

# PERFORMING THE PRACTICE OF COMPOSITION

**Alison Isadora**

Victoria University of Wellington,  
Aotearoa/New Zealand  
alisador@xs4all.nl

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss challenges towards our understanding of the role and ontology of the score, in relationship to the roles of composer, performer, audience and performance space. I consider the role of these actants within three situated aspects of the Western art music tradition as proposed by Coessens and colleagues: the ecological, epistemic and social [1].

What emerges from this deliberation, is the reification of the score as the ‘work’, the expectation of a ‘genius’ (male) composer, hierarchic and stultifying conditions for both musicians and audience members, and performance spaces that encourage these stratifications.

Modes of engagement are explored that might foster alternative roles for all actants and the notions of sympoiesis, and the anarchic are presented as potentially useful conceptual tools when imagining an alternative ontology of the score. Moreover, developing on Isabelle Stengers’ ideas on an ecology and interdependence of practices I speculate on the ramifications of considering the score as having a ‘challenging and fostering’ role in relationship to the other parties [2, p.190].

The paper finishes with a discussion of *Together#5.1* in which methods for encouraging a social technology of belonging and shared compositional response-ability between all actants are explored. These methods include collective listening practices, audience scores, adaptive notations and context specific elements.

*Copyright: © 2020 Alison Isadora. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 3.0 Unported](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.*

## 1. PERFORMING AN ECOLOGY OF A COMPOSITION PRACTICE.

*(This paper will be accompanied by a power point).*

My current research is concerned with **Performing an Ecology of a Composition Practice**, specifically within the confines of contemporary Western art music, or what Bhagwati would call eurological music. In this paper I will discuss challenges towards our understanding of the role and ontology of the score, in relationship to the roles of composer, performer, audience and performance space, before contextualising this through one of my recent works.

My use of the term ‘ecology’ is informed by Isabelle Stengers’ proposals on the ecology and interdependence of practices, and resonates with my interests in the fostering of an inclusive compositional practice. Where natural ecologists approach a practice as it *is*, Stengers’ interest lies in what it can *become*. This seems appropriate in a research concerned with the possible creation of new paradigms rather than the continuation of existing ones.

Developing on Brian Massumi’s ideas of the ‘social technology of belonging,’ Stengers offers us a philosophical tool that can be useful in understanding the ‘challenging and fostering’ role that the score may have in relationship to the other parties [2, p.192]. Stengers identifies the social technology of belonging as being one that ‘can and must address people from the point of view of what they may become able to do and think and feel because they belong.’ [2, p.190]

What might the ramifications of an ecology of a composition practice be for the actants? Before we speculate on these possibilities, it is perhaps helpful to cast an eye on where we are now, our current situation, while recognising that the concept of a homogenous ‘we’ is potentially fraught.

## 2. SITUATEDNESS

Coessens and colleagues use Willem J. Clancey's definition of situatedness: "Where you are, when you do, what you do, matters" and make a distinction between three different aspects of situatedness: ecological, epistemic and social [1, p.47].<sup>1</sup> I would like to briefly consider the conditions of contemporary Western art music through this triple lens of situatedness.

Contemporary Western art music primarily emerges out of institutions that also teach the Western 'classical' music tradition.<sup>2</sup> Most musicians and composers involved in new music have studied and performed within this heritage. Furthermore, audiences for contemporary music concerts often consist of people who also attend historic Western art music concerts. It is not surprising therefore that codes of relationship in a new music context are closely connected to their historical relative. These codes determine not only how composers, performers and listeners position themselves and how they relate to each other but also their position in relationship to the score.

The score itself is not a neutral object. Bhagwati's insight into the inherent limitations of notational systems and his uncovering of 'notational bias', encourages a situated reading of scores and raises questions regarding the (often) unconscious perspective of notation in a compositional practice [3].

## 3. ONTOLOGICAL ISSUES

Historically in Western art music the score mediated the relationship between composer, performer and audience. The ontology of the 'work', the reification of the score, traditionally encouraged a clear delineation between composing and performing roles and resulted in the idea of a hierarchic flow of information from composer via the score to the performer and finally audience [4].

Musicologists such as Goehr and Durkin and the philosopher Benson argue, albeit from different vantage points, that the focus on 'works' rather than performances does not acknowledge the creative input from the performer in the artistic process. Furthermore, such a model is unlikely to allow for a potential creative function for the audience or a recognition of contextual situatedness. It is my suggestion that in order to explore the potential of a new music composition practice, it may be useful to 'transversally' explore connections between theories from Philosophy and Performance Studies and practices from modern theatre and dance that enable dynamic, creative roles for the composer, score, performer, audience and performance space.

Numerous musical ontologies have been developed over the years, mostly focusing on various levels of agency between the 'work', score and performance. I suggest that these ontologies are themselves often contextually related and that we may have to accept that not one ontology fits all. Furthermore, our interest in a speculative composition practice invites a reinterpretation of ontological roles.

So, rather than the reification of the score as the 'work', the expectation of the 'genius' (male) composer, hierarchic and stultifying conditions for musicians, physical separation of the audience and performers, and performance spaces that encourage these stratifications, I wonder about the role of:

- the entangled composer who co-ordinates, initiates, and acts as caretaker,
- the implicated musician who co-creates and performs,
- the agential audience who may be an active listener, participant, and co-creator,
- the situated performance space, and
- a recontextualized score which operates more as a script and can be interpreted and adapted.

Where does the role of the composer finish and the role of the performer begin? Is there overlap, or are we looking at a dynamic intertwining of roles? Can we address the audience through the technology of belonging and what role can the score inhabit in this entangled landscape?

## 4. THE ACT OF LISTENING

One of the things I am suggesting is that the act of listening is at the heart of a composition practice. Christopher Small coined the verb 'musicking' to describe the process of music making [5]. Listening, is also, he argues, part of musicking. Salomé Voegelin elaborates further when she suggests that:

'Listening has an exploratory capacity that does not seek to know *about* the world but approaches learning as a practice, as a physical and continuous effort to understand momentarily and always again how to live in the between-of-things.' [6]

When we learn an instrument, we start by learning through imitation, through what Denis Smalley would call transmodal perception, an interaction of different senses [7]. Sound, however, will always be the touchstone by which we compare our effort with the original. In the West, we often follow on by learning through the interface of written music – the score. However, in many traditions, and also in most beat-driven music, reading is not part of the equation.

Many years ago, I had the great fortune to learn rebab, the Indonesian bowed string instrument, from a master

<sup>1</sup> Quoting William J. Clancey. <<https://openair.rgu.ac.uk>> (10/06/2018).

<sup>2</sup> My use of the term classical is not in reference to the specific period of Classical music (ca.1750-1820) but refers to the more generic usage implying the entire tradition of Western art music.

musician. The only ‘problem’ was that we did not have a common spoken language.

I learned both how to play the rebab and also much repertoire, entirely by imitation. At first all I was trying to do was reproduce what he played, later on I started recognizing patterns of similarities, differences and consequences. The one note that was always performed microtonally sharp because the rebab played it at the same moment as the whole gamelan orchestra was also playing that note and it would not be heard as a distinct voice unless played slightly sharper than the rest, giving it a spectral advantage.

Where is the score in this process, where is the ‘work’? As embodied and enculturated memory?

## 5. LISTENING IN TIME

Earlier I mentioned that I saw listening as being at the heart of a composition practice. I’d like to preface that by saying listening in time, to time, through time. And as we know from Einstein, space and time are interconnected. Which leads us to the importance of situation – space/time – in a composition practice. Content and context are intertwined.

An attention to situational specificity would seem valuable in an age of increased globalisation and I would like to think it might encourage a compositional practice that responds to context and stimulates diversity. If we recognise that the score is not ‘objective’ but situated, how do we respond to this, how might this influence our score-making process?

I would like to invite you to notice the situation you are in right now, the sound, light, temperature and to change your spatial situation during this talk if you feel like it.

Last September I spent time in Zealandia, a bird sanctuary the size of the city of Amsterdam, that can be found in a valley within the hills of Wellington city, surrounded by suburbs. Zealandia has a 500 year plan, the time it takes a rimu, an endemic tree, to mature. The rain forest in the valley will only fully be adult and sustainable after 500 years.

Within the sanctuary I hear both native birds I’ve never heard before, but also sparrows and blackbirds, what we in Aotearoa call exotics, introduced by English colonials. And there’s a plane overhead, flying to Australia, and the ubiquitous sound of suburban NZ – the motor-mower. We’re still very much in the city, but the audio balance has been changed. Our listening incorporates an acknowledgement of the human influence, while we hear a whisper, a tantalising breath of how this valley was and what it will hopefully one day again become. We listen in time.

We listen situationally, historically, geologically, mythologically, musically, bodily. Can we hold different ways of listening in our attention at the same time? And what might this mean for the type of score that we create? Furthermore, how do we create scores that are contextually responsive and that encourage a recognition of agency between all the actants?

## 6. SPECULATIVE ONTOLOGIES

Nicholas Cook proposes a shift to seeing scores as ‘scripts in response to which social relationships are enacted’ rather than ‘texts within which social relationships are encoded’ and I would like to extrapolate on this to also include the score as script wherein musical and extra-musical contributions from the musicians and audience are integrated and where different forms of listening may be en-acted [8, p.212]. In such an environment the score/script has the capacity to intra-act with the other actants, to create a complex web of connections. As Yolande Harris says, ‘beyond theorizing the score in terms of notation, much can be learned from reconceptualizing the score as *relationship*’.

I would like to suggest an ontology of the score that embraces an entangled *agential realism*.<sup>3</sup> Who and what is implicated in the different processes inherent in a score – the creation, the performance and the documentation process?

In this context, the notions of sympoiesis, and the anarchic might provide useful conceptual tools. Sympoiesis was first coined by environmentalist Beth Dempster and developed by Donna Haraway. Where Fischer-Lichte describes auto-poietic relationships between the performer and the audience, the ‘feedback loops’ present to some extent in all performance situations, Haraway suggests that nothing is completely self-organising, and that sympoiesis ‘enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.’ [10, p.58] This model of ‘making with’ seems useful when thinking about the ecology of a composition practice and the possible relationships between the various actants.

The notion of the anarchic can, I suggest, expand our understanding of the role of documentation. Massumi refers to an anarchic as a ‘*repertory of traces* of collaborative research-creation events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of potential. They are reactivatable, and their reactivation helps trigger a new event which continues the creative process from which they came, but in a new iteration.’ [11, p.6] I would suggest this could be a useful way of considering the score after a performance – containing the possibility to include the embodied memory of the musicians as part of the anarchic and acknowledging the potential for situational adaptation in a score.

## 7. BELONGING

Let me now briefly focus on *Together#5.1*, one iteration in a series of works which explores potential creative relationships between the composer, musician, audience, performance situation and score. I will briefly outline how I hope this work encourages a social technology of belonging, new ways of listening and shared compositional responsibility. Karen Barad notes that ‘Responsibility, ... is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to

<sup>3</sup> As developed by Karen Barad, see for instance interview in [9].

the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call self.’[9, p.70]

Nestled within the score of *Together#5.1* are in fact four distinct layers of script: for the composer, musicians, audience and ‘lay’ people.

### 7.1. The Composer

The composer has a number of tasks to fulfil both before and during the performance. Firstly, she is required to make a field recording from outside the specific performance space, played back over a localised speaker during the first part of the concert. Secondly, she gives the audience their score before they enter the performance space and instructs them how to proceed. Finally, after the performance, she invites the audience to take part in a reflection, which may be a writing process or a discussion in small groups, depending on the specific context of the performance. I consider this reflection process to be part of the work and the oral transmission by the composer to also be part of the score.

### 7.2 The Musicians

Although a score of *Together#5.1* exists, it is of little use to the musicians, as the vertical relations during the piece are defined by each person’s own heartbeat. In this sense, the work is a series of simultaneously played parts, with moments of alignment. The musical material is not demanding but the detailed written text requires close reading in order to negotiate the work. Furthermore, the musicians are entrusted with creating situational texts relating to the performance space. These could be of an anecdotal, geological, historical or pre-colonial nature. The musicians are requested to reflect on the dialogue between the order and content of these texts and the musical material. *Together* encourages a constant interplay of the musicians’ attention to their own pulse, to the audio around them and to the form, which they create together.

### 7.3 The Audience

The reading process for the audience begins before they enter the hall. The composer offers them a folded paper containing text and images which invites them to participate, firstly by exploring the sonic space of the performance hall, then by following their own heartbeat while attending to the music. During the piece, the audience receive musical, graphic and textual cues to proceed through their score, including an invitation to hum and later sing and finally to follow a musician in a gradual collective decrescendo. In *Together#5.1* the audience are given opportunities to create relationships between the embodied rhythm of their own heartbeat and those of the musicians around them, to listen and respond to an entangled co-creation. Could we call this diffractive listening? Listening to a performance through the pulse of one own’s body? To paraphrase Barad, listening to patterns of difference that make a difference.

### 7.4. ‘Lay’ People

An extra layer of agency occurs in the iteration *Together#5.1*. A role intertwined between the audience and the musicians. These are ‘lay’ people (whom Cardew might call ‘musical innocents’) who spend an hour with me before the performance, learning their score. Music-reading skills are not required, their script is a sheet of text instructions giving cues to navigate the work. This group function as both extra sound sources in the work and as support for audience participation.

### 7.5. The Space

As mentioned above, the space is also addressed. How does the space we are in influence our perception of the work? Where do we situate ourselves in the space as a musician/audience member/participant?

## 8. CONCLUSION

In *Together#5* we consider the shared connection we have through our heartbeat and are encouraged to explore listening both to the other and ourselves. What if we decide we are all in this together? This search for a shared response-ability between all agents can I believe have both political and sonic consequences.

I’d like to end with a quote from Isabelle Stengers:

*‘The problem for each practice is how to foster its own force, make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act...which may also produce experimental togetherness amongst practices, a dynamics of pragmatic learning of what works and how. This is the kind of active, fostering ‘milieu’ that practices need in order to answer challenges and experiment changes, that is, to unfold their own force.’* [2, p.195].

## 9. REFERENCES

- [1] K. Coessens, D. Crispin, and A. Douglas, *The Artistic Turn. A Manifesto*. Leuven University Press, 2009.
- [2] I. Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices”, *Cultural Studies Review*, vol 11, no.1, pp. 183-196, 2005.
- [3] S. Bhagwati, “Notational Perspective and Comprovisation”, in *Sound & Score: essays on sound, score and notation*, ed. P. de Assis, W. Brooks, and K. Coessens. Leuven University Press, 2013, pp. 165-177.
- [4] A. Durkin, *Decomposition A Music Manifesto*, Pantheon Books, 2014.
- [5] C. Small, *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
- [6] S. Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

- [7] D. Smalley, "Space-form and the acousmatic image", *Organised Sound*, vol.12, no.1, pp. 35-38, 2007.
- [8] *Study of Music. A Critical Introduction*, ed. M. Clayton, T. Herbert and R. Middleton. Routledge, pp. 204-214, 2003.
- [9] K. Barad, interview in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, R. Dolphijn and I. van der Tuin. Open Humanities Press, pp.48-70, 2012.
- [10] D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chtulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- [11] B. Massumi, "Working Principles", in *The Go-To How-To Book of Anarchiving*, ed. A. Murphie. The SenseLab, 2016.