditions my music aspires to. Hopefully, things are just going along in a way that doesn’t seem to be about telling something.²⁷

Examples 7a–d contain other kinds of snagging and note repetitions within the context of rhythmic unison. In the first case, violin II dwells in and around F# for most of bars 26–27, despite continual note changes in the rest of the ensemble. In Example 7b, viola has a ‘reverse’ snag on the first beat, arriving on a D then repeating it to coincide with the rest of the ensemble. In Example 7c, the natural harmonic A is repeated by viola in the final beat of the bar. This example is interesting because this harmonic is more comfortable to play on viola than moving to the E natural harmonic. (However the composer does ask for the natural harmonic E in the first beat of the same bar).

(a) repetition

(b) 'reverse' snag

(c) snag

(d) 'grace note' and 'reverse' snag

violin

violin II

viola

cello

♩ = 72

Example 7a–d:
Contact; Vault.

Example 7d shows the cadential close of this section, and a more intricate version of the grace note snag previously discussed. Though violin I moves to C after a C# grace note, violin II sustains

²⁷ Martin Arnold in Paul Steenhuisen, ‘Martin Arnold—Getting Lost, an Art of Musical Meandering’, *Musicworks*, 87 (Fall 2003), p. 29.

Table 2:
Contact; Vault: Pitch Material and the Use of Pedal Tones.

Bars	1–34	35–54	55–102	103–124	125–128	129–132	133–148	149–160	167–177	178–202
Pitch Material	Cdef#Gabc#			Gabc#	—	Def#g#	—	Def#g#	—	Bc#d#e#
				Def#g#		Abc#d#		Abc#d#		F#g#a#(b#)
Pedal Tones	C and G		C and G	G and D				D and A		B and F#
			G and D	G#						

the C#, as does cello, despite also articulating a C# grace note. At the same time, viola plays a 'reverse' snag, arriving on C before violin I, and sustaining its pitch into coincidence with this upper string. Though perhaps sounding convoluted when put to words, a different effect is achieved in music – quite simply a warm gathering of cross-relationships where four methods of ornamentation are brought together into a single closing quarter note.

I would now like to turn to examples of oblique counterpoint that provide harmonic underpinning to a passage (see Table 2). In the opening of the quartet, the cello plays G numerous times in the first three bars of the piece, as well as in bars 7–9. As the mode of this passage (comprising two Lydian tetrachords a fifth apart) is built on the root of C, this repetition of G reinforces the fifth note. Cello and viola also sustain notes C and G between bars 70–75, reinforcing the root and fifth of the mode. In bars 98–102 of the violin II, viola and cello parts, the pitches G and D are sustained. These two notes exist both within the primary mode and in its first transposition of a perfect fifth. As the transposition occurs soon after at bar 103, these pedal tones function as a kind of harmonic bridge between the two scales. (Note that G and D are the root and fifth of this new mode.) At certain moments, these same pedal tones also provide a skeletal outline to the texture, such as in bars 111–116, where G and D are sustained by violin I and II, along with a high-register G# harmonic that reinforces the arrival of a new transition.

D and A are sustained throughout bars 149–160 to underpin the two-part canon occurring between violin and viola. We have at this point in the quartet transposed once again such that these pitches outline the root and fifth of the D mode. The last harmonic pedals occur in the final transposition to B at bar 178. Though in this instance the pitches are only repeated for three bars in cello/violin II before the players turn to the unison melody, their harmonic presence is ongoing throughout the passage (see Example 8). This is because B and F# are clearly repeated (bars 178–180) and then acoustically reinforced by the melody that circles around and through them.

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: violin I, violin II, viola, and cello. The score covers bars 177 to 182. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 72. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The time signature is 2/4. The violin parts play a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The viola and cello parts provide harmonic support with sustained notes and rhythmic patterns. The score is written in a standard musical notation with a grand staff for each instrument.

Example 8:
Contact; Vault: bars 177–182.

rhizome . . .

Giacomo Leopardi maintained that the more vague and imprecise language is the more poetic it becomes. I might mention in passing that as far as I know Italian is the only language in which the word vago (vague), also means 'lovely, attractive'. Starting out from the original meaning of wandering, the word vago still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure.²⁸

²⁸ Calvino, *Six Memos*, 57.

We've been spending our time discussing pitch and rhythm in the context of oblique counterpoint, but I would now like to return to Arnold's applying unusual performance techniques to a traditionally notated melody. It only seems natural to include timbre as an element of counterpoint when considering a piece that so gently and persistently explores the contact points of pitch, noise and silence. Although it is outside the scope of this article to comprehensively examine the relationships between fields of sonority, it would be interesting to closely consider monophonic passages (for instance, between bars 35–52) and trace the changes in timbre that occur when, for example, violin II alternates between high register pizzicato – where there is more noise in the sound, and less recognisable pitch – and open string pizzicato, which has more resonance and more discernible pitch. Likewise, one could consider how the viola's timbre is affected in the ratio between pitch and noise by moving between the partials of the natural harmonics. Furthermore, one could think about the sonic differences between cello's long passages of *battuto* playing on the third and fourth strings (bars 35, 36, 38, and 43–48), as opposed to the first string (bars 41, 42 50–52). There is also the change in resonance that comes from using open strings as opposed to fingered notes, the shifts of colour that result from using different strings, and the changes in resonance and colour that come from movement up and down each string. Another timbral element that might be considered contrapuntally is sound versus silence, an aspect quite relevant to the cello part, for instance.

Although it may seem excessive to catalogue these more ephemeral materials of music – colour, shadow and veil – and consider them equal to pitch, rhythm and variation in our discussion on counterpoint, I believe that this is what the composer means when he writes that he loves melody, but he is not interested in using it to express something. For is not melody designed for this very function? to generate a narrative, to tell a story, to create tension and release, to establish importance in a musical context (an activity that also results in unimportant leftovers, things that are left behind).

If focusing on melody – but leaving behind all narrative aspects – is the composer's guiding impulse, then what remains is a heightened awareness of *all* detail and *all* elements as they mix and mingle, including gradations of colour, pitches as they sustain, unfold and tumble through time, timbre as it moves and winds, rhythm as it gets caught and tangled in itself and empties out, texture as it increases in thickness then thins, only to turn a corner and twist into more quiet streams of ever more fumbling detail. There is no detritus. There is only relationship. In other words, in Arnold's world, varying timbral veils and shadows are just as perceivable as repeated pitches, as heterophonic variation, as canon or chorale. It is for this reason that I imagine not only the extended fields of sonority (outlined in [Table 1](#)) to have their own meaningful and essential set of contrapuntal relationships within *Contact*; *Vault*, but also the subtle shifts and minute variations that I have alluded to in the above paragraphs.

Other Forms of Melodic Texture

The composer's strangely altered string quartet is applied to an entire spectrum of melodic textures: unison, micro-heterophony, monophony, heterophony, canonic as well as homophonic chorale settings. These are outlined in [Table 3](#). Although there is an easy fluidity

Table 3:
Contact; Vault: Pitch Material and Melodic Texture.

Bar	1–34	35–54	55–102	103–124	125–128	129–132	133–148	149–160	167–177	178–202
Modes	C			G	—	D	—	D	—	B
Texture	heterophony <i>bars 26–30: monophonic</i>	monophony	heterophony		4-part chorale		4-part chorale with 2 canons	4-part chorale with canon & pedal tones	4-part chorale	unison

between quasi-monophonic and heterophonic textures in the first half of the quartet, the passage between bars 35 and 54 is an exception. It is unabashedly monophonic, with a sense of focus not previously encountered. Edges here are gathered. The melody is played in unison (though with some registral difference), and there is repetitive use of a 'locked-in' dotted rhythm (see [Example 9](#)). The composer leaves behind wandering ornamentation and other arching tendrils in favour of a dance.

It is not the first time we hear these lilting rhythms, as they were momentarily encountered in the four-bar passage at bars 26–30. But here they are considerably drawn out for 19 bars, within which melodic fragments vary and recur. This is interesting since Arnold's melodies, though consistently self-similar, very rarely repeat themselves. Notice in the extracted violin I part of [Example 9](#) how the first four 2-note cells of bar 36 (labelled #1a) are repeated twice at bar 48; and how a smaller sub-fragment (#1b) circles back numerous times. The chromatic descent that I have labelled #1c is echoed at bar 45; and a long series of cells starting on beat two of bar 37 (see box #2) returns at bar 50. Finally, box #3 is directly repeated a total of three and a half times in a row, beginning in bar 40.

Arnold seems to play most viscerally with memory in these monophonic textures, since linear organisation is aurally enhanced when

The image shows three staves of music for violin I, spanning bars 36 to 51. The music is in 8/8 time and features a consistent dotted rhythm. Various melodic fragments are identified with labels: #1a, #1b, #1c, #2, and #3. Brackets and arrows indicate the repetition and recurrence of these fragments across different bars, such as #1a and #1b appearing in bars 36, 48, and 49; #1c appearing in bars 45 and 50; #2 appearing in bars 37 and 50; and #3 appearing in bars 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, and 50.

Example 9:
Contact; Vault: violin I, bars 36–51.

there are no vertical considerations. Although the composer typically uses resemblances to evoke a feeling of the familiar within the context of continuous change, here melodic fragments actually return in their original forms, thus heightening the 'recall' ability of the listener. There is a correlation between this section and the final 24-bar passage of the quartet, where we re-experience lilting rhythms gathered even more intimately. The composer dances us out of the piece on a single and gentle unison line, octave doubling abandoned, the only time this occurs in the work. The four instruments merge such that individual timbres are forgotten: one almost hears a single instrument playing, one that expresses complex acoustic properties, an intimate interconnection of wood, flesh and string, as each continuously slides over, attacks, and releases the other.

whorled leaf . . .

. . . the light of the sun or the moon, seen in a place from which they are invisible and one cannot discern the source of the light; a place only partly illuminated by such light; the reflection of such light, and the various material effects derived from it; the penetration of such light into places where it becomes uncertain and obstructed, and is

*not easily made out, as through a cane brake, in a wood, through half-closed shutters, etc., etc.; the same light in a place, object, etc., where it does not enter and strike directly, reflected and diffused by some other place or object, etc., where it does strike, in a passageway seen from inside or outside, and similarly in a loggia, etc.*²⁹

Nestled between these outer passages of dotted rhythms are further entanglements with time and memory. For instance, a strange four-part chorale emerges at bar 125, which eight bars later turns into a structure made out of two layered pitch canons between violin I/violin II and viola/cello (bars 133–149). However, the passage remains in rhythmic unison such that the use of canons achieves harmonic transformations within rhythmic continuity. As this passage unfolds, we find ourselves placed once again at the threshold of the familiar and unfamiliar – the canons are oddly constructed, such that each note does not always follow the pitch that it is supposed to: some pitches come before while some come after, some notes are added or missing, while others actually converge. In [Example 10](#), trace how notes are added to the violin I/II canon (they are indicated by x's) to keep pushing and pulling at the pitch series. In fact, part of what is happening here is an exchange in order. The first C in violin I at bar 135 appears in the fourth beat of the bar in violin II *after* the alignment on A₁ rather than before (which is where it should have been). The D in bar 134 can be looked at similarly.

There is also oscillation between register. Although canon 2 is played at a distance of two octaves, canon I is not so consistent.

Example 10:
Contact; Vault: 2 canons beginning at
bars 133.

After starting out an octave apart, the two players come together in the same register, only for violin I to then drop an octave below violin II for a bar, before both parts return to the same register for the remainder of the passage.

The texture and harmonic density of this two-canon passage eventually thins at bars 149 (see [Example 11](#)), despite continuing rhythmic homogeneity. Violin II and cello drop out of their canons and repeat pedal tones D and A. A new conversation begins between violin I and viola (the upper voices of the two previous canons). Once again there is oscillation between unison pitches and octave displacement, with viola rather than violin exploring the higher register.

The composer makes a brief nod to late nineteenth-century string-quartet writing in the final chorale setting, between bars 167 and 177. Although this passage alludes to late Romantic harmonies, the series

²⁹ Leopardi quoted in Calvino, *Six Memos*, 57.

two-part canon:
vln I/ vln—

(canon 1)

(canon 2)

148 149 150 151 152

harmonic underpinning

Example 11:
Contact; Vault: 2-part canon
beginning at bars 149.

of chords doesn't make any particular sense within that tradition; rather it is as though chord progressions have been fragmented into smaller musical objects, and then placed side by side in an unusual and jumbled manner. More than any other passage in the piece, this one reflects the observation by Eldritch Priest that '*Contact; Vault*'s charm is an expression of the way [he] skews his own acute awareness of Western art music's common forms'.³⁰ The lightness of Arnold's writing in this passage contrasts with the density that can be common in the historical four-part chorale, with its concrete pillars of vertical harmonies. Arnold chooses instead to present a hovering cloud of disjointed impulses, playful, and weightless.

Martin Arnold constructs on the edges of almost: almost together, almost remembered, almost perceived, almost known. Though the ambiguity of this place may seem fragile and haunted with longing, it is also tremendously expansive; melody is offered in striking variations of both unity and difference, sound resides effortlessly in the lighted veils of pitch and noise, and every once in a while there are strangely uprooted moments, where vertical perception is allowed to lie down and quietly encounter the dreams of pattern and memory.

³⁰ Priest, 'Boring Formless Nonsense', p. 117.