

From work to workshop: extending the social basis of compositional and performance processes towards collectivity

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Abstract: This paper offers a case-specific, critical evaluation of composition and performance made on the basis of devised graphic and action scores. In the presentation, I will be drawing on original scores created and performed collectively during a series of undergraduate University modules and summer workshops convened over the last few years in Greece. The participants (composition and musicology students in the former case, as well as amateur musicians and non-musicians in the latter) are called to create, alone or in groups, their own graphic or verbal scores and to use them as guides to improvise collectively. In the context of a prose notation and improvisation workshop, composition and performance are detached from the work-centred, authoritative, and often quite solipsistic assumptions of the high modernist European model of "expert music-making". Participants are encouraged to operate outside the contingencies of tonal, modal, or other prescriptive musical languages, focusing instead on an ad-hoc development of structural tools and instructions, a close exploration of timbre, time and space parameters, and developing their personal, unique awareness of the transitional space between controlled and free improvisation, and between individuality and collectivity. The resulting sonic vocabularies are often highly compatible with the groundbreaking, but predominantly author-centred, innovations of the post-1950 European and American avant-gardes. However, the vocabularies fostered here are not developed in response to a singular production-oriented aesthetic, but as extensions of a predominantly social, and hence potentially more sustainable basis instead. This paper examines such extensions in relation to current and historical perspectives on experimental music and free improvisation, and assesses their present aesthetic, political and educational implications.

Musicians working in the context of European art music tradition have known for years that composition is a very serious business. Not everyone can compose a musical «work»; it is the result of considerable labour, several years of study, «inspiration» and, most importantly, technical competence. A composer, accordingly, is a unique figure with a «special gift» and specialist skills. The musical work is conceived as «a self-sufficiently formed unity, expressive in its synthesized form and content of a genius's idea»,¹ while musicians become mere exponents of that idea. According to Lydia Goehr, the above conception is rooted in the *Werktreue* ideal which, from 1800 onwards, attained a central position in the context of this music tradition.

The above conceptions had a direct impact on the way musicians experienced the evolution of notation and the idea of improvisation during the last 200 years. «Before notation was used with any impact», Goehr notes, «the practice of music almost entirely consisted of musical extemporization; it almost was just the simultaneous composition-performance of music»². However, when notation was developed to such an extent as to become the main mode of preserving and documenting music (always within the context of European art music referred to above), the importance of improvisation was gradually undermined, and «by 1800, when composition was defined as involving the predetermination of as many structural elements as possible», improvisation had been negatively defined as the «opposite» of «composition proper».³ The evolution of notation and its acceptance as the absolute means of recording a composer's ideas, turned it into an obstacle for improvisation and posed significant limitations on performers' interpretative freedom. Due to the persistence and historical establishment of these practices, western academic music education to this day largely produces non-improvisers. It generates musicians that, after years of painstaking education, are habitually unable to articulate musical discourse without the aid of some form of musical text (i.e. a

score), and cannot even imagine the possibility of ever creating a musical text for themselves, unless they take the established route of academically supported apprenticeship in composition. As Earle Brown once observed, "as a matter of fact, some of the most brilliant performers on instruments go completely dead, if you ask them to imagine something".⁴ This is largely because their educational context "teaches that the creation of music is a separate activity from playing an instrument"⁵, Derek Bailey noted. And Bailey continued: "Learning how to create music is a separate study totally divorced from playing an instrument. Music for the instrumentalist is a set of written symbols which he interprets as best as he can. (...) The instrumentalist is not required to make music. He can assist with his 'interpretation' perhaps, but, judging from most reported remarks on the subject, composers prefer the instrumentalist to limit his contribution"⁶. Western art music performers learn that the compositions they play are of particular value, and that "every performance of each work constitutes a threat to its existence. So, of course, he has to be careful."⁷

In the improvisation classes and workshops that I have had the opportunity to convene and participate in during the last 5 years, primary aims revolve around demonstrating that participants are capable a) of playing music with the aid of merely verbal or graphic instructions, or even without instructions and b) of creating their own action or graphic scores, as a means of constructing a platform for collective music-making that will not be based on familiar improvisatory idioms (tonal, modal etc.), but, rather, will enable a shared understanding of experimentation. In this way, there is an effort to reconnect «music performers» to a creative process that the current system of western academic musical culture has stubbornly denied access to. The creation of graphic and action scores and the group performance of these scores by students, musicians or amateur musicians is a means of experimenting with sound, space and movement in personally and collectively innovative ways, while also developing the platform of composition towards a more «democratic» direction than the centralised mentality fostered in most academic compositional contexts would assume. It also gives musicians the opportunity to function within an experimental environment, to assume responsibility for its shaping and development, and to recognize and appreciate the risks and benefits that such a responsibility entails.

In workshops, team and communication skills are emphasized through improvising and collectively discussing and performing improvisation-oriented scores, as well as by inviting participants to create scores in groups, and not just as individuals. This emphasis on group work and improvisation constitutes a conscious political and artistic choice, on the antipode of European avant-garde practices, where unmediated collaborative music-making has been reduced to the point of disappearance, and the relationships forged between performers, composers, conductors, ensemble managers and festivals are in essence dependencies, reflecting power structures and financial interests. By contrast, the context of group improvisation provides a unique open field that allows for the development of meaningful modes of co-existence, and real «dialogue» between musicians. As Eddie Prevost puts it, improvisation "is a place where a real sense of creative cooperation and interaction can occur, with all its inherent frustrations and potential for failure"⁸. The European avant garde conserved, without any significant changes, the ideal of a "solitary artist" that struggles against the adversities of contemporary society until his "artistic genius" achieves the recognition it deserves within a local or wide-reaching community. Recognition, in capitalist terms, is equated with an academic tenure as professor of Composition and a set of commissions from established concert halls or operas whose everyday repertoire normally consists of classical and romantic masterpieces that form a primary source of income for these venues. By contrast, as Prevost notes, "no equivalent place of honor has been found for the highest order of collaborative activity. There seems to be no way yet of celebrating the manifestation of creativity and originality by a collective".⁹

My courses, workshops, the open sessions with 6daEXIt, the improvisation ensemble that I participate in, as well as other artistic projects I have contributed to, all share a common aim:

to leave behind them the deeply competitive and often psychologically damaging narratives of composition and performance as Romantic anachronisms that, for me personally, as for other fellow musicians, was once considered the only option for a composer. In its place, a new, collaborative, pragmatic direction is opened up, rooted in the here-and-now of making music not just *for* other people, but also *with* other people.

In these contexts, participants are usually first introduced to the context of improvisation by means of performing and discussing historic and more recent examples of action and graphic scores. The historic examples demonstrate the various functions, the rationale and the aims of verbal or graphic scores created, on one hand, by composers firmly situated within the circle of central European avant-garde¹⁰ (such as K.Stockhausen, R.Haubenstock-Ramati¹¹, A.Logothetis¹²), and on the other, experimentally-minded composers from the U.S. and U.K. such as C.Cardew¹³, E.Brown¹⁴, C.Wolff¹⁵, La Monte Young, etc. The close study of such scores assists the understanding of extended forms of notation in historical perspective¹⁶ and brings participants in contact with impressive and rather unique graphic documents, such as Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*.¹⁷ At the same time, we examine and perform newer scores by composers such as K.B.Nielsen¹⁸, K.Shim¹⁹, P.Sterk and myself²⁰, while familiarising ourselves with ever freer forms for the distribution and dissemination of music scores that function outside the capitalist stronghold of publishing corporations, such as the Upload-Download-Perform forum²¹ where anyone can share their scores with interested readers and performers.

From the first controlled improvisations, musicians are asked to experiment in quest of new sounds and timbres, or to use instruments they have never played on before. It becomes clear that we are exploring an instrument "not simply as a means of making sounds in the accepted fashion, but as a total configuration – the difference between 'playing the piano' and the 'piano as sound source'²². In contrast to European avant-garde practices where technical competence on a specific instrument is of central importance, and familiarisation with complex notation is a necessary qualification for performers wishing to tackle contemporary works, when performing a graphic or action score it is evident that specialist notation literacy or virtuosic skills on a specific instrument are not a sine-qua-non for creative experimentation. Participants can freely investigate familiar instruments as "sound sources" or explore the timbral potential of unfamiliar instruments. Such practices give rise to alternative forms of "virtuosity": the virtuosity of acknowledging the potential of a "holistic" performance dimension to each instrument, of being able to react creatively to musical and kinetic stimuli, the competence to use unknown, entirely unfamiliar instruments in the context of a performance, etc. In their majority, workshop participants develop an ever growing self-confidence from session to session, and present increasingly more creative ways of responding to graphic and verbal notation and confronting musical instruments in that context. The sonic results of such sessions often appear to surpass, in their articulative clarity and their rhythmic, textural and formal complexity, some of the European avant gardes' most refined notational attempts to evoke and capture "new" sounds.

In the process of discussing and performing scores, particular emphasis is given to the role of structure in improvised and experimental music in general. For participants that have not had the chance to come in contact with experimental compositions, it is important that some basic aetiological context is provided as to why specific composers (Cage, Feldman, Cardew, Wolff, G. Brecht, etc.) made music that was often presented through the mechanisms of western art music, but was essentially conceived in starkly different terms than those posed by the European avant garde. A historical approach is essential for participants to understand that "experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined time-object whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a situation in which sounds may occur, a process of generating action (sounding or otherwise), a field delineated by certain compositional 'rules'."²³ One thus realizes that the process of composing and delineating sonic structures can be very different from those one may have learned in formal analysis or

compositional techniques courses. A composer voluntarily relinquishes absolute control over his or her composition, while performers assume a different, more behaviourally-sensitive role from the one reserved for the interpretation of prescriptively notated European art music. Their contribution can influence, shape and alter the end-result of a performance in a global, rather than localized way. As Bailey puts it, "The unique experience for a composer in the use of improvisation must be the relinquishing of control over at least some of the music and, even more critically for the composer, passing over that control not to 'chance' but to other musicians."²⁴

The notions of time and space also gain new kinds of significance. They are no longer reduced to the duration and the location of the performance, but assume a structural role in the creation of a score or the unfolding of an improvisation. Furthermore, structure may be created without any reliance on harmonic or melodic relations, without the need for motivic development, without depending on themes or rhythmic models, without resorting to re-statements of musical sections or units, imitations or variations of given material. It is important for participants to experience that there are alternative materials for the construction of a structure, timbres being the most evident case in point. In other words, one can combine, develop or destroy the timbres generated by one's fellow players, so as to create a shared auditory structure with timbre as its primary material. Such processes can obviously provoke dramatic changes in the ways we, as musicians, conceive of composition, structure, performance, space and time, especially in the context of an academic education.

The scores produced by participants in the classes and workshops I have contributed to in recent years, often take the form of reflective problem-solving, and are presented as attempts to find solutions to various problems addressed during a workshop. The boundaries between controlled and free improvisation, the degrees of control that can be attained, and the gradual transition from control to freedom, are some of the issues that occupied participants working in pairs to construct their own scores, like Lina Tsernou with Manos Karteris, and Nefeli Kondaki with Olga Papakonstantinou, students of the Department of Music Studies at A.U.TH. Lina and Manos constructed the graphic score *Smash Pyramid* (Fig. 1) and Nefeli and Olga the verbal score *Small Blue Ensemble* (Ex. 1) during Music Improvisation classes in Spring 2009. Both scores share the ultimate aim of gradually leading performers to a free improvisation, each outlining this gradual course of action through different procedures.

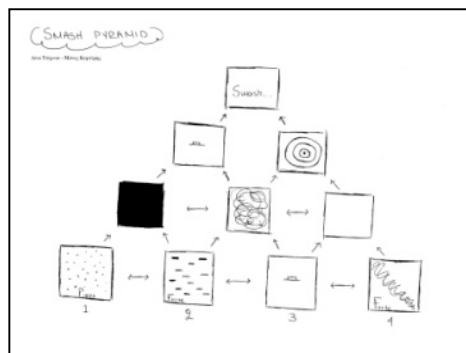


Figure 1: *Smash Pyramid* – Lina Tsernou, Manos Karteris

*The lights are off
A few seconds' silence
Think of something nebulous and depict it with timbres
Listen to the others and play in opposition
Stop
And free yourself*

Example 1: *Small Blue ensemble* – Olga Papakonstantinou, Nefeli Kondaki

The process of composing such scores, particularly when involving music students in an academic institution, suggests a conceptual change in the way that institutionalised learning accommodates composition and performance. The performer's submission to a composer's intentions, the attempt to minimise «errors» in relation to a musical text, the composer's unique «expertise», the irreversibility of musical structure, are brought into question. Ideas such as that of collectivity, liberation from the «standard» of a directly reiterable score interpretation, acceptance of the subjectivity entailed in a verbal or graphic score and of the auditory / visual implications of this subjectivity, transference of responsibility for compositional structure onto the performer, creative use of one's surrounding performance space, a sense of homogeneity within a group combined with a necessity for individuality and distance among its members, become far more significant than the traditional responsibilities of «correctly» interpreting a prescriptive score.

Other scores constructed during such workshops depart from purely musical improvisation, and extend onto an experimentation with space, the performer's body and his / her own thought processes. Eleftheria Christodoulou's score *Leaves and Notes...* (Fig. 2 and Ex. 2) and Sapfo Pantzaki's *Carioca Birello* (Ex. 3) were presented in the action and graphic score «Composing without Notes», convened by myself and Danae Stefanou during the annual «Music Village» series of workshops in Pelion, Greece in 2009.²⁵



Figure 2: *Leaves + Notes...* - Eleftheria Christodoulou

The wind blows, leaves fall and turn into notes
Take a leaf and/or a friend and turn them into a note, real or imaginary
Dissolve the note, in reality or in your imagination, and turn it into a leaf and/or a friend
Notes fall and turn into leaves... and/or friends.²⁶

Example 2: *Leaves + Notes...* - Eleftheria Christodoulou

Close your eyes and think of three spaces in which you would like to be situated during the performance of the piece

Choose one of these and reject the other two.

Open your eyes and, in three movements, approximate one of the two spaces that you rejected. You are 40% light and 60% heavy for as much time as you require in the spot that you are now situated.

Play / improvise / think / move using that instruction.

Next, direct yourself, if you wish, towards the space that you originally chose.

Show to the nearest performer, in whichever way you want, why you initially chose that space.

As soon as you feel 100% heavy, stop.

Example 3: *Carioca Birello* – Sapfo Pantzaki

Despite the fact that Eleftheria's score employs more poetic imagery while Sapfo's is rather more "positivist" in character, they share an important common trait: the space and its employment, the performer's body and his/her relation to other performers, as well as internal, mental action, play a crucial role. Sonic improvisation can be considered secondary. It is possible that, during a performance of those scores, not a single note of music will be heard. Instead, what is highlighted here is the performer's self-reflection, his/her movement, his/her realization that the body acts within a space and influences oneself, as well as one's surrounding space, including people. In the case of Sapfo's score, the performer is faced with the crucial realization that his/her body carries a "special weight" that can change the way one plays, moves or even thinks. One could conclude that these two scores are more concerned with "internalized" than "externalized" action.

The performer's relationship to his/her body, the relationship between the body and the surrounding space, as well as the "mental activity" that is never externalized are issues that, in their overwhelming majority, have been left out of compositional explorations in the realm of western art music. The performing body usually "just sits there", with no active role outside the production of sound. The performer does not have to "listen" to his/her body, but should just carry out a set of given "orders" that are inscribed in a musical text, with the greatest amount of fidelity, even if that means temporarily suspending several levels of one's bodily awareness altogether. Bodily circumstances, therefore, only matter to the extent that they may exert an impact on the impeccable execution of notation-as-written. Similarly, the body's spatial connections with an animate and physical milieu are scarcely taken into significant account within a standard musical education, just as inner, mental action simply lies outside the interests of musical composition as a product-driven occupation. The only accountable "mental activity" in such contexts is the preliminary stage of "drawing-board" or "sketching" processes in composition, and the "study away from the instrument" or "table practice" in performance. If a work of new music is not audibly performed, then it can scarcely be considered as performed at all, especially when one considers academic and institutional environments. The two aforementioned scores, as well as other similar attempts, constitute an expansion of compositional horizons, towards more anthropocentric directions, that will enable performers to think and act holistically rather than in localized, segmented ways; to act with their minds and not just with their hands; to realize that they influence and are influenced by the space in which they operate, as well as the people that are situated there; to feel that their bodies and gestures carry a unique weight that matters greatly, both for themselves as individuals, and for the sake of the music that they are making.

Collective improvisation classes involving both controlled and free improvisation, as well as workshops focusing on the composition and performance of graphic and verbal scores are an important means of enabling musicians that are active in composing and performing western art music to reconsider what might hitherto have been considered a set of irreplaceable, absolute constants. They constitute exercises in collectivity and tolerance, especially when taking place in the competitive, individualistic environment encountered in today's changing university cultures. Collective improvisation and collaborative work expresses for me, and for fellow musicians, a basic human aspiration: "to live in cooperative harmony with fellow human beings"²⁷, through the medium of making and performing music. It is obvious that music cannot reinvent social relations; music is not an instrument of revolution. It is, however, capable, when extended beyond its centralised institutional tradition, to motivate musicians "to take control of their own creative lives", as Eddie Prevost has eloquently argued, and to "weaken the constraints of cultural power imposed by the state that are embedded in the concept of property ownership and the ultimately negative, socially atomizing and exploitative philosophy of 'possessive individualism'."²⁸ To continue with Prevost's line of thought, in an environment "of increased and globalised pressure to conform to an universal capitalist set of social values and relations, in which all humans are reduced to productive-cum-consuming units, we need, albeit in our small way, to use our musics as a means of developing,

demonstrating and celebrating new rituals for a freer and more cooperative system of social and productive relations"²⁹. Through collective practices, improvisers have the ability to stand against the individualistic, centralized model of artistic creation and management that is in dialogue only with the "free market" that sustains it, and to create participatory and collaborative contexts for the development of their art instead. Collective improvisation with or without the aid of a score is an opportunity for musicians, amateur musicians, educators and anyone interested in music, to operate in a non-competitive, human-centred, collaborative creative environment. By re-entering the workshop instead of abandoning the creative process at the stage of a completed work, it is possible to construct and experience circumstances where the "protagonist" is no longer the individual, as in the academically supported narrative of most western avant gardes, but the group. Besides, to conclude with one of Prevost's most astute observations, if we do not assume responsibility for our world, at least to the extent in which this translates into our everyday occupation with an artform, then someone else will do it for us.³⁰

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¹ Lydia Goehr *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: an essay in the philosophy of music* (Oxford: OUP, 1994) 242.

² Goehr 1994, 234

³ Goehr 1994, 234

⁴ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music* (Ashbourne: Da Capo Press, 1992) 66

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- ⁵ Baily 1992, 98
- ⁶ Baily 1992, 98
- ⁷ Baily 1992, 66
- ⁸ Edwin Prevost, *Minute Particulars: meanings in music-making in the wake of hierarchical realignments and other essays* (UK: Copula, 2004), 85
- ⁹ Prevost 2004, 17
- ¹⁰ Erhard Karkoschka, *Das Schriftbild der Neuen Musik* (Celle: Hermann Moeck Verlag, 1965)
- ¹¹ Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, "Notation-Material and Form," *Perspectives of New Music* 4 (1965): 39-44.
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- ²² Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music* (2nd ed., UK: CUP, 1999), 20
- ²³ Nyman 1999, 3
- ²⁴ Bailey 1992, 70
- ²⁵ <http://site.music-village.gr/>
- ²⁶ The Greek original text is actually a pun on the sonic affinities of the words leaf (*fylo*) and friend (*filos*).
- ²⁷ Prevost 2004, 3
- ²⁸ Prevost 2004, 37
- ²⁹ Prevost 2004, 154
- ³⁰ Prevost 2009, 58