

The Flute Player: Sculptural Embouchures in the Work of Ragnhild May

'At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg.'
Donna J. Haraway

Box-shaped wooden organ pipes of various sizes lie on the stage floor, each of them supplied with air from an electronically controlled pump via plastic tubing. Ragnhild May moves between the individual parts of the instrument lying spread across the floor like the tentacles of a large organism. She slowly takes the structure apart as parts of the instrument continue to be activated by the flow of air, producing a slightly pulsating, droning organ sound. The vibrating acoustic curtain of dissonant frequencies weaving between each other and filling the room gradually fade, tone by tone. The end of the performance mirrors its beginning: the gradual assembly then disassembling of both the instrument and composition before the audience, inviting them to connect the visual and the acoustic, and vice versa. Suddenly May takes out a bunch of plastic flutes and throws them into the audience. They accept the challenge and join in, producing a cacophonous composition of shrill fluting and enthusiastic smiles among the spontaneous performers.

May's performance paraphrases Roland Kirk's live album *Here Comes the Whistleman* from 1967, but in many ways it is also characteristic of the way she works. Ragnhild May works with both visual and sonic materiality, using media, genres and formats ranging from 'classical' bronze sculptures, installation, sound performance and video, to neon text works, logo designs and merchandise with equally diverse sources of inspiration: science fiction, teenage culture, feminism, and the history of culture and technology. Regardless of format or content, a unifying thread running throughout her oeuvre is a conceptual, sculptural approach to her subject, be it the cast of a Buffalo shoe or microtonal compositions.

May invents and builds her own instruments. Doing so is not a point in itself, but rather the logical consequence of her conceptual approach to sound as a malleable material. Her focus is on the sculptural qualities of sound as a physical material capable of being moulded and manipulated in the same way as other materials. Sound consists of waves: at a particle level it physically alters or moulds the material it passes through. This is what interests May: sound as a medium – the physical and psychological qualities that make sound into sound. Not only the sound that escapes from the instrument and is influenced by the material and space it travels through, but also sound as it is intercepted by the ear and processed by the brain. Building the instruments herself makes it possible for May to work with a broader spectrum of sound than that of a classical organ, for example. As well as being subject to a range of musical dogma, the organ is also built to create a specific kind of harmony. May custom-makes her instruments to investigate the materiality of sound and generate new acoustic experiences. This includes in-depth work with microtones – intervals or differences in tone smaller than the semi-tones that have traditionally dominated music in a Western context.

As well as an almost infinite microtonal universe, May uses the instruments she makes to create psychoacoustic phenomenon such as the Doppler effect, binaural beats and difference tones, all acoustic phenomenon that are, in a manner of speaking, created in the ear of the listener. This is true of the work *Now I Will Rest on My Laurels, Rest until the Last Trumpet Sounds* (2016), which consists of a self-playing instrument made of slide whistles. The whistles or flutes have no finger holes, the level of tone being regulated by a plunger instead. This mechanical mechanism creates a high-pitched, ominous siren sound of gliding notes (glissando) and constantly modulating difference tones, the latter created when two tones vibrate in unison to create a third, deeper tone that does not actually exist yet is perceived by the ear.

This makes listening a highly bodily experience, where sound is created in interaction with the listener. May's public commission with the telling title *Lutter øre (All Ears, 2021-22)* addresses

the active, focused listener. The installation consists of life-size bronze ears that operate as a low-tech intercom system. The bronze ears are connected in pairs by an underground pipe system and attached to acoustic resonators that amplify specific frequencies in each 'pair' of ears. The acoustic resonators – which refer to the research of Hermann von Helmholtz, who created the foundations for the invention of the telephone – create a series of distinct acoustic experiences and ultimately an enhanced sensitivity to the materiality and special qualities of sound among listeners. Sound is not only the medium for the message, sound is the message, to paraphrase media theorist Marshall McLuhan.

May's frequent choice of the recorder and other wind instruments is also based on the unique connection these instruments have to the human body. They mime essential bodily functions, such as breathing, but also the human ability to speak or sing. Or as the artist puts it: "The flute can be seen as an extension of the vocal chords and vocal cavity – and an extension of the human voice." The latter is something May pursues in her collaboration with artist and singer Kristoffer Raasted. Their joint work *Portable Organs* (2017) – a performance for voice and a custom-made transportable pipe organ – explores the interplay of the material and aesthetic dimensions of the two sources of sound in a poetic, microtonal performance where it can be difficult to determine whether the guttural, droning harmonies come from a bodily organ or an organ pipe – or whether they are the result of psycho-acoustic 'co-composing'.

This close connection between the body and wind instruments is given an extra sculptural dimension in works such as *Music's Apparent Power to Affect Mind and Body* (2014) and *The Flute Player* (2015/2019). Here the instrument is a direct extension of the body, forming what May herself describes as an 'exoskeleton', i.e. a hard outer layer or form of armour. In *The Flute Player*, a performative version of *Composition for Flute and Iron Lung* (2013), May wears the instrument like a Baroque dress. The work consists of a crinoline-shaped metal construction made of three bicycle wheels covered with soprano flutes 'played' by a vacuum cleaner. Since half the flutes are tuned to a slight shift in frequency, they produce a composition of difference tones that accompany and are accompanied by May's own recorder solo. Even when not actually wearing the instrument, May is closely connected to her instruments, partly by building them herself, which creates a strong bodily connection with the instrument and its compositions, and partly due to the sculpturally performative nature of her installations in which May's 'concert persona' moves between her computer, the tubes, and the wind instruments, constantly adding to and subtracting from the composition as well as the sculpture.

The flute player is a classical motif in art history, but in May's work the title also makes specific reference to Jacques de Vaucancon's automaton *The Flute Player*, which when first exhibited in 1738 spellbound its audience with its humanoid appearance. Using a complex air-supply system and a mechanism resembling the human physique, Vaucancon had created an instrument that could breathe – not dissimilar to May's wind instruments in works like *It Ended with Silver Balloons*. This performance by a pneumatic, digital instrument with 64 air pipes using May's own software design directs the current of air polyrhythmically to silver balloons and flutes tuned to different tones, reinforcing the impression of a breathing, pulsating organism.

Recorders and organ pipes are central to May's works as sources of sound and sculptural materials, but also as technological and cultural references. As well as her personal relationship to the recorder – her first and still favourite instrument – its cultural status and history are also key for the artist. Its pedestrian image as a 'gateway' instrument to other, more sophisticated instruments is addressed in works including *Music for Children* (2018), which with its sculptural and analogue simplicity forms a contrast to the artist's complex, digitally controlled wind instruments. The work consists of an over-dimensioned recorder measuring 2.6 metres in length. This not only gives the instrument an exceptionally deep bass tone, but also a monolithically sculptural substance and stature. *Music for Children* also has recorder scores for the lullaby 'Stille Nu' ('Quiet Now'), which together with the title *Music for Children* refers to Carl

Orff and Gunild Keetman's theory of music pedagogy, which since the 1950s has influenced the teaching of music in the West and reinforced the status of the recorder as a children's instrument associated with cheap plastic instruments and a shrill tone – usually played by girls.

May's ironic take on such cultural values is epitomised in her production of merchandise, logos and slogans satirically promoting her own artistic 'brand'. She co-opts commercial lingo and User Experience (UX) aesthetics in overstated, shameless self-promotion zooming in on a culture where selling out has become a criterion for success. Fans can spend a fortune on scarves, towels and socks with feel-good slogans like 'Always Good Art', 'Feel the Art Power' and 'Performance Without Compromise'. A similar strategy can be seen in May's bronze casts of stilettoes and a Buffalo shoe, which function as humorous, feminist comments on the pedestal-sculpture debate .

In her feminist classic *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway describes irony as “humour and serious play”. It is about “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.” This, she continues, is precisely what makes irony a useful rhetorical and political tool. In this sense, May's works can be seen as monstrous, ironic hybrids constantly challenging the boundaries between traditional dichotomies such as pedestal/artwork, performer/audience, analogue/digital, high/pop culture, materiality/immateriality, reality/illusion, myth/fact, body/machine, and not least feminine/masculine. Building on Haraway's concept of the cyborg, in which the author advocates for communities based on affinities between humans and animals or between humans and machines rather than identity politics, May works towards post-human, post-identity connections. When her flute player captivates its audience it is thus not due its human dimensions, but rather because of its visual and auditory cybernetic Otherness.