

Composing Database

June 9, 2018

In a general way, the practice of composition takes place from the most distant memory of sound to the intimacy of perceivable waves. These waves, or physical oscillations or vibrations in a medium, need to be first and foremost perceivable, whether as sound or color, or as movement in itself. The very structure of musical instruments and speakers, for example, together with their resonant bodies, is based on such oscillatory property of sound waves. A wave is, then, the minimal and elementary condition from which any composition can take place. Within this broad conception of music composition as wave manipulation, I attempt to draw attention to certain qualities of these waves.

The kind of wave that are of interest for music composition is the mechanical one. Mechanical waves depend on media to occur. More precisely, in their energetic transference through the medium, what the oscillation of the wave depends on is, namely, the matter of such medium. Further, in order for these waves to be perceivable, we have to become part of this medium: our body needs to be there, immersed in the medium.

We are, however, always already immersed in media, and our senses are constantly sensing waves. For example, if I flush the toilet I will begin a constellation of sound wave-sources from the water tank that will reverberate in the bathroom until the water tank has been filled again. The fact that I am there causing -and immersed in- the sonic flush is not enough for it to become music. Therefore, for music to emerge from these waves which are constantly flowing through us, two negative processes need to take place. First, we need to pay attention, that is, we must block out (some) waves; secondly, we need to forget them. It is thus not enough for me to press the button, I need to focus my attention on certain aspects of the flow of these waves, and I can do this because of the partial recollection I can have of the flush. In turn, these processes will be understood in their relationship to consciousness and memory.

1 Consciousness

On the one hand, it is our “limited” consciousness, what philosopher Zizek notes as a “filtering apparatus,” what grants us the possibility of “vetoing” stimuli:

“Only through this delay/limitation does the “world” open itself to us: without it, we would be totally suffocated by billions of data with, in a way, no empty breathing space around us, directly part of the world.”

This cognitivist view -of the body as an information processing system- prescribes the principal function of consciousness to be that of limiting the amount of data to be processed. This means that, within a context of continuously flowing sound waves, “what we perceive as the most immediate sensual reality is already the result of complex elaboration and judgement.” What this elaboration or judgement point to is a process of selection, of segmenting, out of the pool of waves in which our body is immersed. What I hear in the toilet flush is a resultant between all incoming stimuli and the very fast filtering I consciously activate. In this sense, the entire history of music can be heard in a simple, routinary toilet flush.

2 Memory

On the other hand, the importance of forgetfulness can be represented by Borges’s *Funes, el memorioso*, a short story of the young Irineo Funes who, due to an unfortunate accident, became incapable of forgetting. He was, thus, condemned to absolute memory, and so to its consequences:

“I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, to generalize, to abstract.”

Funes is secluded in a dark, silent, and enclosed space so as not to perceive the world; the only way for him to sleep is to imagine the opaqueness of an unknowable future. Somehow, the thought of Funes flushing the toilet in the dark is a panicking thought. The highly saturated auditory spectrum water is capable of generating would be inscribed in poor Irineo’s memory in such an infinitely continuous way that each fraction of wave oscillation would be different, unique, leaving no space for repetition of any kind; saturating the mind in the same way a supercomputer would if ordered to compute with accuracy the wave equation.

Thus, in order for a music composition to emerge from this constant flow of mechanical waves, two kinds of activities are required. A conscious one and an unconscious one. The conscious activity is that of our attention, the filtering of the overwhelming world coming at us in the form of waves. The unconscious one is that of forgetting, an erasure that prescribes our capacity to recollect.

I admit that these concepts are still, if anything, vague, and they demand further development. However, I consider this overall activity (of blocking and erasing) the possibility condition of what I call the unveiling of the music object: a process of repetition that is part of the music ritual.

3 Unveiling

The repetition in the act of unveiling is fundamental in the listening experience as such: the activity of the listener. For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, listening is a relation, neither to ‘me’ (the listener), nor to the ‘other’ (the listened), but the “relationship in self:”

“[listening] forms a ‘self’ or a ‘to itself’ in general, and if something like that ever does reach the end of its formation, consequently, listening is passing over to the register of presence to self, it being understood that the ‘self’ is precisely nothing available (substantial or subsistent) to which one can be ‘present,’ but precisely the resonance of a return.”

As musicologist Brian Kane suggests,

“Nancy calls this a resonant subject in order to underscore that this subject is, like sound, a structure of infinite referrals and deferrals. The subject is always listening to itself without finding itself given as present (p. 143-144)”

Now, the idea of unveiling takes the visual metaphor of uncovering something in order to be able to see it. The curtain in the theatre, for example, is a materialization of this unveiling; when the curtain rises, it is the performance of this unveiling. Comparing this performance with Nancy’s resonance, it can be considered as a reaction (or repetition) towards itself. In an applause, likewise, a repetition occurs out of the same energy which originated the listening: in the acoustic form of rain, of a multitude of wave-sources that, once it fades, allows for a stage to appear (and disappear). What this energy of the applause announces is this embodiment of Nancy’s relationship-in-self, in a motion towards the stage, anticipating it, thus, as a call for performance, for ritual.

4 Staging

What this unveiling calls for is the staging of music. This staging is the performativity that enables the musical object to occur. The finitude of composition thus is not in the product, in the “thing”, but in the practice, in the performative action that renders the work as a separate, cut-out, external object. Drawing from philosopher Jacques Derrida’s notion of writing as “breaching”, the performance, therefore, can be understood as the effraction of the spatiotemporal dimensionality of waves, the

“breaking of a path against resistances, rupture and irruption becoming a route (rupta, via rupta), violent inscription of a form, tracing of a difference in a nature or a matter which are conceivable as such only in their opposition to writing.”

In this violent rupture of the trace is where I locate the expression of music. The aesthetic dimension of music emerges as such from this violence: from the separation of the work from “a nature or a matter.” To further deepen this conception of the informal “stuff”, or “resistance” in which the path is opened through, in “opposition to writing”, I will draw from Žižek’s interpretation of *jouissance* and from Nancy’s notion of inoperativity.

5 *Jouissance*

To arrive at his notion of aesthetics, Žižek presses on a categorical reversal in our experience of pleasure. He claims that sensual pattern recognition (as pleasure experience), which is simultaneously our source of (species) survival and the foundation of the aesthetic experience has shifted from being a means, to being an end in itself (e.g. art). In doing so, Žižek notes the inoperative aspect of sexuality:

“the fact that sexuality can spill over and function as a metaphorical content of every (other) human activity is not a sign of its power but, on the contrary, a sign of its impotence, failure, inherent blockage” (p. 250).

This is why he equates modern art with the Freudian “death drive”:

“Is not the most succinct definition of modern art that it is art ‘beyond the pleasure principle’? We are supposed to enjoy traditional art, it is expected to generate aesthetic pleasure, in contrast to modern art, which causes displeasure –modern art, by definition, hurts.”

Displeasure is a symptom of an excess of *jouissance*. This excess is thus, for Žižek, the sign of the “sublime” (causing “pain-in-pleasure”), that which “produces its effect through its own failure.” The severed object in which the music work results is, therefore, an essentially inoperative object:

6 *Inoperativity*

“that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension.”

The unwork of art is what emerges out of the interaction between unveiling and staging: what characterizes the aesthetic dimension in (modern? Serious? contemporary?) music is the inoperative quality of its severed object, what

Nancy interprets as the unworking. Thus, the practice of music composition can be understood in terms of this positive, active force of unworking.

This unworking, furthermore, can only be carried out in the spatio-temporal dimension of perceivable waves, and it is in this dimension only where the composer's activity can be described. By putting these waves together (com-ponere), the composer enters into an inoperative ritual, a music ritual in which the 'work', or the 'thing' composed is unveiled on a stage, opening up the space for aesthetic expression. The staging and unveiling of waves constitute the possibility condition for the ritual of the unworking.

The unworking of the music object can be further understood in relation to memory. Memory, as the "essence of the psyche," is "resistance", "an opening to the effraction of the trace." In this opening within the resistance of memory the creative force of the future is liberated. In other words, the trace (as inscription, severing, or history) that this breaking entails is the possibility condition of its future: the futurity of difference is embedded in its predicate. In this sense, for Irineo Funes, his impossibility to forget is an hyperbolic metaphor of the negation of resistance: the condition of absolute memory turns into absolute non-resistance that impedes thought.

The question is how, then, can the recognition of certain patterns in the spatiotemporal dimensionality of perceivable waves be accounted for as rules of a certain kind, or as style of a certain composer, or music period? How does identity emerge from this precondition of difference?

7 Language

This is how the database enters into the framing of the practice of composition that I attempt to draw attention to. In particular, what I want to point to first is the parallelism between the written word and data structures, in relation to the concept of the archive. This will prove to be the fundamental link between database and composition practices.

First of all, in written language and in a computer -as a system with a capacity for automated storing, changing and moving data, whose simplest units (bits) can be conglomerated into complex data structures (databases)- there is an underlying layer of meaningless symbols. Like the letters in the alphabet (symbolic pointers to certain sounds; vowels, consonants, etc.), at their lowest level, there is no meaning involved in data structures. This is to say that, beyond the mere symbolic representation of the void and the absence of void (the bit, 0/1), the binary layer of any database is in itself exempt from signification. It is only with higher, complex structures of bits (bytes, or words) where perceivable meaning resides.

8 Archive

Therefore, this horizon of meaning which is available through the word brings into surface the concept of the archive. For Derrida, the commencement and the commandment, the origin and the rule come from the same root of the word 'archive' (the notion of Arkhe, as origin, house of authority, and so on). The ruling within a social system is grounded and originates, therefore, in the address housing those who possess the potentials of the law; those who have access to the archives where the written word is kept:

“the archontic principle of the archive, which in itself presupposes not the originary arkhe, but the nomological arkhe of the law, of institution, of domiciliation, of filiation. No one has analyzed, that is to say, deconstructed, the authority of the archontic principle better than [Freud]. No one has shown how this archontic, that is, paternal and patriarchic, principle only posited itself to repeat itself and returned to re-posit itself only in the parricide.”

This archontic principle of the archive is present in the database. Within a digital system, a storage unit holds the data structures in place and, like the written word, these structures are endowed with the potential to dictate their own use. The database is thus always already self-determined: the archontic element, however, is not in the database in itself, it is for itself; it is embedded within the structural quality of the database, in the design with which the database is set from the start. In other words, the potential of the database only emerges through its performance.

9 Database

At this point, a distinction needs to be made between the database as computer and the database itself. In the above definition of the computer, the notion of the database is embedded. What is a database? In the simplest sense, it is the structured collection of data that is available through the computer. Generally, a database is a list of words, a set of properties of a given object: a spreadsheet keeping track of the stock in a pharmacy; all your location activity stored in your phone.

There is, however, a deeper concept of what a database is. For example, on any cell phone you can have a folder with images. In a sense, this folder is already a database of images. But, the same storage device has data about those files, and this metadata is in itself a database, stored someplace else in your device; further, each image file is a database in itself, holding bytes in an image 'object' that enables access to itself, and that predetermines how you can access that file; further, the way to access data is in itself a set of rules deployed in a fixed, particular manner; further, the coding of these rules is carried out in programming languages (databases of commands), which go straight down -through the terrain of machine code interpretation- to bit movement, change,

and storage.

Without this web of interconnected but independent databases, the computer would simply be an extremely fast calculator. The notion of the database is inseparable from that of the computer. This is why when you engage with a computer, with any software, program, etc., you are already using a multitude of databases.

10 Performance

What is important here is, then, that this use of the database, which becomes a practice over time, comes with instructions, as instruction. This is the linkage with the concept of an archive. The computer is a multitude of databases constantly projecting their authority, their archontic power onto their users. This is what is generally feared from computers, or software in general, because it raises certain paranoid thoughts in relation to the extent to which freedom is determined by technology. However, far from being an imminent danger of submission on the part of the user, the case is quite the contrary: the potential of the database practice is only actualized through the user, and it depends not so much on the awareness of this fact by the user, as on the performativity of the database.

The archontic principle, then, takes effect through both writing and databasing; it is equally present in both practices. Thus, in the same way the written word becomes the rule, just as the structured data prescribes its command, the severed object of music emerges as style, order, or identity.

I would like to ask now a few questions touching on the performance of the database. In what does this performativity consist of? How does this projection of authority relate to the multiplicity of authors the computer (as a web of interconnected databases) depends on? Further, how does this authorial multiplicity reflect on the performativity of the database?

In other words, given the fact that the computer is a multitude of interconnected databases and, in turn, that these databases are authored by a multiplicity of authors, how is the figure of composer (as author, and as database performer) to be redefined? How is the agency of the composer redefined in terms of this status of nodality, that is, this status of being as a nodal point in an archontic web of decentered authority? Or, to put it still in another way, how can we conceive the aesthetic experience without this authoritative (patriarchal) character; without this inherent imposition of order and identity? I think the space is opened, thus, for the concept of an anarchic unwork of art.