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'still every year they went': Studio Performance At Sea

Dr Philip Reeder & Dr Johny Lamb

The title of this project comes from Susan Cooper's *Greenwitch*, a novel set in the fictional Cornish fishing village of Trewissick. In describing the declining numbers of fishermen working in the village Cooper is sure to add that 'still every year they went.' The book was published in 1974. On the 15th April 2015 Philip Reeder and Johny Lamb chartered the *Girl Emily*, a 1974 commercial line fishing boat from Custom House Quay in Falmouth, Cornwall, and went to sea. As the skipper and his mate went about their business of fishing, Lamb performed nine newly arranged settings of traditional folksongs of maritime practices, with a primary focus on the fisheries. The performances, the sounds of the boat, her engines, her wake, the creaks of her hull, her propeller and any other environmental sounds were recorded by both researchers. A further iteration ensued on land, where Reeder composed with the trace of performance and captured sounds, for an accompanying album and video. The work in this edition, showcasing documentary footage of the performance and phonography at sea, features *The Farewell Shanty* and *The Unst Boat Song*, and precedes further re-composition for live performance in surround sound, on land, from sea.

The sound recording took place using ambisonic, stereo shotgun, lavalier, and hydrophone microphones. In this capture phase of the work, Sterling's notion of phonography entailing a 'bias to discover' (2001) was set against Lamb's performance. The ambisonic microphone was placed away from Lamb on the perimeter of the deck, to ensure capture of surrounding context, as alluded to by Chattopadhyay (in Lane and Carlyle 2013: 53). A stereo shotgun microphone directed at Lamb provided a compromise between context and specificity, with lavalier microphones on his instruments and person granting almost complete removal of context. Of course, audible clues remain, such as the characteristic reverb and frequency response imparted by recording outside in open spaces. Hydrophones located under the surface of the water

give a trace of an environment absent from Lamb's performance, but serve as a reminder that this recording has taken place at sea. The varying distance from microphone to performer on these recordings, and the focus on both phonography and production, was explored in the studio composition phase. In studio recording microphones are often time aligned to compensate for distance. On *The Unst Boat Song* this ambiguity between phonography, performance, and production was actively pursued by misrepresenting the time difference for Lamb's voice to reach each microphone, to audibly evince the methodologies at work. This microphony and production has therefore allowed for the exposure of a particular phonography of performance.

Reeder's studio composition from Lamb's captured performance and surrounding audio, suggests an investigation into phonography, but also initiates questions around the nature and locations of performance, and what production is. Indeed, this relationship continues to shift past the album's completion, anticipating subsequent 'live' performance (far removed then from those initial performances upon the deck of the boat). The relationship between performer and audience through these iterations is pluralised to the point of different audiences at different moments of mediation throughout the work's ongoing becoming. But it is this unsteady set of continuing methods, that obliges us to negotiate the taxidermic process of music production (Lamb 2014: 76) as a voyage back towards performance rather than a reification of it.

Prior to any live re-performance, the choice of song, technology, methods of capture and presentation, embed the project within the inevitable fiction of a singular recorded performance. This taxidermy refers to the often under-discussed nature of music production and the great changes recordings go through to facilitate the perception of single capture. Given that the studio environment and its developments (even aboard a boat) have meant that 'the record shifted from document to that of a highly crafted object of "ideal, not real, events"' (Cascone: 2004), then we must conclude that the notion of a recording being an accurate representation or capture of what happened is at best difficult to trace. There is arguably an inevitable failure in the recorded

articulation of the experience of being at sea which is enhanced and underscored by our efforts on the boat and later in this studio, not least within the 'ontological catastrophe' (Lamb: 2014) of recording. In this instance, the 'real event' is actively compromised on *The Farewell Shanty* through the presentation of vocals, which were performed with no click track, yet eventually manifest as backing vocals with no concession to the underlying performance's tempo. At the time of capture there was no intention to use more than one take, but the proximity in tempo of each performance suggested this multi-tracked approach in the production of the piece. This perceptual shifting from real performance to studio animal/object (Poliquin 2012: 5), is indicative of Reyes' notion that a "good" recording aligns a material object with a social object' (2010: 325) and allows medium and subject to intermingle as material. The choice of song and context also speak to this theme.

The songs here all belong to the tradition (or have been written within those forms), but they do not necessarily imply the same context. There are shanties that historically belong at sea, fo'c's'le songs as at home in the tavern as the forecastle itself, and songs that though performed on land, describe the experience of being at sea. This project takes them all to the water, but not under sail. The tasks are different, the means of propulsion changed, and the business of fishing industrialised and in a greatly turbulent period of financial and political trauma. There are ghosts in these performances and a host of pasts brought to the deck, performed and recorded, then brought back to act as catalysts for subsequent iterations of the work. As context changes, so too does meaning. What metaphor has *The Unst Boat Song* become? The song, from a time long before a fishing industry, reinforces this sense of haunting in its sounding from a boat. This vessel, working in this troubled and declining industry, being so far removed temporally, that the language of its lyric (Norn) is no longer spoken, yet the conditions it describes are still very much a current concern for Shetland fishermen. It is the layering of context, history and medium here that is of particular interest to the researchers. These things become fluid, and the relationships become indistinct. Phonography, production, performance, and

site become as generative as the process of songwriting and it becomes hard to cite any primary discipline within this work.

The video, like the sound, takes a pluralised position. Part documentation, part fiction. Of interest to the artists are details of process rather than fixed capture of complete performances. The video portrays the singular performance, and exposes the recorded iteration as a fiction. Under the direction of Reeder and Lamb, the camera is often close to its subjects, and takes in not primarily the performance, but the microphones, the cables, the skipper, the propeller. The human body making music on the deck of the boat is clearly just one component in the capture of sources, and the boat, the sea and everything else falls within the frame of process and recording, allowing a potentially greater transparency to the outcome as fixed audio-visual work.

The work devised for and published exclusively here is designed for binaural listening, ideally through headphones. This project continues through its various iterations and a full album of as yet unreleased songs is scheduled for publication in 5.1 surround and vinyl on Armellodie Records in late 2016.

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