

# For William Basinski, the Message Is the Metaphor

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William Basinski's live concerts are reputed to be transformative experiences, despite his use of silence.

**Seth Tisue**

Silence is a concept that to many might seem contrary to the purpose of most music. However, experimental musician and composer William Basinski expounded on how he uses silence, discussing the aesthetic philosophies behind his work prior to his upcoming Moscow concert on Saturday.

A classically trained musician and composer in the minimalist tradition, Basinski has been making emotional, mystical sound collage works primarily with analog reel-to-reel tape decks by creating loops of short melodies, overdubbing directly onto them.

"Silence is a rare commodity these days," he says, even though it figures strongly in his compositions, and is very often their very essence or end point. However, this silence is not directly represented like in the works of Cage, but instead is illustrated and coaxed out.

The aesthetic of malfunction is prominent in his compositions, and for Basinski it is particularly compelling as he finds it to be endemic in everything human. Basinski explains that "we are malfunctioning as a species, so it is to be expected and hopefully learned from."

Having just performed his seminal piece, *The Disintegration Loops*, at the La Batie festival in Switzerland with the Geneva Chamber Orchestra, Basinski explained over the phone with *The Moscow Times* how he came to arrive at *Loops*, which was not originally intended to be performed live.

He was in the process of digitizing analog tape loops of compositions dating back two decades when he discovered that the iron oxide particles on the reels turned into dust and flaked off as they rubbed against the tape head, leaving behind bare spots on the reel. By chance, instead of the music itself, the process of decay became the message, "a very profound and powerful one that still resonates."

These recordings were released in four volumes between 2002 and 2003 by his own label, 2062 Records, based out of New York. It was lavishly reissued last year as a 9 LP box set by Temporary Residence Ltd.

The hazy memories and fragments in time that made *Loops* so emotional and cinematic were only heightened by their connection with the 9/11 attacks. Basinski completed the piece watching from the roof of his Brooklyn apartment building as the World Trade Center burned, with its cover and videos comprised of personal footage taken while standing there.

An artist known mainly for his frequent reworking of older material, he got Maxim Moston to transcribe *The Disintegration Loops* to be performed live by an orchestra, with its first performance at the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

When asked whether the performance of this work in actual space and time takes something away from it by arresting an ephemeral moment, he replied that one should first listen to what it sounds like live, with "dedicated musicians of flesh and blood" adding another level of depth to it. He said that a live show, where one is able to sit and see brilliant musicians performing this work "talk(s) about an eternal moment," adding that he intended to bring the performance to Russia in the near future.

Basinski intends to perform *Nocturnes*, his first new release in 4 years, for his Moscow concert on Saturday. A tape and prepared piano piece, it is once again comprised of fragments of his early compositions, written during his post-graduate days in San Francisco in 1979.

Originally a very formal composition, *Nocturnes* came about as Basinski tested what the piano would sound like if he cut off the attacks of the notes in certain themes. "I would hit the key, then hit the record button on the cassette deck. What resulted were some very suspended, aqueous sounds that still somewhat sound like a piano, but without the felt hammer hitting the string; it's changed."

He created a graphic score with a horizontal timeline for each of the 12 loops made for this project and began building the layers by directly recording over them one at a time, leaving no room for error. He did though, realizing that he had gone too far after adding the two final

loops. He recently came across the original cassette master and digitized it, fixing it with a few snips back to its intended state.

Over its 40-minute duration, one can make out a resonating piano, with its barely audible notes evaporating into the ether once struck. Its pace is glacial, and one strains to follow the irregular cycles of not-really-there sounds that only shimmer briefly then vanish, bringing to mind the temporal nature of life.

"Peace and quiet? What ever happened to that? Where does one find it these days?" he asks me. Silence can be very powerful, and Basinski's music, struggling with space and the passage of time, is often described as transformative when experienced live. If this is true, audiences in Moscow are in for something special.

*William Basinski will play at 7 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 7, at the Dom Cultural Center, Bolshoi Ovchinnikovskiy 24, str. 4.*

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