

Why Theater? *or A Series of Uninvited Guests*

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I, too, relish what is often referred to or understood as "absolute" or "abstract" music...just as much as the next guy. Or perhaps a better opening statement might be, "Remember when we wrote music?" This short essay hopes to obviate any preaching to the already converted by addressing specifically those who are fundamentally suspicious of that leap of faith into the "extra-musical." I recall years when I, too, would invariably shut my eyes while composing "tape music," to enter that darker domain of aurality without seeing, or seeing only that which the imagination conjured in tandem with the strangeness of listening...albeit an intimate listening...in order that music first speak in music if to unlearn itself, to un-speak itself, that it might discover a deconstructive stutter of sorts.

My perspective then was that music must first ground itself in the impossible, a critical defiance against conditioned listening, and it might do this through perceptual paradox, thwarted expectation, cognitive conundrum. Query—uncertainty—has a watchful, "caffeinated" nature. There is much in the world to be anxious about.

So for decades, I composed a music to be heard exclusively on headphones, oddly defined by digital samples of once live, acoustic instruments severed from their actual real-time performance, best evaluated and arranged with no light source, including the distractive glow of a computer screen at night. For only in the darkest depths of one's projected imagined space did sounds regain a near visual re-embodiment, as physical objects that then perform an impossible dance in an inexplicable, cranial hall and thereby become sufficiently provocative to prompt the imagination to create, alongside the real, a house of mirrors, an imagined theater. And yet, how was this all to be reckoned with what we say when one "closes one's eyes to the world"?

Of course, there are many clever answers to this, which time gnaws away at, and one inevitably comes face to face, again and again, with one's conceptual constraints. This, I suppose, one can attribute to a kind of dialectical thinking. The first of these queries might be formulated—in a most veiled manner—as "Why instruments?" Or perhaps more astutely put, "What is an instrument?" This question is native to one who spends much of one's working hours in a recording studio/laboratory, where the final realization of a work abandons entirely the visual experience of those sound sources along with their human agents. Somewhere down the line, in a most seamless manner, the questioning turns toward an inquiry into broken or intentionally deconstructed instruments with their useful sonic idiosyncrasies and expressive pregnancy, then moves on to any possibly worthwhile object lying about the house, followed by makeshift instruments of a rude construction or refashioning traditional instruments with more unusual

preparations. By "traditional," I'm meaning the inclusion or exclusion of so-called "non-Western" instruments as well, bringing us smack center into the cultural politics of appropriation, Orientalism, deracination, etc. Sooner or later, the inquiry shifts focus from instruments as objects to the human performers as confounded agents, tossing soft objects at their faces during the recording session, in order to elicit the energies of mistakes...or performing on one's back, spine arched. Soon, the question is altogether reformulated as "What is a performer?" In recording flies, for instance, one might understand the insect both as instrument and as performer (a virtuoso of wing tremolo). And in this inquiry into flies as instruments, be they free flying or trapped in restrictive netting, here the line of query stumbles inadvertently on what one might call our first "uninvited guest." For *music*, as some might say with a degree of disdain, has become *organized sound*. Shut the eyes again and one is hard-put to evade the imagination's seductions toward the free associations of visual images. Music has become *descriptive*, despite providing no real objects for the eyes. The imagined theater is inescapable, one far more reliable, beyond the fantasy play of visual metaphors a composer imposes on a work that may prove unshared by any listener. We head towards the programmatic.

Nevertheless, there awaits still another path to theater, stumbled upon accidentally, simply by exchanging the means of the music's diffusion. That is, by replacing the antisocial headphones with the communal loudspeakers and then placing the latter in a concert setting, one invites back into the equation the physical stage. All that is required now is a collection of seats facing the stereo pair, and the ritualistic concert venue has rematerialized before our very eyes. The beauty of binaural headphones had always been the interior stage of the listener's skull, more than likely in the solitude of one's private abode. Now, however...and who hasn't heard this said...the loudspeakers alone are insufficient performers in the much awaited and anticipated spectacle, shared by a public audience, a social gathering that one would unlikely produce at home. So we invariably dim the lights as a feeble apology for the lack of visual exhibition. The loudspeakers disappear in the darkness and one is again left to one's own imagination.

Then one day, with a similar event as the one described above, one discovers, along with the loudspeakers on stage, a heavy, obstinate grand piano, ordered to remain unmoved during the playback concert. The instrument sits squarely in view, though without a performer. But who can ignore it. In fact, there comes a moment during the piece when one might even associate the piano-like sounds from the fixed playback with the instrument-object on stage. What is it? The physical instrument as conceptual representation? But then if one—even for the briefest of moments—assumes that the sounds one hears as elicited from the true, factual instrument itself, is that not the moment of intrusion of yet another "uninvited guest?" An imposter of sorts claiming sounds that it has not produced? And as there is still no human agent in this imagined act, the instrument as object takes on a mysterious air of aesthetic presence, importance, meaning. Would this not be amplified if the piano's lid were raised full stick and a small light made aglow from the chasm of its strings!

Finally, the defining moment arrives. On this evening, we ask not only for the lid up, but for the very physical presence of that most uninvited of "uninvited guest" onto the stage: the just-significant, live human performer, seated at the keyboard though never depressing a single key, through the entire playback of a "tape piece" diffused entirely through loudspeakers. Is this truly the imposter-actor? The audience knows from the start that there is no honest live performance, or do they? Perhaps the half on the left-side of the venue do—those able to discern the keyboard and fingers—while the other half on the right-side of the audience are left only to mere conjecture. Still, with the presence of a human on stage, the live concert ritual, with all its etiquette and deference to a performer, has rematerialized. Theater of an exterior type is reborn, albeit in its barest, most conceptually reduced instance. Indeed, it reminds us of the scam of lip-syncing, the most rudimentary translation of the virtual medium—once live, but now recorded—returned to its live production. I call this moment, in the context of headphone music, "When People Return." It is the instance when the past, pre-recorded, virtual reality of digital samples is superimposed on the live, present reality of human performers. And if so-called "live music" exists in opposition with "recorded music," then one might with a little playful thinking call the recorded medium, "dead music." Thus here the living and the dead co-inhabit the space of their translation, one a reflection of the other.

What follows on the next occasion is predictable. The live performer will then actually play something. Still inherent in the very premise of this bifurcated musical medium, however, is the core idea of *not playing*, though *pretending to play*. Consequently, the spatial displacement of virtual sound and live agent proposes a ventriloquism-effect of sorts. And if this concept of lip-syncing is taken one step further, a live gesture that both pretends to play and yet has also become detached from its translative function solicits the next of our "uninvited guest." This is the strange moment of mistranslation between live lip-syncing or false doubling and its pre-recorded playback. Between a just-noticeable decoupling and a grotesquely exaggerated departure, a vast play of confusion brought on by the ambiguity of "who is doing what" is created. This uncertainty is further exacerbated by hidden loudspeakers from the rear of the audience, creating yet another layer of perceptual misdirection, a further strange doubling, though intermittent and thereby purposefully unpredictable. And yet doubling refers back to its roots in the accumulation of vertical interpretations and representations. Theater is an orchestration, alternatively a heterophony, which has projected itself explicitly into the visual domain.

Consequently, if music's physical production and its labor have been decoupled to varying degrees from the sounding whole, the once-presumed gestural artifacts of musical production—previously extraneous to the enterprise of music making—rise up in revolt to join the inflated game of fact and fiction, the interplay of truth and fraud. Page turns, cued glances, time beat with

the foot, the exchange of doubling instruments, the muting of instruments, the acknowledgment of the audience: all these become foregrounded, rehearsed, stylized...acted.

And so what does the layering of live performance and theater accomplish for that now buried "tape piece" of digital samples, if the balance among the layers creates a ruthless confusion? It aids the layer of "the dead music" to remain buried as a subconscious perception, even if it is sounding alone in long passages. It therefore allows for an averting of the eyes—the inward eyes afforded their suspension of disbelief requisite of any fiction— at the same time when the actual physical eyes are wide aglare, aghast by what they see on stage. It allows the spectacle its *shadow*, its alienation-effect. It is how that shadowy presence...as the last "uninvited guest" (now "ghost")...finds access through a backdoor, as it were, met unawares. In the end, there is and there isn't the playback track. It fades away to become yet another unnoticed presence: part of the venue's walls, or a curtain, or a door...seen, but not watched.

Theater is a sleight of hand. It is the distraction by which the dead rise covertly, poignantly, unbeknown...or only vaguely sensed...among the live, the living.