

HOW DO YOU PLAY THAT? A PERFORMER'S OUTLOOK ON GRAPHIC SCORE INTERPRETATION

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1. Introduction

This research gives critical insight into the preparation and performance of scores using primarily graphic and non-traditional musical notations. While much scholarship exists on the compositional structures and historical significance of graphic scores, there is a dearth of information that directly addresses issues of performance. This is most acutely felt in the lack of performance methodologies for graphic works requiring the performer to determine sounding qualities such as pitch, rhythm, amplitude and timbre. My research addresses this deficiency by examining methods of graphic score performance and applying the analytical findings to canonical and original graphic compositions.

2. Research objectives

This research investigated how professional musicians recognized as outstanding composers and performers of new music have composed, interpreted and performed graphic scores. In doing so, it sought to answer three questions: what specific strategies have the research participants used for graphic score interpretation; how, if at all, do participants use improvisation in performance; and what methods of communication (i.e. notational, textual, verbal and gestural) have been used in performance. It also examined descriptions of specific performances to discover how interpersonal relationships and concert environment could affect performance.

3. Method

To collect data, I conducted interviews with five double bassists about their experiences composing and performing graphic scores. This instrumental delimitation was set because, as a double bassist myself, I was intimately familiar with the repertoire, techniques and performance requirements typical of the double bass. The bassists interviewed were Robert Black, Simon H. Fell, Barry Guy, John Lindberg and Lisa Mezzacappa. They have allowed their names to be used and were not paid for their participation.

To analyze the data, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (I.P.A.) as my methodology. Per Smith and Osborn (2015), I.P.A. has been “dedicated to the detailed exploration of personal meaning and lived experience” (p. 25). As my research focused on individual approaches to score performance, it was an appropriate framework to explore the participants’ experiences with graphic notation. The data was analyzed according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) methodology for I.P.A. in qualitative research. This process involved recording and transcribing each interview; printing the interviews to make notes, code data and develop emergent themes; and clustering the emergent themes according to content. These clustered themes were grouped together according subject matter to develop the superordinate themes of this analysis.

4. Analysis

The following analysis discusses three emergent themes from my research: *a)* determinacy, *b)* mapping, and *c)* understanding a composer’s “sound world”. The following sections explores each emergent theme in conjunction with data from the interviews. This

exploration thus constructs a linear narrative by which one can begin the process of assessing and performing a graphic works.

4.1. Determinacy

The first emergent theme within this analysis is determinacy. Per Cage (2004), determinacies are compositional structures fixed by the composer that remain constant across multiple performances. Examples of determinacy are abundant in the graphic works of composer and double bassist Barry Guy. In addition to determinate features such as instrumentation and the inclusion of traditional musical notation, Guy states in our interview that he considers a pre-determined space for a soloist to improvise as ‘one sort of formal structural element’. Therefore, though improvisational processes vary from performance to performance, the pre-established space in which improvisation occurs is determinate. Determinate structures also include the rules and instructions governing the performance of a graphic score. Though these rules may apply to improvisational practices undertaken during performance, they themselves are determinate in that they are set by the composer and, as Guy states, “applied throughout the whole piece”. Lastly, graphic notations themselves may also be determinate. Though Guy uses graphics to give the performer “various grades of freedom”, it is he who determines how they are interpreted. In the following example, Guy explains the meaning of coloured graphics in his graphic piece *Mr. Babbage is Coming to Dinner!* (2014).

BG: *Every player has a hand coloured score or part [...] but their interpretation is not always going to be the same. It depends on how you negotiate the coloured section according to the rules. For instance, the top of this particular graphic indicates high pitch area; the middle*

suggests mid-range instrument sonorities and the bottom obviously invites low register articulations.

This example offers insight on why a composer would need to specify the meaning of a graphic. The equivocation of graphics placed high upon a page with a high pitched musical tone (and vice-versa) is not particular to Guy. Williams' (2016) research into graphic interpretation suggests performers often make similar correlations. However, as Guy wishes to ensure that musicians to play tones within certain registers at specific points within the piece, he assigns meaning to the graphics which indicate this action.

Each research participant stresses that the performer must thoroughly assess and learn the determinate components of a graphic score. This involves developing the facility to perform notated phrases, understanding the rules for performance, and understanding how improvisation functions within the compositional structure of a piece. For John Lindberg, this level of preparation allows him to "face anything" and enables a mental state resembling Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) concept of flow. Per Csikszentmihalyi (1992), flow is a state of optimal experience occurring when one applies their preparations towards a task with such a focus that they lose a sense of self awareness. For Lindberg, once he has assessed a composition's determinacies and "prepared everything I need to prepare", he can perform at a point where "you don't have to think about it" and he is "simply playing".

4.2. Mapping

Once the performer has understood a composition's determinate structures, they may begin the process of mapping, or assigning sounding qualities to graphics without meanings predetermined by the composer. As Lisa Mezzacappa explains, visual characteristics of a graphic

such as colour, size or placement upon the page can be correlated to techniques, textures, tonalities, intervallic series, methods of group interaction, amplitude, and duration. Once one has assigned musical meaning to the graphics, they can then begin to develop fluency facilitating the mappings in conjunction with the mappings of other graphics and any determinate material.

4.3. Sound world

With the sonic possibilities afforded through mapping, it may become difficult to determine if one is performing a work “correctly”. For Robert Black, it is helpful in the interpretation process to establish the “sound world” of a specific composition. Black uses the phrase “sound world” to describe an overarching conception of performance as well as an aural imagining of the collective output of a composer. To do this, he states that one needs “a general understanding of a particular sound world, the creative world of [the composer whose piece you are performing]”. In this way, aural conceptualization, which is informed by an understanding of ‘the creative world’ of the composer, serves as a guiding principle when interpreting graphic notation. Simon H. Fell elaborates on this process in his interview, stating that “what the historical circumstances behind the pieces are; what the various historical interpretations of the piece have tended to be; what [the composer’s] version of the piece tend to be like” are influential to the interpretive strategies of the performer. As such, an awareness of recurrent musical qualities within a composer’s musical output can be helpful in developing a conception of a sound world for the performance of a graphic score.

5. Conclusion

This analysis has shown how an understanding of determinacy, mapping processes and the concept of a sound world can aid musicians in the performance of a graphic score. In the

video demonstration that accompanies this text, these concepts are put forward in the performance of five graphic works, each of which demonstrates a unique aspect of these findings. In my own experiences as a performer, I have found it helpful to be methodical in my practice. In addition to the diligent practice of determinacies, I have kept a journal of mapping strategies, thoughts on and strategies for establishing a sound world, and questions regarding performance aesthetics. It is my hope that this research can assist those endeavouring to understand methods of graphic score performance and help stimulate creative processes within composers, performers and scholars of graphic composition.

References

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