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Intermedial Environmental Aesthetics: The Musical Afterlife of George Mackay Brown's Poetic Recordings

In the summer of 2021, the Scottish composer Erland Cooper "planted" a spool of quarter-inch magnetic tape in the soil at an undisclosed location on the Orkney Islands. Having recently signed to a major record label, Cooper had set about working towards what was assumed to be his first release under the new contract: a violin concerto titled *Carve the Runes then be Content with Silence* (hereafter *Runes*). In a manner consistent with that of his other recent solo compositions, the resulting piece was stylistically positioned between contemporary classical, ambient, and popular idioms. Cooper recorded the work in Glasgow, mastered it to tape, then deleted almost all trace of it. All that remained was the single master tape: an analog, material manifestation of the work's recording – and one that Cooper had now consigned to the earth.

Cooper's intention was to leave the tape in the Orkney soil for three years, then to unearth it and examine the impact of its subterranean treatment on the recording.[1] "The material on the tape may have eroded completely," he is quoted as saying, "or the peaty soil may have preserved it perfectly well. [. . .] Any alterations to the sound and music, when it comes out of the earth, will be reincorporated into the pages of a new score and live performance. This is an act of patience, a collaboration with time and the natural world" (Cooper, in Barbican Centre 2022, n.p.).

Framing "the natural world" as a collaborative agent in the compositional process resonates with Cooper's broader commitment to environmental aesthetics in his work. In the case of *Runes*, the music, made material through its mastering to tape, was subjected to edaphic decomposition not as a means of destruction but of evolution and growth: the tape was "planted" in the soil; the music would be *recomposed* by the earth. Moreover, in the promotional materials accompanying the release, Cooper was keen to foreground patience as a foundational theme in *Runes*, presenting the work as an antidote to the immediacy of a recorded music industry dominated by digital streaming platforms (DSPs) such as Spotify and Apple Music which incentivize frequent releases for commercial gain.

1 Cooper left clues as to the tape's whereabouts as a treasure hunt for fans of his work, two of whom dug up the spool the following year (cf. Hall 2022).

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That said, no sooner had Cooper set the unearthed analog tape to play in his studio than he began its digitization, preserving and later disseminating the recomposed work via digital means.

As listeners would come to hear when the album was released in 2024 and reached #1 in the UK Official Classical Albums Chart (cf. Levine 2024), a core element of Cooper's *Runes* is the inclusion of poetry recordings. There are traces of poetry's influence throughout Cooper's work: the very title of *Runes* is a quotation from the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown's (1921–1996) "A Work for Poets" (2005, xix). Much of the verse included by Cooper relates to Scotland's culture, landscape, and wildlife, contributing to an emergent nexus of nature- and place-based meaning. Moreover, Cooper's decision to include recordings of spoken recitations by Brown on *Runes* suggests an interest in foregrounding not only the content of the words but also their sounds as vocalized by the poet, affording listeners an auditory glimpse of Brown's personhood as an Orkney native. The evocations of place and identity carried by Brown's regional accent, together with the intimacy of close-miked voice recording, contribute to the sense that these words are being transported from their historical "source" directly and authentically to listeners' ears.

In *Runes*, the sound of poetry forms an integral part of the intermedial musical artifact, with intermediality understood here as the production of direct/overt (intracompositional) relationships between conventionally distinct media (cf. Wolf 1999, 39–40). In this chapter, we analyze how Cooper integrates poetry and music in a manner that foregrounds the *material* and *spatiotemporal* modalities of these media. Our theoretical framework and method are influenced by Lars Elleström's characterization of intermedial communication in terms of material, spatiotemporal, sensorial, and semiotic media modalities (cf. 2021, 16–24). Combining critical, musical, and literary analysis, we argue that the technical devices of production and display that constitute the physical media of recorded music and poetry are made audible and visible in Cooper's work, and that this in turn affords audiences' perception of specific nature- and place-based meaning. Insight into the compositional process was gained by working closely with Cooper throughout the genesis and release of *Runes* as part of a broader research project, and by the first author's role supporting the re-transcription of the unearthed tape.[2] We demonstrate, then, how Cooper exploits the material and spatiotempo-

2 The project, "Influencing Environmental Values through Music" (2023–2024), combined theoretical, empirical, and music-analytical methods and a knowledge exchange component (PI Dibben). It was funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund, based at the University of Sheffield. It explored environmental aesthetics in contemporary music, taking Cooper's work as a case study to examine the relationship between audiences' ecological worldviews and the nature-

ral modalities of the intermedial artifact and the authoritative sound of spoken-word recordings (cf. Lane 2006, 7–9) to contribute to the perceived authenticity of his work while also bringing poetry into new, intermedial constellations for a community of listeners in the digital age.

Recorded Poetry and Music: Intermedial Entanglements

In historical terms, the close association of music and (lyric) poetry is by no means unusual. Their intersection spans millennia, with the professions of poet and musician often indivisible in early literate cultures. The term "poet-composer," for example, has been used to describe lyric performers across Western history, whether associated with Ancient Greece (cf. D'Angour 2018), medieval Europe's vernacular traditions (cf. Leach 2007), or the singer-songwriter movements of the present day (cf. Bentley 2019). Common to practitioners across the ages was an attention to the rhythmical and metrical resonances between poetic verse and melody, with a poem's musical realization often developing in tandem with its lexical and syntactical content. Only "in the light of the increased textuality of the later Middle Ages" did poetry become more readily detached as an art-form from music (Leach 2007, 5), after which poetry's oral mediation dwindled; in many domains, it became written to be read, not composed to be performed.

Over recent centuries, as the professional disciplines of music and poetry have grown more disparate, composers have looked to existing poems for texts to set. In cases where poetry settings – that is, the use of existing poems in the composition of songs – represent the primary objects of study, much of the Anglophone scholarly literature has been devoted to Western art music, particularly nineteenth-century Romantic song traditions (cf. Thym 2010; Weliver and Ellis 2013). Scholarly accounts often foreground explicitly intermedial relationships between music and text (cf. Scher 1992; Wolf 1999).

The setting of existing poetry in popular music traditions has been relatively neglected in academic circles. Where discussions of "poetry" enter popular music studies, debates tend to focus on the extent to which certain (newly written, not existing) song lyrics constitute poetry (cf. Frith 1996; Ricks 2004) and, by extension, the broader high/low binary and popular music's "literary capital" (Hibbett

and place-centered meanings they perceived in the music. Further accounts of the study, including its empirical components, are forthcoming.

2023). This is especially true of recent scholarly accounts of the poetics of rap, which emphasize the inextricable link between text and music in the structures of flow, rhythm, and pace (cf. Bradley 2009; Balestrini 2019) – for example, in the case of Kae Tempest's recent commercial recordings (cf. Goursaud 2022).

Where the musical setting of existing poetry is concerned, there is a modest, though rich, literature focusing on the meanings of transhistorical (and transcultural) interplay. For example, Simon Keegan-Phipps and Trish Winter have analyzed how the British-Bengali composer Bishi weaves together English and Indian musical and literary references in her album *Albion Voice* (2012) to produce a "celebration of a contemporary multiculturalism," setting the texts of poets including John Milton to music in a manner that "reinforces a sense of antiquity" and "invokes associations not only with a historical England, but with the surviving cultural institutions of that place" (2017, 198). In this way, Bishi superimposes the cultural products of different times and places, harnessing the resulting tensions to speak specifically to transhistorical issues of intercultural transfer.

Bishi also incorporates recordings of her own readings of Geoffrey Chaucer into *Albion Voice*, contributing to a decades-long tradition of artists including spoken, not sung, recordings of existing poems in their songs. More recently, Eduardo Barros-Grela and Andrea Patiño de Artaza have considered the issue of "cultural translatability" in the case of Beyoncé's incorporation of Warsan Shire's spoken-word poetry into her album *Lemonade* (2016), arguing that the album showcases how today's "singer-songwriters adapt literary texts to the new media in ways that speak directly to contemporary global subjects" (2023, 95).

While the incorporation of novel poetry recordings into popular music has become more commonplace over recent decades, the use of existing recordings is much less common. The use of archival recordings of non-poetic speech has certainly featured across musical genres: Beyoncé, for one, incorporates an extended excerpt from a talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie into her feminist anthem "Flawless" (2013); and the British band Public Service Broadcasting incorporate voiceovers sampled from public information films and archive footage into, e.g., their album *Every Valley* (2017). As sound artist and theorist Cathy Lane has argued, in such cases, "the main function of the spoken word material is as a signifier to historical authenticity, a voice of authority or *vérité*"; it serves to "retain both the meaning and the idea of the authenticity of the speaker as a genuine voice from the past" (2006, 9). In this way, the incorporation of spoken-word recordings into musical works results in the weaving of an intermedial tapestry of voices and other sounds that draws upon multiple sources and discourses in its mediation of meaning.

However, as adduced above, there is little evidence of composers using archival recordings of spoken poetic recitation in their music. A recent exception to

this trend comes in the form of Cooper's *Runes*, in which the composer integrates recordings of Brown's poetry on the subject of the natural and cultural worlds of the Orkney Islands into his musical score. In what remains of this chapter, we analyze *Runes* to better understand how the use of archival spoken-word recordings in contemporary music represents an intermedial crossing between music and poetry that foregrounds issues of materiality, authenticity, and – in the present case – (regional) place. We use a combination of musical, sonic, and textual analysis to spotlight emerging intermedial practices pertaining to musico-poetic creativity in the digital (and environmentalist) age, attending closely to the meanings of the poetic verse, its co-constituting role in the intermedial nexus of the work, and the broader sonic character of the recordings. In this way, we demonstrate how Cooper both exploits the musical affordances of the texts and of the poet's own voice and highlights the materiality and spatiotemporal mediality of the recordings themselves. Recordings of poetic recitations, then, form one of a host of musico-sonic elements that Cooper integrates into his aesthetic palette as a means of evoking ideas about temporality, place, and the natural world, and in a manner which accentuates the intermedial relations between music, poetry, and sound recording in the digital age.

The Poet's Voice through the Archives: George Mackay Brown

Cooper was raised in Stromness, Orkney, and moved to the south-east of England in early adulthood (cf. O'Connell 2019). Though he now lives away from the Islands, many aspects of the production, promotion, and presentation of Cooper's music are linked to, or aim to cultivate a sense of, Orkney's geography and culture. The critic Robin Murray describes Cooper's work as "intertwined with the natural world," suggesting that the composer "carries a piece of Orkney within him" that he channels through his work in a manner that "seems to connect with a vast array of people" (2024, n.p.). This transmission of a sense of rooted place, of a faraway home, is partly achieved through musical materials, such as those which draw upon stylistic features of Scottish folk music, as well as through visual and audiovisual outputs that accompany his releases, some of which are filmed on the Islands. Moreover, Cooper often names tracks and album projects after dialect terms or Orkney locations: for example, his first solo album, *Solan Goose* (2018), takes its name from the Orcadian dialect term for the northern gannet (*Morus bassanus*), a seabird native to the Islands; and his second and third albums, *Sule Skerry* (2019) and *Hether Blether* (2020), are both named after islands

(one real, one fabled) associated with the archipelago. During live shows, Cooper sometimes encourages audiences to imagine the concert venue as a ferry crossing the sea between mainland Scotland and the Orkneys (cf. Seaman 2020). Similarly, he often uses bespoke lighting to conjure a sense of the sun rising over the horizon of the sea, doing so in conjunction with field recordings of natural phenomena such as storms.

As well as recordings of Orkney's natural landscape, the rich, lilting accents of the Islands' inhabitants can be heard throughout Cooper's solo oeuvre. For example, an archival recording of an Orkney resident recounting how he kept a short-eared owl as a pet in his youth is heard at the opening of Cooper's track "Cattie-Face" (from *Solan Goose*, 2018). The audible artifacts of the tape recording, produced to document an interview conducted by local historian Ann Marwick sometime during the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Freeman 2018; Marwick 2020), contribute to a distinct sense of an oral past being mediated to the present through sound. The effect, recalling Lane's argument that spoken-word material can be used in music and sound art to act as a "signifier to historical authenticity" (2006, 9), is one of genuine, intimate testimony linked inextricably to a specific, temporally distant culture (Orkney), one to which listeners are afforded access via recording. In this way, past sonic events are made audible to listeners in the present day, which may serve to bring these voices into critical consciousness.

In her typology of the spoken-word recordings often used by composers and sound artists, Lane classifies the audio sources into three imbricated strands: those in which "the words are initially scripted or scored," those that gather material from "everyday conversations or interviews," and those drawn "from pre-existing archival sources" (2006, 4–5). Marwick's "Cattie-Face" interview recordings might be said to straddle the latter two categories; but for what remains of this chapter, we deal with the final of Lane's types as it pertains to Cooper's album *Runes*: the harnessing of material – specifically, spoken-word poetry recordings – from the archive.

As noted above, in *Runes*, Cooper integrates recorded recitations of poems by Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown, creating an intermedial artifact which foregrounds its own materiality. Brown is regarded as one of Scotland's most accomplished poets of the twentieth century (cf. Bevan and Murray 2005a, xxii; Fergusson 2006). Much of his poetry presents fragments of stories pertaining to the culture and life of the Orkney Islands. His style has variously been described as blending "the laconic and aphoristic diction of his Norse inheritance with traditional folklore structures" (D'Arcy 1996, 247) and as striking "a fine balance of affection and sharp observation" (Fergusson 2006, 247) in language rich in symbolism and evocative of agricultural, religious, and Orcadian community life.

Brown's work received renewed prominence in 2021 with the centenary of his birth.

The recordings of Brown that are featured in *Runes* were made on reel-to-reel tape over several years by fellow Orkney resident, and later executor and editor of his poems, Archie Bevan (cf. "George Mackay Brown" n.d.). Originally released on vinyl in 1971 (Brown 1971), they can now be found online in digital form (via The Poetry Archive 2025), though still featuring the hiss and crackle of the playback medium – a feature to which we return below. The intermedial character of *Runes,* the relationships it manifests between poetic and musical expression, arises from the way in which this pre-existing spoken-word recording is interwoven with what is ostensibly a three-movement classical-crossover work for string ensemble.

The structure of *Runes* bears the mark of the poetry it features. Each of its three movements is titled with a section of the run-on couplet that ends Brown's poem "A Work for Poets": "Carve the runes [Mvt. 1] | Then be content [Mvt. 2] with silence [Mvt. 3]" (Brown 2005, 378). The same couplet is carved into his headstone as an epitaph (cf. Bevan and Murray 2005b, xix) and forms the title of Cooper's work. There is no regular pattern to the temporal or structural integration of the recited poetry and music: the recitations are extracts, often sectioned and distributed across musical movements. The first recitation is of "The Coat," the first verse of which is heard in "Mvt. 1 Pt. 2," and the second and third verse in "Mvt. 1 Pt. 3."[3] Elsewhere, poems are reordered and interspersed with each other: "Sea Orpheus" follows in "Mvt. 2 Pt. 1" and "Mvt. 2 Pt. 2," but beginning at its fifth section and being intersected by a complete rendition of the poetic miniature "Country Girl" ("Mvt. 2 Pt. 1"). The final recitation (in "Mvt. 3 Pt. 3") comprises the first four sections of the poem "From Stone to Thorn," incidentally one of the first of Brown's poems set to music by British composer and fellow Orkney resident Peter Maxwell Davies (cf. Crawford 2007, 23–25). The honed, austere statements characteristic of the poet's later style are foregrounded over a string accompaniment that provides temporal and motivic continuity. The central, "forward" placement of spoken word on an instrumental background is consistent with other studio music songwriting styles (cf. Dibben 2013, 113), though the two are closely integrated here through the use of specific techniques. For example, in "Mvt. 1 Pt. 2," the intake of breath and first entry of the voice forms the anacrusis to the string entry on the downbeat of "She *bowed* in her door" (from the first verse of "The

3 When listed on DSPs, the individual tracks on *Runes* are titled in a specific format, which includes a title that sometimes refers to Brown's poetic excerpts (e.g. "Then be Content (Mvt. 2): Pt. 2 'driftweed scored the strings'"). For the sake of brevity and consistency, we reduce the length of the track names when referring to them here (e.g. "Mvt. 2 Pt. 2").

Coat"; Brown 2005, 66, added emphasis); elsewhere, the recitation enters after a brief string introduction ("Mvt. 2 Pt. 1," from Brown's "Sea Orpheus"; cf. 2005, 68–69), or voice and strings start together as if the two are equal instrumental parts ("Mvt. 3 Pt. 3," from Brown's "Stations of the Cross"; cf. 2005, 178–192). In moments where words are notably absent, instrumental sound takes precedence – sometimes in the form of granular, gritty textures (e.g., "Mvt. 3 Pt. 1" and "Mvt. 3 Pt. 2") and other times as lush, orchestral crescendos ("Mvt. 2 Pt. 3") and elegiac melodies ("Mvt. 3 Pt. 2"). Throughout the work, then, there is evidence of the poetry becoming structurally interweaved with musical features, suggesting that the poetry is integrated into the musical object to a degree that extends beyond mere "voiceover."

Compositional techniques such as word-painting and obvious mimesis between words and music are used sparingly. For instance, a coolth of dissonance follows the mention of "a cold mermaid" ("Sea Orpheus," in Brown 2005, 68) in "Mvt. 2 Pt. 2"; and the strings sound out the metaphorical "dance" of life referenced in the recitation of Brown's "The Coat" in "Mvt. 1 Pt. 3" ("Between crib and coffin | You must dance in a beautiful coat"; 2005, 67) and conjure the image of the "lyrical tramp" ("The Poet"; 2005, 46) in "Mvt. 2 Pt. 2."

The visual images evoked by Brown's poetry – of a rural, community life based around fishing and farming (cf. Baker 2009, 136) – serve to frame the melodic contours and rhythms of solo violin lines as folk-like reels. The first words recited in *Runes* (from "The Coat") feature the characters of weaver and reaper, between them symbolic of both rural activity and beliefs about the end of life, and place the reader in a rural, coastal setting ("spindrift" referring to salty sea foam blown inland):

> She bowed in her door, all ripeness.
> The reaper went round and round.
> Wave after wave of bread
> Fell with a secret sound.
> She sent the shuttle flying,
> She laid the new cloth by,
> And through that yellow spindrift
> She sent a drowning cry.
> (Brown 2005, 66)

This sense of temporal and geographical location is bolstered by the recorded presence of the poet's Orcadian accent. Orcadians speak with a distinctive accent and Scots dialect (often referred to as "Orcadian" or "Insular Scots"), which derives partly from Norse and is sometimes described as having a lilting, rising intonation (cf. Heddle 2010, 53–54). The sound of Brown's voice is a marker of a place and, by extension, of the people whose lives are recounted in Brown's poetry. The

"work" that the recorded voice of the poet does here, then, is to place the listening imagination in a temporally ambiguous geographical location and community (Orkney), one rooted in a seemingly pre-industrial past made present by virtue of hearing the words spoken by the now-dead poet. This imbrication of Cooper's musical "present" and the poet's lyrical "past," both linked by their geographical and cultural connection to Orkney, speaks not only to the work's intermedial character but its foregrounding of the "liveness" and "deadness" of the various sonic materials – that is, as Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut would term it, its *intermundane* character (cf. 2010, 14): its bridging of the acoustically recorded "worlds" of the living and the dead. In doing so, the listener may be transported to a quasi-idealized "place" that sits somewhere between Brown's and Cooper's mediations of Orkney, suggestive of a culture apparently unblemished by the forces of urbanism and postmodernity, and one that emerges equivocally – even precariously – between the worlds of Orkney's (living) present and of its (dead) past.

On this account, the presence of Brown's own recorded voice performs a dual function in *Runes*: it serves to transport listeners to a place somewhere between the real and the imagined, the past and the present; and also, in its status as an archival recording, it brings a sense of historical "*vérité*" to the intermedial work. As Lane argues, for such "historical authenticity" and "authority" to be communicated effectively in a multimedia artwork, "[t]he voice must sound authentic in terms of the quality of the recording and the delivery of the words and indeed the accent of the speaker. It signifies a witness and it is a carrier of the past" (2006, 9). Brown's voice, then, adds gravitas to *Runes*; Cooper harnesses the poet's renown and the "depth" of his poetic verse, integrating his voice into the very fabric of the music in a manner that extends far beyond voiceover and, in turn, reveals the rich intermediality of the work.

Vinyl, Tape, Digital: (Inter)mediality and Materiality

Just as the verse and its performance in the poet's own voice may evoke for some the sense of an Orkney of times past, so too can the "vintage" sound of the recorded medium. Cultivating something of a retro aesthetic is at the core of Cooper's artistic ambitions: promotional photographs taken inside his London studio (cf., e.g., O'Connell 2019; Murray 2024) portray the composer surrounded by mid-century furnishings, and he consistently plays sound from large reel-to-reel tape machines onstage during live performances. Thinking specifically of *Runes*, such a vintage quality is perhaps most evident in Cooper's foregrounding of the materiality of the recorded medium itself: its technical devices of production and display (cf. Elleström 2021, 18). Its record sleeve depicts the "planted" master tape,

and much of the promotional material surrounding the release is focused on the novelty of its burial and subsequent impact on the sound of the recording. The mediality of the tape is also manifested sonically: throughout *Runes*, we hear the warp and bend of magnetic tape; and when Brown's recordings enter the texture, we hear the hiss, crackle, and bump of a needle on vinyl. As with all analog recordings, we can hear traces of the technologies used to produce them – sonic artifacts that litter the texture of the tape medium, producing an aged, warm tone, or traces of the analog "noise" of a record player's stylus passing across dust in the grooves of a vinyl disc. By foregrounding these sounds, Cooper draws attention to the status of the intermedial work as a collage of recordings, bringing with it the associations with the physicality of analog, material technologies.

As adduced above, Lane foregrounds the "quality" (2006, 9) of a recording in its transmission of a sense of authenticity. Similarly, musicologists including Stan Link (cf. 2001), Eric Clarke (cf. 2007), and Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen and Anne Danielsen (cf. 2016, Ch. 4) have drawn attention to the ways in which composers and producers have used the sound of recordings to varied aesthetic ends. In all such accounts, the focus is on the tension between the "noise" of analog technologies and the "clean" sound of digital recording technologies – what Brøvig-Hanssen and Danielsen term "digital silence," the advent of which "allowed for a contrast with the noise inherent in previous recording and playback media that had never before been possible, and thus suddenly made these sounds from the very recent past seem 'old'" (2016, 79). The analog–digital superimposition of certain popular music recordings might therefore be read as opening a critical and aesthetic dialogue between past and contemporary practices: "In terms of technological progress," writes Link, "noise is clearly 'backwards.' Much noise has been obviated by technological change, and retro filtering harkens back to an earlier time in a way that is obviously critical as well as functional" (2001, 36). Thinking in terms of the "critical" dimensions of such techniques, Clarke argues that the acoustic presence of analog noise "confers a certain authenticity on the sound": "A noisy sample specifies sounds that 'really happened,' a preserved and precious past" (2007, 56). Such sounds, then, may be heard as vestiges of an acoustic past grounded in the materiality of vinyl, magnetic tape, and related media (cf. Reynolds 2011, 329–330; Fisher 2013, 46). On these accounts, and drawing, too, from Lane's argument about the quality of spoken-word recordings, analog noise might be heard to denote historical authenticity, and it may in turn serve to mediate certain depths of meaning that are rendered otherwise "silent" via digital means.

In the case of *Runes*, mediality is foregrounded through the sonic signatures of both vinyl and magnetic tape. In "Mvt. 2 Pt. 1," the vinyl crackle accompanying the poet's voice places the sound firmly "in past tense" (Link 2001, 39) but is brought to life through the first-person, present-tense perspective of the poetic

miniature "Country Girl," which begins: "I make seven circles, my love | For your good breaking" (Brown 2005, 50). Later, as *Runes* draws to a close, the crackle heard at the end of "Mvt. 3 Pt. 4" is accompanied by the gentle thud of the needle cycling around the central groove of a vinyl disc, its audible revolutions foregrounding the materiality of the sound technology and bringing with it the "real," physical sense of the medium.

Thinking more generally about the timbral textures of the recording's mediality, it is as though all that we hear in *Runes* is in sepia tone (cf. Fisher 2013, 49), sonically akin to the subdued glow of an old photograph. The warmth offered by the album's mastering to magnetic tape is audible throughout, as are the sonic signatures of tape-hiss and pitch-bend. *Runes* opens (in "Mvt. 1 Pt. 1") with low-level recording hiss, over which solo violin and accompanying strings enter in an arrangement reminiscent of a classical concerto whose timbral clarity betrays the notion that the hiss we hear is an integral part of the string sound. When staged, Cooper is careful to realize this sonic world through the presence of a reel-to-reel tape player, which he visibly turns on at the beginning of the work to indicate its fundamental role in the overall texture of the work.

In the recording of *Runes*, the noise of the magnetic tape is most vivid and aesthetically central at the opening of "Mvt. 3 Pt. 1." The wider movement is titled "With Silence," so it appears both thematically and sonically significant that this "silence" manifests as the sound of the recording medium. Around 1'20" of rich, woody tape sound is marked in the score "*con la memoria* [with memory]," a name that Cooper includes in the track's title on DSPs. This further enhances the multimodal sense that we, as listeners, are reaching back through time, remembering and memorializing something spatiotemporally separate from us. Out of this near-silence emerges a glass-like texture of string harmonics, a *crescendo dal niente* that is initially imperceptible in its timbral similarity to the high-frequency hiss of the tape; a listener may not notice immediately that the strings have begun playing, requiring the dynamic to increase gradually over time to register the musico-sonic shift. It is at this point that the boundary between silence and sound is most unstable, in turn foregrounding the close interweaving of musical and non-musical sounds in the intermedial work.

The aesthetic imbrication of both musical sound and the "noise" of the recording medium is also reflected in Cooper's various attempts to simulate non-musical sounds in the instrumental writing. Throughout *Runes*, Cooper manipulates certain aspects of the musical materials to imitate both natural and technological sounds. For example, at the very opening ("Mvt 1. Pt. 1"), the upper strings emulate the sounds of gulls and waders through fast-paced, rhythmic *glissando* gestures redolent of birdsong, while the lower strings play in near-unison, gradually bending their pitches microtonally to replicate the sounds of a ship's horn

"bouncing and bending in the harbour" (as both score instructions and the DSP title of the track indicate). For much of *Runes*, the string arrangements are consonant and melodic with simple, memorable themes: they have clear, diatonic key centers and are performed in a style characteristic of much recent classical-crossover music, saturated with dynamic swells and fades, as well as regular use of *portamento* slides and expressive *vibrato*. However, this tonal certainty and timbral clarity is artfully destabilized at certain points. For example, at the very end of "Mvt. 2 Pt. 3," the soaring, filmically affective strings groan to an unsettling halt, their pitch wavering widely and slowly in a manner that seems to evoke the rural imagery of the track's DSP title ("walking through heather and peat"). In this way, the moments of pitch-bending appear conspicuous in their juxtaposition with the rich, steady timbres and textures of much of the work.

The figure of the pitch-bend also links to the "wow and flutter" signatures of the recorded medium – those irregular fluctuations in pitch that result from the material movement and/or slippage of magnetic tape. As suggested above, the tape medium is central to the identity of the work, and the detunings, *glissandi*, and microtonal dissonances of the string ensemble represent mimetic manifestations of the warp of degraded magnetic tape. Cooper's decision to imitate the sounds of magnetic tape even before planting the master in the ground speaks to the productive, iterative cyclicity of his "collaboration" with the natural world: he foreshadows the impact of the natural world on the recording in his own musicalized mimicry of the wow and flutter of the tape, even though when initially composing the music he was several steps "behind" the eventual mediation of the work by magnetic tape. In this way, Cooper not only imitates the sounds of both nature (e.g., birdsong) and technology (e.g., ships' horns) in the work but also their natural–technological interaction (i.e., the eventual sonic results of edaphic decomposition on the tape). In certain cases, then, a listener may be unable to perceive whether the pitch-bends they hear result from the impact of the soil on the material of the master tape or from Cooper's own compositional decisions and directions in the score. The outcome, then, is one in which the work's authorship is artfully blurred between the (human) composer and (nonhuman) collaborators, namely the recording mediums and their interaction with the Orkney soil.

The "planting" of the *Runes* master tape, then, has an important impact on its sonic character. However, as we have shown, this is just one dimension of the work's identity that accentuates its (inter)mediality. Magnetic tape is also crucial to the genesis of the work in other ways: Brown's poetry recordings were initially made using a four-speed tape machine (cf. Bevan in The Poetry Archive 2025, n.p.) before being mastered to vinyl. This vinyl was then digitized, with Cooper mixing the digital recordings into *Runes* before mastering it to tape and burying it. Later, Cooper digitized the unearthed tape for it to be uploaded to DSPs (or, in some

cases, mastered to vinyl). The chains of remediation (cf. Bolter and Grusin 1998) involved in Cooper's integration of Brown's poetry into *Runes* – from tape to vinyl to digital before Cooper, then from digital to tape to digital to vinyl in his own work – point to the knotty, hypermediated nature of the final digitized artifact. Accounting for the "remedial" genealogy of *Runes* serves to uncover the rich, complex archaeology of such intermedial works in the digital age, which draw upon layers of mediated meaning to produce new entanglements that straddle past and present, analog and digital, real and imagined.

Conclusion

In interpreting the intermediality of *Runes*, it is vital to consider how it binds together and problematizes all manner of structural binaries: the natural and cultural worlds of Orkney, musical and non-musical sounds, human and nonhuman agency, the present and the historic, and so on. Recall Cooper's own statement of intent cited in this chapter's opening: that *Runes* represents "a collaboration with time and the natural world" (Cooper, in Barbican Centre 2022, n.p.). We would suggest that the "sounding out" of the recording's materiality – just one aspect of its complex mediality – situates Orkney in a partly real, partly imagined past in a manner which draws attention to temporalities both human and geological in scale, as so vividly symbolized in the human–earth co-composition of the "planted" master tape. In this way, it is difficult not to read environmentalist import into the work's reverie on time, especially when attending closely to the intricate mediation of meaning in the interplay of Brown's poetry, his voice recordings, and the musico-sonic tapestry of Cooper's work. Emerging from the intermedial integration of poetry, music, and sound technology, together with the visual and promotional materials accompanying the release, is an environmental aesthetics that multiply underscores the close relationship between human cultures and the natural world while foregrounding the impact of analog technology on our experiences of music and poetry in the twenty-first century.

All media are multimodal, and the shared aspects of poetry–music relationships are well established. However, we have argued here that Cooper's *Runes* is noteworthy for its intermediality: it draws attention to and employs the material and spatiotemporal modalities of recorded poetry and music to an aesthetic that invites listeners to reflect on ideas about historical authenticity, human–nature relationships, and the passage of time. By focusing on the mediation of meaning by the inclusion of archival poetry recordings and the foregrounding of sound-technological mediality, we have suggested that Cooper's use of poetry in his crafting of an intermedial artwork appears fairly unusual; while it can be seen as

rooted in established practices of incorporating spoken-word recordings into music, what distinguishes Cooper's creative practice is that these are specifically recordings of *poetry*. As a consequence, the voice and identity of the speaker and the community they represent are foregrounded, evoking place through accent as well as poetic content. Moreover, in *Runes,* the compositional techniques outlined above harness the material and spatiotemporal modalities of recorded music and poetry to specific aesthetic ends: the human-scale temporality of individual lives whose existence spans a specific moment in time are presented alongside the geological-scale temporality of the natural landscape. One interpretation of these intertextual relationships is their signification of an individual, finite, lived experience of a specific (Orcadian) natural and cultural landscape which is framed by a beyond-the-human timescale. The sonic worlds of *Runes*, then, may encourage listeners to contemplate temporality both in terms of, and beyond the realms of, human subjectivity, with the potential to induce critical reflection on place-based environmental themes.

Beyond its relevance to the environmental crisis, the inclusion of poetry in *Runes* has particular significance in its twenty-first-century context. Notably, *Runes* draws attention to certain aspects of the mediatedness of the intermedial artifact while trying to hide others: for example, the foregrounding of the analog in the self-conscious presentation of vintage equipment on stage and in sound sits alongside the not-so-staged use of digital technologies for the production and dissemination of Cooper's music. Moreover, this twenty-first-century intermedial practice sits uncomfortably within the mainstream modes of digital dissemination via DSPs. For example, Cooper's music appears in two forms on Spotify: one with the poetic recitations included, and one without, as this allows Cooper's instrumental versions to occupy the functional niches which characterize DSPs (in this case, tailored for editorially curated playlists that invite background, ambient listening). So, while from a critical perspective one might argue that the poetry is fundamental to the music, it is also easily removed to produce instrumental, ambient backdrops that fit into the mainstream consumption practices curated by DSPs.

In addition, Cooper's creative practice harnesses anachronistic tendencies of traditional poetic recitation as part of an aesthetic bound up with time and retrospection. In *Runes*, recorded recited poetry is framed as an "antiquated" medium in the digital age. From this perspective, the "anachronism" of recited poetry in the twenty-first century, particularly in the form of recordings recited by a now-deceased poet, forms part of a vintage aesthetic but one which also brings with it the "authority" and "authenticity" associated with the recorded voice (Lane 2006, 9). Yet from another perspective, it presents this poetry as still "relevant" to listeners of contemporary digital musics and connects such apparently outdated media

forms with contemporary poetic recitation practices. As noted, Cooper can be regarded as bringing poetry to audiences via DSPs, but there exists a tension between the analog live performances which present the intermediality of poetry and music together and what is required for discoverability on DSPs. In this respect, Cooper is one of a generation of composers adapting to the ever-increased digitization of the music industry.

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