

Dear Samuel,

in my answer to your May Question i wrote:

*“discussing (thinking about) specific pieces (or concerts respectively), I like to ask (myself) (at least) two questions:*

- 1. how is it, how does it feel, to be part of this for a (the) player(s), what happens to them?*
- 2. how is it, how does it feel, to be to part of this for a (the) listener(s), what happens to them?”*

This month i would like to pass these questions on to you.

Do they resonate at all with your experience, when writing a piece?

Or is your focus more on other things?

Antoine

Dear Antoine,

Thank you for a subtly rich question. My first reaction was: Of course, these are absolutely central questions for me when composing a piece. It is indeed an imagination of the performance situation, which is principally comprised of the subjectivities of the performers and of the listener, that drives my compositional process.

In fact, your question made me ask myself a second one: what else could there possibly be? And that made me feel there must be catch somewhere in the question.

The first answer, I imagine, could be something like this: apart from the subjectivities of the performance situation, a composer might want to make the subjectivity of the composing situation a central concern. The danger there is that it might lead to some kind of agenda of self-expression understood in a quite vulgar sense (the ego of the composer as a guarantor of artistic content), which I think the two of us would probably not subscribe to and in fact I don't think I know of any composer that I respect who does.

Alternatively, you might be writing with an eye to effects that are strictly not part of the musical dimension of the piece, but that relate to its functioning in the world – such as, what kind of attention will this piece generate, how does it relate to institutional concerns, is it fashionable, etcetera. Again, obviously, this dimension as such is not very interesting.

However, I'm very interested in extra-musical aspects and effects when they *do* relate to the purely musical, when the way we make music could be seen to have bearing on other things that we do in our lives. Indeed, I think that today, we're once more in a position to affirm the purely musical and an ideal of absolute music in a way that will not lead to a sterile metaphysics of art, but that can open itself onto the outside world at the same time. It would think pure music not as a construction of sublime sound objects (not as "organized sound"), but as an investigation at the most basic level of our abilities to sense time, space and sound, and to act, react, reflect on what we hear and do, to coordinate and organize ourselves (elsewhere I have called this music as "organization of action in sound").

I believe such an understanding of music as an investigation of human action and organization can also open up pure music to the outside world, and may have a much more productive relationship with it than currently dominant modes of thinking the relation between the musical and the extra-musical, which, I believe, have become completely exhausted by postmodern hyperconsciousness (the tendency to think music in terms of cultural identities or marketing strategies).

If we, as composers, investigate the subjectivity of the musical situation (listening, playing), I believe we may develop a knowledge that will have bearing on our understanding of what people are capable of in general. Our actions and experiences in music can be extended into actions and experiences within the world at large. So thinking our musical practice in terms of what players and listeners feel and what happens to them, which seems to think primarily the 'inside' of the musical situation, can include an awareness of its 'outside'. In fact, I believe we must wager on a fundamental paradoxical assumption about pure music, which is that considering its relationship to its 'outside' is in fact a proper part of its 'inside'.

This hypothesis now allows me to situate the catch that I felt in your question. If the relationship to the outside of the musical experience as such really is properly part of the musical experience, then asking yourself, as a composer, what players or listeners will experience during your piece should also include some sense of the outside of the piece. It might be that you can't think music proper without somehow thinking about those "other things" too. The problem of course is that this outside is properly outside of the composer's jurisdiction, so to speak. We don't know what is out there, yet our piece must deal with it.

If writing music then is to be an act of affirmation, it must be an answer to the question: how do we deal with what we can't deal with? I will understand an experimental art practice to be an investigation of our limits at the same time that it investigates our possibilities for action. A piece of music will be a speculative proposition about what we can do. It defines parameters for subjective experience. But those parameters are at the same time parameters for what remains outside of what we can plan in advance. Musical composition is the art of giving shape to the line between what we do and what we do not organize. What is affirmed is a field of potential musical experience that is at the same time a site for the emergence of the world as unforeseen. Perhaps we're carving provisional fields of sensation and action out of radical negativity. Our art probes our relation to the world by setting up a specific position within it, and then seeing what we can learn from that vantage point.

I tend to think of this as probing our distance to reality. We may not be able to know reality directly, but we can set up these fields of action within it. The field is defined by its range of possible experience and action that we determine as composers. You could think of that range as the dimensions of the composition. But in actually performing the piece we may come to an awareness of further modes of action and sensation that have not been defined in advance: there is always an element of surprise when certain of these possibilities are really coming together, here and now, in a specific way. It seems that within reality, further dimensions may be possible. We are glimpsing something of our distance to the world as such, and realize there is more that we can investigate. There's something going on here...

I imagine all composers will recognize this wonderfully shocking moment when you hear your own work and think, did I really write this?

This is why in my music I'm interested in various forms of indeterminacy, both the space that a composition opens up for musical action on the part of the performer, and indeterminacy of perception and meaning for listeners. It has led me to investigate alternative forms of performer coordination, the use of performer choice as a compositional resource, and situations of total counterpoint with strong relations between voices allowing their individual movements to feed into one another and their identities to blur. Additionally, I think that hyper-determined structures allow for a form of indeterminacy of their own, as they always contain a tension between the structure as such and specific parts within it (in planning forms I often think of symmetrical structure collapsing into specific instance). I hope such indeterminacies may function as points of entry for some "extra" into the music, and to a significant extent I understand the art of composition as the art of

determining the dimensions of a musical space within which such extras may emerge, and through which we may sense what the dimensions of further space might look like.

To me, these are general contemporary concerns, not only artistic ones. It seems to me that in our day and age, an affirmative understanding of what we can do as fundamentally linked to what we can't control is of central importance. Today we must determine fields of action against backgrounds of absolute uncertainty. This has political importance too, since politics these days tends to be entirely governed by mechanisms of security, risk management and statistics: flawed attempts to regulate contingency. The politics of climate change would be a very good, highly contemporary example, it being the challenge to politics to think the possibility of some total change in the world on the basis of scientific models that will always be somehow epistemologically incomplete. The problem here is that most politicians can only do their politics on the basis of models that model what we think of as "normality", i.e. industrial consumer capitalist reality of the past two centuries, which might just suddenly turn out to be applicable no longer. Similar things hold, I feel, for media representations of the world: we know these to be unreliable as they tend to ignore how the representations exist essentially at some distance to the world, yet still they determine our picture of it. In such times, it is no longer sufficient to adopt a "critical" stance, trying to get to the "true reality" behind appearance – we would probably end up merely replacing one representation with another. Instead, we need to learn to accept reality as radically haunted by the negative and contingent, and then to experimentally carve out further spaces for action.

After this long digression, I think I can answer your question more briefly: Indeed, my focus is primarily on what happens to the players and to the listeners – but that means that it should also be on other things, which I don't know.

Or to put it another way, what could be more surprising, more rich and strange, than somebody making a sound? That is something I want to keep learning from.

Samuel