

Jürg Frey

AND ON IT WENT

One possibility of experiencing time is the path. It is what lies ahead at the start of a performance: the composition develops, takes first one direction then another, perhaps doubles back, sets an accent here and there, focuses on certain sonorities or thematic levels. It unfolds continuously, and the more we hear of the piece, the more of a past the piece acquires. This past lays a path in our memories, we remember it as fragments of a sound edifice we have traversed with our ears, or as something more organically grown, evolving its path in time. The questions arising here are in the nature of: How will the piece go on? Why will it go on? What direction will it take? And at what speed?

Another possibility of experiencing time is expanse. Music consists of sound; unchanging and unchanged, it expands in space. Attention is not trained on the individual event but wanders in space, laying claim to space just as sound does. Composition and space merge, and both are components of a sonic situation without temporal direction, a situation that may even be unbounded and, through its very presence, determined by sound, space and listeners. Memory is shaped less by the individual details than by a situation in which one has spent a certain period of time.

The questions here are: How do boundaries come to be? Where are those boundaries? How do special qualities come to be? Where is the core of the composition, the core that accords the situation its identity and its energy? What gives sonic and compositional texture to the work as a whole?

Let us imagine the composition sketched above: 672 slow quavers, each one notated individually, ranging over staves and pages, played by four performers with eight triangles; then 672 slow quavers, each notated individually, ranging over

staves and pages, played by four performers with eight finger cymbals. Later, for minutes, the sound of cymbals, then tam-tam noises and the soft sounds of bowed stones, metal sheets, and then, after a good half hour, the first rests - and in between, long passages marked by the unvarying sounds of the bass drum, played pianissimo, and later the rustling of leaves, the sound of stones and humming.

I am on the threshold between these two experiential worlds: the world of the path and the world of expanse. But let me make clear that I am not intent on exploring the whole spectrum between processive composing - an activism focused on ceaseless change - and work with static sounds, or on installational thinking. I am not oscillating imaginatively back and forth in the hope of occupying as many compositional positions as possible. On the contrary, I am on the precise threshold where static sonic thinking almost imperceptibly acquires direction, where static, wholly motionless sounds meet the onset of movement and directionality of the sound material. On this threshold - an airy, mobile threshold that is entirely elusive as a place, but occasionally allows music to be experienced as a place - there is still enough scope, uncharted territory and vitality to inspire the compositional process and pose a challenge. Often differing only in nuance, these two fundamentally divergent patterns of compositional behaviour can meet in both consecutiveness and simultaneity. In the process they create the space and perspective necessary for the composition as sonic space to converge into a single situation with the performance venue as performance space.

While the idea of the path is more strongly associated with essentially melodic thinking - even if melodies, of whatever kind, cannot necessarily be heard in the composition -, spatial thinking has more to do with sound or the idea of the monochrome. Melody and the path have a beginning and an end, but sound and space have a timeless presence.

Musical experience shows that the two aspects so cleanly separated here engage complexly with one another: for instance, when a static electronic sound is suddenly perceived as a very high speed, or when a movement progressing evenly, step by step, gradually tends towards an experience of monochromy. That is when the path gradually transforms into space. On the other hand, a sound can tell a story, or - by virtue of very small, initially imperceptible changes - a seemingly static, monochrome sound gradually allows us to recognise that we are suddenly somewhere totally different. That is when sound in time lays a path. So we find ourselves in complex experiential worlds: as a result of a long duration in time, a path, a way, can become an expanse or a space - and conversely, where attention is turned to detail, to small changes, an expanse or space can be experienced as a path, a way.

Combined, the two revolve around the core of the piece: monochromy as a sense of the overall, narration as a way from one thing to the next.

These dual situations present the interpreter with an unaccustomed challenge. When he is confronted with the monochrome existence of sound, it means genuinely vanishing behind the sound and making any hint of theatricality generated by his very presence disappear. This implies, first and foremost, that the sparse, specific material central to this monochrome situation must be left, so to speak, unsullied by the playing. In other words, it must not be given weight and interest through interpretation and the individuality of the reading: that is precisely what these sounds abstain from. Transcending this conventional idea, the interpreter deploys his mastery of the instrument to achieve a virtuosity consisting in producing sounds in such a way that he himself disappears and all that remains is sound in space. Any insecurity, be it instrumental, emotional or physical, immediately shifts the interpreter into the foreground and interferes with the monochrome experience.

This is the basis on which the presence or absence of sound and performer can gain thematic importance. At the same time, it is the point of departure from which sounds set off on their path: the composer's strategies and attitude towards the material frequently need only a slightly different energy to give direction to sounds, introduce a change or leave one section and arrive at another. The faintest stirring is enough abruptly to banish the monochrome space: the focus is turned on the composition and with that on the presence of the player, who, as interpreter, is communicating this compositional change. Attention shifts from an undirected space-time situation to a directed situation in which sounds begin to wander and subtly radiate a direction that causes the situation to appear in a slightly different light. This may happen in order to truly set off on a path, or perhaps to shift quickly and lightly from one sonic situation to another. At all times, the interpreter is expected not to want to hold and shape the sounds, but to let go of them as he plays, enabling the inherent qualities of the sounds to become perceptible and experienceable. Time flows through the performer, and he not so much showcases his own presence as he articulates the presence of the overall space. He reacts with seismographic sensitivity to the slightest change, the subtlest crossing of the threshold between monochromely undirected situations and the shaping of time, which suggests direction and a path.

This is where a composer's formal interest is kindled - an interest that might be described as the composition breathing between the two states of space and path. What can be said for the interpreter applies at least as much to the composer: he decides about the musical and compositional parameters, he approaches the musical material with meticulous precision and is the inventor of these situations. But they can emerge only if, as a composer, his attitude towards his artistic intentions renders him, so to speak, absent. At the same time,

however, precisely what he considers right for the respective composition is supposed to happen. This is not a paradox, it is the foundation on which this kind of compositional work builds. The result distinguishes itself from a musical experience centred on listening to an object of art and artifice presented at a performance venue, which I observe from outside in a listening mode. Instead, space, sound and listener create a field of tension informed by the various balanced presences, a field that can become an existential experience of physical and mental existence for the listener.

The fragility characteristic of this field of tension derives from the fact that motionlessness and movement, monochromy and narrative are close enough together for them to be able to shift quickly and easily from one to the other. In either state, there is always a sense of the other's absence: monochromy as the absence of movement and directed material as the absence of monochromy. It is this oscillation that infuses the field of tension with much of its energy and complexity - additionally enhanced if listeners' experiences are taken into account as well. A monochrome sound world will not always resonate in the listener as a monochrome experience. It may easily be that, at the end of a performance of static music that has remained motionless, the listener is in himself no longer where he started out - just as, conversely, directed, mobile music that lays a path need not always take the listener along on a journey.

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