Reflective report for *Portals*: Composition

James A. Fox 2016

The aim of this report is to reflect on and document the process of composition at the post-production and pre-performance stage. For *Portals* this includes discussion on the discovery and testing of readymade material, as well as software. I am hopeful that this will enable a more comprehensive understanding of my working methods and develop them in order to produce more efficient results or better pieces.

Ideally this reflective report will be augmented with a following document to reflect on the performer's approach, thoughts, concerns, and other input after her performance on January 28th 2016.

Why compose using video?

• an aesthetic and philosophical decision: gesture is amplified in this method as there is a focus on intentional physical gesture which is formed as an outcome from musical performance (existing/recorded) as material.

• video can document physical action very well and is very easy to share, access, and present.

• video can animate material or present static images through a fixed amount of time.

• video scores may have the potential to produce music which sounds as though it operates outside of a conventional form of notation operating within a 2D lattice (Wishart, p. 7, 1996), and may offer up other spaces for exploration, such as improvisation.

• will provide the performer with different challenges, enhancing the likelihood that improvisation and live reaction to the score will become important for the performer.

• The conventional paper-based score carries many preconceptions or codes of practice through the continue use of such a system (Godlovitch, 1998, p. 2). Video could combat or exploit some of these established codes and practices.

• there is potential to create an open and indeterminate environment for performance in which experiential, unconscious, and unthought musical and instrumental knowledge is called upon: exposing the musician's musical and human responses.

• improvised and prepared performance approaches are both made available through video, although I must insist that real-time improvisation be avoided as a prepared interpretation is desired in order to provide greater definition to the musical output which it is hoped will be easily replicable.

• audiovisual pieces: the video score is of equal importance for the audience and performer as the temporal and ephemeral nature of both video and music combine through automation of video projection and uninterrupted musical interpretation and performance.

• by projecting the score we can move away from the score being part of a private discussion between composer and performer and create different dimensions for audience perception, which may include elements of imagined and perceived sound: video is easily presented to any size audience.

Aesthetic and philosophy

Using readymade video showing pre-recorded and existing intentional gesture were inspired through video and visual art's use of décollage, collage, and photomontage. The connections with video and visual art are important to consider as the video score itself will be projected or broadcast while the performance of the score is taking place. The audience will perceive and make links between the score and sound production while also perceiving the interpretations from the performer.

Problems with finding material: ethical concerns leading to aesthetic, style, and structure

Ethical considerations were raised from the beginning of the project but the use of videos with Creative Commons licences enabled this work to continue.

Due to this restriction the number of accessible videos was reduced significantly as I had already set a strict set of specifications which the readymade video must fulfil:

• be in a HD format of at least 720p
• use medium-close and close up shots
• the footage itself must be of a professional standard (good lighting, angles, and a thoughtful presentation)

These combined issues combined removed the difficulties of choosing material but also reduced the amount of quality footage available. This forced me to reconsider how best to use the materials that fit into all the specifications. I had originally intended to create a score made from many small and clearly different clips which would be woven together, as in a previous piece *Questioner, 1863*. Instead it was essential to employ an economy of material as the number of useful gestures was limited.

Software: editing and arranging

Editing was a two-stage process involving one editing suite for hard editing and another suite for adding effects, making detailed changes, and finalising the

arrangement.

Lightworks for PC was used for the initial stages as its intuitive keyboard-driven interface made real-time selections and editing of materials very straight forward. Several excellent effects, such as masks and blurring effects, also proved useful. The portals in the piece were created by combining several effects and then animated in single frames using the DVE (Digital Video Effect) function.

Screen Flow for Mac OSX was used as a compositor and arranger as simple tasks are very efficient to complete. It also has some effective blurring and blending effects which compliment those of Lightworks.

Working with video editing in this way is remarkably similar to working with audio: the use of a DAW, a linear editing window, effects and plug-ins, sync, and rendering (akin to making a bounce). I found myself recalling and practicing skills developed in the electronic sound studios and applying them to video work.

Projecting the score: advantages and disadvantages

Presenting the audience with the score breaks the private relationship which exists between composer, score, and performer.

It could be argued that displaying the video score detracts from the performer's role within the performance, and that sound could become subservient to the visual form (Kahn, p 106, 2001; Prevost, p. 34, 1995). I actually consider the visual element to be essential in performance as it is the performer's individual musical response in relation to the video stimulus which is being exposed and presented. There is a chance that the identity of the the work may become confused and a hierarchy created: the piece could be perceived as a fixed and fully composed audiovisual piece rather than a visual score and one interpretation. However, it is the performer which creates the sound, not the video and both pieces are integral to the overall work.

What does Portals offer the performer?

• A strong structure and limited number of gestures should provide a stable platform from which the performer can experiment and explore the material.

• It should be clear to the performer what actions are being encouraged, and the development, comparison, and juxtaposition of the materials should reinforce this.

• Clearly contrasting phrases should be discernible through the use of material which demonstrates the possibility for legato or staccato articulation, high and low pitch registers, and vibrato.

• Use of a repeated cell made from bowing footage provides rhythm, indications of

which string to play, but does not provide bowing pressure.

By including an instruction that the performer should attempt to create a punctilious replication once a musical interpretation has been attached to gesture, it should be possible for the performer to create a piece which has a clearly discernible character with a strong structure and identity.

Difficulties

It is difficult to create a score which does not exhibit an exact demonstration of register and rhythm using found footage. There may still be too much information which the performer can connect to solid ideas of pitch and rhythm.

Determining what a performer might consider as being footage for them to interpret into sound was most challenging. Through numerous sketches I was eventually able to establish a clear set of instructions by removing any unwanted information such as the performer's clothing or background imagery.

Conclusions

Creating and reflecting on this piece helped to cement several issues and aesthetic details which I feel should remain consistent throughout the exploration of video:

• use of gesture associated with instrumental performance.

• prepared performances, rather than improvisation in real-time.

• a degree of openness towards musical parameter, but not towards structure. The repetition of gestures, coupled with the instruction to repeat an interpretation as closely and faithfully as possible, is vital when creating structures.

• use an economy of material: repetition and development allow for global structures to emerge through local changes and developments.

• every element of the visual stimulus is of important consequence to composer and performer, and is comparable to the mies-en-scene of a play or film.

• the negative space should be black: a pixel is black when not in use (when no power is sent to it) so a black negative space will place the moving coloured image into the forefront of the image in this medium.

The next approach to video

The next phase includes completing some ideas for pieces using readymade footage

along with text, as well as moving onto green screen and working with chroma key techniques. This would allow me to create my own footage and focus just on the gesture only. The possibilities for this are quite exciting, and could move the work closer to a completely open score.

References

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Wishart, T. (1996). *On Sonic Art.* Edinburgh: Harwood Academic Publishers