

## In Her Own Words: Practitioner Contribution 3

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This practitioner contribution documents a series of compositions created between 2013 and 2018, when my compositional process and research trajectory distinctly altered as a result of life changes. My work as an electroacoustic music composer has consistently explored sound recordings of objects, instruments, and environments captured from the real world. My interest in this field was cultivated during my undergraduate music degree at the University of Manchester, where I learned how to combine composition with computer technology.

My earlier fixed-media works (from 2006 to 2013) exhibited a preoccupation with foreign, unfamiliar, and exotic sound sources. Armed with a portable field recorder, I travelled the world to capture culture-specific sound materials; anything from street musicians and jukeboxes to languages and traditional instruments. I would bring these sonic treasures home like souvenirs,<sup>1</sup> unpack them, and give them pride of place within my fixed-media compositions. These globally sourced sounds can be heard in my works *Sonidos Bailables* (2006), *Cajón!* (2008), *Dance Machine* (2009), *Karita oto* (2009), *Javaari* (2012–13), and *New Shruti* (2013), in which the search for sound involved field trips to Argentina, Mexico, Portugal, Japan, and India respectively. A shift in focus to home-sourced sounds led to the creation of a series of works derived entirely from domestic sources: *Time Will Tell* (2013), *Ice Breaker* (2015), *Snap Happy* (2017), and *Landline* (2018). The shift was propagated by a significant life-changing milestone; the birth of my two children.

### The Domestic and Creativity

Having two children in close succession resulted in more time spent around the home and less time travelling overseas for recording projects. This elongated period at home was unusual, and grounded me in a single location for long stretches of time both in the pre- and antenatal stages. Sounds found around the home, which had always been there, suddenly became points of inspiration for compositional

work, since I noticed and appreciated them more for their consistency and association with my home space; I was also around them more than usual. I came to view these home-based sound sources as personal sounds, and they began to mean more to me, as they marked out a period of time that signified importance and change. This shift in sonic focus functioned as a reminder of the emotional connections and memories one can have with the personal possessions that one is surrounded by daily. The re-imagining of the domestic ‘mundane’ is a sentiment I share here with sound artist Felicity Ford, and her concept of the ‘domestic soundscape’.<sup>2</sup> Ford’s use of everyday sound as documented in her research has been used to highlight daily activities that take place within the home, such as home decorating, knitting, cooking, and other sounds from the kitchen. The home environment as an impetus for creating music is not by any means a novel or exclusively (female) gendered approach; take, for example, the kitchen environment which has inspired a wealth of electroacoustic music repertoire from male composers:

- Jonty Harrison’s *Klang* (1982) uses two earthenware casseroles dishes as the sole sonic material.
- Paul Lansky’s *Table’s Clear* (1992) uses kitchen utensil sounds and recordings of a domestic scene in a kitchen.
- Matthew Herbert’s *Around the House* (2002) uses samples of washing machines, toasters, and toothbrushes, processed into swinging grooves.
- Amon Tobin’s *Kitchen Sink* (2007) constructs trip-hop music through looped samples of water splashing and pans clattering, inspired by *musique concrète* processes.
- Konstantinos Karathanasis’s *Ode to Kitchen* (2015) showcases hundreds of sounds from kitchen objects clustered together.
- Matmos’s *Ultimate Care II* (2016) derives every sound from the duo’s washing machine. The thirty-eight-minute duration mimics a single wash cycle.

Exploring the work of installation artist Fran Cottell and her *House Projects* (2001) furthered my interest in this area. Cottell’s own domestic home space was converted into a ‘museum’ venue accessible to visitors, initially established for the public to view ‘the honesty and truthfulness of mess over domestic order’.<sup>3</sup> In one of these projects, visitors had access to Cottell’s home through specially constructed walkways to observe the reality of domestic life (with young children)

along with the objects that inhabited this space. Assessing the domestic through the perspective of anthropology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochbert-Halton's *The Meaning of Things* has also shaped my understanding of the relationship of the self to personal objects (like those objects that appear sonically in my music). This text suggests that: 'to understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become part of our knowledge of human beings.'<sup>4</sup>

The home as a site for artistic creation and contemplation has clearly inspired many, but there is something curiously subversive about the mix of motherhood and the use of domestic objects as a means for creativity within the examples I have encountered. Having an opportunity to take ownership of a domestic symbol, one that has such stereotypical connotations or associations with the 'housewife' role in the traditional sense, feels like an empowering move, most likely for its unconventional application and transformation within an artistic context. The remarkable (and often unbelievable) time and spaces these examples emerge from is also worth a note here. Finding a window to 'make' and continue practice in light of children arriving on the scene is significant and provides the subject for a growing body of practice from voices discussing and representing this impossible juggling act (consider, for instance, the national initiative Mothers Who Make).<sup>5</sup> Academic study has also begun to follow suit, as articulated by the work and theories of dance practitioner Sarah Black. Black's research led to new terminology when she considered the combination of creative practice and mothering.<sup>6</sup> Her concepts of 'maternal ethics', 'mother as curator', and 'mother-artists' are particularly significant in this context.<sup>7</sup>

My collection of compositions, under the heading of 'Domestic Bliss', adds to this emerging body of work from women practitioners that document periods of transition, in which those artists are still eager to be creative. My contribution, from the perspective of a woman electro-acoustic music composer, discusses decisions to use home-sourced sounds in my music making, and explains the connection these sounds have to my changing circumstance. From the outside, and without reading this as evidence or verification, listeners of my compositions are unlikely to receive this level of context, significance, or meaning, but to myself, as composer, I look back on these works and catch the symbolism, memories, and connections embedded within the timbres and structures.

## Domestic Bliss (2013–2018)

### Time Will Tell (2013)

In 2013 I was given a commission from EMPAC (Experimental Media and Performing Arts Centre), Troy, New York. This residency in spring 2013 gave me access to the Goodman Studio,<sup>8</sup> a team of technicians, and *carte blanche* to create a new work for performance at EMPAC. On arrival my only preconception for a new composition was to continue my interest in short sounds (initiated in my earlier work, *Switched on*, 2011). Part of my sound-collection activity led me to a clock shop in a nearby town, Waterford. These clock sound recordings were added to my collection as part of my residency, a collection which also included the sounds of the EMPAC building, the surrounding environment, and a thunderstorm I experienced during my stay. On my return from my residency, I continued to work on the sound materials that I had gathered, but it was my extended malaise with hyperemesis gravidarum that solidified my focus upon clock sounds featured in *Time Will Tell*. Non-stop sickness and the knowledge that symptoms might ease off in the second trimester kept my mind on the passage of time, checking off dates on the calendar, and working on the mantra of ‘taking one day at a time’. Hearing the sounds of the house during this seemingly endless ‘housebound’ time was a new experience, one that I had not previously had the ‘luxury’ of. The previously unnoticed clocks tick-tocking in the house that continued to mark out each day found their way into my commission. *Time Will Tell* was premiered in EMPAC in November 2013, when I was four months pregnant.

### Ice Breaker (2015)

My first daughter was born in June 2014. The summer of this year was unusually hot for the UK, and I remember the sound of ice cubes becoming the ‘soundtrack’ to this time. Copious cold drinks, ice packs, cooling down, and wanting to live in the freezer to escape the heat initiated my fascination with the phenomenon of differential expansion. Placing ice into drinks resulted in the satisfying cracking sound of the ice expanding due to the sudden change of temperature. Five weeks postpartum I developed sepsis and, as a result, spent all of my maternity leave recovering. Recording ice crack and pop sounds was a welcome distraction conducted at nap times. *Ice Breaker* was premiered at the L’Espace du son festival at Théâtre Marni in Brussels, Belgium, in 2015, sixteen months post-partum.

### **Snap Happy (2017)**

Part way through my second maternity leave in 2016, I discovered a box filled with old cameras, which had been tucked away in my loft for some time. After contemplating the camera function on my iPhone, which adopted the classic shutter sound to accompany picture taking, I realised these recently discovered older-style cameras had much more to offer in the sound domain, such as flashes, zooms, clicks, film-roll winds, disc-cartridge cranks, and function button switches. The use of my camera in this antenatal period struck me as a fundamental part of bonding with my second daughter, capturing the passage of time, gathering one-off moments, and documenting developmental milestones that would freeze these memories amidst my particularly acute sleep-deprived state. I chose camera sounds to represent this 'happy' time. *Snap Happy* was premiered in the Martin Harris Centre for Music and Drama at the University of Manchester, UK, in 2017.

### **Landline (2018)**

The discovery of my landline phone behind my sofa, caked in dust, reinforced how little this household object had been used in recent times. This discovery took me back to my memories of the rotary phone my parents had in my childhood home. This shiny black patent object took pride of place in the hallway, complete with telephone table and phone book. It was the first object to greet you as you entered the home. Like the cameras I stumbled upon in my loft, the phone as a device has undergone great developments, rendering the older styles obsolete. My role as composer was to document these changes sonically, fix these endangered 'historic' sounds within a musical form, and also to celebrate the newer sounds emitted by modern phone cameras. In my composition, I explored dial tones, touch tones, rings and ringtones, the engaged tone, and rotary dials from older phones. I received permission to use a rotary dial phone sound from the Conserve the Sound Online Museum,<sup>9</sup> which approximated the sounds of the phone in my memory, as my parents no longer had possession of the phone I recalled from my childhood. This work became concerned with recreating a domestic space from a childhood memory; a time hop to an earlier time, forced from the reflections I had been having of being a child, which tends to happen after one has had children. *Landline* was premiered at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia, in 2018.

## Notes

1. Manuella Blackburn, 'Importing the Sonic Souvenir: Issues of Cross-Cultural Composition', Electroacoustic Music Studies Network Conference proceedings (New York, 201); available at [www.ems-network.org/IMG/pdf\\_EMS11\\_Blackburn.pdf](http://www.ems-network.org/IMG/pdf_EMS11_Blackburn.pdf). (accessed 10 December 2020).
2. Felicity Ford, 'The Domestic Soundscape and Beyond . . . Presenting Everyday Sounds to Audiences', PhD thesis (Oxford Brooks University, 2010).
3. Fran Cottell, [www.francottell.com/](http://www.francottell.com/) (accessed 5 June 2019).
4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochbert-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1.
5. Mothers Who Make website: [www.improbable.co.uk/motherswhomake/](http://www.improbable.co.uk/motherswhomake/) (accessed 11 December 2020).
6. Sarah Black, 'Mother as Curator: Performance, Family and Ethics' (PhD thesis, Middlesex University, 2018).
7. Ibid.
8. The Goodman studio at EMPAC can be viewed here: <https://empac.rpi.edu/about/building/venues/studio-1-goodman> (accessed 5 December 2020).
9. Rotary phone sound sourced from Conserve the Sound project, available at [www.conservethesound.de/en/](http://www.conservethesound.de/en/) (telephone name: Fernsprechtischapparat, Manufacturer: Deutsche Bundespost) (accessed 4 October 2017).

