

RESEARCH REPORT

Rationale and Neurodivergence: Reflections on, and Repercussions of, the Quintessence Project

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In Autumn 2003, under a previous name, I published a research report in this journal, entitled ‘The Quintessence Project: Re-envisioning Mediaeval Music through the Lens of Electroacoustic Technology.’¹ The report detailed the beginnings of an effort to blend historically informed performance practice (specifically of Gregorian chant) with improvisatory techniques, scaffolded by electroacoustic ‘found sound’ techniques including looping, filtering and granulation.

Eighteen years later, I am privileged to find myself in a position to write another research report for *Context*. The Quintessence Project, it eventuates, has had profound and lifelong applications for my practice as a performer, and its techniques continue to inform my compositional, experimental, cross-media and advocacy work to such an extent that my chosen name reflects the project’s. The first aim of this report is to be part retrospective, part progress report, and part mapping out of the next iteration of the Quintessence Project.

My second aim is to show that ‘why’ we make work is of central importance to any life lived in service of making. Our individual stories, in turn, are crucial to understanding our individual ‘why’, and cannot be left untold in any research report that hopes to make sense of creative work. Who we are informs what we make.

¹ Helen Thomson, ‘The Quintessence Project: Re-envisioning Mediaeval Music through the Lens of Electroacoustic Technology,’ *Context* 25 (2003): 77–81.

The Quintessence Project's Development

After completing my Masters degree at the University of Melbourne in mid-2003, I embarked on an eight-year stint as a full-time professional solo and ensemble performer in Europe. In furtherance of the Quintessence Project, I studied sonology at the Royal Conservatoire in the Hague, and took up multiple residencies in electroacoustic music-making at STEIM (Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music, in Amsterdam) in parallel to a broad range of other musical work. My improvisation practice has become well established both as a historically informed performer-as-composer,² and in new music contexts. I owe thanks for the former to Gregory Dikmans and Stephen Grant, who were inspiring educators in these areas during my Master's, and set me up wonderfully well for the stellar list of early music outfits and directors in Europe with whom I was privileged, subsequently, to work—notably, the wild talent of Netherlands-based Jörn Boysen, Artistic Director of Musica Poetica.

While still in Europe, I received Australia Council funding to compose and record a CD of my own compositions, and thus *meditatio/xv* came about. Making this recording was a watershed moment in the Quintessence Project, representing as it did an opportunity to use the electroacoustic techniques I had been working with to create new music with a high production value. The work incorporates a basis in the Gregorian chant Mass XV ('Dominator Deus'),³ crossing into—and over—Zen meditations, with a third, new-composed voice created using live electroacoustic manipulation of the two acoustic lines. I was fortunate to work with Grand Master of Shakuhachi, Riley Lee, as collaborator and counterpoint to my own voice.

Since my return to Australia, I have been generously supported in continuing to develop a genuinely spur-of-the-moment historically informed ornamentation practice by my Baroque quartet, Sequenza. In terms of more avant-garde free improvisation, I continue to work on refining the Quintessence Project. In 2019, I undertook a residency at Salamanca Arts Centre as part of the HyPe Hybrid Performance Program in order to develop a surround /spatialisation scheme and a cymatics rig to articulate into Quintessence-based soundbaths. Cymatics is defined as 'the study of wave phenomena, esp[ecially] sound, and their visual representations.'⁴ In my case, I was looking for an aesthetically pleasing means of making sound visible. With considerable help from Dylan Sheridan, I rigged up a system to capture, via webcam and ceiling projection, coherent light wave patterns produced by sound travelling through a subwoofer into a bowl of water. I am currently developing an endurance performance format that relies heavily on the live sound manipulation and multi-instrumentalism of Quintessence's origins. I will say more about this below.

In parallel, I received composition and arranging commissions from such diverse outfits as Sequenza, Van Diemen's Band, the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra, Canberra's Oriana Chorale, the Festival of Voices, QTas Choir (Tasmania's choir for LGBTIQ+ community and allies) and, in particular, Gap in the Fence productions. These have afforded me creative space and funds to complete works ranging from songs for community choir, to *A Tasmanian Requiem* (2018): a

² For an elucidation of this term, see David Fuller, 'The Performer as Composer,' in *Performance Practice: Music after 1600*, ed. Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1989), 130–39.

³ Based on the original Gregorian chant as found, for example, in the *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei* and *Credo IV* of *Gregorian Missal* (Solesmes: St Peter's Abbey, 1990), 125–27, 141–44.

⁴ *Collins English Dictionary*, s.v. 'Cymatics,' <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cymatics>.

full-length concert requiem for brass quintet, percussion and vocal septet, dealing with the grief and loss that is the continuing legacy of the Black War in Tasmania.⁵ I also continue to perform regularly; I have held (and in some cases, continue to hold) several musical directorships, and I lecture in classical voice at the University of Tasmania.

Crucially, as my career has progressed, I have come to understand my own context, challenges and capacity. I am determined, here, to break the rule that says personal perspectives do not belong in research papers, at least in the case of documenting creative research processes (the concept of breaking down distinctions between the academic, the creative and the personal as a necessary act of decolonisation is a paper for another day). On the contrary, I believe the work and research journey of every creative rests squarely on their personal story. The story that underpins a large chunk of my artistic practice today is about how my own lived experience fed into a drive to make my creative practice serve (to the greatest extent possible) to advocate for positive, needful change.

Continuities

The above career precis should make it clear that a lot of the original fascinations that informed my embarking on the Quintessence Project have proved to have remarkable longevity. I am still a career musician, despite having tried unsuccessfully, on more than one occasion, to turn away. I am still deeply motivated by a desire to innovate and cultivate a multifaceted practice. Gregorian chant remains among my ‘first and forever’ musical loves. I also remain passionate about improvisation as a musical form and technique, both as a part of an ongoing interest in historically informed performance practice, and as a less bounded, new music-driven creative practice. I continue, on a regular basis, to use live sound manipulation techniques as part of my creative kit. I even still use some of the same software—Ross Bencina’s *Audiomulch*⁶ and Miller Puckette’s *PD*⁷—for digital signal processing. As one would hope, however, a great many other aspects of my work have developed and progressed since the publication of ‘The Quintessence Project’ in 2003, and the rest of this report documents that development.

Changes

I am particularly struck by this paragraph in the opening part of my original report:

My agenda was to rehabilitate chant, or adaptations of chant, as concert repertoire; to recast Mediæval music using modern techniques; and, if possible, to do these things as a solo performer.⁸

Listener interest in Gregorian chant has seen a significant renaissance, rescued from long obscurity by contemporary marketing and dissemination techniques. Beginning with the cleverly-marketed release by pop labels of albums like *Chant* (1994) and Enigma’s *MCMXC A.D.* (1990),⁹ Gregorian chant was repopularised in the context of a zeitgeist of spirituality and

⁵ More information on the Black War in Tasmania can be found in Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2013).

⁶ ‘AudioMulch,’ *AudioMulch Interactive Music Studio*, <http://www.audiomulch.com>.

⁷ ‘Software by Miller Puckette,’ *University of California San Diego*, <http://msp.ucsd.edu/software.html>.

⁸ Thomson, ‘Quintessence Project,’ 78.

⁹ Kory Grow, ‘Flashback: Spanish Monks Ignite Gregorian “Chant”-Mania,’ *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 15 Mar. 2019.

'relaxation listening'; handily, this popularity coincided with the beginnings of the internet. Subsequently, online music streaming services have changed the landscape of music listening completely, and forever. Though arguably not great news from the point of view of fair pay for artists' work, the fact that online music streaming platforms feature a huge catalogue of instantly-accessible online music across every genre—with clever algorithms to direct listeners sideways to similar work according to work they have enjoyed previously—has meant that users listen much more widely, and much more according to their own taste. In general, those who appreciate a sparse, slow and monodic soundworld are bound to delight in chant. So, I owe a great measure of my success as a performer of, and educator in, Gregorian chant, to modern techniques of disseminating the work.

I will admit to a little embarrassment that my twenty-something-year-old self thought that as towering a form as Gregorian chant might be in need of rehabilitation, by me or anyone. It is a testament to chant's power as a musical form in its own right that its structures and melodies underpin Western art music to such an enormous extent. It is so robust and rich a basis for composition that it has been so used throughout the ages, and still is now, by me, among many others. However, I have long since ceased to be under any misapprehension that my use of Gregorian chant as a compositional basis is for chant's benefit; on the contrary, it is entirely my humble good fortune to be able to hang my work on such a mighty underpinning.

Late-diagnosed Neurodivergence

When I began my foray into live electroacoustic manipulation of found sound, my confidence in myself as being socially competent to work fruitfully with others was at an all-time low. I did not realise it at the time, but this was because I am autistic,¹⁰ and the unspoken yet highly codified 'dos and don'ts' of professional social interaction were extremely perplexing for me.

This is relevant for a few reasons. Over the course of my career, I have come to realise that, due to being autistic, mine is and always will be an outlier's perspective. This is both a great gift, and quite disabling; my unique brain plays equally into highly developed and sometimes quite niche skills and disastrous stumbling blocks. It has made me the artist that I am but it has also prevented me from being the artist that I could be. The crucial factor is that, even before it became clear to me that I was profoundly 'not like other folks', being neurodivergent had an impact on my rationale for making creative work that increased over time. This rationale only became clearer the better I came to understand myself.

I am struck, in my original report, by my rationale for embarking on the Quintessence Project. I wanted to carve out a successful career niche by positioning myself as cool, innovative and unique, while calling on strong and beautiful ancient meditative forms. More importantly, my unstated rationale was that I wanted to evade the awkwardness of working with people, whose behaviour and communication styles often baffled or frustrated me.

My present rationale for creative work, on the other hand, feels much more clearly articulated, meaningful, and honest. Being neurodivergent is still centrally relevant, but I am now more than happy to name it explicitly; my 'why', in all its vulnerability, is something that I am proud to own. Everything I do is underpinned by an extremely strong drive to advocacy

¹⁰ My experience of receiving an autistic diagnosis well into adulthood is reasonably typical, according to research now being done into neurodivergence in people assigned female at birth. See Hannah Devlin, 'Thousands of Autistic Girls and Women "Going Undiagnosed" Due to Gender Bias,' *Guardian*, 15 Sep. 2018.

through making, and the discovery of my neurotype is the means by which I have realised this. The progression from my confused, mid-twenties self to where I am now has happened in three broad phases.

The Solo Work Experiment (Partly) Fails

I swiftly discovered that working alone is different from, as opposed to easier than, working with others. There are rewards associated with the rigours of self-motivation, the lack of a sounding board, the fact that one's only source of real-life inspiration is one's own idea set and the hours of sitting alone in a room trying to make work, but playing with others is, in many ways, both richer and easier. So, having spent a year in the Netherlands earnestly gathering skills and knowledge in service of the Quintessence Project, my aims quickly morphed in favour of a practice comprising both alone-work and work with others.

Developing the Mask

To work successfully with others, I needed to find a better way to navigate the social aspects of doing so. Like so many other autistic people, I was already in the business of developing and, over the course of my career, becoming increasingly proficient at using a suite of masking techniques. Autistic masking is the process by which an autistic person modifies their behaviour and responses in order to be better received by allistic people.¹¹ Masking is, for the autistic person, a technique that yields extremely mixed results. It is, undeniably, effective: it helps one make their way in the world and do the things about which they are passionate. Masking is also mortally exhausting, leading, often, to a phenomenon called autistic burnout, typically occurring in an autistic person's thirties or forties,¹² sometimes with disastrous consequences. Finally, the near-universal societal expectation that autistic people will mask for the benefit of allistic people is a poignant example of systemic injustice. It speaks to a world that assumes that autistic modes of communication and interaction are inherently unacceptable, whereas allistic modes of such, because they are used by the majority, are optimal and to be emulated. One only need look to examples of strong, uncompromising voices of autistic individuals such as Greta Thunberg to have an inkling that the above attitude is as reductivist as it is suspect.

Falling Apart, and Rebuilding

For many years before my own autistic burnout, I had refused to own the extent of my own struggles, woundings, and disenfranchisement. I lied, as much to myself as anyone else, pushing myself to perform the 'successful, happy, queer, quirky, yet lovable, reliable, unflappable professional' in every waking moment, in the face of increasing exhaustion and dysfunction. When the bill for this precarious overextension ultimately fell due, I had racked up an enormous personal energy debt.

In mid-2018, in the wake of the production run of *A Tasmanian Requiem*—successfully executed, extremely well received, gigantic, thematically significant, and easily the most

¹¹ One account of this phenomenon and its costs can be found in Eilidh Cage and Zoe Troxell-Whitman, 'Understanding the Reasons, Contexts and Costs of Camouflaging for Autistic Adults,' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49, no. 5 (2019): 1899–911.

¹² The beginnings of qualitative research into autistic burnout can be found in Dora M. Raymaker, et al., 'Having All of Your Internal Resources Exhausted Beyond Measure and Being Left with No Clean-Up Crew,' *Autism in Adulthood* 2, no. 2 (2020): 132–43.

challenging piece of creative work I have ever undertaken, both in terms of my craft, and interpersonally—I ran, all at once and catastrophically, out of capacity. I was forcibly unmasked, and had to own myself as traumatised, extremely anxious, uncontrollably reactive and plagued by a raft of acute sensory processing issues. I could no longer get decent sleep, concentrate, switch from one task to another, tolerate noise or interruptions, or concatenate even moderately straightforward chains of tasks (for example, making a non-instant coffee). All my creative work stopped dead.

I am still, three years later, in a long process of recovery. For me, recovery is—among other things—about re-learning how to self-regulate, and coming to understand what kinds of activities and behaviours come at an unacceptable energy cost. A lot of the masking strategies I had been using before burnout failed this cost versus benefit test, and so I am consciously in the process of stripping them away. This means I am becoming blunter, queerer (or at least, queerer-presenting), less gender-binary, more likely to ask for accommodations, and in general less apologetic about the ways in which I am different. My assistance dog makes the fact that I am dealing with psychosocial challenges palpable. This is both a blessing and a curse—which is, I suppose, fitting, for someone whose professional life is a paradoxical mix of repeatedly being pulled into leadership roles on the one hand, and just wanting to get cool things made and into the world on the other. The whole ‘unmasking’ process feels, often, like sticking my head above the parapet and asking to be shot down, particularly in the rather conservative world of classical music. Happily, so far in this journey, my peers, mentors and students alike have been wonderfully supportive and accepting.

What I Learned

The blessing in disguise is that being so suddenly unable to function put the rationale for the work I had been striving to do over the past several years into very sharp perspective. Almost all the compositional work I had been doing for years was advocacy driven; this drive, in turn, was informed by a long-occluded conviction that it was incumbent on me to advocate, through my own story, for myself and for other queer people, gender nonconforming people, disabled people, and neurodivergent people. From there, it seems logical also to leverage my privilege as a well-educated, white, European-descended person with relatively secure housing and finances, to (carefully, with a lot of listening) advocate for other disenfranchised communities—and not just people; to advocate for protecting, at all cost, the planet on which we all depend.

With advocacy through making as my motivation, I have been able, for the first time in my life, to own my job as a maker without embarrassment or apology. It has been immensely freeing, even as, I fear, it commits me to a life of periodically overextending (and risking reinjury or further damage) in an effort to ‘be the change’.

What is Next for the Quintessence Project?

How, then, do I press the Quintessence Project, practiced and refined and experimented with over decades, into the service of advocacy? I take as my model the aforementioned Greta Thunberg, whose school strikes for climate change began as long sit-ins mounted by Greta—doggedly, over months and in all weathers—herself, a lone voice in an urban wilderness. My hope is that I may bring that same doggedness, that same clarity of message and strength of call to action, to an endurance run of work which rests squarely on the foundation I envisaged

eighteen years ago in the Quintessence Project. By seeking to advocate through the making of both auditory and visual art in a public, durational setting, I hope that my own call to action might be strengthened by being beautiful, as well as potentially uncomfortable, to witness. I hope to move people at the heart level, rather than seeking to persuade through rhetoric alone.

Bowerbird, workshopped under the mentorship of Brian Ritchie at Tasmania Performs' incredibly useful Tarraleah residency in 2020, will have its premiere iteration in Salamanca Square in September 2021. It will occur with the generous support of the City of Hobart, and in partnership with TasPride's 2021 Artfully Queer exhibition. A further iteration using a different location, framework and materials will take place as part of Mona Foma in January 2022.

Over a number of weeks, I will be improvising a soundscape for four hours a day, five days a week. My instruments will be voice, live sound manipulation, violone and extended percussion. In parallel with that making, I will also be creating a sculpture that encloses me in my performance space. My 'bower' at Salamanca Square will be made of locally harvested unspun sheep and alpaca fleece, which I will hand-twist and crochet into a series of interlocking lacework patterns and attach to the infamous Christmas Tree. My theme will be 'Home', informed by the current pandemic and its implications for our sense of home as a safe place. At Mona Foma, I will develop a different theme, material-set for a weaving-in which points that theme up, and frame, this time a geodesic dome.

For both performances, I will be using theme-relevant, crowdsourced lyrics, which I will harvest in real time from a live stream. The stream will be two-way: I will livestream a video of the entire event, in order to provoke input of lyrical material, as well as to engage remote audiences and document my process. I hope also to make a time-lapse video of each iteration of the work.

My hope is that *Bowerbird*, from these foundational outings, will continue to happen at intervals in different locations, and advocate for various needful changes, over the course of the rest of my career. I plan to invest in my own dome, which can be mounted and demounted by a single person, in order to create a continuity of physical framework that will give this work an aspect of brand recognition. Within that frame, the themes and weaving-in materials will change over time according to location, and what needs saying most pressingly. This last is somewhat hard to predict; who knew, for example, that the major preoccupation of the world in mid-2021 would be a virus?

Over time, with enough iterations of the work, my intention is that an oddly compelling meta-work may slowly emerge from the resulting patchwork, and that my own journey in this work will document, I do earnestly hope, gradual movement in good directions.

About the Author

Quin (formerly Helen) Thomson is a composer, classically trained soprano, multi-instrumentalist, improviser, live sound designer, musical director, and advocate through making. They have performed extensively both in Australia and internationally, and their compositions have been performed by the QTas Choir, the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra, the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra Chorale and Percussion Ensemble, and Canberra's Oriana Chorale. Quin directs the TYO Chorale and lectures in Classical Voice at the Conservatorium of Music, University of Tasmania.