

The logo for 'tessellatum' features the word in a dark blue, serif font. Above the letters 't', 'e', and 's' are three thin, white, triangular lines that resemble a stylized roof or a series of peaks. The entire logo is centered at the top of the page.

# tessellatum

## **Violist Nadia Sirota on Tessellatum**

*Tessellatum* was commissioned in an acute fit of jealousy. The first time I heard Donnacha Dennehy's music I was seduced, I *needed* to be a part of that sound world, to inhabit it, even. Donnacha's work is almost cubist — he fractures sonorities and re-assembles them into intricate kaleidoscopes of sound, thrusting piles of animated drones and pulses next to ionized timbres derived from the harmonic series.

For this piece, we settled on an odd and kind of unprecedented instrumentation: 11 bass viols and 5 violas. I had spent a loopy, jet-lagged morning reading renaissance duets with the gamba player Liam Byrne in London, and become obsessed with the weird timbral pairing of viola and bass viola da gamba, which flips the darkest sounds to the highest register and the brightest sounds to the lowest.

Donnacha took this idea and spun gold with it, creating a kind of unrelentingly-beautiful wall of sound, which he deployed, along with harmonies derived from the harmonic series, to gradually un-moor the ear from its ingrained, equal-tempered references. For this record, Liam and I multi-tracked all 15 parts, producing a tapestry which moves from almost-medieval textures through spectral vales to nearly-Celtic passagework.

The animator Steven Mertens had a kind of crazy task: creating a way for audiences to absorb the structure of this tightly-woven work in real-time. Mertens solved for this in a completely unique way, creating his own syntax of abstracted deep-sea tabelaux, forming an alien but parallel world, structurally identical to the music but fully translated and adapted to his rich visual universe. The result is gorgeous, illuminating synergy- two works of art that support and enhance each other.

### *A note on tuning the viols*

The viola da gamba is most often associated with early music, music written in the 500-year span from the thirteenth century onwards, so how do you make that instrument perform the very modern task of playing Donnacha's microtones — pitches that would be found in-between the keys of a piano?

It turns out that gambas were kinda built for this. Back in their day, specifically the 16th-ish century, tuning systems were all over the place. Western music didn't completely settle on our neat-n-tidy 12-equal half-steps thing until something like 200 years ago, and even so, equal temperament's domination came about super gradually. So all this is to say: viols are actually pretty easy to modify. For *Tessellatum*, Liam split some frets and tied on a whole bunch of new ones. The tricky part was that, unlike oddly-tempered early music pieces, *Tessellatum* is constantly toggling between equal temperament and just (harmonic series) intonation. So this meant that Liam and Donnacha had to conspire pretty epically to make all these pitches physically possible. But they did it! And it's ingenious and gorgeous and completely unique.