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Interpreting a Requiem for Insects: *The more I know, the less I understand.*

How often as fans, musicians, or indeed as musicologists might we search online (or anywhere else for that matter), mining and researching for information that might help us better understand a piece of music? And does this information, this additional knowledge which we seek somehow change our interpretation of the music we listen to or study – perhaps even altering its perceived value in some way? Furthermore, what is it that makes one particular ‘musical text’ seem more or less authentic or authoritative when considering and relating it to our individual personal experience or level of expertise?

A musical text is (broadly) defined as a documented piece of music that might be interpreted by somebody else, be it notated or as in more recent times recorded work. Perhaps then, understanding the many interacting layers of differing interpretations from composer to producer, to performer, then the end listener is quantum-like - when we observe it, our interpretation changes. Many of us (myself included) feel compelled to find interpretations, and sometimes we get lucky, gaining direct access to the process. Unique and perhaps rare kinds of opportunities present themselves to us, allowing us to become involved with and as such part of the story or the life of a piece of music – even if only in some minor or seemingly unnoticed way. Indeed, this sort of serendipitous involvement might allow us to interpret a piece of music from unique and even multiple perspectives - with a kind of special access granted to the procedure and its protagonists. We get to see it as a somewhat independent observer, a privileged audience member, and as a participant with little time or the chance for preconceived ideas or bias.

During my professional working life as a sound engineer and session musician, I have found myself in this position on many occasions. Often (in some cases accidentally) working on and writing songs with/for pop recording artists such as Paulo Nutini (Alloway Grove), Portishead (Motherless Child), and Faithless (Emergency). Recently, I found myself in this sort of position again, becoming involved with (what was for me) an unfamiliar style of music – that is, experimental acoustically self-balancing ensemble music. It began with an email our University tutor Phil Brissenden sent to the Advanced Studio Production (MA) group asking if any of us would be interested in recording the Adelphi Contemporary Music Group (ACMG) ensemble playing Tim Wise’s piece: *Requiem for Insects* at an upcoming session in Peel Hall (Brissenden, 2020). Our ASPT group was already practicing recording acoustically self-balancing ensembles at the venue earlier that week, and after discussing Phil’s email, a group of four students (myself included) determined it would be good experience/practice to have a go at recording the ACMG ensemble.

Thus, on the Wednesday evening (04/11/2020), we set up around the group - which consisted of two Salford University tutors, Phil Brissenden (conducting and producing), and Alan Williams (playing the accordion), alongside experienced piano, flute, guitar, and trumpet players. Moments before recording began, Phil (who was conducting a producing the piece) handed me a copy of the score for monitoring/recording purposes – with what appeared on reflection to be a knowing kind of smile. To add context, I come from a popular (commercial) music playing and recording background. So, when I attempted to read at the

eleven-section score, I was immediately intrigued, wondering how this unusual experimental ensemble might sound with this strange type of graphical score instruction and guessing there would have to be plenty of interpretation from everybody involved.

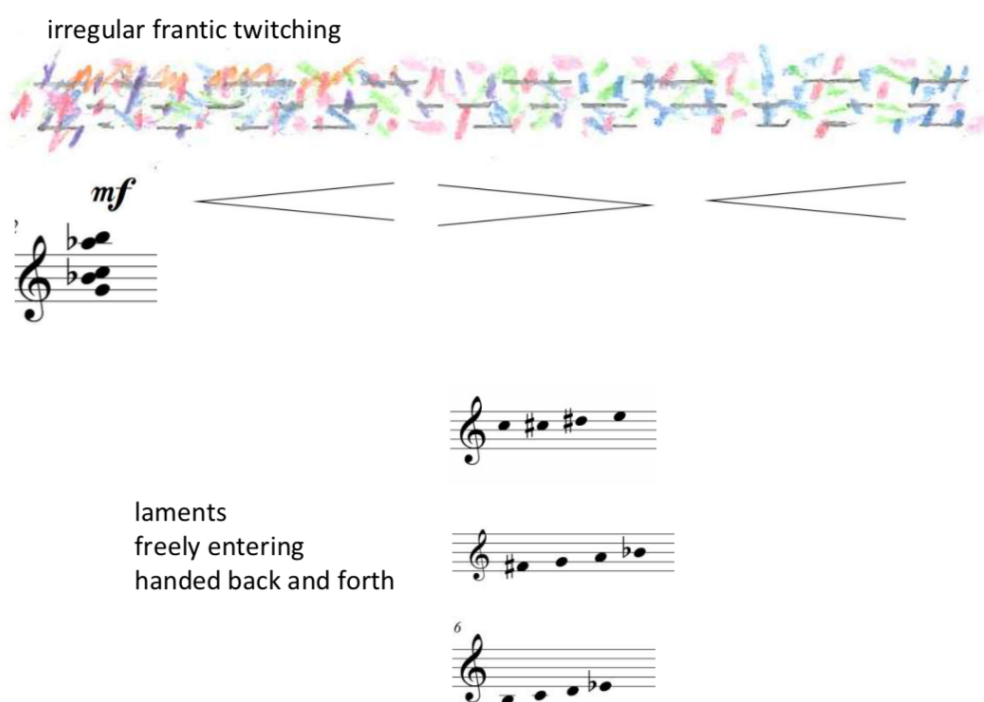
The Score.

Following are a number of visual examples taken from the original '*Requiem for Insects*' score (Wise, 2018), alongside audio extracts from the aforementioned recording:

Figure 1:

F

irregular frantic twitching



mf

laments

freely entering

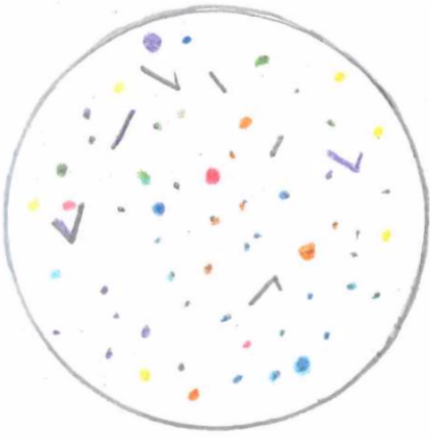
handed back and forth

Above (Figure 1) is the score for Section F. Note the unusual coloured drawing iconograph in combination with more typical elements of western music notation. Listen to the accompanying '*Section F.mp3*' file for audio extract.


Below (Figure 2) we can see the score for Section H, which uses a different recurring circular iconograph (or theme), and can be heard in the attached '*Section H.mp3*' file.

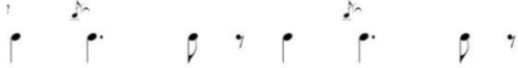
Figure 2:


H



ff *mp* *mf* *p*

tutti 


solo voice
ad lib 

guitar
feedback
ad lib 

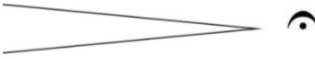
Finally, pictured below (*Figure 3*) is Section I of the score, with its unusual graphic and instructions. Listen to the 'Section I.mp3' file for audio extract.

Figure 3:


I



ff chaotic, catastrophic
harsh tones
mechanical rhythms
tremolo, flutter tongue, etc.



tutti



We can see from the above examples that Requiem for insects is a graphic - indeterminate score. It combines temporal/non-temporal elements, linear and non-linear graphical representations. And what Seeger suggests are traditional prescriptive and novel descriptive forms of notation and graphics (Seeger, 1958) - alongside 'script like' articulatory performance instructions such as:

"Irregular frantic twitching" seen/heard earlier in section F, or "sound becomes desiccated, dry, dying" as found on Mechanical 2 in Section G (see *Figure 4* below).

Figure 4:

Figure 4 illustrates musical notation and performance instructions for sections F and G. Section F features a graphic of "irregular frantic twitching" (a red arrow points to it) and musical notation with a dynamic marking of *mf*. Below this, instructions state "laments freely entering handed back and forth" with three staves of musical notation. Section G is labeled "mechanical 2" and includes musical notation with a dynamic marking of *f* and a "subito" marking. It is divided into three groups: "group 1", "group 2", and "group 3". A red arrow points to the end of group 3, with the instruction "sound becomes desiccated, dry, dying". A diagonal blue line separates the two sections.

So, how did Phil (conducting) communicate his ideas concerning interpretation to the group? And how did they respond with their own input to the demands of such an abstract musical text? During the recording process, the conductor and group, who are familiar with each other and have previously rehearsed this piece (more on this later), discussed different ways of performing the score. In the audio example 'F discussion.mp3', we can hear the conductor describing how he interprets and therefore would like take-2 of section F played. Phil explains to the group how he would like "Breaks in the laments" before describing how he interprets the laments handed back and forth instruction as a kind of "question and answer" between the different instruments. In the audio extract: 'I discussion.mp3', we hear how the strange graphic in Section I – suggesting what accordionist Allan describes as "Bifocation" is tackled, with interesting results heard on the flute.

The Composer

Following the recording of Requiem for Insects, I resolved to try and find out more about the unusual score and the strange 'experimental' music I was involved with that evening. I began by contacting the composer - Salford Lecturer Tim Wise, which culminated in a fascinating forty-minute online 'teams' discussion concerning the piece. Tim started by explaining that the work – inspired by an article about how humans are responsible for destroying the ecosystem of insects - was written specifically for the ACMG, a group often

frequented by first and second-year undergraduate students getting a feel for playing together as part of an ensemble. The work was intentionally conceived to be accessible to relatively inexperienced musicians who might not sight-read or have played as part of a group. He continued, explaining the roots of the graphical nature of the score as something Phil, Alan, and himself had developed over time as leading members of the ACMG, adding that as the group was by now familiar with this way of working, it had developed a sort of collective understanding regarding interpreting (or decoding) this unique methodology. I asked Tim about the ubiquitous circle iconograph (as seen above in section H), which he explained was influenced by a trip to a butterfly house, imagining staccato notes as the random flashes of colour created by the wings of the flying insects.

The conversation then moved on to a fascinating discussion about the subject of non-linear forms of notating and performing music - and how this might be represented sonically. Perhaps, more 'static' rather than linear soundscapes might be created, with an intentional move away from more traditional arrangements with typical cadences and repetitive sequences - where what we have just heard suggests what we should hear next. Instead, Tim posits we might focus on what is happening at any given moment and the sonority or realness of the formed sound – likening it to a sonic version of abstract expressionist art (e.g. Jackson Pollock).

After hearing preliminary edits of the recording, Tim expressed his belief that the piece *should* sound different every time it is performed, that the score was designed to be interpreted by the conductor, performers, and audience alike, and although his own ideas on how the piece might sound would likely differ, he suggests that Phil's production might perhaps turn out better than the one he had imagined. He added how this particular interpretation might also differ from others - in terms of quality, sonority, technique, and confidence, when considering the level of accomplishment of the musicians and the detailed musical knowledge prevalent in the group. He concluded the interview expressing how delighted he was with the recorded - although not yet mixed version (Wise, 2020).

The Conductor

Following the above revealing conversation with Tim Wise and continuing my search for interpretations, I set up another interview – with the composer/producer of the recording Phil Brissenden. Phil gave some background surrounding the piece, describing like Tim how the graphic nature of the score – its circles and other symbols - were invented by himself and other members of the ACMG as a sort of code for the group to perform. Tim created the whole score in PowerPoint, with hand-drawn iconographs scanned into the document, and Phil went on to describe how the work had been performed a year or so earlier for a live audience at peel hall - projected on a large screen for the ensemble to read together. He explained the difficulties and the sense of frustration a composer might face when also attempting to conduct a graphic score, such as the difficulty in communicating the imagined sound to the ensemble. Enthused, and with a strong vision of how the piece might sound, Phil persuaded Tim to let him take over the role of conductor.

Phil continued, explaining his approach to performing graphic scores. Practice it, discuss it with the composer and group, assign roles for the musicians, and learn what sounds each instrument is capable of making (as can be heard in the above discussion with the flautist in section I). He described how 'Requiem for Insects' was originally commissioned by the Manchester Museum as part of its insect's exhibition; an exhibition to raise public awareness of the disappearance of insects and the (human) destruction of their ecosystem. The group had rehearsed to perform the work live in the museum, although due to COVID restrictions the performance was unfortunately cancelled.

Disappointment aside, Phil believed that this presented the group with an excellent opportunity to record the piece when considering the group's familiarity with the music and each other through repeated rehearsing. He explained the difficulties of performing the fifteen-minute work live – in capturing the contrasting dynamics and subtle interactions between musicians in a single playthrough over this 'live' time frame. Thus, for the recording, similar sections (in terms of performance/sound) would be played one after the other, with the best 'takes' selected and then later compiled for a final master version of the piece - to be interpreted by the listener, in effect another, new musical text (Brissenden, 2020).

A new musical text?

The final version of the Peel hall recording is currently being edited and mixed, which raises an intriguing question. Might this rehearsed, refined, and edited version of the work now be considered the authoritative musical text - the version to which all others might be in some way compared? Or perhaps the original score should be thought of as the authentic musical text - a work of art in its own right?

Davies argues that an authentic performance must accurately reproduce the notes on a score while also proposing that what is written by the composer might not be an accurate representation of what the performers should play (Rudbridge, 1996). While, Leppard suggests that the clearest possible representation of the music is that its intrinsic qualities, vitality, and values are presented as vividly as they may conceivably ever have been (Rudbridge, 1996).

Arguably, one of the preeminent pianists/performers of the twentieth century, the controversial Glenn Gould (1932 -1902), was known for his focus on editing during the recording process. Using the technology available to him, studio pioneer Gould relied heavily on tape edits along with multiple recorded takes to create what he considered the best possible representation of a particular piece. A process observable in the video '*Glenn Gould listens to & edits English Suite 1 Bourrees*' (Youtube, 2021). In response to contemporaneous critical discourse surrounding the subject of authenticity, Gould defended his methodology, comparing the process to that of directing and making a film, challenging listeners to hear the edit points, and arguing "The tape does lie, and nearly always gets away with it" (Kingwell, 2009).

That said, Gould's award-winning 1955 recording of Bach's Goldberg variations was, at the time of release, the most successful (in terms of sales) classical album to date. Indeed, the

recording is still highly regarded and currently sits at number three (Gould's later 1981 recording occupies number two!) in the Pitchfork.com highest rated albums of all time (albumoftheyear.org, 2020). Moreover, Gould's annotated (Bach) score from the 1981 recording has been placed for auction with a value of around \$150,000. Although admittedly, Gould's recordings differ contextually (not least considering attitudes of the time), complexities surrounding authenticity/authority remain just as pertinent when attempting to attribute these factors to *any* musical text, be it recorded, edited in some way, or indeed written. The ACMG recording of Requiem for Insects and its original written score exist as multi layered interpretable works and separate musical texts. However, it seems both might be considered authoritative and authentic in their own right.

Conclusion

Finally, answering my own rhetorical questions posed in the introduction:

How many times do we research a piece of music to better understand it? - Often, which might be one of the reasons myself, and many others choose to study the subject. Does this additional knowledge affect our interpretation in some way? I would argue it does. It seems the more I know, the less I understand - yet the work and investment that goes into interpreting or trying to understand a piece of music (somehow) adds value. And on what makes one particular musical text more authoritative or authentic than another? Perhaps on some level, we associate these values with what we are most familiar with in the first instance. Although the discourse, as we have seen, is complex, contextual, and apt to change. Ultimately it seems many of these questions concerning meaning, value authority, etc. are as Moore posits when discussing authenticity "ascribed to rather than inscribed in a performance" (Moore, 2002).

That is to say – it is all about interpretation.

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