

# Chapter 1

## Compositions

This chapter aims to briefly describe the submitted work. However, these are not detailed commentaries of the musical output as the previous chapters already serve as a meta-commentary on this work.

### 1.1 E-tudes

*E-tudes* is a set of electronic *études* for six stage pianos, live electronics and mechanical piano.<sup>1</sup> These compositions were written for the ensemble **pianocircus**<sup>2</sup> for a project that became a two-year collaboration and lead to two performances.<sup>3</sup> What initially attracted me to this ensemble was its very particular instrumentation consisting of six electronic stage pianos. I thought this would be a suitable platform to experiment with the notions of *real-time plunderphonics* and *live musica derivata*,<sup>4</sup> considering that these instruments are electronic and therefore produce no considerable audible acoustic sound.<sup>5</sup> Like a book of *études* from the repertoire, *E-tudes* consists of a set of pieces that can be performed together at the same event or individually as separate short pieces. At present time, I have completed four ‘e-tudes’, and as an ongoing project, I will continue adding new pieces to the collection. *E-tudes* is modular in the way in which it can be presented: depending on the set of circumstances for a given event, they can be presented separately or as a whole, either as a concert performance or as an installation with perforative elements. In the installation version, the

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<sup>1</sup>In case a mechanical piano is not available, it is possible to use a sampler with piano sounds.

<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.pianocircus.com/>

<sup>3</sup>Enterprise 08 Festival, The Space, London, May, 2008, and The Sound Source, Kings Place, London, July, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>See pp. 91–92.

<sup>5</sup>The only acoustic sounds that can be heard are the keyclicks produced by the physical contact with the stage pianos while playing. This noise is slightly audible mostly when there are no sounds playing through the speakers (or they are very quiet).

audience walks into, out of, and around the area surrounding the musicians and has creative control over how they want to experience the performance. By choosing between listening to the speakers in the room or to various headphones that are distributed through the performance space and generate different outputs, each member of the audience fabricates their own version of the piece. Therefore, in the installation version there are various possible outputs generated by the computer from the performance, which the audience can choose from. It is also possible to have a performance where the members of the audience are wearing wireless headphones that can receive multiple channels that are transmitted in the performance space, therefore allowing them to choose which channel they want to listen to.<sup>6</sup>

I use the same configuration for all of the pieces that comprise *E-tudes*: the ensemble of six stage pianos is placed in hexagonal formation and divided into two subgroups. The first subgroup consisting of three pianists are asked to select *études* from the western piano repertoire at will—they can select the *études* they prefer to perform (for example, *études* by Chopin, Debussy or Ligeti, to mention just a few)—and are to play them in their chosen order during the duration of the performance. The second subgroup consisting of the remaining three pianists perform together from *The Sixth Book of Madrigals* by Don Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa (1566-1613).

The pianists playing the madrigals send Midi information to two laptops that transform the audio signal from the *études* and schedule the digital signal processing events. The audience is not able to hear in the room what the pianists are playing as the stage pianos do not produce an acoustic sound. The seventh performer (performing the live-electronic part)<sup>7</sup> performs different tasks: at some points s/he speaks the Madrigals' text into a microphone and the spectral information from this signal is used to process the final audio output and to trigger other sound events, at the same time playing Midi controllers. The live electronic part is not fixed, leaving space for improvisational elements within the human/computer interaction. Finally, through the analysis of all the inputs the computer sends Midi messages to the mechanical piano, adding yet another element to the performance. In the room the final result of the creative process of combining the simultaneous performances in diverse arrangements is diffused through the speakers. In the installation version, the headphones that are spread through the performance space portray the inner life of the performance sounding in the room and reveal the inner layers of computer processing and the appropriated compositions.

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<sup>6</sup>This was the case in the performance at Kings Place.

<sup>7</sup>In the performances of *E-tudes* I performed this part myself.

## 1.2 On Violence

This composition attempts to explore the aesthetics of violence and reflect on different manifestations of violence. It is also inspired by slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's ideas about violence. Žižek categorizes violence into two main types: subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence is clearly identifiable by an agent, for example acts of terror or crime, and it is perceived as a clear interruption of the normal state of things. On the other hand, objective violence is violence that is inherent in the social fabric and it is hard to see and experience for the advantaged classes or countries. What Žižek argues is that objective violence is inherent within the social "balance" and it is objective violence which triggers acts of subjective violence. Furthermore, Žižek identifies two types of objective violence: symbolic and systematic violence. Systematic violence is manifested through our economic and political systems that in order to give the idea of a normal smooth running of things, exert systematic violence on large groups of people. Symbolic violence is related to and included within systematic violence but it is specific to violence expressed through language and other symbolic systems (like music). Žižek goes further to argue that the forms of symbolic violence are actually based on and manifested by the symbolic systems as such.

## 1.3 Žižek!?

Žižek? is a computer-mediated improvisation that gives a live alternative soundtrack to the Žižek! (2005) movie. Each performer has a laptop in front of them. The laptops are connected through a network by which the composer guides the improvisers by sending them written directions, animations (moving graphical notation) and through headphones, an aural score that consists of sound and music derived from the audio of the film.

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## 1.4 FreuPinta

## 1.5 Improvisations