

# Joshua Fineberg

# **SONIC FICTIONS**

1	L'abîme (2015-16)	16:36
	Talea Ensemble	
2	just as much entangled with other matter (2013)	10:01
	Pascal Contet	
3	La Quintina (2011-12)	18:58
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4	Objets trouvés (2008-09)	17:38
	Argento Chamber Ensemble	
Total <sub>l</sub>	playing time	63:15

# **Joshua Fineberg: Sonic Fictions**

In the past ten years—since his multimedia opera *Lolita* (2005–08)—Joshua Fineberg has described the majority of his compositions as "sonic fictions." What does it mean for music to be "fictional"? Arguably, all composed works could be seen as fictions in the sense that they are creations of the imagination, but we rarely apply the term to music—with the possible exception of the Romantic tone poem or Mahler's novel-symphonies. There are precedents in spectral and post-spectral music for the creation of "unreal" reflections of nature: consider Gérard Grisey's description of instrumental synthesis sonorities as "mutants of contemporary music" or Philippe Hurel's fascination with *trompe l'oreille* effects. Many of Fineberg's spectral works of the 1990s and early 2000s (like those of his mentor Tristan Murail) explore correspondences and analogies with the non-musical world, reflecting aspects of subatomic physics (*Broken Symmetries*), Zen rock gardens (« *Receuil de pierre et de sable* »), and the chaotic mathematics of fluid dynamics (*Streamlines*).

But in his sonic fictions, Fineberg is not interested in programmatic approaches or the musical modeling of nature. These works are not built around narrative, realism, or mimicry, but rather are indebted to modernist writing that explicitly draws attention to its own fictitiousness. Writers such as Joyce, Beckett, and Borges create an explicitly layered and multivalent discourse, in which reality is "shaped and manipulated" through different subjectivities, presented in an openly artificial frame. To Fineberg, a sonic fiction is not merely a counterfactual construction in sounds but rather "an acoustic perceptual object that is constantly being shaped and manipulated by authorial and interpretive voices."

The idea of sonic fiction emerged from the composer's intense engagement with the novels of Vladimir Nabokov while writing *Lolita*. Nabokov's own penchant for unreliable narrators—Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* is simultaneously the novel's antihero and its dominating, distorting voice—illustrates one way of presenting plot and character through a warped fictional frame. In Fineberg's *Lolita*, the "sung" voices heard by the audience are all electronic "reflections" of the narrator's speaking voice, transformed by the computer through source-filter analysis and synthesis. This technique (developed at the Paris research center IRCAM) allows the pairing of the narrator's vocalizations with new, artificial vocal tracts that transform his voice into different characters. As Fineberg writes, "These voices are not intended to sound like the voices of 'real' singers. However, they should not sound like electronic transformations either. They are meant to evoke the unreality and strangeness of a fantasy, the sound of voices in our heads." The music makes manifest Humbert's delusions, capturing his misrepresentations of the world and people around him (including the unfortunate Dolores Haze.).

The first work on the present recording, *L'abîme* (2015–16), is a rich example of Fineberg's approach towards sonic fictionalization. Written for the Talea Ensemble, the work sets up a unique layout of spatially separated and functionally distinct groups: three soloists—clarinet/bass clarinet (Marianne Gythfeldt), bassoon (Adrian Morejon), and cello (Chris Gross)—are complemented by an on-stage ensemble (flute, oboe, piano, violin, and percussion) and three off-stage instruments located at the back of the hall (horn, viola, double bass). While the complex extended playing techniques of the soloists "are the source of almost everything one hears" (in terms of their spectral frequency content), these source sounds "are projected, distorted, diffused and replicated in the mostly pitch-based ensemble parts, like images reflected again and again in a hall of mirrors."

This notion of distorted reflection is an essential part of the sonic fiction of  $L'ab\hat{n}me$ . The on-stage ensemble provides a second degree of remove from the source sounds of the soloists, comparable to the distancing techniques of Nabokov. As Fineberg notes, "In a novel or film one doesn't just have plot or character, one also has the linguistic and narrative tools and structures used to represent or 'misrepresent' whatever is the subject of the fiction." Though on the surface, the "noisy" soloists and "pitched" ensemble inhabit very different sound worlds, one is in fact the reflection of the other. The off-stage trio contributes to the "fictional frame" that subtly alters the perception of the foreground, on-stage musicians: often, this trio provides a slowly sliding ascent or descent, reminiscent of the endless trajectory of a Shepard-Risset glissando. The title,  $L'ab\hat{n}me$  ("The abyss"), has unique resonances in French: the "abyss" it conjures is less an empty void than a hall of endless reflections (*mise en abîme*), "a kaleidoscope of doubles and resemblances."

The second work, *just as much entangled with other matter* (2013), develops a sonic fiction in the more intimate sphere of a solo piece with electronics, written for and dedicated to the virtuoso accordionist Pascal Contet. The title is excerpted from a passage in William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) that discusses the impossibility of developing a perfectly abstract concept divorced from concrete objects and sensations. Much as we might seek to analyze and isolate pure essences, James writes, "colors, sounds, smells, are just as much entangled with other matter as are more formal elements of experience, such as extension, intensity, effort, pleasure, difference, likeness, harmony, badness, strength, and even consciousness itself." We can imagine abstractions only imperfectly and approximately, he argues, as they are always embedded in real-world objects and sensations.

As in L'abîme, spatialization is essential to the work's conception. The sparse, elegant electronics are realized through pianissimo "hidden playback." In live performance, the electronic part is played back on synchronized smartphones hidden among the audience: diffuse and difficult to localize, it is based on the manipulation of very high accordion tones giving the colorless, pure impression of sine tones. Starting at the top B-flat of the piano's keyboard, a single, indefinitely sustained tone slides gradually downward, taking more than three minutes to traverse a whole tone. Moving so slowly that the change is virtually imperceptible. this tone is paradoxically both stable and instable at once. After this first slow, descending glissando, the tone splits into two, then fravs into multiple strands. each with their own gradually changing trajectory. Rather than a foregrounded element (as in the works of Alvin Lucier for solo instrument or ensemble with sinewave sweeps), the electronic part of just as much entangled with other matter is often barely audible, masked by loud clusters from the accordion or blending imperceptibly into the acoustic spectrum of the live notes. The sustained electronic sounds play a vital role in re-contextualizing the live musical discourse, altering the perception of the performance by placing it in a new perceptual frame, sometimes clearly audible and sometimes vanishing into the background.

La Quintina (2011–12), was written for the Arditti Quartet with live electronics by IRCAM (Greg Beller) and the SWR ExperimentalStudio Freiburg (Joachim Haas). The guiding metaphor for the work is a unique style of Sardinian singing by the Confraternità de Castelsardo, as described by ethnomusicologist Bernard Lortat-Jacob. This tradition is carried on by quartets of four male singers, who perform in Holy Week services. The singers huddle closely together, their arms around each others' shoulders. As their voices blend and they carefully shape their vowels and intonation, upper harmonics combine to produce la quintina ("the little fifth one") a ghostly, feminine voice considered as a manifestation of the Virgin Mary. This is not a combination tone, but an emergent, illusory effect: what psychoacoustician

Albert Bregman would call a "chimeric" phenomenon, the illusory recognition of a sound source through the regrouping of parts of other sounds.

The string quartet of *La Quintina* is arranged similarly in a close, inward-facing circle, their attention directed towards each other rather than towards the audience. Lead practice mutes make the acoustic sounds produced by the quartet very faint and barely audible in the hall—but their playing is captured by close-placed microphones that relay their sound to a computer for processing, transformation, and diffusion in the hall. The electronics are entirely based on live processing—particularly the technique of source-filter synthesis already used by Fineberg in *Lolita*. The muted string sounds captured by the microphones are paired with new spectral envelopes, a live timbral transformation which clothes the source sounds in artificial timbres based on string and voice models. The results vary from near verisimilitude ("a string quartet wearing a string quartet costume") to more abstract and phantasmagorical effects as the muted strings are overshadowed by their electronic doppelgangers, a transformed image broadcast from the speakers in the hall. We could see this as a fictionalization of the quartet, a projection of their private, almost inaudible playing into a surreal virtual space.

The work starts with microtonal variants around the tuning A (440 Hz), invoking the familiar on-stage tuning ritual but soon moving into a complex musical discourse, largely based on four-part chords (as in the Sardinian polyphony). These chords are often microtonal variants of major triads, with pure triads shining through the texture at major arrival points. The cello often imitates the sliding, melismatic chant of the vocal ensemble's bass, who enters before the other members of the quartet and drifts in pitch until he finds the most resonant *chiave* (key) for the performance space.

The fourth and final work presented here is also the oldest: *Objets trouvés* (2008–09), played here by New York's Argento Chamber Ensemble.

Written shortly after *Lolita*, Fineberg's emerging idea of "sonic fiction" is exemplified by the re-framing and re-contextualization of a few carefully selected "objects"—sustained chords, homorhythmic repeated-note melodies, flutter-tongue/tremolo bursts—repeated cyclically and transformed over the span of the piece. The piano often takes on a central role in these translations, frequently in a dialogue with the instrumental ensemble where the two blend into one another.

The French phrase "objets trouvés" has meanings both prosaic (a lost property office) and rarified (the use of everyday objects in visual art through collage or assemblage). In this work, Fineberg draws on the idea of recontextualizing a familiar object through its placement in a new setting, like a packet of Gauloises in a Robert Motherwell collage. This shift can transform the object from the everyday to the exquisite. Such re-framing is an important part of Fineberg's idea of sonic fiction: "music, with its unique ability to alter time and attention" can directly shape the listener's attention and focus in a way that static visual artworks cannot, adding a layer of authorial interpretation and manipulation to the experience of the artwork. The rich and quasi-electronic sound world of *Objets trouvés* builds up a compelling drama from these cycles of twisted, altered objects, a constantly shifting terrain both strange and familiar at once.

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# The performers

The **Talea Ensemble** has been labeled "...a crucial part of the New York cultural ecosphere" by the New York Times. Recipient of the 2014 CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, the ensemble has given many important world and US premieres of new works by composers including Pierre Boulez, Georges Aperghis, Olga Neuwirth, John Zorn, Unsuk Chin, Brian Ferneyhough, Beat Furrer, and Pierluigi Billone. Talea has performed at Lincoln Center Festival, Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt, Warsaw Autumn, Wien Modern, Contempuls, Newport Jazz Festival, Royaumont (France), and Art Summit Indonesia (Jakarta). Radio broadcasts of performances have been heard on ORF (Austria), HRF (Germany), and WQXR's Q2.

As an active collaborator of new music Talea has joined forces with the Austrian Cultural Forum, Consulate General of Denmark, Korean Cultural Service NY, Italian Cultural Institute, and the Ukrainian Institute. Assuming an ongoing role in supporting and collaborating with student composers, Talea has been a guest ensemble at Columbia University, Harvard University, Stanford University, Ithaca College, Cornell University and New York University. Talea has recorded works on Wergo, Living Artists Label, Gravina Musica, Tzadik, Innova, and New World Records.



For over 20 years, **Pascal Contet** has been a leader for the creation of contemporary music, and a pioneer of the genre in France. With the creation of around 300 new works to his name, he has collaborated with many composers, including Luciano Berio, Bernard Cavanna, Joshua Fineberg (USA), Jean Françaix, Bruno Mantovani, and Martin Matalon.

Following his private study in France, Contet continued his musical studies in Fribourg (CHE), the Hanover Academy of Music with Elisabeth Moser, the Copenhagen Royal Conservatory (DNK), and the Graz Academy of the Arts (AUT) with Mogens Ellegaard.

A recipient of numerous awards and the laureate of many foundations for his work as a soloist, chamber musician, and for his recordings, Contet has collaborated with a wide variety of artists in diverse fields of expertise, from theater to electronic music, to create new and innovative music and mixed media productions.



The Arditti Quartet enjoys a world-wide reputation for their spirited and technically refined interpretations of contemporary and earlier 20th century music. Many hundreds of string quartets and other chamber works have been written for the ensemble since its foundation by first violinist Irvine Arditti in 1974. Many of these works have left a permanent mark on 20th century repertoire and have given the Arditti Quartet a firm place in music history. World premieres of quartets by composers such as Abrahamsen, Ades, Andriessen, Aperghis, Birtwistle, Britten, Cage, Carter, Denisov, Dillon, Dufourt, Dusapin, Fedele, Ferneyhough, Francesconi, Gubaidulina, Guerrero, Harvey, Hosokawa, Kagel, Kurtag, Lachenmann, Ligeti, Maderna, Manoury, Nancarrow, Reynolds, Rihm, Scelsi, Sciarrino, Stockhausen and Xenakis and hundreds more show the wide range of music in the Arditti Quartet's repertoire.

The ensemble believes that close collaboration with composers is vital to the process of interpreting modern music and therefore attempts to work with every composer it plays. The players' commitment to educational work is indicated by their masterclasses and workshops for young performers and composers all over the world. The Arditti Quartet's extensive discography now features over 200 CDs.

42 CDs were released as part of the ensemble's series on Naive Montaigne. This series set the trend, by presenting numerous contemporary composer features, recorded in their presence as well as the first digital recordings of the complete Second Viennese School's chamber music for strings. The quartet has recorded for more than 20 other CD labels and together this CD collection is the most extensive available of quartet literature in the last 40 years. To name just a few, Berio, Cage, Carter, Lachenmann, Ligeti, Nono, Rihm, the complete chamber music of Xenakis and Stockhausen's infamous Helicopter Quartet. Some of the most recent releases are with the French company Aeon and include profiles of Harvey, Dusapin, Birtwistle, Gerhard, Ferneyhough and Paredes.

Over the past 30 years, the ensemble has received many prizes for its work. They have won the Deutsche Schallplatten Preis several times and the Gramophone Award for the best recording of contemporary music in 1999 (Elliott Carter) and 2002 (Harrison Birtwistle). In 2004 they were awarded the 'Coup de Coeur' prize by the Academie Charles Cros in France for their exceptional contribution to the dissemination of contemporary music. The prestigious Ernst von Siemens Music Prize was awarded to them in 1999 for 'lifetime achievement' in music. They remain to this day, the only ensemble ever to receive it.

The complete archive of the Arditti quartet is housed in the Sacher Foundation in Basle, Switzerland.



The **Argento** New Music Project's fierce emotional commitment onstage and relentless determination to master all technical aspects of its repertoire has inspired world renowned composers such as Tristan Murail, Beat Furrer, and Georg Friedrich Haas to repeatedly name Argento as the best interpreter of their music in the United States. Argento first gained prominence at New York's "Sounds French Festival" in 2003, and was shortly thereafter invited to work closely with Elliott Carter and Pierre Boulez for the opening concert of the French American Cultural Exchange. From its inception, Argento has dedicated itself to a thorough command of the microtonal challenges of contemporary Spectral composers, an effort that culminated with Argento's first CD "Winter Fragments," which won the prestigious Geijutsu Academy Award for best recording in 2010.

Argento has given world premiere performances of works by leading composers such as Tristan Murail, Helmut Lachenmann, Bernhard Lang, Sebastian Currier, Fred Lerdahl, and Philippe Hurel, as well as exciting emerging composers including Sabrina Schroeder, Murat Yakin, Erin Gee, Yoni Niv, Victor Ádan, Hila Tamir, Sang Song, Daniel Iglesias, and many others. Argento brought one of the most influential recent masterpieces of contemporary music, in vain, by Georg Friedrich Haas, to New York, at a time when the composer was unknown and unperformed in America. Argento's US premieres include works by Salvatore Sciarrino, Luca Francesconi, Michael Jarrell, Olga Neuwirth, Enno Poppe, Gerard Pesson, Mathias Spahlinger, Gerard Grisey, and Eva Reiter. Equally important, Argento introduced American composers to foreign audiences in its many performances at international festivals throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Argento's recent highlights include a performance with the legendary soprano Frederica von Stade at Weill Hall in Sonoma, and the world premiere performances of the following works: Ann Cleare's eyam ii, commissioned by

the Arts Council of Ireland and premiered at the Library of Congress; Jerome Combier's Conditions de Lumiere, commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and premiered in both New York and Paris; and Beat Furrer's spazio immergente, commissioned by the Stiftung Mozarteum Salzburg and premiered in its entirety at the composer's first American portrait concert at Carnegie Hall.

Under the direction of Michel Galante, Argento has become an essential source of adventurous new music - Alex Ross, New Yorker.

## The conductors:



Michel Galante (Argento)



James Baker (Talea)

# The composer

American composer Joshua Fineberg began his musical studies at the age of five: they have included – in addition to composition – violin, guitar, piano, harpsichord and conducting. He completed his undergraduate studies at the Peabody Conservatory with Morris Moshe Cotel where he won first prize in the bi-annual Virginia Carty de Lillo Composition Competition. In 1991, he moved to Paris and studied with Tristan Murail. The following year he was selected by the IRCAM/Ensemble InterContemporain reading panel for the course in composition and musical technologies. He worked for several years as a free-lance composer in Europe and as a consultant researcher at IRCAM, then, in the Fall of 1997, he returned to the US to pursue a doctorate in musical composition at Columbia University, which he completed in May 1999. After teaching at Columbia for a year, he went to Harvard University where he taught for seven years and was the John L. Loeb Associate Professor for the Humanities. In September 2007, Fineberg left Harvard to assume a professorship in composition and the directorship of the electronic music studios at Boston University. In 2012 he became the founding director of the Boston University Center for New Music. Beginning in 2015 he has shared his time between Berlin and the United States. He has won numerous national and international prizes and scholarships and is published by Editions Max Eschig and Gérard Billaudot Editeur.

In 2011, Fineberg was named an Artist Fellow of the Massachusetts Cultural Council and in 2016 he was named a Chévalier de l'ordre des arts et lettres by France. Fineberg's works are widely performed in the US, Europe and Asia. A monographic CD of his music recorded by the Ensemble Court-Circuit was released in 2002 as a part of Universal France's Accord/Una Corda collection, another CD recorded by the Ensemble FA was released by Mode Records in June 2009 and in 2012 a CD with his complete works for Piano, performed by Marilyn Nonken, was released by Divine Art/Métier. Major projects include an 'imaginary opera' based on Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita" for actor, dancers, video, ensemble and electronics realized in collaboration with JOJI; Speaking in Tongues, a concerto written for Les

Percussions de Strasbourg's 50th anniversary tour, *Objets trouvés* written for the ensemble Court-circuit and *La Quintina* for string quartet and electronics written for the Arditti Quartet and premiered at the Ultraschall festival in Berlin that marked the first co-realization between the ExperimentalStudio in Freiburg and IRCAM in Paris. Most recently he completed *take my hand...*, an evening-length immersive musical theater work for Chicago's Dal Niente Ensemble and Mocrep which was premiered on June 3, 2017.

Besides his compositional and pedagogical activities, Joshua Fineberg actively collaborates with music psychologists and computer scientists in music perception research and helps develop tools for computer assisted composition, acoustic analysis and sound modification. He has been involved in working with performing ensembles and as producer for recordings of many ensembles and soloists. Joshua Fineberg is also the issue editor for two issues of The Contemporary Music Review on "Spectral Music" (Vol. 19 pt. 2 & 3) and for a double-issue featuring the collected writings of Tristan Murail in English (Vol. 24 pt. 2&3). From 2003-2009, he served as the US Editor for The Contemporary Music Review, where he still serves on the editorial board. His book "Classical Music, Why Bother?" was published by Routledge Press in 2006.

Joshua Fineberg's music has been described as a music of paradoxes: at once turbulent and contemplative, simultaneously active and reflective. The sound world is colorful and seemingly decorative, yet rigorously constructed and the consequence of careful acoustic observation and research. Fineberg belongs to the second generation of composers influenced by the so-called 'spectral' school of Frenchmen Gerard Grisey and Tristan Murail. In his music, however, the relationship between acoustical models and the resultant music is more elusive and sophisticated. Fineberg considers the use of models fundamental to his entire compositional approach. They may be poetic models as much as concrete technical ones – indeed the two may be directly related to each other.

#### Track 1

#### L'abîme (2015-2016)

For solo clarinet/bass clarinet, bassoon and cello with ensemble and off-stage instruments

Recorded on February 21, 2017 at Oktaven Audio, Yonkers, New York, USA

Recording: Ryan Streber (Oktaven Audio)
Editing and production: Joshua Fineberg

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Talea Ensemble:

Flute: Barry Crawford | Clarinet: Marianne Gythfeldt | Oboe: Andrew Nogal | Bassoon: Adrian Morejon Horn: John

Gattis | Piano: Steve Beck | Percussion: Alex Lipowski | Violin: Jessie Fellows

Viola: Elizabeth Weisser Helgeson | Cello: Chris Gross | Bass: Brian Ellingsen | Conductor: James Baker

#### Track 2

### Just as much entangled with other matter (2013)

For accordion and hidden playback

Recorded on January 9, 2016 at La Muse en Circuit, Alfortville. France

Recording: Chistophe Hauser

Editing and production: Joshua Fineberg

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Pascal Content, solo accordion

#### Track 3

### La Quintina (2011-2012)

For string quartet and live electronics

Recorded/produced on October 16, 2016 and October 4-6, 2017 at the SWR Experimental studio, Freiburg, Germany Recording and Editing: Manuel Braun (tonmeister, SWR)

Postproduction: Joachim Haas (SWR Experimentalstudio) and Joshua Fineberg

Published by Gérard Billaudot Éditeur

Arditti Quartet:

Irvine Arditti, violin | Ashot Sarkissjan, violin | Ralf Ehlers, viola | Lucas Fels, cello

Live electronic realisation: Joachim Haas (SWR Experimentalstudio) and Greg Beller (ircam)

### Track 4

#### Objets trouvés (2008-2009)

For chamber ensemble

Recorded on May 20, 2016 at Systems Two Recording Studio, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Recording: Max Ross (Systems Two)

Editing and production: Joshua Fineberg

Published by Gérard Billaudot Éditeur

Argento Chamber Ensemble:

Roberta Michel, flute | Carol McGonnell, clarinet | Joanna Chao, piano | Matt Ward, percussion Keats Dieffenbach, violin | Caleb van der Swaag, cello | Michel Galante, conductor



### Joshua Fineberg

## More music from Joshua Fineberg and Métier



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Spectral piano Music MARILYN NONKEN (piano)

Includes "Erlkönig" by Hugues Dufourt and these works by Joshua Fineberg:

Tremors

Liahtnina

Fantastic Zoology

Grisaille

Veils

Till Human Voices Wake Us

Métier MSV 28524

"At first glance, this highly abstract, very dissonant music seems extraordinarily challenging. But it is so purely expressive, honest and, not least, presented with such passion, that it should be intensely engaging for any music lover with an open mind. For me, this is yet another triumph for one of our greatest champions of living composers." - Peter Burwasser (Fanfare)

"Dense, mercilessly virtuosic writing ... Nonken handles the incremental tension superbly." - Graham Lock (International Piano)

"This features compositions by Joshua Fineberg and Hugues Dufourt and answers the question 'Can one still write for the piano today?' with a resounding yes." - 'Pliable' (OvergrownPath.com)

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Mastering for CD: Stephen Sutton (Divine Art) This recording was made possible by the generous support of the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, La Muse en Circuit, Argento New Music Project and the SWR Experimentalstudio



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