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Ostrava Days 2009

Philip Thomas: I think I'm the only non-composer speaking at Ostrava. Is everyone here a composer? When Peter asked me to talk I thought about what would be most useful for you as composers. I told Peter I could give lectures on the following things and he said no, no, no, we don't do lectures, we're not a school, we share. So I'm going to share my experiences with you in a presentational format. I'm a pianist and musicologist. I write mainly about performance issues relating to experimental music. I'm going to talk about notation which I hope will be of interest to you. I know I approach things differently from many performers and so anything I say today is not truth, just my experiences.

I grew up on a farm in Devon, England. My nearest neighbor was two miles away. I had no experience with music as a child except some really, really bad barn dance music. I was quite a late developer to notated music let alone contemporary music. I remember going for interviews at colleges and conservatories when I was 17. At the Royal College I remember the interviewers ask me what contemporary music I knew. I said I knew Bob Dylan and the Happy Mondays, an indie dance band from Manchester.

[Laugher]

A really important moment for me came when I went to London to compete at a competition. It was the only competition I've ever been in. I felt physically ill the whole way through. The whole thing stank of the conservatoire. I still have the shakes when I go into these places. I even feel it in this corridor. There's something about the institution that I don't relate to. I didn't want to feel sick when I played the piano so I thought I would jack it all in.

After the competition I remember wandering around London aimlessly. All of a sudden I came across an exhibition of Mondrian's art. Upon going into the gallery I immediately felt there was something here that I knew I related to. It was an instinctive feeling. That same evening I heard there was an event put on by AMM, the British improvisation group of John Tilbury, Eddie Prevost and Keith Rowe. The concert was the most musical experience I had encountered in my life. Feeling sick in the conservatoire, going to the exhibition of Mondrian and going to the AMM gig taught me that I had to find my own unique path with music.

I tend to play music from John Cage onwards. At the moment I'm playing a lot of Christian Wolff. I'm about to record all his piano music. A large part of why I'm drawn to the Cagean tradition is the notations. There are various things that are important about notation. There is a need to feel that the piece is progressive, that it's moving on from the past and creating a new way of hearing. As a performer you want to have new experiences and be able to develop yourself as a musician. I'm trying to play music that I'm going to learn from. The music must change my technique, my understanding of music and my understanding of the piano specifically. This development often occurs when the notation requires me to do some kind of work, to *do* something rather than interpret something.

The way we normally think about interpretation is based on a 19th century notion of expressivity. People often ask me if their music is pianistic. I think what they really mean is how does it compare to Liszt? You know what a piano is. If you can do something with the piano then it's pianistic. Interpretation, as the term is usually used, is an idea that relates to a previous kind of music that's rooted in the conservatoire, in performance practices that are institutionalized. These practices derive from Romantic styles of piano playing.

There is this idea that you can make something expressive by sticking a load of rubato onto top of it. That's often an instruction in a score and I don't really know what it means. My understanding of rubato is that it occurs in a particular kind of tonal music as a way of moving somehow and somewhere. The expressiveness comes from how notes relate to each other. These are

essentially Romantic ideas of expression. When you try and put rubato into music that does not fit that category it often does not work.

Another thing I'm interested in with respect to notation is that it makes the piece collaborative in some way. I'm interested in notation that requires me to work with the composer. I don't want to be in any kind of hierarchy. I know I'm not a composer and I'm fascinated by what composers do. That process of engaging with music is absolutely fascinating to me. One of the most exciting things in life is getting a piece of music in the post and trying to get a grip on it in some way. That's a great experience! The notation is the medium for the collaboration. That's really important to me.

I love to take on board composer's ideas but these days I'm not interested in playing music where the composer says 'play it like this'. I say 'you play it like that'! I'm being slightly provocative about this but I just want the composer to respect the fact that performing musicians bring things to the table.

I'd like to show you some notations that meet these criteria. I have four examples to share. Before beginning I want to mention that I really enjoy the visual aspect of notation. That's really important to me. I'm probably going to create a couple enemies here but on the whole I really don't like computer-generated scores. They are so anonymous. I get so many scores sent to me as pdfs which is not nearly as much fun as getting something in the mail. I really love seeing composer's handwriting, it's almost like a window to the soul of the composer.

Student: We all were trained to read certain notations and regard them as a given absolute. In the kind of late 19th century notation that still prevails today there are aspects of the music that are not notated but are part of conventional performance practice. I feel that if you remove the conventions from the late 19th century style then the notation, like all notations, are hopelessly incomplete and have to be supplemented.

PT: I would agree with that. This problem goes back to the heart of the education system where things are very standardized. I said that I don't enjoy Sibelius notations but I know that if you're writing for large ensemble you have to use the programs. The ensembles won't accept the scores any other way. If you're ever going to write a piece for me write it by hand and I'll love you for it!

[Laughter]

In the '70s Christian Wolff drew wavy little stems on his notes. They look absolutely beautiful and communicate a sense of improvisation and flexibility. He abandoned this practice in the 1980s because of too many complaints from performers. I'm really sad about that because I loved that notation, it gives a flavor to the music. The visual aspect is a part of the music and a valuable part in itself.

As an aside I should mention that I don't perform by memory anymore. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, I don't want to feel sick when I'm play. [Laughter] Secondly, I love to be inspired by the visuals of the notation when performing.

My first example is from Howard Skempton, a really wonderful English composer who writes very simple, sparse music. He writes so immaculately. This example is called *First Prelude*, an early piece from 1971.

[Plays]

As you can see there's very little written in the notation. No dynamics, no tempi, no ways of playing. You simply have pitches and durations. Curiously enough I haven't seen the manuscript for this piece. When I played it for Howard in 1993 he said the following things about the performance; 'I like the slight rubato, the flexibility, the ebb and flow, how the chords ride into

each other … which is what I try to do when I play it, I lean into the next bar to create momentum… I love your dynamic level because there are subtle changes and I like your tempo because there is room for slight rubato which is crucial'. There's that word again!

He goes on, 'I like how you clipped notes. I'm definitely aware that the piece is being driven, but it's a question of it being driven from which point. I like a tenderness to start and then it's a matter of cajoling it along. So I like the warmth but essentially it's a matter of sound, balancing it, letting the sound speak for itself, not forcing it but still playing the music as well.' He goes on.

He has quite a lot to say about a piece that says very little in the notation! Clearly he had ideas about how he would play it but he chose not to notate his ideas in the score. One can imagine the piece with the ideas written in which may or may not be as successful as this version. I really like that he didn't include those ideas in the notation. It means that I've got this dialogue with it. It's about the piano and the weight of the keys. I'm developing myself as a performer while trying to understand the music. It obviously doesn't have a particular narrative, it's non-teleological; it's like an object rather than something that's going from one place to another. I am thinking in the smaller scale about how one chord might move into the next chord or how one chord is be affected by a previous chord.

Student: Do you think that kind or writing works for chamber or orchestral music?

PT: You'll have to ask Peter these things.

Petr Kotik: A chamber ensemble is different from an orchestra. In the chamber ensemble the music is much better rehearsed. A good chamber ensemble breathes and thinks together, they become telepathic. A good ensemble can do that kind of rubato without any problem. But it takes time.

PT: In a small group you can make those decisions collectively. I'm talking about piano music today because I'm a pianist. My examples really are very narrow.

The next example is by Bryn Harrison, an English composer again. This is a piece he wrote for me called *être temps* [*Being Time*]. Here the notation is rhythmically complex and rigidly notated. I'll play the first two pages so you can get an idea of the piece.

[plays]

When I played the piece for the composer and I asked him if it was right he shrugged and said 'sure'. That was Bryn Harrison's response! It was such a contrast to Skempton's response. Here the composer says a great deal in the notation and very little outside of the notation. In this piece there's very little one responds to in terms of traditional music. There's not much in the sense of tonality, there are very few notes. It's very reductive in terms of its content.

The notations are very busy and as I'm playing it I have a very different experience from you as a listener. I'm counting and shifting tempi almost every bar. I have nested duplets everywhere. I'm counting in quavers and semi quavers. He could have written this in space-time notation but how would that work in the performance? It probably wouldn't be as dynamic and lively. In space-time notation I feel like everything is a downbeat; there's no metric scheme. Here notes are being played in response to fast and erratic counting. All that brings a kind of articulation and a way of playing which creates a varied kind of sound.

Bryn Harrison is an example of a composer working with very traditional notation but using it in a complex way that creates a response in me as a performer. It works with tradition in a way that feels untraditional. I'm not thinking at all in terms of structure or phrasing. I'm doing what it says. I'm doing the work. The expressivity is a result of what I do rather than something I put in or slap on top of the music like tomato ketchup. Expression follows the music.

Christian Wolff says we don't follow expression; it follows us. Expressivity is a natural result of what we are doing rather than something to engineer through external means. Here the notation says all that it needs to say. I would suggest that this piece couldn't exist without the notation. Obviously that is true of all notated music but with this piece the notation is a part of the aural result, it's not something you can transcribe.

Should notation say all that needs to be said? I great part of me says yes it should. When I get a piece in the post I don't need to know anything about the composer or what influences them. The notation itself should convey all that needs to be said.

The next example is *Intersections II* by Morton Feldman. This is a graph piece where he divides the piano into three registers. The upper part is the top line, the middle part is the middle line and the lower part is the lower line; that stands to reason. The squares horizontally are units of time increment to a mark of 158 notes per minute. The numbers in the squares are the number of notes to be played within that time bracket. He's determined when to play and whereabouts on the piano to play but not exactly what to play. This is an early piece from 1951. I haven't played it for a number of years but it could sound something like this.

[plays]

Student: Do you have a realization of the piece?

PT: David Tudor did but I don't. I played exactly what you've got in front of you. Tudor did it for Tudor reasons. [Laughter] There's something about the physical geographic mapping of the gestures that is perfectly learnable from just reading this, it's not impossible to do. In some ways this is not the best example of the graph pieces. There are other notations by Feldman called *Projections*, you might know them, which are generally slower. These are fast for Feldman and are often played very loudly. Tudor's recordings of them are very loud. *Intersection III* is louder and denser still.

Student: Perhaps because you are familiar with Feldman's non-graph notations you know the kinds of pitches to chose, but there's nothing to stop you from playing major and minor triads.

PT: Absolutely, you could play it entirely in the key of b-flat major.

Student: Would that have been sensible to Feldman?

PT: Feldman abandoned graph notations after *Projections*, with some exceptions, because people didn't play the notes he wanted them to play. He recognized that was a flaw in him, not the performers. He explored indeterminacy in other ways, prescribing pitches carefully while finding other ways of creating flexibility in time.

With Feldman's indeterminacy I would suggest that you as the performer have to bring what you know of Feldman's music to create a successful performance. Interpret the music with Feldman's sound. With Cage it's a different thing. When you interpret his music you don't have a particular sound to give it. What's a Cagean sound? You bring an aesthetic to it where you are going to use chance operations. The wonderful thing about Christian Wolff's music is that he meets you half way, you bring yourself to the table and he brings himself to the table and you see what happens. For me that's a really satisfying situation.

Student: What pieces are good examples of the Feldman sound?

PT: Anything written after the graph pieces and contemporaneous with the graph pieces are fine examples.

Student: Did he make his own arrangements of graph pieces later?

PT: No, but Cage made a wonderful remark saying something like 'Feldman's notated music in time is like Feldman paying his graph music'. But still there's no direct parallel between Feldman's later scores and his graph notation. For Feldman pitch was everything. What he was trying to do in this piece was get weights of sounds, densities of sounds, but he was still really attached to the pitches.

Student: Isn't this John Cage's handwriting?

PT: Yes it is! Cage notated them for the publications. Well spotted! Even though I still play these pieces I would say this is flawed indeterminacy because it doesn't tell you all that Feldman actually wanted. That's why he abandoned the graphs.

A good notation for me, and this is picking up ideas from Cornelius Cardew, is one that makes me move in a certain way. Notation shouldn't be a description of sound, ever. It's something that makes me do something. Sound is something you can hear. The notation tells the performer, to varying degrees, what to do. Thinking about notation as a call to action as opposed to a description of sound covers a whole multitude of notational approaches. It covers graphic scores, such as Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* - it doesn't tell you precisely what to do but it's a call for action. When you read that notation you will do something in response to it. It also covers more tradition notation like Bryn Harrison's *être temps*, which is confined to notated rhythms and so forth.
Often when I'm discussing a piece with the composer and say 'I want it to sound different from how you're playing it'. This usually happens when they've failed to convey a particular sound in notation. While I don't play any Ferneyhough I really respect his particular kind of complex notation. He is notating such heightened complexity that the kinds of things the performer is going to do in response to the score will engineer the kinds of sounds that he's wanting. Having said that I know some people have felt Ferneyhough tap them on the shoulder during a rehearsal and say, 'actually that was an e-double sharp semi-quaver'.

[Laughter]

The scores I respond to more than anything else are scores that take me out of myself, furthers myself, develops me as a performer and makes me hear music in new ways.David Tudor, who is someone I admire enormously, was so talented, such a genius, that he just got bored of the piano music that had been written for him in the 1960s. In these wonderful letters written to Cage and others Tudor explained how he wanted to make his own music. He needed to explore his own nature as a composer. Tudor said "If I play something that is so notated I notice now that after having done it for several years it [the piece] has a tendency to put me to sleep. It wants all the time to recede into an area where my feelings are called upon more and more and all the features that seemed to be so striking when the works were first composed now become much less striking. […] If I play music that doesn't have any such requirement, where I'm called upon to make actions […] then I feel that I'm alive in their condition."[1]

Tudor is talking about how he can do what the composer wants through his training and experience but how that is not a particularly enlivening situation. But someone who calls him to do actions, to do work, is something he's responsive to. I feel an affinity with what he's saying. So many times I've played a piece for a composer and they ask me to play something more expressively. I don't know what that means so I just slow it down and speed it up a little bit and they say, fantastic that's it. [Laughter] Something about that feels dishonest. I'm interested in situations where I have to find something new to engage with in the score. That's what fascinates me. There are other people who would completely disagree with that.

Student: I like what you're saying. When I go to work with the musicians and I almost always take their suggestions. With respect to notation, would you say that the more precise the notation tries to be the less room you have to bring your own presence to the music?

PT: Sometimes that's true and sometimes it's not. It depends on the intention of the composer. The middle ground of standard notation where things are not too complex I find more strict than anything because I only kind of know what the composer wants and I'm drawn by tradition more than experimentation. Very complex notations do not imprison me. The wealth of detail is something I can respond to. I'm going to find things in that I've never found before.

I always love playing Michael Finnissy's music because I find my technique gets better. I also improvise quite a lot. To me improvisation affects me in a way that interesting notation affects me. What I've noticed is that when I try to improvise like Finnissy I always find it sounds flatter than the music the notation creates. The energy produced from trying to do the very difficult creates a tension that is unattainable any other way. Heightened complexity creates a physical quality, a call for action that makes you move in a specific way.

The composer Roger Redgate said "It might be argued that the degree to which composers accept inherited notions of the function and possible limits of the notational system is inversely proportional to their critical awareness of notation's structural function as an integral component of the expressive discourse." That's just slightly more complicated than his music. [Laughter] He's getting at the fact that composers who are aware of the potential of notation can use that to create something new. The composition itself will be a result of that method. He is guarding against the assumption that notation means one thing. The idea that you have a set of sounds in your head that you can write down is a lazy approach in some ways.

When writing a piece Christian Wolff always asks himself 'what is the worst thing someone can do with this indeterminate notation'? If he finds the answer acceptable then he accepts the notation. That's a good measure. People like Cage and Wolff talked a lot about assuming a certain amount of good will with their players. Performers and composers are nice and want to get together to make music and have a good experience. Let's assume that's the case. Sadly, that's not always the case.

Student: You have an ensemble that really creates its own performance practice. That seems to be something that occurs outside notation. But a lot of older experimental pieces are becoming objectified because of a pervasive historical performance practice that has surrounded them.

PT: I feel distinctly uncomfortable about that and yet whenever I write articles I often end by defining some kind of performance practice for a particular situation. It's strange. While I am interested in the aural tradition, it's also important that the notation tells it all.

In addition to playing solo works I also I play in a group called "Apartment House", a UK-based group. I remember once we were playing a Wolff piece where there was an instruction for the clarinet to play a note at a particular point in time and crescendo and stop the note with the entrance of the next sound. It so happened that the gesture occurred at a point where there was no other sound. This poor clarinettist was just blowing and blowing and getting really red in the face and then he just exploded in a fit of rage. He was obeying the score and couldn't continue. That became a great experience; we had a fantastic discussion about it afterwards.

There is now a new generation of experimentalists that is writing music for people that work mostly within the experimental tradition. They assume that when they write a particular instruction it's going to be played within a parameter of experimental music performance practice. It's an interesting situation. I love it when I hear recordings of experimental music that sound so different. I don't always like them but I love that they exist. I think my approaches are well informed but I also love hearing things that blow all my theories out of the water.

Wolff said “the score makes no finished object. At best, hopelessly fragile or brittle. The score is one element of the conversation, an inducement to exploration, something flexible, reusable, consistently useful”. Fantastic. That’s a situation I want to be in. That’s a nonhierarchical approach to composition. The score is just the beginning of something.

I’m going to give to more examples of Wolff scores. The first is from *Duo for Pianists I*. This is a piece for two pianists. The scores are slightly different. You don’t coordinate at all you just start together, it’s about three minutes. There’s a great balance in the piece between the composer and performer involvment. You’ve got to prepare the score in advance. You could have a number of different versions but you have to do some work in advance. I love the balance of freedom and control. The music is progressing and I’m also free. There is also dialogue in the piece with the other pianist. It’s performer utopia!

In *Duo for Pianists II* there are the same kind of notations but the order is not prescribed. These are from 1957 and 1958. In these pieces the continuity is not prescribed, the way in which you move from one to another is determined by what you hear from the other pianist.

Student: Wouldn’t it be more economical to write this in traditional notation. You wouldn’t have to spend so much time working things out.

PT: If you don’t want to play it don’t play it. That’s a serious point actually.

Student: You don’t agree that you can notate this differently and get the same effect.

PT: I would suggest that the notation has a particular kind of effect.

I’d like to present another example of extremely complex music. I tend to work in these two extremes – complex and indeterminate. Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück I* is probably the earliest example of extreme complexity. This is from 1951. What was Stockhausen’s intention in writing this piece? He was writing a lot of tape music at the time. His sense of dividing time electronically was very advanced. This notation was a response to those complexities.

Stockhausen talked about producing subtleties in the performers that were similar to the subtleties in his electronic music. He set out to do through creating new kinds of notation. With this score he is not trying to say that this will last this length of time and that this should be 17/18th faster. He’s not simply asking you to be exact. What we have is a set of relationships; this phrase will be slightly slower than this one. It’s a set of proportional values. When I perform the piece I try to grade the shifts of tempo. Some of the complex rhythms you have to work out. The only problem for me is that I’m not as interested in the traditional phrase grouping implied by the serial techniques. Rhythmically, though, it’s a very radical piece.

In the same year Cage wrote *Music of Changes*. This is a space-time notation although it’s slightly perverse because the rate at which you move through the space changes. Bars 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 look more spaced out but are actually moving at a faster rate than the first three bars because the tempo has shifted. He used the I Ching to decide whether the tempo would be static or changing. Tudor had to learn a new math to play this piece. I did the same. You can choose to make it exact.

Some people ask why bother? That’s a perfectly good question. For me it’s something I want to do. I really like this piece and I want to play it. That’s incentive enough. Cage spent two years tossing coins at this time. I figure if he spent so much time making it I don’t mind spending the odd few months trying to get to grips with it as a pianist. I’m interested in being taken beyond myself. Those are two very extreme examples of complexity from 1951. Thanks for listening and sharing your thoughts!

[1] David Tudor and John Cage interviewed by Mogens Andersen in a broadcast of Danmarks Radio on June 3, 1963. Featured on the CD *David Tudor – Music for piano*, ed.RZ 1018-19 (2007)