

A black and white photograph showing a person's legs and feet, possibly sitting or lying down. The image is somewhat blurry and has a soft, ethereal quality. The word "nullibidem" is overlaid in the center in a clean, white, sans-serif font. The background is dark, with some light spots on the left side, possibly from a window or light source.

nullibidem

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*A site-specific performance
that never happened
in a place that doesn't exist.*

A fixed media composition
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as utrumque.
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www.utrumque.com/nullibidem



Introduction

nullibidem is a set of experiences, recordings, reflections and propositions. This text is one of them. *nullibidem* collects a large and heterogeneous body of work, e.g. software development, acoustic measurements and modelling, musical composition, performance through meditative repetition of physical interventions in electroacoustic situations, staging through binaural recording, and a process of recombination and collage where the recorded iterations of on-site work were used to construct a fixed media release. This text is not an explanation of the music of the fixed media release, but rather a reformulation of the same process, hopefully offering a complementary perspective on the same work.

The name, *nullibidem*, is a concatenation of *null*, *ibi*, and *dem*, forming *nullibid*, nowhere; *ibi*, there; and *ibidem*, the same. As the name suggests, *nullibidem* is an inquiry into the notions of place, presence, and co-habitation. In particular, it is an attempt to explore place-making in musical composition, performance, and experience. But in order to lay all of the parts out, we need to start at the end by looking at the fourth dimension first: time.

The next section therefore describes the particularities of the timeline of the creation of

nullibidem and how, in a sense, *nullibidem* is a staged reconstruction of the compositional process of a piece that preceded it. In the section after that, the spatial characteristics of *nullibidem* are described, looking at how the idea of space and site are shared and differ in the production and experience of *nullibidem*, and how that points to a distributed practice of site specific music that can embrace many ways of being present.



The virtues and virtuosity of carefulness

To understand what nullibidem is, we must begin with how it came about. utrumque set out to compose and perform a piece of music, called *Clockwork*. The circumstances of the composition were complex for three reasons: 1) the piece was site-specific as it relied heavily on the particular acoustics of the place where it was to be premiered, 2) one of the composers and performers would not have access to the site during either the period of composition or the performance itself, and finally, 3) a majority of the audience would not be permitted to attend physically, but would instead be offered a live video and audio stream from the premiere. These constrictions were results of the ongoing pandemic, but they opened up a methodological space that in turn allowed us to raise and work with the questions in the directions pointed to in the beginning of this text.

What followed was a composition process where one of us, Eckel, was physically on site and the other, Elblaus, was represented by an artificial head with binaural recording capabilities and a speaker, thus providing the capability to listen as well as speak. In addition to this, Elblaus could send control data to a computer on site that ran a digital musical instrument that was connected to speakers permanently

mounted in the space. Eckel on the other hand could and did move around the space freely, manipulating a prepared speaker and a snare drum fitted with a transducer. In this way, the piece was constructed, composed, rehearsed, and finally performed.

While we will come back to some the specifics of what kind of material *Clockwork* contained, how the instruments worked and what the relationship to the site was, it is important to note that the negotiation of the hybrid space by us during these sessions was an experience that immediately felt rich, both with promise and with some more eerie or odd qualities. Because of this, we decided to keep working on the material, and, more importantly, in that very same way, in a series of sessions that took place several weeks after the premiere.

Initially, the recording sessions were to be simple recordings of the different parts laid out in the instruction score for *Clockwork*, but immediately, the dynamics of the sessions themselves made the material unfold and stretch, with each take having seemingly endless temporal possibilities. Without even being in the same room, we were able to reproduce a meditative shared practice that we had been developing for some time, the tuning of our feedback systems

that was the very starting point of our collaboration and therefore utrumque itself.

On tuning and performing

In much of our previous work, the concert situation has been a challenging fit. We work with site-specific room-scale acoustic feedback, often carefully tuned such that even very small shifts in the room, e.g. a creaking chair or an audience member moving slightly, can change the ongoing sound drastically. Rather than seeking forceful stability, we have tended to seek out and cherish liminal states that vibrate just on the border between two or more possible outcomes, setting the stage for instability and trying to inspire a sense of care for the complex system that the shared acoustics of everyone present at the site of performance inhabit.

This tuning process, where we and our instruments explore and adjust to acoustic variations caused by e.g. how furniture is arranged or the temperature and humidity in the air, has brought with it a sense of shared concentration, a heightened sense of presence that is humble, listening, adaptive, in a word: *careful*. While we found this mode of working rewarding, it was hard to bring that experience into the concert situation and share it through performance. Once the curtain went up, a more rigid hierarchy erected itself, with a socially coded direc-

tional scheme where music flowed in one direction and applause and the occasional cough in the other.

In one performance, at the Inter_agency Open CUBE concert in 2018, we asked to have our piece first in the program and opened the doors to the venue an hour before the start of the concert, in an attempt to allow the audience to share the tuning process with us. While the concert part of the performance was composed and performed from a score, the tuning was done following only a loose set of instructions.

While these kind of stagings of non-concert-like performances is still a material that is being developed, what is fundamental here is the drive to open up the process, share the preparations and tuning, and seeing as much if not more value in the experience of the shared aesthetic labour that is required to precede any kind of more traditional concert performance.

Careful studio work

When the recording sessions began, the absence of a premiere date and the luxury of being able to stay in an experience for as long as we wanted allowed for the unplanned emergence of our tuning practice, that in turn made possible a careful playing and listening that we could negotiate and navigate without explicitly verbalising a shift in our plans. We engaged with the

material in the way that our co-created methods guided us, stretching, repeating, iterating, and staying with the smallest detail until it resolved by its own volition. As such, the emergence of nullibidem from Clockwork seems in retrospect almost inevitable.

As the material built up and the editing work started between the recording sessions, the scope of the new material became clear. Furthermore, listening to the recorded sessions, they contained precisely that elusive tuning work that had been so hard to achieve in a staged performance. After some preliminary attempts a decision was made to abandon the plan to simply repeat the Clockwork piece, and instead let the new material suggest its own form as it unfolded, and just focus on staying careful in the recording sessions and let our established methods guide us to produce material for a new kind of composition.

Restaging a compositional process

The results of the sessions and the editing work that followed can be seen as a piece of fixed media electroacoustic music, and may also be enjoyed by some as such. However, what it is in our minds, is a re-staging of the compositional process of a piece that doesn't exist in a finished form. Put in another way, the goal of the editing of the sessions were not to extract the best

take of each part of the score and string them together to form the piece. Instead, we kept almost all of the material, and used it to construct an experience more akin to attending the recording sessions, sharing the work of extended durational focus, being a part of the making, submerged in the process that generates the material rather than being given the final distilled result.

This perspective is further reinforced by the choice to only use binarual recordings of the session in the final mix. While we had other mics present, the fact that all the audible material of nullibidem is from Elblaus' auditive perspective of the sessions allows the listener to re-frame their role. In staying with the material, through all its repetitions and seemingly static parts, the audience is performing the compositional work of learning about the characteristics of the space, and the artifacts involved, through their behaviour when fed back.

The careful listening produces a felt knowledge that is the required insight needed to finish the piece, yet the piece in that sense is never completed. What is offered is instead an experience of the necessary aesthetic labor involved in getting there.



nullibideity

In order to discuss the many ways that nullibidem takes place, we must again look at the originating spark of it's process, the Clockwork piece. The central idea of clockwork is to connect two particular spaces acoustically to create one big feedback system. This idea is further complicated by the fact that at different times, one, or both of the spaces can be substituted with digital simulations. These substitutions were not arbitrary conceptual gestures, but a solution to practical problems of access to the spaces in question. The compositional work started in the simulated spaces and only when the material was good enough, we tried setting up in the physical spaces.

Crucially, even at the premiere and therefore in the final version of Clockwork, one of the spaces was still present in the form of a digital simulation. It was only in the nullibidem recording sessions that we could fully use the two spaces as we wished, an important fact that is reflected in the two parts of nullibidem.

Two places

The first part of nullibidem is constructed using recording sessions that took place in the primary space, a staircase at IEM in Graz. This

is also where the premiere of Clockwork was staged. However, we both played instruments that incorporated simulations of the other, secondary space, the IEM CUBE concert hall in the same building as the staircase. The second part of nullibidem is built from recording sessions taking place physically in the secondary space, CUBE, where the primary space is present as a digital simulation.

Again, the constraints set by the pandemic limitations of presence and access led us to investigate playful layerings of simulated and physical spaces that produced rich hybrid forms of spatial experience. Note that, orthogonal to this, we also still have the fact that Elblaus was always present remotely, experiencing everything through the same binaural perspective as the prospective listener, hearing both physical and simulated spaces overlaid. Eckel on the other hand, manipulating physical transducers in the physical space, had a very different and more dynamic perspective, simply because of the ability to move his head.

If one was to assign a degree of accuracy to these experiential perspectives, it would be intuitive to favour physicality and proximity, putting Eckel's presence as the comparatively most authentic. But in fact, the opposite was

the case. In the end, how the sessions sounded to a person physically present in the space was less important than how it sounded through the binaural recording. When the perspectives differed, it was the, in one sense more removed or artificial, perspective provided by the dummy head that was given priority. Thus, even the physical spaces were in turn explored primarily as mediated and can be understood to be on par with the simulations in that they become sources rather than destinations. Simply put, it doesn't matter how it sounds *in there*, either in the digital simulation or the physical space, it is only the characteristics of the signal coming *from there* that matters.

In our previous work, the relationship between the model and what is being modelled has always been clear. Systems that can represent some subset of the qualities of another system can be considered simulations of that system. The simulation is always less than the system it models. While one could understand the physical spaces as the systems being modelled and their digital counterparts as the simulations, it can be argued, that since the physical spaces themselves only appear in their strict binaurally mediated form, they can also be understood as a simulation. At the very least, the relationship is not as easily determined.

All of these layers of perspective, presence, place and mediation together form a complex

weave that would have remained a curiosity if it wasn't for two things.

First, the synthesis method employed is a form of filtered acoustic feedback that is very sensitive to even small differences in the resonances and reverberant qualities of the spaces used to create them. The acoustics of this hybrid space are not just an effect or a minor addition to the sound, it is the very fundamental component of all of the sounds heard in nullibidem. In fact, as stated in the previous section, nullibidem itself is a sounding out of these rooms and simulations, where their nuances are slowly teased out to provide the very pitches and timbres heard.

Secondly, the auditive experience of nullibidem invokes such a strong sense of space and presence, while it at the same time is constantly shifting between microscopic and macroscopic views, entangling events that did not happen at the same time or place, or indeed in some cases, not in any place by any traditional definition. This opens up for engaging experientially with the questions alluded to in the title. And while nullibidem goes to some lengths in terms of complexity to bring these questions to the forefront, they turn out to be relevant for almost all performance situations.

What perceptions of space emerge in the mind of someone performing, and how can we relate to them as composers and as an audi-

ence? To what degree can we share a space acoustically, and how does that co-habitation translate through mediation?

Three pairs of transducers

Nullibidem relies heavily on three pairs of physical transducers. The first two are movable, and the nature of their manipulation was the main determinant of the character of the different sections of both pieces. The second two were a set of fixed loudspeakers, permanently mounted in the staircase. The third pair were the microphones in the artificial head, the ears, that provided the binaural perspective.

The first transducer pair were different than the other in that they were not symmetrical. One was an open speaker, that is, it was without any housing. When incorporated into the feedback system, it allowed for directed projection of sound and therefore selection of which part of the architecture of the site were to be given attention. Its open design allowed for preparations, and attaching felt to its magnet and applying reinforcements to its cable made it possible to drag it across the floor. Finally, an addition of a three way switch made it possible to switch the speaker on and off, and also turn it on with a rectifying diode in the signal path, providing a distortion effect. The other transducer was mounted inside a snare drum, suspended be-

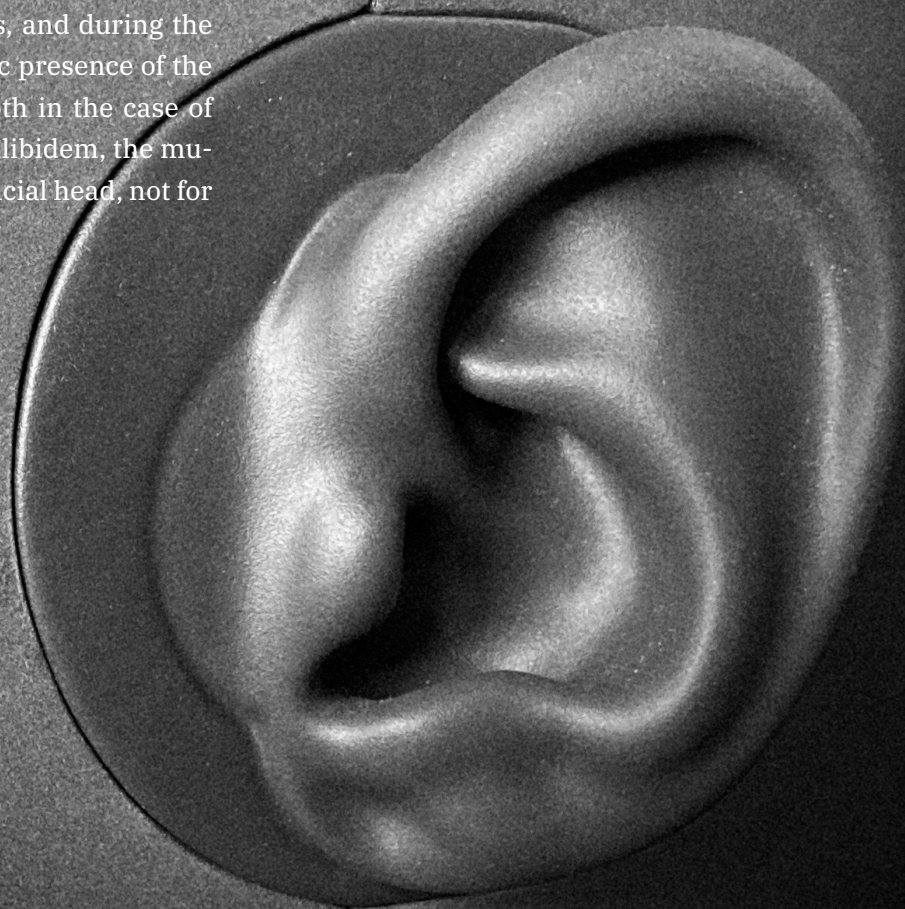
low the top skin, making it possible to excite the drum, creating a very complex and highly non-linear resonator. Using the open speaker and the augmented snare together, by for instance placing the open speaker with the cone facing down on the top of the augmented snare opened up a rich space of manipulation of the feedback sound.

The second pair of transducers, the permanently installed loudspeakers, were an offering of the site, i.e., an acoustic characteristic among others to relate to. The loudspeakers were positioned in the ceiling and on the floor in the center of the staircase, giving all sounds played through them a very prominent and diffuse reverberation. Because of their deep integration into the acoustics of the site, the loudspeakers were connected to the parts of the feedback system controlled by Elblaus, producing percussive and transient sounds to excite the acoustics as well as cut through it.

Before we get to the third pair, the ears, there are many more non-physical transducers that need to be mentioned. For each of the physical transducers, there exists many mirrored versions in the digital simulations, and some transducers that exist in the digital domain have no physical counterpart.

The ears are however always the gateway, the perspective we take both on the physical and the simulated. In one sense, the ears are the only transducers that we experience directly as however many layers of physical and simulated steps a process has, the digitized electrical signal recorded by the ears is always the last step in all of them.

For the purposes of nullibidem, the ears of the artificial head are our ears, and during the recording sessions, the totemic presence of the head was treated as such. Both in the case of the Clockwork concert and nullibidem, the music was performed for the artificial head, not for the people present on site.



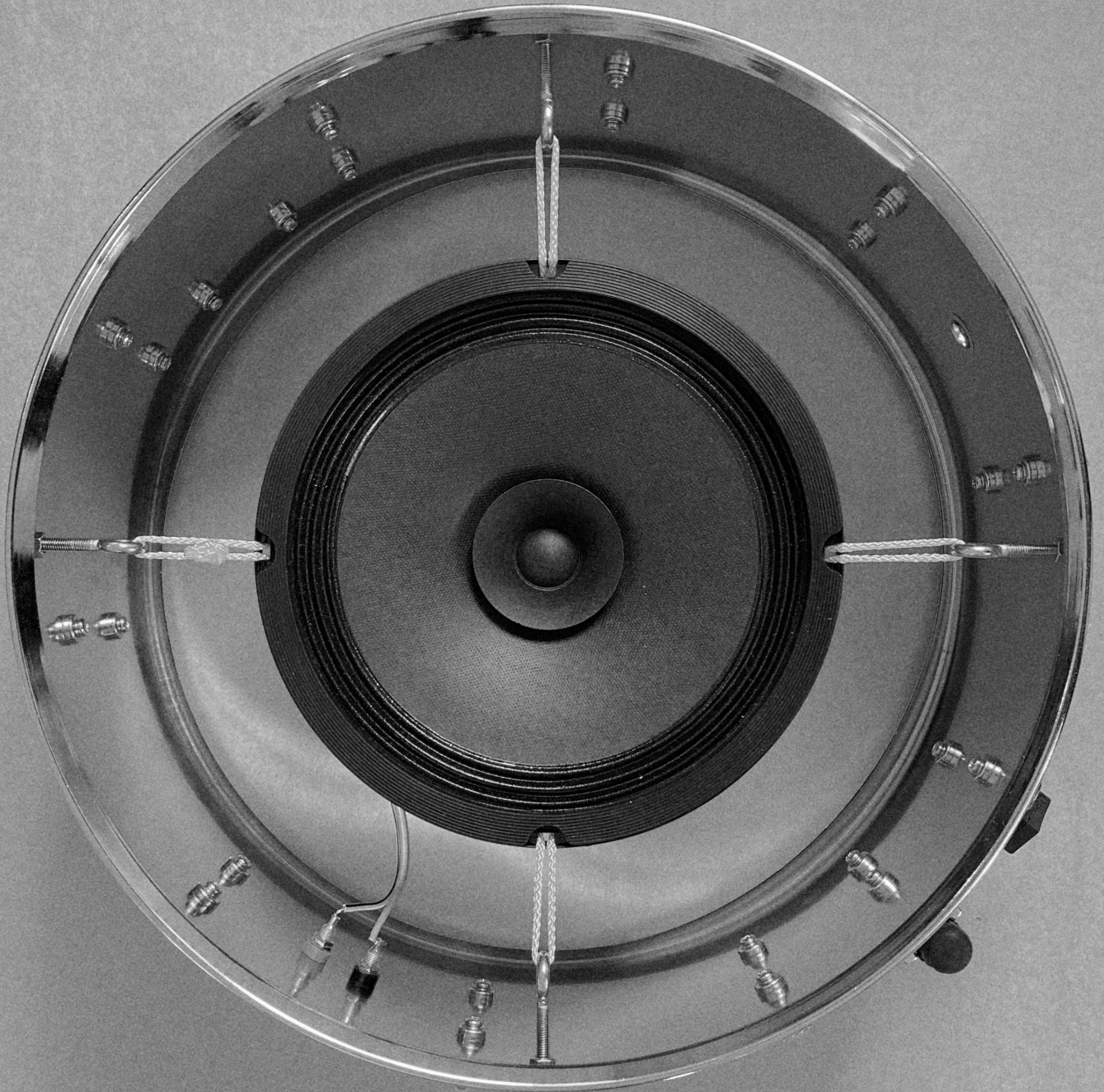
Media, fixed

Throughout the compositional process, the recording sessions, the post production work and all the way through to the listening experience, the setting of the piece remained ambiguous. Everything that is a document of something physical, a determined site, relies on sound emerging from simulation, and the recorded documents are themselves filtered back through different digital worlds. This recirculation of material through layers of different manifestations of place has both been a specific synthesis technique, and a practical tool to allow ensemble playing over great distances. Being immersed in this way of working has by necessity diffused previously straight forward notions of presence and place.

These iterations provide a gradual shaping, each transition leaving an imprint, resulting in an accumulation of sedimentary layers, where common resonances create emerging form and conflicting characteristics null. In this process, playing and listening, instrument and performance space, loudspeaker and microphone, all become variation of the same thing. Anyone of these can be draped over any other, all of them are just shaping transitory processes, all of them have an input and an output. The signal can recirculate in networks of these processes

in real time while being shaped by the performers involved, or they can pass through once, be recorded, edited and reprocessed by travelling new paths between transducers and acoustics, physical and simulated.

What then can we call the final fixed media form of nullibidem? It is a mediation, a record, temporarily fixed, of hundreds of layers of signals, each injected and recorded with the transducers in the acoustics described above. Perhaps then it is the portrait of these transducers and acoustics that nullibidem captures. But not simply their spectral characteristics as such, but through aesthetic intervention and intense experiential labor, their potential for musical behaviour. The assembled density of simulation and mediation produces a place that isn't precisely somewhere, but at the same time is not nowhere. It is a place that we have shared as a place of work for many months, and now invite you to join us in. To what degree the place you experience is the same as ours remains to be heard.



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