



Old Instruments New Sounds

Throughout history, composers have been interested in **finding new sounds** to realise their imagined musical ideas. Sometimes this has meant **new instruments**, sometimes creating new sounds **electronically** and sometimes it has mean asking traditional, **old instruments** to do **new things**.

Rebecca Saunders is a British composer based in Berlin who recently won the prestigious Ernst von Siemens Music prize for composing. Much of her music involves traditional instruments making **unexpected** and **unusual sounds**. Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG) has performed a lot of her music over the last few years. In Autumn 2019 BCMG performed *A Visible Trace* by Rebecca. Here is a link to Ensemble Linea performing it:

<https://youtu.be/bUIR81KC-84>

Rebecca Saunders is interested in **finding out** all the sounds an instrument can make and often **learns the instrument** that she is composing for so that she can understand it better. This includes a **fascination** with the sounds we might consider to be **mistakes** or **ugly** such as bow scratches or unwanted clicks. One of the musicians who performed with BCMG was **guitarist Tom McKinney**. Here he is talking about the sounds he makes on the electric guitar in *A Visible Trace*. As you listen, **note down** all the different ways Tom plays his guitar.

<https://youtu.be/UFIbWpmmA64>

Rebecca gives the **dictionary definition** of a 'trace' as the programme note for *A Visible Trace*. Trace is both a **verb** and a **noun**. **To trace** is to follow a mark, a line or path and **a trace**, is a sign, mark or other indication of something having existed. As well as using unusual sounds, in *A Visible Trace*, Rebecca explores sounds on the verge of silence as if only a trace of the sound has been left behind.



Your Turn!

Explore your instrument and find as many unusual sounds as possible. What interesting ways can you find to make sounds/notes/noises? Everything is allowed but not melodies or rhythms. Be inventive! Draw a simple symbol for each idea on some paper. Here are some ideas to try:

Brass: mouthpiece bop, growl/flutter tongue (roll your rrrrs while playing as normal), tapping bell, buzzing into mouthpiece, different mutes. Additional: trombone - glissandi, French horns - handstopping and key rattling, trumpet - blowing over end of valves while moving them.

Flute: key slaps, wah-wah using the headjoint and hand over end, then you can flutter tongue (roll your rrrrs) or pitch bend using the whole flute or just the headjoint.

Recorder: using nails to tap, or whole hand on the bottom. Covering and uncovering the labium (top part) with your hand. Unusual or false fingerings. Sucking instead of blowing.

Oboe: pitch bending on the instrument or reed alone, cheat multi-phonics, blowing directly down the bore hole, key rattling.

Strings: pizzicato, mute, tapping the wood, playing with the wood of the bow, bowing behind the bridge, on the bridge, the sides of the instrument and the tailpiece (cello/double bass), glissandi, ricochet - bouncing the bow on the strings, wide vibrato, pressing too hard on the strings with the bow.

Have a **play** with the sounds you have discovered:

- Make **sequences** of your sounds - note down ones you like
- Add **silence** into your sequences - what is the effect of adding silences?
- Can you **transform** one sound into another sound or a normal sound into an unusual one?

Another feature of Rebecca Saunder's music is that she often uses just a **few pitches/notes**. Choose just **3 notes** to use for the next bit:

- How many ways can you find to play one note?
- How quiet can you play a note?
- How quiet can you play a high note or a low note?
- Can you make a note emerge out of total silence, disappear into silence or both?

Find a line or shape to trace on a map, a photo, a picture. Using your sounds and notes decide on a sequence of them to trace your line or shape. Add your symbols to the line or shape to make a score. Perform and record your piece.

Please send any music you create to learning@bcmg.org.uk