COMPOSING ALONGSIDE PARADOXES

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I have always loved how an item or a word can serve as a detonator. The Empty, introduced in the 1971 novel 'Roadside Picnic' by the brothers Strugatsky, is such an item: Allegedly left behind by aliens who visited the earth, an Empty comprises of two copper plates spaced apart with "nothing" in between them, and no force can tear the two apart. Like no other of the alien artefacts, the Empty fascinates due to a paradox: It is fully permeable for the senses – you can put your hand inside - yet its meaning is completely opaque.

The German translation is peculiar in that it uses a pleonasm: 'Leere Null' means empty (or void) zero. In this respect, the object could be seen as a container—the contour of the zero—which is susceptible to being filled with our imagination (rewriting the opaque meaning). Everything seems possible; it is the blank sheet in front of the writer or composer, before it is ignited by a spark of inspiration.

But is this so? If one takes a pencil and draws a zero, one is set back just two years before the Roadside Picnic. Spencer-Brown's 1969 treatise 'Laws of Form' begins with the act of distinction, the arrangement of a boundary, drawing a circle which severs an inside from an outside. The two sides are not equivalent, as one is indicated and the other is not. I am choosing a sound X and thereby excluding all other sounds that are not X. However, there is no blank sheet in the beginning, as there is no beginning. "There can be no distinction without motive, and there can be no motive unless contents are seen to differ in value." This is the second paradox of the copper discs—as parallel mirrors they produce infinite reflections, transgressions of the boundary between marked and unmarked space in the attempt to establish an original motive.

The resolution is to look at the motion itself. The fact that there is an act of musical writing is what is important, not what is being written. The form of this writing unfolds in time as an oscillation, Spencer-Brown's $X = X$. Taking something and crossing it out, transforming it, overwriting it. Composing as palimpsest, however not along a straight line, but rather as a vacillation, a going forth and back in the decision space.
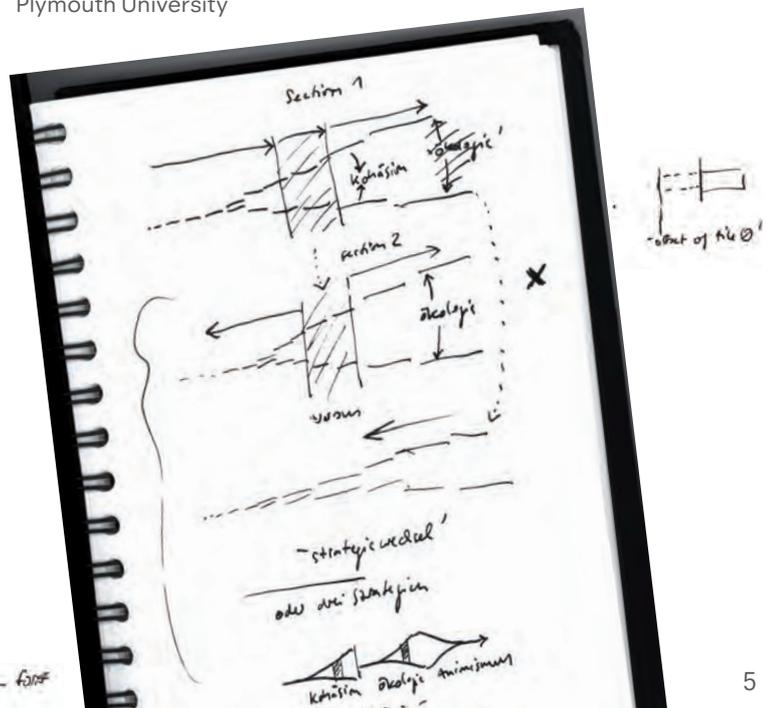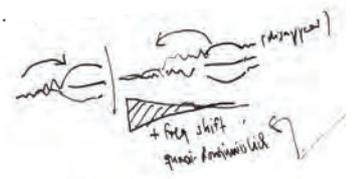
The genre of "tape" music imposes another paradox or obstacle: During the process of writing the piece, the composer can hear the sounds and gestures it is made of in an arbitrary succession, indeed they can be moved around on the "time canvas", looking down onto them with the comfortable vision of the bird's eye. However, when the piece is presented, there is only one path in the decision space left to be presented. This is not a problem with which only the electroacoustic composer is confronted, although due to the nature of the material, the contrast is particularly strong here.

In the same year, 1969, Morton Feldman wrote a piece titled 'Between Categories', along with an essay of the same name. The text discusses the nature of time: "I am interested in how Time exists before we put our paws on it—our minds, our imaginations, into it." He dreams of a time preceding this 'mani-pulation' typical of the tape composition (or we could say the operation of the bird's claws). The experience of unstructured time of course is an illusion, as it requires observation and hence a distinction and an indication (structuring).

Perhaps we should rather speak of programmed instead of unstructured time. A time which exists as trace regressing from "the piece", preceding it and re-entering into it in the performance. In 'Leere Null', I am playing a hide-and-seek game with the obstacles of tape music. All the gestures are developed through a computer-aided rewriting process. Iteratively a sound is taken and an algorithm suggests other sounds which more or less "imitate" certain aspects of it, becoming significant due to their imperfection in the imitation. One of the hiding strategies is to project the sequence generation backwards in time, inverting the perception of cause and effect and allowing for seemingly very different phrases to gradually transform into the same phrase. One of the revealing strategies is to allow the ear to follow the oscillatory movement of the palimpsest, the oxidation, both as temporal succession, but also as simultaneous spatial (multichannel) unrolling. The motion of crossing from unmarked to marked space is coupled to a question-and-answer game I am playing with the algorithm, which is an emancipated partner in the writing.

Related Performance:

Leere Nullen, 20:00, 10 Feb 2012, Theatre 1, Roland Levinsky Building, Plymouth University