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Phenomenology and temporality in the composition of experimental minimal music

This article explores the nature of the temporal experience in experimental and minimal music from the perspective of two practicing composers, Richard Glover and Bryn Harrison. We are presenting our own ideas about the experiential aspects of our music, which are not intended to be final conclusions but rather introducing points for discussion.

We are both composers whose music, whilst sounding quite different, is linked by its shared concerns regarding repetition, a lack of memory reference points, and subsequently prompting an alternative temporal experience in the listener to that of music based around narrative and representative approaches. The music theorist Jonathan Bernard wrote about 1960s Minimalism that this was music ‘which is about time’, and this quote can be used to describe both our musical output. However, whilst we share this central concern in our music, we clearly approach this from two different perspectives: one centred upon repetition and cyclic form, the other utilising non-repeating sustained tones.

The music which we both compose lies somewhere within the experimental tradition, and is written with the related approach to performance in mind; this approach is best encapsulated by pianist Philip Thomas’ notion of ‘non-interventionism’. Playing in this manner encourages the listener to focus more upon the auditory nature of the work, rather than the physical, gestural nature created by the performer. The interpretive role of the performer is designed to focus the listener’s perceptions upon the sound, rather than themselves.

Richard Glover

In my own composition of the past five years, I have been occupied in working with sustained tones, defined as pitches which continue sounding, so operating outside of traditional notions of gesture which are linked to breath, or movement. Sustained tones provide an aural continuity like no other auditory material: as the pitches continue to sound, the firing rate of neurons indicating a particular pitch begins to slow, and eventually stop, thereby allowing our perceptual mechanisms to better process the myriad fluctuations and articulations present in the sound from the peculiarities of

human performance (such as transforming harmonic spectra due to bow position, beating patterns between two near-unison tones, and subtle shifts in dynamic and pitch). Repetitive music also enables the listener to begin discerning acoustic variation within the performed notes, but the constant re-firing of neurons (alongside the constant onset of new notes after each silence) means that perceptive and cognitive mechanisms have many other performed parameters to which to attend, unlike the experience of sustained tones wherein note onsets tend to be hidden, or avoided where possible.

The listening experience associated with sustained tones has been described by American music theorist and composer Larry Polansky as enabling the listener to ‘evolve’, as their awareness is drawn towards properties of the sound which are usually hidden within more gestural music.¹ The listener is able to focus on the various acoustic fluctuations at their leisure, and the indeterminate nature of these fluctuations (i.e. slight shifts in intonation would not have been composed in, but rather emanate from, say, the beginning of a down bow on a string instrument, or a new breath on a wind instrument) present themselves to the listener not as part of a traditional developmental compositional discourse, but rather as a series of un-composed events, exposed for examination.

The music recording accompanying this paper presents a listening environment wherein this approach to composition and performance is utilised. The recording is an excerpt from *Gradual Music* written for the German ensemble musikFabrik in 2009. The piece is constructed from extremely gradual glissandi played by the small wind and string ensembles against a continuous sustained tone chord played by EBows on the piano, and this compositional structure allows for the acoustic fluctuations mentioned above to proliferate from the performed pitches.

In order to relate this listening environment to the temporal experience, I will draw upon existing philosophical concepts with which I align as a creative practitioner, (and which inform my own creative process), rather than as a philosopher promoting the validity of one concept over others.

The listener’s ability to attend to different surface phenomena occurring simultaneously means that they may depend less on the usual forward anticipation involved in the experience of gestural languages. This ‘unstructured temporal continuum’, in the words of music theorist Jonathan Kramer,² results in a continual temporal flux provided from the surface articulation groupings.

Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the ‘unbroken continuity’ of the temporal experience, resulting from the chain of retentions and overlapping horizons;³ the continual temporal flux

provided by the transformational nature of the surface articulations produces a stream of events. The only notable aspects of these events which may result in us imposing a meaningful hierarchy may be greater speeds in beating patterns, or greater intensities of harmonics, but we are aware that this hierarchy is only in place because of our own individual experience at that particular performance, rather than it's being pre-composed (as these surface phenomena are produced indeterminately).⁴ Therefore, this stream of indeterminate, non-hierarchical events suggests a linear progression, or the notion of a continually moving time-window; upon experiencing my music, the window is extended owing to the similarity, and therefore high predictability, of these events, and consequently the context of dependency is widened.⁵ This enables the listener to retain more of the past and future in the present than with higher-informational experiences.

However, the various relationships between the indeterminate surface layer articulations produce a temporal flux, and thus the length of the time-window is continually contracting and expanding, depending on the activity of the surface layer. This model allows for a non-linearity of temporal experience, whereupon sounds need not be perceived as linked together in a single sequence, but also allows for the sense of motion the listener perceives in the music from the unbroken continuity.

This perspective upon the temporal experience feeds into the compositional process itself. I design gradual pitch structures which coalesce together using simple linear processes, therefore producing indeterminate surface articulations; however, the predictability of the pitch patterns ensure the continuity and the fluidity of the time-window fluctuations. My own compositional path is set to explore further pitch structures which operate within a high level of predictability, allowing deeper investigation of surface phenomena and the temporal experience itself.

Bryn Harrison

In this part of the paper I shall briefly discuss my own preoccupation with perceptual issues of musical time and, in particular, will attempt to demonstrate how these ideas manifest themselves in a relatively recent work entitled 'surface forms (repeating)' (2009). This preoccupation can be seen in light of, what the eminent musical psychologist Susanne Langer has described as, 'making time visible'⁶ and through an ongoing body of practice-based research that I have undertaken over the last decade or so into finding methods that run counter to the traditions of teleology and musical narrative. In doing so, I will draw on aspects previously discussed in my PhD thesis (2007) as well

as from a recent paper of mine entitled 'scanning the temporal surface' (2012). My main aim is to argue that this newer work adopts a slightly different view point from previous works in attempting to present all the material of the work as quickly as possible but that a more complete picture of the work can only be apprehended through the repetition and prolongation of this material over time. Form, it could be argued, is the result of the emergent properties of the system.

In my PhD thesis I discussed the ways in which I have found extremely simple, repeating patterns that contain a coherence of step-wise pitch intervals to be the most effective way of maintaining musical consistency. Since the year 2000 I have been organising repeating sequences of pitches into cycles of varying length to create clearly perceptible melodic lines which may display a clear sense of movement or linearity or may be organised using a limited set of pitches to arrest a sense of movement altogether.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these cycles are usually presented within a highly repetitive context, the intention being to create, what the American playwright Richard Foreman has described as "the work of art as primarily a structure for articulating its mode of being-present."⁷ As the British artist Bridget Riley has made clear, repetition is at the root of both movement and stasis. As Bridget Riley has stated, "on the one hand it acts as a sort of amplifier: making active events that might otherwise go by barely unnoticed"⁸ whilst, on the other hand, it is capable of arresting any direct sense of development through time. Repetition, I discovered, can make music present simply by being reiterative. The American composer Morton Feldman creates a playful approach to this premise through a conscious attempt at "formalising a disorientation of memory"⁹ in which he would "...have the same thing come back again, but ... just add one note".¹⁰ Repetition as near repetition.

Additionally, as Feldman's late music exemplifies, our perception of high-level repetition changes the experience of what we hear: the sequence of unchanging (or only slightly differencing events) begins to take on a life of its own, becoming almost larger than the sum of its parts. The accumulative effect creates, what the Austrian composer Bernhard Lang has perceptively described as, "a kind of third dimension emerging out of the two-dimensionality of a rotating disc."¹¹

Over the last few years, I have worked towards the production of fluttering, ephemeral surfaces that quietly but actively engage the listener in the passing of fleeting events. Successions of notes that often operate at a speed and density beyond that which can be immediately apprehended are repeated again and again, allowing the listener to gradually build up an understanding of the composite elements of the textural surface over an extended period of time. Here, near and exact

repetition operates in close proximity, providing points of orientation and disorientation for the listener. Change is not absent from the work but is conditioned by our experience of listening. As Hulme has stated (and quoted by Deleuze) difference might be observed within the mind that contemplates it rather than directly within the object itself.¹² The premise of time therefore becomes even more explicit in providing meaning to the work – instead of attempting to construct time on a moment to moment basis the music strives towards the creation of a singular time event.

Fig. 1: opening page from *Surface forms* (repeating):

Distant, understated, opaque. Always as quiet as possible unless otherwise indicated.

The musical score is written for a 16-measure piece in 5/16 time. The instruments and parts are:

- a. fl.
- cl.
- bpt.
- trb.
- (R.U.)
- vibr.
- (L.U.)
- (R.U.)
- trp.
- (L.U.)
- sop.
- via.
- v.

The score includes various performance markings such as *ppp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *gliss.*, *ord.*, *s.t.*, and *fine*. Dynamic markings are often followed by a time signature change (e.g., 5/16 to 3/16). The vocal line includes the lyrics: *Kaa Au See Noh An*. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

This fleeting and ephemeral aspect of the opening section creates, for me, a fascinating perceptual aspect to the piece; the music always seems to be outside of my grasp, beyond what I find to be immediately perceptible. Depth is intentionally reduced and detail emphasized to draw the listener towards the textural surface on a moment to moment basis. One way to ensure this was to create a piece in which all instrumentalists playing similar harmonic and rhythmic material within a confined dynamic and pitch range, rather like in the ensemble music of the late Aldo Clementi. The effect I had in mind was latterly described by an ex-student of mine as being somewhat like skip-reading through a book. If the book, hypothetically, contained identical extracts of the same text on each page we might not necessarily identify the same information since it seems likely that we would be encountering a different location point in the text from one page to the next.

Surface Forms (repeating) was written for the highly virtuosic musicians of ELISION, following a commission from the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (2010). The work operates on cycles of approximately 43” – far longer than the short cycles of just a few seconds utilised in my previous works. Whilst the repetitions in these earlier pieces set up conditions through which, it could be argued, the psychological present may be perceived as a measurable entity, in *Surface Forms* the cycles are too long and the materials too dense for the music to be perceived in this way.

What I had not anticipated was just how difficult it would be to actually discern the literal repetitions; i.e. the ‘joins’ between the end of the cycle and the start of a new one. Every eighth page the sequence of time signatures and the underlying harmonic structure (given by the harp, vibraphone and a tape part of the same material in sine tones) repeats. This provides a template onto which various musical figures can be overlaid. With each repeat of the seven-page cycle, materials may be re-used or a new page introduced. I settled on three different options of pages to be used for each of the first seven pages of the score, resulting in a total of 21 different pages that repeat to make up the total 105 pages of the score. Articulations (and occasionally dynamics) are subtly altered with the re-introduction of a previously used page. Very occasionally, materials from different pages are combined.

The fact that the cycles always exhibit properties of self-similarity and that new materials are often based upon or similar to existing materials (sometimes transposed from a previous page) adds to this ambiguity and a further disorientation of memory. The pitch trajectory itself is a loose three part canon from which lines can be derived. The self-similarity inherent within the repeated intervallic sequences ensures a sense of linearity and perceptual continuity on a micro-level – each

pitch leads predictably to its immediate successor albeit often 'distorted' through the employment of octave displacement.

It could be said that my musical output over the last ten years has evolved slowly with each piece generating scope and possibility for future research. The evolution of contingent pitch cycles has provided a certain harmonic consistency and fluidity to these works and has allowed many possibilities for exploring the notion of a non-directed linearity. The challenge of recent years has been to discover new contexts for the work and of pushing the boundaries of what I know. Whilst it is hoped that the musical language itself will continue to evolve into new and fruitful areas, it would appear unavoidable that notions of time will remain at the heart of this research in terms of creating musical works that provide a reflective space in which we can listen.

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¹ Polansky, Larry, 'Jim Tenney and Space Travel', *Perspectives of New Music*, 25/1, (Winter – Summer, 1987): 437-8.

² Kramer, Jonathan, *The Time of Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1988): 210.

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962): 418.

⁴ Due to the indeterminacy of these pieces, each separate performance of the same piece will result in significantly different sonic experiences in terms of the surface articulations produced.

⁵ The context of dependency describes how much temporally remote material constrains the probability of occurrence.

⁶ Susanne Langer, cited in Kramer, *op.cit.*:5.

⁷ Richard Foreman, "Glass and Snow (1970)" in *Writings on Glass*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997): 80.

⁸ Bridget Riley; quoted in the film documentary 'Bridget Riley' by David Thompson, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979.

⁹ Morton Feldman, 'Crippled Symmetry' in *Essays*, ed. Walter Zimmermann (Kerpen: Beginner Press, 1985), 127.

¹⁰ Feldman, *Ibid*, 178.

¹¹ Bernard Lang, 'Loop Aesthetics', paper presented at Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, 2002.

Source: <http://members.chello.at/bernard.lang/>

¹² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Continuum, 2004): 90.