

## 40,076 years of the avant-garde

A further loose-leaf chapter for my ongoing polemical memoir — *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man*.

### *Clearing the Detritus of Time — The Parsing of Sounds— Remembering to Forget*

It was during a long drive back from Manchester to my home in Matching Tye that Silvan Schmid and I toyed with the idea of us playing together—trumpet and drums. Previously, in our musical association, I was mostly a bowing percussionist. We were, in fact, at the end of a tour featuring Silvan, together with viola player Richard Scott, alto saxophonist Tapiwa Svosve, and myself. Our casual speculative chatter in the car did lead to a tentative development, with Silvan inviting double bassist Tom Wheatley to join us. Tom was known to me through his participation in the weekly London improvisation workshop, I first convened in 1999. So ensued the trumpet, double bass and drums format, although not particularly common, it was clearly redolent of early free-jazz concepts. Our first concert together at London's Cafe OTO did nothing to divert this perspective. For me, it was only when we played a preparatory session, at All Saints church at High Laver (the location of the recording under discussion), that I began to appreciate a wider range of creative possibilities within the ensemble. Somehow, in the uniquely resonant yet benign acoustics, All Saints church encouraged a more acute, and active sense of space, instrumental articulation, and sonic awareness. It is these, and attendant issues arising, that are the subject of the following narrative.

## *Clearing the Detritus of Time*

A common theme of progressive discourse, when I was younger, was that music always seemed to be behind the creative curve. Whereas modernism in the plastic arts—in a multiplicity of guises—was assumed to be viral.

Yet, if we look closely (for example) at cubism and expressionism, ‘their’ modernist agendas often took on crude, or primitive, characteristics. Is there not a strange disjunction here? Because the modernism in science—including its attendant technologies, and even architecture, and with its avowed logic and positivism—was sharply contrasted by the almost childish (and, for some, deranged) output of this ‘modern’ art.

Orthodox music (during this late 19th/early 20th century period) meanwhile seemed much more staid and cautious in its relationship with the creative thrusts of modern intellectual thought. The French impressionists were well established—even perhaps well beyond their creative peak—before composers like Debussy, Ravel and Satie made their sonic impressions.

*[A serpentinian thought-experiment]*

If the above characterisation bears any weight, then it also begs the obvious question: why? What, for example, provoked Picasso to produce distorted images of human physiology, so countering conventional portraiture, or photography, or ‘common sense’? Perhaps the frenzied railing of Nazi fanaticism against ‘modern art’—as perverted, or as the excrement of the retarded—bears closer examination. Or, more pertinently perhaps, we

should ask: 'what was modernism in art itself railing against'?

There can, surely, be no doubt that there is a disjunction between progressive scientific narratives, and the (sometimes) alarming images offered by what we commonly refer to as 'modern art'. Wherein, for the most part, are the analogous lines with statistical certainties? Or, the mathematical precision we perceive in photographic representations of reality?

Picasso's human forms are both unflattering and provocative. He was too good a draughtsman, though, for his output to be compared to, or confused with, the outpourings of the deranged or 'the degenerate'.

There is, of course, always the possibility of the work of an original mind being imitated, and inflated by others who, themselves, may not share the conceptual genesis of an originator. And, it is perfectly possible that such imitations can be stylistically trimmed for more-suitable popular consumption. This means that the power of the original observation becomes diluted, or even drowned, in a welter of inanity. But, let us put aside the complications that arise from possible false creative sightings.

In 1937, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, displayed an exhibit titled: *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*. This featured photographs and water-colour illustrations. Alongside these exhibits were paintings of modern artists, including Hans Arp, Paul Klee and Juan Miró. Then, in 1947, London's Institute of Contemporary Art mounted a show called *40,000 Years of Modern Art*. And, in

2019, Paris hosted: *Préhistoire, une énigme moderne*, at the Pompidou Centre.<sup>1</sup>

There is, then, sufficient evidential certainty that some modern artists, curators, and (presumably) a public, were interested in these long-lost scenes of an earlier human culture.

I acknowledge that I am not well-read in this area of cultural studies. However, the only reports I have seen (so far) remark that these palaeolithic paintings had “a vital relationship to modern art”; and, “had something to contribute to the creativity of the present moment.” And, of course, the Paris exhibition referred to this phenomenon as ‘an enigma’. The curious thing is that although prehistoric art was thought to have something to say about 20th century conditions, no specific effects were enumerated. No particular explanation of what these examples of pre-historic art might actually mean to a 20th century society.

Given the above scenario, one is driven to suggest that palaeolithic cave-art was deemed relevant, presumably, in relation to the ensuing new thinking of the modern age: the discoveries in physics, chemistry, biology, and philosophy. The ‘artistic modernists’, and their supporters, were moved more by pre-history than by more recent human activity. Or, it may have been an aversion, or a comment upon the implications of ‘modern thinking’ — especially that arising from the new scientism, and ‘the applications’ of these discoveries. The industrialisation of World War I would have been a violently salient example of the potential hazards of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to D.G. Haskell for the information about these exhibitions: Haskell, D.G. *Sounds, Wild and Broken*, Faber & Faber, 2022, p. 213

'progress'. Picasso's *Guernica y Luno*, I think, supports this supposition.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Parsing of Sounds*

Such pre-historic possibilities do not appear to have informed contemporaneous musicians. There are, of course, no audio equivalents to the vibrant cave paintings of Lescaux.<sup>3</sup> Any such pre-historic sounds have long-since died on the air. There are remains: remnants of bones made into flutes collected from the detritus of cave-painting sites. This suggests that music-making was a possible corresponding activity in these magical spaces which—now bereft of pre-historic residual music—remain as mostly silent auditoria. Some musicians, though, have been inspired to savour and explore such unique acoustic settings.

The usual response to 'awkward' acoustic spaces is to modify them, with electronic treatments, in order to meet the perceived acceptable norms.<sup>4</sup> At times I have resisted this option, having to fight (and occasionally losing) the imposition of unwanted PA [public address] amplification. The PA engineers knew better! This reveals a systematic contrast in values. For there is an over-whelming pressure to change natural acoustics in favour of a technically

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<sup>2</sup> By the way, the more I look at images of the Guernica painting (and I have also stood staring at the original at the Museo Nacional del Prado), the more its assemblage of flat juxtaposed images devoid of perspective, reminds me of cave-painting sites which, I believe, situate multi-authored, and possibly multi-temporal works similarly.

<sup>3</sup> Maybe Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and *Firebird* come close to qualifying. Although they might be considered to be an overly romantic form of primitivism.

<sup>4</sup> Or, to make up for deficiencies in a musician's articulation!

enhanced sound experience. It mirrors (to my mind) the imposition of unnecessary technological solutions to natural phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

Some informal musicians seek out such ‘problematic’ situations. Notably, saxophonist John Butcher. In 2002, he recorded *Cavern with Nightlife* at the gigantic Oya Stone Museum, in Japan.<sup>6</sup> And later in 2006, John undertook the ‘Resonant Spaces’ tour across northern Scotland, playing in a sea-cave, an underground reservoir, a giant mausoleum, a Neolithic stone circle, a massive oil tank, and the UK’s largest surviving ice-house.<sup>7</sup> American tenor player, Joe McPhee, made comparable expeditions which included resonant spaces in Mexican convents, and war-bunkers in Newfoundland.

These musicians are among the curious, inspired by the possibilities of non-bespoke concert spaces. This acoustic adventurism is surely redolent of our palaeolithic musical forebears.

Meanwhile, the emphasis in classical concert music aspires to acoustics which favour the orchestra—full, or chamber. Mostly, the options are purpose-built comfortable concert venues with preferred, often engineered, acoustic profiles. Caves are generally out of the question! Although, to my mind, there exists a neat exception: the Sibelius Museum in Turku, Finland. This combines central heating,

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<sup>5</sup> There is no better example, in my experience, of more tolerant PA monitoring than the agreed absence of PA at the concert John Tilbury and I made at The Museum Indústria at da Baía do Tejo, Portugal in 2015. As the name implies, the concert venue was a cavernous post-industrial building. AMM Indústria, Matchless Recordings, MRCD105, 2021

<sup>6</sup> John and I played a concert in the chilly quarry on our 2010 tour of Japan.

<sup>7</sup> *Cavern with Nightlife* - Weight of Wax 01 (2002). And 2004 *The Geometry of Sentiment* - Emanem 41429, 2004

and cushioned-comfort in an ersatz cave-like setting. I am not certain this was an intended cavern impression.

However, if caves with spectacular acoustics inspired palaeolithic humankind, it would not be surprising if similar acoustic settings were desired and used in later human complexes. Churches are potentially such creative sites—and many have a cavernous quality; although acoustically they are variably suitable. But, churches as intended latter-day sites of social and creative activity is controversial. And, the more extreme echo, redolent of most traditional churches, is usually thought as best-suitable for the singing of masses and chants. However, churches are not generally perceived as natural or intended, sites of creativity. This kind of usage—where appropriate—is really only a consequence of religious redundancy. Mostly the architecture is unsuitable for many kinds of acoustic art. Yet the evidence of ancient churches (and church-like structures) originally having a different use, and a divergent orientation, is a developing realisation. For, there is significant (and maybe sufficient) anthropological, and comparative archeological, evidence to suggest those social structures which evolved into foci of religious expression, and attendant social authority, had their formative roots in more ‘prosaic’ practices, where socially necessary, and leisure artefacts, were communally created. What became ‘A House of God’—and arguably a place sterile for social productive requirements, and an ultimately repressive institution—had more likely been a creative working space for a community.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Insights into this possibility are extensively explored in: Graeber, David & Wengrow, David, *The Dawn of Everything — a new history of humanity*, Penguin Books, 2022

This brings me, finally, to a coincidental explanation of the site of the recording which this essay accompanies: All Saints church, High Laver in Essex. As David Grundy so meticulously explains in his notes to the CD *Unearthed* (Volume 1 in this 'High Laver Levitations' series) the space in which these recordings were made is special. It has a unique quality. I am no acoustic specialist, but playing within its confines gives our music a lift. Unintentionally, I suspect, this enclosed environment magnifies, and mysteriously mitigates, the potential virility of musical output. It demands a certain kind of respect, and a disciplined response. But, this is laced with a luxurious expansive quality. What comes back at you—as a player—is not a cacophony of a confused clashing admixture of sounds colliding—which is often experienced within a church acoustic. Playing with, and within, this acoustic setting is liberating. Audiences too, delight in its life-affirming embrace.

[A speculative conclusion]

### *Remembering to Forget*

Is it too fanciful to suggest that the music enshrined in this recording emanates from a joyous, and possibly atavistic (and certainly optimistic and even utopian) sympathy with 'the idea' of community and place? But, I would argue, it may be much more. Because we have not occupied this (unintended?) performance arena in order to extol or practice conventional notions of music. Our informal sound-making has some of its founding momentum echoing from the inspiration of other non-conformist musics. And, although we are not immune from the influence of *tonic-sol-*

*fa*, and the metronome, we are wary of their exigencies and fixating tendencies.

This awareness offers an insight into the, perhaps instinctive, regulator that guides our ‘spontaneous’ musical decisions. My own way of trying to examine this process is encapsulated within (what I regularly refer to as) informal music’s twin defining analytic and active propositions—heurism and dialogue. Or, in any social engagement, within the creative parameters of sound, the improviser’s ‘one’ kicks-in: while wandering through the cavernous folds of our minds.

This, then, is both joy in activity and expression. It is also an inherent critique of the almost overwhelming preponderance of our own ‘perceived’ modernity. So, just as some of our earlier 20th century modernist painters were critiquing modernism itself, some musicians today are contesting the current conventional under-tones, and insidious shibboleths, of our time. Maybe at this moment of impending redundancy—within an emerging ‘age of artificial intelligence’—we may appear to be retro-active—even crudely so, given the absence of high-technology. Because this trio appears to have an old-fashioned dependence upon membrane, pipes, wood and metal—rather than on semi-conductors, and other electronic processors.

Late to the party we may be, but just as the earlier 20th century modernist painters (at least the more ‘conscious’ of them) ultimately can be seen to critique their modernity, so we too suggest that, again, humankind itself might—in this hyper-sonic age—be losing its humanity.

The work of Arp, Klee, Miró and Picasso with their often flat and often crude, symbolic imagery has (for those who wish to see it) a terrifying innocence. Their direct and

uncomplicated observations have been (paradoxically) viewed as ‘modish’ or ‘childish’.<sup>9</sup> But these perceptions only reveal a complicity with the expunging, perhaps even destructive, effect of educating our young. The palaeolithic mind is only open to us because of what remains of their existence. There is danger for our own well-being in neutralising their work in sophisticated, or trivial analysis. Such are skin-deep cultural adjustments, while we slide back into whatever comfort can be derived from the goods and services of our smothering capitalism. It is here that we must be careful not to confuse human ingenuity and discovery—as the instruments of progress—with the frequent exploitation (and possible misuse) of subsequent applications.<sup>10</sup>

A significant difference of practice, between the plastic arts and musicians (of most kinds), is the social dimension. Painting, for example, is meditative in execution. Playing in a musical ensemble is not only ‘with’ others, it is usually produced in public ‘to’ others. There is a certain inescapable scrutiny applied. Generally, any negative response can only be mitigated by blaming the composer! This escape clause is not so readily available to the informal, or improvising, musician.

I recall almost reeling from one such unexpected response. (The following is a fitting anecdote, given an earlier reference to an exhibit of palaeolithic art at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art.) I played a gig at the ICA in

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<sup>9</sup> A distinction should be made between ‘perceived’ childish-ness (silly and immature), and the desire of some modern artists to paint in an uninhibited style they saw in children’s art. Picasso is quoted as saying “It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.” “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Musicians: take note!

<sup>10</sup> Recall the nightmarish fears the progenitors of nuclear physics had about the possible consequences of (the mis-use of?) their work.

the 1970s. At the end I was approached by ‘a concerned’ member of the audience. Controlled but clearly angered by what he had experienced, he started by having to make an, albeit, reluctant acknowledgement. “I can see that you can play the drums—a bit“. (Obviously not willing to give me any more credit than he thought was merited.) “But, why do you play like that?”

It has taken a while. But, I now feel vindicated. I might even dare to associate myself as a belated fellow-traveller with the likes of Arp, Klee and Miró. Because, even given the tenuous historical discovery of bone-flutes within the detritus of palaeolithic caverns of social creativity, I can allow myself—and extol others—to imagine ourselves as proto-musicians investigating the acoustic, social and cultural environments of our own time.

Edwin Prévost, January, 2024

[The above essay accompanied the CD called *The Wandering One* Matchless Recordings catalogue number mrcd115]