



**NICOLAS COLLINS**  
**Sound Without Picture**



with Ben Neill and  
Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin

**NICOLAS COLLINS**  
**SOUND WITHOUT PICTURE**

- 1 *Still Lives* (1993) ..... 5:45  
 text: Vladimir Nabokov
- 2 *Strange Heaven* (1998) ..... 13:48  
 text: Denise Eddy and Susan Tallman
- 3 *Charlotte Aux Poires* (1997) ..... 10:51  
 text: Susan Tallman
- 4 *Lightning Strikes Not Once But Twice* (1993) .. 6:53  
 text: Nicolas Collins
- 5 *The Scent Of Mimosa* (1997) ..... 9:07  
 text: Dorothy MacArdle
- 6 *Sound For Picture* (1992) ..... 10:52  
 text: David Wright
- 7 *Still (After) Lives* (1997) ..... 7:50  
 text: Vladimir Nabokov

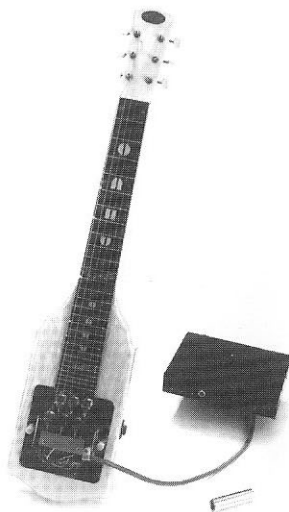
Nicolas Collins: voice, electronics

with Ben Neill: trumpet on *Still Lives* and *Sound For Picture*

Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin: *Still (After) Lives*

- Normisa Pereira da Silva: flute
- Winfried Rager: clarinet
- Gudrun Reschke: oboe
- Karola Elsner: bass clarinet
- Steffen Tast: violin
- Sebastian Krunnies: viola
- Ringela Riemke: cello
- Arnulf Ballhorn: bass
- Friedemann Werzlau: vibraphone

Compositions © Nicolas Collins 1992, 1993, 1997, 1998.  
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*Still Lives* was recorded in the Concert Hall at BBC Broadcasting House, London, on September 20, 1993, for broadcast on *Mixing It*, BBC Radio 3. Producer: Philip Tagney. Released by arrangement with BBC Music. © BBC 1993. The text in *Still Lives* is excerpted from Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, published by Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc. copyright 1947, 1948, 1950, 1951 © 1967 by Vladimir Nabokov. Used by permission of the estate of Vladimir Nabokov. This recording originally appeared on *Unknown Public 04: Musical Machines*, London, 1994.

*Strange Heaven*, *Charlotte Aux Poires*, and *The Scent Of Mimosa* were recorded in the Kleine Saal at SFB Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin, in December, 1998. Producer/Engineer: Ekkehard Stoffregen. Assistant Engineer: Hans-Jürgen Paesch. The composition of *Strange Heaven* was commissioned by Pro Musica Nova (Radio Bremen), 1998. *Charlotte Aux Poires* and *The Scent Of Mimosa* were written for the Berlin Biennale, 1997. The text in *The Scent Of Mimosa* is excerpted from *The Uninvited*, and is used by kind permission of the Estate of Dorothy MacArdle, © The Estate of Dorothy MacArdle.

*Lightning Strikes Not Once But Twice* and *Sound For Picture* were recorded at STEIM, Amsterdam, in April, 1993. Engineer: Nicolas Collins. The recording of *Sound For Picture* was commissioned by NCRV radio and the Stimuleringsfond, Netherlands, 1993. The text in *Sound For Picture* is excerpted from David Wright's *Deafness: A Personal Account*, copyright © David Wright 1969, 1990. Used by permission of David Wright and Peters Fraser Dunlop. The recording of *Sound For Picture* has appeared on *Oracular Editions #1*,

Minneapolis, 1995. The recording of *Lightning Strikes Not Once But Twice* has appeared on *Howard 31*, Artware Products, Wiesbaden, 1994, and *America The Beautiful*, RRRRecords, Lowell (MA), 1994.

*Still (After) Lives* was recorded in the Kleine Saal at SFB Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin, in March, 1999. Producer: Wolfgang Hoff. Engineer: Ekkehard Stoffregen. Assistant Engineer: Ricarda Molder. *Still (After) Lives* was written for the Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin, and this recording was made possible by its generous cooperation.

Mastered at SFB Haus des Rundfunks, Berlin, in June, 1999, by Ricarda Molder. Additional pre-mastering for *Lightning Strikes Not Once But Twice* and *Sound For Picture* by Robert Poss.

The SFB recordings were made at the invitation of Manfred Mixner of the SFB Hörspiel Department, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

Special thanks to Thomas Bruns of the Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin, Ingrid Beirer and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, Berlin, for supporting the composition and recording of this music.

Cover illustration: *The Sense Of Touch*, Utrecht School, 17th Century. Photograph by courtesy of Sotheby's Picture Library, London.

Photo, back page of booklet: Stéphane Janin Long exposure performance photo courtesy of Nicolas Collins. All other photos: Andre Hoekzema

Design: Ellen Fullman

Executive producer: Herb Levy



*Sound Without Picture* is a set of pieces about the senses – sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell and “sixth sense” –, each built around a text invoking the presence or absence of a specific sense. The rhythm, inflection and timbre of the spoken voice are translated into sonic accompaniment by means of a variety of devices. Most of the pieces are for solo performer with live (rather than pre-recorded) electronics; some have an instrumental part for a second musician. They grow out of a desire to convey in music the hypnotic pleasure of the narrative tale – rooted, no doubt, in the act of reading to my infant children.

In *Still Lives* a modified CD player slowly scratches through ten measures of recorded music by Giuseppe Guami (1540-1611). As the CD steps from one skipping loop to the next, the continuous counterpoint of the canzona is suspended in wobbly harmonic blocks. This sense of suspension is heightened by the live trumpet which, mimicking the timbre of



the early instruments, anticipates and retards phrases from the Guami score. The text, from Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs, addresses memory and mortality.

*Strange Heaven* grew out of conversations with a blind friend, Denise Eddy, in which she reflected on the role of touch in her life. The text is a fictional letter from a mother to an adult child. As the words are spoken, they are resonated and drawn out by a digital signal processor which is controlled from a keypad affixed to the slide of an old

trombone, and plays back through a compact loudspeaker coupled to the mouthpiece.

The same electronic instrument transforms voice, feedback, a CD of test tones and the song of a nightingale in *Charlotte Aux Poires*, a piece that twists the Proustian take on taste, and explores the notion of “a taste of the future.” It was written in reflection on the first year of my daughter's life.

In *Lightning Strikes Not Once But*

*Twice* the strings of a ‘backwards’ electric guitar are resonated by swooping oscillators. By wiring pickups to play, rather than receive, sound, this home-made instrument produces an effect similar to that induced by shouting into a piano with the sustain pedal depressed; the original sounds are reduced to undulating overtones. The shearing texture that results accompanies a story, based on an AP wire service report found in an Al Ruppersberg print, about a man who loses and regains his sight under violent meteorological conditions.

*The Scent Of Mimosa* hangs upon a Dorothy MacArdle ghost tale that evokes the ineffable link between the sense of smell and the “sixth sense” of the uncanny that are said to accompany a haunting. The reading is set amidst a pinball-like digital processing of tiny fragments of scratchy old film soundtrack. The off-kilter piano accompaniment is generated by a program that spins variations on the inflection of

the voice.

In *Sound For Picture*, South African poet David Wright describes the moment in his childhood when he realized that he had lost his hearing; when, for the first time, he separated visual cues from the



sounds he associated with them. Through the wash of strings on a ‘backwards’ guitar, the words, birdsong, feedback, a ticking watch and a trumpet take on a hazy, ethereal quality. A simple computer program maps the inflection of the speech to sampled percussion to create the rhythmic underpinning of the piece.

*Still (After) Lives* is a purely acoustic treatment of the earlier electronic piece, *Still Lives*, with a chamber ensemble emulating the musical artifacts of the malfunctioning CD and the original trumpet part. Both pieces were written in remembrance of British artist and friend Stuart Marshall (1949-1993).

Nicolas Collins, Berlin, July 1999.

*Still Lives, Still (After) Lives* (Vladimir Nabokov)

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.

*Strange Heaven* (Susan Tallman, after an interview with Denise Eddy)

Johnny Dear,

I realize – now – how odd it might have sounded when I said your baby Quentin was beautiful. Is it strange that I use that word? I've been thinking about your question – what was it like for me to know you “only by touch”? I myself would never have put it that way – that I knew you *only* by touch – I would say rather that I knew you *also* by touch. After all, I could hear you, I could smell you, I could taste you with kisses. Now that you are a father you will understand how thoroughly a baby's presence fills the air. Perhaps I paid more attention to these other things than you will with Quentin, since you can see him.

But of course, I first got to know you mainly with my hands. When I fed you I would put my finger on your mouth and zoom with the spoon to find where my finger was. That's just common sense.

Touch is also how I knew what you looked like, if you will – how I knew that, as a baby, you were quite bald, like a hard, fuzzy, unripe peach warmed by sunshine. It's how I knew that you shot up two centimeters in a fortnight, and that you had lovely small ears (unlike your father.)

Other people told me about things like the color of your eyes; the freckles on your nose. I can't say the information meant much to me, even though I can still remember that blue is the color of clear skies and paraakeets, and that when I was ten I thought boys with freckles were cute.

I assumed you were beautiful.

It is true that I must have known less about your face than you will know about Quentin's. I mean, I knew its shape – the high forehead, the straight nose, the round cheeks – but I could never know its full range of expression, I suppose. What did your face look like when you scored that penalty shot when you were eight? Did you smile? Did your jaw drop open? Your eyebrows shoot up? I never knew. I didn't know what you looked like, but I imagine I knew what you *were* like at that moment. The way your whole body and mind contracted into a ball of concentration and then burst up and out – an explosion of muscles, ligaments, heat, breath, joy.

I don't quite know how to explain it. I guess from the time of my blindness, people became less physical and more abstract. Even you. It's rather like the way that in a dream you sense that someone is there, and you'll know exactly who it is – Gretchen, Quentin, old Spud, or whoever – but you won't exactly have seen them. Does this happen to you? It happens to me, both asleep and awake. You are terribly important to me, but the physical just doesn't come into it that much. That may sound a little other-worldly, like angels being both beautiful and invisible, but that's more or less what it's like.

Isn't that odd?

I always thought it would have been nice to have seen you, with my eyes, the way most people do. But I wonder: what would I have lost in exchange? Would I trade a snapshot for this strange heaven?

I don't know.

*Charlotte Aux Paires* (Susan Tallman)

Taste, everyone knows, can invoke the past. Long before Proust, people understood that a flavor on the tongue could “bear unflinchingly ... in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of [its] essence ... the vast structure of recollection.” A molecule in the mouth ... brings the brain reeling backwards. But what I wonder about is whether there is an inverse of this: is there a chemical-synaptic combination that would trigger “vast structures of expectation” rather than recollection? Is there “a taste of the future,” rather than the past? And what

would – what could – a taste of the future be?

Could it lurk in the native cuisine of a place you have never been, but plan to visit? Your first bite of *negi-hamachi* before a trip to Japan? Provoking sensual imagination of where you will be in two weeks time? But the promise scented here is really one that covers miles rather than years. It speaks the language of *exotica* rather than futurism.

But Futurism in food? This only brings to mind all those freeze dried astronaut provisions – sad, vapid, unpleasantly orange. These cannot be the flavors of tomorrow – they are only the commercial conceits of today. The future can only make them dustier. A “taste of the future” would have to be a taste that speaks of change ... of burgeoning ... of a world to come.

A seed.

Pumpkin seed, sunflower seed, poppy seed, chestnut. But we are not birds, happy in symbiosis with the botanical world, dropping pre-fertilized pods on the lawn. A seed eaten by a human is a seed betrayed – its passage to the future is cut short by its passage through the digestive tract.

So what is left?

To taste, like a sommelier, without consuming.

Not to swallow, but merely to touch upon a thing that is now, and that promises to become more that it is now.

A taste that is not a bite, but a kiss, brushing against the skin of expanding life.

A flavor more fruitful than fruit.

The bosky, nectarous, nose-tickling smack at the back of a baby's neck:

*Charlotte Aux Poirés.*

### *Lightning Strikes Not Once But Twice* (Nicolas Collins)

My name is Edwin Robinson. I'm 62 years old. I live in Falmouth Maine. From 1952 to 1978 I drove a truck for Red Ball Freight. One night I was coming back from Portland and a big gull flew smack into my windshield. I saw a flash of white and the glass shattered. I missed the curve and ran off into a big elm. When I came to I couldn't see a thing. I've been blind ever since.

Last week there was this big storm. I was out in the back yard, kind of dozing. I felt the first drops on my cheek and the wind coming up my hair, so I got up. Pat (that's my wife) had strung a rope from the back porch to the maple at the end of the garden after the accident, so I could find my way without getting into the flowerbeds. I reached for the rope and headed for the house, but I must have got turned around, 'cause after a while my left hand touched the tree.

That's when it happened. I heard a sound like a whip, my hand got slapped hard, and I must have gone flying 10 feet back the line. The next thing I knew I was staring up at white smoke curling off a black branch against a gray sky.

Pat came running toward me wearing the most beautiful red dress I'd ever seen.

### *The Scent Of Mimosa* (Dorothy MacArdle)

Pamela woke me.

She made me stand by the banisters; there was nothing to be seen and no sound. She didn't explain, but after a moment I realized what had excited her – it was the scent: the perfume of mimosa was wafting up through the house, wave upon wave, as if on a warm, soft breeze.

“Let's see if we can trace it,” she whispered.

We went downstairs; the scent was a great deal stronger in the hall, but was faint in the nursery. Pamela laughed softly: it was like playing hide-and-seek. The dining-room was as we had left it, bare except for packing cases, pictures stacked with their faces to the wall, and rolled up rugs. In the watery moonlight it looked unnaturally still, dead, but the air was

fragrant with that golden mimosa scent.

"It makes me dizzy," Pamela whispered. Leaning over a packing case, she breathed deeply and beckoned me with a gesture. When I stood beside her I was sure, as she was, that the scent was strongest here. A feeling of mystery made us both talk with hushed voices and move as if in the presence of someone who must not be disturbed. Pamela lifted the loose lid of the case.

"What is it?" I whispered. I saw nothing but a lot of junk.

"Don't you see," she replied, "it's not ours; it's the old stuff; it's theirs, stuff that was left in the studio cupboards."

It was an assortment of the kind of rubbish which people hoard because it is difficult to dispose of or because it may "come in useful" some day. There were rolls of wall-paper, a world-map, lengths of stained old silk and brocade; there was a teddy-bear, a headless doll, and a large chocolate-box with the picture on its cover unstuck.

I said to Pamela, "Are you sure we're not imaging the mimosa? Do you smell it still?"

"Indeed I do! It seems to be coming in waves, as if the air were being fanned. Open that little box."

I felt a curious reluctance to touch it. I said, "Leave it till tomorrow," but Pamela took it and pulled off the lid.

On the top, carefully rolled, was a piece of gaudy striped silk – a small square shawl with a tangled fringe. She took out next a fan, covered with sequins, a high, tortoise-shell comb, an empty vial, and a pair of castanets. "Carmel's treasures," she said under her breath.

A shiver passed through me. I struggled against the conviction that we had been forced or led to do what we had done, to come to this room and discover these things. I felt a ghostly presence too close. I scarcely heard what Pamela was saying; she repeated it.

"What's on the label? Have you a match?"

There were matches in my dressing-gown pocket; I struck one and held it to the printing on the faded label of the heart-shaped flask:

*"Parfum Mimosa."*

### *Sound For Picture* (David Wright)

His visit inaugurated a ceremony which was to be observed every morning so long as I stayed at the nursing-home. Pulling his gold watch (it had rococo Victorian initials engraved on the back) from his waistcoat-pocket, he would hold it up to my ear. "Can you hear the tick?" I would shake my head. My head was thick with bandages.

My father never failed to pay his early morning visit or to administer the ritual of the watch. It gave me the first clue to the discovery I was to make in the course of the next few weeks: that I had completely lost my hearing.

One would think that deafness must have been self-evident from the first. On the contrary, it took me some time to find out what had happened. I had to deduce the fact of deafness through a process of reasoning. I did not notice it. No one inhabits a world of total silence: I had "heard" the doctor's car driving me to the hospital, while the tread of the nurse coming into my room used to wake me in the morning – how was I to know? Nobody told me.

It was made more difficult to perceive because from the very first my eyes had unconsciously begun to translate motion into sound. My mother spent most of the day beside me and I understood everything she said. Why not? Without knowing it I had been reading her mouth all my life. When she spoke I seemed to hear her voice. It was an illusion which persisted even after I knew it was an illusion. My father, my cousin, everyone I had known retained phantasmal voices. That they were imaginary, the projections of habit and memory, did not come home to me until I had left the hospital. One day I was talking with my cousin and he, in a moment of inspiration, covered his mouth with his hand as he spoke. Silence! Once and for all I understood that when I could not see I could not hear.