Reviews

John Luther Adams, *Inuksuit* (Cantaloupe Music, 2013)

John Luther Adams, *Become Ocean* (Cantaloupe Music, 2014)

D. Edward Davis

One need not read too far into any published writing about American composer John Luther Adams before inevitably stumbling across a reference to “nature” or “the environment” or perhaps to any of the storied correspondences between music and the world outside. Indeed, these broad topics have fueled Adams’s creativity for decades, forming the basis of his published writings, interviews, and program notes. He regularly describes his compositions in relation to the natural world, even coining the phrase “sonic geography” to refer to the strong associations in his work between sound and environment. Adams writes often about the use of both “space” and “place” in his compositions; in a 2008 interview, he described his evolving compositional style by saying, “My music is going inexorably from being about place to becoming place.” In this offhand observation, Adams highlights a fundamental shift in his own creative thinking: while his earlier works are directed outwards—pointing listeners towards associations with naturally-occurring landscapes or soundscapes—his newer works instead function “as place,” as environments in and of themselves.

Adams’s idiosyncratic ideas about sound and place apply not only to live concerts; they extend even into his approach to recorded music. Recorded performances of classical music are often thought of as a glorified form of documentation, perhaps even as a transparent representation of the activities of live musicians on a stage. In his book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Thomas Turino proposes a typology of
recorded music, grouping sound recordings into two (opposing) categories that he labels ‘high fidelity music’ and ‘studio audio art’. For Turino, ‘high fidelity music’ is characterized by *liveness*: “studio recordings that are meant to represent what an ensemble actually does, or could ideally do, on stage.” In contrast, ‘studio audio art’ is the product of electronic wizardry that draws attention to its own artifice: “recorded music that is patently a studio form with no suggestion or expectation that it should or even could be performed live in real time.”

John Luther Adams’s two recent releases—*Inuksuit* (2013) and *Become Ocean* (2014)—productively straddle Turino’s conceptual distinctions. These recordings offer heavily edited and manipulated studio experiences that do not transparently reproduce the sounds of a live event, yet at the same time they manage to serve as realistic representations of works written for concert performance. Variations on this particular ontological position have been common in rock and pop music at least since the Beatles retired from touring in the mid-1960’s, but *Inuksuit* and *Become Ocean* represent rare examples of neither-here-nor-there recordings that might be accurately filed under “Classical”.

John Luther Adams’s earliest extant pieces—written shortly after he moved to Alaska in the 1970’s—portrayed or represented the sounds of nature directly, a kind of transcription of the outdoors. In *songbird songs* from 1974-1980, musicians contribute melodies based on birdsong, interlocking these passages in randomly-organized alignments that suggest the chaotic unpredictability of a forest canopy teeming with birds. By the late 1990’s, in large-scale pieces like *In the White Silence* and *The Light That Fills the World*, Adams had moved away from direct imitation and towards an exploration of what might be called “the sublime”, composing sonic suggestions of expansive frozen tundra, towering mountain ranges, and other epic Alaskan environments.

In several of his most recent compositions, Adams has pushed his music’s connection to the outdoors one step further, creating literal “outdoor music”—specifically designed to be performed (and heard) outside. His first outdoor work was 2009’s *Inuksuit*, written for a flexible group of 9 to 99 percussionists. Unlike many earlier works written for outdoor performance—David Dunn’s *Nexus 1* (1973), for example, or Marcus Kaiser’s *zwischen* (1998)—*Inuksuit* is not “site-specific” or tethered to a single place; it can be presented at any location large enough for the percussionists to spread out, as indicated in the score. While this decision allows for a wide variety of potential performance conditions (as well as, from an economic perspective, facilitating a dramatic increase in the number of possible performances), it also presents challenges, as each new site requires the musicians to accommodate its particular restrictions and/or exploit its unique advantages. Since its premiere, *Inuksuit* has become one of Adams’s most frequently played pieces, receiving dozens of performances at outdoor locations around the world.

In any of its possible configurations, a performance of *Inuksuit* has three immutable characteristics that set it apart from the vast majority of traditional “concert music” performance. First, the conductor-less musicians in *Inuksuit* have a high degree of individual autonomy, resulting in a moment-to-moment musical texture that is largely chaotic or random. Second, the natural variability of the performance site
contributes additional unpredictable content. Unlike a concert hall which is designed to be as quiet as possible, an outdoor performance of Inuksuit is colored by the site's existing ambience; any number of variable environmental sounds may contribute to the soundscape, including wind, trees, birds, passing traffic, airplanes, etc. And finally, the audience at a performance of Inuksuit is encouraged to wander freely, to move in and among the musicians, creating their own unique and individual sonic pathways through the work. These characteristics—the heightened focus on the dialogue between music and environment, combined with the in-the-moment decisions of performers and audience—make for an exhilarating live listening experience. Inuksuit is, by its very design, unrepeatable. In the early 21st century, at a cultural moment where most music is experienced as a fixed (recorded) version, a work whose meaning is irrevocably tied to live performance stands as a slightly uncomfortable outlier.

Despite this seemingly insurmountable limitation, in 2012 a group of 30 musicians led by Doug Perkins successfully raised $10,000 through the crowdfunding site Indiegogo in order to create a recorded version of Inuksuit. The musicians gathered at a remote recording studio in rural Vermont and captured the sounds of a full-scale performance in the forest outside the studio. In the process of making this recording, the producers and engineers were forced to engage directly with the philosophical conundrums posed by Inuksuit’s outlier status: How can we best recreate the sensation of being physically surrounded by performers on a recording? How can we best capture and then present a convincing balance between musicians and natural sounds? How should we best “fix” a piece that is intentionally created to be different with each performance? And how can the agency or mobility of an audience be incorporated into a recorded performance?

In his seminal and often-cited 1936 text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin writes: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Benjamin describes this experience-of-the-real as a kind of secular “ritual” performed by a viewer or listener. To Benjamin, every audio recording (and photograph and film) has been stripped of this ritual and lacks what he calls an “aura”: a connection to history, tradition, and authenticity. What remains when an artwork is reproduced, then, is fundamentally incomplete, a mere faint shadow of a real-life experience of art.

It is easy to empathize with Benjamin’s perspective when one compares the experience of listening to a live performance of Inuksuit to the experience of listening to its recorded version. With its priest-like performers marching slowly from place to place, blowing conch shells, swirling maracas, and rolling on gongs, the piece certainly presents itself as a modern secular sonic ritual. Indeed, at the site of a performance, where we are able to experience “its presence in time and space,” we become more than “listeners,” more than passive recipients of the music. Instead we are—alongside the musicians—an indispensable part of the work’s realization. We are active participants free to explore physical space, bringing the work into existence with the presence of our bodies. In contrast, listening to a recording alone in the comfort of our living rooms we come to understand one of the unshakable
limitations of the recorded medium: it might reproduce a piece’s sounds but never the aura created by our direct engagement.

In designing the finished recording of *Inuksuit*, which was released by New York-based Cantaloupe Music in 2013, producer Doug Perkins and his collaborators (including the record label, the engineers, the musicians, and the composer) have incorporated a number of strategies to compensate for the loss of aura, for the disappearances that occur during the shift from live performance to fixed-media. These strategies serve to address the four philosophical conundrums listed above, in order to create a home-listening experience that most closely resembles an experience of “being there.”

First, Cantaloupe Music released *Inuksuit* in a multi-disc package, a standard stereo CD version alongside a surround-sound (5.1) DVD version. The surround-sound mix of the piece allows listeners with home theater surround-sound systems to attempt to recreate the sense of immersion that defines *Inuksuit*’s soundworld. To my ears, the multi-channel playback situation does a reasonable job of duplicating the sensation of being surrounded by the musicians; during the raucous climax, pounding drums, sirens, and cymbals reached me from all directions. Instead of a two-dimensional or flattened representation of many dense layers, the surround-sound *Inuksuit* mix more realistically suggests the feeling of being inside the music, with individual performers clearly separated in space, closer to what one might experience at a live performance. With eyes closed, it didn’t take much imagination for me to picture myself at the center of an noisy circle of percussion.

Since the “music” of *Inuksuit* is comprised of both percussion sounds and the natural environmental sounds of its performance site, the producers of the recorded version clearly worked to make both equally present in the finished product, crafting a kind of balance between them in the mix. The Vermont forest is very audible on the recording, particularly during the sparse opening and closing sections. As the piece begins, running water, rustling leaves, and singing wood thrushes and ovenbirds establish a rich listening environment—a kind of sonic context for the rest of the work. These natural sounds are gradually (and elegantly) integrated into the delicate white-noise gestures made by the musicians over the course of the first track. The final eight or nine minutes of the recording feature an extended conversation between piccolos, bells, a gently babbling stream, and a red-eyed vireo. Though undoubtedly “artificial”—in the sense that most listeners remain aware that these sounds were layered, equalized, compressed, and balanced in a recording studio—these moments of dialogue between the human and the non-human stand out to me as particularly effective, inviting listeners to imagine the musical potential of the entire sounding world.

The final two conundrums listed above represent intractable philosophical problems built into the very nature of recorded sound, and the Cantaloupe Music *Inuksuit* does little to satisfyingly address them. The unpredictable nature of any live musical event is instantly lost when it is fixed into a CD or DVD. Instead of each performance being unique—full of special, unrepeatable moments accessed only by an attentive audience—we now know that a cymbal crash will always occur at 2:02 on track 3.
of the *Inuksuit* recording, no matter how many times we play and replay it. In his excellent 2014 book *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*, David Grubbs discusses this particular conundrum as it relates to the work of American composer John Cage. cage famously embraced “chance” (randomness) in both his compositional process and in live performance, and, as a result, he claimed to be philosophically opposed to recorded music of all kinds. In particular, he did not want his “open” works (which varied greatly from performance to performance) to be made permanent by fixing them in a recorded version. To Cage, a singular interpretation of a piece, fixed in this way, served to circumscribe the piece’s open (endlessly interpretable) identity. The Cantaloupe Music recording of *Inuksuit* will, of course, always offer the sounds of just one particular Vermont forest on one particular June morning in 2012, one particular instantiation of a very “open” work.

Fixed-media recordings fix their listeners in space as well as in time, and the *Inuksuit* recording makes no attempt to address the agency and the mobility of the audience that is a significant element of any live performance of the piece. Listeners to this recording cannot choose to follow a different “pathway” through the work. Other than feebly moving a few feet closer to a living-room speaker, they cannot truly remix the balance of the piece by adjusting their physical positions, instead remaining in a fixed proximity to the sounds around them.

Recent experimental work in the subfield of artificial reality has shown one possible solution to the conundrum of listener-choice: complex audio technology (with real-time computer processing) can allow a participant to navigate a virtual sonic environment made up of prerecorded sounds, even simulating the reflections and resonances of an outdoor site. It is easy to imagine someday digitally reassembling hundreds and hundreds of tracks of a carefully-recorded performance of *Inuksuit* into a virtual “landscape” that an audience member can explore, though, to me, an overwhelming reliance on technological mediation runs counter to the work’s stated goals of direct engagement with the world around us.

In the final assessment, the 2013 *Inuksuit* recording is both well-constructed and well-considered. The production decisions align gracefully with the spirit of the work, and, despite the passive experience necessitated by the built-in limitations of the medium, the recording does indeed deliver many moments of engaging listening. If it inspires listeners to seek out live performances in their hometowns—or perhaps even to organize such live performances themselves—then it will have achieved its highest purpose.

In his essay “Illusion and Aura in the Classical Audio Recording”, Peter Johnson takes issue with Walter Benjamin’s assertions about the loss of aura in mechanically-reproduced media. Johnson points out the flaws in the “fundamentalist notion that every recording is false”, instead arguing that recorded classical music offers access to an altogether different mode of listening. He writes, “A recording may afford a distinctive listening experience, of value not because it sufficiently replicates live performance but because it is able to offer a musical result that is quite impossible to produce in the concert hall.” In 2014, Cantaloupe Music released a follow-up to
Inuksuit that serves to illustrate Johnson’s point, a recording that offers its listeners an immersive experience entirely dependent on recording technology.

Become Ocean, a large work for symphony orchestra, earned John Luther Adams both the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music and a 2015 Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition. The lush and sprawling piece was written for the Seattle Symphony and premiered in 2013 in Seattle’s Benaroya Hall. The score for Become Ocean calls for the orchestra to be divided into three groups, taking advantage of the unique architecture of Benaroya Hall by spatializing the musicians around the audience. A concert preview in the Seattle Times describes the sensation of “surround-sound” that the composer hoped to create:

“I’ve always craved space — in my life and in my music,” Adams says. “Over the years this has led me from painting musical landscapes to composing music that I hope creates its own inherently musical sense of space and place. My aspiration is to create strange, new and beautiful places in music and invite listeners to take their own journeys through those places.” Become Ocean, performed on a concert-hall stage, won’t literally surround its audience. But it should still be “an immersive experience,” Adams says. “I treat the orchestra as three separate ensembles, widely separated in space,” he explains. “We will extend the stage in Benaroya Hall to expand the physical space of the piece.”

Nearly a year later, when the piece was performed again by the Seattle Symphony in New York City’s Carnegie Hall, no such stage extensions were possible, and the large orchestra was packed tightly onto the concert stage. My cheap seat on the distant Second Tier was one of the furthest from the stage, and the resulting listening experience felt surprisingly flat to me, too small and too fragile, lacking in both raw power and compelling sonic detail.

Cantaloupe Music’s 2014 Become Ocean recording addresses this issue in the most direct way possible, literally situating its listeners directly at the center of a full symphony orchestra. Like Inuksuit, the immaculately-engineered\(^{15}\) performance by the Seattle Symphony was released in a CD/DVD package featuring both a stereo mix and a 5.1 (surround-sound) mix of the piece. Instead of straining as I did to hear the subtleties of the piece from a distant vantage point in a concert hall, the surround mix of the recorded version makes possible a rich listening opportunity—complete with both raw power and compelling sonic detail—in the comfort of my own living room. Aside from hiring the Seattle Symphony and conductor Ludovic Morlot for a private command performance,\(^{16}\) there is no more realistic way to immerse oneself in Become Ocean. The experience of being surrounded on all sides by an orchestra, of feeling your ears almost pressing against each instrument, is—paradoxically perhaps—a much more immediate listening sensation that is typically possible during a live performance in a standard concert hall.

In service of this idea, John Luther Adams helped to organize an “Exclusive Pre-Release Listening Party” at The Greene Space in New York City in 2014. To celebrate
the forthcoming release of the *Become Ocean* recording, the full 42-minute recording was “performed” for a paying audience in full 5.1 surround-sound. In an online press release for this event, Adams writes: “As a composer and a listener, I hope to discover strange, beautiful new places, and to get hopelessly lost in them. The best place to experience *Become Ocean* is in the middle of the stage, between the three instrumental choirs of the orchestra. At Carnegie Hall, that’s not possible. So I invite you to join me at The Greene Space, for an immersive experience of the new surround-sound recording, courtesy of Cantaloupe and Q2 Music.”17 To Adams, listening to a recorded orchestra is not a faint-shadow-of-reality, lacking in aura, but the exact opposite: it is an opportunity to hear the “best” version of the piece. Having personally experienced both the live and recorded versions, I am reminded of Peter Johnson’s point that recordings can “offer a musical result that is quite impossible to produce in the concert hall”; the Cantaloupe Music DVD of *Become Ocean* stands as excellent proof of this principle in action.

On the basis of the privileged status of the *Become Ocean* surround-sound mix, John Luther Adams was able to sell out tickets to his “Exclusive Pre-Release Listening Party”; the promotional materials, which promised “an opportunity to experience *Become Ocean* in engulfing 5.1 surround-sound, just as the composer meant it to be heard”,18 attracted a full house, with audience members paying $20 each to listen to a recording that they could purchase for playback in their own living rooms only three weeks later. In a musical landscape where both classical composers and EDM producers create memorable live-concert experiences by simply pressing the play button, Benjamin’s idea of the aura has indeed been radically redefined.

As a brief coda, it is important to highlight the precarious economic position of any business trying to create and/or sell recorded music in 2015. In the current media marketplace, music-streaming services like Spotify, Apple Music, and Pandora have conspired to make even purchases of mp3 downloads into a thing of the past, to say nothing of outmoded physical media like compact discs. Most consumers have stopped paying for music altogether, and struggling record companies have attempted a variety of business strategies to entice consumers into spending money on music that they would otherwise listen to for free.

In this regard, Cantaloupe Music’s marketing of a relatively expensive CD/DVD surround-sound mix for its recent John Luther Adams releases is an intelligent economic move. While anyone can listen to stereo versions of *Inuksuit* or *Become Ocean* on any music-streaming service—they are even currently available for free on Cantaloupe Music’s own Bandcamp pages9)—as of this writing, none of the major download or streaming services offer music to their listeners in a surround-sound format. An old-fashioned physical media purchase (for example, a CD/DVD double-disc set) is still the only way for true aficionados to hear Adams’s recent compositions in surround-sound. As a composer who writes so eloquently about his music’s relationship to “space” and “place”, John Luther Adams is well served by Cantaloupe’s willingness to do justice to his musical ideas by releasing them in carefully-crafted and beautifully-engineered 5.1 mixes.
1 Alex Ross, “John Luther Adams’s Arctic Songs.” The New Yorker, May 12, 2008. [my emphasis]
4 Ibid. 78.
5 It is probably not coincidental that, before Adams joined the classical music elite, he was a rock drummer who played in New Jersey garage bands in the late 60’s and early 70’s.
6 Of this imagined dialogue between the musicians and the performance site, Adams writes: “At the beginning and end of the performance, there may be relatively long rests between composed sounds. In these pauses, the music of the place becomes part of Inuksuit, which in turn becomes part of the continuing music of the place.” John Luther Adams, Inuksuit: for nine to ninety-nine percussionists. (Fairbanks, Alaska: Taiga Press, 2009).
7 Adams offers a political angle to this activity in a recent published writing: “There is no best seat in the house. You may choose to root yourself in one location and let the music move around you. Or you may wander freely throughout the performance, following your ears, actively shaping your own experience, creating your own “mix” of the music. For me, this relationship between the music and the listener simulates a human society in which we all feel more deeply engaged with the world, and more empowered to help change it.” John Luther Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene.” Slate, February 24, 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/02/john_luther_adams_grammy_winner_for_become_ocean_discusses_politics_and.html
10 Of course, Cage's actual behavior in relation to his stated position turns out to be much more complex. See Grubbs, especially Chapter 3, for an in-depth discussion.
11 See John Luther Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene” and Note 7 above.
13 Ibid. 39.
15 Engineers Dmitriy Lipay and Nathaniel Reichman were nominated for a Grammy Award for their outstanding work on Become Ocean.
16 Of course, this luxury would be prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthiest John Luther Adams fans.