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# Composition in Improvisation: Forms and Otherwise

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University of Glasgow 2010

## Abstract

This is a folio of compositions that interferes with composition and improvisation in practice and in theory. A resistance to theme and content is countered by proposing a very broad conception of form that brings into play anthropological and philosophical examples as well as a questioning of traditional musical forms. The pieces in general propose ways of composing and playing otherwise. The scores are interspersed with texts which engender relationships and patterns of thought pertinent to the workings of the pieces such that a critical position is articulated without resorting to long-winded argument. Audio recordings of the pieces are included at the rear of the document.

Thanks are due to Nick Fells for supervision: Miguel Carvelais, Aby Vulliamy, George Burt, Una MacGlone, George Murray, Aileen Campbell and Peter Nicholson for their playing and thinking contributions: Arild Vange for the extensive walking conversations and the Levinas tip: The Munich Instant Orchestra, Contemporary Music Ensembles at Glasgow University and Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra for giving the larger pieces their time: Maria Gil for theatrical provocation and support: Barry Essun and Alasdair Campbell for their festival hospitality and curatorial conviction: Sarah Tripp for many critical insights: Wendy Davidson and Mike Davidson for all kinds of support.

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# Introduction

## 1

The following document is a collection of compositions with some commentary. I have arranged the sequence of compositions so that the order they were written in is apparent. Placed between these are various texts that serve to comment on the pieces and to propose relationships between things I have read and things that I have done throughout the period of working on this project, providing a context for the pieces and proposing how they emerged from those readings activities and encounters. All of this maps out a body of work that aims to pose questions of composed music and break down assumptions about the relationship between compositional and improvisational practices in music. I am not interested in making a coherent argument, but that does not mean that coherence is absent from the work. The relationship between the texts and the pieces is for you to think about.

## 2

Perhaps it is better now to concentrate not so much on how to do things better, to improve, to innovate but to ask how to do things otherwise than we have been doing. The projection of sideways critical movement serves to ensure distance from certain political and economic priorities at large. Improvement and innovation are

inextricably linked to capital. The question, can we do things otherwise stems from a need to inhabit and not just pose the possibility of other ways. We can think of this in terms of finding other forms, questioning form (which relates to structure but is more elusive hence more interesting). The extent, depth and wisdom of form has become the secondary subject of this thesis.

### 3

I think we can still learn from Susan Sontag's insistence against interpretation and her proposal of dwelling instead on form. Form, unlike the material content of music or art, does not invite individuation. We don't dwell on what the length of a piece *meant* for us. We don't say the structure was *evocative*. We are not invited to invent ourselves in the site of formal proportions but rather are directed to what is contained therein for our subjective development. But these formal aspects of music or/and art are those aspects which are shared on the most basic level. Perhaps it may be permissible to think the age of a painting as part of its form? If I use the direct address 'you' instead 'I' or 'she' – this is a formal device.

### 4

In terms of improvisation I have already alluded to an interest in Levinas when it comes to thinking about what this practice can be for us. As an improvising musician

I do not have control over the whole of a piece, the practice of ‘free’ improvisation does not lend itself to gauging or forming a totality. I don’t know what the others players are going to play but their sounding obliges me to respond, even if my response is soundless. The music and sound always exceed the control of the I and in a sense this exemplifies Levinas’s identification of infinity with what is beyond the ‘I’ There is form and structure grounded in and built into the listening relationship before anyone has made a sound. Listening in a sense (literally) institutes improvisation. And improvisation (like an unvoiced greeting) *is* that expectant listening that anticipates the first sound.

## 5

Following Levinas’s examination or insistence on the ethical force of *the saying* over the ontological, thematized and immobilized *said* we should guard against confusing improvisation with its materials. *What* I play in a given context is one thing but how and why I play certain things comes closer to the opening on listening that gives our musical gestures their sociality.

## 6

There remain complex questions of musical material to be expounded on. A signature style of playing can be in part a confirmation of identity but can also be read as

confirming that there is a listening subject there present to the others, an appearance which nevertheless never fully appears. Some signature styles are more open than others; one might hazard to say that melodic playing is in danger of being perceived at the top of a sonic hierarchy, or that noise can engulf as much as it can embolden. That's not to say that there are truer improvisations or some that are false, but when we speak of responsibility in improvisation (to the aesthetic, to the group, for the other players, for the audience) it comes back to social obligations, what effect our musical decisions have on others.

## 7

Thinking about these questions of improvisation is the basis of the compositions that follow. For example we might ask: *why* play music in relation to some people and not others? Why play here and not there? If I play now and for a certain duration, what formal rules can inform this now and this duration? Levinas's philosophy expounds a conception of the formal relation between the I and the Other, the encounter with the Other. I would posit this formal relation (conceived by Levinas as more originary than ontology) as form. I know I'm playing rather fast and loose with terminology but that's what the game is in this context. I want to get going, to do something, to make of this some clear and definable praxis.

## Forms 5

Form understood as “Objects and the relations between them: objects like morality, sexuality, flirtation, prostitution, eroticism, love, household, society, history, bourgeoisie, drama, religion, death, science, art, literature and anthropology; and relations like hierarchy, complementarity, symmetry, correspondence, obviation, metaphor and metonymy. Forms mediate the human experience of the world: the human world can be said to be formally constituted.” (Rapport, N and J Overing 2003: 136)

## Frame : Event

### Frame

If you make a short sound, make no sound for a while and then make another short sound we can think about whether you have made two short sounds or bracketed or framed a period of other sound. This is form. Let's not worry about interpreting the gap in the middle. Leave it alone. Think again about the frame.

Similarly if you make an unusual or unexpected sound in the middle of some other sounds we can think of this as providing an internal frame to the other sounds: the transition from one state to another frames the states. The transition may be very brief.

## Event

Given the above you can appreciate that a period of time is in this way framed. This can be thought of as an event. Listening institutes musical events in the same way as framing does. Attention comes and goes, is attention parenthetical? This may be appreciated by playing a record. It might be the twentieth time you have played the record but this is the first time you have played it in your new house, with a cat in the room, with an old lady looking in through your front window. Context is important, mostly. The record doesn't change (much) so your attention should be drawn to the event of listening. At the beginning of what is anticipated to be a concert, expectant listening frames a period of time given (by that listening) over to an event of music. This will be the case even if the players do not play any sounds, you hope.

# Forms 1

Jean Francoise Lyotard *Just Gaming* (1985) :

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985: 36)

(...)

[REDACTED]

[Redacted text block]

(...)

[Redacted text block]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (1985: 32)

(...)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (1985: 35)

## Forms 6

*writing*

*GIO*

For improvising ensemble with a history

hand out paper and writing implements to everyone

make sure they have something to lean on or can manage to write comfortably

explain that what they are going to do is to improvise as they would normally do. to engage in the same formal conditions, habits etc. duration as per usual

instead of playing everyone should write

- what they would be playing
- what other people would/might be playing
- in relation to whom they would or might playing
- why they *are* playing
- what they would play if things were slightly different
- who else is playing
- and so on

record the sound of the whole process from first introduction to the end of the discussion afterwards

display the pieces of writing for everyone to be able to read including an audience

perhaps make a small book with the recording inside

## Forms 2

2 a - What is the formal role of authorship (authorship understood as individuating)?

2 b - Whose is the role of authorship in an instance of group improvisation?

2 c - Can authorship as a concept obtain among a sum of individuals or is it necessarily negated given its alignment with the *individual*?

2 d - Might authorship lie with the musician who plays the most or the one who organises the session, or perhaps the one who has the most to say once the music has finished?

2 e - Improvisation is not an authorial practice.

2 f - If we value a musician for their improvising skill, are we simply reinstating the authorial role?

2 g - Encounter as form.

2 h - Individuation as a form.

2 i - Form as disindividuating.

2 j - What are heteronomy and autonomy for improvisation and composition?

2 k - How are autonomy and heteronomy expressed if not formally?

2 l - What about heteronymous autonomy?

2 m - Improvisation is linguistic in the sense that it can be said to be based in the obligation to respond (though one might not respond overtly, thereby tension can be played with). Those same formal structures of conversation obtain in improvisation even where nothing is said. We are concerned here not with linguistic meaning but with linguistic acts, formal structures of listening and obligation.

## Forms 3

*Thinking form in its extended context: withdrawn from any argument of truth statement or logical argument, where in the following quotations can we find clues to other ways of understanding form in improvisation, in composing?*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Levinas 2006 : 3)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Levinas 2004

:40)

(...)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Levinas 2004 : 40)

(...)

[REDACTED]

(Levinas 2004: 46)

*[With art thus formulated as said how can we begin to work with music, with sound as saying rather than said?]*

[REDACTED]

(Levinas 2004 : 5)

## Tintinambulatory

At the top of a bell tower make sounds in relation to the sounds coming from the area surrounding the tower, the acoustic range of the bell.

As far as possible the sounds made should be neither more nor less prominent than those from the environment.

20 mins – 1 hour

## Tintinambulatory 2008

*A performance for the Instal Festival, Glasgow*

*“The pays (the Roman pagus) provided the co-ordinates of individual and group identity: your pays was where things felt familiar, an ‘aural domain’ within earshot of a particular church bell – according to an 18<sup>th</sup> century survey, two thirds of brides came from ‘within shouting distance of the bridegroom.’” (London Review of Books Vol 30 number 15 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008: 27)*

My colleague Aileen Campbell and I are asked to think of an everyday place in our lives where we would like to perform.

The everyday places where we go, map our routines, the places where we are bidden to go by our contracts and obligations: I go to work, I am obliged to return library books, I have promised to help out at a record shop, and so on. And I could imagine playing in all of these places.

I heard the bell from Glasgow University as I had done countless times before. The everyday place or space with which I wanted to play was something less geographical than conceptual. I wanted to play with the acoustic domain of the bell and to think of a way to put my playing into a relationship with the space defined by the bell.

So we would play in relation to the sounds that could be heard in the bell tower coming from the surrounding area, the area over which the bell could be heard.

The bell makes a territorial sound; it defines the space of the campus and marks time. There is a disciplining rule to the bell’s behaviour. In positioning ourselves in relation to the surrounding area’s sound we re-territorialize the acoustic domain of the bell bringing the west end in its diversity into the institution’s sonorous peak.

The music we play becomes relatively insignificant as to its content: a respectful engagement with the sound takes over, an encounter with the acoustic field which does justice to the sounds as they are heard in a place where they would never normally be heard.

It would be important for us to be conscious of the territorializing aspect of our sounds as they are made in the space.

**The proposal:**

The bell from the university is heard all over the west end of Glasgow. It demarcates the area between where Aileen and I live.

It marks every hour, half hour and fifteen minute intervals.

It is a territorial marker signalling to those within earshot of the main building when classes begin and end and rings constantly for ten to fifteen minutes before 9 am to mark the beginning of an academic day.

The sense of the university being up on the hill looking down on everyone else (“hello down there”) is borne out by this territorial signal.

We want to play with this and invert the rule.

This site is everyday in the sense that the bell marks the day, is heard in the space where we live and defines the place/space acoustically.

## Forms 10

The composer arranges for either a large improvising ensemble or a chamber orchestra to perform at one end of a room in which the audience is assembled. Another substantial space should be left free at the other end. The improvising ensemble or chamber orchestra performs an improvisation or a scored piece. The composer from the beginning is slightly removed from the group. After a period in which the music is established S/he moves towards one of the players and takes their instrument from them. The instrument is carried by the composer to the other end of the room. S/he returns and forcibly, persuasively moves the player again to the other end of the room perhaps leading them by the hand or dragging them. S/he returns for their chair and any extra equipment they need and brings these to the removed player. Instrument, chair and player are re-united and they begin to play again. The composer goes to the ensemble and selects another player. The process repeats until the whole ensemble and all equipment and chairs are moved to the other end of the room. Throughout the piece the players play as usual, sometimes playing, sometimes listening. The only person who initiates the movement is the composer. Performers should be passive in the face of these intrusions but dedicated and active in the performance of the music they are playing.

## Tintinambulatory Commentary

### **Performances**

I have performed this piece in two locations and made three recordings of it. Two from the University of Glasgow bell tower recorded in February 2008 for the Instal Festival with Aileen Campbell and myself performing. The third was recorded in May 2009 at the Stirling Tollbooth near Stirling Castle, a solo guitar version played by myself. The Glasgow performance was commissioned by the Instal festival as part of that year's Personal Spaces program where artists were asked to find a place that was part of their daily lives in which they could perform. Other performances took place in a skip on Woodlands Road, the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Underground, in a community centre in Blackburn and a short film was made in one performer's living room.

Aileen Campbell and I worked on this piece together following the concept that I proposed. The Instal festival curators arranged access to the bell tower via the University's media office. No audience was allowed to attend besides the curator and a representative from the office. The university had informed us that since the bell tower had been the site of a number of student suicides in the past there were questions of personal liability insurance to be taken into account. The festival took place in February so gloves and hats were worn; the performing conditions on the top of the building were taxing. High winds and low temperatures made careful reflective playing difficult and uncomfortable, especially after climbing up several stories of

tightly wound spiral stairs. We set up the recording equipment and set about playing as quickly as we could, which is a shame since the conditions of the site made it difficult to give time and space to thinking about the piece and taking time to just listen.

The documentation reveals, I think, a slightly hurried performance of the piece where the balance between environmental sounds to played sounds is weighted more towards what we were doing rather than an even balance between context and performance gestures. The version we did in a lower chamber of the tower (replete with dead magpies and dust) while acoustically and meteorologically more favourable owing to a kind of wooden baffle structure within the stone arches, sounds more like an everyday improvisation. The sounds coming from the surrounding area are clearer due to the lack of wind but somehow seem less present. I think that we played in that space has far less to do with the environmental sounds.

Given these two unsatisfactory instances of the piece I arranged to perform it again while rehearsing for a performance of *Swifan* in Stirling at the Le Weekend festival. Coming at the end of May this afforded a gentler climate and a different environmental acoustic. With no time pressures or distractions I was able to play with more patience, to place the sounds I was making within the field of sounds coming from around about rather than playing over the top of those sounds. The variety of sounds in the surrounding area is far greater as well with the movement of birds, aircraft, trucks, people and other inanimate activity clearly audible.

## **The Concept**

The original concept of this piece has a certain elegance to it, but I find that after a period of time thinking about the piece, performing the piece, working on the documentation, that this conceptual side to it does not carry very well, it doesn't open itself up in the process of doing the piece. Another way of looking at this is that the form of the piece is grounded in the spatial structure of where one performs it and not integrated in to the temporal time based structure of the piece as represented in the recordings. It needs an aural map examinable as one would a geographical map. But the recordings give this piece as largely one directional, the environmental sounds are synthesized by the performer (and the microphone), and the performer becomes an individuated node point, or an end in themselves where those disparate sounds are gathered under one auditioning. And while this runs in accordance with the idea of inverting the structure of the bell so that the performer becomes a sort of receiving bell, I'm not sure that this is apparent to anyone else. It's a very private piece, which in turn inverts the principle of the bell, which performs a very public marking of time and space (I can hear the Glasgow University bell a mile away as I write this). So while conceptually it 'works', I am not sure for whom it is working. In the places where I have done the piece so far there has barely been enough space for the performer, never mind finding space for an audience as well. The piece asks questions about the audience for contemporary music. Is a small audience a problem, and is a small audience always a specialized one? Are we not in a situation where

music can be thought to be free to find whatever audience it can? If these pieces propose valuing intimacy then how would we reconcile them with larger audiences? The majority of the sounds on the recordings are available to anyone who happens to be in the area. What marks it out is the focus on perspective, which is specialized in this case. The document is of a specific time and place which is not repeatable (which the mechanical tolling of the bell draws to our attention somewhat ironically), but I'm inclined to foreground the formal aspects of the piece over the sonic content or material it deals with.

### **Environmental Listening**

The title plays on the idea of a listening that takes in the walkable area around the site of performance coinciding with the range of the bell. Contrary to a sound walk such as those devised by Janet Cardiff the formal structure of the piece sets sounds from the surrounding area into a listening relation.

Beginning with Ludwig Koch's first recording of a bird made in 1889 the history of recorded sound has been accompanied by the history of recorded environmental sound whether focussing on birds as 'performers' as in the case of Koch or representing soundscapes, as in Chris Watson's more recent work that takes in a wider range of species and the interaction of diverse creatures and sonic fields. The use of

field recording in explicitly composed music practice runs closer to my activities more than a purist approach where an idealized recording is sought. In the case of Jez Riley French's work the act of listening in a space is what is documented rather than a space where any trace of the sound recordist is removed. Michael Pisaro's *Transparent City* pieces combine field recordings with sine waves, the sine tones subtly contextualising the sounds from various locations around LA. Toshia Tsunoda's work in this area is invasive and intimate where the microphones are positioned such that the internal resonance of objects in environments are represented, the vibrations of very large objects such as ships and piers.

These approaches are all very well but I'm not interested in the sonic environment as something to listen to, as something to objectify. I have no inclination to romanticize what nature sounds like or to declare one location more aesthetically interesting than another. What is at issue with this piece is form. And the idiosyncrasy of the piece is that its form is not fundamentally temporal. It's not grounded in the relation of one sound after another, although these occur of course, but rather is grounded in one listening frame in relation to another.

## Forms 9

*preparing a string quartet rehearsal*

“...as an early indication of the way things will go; on Sunday I bought an old LP of the Vegh Quartet playing two Brahms quartets. An old Decca record from the late 50s with a big garish cover and a bright orange label with silver print (indicating that it is from after the time when they started making stereo records but not necessarily that it was also released in stereo since the recording may have been made before stereo). Being mono apparently you have to turn the balance control over to one speaker. It has grandfatherly overtones and a slightly acrid oily smell.”

## String Quartet

### **Questions for a String Quartet**

When did you begin to know that this instrument, this kind of playing would satisfy you such that it could become your work?

Have you ever seduced someone with your playing?

Where were you taught, what kind of room; describe it.

What were your teachers like?

Is the quartet an agent of change?

What in the world has this quartet altered?

Which string quartet recordings are significant for you?

Feldman said that in his music there was something of the sound of Schubert leaving him: has Schubert left you?

Who asked you to join? Or how did you join?

When do you play, in the day, when do you prefer to play?

What part of the world of the quartet is being denied here in this questioning process?

What are you responsible for when you play?

Was there a time when you wanted to give up?

Is this an escape?

Where would you like to play, aspirationally speaking?

Who would you like to play for?

Have you played for anyone and regretted it?

During your time has the quartet had to make difficult ethical choices?

What is the quartet when you are not playing?

What happens when you make mistakes?

Why do you make mistakes?

## Memories of music

*I remember a string quartet rehearsing in my parents house when I was a child; my father played the cello, Alec Wands a soon to retire high school music teacher played viola. The fiddles were played by two local doctors. All of them were characters. Chris Cameron the first violinist had a glass eye.*

*I remember driving a toy car up and down the neck of my mother's nylon string guitar making a noise that I was later unable to reproduce.*

*I remember it started to snow one year on the way to the autumn concert by the St Boswells Concert Band.*

*I remember playing in a swimming pool during the interval of a George Melly concert in Hawick.*

*I remember playing the third trumpet part from memory with the Borders Youth Stage Band at a beer festival in Karlsruhe next to the Rhein.*

*I remember a huge glass gin bottle that was being played by a timid percussionist smashing behind me during a performance of a piece called The Sun Paints Rainbows on the Vast Waves by David Bedford.*

*I remember the RSNO not being able to play Berg's violin concerto.*

*I remember being asked not to play so weirdly in a high school band.*

*I remember my great grandmother extolling the virtues of playing the organ and ruminating on the benefits this would bring to my brother, even though he had all but given up the piano.*

*I remember playing my grandmother's piano in her house in Jordanhill and being told not to thump it.*

*I remember hearing the top 40 countdown on radio 2 in Sunday nights playing in the kitchen upstairs while I was supposed to be sleeping.*

*I remember no-one clapping for 15 minutes after a Phil Niblock concert in Munich.*

*I remember Raymond not provoking Miguel into changing to mark the transition half way through their set in Stirling this year.*

*I remember being bored to death playing the third note of every chord in a performance of fiddler on the roof in Galashiels.*

*I remember not liking Handel as a child.*

*I remember playing complex recorder music and simple brass music on a music course in summer 1986 or 87 (I can't remember which)*

*I remember not being able to play a tune for the chimney sweep (who provided the parts for sharamanka gallery)*

*I remember hearing John Coltrane live in seattle and Varese conducted by Boulez at alisdair's house in Edinburgh the summer after high school.*

*I remember a Ravi Shankar CD playing in the bookshop in Selkirk.*

*I remember not being able to hear the other singers while singing in the school choir one Christmas following an cold which left my ears blocked.*

*I remember Chris Hladowski's bazouki solo at the Garrioch Arms.*

*I remember listening to Aphex Twin's ambient works volume 2 in the car driving out the north road along the Ardnamurchan peninsula in the afternoon sun: dark burnt earth stone and blue sea.*

*I remember thinking that drummers should do more than keep time and that I didn't play the drums after that.*

*I remember giving up the recorder and some years later declining to go out with the daughter of my former recorder teacher – I don't remember whether these things are connected.*

*I remember talking to Sarah Longrigg about the time she met Messiaen and heard him improvise and how she'd run around Paris going from organ event to organ event on a little timetable that was doing the rounds of organ obsessives a the time.*

*I remember John Fahey's black shorts*

*I remember seeing a poster for a Han Bennink concert in James Mooney's room and thinking that I should really go to more concerts like that.*

*I remember the last chord of Messiaen's St Francoise d'Assise*

*I remember the music with Tatsuya working in Sheffield.*

*I remember Michel Doneda playing with a bird outside the tea room where we had our concert.*

*I remember discovering Bruckner's long longing symphonies while working in Tower records in when the first Celiebedache box set came in.*

*These are all very factual and not very engaging: remember things that matter more.*

*I remember my trumpet coming apart on a music course during the first rehearsal and borrowing a large bore Vincent Bach instrument from one of the tutors and it was so much easier to play, made so much more sound and it seemed so strange that we were learning to play on such bad instruments.*

*I remember Hanna Tuulikki singing Wuthering Heights, very drunk, and it was loud. And then the police came to find that all the noise was coming from one small girl.*

*I remember finding the score of Cage's Water Walk in the university library and not being able to make a connection between its graphic aesthetics and how the piece might sound.*

*I remember our head teacher admonishing a fellow pupil for listening to a walkman (Marillion I think) while on a school trip in Glen Coe, that there was much to be listened to in the countryside.*

*I remember playing a green tea pot in my room in halls of residence and thinking, well that's all it takes....*

*I remember recording in the garage and just now realising that the master tapes are all for a double speed 4 track which I no longer have, so are useless.*

*I remember having dubbed a copy of everything to normal cassette. Some of the recordings were solo guitar improvisations although I didn't think of them like that at the time, I was struggling to work out how the music could be made by a group.*

*I remember the Edinburgh festival fireworks concert when the crowd started to shout and boo the nationalism of Elgar's pomp and circumstance, and the national anthem Thatcherism, the poll tax).*

*I remember not being able to find the records I wanted to hear.*

*I remember a conversation: my grandmother – Oh I hated it, there are no tunes in it, you don't come away from Wozzeck whistling any tunes: my uncle –Oh I left whistling a few tunes. I immediately thought, 'I need to listen to this!'*

*I remember hearing the swifts circling around over the village in summer.*

*I remember my great grandmother telling me about the time she met Rachmaninoff in a hotel in Norway and how she heard him practicing the piano through the wall. He had big hands and liked to play with the children she was looking after.*

*I remember Peter singing maybe it's because I'm a Londoner in pigeon French during a horrible rehearsal in Dresden.*

*I remember the bookshop owner in Selkirk asking of a CD I'd given him whether its discourse was 'anti music'.*

*I remember another book shop, the stand in shopkeeper a small man called jack who professed an interest in Messiaen as defence against a customer who was satisfied with his Beethoven, his Mozart and his Haydn.*

# String Quartet

(1)

*21 minute Version*

## Player I (273423)

0:00 – 2:00

2:00 – 9:00

9:00 – 12:00

12:00 – 16:00

16:00 – 18:00

18:00 – 21:00

## Player II (4854)

0:00 – 4:00

4:00 – 12:00

12:00 – 17:00

17:00 – 21:00

## Player III (62283)

0:00 – 6:00

6:00 – 8:00

8:00 – 10:00

10:00 – 18:00

18:00 – 21:00

## Player IV (561324)

0:00 – 5:00

5:00 – 11:00

11:00 – 12:00

12:00 – 15:00

15:00 – 17:00

17:00 – 21:00

Within each time bracket devote yourself to one memory of a string quartet event.

Play a sound when you are remembering this quartet.

Stop playing when you stop remembering.

This might be a concert, a performance you gave or a recording you heard. The longer brackets allow for more extended contemplation.

Leave silence where it occurs.

You might only play 1 minute of music within a three or four minute time bracket.

In other words the given time is not to be filled.

You can indicate the time you spend considering it by playing a long steady pitch.

You can play the music you remember.

You can play short sounds that mark out the period of time in which you are remembering.

You can indicate the contours or the quality of *how* you remember it by playing in your own way.

The objective is to invoke an absence, to invoke absent music.

This is not the same thing as playing something from memory.

Don't be afraid of the silence and the tension this can produce. The stronger it gets the better.

# String Quartet

*Evening Version (2)*

play only when you are in the state of remembering a quartet

make the sounds you play simple and quiet

when not playing, listen

duration - 1 hour or longer

Neil Davidson 2008

**Notes:**

There is a need to stress simplicity and the reasons for this: it leaves the simple function of the piece, the way it works clearer and then any quotation, more improvised bits stand out rather than being the default (which would just make it sound like any other improvisation). The trick is to do justice to the instruction to make sure the identity of the piece comes across: sound and memory coming into presence and leaving again – which should be as uncluttered and unhindered by signature styles of improvisation as possible (which is not to say that simplicity is not a style but it moves away from those signs that suggest conscious attempts at stylization).

Dynamics can be experimented with but the main thing is to let the sounds sit in the room without pushing things around too much. Occasional peaks are ok but the banality of constant mf should be avoided.

Remember to stop playing when you lose the memory.

When silent hold your posture and hold the piece in the room. You are performing all the time when silent.

Concentrate on making the transition from playing to not playing as clean and musical as you can.

The piece doesn't necessarily begin with the first sound. Sitting down and becoming comfortable are part of the performance and any audience members can be made to understand this by some simple means. The important thing is to make sure that an air of concentration is held and that this is already there at the beginning and lingers on after the notes are given that the piece is 'finished' in other words that the players have stopped playing.

The piece ends when all the players have comfortably ended. When you have finished playing you can put down your instrument and sit within the audience or leave the room. The last person playing who ends can acknowledge the piece is over to the audience.

This version came about because I wanted the 1<sup>st</sup> version to be useful and I want this one to be immersive, to keep going until something has happened.

There will be even more silences. Don't rush. Settle down and become adjusted to the room. If you need to move, to get up and stretch do so but don't distract the others. If you need to leave, do so.

Waiting is an integral part of the piece so perform your waiting with care.

If you play a complex extended technique sound this will be read as theatre. You will give overdue weight to the musical activity in the room since it will be unusual and will most likely refer back to the body of the player, to the physicality of sound and musicianship. Instead the piece requires a simple sound that will merely be present and no more.

## String Quartet

*Electronic Version (3)*

Each member of the string quartet will be interviewed individually by me for around thirty minutes or so, perhaps longer if the occasion allows.

The interviews will be carefully recorded in an appropriate room so that the audio can be used in the piece.

The interviews will pose questions about musical intimacy, about player identity, about interaction and various forms of musical fantasy.

Some of the things I want to reveal:

- What gave them the desire to play in a quartet, where did the desire come from?
- About a time when they felt they played very well, when they played very badly.
- An account of a musical fantasy and further questions on this theme.
- Have they ever seduced anyone with music, with their playing?

The main thing is to get them to say things about playing that would not normally be revealed.

### **Technical Matters:**

Commission or make a max msp or Pd patch that can play back the recordings of the four interviews over four separate channels. Four inputs or channels on the max patch should be gated so that a sensor attached to each instrument can be used to silence the channel while the instrument is played and allow the sound of the interview to be played back when the instrument is not played. A lag of a second or so between these operations would be desirable to smooth out the edges. The instruments should not be amplified and the sound of the voices should not be played back above normal vocal levels: there should remain a sense of intimacy and a need for the audience to attend carefully. Obviously there will be overlapping so not every word will be picked up on.

To clarify: whenever a player stops making sound on their instrument, whenever the sound of the strings drops below a certain level (for practical purposes so that instrument handling noise is not a factor) the sound of their interview can be heard. This means that when they play they repress the sound of their voice. When they stop

playing or play intermittently the sound of their voice emerges.

The scores and versions 1 and 2 are to be used to account for the interaction between players in terms of playing, to limit their playing time so that they cannot repress everything.

**Notes:**

Short sounds / excerpts will only interrupt the voice for a moment, disrupting the continuity. Long sounds will obscure whole syntax streams.

Perhaps they should be *relatively* free to repress their voices at any point, choosing either to play short fragments or hold sustained sounds, either pitched or non pitched but should not be in a position to play constantly.

The linguistic voices will become contrapuntal.

The players will find that they will say concordant and discordant things.

Neither voice nor instrumental sound is prioritized.

Ideas of musical development and identity are played with extensively.

# String Quartet

*Version (4)*

play one tone only when you are in the state of remembering a string quartet

make the tone you play simple and quiet

when not playing, listen

duration 1 hour, or longer

Neil Davidson 2010

## String Quartet Commentary

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Rugoff, Ralph  
<http://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/10519/appointment/> 17/5/10 from  
Financial Times Feb 1999)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Whitehead 2009: 86)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

(2009: 88)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] (Whitehead

2009: 89)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] (Whitehead 2009: 91)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] (Whitehead 2009: 92)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted] (Whitehead

2009: 92)

[Redacted]

(Whitehead 2009: 92)

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Barthes 1986: 252)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Barthes 1986: 253)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Barthes 1986: 255)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] (Barthes 1986: 256)

## Process of the String Quartet

The string quartet is an intimate institution. The forms of music written for that institution are often based on the intimacy and familiarity which playing in such a group affords. I thought that working with a string quartet in a carefully planned collaborative process would be fulfilling for all parties concerned. I would devise a way for them to work together which would reveal aspects of their group that were hitherto un-, or under-explored. I took as a starting point for the piece Sophie Calle's *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*, an installation project in the Freud Museum, London where the artist arranged objects belonging to her which related back to her previous work in and around the house, setting her own biographical traces within the structure of Freud's.

I worked into this premise the idea that the Second Viennese School of composers were dismantling tonality around the same time as Freud was dismantling the idea of a whole and autonomous subject. There was also the more circumstantial or prosaic relationship between the distraught dissonance of the second Viennese School's music and the hysteria given prominence in Freud's writings. And into this I endeavoured to weave a reading of Roland Barthes's essay *Listening*, which examines psychoanalytic listening.

This convergence of memory, biography, the formation of the subject and listening proposed the exploration of some autobiographical material. An article on the American artist Joe Brainard by Mark Ford in the *London Review of Books* which

discusses Brainard's memoir *I Remember* suggested the simple process of a list of memories which are featured in the score of the piece.

For all the specificity of details, such a list is as available and generic as comic characters like Nancy. Once popularised by Koch (Kenneth) and his primers for teaching poetry to children, the 'I remember' format quickly became a staple of school – and adult – writing classes. (London Review of Books vol 30 no 14 2008)

Working from this resourceful position I sketched out a plan for the quartet. I would record interviews with the members of a string quartet. I would ask them questions about their lives as musicians, their desire to play and how they came to be doing what they do, and why.

The plan at that stage was to take the recordings and write a MAX MSP patch that could play the four sound files through amplification of some kind. The patch would incorporate a switching system whereby an audio signal from each instrument of the quartet would trigger the signal: while the musicians played the sound of their voice in interview would be silenced, when they stopped playing the voice would be heard. It would function as a sort of repression machine. But I could not find a way to organize the playing and not playing which would put the players in the appropriate zone, so that they would not be free to play all the time, nor would they be left

without a reason to play. And I wanted them to be able to attempt to silence any things they said in interview which they did not want people to hear.

I took the questions and the ideas developed up to this point and set about finding ways to implement them in workshops, but without the technology. Discussion and feedback from the players would still play a part but I was less sure of putting the players on the spot since this might make them less amenable to the piece in the long run. I prepared a variety of scores and exercises that could be used to integrate memory and performance and which would make the players more aware of these aspects of their own playing. I worked with some scores from Schoenberg, drawing on the initial premise of the second Viennese school and psychoanalysis. I listened to the quartets and marked the page in the score wherever I remembered what I was meant to be doing. I then copied the fragments framed by those marks and assembled them into pages of fragments for the musicians to play in a kind of mobile form. These were never used in the end since the quartet I ended up working with were quite comfortable improvising their own material.

Meanwhile I made numerous requests to a professional string quartet for them to take part in this process. They declined to respond (although they were already booked to perform pieces by composers from the department where I work, at a funded event with all performances and rehearsal time paid for). After nine overtures it occurred to me that it was time to find another quartet. I arranged a workshop with some string players from around Glasgow who I knew would be amenable to this sort of thing:

Una MacGlone – double bass, Peter Nicholson - cello, George Burt –acoustic guitar and Aby Vulliamy - viola. It did not strike me as a problem that they did not play the instruments of a conventional string quartet. We did several exercises. First they improvised a piece on their own for ten minutes to get acquainted. I asked Peter Nicholson to do an exercise I learned from sound artist Graeme Miller where he placed a playing card on the ground for every musical memory he could retrieve beginning in with the earliest memory of music he had and ending with the most recent. These formed a line of cards, each with an attached memory. I then asked the others to play the line of cards, to imagine the memories and give them some kind of musical presence. Musically the result was satisfactory enough but Peter Nicholson was nonplussed by the whole procedure. He had been unable to bring to mind any positive memories and had, it transpired, lain out a line of abject misery. The mood darkened. The session ended with me asking them to improvise a piece in the style of Schoenberg (to lighten the atmosphere), which worked well.

At this point the strategies I had devised had not really delivered anything substantial and had caused more alienation from the process of doing the piece than opening up to it so I set about revising things from scratch. At the next workshop I asked the players to work from a time bracket score, Version 1 of the *String Quartet* as it now stands. They were to play only when they were in the process of remembering a string quartet. They were to play one quartet memory per time bracket. This was to impose extra limits on their playing in order to slow down their involvement in the

piece, to restrain the urge to play and to get them to focus. This worked tolerably well.

The piece in its final versions, the 21 minute version and the evening version is probably the clearest example of any of these pieces of a way of producing musical form from a process which is inaccessible to the composer. Nobody but the player can have access to the rule of when to play. The piece doesn't ask them to play in relation to each other, but inevitably memories are triggered by association and what the players play can have an effect on this. For this reason I have limited the options further so that they play as simple a material as possible, merely suggesting that the memory is there and no more. Improvising on the piece remembered is less convincing in terms of giving this piece presence since the identity of this string quartet piece can be lost when a performance begins to sound like a free improvisation. The occasional use of direct quotation is acceptable but allowing oneself to be drawn into the musical world of the remembered quartet complicates the process enormously.

I have included recordings of this group doing an early version of 21 minute version (track 1), an evening version (track 2), a version of the same performance but with the microphone being switched on and off by me so that while I (the recordist) am remembering a quartet the signal passes through (track 3), and a solo guitar version of the evening version (track 4) using an e-bow to produce sustained tones indicating the duration of the memory of various string quartets.

The most refined recording of the piece in terms of aesthetic clarity is this last one, although as the listener may find the switch between the e-bow to the stone at around 40 minutes is perhaps clumsy. It certainly breaks the neutrality of the sustained tones as markers of moments of remembrance and introduces a sound which is so complex in its own right that it may find undermine the sense of process unfolding. I could have recorded another take, without this, but I think the flaw in this document tells us more about the piece than a supposedly better one would.

### **Form and Content**

How to read this piece analytically is another question altogether. Think of Sophie Calle placing objects of her own in the context of Freud's biography in *Appointment with Sigmund Freud*. There is no sense of bringing the object of the past into the present context in the *String Quartet*, unless of course one thinks of the instrument itself, which could certainly be a possible strategy for exploring the piece: borrowing significant old instruments (those used by the Budapest Quartet for example) for use in a performance of the piece, but this is supplementary to the formal activities taking place. We do not hear the quartets themselves. The polyphony of the remembered quartet is inaccessible to the individual player so any quotation however subtle is inevitably limited (perhaps a sustained sound would evoke the long pedal notes of some of Shostakovich's quartets). Instead we hear the event of memory coming and going. Is it possible that anyone would want to interpret these memories, these

sounds, to try and dig out which quartet is being remembered to get at a meaning of the piece? This is potentially a misreading of the situation. Susan Sontag warns against interpretation in her essay of the same name:

“...Levi-Strauss argues that the activity of mind in imposing form on content is fundamentally the same for all minds, archaic and modern.” (Sontag 2001: 79)

Sontag’s interest in Levi-Strauss supports her argument in *Against Interpretation*, which prioritises a critical awareness of form such that it will supplant the prevalence of interpretive criticism. I find such a position sympathetic to this thesis.

“...it is the defense of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call “form” is separated off from something we have learned to call “content”, and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory.” (Sontag 2001: 4)

and

“it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to *interpret* them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art.” (Sontag 2001: 5)

I do not intend to reinstate a form/content distinction or separation but instead to highlight the possibilities of rebalancing or deconstructing such a separation through the process of composing and playing pieces of music such as the String Quartet under discussion.

“Ingmar Bergman may have meant the tank rumbling down the empty night street in *The Silence* as a phallic symbol. But if he did, it was a foolish thought. (“Never trust the teller, trust the tale,” said Lawrence.) Taken as a brute object, as an immediate sensory equivalent for the mysterious abrupt armoured happenings going on inside the hotel, that sequence with the tank is the most striking moment in the film. Those who reach for a Freudian interpretation of the tank are only expressing their lack of a response to what is there on the screen.

It is always the case that interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else.” (Sontag 2001: 10)

This piece is foremost an analysis of form. The simplicity of the sonic material serves the elucidation of the form.

## Performance

It is implausible that this piece could work in a performance if the audience did not know what was going on. They have to know in general terms why the players come to make the sounds they do when they do, but not what the specific memory triggering each sound is beyond the recognition of an act of memory. This problem arose when I had arranged, having failed to find a quartet willing and able to perform the piece, to play the piece in a solo guitar version at the 2008 Sound Thought postgraduate performance event at the University of Glasgow. Appropriate program notes were sent and I had prepared some things to say before I began so that the piece would be understood, or rather that my activity as a performer could be known in advance. Despite this care, when I arrived at the venue I discovered that the program said, “Neil Davidson – Improvisation: String Quartet”. The promise of improvisation effectively rendered the premise of the piece impossible. If the audience had any notion that what I was doing was improvising (whatever they take that to mean) rather than internally listening for some absent musical events it would fail to convince as a piece. It might sound exactly the same and express the same ‘content’, but the formal device would be lost. The metaphysics of presence and absence in the piece depend on an informed participation from the audience. This was now impossible because most of the people in the room knew that what I normally do in performance is improvise, and I could not think of a way to introduce the piece that could adequately explain all this while acknowledging the hospitality of the event

organizers. I certainly didn't want to put anyone on the spot for a simple mistake. So, in the end, improvise is what I did.

What this scenario revealed was the fragility of a piece that explicitly works with presence and absence, where the sounds you hear have no specific meaning but are still always supplementary. The reason for the sounds is inaccessible and is arbitrary. And perhaps the simpler the sounds are the less a listener is likely to read meaning into them, or to invest the sound with a withheld meaning or source while the more complex sounds might imply a mystery to be solved, given the psychoanalytic edge to the piece. And I don't wish to choose between these approaches. What happens is that the informed audience knows that the sounds are invoking something else, but they don't know what. They don't need to know, nor do the other musicians.

## Forms 13

Throughout the period of working on this thesis I have spent a few hours each week working in a record shop where collections of records are donated and sold. I deal with the classical vinyl records. Often the collections come to the shop because someone has died or they have moved into a smaller house or they have had to give up the collection for some other significant reason. Sometimes the person giving us the records tells such things, sometimes not.

Secondary information held by these collections:

- From the specific pressing marks, labels, catalogue numbers and so on one can deduce the time when the record was manufactured and observe its condition relative to other records from the same period (possibly indicating that it was bought second hand rather than new at the time).
- Any written marks made on the sleeve (gift notations, memorials, analysis)
- The sequence (if there is one) devised by the collector, for example numbered stickers, indicating priorities and connections not apparent to anyone else.
- The surface of the record revealing how much play the record has had perhaps indicating a particular favourite.
- Excessive scratches on some records may indicate drunkenness while playing and suggest that some music (I have noted this often with Mahler's ninth symphony) is preferred while intoxicated.
- Records which, in terms of the kind of music they contain, stand out from the rest, indicating they may have been given as gifts.
- Strange combinations of records might indicate a shared collection; a couple or a child's records having found their way back into a parent's collection or vice versa.
- The relative cost of first editions and budget reissues suggesting how much money the collector may have had at different times in their lives
- Changes in taste
- Periods when spending priorities have been diverted to other matters, then returned.
- A tension emerges between appreciating that tastes vary relatively little from person to person, that the most obvious fact emerging from these interpretations is how much disposable income the collector had, and that despite this there is always a trace of the listening individual remaining in the relations between these objects.

## Swifan

Your great grandmother met Sergei Rachmaninov in a hotel in Norway in 1918. She was working as a nanny in the rooms next door to those occupied by SR. She heard him practicing through the wall and he would come in talk with her and entertain the children. During this time, having fled Russia, SR was preparing to travel to America to work as a concert pianist recognising that he could not earn any money as a composer. His practicing was therefore bound up with this migratory movement and his touring of Scandinavia was part of this preparation.

You will practice the pieces for solo piano from SR's 1918 repertoire on the guitar within the frame of a performance situation. This performance will be as a preparation for a forthcoming tour. The piece should be introduced carefully in conversation, in publicity material and in whatever form seems to do justice to the ways of the piece.

Practice of the pieces is simply that. Keep working at them until you can play as much of them as can be played on the guitar. Whether an aesthetically interesting performance results from this or not is not the prerogative of the piece. The aesthetic yield of the piece is a product of the process alone.

# Repertoire

## Concertos

Scriabin - Piano concerto  
 Tchaikovsky- Piano Concerto no. 1  
 Liszt - Piano Concerto no. 1

## Solo Piano Works

Bach/Busoni – Chaconne  
 Beethoven – 32 Variations in C minor WoO.80  
 Beethoven – Sonata Op.10 No 3  
 Chopin – Sonata Op 53  
 Chopin – Etudes op 10 and 25 (several)  
 Chopin – Variations  
 Haydn – F Minor variations  
 Liszt – Hungarian Rhapsodies no 2 and 12  
 Medtner – fairy tales Opp 20 and 26  
 Rachmaninov - Morceaux de Fantasia Op.3 – 1,2,3,4,5  
 Rachmaninov - Morceaux de Salon Op 10  
 Rachmaninov - Preludes Opp 23 and 32 - op23 number 5, op32 numbers 3,5,6,7,12  
 Rachmaninov - Etudes Tableaux Opp 33 and 39 - op33 numbers 2 and 7, op39 numbers 4 and 6.  
 Schubert – Moments Musicaux D780 (2 of)  
 Scriabin – Preludes op 11 (number 8), sonata no 2 op 19, etudes op 42  
 Tchaikovsky – Troica (November) from The Seasons op 37

## Glasgow 4 Text by Maria Gil

The following excerpt from the performance text of *Glasgow 4, o nom de todas as ruas* was written by Maria Gil following our second meeting. It charts the route to our meeting via her purchase of an LP of Rachmaninov's second symphony and introduced the piece *Swifan* to audiences in Lisbon, Glasgow, Tavira and Santiago de Compostela. Maria Gil and I worked on a number of theatre projects together from 2007 - 2009.

You saw in this shop window, an old record of Rachmaninov with a beautiful cover from a distant icy place. You go into the shop and you start talking to the man working at the counter. While you are talking about music and the city you tell him that what you're really looking for is a guitar player, someone who can improvise and also perform and he tells you that you must meet Neil. Neil is an avant-garde musician that coincidentally was going to Lisbon the following week to give a concert. He asked you to wait and a few moments later you are talking to Neil on the phone. You never understood very well where he was going to play in Lisbon. But you arranged to meet when he returned. Meanwhile, you are in one of those informal meetings, very fashionable at the moment, about "time management" or "time planning". One of the girls, Luciana, she is a musician and when you tell her that you are looking for a guitar player she tells you must meet Neil. Neil is an avant-garde musician. At first you don't associate this Neil with the Neil on the phone at the record shop. But then you realize they are the same. The following week you are at a concert and Neil is playing with a girl. And it is really avant-

garde. He's playing guitar with a little stone, a small empty whisky bottle and she is making sounds with her mouth closed and she has her eyes closed too. When you finally meet, Neil brings a book by Derrida and he tells you that this book is about a woman who during her whole life wrote down all the dreams she had. Before she died she gave all her writing to a French archive, but they didn't know what to do with it? They had never kept this kind of material before. Derrida met this woman in a library in Paris and they exchanged letters until she died. And for a moment you don't know which story you are living anymore, nor to whom the Derrida book belongs nor in which city you are after all? Nor how everything is going to end up.

Neil also tells you a story about his great grandmother. During the war she was in this hotel in Denmark, taking care of some children, a sort of nanny I guess. Neil tells you that Rachmaninov spent some time practicing in that precise hotel, in the same period his great grandmother was there. Neil found out which pieces Rachmaninov practiced in that period in that hotel in Denmark. And today he uses those pieces in performances. Although those pieces were for piano. And then you remember the old Rachmaninov record, the one you saw in that shop window, with a beautiful cover from a distant icy place. And you wonder if that landscape on the cover is the same which Neil's great grandmother and Rachmaninov saw from that hotel in Denmark. And you wonder if that same hotel is Hamlet's old castle. Hamlet, who is now wandering through India in search of himself. (Gil 2009: 97)

## Swifan Commentary

Watching swifts circle around over the Portuguese town of Tavira in the summer of 2008 I wondered if their circling was a way of memorising the place, positioning things on the ground in relation to the sky at night and the surrounding landscape. I wondered if there was a word in English for this movement. I didn't find one but there was an old English word, 'swifan', which meant to move in a course or to sweep, and this seemed to be appropriate.

The piece originates in the meeting between my great grandmother and the Russian composer and pianist Sergei Rachmaninov in a hotel in Oslo in 1918. Apparently he was on tour in Scandinavia developing his piano technique before going to work as a concert pianist in America following his departure from Russia. He spent his time practicing in the room next door to hers. I made enquiries and found out the pieces he was playing around that time. Some are by Rachmaninov, others are by Chopin, Schubert, Beethoven, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Scriabin. He made recordings of many of these pieces for RCA shortly after arriving in America.

The piece Swifan is the ritual of practicing those pieces on the guitar. The context in which this practicing happens is where the piece begins to assert an identity for itself. The proper realisation of these piano pieces on the guitar is impossible given its restricted range and the note combinations available. The point is not to play the

pieces well as such but to approach them as a ritual. As preparation for a tour or a migratory movement the piece connects biography, travel, technique and memory much of which is bound up in the title and its relation to swift behaviour. I toured Japan shortly after a three-day performance of this piece in Stirling.

Practicing a piece of music is like circling around a small territory, getting to know it, memorizing aspects of it which are difficult, getting it under the fingers. Similarly the sweeping, circling movement of the title is also linked to the rotation of gramophone records, LPs, CDs, minidisks, hard Drives, all ways of 'memorizing' music or at least ways for objects to remember it for us. I suppose the ideal location for the performance of this process for preparation/practice is a hotel room or a room given for my use explicitly as a musician in a foreign country.

## **Development**

To begin with I felt that the story, the scenario and the role of Rachmaninov's practicing in his art, all this fell into the area I which I wanted to work: themes of encounter, listening, departure, transition, developing one's performance practice. Quite how to reconcile a distant relative's biographical event with my own artistic practice has taken a while to formulate and has gone through a number of changes largely because I kept changing my mind about what musical activities I wanted to do myself.

The basics were established early: I would practice those pieces that made up Rachmaninov's recital repertoire from that period. My initial thoughts were along the lines of using those pieces as preparation for tours of my own music; that I wouldn't play the piano pieces in concerts but that the preparation involved to get myself playing well might make use of those pieces. This led further to a notion that to spend a year working on these pieces would inevitably change my own playing in subtle ways or perhaps very marked ways, something I felt was desirable and would be interesting in itself.

Around the time I was thinking through these problems I began working with Maria Gil, a Portuguese theatre director and performer who was researching an MPhil at Glasgow University in autobiographical performance and intimacy. She wanted to work with a Scottish improvising guitarist in a performance that was due to take place in Lisbon in January 2008 and she asked me to collaborate with her. In the resulting piece, *Glasgow 4: o nom de todas as ruas* she tells stories about the people she meets in Glasgow in the first four months of her residence there. I was one of those people so our initial meeting is described within the performance and since during this early meeting I explained the idea of this piece to her the story of my great-grandmother and Rachmaninov is included as well. So the piece was introduced as a concept and in practice to audiences within the frame of another piece, a theatre performance. In the performance, following her telling of the story in question, I play a Rachmaninov

Prelude, opus 3, no. 2 starting with the first 20 bars or so and gradually introducing improvisation, because from that point on I could no longer play the piece.

The first performance of *Swifan* in its own right took place at the Le Weekend festival in Stirling in May 2009. This annual festival for experimental music takes place in a building with a number of smaller gallery spaces and I took up residence in one of these at the top of the building. I played for up to two hours at a time intermittently throughout each day for the three days of the festival. The pieces I concentrated on during this performance were Schubert's Moment Musicaux number 1, Beethoven's Piano Sonata op 10 number 3 and Rachmaninov Preludes op 32 numbers 3, 5 and 7. The door to the space was open throughout and information was provided to encourage the public to come in and listen. Documentation of this process can be heard on tracks 8 –11.

## **Analysis**

This piece dissects the role of the solo recital performer. There are few things quite as uncomfortable as performing pieces of music in front of an audience that you cannot play, especially when your presence at the festival is predicated on being a capable musician. But it was, after all, because of my intention to put myself in such situations that I wrote the piece. I wanted to remove the safety net of ability, of style, of the comforts of genre and produce a composition that was stripped of tangible

achievable goals and instead presented a clear project or a simple task that would reframe my playing. This raises some interesting propositions about craft and what we value in musical performance and in particular in experimental music which often reproduces fairly classical norms in terms of what is expected and valued in a performance. Performing failure or gradual attainment is a difficult thing to frame. In the event of the Stirling performance I persisted in practicing the pieces and trying to reconcile them with my playing. But on listening back to the recordings I am frustrated by the default gestures of punctuation which I turn to when I lose the place, run out of playable material or get bored. There are plentiful traces of the performer framing the practicing mode with critical distancing, disavowal and compromise.

As an installation piece it has a good argument to make. The context in which the piece is performed will alter its reception a great deal; performed as a concert it would present a significant challenge in terms of making a convincing statement; 'I mean to do this, this is what I intend'. This subtext if you like is very hard to bring into the performed content of the piece. As a performance stripped of the trappings of conventional musical culture, whether classical or experimental etc, it can operate more freely. What I hear on the recordings from Stirling is that I am trying to reconcile those two spheres. The recordings of the Rachmaninov *Prelude op 3 no. 2* from the theatre performance Glasgow 4 reveal a performance that has the security of its place within another piece, one more clearly rooted in a performance tradition. Tracks 6 and 7 are from rehearsals for Glasgow 4, Track 5 is a recording made for a

performance of the piece in which I could not take part since took place in Spain while I was in Norway. As with the string quartet detailed above, it is essential for an audience to know what I am doing when I perform the piece.

## Forms 4

A performance of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra is arranged. But the players are not from the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra. The instruments are more or less the same. The program of pieces is of the same kind. The same venue is used. The same introductions are made. The same format is used. The same advertising and publicity style is employed. The same audience come.

## Pieces for Large Ensemble

## Forel

play something for the person sitting nearest to you at a low volume

or

talk about (in relation to) what the person nearest to you is playing  
- speak at a volume no louder than their playing

duration: 10 -15 minutes (or longer if the audience is allowed to move among the players)

**Notes**

Low volume, *mp* or less.

What is said does not need to be intelligible from an audience perspective.

Layout: the arrangement of the players in the space is free but should serve the aims of the piece

It will help if players don't flit back and forth between activities or imitate or copy anyone else, or make dramatic/theatrical gestures

Rather than thinking about the content of what you play, the sound, think about what it offers the other. What you play should be for the person nearest to you. It doesn't necessarily mean play something to entertain the other or to please the other.

More than anything else it means to play with an ethical sense of their musical needs under the social conditions of this piece, under the social conditions of this orchestra.

## Herrschaftsgebiete

*Devised in collaboration with Contemporary Music Ensemble class at Glasgow University 07/08*

### **Things to do**

Place yourself in a part of the room at some remove from the other players but so that as many as possible can hear you.

Improvise in this place in such a way as lends the place a clear identity.

Listen to as many players as possible. Memorise as many musical identities as possible.

After the musical identities have been established (2 minutes or so) players may begin to move. Each player may move to the place of another.

On arriving in the new place the player must adopt and support the musical identity that was established by the previous player or maintained by the previous player.

Do not play while moving from one place to another.

Continue for 20 minutes or so. Listen for and be attentive to gradual development.

### **Things to bear in mind**

Simple music is better than complex music for this task and consistency of material is better than constantly changing material.

What you play must be recognisable and playable in some way by the other players (though it is also their responsibility to cope with such problems)

More than one player may occupy the same 'place' at the same time but they must be playing with the aim of realising the same 'identity'.

Don't all move at once: some must stay playing where they begin for some time so the music will not halt or drop out inexplicably.

Musical identity is meant in the sense of a sound/noise/pattern that is recognisable and representable by various musical means. What I don't mean is playing the clown, playing sad music, playing aggressive music, or inventing a musical personality that always imitates people.

Players must work to be aware of as many different identity-places as possible so as to be able to play in as many as possible when moving to those places.

In very large ensembles (12 +) the players will not be able to listen to everyone. In this case listen to whomever you *can* hear. When you move to a new place, listen again to those you *can* hear. In this way players remain consistent to the idea of the piece while moving around potentially large buildings.

Instrumentation:

Some instruments forbid easy movement such as electric guitar or double bass. Where there is difficulty in movement there are a series of choices:

- stay put.
- make only one movement, as above.
- play something else for this piece (Whistle, Dictaphone)
- carry it carefully
- in the case of percussion use small instruments inventively (in the service of the musical identities already established)
- play acoustically

## 12 in 60

Play 12 minutes of sound within 60 minutes

The time can be divided up into smaller portions

Very short sound events should be thought of as grouped together, or as bracketing a period of the time

## Other Piece for GIO

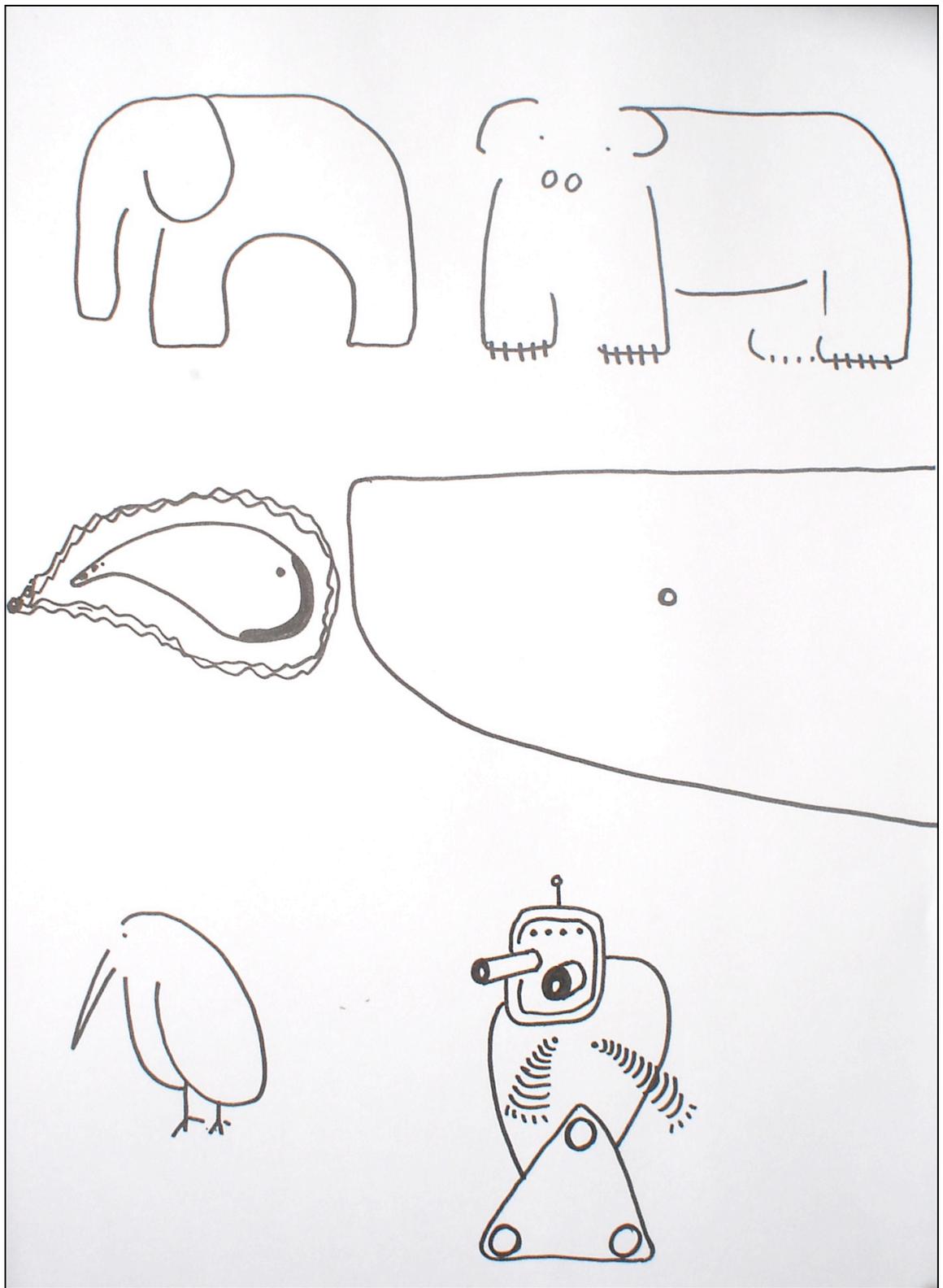
Choose someone you don't normally play in close relation to in the band.

Play in relation to what they do in one of 3 ways (one at a time but you can do all of them any number of times within the piece)

1. If they are playing you don't.
2. Play long sounds that underpin what they do
3. Play in close relation to what the other is doing without imitation

Transition: at what you think is the middle of the piece change your focus to another player, someone you often listen to.

## Monster Parts



These monsters are next to each other but you don't have to be.

They are an **elephant** and a **bear**, an **oyster** and a **whale**, a **bird** and a **robot**.

Listening to what another player is doing decide which animal / monster their playing relates to (in whatever terms you like) and play in relation to them in a way ordered by the given pairing. For example the double bass is making a sound you think is an oyster sound, so you play in relation to their sound in terms of the relationship between an oyster and a whale. You are playing the whale, but not necessarily whaleness.

Or

Begin to play in a way that relates to one of these animals / monsters and then listen for ways in which your chosen sound/animal/monster relationship relates to another sound in the group in terms of the animal/monster pair.

### **The piece is about difference**

The whale is bigger than the oyster but from roughly the same place

The bear is roughly the same size as the elephant but of a different texture

The robot is metal and the bird is not

e.g. guitar perspective: guitar = bear <in relation to> sax = elephant : guitar plays in relation to sax in terms of similar scale but different texture...

e.g. flute perspective: flute = whale <in relation to> drums = oyster : flute plays big sounds in relation to small sounds from the drums but both might be wet...

The other player doesn't have to know that you have chosen them as a whale, oyster etc for the piece to work. Consequently the pairs do not need to map both ways but can form a network of relations which nobody can untangle or determine

Play one pair at a time

You can change pairs throughout the piece

Play each pair only once

No animal noises

Duration – as long as it takes

## On Entering or Leaving the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

*Article for the publication accompanying the exhibition: It isn't What it Used to be and Will Never be Again - Bik Van Der Pol - CCA Glasgow 2009*

### Part 1

Have you decided whether to leave yet?

No, not yet. I still don't know how to represent my reasons. I will say – it is time for me to leave – but that is not the end of it. I will explain myself and I will have to convince people of why I made this decision. And I cannot separate my decision on whether to leave from this expectation of how I will convey my reasons.

Aren't these quite separate things?

No. If I leave then I change myself. I become someone else, or rather, I put myself in a position that I don't yet understand and from there I will have some explaining to do. If I decide to stay then I do not cross that threshold and so, perhaps, I have less explaining to do. In any event I cannot speak from there yet.

Is this a question of the safety of the same and the risk of the unknown?

Indeed, but to put it another way, that step from one state to another, the broaching of presence in a new space or of articulating a new perspective is what makes the process interesting. You choose and it affects everyone. In a way what holds me back from deciding is the understanding that whatever I choose is not just for me but is chosen for everyone concerned. And this happens with each performance event with every instance of playing and every sound as it is played. I am responsible for my decision and for representing that decision. That representation might either be in the form of a conversation or it might be in the form the sound takes when I make it. Since that is the way I represent a musical decision, by making it audible.

Is it then more of a problem of structure than representation; that the way you represent your decision recedes behind the formal relation between your decision and those of others?

Yes. I am further convinced that what I say might come to get in the way of anyone really encountering the nub of the matter, that tangible, droppable aspect of the gesture of sound making. It's never just a question of deciding what I want, otherwise I would just follow my pleasure, as uncle Claude put it, and while that is laudable in solitary moments – performing solo as it were – I can't bring myself to do it with other people, well with an audience of course it's no problem, but among others one

puts their demands on my sounds to the fore. I ask what do the sounds I make offer the others? Are they hospitable welcoming sounds or are they territorially obnoxious, leaving little space for anything else to be heard? In fact I think this last point is where I return to the beginning, that it's undecidable. I cannot know what another player is thinking, what they might want, prefer or need musically speaking. And I think this really is a good thing.

## Part 2

Revolution in art and music comes with certain conditions. To claim any music or art as revolutionary inevitably throws up the question of what will be overthrown. In an information saturated culture the archival command means that we are too richly bound to the past, to its detritus to leave anything truly to history because that history so effectively satisfies an avaricious present. But there are other presents to choose from. When we start to concern ourselves with acts and gestures of communication rather than the content or what is said then we become responsible not for history but for those we work and communicate with.

Plagiarism on the other hand is a transgression of the archive of what is written and said: the act of putting another's words into use as one's own. It is also disarmingly economical. Can you plagiarise someone's gesture of response?

We would do well to examine properly those art forms that most effectively evade documentation (a mysterious form of plagiarism), those that seem a pale imitation of their eventfulness once they are repeatable. Which of these aesthetic forms or acts most effectively disrupt the archival order? Apparently the archive begins with Noah. And hot on Noah's tail is an implicit anxiety about inter-species acts of fuckery. Moth fucks mouse. Oyster fucks toad. By these means things start to sound interesting again. Difference can be enjoyed respectfully and monstrosity emerges as pleasure. An anxiety about plagiarism might be said to stem from a prohibition of such trespasses and Noah, and we're dealing with an idea more than a man, probably has the most to lose from that kind of thing. If books and animals start spontaneously to form new texts and species everything becomes very interesting and heterogenous. It seems like one of the most transgressive things you can do now is to really listen very carefully and respectfully to someone who is absolutely nothing like you.

## Pieces for Large Ensemble Commentary

These pieces are for exploring form within large ensemble improvisation. They put the players in a position where they have to work out other ways of responding and working with form, to find new ways of placing sounds in time and to question their forms of response.

They are for large ensembles that have a facility in improvisation at their disposal. I have tried to ensure that individual instrumental skill or craft is not an issue. Very simple sounds will often disclose the form of the piece more successfully than complex figurative or expressive playing.

Two strains of organising large ensemble improvisation that I reject are conduction and the use of graphic scores to organize the music temporally. Too often in these approaches listening becomes subordinate to the gaze. The totalizing, 'I' oriented form of conduction where the one leads the many I find repellent. In the case of graphic approaches I prefer to use graphic notation to propose differences, spatial relationships or scale: something easily committed to memory. And on no account would I condone anyone being 'inspired' by such notations.

## Forel

This piece was written in response to a call for pieces for the Edinburgh Composers Orchestra. I don't know anyone in the orchestra; at least I don't think I do. The title of the piece derives from a word for a slip case for a book, or a parchment cover, a kind of object or a gloss. It is both protective of and more exposed than what is within. But it also tells us about what is inside. The brief was to write something for a mixed instrumental ensemble that musicians of various abilities could play. I wanted to find a way to put the musicians in a situation that would reveal something about improvisation without exposing the players to the difficulties of large group free improvisation but also to give them something very simple to do. At the same time the piece as it stands is very exposing; there really isn't anywhere to hide in this sort of context. But it is not about instrumental skill or craft.

Sometimes in rehearsals or workshops situations arise where the players feel they want to comment on or be constructively critical of someone else's playing. This piece offers a forum for that, but without leaving room for discussion, and most importantly anything said within the piece cannot assume a superior position, cannot claim a higher authority than anyone else speaking or playing since they are all within the same forum, within the same sonic frame.

It sets up a scenario where the message content of what is said by a musician is placed on a level with the sound the other is making. There can be a degree of interaction between player and speaker but this is in a way suppressed within the field of sounds and speaking throughout the orchestra, and this piece should really be done by at least twelve people. The people playing 'musical' material are doing so relatively autonomously from one another since their priority is to play something for the person sitting nearest them, not to engage in the broader field of musical activity within the group.

The critical function of the piece is that it introduces alien behaviour into an orchestra. We can imagine, although such an act will probably be attended by a degree of horror, a symphony orchestra doing this piece. It is time that the notion that a piece is completely unsuited to an ensemble be seen as the foremost reason for that ensemble to perform it. And to perform it well.

The piece has never been performed. I decided that this is one piece that I want to be asked to do with a group. I will not ask an orchestra to do this piece; they must want to do it. So I will endeavour to make the score freely available so that this might come about.

## Herrschaftsgebiete

Two of the pieces included in the folio were composed in collaboration with other people. I hope it is clear that the idea of a single stable author of a piece of music is already in question. Rather than presenting the work of others as my own I hope to give a clear picture of how the pieces were agreed on and how the responsibility I have taken in accounting for them here in itself argues for their inclusion in this folio. *Herrschaftsgebiete* was developed in collaboration with students from the Contemporary Music Ensemble course I was teaching in 2008. I left them to devise a piece themselves while I was working in Lisbon. They began with an idea that each player moves from music stand to music stand each one of which has a different page of Cardew's *Treatise* on it. While this did not in itself produce a very stable or dependable result I made some suggestions which led from this point through a variety of versions towards a final piece. These suggestions were concerned with focusing on giving each page an identity, to the point where the Cardew scores were abandoned and the idea of playing a musical identity came to the fore.

Each player produces some musical material that gives their place in the room an identity. This is counter to the notion that improvisation is about putting forward your own identity as strongly as you can. Each identity must be audible to as many players as possible or as is realistic given the room or building in which the piece is played. The piece is ideal for exploring large and unusual spaces. So each player is involved

in orchestrating and dissolving that orchestration as they move from point to point around the room. This could be done on a very large scale provided you had sufficient people. It is essential that time is spent dedicating oneself to lending the space an identity and to picking up and memorizing the identities being articulated within earshot.

Most importantly no player is going to have a grasp of the whole.

What the piece doesn't immediately ask for up front is silence. So perhaps that is the basis on which I can take it apart for analytical purposes. It would take great skill and composure from a large ensemble to be able to work with very minimal sounds and placement of sounds for local identities to be grounded in those points in space such that they could be recognised and sustained by succeeding players. To play for one's own sake or interests, leaving behind a distinguishable trace of oneself only for another to come along and ensure its preservation; this would be to miss the point or rather the opening of the piece, since to play something which is hospitable to any other player is essential. Why should another player have to deal with your musical identity once you've left it behind?

So far the performances have tended to be quite full or dense in terms of what the musicians play. This can be accounted for in some measure by accepting that it takes a while for people to trust the process and to work out what is going on. The comfort

that comes from playing robust sounds can make it easier to find one's way into the piece. In future performances I would like to experiment with focusing on playing less, on reducing the sonic material to a localized division of time and space through placement of small sounds, asking how little it takes to mark the space with an identity. The care with which this might be done may lend each point of the room as much identity as would a constant stream of sound. It will probably take much longer for the initial phase of the piece to take hold, for the identities of the different points to be established. But this is a good thing, as long as there is a sense of flow from point to point or space to space, a continuity between the movement of attention between points and a continuity between the movement of players as they move on.

### **Performances**

The piece has been played by two successive classes from the Contemporary Music Ensemble course at Glasgow University in 2007/2008, 2008/2009. A recording of the most recent of these is included (track 22).

It was also intended for use in a collaborative project that took place in Munich in October 2008. The concert was to be played in Museum Villa Stuck, an art gallery with a very long reverberation. Several factors moved against this. The musicians running the project were afraid of any musicians moving around the space since they were worried that this might cause the audience to move as well. Also, since the

music for the museum concert was to be collaboratively organized there were many other suggestions for sections of music and it turned out that one of the other musicians had the idea that he would start playing in one part of the gallery and interact with localized musicians as he moved through the space, a trail of imitation running through the building. This was so similar in terms of basic idea that I decided to drop the piece in that context. It was in that situation that two colleagues and I devised the piece *12 in 60*.

## 12 in 60

The project in Munich that Una MacGlone and Miguel Carvalhais and I were involved in had promised to be a collaborative process open to diverse ways of constructing music for a large group of improvisers. We were frustrated to find that this was more a case of offering suggestions like, “we should have a tutti section”, “the percussion should play in the elevator”, or “there should be a duo”. Perfectly acceptable ideas in their own right but not formally interesting and since the form of the piece was emerging as a patchwork of unrelated ideas there was little place for listening to inform the process of the piece. I am more interested in integrating a formal process, something more liberating for the players in terms of their material but strict in terms of transitions and contrasts, strict in terms of reasons for playing. The piece was being devised almost entirely in terms of its content, what people would *do*, and as the rehearsals progressed it appeared to be the case that once an idea was proposed and tried, it would stay and would be played the same way each time.

MacGlone, Carvalhais and I were dissatisfied with this process and this way of playing. Mid way through the rehearsal period we hashed out a plan for how to work with the piece *12 in 60*. I suggested the basic time frame idea referencing George Lewis’s proposal at the GIO/ICI workshop back in 2003 and we then discussed how it would work, what to say, how to persuade the other musicians that it would work. This piece is exemplary of the idea that a piece of music is not necessarily about an autonomous idea, nor about an aesthetic priority but can acquire its identity from the

way it acts politically, how one persuades musicians to play it, how – when the musicians do play it – they deal with its implications. The value we saw in it was that any number of the previously worked out ideas and sections could be incorporated within this frame. But it would be up to individuals to work out when and where to play them. They could rely on listening, they could signal to the others involved or they could agree a plan in advance. But the overarching economy of the piece, that you only have 12 minutes of playing time within 60 minutes, and that you should to spend those minutes wisely, means that some players might opt out. In such a scenario everyone is in a position to negotiate with an even deal of the cards rather than it falling to those persons with the most prominent voice to decide how the performance is put together.

We played the piece in this way in rehearsal and a recording of this is included in the documentation (track 18). The discussion that followed was very revealing in that it did indeed focus on investments and the social economy of the group. People who had had little to do or say beforehand were vocal and enthusiastic. The interactive aspect of the piece was thought to be valuable. Sonic voices that had been absent until then were heard clearly throughout the piece, and the music was decidedly more playful. But there was dissatisfaction with the perception that the way the piece functioned made the previous work redundant, even although it could incorporate it should anyone desire that. Of course in the discussion the voice which had the most to lose, the one which consistently decided which section would come next and

judged the ideas that were suggested and so on was the one which vetoed the use of the piece.

I suppose this comes back to our recognition of the political dimension of the piece which, certainly in the situation for which it was conceived, was designed to destabilize certain hierarchies, to seek to dissolve some behavioural patterns but also to be openly hospitable to all the players and the musical ideas proposed throughout the collaborative process.

This is the effect the piece had and that is the good that it does. The form is open to anything except an authoritative voice. The process is entirely given over to forms of negotiation and individual game playing. And this is profoundly alienating to those who wish to 'deal the cards' as it were. What was interesting, although frustrating, was to watch the other musicians in the group move from positions of excitement about how the piece worked, towards their more established roles; the social order of the group congealed exactly as the piece we eventually played did, into a rigid structure with very little in the way of listening taking place within the music.

Miguel Carvalhais arranged to retrieve a copy of the recording of *12 in 60* from the engineer who recorded the whole process and thanks to this good fortune and attentiveness I can include it here. The piece has since been performed in Porto with a group of Portuguese musicians affiliated with the Cronica label, by the Contemporary Music Ensemble at Glasgow University and by the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra.

Recordings of each of these are included. The version from Porto (track 20) is, I think, less satisfactory for having a greater playing-to-not-playing ratio (20 in 60) and a slightly lacklustre ending. The ending is possibly the trickiest part of the piece since the players have to balance their material so that there is a sense of an ending happening and not just the impression of the music running out of steam. Strict time keeping helps deal with this. The other recordings by the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (track 21) and the two Contemporary Music Ensembles (tracks 19 and 20) reveal various musicians in various stages of coming to terms with the ramifications of the piece.

A few final reflections: What you play must be self sufficient because any interactive playing might be left hanging if the other player is following a strict time based structure, for example playing one minute of music between minute 7 and minute 9 (you presumably won't know this). Patterns tend to be effective in terms of revealing contrasts and sudden ruptures. Players who improvise as they might usually do and follow their intuition tend to run out of time very quickly and are unable to support the piece in its later stages, which is the responsibility of everyone to negotiate. There is no point in noodling or hoping someone will join in with what you do. You have to offer something substantial or you will just make it more difficult for the others.

## Other Piece for GIO

The premise of this piece is simple. Play in relation to someone you wouldn't ordinarily pay close attention to in the group. Rather than playing up a moral imperative this introduces potentially new aesthetic forms within an established group, providing the players take the task seriously. Another way to look at this is that each player is asked to look the other way. This is a call for critical reflection.

When I worked on this piece with the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra many players didn't like the implication that there were people they didn't often play in relation to. The idea that there might be habit formed favourites within their listening milieu upset some people. Perhaps this was just a matter of touching a raw nerve, discomfort arising from the musicians having to examine their motives in playing. To have to think about that sort of thing at all might have been simply unfamiliar. On the other hand there might be good reasons for not playing in close relation to some players.

It was very much designed for a specific group of players. I would only suggest playing it if the group in question had worked together reasonably often and had a fairly open approach to working together. Also the idea of a critical mass of responsiveness converging around a small number of players in an improvising ensemble can only really be examined within a large group, more than 8 or 9 for example.

The formal shift in the middle of the piece is there to introduce difference on a structural level: do one thing then do another. To give responsibility for knowing when to change to the players is another part of the game; perhaps they will change activity when they have lost interest in the other player, or when that relationship has ceased to offer motivation for playing. In any event the decision that such and such a point is the middle of the piece is far from neutral. While I have left the duration of the piece open ('as long as it takes') this is in fact a variable that can be used to stretch the piece both in terms of how the musicians relate to each other and in terms of time. If the decision is taken to make the piece last two hours the balance of responsibility becomes quite different. People are now in a situation where not playing can be understood as a positive, to play in relation to someone doesn't explicitly mean 'play' but to be in relation to their playing. If you have only one formal task to perform over one hour (playing in relation to just one other) then you have to do it well, you might be more exposed, you could have to work a lot harder to explore the nuances and proportional weight of each sound. Imitative back-and-forth improvisation will very quickly run out of momentum and substance (as it often does). Taken seriously this could produce extraordinary results or a miserable two hours of tedium. That's why it's interesting.

Documentation for this piece is on track 23.

## Monster Parts

This is a simple looking piece which is difficult to explain in a hurry. The pairs were suggested to me by a list that came up during an email exchange with a friend which proposed a series of monstrous affinities. It's a piece that asks musicians to think about the relationships: between each other, between different kinds of sounds, or sonic materials. Players are asked to associate a particular animal/monster with a sound coming from another player, to align what they do sonically with a bear for one reason or another – their reason is not particularly important. It could be for any reason at all, but the relationship between what they themselves then play and the bear sound must reflect the relationship between a bear and an elephant, somehow. Getting started is awkward but once things get going the bear / elephant combination can be realized quite easily. The goal of the piece is to concentrate on difference rather than similarity. As an exercise this encourages ways of producing difference within the musical texture while grounding that difference in the diverse identities at play within the music.

The drawings are supplemental to the activity detailed above. There is no need to have the score in front of you when you are playing the piece, provided each player bears in mind the kinds of difference articulated by the pairs of drawings: differences of proportion, texture, origin, environment, etc. The bear and the elephant are both large mammals with big feet, interesting ears and interesting foraging behaviour. But

the bear is furrer than the elephant, has no trunk, is smaller, eats meat as well as everything else and can climb trees. An elephant can choose to push a tree over if it needs to access the top branches. These are the kind of things the piece invites players to dwell on. The drawings are definitely not to be interpreted in their own right since they do not do a good job of articulating these differences. Nor should they lead to anyone being inspired. Animal noises are of course forbidden.

The piece also asks performers to engage in a critical process that introduces distance between the idea and the act of playing. The performer has to in some sense forget the willed side of what they are playing and concentrate on its relational aspect; how what they play is different to another sound. This works like a strategy of negation, avoiding a positive statement or instruction in favour of a conceptual movement. The piece introduces doubt.

Formally it is difficult to predict a sameness of structure for the piece in any event of its being performed. On two occasions when the piece has been played the music fell into three discreet sections in accord with the three pairs of animals/monsters. On a third occasion, not documented, these sections dissolved into one another. Either of these outcomes is acceptable.

The humorous drawings belie a more serious project within the music which is to find or present ways of relating to other musicians in a largely improvised forum where the relationship does not fall to an imitative relation, to avoid a relationship which is

articulated through sameness. I want to bring about ways of relating to other musicians durationally or attentively or otherwise that are based on bearing out the encounter with that musician by concentrating on their otherness, the difference of their music.

Documentation of the piece can be found on track 24.

## Apertures

*A piece for sitting by the window thinking about how to use time constructively in a strange city where any work done is at the expense of encountering the city in its strangeness. For George Murray*

Using a very small harmonica or trombone using only the lowest and highest notes.

When a bird comes to the balcony to drink from the plant pot trays or to eat bugs, play a note for the duration of the visit. If you need to take an extra breath do so and begin to play again with considered poise. The sounds should be even in dynamic and envelope. A pulse may be articulated but should be steady and gentle. On no account should bird song be imitated in any way.

The attempt to make even and gentle sounds might be frustrated by the simplicity of the instrument. This is not a flaw in the piece: allow breaks and emergent sounds which result from the difficulty of control to happen but don't force them. Let the sounds relate to sounds from outside by chance rather than design.

or / and

Play a note, as above (repeat as resired with appropriate silences between notes), so that a bird will come and drink from the plant pot trays or eat bugs.

Duration: as long as it takes.

N Davidson Martin Monitz, Lisbon December 2008

## Apertures Commentary

This piece first came about in Lisbon, in December of 2008 while I was living in the Martim Moniz area of the city centre. This part of the city is where drugs are sold, where the immigrant populations tend to congregate and where some of the large central hotels are located. I was staying in an apartment on some way up a staircase leading from Martim Moniz (a square come roundabout) up to the castle which sits between Graça and the city centre. As the subtitle explains the piece has its origins in the work of finding a way to adjust to living in a different place. You can go out and explore or do this sort of thing, compose something and sit listening. I had already gone out, walked around and explored and yet this piece has something of both options about it.

Like *Tintinambulatory* it opens up a field of listening and establishes its form within this field. The piece has multiple frames, the window frame, the time frame of animals coming and going, the time frame of the duration of the piece, the spatial frame, the internal time frames created by the iteration of the notes played, the scope of the microphone in documenting the sounds, the sonic field within which the recording takes place. Of course it needn't be recorded but the evidence here confirms that it has been so I write about that as well.

Two recordings exist of the piece, one made in Lisbon in December 2008 (track 16) by myself playing a small harmonica and one in Glasgow March 2009 played by

George Murray on the trombone (track 17). These are examples of the rough outline of the piece, it's habitat, but I don't think either are exemplary. They don't give a proper instance of the piece doing its job. Having performed it a few times myself and worked with another musician on a further version I am inclined to suggest that future performances be planned as far as duration is concerned, for example deciding on where to play and then setting aside a given time, for example an hour or two in the evening in which to play. You can perhaps choose a more or less likely place for the seduction or observation to take place and this will affect how long the piece lasts or how long it needs.

## Forms 14

### 14 a

*6<sup>th</sup> May 2010*

*Sculptor: do you think a lot about death?*

*Composer: yes*

### 14 b

Some references:

- Ana Mendieta
- Arte Povera
- Christian Wolff: Text Pieces
- John Berger – The Shape of Pocket
- John Cage
- Sophie Calle: Appointment with Sigmund Freud
- Pauline Oliveros
- Cy Twombly
- Russell Hobban: The Lion of Jaquin Boaz and Boaz Jaquin
- Emmanuel Levinas: Totality and Infinity / Otherwise than Being
- Jean Francois Lyotard: Just Gaming
- Jaques Derrida: Signature Event Context
- Helene Cixous: Steps on the Ladder of Writing
- Donald Barthelme
- Paul Celan
- Jose Saramago

## Cy Twombley: Works on Paper by Roland Barthes

Substituting the words *improvisation*, *music* and *composer* in excerpts from the above essay produces the following imperfect reflections on improvisation:

### Paraphrase 1



(Barthes

1986:160)

### Paraphrase 2



(1986: 164)

### Paraphrase 3



(1986: 172)

# On Gesture

*after Cy Twombly*

For Peter Nicholson

utter the word 'virgil' once during an improvisation.

[rather than improvise as usual play otherwise, play blind and while still improvising  
test what is unwilled in your playing]

## On Gesture Commentary



This piece caught me by surprise. I was thinking again about the Roland Barthes essay on Cy Twombly's drawings. It had occurred to me in the past that there was a relationship, a resonance between a kind of calligraphy and the gesture of improvisation, something about the way of handling the brush or tool that supports an excess, goes beyond the conveying of the text or a sound and returns out attention to the physicality of the writer / player and their relationship of touch with their activity. String instruments are very much bound up with touch, being a guitarist I am more likely to come up with a notion of calligraphy being related to my practice than say, a saxophonist might. I would write about the hand in improvisation on the hinterland of where action and intention merge with sensory feedback and the response of the string, with the acoustic field of impression where all these converge in music.

This piece is a response to that fascination. Cy Twombly's writing in his drawings and paintings, his choice of words from classical mythology and literature would seem to be operating in a similar manner. And they are set within a clear frame. I have taken one of Twombly's drawn words from the painting *Virgil* (1973) and given it as a single word to be spoken within an improvisation. It acts as an internal frame on which the piece hangs and as a tiny moment framed by the sounds around it. This back and forth of frame and interior is a kind of emblem of the aporia of improvisation.

Frames conceived as containers is one way of thinking about the concept of a frame. How does one single utterance serve to frame an event of music of indefinite length simply by falling within the context of music? We are often caught unawares between expectations of music and memories of music. But I know in advance that whatever comes before the utterance of the word will be altered when the word is spoken, and whatever follows will be transformed as well, not in material terms but as an echo of an instance of speech which is not resolved in terms of its meaning within the time frame of the piece. The word does not function as meaning, it doesn't communicate as such, partly because it is a name but also because the act of speech neither addresses the music around it directly nor is it directed towards the audience. It hangs like a plucked sound. In the context of Peter Nicholson's performance (track 15) it is spoken with the same tactile quality of touch given to the cello sounds made by the hands. This is the last piece in the folio because it is a way out, it isn't framed on the outside.

## Small Light Pieces

*Published in Gnommero 2010*

“Bagatelle” is not the name of a musical form but, rather, is the title for small, light pieces, usually for keyboard. Although François Couperin had used *Les Bagatelles* as the title for one of his harpsichord pieces, the first use of the word as a generic description was by Beethoven, in his Op. 33 set. (The two later sets, Op. 119 and 126, were titled by the composer, in German, “Kleinigkeiten”, which means about the same thing; the publisher called them “Bagatelles” anyway).” – Leslie Gerber; from the notes to the LP of Beethoven’s *Bagatelles* Op. 33 and 126 played by Glenn Gould CBS 1975

Among her small, light pieces are the *Dunnock* and *Cirl Bunting*. Though extant as creatures in their own right, her rendering of them in resin, flint and torn-paper stands as an urgent provocation to nature. So much so that “*Dunnock*” has subsequently become the generic term for a small flint, resin and torn-paper constructions of a darker hue, and “*Cirl Bunting*” the generic term for the same materials rendered in yellow hues. *Dunnocks* and *Cirl Buntings* have largely been forgotten as people take increasingly greater delight in these small light pieces.

## Appendix: Audio Documentation

A minimum of audio processing has been applied to the recordings. A small amount of compression and EQ has been added to give the recordings adequate presence.

Edits have been made to trim the beginnings and endings of pieces.

Caveats:

There is a mobile phone signal in the recording of Monster Parts that cannot be removed without disrupting the integrity of the performance (the only extant recording of the piece).

It is not necessary to listen to every recording of every piece. An asterisk denotes where some performances are more successful than others, by which I mean that they reveal the formal workings of the piece, are well played in terms of intonation and so on. Other recordings of the pieces are included for comparative evaluation and to indicate the development of a piece over time.

Approximate durations are included.

### **Performers**

GB: George Burt – acoustic guitar

AC: Aileen Campbell - voice

ND: Neil Davidson – acoustic guitar / harmonica

UM: Una MacGlone – double bass

GM: George Murray

PN: Peter Nicholson – cello

AV: Aby Vulliamy – viola

**GIO: Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra**

(a)

Stuart Brown – percussion

George Burt – electric guitar

Aileen Campbell - voice

Neil Davidson – acoustic guitar

Nicky MacDonald – melodica and voice

Raymond MacDonald – alto saxophone

Nicky Moran – viola

George Murray – trombone

Peter Nicholson – cello and voice

Matthew Studdert Kennedy – flute

Armin Sturm – double bass

(b)

George Burt – electric guitar

Aileen Campbell – voice

Neil Davidson – acoustic guitar

Chris Heinrichs - violin

Raymond MacDonald – alto saxophone

Nicole McNeilly - trombone

George Murray – trombone

Peter Nicholson – cello and voice

Emma Roche – flute

Gerri Rossi – electric piano

Armin Sturm – double bass

**CME: Contemporary Music Ensemble 2008 / 2009**

Sam Clark – piano (left)

Michael Shearer – tenor sax

Tibbie MacIntyre – violin

Lauren Till – flute

Jemma Knox – percussion

Amy Donnellan – piano (right)

**MIO: Munich Instant Orchestra 2008**

Miguel Carvalais – laptop

Neil Davidson – electric guitar

Heinz Friedl – clarinet

Margarita Holzbauer – cello

Rich Laughlin – trumpet

Harald Lillmeyer– electric guitar

Una MacGlone – double bass

Ulrich Müller – electric guitar

Irmela Nolte – flute

Christoph Reiserer – soprano saxophone, clarinet

Sigi Rössert – bass and electronics

Thomas Simmerl – percussion

Wolfram Winkel – percussion

Markus Muench – violin

Tobias Weber – viola

Leo Gmelch – tuba

### **NDE: Natal Dos Experimentais**

Gustavo Costa – percussion

Jonathan Uliel – zither & electronics

Miguel Cardoso – laptop & tenor sax

Miguel Carvalhais – laptop

Neil Davidson – acoustic guitar

Pedro Almeida – electric guitar and laptop

Pedro Tudela – laptop

The Beautiful Schizophonic – laptop

Vitor Joaquim – laptop

Autodigest – laptop

## Disc 1

### Early Pieces

#### String Quartet:

- |                                   |                             |             |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| 1. String Quartet 21              | GB, UM, PN, AV              | 7/3/2009    |
| 2. String Quartet Evening Version | GB, UM, PN, AV              | 7/3/2009    |
| 3. String Quartet Switch Version  | GB, UM, PN, AV, ND (switch) | 7/3/2009    |
| 4. String Quartet Solo Guitar     | ND                          | 10/3/2009 * |

#### Swifan:

- |                                  |    |              |
|----------------------------------|----|--------------|
| 5. For Spain 2008                | ND | June 2008    |
| 6. Rachmaninoff Solo Lisbon 2008 | ND | January 2008 |
| 7. Rachmaninoff Solo Lisbon 2008 | ND | 27/1/2008    |

(more documentation of Stirling performance to follow)

- |                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| 8. Beethoven Stirling    | ND |
| 9. Rachmaninov Stirling  | ND |
| 10. Rachmaninov Stirling | ND |
| 11. Schubert Stirling    | ND |

#### Tintimambulatory

- |                              |        |           |
|------------------------------|--------|-----------|
| 12. Upper Bell Tower Glasgow | AC, ND | 14/2/2008 |
| 13. Lower Bell Tower Glasgow | AC, ND | 14/2/2008 |

14. Stirling Tintinambulatory	ND	28/5/2009 *
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### **Late Pieces**

15. <u>On Gesture</u>	PN	11/2/2009 *
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### Apertures

16. Apertures Lisbon	ND	December 2009 *
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17. Apertures Leslie Street	GM	10/3/2009
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## Disc 2

### **Pieces for Large Ensemble**

#### 12 in 60

18. 12 in 60 Munich	MIO	29/9/2008 *
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19. 9 in 30 CME	CME	26/11/2008
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20. 20 in 60 Porto	NDE	21/12/2008
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21. 6 in 20 GIO	GIO (b)	6/5/2009
22. <u>Herrschaftsgebiete</u>	CME	26/11/2008 *
23. <u>Other Piece for GIO</u>	GIO (a)	17/2/2009 *
24. <u>Monster Parts</u>	GIO (a)	17/2/2009 *

All tracks recorded mixed and mastered by Neil Davidson except:

12 in 60 Munich – recorded by Wolfgang Obrecht, mixed and mastered by Miguel

Carvalais – and Natal Dos Experimentais – recorded and mixed by Miguel Carvalais.

### **Analysis**

The recordings of the pieces presented here represent the majority of cases where these pieces have been played and performed both in rehearsal and in performance before an audience. There is an obvious contradiction between a folio of compositions that are concerned with the event of music, the relation between performers and the form in which the documentation of those pieces appear. In one sense an audio recording of a piece objectifies it, fixes it in one single version that closes the piece off from response.

This is largely inescapable. The options for documenting the pieces are limited to various capturing media such as photography, various formats of audio recording, video and film. To use testimony would be a way to get around these problems by presenting multiple perspectives on the event of music, asking various parties to write about what happened giving as much detail as they could. But I am probably not the only one who finds this uneconomical in terms of time and resources. I would like to explore this process further, perhaps as a piece in its own right. Most of these recordings took place with no audience, or a very limited one. I did make some interviews with people who were involved at various stages but these did not bring forth significant insights or particularly persuasive thoughts about the events of music in question. They certainly were not sufficient to being to presence and idea of what happened in the music, were not representative of the music which, It's fair to say, would take a great deal of skill in writing or speaking. It will always come down to representation. That is what the recordings are and do not substitute the experience of those who took part in the performances whether they were performers or members of the audience.

I have tried to resolve this by presenting multiple recordings of the same pieces, showing their development over time and showing the difference between versions as much as any one piece's 'identity'. The more versions of a piece I present the more decisions there are to make on the part of the listener, the more routes there are through the folio. This in turn reflects the participatory role of the listener in the event of music as well, their involvement in listening to one aspect, then another, focusing

on particulars or the general, by their attention showing that the music matters, that the listening relation can be constituted in shared values.

As historical recordings of composed music and pre 60s jazz fall out of copyright protection we find ourselves with easy access to vast numbers of performances of the same pieces or works. A jazz standard or a string quartet can find itself represented in so many diverse formats and interpretations that we might wonder where the limits of its identity lie. One of the perhaps ironic side effects of the rampant consumerism of recorded media is that the works are by default presented as multiple, always taking a different route. What is clear at this point in time is that the recording of music does not 'fix' it at all but instantiates difference by dint of the way it is sold, always in comparison to another recording or in relation to the absence of any other recordings.

We might ask about the repeatable side of the recorded music document, that one can listen to it so many times that it congeals into familiarity. Which is the best instance of its audition? Is it the first time or the most practiced time (on the part of the listener, repetition is part of practicing an instrument and also, so it seems, listening)? But which first time?

The context of listening is as important as the content, as the thing listened to: if we can decide what that thing is. Just because the listener is not 'performing' in the conventional sense does not undermine this relationship. All of this points back to

experience. If recordings of music remind us of the value of experience of music then they can't be all bad.

## Forms 12

People I played with during the period of working on this thesis:

Ali Robertson  
Malcy Duff  
Jez Riley French  
Michel Doneda  
Tatsuya Nakatani  
Raymond MacDonald  
Una MacGlone  
Peter Nicholson  
LIO  
Munich Instant Orchestra  
Siozic Lebart  
Nusch Werkowska  
Ernesto Rodrigues  
Guilherme Rodrigues  
Hernani Faustino  
Nobuyasu Furuya  
Emma Roche  
Nick Fells  
Radu Malfatti  
Michael Pisaro  
Toshimaru Nakamura  
Eva Marie Huben  
Klaus Filip  
Seymour Wright  
Toshiyuki Kobayashi  
Taku Unami  
Nikos Veliotis  
Aileen Campbell  
Jerome Noetinger  
Jean Phillip Gross  
Heddy Boubaker  
Ben Knight  
Hannah Ellul  
Nicole McNeilly  
Liene Rozite  
Michael Shearer  
Chris Heinrichs  
George Lewis

Satoko Fujii  
Natsuki Tamura  
Noritaka Tanaka  
Tom Bancroft  
George Burt  
George Lyle  
Cr:acc Ensemble  
Muscletusk  
Armin Sturm  
Stuart Brown  
Rick Bamford  
John Burgess  
Goerge Murray  
Nikki Moran  
Lin Zang  
George Burt  
Dario Fariello  
Filippo Giuffrè  
Antonio Antonio D'Intino  
Fritz Welch  
Michael Francis Duch  
Tony Kluffen  
Nicole McNeilly  
Liene Rozite  
Michael Shearer  
Nicolas Desmarchelier  
Wade Matthews  
Arild Vange  
Bily Letford

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