

LAWO
CLASSICS

Henrik
Hellstenius

Places of Sounds and Words

Elisabeth Holmertz – Soprano
Cikada
asamisimasa

What is the nature of the relationship between music and the wider reality that it exists within? Does art imitate life, or can life imitate art? Can the two meaningfully coexist? When a sound is taken from the real world and placed into a musical context, does it mean the same thing? Where does meaning come from, and how do we decide what a sound means?

Henrik Hellstenius first began investigating these questions in 2007, with *Places of Sound*, a work composed for a choreographed performance at the Norwegian Opera and Ballet, that combined two singers, strings and sounds from the real world. Some years later, Hellstenius returned to this, exploring in more depth what he refers to as a “polyphony of signs”, bringing together the worlds of composed and found sounds and investigating their impact and effect on each other.

One result of this is *Places of Sounds and Words* (2014), a seven-movement cycle that demonstrates a curious and provocative series of interactions with and responses to sounds from the natural world. Hellstenius has described these movements as “brief music-theatrical encounters that touch on the subject of how we are present in the world yet do not participate in it”. Apparently, then, this is music not designed or intended to draw parallels between real life and music, nor to find a way of integrating the two into a seamless, interconnected whole. On the contrary, Hellstenius’ concern in *Places of Sounds and Words* is to demonstrate the ambivalence of the relationship, veering between sympathy and antipathy.

Throughout the piece there is the curious impression of soloist and ensemble together acting as a protagonist in response to the variety of real world sounds (played as a series of sound files) to which it finds itself exposed. At its most simple, and receptive, their response is mimetic. The fifth movement, ‘Animals in the

forest’, involves a sequence of episodes where the players act to both imitate and, perhaps, to try to blend in with the environment of chirps and calls created by the real world sounds. The imitative effort is an extensive, earnest one, suggesting it to be of considerable importance, thereby holding up the sound files as an exemplar, something to aspire to. A similar sentiment emerges in ‘A Girl’, where the drawn-out sound of a processed female voice seems to inspire the soloist to strive for an elaborate syllabic duet. This is contrasted in ‘Mutated Birds’, where the soloist falls silent and the organ, violin and cello’s combined response to processed birdsong is much more muted. The strings make basic, simplistic representations of bird calls through repeated notes, but the whole tone of the music is almost defiantly opposite: slow, sombre and withdrawn, the cello in particular becoming increasingly separate from the others, engaged in hectic low material.

The relationship is more ambiguous in the dark central movement ‘Lost in life’, where the real world sounds are taken from phone calls to police in situations of domestic abuse. Here, Hellstenius reduces the ensemble to lengthy sustained tones, thereby throwing emphasis onto the disturbing snatches of conversation and vividly capturing the fraught, dangerous dramas taking place on the other end of the phone line. Yet while the ensemble sounds utmost immersed within and focused upon the real world sounds, the soprano’s words are conflicted, speaking of a “wish to manifest myself / See myself” but instead becoming “lost in life / Asleep / My presence is lost”, perhaps echoing the feelings of the traumatised women.

Elsewhere, Hellstenius problematizes the relationship between acoustic and real world sounds, such that they are much more disconnected. From the start of the opening movement, ‘Things, places and people’, the soprano’s response to the sound files – which here are

passive, dynamically flat, field recordings of people moving about, talking, etc. – is one that directly questions notions of reality: “Nothing else is real / Everything is distorted / By the veil of my mind”. This kind of response is extended at the end of the work. ‘Places, people and things’ is a reprise of the opening, whereas the final movement, ‘I see only forms’, goes further still, pushing the relationship to a point of complete disconnect. The soprano asserts “I am here” while simultaneously questioning “Am I here?” to a distant accompaniment of the sound of people walking, the ensemble mirroring this uncertainty with blank tremolandos.

The same year that *Places of Sounds and Words* was completed, Hellstenius oversaw the launch of a related project, ‘Music with the Real’, in collaboration with percussionist Håkon Stene and the ensemble asamisimasa. The project’s aim was “to explore dialogues between traditional musical materials ... and outer-musical materials derived from our everyday surrounding ..., thereby attempting to create musical dialogues between the two”. An important aspect of this aim was to investigate whether referential sounds – including banal, not obviously interesting sounds – from real world contexts could not merely be incorporated but continue to function on their own terms within a musical composition.

Hellstenius’ contribution to the project was *Instrument of Speech* (2016–17), a work that moves away from the more neutral, passive, generalised sounds found in *Places of Sounds and Words* in favour of active linguistic sources that speak, literally, in an altogether more direct and immediate way. The composer’s concern was not simply with the fact that words and music both involve the creation of sound, but more specifically with the ways that meaning is derived. Hellstenius has described how “the manner in which language and music create meaning is profoundly different, to some

perhaps even contradictory. If music creates meaning (which is in itself an extensive discussion), to most of us the manner in which it does so is nothing like the way we feel language creates meaning.”

The result is a similarly conflicted engagement to that in *Places of Sounds and Words*. In opening movement ‘Bennett Talks’ the players sound disconnected, even aloof, acting in a sombre, self-contained way that appears to ignore, or at least be indifferent to, the short snippets of John G. Bennett’s ruminations on language. ‘Readings’ is the opposite, where in a similar manner to ‘Mutated Birds’ the ensemble becomes mimetic. Their behaviour is a kaleidoscope of tiny gestures that respond directly to the momentary syllables of speech being played, creating a parallel ‘language’ of infinitesimal sounds that could indicate being part of a larger discourse, but in the same way as the fragmented spoken syllables, discerning what they might mean is challenging, particularly towards the movement’s close when Hellstenius indicates the ensemble to perform with “no coordination”, undermining the possibility that each player’s material is connected or related to anyone or anything else.

‘Chomsky Lectures’ also plays with aspects of imitation, the ensemble both mirroring and doubling the melodic contours of the phrases of Noam Chomsky’s voice. They go beyond this, though, later on anticipating his words before we hear them, and expanding upon them too, suggesting additional words that we have not heard. However, the notion of a disconnect ultimately appears again, the verbal content repeatedly referring to a “blooming buzzing confusion” while the ensemble is reduced to tremolando jitters. This is expanded in final movement ‘Babel’, retreating to more passive real world sounds (including some heard in *Places of Sounds and Words*) and excerpts from TV and movies. The title references not simply the mythical tale of

people thrown into linguistic confusion but addresses the fact that all “meaning” in the context of this piece (and all music) could be regarded as something we have rationalised into existence rather than being something concrete or absolute. In the same way, the music forces us to wonder about what relationship there is, if any, between the human voices and the music; are all signs of connection just an illusion?

Although it does not use sound files, the piano trio *Unfolded*, composed for Cikada in 2020, explores a similarly tense interaction between discrete, perhaps irreconcilable, types of musical ideas. Hellstenius describes it as a development from “a spare material of chords and sound objects ... towards a more linear music”, though the process is not quite as simple as that. Working together, the trio is initially concerned with small micro-gestures, most of which are either non-pitched, such as brushing piano strings, or have their pitch content obscured or cancelled out through dissonance, clashes and percussive impacts. Yet almost from the outset there are indications of a very different behavioural impulse, soft and sustained, focused around a gently undulating almost-unison microtonal melody. As *Unfolded* progresses, the friction between these two kinds of material, transient and extended, doesn’t simply manifest in episodic juxtapositions but also triggers internal dissent among the players. The piano, in particular, is persistent in wanting to return to this gentler music, but loud interruptions repeatedly thwart these attempts. It’s not until the closing minutes of the piece that the violin and cello are genuinely won over, leading to an exquisite epilogue of quiet delicacy, interjected (but now not derailed) by a couple of wild joyous runs from the piano. Unlike *Places of Sounds and Words* and *Instrument of Speech*, *Unfolded* eventually manages to achieve an integration of its disjunct ideas, arriving at a state of unity.

– Dr Simon Cummings
composer/researcher/writer
5against4.com

Places of Sounds and Words

Text: Henrik Hellstenius /
Jeanne de Salzmänn

I. Things, places and people

Nothing else is real
Everything is distorted
By the veil of my mind
My mind
Nothing else is real
Distorted by the veil
It prevents me
The matter of things, of places, of places and things
With the nature of places and people and things
I am aware of a reality I cannot possess
People and things that I cannot possess
The nature of things and people I wish I know
Places and people I wish I know
I am here
Am I here?
I am not closed
I am here
I am
I am imprisoned in one part of my body
I am not closed
Still I feel separated from what is real
I sense it

IV. Lost in life

I am lost, lost in life
Asleep
My presence is lost
I am
I loose myself
In the surroundings
of that feeling of myself
Desires
A wish to manifest myself
See myself
The hand
The eye
The I
The eye
The hand
I
The eye

VI. Places, people and things

Nothing else is real
Nothing
Is real
Distorted by the veil
Nothing else is real, nothing else is real
It prevents
It prevents me

VII. I only see forms

/: I am here :/
I see
I only see forms
See, only things and shapes
All the inner and outer events
seem like a dream
I do not feel truly touched
What is it?
That impression?
My impression of myself
Am I here?





Henrik Hellstenius

Henrik Hellstenius (born 1963), a Norwegian composer, studied composition at the Norwegian Academy of Music and with Gérard Grisey at Conservatoire Supérieur.

Hellstenius's output encompasses a large range of works: chamber music, orchestral works, opera, electro-acoustic music and music for theatre and dance. His music has been performed frequently at concerts and festivals around the world by ensembles and musicians such as Cikada, BIT20, Oslo Sinfonietta, Court Circuit, Irvine Arditti, Peter Herresthal, asamisasa, Hans Kristian Kjos Sørensen, Ensemble El Perro Andaluz, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra and Stavanger Philharmonic Orchestra.

His first opera, *Sera*, received the Norwegian Edvard Award in 2000, and has been staged in Oslo and Warsaw. His second opera, *Ophelias: Death by Water Singing*, premiered in Oslo in 2005 and was staged in Warsaw, Oslo and Osnabrück, Germany. It was recorded in 2014 and released on the LAWO Classics label in 2016 (LWC1098). In 2022 he received a Spellemann Award (Norway's Grammy) as 'Composer of the Year' for the release *Past & Presence*, also on the LAWO Classics label (LWC1229).

Hellstenius has been composer in residence with the Bergen International Festival 2011,

Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra 2013/2014, and the June in Buffalo Festival 2017.

In recent years Hellstenius has focused on the musical relationship between sound, words and movement in its many forms, ranging from staged concerts and performance works to musical theatre pieces. He is at present conducting an artistic research project, 'Extended Compositon', where he focuses on the possibilities in composition with movement, sound and language.

Hellstenius is also a professor of composition at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo and has been a guest teacher of composition at festivals, conservatories and universities in Germany, the USA, Austria, France and the Nordic countries.

Elisabeth Holmertz

(Places of Sounds and Words)

The art of Singing and Elisabeth Holmertz chose each other after an 8-year-old Elisabeth saw Rossini's *La Cenerentola* at the Grand Theatre in her hometown of Gothenburg. Her goal and dream was to become an opera singer, stand on stage in fancy costumes, and sing otherworldly, beautiful music. The path was a pretty straight one, through music lessons, music high school, musicology studies, a conservatory (Oslo), and a conservatory again (Cologne). Somewhere, the dream of becoming an opera singer waned and was transformed into becoming "just" a singer and, later, an "Actor Singer" – a singer who also acts, but not necessarily on the opera stage.

As a young and a little bit lost singer she met Henrik Hellstenius for the first time in 2005 when she sang the title role in his opera *Ophelias: Death by Water Singing*. Here she was challenged to go beyond classical vocal ideals and experiment with different techniques and theatrical expressions, things she's carried with her for the rest of her career.

She also found her voice mainly in the improvisational music of the 17th century and the complex music of today. It's there, in the space between these extremes, she balances. Or better, she jumps between genres, styles, and expressions: singing not only lute songs and baroque opera, but experimental opera, opera for babies, and avant-garde contemporary music.

She has been a soloist with Concerto Copenhagen, Cikada, and both the Norwegian and Danish Broadcasting Orchestras, however she cherishes most her own projects: ensemble Odd Size, who, among other things, performs a version of Handel's *Messiah* for only four musicians; crossing the boundaries between new and old in Vollen United with Kenneth Karlsson; ongoing collaborations with flute and drum artist Poul Høxbro and lutenist Fredrik Bock; and new music and improvisation with harpist Sunniva Rødland and percussionist Sigrun Rogstad Gommæs. Elisabeth also sings in Rolf Erik Nyström's ensemble, Oriental Winds of the Baroque, which explores the origins of European baroque music. We should also mention here her close collaboration with composers such as Rolf Wallin, Rebecka Ahvenniemi, Jenny Hettne, Tansy Davies, Julian Skar, Maja Ratkje, and Eivind Buene, among others.

In 2020 she completed a PhD in artistic research at The Norwegian Academy of Music. Here she explored her own varied artistic roles, while striving to expand the boundaries of what is expected from a classically trained soprano by performing all the roles in Monteverdi's opera, *L'Orfeo*.

On this recording Hellstenius and Holmertz have continued the work they started in 2005.





Cikada

(Places of Sounds and Words / Unfolded)

On this recording:
Bjørn Rabben, percussion
Kenneth Karlsson, piano
Odd Hannisdal, violin
Torun Stavseng, cello

Since its 1989 formation in Oslo, Cikada has developed a refined and highly acclaimed profile on the international contemporary music scene.

From the very beginning, Cikada has consisted of flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, string quintet and conductor. All ten are equal, permanent members, and the ensemble has become synonymous with the 'Oslo Sound' of fresh, vibrant, warm and virtuosic interpretations of consciously selected, contemporary repertoire.

In concerts at major international festivals and on numerous albums, Cikada's distinct ensemble profile manifests itself in strong program-

ming. Integral to this work is a wish to develop long-term collaborations with composers and to build composer portraits with commissioned works over longer periods of time.

The nine musicians also take part in various smaller formations within the group: Cikada String Quartet, Cikada RBK (clarinet, piano and viola) and Cikada Piano Trio work as independent Cikada units, adding to the ensemble's international identity.

Cikada was awarded the prestigious Nordic Music Prize in 2005.



asamisimasa

(Instrument of Speech)

On this recording:
Ellen Ugelvik, piano
Tanja Orning, cello
Anders Førisdal, guitar
Kristine Tjøgersen, clarinet
Håkon Mørch Stene, percussion

asamisimasa was founded in 2001 by musicians sharing a passion and interest in avant-garde music and its history. Since then, the ensemble has premiered numerous cross-media works especially written for them, often contextualized with classical repertoire and historical avant-garde work.

asamisimasa has collaborated with composers such as Helmut Lachenmann, Mathias Spahlinger, Nicolaus A. Huber, Aldo Clementi, Alvin Lucier, Brian Ferneyhough, Helmut Oehring, Clemens Gadenstätter, Klaus Lang, Johannes Kreidler, Joanna Bailie, and exten-

sively with cross-media composers such as Simon Steen-Andersen, Øyvind Torvund, Martin Schüttler, Matthew Shlomowitz, and Trond Reinholdtsen.

Performances include Berlin Philharmonie – Debüt im Deutschlandradio Kultur, WDR Cologne, Darmstadt, Donaueschingen, Ultraschall, Ultima, Huddersfield, Rainy Days, Monday Evening Concerts LA, Other Minds Festival (San Francisco) Cutting Edge (London), Angelica and SPOR among others. Their first two recordings, with music by Simon Steen-Andersen (DK) and Øyvind Torvund (NO) were awarded the Norwegian Grammy (Spellemann) for best contemporary music record of the year. asamisimasa has also devoted full length albums to works by Laurence Crane, Matthew Shlomowitz and Trond Reinholdtsen.

Henrik Hellstenius

(*1963)

Places of Sounds and Words for Soprano, Ensemble and Electronics (2014)

- 01 I. Things, Places and People__05:43
- 02 II. Mutated Birds__04:35
- 03 III. A Girl__03:37
- 04 IV. Lost in Life__05:28
- 05 V. Animals in the Forest__04:56
- 06 VI. Places, People and Things__02:17
- 07 VII. I Only See Forms__05:23

08 Unfolded for Piano Trio (2020)__12:35

Instrument of Speech for Ensemble and Electronics (2016–17)

- 09 I. Bennett Talks__04:15
- 10 II. Readings__03:15
- 11 III. Chomsky Lectures__05:37
- 12 IV. Babel__06:32

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