

BECOMING FERTILE RAIN

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To me, the purpose of music is to produce some experience in an audience. The audience can include performers and non-performers, and the experiences generated by music have huge variety. Throughout history, music has been used to foster communities, explore spirituality, represent the abstract, tell stories, etc. This isn't to say music must have a function, or be made with usefulness in mind. However, I don't consider sound—or lack of sound—music unless it is created or perceived with some artistic intent, resulting in a personal experience.

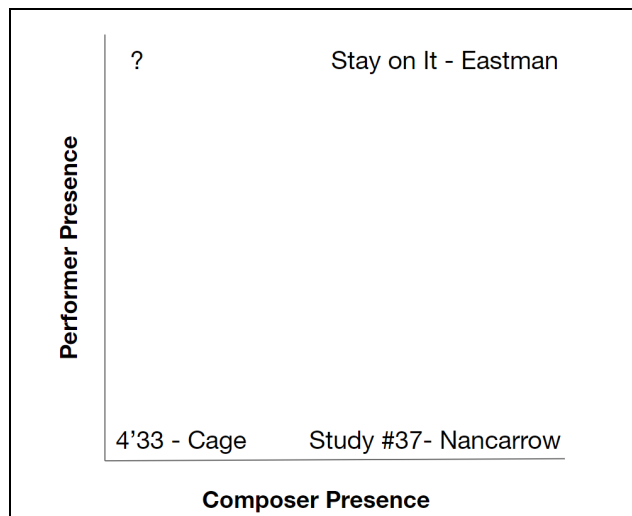
If the result of music is a listener's experience, what are the composer and performer's roles in causing that experience? Who's voice is being heard by the audience? To help me think about these questions, I've created two terms: performer presence and composer presence.

Composer presence describes how much the composer's voice is heard in a musical performance. It's like you can hear their fingerprints on the sound, specific elements that make you think "that's so them." Another way to gauge composer presence is to ask whether the music has a fixed or fluid perspective. For example, many Schostakowitsch symphonies are firmly rooted in the cultural and political events of 20th century Russia—giving them strong composer presence. However, the perspective of a piece doesn't have to match the composer's personal experience to qualify. Any time a piece is fixed with a lens of the composer's choice, composer presence is there.

Performer presence is similar, but checks for the performer's unique voice in musical performance. It is not mutually exclusive with composer presence, and it tends to depend on composer presence. Performer presence can be seen through the same audible fingerprints and "that's so them" moments as composer presence. Like composer presence, it is not limited to when the performance matches the personal experience of the performer. Often, performers make a point by playing characters which are different from their typical life. In both cases—expression of self aligned experience and expression through a character—the performer's unique human touch can be seen. This is performer presence.

There are few limitations to this model. First, artists' traits can't be easily dissected and categorized, especially since artists constantly influence each other. Second, people constantly debate how much composer presence is in each work and how much performer presence is appropriate. Finally, composer and performer presence are not separable; they have a complex, deeply personal relationship (even if we ignore the special case where the performer is the composer).

With these limitations in mind, the presence model is useful for thinking broadly about composition and performance. If it is used to make claims about specific pieces, it becomes highly subjective, but here are works that feel like corner cases to me:



One of these pieces was a life changing experience for me. In July 2022, I heard Julius Eastman's music for the first time when *Stay on It* was performed by the Northwestern Contemporary Music Ensemble. This music was like nothing I'd ever heard. The souls of every performer on stage shined like bright, colorful lights. Many of the musicians I hadn't known before this concert. Yet through the performance, I felt a deep connection to all of them.

That night sparked a crush on performer presence that I still haven't shaken off. I've felt a strong desire to push into the top left corner of that graph. This caused me to encounter many new challenges. How should this music be structured, if it should be at all? How do we pick a medium to communicate composition ideas? How do we practice, rehearse, and perform this music?

My first attempts in this arena are in the collection *Free Response Volume 1*. Most of those works are written prompts for structured improvisation with open instrumentation. Since then, I've been experimenting with adding more structure to the scores, without sacrificing the freedom of the performers. Of my newer works, *Revolution 10*, *Spruce*, and *Theatre no. 1* have made progress in that direction.

While reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching* I found a passage describes this artistic pursuit well:

“When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of the Dharma [the teachings] to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness. A teacher cannot give you the truth. The truth is already in you.” - *Thich Nhat Hanh*

From this perspective, the composer-performer relationship takes on a new color. The goal of the composer is not to push their ideas through the performer, but to pull the performer out of themselves. The primary question of composition becomes: how can I create the most fertile rain for the performer and how can I make a space for their seeds to bloom most freely?