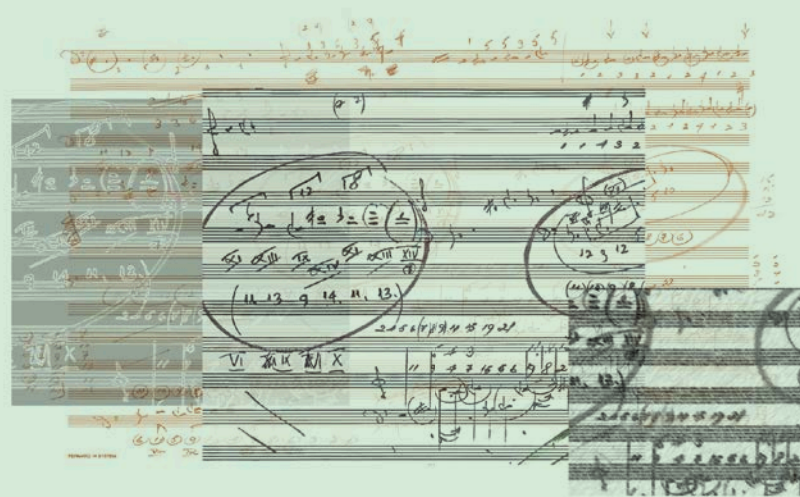


# Traces of Oblivion



TRACK LIST

1. *circular patterns*
2. *revisited and inspirited*
3. *fragments of an imagined music*
4. *in the end perhaps even lost*
5. *beneath a porous veneer*
6. *discrete articulations*
7. *vigilantly awake*
8. *adrift and deserted*
9. *memories of the forgotten*
10. *a disappearance through erosion*

Stefan Östersjö plays on an 11-stringed alto guitar built by Yoshimitsu Hoshino 1984  
Jakob Riis plays laptop, real-time processing in Max/MSP patches developed since 2002

Recorded at Inter Arts Center, Studio B, on 5–7 October 2018

Mixed and edited by Jakob Riis at Inter Arts Center

Produced by Ole Lützow-Holm and Stefan Östersjö with support from Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research Council). The music is part of the artistic research project *At the conceptual limits of composition. A shrinking emptiness – meaning, chaos and entropy* headed by Anders Hultqvist at the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg, and funded by Vetenskapsrådet.

Mastered by Per Sjösten, Sound Processing Studio (per@sound.se)

Lützow-Holm and Östersjö shares the authorship of the musical work. The authorship for the production of this album is equally shared between Lützow-Holm, Östersjö and Riis.

*Traces of Oblivion* for 11-stringed alto guitar materializes as a kaleidoscopic, incomplete outcome of extensive dialogues with the guitarist and researcher Stefan Östersjö. Through practical as well as conceptual elaborations we explored endless procedures inspired by the instrument's characteristics with regard to timbre and architectural design. Gradually, two particular aspects came to play a significant role: On the one hand a construction feature of the alto guitar with five scale-tuned strings in the bass followed by six chord strings (simultaneously proposing, as it were, historical resonance *and* unbiased experimentation) and, on the other, a scordatura whose micro-tonal deviations constitute the acoustic habitat of the music. The core organizing principle is made up of carefully chiselled gestures, some of which are recorded sound files layered in loops and activated in the course of the performance as an archive – memory and oscillation at the same time. Moving through transient, winding passages and circular patterns, it is as if *Traces of Oblivion* evoked images related to a sense of loss.

Ole Lützow-Holm

**The following essay** consists of fragments of a dialogue between Ole Lützow-Holm and Stefan Östersjö who collaborated on the making of the piece. The text forms the core material of a forthcoming audio paper titled *Traces of Oblivion – A Disappearance through Erosion* to be published in the final publication of the research project.

**Ole:** In his essay *The Death of the Author* from 1967, Roland Barthes, reflecting on the act of reading, proposes a strategy where one's attentive empathy connects with the shared discourse that the literary work generates over time as a result of a continuous sedimentation of contradictory meaning and understanding – rather than with the biographical imprint of the author. Barthes rejects the idea of a finite message of the work and what he calls the *tyranny of literary critique*.

A couple of years earlier, Susan Sontag draws a similar conclusion in her essay *Against interpretation*. There, distancing herself from what might be labelled the sickness of speculative pursuit of content and biased over-interpretation

tion by critics, Sontag is encouraging us to let the work *work* and to sharpen our recognition of how it appears and *does whatever it does*. She opposes hermeneutic strategies and finishes with the notorious appeal: *In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art*.

In Julia Kristeva's pioneering text, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, it is primarily the exposition of the concepts *genotext* and *phenotext* that interests me. Furthermore, her ideas about *rupture* and *Mimesis* are indeed persuasive with regard to a different musical awareness, as well as how Kristeva defines *feminine* as every single action that undermines the authoritarian *masculine* discourse – in other words: that which excites freedom. Finally, the temporalities attributed to her theory of the *semiotics* – the being before language – are so close to music.

Departing from these rudimentary meditations and inspired by another essay by Barthes, *From Work to Text*, I have considered various possibilities of thinking about musical composition in terms of a *rhizomatic archive*. By that I mean a place, rather than a narrative – a process, rather than an arte-

fact. Barthes makes a distinction between *work* and *text*, suggesting that the work refers to the physical object – the book, the canvas, the score – and the text to the accumulated layers of significance, interpretations and discourses contained within the work.

I set out to conceive of a non-linear music, the accomplishment of which was founded on the image of exploring a terrain, choosing at any given moment one's path through a topology of constituent, very distinct elements that occupy a strong identity. Another important property was the notion of *ambiguity* – of unfinishedness, uncertainty and doubt – and of being *in between*. I wanted to investigate the potential of a musical *text* that never winds up.

**Stefan:** But perhaps *Traces of Oblivion* is less a representation of the death of interpretation, and rather a journey into the nature of interpretation in musical practice. The seemingly endless amounts of drafts, etudes and sketches that constitute the majority of the scored materials connect to the origins of musical notation in mnemonic signs, rep-

resenting only a framework within which the individual components were part performed from memory, part improvised. At the same time, the scored elements providing detailed and precisely shaped materials are always unfinished, with no beginning and no end. A different way of describing the same materials is to see them as traces of listening, as fragments of an imagined music. Different modes of listening, could be another way of describing the processes in musical creativity that sometimes are referred to as interpretation and sometimes as composition.

**Ole:** One of my major concerns applies to what I profoundly view as a *fundamental instability* of the musical artefact: its fragile nature as an ephemeral, contingent arrangement where the frailty seems to suggest an *epidemic methodology*. The text remains a contagious weave beneath a porous veneer.

I can only comply with your idea (as I choose to read you) about the mnemonic potential of the notations of *Traces of Oblivion*. How they were literally left behind – as if

adrift and deserted – is perhaps exactly that, which stimulates an interpretational approach of playing from memory *and* improvising – thereby fluctuating, as it were, between orality and literacy. It's like story telling in a way: remembering and inventing at the same time.

**Stefan:** Indeed, I think in a sense, *Traces of Oblivion* actually emerges out of the (continuous) failures to give the composition a final shape. This, to me, seems to be part of the beauty of the piece. What instead emerges is a composition which very specifically draws its identity from its performative nature, and essentially, through collaboration. Herein the project addresses questions raised by Goehr in her critique of the (mis)conception of the musical work as a fixed entity, defined by the score. I tend to think of the act of musical collaboration as a negotiation of voice. The voice of the composer and of the performer, manifest through the writing of scores and through performances and recordings.

**Ole:** You mentioned the mnemonic features of the script. One would I guess, at a first

glance, regard them as a support structure for memorizing. And they do serve that purpose, indeed. But maybe there is a secondary function embedded in the compilation of rigorously notated score fragments, paired with sketches and illegible scribbles, that is about *forgetting*. And that this is where the archive acquires its meaning and becomes a focal component as the memory of the imagined music. Then, the playing becomes the dying – a disappearance through erosion.

**Stefan:** The clearest realization of *Traces of Oblivion* as an archive was carried out in collaboration with Jakob Riis. He devised a Max patch which plays back materials from the compilation of audio recordings randomly, but with an algorithm which also brings into the exhibition space portions of the tape part we created from the recordings made with hand held fans. This tape part helps to structure the sonic representation of the piece, which consists of the many improvisations using the tuning, which we generated in the years leading up to the premiere of the piece in 2011, as well

as recordings of the five materials presented above.

The possibility of entering this archive as a performer, making choices in the moment as to how a certain material can be brought into play, developed and eventually brought to a (temporary or conditional) sense of closure is equally fascinating. Both of these possibilities are in my understanding reflections of the identity of the piece as drawn from the multiple materials stored in the archive.

**Ole:** Which, in turn, reminds me of the fact that our inceptive point of departure was actually a chamber work of mine that you had once performed: *Blind Evidence* for flute, oboe d'amore, viola, percussion and a similarly retuned *six-string* guitar. And to get me going, you composed a series of elaborate studies in two-part counterpoint based on that scordatura. It was long before I responded – and only much later that you suggested to expand the range of colours with the 11-stringed alto guitar. But your inspirational input at that point left its decisive mark.

As you rightly bring up, we have not yet explored strategies how to involve a live interaction of yours with the archive. It should not be a far-fetched alternative. Nor would it be unfamiliar, bearing in mind the dialogical methodologies that are in play on so many levels. It might also draw attention to a more explicit exchange of the performer's endeavour with memories of the forgotten.

Ideally, *Traces of Oblivion* owes its potential gravity and consistency to an inexhaustible aggregate of possible approaches that are all true in the sense that they embody points of reference and trajectories whose predominant purpose is to maintain a discourse.

**Stefan:** In later years I have also been toying with the idea of introducing more instruments in *Traces of Oblivion*, which could have created a larger piece of the same kind as *Blind Evidence* might have become in the performance we wanted to realize with Ensemble Recherche. I imagine this could be a way to accentuate the potential for multiple manifestations emanating from inside the archive.

**Ole:** Let me briefly come back to a significant detail that you mentioned in your previous comment – namely the handheld fans – which correlates with the discussion about there being an acoustic equivalent to a still shot or not. That, too, was a magical moment, when you first touched the strings with the spinning propeller and caused the scordatura to reverberate like an aura. In my ears, it was as close as one could get to an image of a sonic still shot.

**Stefan:** To me the very essence of *Traces of Oblivion* lies in the *incompleteness* of its elements. Since each of the five “essential materials” are notated without beginning or ending, it is always necessary to take several steps away from the letter of the notation in performance. The part which is notated might then occur after several minutes of playing, or sometimes, perhaps not at all. And still it is possible to identify the material at hand. In order to perform the piece, you must forget the writing, and enter into the flow of events as they unfold from the archive.

**Ole:** If I were to account for aspects that played an important role while working on the premises on which to build the music, the instrument itself – a sounding body with technical, acoustic and historical attributes – was at the core of my interest. Thus, the scordatura, with its characteristic quarter-tone deviations, constitutes a particular modification of the alto guitar that produces a distinct sonority when brought to vibrate. The five materials, on the other hand, may be perceived as five discrete articulations voicing, as it were, the architecture and micro-tonal alteration of the instrument. Together, they signify specific connotations, and if there is any hidden meaning in *Traces of Oblivion*, it has idiomatic rather than conceptual implications.

**Stefan:** A central component in any performance of the piece becomes a negotiation of an ethics of resonance and resistance. Either a resonance with the affordances of the instrument with the given material, or the opposite attitude of a more critical engagement, drawing new manifestations of

the scored material through the application of further constraints. In the forthcoming recording sessions, I would wish to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of this relation between resonance and critique in a performance of the piece, but also, to engage the entire archive in this exploration, an activation which also involves the encounter between voices of both composer and performer on the threshold between the now of the recording situation and archived material dating all the way back to 2004!

OLE LÜTZOW-HOLM studied composition with Klaus Huber and Brian Ferneyhough. Springing from a contemporary, central European mode of expression, he has created works for a variety of ensembles and contexts and was early to receive international recognition for his music. Lützw-Holm is a professor of composition at the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg. In 2012 he completed the research project *Towards an Expanded Field of Art Music*. There, the topic was to experimentally introduce ideas and hands-on procedures advocating alternative means of approaching classical as well as contemporary music. The research methods were devised to facilitate practice-based musical dialogues, inviting a wide scope of interdisciplinary discourses to participate in the quest for a potentially broader range of musical understanding. In recent years he has explored possibilities of short-term, transient musical practices, involving improvisation and open form, that operate with concepts of ambiguity and incompleteness, often in collaboration with other artists.



STEFAN ÖSTERSJÖ is a leading classical guitarist specialized in the performance of contemporary music. Since his debut CD (Swedish Grammy in 1997) he has released more than 20 CDs and toured Europe, the US and Asia. He has been part of numerous collaborations with composers, but also in the creation of works involving choreography, film, video, performance art and music theatre. Since 2006 Östersjö has been developing inter-cultural artistic practices with the Vietnamese/Swedish group The Six Tones as a platform. He has cooperated with conductors such as Lothar Zagrosek, Peter Eötvös, Pierre André Valade and Andrew Manze.

Östersjö received his doctorate in 2008 and became a research fellow at the Orpheus Institute in 2009. He is chaired professor of musical performance at Piteå Academy of Music as well as associate professor and head of doctoral studies in artistic research at the Malmö Academy of music. Since 2009 he has engaged in several, international research projects and is currently starting a new project funded by Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg titled *Musical Transformations*, which adopts a de-colonized approach to the study of musical change in intercultural society.



JAKOB RIIS is an electro-acoustic musician and composer with a strong focus on improvisation and electronic real-time processing of instrumentalists as well as of sound in general. With a background as a trombone player and composer in modern and free jazz, he has since the 2000s moved towards a more experimental musical scenario developing personal, digital computer-based, as well as analogue tools for his work on integrating electronic and acoustic musical idioms. Works for solo performances, small groups, ensembles and acousmatic loudspeaker

orchestras in a gray zone between experimental sound art, free jazz and contemporary music. Collaborations with musicians and ensembles includes Lotte Anker, Bill Horist, Mats Gustafsson, Copenhagen Art Ensemble, Konvoj Ensemble and The GhettoBlaster Ensemble; contributions to more than fifty releases on record companies in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, France, England, Vietnam and the United States; concerts in Europe, Vietnam, Canada, Brazil and the US; and residencies at EMS (Stockholm), CMRC/Ksyme (Athens) and IAC (Malmö).