

Doctoral School Research Award 2021/22

Report on Festival Mixtur 'Sound Experimentation Workshop'

Festival Mixtur was founded in Barcelona in 2012 as a meeting point for sound artists/composers, researchers, and audiences; as part of their 2021-22 season a call was put out for composers to participate in the 'Sound Experimentation Workshop', a substantial artist-development programme. The Doctoral School Research Award provided essential financial assistance to enable me to attend the first stage of this course, which ran from 30th September – 3rd October 2021.

Programmes such as this operate widely across the UK, Europe, and the wider international community of new music. They are a chance for practitioners to meet, engage with cutting-edge music, and experiment with their own ideas – they also represent an opportunity to bring work to a wider audience, and are a key mechanism by which composers build links and secure commissions with performers outside of their own country/community. Festivals of this kind might, at times, tend towards whatever passes for the 'commercial' in this relatively niche field – however, I found Festival Mixtur to be an intriguing blend of the experimental and the theatrical, shot through with a commitment to emerging artists. Performances were not only of the "sit in the dark and listen" variety, but included Ensemble Garage performing in the round, film from multiple angles live-broadcast to a succession of video screens (Michael Beil's *Caravan*, 2017) and Vertixe Sonora performing an intriguingly-overlaid set of miniatures, accompanied sporadically by Angel Farado's electronic tapestries.

The attraction of the festival, for me, was its enthusiasm for experimentation, and its presentation of work in unusual formats – my own work engages with questions of audience- and performer perception, and at times tends towards more of a static 'installation' energy than a traditional, dynamic format. As part of the programme, I was able to work alongside Ensemble Garage in workshopping 'candle / rain-light', a short piece for solo trombone which explores the tension between these two modes of composition. Support was offered by tutor Ramon Lazkano, and wider input took the form of lectures & tutorials by composers/performers of an international standard: Beat Furrer, Cassandra Miller, and Juliet Fraser.

There were other, more specific gains from participation in the workshop – I am slow to accept instruments into my music, and over the years have only gradually expanded my field of engagement. It's important to me that the instruments are well-written for, and fit organically in the soundworld; the trombone had thus far been an instrument alien to me, and it was good to get a sense of how it might be compatible with my musical ideas.

Equally, one of the areas of exploration in 'candle / rain-light' is the effect which particular systems of notation have upon the energy of the performance; both Patrick, the trombonist of Ensemble Garage, and tutor Ramon Lazkano had intriguing comments on the idea of 'poise' when working with freely-metred notation. This led into a fruitful discussion about the acoustics of the trombone, and how the use of mutes – necessitating a particular stance & resulting sense of 'poise' – affected not only timbre but also performance energy.

This trip was a success on two levels – one, in looking outward to connect with broader practices from across the continent and two, in looking inward to experiment, expand my own practice, and to locate the trombone amongst it. It would not have been possible without the support of the Doctoral School Research Award, for which I am hugely grateful.

Sam Messer – PhD Music