

Some notes on 'Ashes of Burnt Sage'

This project comes out of my exploration of an improvisation practice influenced by extreme metal as well as various different shamanic music traditions that have a much more fluid sense of rhythm. I wanted to explore a music that felt like a waterfall or fast-flowing stream or busy freeway—a chaotic, overwhelming sound, but with a constant sense of flux and flow.

I also took particular inspiration from left-hand path spiritual traditions and the driving forces of black metal—the desire to explore extremes, the investigation of transgression and the antinomianist stance. I feel interested in inhabiting these spaces as a queer, trans woman, given that some expressions of these stances can read like the hedonism of the privileged at the expense of those who have less privilege precisely because of normative and authoritarian systems antinomianist positions nominally critique.

The piece explores the idea of a ritual context that has a communal element in creating a set and setting conducive for ritual experience, but which focuses on an individual (and perhaps individualist) experience. In this sense, it functions as an individual-anarchist spiritual practice. Mutual aid and solidarity in the pursuit of an individual(ist) spiritual experience. Sonically it takes inspiration from Tuvan shamanic practices where multiple shamans will each play their own varying beat. As Hodgkinson notes: “Xenochrony is the technical term for this, and you can hear it when several shamans participate in one ritual, each with a personal tempo of drumming, each addressing personal spirits” (Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 148).

I have no desire to prescriptively suggest these, however, and players may read the score simply as musical instructions. That said, I firmly believe in a spirituality that infuses everyday life rather than something separate from it and a musickal experience can function as a spiritual one in my world. (For clarity—I regard *any* experience a performer has as a valid expression of the piece. No investment in any form of spirituality required.)

The constant intensity of the piece defies an exploration of dynamics or narrative—the piece cannot ‘go’ anywhere. The piece does away with linear narrative and becomes about exploring—through playing or listening—textural, timbral differences. The piece makes use of repetition to deconstruct our usual experience of linear time and to perhaps facilitate a sense of trance or the ‘ecstatic’. The piece invites us to let go of our desire to order sound (because in this instance we perhaps cannot) and to instead refocus our attention on the present moment—each beat, each moment becomes its own world. The physicality intensity of the piece also contributes to this.

The structure of the piece takes particular cues from descriptions of shamanic journeying. The piece starts with a drum beat, and drums drive the whole piece, and the piece ends with bells and chimes which signify a move to finding an ending. Many spiritual traditions make use of bells, chimes or gongs as a means to focus the attention. In this work they also function to bring the ensemble back to a sense of common experience and presence in the moment. This also has a ‘grounding’ effect—or at least signifies that the players should seek to ground themselves, particularly if they have had any intense experience during the piece. The end also serves as a transition out of the intense, individualistic, extreme soundscape of the piece and perhaps offers some relief and can facilitate the transition for the audience as well.