

Oliver Sellwood – Nara
(blog post for OUT-TAKE ensemble concert, 19/6/17)

In his recent music, Oliver Sellwood has been exploring a concept that he calls 'expanded musical environments'. This describes an approach to evaluating the sonic and performative possibilities of a given set of musical resources (whether comprised solely of traditional instruments or incorporating electronics and other technological augmentation) in terms of the interaction between different groups of variables within a system. An example Olly often uses is the string quartet, which can be conceptualised in terms of the intersection between various components of the different instruments (the strings, bows, tuning pegs, fingerboards, bridges, etc.) and the physical movements of the performers' bodies (whether their left hand fingering positions, their bowing attacks, or more unusual techniques like striking the instrument body). Small changes to any one of these variables can interact in complex ways to produce new and unexpected sounds. By treating the raw materials of music in such a methodical way, Olly hopes to discover interesting musical possibilities through combining instruments and various associated technologies in novel ways.

This approach to composition seems particularly suited to the electric guitar, an instrument that is already essentially modular, in that it requires the coordination of various electronic components in order to even be heard. Although the player may directly interact with the guitar itself, the amplifier is just as essential to producing the instrument's characteristic twang, and the use of additional devices such as effects pedals to colour the sound is commonplace. There are infinite possible combinations of guitars, amplifiers and effects that will all produce different timbres and musical results, and even slight differences like changing the ordering of pedals in the signal chain can have a noticeable effect. Olly's approach to the instrument in his new piece 'Nara' may seem a little radical, but is also firmly situated within the tradition of guitarists tinkering with their 'gear' that stretches back to the earliest innovators of the instrument such as Les Paul. Olly has modified a guitar (perhaps appropriately it happens to be one of Les Paul's ubiquitous signature models) by attaching a custom pickup that allows each string of the instrument to produce a separate signal that is then sent to one of six amplifiers (the instrument is thus made 'hexaphonic'). This allows the composer to apply different processing to each string – something that is not possible when using a single amplifier. In the case of Nara, Olly has chosen to apply various delays and reverb effects to four of the strings, while the remaining two are augmented by the use of 'Freeze' pedals, which when activated will capture the sound produced by the string in question and sustain it for a potentially infinite length of time. The piece explores many exciting effects made possible by different uses of these pedals in combination with various conventional and unconventional guitar-playing techniques.

As a guitarist, learning to play Nara has been a fascinating experience. The piece lacks many of the usual tropes of guitar virtuosity, such as fast scales and runs or complex contrapuntal writing, yet still presents a real challenge to the player through the coordination between left and right hand technique and the use of the feet to operate the Freeze pedals (I am reminded of Frank Zappa's claim that he switched from playing drums to guitar as a teenager because of his inability to coordinate his four limbs adequately!). It is also not enough to simply click the pedals on and off at the right moments – one has to take care to ensure that the notes sustained by the pedals and any pitches played in 'real-time' are suitably balanced in volume (an issue which requires attention to detail both in setting up the equipment and in the use of dynamics while playing). Having practised the piece both with and without the full hexaphonic setup, it is very clear to me that the effects that Olly explores are only made possible by his unique approach to the electric guitar. It is a real privilege to premiere Nara on the 19th June at the Talking Heads, and I hope that I will have further opportunities to play it in future.