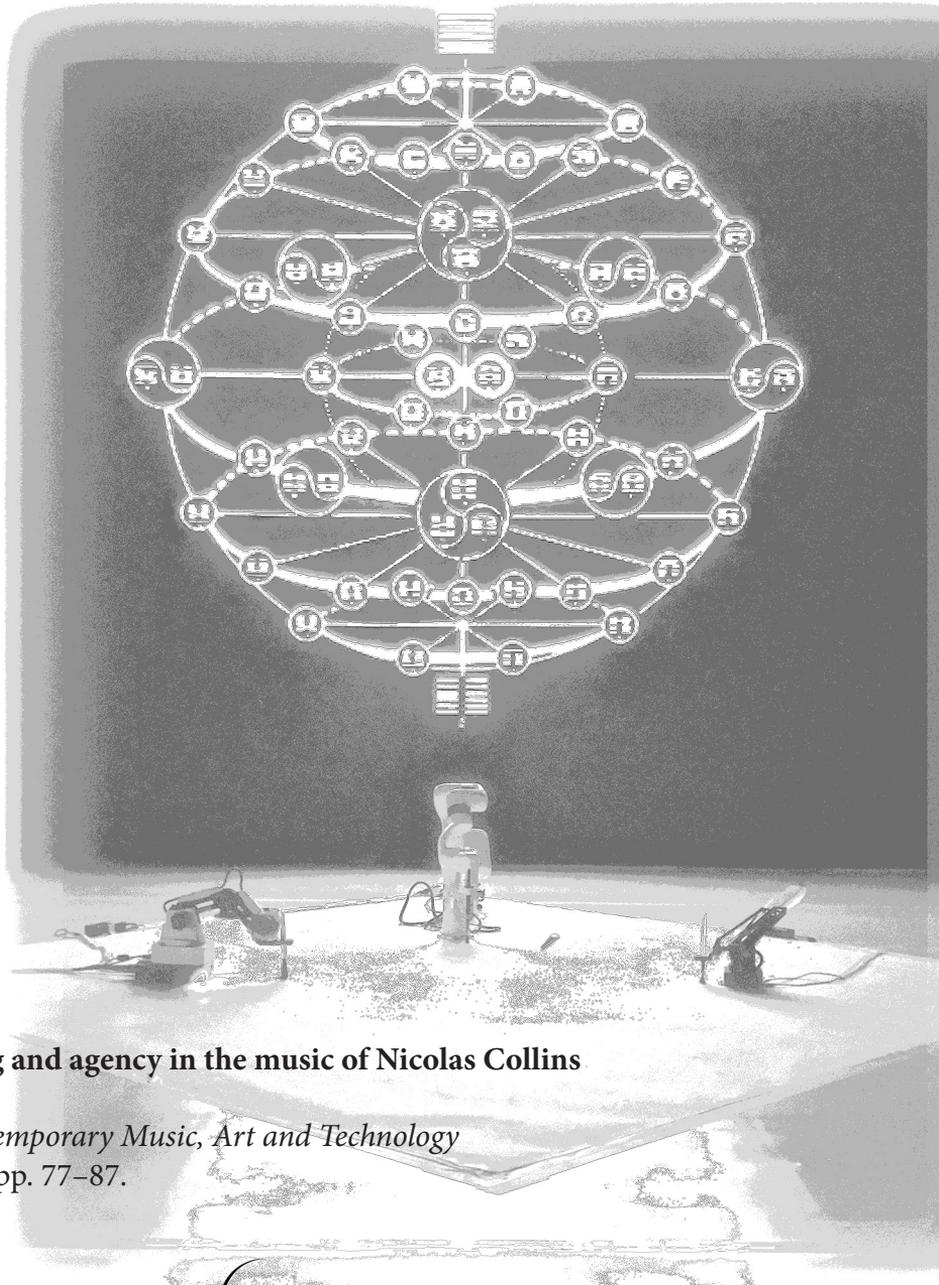


I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



The Human *Still Lives?*

Technology, borrowing and agency in the music of Nicolas Collins

Mark Dyer

INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

No. 4, Vol. I, July 2020, pp. 77–87.

Mark Dyer*

Royal Northern College of Music
Manchester, United Kingdom

THE HUMAN *STILL LIVES*? TECHNOLOGY, BORROWING AND AGENCY IN THE MUSIC OF NICOLAS COLLINS

Abstract: This paper considers aspects of late 20th century experimental music in a post-digital era, where DIY approaches of hacking now outdated digital technology have enabled new forms of artistic expression – namely, glitch and aesthetics of failure. More specifically, it will examine American composer Nicolas Collins’ approach to hacking portable CD players as a means to imitate sound production methods of turntable artists from the 1980s, in such works as *Still Lives* (1992). The paper will then explore Collins’ attempt to orchestrate this work for acoustic instruments using open musical notation in *Still (After) Lives* (1997). This discussion is viewed through the lens of musical borrowing, tracing Collins’ material – a canzone by Giuseppe Guami – through its varying mediums and guises, highlighting the limitations of technology and notation as a means to rearticulate a musical fragment and the fruitful artistic avenues this opens. Through the examination of a musical material, the paper goes on to scrutinize the entanglement between human, material and machine agents. I propose that understandings of such practices might be extended from the post-digital to the post-human: a collaborative network of agentic ‘things’.

Keywords: Nicolas Collins, post-digital, musical borrowing, new materialism, posthumanism, transhumanism, ruin

The following article is a revised version of a paper written at the Darmstadt New Music Summer School, July 2018. It was commissioned through the ‘Technology in Music Book Sprint’¹, led by Dr Camille Baker, as part of the Defragmentation project on curating contemporary music. I entered this workshop with the aim of discussing the role of technology in a series of pieces by American experimental composer

*Author's contact information: Mark.Dyer@student.rncm.ac.uk

1 A summary of this residency, and the original manuscript, has been self-published by C. Baker < <https://books.apple.com/us/book/id1461493311> >.

Nicolas Collins. As the project developed, with discussions between interdisciplinary practitioners and thinkers, we as a group found overlapping interests in areas of New Materialism, Posthumanism and Transhumanism in relation to technology. Our overarching question became: “Where lies human agency?”. I therefore wanted to further probe Collins’ music with this query in mind. Furthermore, considering the aspects of musical borrowing in these pieces, this paper asks what light New Materialist theory might shed on the borrowed ‘material’: What is its *thingness*? What role does it play in the creative process? What are the limits and hierarchies of agency within material entanglements of artists and things, when engaged in borrowing? This article represents a provisional and experimental effort to reflect upon such questions.

Still Lives

In the early 1990s, Nicolas Collins began his DIY practice of hacking portable CD players in an attempt to imitate the virtuosic turntable techniques of ‘80s DJs (Collins 2009, 1). In *Still Lives*² (1993) such a device “suspends, re-articulates and draws out short ‘skipping loops’” (Gottschalk 2016, 260) of a recorded source material, namely, the first nine measures of 16th/17th century composer and organist Giuseppe Guami’s *Canzon La Accorta a Quatro*. Unlike similar artists’ endeavours at the time, Collins tampers with the player mechanism itself rather than the CD and, consequently, we hear the resultant errors (Stuart 2003, 49). At the same time, a “single trumpet anticipates and suspends pitch material” (Collins 2009, 5) from the Guami source. The piece culminates with an extract from Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiographical memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951), read by Collins.

Much has been written about the exploration by Collins and other artists of skipping CDs through the post-digital lens where glitch is not only a symptom of malfunction, but a mode of expression. Kim Cascone (2000, 12–13) understands such practice as “working beneath the... veil of the digital medium” and a shift in focus towards the detrital sounds. Cascone (2000, 12) argues that in such instances, the medium is no longer the message but rather the “tools themselves have become the message”. The equipment we use to create and listen to music – whether digital or analogue, software or hardware – has become inseparably ingrained into the music itself. Ian Andrews (2002, 5) highlights the complexities of Cascone’s argument and proposes that such practice might be understood paradoxically as both a rejection and perpetuation of the digital media hype, and as a technological movement towards transparency whilst entrenching a more powerful illusion of control. Whilst I sympathise with Andrew’s survey of contradictions inherent to the post-digital, I am less convinced that, in the instance of *Still Lives*, the “glitch becomes the whole aesthetic at the expense of other content” (Andrews 2002, 5). Here, Collins’

² Released on *Sounds without Pictures*, Periplum, P0060, 1999, compact disc. A recording can be found on the composer’s website <<http://www.nicolascollins.com/soundwithoutpicturetracks.htm>>

borrowing of an existing music, and more specifically of a recording of a particular musical interpretation, adds another dimension to Andrew's argument.

This feature has implications on my reception as a listener. We might equate the Guami recording (a preservation or trace of a performance) to a photograph of an object. In *Still Lives*, we as listeners are invited to magnify and incessantly scrutinise the 'errors' and detritus – the digital failures – as if slowly and methodically perusing a small section of this photo through a cracked glass frame. This neither fully obscures nor detracts from our viewing of the photo, but allows us to focus more on the fractured qualities of the image itself and to look at the frame all the more – its material limitations, its fragility, its role in, and transformation of, our viewing. To address Andrew's notion of content, we'd have to ask whether the glitches obstruct the 'real' music, or whether the intact Guami extracts obscure the scratches. Or, whether a compromise might be achieved: placing significance not in abstract and aestheticized scratches, but in etchings made upon a *thing*.

Still (After) Lives

In *Still (After) Lives*³ (1997) Collins orchestrates the aforementioned piece “with a chamber ensemble imitating all the CD artifacts – from looping to glitching – purely acoustically” (Collins 2009, 5). Set for an open configuration of string and wind instruments as well as vibraphone and narrator, players are presented with the pitch content from the first nine measures of the Guami *Canzone*. The score⁴ functions “like a jazz lead sheet” (Duguid 1995) where the conditions with which the performers are to interpret these in terms of rhythm and timbre are underdetermined in the notation itself. Whilst Collins' written instructions for instrumental techniques, pitch detuning and rhythmic divergence might not achieve the direct sonic imitation of the digital failure as explored in *Broken Light* (1992), we're reminded that players cannot “be' a skipping CD player” (Duguid 1995). Instead, Collins' instructions hint towards a mode of performance that invites a human and new articulation of the same process that occurs in the earlier instalment. The Nabokov text is once again presented at the end of *Still (After) Lives*.

In his re-purposing through notation for acoustic instruments, Collins pursues an increase in risk and the potential for glitch in the human performance. As Tim Rutherford-Johnson suggests, the aesthetic of glitch is not confined to electroacoustic music, but also manifests in the realm of the acoustic, in earlier practices such as Helmut Lachenmann's *musique concrète instrumentale* and the “negative space” that exists in the periphery of “good' sound production” (Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 203–204). Whilst Collins clearly inhabits a very different sonic and aesthetic world to Lachenmann, there is a comparable attempt here to achieve a form of failure in how

³ Released on *Sounds without Pictures*, Periplum Records CD (1999). A recording can be found on the composer's website <<http://www.nicolascollins.com/soundwithoutpicturetracks.htm>>

⁴ The score can be found on the composer's website <<http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/stillafterlivesscore.pdf>>

the ensemble interacts and combines. Such attempts also characterize the practice of Austrian composer Bernhard Lang, whose extreme employment of repetition in the *Differenz/Wiederholung* series (1998–2013) coincidentally also references DJ culture. Collins’ performance instructions encourage improvised variations in rhythm, rests and beating dissonances, leading to a desynchronised and dense hocketing texture. Collins admits a desire to “pull [him]self back” (Duguid 1995) and explore the “break point” (Collins 2011, 4) of an instrument. We might understand this latter point in terms of Lachenmann’s ‘bad’ sounds, or how a Baroque instrumental texture is ‘wrongly’ re-assembled. Collins goes further to say that “hardware does a better job of giving voice to the irrational, chaotic and unstable” (Collins 2011, 6). Of course, this is the case with the tinkered CD player, but we might also understand Collins’ reference in terms of acoustic instruments and human performers. We might therefore recognise this second instalment as a continued pursuit of this endeavour.

Moreover, I am interested in relating *Still (After) Lives* to Cascone’s conception of the post-digital, not only in terms of glitch as a mode of expression, but also with regards to the limitations of a piece of technology. I would argue that we should not understand Collins’ transcription of the digital sonic expression into musical notation as a championing of the latter in favour of the limited and failing former. Rather, if we view notation (or writing more generally) as a technology in itself, as proposed by varying anthropologists and discussed by Tim Ingold (2007, 127–142), we might understand *Still (After) Lives* as a fruitful exploitation of the failures and limitations inherent to notation as a medium. Or, to put it another way, a delighting in the dysfunctionality within the “functionality of code” (Collins 2011, 4).

Furthermore, Collins expands upon the definitions and properties of hardware and software and their respective correlations to acoustic instruments and a musical score. He proposes that:

acoustic instruments are three-dimensional objects, radiating sound in every direction, filling the volume of architectural space... Electronic circuits are much flatter, essentially two-dimensional. Software is inherently linear, every programme a one-dimensional string of code (Collins 2011, 3).

Although Collins is clearly referring to each medium’s physical dimension, he goes on to relate this to Alvin Lucier’s association between these dimensions and the resulting “sound’s behaviour in acoustic space” (Collins 2011, 3). Whilst this point may be contested by those working in the domain of software-based music, I am less interested in whether this is strictly the case, and more that this was a motivating perspective for this project. Following such logic, we might therefore trace Collins’ progression in the *Still Lives* series from the two-dimensional circuitry of the CD player, to a very different two-dimensional system in the form of music notation (the encoding of binary axes via harmony and counterpoint), to the three-dimensional realisation of this circuitry using acoustic instruments. Mindful of my own practice

as a composer, of correlating degenerated borrowed material to architectural ruins, I am compelled to understand this progression through sonic dimensional spaces to social-geographer Tim Edensor's description of sensual experience in urban environments. Edensor distinguishes between the smooth and sterile state of the modern city (either through an overloading or numbing of sensual experience) on the one hand, and the stimulating, multi-textural and delightfully chaotic experience of ruinous spaces on the other (Edensor 2007, 218). Whilst such a bifurcation does not account for more ambiguous liminal environments that exist between these two extremes, I find this metaphor useful. The *Still Lives* project sees Collins attempting to move away from the smooth realm of the functioning digital compact disc and instead inhabit a sonic space that is irrational and unstable, an entanglement of in-between territories: a musical ruin.

I now return to the photograph analogy. I wonder if in the case of *Still (After) Lives* and the production of a score, Collins has drawn a crude outline based on the fragmented perspective gained from the earlier instalment. The performers, like Cageian colourists (Cage 1973, 35), are then asked to fill in these blueprints and illuminate the captured object using broadly prescribed but underdetermined tools: swatches of each shade upon the palette. We as listeners then bear witness to this haphazard process of pigmentation and peruse the wonderfully fractured and fractal canvas that is unveiled.

Musical Borrowing

But what is the subject of this illustration? What are its composite layers? Certainly, as Andrews suggests, the glitch aesthetic forms part of its content, but Collins' engagement in musical borrowing adds a problematic factor. The Guami source is an equally important component of the *Still Lives* series. So, the 'photo' also depicts referenced musical material. But then we ask, what is the nature of this material, its thingness? Here, I find composer Richard Beaudoin's discussion of iterative musical borrowing useful. In discussing his own *Études d'un prelude* in which he manipulates a specific recording of Chopin (coincidentally, also through translations between digital and notational media) by pianist Martha Argerich, Beaudoin (2010, 102) describes the borrowing of a musical recording as "hearing triple". Beaudoin proposes that a performance of his *Études* reiterates the accumulated creative acts, interpretations and commentaries – or, 'hearings' – of the original composer, the recorded performer and Beaudoin's own. In the case of *Still Lives*, a particular performance of the Guami *Canzone* is borrowed, the traces of which are pinned down in reproducible permanence through the use of technology. We might therefore understand Collins' manipulation of this distinct material in *Still Lives* as similarly hearing triple, and his repurposing in *Still (After) Lives* as hearing quadruple i.e. the notated Guami, the original performance and recording of this, Collins' first interpretation in *Still Lives*, and his ensuing reading of this in *Still (After)*

Lives. Alternatively, we might understand the latter instalment as an alternative third hearing, running in parallel to, rather than in succession from, the former. What we are dealing with then is a composite material, whose individual elements consist of the iterative and divergent interpretations of traces of performances that once occurred. The anonymous recording and its quirks are passed like delicate artefacts between the various renditions and media, demonstrating the “fluid nature of the digital environment” (Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 96): a function composition.

What is the reach of such fluidity and the boundaries of the environment it inhabits? What are the limitations of any piece of technology, be it a CD or scored notation, in rearticulating traces of a musical fragment? José A. Bowen (1993, 141) understands such reconstitutions as “merely spatial representations” and “not the temporal musical work”. Such a reading would prioritise the Guami work – the source ‘material’ – over its translations. I would argue that the work aspect of the *Still Lives* series resides precisely within the mode of translation as material in itself and shifts the emphasis to the relations between material configurations. Whilst Collins admits a desire to de-base discussions around representation in the art world (Conrads 1997), he demonstrates an awareness of (and perhaps a concern with) the anxieties around borrowing and reproduction in the libretto to *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night* (1990) for chamber ensemble, electronics and voice. Collins asks (using texts by art historian Susan Tallman and author Peter Dickinson), in the instance of photo-reproduction where there is “no difference in substance” to the original, “How do you even know what is true and what is not? How do you distinguish between real memory and invention masquerading as memory?” (Collins 1990, 5). Perhaps now the following Nabokov extract included in both *Still Live* and *Still (After) Lives* begins to assume greater poignancy:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumble bee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die (Nabokov 1999, 56).

Whilst Nabokov invokes a Proustian involuntary memory by appealing “to the reader’s [or, in this instance, the listener’s] memory through... evoking a multisensory tableau” (Rodgers 2018, 40–41), Collins (2011, 6) specifies that an engagement with “outmoded’ hardware is not always a question of nostalgia” but a renewed interest in its fallible qualities. Such practices needn’t seek to return to the irrecoverable days of the device but might creatively engage with the sonic imperfections that led to its decline. We might therefore agree with Phyllis A. Roth’s suggestion (2014, 53) that, in the instance of the above extract, “Art... redeems from time what would

otherwise be lost. Everything is as it *should* be". Collins' employment of the Nabokov text in both instalments of the *Still Lives* series suggests a wry smile in the face of the failing hardware and ambiguities of music notation, as well as the new 'mis-hearings' of the original Guami recording they allow. In this sense, as with Roth's (2014, 53) description of Nabokov, Collins' "complicity in the temporal – indeed... his complicity with death – is, on one level, absolved". Perhaps we not only have to accept that the employment of *any* technology to rearticulate the trace of a musical fragment is inevitably insufficient and perhaps work-destroying, but, exactly because of this, it is the only means of doing so.

Where is the 'Human'?

However, should we grant absolution solely upon Collins? Much of my discussion so far has focused upon materials – both in a musical sense, and objects such as the CD player. Do such matter also play a role here? Where is the 'human' and how does this correlate to machine (non-human), human (both composer and interpretative performer), posthuman and transhuman notions of agency? I will now couch the *Still Lives* project within the discussion of New Materialism in order to further probe the identity of the 'material' and the role of 'technology'.

In the first instance, we might look at Collins' choice of the Guami 'material' through the varying perspectives on what role matter itself can play. Whilst I sympathise with Andreas Malm's (2018, 83) scepticism towards a scenario where "the humans in question had no agency *qualitatively different* from... all the other materials present", I am also attracted to Jane Bennett's conception of vibrant matter. Bennett (2010, viii) proposes that materials "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own". This opening up of hazy definitions may perhaps resonate more with those who work with seemingly inanimate matter in their practice where the material has its own disposition, and leads as much as it is moulded. Whereas one might say that Collins chose the Guami recording to work with, we might also acknowledge that Collins, similarly to Beaudoin (2010, 103), was "accosted by the sounds", and that the original recording – its particular traits and its behaviour within the hacked player, i.e. its thingness – suggested itself for borrowing. Suddenly, the capacity for influence beyond that of the human's is extended.

In the second instance, we turn to the hacked CD player as an agentic object. Collins (2011, 5) describes such hardware as being "constrained in its 'thingness'", and the process of hacking, tinkering and meddling as a means to explore the "implications present in a piece of technology" (Conrads 1997). So, it is not merely a case of Collins utilising the sounds of glitch, but unmuting the CD player's capacity to articulate its *own* idiosyncrasies through sound. Collins (2009, 2) further supports this proposition by suggesting that the machine explores "its own automatic variations of the CD" – its own re-articulation of a musical utterance –

and “chose that time to get stuck” (Walters 1995). The CD player, then, becomes an object capable of its own mode of expression and plays an active role in our ‘hearing triple’ of the borrowed Guami.

Before we applaud our singing CD player, let us now reintroduce our human actants to the scenario and consider *Still (After) Lives* through such a lens. In *Still Lives* Collins begins a dialogue with the non-human and is receptive to what it has to say. He then intervenes and translates this information into notation, itself a form of technology: another object with its own system of code, its own suggestions, and its own disposition. Following Micheal Sean Bolton (2014, 19), we might understand Collins, through such actions, as a “decentered posthuman subject: a subject created and re-created through interactions and interfaces with and within systems of information flow”; Collins occupies multiple nodes in his own network, each with their own role and varying hierarchy. Later, sentient beings in the form of instrumental performers are asked to interpret the notation of *Still (After) Lives* and engage in this flow of information. Such nodal hierarchy surely complicates any notion of performance practice that might be established or called upon within this series. For instance, it would be interesting to know what voice (if any) Collins might have in a rehearsal process, in which case another node of influence and shift in hierarchy would be established. Finally, the human subject can reclaim its own agency, its own means of expression, and have the final say in our ‘hearing quadruple’. However, this triumph is complicated not only by Bennett’s (2010, 4) suggestion that “we are also nonhuman”, but also by N. Katherine Hayles’ (2005, 175) conclusion, following Guattari, that “the human has been mechanical all along”. Our performer, then, is but another piece of technology, an example of Cary Wolfe’s “prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality” (2007, xxv). Its (rather than *their*) capacity to freely express its own artistic will is but a back and forth signalling of information in a chain of vibrant things.

However, I am reluctant to completely let go of our artistic ‘human’ agent. I cannot fully relinquish my listening of the *Still Lives* series to a circuitry of information processing. I still find the photographed object, in all its fragmented guises, beautiful to behold. Rather, I would like to reassess Collins’ role as the composer. For, following Andreas Malm (2018, 93), we might reconsider that “the agent is the person who instigates the sequence” and that Collins’ decision to hack the CD player and insert the Guami recording in the first place gives him agentic seniority. That is not to say that any performance of *Still (After) Lives* will fit neatly with what Collins had initially intended when he picked up the soldering iron. Rather, we might remember that Collins “is a material being situated in a fully material world” (Malm 2018, 95), and with the *Still Lives* project, “unleashes a chain of events that are [his] doing, although not one with [his] initial goal” (Malm 2018, 94). Indeed, if we can broaden our scope of this chain of events, we might even recognise the agency of Giuseppe Guami and the initial dictation of the *canzone*, with which he “has done something [he] had never dreamed of” (Malm 2018, 95).

The *Still Lives* series provides a case study through which to broaden the definitions of what we consider technology and human, and perhaps for these categories to overlap and blur. For myself as a composer, listening to and thinking about this music has allowed me to reflect upon my own and other practices of musical borrowing. I admit that the need to designate agentic seniority is a personal endeavour that perhaps demonstrates a bias towards the composer, though I would prefer to reword this as a sincere interest in the process undertaken by an individual in conjunction with an appreciation of the resulting product. I see Collins' process and the *Still Lives* series as an invitation to practitioners engaged in borrowing to further scrutinise the 'material' that is appropriated, and to be receptive to the ways that it works upon us in return.

List of References

- Andrews**, Ian. 2002. "Post-digital Aesthetics and the return to Modernism." MAP-UTS lecture, 2002. Accessed 9th July 2018. <http://ian-andrews.org/texts/postdig.pdf>.
- Beaudoin**, Richard. 2010. "You're There and You're Not There: Musical Borrowing and Cavell's 'Way'." *Journal of Music Theory* 54, no. 1 (Spring): 91–105.
- Bennett**, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bolton**, Michael S. 2014. "Digital Parasites: Reassessing Notions of Autonomy and Agency in Posthuman Subjectivity." *Theoria & Praxis* 1, no. 2: 14–26.
- Bowen**, José A. 1993. "The History of Remembered Innovation: Tradition and Its Role in the Relationship between Musical Works and Their Performances." *The Journal of Musicology* 11, no. 2 (Spring): 139–173.
- Cage**, John. 1973. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Calder and Boyars.
- Cascone**, Kim. 2000. "The Aesthetics of Failure: "Post-Digital" Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music." *Computer Music Journal* 24, no. 4 (Winter): 12–18.
- Collins**, Nicolas. 2011. "Semiconducting: Making Music after the Transistor." Notes for a presentation at the "Technology and Aesthetics Symposium", NOTAM, Oslo, May 2011. Accessed 2nd July 2018. <http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/semiconducting.pdf>.
- Collins**, Nicolas. 2009. "Hacking the CD Player." Online publication. Accessed 7th July 2018. <http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/cdhacking.pdf>.
- Collins**, Nicolas. 1990. "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night." Libretto. Online publication. Accessed 13th July 2018. <http://www.nicolascollins.com/texts/darkandstormynightlibretto.pdf>.
- Conrads**, Martin. 1997. "Nicolas Collins in conversation with Martin Conrads." Online publication. Accessed 10th July 2018 <http://www.art-bag.org/contd/issue2/collins.htm>.
- Duguid**, Brian. 1995. "Nicolas Collins." Online publication. Accessed 9th July 2018. <http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/collins.html>.
- Edensor**, Tim. 2007. "Sensing the Ruin." *The Senses and Society* 2, no. 2: 217–232.
- Gottschalk**, Jennie. 2016. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hayles**, Nancy K. 2005. *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ingold, Tim. 2007. *Lines: A brief history*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Malm, Andreas. 2018. *The Progress of this Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*. London: Verso.

Nabokov, Vladimir. 1999, first published 1951. *Speak, Memory*. London: Everyman's Library.

Rodgers, Michael. 2018. *Nabokov and Nietzsche: Problems and Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury.

Roth, Phyllis A. 2014. "Toward the Man behind the Mystification." In *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work*, edited by Julius E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, 43–59. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. 2017. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. California: University of California Press.

Stuart, Caleb. 2003. "Damaged Sound: Glitching and Skipping Compact Discs in the Audio of Yasunao Tone, Nicolas Collins and Oval." *Leonardo Music Journal* 13 (December): 47–52.

Walters, John L. 1995. "Nicolas Collins Interview." Online publication. Accessed 10th July 2018. <http://audiolabo.free.fr/revue1999/content/collins2.htm>.

Wolfe, Cary. 2007. "Bring the Noise: The Parasite and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism." In *The Parasite*, Michael Serres, xi–xxviii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

THE HUMAN *STILL LIVES*? TECHNOLOGY, BORROWING AND AGENCY IN THE MUSIC OF NICOLAS COLLINS (summary)

This article considers aspects of late twentieth-century experimental and postdigital music, where Do It Yourself (DIY) approaches of hacking digital technology enabled new forms of artistic expression – namely, glitch and aesthetics of failure (Cascone 2000). More specifically, the paper will examine American composer Nicolas Collins' creative practice of circuit bending the portable CD player in *Still Lives* (1992). It will be shown that Collins' borrowing of an existing music – nine measures of a canzone by composer Giuseppe Guami – complicates prevailing discussions of such music solely through the lens of the postdigital. The article will then explore Collins' orchestration of this work for acoustic instruments using open notation in *Still (After) Lives* (1997), going on to show that such work demonstrates the pursuit of glitch as a potential in the human performance, as well as the exploitation of the limitations inherent to notation as a medium. In doing so, the article explores Collins' conception of each medium's physical dimension and goes on to relate the transition between sonic 'spaces' to social-geographer Tim Edensor's (2007) description of sensual experience in urban environments.

The paper will then further scrutinize Collins' practice of musical borrowing – more specifically the borrowing of a recorded performance – and relate this to composer Richard

Beaudoin's (2010, 102) conception of "hearing triple". By exploring issues of re-articulation, representation and memory, the article will then analyse Collins' quotation of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951) in the *Still Lives* series. It will show that the employment of any technology to rearticulate the trace of a musical fragment is insufficient and even work-destroying but, as a result, it is the sole means of doing so.

Through the examination of a borrowed musical *material*, the article will then explore the *Still Lives* series in relation to theories of New Materialism, Posthumanism and Transhumanism, scrutinizing the entanglement between human and non-human agents. The paper will firstly explore Collins' decision to borrow the Guami canzone, before framing the composer, the hacked CD player and the instrumental performers as agents within a nodal and collaborative yet hierarchical network.

The paper concludes with a personal reflection on the *Still Lives* series in relation to my own creative practice. I suggest the series is an invitation to artists engaged in borrowing to further scrutinise the 'material' that is borrowed, and to be receptive to the ways that it works upon us in return.

Article received: February 19, 2020

Article accepted: April 25, 2020

Original scientific paper