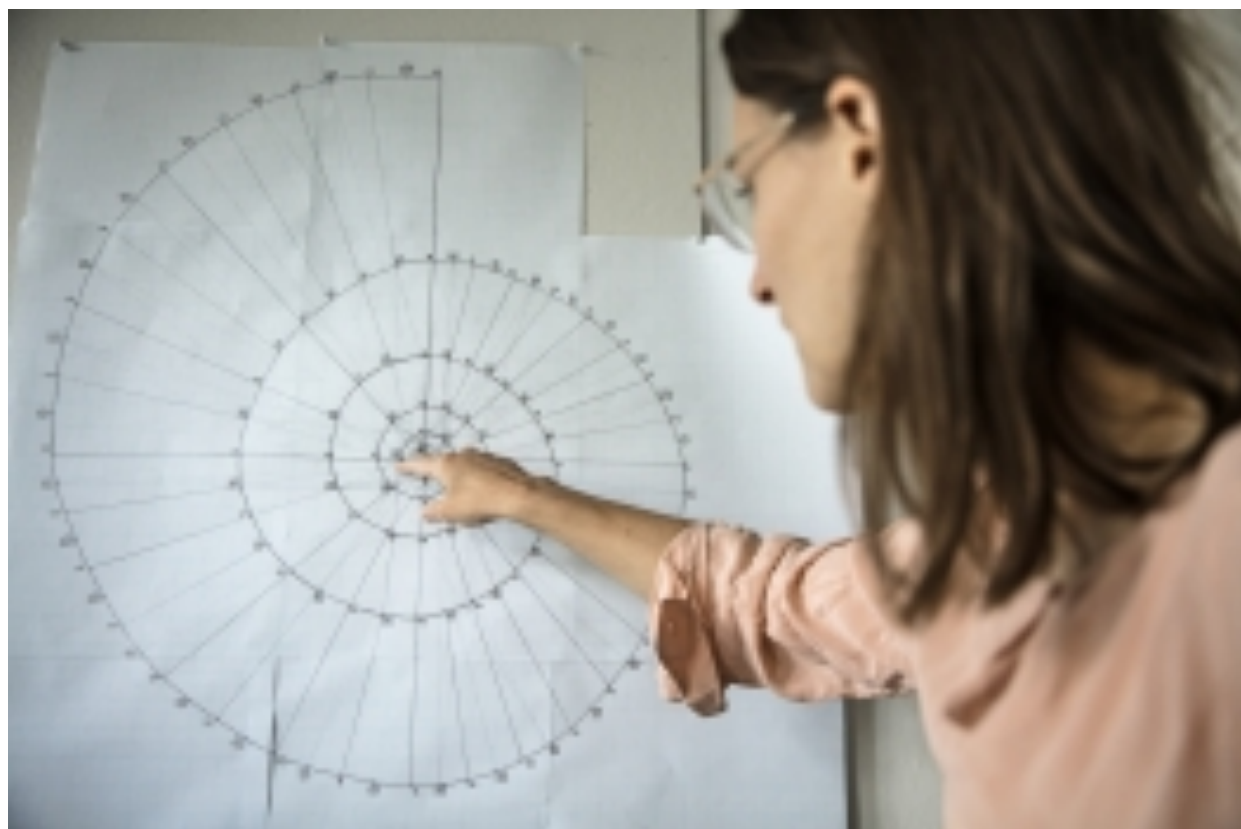


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## Catherine Lamb's Interiors

by Ryan Dohoney

In her foundational essay "Psychoacoustic Phenomena in Musical Composition," Maryanne Amacher took seriously the work listeners do to perceive "immersive sonic architectures": "The fact that ears produce their own tones is now completely taken for granted by the scientific community. However, ... this astonishing function of our ears is simply not yet acknowledged consciously by the musical community in theory or in musical composition."<sup>[1]</sup> In a talk given in late 2019 in Chicago, Catherine Lamb took up Amacher's theme and offered her own variation on the theme. We have arrived, she argued, in the age of the listener. Our musical practices must reckon with the reality that listeners, musicians, and composers co-create musical worlds. Lamb does not abdicate intentionality, neither does she pander to a bankrupt attention economy whose criteria for success amounts the dopamine-fueled rush toward the next pleasurable distraction, neither does she suggest that listening become a scientific compositional method gleaned from measurable cognitive responses.

Instead, Lamb's music opens a space in which listeners find ourselves in states of dis- and reorientation in which we come to ask *who is the listener?* She realizes



construct distinct transformative experiences.”[2] The phenomenal richness of her music shares some aspects with the epistemologies to which Lamb is indebted (*dhrupad* via Mani Kaul, just-intonation via James Tenney, psychoacoustics via Maryanne Amacher) but is irreducible to them. Her focus on what she calls the “interaction of tone” invites us to broadly construe both *interaction* and *tone*. Indeed the instruments, technologies, subjectivities, and histories of her musicians and audiences interact singularly and unrepeatably *as* tone. While attending to Lamb’s music, listening becomes the ever-shifting awareness of an interiority spiraling in scale from my own psychoacoustic experiences to the collective space of the room of the musical event to a global sense of listening beyond the boundaries the music draws.

It was a recent performance of Lamb’s music sponsored by Lampo that got me thinking along these lines. Near midwinter’s day in Chicago in 2019 I came to the third-floor ballroom of a repurposed mansion on the city’s Gold Coast to hear Catherine (on viola), her close collaborator and friend, flutist Rebecca Lane, and Olivia Block (on synthesizer), perform *Prisma Interius IV* at the Graham Foundation. *Prisma Interius IV* is part of a series Lamb has been developing since 2017 for the secondary rainbow synthesizer, instruments, and voices. Lamb developed the secondary rainbow synthesizer in collaboration with Bryan Eubanks in 2014. In performance it applies live resonant band-pass filter to audio relayed by microphones placed near the performance space. Depending on the resonant frequencies of the external sounds, the identity of the environment beyond the concert space is more or less recognizable. What began as low rumbles and sustained drones at the beginning of the concert later admitted the sounds of sirens and barking dogs, suturing the city and performances space together into an expansive interior in which audience, performers, and urban soundscape belonged and listened together. The harmonic plentitude Lamb offers lets me *hear more* beyond the tones played. I am swept up into a whole environment shaped gently by Lamb and Lane’s contributions of tone. I am forced out of this interior castle when I notice how Lamb seems to guard her own boundaries by closing her eyes—singing and playing for herself amidst of the shards of sound swirling around her. *Prisma Interius* translates to “interior prism”—a concept apposite for what Lamb’s music accomplishes: the refraction, redoubling, and explosion of a crystalline space that both protects and limits our *interactions as tone*.

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[1] Maryanne Amacher, “Psychoacoustic Phenomena in Musical Composition: Some Features of a Perceptual Geography”, in *Arcana III: Musicians on Music*, ed. John Zorn (New York: Tzadik, 2008), 9–24, 13.

[2] *Ibid.*, 10.

