Composed Performance

Jessie Marino, *Wesleyan University*
COMPOSED PERFORMANCE

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Middletown, Connecticut

May 2013
dedicated to my Mom, Eric, Natacha & Andrew, for all of their love and friendship,

and Ron Kuivila, Paula Matthusen and Alvin Lucier for their invaluable guidance.
Actual Photograph.

from R-L, Sophia, Teresa, Pierre, Ashlyn, Lauren.

taken April 2005 at Manhattan School of Music.
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From 2006-2008 I lived in Berlin Germany. While there, I was lucky to see a few wonderful performances of pieces that were emerging in a new genre called Composed Theater. These pieces take their cue from the work of Mauricio Kagel, in that the music and the visual representations onstage are of equal importance. Additionally, the visual material is treated in a musical way, taking into consideration terms of formalization, development, and time. Theoretically speaking, you would be able to analyze these visual gestures in the same way that you would musical ones.

The piece that really changed my mind about what composition could be was called Tafel Eins by Manos Tsangaris. In this piece two percussionists inhabit a small dark room. In the middle of the room is a table with objects of various size, all of which make noise. There are radios, large spinning metal rings, wooden blocks, lamps, mallets etc.....All of the actions that occur on and off the table are scored out with rhythmic cells and are accompanied by lighting and staging cues.

In this piece, Tsangaris composes an entire situation. He uses musical gestures to structure the passing time and lighting events to build a framework
for the musical gestures to lie within. As a person who was eager to compose, but rather intimidated by the western classical tradition of composition, seeing this piece was exciting and awakening. This composer was using objects, not instruments, to form his compositional material. The score, was not transposed trumpet parts or complicated orchestral doublings, it was text based instructions on how specifically to manipulate these objects. One could argue that traditional instrumental notation essentially does the same thing, it is a way for the composer to instruct the performer in how to manipulate their instrument, but for someone who didn’t know the range of a bass clarinet or how to notate multiphonics, Tsangaris’s piece showed me a new concept of composition that could be immediately pursued, without working knowledge of loads of instrumental techniques. After seeing this piece, I returned to New York to start writing my first piece.
Introduction

When I was first learning classical cello repertoire, I would meticulously practice my sniffs. While watching broadcasts of Rostropovich or Casals playing on PBS I noticed that they were very precise in the way that they breathed and I thought that I had been missing out on a fundamental part of classical performance practice. So I started practicing my sniffs. I would scribble into my music, next to fingering and bowing markings where to make an audible nasal punctuation, which according to my understanding of watching professional cellists play, would make my performance authentic. Sniff practice increased when I started playing chamber music and was specifically instructed by my coaches to mark entrances, give cues, and dictate tempi by sniffing. The speed and crispness of my sniff was also important. If I was playing a speedy staccato section of a Minuet, sniffing in a slow elongated way would be inappropriate. The notation of my sniffs then became more specific. Quick Sniff. Mad Sniff. Slow Sniff. Sharp Sniff. Different sniffs would be practiced during the course of any given rehearsal. Not only sniffs, but facial expressions too. When the soaring cello duet happens in the first movement of the Schubert Cello Quintet, everyone in the ensemble would look dolefully over at the two cellists while they played
together. Eyebrows raised, chins up, a tearful slick in their eyes, their bodies
leaning forward as the duet glided towards the phrases climax. I found most of
these gestures to be ridiculous, even at a young age. However, this hyper-
extension of emotional portrayal may be one of the reasons why performers like
Yo-Yo Ma and Jacqueline Du Pre are so compelling to watch. They are some of
the few classical players who have even become household names (Jacqueline
even had a Hollywood film made about her life!) When you watch them play,
you can’t help but feel something akin to real emotion. Their faces contort into
looks of anguish and sadness or serious intensity. Their facial expressions,
physical posture and flamboyant bow movements dictate when the audience
should be feeling something sad or beautiful or dangerous. Perhaps performers
insist on visually expressing the music’s emotional qualities in an effort to
heighten their relationship with the audience and place a stamp of their own
personality onto the music, but for my taste, this particular performative practice
takes a musical work and turns it into a soap opera.

Cage and Tudor did not perform with this kind of romanticized posture.
Their strict suits and ties, empty expressions, and perfunctory movements across
the stage responded to this performative cliché of wearing your heart on your
sleeve. Their Neo-Dada aesthetic of indifference shows an example of one way to counteract romantic performativity, by erasing it completely.

Early pieces of Philip Glass and Steve Reich used repetition as a mechanism for removing performative romanticism. The pitches in their music are taken from the tonal worlds of late romanticism, but they do not perform a harmonic purpose. They lack progression and stay statically fixed in one position, stationary chords chugging mechanically through time.

Language is also obfuscated by repetition. In Reich’s tape piece “Come Out” the words “Come Out” loose their meaning after you hear it 20 times. Reich squashes your ability to sympathize by force feeding you the same words which, over time, become abstracted.

The emergence of YouTube has made it extremely easy to watch a performance of any active ensemble playing live, which means that everything about their performance needs to actually be performed. Ensembles are now expected to take the visuality of their musical playing into account. In response to this need, there has been a noticeable resurfacing of romantic performance postures in the concert setting of even the most thorny unromantic music.
Watch this video of flautist Claire Chase.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArK2EE1cHdc

Keyword search: “Clair Chase, Jason Eckardt, 16”

I love to watch her play - it’s completely insane! Part of what Claire does visually, as a performer, is out of necessity. She has to contort her face and neck to produce the wild timbres and air sounds that are a part of the piece. But most of what she does is an exaggerated version of what is actually needed to produce the sounds. It looks like a perfectly psychotic kick boxing match! She has constructed a set of movements which seem to match the intensity of the glitchy violent music that she is playing, the same way a cellist raises their eyebrows and physically sinks down into a large melodic leap. Granted, audiences need any help that they can get to try to help them understand the sound world that many of these contemporary piece put in place. However, this practice of physical and emotional projection onto the music seems, to me, a disingenuous ploy to try to reach an audience and get them involved with the musical event, even if it is only momentarily.

The tactic that I have been trying to put forth in my work, in order to battle this falsified performance posture, is to use the gestures that performers
make while playing, but to remove the sonic material that accompany these gestures. In essence, I am removing the sonic context which make these physical movements seem viable, and blowing up the remaining gestures to a much larger size, exposing them as separate entities from the music they are normally associated with.

My work of the past two years has primarily focused on using these blown up physical gestures as musical material. Classically trained instrumentalists practice physical movements repeatedly, perfecting them in order to achieve reliable sound production, intonation and a heightened sense of emotional expressivity through sound. But what happens if you take the instrument away? You’re left with a vigorously trained body, musical intuition, and visual representations of sonic intensity. I wanted to used these elements as the basis of my compositional material. In my own perception of contemporary music, it seemed that most composers were mainly working to create extraordinarily beautiful forms within which to place musical materials. The materials, though, are the same spectral, scratch-and-sniff, fire-in-a-pet-shop, sound materials which have been cultivated and used since the 1960s.
Using theatrical visual gestures as musical material was both a way of separating my compositional/performative persona from my instrumentalist identity, and a response to the way that composers have been recycling musical materials for decades.
Rot Blau is a tightly knit rhythmic duo which uses synchronized and mirrored upper body movements to create small vignettes which depict the exercises of two androids. The performers are outfitted with identical wigs, in red and blue respectively, and two toned (white + red or blue) gloves that have hard metal tacks on each of the finger tips. The performers execute their movements in unison, and as the vignettes progress, the performers switch their seating arrangement (first Player 1 sits on the left side, then moves to the right side), their wigs (first Player 1 wears blue, then switches to red) and eventually their gloves. By the end of the piece, the two performers have completely switched over to the other players color scheme and position on the stage.

When I wrote this piece, my long time friend and colleague Natacha Diels (who performs this piece with me as our duo On Structure) were often being
confused for one another. We are two women of similar build and stature and, at that time, both had very short haircuts. Besides the fact that we are basically the same height and had the same haircut, we look nothing alike. We are however, very close friends and would often be seen together in social situations. It got to the point where a stranger came up to me on the street and started yelling at me for not returning their phone call. Of course, he had been trying to reach Natacha, and she had been tactfully avoiding him, until he ran into me!

I wanted to write a piece that would exploit these identity mix-ups. The piece would be a game to see how quickly the audience would notice that we had switched, or if they noticed at all (Neuroscientists call this phenomenon “Change Blindness” - Macknick and Martines-Conde, 2010 pg. 80) and a way of exploring the very subtle differences in personality through performative actions. When we practice this piece, we rehearse making our actions as identical as possible. But of course you can only get so close. For example, my head movements are always a little faster and crisper than Natacha’s, while her hand movements are a little bit higher and have more bounce to them. These differences, though slight in size, are very big indicators as to the identity of the performer. They also layer on an additional question to a rather simplistic piece;
What does it mean to project a sense of self onto a performance, and how much of your individuality is required during a performance, in order to secure your identity within the minds of the audience?

Performance of Rot Blau
MATA Festival, April 2013
This piece for snare drum, lamp and tape is quite simple. It is about a very rudimentary part of music perception, in particular, the way that people internalize a beat. I would to hear pop songs on the radio where a guitar part enters strumming quarter notes. [1 - 2 - 3 - 4]. When the drums come in though, you realized that the guitar was actually outlining the upbeats of the songs. [1 + - 2 + - 3 + - 4 +]. I thought that this was an interesting trick and wanted to try it with an instrument designed to delineate the difference between down beats and up beats; a snare drum! The piece starts with the performer forcefully hitting a rimshot on a snare drum. At the sound of the rimshot, a lamp positioned above the snare flashes on and then quickly back off. This continues monotonously for a minute and a half. Suddenly the song “I’ll make love to you” by Boyz II Men plays for the length of one chorus, and quickly cuts off. The performer continues to hit the snare drum at the same pulse, but now instead of turning on when the drum is hit the lamp is quickly turned off.
The performer is instructed to wear earbuds and listen to the entirety of the Boyz II Men song. They play along with the snare part in the song itself. At the beginning of the piece, the audience is meant to hear the snare hits as heavy down beats of each bar [1 - 3], but after the song comes in you hear that these strong sounding beats have been on the upbeats of each measure [2 - 4]. The lamp’s function also switches when the feel of the beat changes. Initially turning off an eighth note after the drum hit, then after the song turning off exactly with the hit.
On Structure is a performance platform that Natacha Diels and I started in 2009. After working on my piece Rot Blau, we wanted to create a duo that would be focused on performing works which amplified musical visuality. Since our formation, we have mainly created works for ourselves, though there are plenty of works by other composers, Rick Burkhardt, Manos Tsangaris, Inigo Miranda Giner, Carola Baukholdt, for example, which fall into this category. It has been an important part of our identity as a duo, however, that we have focused on writing our own pieces. Having your close friend as a musical partner means that you get to take incredible liberties in nearly every aspect of the creative process. Most times we do not show up to rehearsals with a “score”. Instead, we sit together and show one another how we would like the movements to look, much like a choreographer working with a dancer in their company. Not having
a written score also means that the form and pacing of the work can change instantaneously, which often happens in our collaboratively composed pieces. During the rehearsal process we try out different mappings of musical sections, which eventually settle into something more permanent. However, because we usually perform a piece that we’ve made 20 or more times, we also change things from performance to performance. This serves mostly as a tactic for preventing boredom, but is also a completely unique opportunity for a composer to be able to make significant changes mere moments before a performance. Writing for ourselves means that we get to continue experimenting even when the piece is “done”. We are allowed to act as performer and composer at the same time. For me, this is the most interesting and revealing part of our work together. We get to try new things at every performance. Sometimes our off the cuff ideas shed a whole new light onto the piece and sometimes they completely flop. Simply having this repeated experience has been extremely informative to all of my compositional work.
**Sumi Jo**

Sumi Jo is the first piece in a series of studies that I would like to pursue, which unpacks the oddities of western classical music performance practices. This piece for solo soprano and video does not require the soprano to sing. Instead, they are instructed to watch a video of a different soprano singing a difficult Aria (in this case, coloratura Sumi Jo and an Aria from Lakmé,... I realized too late that I should have used Cecilia Bartoli singing Vivaldi!!). The score is a direct transcription of the movements that the singer makes during her performance. What was interesting for me to see was the overlap of movements that needed to be made in order to physically produce the sounds of the Aria, and the movements that Sumi Jo had decided to add for dramatic effect. In the performance of *Sumi Jo*, the performing-soprano stands in front of a large black screen and lip syncs to the Aria, performing all of the notated movements. At particularly intense moments of physical motion, a clip of the video-soprano pops up on the screen. Suddenly the audience sees short clips of these physical movements illuminated and they start to pick up on the fact that the performing-soprano is mimicking these movements exactly.
This piece functions as critical commentary through means of abstraction. Let’s assume that opera is the fundamental contact point of musically abstracted language. Typically, the words in a romantic opera aria are stretched out to the point where you don’t understand them: single syllables can be held through a number of measures. (Hence the need for super titles.) In an opera setting, the movements that are performed by the singers have a purpose. The singers are on fully set stage, as a character in costume, acting out a storyline. In this scenario, raising your hand aggressively at an unfaithful lover makes sense dramatically, both because of the scenery around you and because you need to help the audience retain their attention to the motivating principles of the plot. The language has been so stretched out that it is rendered quite useless in adding to the dramatic tension of the scene. This is where the musical harmonies and melodic line, plus the dramatic presentations of the singer come into play.

At some point, orchestras started playing famous opera arias during their regular season of symphonic concerts. In this situation, the singer is brought on stage in the same way that a violinist playing a concerto would be. They stand in front of the orchestra, usually wearing an ornate gown, and sing the aria. No super titles, no scenery, no costumes: just the accompaniment and the melody.
Imagine Tom Brady in a tuxedo yelling plays during a formal dinner for die hard Patriots fans, without the stadium, without his uniform, and without his teammates. It would be ridiculous!!! Removing the aria from the context of the entire opera doesn’t make any artistic sense. In Sumi Jo  I tried to take this concept of removing the operatic object away from its context and extend it even further. Hyper-enlargement of the singers’s physical movements essentially do the same thing that the music does to the language of the aria. It stretches it out and renders it meaningless or at least unintelligible.
ATTN MGMT

ATTN MGMT consists of a few small experiments that I wove together for my thesis concert. I was torn on how to approach this concert. Traditionally, one presents a culminating event of all of the works that they have completed during their course of study. But I wanted to have the opportunity to try out some new ideas and see if any of them were worth pursuing. The main idea was to work with a number of different ways of controlling an audience’s attention. The piece is comprised of a guided meditation where the Hypnotist hypnotizes herself, a scene in a waiting room of synchronized sitting, viewing a number of neuroscientific brain game videos, and a non-linear magic show. Each of these events explores a different aspect of gaining or loosing focus by manipulating the audience’s sonic and visual perception.

Meta Hypnosis:

The piece starts with the voice of a hypnotist speaking softly and slowly, inviting the audience to be lulled into a hypnotic state. The hypnotist winds up doing a rather convincing job and hypnotizes herself in the process. The slow voice chants evenly allowing the audience members to relax and think their own
thoughts (whether they be attending to personal boredom, participating in the
new age guidance, or thinking other thoughts), but as the hypnotist starts to get
off course, becoming repetitive and nonsensical, the audience then may attend to
the outside voice. They focus their attention to the things around them, other
audience members, for example. Mainly their attention shifts from inside their
minds to the world around them.

**Waiting Room : for one or two synchronized sitters.**

To start writing this piece, I observed all of the small movements that I made
while waiting for something. The list amounted to about 50 actions. After
weeding out the ones that were physically similar, I had a list of about 18
movements. Using chance operations I plugged these movements into a formal
rhythmic construct which as the piece develops, becomes more recognizable as a
quantifiable steady rhythm, simultaneously making unremarkable actions seem
unnatural, exaggerated, and extreme. In context of the overall piece, *Waiting
Room* serves as a way to control the audience’s attention, focusing it on the
smallest movements that a performer can make. As the performer enters the
room, the audience gives their attention over to the performer. If the performer
decides not to reward this attention with a feat of entertainment, the audience may lose concentration and start to focus on other things, once again allowing them to go back inside of themselves to engage with an inner dialogue. They may also decided to attend to the other audience members, perhaps noticing a similarity in the gestures of the performer and the rest of the audience (a simultaneous crossing of their legs for example.) As the rhythmic structure becomes clear and overly complicated, the attention is recast onto the performer. The performer maintains this attention and will use it in the following pieces to distract and control what the audience is allowed to experience.

Ritual VI :: Patter :: For Tommy Cooper

This Ritual piece is a dissected magic show. Six simple magic tricks get boiled down to their singular elements and recombined in a non-linear fashion. There is a rubber band that jumps through my hand at the snap of my fingers; a dollar coin with the ability to disappear into thin air, a numeric or “self-working” card trick, a scarf that can cut through skin and bone without leaving a mark, and a salt shaker (or in my case, an empty jar of capers) that can fall straight through a hard table. When researching these tricks I was fascinated by the variation from
magician to magician in the way that they set up the trick and the difference in
the amount of time it took for them to work through the set up. None of these
tricks are particularly difficult to perform, they involve minimal sleights of hand,
but they do require an interesting story and the correct pacing. I wanted to see if
the tricks would still be perceived as “magical” even if the pacing got scrambled
and the story became abstracted, repeated in odd ways or disintegrated
altogether. The piece that results is completely unconvincing! Despite the show
being boring, unintelligible and not at all magical the audience still stayed
focused on my performance, which I found to be an interesting and unexpected
result. There are a few tactics working simultaneously which allow the magician
to keep the audience’s attentional spotlight. First, the sound of my voice actually
comes from my physical body in this part of the piece, a change from the
previously recorded voice that you hear coming from the speakers. Physical
proximity and direct eye contact with audience members and giving specific
tasks to individuals also helps to guide a drifting attention span back to the
magicians table. But the most vital part of keeping attention through the tedium
of this piece is the prospect that something magical and unexpected might
happen. If I felt that there was a general malaise descending on the spectators, I
delivered the punchline of the magic trick; actually making the coin disappear or the pulling the scarf through my neck. Even if the trick is completely unconvincing, there may be a moment of disorientation or a suspension of cynicism that reinvigorates the spectators willingness to believe that there could have been something magical at play.
Tausendteufel & Humm

Tausendteufel & Humm (T+H) is a piece that I wrote for Ensemble Pamplemousse which I really dislike. I had been writing more visual music and wanted to try my hand at writing instrumental music. The piece turned out to be an over-composed PuPu Platter of extended instrumental techniques and linguistic gibberish. What was valuable about writing this piece, was that it became very clear to me that what I am trying to do with instruments has nothing to do with writing for the sounds that they produce, rather, I am trying to compose instrumentally idiomatic physical gestures which haphazardly also make a sound. In T+H, I composed the musical language where in most of my other pieces, I compose the space around the performer and allow the musical language to appear as a result of a visually composed process. It also raised the question of how I should go about locating my work sonically. I have found recently that presenters and audiences typically define my work as a musical type of performance art, not an artful performance of music. In order to stay grounded in the medium of music, it seems clear that there needs to be some changes made in order to form more obvious ties to sonic construction.
Ideas for the Future.

I am now trying to figure out how to allow for more sonic complexity in my work without allowing the performer to retreat comfortably back into the safety of properly playing their instrument. Additionally, I am interested in researching how different types of performance effect the passing of time. In watching countless videos of magic acts, I noticed that most of them are not much longer than 15 minutes. Unless you are Sigfried and Roy or Penn and Teller, who have the fiscal capabilities and staging power of Las Vegas to make larger more technically involved tricks, a magician is usually limited to a table, a deck of cards and a few other props. In this case, having a magic set last longer than 15 minutes would become rather tedious. Stand up comics usually have a similar schtick, a few quick jokes and a few longer jokes side by side, then get off the stage before tomatoes get thrown! Theater, ballet and opera can last much longer. In theater, you have a story line to keep time moving forward, while in ballet and opera, you have both audio and visual mediums and a storyline keeping you focused through the three hour long performance. Music is one of the rare performance models that involves just one medium for an extended period of time. Bach Suites, Beethoven Symphonies, Brahms Sonatas. The work
I’d like to make in the future will explore different modes of performance and re-contextualize their gestures, timing, sights, sounds, quirks and other defining characteristics and place them within highly structured musical forms.
Postlogue

Charles Curtis :: Eliane Radgieue :: *Naldjorlak*

When I first heard Charles Curtis play *Naldjorlak* I was astounded by the space that the piece created in the room. As soon as he bowed the carefully tuned instrument, the entire room felt bigger. This expansive feeling was wonderful, it completely eliminated the cello as the object of resonance and pushed your aural attentiveness away from the physical body of the cello. When Charles started playing the wolf-tone, the instrument completely disappeared, all you heard was the room, the space around you and the interaction of the waves of sound with the air. At that time, I was tired of being a cellist. I had spent many years learning and perfecting all of the newest string techniques, double bows, scordatura, documenting multi-phonics, pressing out subtones, every different kind of pizzicato variation, noise, scratch, glitch, crunch etc. But none of these pieces or these techniques ever created a new experience for me. Something that would fundamentally change the way that I perceived my environment. Hearing *Naldjorlak* changed the way I viewed my relationship with the instrument.
At this point, Charles has taught me $3/5$th of *Naldjorlak*. There is no score to the piece. When they met in Paris in 2005 it was aurally transmitted from Eliane to Charles, and now from Charles to me. Though I have reservations about the mystical sanctity Charles shrouds around this piece, I have immense respect for the aural learning tradition that he and Lamonte Young and Eliane have cultivated in their works and feel extremely grateful for the concentrated time that Charles and I have spent together while learning *Naldjorlak*. When I live in California next year, I will learn the remaining parts of the piece and practice it for a year before performing it for Charles and Eliane. It will be the last piece of cello repertoire that I will seriously study.
**Post-Postlogue**

an addition to the English language?

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**Snoreburn**: *n.*; the tingly burning sensation in your nostrils after you have eaten any kind of particularly spicy mustard.

e.g.) Dude, I ate too much wasabi and it totally gave me a snoreburn.
References