

The creative mission: on the coincidences of experimental music, alternative notation and non-representational art

The most frequent question in view of alternative notation is always: what do we need it for, since we already have a notation system that has been working very well for many centuries. Effectively the notation we have works very well with an enclosed area of music, and that is basically modal music. With chromaticism our notation system already runs up against its limits, since the concept of alteration does not exist in twelvtone-composition; i.e. the tone indicated as either C# or Db, is actually an autonomous tone. However the autonomy of the twelve tones can never be adequately represented in conventional notation. It is probably due to that conflict, that serial music could never prevail on a broad level. In accordance with our notation system, the vast majority of contemporary music is still modal. Music that breaks with this convention is often labeled "experimental music".

A composer does not only have to think in sounds, but also in signs. If his imagination for some reason resists a conventional notation, he has to find alternative ways to bring it to paper. Alternative notation occurs in form of graphic designs, diagrams or verbal instructions. In addition to that it frequently meets with **a musical perception, that is not primarily focussed on output, but rather on the conditions of music playing itself.**

Conventional notation, in sheets, letters or tabulature, is always associated with the idea of musical progression displayed in parameters, i.e. more or less precise units of oscillation frequency, duration and volume. Alternative notation by contrast relates primarily to those aspects of music playing, that can not be displayed in parameters. Those are on the one hand the spontaneous affects of improvisation, on the other all those phenomena whose pitchstructure is indefinite, respectively appears irrelevant in the musical context. Traditional notation always refers to the sounding result, whereas alternative notation may also refer to the way sounds are generated. E.g. in his composition "Imaginary landscape No.4", for 12 radios, 24 performers and conductor, John Cage gives precise information about how to controll the radios, yet the sounding result remains unforeseeable.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRa0j EIth0>

Since the 1960s, alternative notation frequently appears in scores of New Music (with Cage, Kagel, Penderecki, Lachenmann, Schnebel, etc.). Due to the discovery of everyday sounds as musical material, involving an extended concept of "timbre", the musical relevance of pitch relations, and thereby the supremacy of sheet music as the universally valid form of notation, relativises radically. Increasingly complex structures, fusions of sound and noise masses, can no longer be simply displayed in sheets. Additional specifications of the sound character, or instructions for sound generation, in verbal or graphic forms become inevitable.

Simultaneously the significance of the score and its resulting power relation between the composer and the interpreter is generally negotiated.

An increasing number of composers feel discomfited in view of a completely elaborated music of the serial manner, that refuses any possibility for the interpreter to interfere. In some cases this leads to open forms of notation, which provide possibilities of choice, and thereby challenge the player to self responsible creation. We speak of experimental music, because the performance of those pieces leads to unpredictable results. The score thereby defines the frame conditions for an indeterminate progression.

In conversation with the musicologist Heinz Klaus Metzger, in 1964, the composer Christian Wolff illuminates the reasons for a preoccupation with indeterminate elements:

Individual motives doubtless vary. There may not be any. My own at first were practical. It was quicker to write that way, leaving various aspects of the sound free, especially after the labourious notation of details which had so preoccupied one before. Then, the greater freedom made performance more convenient, if not livelier for the performers. They could do more than perform as more or less adequate machines of reproduction.

The graphic score "Treatise", by Cornelius Cardew, written between 1963 and 1967, provides 193 pages of abstract graphic designs. With the title, Cardew refers to Ludwig Wittgensteins "Tractatus logico philosophicus", which is merely an investigation of the borders of language, particularly preventing metaphysical content. "Treatise" can be understood as a kind of linguistic approach to musical improvisation in form of graphic designs, that do not indicate specific musical content, but rather provide a differentiation of linear proportions, that the improvising musician is invited to respond to in whatever way he deems appropriate. However as soon as he gets involved in it, he will be forced to self responsible decisions, that will always bind him for the further course of the play: i.e. two identical signs must not be interpreted differently, or vice versa one and the same sound should not apply to two different signs. Furthermore it may seem natural to interpret two similar signs as variations of the same basic sound. With each sign or shape requiring a decision for a specific soundcharacter, the score indirectly provides a musical structure.

Cardew emphasizes in his "Treatise handbook" (1971):

the score must govern the music. It must have authority, and not merely be an arbitrary jumping-off point for improvisation.

(projection: Treatise, sound file)

In his essay "towards an ethics of improvisation" he further explains: Ideally such music should be played by a collection of musical innocents; but in a culture where musical education is so widespread (at least among musicians) and getting more and more so, such innocents are extremely hard to find. Treatise attempts to locate such musical innocents wherever they survive, by posing a notation that does not specifically *demand* an ability to read music. On the other hand, the score suffers from the fact that it *does* demand a certain facility in reading graphics, ie a visual education. Now 90% of musicians are visual innocents and ignoramuses, and ironically this exacerbates the situation, since their expression or interpretation of the score is to be audible rather than visible. Mathematicians and graphic artists find the score easier to read than musicians; they get more from it. But of course

mathematicians and graphic artists do not generally have sufficient control of sound-media to produce "sublime" musical performances. My most rewarding experiences with Treatise have come through people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians, ie play music to the full capacity of their beings. Occasionally in jazz one finds a musician who meets all these stringent requirements; but even there it is extremely rare.

The increasing lack of confidence in conventional notation however follows a series of breaks with tradition in the music of the 20th century. The abandonment from functional harmony and rhythm, the opening of the timbre spectrum towards noise, and the suspension of systematic regulation by employing aleatoric procedures, finally disembody in a situation of **unconditionality**. Apart from the physical limits of performability and audibility, music is no longer constricted by whatsoever external borders, whether regarding form, material or meaning. The composer is offered unlimited freedom of choice in his means of expression, whereby his field of competence likewise opens up to the unlimited. He may apply commodities, household devices or toys as sound sources, or even construct his own instruments. He may invent new scales, new tone-systems, new forms of notation or involve external media. As a result of his own creative work, he himself defines his limits, be that within or beyond the realm of whatever we refer to as "music". To the degree his field of competence is shifted towards precompositional definition of leeways and rules, the literal "composition": the assembling of preformed materials and the detailed embellishment of the "piece", is becoming an aspect of interpretation. The composer no longer conceives himself as a poet of tones, but rather as an inventor of music, a creator of a musical genre, or initiator of an open-resulted process. The specific "piece" does not claim to be a self-contained "work". In the ideal case it becomes a paradigm, for a new perception of music, or even a new form of art, beyond "music". At least that is what the term 'New music' initially implies.

The displacement from an **aesthetic of work** towards an **aesthetic of process** originates in the anti-art movement Dada, founded in 1916, and is taken up in the 1960s again by Fluxus, a group of visual artists and composers, including such colourful personalities as John Cage, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono and George Brecht. Performance art and happening are becoming the leading artistic media, whereby the object of art, be it visual or musical, is frequently degraded to a mere side-product.

Incidental Music (George Brecht)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0n9818oCbJo>

The development inevitably leads to the overlapping of artistic disciplines, with intersections like "sound-sculpture" or "instrumental theatre", and finally results in a debordering of the music term itself. John Cage remarks: "you don't have to call it 'music' if this expression hurts you". At this point however arises the question, what the term 'music' originally implies. In absence of a general definition, this must be negotiated with every new work to be presented in a musical context, and ever since has become a basic issue of composition itself.

Yet the faltering of terms is merely a consequence of abstraction: the artistic idea detaches from the material object. Visual artists as well as composers accustom to transgress the borders of their particular profession, thereby establishing a level of idea-transfer between the media. The "graphic score" can just as well be transformed into dance or animation film as into music; concurrently it can be viewed as an autonomous piece of visual art. In the same way one can transfer any work of nonrepresentational-art into a musical form, by means of a code, if one is able to lay bare its underlying Gestalt-principles.

(projection: Pollock, Twombly, De Kooning)

In view of non-representational art, the question is obviously not "what does it represent", but rather "how is it made". Examining the paint traces left on a canvasboard, the spectator may virtually reconstruct the artistic procedure: the painting itself has no further function than to document the act of its own creation. The application of paint does no longer stand in service of delusion, but rather in service of enlightenment: **the material reveals itself in its immediate physical presence.**

This is also valid for a large part of New Music, in particular for the music of the so called *New York School* (including the composers John Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff and Earle Brown) which has been decisively influenced by the ideas and developments in non-representational painting. Morton Feldman operates in his pattern compositions with a technique of developing variation: by gradually changing the parametric settings from tact to tact, he creates comparison features. Thereby the instrumental tone exposes itself in its pure material condition, since it always transmits the modified settings immediately in form of its own sonic properties.

(projection: Feldman: string quartet II)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8e3qaFlocU>

When John Cage demanded to "let the sounds be themselves", this was not a speech for material fetishism, but rather for the delivery of sounds from their representational obligations within a musical syntax. According to the rhetorics of the classic romanic reference-system, they appear from now on as empty characters. Simultaneously they enfold significance in their immediate sensual presence, so to speak as paradigms of a *suchness for its own sake*.

(John Cage Atlas Ecliptalis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6r3cqASxGE>)

If we define abstract art as the exposition of a universal creative principle, be that in the form of words, signs, colours or linear proportions, the graphic score features the highest possible degree of abstraction, insofar one can transfer it into sound or movement, and at the same time perceive it as the image a process of reflection. This in view, the graphic score may be considered a form of philosophy by other means.

With reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein's comparison of a language with a city, Cornelius Cardew once wrote:

"Entering a city for the first time you view it at a particular time of day and year, under particular weather and light conditions. You see its surface and can form only theoretical ideas of how this surface was moulded. As you stay there over the years you see the light change in a million ways, you see the insides of houses - and having seen the inside of a house the outside will never look the same again. You get to know the inhabitants, maybe you marry one of them, eventually you are inhabitant - a native yourself. You have become part of the city. If the city is attacked, *you* go to defend it; if it is under siege, *you* feel hunger - you are the city. When you play music, *you* are the music."

The challenge of radical improvisation is always to leave rehearsed patterns behind, and freely invent music within the Here and Now. This however affords a great deal of discipline.

In his essay "towards an ethics of improvisation", Cornelius Cardew enumerates seven virtues a musician can develop:

1. *Simplicity* Where everything becomes simple is the most desirable place to be. But (...) you have to remember how you got there. The simplicity must contain the memory of how hard it was to achieve.
2. *Integrity* What we *do* in the actual event is important -not only what we have in mind. Often what we do is what tells us what we have in mind.
3. *Selflessness* To do something constructive you have to look beyond yourself. The entire world is your sphere if your vision can encompass it. (...) You should not be concerned with yourself beyond arranging a mode of life that makes it possible to remain on the line, balanced (...).
4. *Forbearance* Improvising in a group you have to accept not only the frailties of your fellow musicians, but also your own. Overcoming your instinctual revulsion against whatever is out of tune (in the broadest sense).
5. *Preparedness* for no matter what eventuality (Cage's phrase) or simply *Awakeness*. (...) A great intensity in your anticipation of this or that outcome. (...) "He who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him, notes with a strange headfulness the faintest paleness of the sky" (Walter Pater). This constitutes awakeness.
6. *Identification with nature* Drifting through life: being driven through life; neither constitutes a true identification with nature. The best is to *lead* your life, and the same applies in improvising: like a yachtsman to utilise the interplay of natural forces and currents to steer a *course*.
7. *Acceptance of Death* From a certain point of view improvisation is the highest mode of musical activity, for it is based on the acceptance of music's fatal weakness and essential and most beautiful characteristic -its transience. The desire always to be right is an ignoble taskmaster, as is the desire for immortality. The performance of any vital action brings us closer to death; if it didn't it would lack vitality. Life is a force to be used and if necessary used up. (...)

The terms "composition" and "improvisation" have actually never been strictly distinguished from another. They rather refer to the exterior poles of a continuum, within which dissimilar degrees of indeterminacy may occur. Composed music always contains improvisational elements,

insofar a performance can never be completely controlled by notation in all of its parameters. A good composer takes account on this fact, by integrating indeterminate elements in the notation. In classical music those elements appear e.g. in form of the fermata (which indicates the indeterminate extension of a duration), grace notes (notes that are inserted outside the metric beat), or vague verbal indications of tempo, dynamics or expression (such as *poco a poco ritardando; piano dolce; misterioso*, etc.). In New music there have been developed numerous techniques of integrating the indeterminate. Apart from graphic or verbal scores, indeterminacy appears in forms of semiconventional notation, such as notes without stems (indicating fixed pitches but flexible durations) mobile scores (providing a construction kit of musical modules to be put together in realtime) or hypercomplex scores that force the interpreter to improvise because the music, as it is written, is impossible to perform.

Vice versa improvised music always contains compositional elements, insofar the player has always to some degree control over his instrument, and has developed his own techniques, even in avoiding habits. Yet a musical instrument is a composition on one's own, as it always provides a predestination for a certain type of sound production.

One may distinguish between two reverse approaches in view of permeating the improvisational process compositionally: the **deductive** and the **inductive** one: with the deductive, we start with an indeterminate notation, in order to advance gradually to a particular form. With the inductive, we start with a clearly defined idea, in order to advance to an indeterminate result.

The deductive approach starts with the analysis of the improvisational play, i.e. the improviser observes his own play, in order to detect lawfulness of cause and effect. The sound-texture of an improvisation is always due to particular motion patterns. These can be described by means of words or graphic designs. With regard to the determination of a sound, we have to distinguish between its constant and its variable aspects. The constant ones are those to be set out in writing, while the variable ones may be left up to improvisation. Which aspects of a sound are actually regarded variable and which ones constant, is the question decisive for composition. It may turn out very differently from piece to piece, or even within one piece, from event to event.

In my piece "Ordinary Music Vol.6, for four electric guitars", I have worked in that way. With the guitar in my hand I have tried miscellaneous techniques in view to reveal the instruments most characteristic sound features. At the same time I developed a non-parametric notation.

(projektion OM6) http://www.ordinary-art.com/audio_samples/om6b.html

By contrast with the inductive approach, the improvisational process is being operated from outside, with the aid of a conceptional framework. In order to prevent a stereotype reproduction of rehearsed gestures, the indeterminate score may provide instructions, of how to interrupt the oblivious improvisational flow. Once we conceive the creative process not

from the result, but on the contrary: we encounter an experimental design which will lead to unpredictable results. Examples for this can be found in Christian Wolffs game pieces ("for 1,2 or 3 people", "for six or seven players", "for pianist" etc.). In these pieces the performers are placed in an instable situation, i.e. they must be permanently available to fall decisions, that will always take influence on the further course of the music. Within the sounding result, this instability is made audible, i.e. one hears that the generated sounds are not determined by a parametric coordination system, but originated by spontaneous reactions.

In his score "for 1,2 or 3 people" (1964) Christian Wolff gives four different instructions for coordinations: "play after a previous sound has begun, hold till it stops", "start anytime, hold till another sound starts, finish with it", "start at the same time (or as soon as you are aware of it) as the next sound, but stop before it does" and "start anytime, hold till another sound starts, continue holding anytime after that sound has stopped". Also the sounds themselves are characterized by indeterminate features, e.g. as "anything", "a high in some aspect", "a sound in some respect dissonant with what immediately precedes", "a sound involving friction", "a sound involving stretched material" or "a slight alteration of sound".

(projection: Christian Wolff for one, two or three people)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nY6rGeWwL_0

In the beforementioned conversation with Heinz Klaus Metzger, Christian Wolff explains:

Finally I realized that the kind of sound made in an indeterminate situation includes what could result in no other way; for example, the sound of a player making up his mind, or having to change it. In fact, the indeterminate notation I've used is, as far as I know, the only possible one for the kind of sound I should like. And don't forget, we also like to be surprised.

"Edges" (1968) is an improvisational concept, providing an informal group of thirty signs, serving as cues, limits or reference-points. The signs partly relate to sonic features like "resonant", "dirty" or "filtered", partly to motion sequences such as "bumpy", "slack" or "intricate". The improvising players are supposed to trigger the signs in any order, whereby the score serves as a kind of topographic map.

(projection: Christian Wolff Edges)

In his composition "Four6", John Cage provides four individual "schedules", structuring always twelve numerized sounds, which the individual player is free to pick out for himself. Within an indicated time-frame, the duration of a sound is also decided by the player. This kind of game, which requires no musical education at all, may offer an insight to contemporary composition, by ways of vivid music making.

(projection: John Cage Four6 / CD)

Finally all these approaches have in common, that they combine a precompositional structure with the spontaneous affects of live-

creativity. The compositional process is partly shifted from the studio-to the performance situation. The listener, himself an integral part of the situation, can thereby experience the work in a state of becoming.

As a conclusion I would like to respond to the utopical dimension of an artform which is essentially pure creation, regardless of topics or subject matters, and for that reason is labeled "non-representational art".

By nature every human is predestined to live a self-determined creative life, since only in being creative a human comes to himself. However in our society the concept of creativity is in contrast with the institution of work. Employment relationships are power relationships. The capitalist society, likewise most other contemporary or previous society models, resembles a labour camp. People are often sentenced to unproductive and uninspired work, instead of being supported in enfolding their own creative potential. Hindering people to enfold creativity is actually a very violent act, not to say a crime against humanity. This in view, making art is always a commitment to revolution. The creative act is an act of selfliberation.

Works of modern art are often ridiculed with the statement: "I could do that too". In that respect one can only return: "Go ahead and do it!" A work of art is no demonstration of skill, but rather a model for aesthetic behaviour. Its underlying Gestalt-principles, namely the relationships of its parts with the whole, may not be solely transferred inbetween the artistic media, but may also apply to every even minor daily activity. As a model for a domination-free global society, the artwork not least reflects the possible relationships of the individuals with the society as a whole. Those relationships are most desireably characterized by the greatest possible independancy and coincidently the greatest possible identification. In a moment of transcient lucidity a work of art may at least give a vague idea of how this perfect balance can ever be achieved.