

# Nomi Epstein: *sounds* [New Focus Recordings]

An e-mail conversation between Nomi Epstein and Deborah Walker around Nomi's recent album *sounds* (November 2020 - February 2021)

sounds

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Nomi Epstein

D.W. - I'm looking at the picture on the cover of [your CD \*sounds\*](#). Colourful leaves lying on the ground, colours of the Fall. A pair of black boots, presumably worn by the photographer. Colours of the Fall, just as it is right now here in Berlin. But the image of leaves recalls also the sounds of the Fall, the moment where those leaves become more noisy while falling, hit by the wind or crushed under our feet. "sounds" is also the title of your album... While listening through it, I felt that

**the idea of sounds and colours were very much intertwined... is this something that resonates with you?**

N.E. - That's a good question, and I like how you phrase it. I may have gone a slightly different direction in my answer than what you were asking? If so, please let me know.

The picture is of sentimental value to me. I am the photographer, and those are the oversized rain boots I had borrowed from my nephew. I had traveled to be with someone very close to me who was struggling in their life. The day was full of incessant downpour but all I had planned to do was to go to the Arboretum and take in the fall foliage. It felt like the downpour was both a cleansing of and an acknowledgement of the suffering of this person. I was so taken by the vibrancy of the leaves in the midst of all this, and it matched the immediacy of the downpour. So when searching for a cover idea for my CD, I chose this picture simply because of its beauty, the leaves below me literally took my breath away, but also because the moment that was captured in that picture held great meaning to me.

To answer your question more directly: I think of sound and color as the same, not in a synaesthetic way, but because what I do with sound and what I listen for is sonic color (timbre), and I enjoy working with color as a main structural building block.

Though I was not purposefully making a correlation between the picture (or its meaning or concept) and the music on the cd, you are correct that here, and in most of my music, I tend to focus on colorplay.

But I guess that makes me think more about musical metaphor, which I have spent a lot of time ruminating over in terms of my own listening practice, how I hear, how I think about what I hear, and any extramusical stimuli that may have been attached by the creator. Since in my own music I so strongly veer away from musical metaphor (or deriving meaning from extramusical stimuli that are presented alongside the music, or deriving extramusical meaning from sound based on a learned sonic signification), that what has developed for me, in terms of titles or visual components (like a cd cover), I often pair things just because I like each of them, rather than pairing based on a philosophical or conceptual relationship. I may find beauty or interest or there may be something that resonates with me in a secondary (extramusical) component, but those resonances for the two different things aren't based on any connection I believe that exists between them that will give further meaning to the piece. They aren't placed side by side so that my listener will make a correlation between them, though I know that's a slightly impossible task I've asked of people, since our brains always try to make connections between stimuli presented to us. I suppose the connection between these

stimuli is simply my finding them both intriguing, and perhaps, there may be some correlation between them, or a way to find correlation since I have a specific aesthetic taste.

**Moving away from metaphors and to be as close as possible to your personal way to perceive. I was going to ask you about intimacy, but I will follow your words and try to stay away from concepts... If I think through my perception, I felt that your music, your *sounds*, is an invitation to listen in a certain way: something in the music retains me in the present moment, rather than showing me a particular structure, form or shape...**

Sorry, just to go back to your words on metaphor: I didn't mean to push your question in a particular way. I think what I mean with metaphor is more about traditional metaphor, so things that might carry extramusical meaning, for example, and more about equating a narrative. But, I do feel certain concepts are central to my music, and the word "intimate" is certainly a word I use to describe the sound world. Your perception of an "invitation" is exactly what I want of the listener. I do not want to force the listener into a kind of listening practice that I think would most benefit the listener's experience, but rather, offer it as an invitation to do just that. The music itself does not have the kind of surface activity, dynamism, tempo, nor loudness to actively entice a listener in the "usual" way. But it offers an atmosphere, a kind of opportunity to hear what might have been considered a background into foreground and an invitation to dissect its sonic components. And I think if a listener accepts the invitation, it is a rewarding experience.

I like that it has the effect of keeping you in the moment. Now a return question: For you, does that mean more active listening of each moment? Does that make you listen to the now and not wonder or worry what might happen next? Or that you don't feel the need to connect it to what happened before and what might happen next?

The image shows a musical score excerpt for piano. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a 10-measure phrase, including a fermata and a 'pp' dynamic marking. The second staff is a treble clef with a 7-measure phrase, including a 'pp' dynamic marking. The third and fourth staves are a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a 7-measure phrase, including a 'pp' dynamic marking.

A score excerpt of Nomi Epstein's *Layers for piano* (2015-18)

What you describe makes me think of James Tenney's words in the presentation of his *Postal Pieces*. I don't remember the exact words but it mentioned that while listening into minimal material that is moving away from a narrative where you "enjoy surprises and new events," then you are really focusing into sound, really listening to it. When I wrote about the present moment listening effect in your music I was thinking more precisely to your piece *Dyads*, which is a succession of dyads in a rather regular tempo. Let's say an Andante tempo, not fast, nor slow. It's quite an interesting tempo... that doesn't allow the listener to rest! In my perception, the music is changing and not changing at the same time. At some point I lose track of what was before, I have the impression of having already listened to some of the dyads, some of them come back again... but not in a repeated pattern... and then I started to hear more and more the sounds of the resonance pedal, like a parallel piece in itself. Like a piano breathing while playing. In this piece I can hardly remember what happened before, what was played before... it's like entering in a state of amnesia. The new dyad, the resonance, the pedal... The piece lasts 17 minutes, but when it ended I thought it was only after 5 minutes... this is to describe how my time perception was confused by the nature of the music. I loved the last chord, lasting so long, stretching the ear into the silence.

I wonder how does it feel to play the piece. I guess you've been performing it yourself before collaborating with Reiner Van Houdt? Also, it would be great to hear about your encounter with this musician devoted to avant-garde and experimental works. The first time I saw him he was in the cover of an LP of Walter Marchetti's *Concerto for the left hand*. He was sitting at the piano, while his left hand was holding an umbrella, wide open over his head.

I love your reception of [Dyads](#), and that it had the intended effect of blurring one's sense of time passing, of duration! Thank you for listening with such open ears and mind. I especially loved your comment "like a piano breathing while playing," hearing a parallel piece in the resonance. That's so perceptive, and such a beautiful way to put that. I hope it's okay to borrow that phrase when I talk about my music in the future.

And, your mention of listening "amnesia" is wonderful. That's precisely the type of listening experience that is most captivating to me. It's of course something I experience with late Feldman and also with Bryn Harrison's music, and there are many other pieces/composers who work with this too. I believe this experience is a form of meditation, and it feels wonderful to be inside of during, but also most powerful when the piece (or meditation) ends and you realize where you've been, how deeply inside of something you've been. It makes me feel like I've been so close to something, it's so intimate and personal, and that for that time period all that existed in the world was me with sounds, nothing else.

*Dyads* was initially just part II of *Solo for Piano* and lasted only about 4-5 minutes, until I started performing the piece. Up until then, it had been performed only by the dedicatee, David Kalhous, and then I was asked to play my music on a number of concerts, and looked back through my work and decided I'd perform this part of the piece only. The composition was set up, just how you describe, as a series of c. 15 dyads (though to be fair, there are a few triads in there, something I didn't realize until later) which return in various orders. I used my own d.i.y kind of homemade method of randomization to construct the ordering of dyads, and how often they will be heard. But, once I decided to perform this on concerts, I worked on elongating the piece by playing the structure forwards and then backwards, with no pause in between. I experimented then with how many times I would play it, so forwards, backwards, forwards, backwards, and then adding on, until it filled the duration I was looking for, or it sounded right to end in performance. Sometimes the duration was preplanned, and for others, it was decided in performance, but I liked the way that it continued to further obscure time, and do what I generally seek to do, which is to sidestep trajectory or teleology.

Still I continued to work on the piece, something I rarely do when a piece has been finished, and especially for one written so long ago. I added 2 new sets each of about 15 dyads, which mimic some of the intervals found in the original set, and experimented with how to intertwine these additions into the original piece. The score currently exists as the original score (single page of about 80 attacks) plus an extra sheet showing 2 additional sets of dyads, and instructions for how to go about reading the original score (playing forwards, backwards, etc), and how and when to interject a single dyad from one or both of the new sets. So, it should be said that no performance will be the same,

since dyads from the additional sets can be interjected at any point, or not used at all, and one has other formal options as well. Before settling on the current version which is on the *sounds* album, I was experimenting with how to structure the old and 2 new sets of dyads, and I enjoyed and still enjoy playing around with the structure. Just before we recorded, I performed a version in Berlin where I started by playing the 2 new additional sets forwards, backwards, etc. and then launching into the old score.

In case it's of interest: [Here's a video piece](#) with sound that I put together for a project during quarantine which actually has Reinier's performance of the piece (from the CD) as background, followed by a new performance of the piece by me on my completely out of tune piano in my home, to get an idea of how it can be played, and the options that are possible. But for this performance I did a dictation of his performance and just played it in retrograde.

But that aside, it was quite wonderful to work with Reinier. I've seen pictures of that concert that you describe, and it's such a great image to see! I wish I could have been at that performance. It's, of course, the beauty and patience of his playing that also draws me and others, and also I think his choice of repertoire to focus his mind/hands on.

He'd sort of unexpectedly premiered my [Layers for Piano](#) a few years prior on a Dog Star Festival concert in LA that Michael (Pisaro) had organized, and I had fallen in love with his playing of it. So, without having really any interaction with him, I asked him if he'd be interested in recording it along with some of my other piano works, and he agreed. So, we did it in Brussels when I was there for Q02 in summer 2019.

I find him quite remarkable, and working with him, and seeing first hand how steady and focused he is as he performed during the recording, but also the attention span and all this having drunk something like 10-15 espressos, blew me away. There's really great attention to detail, a love of sound, of color, of the instrument, and of his careful interaction with the instrument that are so palpable in working with him. There's a depth, but also a levity that only enhances the sound.



Nomi Epstein and Reiner Van Houdt during the recording in Brussels, 2019

**Thank you for sharing your Grey Performance, and for inviting us to wonder into your living space!**

**Eliza Bangert and Jeff Kimmel, two other musicians who played in the CD, are also part of a•pe•ri•od•ic, the ensemble you've founded around 10 years ago, a big part of your life. It is also a composer-performers group and members are used to writing for the ensemble as well. So could we say that a•pe•ri•od•ic is also a "place for experimentation?" I am curious to hear how did the piece *sounds for Jeff and Eliza* come about...**

Thanks for your question:

[a•pe•ri•od•ic](#) has, indeed, been my experimental music baby since 2010, and I'm proud of its work. The group's personnel is interesting. There are composers who perform, composer-performers, performers, and performers who compose.

That being said, the majority of my programming has been music written by composers outside of the group (and actually outside of the city). But, since the music that we work with is most commonly open form, realization of these pieces requires a lot of creativity, open-mindedness, and of thinking outside of the box. And I think that's what draws us to

it, or at least that's the case for me. Experimentation here is coming together and imagining the possibilities, discussing them, and working through them. The process of working on how a piece will be realized presents some of the richest musically interpersonal experiences I've had, and certainly the most enjoyable, challenging, and rewarding ones. I'm truly grateful for this sort of odd mix of people, of interesting minds and approaches that we make up.

[sounds for Jeff and Eliza](#), came out of my always admiring the gorgeous sounds that Jeff Kimmel was able to make, and for years us saying I should write him a piece. But, as I really started to focus on writing the piece, I began imagining a piece for friend, flutist, and all around great person Eliza Bangert in addition to Jeff and myself. It became clear that this trio, my musical and compositional trust in the two of them was paramount to what and how I wanted to write. They were incredibly generous with their time and throughout the 8+ months or so that I was working on the piece. We came together a number of times to test things out, run things, and they kindly worked with me on finding very specific multiphonics which were central to the piece's structure. I have so many versions of the piece which through these sessions were edited, changed, altered, in both significant, large and minimal ways. I wouldn't have been able to write what I wanted without their help and their sharing the knowledge they have of their own instrument. It was wonderful and special how they really stepped into the world of the piece, and joined me there.

A score excerpt of Nomi Epstein's *sounds for Jeff and Eliza* (2018)

**Dear Nomi, thanks a lot for this exchange or interview or whatever this is! It has been an enriching experience to get to know more about your way of listening, playing and composing and hear about your imagination and ideas. I feel we could continue this more and more... maybe we'll do it one day? *sounds* is your first album completely devoted to your music. Do you have other recording projects in mind?**

Deb- Thank you! It's been great to hear your thoughts and ideas, and the connections you make when listening to it. This has really been my pleasure!



In terms of recordings projects. There's one project that's in the works. Greg Stuart and Erik Carlson approached me maybe 2 years ago about writing a CD-length piece for them for an Another Timbre release. I sent the piece, *cubes*, to them in Jan 2020, and then, of course, pandemic hit, and everything was sort of put on hold. I imagine sometime in the next year, things will start progressing with it. It's a difficult/complicated text score which is part of my "recording project pieces," like [collections for Erik](#) and [collections for Juliet](#). These are pieces which are written in a way that requires the recording process in that structuring can only be done once certain parts have been recorded. Although *cubes* is not one of the "collections" series, it is a recording project piece.

Besides that, I'll say that the process of making a solo composer CD was both rewarding and incredibly challenging. I was grateful to have received funding from both my city and state artist grants, so as to defray most of the high costs of the project, but getting to work with so many wonderful artists in all steps of the project was incredibly meaningful and memorable. I'm grateful for the work and the care that everyone put into it.

I would definitely like to make another solo composer CD in the future.

Thank you again, Deb, for your wonderful questions and insights!

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New Focus Records Video Interview with Nomi Epstein about "sounds"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekq59AVwEiU>

Nomi Epstein website <http://nomiepstein.com/>