

# Mapping contemporary music : four positions

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# Mapping Contemporary Music: Four Positions

Matthew Shlomowitz

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## WHERE WE ARE NOW

As New Music *today* extends and contests where it was *before*, I will begin by articulating two late twentieth century positions and consider them from our current perspective.

## POSITION 1: CRITICAL THEORY

My 1990s education was based on studying works from the twentieth century classical tradition, most of which were atonal, modernist and concerned with internal, rather than referential, matters. We studied this music to learn the techniques, but there was also an assumption that this work had value because it exemplified the aesthetics of critical composition as developed from the Frankfurt School of philosophy, and especially Adorno. Adorno believed that for music to achieve aesthetic authenticity it must upset convention and resist governing norms. And this was fundamental to his underlying belief that works of art can change consciousness and in turn change reality. We couldn't play our music to our parents or high school friends because it was so ugly and devoid of perceptible patterns, but we believed in the higher calling that music that breaks with routine in the aesthetic realm proposes the same for the social and political realms. Many of us have lost confidence in this position today. Firstly, this position simply established new conventions and routines; Adorno was indeed one of the first to comment that the new music was quickly growing old. Secondly, these values now seem elitist, dogmatic and paternalistic. And thirdly, given the insularity of new music, it is hard to see evidence that the music was achieving these aims. I think instrumental music can lead us to hear differently, but I have less confidence in the assertion that it can lead one to think differently, and less again in the notion that it can be an agent for social or political change.

## POSITION 2: POSTMODERNISM

Jonathan Kramer argues that the term «postmodern music» is used to cover two very different positions: (1) the reactionary composers who retreated to the «golden ages of classicism and romanticism»; and (2) the innovative composers that broke down barriers between high and low art and embraced pluralism. Kramer believed that the former should instead be called anti-modernism, as this conservative stance is simply a retreat to the pre-modern rather than postmodern. He reserved the term postmodernism for the radical work that contested the value system of both modernist and pre-modernist music. Postmodernism challenged the assumption of unity through avoiding a totalizing musical language such as tonality or serialism. And it challenged the romantic notions of artistic originality that persisted through modernism. In postmodernism, the creative act is no longer regarded as an autonomous act, but rather is seen as part of the cultural world. This is exemplified by the contrast between historical and postmodern approaches to quotation. In the historical approach – for instance, the Bach chorale setting in Berg's *Violin Concerto* – quotations are heard as distinct from the 'normal' music of the composition, whereas in the postmodern approach *all* of the music may be quotation. This revolution shaped the context for much music making today, but given that Berio's *Sinfonia* was written fifty years ago, those battles don't have the same significance any more. To simply replicate postmodern dictates now would be to do what artist Andrea Fraser calls «cultural reproduction», a term she contrasts with art. Those of us who hold both a postmodern sensibility and a desire to innovate need to worry about this potential contradiction.

I will now explore two dominant themes that I see in new music of the past decade.



*Expanded Sonic Practice: Scene from the opera Electric Dreams by Matthew Shlomowitz.* © Johannes Gellner

### POSITION 3: MATERIALISM

The rejection of cultural theory is reflected in the recent return to materialism across academic and artistic disciplines. In our field, music philosopher Christopher Cox has argued that cultural and aesthetic theory has been dominated by a set of approaches (e.g. semiotics, poststructuralism, deconstructionism) that can be grouped together as «cultural theory» because they all view the world in the same way: they are all based on the belief that we understand reality symbolically. Drawing on Deleuze, Cox advocates for a shift away from thinking of symbols and representations as the main way of understanding sonic art, and towards a focus on the material reality of sound. This way of thinking is not new. It reflects the aesthetics of significant twentieth century composers, such as Cage, Schaeffer, Oliveros, Lucier, Branca and Radigue. Whilst this is a disparate list from other perspectives, broadly speaking each offered musical experiences where the attention was directed towards the sounding shape, and the act of listening, rather than music as expression, representation, signification, or cultural engagement. In New Music, reflecting the broader rise of materialism, this position has become one central trend of the past decade. I welcome that much recent work with a material focus does not follow a position I call «pigeon aesthetics» (even the most mundane sound can be beautiful), but rather is dedicated to the pursuit of creating distinctive, spectacular and sensual sounding shapes.

### POSITION 4: EXPANDED SONIC PRACTICE

The echo of Deleuze in music and beyond over the past decade has been concurrent with the echo of Derrida. In his 2009 book *In the Blink of an Ear*, Seth Kim-Cohen draws on Derrida to advocate for an 'expanded sonic practice'.<sup>1</sup> In 1981, art philosopher Arthur C. Danto<sup>2</sup> argued that titles are ontologically part of the work, not an appendage to it, because titles shape how the work is experienced.

In Kim-Cohen, the conception of the work expands further to include other aspects that have been typically thought of as outside the work. This includes the subjectivity of the spectator, as shaped by social, political, gender, class and racial experience; the reception history of the work; and the context in which the work is encountered. In one direction, the boundary of the work expands to include the performer's haircut, and in another, to include what each spectator brings to the experience.

The boundaries of the musical work have also expanded in much twentieth century composition. Many recent pieces include aspects such as physical action, lighting, image and theatrical approaches to expand the possibilities of concert hall work beyond the purely sonic. There are important twentieth century antecedents (e.g. works by Kagel, Globokar and the Fluxus group), but these concerns have now become commonplace. Such work, by definition, takes a different focus to the materiality of sound orientated composers discussed

before. This work is concerned with subjectivity, signification and cultural engagement. This shift is reflected in Jennifer Walshe's much-discussed New Discipline manifesto, and the *Music in the Expanded Field* composition workshop by Marko Ciciliani hosted at Darmstadt in 2016. Walshe writes: «In performance, these are works in which the ear, the eye and the brain are expected to be active and engaged. Works in which we understand that there are people on the stage, and that these people are/have bodies.»<sup>3</sup> The manifesto is not a call for *all* composers to think beyond the sonic, but rather a call for those who are to become more rigorous – more disciplined – in dealing with these additional elements.

Such work elevates the role of sound in audiovisual work, and we can hope that extensions of musical approach into other domains meaningfully contribute to theatrical practice by proposing new models and focuses. By expanding the skill sets of musicians, it is also developed new and spectacular forms of interdisciplinary performance virtuosity.

Within the expanded field, a subtrend has been the rise of composers taking part in performances of their own work. In a recent article, «Composers on Stage»<sup>4</sup>, Sanne Krogh Groth argues that this phenomenon merges the traditions of Western art music with performance and live art aesthetics. She outlines a number of motivations for such work: staging the score; staging the auteur; a critique of the bourgeois concert institution; and a critique of the status of the romantic conception of the composer. She also argues that this work challenges new music conventions, and especially the supremacy of the score. As while the sounds and aesthetic concerns of twentieth century music grew ever more detached from the classical tradition, the score-centered paradigm persisted. Groth suggests that these assumptions «are still present but ... are now ripe for renegotiation». Also ripe for renegotiation is the relationship between composers and performers, with works increasingly coming into being through

collaboration that engage the creative and technical skills of performers, and in turn contest the old *performer as conduit* model and hierarchies.

I have outlined two positions that I think serve as central reference points in new music of the past decade: (1) the object-oriented work that focuses on the materiality of sound; and (2) those works concerned with subjectivity, signification and cultural engagement, often through extending the scope of work beyond the sonic. These two positions, of course, do not account for the whole reality, but I think they are important and provide useful frameworks for the discussion.

As I now transition the focus of this talk from *where we are* to *where I am*, I will first locate myself within these frameworks: I am a type 2 composer. I am a type 2 person! I have always gotten more out of René Magritte and Roy Lichtenstein than Jackson Pollock or Agnes Martin. I am attracted to the relational and concrete; I generally struggle with the abstract and poetic. I don't mean this dogmatically. I want to be open to everything. With Plus Minus we programme other stuff, and I have had totally magical experiences with music and sound art that focuses on the material. But, in the end, when it comes to the work I want to make, I have a type 2 sensibility. So, in the past decade, it has been natural for me to want to be a part of the expanded field trajectories I outlined before.


## WHERE I AM NOW

OPEN SCORES are a model for making music, which can be defined as collaboration between performers and an incomplete score. That is, open score works propose a collaborative model where performers determine key elements in fashioning their version of a piece. Open works are literally «unfinished»: the author hands them on to the performer more or less like components of a construction kit. The performers

*Crotchet = 45 (metronomic)*

**[1]**

**Performer 1:**     ||| / A B C D E D C B + / |||  
**Performer 2:**     ||| / A B C D E D C B + / |||

x2 

**P1:** A B C D | D C B + | A B C C | B + A B |  
**P2:** A B C D | E D C B | + A B C | D E D C |

**P1:** B + A + | A + A + | A + A + | A + A + |  
**P2:** B + A B | C D D C | B + A B | C C B + |

**P1:** A + A + | A + ||| / A + + + | A\* + A\* + A\* / |||  
**M:** A B B + | A + ||| / A + + + | A\* + A\* + A\* / |||

x3

*The score as a construction kit: First movement from Letter Piece 2: Assam, Buchanan, Chelsea, Dalmatian and Egypt (2008) by Matthew Shlomowitz.*

make the work with the composer, with the score. Open scores are not communicated with conventional stave notation. They can't be since stave notation is based on the idea of a completed score.

Performances of theatricalised concert work often have an embarrassing «high school drama club» quality. I would to call this the «Kagel Problem». Sometimes the issue is that the notion of theatre is naive and undeveloped, but the issue I want to focus on is that the work often unrealistically calls for an idealised performer that is an excellent musician with substantial acting skills. For example, Kagel's *Atem* involves a theatrical scenario, where a solo wind player plays the role of a retired musician obsessively repairing his instrument whilst searching for the musical phrase that will free him forever. In the past decade composers have taken a more cautious approach to extending the skill sets of musicians. In general, work has steered away from asking musicians to play character roles and towards a conception of the performer as automaton.

It seems to me that a decade ago the automaton approach was a good way to open up composition to aspects such as physical movement. It allowed composers to pragmatically expand typically compositional ways of thinking and present musicians with parts that play to musical strengths, whilst expanding the scope into the non-musical. For example, reading a score, working with and against a beat, taking a pretty minimal approach (e.g. learning a limited number of actions). A decade later we are in a different place: composers and performers have developed new knowledge and skill sets. One critique of the automaton approach, however, is that it makes performers faceless, denies the specificity of their body and subjectivity. I expect the work that continues in this direction to deal with this issue.

*Popular Contexts* is a series of works combining instrumental music with identifiable recorded sound. The work explores ways in which real-world sound constructs contextual frames for instrumental music, and vice versa.

This work fits in with the trend that Harry Lehmann has termed «Relational Music»: music that sets up concrete relationships with aspects of the external world.<sup>5</sup> For Lehmann, Relational Music seems to refer to work that makes relationships through engaging another medium (video, movement, text). I think purely sonic works – and here I am excluding spoken language from the sonic realm – can also be relational when they involve recognizable recordings. Such recordings engage the world when those recordings are not only heard for their sonic or musical qualities, but also for the information they convey. A recording of someone climbing stairs conveys similar information to a textual description or visual depiction of someone climbing stairs. Likewise, we know that images of war combined with *tragic* music will be perceived differently to the same visual sequence combined with a *polka*, and I think a similar kind of contrast would be achieved by coupling a recording of war sound with *tragic* music as opposed to a *polka*. Each medium communicates in different ways, but my point is simply that recognizable-recorded sound can engage



*How to resolve the Kagel Problem? Mark Knoop and Tom Pauwels performing a Letter Piece by Matthew Shlomowitz. © no credit*

the real world just as powerfully as textual and visual means.

I want my work to also engage Schaeffer's third mode of listening, 'reduced listening': the intentional process of directing our attention towards appreciating the sounding shape and ignoring any meaning sounds might contain. This mode of listening is at the heart of work that focuses on the materiality of sound. But it is of course possible to make works that engage with both the materiality and referential. I love work that encompasses both, such as Ablinger's *Voices and Piano*, where perception shifts between attending to the semantic, the personality of the recorded voice, and the sounding shape. Walshe's *Dordán* is on one hand a conceptual work that constructs a fictional historical Irish Dada work ostensibly about drones, whilst also offering the type of reduced listening experience drones are ripe to offer. And James Saunders' recent instruction-based scores create performance situations that draw attention to the real time decision-making psychology of performers negotiating a group context, whilst also offering sonic aesthetic pleasure.

1 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, The Continuum, New York, 2009.

2 Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1981.

3 Jennifer Walshe, «*The New Discipline*», <http://www.borealisfestival.no/2016/the-new-discipline-4/>, 26.10.2017.

4 Susanne Krogh Groth, «*Composers on Stage: Ambiguous authorship in contemporary music performance.*» in *Contemporary Music Review*, 36, 2017, pp. 686-705.

5 See Harry Lehmann, *Die digitale Revolution der Musik – Eine Musikphilosophie*, Schott Verlag, Mainz, 2012.