



School: Bath School of Music & Performing Arts

Researcher: Dr Matthew Sergeant

Project Title: Lichen (2016, for electric lap-steel guitar)

UOA: 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

Research Questions

Lichen (2016) is a composition for solo electric lap-steel guitar. The composition came about through a commissioning opportunity organized by guitarist Daryl Buckley (ELISION Ensemble, Australia) who was looking to build a repertoire for the instrument.

The primary research questions explored in the composition significantly develops conceptual and technical ideas originally derived as part of the researcher's PhD project ([University of Huddersfield, 2013](#)) – those of erosion and encrustation as transformative compositional operands. Through this new work, the project asks how such operands might be expanded into a material (i.e. physical) domain by exploring how ideas from philosopher Karen Barad might be applied to create a new compositional space.

Barad's work is broadly associated with the 'material turn' in contemporary critical theory where 'matter is no longer imagined [...] as a massive, opaque plenitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. One could conclude accordingly that matter "becomes" rather than matter "is"' (Coole & Frost 2010: 10). In particular, this new work asks how Barad's concept of 'intra-action' might be used to compositionally reconceive live instrumental music. For Barad, '[t]he neologism "intra-action" signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action' (Barad 2007: 33, emphasis retained). As such, conventional notions of causality are reversed here, separable agencies (in the plural) are not something to be entwined, but instead come into being through their entwinement (the parallels with ideas quantum mechanics is not overlooked by Barad). The conception(s) offered by Barad extend well beyond notions of mere superimposition and counterpoint and instead present a glimpse of a music where separable musical forces only become delineable through and a notion of mutually transformative entwinement.

As such, the primary research questions embedded in the work can be considered as follows:

What might we consider as the agencies in operation in an electric lap-steel guitar performance?

How might one derive a compositional strategy whereby the sonic result of the composition can be foregrounded as the 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (ibid)?

How might one create and control a compositional space that foregrounds the intra-activity of these agencies as they into being?