

## Laurie Scott Baker – Scratching the Surface

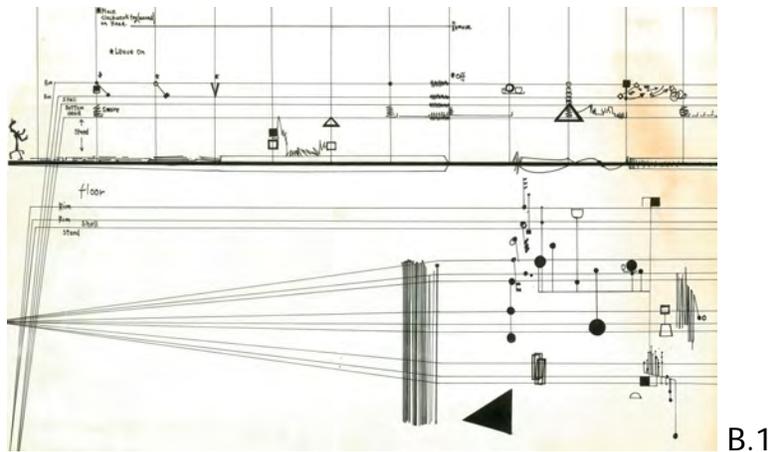
Interview & Text: James Paull



A.1

*In May 2013 an exhibition of Laurie Scott Baker's graphic scores was held at SNO. The scores are works that he produced during the 1960s. Collectively, they document a period in which Scott Baker's immersion in improvisation and experimental music coincided with his interest in graphics as well as concepts such as indeterminacy.*

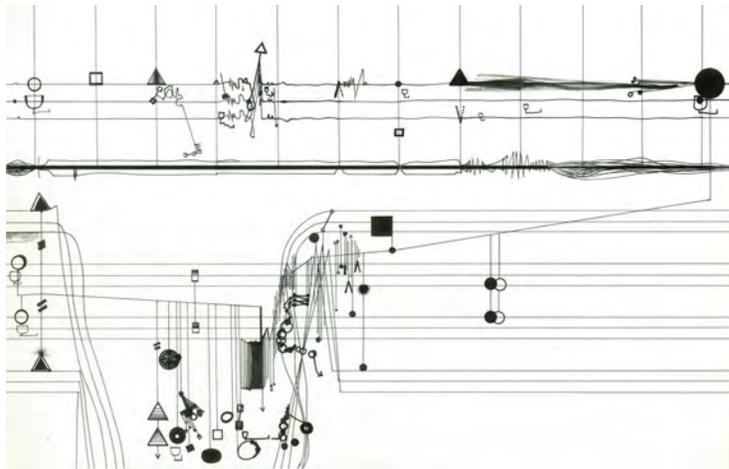
*Scott Baker's scores display in their visual qualities an artist deeply skilled in his craft, while exuding an esotericism that resists easy translation. But Scott Baker's scores are also an important social document. They tell us of a working musician-composer's processes — records of how and what he wanted to play in a different way. They also document the mid-century coincidence of graphic art and music. This was to prove influential in the creation of an expressive body of work that spoke to people who were not necessarily musicians but wanted to participate in a wider, more democratic sphere of performance.*



*In this interview Laurie Scott Baker describes some of the works in the exhibition, offering some personal thoughts on viewing them as well as considering the broader significance of the graphic score genre.*

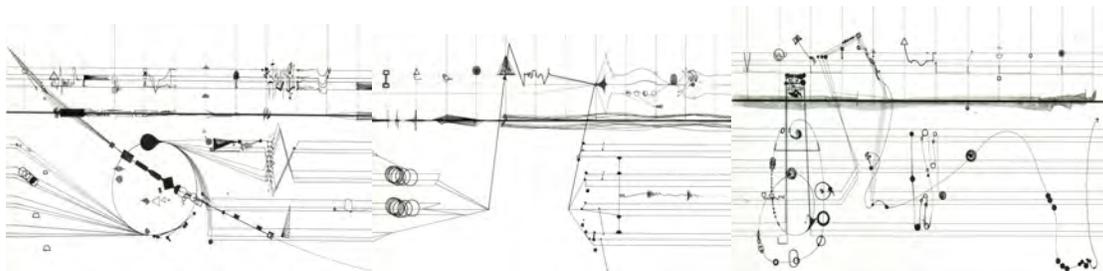
The *String Trio* (1967) is an interesting work for me, perhaps being a string player myself. The piece is basically written in conventional notation but with graphic elements. There are no traditional time signatures but the score is notated in a kind of 'space-time' notation with actual duration left to the players. The viola part is written in the bass clef (rather than the usual viola clef) and sounds an octave higher than written. Although the piece is not a graphic score as such, the graphic elements are very important and the score makes a strong visual impact. I tried to avoid using current trends such as complex Twelve-tone systems although graphic notation was itself an esoteric trend in this period. To write this piece required an intimate knowledge of the instruments I was scoring and graphic technique.

*Percussion Quartet* (1967-68) relates to my interest in seismology that developed from conversations I was having with some people who frequented the Riviera Night Club in Hartlepool where I played most nights at this time. I used to talk to them during my breaks and this went on for several months. They were recording seismic data and were based in the North East of England because of its proximity to the North Sea. Their work was used to develop what became the North Sea Oil Field, but also indirectly informed my *Percussion Quartet*. These conversations influenced the direction of the Quartet — the sub-title alone suggests this, 'Seismic Possibilities'.



B.2

In writing the Quartet I wanted to write a piece that reflected this type of data exploration, a process where very quiet things are measured in order to amplify and study their significance. This is partly the reason I notate, via instructions, the physical movement of the instruments. This movement is not only an integral feature of the work but is always variable due to the different possibilities of the performance space and its acoustics, feedback and so on. In short, it is an experimental piece based on seismology.

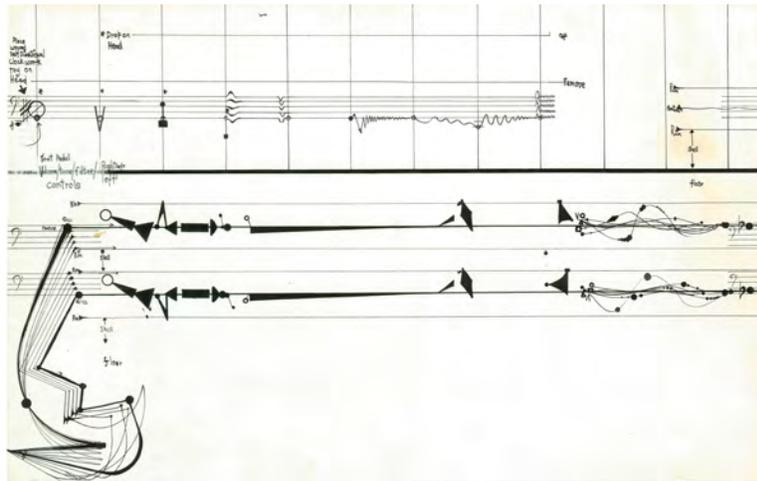


B.3-B.5

*Scott Baker's interest in what he calls 'sympathetic phenomena' reflects the desire to notate a broader awareness of environmental activity. Such phenomena are akin to synchronized or coordinated vibrations that manifest in the sounds of the built environment, be it the soundscape of a city, a room populated with musical instruments or even the instruments themselves. This by no means signifies a self-contained 'tuned' soundscape; the randomness of sounds one encounters is as constitutive an element to defining the environment. 'Indeterminacy' is, therefore, of critical importance in appreciating the extra-musical dimension that informs Scott Baker's compositional and performance processes.*

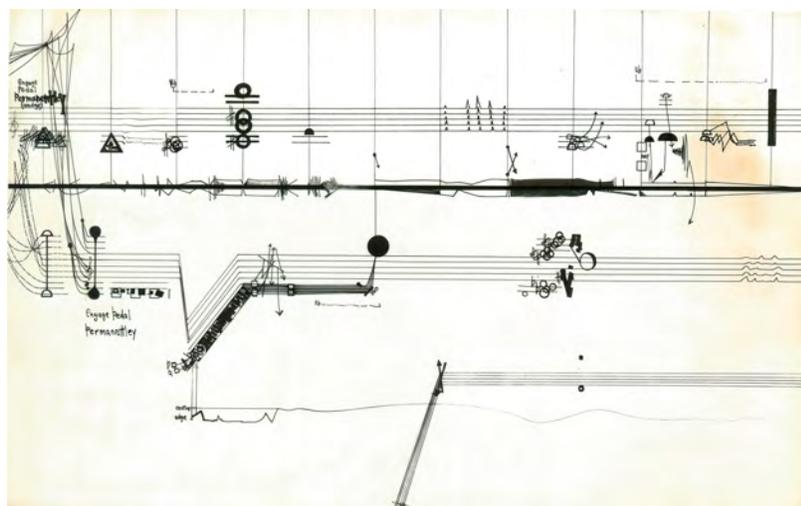
In *Percussion Quartet* I explored methods for amplifying the percussion instruments in highly subtle ways. I use contact microphones, magnetic pickups

or similar devices, not to make the instruments sound very loud, but in order for the listener to hear the tiniest of sounds audible in the instruments themselves. For instance, the timpani with their taut membranes convey a sound whether actually 'played' or not. The skins/membranes act like a condenser or ribbon microphone. You might say it has its own seismic data recorder built-in. Generally this magnetic 'other' data is not within human hearing, just like data from the North Sea is not within human hearing. However, in a performance environment, even when there is very little activity regarding the instrument, there will be activity in the form of what I call 'sympathetic phenomena' made by the building, nature, the city and so on. This is a fundamental concern of the piece.



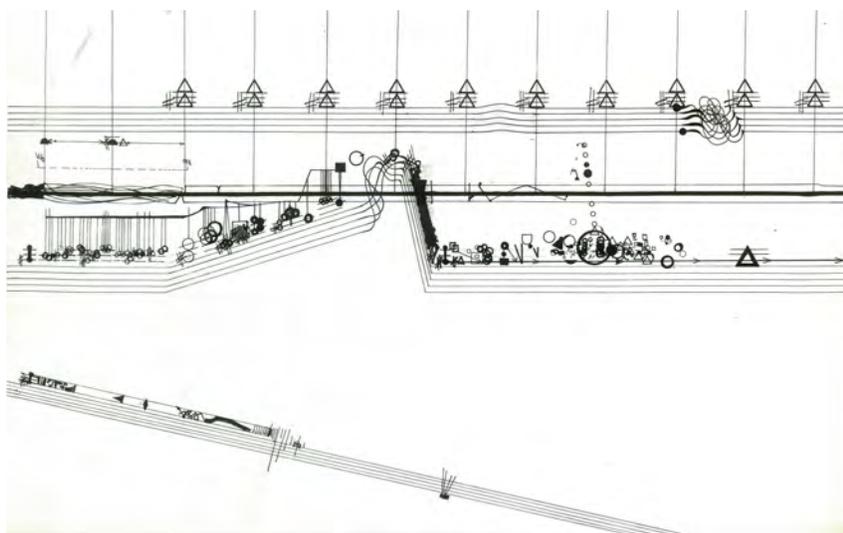
B.6

Having said this, everything is a bit random, or 'indeterminate' as Cage would say, in the way any building makes its own sound, just as does the city outside the common spectrum of sound-making activities. My thinking in *Percussion Quartet* was that membranes of the instruments I was writing for were richly varied. There was the skin of the drums, the metal of cymbals, and the wood of the marimba and so on. Each contained unique sound qualities that in a collective setting might interact with each other. To explore this I carefully placed on or near each instrument microphones so that each instrument would respond to the sounds of other instruments and events.



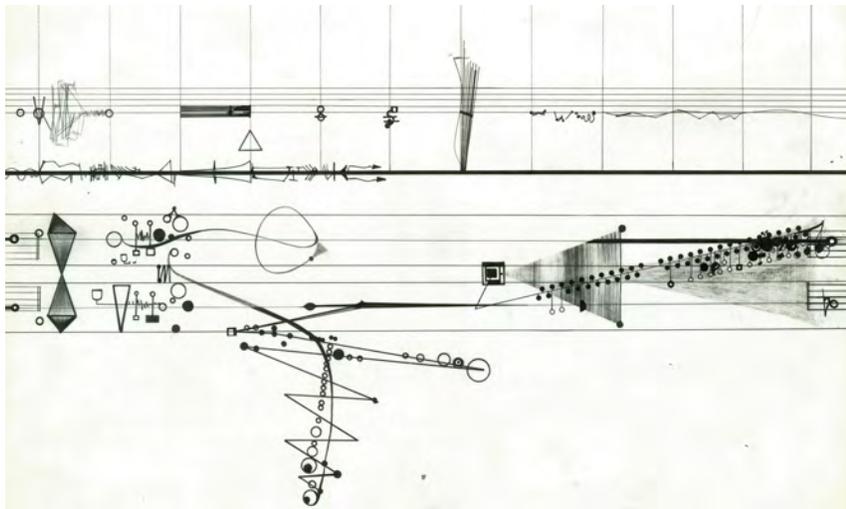
B.7

So, the performance setting has been finely calibrated. The performers can use devices such as DeArmond 610 pedal XY foot pedals to control the microphones in various ways. Then there is a range of definite symbols in the score that I employ such as a diamond to indicate bowing techniques. Similarly, when I'm focusing on dynamics, you'll see that the notes are small when they're quiet, but a big clear white note is played loudly with a soft mallet.



B.8

The use of these and other symbols reflects my specific interest in graphic scores at the time. My studies of the graphic scores by other composers helped direct me towards the techniques I used for the Quartet. When writing the piece, I knew of no other way to express my concerns other than graphically. For example, there is an area in the score where the lines are drawn outside the staff. These lines indicate that the instrument be moved off the stage; when the line returns back into the staff the instrument comes back onto the stage.



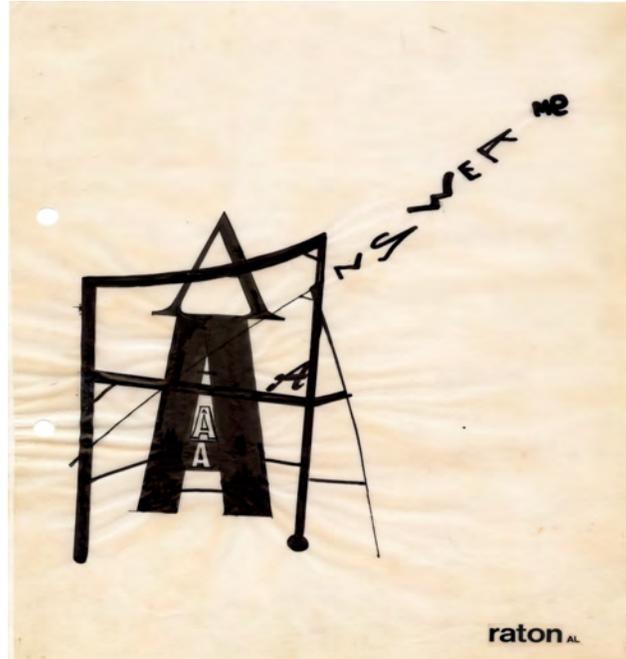
B.9

This brings us to a significant feature of the *Percussion Quartet*. In a way it starts *off* the stage in that the set-up of the instruments and equipment can be a part of the performance. Both in terms of sound and graphics, there is a pronounced extra-musical dimension. In each case it's not just the stage space that is of interest, it's all around. This is one of the things I like about this piece. It's alive; the environment is alive. There is a Cagean quality in that it's expanding our awareness of what music is.

*In referencing the composer John Cage, Scott Baker alludes to his longstanding interest in Cage's scores and writings, something that began with his activities in free improvisation as a bass player in Sydney in the early 1960s. It was, however, another composer who was exploring different methods of notation with whom he was to form an immediate and eventually close working relationship, the composer Cornelius Cardew.*

I first met Cardew in 1965 just after I'd arrived in London after leaving Australia. I showed him a score straight away. It was *30 Second Sketches for 2 contra basses, one player* (1965). He wanted me to perform it, but I was working out of London in a show band so I couldn't. Shortly after that, I started to produce more. For a number of years I had been absorbing both Cage's scores and writings and had a copy of his book, *Silence*. There were others at the time like Mauricio Kagel, but they didn't appeal to me because I thought the quality of the graphics was poor. Although I liked Cage's scores, they were not pure graphics in the strict sense because everything is defined and the scores come with very specific instructions. I became increasingly attracted to Cornelius's scores. With *Treatise* (1968), the quality of the drawing was very high, but then he was a graphic artist and worked in the graphics industry as a day job. This was something I appreciated perhaps because I also have a background in graphics.

I studied at Julian Ashton Art School from 1958. My first job was as a runner for an advertising agency. I would hang around studios and talk to guys there. Then I worked in a factory that made metal signs and I learnt to do lettering there. A year later I got a job as a cadet artist at the *Sydney Morning Herald*.



C.1

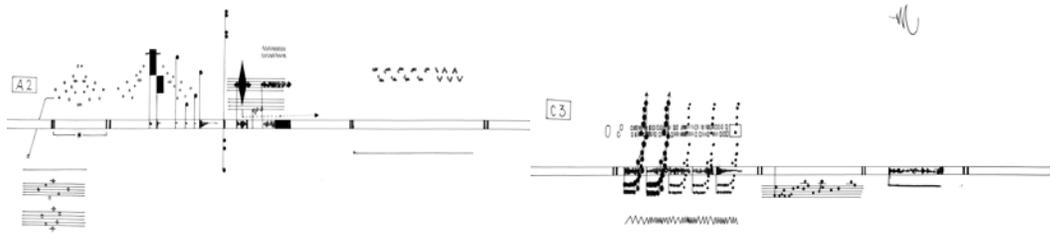
The shared background in graphics points to something much more important. Historically, composers such as Cardew and Cage developed their graphic scores through art colleges. Cardew started lecturing in art colleges. He was speaking to people who were not musicians. That was behind the spirit of the Scratch Orchestra too; people of all backgrounds wanted to participate like the painter Tom Phillips, maze maker, designer and polymath Greg Bright as well as many others.

*It was not only Scott Baker's graphic scores that attracted the admiration of Cardew but also his life as a working musician. From the moment he arrived in Britain, Scott Baker would pick up work by meeting people in common, people he didn't know yet he could work with and develop in casual bands. During the period of his most prolific graphic score output, he worked the club circuit, performing standard repertoire and employing improvisation to subtly alter music that was otherwise highly formulaic. His scores are unusual in that they are the expression of both a working musician and experimental composer. What the scores document is an improvisational history essential to both processes.*

In a very important sense, the scores were a response to working out how and what I wanted to play in a different way. How to score it out be it text or a mixture of tape, or live music. I was a bit unusual in that even when I was working on the club circuit in London during the mid-Sixties and playing what was required, I did so in ways that allowed me to explore improvisation. I was playing music that was very organized, a lot of it standard repertoire. As a musician it was easy to get bored out of your crust, so it was important to use a lot of chromaticism in the playing. It helped make things more enjoyable and interesting. At this time I was playing a lot of Latin American music. I liked composers such as Jobim and Gilberto because their songs allowed for this kind of improvisation.

This is the thing you learn when you're playing harmonic jazz. You can start with a basic popular song in the key of C and then alter the foundations of the piece by making things more chromatic. A good pianist will develop this by using substitute chords among other devices. By the end, the piece will be somewhere else. The bass line is what begins to change the piece. By playing this way, you're making the song more harmonically complex but still recognizable and still fine. It takes a lot of hard work, but it makes the piece more exciting.

My scores can definitely be regarded as notating an improvisational history. Look at *String Trio* and on one page notice how the three instruments are playing one sustained note. Then the note gradually thickens becoming quite abstract by the time it crosses onto the second sheet. To achieve this change you have to improvise in some way. The challenge as a composer is how to notate things like sound qualities in amplification and other kinds of treatment.

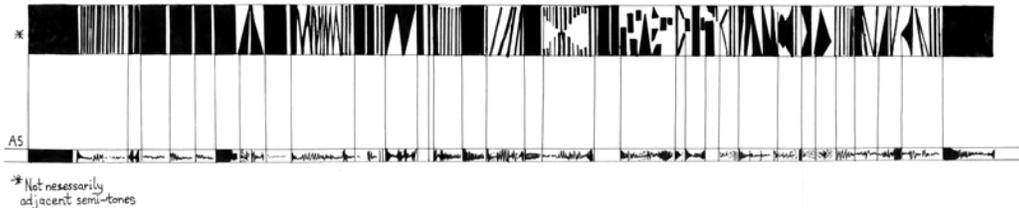


C.2-C.3

*The SNO retrospective is an opportunity to reflect on the mid-century coincidence of graphic art and music. Laurie Scott Baker's feelings about the genre, the story he thinks people might take from their encounter with his scores and the question of their validity today are wide-ranging yet crystallize the shared creative ethic that sought to release the player from the dictates of rehearsal, from the drudgery of musical institutions and musical professionalism.*

Looking at the works today, I still have a special fondness for *30 Second*

*Sketches Two Basses One Player* because it was my first successful piece using a new approach and type of notation. The *String Trio* is also interesting simply because of its natural flow and its transitional qualities. *Percussion Quartet* is something I still go back to because of its complexity and openness. It features minute sounds and the instruments have their own natural ambience and phenomena. In a way the performers have to have a sort of telepathic sense and awareness of each other to pull this work off. It may look like it's a free for all, but I can tell you it's absolutely not. If musicians don't take the score seriously, it simply won't work. When the performers are on stage the success of the piece is entirely up to them. A lot therefore rides on their shoulders.



#### C.4

Graphic scores are obviously a thing of their time, one that helped lead to a new kind of musician. It did influence people; it spoke to some composers, although this took time. It also spoke to musicians like Keith Rowe, Derek Bailey and Jamie Muir, not to mention AMM, a very hybrid body. It gave rise to live electronics. It also had some influence on classical musicians; some would take it seriously and take it on.

And it remains valid today. In some countries it's used in education. A few years ago Resonance Radio put on '40 Years from Scratch', curated by Carol Finer. It was a 36-hour festival of music and talks. My performance was 'Out of Scratch' and was about like-minded performers that were in the Scratch Orchestra and who then developed as groups in their own right such as our group PLM, which did more political songs. A whole lot of music students were brought down to participate because they were so intrigued by Scratch scores. They'd been shown a book of *Scratch Music* in college. These people have been playing since they were five or six years of age and yet had never encountered anything like these scores. They were flabbergasted. They understood that this is music; you can play it without being judged. Soon after they were meeting in the morning to play these scores, opening a page and just playing as a relaxing way to start their college day.

What became apparent to me was that what these musicians were doing for a full-time living didn't give them relief from anything in life, but this did. It gave

them a different approach, not just to playing but living. The notation of the thing therefore plays a very important role in all this whether it's pure graphics or a little drawing with some words. Musicians have been hot-housed since kids and this is giving them freedom. Who says the piece can't be played slowly or quickly? Who says anyone can't participate?





D.1-D.4

*Born in Australia, Laurie Scott Baker has been involved in improvisation, free-form jazz and experimental music since the early 1960s. He formed a close working relationship with Cornelius Cardew participating in the Scratch Orchestra and then as a founding member of Peoples' Liberation Music. He has worked extensively for the BBC, composed for film, television and radio while writing and performing his own compositions. In 1991 he formed a record label named Musicnow with his partner Brigid Scott Baker. Laurie Scott Baker has recently formed creative partnerships when returning to Sydney with Geoffrey Barnard and Ruark Lewis.*



E.1

#### Photo Credits

A.1 Laurie Scott Baker playing with VCS3, West Kensington, London, c. 1970

Photo: Jack Thorncraft.

B.1-B.9 Laurie Scott Baker. *Percussion Quartet* (score details).

C.1-C.4 Laurie Scott Baker. *Keyboard and Extra Materials* (score details).

D.1-D.4 Laurie Scott Baker performing with Geoffrey Barnard and Monika Brooks, Sydney, March 2013. Photos: Ruark Lewis.

E.1 Scott Baker performing at SNO, Sydney, May 2013. Photo: Teri Hoskin.