Soundpainting as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance

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The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'

And they said then, 'But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.'

Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

Table of contents

Acknowledgements

In spite of a persistent fiction, we never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on.

Michel de Certeau (1988:43)

Jean Bourdin (former head of the Alliance Française de Pretoria) provided the initial impetus for my study of Soundpainting by suggesting that our institution host a series of workshops on the topic presented by François Jeanneau in Pretoria during December 2002. Walter Thompson and Professor Jeanneau were both very generous in sharing their time and expertise on the topic with me, and Professor François Théberge (Head of Jazz Studies at the Paris Conservatoire Supérieur de Musique et de Danse) kindly hosted me during Thompson's Soundpainting workshops in Paris during March 2003. Informal conversations with Anthony Braxton and Eberhard Weber in Munich 1980 also proved inspiring and thought provoking.

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all of whom provided inspiration and encouragement in my initial studies of music and philosophy. Professors Darius Brubeck and Jürgen Braüninger of the University of Natal further shaped and guided my musical studies at Masters' level.

Dedication

My observations regarding Soundpainting and improvisation are fuelled by some thirty-plus years of experience as an improvising musician and performer in the fields of *jazz* and free music, as well as so-called popular and world music (especially that originating from the Indian sub-continent). These experiences have led to the good fortune of working and playing with some wonderful musicians from all these genres both at home (in South Africa) and abroad. These encounters have not only enriched me as musician and hopefully as human being, but also encouraged the attitude of keeping an open mind (and ear).

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As a fairly regular contributor to the National Youth Jazz Festival (held annually in Grahamstown) I was appointed as musical director of the Standard Bank National Youth Jazz Band in 2001. I thank Alan Webster (Festival director) for this opportunity, as well as the Standard Bank National Youth Jazz Band 2001—Ragnhild Tveitan, Siya Makuzeni, Mzamo Bhengu, Simon Bates, Matthew Boon, Michael Bester, Shaun Johannes, and Michael Horn. My family (my mother and sisters Caroline and Josephine) also provided support and encouragement and I owe them a sincere vote of thanks.

I dedicate this work to all these people from whom I have learned so much both personally and professionally, but especially to my wife Lydia for her tremendous encouragement, support, and advice.

Summary

Soundpainting is the method of "live composition" invented by New York-based composer and saxophonist Walter Thompson. Using physical gestures for the spontaneous creation of music, Soundpainting therefore shares similarities with other types of *gesture*-based systems for music performance, such as orchestral conducting. Thompson himself (2006) describes his Soundpainting system as a "universal live composing sign language for the performing and visual arts," and therefore Soundpainting can be considered as a subset of other communication systems such as verbal and written language, *kinesics*, and *paralanguage*.

This thesis outlines the general principles of Soundpainting as a system for setting into motion spontaneously created music. The author's aim is to describe Soundpainting in relation to the *linguistic turn* in Thompson's own definition. This opens the way to a sociosemiotic analysis, in which it is susceptible to examination in the light of some theories of language that have emerged in the course of the twentieth century.

A theoretical framework is developed drawing on the work of such pioneers of *semiotics* as Saussure and Peirce, as well as the later work in philosophy of language of Wittgenstein, Barthes, Eco, Derrida, and others. The eclectic concerns of Soundpainting suggest situating Thompson's language in the context of current debates in *critical theory* about tonality, jazz, and improvisation as strategies for constructing identity. Soundpainting, by demonstrating that musical signification can be negotiated through consensus, problematizes the convention of the composer as the sole legitimating authority of the work.

Considering Soundpainting as a processual activity, this dissertation outlines the general principles of Soundpainting as a system for the spontaneous

creation of music. Emphasizing the process-based character of Soundpainting (and its affinity with other forms of improvised music) suggests that such categories of musical activity need to be studied from a different vantage point from that of historical musicology.

Keywords

Communication, Conducting, Critical theory, Experimental music, Free Improvisation, Musicking, Philosophy of Language, Semiotics, Soundpainting, Wittgenstein.

Notes to the reader

The author wishes to explain in advance a few conventions regarding proper names and references as used in this doctoral study. When the author cites a name such as Ferdinand de Saussure or Michel de Certeau in full, subsequent references will be cited as Saussure and Certeau.

Wittgenstein's writings are normally cited by title and paragraph number, not by page number. To alert the reader to this, the author uses the symbol <§>. A citation from *Philosophical Investigations* aphorism 9 is then understood as (Wittgenstein), PI §9. The author follows this convention also with regard to writings of Debord as cited.

Gestures in the Soundpainting language are indicated by enclosure within these symbols <>, as in the <long tone> gesture.

The whole gamut of musics known as "classical" is defined as largely tonal, notationally based music of the common practice period, dating from the time of Bach until the end of the nineteenth century, and is abbreviated WEAM (for Western European Art Music), after Conrad Cork's "felicitous acronym for

Western European Art Music" (Collier 1998:11).

For convenience, the author provides a glossary (section 1.10), following the convention that the first time such a term is introduced, it is placed in ***bold italics***, indicating that a further definition is available in the glossary.