

Section 1a: Analysis of *first music for marcia hafif* by Antoine Beuger

Antoine Beuger's piece *first music for marcia hafif* (1994) is a radically quiet and focused piece, lasting nine hours with less than an hour (52 minutes and 55 seconds) of performed sound. The sounds themselves are soft and delicate noise sounds produced by scraping wood or paper against sandpaper. The sandpaper is fixed on a box (roughly the size of a piece of paper) atop a table so that the performer acts on it as if drawing. This action directly evokes Marcia Hafif's pencil drawings, for whom the piece is dedicated.

In the 1970s, Hafif began a series of works composed of short hand drawn lines on paper¹. The marks are all drawn closely next to each other in rows with the changing weight and thickness of each line acting to create gradations in grayscale and visual motion over the page.

Beuger's score literally evokes this by organizing the sandpaper in a grid. Each movement of the performer is specified with the starting and ending location along with exact timings. The sandpaper is played with a small wooden stick or a small piece of paper. It is easy to compare this difference in precision between instruments with the difference of a freshly sharpened pencil and a dull one. Beuger indicates the use of "minimal pressure, just letting the stick or the piece of paper find its way over the uneven surface of the sandpaper." The motion is always with the opposing hand so that one drags the instrument across the body (i.e. right hand moving from left to right) rather than pushing away.

The variation arises mostly from the path of each movement and its duration. Each path has a different range (approximately 5 – 30 cm) in addition to the physical variations in the sandpaper itself. The times vary even more dramatically with some actions as short as 2 seconds while others last up to 10 minutes and 10 seconds. A more precise metric is the *speed of movement* necessary to realize each specified action (number of points on the grid / number of seconds). If each point is spaced about 5cm away, the slowest speed in the piece is 0.01 cm/second and the fastest being 10 cm/second. The average speed is about 1.55 cm/second.

The range in speeds is large enough to result in faster actions which create continuous noise and actions which are so slow that the sound becomes granular, where each bump of sand might be heard with seconds in between. This variety has recursive, or fractal properties, where the discrete events produced by the form seem to produce smaller events of similar form when slowed down. Fig. 1 shows my hand drawn realization of every action in the score, where solid lines represent actions performed with the wooden stick and shaded lines actions with the piece of paper. This resembles (vaguely) some of Hafif's early pencil drawings, like this upper-left corner shown in Fig. 2.

¹ <http://marciahafif.com/inventory/pp.html>

Fig. 1: Hand drawn realization of the score

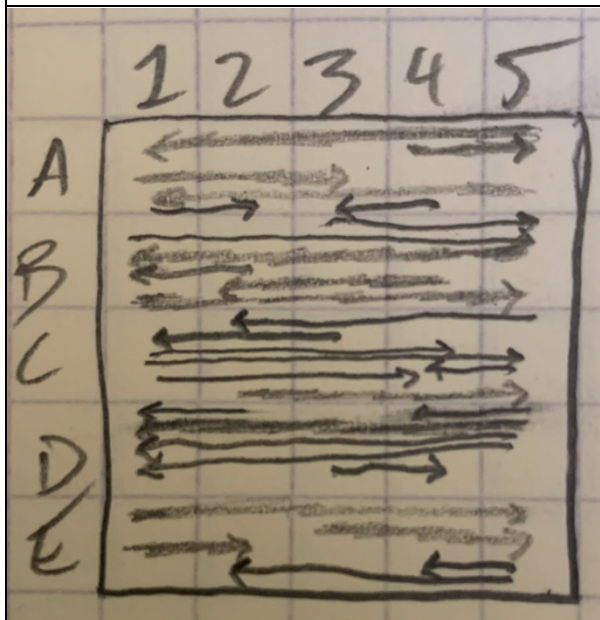
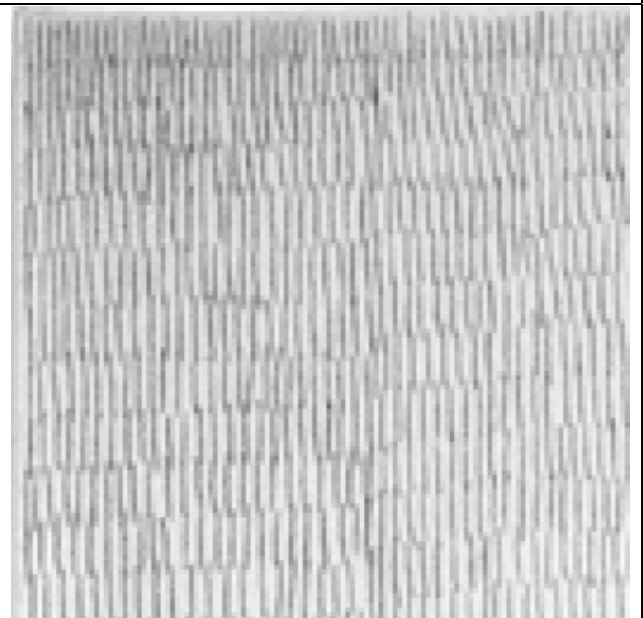


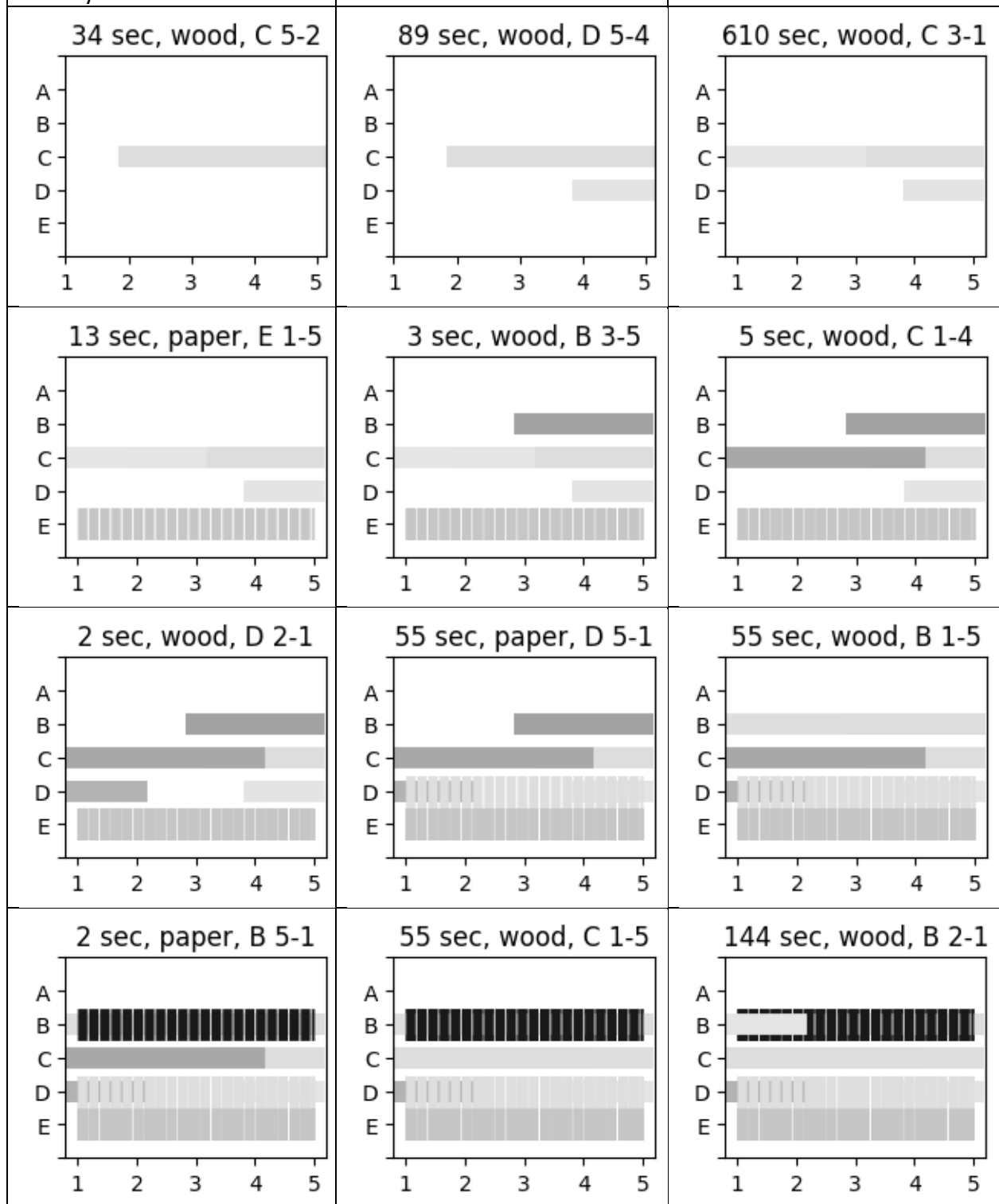
Fig. 2: Marcia Hafif: Pencil on Paper, Feb. 16, 1972

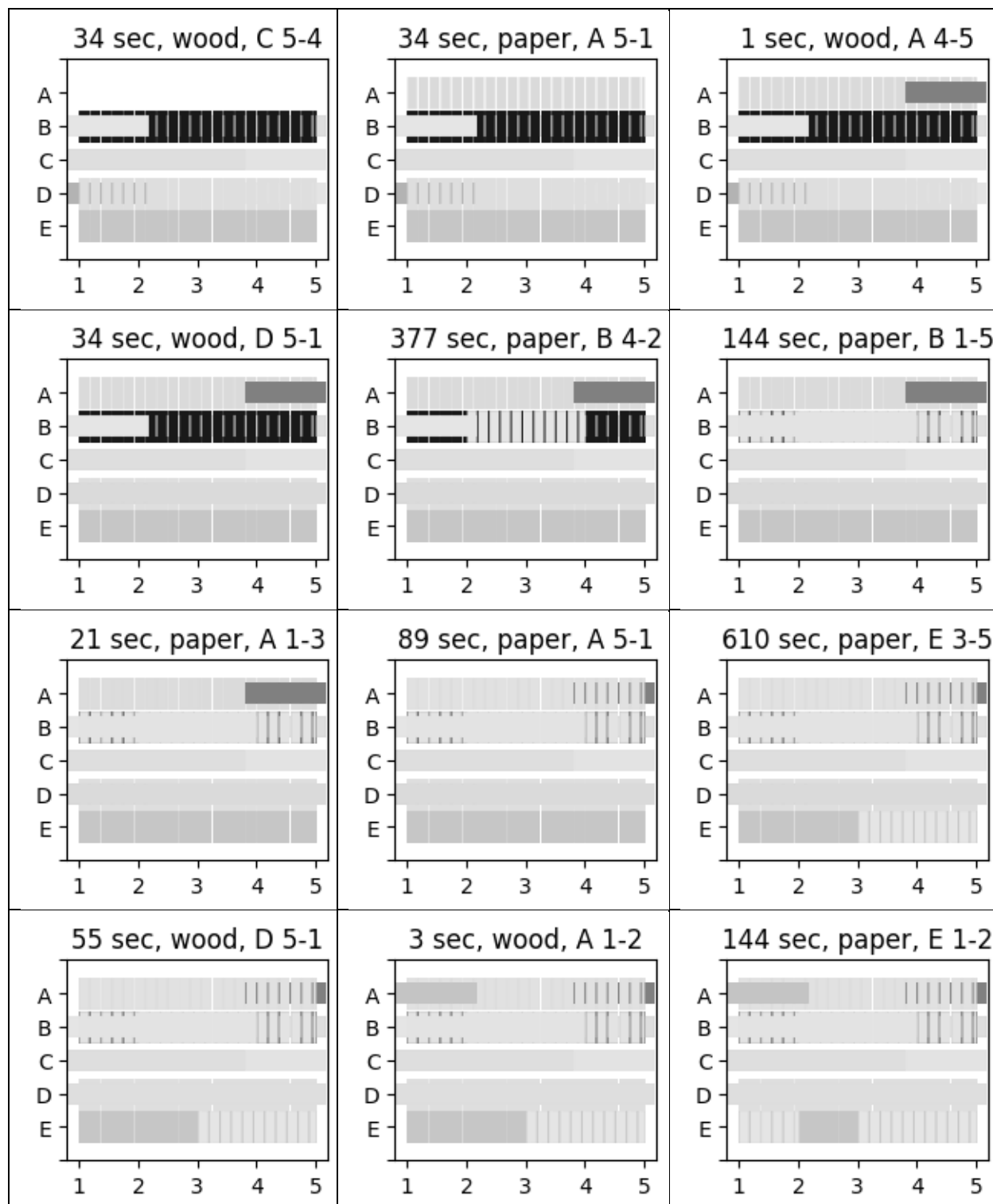


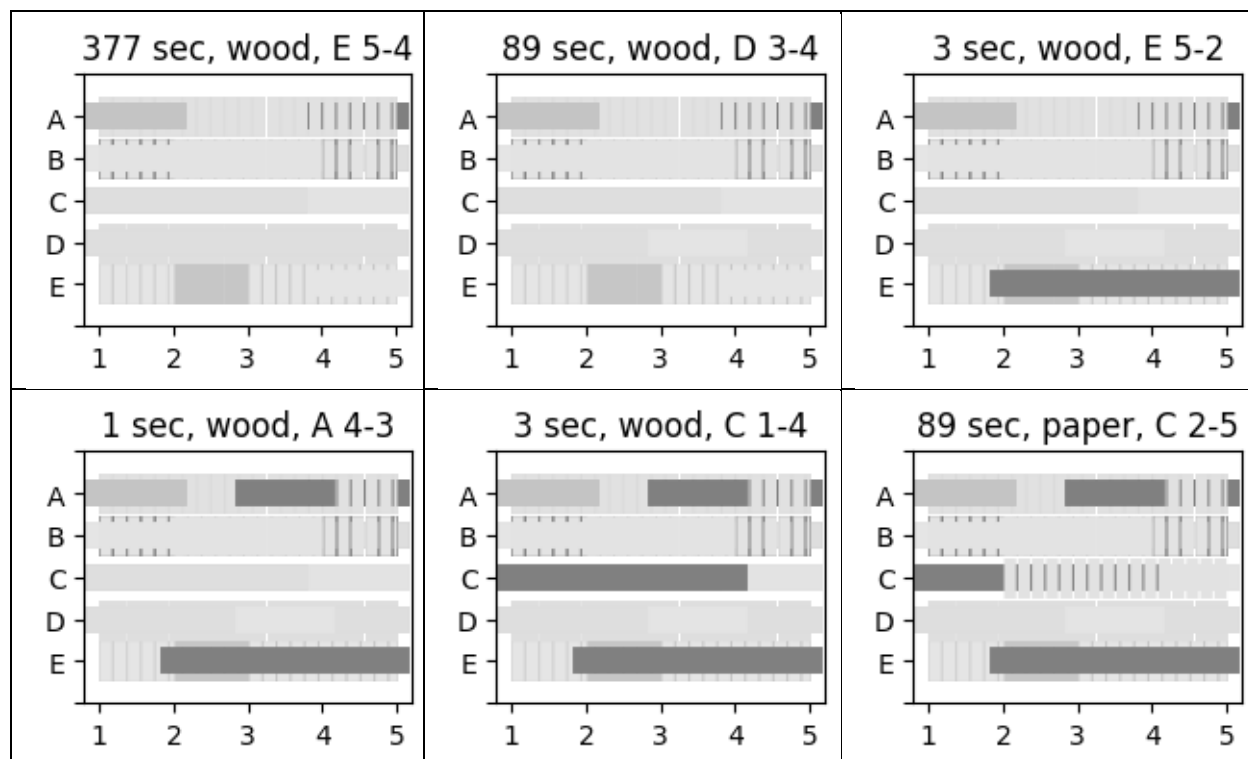
The timing of the piece presents the most drastic distinction in terms of performance. Except once, there is never less than six minutes of silence between each action. The separation of each action demands patience during silences and an intense focus on each movement. This suggests a similar kind of manual labor and diligence surely required for Hafif's drawings. While the drawings are clearly not aiming for the precision of something like an architectural drawing (which comes to mind in some of the images), they are still highly disciplined in the relation of each mark to the next and how they always touch but never cross or overlap. This discipline is necessary for Beuger's piece as well which, though requiring only an approximate visual attention, requires a high level of attunement to time and the physical control to move at incredibly slow speeds.

Figure 3 shows the entire progression from beginning to end, with each movement retained as a mark. Solid lines, again, represent actions with the wooden stick and the thicker dashed lines represent the actions performed with the piece of paper. The shading of each line is a representation of the speed where darker lines represent faster movements. The duration, and instrument (wood/paper) are also indicated along with the exact movement. Imagining this progression with hand drawn pencil lines like in Fig. 1, one can easily envision the process starting with a single marking and progressing to something like that shown in Fig. 2.

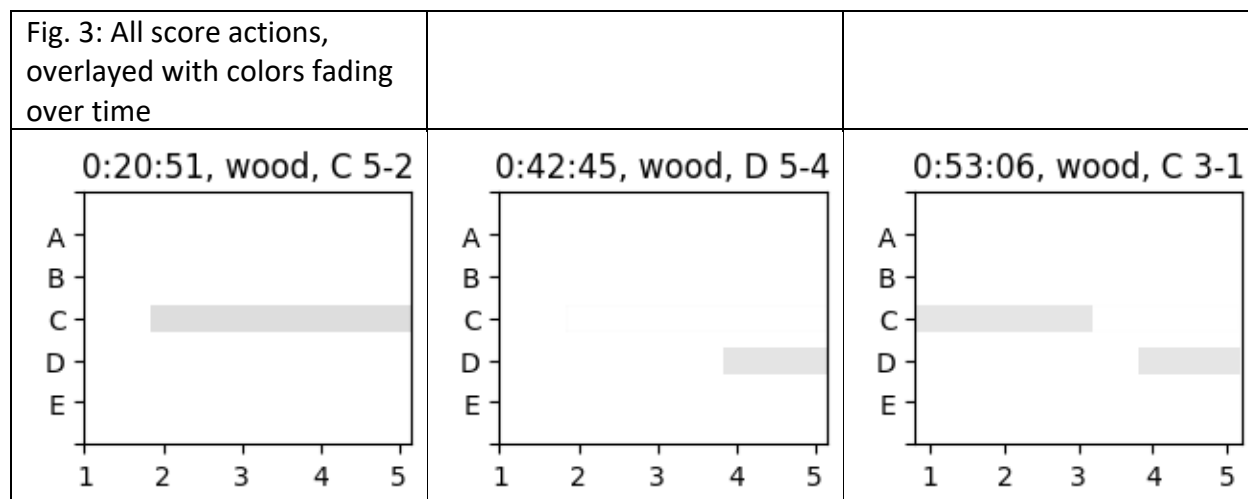
Fig. 3: All score actions, overlaid

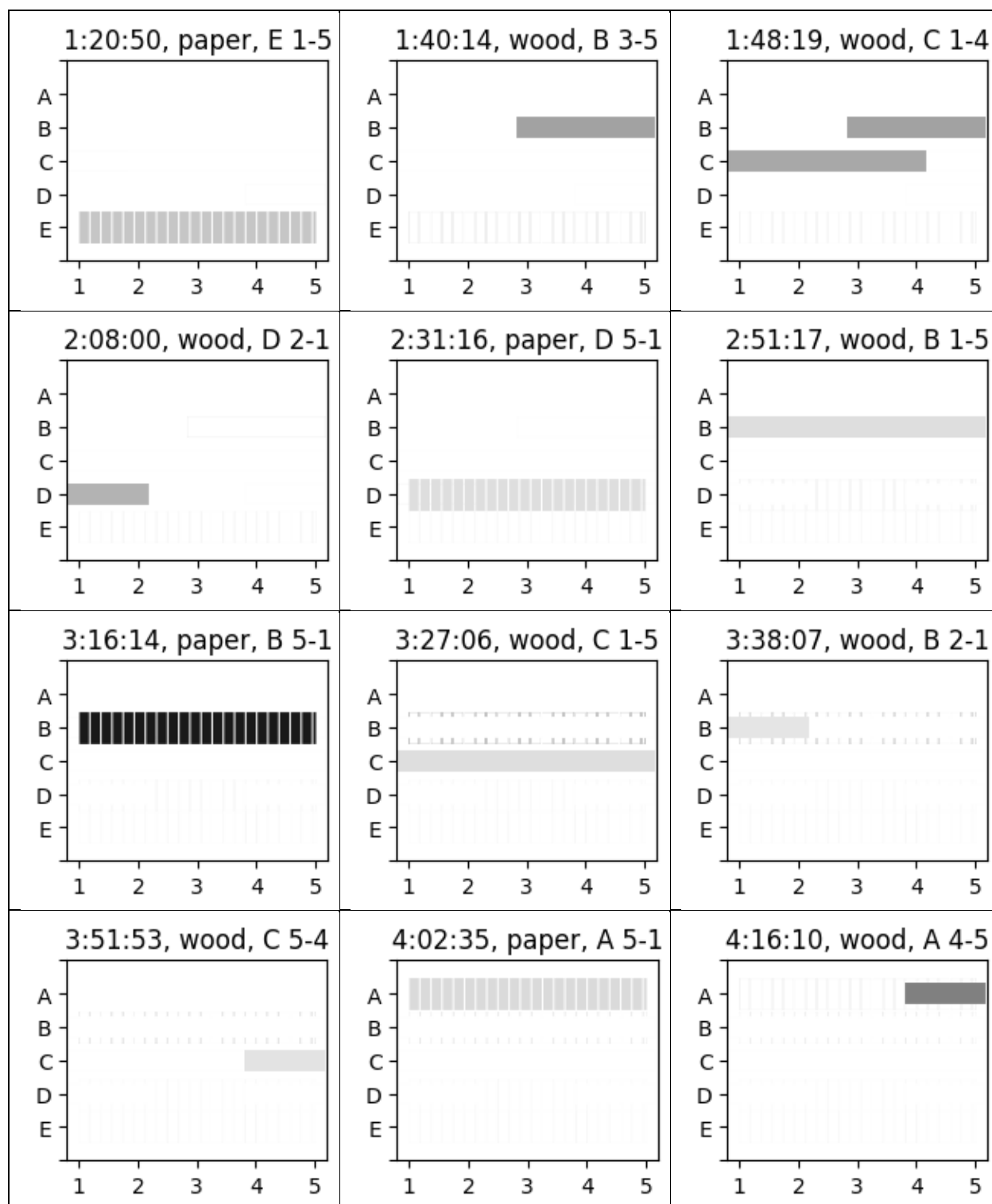


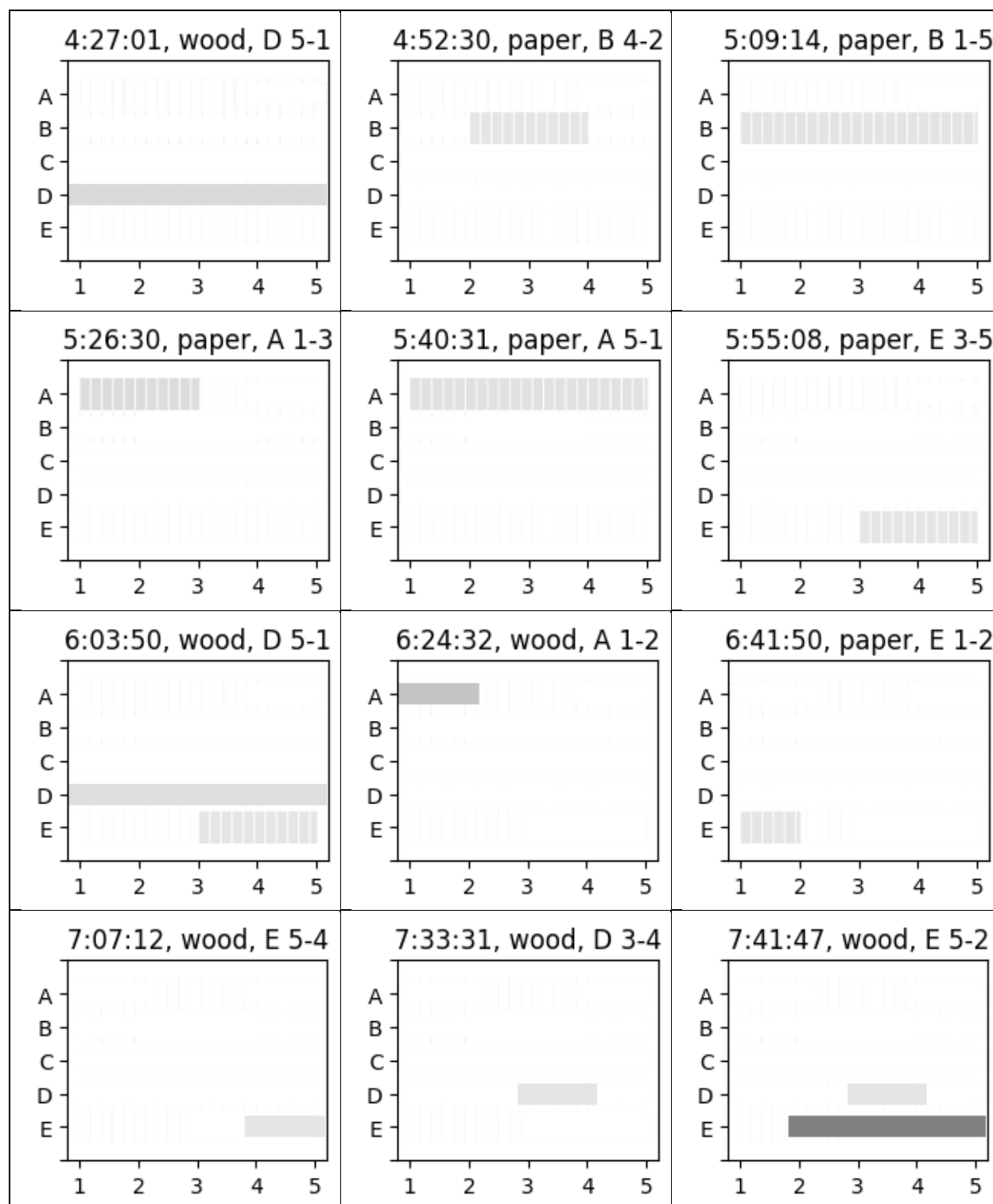


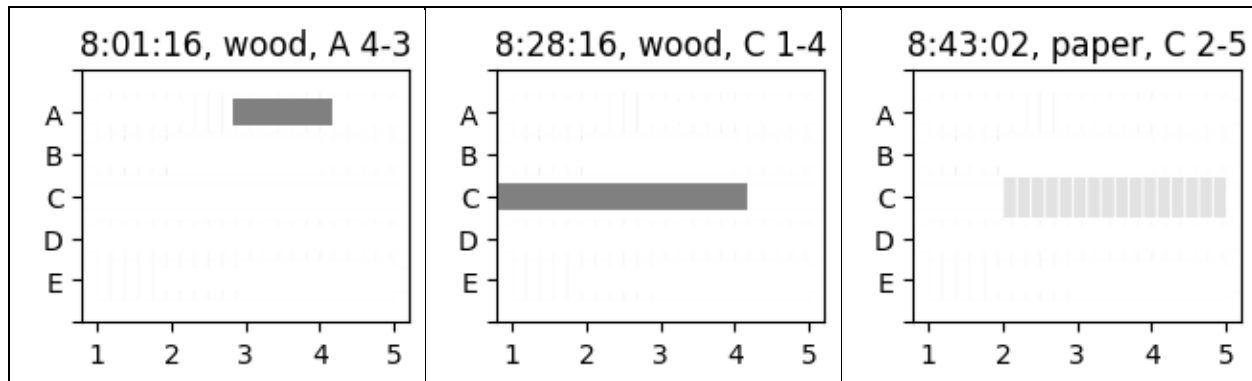


The reality of the performance, however, is that each action is separated by long periods of silence, in which the performer(s) sit at rest. In the nine hours of performance, most audience members (presumably coming and going in a gallery setting) might only witness one or two actions. Figure 4 shows the same process as above, but with colors fading to white over time showing how the experience of each audience member would likely include only one action (or a few at the busiest times). The starting time of each event is given instead of the duration so that the time between event onsets can be seen (though the color fade is determined by how much time has elapsed since each event *ended*).









This progression shows how, even at periods of greatest activity, the actions and sounds are extremely sparse. The most dramatic point of the entire piece happens two-thirds of the way through the piece (perhaps an intentional nod to classical form?) just after six hours have passed when, for 55 seconds, both hands are active simultaneously with a very slow and soft right-hand movement with paper and a faster left-hand movement with the wooden stick. Aside from this, each action is separated by long periods of silence (often more than ten minutes) where the environmental sounds of the room are all that might be heard.

This massively disproportionate ratio of sound to silence is a demonstrated interest of many of the composers making up the Wandelweiser collective, developing from the work of John Cage. In the long periods of silence in *first music for marcia hafif*, one can easily forget that a performance is happening at all. Depending on the position of the performer(s), different social situations might be affected where a quiet focus is maintained throughout or, conversely, normal activity might resume between the performance actions (or even throughout them). When the Cornell Experimental Music Ensemble (including myself) performed this work in 2020 at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, there were several long periods of silence when people coming in and out of the gallery were having conversations and apparently ignoring the performers. However, when we lifted our arms to prepare for an action (a relatively small gesture) the room became suddenly quiet as people had apparently maintained some awareness of us even in the long periods of inactivity.

The potential for multiple performers exemplifies the recursive quality described earlier. The score stipulates simply: 'for any number of players', but that 'all players play the same part'. Each performer performs the same actions, but due to the extremely delicate materials and movements, there will be subtle irregularities throughout. While dragging a stick a few centimeters over ten minutes, for instance, even the most controlled hand will devolve into short bursts of movement rather than a smooth continuous one. This mirrors the form of the entire piece, in a way, as the performed sounds are dwarfed by the silences between them. The usual role of environmental sound as a negative space for performance is upended as the periods of silence are so enlarged that the anticipation of performance one normally experiences as an audience is almost forgotten much of the time. A tension is maintained, however, as the physical presence of the performer(s) are a constant reminder that something performative *might happen sometime* and the question persists of how that will impact the otherwise silent space. I found this tension to exist even as a performer of the piece. Sitting for long periods in a quasi-meditative state, but still maintaining an awareness of the clock, each

action becomes amplified. The sound seems to be amplified too as it feels like a disturbance of the environment. I recall that as the performance went on I could hear each scrape of sand on the paper more clearly as I became more attuned to the sound of the room and my own sound seemed to be more disruptive.

Drawing inspiration from Marcia Hafif's dense pencil drawings and in choosing sound materials most often used for creating loud noise (sandpaper), Beuger provokes the listener by extending the temporal surface of the piece exponentially. The environmental sounds and other perceptions that arise between the performed events act like the surface of a canvas of painting appearing through the paint. The conditions (the ground of possibility) for experience become the object of experience, or at least get a peripheral glance.

The program I created to perform some of the analysis and generate the plots above can be viewed here: https://github.com/john422e/A_Exam_Part1_Section1/blob/main/fmfmf.py