

JAMES O'CALLAGHAN
composer and sound artist
p r e s s k i t

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BIOGRAPHY

James O'Callaghan (b. 1988) is a composer and sound artist based in Montréal praised for his “mastery of materials and musical form” (Electromania, Radio France). His music has been described as “very personal... with its own colour anchored in the unpredictable.” (Goethe-Institut) His work intersects acoustic and electroacoustic media, employing field recordings, amplified found objects, computer-assisted transcription of environmental sounds, and unique performance conditions.

His artistic output, spanning chamber, orchestral, live electronic and acousmatic idioms, audio installations, and site-specific performances, has been variously commissioned by the *Groupe de Recherches Musicales* (INA-GRM), the *National Youth Orchestra of Canada*, *Ensemble Paramirabo*, *Quasar* quatuor de saxophones, and *Standing Wave*, among others. His album *Espaces Tautologiques*, released by *empreintes DIGITales*, won a Prix Opus, and was listed by 5:4 as one of the “best albums of 2016”.

His works have been performed internationally and featured in many prominent festivals, including Gaudeamus Muziekweek (Utrecht), SICMF (Seoul), KLANG! (Montpellier), MANTIS (Manchester), SF Tape Music Festival (San Francisco), Cluster (Winnipeg), AKOUSMA, Suoni per il popolo (Montréal), Sound Travels, 21C (Toronto), MANCA (Nice), IFCP, and NYCEMF (New York).

His music has been the recipient of many national and international first prizes, including the ISCM Young Composer Award (2017), the Salvatore Martirano Award (2016), the Robert Fleming Prize (2015), the Jeu de Temps / Times Play Awards and the SOCAN Foundation John Weinzwieg Grand Prize (2014). Significant nominations include those for the Gaudeamus Award (2016) and a JUNO Award for classical composition of the year (2014).

Active as an arts organiser, he co-founded and co-directed the *Montréal Contemporary Music Lab*, and served on the artistic committee of *Codes d'Accès*. He also presents at conferences and publishes regularly on compositional topics including instrumental transcription of environmental sound, cross-media transcription, soundscape music, and electroacoustic diffusion through instruments (*Organised Sound*, *Twentieth-Century Music*, *eContact!*, *Electroacoustic Music Studies*). He is an associate composer of the Canadian Music Centre.

Originally from Vancouver, he received a Master of Music degree in composition from McGill University in 2014, studying with Philippe Leroux, where he also taught an introductory course in Electroacoustic composition. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts honours degree from Simon Fraser University in 2011, studying with Barry Truax, David MacIntyre, Rodney Sharman and Arne Eigenfeldt. He has also studied and taken workshops with Kaija Saariaho, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, Lasse Thoresen, Christopher Butterfield, Christopher Fox, Michel Gonneville, and R. Murray Schafer.



PRAISE FOR “ESPACES TAUTOLOGIQUES”

- 1st disc by Montréal-based young Canadian composer James O'Callaghan.
- All four works on the disc are award-winning.
- *Espaces tautologiques* was launched on September 8, 2016 during the Gaudeamus Muziekweek in Utrecht
- This release comes out on the label *empreintes DIGITales* based in Montréal. Established 1990, this label is widely considered as the world leader in electroacoustics / acousmatics.
- Prix Opus: disque de l'année: actuelle, électroacoustique
- “Best Albums of 2016” 5:4 (UK)

“The four works on this fascinating collection from Empreintes DIGITales vividly demonstrate O'Callaghan's very physical relationship with found sounds.... ...[They create] the startling impression that the instruments are organic life forms and we are hearing their internal organs and mechanisms... ...a potent drama emanates from continual alternations between mild and torrential episodes...”

-Simon Cummings in 5:4 (UK), December 30, 2016

“O'Callaghan heeft een zeer verfijnd oor voor kleuring van klanken die hij aantreft in omgevingsgeluid, found sounds, ruimtelijke akoestiek, maar ook in minutieus onderzochte typische eigenschappen van timbres van akoestische instrumenten. O'Callaghan is uiterst nauwgezet en kundig in het tonen van niet alleen deze brede variëteit aan materialen, maar evenzeer de muzikale vorm.”

- Cultuurpers (Netherlands), December 21, 2016

“James O'Callaghan takes us down the rabbit hole into a visceral, endogenous acousmatic wonderland.”

- Paul Steenhuisen in The WholeNote #22:4 (Canada), November 1, 2016

“what did I get from this album: genius, essentially.”

- Andy Backhouse in Sigil of Brass, October 21, 2016

“Sounds... but what those sounds are remains a mystery and it is this unknowable element that makes it all so intriguing.”

- Include Me Out (Germany), September 26, 2016

“Avec Espaces tautologiques, James O'Callaghan impressionne de par sa virtuosité à fusionner les genres, passant dans un même morceau, du field recording à l'électroacoustique pour le faire exploser en route sur les terres d'une électronique glitch matinée de musique contemporaine sound designée.”

- Roland Torres in SilenceAndSound (France), September 20, 2016

“Montreal-based James O'Callaghan confirms his position as a world-class composer with the release of *Espaces tautologiques*, his first album on the Empreintes Digitales label. Composed between 2011 and 2015, the four acousmatic pieces on this fifty-minute recording are further proof of O'Callaghan's remarkable technical proficiency and virtuosity.”

-Pierre-Luc Senécal in Musicworks (Canada), September 1, 2016

SELECTED REVIEWS AND PUBLICITY

29 November 2017, Ludwig Van Toronto, Hye Won Cecilia Lee

<https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2017/11/29/feature-10-canadian-composers-who-are-redefining-classical-music/>

ROUNDUP | 10 Canadian Composers Who Are Redefining Classical Music

Crossing over from electronic music, young James dipped his toes into contemporary music as a curious Fine Arts undergraduate student at Simon Fraser University. Having never studied a musical instrument, this non-relationship gave James a way to bringing the other worlds in.

O'Callaghan mashes electronica, amplified found objects and field recordings to create a compelling sonic world, and three years ago, at the tender age of 26, he was a 2014 Juno award nominee and SOCAN's John Weinzwieg Grand Prize, with Isomorphia, a National Youth Orchestra commission. For the academically inclined, his paper, *Orchestration of Ecology*, as *Ecology* (2013) gives great insight into his compositions.

12 October 2017, Überblog, Goethe-Institut Montréal, Esther Bourdages

<https://www.goethe.de/ins/ca/fr/kul/sup/ube/21077868.html>

James O'Callaghan - un portrait : Écouter-percevoir l'espace du son

...La musique d'O'Callaghan s'inscrit dans une démarche contemporaine touchant à un large spectre de formes sonores : musique de chambre, orchestrale, de l'électroacoustique en direct, de l'acousmatique, des installations sonores et des performances in situ. Le compositeur signe une musique bien personnelle, qui possède sa propre couleur ancrée dans l'imprévisible : tout en s'influençant des traditions, il se dégage d'en suivre une seule à la lettre. La musique d'O'Callaghan, qui demande une écoute attentive, fait émerger des réflexions d'ordre matériel : les matériaux sonores utilisés -instruments de musique, field recordings puisés de la nature ou de l'environnement urbain, amplification d'objets du quotidien et procédés électroniques- sont trafiqués et par conséquent le rapport geste-effet se trouve souvent brouillé.

En concert, O'Callaghan ne propose pas de musique fixe mais au contraire articule une musique d'action, c'est-à-dire que la transformation, l'intervention et la manipulation en direct font partie de son lexique de production. Ainsi, le geste du performeur intègre minutieusement la démarche du compositeur. Ce qui résulte à une musique d'instruments et d'objets agités de tensions, torsions, grincements, ouverte aux bruits fracassants et à un éventail sans fin de textures. Une musique qui expose des structures compositionnelles expérimentales, dépourvues de hiérarchie esthétique, et orientée vers le processus.

L'un des champs de recherche du musicien lié à l'action comprend le mimétisme instrumental. Interprétée en septembre dernier au Conservatoire de musique de Montréal, Xeno (2017) pour voix et électronique démontre bien le concept : la pièce présente un flot constant de transformations vocales produites par la chanteuse soprano Sarah Albu qui imite des sons d'animaux en parallèle à la diffusion d'une pièce sur bande. Souvent les vocalisations de Albu se fusionnent et se confondent aux sons d'animaux sur l'enregistrement. Des silences ponctuent la trame, créant des pauses afin de mieux relancer la voix percussive, bruitiste, voir stidente.

Un autre thème cher à O'Callaghan est celui de l'amplification d'objets du quotidien et d'instruments de musique. La pièce acousmatique *Empties-Impetus* (2015), diffusée au même concert au Conservatoire, explore la sonorité des corps d'instruments, qui constituent un quatuor à corde traditionnel, en disposant de micros et de transducteurs dans ces derniers. Il détourne de la sorte les instruments de musique icôniques en leur donnant d'autres rôles et de nouveaux timbres. La diffusion en concert devient transformée avec les petites sonorités qui sortent de la lutherie, acoustique d'espaces intérieurs. Il se consacre aussi à l'amplification de guitares acoustiques, de pianos jouets et d'objets, comme des livres, voir les œuvres antérieures *Reasons* (2012) pour livres amplifiés et électroniques et *Opinions* (2014) destinée à un quatuor de livres amplifiés. En 2016, il sortait le disque *Espaces tautologiques* sur l'étiquette montréalaise d'électroacoustique empreintes DIGITALEs. Le titre donne un indice sur la forme. Il s'y trouve donc des répétitions et variations autour de l'étude de propriétés réverbérantes des espaces acoustiques (voir le texte du programme). Peut-être qu'O'Callaghan fait aussi un clin-d'oeil au concept de tautologie chez le compositeur Luc Ferrari?

Écouter les créations de James O'Callaghan nous permet de découvrir une musique concrète percutante, pleine de surprises qui entrelace avec finesse l'espace du son et les objets sonores.

23 May 2016, Voir.ca, Pierre-Luc Senécal

<https://voir.ca/pierre-luc-senecal/2016/05/23/les-cavaliers-de-lapocalypse-retour-sur-le-concert-de-lecm/>

Après l'entracte, la cheffe d'ensemble et directrice artistique Véronique Lacroix accourt sur scène, comme une gamine vers le carré de sable. Elle avait peut-être hâte de jouer la pièce particulièrement punchée de James O'Callaghan. Avec ses grands gestes dramatiques, elle met toute la musique en sourdine, bande électronique comprise, avant de relancer l'ensemble dans une écriture très articulée, très « électroacoustique », musique avec laquelle le compositeur est parfaitement confortable. Les flûtes s'échangent les souffles, comme la rumeur de mouches venant à bourdonner proche de nos oreilles, les clapotis de clés évoquent de minuscules pattes d'insecte, et on croirait que la bande devient l'écran sonore sur lequel les sons viennent s'imprimer. La fin de la pièce approchant, les lumières de la salle sont baissées, comme si la nuit était tombée, et les interprètes sur scène allument de petites lampes pour éclairer leurs partitions. Durant ce paysage nocturne, les haut-parleurs projettent des chants de grillons, auxquels se joint l'ensemble avec des sons dans l'extrême aigu, donnant à entendre un passage particulièrement réussi. L'œuvre prend fin avec cet enregistrement de criquets qui s'amenuisent peu à peu, et la nuit finit d'envelopper complètement la salle.

20 February 2015, Musicworks, Jennie Punter

<https://www.musicworks.ca/featured-article/sound-bite/james-o-callaghan-s-bodies-soundings>

James O'Callaghan's Bodies-Soundings, winner of Musicworks' 2014 Electronic Music Composition contest, is a highly suspenseful acousmatic piece in which sounds are partially diffused through tactile transducers (specialized speakers that transmit sound through any object to which they're attached) that are attached to an acoustic guitar and a toy piano. The two instruments are not played but, instead, act as sounding bodies. The thought process and experimentation that led to the composition actually started with the piano—but not in the traditional way that some might imagine.

"I don't play piano. I never studied an instrument at all," says O'Callaghan, who grew up in Vancouver and has a bachelor of fine arts degree from Simon Fraser University. (He's been based in Montreal since 2011, and received a master of music degree from McGill University in 2014.) "Coming into composition without a traditional music background, I often found myself confronting the piano," he continues. "It's called the composer's instrument—you can play an orchestral reduction on it, simulate the sounds of so many other things. But that idea just never made sense to me."

This non-relationship (as he calls it) with the instrument was the starting point for his acousmatic work Objects-Interiors, which premiered at the 2013 Cluster New Music and Integrated Arts Festival in Winnipeg and won first prize in the Hugh Le Caine Awards category of the 2013 SOCAN Foundation Awards for young composers. In the setup for a performance of the piece, two loudspeakers are placed inside a piano, whose sustain pedal is weighed down. As O'Callaghan describes it, the piano's resonant interior (wood and metal surfaces) and the sympathetic vibrations of its strings contribute to "an acoustic tincturing" of the sound material coming from the speakers...

14 January 2015, East Bay Express, Sam Lefebvre

<http://www.eastbayexpress.com/oakland/review-the-san-francisco-tape-music-festival/Content?oid=4167406>

... James O'Callaghan's "Bodies-Soundings" was sculpted in part from slabs and slivers of bass. O'Callaghan set an acoustic guitar and a toy piano on stage. The program notes described it as an interrogation of the instruments, but O'Callaghan's piece was a festival highlight without the visual tokens. In a way, the superfluosity of that one bit of action on stage actually validated the Tape Music Festival's programming ethos. ...

SELECTED ARTISTIC AWARDS

- 2018. Prix Opus.** Disque de l'année, musique actuelle / électroacoustique, for *Espaces tautologiques*. (Conseil Québécois de la musique)
- 2017. ISCM World New Music Days Young Composer Award.** For *subject/object*.
Musica Nova. Honourable mention in mixed category for *Xeno-*. (Musica Nova, Prague)
Prix CIME, Residency prize for *Empties-Impetus*. (Confédération internationale de musique électroacoustique, Bourges)
- 2016. Gaudeamus Award.** Finalist, for *AMONG AM A*. (Gaudeamus Foundation, Utrecht)
Salvatore Martirano Memorial Composition Award. 1st prize, for *AMONG AM A*. (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
Prix collégien de musique contemporaine. Finalist, for *AMONG AM A*. (CMC Québec, Cégep de Sherbrooke)
- 2015. Robert Fleming Prize.** (Canada Council for the Arts)
Musica Nova. Honourable mention in acousmatic category for *Isomorphic*. (Musica Nova, Prague)
KLANG! International composition competition. Finalist in professionals category for *Empties-Impetus*. (KLANG! Acousmonium, Montpellier)
Musicworks Electronic Music Composition Contest. 1st prize for *Bodies-Soundings*.
- 2014. JUNO Award.** Nominated for Classical Composition of the Year, for *Isomorphia*. (CARAS)
SOCAN Foundation Awards for young composers. John Weinzweig grand prize + 1st prize, Sir Ernest MacMillan category, for *Isomorphia*. (SOCAN Foundation)
- 2013. SOCAN Foundation Awards for young composers.** 1st prize, Hugh le Caine category, for *Objects-Interiors*. (SOCAN Foundation)
Jeu de Temps - Times Play (JTTP) Awards. 1st prize, for *Objects-Interiors*. (CEC)

OTHER CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- **Invited to produce solo show “Électrochoc no. 1: James O’Callaghan.”** 28 September 2017. Concert series curated by Louis Dufort. Conservatoire, Montréal.
- **Featured composer in: *Autour de l’orchestration*.** Orchestre de l’haute école de musique de Genève; Pierre Bleuse, cond. Geneva.
- **Artist-in-Residence:** HELLERAU – European Centre for the Arts, Dresden. October-December 2017.
- **Featured composer** of portrait concert: **“Focus: James O’Callaghan”** by **Quatuor Bozzini** 18 January 2017. Sala Rossa, Montréal.
- **Invited for studio residency** at Radio France to create new work commissioned by the **Groupe de recherches musicales (INA-GRM)**. January 2015.
- **Invited to produce solo show “Object Oriented Tautology”.** 30 October 2014. Concert series curated by Rodney Sharman. The Apartment Gallery, Vancouver.
- **Composer-in-residence** with the **National Youth Orchestra of Canada**. 2013.
- **Invited to present work at prominent festivals**, including Gaudeamus Muziekweek (Utrecht), Multiphonies (Paris), MANCA (Nice), KLANG! (Montpellier), MANTIS (Manchester), Sonorities (Belfast), SICMF (Seoul), AKOUSMA, Suoni per il popolo (Montréal), Mois Multi (Québec), Sound Travels, 21C (Toronto), Cluster (Winnipeg), Sound Symposium (St. John’s), Sonic Boom (Vancouver), IFCP, and NYCEMF (New York), SF Tape Music Festival (San Francisco).
- Recipient of artist grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, le Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, the SOCAN Foundation, the BC Arts Council, as well as scholarships from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, McGill University, Simon Fraser University, and the Banff Centre.