

# STRUCTURING CENSORSHIP IN DIGITAL SCORES

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## ABSTRACT

Digital scores allow for new ways to experiment with agency and perception within composition and performance. My recent works *Censoring Experiment* and *Shadow Aria* examine the possibilities for digital scores to incorporate methods of censorship with the aim of highlighting and unpacking it as a social issue. Despite an assumption that censorship is an issue of the past or limited to non-western countries, recent cases of artistic censorship in Australia and North America have brought attention to the ongoing problem, particularly as it affects marginalised artists and composers. In this paper, I discuss my two pieces that attempt to address, complicate, and subvert the issue of artistic censorship through experimental composition. Digital scores are the medium that allows these pieces to exaggerate real censorship and test how performers react creatively to censored environments. I argue that animated notation and mixed-media environments created through technology give me the ability to replicate and change a real-life social issue within a performance, letting my art not just comment on a political question, but work towards new insights through practice-based research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Working with digital scores as a composition medium, my practice-based research explores forms of censorship experienced by underrepresented artists in the field of Western art music, and experiments with ways of incorporating censorship into experimental intermedia works. Early experiences of censorship in my own music and writing career led me to research recent cases of composers and artists across contemporary western society being silenced, particularly other composers who face discrimination for their identities and for the political themes of their work. As a recent example, Black American composer Daniel Bernard Roumain had his opera commission rescinded by Tulsa Opera after writing the work *They Still Want to Kill Us* (2021) because he refused to change the final lyric of the opera, “God Bless America; God Damn America!” His opera reflects on the 1921 massacre of hundreds of Black Americans in Tulsa, and while Tulsa Opera were open to

presenting an opera about the massacre, they were only willing to do so without such explicit wording that would shock or offend their audience. [1] A particularly scandalous Australian case of artistic censorship was that of queer artist Casey Jenkins, who had the government arts funding for their work *Immaculate* (2020-2021) revoked by the Australia Council for the Arts. The work in question included streaming video of their process of self-insemination towards pregnancy, letting the viewer into an emotional part of queer life that is often hidden away. [2] These are only two examples among several recent cases of artistic censorship in the USA and Australia, but speak powerfully to the impression that censorship is still an issue faced by composers and artists that represent their marginalised communities.

In light of the understanding that censorship affects contemporary composers and artists in a Western context, and framing ideas of censorship around expanded definitions that Matthew Bunn names New Censorship Theory [3], my compositions test ways of structuring censorship into intermedia works. The two pieces discussed in this paper both create environments of censorship for improvising performers that are mediated through technological forms of communication, or digital scores. While they each include real-time aspects of randomisation, the moments and forms of censorship in the pieces is structured into a composition, with different sections of the pieces triggering different types and speeds of censoring gestures with varying levels of intensity throughout the works. This randomisation within a structure allows the works to play with concepts of surprise and failure within a musical form that unfolds through time. Jack Halberstam’s notion that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” [4] and Linda Candy’s method of “reflection-on-surprise” as a way of understanding unexpected outcomes [5] guide my understanding of performer and audience reactions to my work. In my own work, the medium of the digital score provides new possibilities for unpacking the effects of artistic censorship through experimental intermedia composition.

## 2. DIGITAL SCORES AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

Digital scores for intermedia composition are a provocative medium to explore the concept of censorship. To define digital scores, Craig Vear writes that “when a

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musician is interested in communicating a musical idea that is only created through and with technology then we can call that a digital score.” [6] Some forms of digital scores include animated scores, graphic scores, interactive and AI-based scores as well as digitally enhanced traditional scores. A scanned copy of a paper score, however, is not normally considered a digital score unless it makes use of technology to build upon the original material in some way. [6] Digital scores are classified as such if their core purpose is as “a technically mediated communication interface between the creativity of a composer, the creativity of a performer and the creative mind of the listener.” [6] Therefore, the role of technology in digital scores is key to their realisation. As opposed to traditional forms of music notation, digital notation allows for real-time composition and chance processes and different forms of engagement and interactivity between performers and the score. As a composer and practice-based researcher, digital scores give me the potential to simulate environments of censorship using technology. The possibilities of technology to aid in the facilitation of ideas between the composer, performers and audience gives composers the potential to integrate conceptual ideas into the medium of the score as well as the resulting performance. Researchers in the fields of digital and animated notation have pointed out how these forms of notation can facilitate different kinds of interactions between composers and performers, audiences and time. [6][7][8] My recent compositions discussed in this paper experiment with the possibilities for these distinctive mediations to recreate, complicate, and subvert environments of artistic censorship, untangling the effect of censorship on performing artists.

### 3. CENSORING EXPERIMENT (2022)

*Censoring Experiment* is an audio-visual work for one performer playing through a Max patch on a laptop with a webcam.<sup>1</sup> The work is attended for online performance through live-streaming or pre-recorded distribution on online platforms. This piece is an attempt to recreate and exaggerate forms of censorship faced by marginalised people on websites and social media applications. In the USA, the FOSTA-SESTA law was recently introduced to stop sex trafficking activities online by policing sex work on the internet. Website owners are now held responsible if illegal sex work is advertised on their platform, however because many large websites that host user content have no way of efficiently moderating for that, they use either algorithms or outsourced workers to ban any sexual content. [9] Content that is deemed pornographic because of the inclusion of nudity, body hair or menstruation is routinely banned from platforms including Instagram, Facebook and Twitch. Moderation processes particularly target black people, Indigenous people and people of colour, and non-cis-male bodies. [10] As a response to recent changes in policy and cases of censorship online, I tested the idea of censoring an improvising performer during their

performance and observing how they would react. The Max patch processes the incoming video and audio of the performer’s improvisation, creating a version that distorts, erases and covers up parts of the visual and audio input, as shown in Figure 1. The censoring events are randomised within a structure that defines the density and kinds of events that occur in different sections of the piece, building to more heavily censored moments. With no other instructions given to the performer except to improvise into the webcam and respond to the processed video and audio played back to them as a score, the resulting piece is the censored mirror the performer sees as they play. A digitally created environment that the performer improvises in becomes both the space of the performance and the score itself, the digital score creating an “integrated cross-disciplinary performance”. [6]



**Figure 1.** One form of randomised visual censoring in *Censoring Experiment*.

Composing in a digital format in this piece reveals possibilities of randomness only available in real-time composition. The randomised structure of the score is important to the work conceptually and practically, giving the performer unexpected moments to respond to. This real-time aspect incorporates a layer of unpredictability into the patch, making it feel more like a malleable environment than a traditional fixed score. Cat Hope posits that “animated notations can assist us to challenge our perceptual notions of time for music and sound”. [8] In *Censoring Experiment*, the randomisation of events in time, facilitated by the digital nature of the score, allow the piece to simulate a changing environment of censorship more realistically. The unpredictability of the work to the performer, even after rehearsing or performing the piece multiple times, allows for surprising real-time responses in each iteration. These moments of surprise can lead to observations on how performers respond to unpredictable censorship of artistic expression on online platforms.

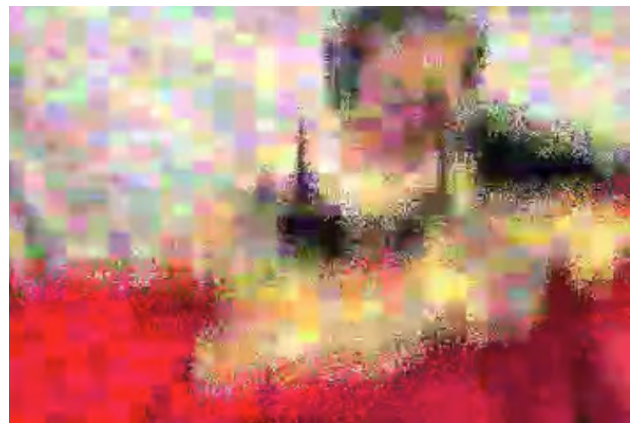
In comparison to traditional, fixed forms of music notation, digital and real-time scores change the structures of agency and freedom for performers. Ryan Ross Smith

<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/789422211>

writes, “Simply put, agency lies primarily with the performer to activate or dynamize the conventional score, whereas the dynamic score has agency over the performer; movement is perceptible, not of the eye, but to the eye.” [7] This effect is enhanced when the animated score is visible to the audience, letting the viewers in on the process. Lindsay Vickery’s piece *Mueller* (2020) makes a statement about censorship by setting up an animated score that is impossible to keep up with, and projecting that score for the audience as well as the performers. [11] The musicians play fast stabs of sound when the black rectangles of redacted words appear in the Mueller report, flicked through quickly in the projection. The result is that the performers ultimately make mistakes in trying to keep up with the piece, and the report itself is redacted by the speed of the animation. In *Censoring Experiment*, only the resulting video processed through the Max patch is presented to the audience as an online or live-streamed video. Therefore, the performer in this piece has limited agency over the final product seen by the audience, reflecting the nature of censorship on online platforms. They insert themselves into the score and attempt to take back some control over it.

While animated scores change the agency of the performer in relation to the score, and while showing the score to the audience heightens that effect, performers often feel freed, not restricted, by digital scores. Vear has investigated performers’ responses to digital scores and writes that “Digital/generative scores may feel liberating to a performer.” [6] A dichotomy between restrictive and liberating elements in the performance of a digital piece is seen clearly in Elizabeth Jigalin’s performance of *Censoring Experiment*. While the Max patch amplifies restriction and censorship, the underlying theme taunts the performer to work against it and reclaim agency and freedom. Unprompted, Jigalin does exactly that in ways that were unexpected to me as the composer. At the beginning of the piece, when the video and audio processing censors her gently and sporadically, she works with it and allows the score to guide her. As the processing ramps up, she realises that she has to fight to work against it. She plays louder and makes bigger movements, but as these are continually distorted, muted and covered up, she has to take a different approach. She finally finds more playful ways to work against the censoring environment by turning the piece on its head and proving her agency over the digital score. Taking off her shirt, she covers the webcam in red fabric as pictured in Figure 2. This has the multiple effect of heightening the risk of the performance – leaving her underwear visible for a few seconds through the pixelation that could change at any moment – and taking control over the score. Now she can shape the video by moulding it in red fabric. The way that Jigalin takes back control over the censoring score reflects an approach that artists can and do take in real life, using their creativity to push back against algorithmic mass censorship. The possibilities of a digital score and

real-time composition allow an experiment like this to be possible, and to condense and replicate a social issue on a small scale to begin identifying ways to address it.



**Figure 2.** Jigalin reclaiming agency over the digital score in *Censoring Experiment*.

#### 4. *SHADOW ARIA* (2022)

Digital scores take many forms beyond screen-based notation. Vear defines the term broadly:

From animated graphic scores and projected images to mixed-media environments; from co-located telematics with distributed code to artificial intelligence, thinking machines, robotics and hacked bodies, there is a broad wealth of innovation offered to musicians through the digital score. A defining feature is that they benefit from the usability and functionality of dynamic technological environments at some level and are responsive, evolving as the performance progresses and operating on a level of interactivity more in common with gaming and immersive new-media art. [6]

The idea of a mixed-media environment forming a score is experimented with in *Shadow Aria* (2022).<sup>2</sup> *Shadow Aria* is a short piece for four improvising performers, fixed multichannel tape track and a Max patch controlling four spotlights. It was premiered in late 2022 with double bass, percussion, bass clarinet, viola and a 24.2 speaker spatialisation. The action of the spotlights is randomised within a structure, similarly to the processing in *Censoring Experiment*. Unlike the screen-based *Censoring Experiment*, *Shadow Aria* takes the notions of a digital score beyond the screen by using digital methods to create an analogue, spatialised environment for both performers and audience. The piece is about silenced voices, broaching the topic of censorship in the arts from a different angle. A few years ago, I spoke to Helen Gifford, one of the most interesting Australian composers of the last century. She told me about orchestral pieces and operas she had written over the years that were never performed because of gendered

<sup>2</sup> <https://vimeo.com/789426278>



discrimination and the restrictions of her illness. [12] I wondered how many pieces have been lost, or never written, due to the lack of opportunities given to marginalised people, and in Gifford’s case, women in a male-dominated discipline. The music of *Shadow Aria* is the accompaniment to a silent soloist. Performers are instructed to improvise with the spatialised tape track, drawing from both the sound and its movement in the space. When a spotlight hits them, they become still and silent, representing the ghost of a silenced voice. The score is the environment they improvise in – light, audio and spatialisation are the prompts for the performers.



**Figure 3.** Spotlight on one performer in *Shadow Aria*.

The lights censor the performers directly (via the computer), in that they must cease to play when they are lit. Because they only play and move in the darkness, their performance is then censored again from the audience. Other multimedia composers have played with this idea of hiding performance in the dark, including Alexander Schubert in his piece *Sensate Focus* (2014) that also makes use of computer-controlled spotlights. [13] Schubert’s piece has the performers following a notated score, but their sounds and actions are lit through synced-up lighting cues, giving the audience the impression of digital sampling rather than live performance. While the piece is meant to evoke a digital feel, Schubert also wanted to draw attention to the impossibility of the robotic performance, “it shows the flaws in the body and how we work with them and how it is impossible to fulfil all the demands we put on it”. [14] *Shadow Aria* takes a different approach in its use of lighting as a representation of censorship. The presentation of the piece is distinctly analogue, although a Max patch forms a digital real-time score that controls it. The lights are warmer in tone, and turn on and off slowly. Rather than aiming to catch out the performers, the piece gives them time to halt their performance with theatricality, giving the audience a glimpse of each musician’s personality even though they never see them play. The tape track, too, is recorded on analogue synthesizers, blending in particularly with the percussion and clarinet sounds in the premiere performance. Instead of being a score that focuses on mistakes and surprise, like *Mueller Report* and *Censoring*

*Experiment*, *Shadow Aria* gives the performers gentle cues to shape their improvisation and complicates the audience’s perception of the work. While *Censoring Experiment* tries to exaggerate the restrictive censorship of arts on social media and force a reaction out of the performer, *Shadow Aria* reminds the audience of ghosts and shadows of underrepresented voices.

Spatialisation forms a part of the audio score by providing a moving foundation for the performance. The improvised music is shaped by the tape track, with the combination of the tape track and live performance making up an accompaniment to an imaginary soloist. Because of the suggestion of an accompaniment, and the often-quiet nature of the tape track, the piece feels held-back. Spatialisation allows sounds and gestures of a soft dynamic to fuel the improvisation. As opposed to a stereo track, in multichannel compositions a quiet sound can be heard distinctly above other louder sounds in the same register, either because of the listener’s proximity to a speaker or because of a gestural movement. [15] This allowed me to layer a number of synthesizer sounds in the track and have certain gestures available to the attention of one specific performer, giving each musician a different version of the audio score. In the premiere, this was not entirely successful as the spatialisation needed more workshopping to ensure that each musician had an equally interesting experience in their position. However, it did work to some extent, and the performers listened carefully to interact with the sound and movement surrounding them. For the audience and performers, spatialisation also introduced another level of censoring in the work. Having up to eight different audio tracks moving through the speakers in different ways while the four musicians play creates a level of complexity that cannot be fully perceptible. When spatialised sounds are layered in this way, “...all but the most significant characteristics are filtered out of the event, while the rest of the information is more or less ignored.” [15] Therefore, each audience member and performer will focus on the sounds loudest, closest to them, or with the most movement perceptible in their position. They each censor out some information to hear their own personal impression of the whole composition.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

While *Censoring Experiment* and *Shadow Aria* both explore similar themes of artistic censorship, they test out different ways of incorporating structured censorship into digitally scored compositions. *Censoring Experiment* relies on concepts that are distinctly screen-based and suited for online distribution. The solo performer fights against censorship within the computer screen, reminiscent of the algorithm-fuelled censorship they experience on social media and web-based platforms. This forces them to react creatively, using their body and performance to regain agency over the work or shape their music within the censored environment. *Shadow Aria* asks the four performers to censor themselves in collaboration with the tape track,

making space for the silent soloist. The result is a more cautious performance, with a sense that the performers are working together with the lighting and spatialised sound. Both pieces create a structured environment of censorship as different kinds of digital scores – *Censoring Experiment* as real-time animated notation, and *Shadow Aria* as a mixed-media environment of light and moving sound. These pieces begin an exploration for the potential for different forms of digital scores as methods of incorporating censorship into compositions and representing the social issue of censorship to performers and audience. Future experiments will take this concept further by testing the difference between musicians’ and audience’s perceptions of censorship coming from digital means and coming from a human in live performance, leading to further insight on how we might react to algorithmic moderation on the internet.

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