

Dear Samuel,

Last month we spoke about how to conceive of “a score”.

A question I have always asked myself is: what is “a piece”.

We give them names and somehow we seem to know, when a performance of a piece is a performance of *that* piece.

We speak - at least in our musical tradition - about the performance of a piece, not the performance of a score.

And we are convinced, that, for example, Beethoven’s “Sonata op. 109” somehow exists, even, when it is not being played.

Also, writing a piece, i somehow know, that it is not yet finished, that it is not a piece yet.

That it is still more of an idea, or a number of sketches. That it is still becoming a piece, instead of being one.

To me, naming a piece is like the affirmation of its existence.

So let me formulate my question for you to think about this month:

“what is a piece?”

or

“when is a piece?”

or

“how does a piece of music exist?”

or

“do pieces of music have an existence?”

Antoine

Dear Antoine,

It's interesting that you choose to ask the question in four different phrasings. Perhaps the ontological status of a piece is itself multiplicitous - as if each piece might be a piece for its own

proper reasons. Nevertheless we call them all "pieces" – pieces of what? Of music.

To me this suggests that there is an infinite stuff called music that we somehow find ourselves making pieces out of. Are we cutting pieces out of music? And does the term "piece" perhaps itself already imply some kind of romanticism – as in the romantic literary fascination with the fragment? This suggests that the next step (after the question of the score and the question of the piece) might be the question, "what is music?", but for the moment I'd like to refrain from asking that one. Instead, I'll try to circle around the piece a little bit more – and we can hope that music might start speaking to us, through pieces.

The variation of your question that I find most resonant is "When is a piece?". This is something I find myself thinking about quite a bit. For example, I have a sense that pieces of music (or music, or sounds...) have a different mode of existence in time than literary works, even though it's a fellow art form, because the existence of language is so closely connected to its usage that there is no real way to separate an utterance from a reference, whereas in music we can have a notion that the sound we hear is itself (whether or not we can actually fully conceive of this "itselfness" of the sound).

From my compositional experience, I think I can characterize the "when" of a piece in terms of some critical moments that seem to define the temporal structure of the piece, the rhythm of its arrival into the world.

First, there is the spark, the desire or reason to create the piece, which can come from any source – ideas, feelings, visions, opportunities, people... I find that unexpected turns in a conversation have often been fantastic sparks, and anonymous commissions can be the hardest sparks, but it can come from anywhere really.

Second, there is the imagination of what the piece is going to feel like, a sense of its quality of moving through time, a sense of its existence in space. For me, this moment is often very closely connected to the first moment as I imagine the people that I write for, the type of occasion that I write for, the performance space that I write for.

Third, there is the discovery of the proportions of the piece. I call it proportions because I tend to rely on finding numerical proportions that feel like they fit, to give me a better insight in what the "life" of the piece (that quality of moving through time and existence in space) actually is. The proportions are never dull numbers, they are numbers that suggest life to me. However, what I call proportions always includes a sense of what is often thought of as "musical material" (scales, melodies, rhythms, etcetera), so it is a more general category than merely one of quantity. Still, whenever I write a piece of music, I find myself jotting down pages upon pages of numbers, until I have found a set of them, usually quite simple, that seem to contain the code of the piece's life. And I recognize those finds as moments of the piece.

Fourth, there is the name of the piece. Finding the name of the piece is probably the most significant breakthrough moment in the piece, and in that sense I'm inclined to agree with you about the importance of naming. If the proportions are right and the name fits, then I know I have a very strong sense of what this piece is and what will make it act.

Fifth, more technically, there is the notation of the piece, by which I mean the imagination of

how the written symbols (or other encodings) that I will use may address performers and thus constitute for them a space of possible action. The notation is what allows the life of the piece to reach out into the world.

Sixth, there is working on the piece with (or as) performer(s), usually leading to a concert presentation, which I believe also to be part of this sixth moment – it's the moment when audiences, too, get a chance to work on the piece.

Seven, there is the memory of the piece, the thing that you turn out to have learned from it as you look back on it after the period of work has ended. It can be a very surprising moment.

Obviously, these moments do not necessarily all happen in the same order and possibly moments might happen more than once. For some pieces I may have to change proportions midway through the process, destroying the piece that I was making, as it turns out that this time, it is another piece that is meant to be. Likewise, work on the piece can always be resumed after it has ended, and memory may change. And not all pieces will have these moments play equally strong roles. But there exists no piece of mine in which one of these seven moments does not come to define the "when" and the life of the piece, its life in the world, which in the end is that which the piece can teach me, and hopefully others, about music.

Samuel