

Dear Samuel,

as my November question will be the last question of our project, it strangely got some extra weight for me and it took me a long time to find a “good” last question.

This feeling gradually made my question emerge:

How do you think about the end of a piece, e.g. its ending? Being in the middle or the beginning of a (performance of a) piece often feels different from “nearing the end” of it, even in pieces that are not in themselves structured like a drama or a narrative.

somehow “the end” always seem to be something special, with a special intensity or impact, even if it happens all by itself and is not structurally intended.

listening to a piece of music, at some point i invariably start to become (mostly somewhat melancholically) curious, how the piece will come to an end, or better: how things will be, when the piece has come to an end.

Is this something you can relate to? Do you think about it, when you are composing a piece?

I am looking forward to your (last) answer, (somewhat melancholically) curious, how things will be, when our email project has come to an end.

Yours,

Antoine

*Is the last one all right? I know  
I keep speaking of the last one, but is it all right?*

- John Ashbery, *Baked Alaska*

Dear Antoine,

Thank you for a great and, I find, provocative, even mildly disconcerting question.

Some projects are ending; others are beginning. Indeed this is one of the projects that are ending. But the end is of course the beginning of something new. I've enjoyed the experience of this particular project so much that I'm already thinking about how to continue it in future projects. For example, to do a correspondence with somebody from a different discipline. Or between the two of us we might find another way to go on.

The question came at a time where another project that I've been heavily involved with over the past few weeks was reaching a crisis point, and the question came up whether to end it, and how: it's the experience of the “artists' tent”, which has been like an open house for thinking politics and art for the past few weeks within the space of Occupy

Amsterdam; its openness, I felt, gave it an almost paradisiacal quality, which I knew would be temporary. For six weeks, some people have invested a lot into it, and now they are getting tired. There seems to be an increasing desire for something to work towards, or alternatively, to find a right way to articulate the fact that this brief phase (of a project, of the revolution, of our lives) is coming to a close. The day on which I started thinking about your question we had some heated and chaotic discussions on whether and how to articulate that moment. That is quite hard, since part of the Occupy strategy is to have “no end” (in both the sense of time frame and of program). Yet we need one, humanly: something like a local, perhaps temporary end. In other words, we were at the boundary between the defined and the indefinite, which is ontologically also the border where events occur. And the fact that Occupy in Amsterdam is slowly, inexorably, changing makes it necessary, again and again, to re-think our position regarding the end. The fact I felt that crisis so clearly, so explicitly, when reading your question, gave it extra charge. And that makes me slightly reluctant to answer.

Instead of a definitive answer, all kinds of experiences and observations came to my mind. For example, there is an essay by Calvino that I found fascinating called “Cominciare e finire”. In it, Calvino mostly talks about the openings of novels, saying that the way a novel approaches its story, introduces its main characters or locations, tells you very much about it; but this seems to be less true for the end of a novel, because novels usually make their point before the end. So the “end” of a novel is not necessarily its end. That probably explains why I so often fail to read novels all the way through. But in a concert setting, you don’t have that, of course. The end *always* is a dramatic moment for the performance.

Kenneth Koch: “A serious moment for the water is when it boils”. Perhaps that could be a formula for the end: a serious moment, marking a phase transition of attention. In musical performance, it releases the participants from musical concentration into its contingent context, life, with its own modes of concentration. That point of release, the type of release, the energy with which one is released back into life, cannot but be essential to the performance.

I was thinking of endings in music that I know. How it’s interesting that there’s only one Mass among the prominent mediaeval/renaissance cycles that I’m aware of in which the *Ite Missa Est* was also set as a polyphonic movement – and it’s what we traditionally see as the first one, Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame*. But most composers seem to have shied away from composing out this moment that states that the piece is done as part of the music itself. Is it, for most, too ominous a threshold to cross, almost like a taboo, to include the “go away” within the music itself? (There’s another Machaut piece that explicitly addresses its own ending in an original way: *Ma fin est mon commencement*.)

Also, I was reflecting how it has become relatively rare in contemporary music to have very conclusive, let alone triumphant endings. Xenakis presents an interesting case: he seems to have put all the affirmative, climactic energy, of the kind that Beethoven would reserve for endings like that of the 5th, in the middles of his pieces; but (I owe this observation to Dante) his endings always seem to do something different, they’re often rather subtle little gestures, afterthoughts, seeming escape routes.

We’ve become good at different kinds of end: the uncertain end, the logical end (exhaustion of a process), the mere cessation. Interestingly, endings are very rarely unexpected in music. (I very much enjoyed, and highly relate to, your observation, that one senses “endness” even in pieces that have no obvious dramatic structure, a very mysterious fact.)

As you can see, I'm procrastinating here in answering your question. I rather seem to want to slow down, just let the question meander and go nowhere. But, in fact, yes, I do think of endings a lot when I compose. I need to have a sense of what I send the participants in the music away with.

Going through my catalogue, I notice that a process ending in dispersal seems to be a prevalent mode of ending in my work, though not the only one. Another thing I notice is that many pieces end in the high register; quite a few pieces end with gestures of "ascension" into the blue. Perhaps, in this respect, there is a hint of mysticism in my work after all, or a sense of "becoming-invisible". But some pieces have more clear endings, at a point where symmetry has been reached for example.

One piece that very explicitly addresses the idea of ending is *Eindig Stuk (Finite Piece)* for string quartet and electric guitar. It does so by using a rather complicated kind of structural ambiguity, on the edge of irony, using polyphonic count-downs as an important structuring device within the music. The idea for that piece came out of a desire to inject a sense of direction, of "projection", of setting up a field of expectation into my musical thinking - something that the possibility of structural voice leading in tonal music makes possible, but that is a kind of technique I could never find a convincing use for in my own work.

What I call the "irony" of the piece here refers to certain complexities by which the technique of *Finite Piece* half-undermines itself. The polyphonic countdown structure I designed is very simple to follow within each voice as such, but very hard to follow when all four do it at the same time; likewise, the musical material is structurally strictly correlated to the counting, but the polyphony makes this strictness less immediately apparent. Additionally, there's the idea that the piece projects its structural "end" beyond its end as a performance, since the highest-level countdown does not reach its conclusion.

It seems that my work so far has avoided the kind of highly affirmative, decisive, let alone triumphant end, and thinking it over, I notice that this has often been half-consciously present in the back of my mind as a minor worry. Am I foregoing that mode because I really have no use for it at all, or perhaps merely because I think it's "not done" in the kind of musical thinking that I understand myself to be part of? It was tempting to try to write such a piece this time, a piece that would somehow work its way towards a very definitive end, but I couldn't manage to do it yet. For now, then, I decided to compose a piece that once again thematizes ending by approaching it from an opposite direction. The *Ricercare* is a search for its own ending, without any criteria being given, which can only happen in the unexpected form of a collective decision.

Still, wouldn't it be great to somehow re-invent that kind of decisive ending, but updated in such a way that it would be credible again within a musical thinking that I can recognize as contemporary? What kind of transformations will the triumphant ending have undergone, should it some day manage to resurface in my music? That might, for me, be a good question to take with me into the future, as we end this project.

Yours,  
Samuel