



**Opening up
New Spaces,
Exploring Time**

Interview with
Hilary Jeffery

Arie Altena

Hilary Jeffery was interviewed the day after the premiere of his electronic composition *Mesmeric Forest* in Krems, Austria. As a trombonist Jeffery plays in many different ensembles, ranging from Catherine Christer Hennix' Chora(s)an Time-Court Mirage and Zeitkratzer to the Kilimanjaro Darkjazz Ensemble. He works in and in-between the fields of improvised, electronic and contemporary composed music.

Arie Altena What is *Mesmeric Forest*?

Hilary Jeffery *Mesmeric Forest* is a soundscape of an imaginary electronic forest. The version performed last night is a multichannel piece that uses the space and possibilities for spatialisation with a multi-speaker set up, in this case the GRM (Groupe des Recherches Musicales) Acousmonium installed into the Minoriten church in Krems. I call it a forest because the material suggests possible sounds and atmospheres of a forest. The piece uses synthetic sounds, which makes it an imaginary electrical forest. I call it 'mesmeric' because my intention is to induce something like a light form of hypnosis.

The idea for making this type of soundscape originates from my research and work into making scores. I'm trying to find alternatives to approaching, perceiving and reading music in a linear way. When music is read through notation in the Western tradition, it is typically done so in a linear fashion. I've been trying to get around this in my work. I came up with the idea of making scores which function in a similar way as maps. One can explore a territory with a map in an intuitive, interactive and non-linear way, and I have been trying to apply this to explorations of specific musical territories.

I have tried this idea on several occasions with different musicians. I made a map of an imaginary city for instance, as well as a forest, and I used these scores for ensemble playing. I see *Mesmeric Forest* as part of a larger project that includes using maps as scores. The next stage in this work will have the same soundscape plus a new map describing possible representations of this abstract forest. The map could then be used by listeners to find their way in the composition and orient themselves in the

space created by the sounds, as well as functioning as a score for musicians who perform live with the soundscape.

^{AA} You used maps as scores in a concert with Rozemarie Heggen, Pamela Kurstin and Patrick Puslinger, which was recently released on Col Legno under the title *Besides Feldman*. Can you explain how that worked?

^{HJ} It was a concert in Vienna in 2010, which drew on the ideas of Morton Feldman as a form of inspiration for a group improvisation. During my research for this concert, I studied some of Feldman's work and identified what I considered to be key aspects of his ideas, eventually coming up with five sentences that summarised these aspects. I wrote these sentences on paper and illustrated them with graphics that could suggest ways of playing them. I made a few versions of this and we each chose a different one to refer to while playing. The diagrams, signs and words functioned both as a map of potential music, and as a way of focusing the playing and directing the mind. Some of the words on the map can be clearly related to music ('*patterns not loops*', '*repeat same chord in different ways*'); others ('*timeless, floating music*', '*being in-between*') are more vague and require a personal interpretation. We did not really play anything by Feldman, especially because he did not hold improvisation in very high regard. However, we did manage to find our own way to enter into, and inhabit parts of Feldman's universe, with the Score Map as a reference.

Every composer dealing with notation obviously has to think about the question of notation, and find his or her own individual solutions. Of course there are infinite possibilities and my Score Maps are just one such attempt to delve into this question, and not a particularly original one at that.

^{AA} What source material did you use for *Mesmeric Forest*?

^{HJ} The source material comes from my imagination. I'm very inspired by the specifically electrical qualities of natural sounds, and sounds in forests, for instance,

the sounds made by crickets, birds and frogs. Firstly, I just imagined extensions of these sounds. I tried to actively listen while in such environments, while simultaneously trying to figure out how such sounds could be technically realised in a studio. With this in mind I created some initial sounds using simple synthesis techniques using Max/MSP. Most of the material used in the piece was eventually generated at the GRM studios in Paris using a combination of analogue and digital techniques. The actual methods I used for this version are only a few of very many possible ways to create such sounds. The most important thing for me is to convey the idea I originally imagined. For this version I did it in the best way I knew, and with the resources at my disposal. Another time I will use other techniques.

^{AA} How did you structure the composition?

^{HJ} I wanted the beginning of the piece to be quite low level, almost subliminal, so that you don't even really notice that the piece has started, and you also hear the natural sounds of the space, and your own sounds, which include thoughts. Especially the beginning should be like being in an environment that is also an internal environment. Many of the sounds could be similar to tinnitus or to the sounds you hear in your own ears when you are in a very quiet room. I try to invite people into that world.

I like to leave space in my music where the listener can imagine things for him or herself. *Mesmeric Forest* is an attempt at creating a twilight world where you are not sure where you are. It's called a forest, but listeners can also find their own associations and imaginations with the sounds. The music does not say everything; it only makes suggestions and leads the way into open structures, which each listener can actively engage with. The idea was partly to create something close to hypnosis. The piece has loops that repeat, and the listener's mind will naturally try to latch onto these loops, making their own patterns, which could create alternate or a trance-like states of consciousness. In terms of structuring the composition my working method is inevitably very informed by my background as an improvising

musician. I am guided more by intuition than by prepared structures. In my music, a structure is gradually revealed through the playing. I put *Mesmeric Forest* together in the studio, intuitively combining the various loops in different ways. The structure and the form appeared from that process. It was created with the live performance on the Acousmonium in mind; a CD version would be very different. I will continue to work on this piece and eventually would like to have all the basic loops appearing and disappearing during a live performance, controlled by random, generative or natural algorithms, preferably something which has a relation to an actual living forest. My intention is to realise this next step in a version for the Game of Life wavefield synthesis system in The Hague.

^{AA} How important is instrumental technique for you?

^{HJ} It's absolutely essential. I'm not a natural instrumentalist. Some people have a knack of picking up many instruments and being able to play them. I'm not like that and only really play the trombone. I have to work consistently to master the instrument. It is somehow not surprising that I have chosen the trombone, as it is a very difficult instrument to master; it takes a certain kind of single-mindedness. On a more general level my feeling is that no matter what style of music you play, you need to have a good technique on the instrument – whether it is a trombone, harp, sitar, voice, washboard or laptop. I am what is called 'classically trained', although there isn't really any other way to learn how to play a trombone, and most other instruments too. In terms of music practice I was never particularly attracted to playing classical music, except as a good exercise. I was more attracted to the jazz tradition. To a certain extent I am interested in what might be called 'contemporary music' for trombone, particularly the solo repertoire. As a young student I was very inspired by Stuart Dempster's book *The Modern Trombone: a Definition of Its Idioms* (1994), from which I learnt a lot of techniques and gained a deeper understanding of the instrument and its potential. I was also very inspired by James Fulkerson's solo music for trombone and live electronics. It has

been a great privilege for me to meet, study and work with him since I first came to the Netherlands in 1998.

As an interpreter of written music I'm only really interested in doing this when playing in an ensemble, such as Zeitkratzer, or when I can work directly with a composer. The highlight of this way of working with composed music for trombone has been the work I did with James Fulkerson and the American composer Philip Corner. This resulted in a complete CD of his trombone music for New World Records (*Extreme Positions*), released in 2007. In the end I cannot subscribe to any particular tradition and I always feel uncomfortable when someone asks me if I am a 'classical' or a 'jazz' player. This is a question that often comes up and I think it is due to the arbitrary and small-minded classifications of music created by the combination of many music schools, performing rights organisations and market forces. A lot of the music I make is in-between worlds and in fact my definition of a musician is someone who is inevitably 'between worlds' in all kinds of ways. I cannot really say that I am a jazz musician or a classical musician, or even an improvising musician. I am a musician and composer and I'm trying to find my own way.

^{AA} Were you attracted specifically to the trombone?

^{HJ} No, not consciously anyway. It was an arbitrary choice that I made when I changed schools and the only instruments they taught were wind instruments. I had been studying the violin before this and I never intended to become a trombonist, at least not exclusively, and it isn't the only thing I'm busy with. At the same time I really appreciate the trombone as a central part of my life in music and I'm very grateful to have had the chance to learn how to play it and for all the experiences that have come with playing it. I like it because it's just a piece of metal and is a very simple instrument in some ways. However, to produce a good sound on a simple piece of metal like this is not easy, so playing it means that I have to have some kind of discipline. It helps me to stay at least partly connected to this planet.

^{AA} The German artist Jan-Peter Sonntag – who also plays the

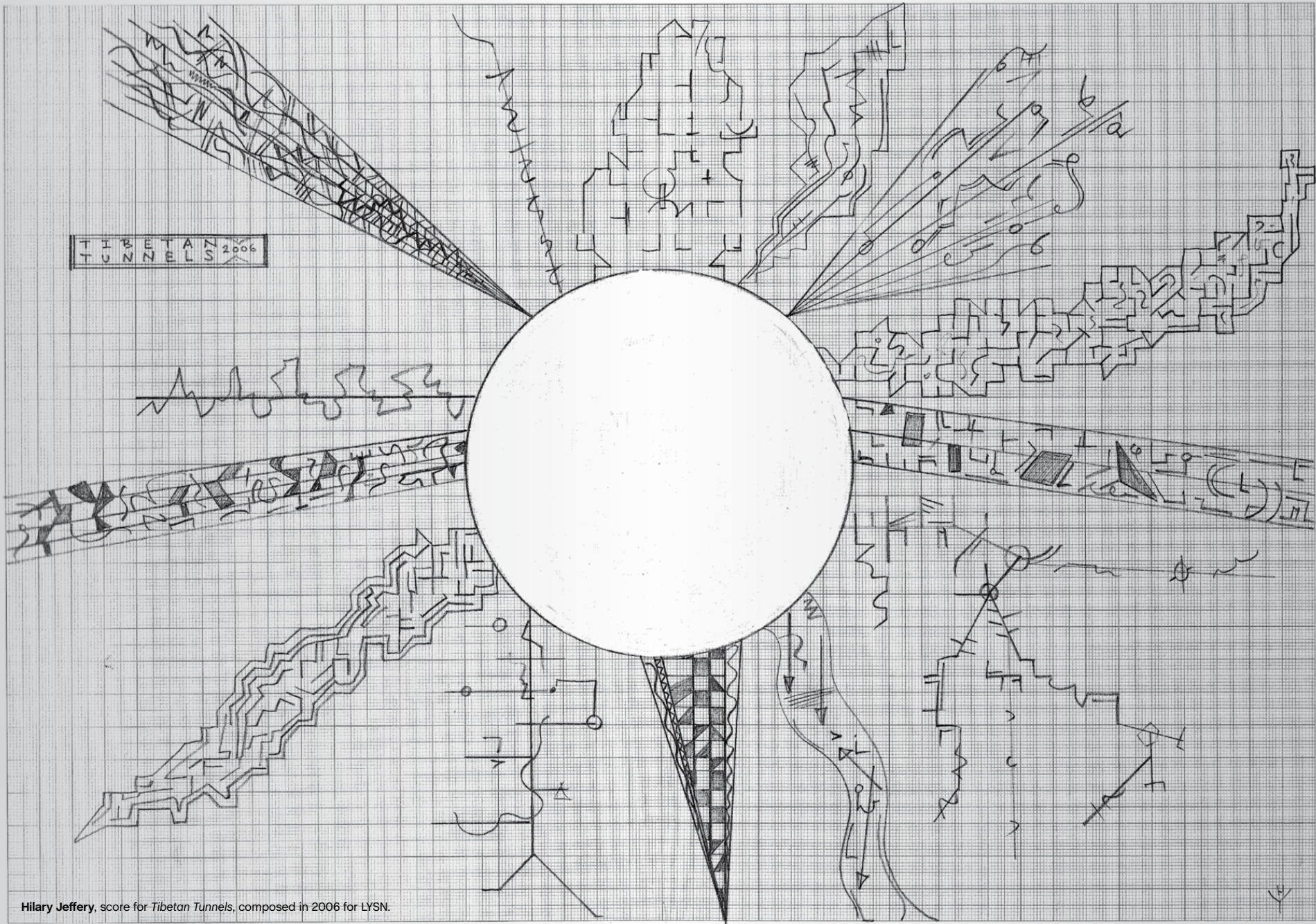
trombone – once explained to me that he finds the instrument so attractive because playing the trombone forces you to listen to the physics of the sound. It's just a tube and it has a direct connection to the physics of sound.

^{HJ} That is absolutely the case. It informs my playing too. The harmonic series is so clearly there. Playing the trombone is a good way to focus on music. In fact the trombone is also always more than just a piece of metal – it is also the person playing it and the space(s) in which it is played, including the 'virtual' spaces offered by amplification and digital or analogue electronics. A trombone in a cathedral will sound completely different from the same trombone played in cupboard. The space is part of the instrument, and a certain space can almost change it into a different instrument. With digital sound processing these spaces can shift all the time, one moment you play virtually in a cave and the next moment it sounds as if you're playing in the open air. I find this a very fascinating idea, because it means that when I play in this way with electronics, all of these spaces become part of the instrument too and I can move between them at different speeds, or occupy several simultaneously. I am therefore very interested in working with sound artists who can help me to explore expanded and changing virtual spaces. One such artist is Joel Ryan, with whom I am very much interested in working with in the future.

^{AA} You use high-pitched, almost tinnitus-like sounds in *Mesmeric Forest*, which worked for me because the sounds you use are very close to the sound I hear in my ears when it is very quiet.

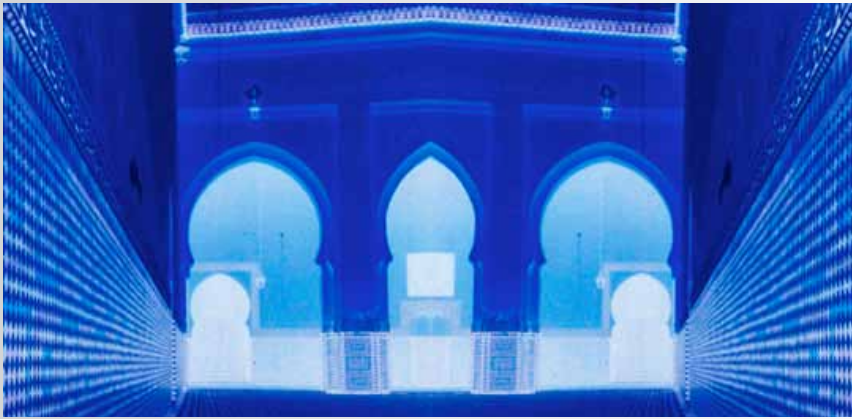
^{HJ} Yes, although I don't know if that worked for everybody. In theory it could give you the feeling that you're also hearing something inside your own head at the same time as the music is playing. This is something Maryanne Amacher was working with in a much more consistent way, although I do not really know her work that well, and never had the chance to hear her perform. I discovered some aspects of these types of high-pitched sounds through meditation. I try to

**Time is not always linear.
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move as a spiral.**

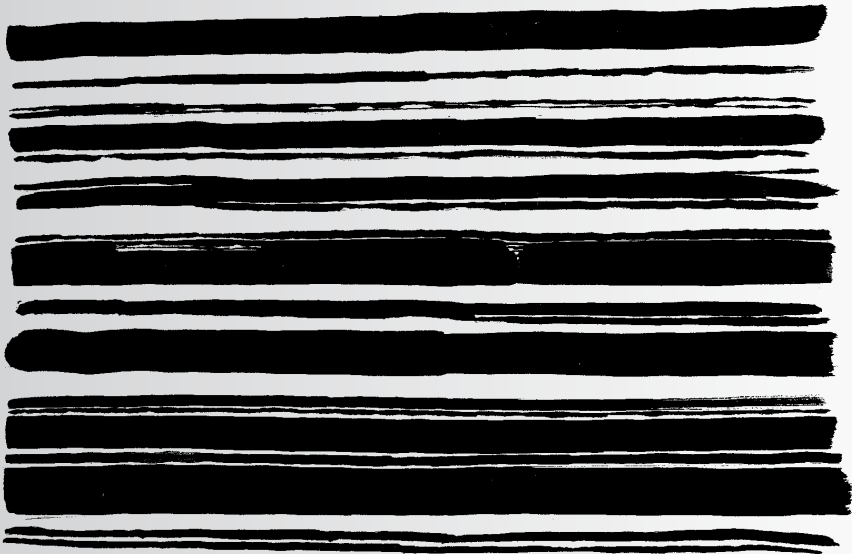


TIBETAN TUNNELS 2006

Hilary Jeffery, score for *Tibetan Tunnels*, composed in 2006 for LYSN.



Hilary Jeffery, *Third Entry*, 2009.



Hilary Jeffery, score for *Bands of Light*, composed in 2006 for LYSN.

use them as a way to focus my attention while meditating. Rather than attempting to get rid of them or block them out, I try to go into them. Then one starts to notice there is actually more to them than just a ringing – several pitches start to appear in a form of beautiful and very personal additive synthesis and one can travel internally using these pitches as vehicles. Such a form of listening becomes a real-time musical composition, which in fact everybody has access to. Everybody has his or her own sounds inside them. I don't exactly know how this works for deaf people, but I would suggest that somehow it does. John Cage writes about it in *Silence* (1961), when he relates his experience in an anechoic chamber. This subject also connects directly to the work of La Monte Young and Catherine Christer Hennix and their work with tuning and inner sounds. Hennix talks about these sounds as a way to focus the mind. Last night I hopefully created an environment in which listeners, those who are ready and open to it, can interact with these sounds in their own minds. The music only provides some information; the rest is up to the listeners. You can make the connections and if you enter the right state, it probably feels like an internal space is opening up.

^{AA} To some people that might sound rather vague...

^{HJ} It's true that sometimes people speak about these things as if they really are vague and unclear – 'tuning into your inner sounds' – but I think that they can actually be approached in a clear and scientific way. My approach is still inevitably that of an improvising musician's – I play with the ideas and eventually arrive at a point where I hit on the right thing. At some point I find material, space and an approach that works and then I can explore that further. I learned a lot in this area through working with Catherine Christer Hennix. She lives with a drone; it plays all the time in her house. She uses it as a way to stay focused and centred. Sometimes she listens to it while going to sleep and hears her own inner sounds interacting with the drone. We also play with this drone in Chora(s)san Time-Court Mirage.

^{AA} How is it to play in Chora(s)san Time-Court Mirage?

^{HJ} It's a fantastic experience. If you give it enough time, whole worlds open up and it can become very engaging and uplifting. It is a specific approach to ensemble improvisation within a very defined area. We play with the electronic drone, which is in fact a composition in itself entitled *Soliton(e) Star*, created from many repetitions of a tiny sample, placed forwards and backwards so that it is a mirror image of itself and repeated infinitely. When I first heard it, it didn't sound like much. But as I started to play with it, particularly with Christer's notes and guidance, I started to hear a lot more and felt like I was moving into a new space.

My experience is that first you just play, and nothing seems to happen and then suddenly it is as if a window opens inside the sound. If this interaction between the mind, the sound of the instruments, and the drone happens, you do feel as if you are entering a different space. Specific notes suddenly have a very clear effect. If you play these specific tones and you keep playing them, your ears open up. When we play acoustically it is hard to tell if other people can really hear this too, as it seems to be a private inner experience. A lot of what is happening sound-wise takes place in your own head. That's one of the reasons why we amplify our instruments, because the effect is much more pronounced. We use amplification and a delay system and there is often continuous controlled feedback through the use of long delays. Gradually different harmonics appear and as you play you reinforce these harmonics through feedback. We constantly play the same tones, adjusting them slightly all the time. Sometimes it's as if we are surfing, riding the sound waves.

Christer likes to have brass instruments in the ensemble because the harmonics are very rich and clear. The tuba, trombone, French horn and trumpet are ideal instruments for this music, and voice, of course. A trombone is very useful as you can adjust the pitch with the slide, though actually the slide only does half the work, I do a lot of adjusting with the embouchure and breath. It's the same with the tuba and trumpet; Robin Hayward plays his microtonal tuba and Franz Hautzinger has a microtonal

trumpet. As far as I can say so far, this music is about the interaction between the mind, body and the group sound, which in the end are all connected. I also tried to achieve this type of interaction in a different way with *Mesmeric Forest*, and it connects to my idea of using Score Maps as well.

^{AA} How does it connect to using Score Maps?

^{HJ} The combination between the map and the soundtrack creates an interaction within your own mind. If the map is not totally descriptive or directive, and if the sounds of the world the map represents are open enough, there is a real chance of discovering and entering a new environment. This is a truly interactive way of working, not in the sense of computer interaction with a '3D' virtual world or sensor-based interaction with computers. Rather it is based upon the idea that what we usually call reality is virtual anyway (which would make VR into Virtual VR). My feeling is that reality is not real, because so much is happening in our own minds. Ideally the music I make will not be linear, it will have different dimensions, informed by improvisation and also interacting with internal sounds and states.

^{AA} Drone music, like that created by Catherine Christer Hennix, seems to efface time. Or at least one could say that it replaces time with space as the most pronounced factor in the music. *Mesmeric Forest* in a sense starts with an ending – and then it goes on and on. It changes one's experience of time. Is that important for you, getting into a different sense or experience of time?

^{HJ} Sure. What I consider to be 'Music', is always in-between, it isn't just sound; rather it uses sound in the same way as painting uses paint or cooking uses ingredients. A good example of this way of thinking is to say that a melody is actually the space created between the notes. So we have sound, all kinds of music, all kinds of sound art and so many compositions, but actual Music – as far as I am concerned – exists in an in-between world or abstract space. This obviously has consequences for how time might operate in this world. My ideas and

experience in this area are not so deeply developed and are still quite superficial, but what I can say so far is that it means that time is not always linear. Time can also be vertical, or move as a spiral. That certainly becomes apparent when the drone music I'm working with makes me feel as if I'm travelling upwards in time.

It's also a reason why I'm trying to get away from the idea of linear time in music and reading scores in a linear way. Reading a map and travelling through it is very much an individual choice and a multi-dimensional experience. This means at the very least that one can go forward and backwards in time, and shift around in time as space. There is no start or end to it. Of course, at some point and on some superficial levels, the music begins and ends, but within it you can try to create the feeling that when a piece begins it had actually already started and that it does not really end at the end. What you hear is a fragment of a world that is still going on after the concert has ended. An older classic example of this, at least to my ears, is the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. To me it sometimes sounds as if he was tapping into a stream of music that just keeps going on even when the actual piece ends. Of course there are countless other examples of this in most music – gamelan and classical Indian music are another two obvious examples. I find it very interesting to think that our idea of linear time might not be the right one, that reality isn't linear, that it doesn't start and end, and that there are all these different aspects to time.

^{AA} Linear time is clock time. Much Western music – at least since Bach – has been clock-based, using the rhythm of a metronome. Do you think people are beginning to be interested again in music, which time-wise is structured in a radically different way? Not linear, not as a progression through different variations leading to a well-defined end?

^{HJ} Classical instrumental training with a metronome is a very clock-based thing. It's almost too restrictive, but a good musician will utilise and transcend such restrictions in a creative way. I think you need a reference point in music. It can be a key, a drone or a rhythm; sometimes it's a

metronome or a beat. But the actual music shifts in relation to that reference point, and creates something more complex. The first time I experienced good jazz music was in a workshop led by Keith Tippett. Keith's composition and direction got the band, particularly the rhythm section consisting of Ben Clark (drums) and John Richards (bass), to create a feeling of several rhythms and time-modes happening simultaneously, which I feel is an essential part of the feeling for time in jazz music. This way of playing music literally gives one the direct experience of several different times happening simultaneously. It can be truly liberating – liberating in a way that has life-changing consequences, beyond the practice of a particular 'musical style'. The Voodoo music I've heard has this element very strongly too, and obviously it's in jazz through the influence of African music. This could in fact all be studied scientifically but probably not so much with a Western musicological method. I have thought about notating Voodoo music and am working on a new percussion piece where I explore these ideas and experiences with non-linear time. It's not easy to find out how to do this in a clear way, which preserves the feeling of the music and also translates the ideas into a notation that a classically trained percussionist can read and interpret. I like to imagine that if one applied recent discoveries and models of physics to Voodoo music, for example, you might arrive at very interesting insights into how it actually deals with time and how time relates to space, but my knowledge of physics and Voodoo are too miniscule for me to conduct this type of research by myself.

^{AA} What you try to get at is an understanding of time and place that is closer to quantum science?

^{HJ} I'm not qualified to speak in any serious way about quantum science. I'm an improvising trombonist who through music has had the good fortune to have a taste of many other worlds of experience, beyond what is sold to us as 'reality'. I consciously try to go further into these experiences in the compositions I make for groups, such as my flexible ensemble Lysn. Two colleagues – one of whom I'm working with now – Catherine Christer Hennix, and

another who I hope to work with – Joel Ryan, are much more qualified to speak about such issues. Christer says that now the real avant-garde is happening in science, not art. According to her the arts are seriously lagging behind. She has been working from the time when the art world was open to new possibilities that were often informed by science, and she actively promotes a return to those conditions. I'm inspired by this attempt and in my own intuitive way I'm joining in the effort.