

Contemporary Players Artist Chats

2020-21

This is Artist Chats brought to you by San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. You'll hear contemporary music's most inspired personalities share insight into their art, their life, and their upcoming performance with the Contemporary Music Players.

Season 1 Episode 5

Shiver Lung 2: the Composer's Perspective

Artistic Director Eric Dudley speaks with Ash Fure about *Shiver Lung 2*, one in a set of works by the composer that exploits sub-audible frequencies played on speaker cones.

Eric: Joining us now is composer Ash Fure to talk to us about the next piece on our program which is entitled *Shiver Lung 2*. And Ash could you tell us just a little bit about what you were thinking in conceiving of this very unique piece for solo percussion and electronics?

Ash: Yeah absolutely I'd be happy to, and happy to be here, and in conversation with you, and in collaboration with Willie as he explores the piece for the second time actually, we got to work on it together IN-PERSON a couple years back at Mills, (**Eric:** right, yeah—) so it's really a joy to be here.

So *Shiver Lung 2* comes after *Shiver Lung 1* and both of these pieces, this series, there's actually a [*Shiver Lung*] 3 and a 4 also, they're all actually pulled from material I developed for an immersive installation opera called *The Force of Things*, and *The Force of Things* is a project that actually tries to deal with and grapple with and create a sensory-intense social space, [to] really slow-down into climate crisis, and find a way to collectively metabolize the ecological anxiety that's warming around us with more and more intensity (**Eric:** Mhm) everyday. And we started that piece in 2014, and so obviously now in 2021 that rise of anxiety is even more intense and more visceral. And one of the ways my collaborators and I were thinking through how to map that reach towards climate crisis was actually by dealing with sub-audible frequencies. So in *The Force of Things*, which happens in this 150 by 50 foot immersive installation that my brother and collaborator Adam Fure developed, there are 24 sub-woofer speaker cones that are spread throughout the space and they are for the vast majority of the 55-minute piece, pumping out audio which is too low for humans to hear. They're pumping out this sub-audible sine tone and really charging the space with this volatile energy that's omnipresent around us but inaudible to us. And sub-audible frequency has, I think, a lot of resonant power. And there's a darkness and there's an attraction to it and there's this sort of reach just past, I think, human perceptual boundaries to try to understand these phenomena that are unfolding on a scale which is just too big for us to cognitively, yeah, understand and grapple with.

So the subwoofers in that piece, they get also performed on like kinetic drum kits and they shake the architecture but they also, the performers in *The Force of Things*, slide the surface of their hands and the surface of objects across them as they palpitate and they start to sort of pull them into the realm of human audibility through touch and through this investigation of the air and the pulsations of air that they're pushing into the atmosphere. So it's that repertoire of techniques that I started exploring for *The Force of Things* and then I extracted out into *Shiver Lung 1* which is scored for seven instruments and then this solo percussion piece is a further extract and kind of extrapolation of that material, dealing again with these two subwoofer speaker cones, out of their boxes, sitting on a table, pumping out sub-audible frequencies that we can't hear but that the performer tries to render audible for us, (**Eric:** Right—) through this very tactile investigation.

Eric: Right, and so talk to us about the application of that specifically in this piece—right, there's a little bit of, if I'm not mistaken, a little variability in terms of length, just kind of depending on the actual speed of execution of things?

Ash: So there's variability in terms of the transition from one section into the next but the actual, the full proportions of the piece, are linked to an electronic process. So at some point we move from this 10.67 hertz which, again, we can't hear but you see—there's actually a really strange phenomenon that happens with the eyes and the ears, like at the moment—. Most humans start hearing when a cone goes up and down 20 times a second and below that, if it's only going up and down 10 times a second, we can't hear it, but what's interesting is that it's going slow enough we can actually see the motion, we can see the movement up and down, and the minute we start to be able to hear it, the exact sort of threshold, it starts to go so fast actually that it looks like it's not moving, our eyes can't track the frame rate, so— (**Eric:** Right—). In this case, you actually see the cones going up and down for the vast majority of the piece and what creates the polyrhythm is the player moving through a series of textural, timbral explorations...but they're...and those are tracked on the score but exactly which knuckle is pressed and how the palm is moving against the surface of that subwoofer, exactly how the edge of the paper kind of grabs and makes an accent, all these tiny little pressures really alter—EVIDENTLY alter the polyrhythm that emerges. So that's where the kind of spontaneity of the texture happens.

Eric: Right, there's a real subtlety in terms of the actuation of the sound, right? And how exactly something is played on the cone and is then caused to vibrate in a particular way along with it...

Ash: Yeah, and that's for me the real addictive part of performing this material—and I've spent hours and hours and hours and hours of my life inside of these, of this speaker cone world because, yeah, just the tiniest shift of your pinky or your fourth finger, your palm, and the whole polyrhythm shifts. It's like you're surfing it more than you are, you know [*taps out a rhythm*], playing a really scripted rhythmic idea. I think that that kind of thing, finding a kinetic process and having to learn to tune into it, and—you're just...there's no dom-, the player's not dominant in this case. They don't control the situation, they have to learn to adapt to it and shift their body in response to it and there's a kind of symbiosis of the kinetic force of the instrument—the

subwoofer—and the kinetic force of the player. And when they're really tuned in, I think, in my, kind of, experience, really gorgeous rhythmic phenomena can emerge and timbral phenomena.

