# A Recognition of Certain Realities

## Keith Rowe's *Absence*

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**Abstract:** *British experimental musician and free improviser Keith Rowe suffered from Parkinson's for roughly a year before he decided, mid-performance, to retire from guitar-based solo improvisations. A recording of that performance was released as Absence in 2021, and his liner notes direct listeners to the precise moments when he decided to retire – an eleven-second window during which his Parkinson's tremor can be heard, marking the set as both a final performance and a self-conscious performance of finality. In "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," Jacques Derrida shows that dates function precisely by promising readable repetitions of the supposedly-unrepeatable – the final, the only-once – while simultaneously flattening the uniqueness of their referents through that repetition. While sound recording is generally seen as antithetical to the performance philosophies of Rowe and the free improvisers and experimental composers of his milieu, it here serves to date, temporarily bearing witness to Rowe's contributions to music against the all-forgetting tide of history. This chapter examines Rowe's decision to retire and its subsequent documentation and distribution in the context of his performance philosophy, his relationship to tradition, and the dynamics between intention, nonintention, improvisation, and indeterminacy in British experimental music.*

**Keywords:** *experimental music; improvisation; Keith Rowe; Jacques Derrida; recording*

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On November 6, 2015, British experimental musician Keith Rowe, then 75, performed his final guitar-based set as a soloist[2]. This detail was not announced or planned beforehand, and it's unlikely that anything appeared out of the ordinary for those in attendance, or at least for those already accustomed to Rowe's work. Equipped with a Lapstick guitar placed horizontally on a table, radios, contact microphones, a few effects pedals, a six-band equalizer, and a metal strip, Rowe began with silence, a pivotal element of his sonic language since the 1960s. From this space of silence, captured on the 2021 album *Absence*, we soon hear the trace of a presence, a marking: nothing obviously musical, but a violent scrape, a tear, the sound of a contact microphone dragged across a surface. And then: absence. This pattern continues over the next minute, with each noisy gesture answering the call of its preceding silence. Though still uncompromisingly textural, Rowe's sounds soon begin to take on broader dynamics; we hear crumpling, gentle brushing, and other unseen tinkerings. Snippets of radio intermittently enter the field before eventually taking a more prominent role, with Rowe allowing beamed-in music and other transmissions into his improvisation for extended periods of time.

At the time of performance, Rowe had been suffering from Parkinson's disease for over a year[3]. Writing in the online liner notes to *Absence*, he identifies the window of time when he decided to retire from solo performance, directing listeners to an eleven-second section from 12:10 to 12:21 during which his Parkinson's tremor can be heard (Rowe 2021b). While even the ears of the most devoted and attentive listeners would likely fail to register this section as particularly atypical without prior conditioning, for Rowe, it marked the passing of a decisive threshold. Before even considering the specifics of his reasoning, it is clear that, following these moments, we are no longer listening to merely a final performance, but to *a performance of finality*.

2 The performance was part of Christian Kobi's 2008 »zoom in« festival in Bern, Switzerland.

3 Biographer Brian Olewnick reports noticing Rowe's tremor as early as summer 2014. cp. Olewnick 2018: p. 379.

What does a performance of finality amount to, especially in the context of aging performers, and how does this performance complicate the finality it seeks to inaugurate? In popular music, we are most familiar with the farewell tour, a well-worn trope that most would uncontroversially acknowledge as mere theatrical spectacle, pointing to countless instances of supposedly-departing musicians breaking their contracts of disappearance, returning years later – sometimes only a few – to perform yet again, resurrected from self-imposed retirement. There are, of course, other kinds of final performances: the final performance of a particular piece, or the final performance of a program or event. All the more tragic are unplanned final performances, retroactively dictated by the death of the performer. Yet Rowe's finality is of a different kind, not merely performed according to an existing plan, but emerging *from* performance and shaping both the remainder of the set and all performances thereafter; it is, to borrow his description of retirement from the liner notes of *Absence*, a "recognition of certain realities" (ibid) captured on record. It was not, however, his final performance. In addition to three guitarless solo sets, Rowe would also perform with Kjell Bjørgeengen and pianist John Tilbury before eventually rejoining Tilbury and percussionist Eddie Prévost in AMM, the free improvisation group that he founded with Prévost and members of the Mike Westbrook band in 1965 before leaving twice, first in the early 1970s and later in 2004. Rowe reunited with AMM once again in 2015, and this reconciliation would culminate in *that group's* final performance, which took place at London's Cafe Oto on Saturday, July 30, 2022 in the absence of John Tilbury, who could not make it for medical reasons (Grundy 2022). Clearly lacking the calculated profitability of the zombified pop star's post-farewell resurrection tour, Rowe's "returns" reflect an artist coming to terms with changing limitations and circumstances beyond his control, negotiating his relationship to tradition through his ability to perform.

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Rowe first picked up the guitar in 1957 while studying painting at the Plymouth College of Arts and Crafts, inspired by big band jazz, modern abstract art, and the ephemerality of sound as a medium (Olewnick 2018: 26). He recalls in a 2001 interview with Dan Warburton: "With music, I didn't have the commodity. I didn't have the luggage of the canvas. I hit the guitar and made a note, and the note disappeared into air, I didn't have anything. It was completely fluid." (Rowe 2001) He soon joined a band led by Mike Westbrook, a jazz enthusiast and self-taught pianist who also attended Plymouth; initially composed of amateur musicians, the Westbrook band played relatively-conventional jazz influenced by Duke Ellington and Count Basie. However, Rowe's penchant for unconventional approaches was already on full display, even in this early phase: trumpeter Henry Lowther compares hearing Rowe's Westbrook-era solos to "hearing three minutes of Stockhausen in the middle of a Mozart symphony" (Olewnick 2018: 64), while the band's other guitarist, Malcolm Le Grice, recalls that Rowe "did not seem to bother to learn the guitar before he started playing in public – he learned on the stage and so his style was very wild and quite disruptive, but a challenge. I knew more about chords and sequences than Keith, but he was doing something more committed and dangerous." (ibid: 31) His methods would only get more radical: by the end of his tenure with the group, he made a New Year's resolution to stop tuning his guitar and was beginning to experiment with unconventional notation, pasting images from magazines and pop culture onto Westbrook's scores (ibid: 62). Naturally, the group splintered: Rowe and saxophonist Lou Gare began to play with Prévost, who Gare knew from outside of the band. They would soon be joined by multi-instrumentalist Lawrence Sheaff, a Westbrook alum, and Cornelius Cardew, the British experimental composer who, having worked under Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and more, brought a transatlantic perspective on avant-garde art music to the group's experiments in improvisation. This was the beginning of AMM.

Inspired by the explosive free jazz coming out of America and exemplified by Ornette Coleman and late-period John Coltrane, early AMM opted to continue in the creative spirit of these musicians rather than

superficially replicating their sounds; without a repertoire, they not only dispensed with composition and jazz conventions, but also with soloing and constant rhythm (ibid: 73). As Brian Olewnick acknowledges in his biography of Rowe, prior to the addition of Cardew, AMM independently arrived at something akin to American experimental composer John Cage's attitude towards jazz improvisation, believing that established patterns and lexicons inhibit the proclaimed freedoms of the practice. In place of improvisation, Cage valued indeterminacy of composition and performance, utilizing chance operations and emphasizing non-intention to create works whose manifestations vary greatly from performance to performance. Of course, for the performer, this too is a type of improvisation, if with additional constraints. Identifying this contradiction, George E. Lewis argues that the prevalent use of 'indeterminacy' over 'improvisation' in the discourses surrounding New York School composition denies the influence of jazz and other African-American traditions on the development of experimental music; however, in 1960s Britain, where both free jazz and Cagean aleatory musics were essentially American imports, these traditions were often viewed as complementary, as if free improvisation was the natural culmination of modern composition (cf. Lewis 2004; cf. Piekut 2014). By the time of AMM's first record (*AMMMusic*, 1967), Rowe was performing with his guitar laid horizontally on a table – inspired by Jackson Pollock's action painting and recalling the materially-altered lexicons of Cage's prepared pianos – and manipulating radios as instruments in live improvisation. Perhaps epitomized by his use of radio, his work with AMM and beyond could be said to use 'classical' indeterminacy for the purposes of improvisation. In the liner notes to 2003's *Duos for Doris* (with John Tilbury), he revised his position on the above issues, arguing that the term 'improvisation' is "in need of a radical overhaul" because "what is far more crucial is being aware of the decisive moment." (Rowe 2003). Retaining intention and locating it in discrete moments of decision, Rowe offers a music structured by and existing *between* decisions, always colored by the possibility that the performer will decide to *stop*.

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Mortality and aging had already informed much of his 21st-century work before *Absence*. *Duos For Doris* was recorded in memory of Tilbury's late mother, who died shortly before the recording session; eight years later, the duo would record for the first time since Rowe's 2004 departure from AMM, this time in memory of Rowe's late mother, for *E.E. Tension and Circumstance.* Of that album's handwritten notes, Rowe once remarked that they were meant to "recall a trace of old age and an increasing lack of facility": "I wanted it to look shoddy, with errors, away from those slick images of conceit." (Warburton 2012: 64). Rowe's aversion to "slick images of conceit" is here indicative of an unabashedly frank attitude towards mortality that we also see in 2016's *The Room Extended*, a 4-CD set that continues Rowe's engagement with what might be called composition as opposed to improvisation[4]: recorded in the years surrounding *Absence*'s November 2015 performance, its cover is disarmingly minimal, featuring only an x-ray scan of Rowe's skull taken on March 5, 2015.

The image of the skull would reappear in Rowe's later description of the development of Parkinson's, captured in the 2021 documentary *What Is Man And What Is Guitar?: Keith Rowe*:

> In the skull we have these peepholes which are kind of conduits for communicating with the rest of the world, and as the Parkinson's develops, the peepholes become more constricted, they kind of close down, their aperture is lessened. Very slowly, year by year, week by week, month by month, minute by minute, second by second, it is contracting. (Burnett/Jones 2021)

He continues, tying this gradual reduction of perception to a philosophy of performance: "But it's about you inside the skull, not able to do all of the things that you want to do, but just doing the things you can do." Later on, he reframes the statement: "So the performance becomes a performance of what I cannot do and a recognition of my own vulnerability." With Parkinson's functioning as an embodied constraint, Rowe con-

4 Like its 2007 predecessor, *The Room*, *The Room Extended* was deliberately assembled at Rowe's home rather than emerging through live improvisation. cp. Brian Olewnick, *Keith Rowe: The Room Extended*, pp. 371–373 and 380–385.

fronts the limits of improvisation, staging his negotiations of the possible with each performance.

In the same documentary, he discusses his reasoning for deciding to retire from solos: "If I had a contact mic in my right hand, I would want to manipulate that with the utmost sensitivity, as if I was playing a piece of Mozart. I lost the ability to do that." The evocation of Mozart may initially seem odd coming from a guitarist who famously vowed to stop tuning his guitar ("Comparing your work with Mozart seems pretentious, but that's the way I'm going to do it," he continues), and there is indeed an appeal to cultural capital here – if not to demand the reverent listening typically reserved for one of Europe's most beloved composers, then at least to combat common dismissals of free improvisation, noise, and other sonic experimentalisms as being undisciplined or even non-musical. However, anyone familiar with his work from the last twenty years knows that the European classical tradition is central to his practice and self-conception. Rowe biographer Brian Olewnick recalls a mid-2000s lecture at the Columbia University Computer Music Studio during which the guitarist began by simply playing a recording of a Jean-Joseph de Mondoville piece; after pausing playback, he questioned the students: "OK. What is the question?" (Olewnick 2018: 362) When they failed to deliver what he deemed to be an adequate response, he provided one for them: "How can I, as a contemporary electronic musician, achieve the level of probity heard in that work by Mondonville?" For Rowe, this probity seems to largely be a matter of intentionality and discipline, as if there is a moral imperative to the aforementioned "sensitivity." In a 2007 interview, he discussed the experience of seeing classical music in a live setting in terms of audience expectations: "When you go to hear a Haydn string quartet, there are no surprises, are there? In terms of newness. People listen for the exquisite exposition of the quartet." (2007) Compared to the perpetual unknowability of improvisation and aleatory music, this proposition may appear comforting, even easy: the performers and audience both know what they are getting into. Freed from the promise of the unknown, audiences can listen to the excellence of the performance itself, the "exquisite exposition of the quartet." Perhaps this quality of exquisiteness is what Rowe is getting at when

he evokes the sensitivity required to perform Mozart: a haptic responsiveness that is divorced from the music proper, mediating between the space of the room and the transcendent ideal of the score.

As indicated in his comments to his solo performance at 2008's AMPLIFY: light festival (recorded and released as *Cultural Templates*), questions of mortality also underlie his investment in this tradition. Being the only non-Japanese musician present at the festival, Rowe decided to prepare a performance that would foreground his own cultural and musical backgrounds (Olewnick 2018: 366–367). The resulting piece, organized into a series of "templates," utilizes long and untampered recordings of pieces from the European art music tradition alongside Rowe's usual electronics. Each template serves a specific conceptual and personal function, with many framed as a question. Ending with a selection from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aenas*, the piece thematizes death, the movement of history, and the longevity of art. Rowe explains: "All of these sounds are foreshadowing the end, the Dido, I know it's coming. It's about death. It goes away and comes back. What I'm saying with this death motif going, is that that's what will become of our music, and us all, in 100 years probably." (ibid: 370) The loss of music over time is invoked through its opposite, music yet to be lost: "I wanted pieces that survived" (ibid), he explained regarding his selection of sampled material, notably chosen beforehand rather than grabbed from the air. "That's making art, trying to become eternal, resisting loss." (ibid). His apocalyptic foreshadowing – "death […] that's what will become of our music, and us all" – asserts the futility of art's apparent goal, suggesting a performance of finality not on the scale of an isolated individual, but on that of humanity and history, resituating his relatively-niche contributions in relation to not just a tradition, but to that-which-was-tradition, to an after-music when not even Purcell is remembered – music swallowed by its primary material, the passing of time.

Rowe foreshadows and thematizes both physical death and death by collective forgetting, but he is also concerned with death by *remembering*, or more specifically, death by *misremembering* – death by canon. The third template features a section of Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera *Castor*

*and Pollux*, whose horns, Rowe tells us, are heard three centuries later "as beautiful writing, not as revolutionary" (Rowe 2009):

> This template represents the idea that no matter how different, how revolutionary and new we think our creations are, they will become a part of the mainstream, they will become absorbed. Duchamp's urinal, no matter what observers thought at the time, 100 years later it will be a part of the history of the plastic arts. Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) and Matisse's Dance (1909) were both regarded as ugly anti-art and without merit at the time, but are now thought of as possibly the most important and greatest paintings of all time. (ibid)

One can read in this an acknowledgment of the significant delay between the creation of innovative or important works of art and their popular and/or critical appreciation, if such appreciation ever surfaces. "Will our abstract scratching rubbings noise metallic scraping electronic interference glitches need to be placed alongside Haydn?" (ibid) he asks in an explanation of the template. Rowe seems to suggest that this process changes something of the artwork itself, presenting the process of [art] history as the slow neutralization of the then-avant-garde. We may encounter a Duchamp or listen to Rameau, and we may even appreciate their provocations in their historical contexts; however, if they still provoke at all, their provocations are not the same, serving to reinforce the tradition they once challenged. Even that which is remembered and etched into tradition – and only for so long – is remembered as a false memory, divested of the qualities that admitted it to the canon in the first place in order to make it accessible to future audiences; the artwork may still exist, but what and how it signifies has been irrevocably altered.

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In "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," Jacques Derrida inquires, via Celan's poetry and thought, into the nature of the unrepeatable, the only-once[5].

5 I would like to thank James M. Kopf, who thoughtfully directed me to Derrida's essay when I first expressed interest in the ideas of this chapter.

For Derrida, that which marks itself as final – that is to say, that which performs finality – can be most simply called a *date* (2005: 2). He is not merely interested in the singularity of dates, but also in their self-effacement and the seemingly-contradictory nature of their revenant repetitions: "How can one date what does not repeat if dating also calls for some form of return, if it recalls in the readability of a repetition? But how can one date anything other than that which never repeats itself?" (ibid). While each date marks a period of time wholly unique in its ephemerality, one that will never again come to pass, its designation *as* date requires its entry into recognizable systems of language and measurement that depend upon repetition for their cohesion, promising it in the forms of readability and anniversary if nothing else. A date can certainly be written, spoken, recalled, or implied; however, it is because of this, Derrida tells us, that the same date can also be "transcribed, exported, deported, expropriated, reappropriated, repeated in its absolute singularity" (ibid: 6), and in the process, risk losing itself *through* readability, collapsing its sublime totality of phenomena and experiences into a single sign. Encountering markings which profess uniqueness – readable dates – one faces *shibboleth*, signified asignification:"It shows that there is something not shown, that there is ciphered singularity: irreducible to any concept, to any knowledge, even to a history or tradition." (ibid: 33) Marking that-which-was, the date professes to signify a concentration of events as well as its inability to sufficiently do so.

Dating hence follows a circular logic and forms a *ring*, simultaneously announcing the unrepeatable and its [im]possible repetition; while the English phrase "one time" alludes to time itself, Derrida shows that its roughly-equivalent translations in Romance languages emphasize a *turn*, as in the Italian idiom *una volta* (ibid: 2).Turning and returning, the date is in essence a *record* – or, in the case of *Absence*, a CD. Perhaps this is why it is common when discussing jazz and free improvisation to refer to recording sessions (and metonymically, records themselves) as "dates." However, as David Grubbs has shown in *Records Ruin The Land-*

*scape: John Cage, The Sixties, and Sound Recording*[6], this very characteristic of dating is why many free improvisers and experimental composers alike oppose commercial recordings of their work – and for some, like Cage and guitarist Derek Bailey, records of anyone; while philosophies of improvisation and indeterminacy stress an ephemeral music that is enacted through the choices and actions of its performers, the act of recording flattens the fleeting moment to readable and repeatable data. In an interview with Grubbs, Rowe notes that AMM took seriously the idea that "recordings were really undesirable" (Grubbs 2014: 109), echoing statements published elsewhere by the band, such as the statement published in the notes to *The Crypt – 12th June 1968*: "This music is apparently unsuited to mechanical reproduction." (ibid: 120) Yet there it was, taking the commodity form that Rowe had hoped to escape *through* music. *The Crypt* was released thirteen years after its recording, suggesting that its function was at least partially intended to be archival, preserving for posterity not just a single performance, but a document of a long-departed era of AMM and, beyond that, of a particular epoch of British experimental music (cf. Born 2005). Mechanical reproduction may not be ideal for a music like AMM's – a music that certainly cannot be preserved with standard notation – but it is nearly a necessity for contemporary musicians if their goal is indeed "trying to become eternal, resisting loss."

*Absence*, like any live recording, directs us to a specific date. What is concentrated within November 6th, 2015 other than Rowe's performance, whose recorded double, testifying to the former's existence, is also our primary entrypoint *to* the date? Rowe's use of radios in improvisation, a "calibration of the everyday" (Grubbs 2014: 120), could be said to make the date's concentration audible, overlaying not only multiple experiences of the *same* time, but also multiple temporalities; he creates a space in which musics from multiple centuries can coexist and speak to each other, pointing to different dates of writing and recording while

6 Grubbs dedicates the fourth chapter to an analysis of British free improvisation and experimentalism, specifically AMM and guitarist Derek Bailey. cp. "The Antiques Trade: Free Improvisation and Record Culture," pp. 105–134.

simultaneously accompanying him in one concentrated present. He also begins his liner notes to the record by describing his experience of the day, presumably to highlight its importance to his performance, his *reading of the room*. For Rowe, "the room" is a highly-loaded concept. Even with early AMM, he often tried to make music that sounded and functioned as a direct outgrowth of its surroundings. However, the term would later grow to encompass "an altogether larger imaginary conceptual space" (2004) that includes his thoughts, relationships with collaborators, and anything else that might influence performance, such as a situated awareness of politics, history, and global conflict.

In the liner notes for *Absence*, he recalls his experience of November 6th, 2015, as if to provide us with a sketch of the room. He describes a visit to the Kunst Museum, focusing on an exhibition that paired the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec with contemporaneous photography – "Lautrec's Photographic Eye": "What struck me was how the fashion of the day became aged, yet the TL paintings stayed fresh, and that his drawings were fantastic." (2021b) Echoing the themes of artistic longevity explored in *Cultural Templates*, he seems to find in Toulouse-Lautrec an artistic model for resisting loss and pursuing the eternal, measured against the unflinching verisimilitude of the exhibit's accompanying photographs. Though Rowe mentions other exhibitions, only that of Toulouse-Lautrec is granted any substantial comment, and we can reasonably infer that it was a major presence in the room at the time of performance, bringing with it to the stage interrelated concerns of aging and longevity.

While artifacts can announce themselves as dated through the usual codes – month, day, year – they are also more subtly dated through what Derrida calls the cuts and incisions in poetic language, the singular markings that distinguish a text as being *of a time*, of *its* time, caught in between language and history:"Wherever a signature has cut into an idiom, leaving in language the trace of an incision, the memory of an incision *at once* unique and iterable, cryptic and readable, there is date." (2005: 48) We can say that the fashion depicted at the Toulouse-Lautrec exhibit, "aged" as it seemed to Rowe, bears the idiomatic cuts of an aesthetic language long departed. But what does it mean for Toulouse-

Lautrec's work to remain "fresh"? Surely it, too, is dated, bearing the cuts of its language and time. Unlike the fashion Rowe mentions, Toulouse-Lautrec has been made canonical, which is to say both remembered and etched into the visual language of 'tradition.' Yet something escapes this codification into history, and it is precisely that which marks its uniqueness and which Rowe experiences as an otherwise inarticulable freshness.

Let us return to the quality of sensitivity Rowe mentions in *What is Man*. It too is *of a time*, linked more to our own than to Mozart's: it is the level of sensitivity generally expected for a performance of Mozart in the 21st century. It is shibboleth: can we perceive its presence when it accompanies performance? Can we perceive its absence, such as when it is overtaken by Rowe's Parkinson's tremor? If we cannot, we fail to hear Rowe experimenting *within* a tradition. It is not simply a question of whether Rowe's contributions to tradition are made intelligible through performance, but if his performance makes tradition intelligible and audible. Do we hear Mozart in and through Rowe's instruments and objects, passing through him and in time? If we do, do we hear the ineffable Mozart, that which has escaped canonical and institutional codification, only expressible through the abstraction of the shibboleth? Do we hear the layered and spectral temporality of the classical tradition amidst the gathered concentration of November 6th, 2015, or is the contemporary world *too* concentrated for us to make out anything but noise? "[…] it's a world without focus, the sound is overprocessed, distorted and overwhelmed by its overprocessing," (2009) Rowe wrote of the world in the online notes to *Cultural Templates*. Time moves on; from 12:10 to 12:21 in *Absence*, we hear him decisively acknowledge this reality, or we at least know to listen for it. He writes of this towards the end of his liner notes:

> Retirement, or stepping away, is difficult and painful. It requires a recognition of certain realities, that you are not important, that the world does not care that you have stopped performing solos, actually the world does not notice that you have stopped, life outside your bubble continues, get used to it, you are not at the centre of anything. A part of the reality is to try not to leave a big mess for others to tidy up

> after you have left the departure lounge, retirement is an opportunity where you are able to discard all the junk you've accumulated. (2021b)

In the first two sentences, Rowe addresses himself and other, himself *as* other, through persistent second-person address. Piling on top of each other like thoughts-in-motion, the clauses culminate in dour Beckettian deadpan: "get used to it, you are not at the centre of anything." With the final sentence, Rowe appears to offer somewhat standard advice for the elderly, but beyond its literal implications, its relationship to his practice is unclear. What "junk" is accumulated? He seems to provide an answer at the start of the subsequent paragraph: "I want to share with you a recording of that 33 mins solo from Bern before it too departs for the dustbin." (ibid) *It too departs.* Performance, recording, memory: all to be discarded. The recording testifies to what was there, allowing us to listen for Rowe's performance, his Mozart-worthy sensitivity, and the latter's absence. It is its own shibboleth, marking a unique and unrepeatable event while making the latter legible through the literal repetition of playback, turning and returning between 200 and 500 rpm. But like anything else, it too will disappear through and beyond memory.

Thirty minutes in, *Absence* ends with roughly two uninterrupted minutes of Haydn's Symphony No. 80 in D minor, starkly juxtaposed with the pop song that precedes and briefly overlays it. We hear little else but its triumphant glory until Rowe slowly fades out the piece, leaving only the hollowed sound of the room, silence made audible. Shifting. Coughing. Applause. After music.

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