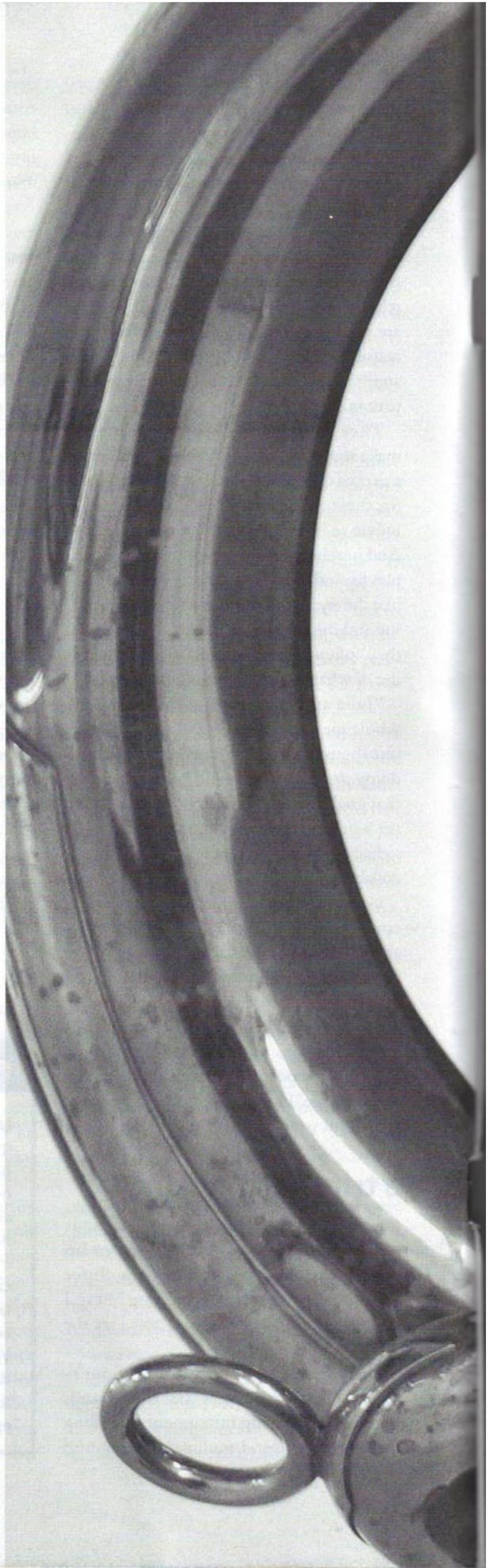
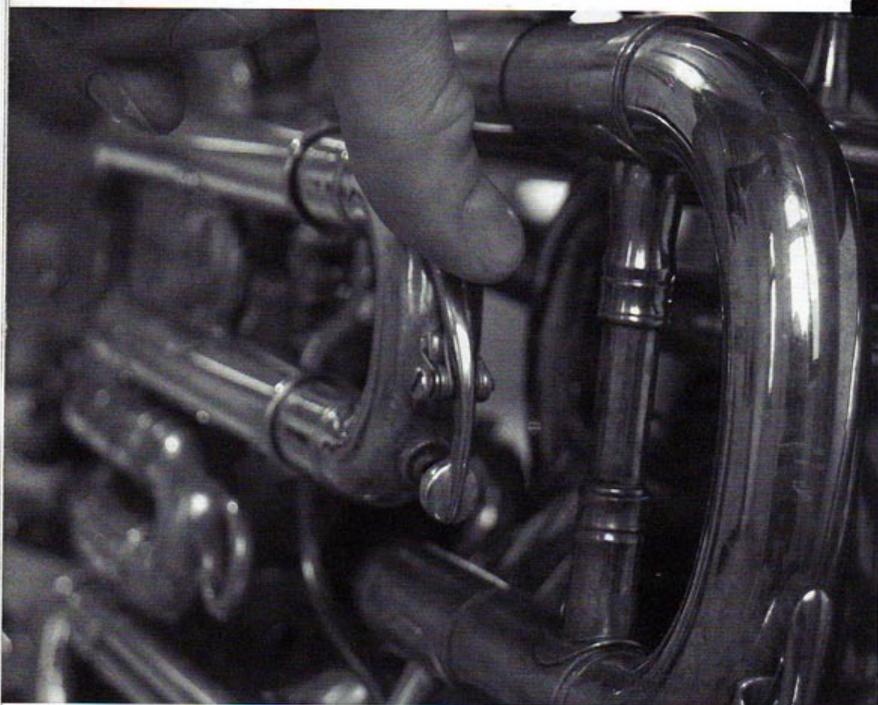
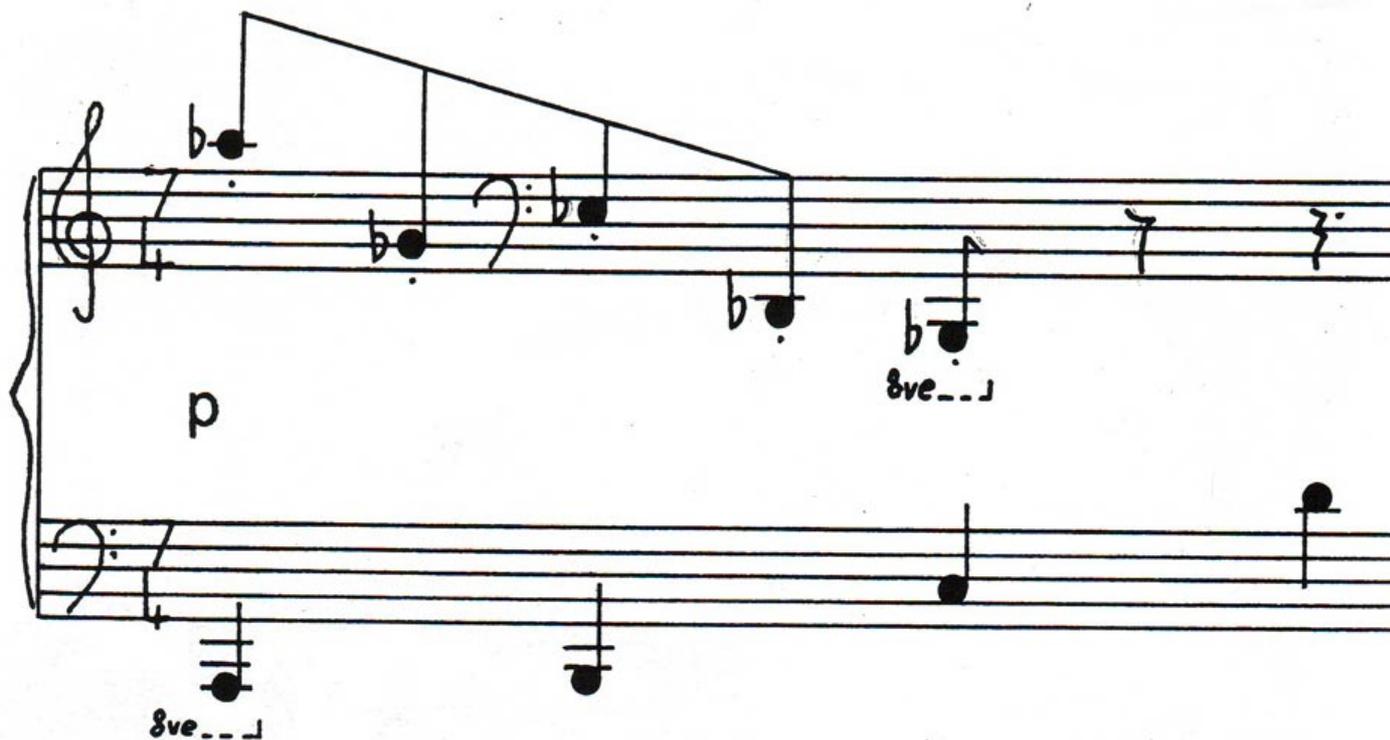


How to tweak a tuba, move  
from reductionist improv to  
just-intonation  
composition,  
and still perform both  
noise-based and narrative-  
line music

# ROBIN HAYWARD: REDEFINING AN INSTRUMENT

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOS BY  
CHIYOKO SZLAVNICS

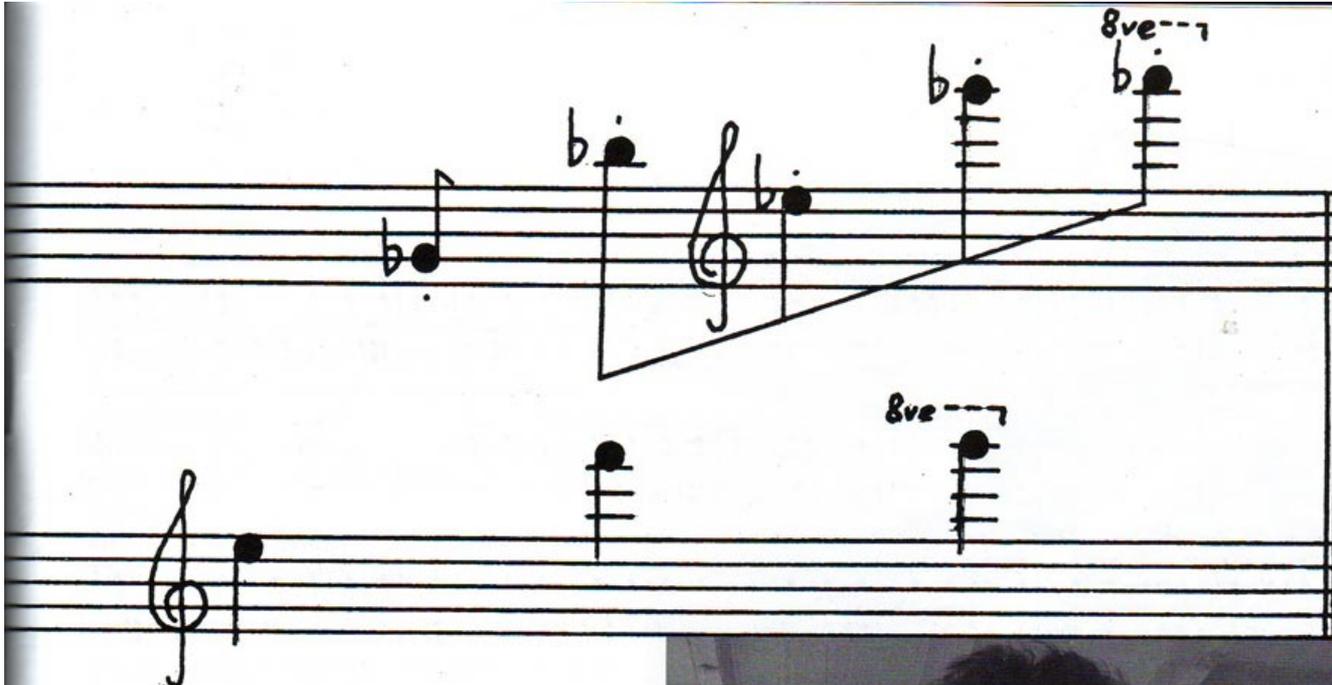




**t**uba player and composer Robin Hayward studied classical and new music in Manchester, England. He was involved in the improvising scene in London from 1994–1997, and then moved to Berlin to develop an approach to improvising with musicians of his own generation. In Berlin he is currently a member of Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin (KNM), Phosphor, and Plainsound Orchestra, in addition to performing solo.

Robin Hayward's most recent project has been the recording of solo tuba pieces that he has developed over the past three years, and which he intends to release on CD in 2004. Previous to developing these solos, Hayward was directly involved during the late 1990s in fostering the aesthetic known today as Berlin Reductionism, with fellow musicians Burkhard Beins, Axel Dörner, Annette Krebs, and Andrea Neumann. Theirs was a music stripped to its bare essentials, focused on sound itself, through the use of transparent textures, extremely low dynamic levels, silence, and, sometimes, abrupt changes of texture. To produce white noise and other related timbres, instruments were often modified—sometimes with electronics—and musicians sometimes developed unconventional playing techniques. Since about 2000, these musicians have been searching for new directions. This interview traces Robin Hayward's musical activities since 1994, and was recorded in September and November, 2003, in Berlin. It has been revised and edited by Robin Hayward and Chiyoko Szlavnic.

ALL PHOTOS BY CHIYOKO SZLAVNICS



Robin Hayward's *Piano Haiku*

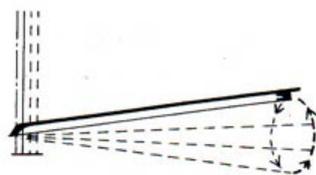
**CHIYOKO SZLAVNICS:** You create a striking image when you perform—your face, head, and upper body are completely masked by the instrument. The audience sees a huge tuba bell directed at them, which resembles a semi-abstract sculpture. Why do you perform with the instrument in this position?

**ROBIN HAYWARD:** Many of the sounds I've discovered have a fairly restricted dynamic range—if I blow harder they do not necessarily get louder, but may simply disappear. For this reason I changed my normal playing position. The tuba bell is designed to point upwards—the audience usually experiences the sound indirectly, reflected back from the surfaces of the acoustic space. For the sounds I was developing, it seemed more appropriate to point the bell directly at the audience, in order to make the details of the sounds more audible.

This had two unforeseen consequences. First, water settled within the now horizontally-lying valve casing, which interfered with the air as it flowed through the decreased aperture, producing irregular high-frequency sounds reminiscent of a short-wave radio. Also, as you've described, most of the upper half of my body became hidden behind the bell. I became virtually invisible during the performance.

**CS:** I'd like to talk about your music chronologically, beginning with your experiences as an improviser in London. What were your impressions of the improvising scene there, and how and why were you drawn to the aesthetic of reduced playing?





♩ = 45

○   
 Light bow pressure

○   
 Gradually increase bow pressure

○   
 Gradually increase bow pressure



○   
 Include sound of hair against back of bow

\* Crank Start may also be played on viola or cello

excerpt from *Crank Start* for solo violin

**RH:** When I moved to London in 1994 at the age of twenty-five, I found an active and open improvised music scene, but I had the feeling of fitting into something that was already established, rather than of being part of developing something. One thing I came to hate in my own playing was the tendency I started to develop of going through the motions, of playing simply to fill space. In trying to avoid this, I remember adopting a strategy for a while of deliberately losing technical control in order to trip myself up and force myself to improvise again. But the results were rather erratic, and it wasn't a strategy for the long term.

A turning point for me was meeting and playing with the trombonist Radu Malfatti. I'd heard Radu in the group Polwechsel, back in the London Musicians' Collective Festival of Experimental Music in 1996. Polwechsel was the first ensemble I heard which was working with a very reduced aesthetic. I'd also heard the trumpet player Axel Dörner play in London—we played together and exchanged notes on some of the distorted-embouchure techniques we'd both been developing. In 1997 I formed the trio rar with Radu and Axel, and we spent some days rehearsing in Radu's flat in Cologne. Those sessions confirmed a lot of what

I'd increasingly been feeling in London. I'd already been moving in the direction of playing less, and in a less obviously interactive way. But it was this meeting with Radu in particular, that gave me confidence that I was on the right track. When we rehearsed in Cologne, there was enough space left in the music to play only when it felt necessary, without this being a problem. When I tried applying this rule in London, I tended to end up not playing at all, as the space in which I wanted to place the sounds was constantly being filled up.

Radu was very encouraging about my attempts at composing, which were pretty basic back then. He also rekindled my interest in John Cage. I was struck by Cage's criticism of the interactive nature of the improvisation he'd witnessed, in particular of the tendency for all musicians to follow a similar dynamic curve. For a while I was also strongly influenced by the idea of non-expressiveness—of sound as sound—and I felt there might be potential in applying these ideas to improvisation. Not with the intention of creating improvised John Cage, but rather as a point of departure.

**CS:** Using silence and space was accepted, and even encouraged by Radu—I've heard that he feels very

strongly about Cage's aesthetic. But why did you move to Berlin to concentrate on this aesthetic?

**RH:** I originally moved to Berlin with the intention of concentrating on rar. I'd also heard about percussionist Burkhard Beins, from talking in London to harpist Rhodri Davies, and it sounded as if Burkhard and I might have quite a lot in common musically.

**CS:** What is it about Berlin that produced an atmosphere in which you were able to develop this approach?

**RH:** I think it's easier to be more focused in Berlin. There are several reasons for this—the city is smaller, and it's much cheaper than London, so there's more time to work on things. There are plenty of spaces to play in, and the architecture of the flats, with their high ceilings and wooden floors, also lends itself well to putting on informal concerts. My solo tuba pieces *Coil* and *Dial* were both premièred in flat concerts. Compare this to the carpeted rooms above pubs to which the scene is often forced to retreat in London. Many of the sounds I've developed in Berlin would be virtually inaudible there.

I also found a group of musicians in Berlin who, for the most part, were willing to discuss the music critically, which was, and remains, important to me. In London I had discussed issues mainly with isolated individuals, for example John Butcher and Steve Beresford. In Berlin there was a small group of about five people who, for about a year, were all developing a similar aesthetic, focusing on the microscopic details of the sounds themselves, their beginnings, ends, and precise timings within the whole. We frequently discussed avoiding the tendency to react immediately to what another musician was playing, waiting instead for the moment when the response would have maximum strength—in a sense, to let time take on the work. For a while, some of us used stopwatches to further avoid interaction—I might be playing a sound, and decide to stop playing in precisely two minutes' time, regardless of what the other musicians might then be doing. Which is not to imply we weren't listening to one another intensely, or that we weren't aiming for an overall group result. It wasn't about ignoring the other musicians, but rather about leaving sufficient space for one another's contributions to exist, without necessarily feeling the need to comment on them musically.

**CS:** Were musicians in Berlin already moving towards reduced playing before you arrived?

**RH:** Yes, I think some were. I'd already worked with Axel, of course, and heard about Burkhard Beins. The guitarist Annette Krebs and the inside-piano player



Andrea Neumann, were also moving in this direction when I arrived.

**CS:** Were you playing mainly with other individuals open to this approach, or in fixed groups?

**RH:** Mainly in fixed groups, as I was more interested in development and refinement than in continually trying out new combinations. The four most significant groups in which I was involved during this reductionist period were rar; my duo with Axel; the trio Das Kreisen, with Annette Krebs and Burkhard Beins; and the quartet Roanax, with Annette, Andrea Neumann, and Axel. Unfortunately, none of these groups released any CDs, and rar never even played a single concert. Roanax made a recording for a CD in 1999, but somehow we never got around to releasing it. I was actually a little skeptical about recording this music at the time, as the focus was so much on this-sound-now-in-this-space. But with hindsight, I think it's a shame we didn't record any CDs.

The only group I am currently involved in from that time is the octet Phosphor, formed in 1999, with Burkhard Beins, saxophonist Alessandro Bosetti, Axel Dörner, Annette Krebs, Andrea Neumann, guitarist Michael Renkel, and electronics and laptop player Ignaz Schick. This group is interesting, as it contains a number of people who went through a similar reductionist phase, but are finding different solutions on the

excerpt from *Tones for enharmonically tuned tuba*

other side of it. I'm curious to see how it develops.

**CS:** Was reductionism restricted to improvised music?

**RH:** No, another reason for my reductionist aesthetic at that time, was that in the area of composition I had not yet found a way of converting the interesting sounds I'd been discovering into well-structured music. I reduced the material radically, partly in order to focus on time and structure as a way towards solving this problem. I developed a method in which I would compose the silences, and wherever there wasn't a silence, there would be a sound. My most successful piece using this method was for the trio *rar*, written in the spring of 1999. But after that, I started feeling that these pieces weren't going anywhere any more. I wanted to stop being so analytical, and start using my intuition again.

**CS:** We'll come back to your compositions. I'd like to

focus on the tuba, and how you view the music you create with it.

**RH:** One of the areas that has been fascinating me has been that of letting the music evolve from the structure of the instrument itself. Due to ease of access, I have mainly been focusing on my own instrument. Through viewing the tuba as a labyrinth of tubing within which sounds may be generated and redirected—a sort of air-powered electronics studio—the traditional tuba sound became replaced by mechanical noise, echoing the machine age in which the tuba was invented. More recently I have been viewing it from another perspective, as a collection of tubes of various lengths, each complete with its individual overtone series. This has led to a pitch-based music in which the traditional tuba sound is clearly recognizable, though in a tuning that again reflects the instrumental structure.

**CS:** How did you come to think of the tuba as a labyrinth of tubing?

**RH:** The discovery that led to my viewing the tuba in this way was made after attempting to compose for improvisers. In 1996 the London Musicians' Collective asked me to compose a solo tuba piece, to be performed by a different tuba player on each of the four nights of the festival. As I didn't want to ask the other tuba players simply to reproduce the techniques I'd been developing in my own playing, I decided instead to alter the instrument in some way, making it impossible for any of us to improvise in our usual fashion. I blocked-up the valve slides, and dripped water into the bell of the tuba so it gradually filled up with water during the course of the piece. It was the first of these alterations which led to the idea of twisting the valves, as it brought with it the idea of changing the function of the valve from a pitch-altering to a noise-producing one.

**CS:** What is twisting a valve? How can a valve produce noise?

**RH:** Instead of using the valves on the tuba to change pitch, which is what they're designed to do, I twist the valves, reducing the aperture through which the air flows, which creates the sound of rushing air within the instrument. Different degrees of twisting create different sized apertures, and therefore different qualities of noise. For example, if the tube is completely blocked off, only a tiny amount of air is able to leak through the valve casing, and the result is an extremely quiet sound which at the same time contains a tremendous amount of energy. The air pressure that builds up within the instrument may be redirected to different parts of the tuba, for example through the water keys, (designed to let out spit and condensation from the instrument), through the valve casing itself, or, by suddenly increas-

ing the aperture, directly through the bell. Hence the labyrinth idea.

The approach could be compared to turning the knobs on an analogue synthesizer to alter the parameters of the sound. Varying degrees of valve-twisting may be combined with one another, or with conventional valve positions, for example with half-valve techniques, to colour and redirect the airstream in different ways.

The technique combines very well with circular breathing, as the passage of air through the instrument is relatively slow, and, as they are quite similar, the sound of breathing in is masked by the intended instrumental sounds. It also complements the tongue-reed technique well. In this technique, the tongue is placed inside the mouthpiece, and acts as a reed as the air flows into the instrument. As the valve is twisted, the back-pressure increases, slowing down the frequency with which the tongue vibrates. In this way it is possible to control the speed of the tongue through the position of the valves.

**CS:** When did you develop these techniques?

**RH:** I discovered most of these techniques in London, but have really refined them during the last five years in Berlin.

**CS:** You have been working extensively with the structure of your instrument, and modifying it. Have you taken the same approach to other instruments when composing for them?

**RH:** I have written two pieces for other instruments based on similar ideas: *Crank Start* (2000, rev. 2001), which views the violin as a clockwork machine to be wound up by the bow, and *Piano Haiku* (2001), which is based on the five black-note, seven white-note structure of the piano keyboard, reflecting the five-seven-five syllable structure of haiku poetry.

**CS:** You mentioned earlier that reductionism had reached its limit, as far as you were concerned, in the year 2000. These pieces were composed around that period of time. If you were beginning to move away from reductionism, can you describe the new ideas you were working with in *Crank Start* and other pieces?

**RH:** Yes, by 2000 I was feeling in a cul-de-sac with the very reduced, static music I'd been producing. The improvisation started to appear mannered and no longer fresh, and in the area of composition I was finding the chance-based methods I'd been using rather predictable.

In *Crank Start*, written for violinist Aleks Kolkowski, I deliberately set out to break my own rules. The piece has a narrative structure, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, and the middle section contains a climax—something strictly forbidden in my previous



aesthetic. Atmosphere and affect are not avoided, but arise as a function of the form and material. The silences not only provide a frame for the sounds, but also serve the narrative in creating and sustaining tension. And the whole piece is based on the idea of winding something up and releasing it—the tension-and-release principle.

The solo tuba piece *Coil* started life in 1998 as an extremely reduced, static piece lasting thirty minutes. But in 2001 I compressed it to seven minutes, and juxtaposed the static sections with dynamic ones. It's the contrast principle, that creates the tension that drives the piece forward—though whether the tension is ever really resolved is something I myself am not sure about. A third element is introduced, both static and dynamic, which seems to absorb the tension, rather than resolving it exactly. *Coil* is one of three entirely noise-based pieces which will be appearing on my forthcoming solo CD. The other two noise-based pieces that will be on it, *Release* and *Dial*, both combine static sections to create a non-static overall form. They give the initial impression of being flat, and of going nowhere. But over a longer time frame they reveal themselves to be linear, gradually moving away from the place where they began.

Narrative is the basic quality I've introduced into my pieces since 2000. I've become fascinated by music's



ability to form lines and appear to tell stories. Memory, suspense, expectation and surprise—all these mean considering my own subjective response to the material, rather than trying to distance myself from it.

**CS:** When I first met you, my impression was that you were primarily working with noise, and that pitch didn't interest you. But at that point we were working together in the Plainsound Orchestra, a group of musicians formed by Marc Sabat two years ago in Berlin. Are you working with pitch and melody now?

**RH:** I wouldn't say I wasn't interested in pitch; I just hadn't yet found a way of working with it effectively. *Crank Start* is not entirely noise-based—there is also the sound of the four open strings, and a band of noise which transforms into harmonics before disintegrating back into noise. But the only successful piece I had composed purely with pitch was *Piano Haiku*, which is only three seconds long. Especially since becoming open to narrative and line, I've been looking for ways to make longer pieces with pitch.

**CS:** And what ways have you found?

**RH:** So far, the solution has come through working directly with the tuba and retuning the valve slides. The slides are normally tuned to approximate equal temperament, but in the '70s the German music theorist Martin Vogel proposed basing the tuning of the slides on the undertone row, creating a network of justly

tuned intervals with the overtones of each length of tubing. I became aware of Martin Vogel through working with Marc Sabat and Wolfgang von Schweinitz in Plainsound Orchestra. The aim of that ensemble was to concentrate on non-tempered tuning systems, and the very focused use of noise. Marc actually had the idea of the undertone tuning before we came across Martin Vogel's work.

**CS:** How have you, yourself, been using this tuning system?

**RH:** Over the last year and a half I've mainly been concentrating on making the idea practicable and developing music with it. It was only in September, 2003, that I finally came up with a piece I felt happy with. The piece is provisionally called *Tones*, and it will be the final piece on my solo CD, when I've finally learned to play it. Playing it is proving to be just about as difficult as composing it was.

**CS:** In what way was it difficult to write?

**RH:** The challenge was to compose a pitch-based piece that would fit aesthetically with the narrative quality of the noise-based pieces on the CD. Working in just intonation was new territory for me, and I tried a lot of things out that seemed promising but didn't lead to anything. It took a long time before I found an approach that worked, though once I'd found one, the piece took on much of the rest of the work itself. The narrative quality arose directly from the material, possibly because, once I'd learnt to recognize them, the network of intervals offered such clear patterns, whereas in the earlier noise-based pieces, I often had to intervene to shape the material in order to arrive at this quality.

My hope is, I suppose, that these pieces have something of both the reductionist and the narrative aesthetics. For a while I was considering calling my forthcoming solo CD something like *Abstract Narratives*. But I decided against it, as it sounds so vacuous taken out of context. All music is abstract, after all.

**CS:** You not only perform your own pieces and improvise with other musicians, you are also a fine interpreter of new music. Tell me about some of the ensembles you've been involved with in Berlin.

**RH:** Yes. Recently I've actually been doing more interpreting than improvising. On arriving in Berlin I found more openness between the improvised and new music scenes than there had been in London. The first composed-music group I joined when I arrived was called *Zwischentöne*, founded and run by the Austrian composer Peter Ablinger. The group brings together musicians with a wide variety of abilities, from amateur to professional, and specializes in

experimental and conceptual scores. It mainly plays music especially written for it, working directly with the composers. I learned a great deal from my time in this group, not least through the direct contact with the composers. Alvin Lucier's and Benedict Mason's use of the performance space as an integral part of the composition have left a particularly lasting impression.

Two years ago I joined Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin (KNM), a group which combines openness to the experimental music tradition with a high level of playing in the conventional mode. The members take an active role in programming, and I've been able to program pieces which reflect my own particular musical interests, for example by John White and Robert Ashley.

**CS:** Looking forward to the coming year now, what will you be focusing on in 2004?

**RH:** My first priority is to get the piece *Tones* recorded, and my solo CD out. Then I'll concentrate on developing the tuning system further, for example, by adding more valves. Unfortunately there's no more space left on my current tuba to add more valves, so this instrument will end up becoming my noise tuba, and I'll have to design or adapt another one to develop the tuning system fully.

Apart from that, I want to continue writing for other instruments. I'm currently working on a wind trio, which will be part of a concert-installation project organized by KNM, taking place in Berlin in June this year. In July, I'm going to the Sound Symposium in St. John's, Canada, where I'll be doing a solo concert and developing an outdoor piece. I'll be working on this piece mainly on site, but the initial idea is to focus on ways in which musicians could interact over long distances.



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*Chiyoko Szlavnic is a flutist, saxophonist, and composer who relocated to Berlin from Toronto in 1998, after receiving a Fellowship Grant for composition from the Akademie Schloß Solitude in 1997. In Toronto, she performed with Hemispheres, and was a founding member of the saxophone quartet 40 fingers—both ensembles explored structured and free improvisation, and interpreted contemporary music. She has composed for various ensembles in Canada and Germany, including those mentioned, as well as Arraymusic, ERGO, New Music Concerts, Quartett Avance, and Surplus.*

## résumé français

Dans cet entretien, le tubiste et compositeur Robin Hayward explique comment il en est venu, à travers son activité dans le milieu de la musique improvisée de Londres, à une approche très spécifique de la musique, notamment en travaillant avec le tromboniste Radu Malfatti. Il discute de son approche très stricte de l'improvisation collective, qu'il poursuit maintenant à Berlin. Il décrit les techniques alternatives qu'il a développées de même que sa conception du tuba comme « labyrinthe de tubes ». Son approche de la composition est caractérisée par l'intérêt qu'il porte à la structure instrumentale comme point de départ compositionnel, autant dans ses pièces pour tuba solo que ses œuvres de musique de chambre. Dans ses plus récents projets, il s'intéresse à l'application du système d'« intonation juste » pour le tuba. Il travaille avec de nombreux ensembles dont Phospor, le Kammerensemble Neue Musiz (KNM) de Berlin et le Plainsound Orchestra. La parution d'un disque en solo est prévue pour 2004 ainsi que des performances au Newfoundland Sound Symposium en juillet de la même année.