

EXTENDED COMPOSITION and THE HANDS. THE DOUBLE

Embodiment of music

Music is movement in time. It often has some sound, so music is movement of sound in time. This sound is often a pitch sound, so music is a pitch sound moving in time. Music could also be a noise sound of some kind, acoustic or electro acoustic. So music is a pitch or noise sound that moves in time. But music can be, and is more. In present days art music, composing music is often a combination of sound, image, movement and language. We experience what I call *Extended Compositions*, compositions where sound is only one factor in the whole composition. I am going to present the work *The Hands. The Double* worked out over a period of two year by me, pianist Ellen Ugelvik and choreographer Kristin Ryg Helgebostad as part of the project called *Extended Composition*, at the Norwegian academy of Music

Music is an embodiment of forces know to the physical world in many shapes and forms. Music is as much about physicality as about abstract sound. This physicality is perceived in different ways by us as listeners. One fundamental thing is that music is sound waves, physical waves of sound that reaches our senses; the ears as well as other part of the body. The structures of the music, the lines, the rhythms, the timbre, the development, the polyphony all this is something that we perceive both as cognitive and physical qualities.

Image schemata

The American philosopher Mark Johnson talks about what he calls “image schemata” and metaphorical projections of these, and how they form our basic understanding of the world.

*An **image schema** (both schemas and schemata are used as plural forms) is a recurring structure within our [cognitive](#) processes which establishes patterns of understanding and reasoning. As an understudy to [embodied cognition](#), image schemas are formed from our bodily interactions, [u](#) from linguistic experience, and from historical context. (Wikipedia)*

An example of an “image schemata” is balance. “*Balance is force vectors and some point of axis or plane in relation to which those forces are distributed*” (Johnsen p.85). The understanding of balance comes to us from a multiple of senses; bodily, visual, aural, verbal. Balance is something we understand in different ways. The experience of something being in or out of balance is different in something we see as movement, hear as sound or feel in our bodies, but they are still all connected, via what Johnson calls “Metaphorical Projections”. This metaphorical projection enables us to understand meaning on different levels and in our different senses from the same basic schematas.

In my understanding, this is why body movement, language, light, video/film, dynamic evolving objects etc. which are all moving in time, can be material in a musical discourse. Composed, performed and perceived alongside sounding material, forming musical compositions, and perceived as musical compositions, because we recognize the basic underlying forces like e.g. “balance”, both in movements, sound, objects etc.

Questions and reflections formulated in the project

- What new strategies for composition and performance will have to be developed to master the multitude of new possibilities emerging from music’s expanded material?
- What new significance is emerging from the layers in an extended composition of sound, language and movements. To put it simple: does this change what “music” is, and can mean?s
- How do we evaluate it, discuss it, understand it?

- When opening up the process of composition and performance for a material and practices that are outside of the musical/sound domain, not only the aesthetic and content of the works changes radically. For composers and musicians new skills are practiced, that in its turn open up for new working methods both for composers and performers, and more time is needed for the process than in standard musical life.
- Interdisciplinary collaborations challenges notions and standards of 'quality, 'virtuosity' and skills. We have to consider how to deal with these concepts in the practice.
- Composition, fundamentally is a dealing with rhythm between different forms and material.

A brief project history

The Extended Composition project started out in the fall of 2018 at the Norwegian Academy of Music. The project as a whole consisted of three separate individual sub projects. All developing the works a collective of different artist spanning over dance/choreography, musical performance, theatre and performance practices and technology.

We had common workshops where we met and focused on showing the groups material and discussing the works and issues connected to the interdisciplinary nature of the works in plenum. Each of the pieces were developed in an intimate cooperation between composers and performers over a long stretch of time. Each of the three pieces were trying out relationships between movement, space, image, objects, language and sound in different ways

Some brief thoughts on material

Music history is all about extension of the material used for composition and performance, extending what possible sounds to use, performance techniques, spaces for performance, relationships to audiences etc. Through this composers and performers have constantly looked for new possibilities and new material. But by searching and finding new material, comes the challenge of controlling this extended material. Material and control of the material is part of artistic processes. c Sometimes the skills that is needed is inside the framework of an existing practice, like playing an instrument. But in most cases it involves a new training. We search new material, but also the ability to control the material, making it a part of the composed and performed artwork.

Some brief thoughts on skills

This leads us to the topic of skills. The need to master new skills in order to control the new material. In all our projects there has been an issue about training new skills when needed to control new material. In *The Hands. The Double* we had both to find ways of creating and assessing movements to be used in the piece, but also skills connecting the performer to space, the body and the surrounding objects. The music theorist Paul Craenen talks about the "Kagel problem", referring to the composer Maurizio Kagel that invented the form instrumental theater in the 1950-ies and 60-ies. Composing pieces that involved theatrical elements for the musicians, what Craenen hints to is that in many of these pieces, it is required that the performer has actor skills that might not be accessible for most musicians. In our work we have been conscious about the "subjective body", that a musicians body is not a dancers body. So when creating movements in the piece *The Hands. The Double*, the body of the performer, pianist Ellen Ugelvik was the instrument. The movements had to be developed through that subjective body of Ellen, in order for Ellen to be able to feel comfortable and to control the material, the movements.

Reception and signs

Coming back to two of our question:

- What new significance is emerging from the layers in an extended composition of sound, language and movements. To put it simple: does this change what "music" is, and can mean?

- How do we evaluate it, discuss it, understand it?

One thing for sure is that time, and the experience of energy in time, of energetic movements in time is fundamental to experiencing something as musical. So energetic movements in time, but it does not have to be pitches. A fundamental force of music is rhythm. In what pace elements are presented, the basic relationships between short durations and long durations, patterns of repetition, iterations of similar events and the experience that all this is part of structures. Structures that could be heard, but as well seen or even just felt as vibrations. We also have another name for musical energy in time and that is “gestures”. Energetic movements of a sound, a body part, an object, an image in the flux of time. Similarities, prolongations or contrasts in the basic form of gestures between light and sound, movement and sound, images and sound make them possible to perceive as part of a common musical structure.

The Hands. The Double

Let us start with a short section of the piece, filmed in a rehearsal.

What do I see?

Ellen sitting in between a grand piano and a keyboard, facing front. She performs gentle movements of the hand on her legs, opening up the palm of the hand. Like a sea shell, maybe. After some of these movements, the arm is coming up and her hand and fingers are doing soft movements in front of the face. Then the whole upper body lean to her left.

What do I hear?

Soft sustained sounds, all with a crescendo, small or large. Some sounds have a metallic attack in the end. It starts with single sounds, played by Ellen in coordination with the movements. At the point when she raises her arm, the sound evolves by itself, and she no longer touches the keyboard.

How do I read this?

I read it as gentle soft touching movements, almost like Ellen is examining her legs and knees. That leads to a another significant movement when she turns her hand and opens the palm of the hand. I can perceive this both as an abstract movement, but also with connotations or signs to something concrete . Could remind of postures from the traditions of meditation, or like turning and looking at the inside of a sea shell. When the hand is up in front of her face, the movement could remind me of seagrass moving in the waves.

The sounds may be heard as pure electronic sustained sounds. Some with very good ears, might hear that they are samples of piano strings played with an e-bow. I hear single sounds developing to several lines of pitches in an evolving polyphony.

How do I perceive the sounds and movements together?

It starts with both being together, both with soft and sustained gestures. They start and end together, they share a common structure of energy and rhythm. Then when Ellen raises her arm, movement and sound develop in slightly different directions and are not any more directly linked as common gestures. A polyphony between movement and sound emerges. The section evolves from a homophonic relationship between movement and sound to a polyphonic. The sounds, as well as the movements develop and change. Good old composition techniques.

PROCESS

In this work, the process and the work has developed together, so has the skills and methods of composing and performing for both Ellen and me. Some of the new challenges we were confronted with was:

- How do we choose the movements to work with, how do we evaluate them, both as a material to compose with, and also its significance, its qualities as signs? What language do we use to discuss and develop them?
- What new skills do we need so as to work with movements and space, in the way dancers and visual performers do?
- How do we compose and perform music when Ellen is not able to see her hands or the keyboards where she plays?

DEVELOPING A METHOD

We developed our method of both trying out and evaluating. I would video tape everything, edit the videos right after the rehearsals, and share them with **Ellen Ugelvik**. We would use the videos as temporary scores for the piece. Both to remember what we did, but also to evaluate what we should change, add and develop. From July 2020 we asked dancer/choreographer **Kristin Ryg Helgebostad** to join our project. Kristin contributed on several aspects of our work. Ellen and I were specifically concerned with how to go further with focusing our physical work, hoping to get it to a new level. Both in the quality of the movements, but also by learning some of the skills that dancers have when relating to space. There were some ground breaking session we had during the pandemic, when Kristin gave us insight to specific techniques for focusing and improving movements, and of relating to space, for example imagining “threads” connecting you to different parts of the room. Through these exercise and skills, the quality of Ellen’s movements completely changed!

CREATING SCORES

Kristin Ryg Helgebostad did improvisations on our movement material, which were videotaped and I would add these into our temporary “scores” for the different parts of the piece. My intention was from the beginning to compose the movements in more or less the same manner as one would with musical sound. Defining gestures as a specific energy in time and space, and develop it, contrast it, “instrumentate” it (for example changing the hands on the same movement). Creating polyphony between different movements, but also creating polyphony between the sound and the movement. This needed for precise scores of the movements. Here is a part of a video score and a musical score built on Kristin’s improvisations. The musical score had to take into consideration that the music should be performed party by not looking at the keyboards.

SIGNIFICANCE AND EVALUATION

Coming back to the question of significance, perception and valuation of this combined musical material:

- What new significance is emerging from the layers in an extended composition of sound, language and movements. To put it simple: does this change what “music” is, and can mean?
- How do we evaluate it, discuss it, understand it?

After the premier of this piece at the Ultima festival I got in a mail from my friend and colleague composer Edvin Østergaard, and I would like to end this presentation with a question he proposed :

If the goal of your project is to create “a composition where sound and movements are equal parts of a polyphony”, I ask myself how this multi-layered composition – sound and movements is perceived. It is maybe not so that an «extended» composition process automatically create an extended aesthetic experience?

THE HANDS. THE DOUBLE <https://vimeo.com/662338060>

Johnson, Mark: *The Body in The Mind* (University of Chicago Press 1987)