

RITUAL AND TRANSGRESSION: A CASE STUDY IN NEW MUSIC

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This research lies on the concepts of ritual and narrative as applied in a case study of a musical theatre piece. In traditional musical narrative the focus is on construction, and one could speak of fields around which hierarchies, systems and rules of musical language are built. In this piece we find unpredictable transgressive musical gestures, acted out by performers, combined with conventional narrative procedures. This study aims to demonstrate that the concepts of musical narrative and ritual cannot be seen as isolated objects but as entities of transformation by composers, and how the trilogy composer/performer/listener (audience) is associated with narrative and ritual. Ritual and transgression can thus be linked to traditional concepts of musical narrative connecting composing, performing, and listening activities.

Keywords: ritual; narrative; performance; transgression; deconstruction.

Public performances of contemporary music within the Western-art tradition are characterized by recurring patterns involving not only repertoire choices, but also behavioural norms that affect performers and audience alike. Composers are aware of the ritual dimension implied by this fact, and their creative work is informed by the knowledge of the impact these patterns have on performers and audiences. This study aims to demonstrate that the concepts of musical narrative and ritual are addressed as entities of transformation by composers, and how the trilogy composer/performer/listener (audience) is associated with both musical narrative and ritual. This research lies on the concepts of ritual, transgression and musical narrative, as applied in a case study of a musical theatre piece – *Sound Bridges*, for flute, marimba and double bass, composed by the first author of this article. The study focuses on how musical gesture takes different meanings in the

trilogy composer/performer/listener, and discusses different concepts connecting the role of embodied ritual in performance, and its effects on the listener.

NARRATIVE AND RITUAL

The rise of the concept of the musical work as an autonomous entity, derived from the defence of absolute music (*i.e.* non-programmatic music) by critics such as Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), and promoted by composers from the Romantic generation, led to a focus on the work (as represented by a score), which apparently rendered less prevalent the role of the performers and the public in the context of live performances. Richard Taruskin points out the consequences of an autonomous outlook for the actual performance:

In music, whose ‘absoluteness’ as a medium has always been the envy of the other arts (at least in the modernist view), we can observe best the translation, once again, of what started as a heuristic principle into an aesthetic one. Moreover, there is a noticeable split between those who regard the absolute ‘meaning’ of a work of art as a matter of abstract internal relationships, and those who would limit the meaning (or rather, perhaps, the essence) quite simply and stringently to the physical reality, that is, to the sounds themselves. (Taruskin, 1995: 74)

The focus on the work and its composer, rather than on the alleged contingencies and variability associated with performance, was decisive in the establishment of a typified structure of public musical presentations that crystallized in the early 20th century, becoming a prevalent pattern that still subsists, to this day, in Western-art musical performances. Before the 19th century rise of the concept of absolute music, these performances were characterized by their variability regarding models of presentation, as they were more focused on music’s social role: performances were generally not presented in concert halls such as the ones we find nowadays, but were closely connected to specific social groups and their activities and spaces of social interaction. Furthermore, until the end of the 18th century, composers and performers were rarely professionally independent, and their work often reflected the aesthetic and cultural preferences of patrons and audiences. The growing establishment of the free-lance composer during the 19th century, combined with the above-mentioned focus on the musical work, led to the gradual development of standardized presentation patterns that reinforced the focus on the work as represented solely by its sonic aspect, and minimized the variability associated with previous performance patterns.

Current standardized patterns are noticeable in several aspects of live Western-art performances, for instance: the average duration of a concert, the choice of repertoire sequences (which follow criteria such as chronology, growing level of difficulty or volume impact), or the types of works presented (seeking contrast through juxtaposition of works of different eras or character, or seeking thematic or authorial similarity). Other patterns affect the performers: dress rules, sets of specific gestures (discreet for expressive, dignified repertoire, or ample and exaggerated for virtuosistic repertoire), or behaviour models towards the audience. But the audience is also conditioned by specific rules: silence during performances, applause at specific moments only, indignant stares at prevaricators, and cough at appropriate moments.

These rules affect concert performances of Western-art historical and contemporary music alike, but the influence of multimedia productions, along with composers' and performers' growing involvement in projects that combine non-musical means of artistic expression, are gradually altering some patterns of musical presentation. The use of theatrical and multimedia resources alter the conventional view of absolute music as represented through the score. The fact that some works deliberately create non-musical references represents an alternative trend in contemporary Western-art music, parallel to the existence of works that retain the absolute-music paradigm. The reliance on theatrical devices, which will be addressed in this case study, is characteristic of a referential trend, a trend that often challenges existing ritual features that are embodied in standardized performance patterns.

The concept of ritual has often been applied as an analytical tool in the context of ethnomusicological studies, focusing on the ritual dimension of the performance of traditional music. This theoretical approach is rarely applied to Western-art musical performances, in spite of the fact that there is a clear connection between the concept of ritual and the patterns of presentation involving composers, performers and audiences. The study of the role of ritual within this framework has been limited, as the concept of the autonomous work has conditioned musicological studies, in particular until the 1980s, and has led to a focus on formal analytical studies or structural approaches that preclude contextual aspects. Sociological and anthropological issues have since become more widely researched, but there is still a marked lack of studies of theoretical models that explore the relationship between composers, performers and audiences in Western-art musical performance.

Exclusively musical analysis tools are generally not suitable for an adequate characterization of contemporary musical works presenting theatrical or multimedia elements, a type of repertoire that contemporary composers and performers are growingly

creating/presenting. Standard analytical tools usually include score-based methodologies. That is the case of the most common analytical methods such as formal analysis, Schenkerian analysis and musical set-theory analysis. These methods depart from the musical text exclusively, and are often associated with positivistic theoretical stances. New currents in musicology have, since the 1980s, challenged the relevance of these types of methodologies and questioned their actual contribution towards a holistic understanding of the work of art. As Joseph Kerman pointed out, the analyst's

dogged concentration on internal relationships within the single work of art is ultimately subversive as far as any reasonable complete view of music is concerned. Music's autonomous structure is only one of the many elements that contribute to its import. Along with preoccupation with structure goes the neglect of other vital matters – not only the whole historical complex referred to above, but also everything else that makes music affective, moving, emotional, expressive. (Kerman, 1985: 73)

If strict musical analysis is problematic for the study of works that were created with a focus on their sonic representation, the choice of a suitable methodology for the study of musical repertoire involving theatrical or multimedia resources becomes even more challenging. Two concepts, nevertheless, can provide suitable models of analysis for this type of repertoire, namely the concepts of ritual and narrative.

In music the use of theatrical devices can enhance performance. They are also linked to ritual practices, a powerful idea that has been, and still is, applied to compositional works. In the context of theatrical and performance studies, this idea has been developed by authors such as Richard Schechner and it remains a key concept in ethnomusicology studies: "Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. [...] Play gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the excessive, and risky. [...] Thus, ritual and play transform people" (Schechner, 2007: 52). If musical narrative is envisaged as a sequence of ritual structures, which may involve an emotional attachment from the audience to the musical work, it then becomes one of the effects that a composer intends to produce in the listener, and the performer, as mediator, plays an essential role in this process.

The term narrative has been addressed differently in research fields such as literary studies, linguistics, aesthetics, and anthropology. In musical research, different approaches to narrative have been discussed (Almén, 2008; Klein, 2004; Maus, 1988, Tarasti, 1979), resulting in "several reorientations of the concept: "... new consensus is

developing about musical narrative that is aware both of the limitations of musical expression and of the rich potential of music as a narrative medium” (Almén, 2008: 3). All these studies shed light on an issue that can be observed through different angles, but “common to virtually all approaches to musical narrative is the recognition of a degree of similarity between musical and literary discourse” (*ibidem*: 11), a similarity that can be extended to theatrical discourse, since “narrative mechanisms native to one medium [...] frequently cross-pollinate with other media, resulting in complex semantic hybrids” (*ibidem*: 38).

The concepts of ritual and narrative can be combined since, as Richard Schechner points out, “performing a ritual, or a ritualized theatre piece or exercise, is both narrative (cognitive) and affective. These work together to form the experience of ritualizing” (Schechner, 1995: 240). Underlying each ritual, we can find a narrative procedure that can be verbally or non-verbally based.

DECONSTRUCTING MUSICAL NARRATIVES

In *traditional* musical narrative the focus is on construction, and one could speak of fields around which hierarchies, systems and rules of musical language are built. In *Sound Bridges*, the work that provided the basis for this case study, we find transgressive musical gestures, acted out by performers, combined with conventional narrative procedures, as the successive suspensions in the piece generate pauses in the discourse, and challenge conventional hierarchical values. An effective non-verbal communication by the performers can mediate a narrative deconstruction of the listener’s expectations, through the connection between musical gestures on the one hand, and musical narrative and ritual on the other.

In the words of Paisley Livingston (2008: 363), “the content of the narrative includes not only a series of represented events, but actions whereby these events are presented to an implicit audience, as well as the agent(s) responsible for those actions. Narrative entails narrating which entails a narrator.” Therefore, we could extrapolate that in a music piece we may speak about musical narrative, and the composer, the performer and the listener are the participating agents: the composer as narrator, the listener as the audience, and the performer as the mediator. A composer sets up a narrative in an analogous way to a literary/theatrical work by establishing a close relationship between verbal and musical modes of perception.

Verbal and non-verbal events are often configured into various relationships, establishing a network of expected values that leads to understanding in the listener. If and when this network is broken, the awareness of the narrative processes can have an

impact on the listener, as “narrative acts as a potential link to important aspects of human experience” (Almén, 2008: 41).

Familiarity builds on our common understanding of things. When listening to music, our imagination constructs narrative contexts and/or discursive trajectories. Nevertheless, the incomprehension of a musical experience also creates barriers and splinters the construction of a continuous thought. The deconstruction of the individual narrative can be achieved through abrupt interruptions in the musical flow. In this paper the concept of flow, taken from Mihali Csikszentmihalyi’s (1988) concept of flow or optimal experience, is applied to the listener’s perspective as an action that can be enjoyable and rewarding, creating understanding and individual sense of control.

The main objective of the musical theatre piece *Sound Bridges* is the narrative deconstruction of the listener’s thoughts. Thus, we find unpredictable musical gestures that challenge conventional concert-performance rules, and cyclically return to traditional settings. The central idea is to create suspense, disruption, discontinuity and rupture in the way the musical narrative fragments are perceived, breaking the traditional formal outline of the piece.

Nonverbal gestures and nonverbal communication clearly play an important role in music performance. Among the functions ascribed to nonverbal behaviour, Highlen and Hill (1984: 368) point out that “behaviour is a primary means of expressing or communicating emotions [...]. Finally, in relation to verbal behaviour, nonverbal behaviours can repeat, contradict, complement, accent, or regulate meaning”. Verbal and nonverbal communication helps to configure musical events into different categories that may organize musical narrative perception.

In *Sound Bridges*, we can trace the dialogic interaction between verbal and nonverbal tools, as they reinforce and complement the narrative that underlies both the composer’s and the performers’ intentions.

The piece’s title and the program notes are verbal communicative tools, which function as a direct way of transmitting an intention from the composer to the performer and to the listener, and engage them into a narrative strategy. Tempo indications, agogic and dynamics, as well as music theatre also function as means of verbal communication between composer and performer, and can act indirectly on the listener’s perception of narrative.

We find both musical and physical gestures as nonverbal tools; in the case of this piece, it is through the music-theatre genre that the composer develops a nonverbal form of communication. The use of several gestures (as described below) generates abrupt cuts in the musical flow. Composer, performer and listener play several roles in this

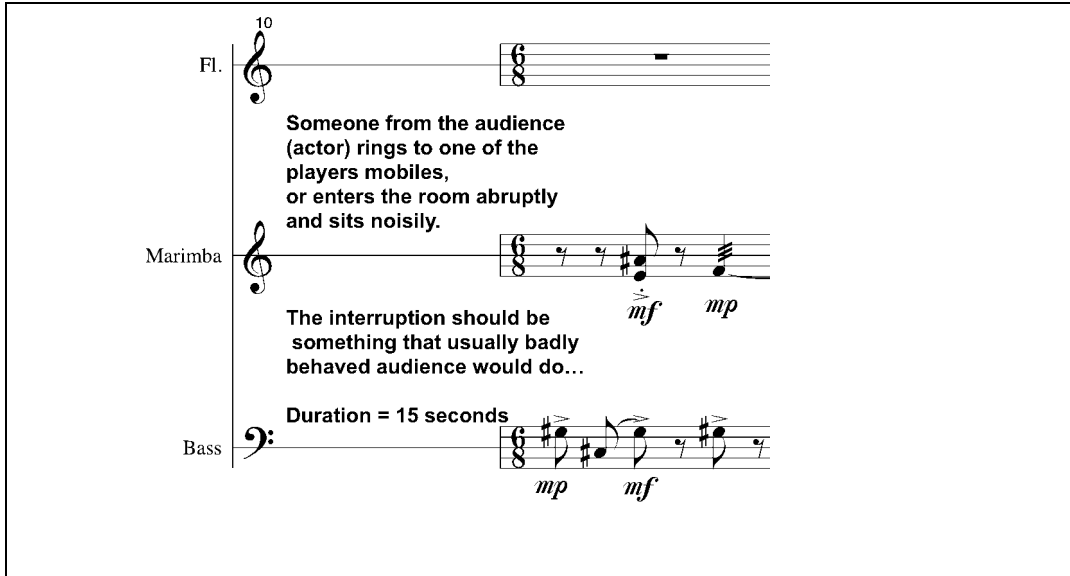
(de)constructed world. The composer challenges both performer and listener to accept an unconventional sequence of events. The efficacy of the piece requires the performer's engagement and willingness to adopt alternative behaviours.

Resorting to cuts as a dominant style, suppressing and subverting the traditional rules of musical writing, are ways of intervening in the musical material, creating multiple sensations and experiences. The musical narration becomes discontinuous, compromising the linearity of the listener's musical thinking. The deconstructed musical narrative prevents the indifferent acceptance of the listener, in an attempt to provoke reflection.

RITUAL AND TRANSGRESSION

Musical theatre performances create ritual-like ways of expression. The trilogy composer/performer/audience becomes deeply embedded with narrative and ritual. *Sound Bridges* was planned as a pre-ordered set of ritualised moments. The work is conceived as a narrative, and score indications enact a set of actions and a dramatic sequence. The ritualised conventional sequences associated with erudite-music concerts are, however, not respected: 6 blocks of music are cyclically interrupted by compositional devices that break musical flow, disrupting the expected musical syntax. These compositional devices include: "mobile ring tone" (Figure 1), "score pages out of order" (Figure 2), "players' cough" (Figure 3), "motionless & repetition" (Figure 4), "leaving the stage" (Figure 5). The narrative sequence challenges the conventional rituals by introducing anti-ritualistic gestures and actions.

The compositional devices applied to interrupt the musical narrative and ritual experience are mainly theatrical. Before the start of a concert, turning off mobile phones is a common ritual. As can be observed in the musical excerpt in Figure 1, the first interruption in *Sound Bridges* is caused by an audience member (an actor) calling one of the players' mobiles (other options are given, such as entering the room abruptly and sitting noisily). This first interruption should be acted as something that a badly-behaved audience would do. The interruption is expected to last approximately 15 seconds. Most audiences, at this point, are unaware of the transgression.



10

Fl.

Someone from the audience (actor) rings to one of the players mobiles, or enters the room abruptly and sits noisily.

Marimba

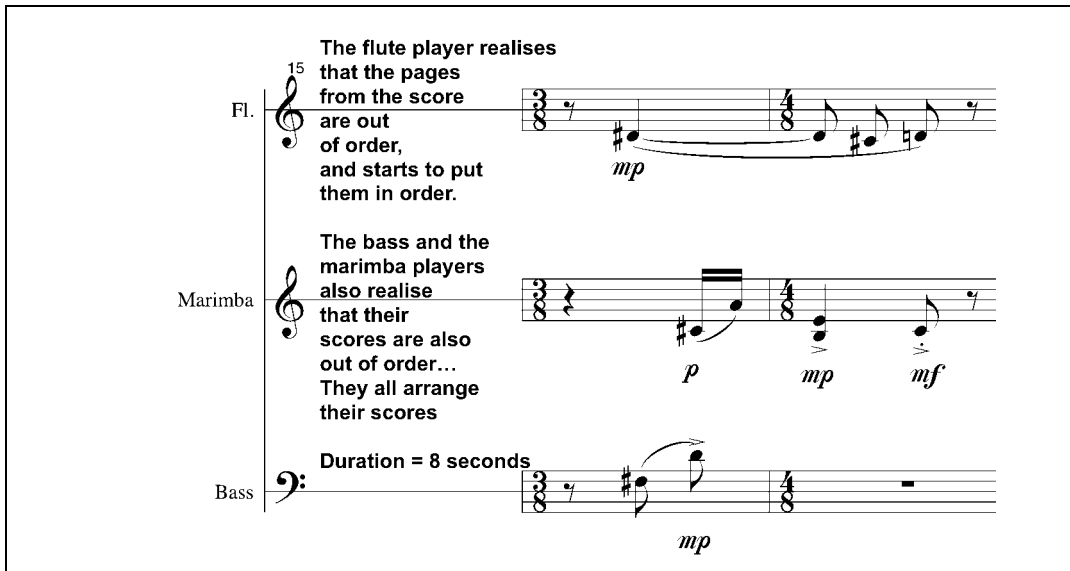
The interruption should be something that usually badly behaved audience would do...

Duration = 15 seconds

Bass

Figure 1 - mobile ring tone

In the musical excerpt of Figure 2, the second interruption of the piece, the flute player pretends that the pages from his score are out of order and starts to put them in order, introducing a further ritual transgression, imitated by the bass and the marimba players. The interruption is expected to last approximately 8 seconds. In the premiere of the work, one member of the audience, unaware of the staging of this uncommon, but possible, mishap, commented: "Such a bad luck! Maybe they should restart this piece!"



15

Fl.

The flute player realises that the pages from the score are out of order, and starts to put them in order.

Marimba

The bass and the marimba players also realise that their scores are also out of order... They all arrange their scores

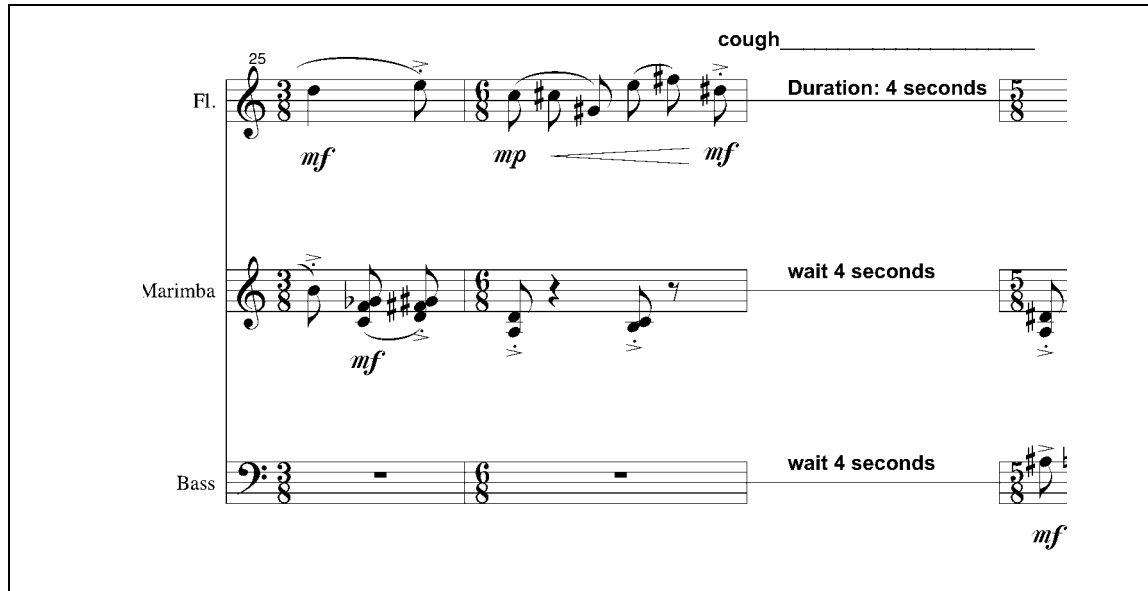
Duration = 8 seconds

Bass

Figure 2 - Score pages out of order

In Figure 3, which corresponds to the third interruption, indications require the flutist to cough, while the other players wait for the cough to stop. Coughing is an action that often happens during concerts, but it is usually associated with the audience; in this case the

composer's intentions are that the performers' actions mirror the audience's. The duration of this interruption is 4 seconds – the theatrical interruption is smaller since, at this point, some members of the audience are starting to realize that these interruptions may be intentional.



The musical score for Figure 3, titled "Players' cough", is arranged for Flute (Fl.), Marimba, and Bass. The Flute part begins at measure 25 with a dynamic of *mf*. It features a melodic line that changes dynamics to *mp* and then back to *mf*. A "cough" is indicated above the Flute staff with a horizontal line. The Marimba and Bass parts have a "wait 4 seconds" instruction. The score is in 3/8 time and ends with a 5/8 time signature.

Figure 3 - Players' cough

By the time the piece reaches the fourth interruption (Figure 4), most of the audience has understood that the first three interruptions were planned, that the piece includes intended transgressions, and that there is a parallel transgressive narrative interrupting what is normally conceived as the ritual of a piece. In this example, players stand motionless (as if someone had pressed a "pause" button) for 15 to 25 seconds; suddenly, they start playing repeatedly the same phrase over and over again. The contrast between stillness and motion provides an alternative gesture that allows the audience to reevaluate the meaning of previous interruptions and embrace the new narrative concept.

Figure 4 - Motionless & repetition

Finally, at the end of the piece (Figure 5), the last compositional device to disrupt the expected musical syntax involves the flute player, who plays his last note as if he has no intention to finish; meanwhile, the marimba player gives up waiting and starts to push the marimba off stage, followed by the bass player. At this point, the standard closing ritual (audience clapping, performers bowing down) is no longer expected; the new ritual has been fully assimilated by the trilogy composer/performer/audience.

Figure 5 - Leaving the stage

Three different perspectives can be distinguished in rituals involving Western-art music: performance, composition and listening. It is possible to apply Schechner's (2007: 56) four perspectives of rituals and ritualizing, namely structure, function, process and experience, to characterize the intervening "actors" (composer, performer and listener).

Composers deal with the aspect of function and experience, projecting how the composition will impact performer and listener. The ritual process used in composition involves the organization of performance concepts and imagined dynamics, namely meaning, modes of performance, choice of physical space and performers.

Performers have to think about the manner in which they are going to present the ritual, how to use the given space and, most importantly, how to enact that same ritual. In *Sound Bridges*, while acting and playing a role, performers momentarily become someone else, actors of the intentions inscribed in the score. Effectiveness is the prime concern, and entertainment is relegated to a secondary plane.

Listeners are also participants in the ritual action. Arnold van Gennep proposed a three-phased structure of ritual action: “the preliminal, liminal and postliminal” (Gennep, 1960/2004: 11). The liminal phase corresponds to “a period of time when a person is ‘betwixt and between’ social categories or personal identities” (Schechner, 2007: 66). As pointed out by Schechner (*ibidem*), during the ‘liminal’ phase, intervenients in the ritual “become ‘nothing,’ put into a state of extreme vulnerability where they are open to change”. Victor Turner (1969) used the term ‘liminoid’ to distinguish voluntary activities (including the arts and popular entertainment) from “liminal,’ which refers to rites of passage. The performance of *Sound Bridges* could be described as a liminoid moment, during which the performers act as mediators, leading the audience from an initial situation when standard rules seem to be enforced, to the acceptance of a new narrative planned by the composer. Applying this concept to *Sound Bridges* we can assume that listeners lose their individual voice in order to accept a new musical narrative deconstruction.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of ritual can be successfully manipulated by the composer and the performer, particularly in the context of contemporary music. Transgression of ritual, as planned by the composer, can act as a deconstructive factor; as mediators, performers take a crucial role in the process, allowing the creation of multiple sensations and experiences in the listener.

Music theatre can thus function as a relevant field for research of nonverbal techniques. Musical works with a theatrical approach can then be seen as a theatrical action that is generated and determined by the music; in *Sound Bridges* these theatrical actions, previously called blocs of music and interruptions, are generated by the music itself, and allow for the deconstruction of musical narrative through ritualized forms of

transgression. Ritual and transgression can thus be linked to traditional concepts of musical narrative connecting composing, performing and listening activities.

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