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patrick brennan



inquiries
interconnections
contours

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Introduction

Most of what transforms sounds into “music” are not the sounds by themselves, but the weave of human activities directed toward those sounds. These include ways of listening, ways of imagining, ways of generating sounds, ways of coordinating people, and ways of conveying information within that process.

When people, especially musicians, talk about “musical structure” they usually mean how the sounds are organized, but there are other structures in play, even more fundamental, that affect our understanding and interpretations of what we hear. These structures are less often spoken of, and more often taken for granted, if thought about at all. What kinds of structures are these? And what are their roles in the “putting together” — in the composing — of a musical event?

This series of essays was written irregularly in chronological sequence between 2011 & 2018 and came to gather themselves into three sections. Part One, *The Stuff*, opens a reexamination of some of the most commonplace language and assumptions regarding music.

What roles are played by listening — or by musicians? Should we restrict our notions of “music” to dictionary definitions such as “a pattern of sounds intended to give pleasure to people listening to it,” or should the term *music* more comprehensively denote a complex

of sound-focused activities subject to multiple, sometimes contradictory, considerations?

Does the conventional, European derived, paradigm of musical composition, where a single composer designs a fixed, repeatable arrangement of sounds, encompass all possible varieties of compositional action, or might another model help cultivate a more inclusive, more “non-centricized” frame of reference?

How credibly can musical sound be depersonalized, anonymized, disembodied, whether that be through John Cage’s more erudite notion of “sounds in themselves” or through the aural carpeting marketplace designation of “music” as an inert consumer object? If we instead recognize person as real and inseparable from musical sound, what would we hear?

Part Two, *Structures*, explores a language regarding composition based in interaction, in the structures of possible social relations among musical participants, and in how musical information, how musical thought, may be communicated while a music is emerging into sound. These together help constitute an ecology of composing. The *act* of composition, the choosing among sounds in the assembling of a sonic image, can be variously situated, each circumstance affording divergent opportunities and circumscriptions. These conditions yield very different sonic events, and each may require distinct recalibrations of recognition, listening and interpretation.

To do this called for repurposing some of our most familiar ways of talking about music, for example, emphasizing “music” and “composing” as, first of all, actions and recasting the noun “composition” as *interactive matrix*. Neologisms such as *dialogical and monological composing*, *metacomposition* and *personics* were invented to invoke a web of understanding potentially more true to what actual-

ly happens in music than do current status quo assumptions about musical structures.

Part Three, *Other Thoughts*, extends from the previous sections to muse over that still recently arrived elephant in the room known as recording, its multiple transformations of our experiences and conceptions of music, as well as a few of the implications of that frequent extrasonic musical actor, rhythm.

These essays evolved cumulatively as a process of discovery, at first simply in order to clarify my own thinking for myself. But, as they evolved, I also recognized that the questions pursued here wouldn't necessarily have to be unique to my particular experience, that other people might likely also be contending with them in their own ways. Here, the adventure approaches possibilities for more public imaginings and discussion, at which point this turns invitation for you to wonder as well.

PART ONE:

The Stuff

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What is it to Listen?

Sound that proposes music invokes expectancy; and expectancy bathes the possibility of music with the light of attention, with a consent to wait and a willingness to meet. A moment of music accomplishes a tenuous and very fragile consensus within which participants transform what they hear while becoming themselves transformed. A dedication to listening such as this might open a transport into altered states. And conversely, far more than any other predisposition, it's indifference that's most capable of dissolving such gatherings, such doings, as music. When cast beyond the reach of caring, musical sounds disperse into incidental noise.