

Timothy McCormack: Earth, dancing

I.

Two dancers stand next to each other, their arms and torsos moving through and within the same space, never touching but always in contact, in silent agreement. The geology of the Earth presses rock strata together and out into surface formations – mountains, depressions, islands. An artist selects and combines different clays and glazes before placing them in a kiln, unsure of how they will react.

These are the metaphors of Timothy McCormack's music. Of combination and communication. Of force and consequence. Of presence and expression.

The choreography of William Forsythe has been an enduring inspiration. McCormack was introduced to his work by Liza Lim, at the University of Huddersfield, UK; at Harvard he studied with the former Forsythe dancer and long-time collaborator Jill Johnson. For a 2010 ensemble piece he borrowed the title of Forsythe's *One Flat Thing, reproduced*, a work that exemplifies the American choreographer's approach.

Forsythe gives his dancers a loose framework, but no musical cues. Freed from rigid external direction, they move in response to each other, working socially to orientate themselves and their parts within the overall plan. Likewise, McCormack's music is coordinated not by a conductor, nor by the age-old method of barlines, but by networks of internal cues and prompts that require the players to listen closely to each other. In both cases the medium becomes a direct channel for social interaction: sounds themselves, movements themselves.

II.

Instruments, and the people who play them, have always been central to McCormack's music, from the virtuoso display of early works such as *Disfix* and *The Restoration of Objects* (both 2008) – written for Australia's ELISION ensemble and America's JACK string quartet, respectively – to the 70-minute *WORLD EATER* (2016) for two trombones, an immense organism composed of breath and lips and brass tubing. This remains the case – he once said that 'It is the instrument itself, as well as the performer-instrument apparatus that is the greatest factor in determining how a piece behaves and sounds' – but youthful exuberance has been tempered to a more internalized embodiment, one that performers and listeners can share equally as the piece unfolds.

With this has come an extension of scale: not only *WORLD EATER* but also another recent work, *your body is a volume* (2017, again for the JACK Quartet), each last more than an hour. Other works comprise 30-minute unbroken spans. McCormack talks of extra-human timescales, and several works draw explicitly on geological imagery. *KARST* (2015–16), for 22 musicians, takes its title from the range of geological formations created from the action of acidified water on soft rock (limestone, dolomite, etc.). The rate of change may be slow, but it never stops, even if it is little more than the effect of one drip at a time. Because they are always in motion such environments, and McCormack's pieces, are more architectural than narrative; you enter into them and the spaces they are creating, rather than search for beginnings and conclusions. 'It devours our world and replaces it with its own', says the programme note to *WORLD EATER*.

III.

'There are no notes in my music, nor are there rhythms', McCormack once told an interviewer. He was referring to his preference for gestural, rather than metered, rhythms, and the creation of sounds through combining forces between player and instrument rather than specifying pitches. (This was around this time that he discovered William Forsythe's choreography.) Although his scores retain some traces of traditional notation – there are staves, and stems and noteheads, of a sort – they are prescriptions for action (the speed of a bow, the position of a finger) rather than for defined sonic results.

A recent inspiration has been the ceramic art of Nishida Jun (1977–2005). Jun would combine in his kilns glaze and feldspar porcelain in massive quantities, not knowing the results until he had excavated and cracked open their hulking forms. What he would see were the chaotic effects of materials interacting under the forces of heat and pressure.

Like Jun's pottery, McCormack's music is experienced not as discrete shapes that we commit to memory – not 'first it did this' and 'then it did that' – but as a series of pressures of one thing against another: like the action of carbonic acid on limestone, an arm sweeping across a body, the melting of glaze into clay. It gradually imprints itself on us as we listen, and the sensation of listening takes on a form of its own.

©Tim Rutherford-Johnson