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FIXING/CIRCUMSCRIBING/SUGGESTING/EVOKING.

An analysis of Stockhausen's text pieces.

by Carl Bergstrøm-Nielsen, Aalborg University, Denmark, 2006.

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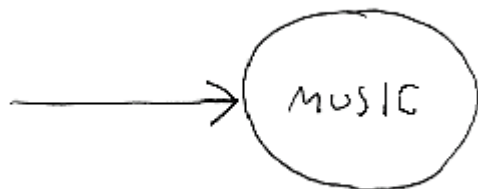
The basis for this article is a longer article in Danish which can be found on the internet at International Improvised Music Archive (<http://www20.brinkster.com/improarchive/>) as well as at www.vbn.dk under my name and under the title "Sprog som musikalsk notation". There is one more short version in German, to be found at the internet locations mentioned above.

INTRODUCTION

Karlheinz Stockhausen wrote two collections of verbally notated pieces for freely variable ensembles: *From the Seven Days* (1968) and *For Times to Come* (1970) - I will use the abbreviations Ft7D and FTtC in the following. There are thirty-one pieces in all. And they have many different degrees of freedom, as I am going to demonstrate here. They also range from down-to-earth to very meditative. Besides the original German versions, official versions of both collections exist in English and French as well – see specifications in the literature list. Thus, they have long been available to musicians and scholars internationally. Yet, there still seems to be a need for more exact information on what is really the musical substance of these pieces.

Since the seventies I have had extensive experience with these pieces. In the Group for Intuitive Music Group we have, since 1975, played Stockhausen's text compositions and our own pieces which were often non-traditionally notated or notated with mixed means. And since 1983 I have regularly lead improvisation courses at Aalborg University and elsewhere.

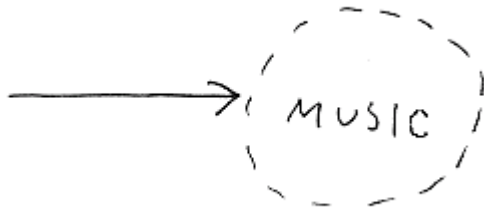
The following sections of this article will deal with different instruction types found in these collections: fixing, circumscribing, suggesting and evoking. As should become apparent, "fixing" is the more concrete and direct form in terms of describing the musical outcome, "evoking" the more indirect one, and there are intermediary steps.



FIXING

Unanimity (from FtTC) begins like this: "Play and/or sing / extremely long quiet sounds / and / extremely short loud sounds". That is, to be sure, a clear description of the material to play, is it not? There are further two pieces in FTtC having as their theme the use of solely long or short sounds – **Elongation** and **Shortening. Right Durations**, the very first piece that was composed as part of Ft7D, takes as its theme the duration of single sounds: "Play a sound / play it for so long / until you feel / that you should stop". From this, a greatly sensitive music of durations can result. Like in serial music from the fifties, this music is emancipated from rigid metre, but it is here more immediate and closer to language, because it arises in the moment and was not written out on paper. I have instructed many groups of students in this piece, and while the sounding result of course differs according to the group, it is however every time very clearly a version of the same piece. **Set Sail for the Sun** (Ft7D – see quote below) is carried by long tones and slow intonation movements of tone. In **Communication** (FTtC) one finds categories like "as quietly, gently and as long as possible", "moderately loud, rather agitatedly and moderately long" and "as loud, excitedly and as short as possible". They stylize the

activity, and every category has a signal function in the piece. Many pieces start explicitly from the single tone or single sound. – Also as to describing the processes there exists quite clear instructions. In **Awake** (FTtC) the text concludes with "Abrupt end" – a relevant challenge to the habitual way in which improvised often will fade out very gradually. And in **Interval** (FTtC) one can speak of a form scheme: two single tones are to grow gradually into two chords of each ten tones – after having reached this, chords are to get smaller until only two tones are left again.



VARIOUS FORMS OF CIRCUMSCRIBING

In this category, specific musical ideas are described which need a certain interpretative activity from the musician. In the examples to follow, various musical states are circumscribed in a both metaphorical and matter-of-fact way: "Play/sing as parallel with the others as possible" from **Bird of Passage** (FTtC). I would interpret it like this: relatively individual parts, relatively constant playing without much pause, being open to inspiration from the others. "Place each note / on the head of another" from **Presentiment** (FTtC) – "Break through the note of another" from **Outside** (FTtC) – "Penetrate into the note of another co-player" from **Inside** (FTtC) – "Divide the sound of another" from **Spectra** (FTtC). Those last four examples could be seen as models for the forming of contrasts or, oppositely, the melting together in the process of a common sound created by two players. And what is the theme of **Set Sail for the Sun** (Ft7D) - ? "play a tone for so long / until you hear its individual vibrations // hold the tone / and listen to the tones of the others / - to all of them together, not to individual ones - / and slowly move your tone / until you arrive at complete harmony / and the whole sound turns to gold / to pure, gently shimmering fire". In my experience this is simply about intonation. It can be achieved by the musicians solely in a teamwork – it could only be prescribed as a certain character they should aim at, but not in a mechanical and exact way. Regardless whether the character in question is "like gold" or like other, interesting qualities!

There are also descriptions of a common poetical nature being less matter-of-fact. Examples are "Fly away" (**Bird of Passage** – FTtC) – "nocturnal forest with dialogues" (**Awake** – FTtC) – "until all [notes] ... / begin to burn" (**Inside** – FTtC). One can imagine different interpretations, but I would presume there is a good chance of agreeing on something characteristic, because of the probability of a common "program music" frame of reference as to what could be "nocturnal forest" (quiet, low pitches, dark timbres...) or "fire" (fast changing polyphonic movement...). Here, like in most pieces, one may try out a piece several times, maybe with a common dialogue in between and thus, in a sense, "intone" the interpretations together.

In many cases pieces have very simple, recognizable basic structures which can form complex situations and developments through heterophony – the part itself appears in various simultaneous augmentations and diminutions and other kinds of variation. Together with the other parts, a complex structure results (one well-known model of such a procedure in composed music is the fugue). This is the case with **Meeting Point** (Ft7D): "everyone plays the same tone / lead the tone wherever your thoughts / lead you / do not leave it, stay with it / always return / to the same place". It will be easy to hear how the parts move away from the agreed-upon tone and come back to it. But how the complex pattern of these movements turn out has not been determined. Something similar is valid for **Right Durations** (see above). In **Unanimity** (FTtC) there is a special direction for the process: "Try to play/sing / more and more attacks / SYNCHRONOUSLY with the others / without visual signs". Taken literally this might be impossible. But the attempts produce a special intensity and alternating episodes of condensed activity followed by relative relaxation. Despite the short statement this is a piece having a strong identity. To my ears, it always sounds "pronouncedly expressionistic" (also when played by different groups).

FIXED AND CIRCUMSCRIBED

I will quote **Vibration** (FTtC) as an advanced example of a multi-layered music:

All together – all separate

All together – all separate

and so on: slowly accelerate (linger three times)

fast!

accelerate further

until

fused

Now we have reached, however, only the first level. The process is to go on, by square multiplication as it were -:

fused:

All together – all separate

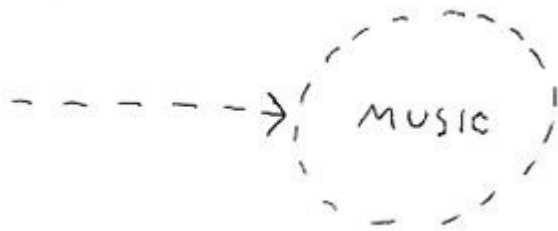
All together – all separate

and

so

on

To my experience this is literally a piece that can make you dizzy, and yet all descriptions are rather concrete. The process must be synchronized, and the idea of "together-separate" may be easy enough to understand. But to realize it is a challenge that calls for collective virtuosity!



SUGGESTING

There is a series of five pieces (in Ft7D) dealing with macro- and micro-dimensions of cosmos. Here, the imagination of the musician is required in order to translate, for instance, the following elements from "**Downwards**" into musical phenomena:

play a vibration in the rhythm of your limbs

play a vibration in the rhythm of your cells

play a vibration in the rhythm of your molecules

play a vibration in the rhythm of your atoms

play a vibration in the rhythm of your smallest particles which your inner ear can reach (...)

For all these pieces, the serial notion about a continuum is the structuring principle, and this might perhaps simplify the task of the interpreter. "First, to fit all isolated phenomena into a continuum, and then work out and compose contrasting elements from this continuum" (Stockhausen, 1959). Both the interpreters and those listeners who look at this text will have an inner "map" on which the different "landscape forms" appear with a common denominator – comparable to elevations, for instance.

Stockhausen relates how "rhythm of your thinking" was once concretized: as a preliminary exercise, close the eyes and tap with a pencil every time there is a change of thought.

In this preliminary exercise we have an instance of that which is the matter in the next section:



EVOKING

Finally there are also instructions for preparations which are to produce or evoke meditative dispositions in the musician. Bearing in mind the big controversies having taken place in Germany, it is of primary importance to observe how *different* the pieces are. **Gold Dust** (Ft7D) is probably without discussion the most extreme one – one may only perform it after having lived four days alone without eating. **Arrival** (Ft7D) is much easier accessible – to imagine energies within your body, in a way comparable to that of usual yoga practise, like it is taught at yoga schools everywhere. A different meditation, that seeks out of the multitude of thoughts and waits for inner silence to appear, form the introduction of **IT** (Ft7D) and continues during the piece. A very simple, but potentially very effective imagination which could be categorized as bordering on the category of poetic descriptions can be found in **Unlimited** (Ft7D): "play a sound / with the certainty / that you have an infinite amount of time and space". Related to this is **Intensity** (Ft7D): "play single sounds / with such dedication / until you feel the warmth / that radiates from you (...)". So, the target groups of meditation practitioners consists in the first case of only special adventurers, in the second case it includes all those who have had some yoga meditation training, and the two last pieces are suitable even for untrained people!

SOUNDING IDENTITY OF THE PIECES

Some pieces, for instance **Right Durations** and **Unanimity**, preserve their sounding identity to a high degree from one performance to another and from one group to another. This is not necessarily the case with all pieces. Hugh Davies gives us a dialectical view on this, in stating, concerning **Intensity**, that this piece sounds in all cases different from a totally free improvisation without any givens. So the basis for **Intensity** is an inner structure, just like composers may work with inner structures which one cannot directly hear. This is, however, an extreme case in practise. Even a piece like **IT**, which maybe has been "fixed" to an amount of 40% but of which 60% has been "evoked" in a seemingly unpredictable way, has according to Stockhausen (in "Fragen und Antworten...") a very definite sounding identity, consisting of sudden actions – and personally I can only confirm this.

CONCLUSION

In Ft7D and FTtC we encounter a number of instruction types which may be combined and which can be viewed in a continuum:

1) instructions which describe musical phenomena and processes in quite concrete terminology, for instance:

"extremely long quiet sounds"

"Abrupt end"

2) instructions which characterize musical phenomena in a circumscribing way:

- in a metaphorical-concrete way, for instance:

"Play/sing as parallel with the others as possible"

- in a metaphorical-poetic way, for instance:

"nocturnal forest with dialogues"

- models of processes which do, statistically, govern a specific character but which also produce unpredictable results, for instance:

"Try to play/sing / more and more attacks / SYNCHRONOUSLY with the others"

3) Instructions which suggest musical phenomena but which leave a wide space open for individually different interpretations, for instance:

"play a vibration in the rhythm of your atoms"

4) Instructions which aim at suggesting or creating a disposition for playing, for instance:

"play single sounds / with such dedication / until you feel the warmth / that radiates from you"

The existence of such a continuum of instruction types is scarcely accidental but has come out of Stockhausens' serial thinking – cf. Kohl's striking observations. As Maconie says, the musical thoughts in FTtC "by and large...take on a more practical turn", compared to Ad7T. Even though there is not a sharp transition, in the second collection there is more fixing, while the "cosmic" pieces and those concerned with meditation form a strikingly large part of Ft7D. Historically, FTtC came later, however, and it may still be less known.

PERSPECTIVE

One of the reasons why Ft7D and FTtC consist of very useful contributions to a repertory with a new performance practise is the fact that they were created by a musician who was familiar with working with musical parameters in an exact way. Any musician seeking around here can select pieces with just the right kind of freedom or fixing, the right kind of meditation or concrete description.

In music literature, Maconie, Kohl, Davies and Bojé provide helpful information about the text pieces – see the literature list and its comments.

Critical mention must, however, go to several other authors here. Brindle, author of a book on experimental music which are in other respects both comprehensive and reliable, makes a summarizing statement. He reproaches Stockhausen for having written

"deliberately and fanatically impracticable" pieces, along with such ones that are "reasonably enough". How can he make the first statement when even Gold Dust has been made successfully at several occasions? However, he can, at least, be credited for allowing Stockhausen's endeavours to appear before the reader represented by two very different examples. He is also aware that the text pieces constitute instructions of quite different kinds: this could be, according to him, "a verse or text which suggests a mood the players must create, a manner of playing, a certain kind of musical action, combinations of these, etc". In other cases however, one might doubt whether the authors have even studied the collections they make characterizing statements about. Sutherland, also author of a general book on experimental music history which treats other kinds of improvisation and new notations seriously, describes the text pieces as simply "deliberately vague or enigmatic". Hermann-Christoph Müller who is even the author of pioneering books on indeterminate performance practise and on Stockhausen's **Prozession**, wrote in an article on that work about the text pieces that they, in his view, "rather suggest a psycho-physical disposition to music making than a clear musical notion". As we have seen, this may be true for some pieces using "suggesting" and "evoking" strategies, but not for them all. It seems that all these authors fail to grasp the fact that Stockhausen indeed does deal with music material using words, making indications of what is to sound or not. Such superficial statements in general music history books and from authors who appear as specialists in the field blur the discussion.

What we are waiting for as something really new about new music seems to be a performance practise which no longer negates the possible exuberance of a free playing together. Through teamwork on equal terms between composer and musician, musicians and listeners are not just having a more interesting time, but also more musical insights. If anyone at this point thinks about Stockhausens' much-commented role as sound projector at the mixing console, then one will have to say that this arrangement has no relevance whatever for what other ensembles do at their own performances. We should loosen the authority of the notes. We are entitled to enjoy, musicians and listeners alike, that we can be nearer to the creation process. That the only form of music-making should be a reproductive one exactly like at the time of Papa Haydn is not ethically defensible any longer either. Verbal notation is a practical means among others to make possible this freedom, no more, no less.

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