

Constructing New Techniques

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In the context of my thesis, ‘Writing Wrong Right: Composing With Extended Techniques’, I examine the ways in which we can remove the barriers that composers and performers face with extended techniques. As part of the thesis, I explore the semiology of notation, and deconstruct it to establish a ‘cookbook’ of elements, which can be used to construct new notation for techniques that adheres to the unwritten ‘style guide’ of existing Western musical notation. This paper is a practical example of this; in it, I use autoethnography to show my experiences constructing both a technique, and a type of notation. This is intended to be representative, as a technique maps an action to a symbol, while a form of notation maps a mode of interacting with an instrument to the score; it is intended that the reader can extrapolate from my findings along with the cookbook to construct notation to suit their purposes as required.

The composer and recorder player Claire Farrell approached me, asking for my opinion on how to notate an extended technique that she had been developing. The technique involves the recorder player covering the window hole with their index finger or hand, which results in the recorder producing a whistle like effect. Air pressure determines the pitch, and the degree to which the window hole is covered determines the fundamental's presence or lack thereof, with full occlusion of the window producing solely the harmonic.

This is an ideal place in which to explore the ways in which we map actions into notation; the question becomes one of how this can be achieved in the most recognisable and orderly manner. Our goal of establishing a defined notation system is to ensure that it is as clear and easy to understand as possible.

Thus began an informative exploration through the various ways that we can map sound onto an instrument. This is an especially interesting topic to me, as I am interested in the ways in which the semiotics of notation influence its parsing. We can treat this development of the notation of a new technique as a case study for best practices, and establish some ground rules on how the written form of Western art music can be adapted to accommodate new techniques that fall outside of the initial set.

1 Literature Review

1.1 Semiotics

A brief overview of semiotics is necessary in order for any serious discussion to be had. Semiotics, the study of signs (read: meaningful communication), was invented concurrently by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce independent of one another. The most appreciable difference between their models was that while Saussure held that signs were made up of a signifier (the form of the sign) and signified (its meaning), Pierce's model also had an interpretant; the object that the audience interprets the signified as (since it is impossible to replicate meaning perfectly). Signifiers are then broken up into three discrete categories;

- *icon*: which have a direct physical connection to the signified. Photographs are an example of icons.
- *index*: which show evidence of the signified. The most common example being smoke indexing fire.
- *symbol*: which have no resemblance between the signifier and the signified; their meaning must be culturally learned. Arabic numerals, the radioactive symbol, and flags are all symbols.

Finally, our signs have two channels of information.

- *denotation*: the basic or literal meaning of the sign (i.e. a rose signifies the flower of the genus *Rosa* of the family *Rosaceae*)

- *connotation*: the secondary, culturally inferred meaning; a rose might also signify passion or love, depending on the context.

Interpreting these signs is described as semiosis, which Tagg states is ‘simply the process by which meaning is produced and understood.’¹ Semiosis happens constantly; the process of converting these words into the understanding of the concept of semiosis is, in itself, semiosis. This is an important step, though, as the interpretant which Peirce describes is unique to the audience; we construct meaning completely independently, informed by our past experiences and knowledge. Thus, the same picture of an aunt’s dog may be interpreted by the aunt as being a loving pet, whereas a neighbour might interpret the image as ‘the bloody dog that wakes me up at 6am’.

How does this relate to music, though? Floris Schuiling describes music notations as

‘interfaces for imagining virtual musical relations’

which is an Looking at Western notation, we have several instances where a symbol may hold a different context depending on the interpreter’s experience—the same notation is used for a harmonic and a note that is meant to be played open on a French horn. If a musician was given a piece of sheet music without any indicator of the instrument that it was written for, their experience (or lack thereof) with one of the instruments may influence how they choose to interpret the symbol.

Semiotics has seen a resurgence of interest with web design, where intuitive ‘notation’ is sought after to reduce the ‘friction’, or difficulty a user has navigating a site. We can learn many things from the research that has been done into how to use skeuomorphic design to convey an element’s function. Our goal with constructing intuitive music notation is to reduce the ‘friction’ just like a web designer. We can use the connotations of existing symbols to help infer how we can construct new symbols. As an example, the line that makes up a glissandi can be either straight, or wavy. The similarity of the last two examples on the right to the notation for *portamento* results in a connotation with those two types being continuous, rather than having discrete pitches. Additionally, the interpretant’s instrument may also influence the meaning to them- timpanists and trombonists are more likely to interpret glissandi as continuous changes, while pianists interpret step-wise due to the nature of their instruments.²

Lastly, we need to understand that some symbols are not compatible with one another; a properly engraved work will never have an upbow and downbow on the same note, as the two symbols fulfill the same function. This is what is known as a paradigmatic relationship; by virtue of the presence of one, it excludes the possibility of the other. Other examples of paradigms would be the degree at which a French horn opens or mutes their instrument. Looking at web design, we can draw a somewhat rough parallel to drop-down menus; there’s only one slot that can be filled.

1. Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos* (New York: Mass Media Music Scholar's Press, 2013), 156, ISBN: 978-0-9701684-8-1.

2. .

2 Methodology

3 Findings

- Textually, through the use of just text instructions. Examples would include ‘mute’.
- Textually and pictographically, with text describing complex operations, aided by the shorthand of symbols. Examples would include ‘mute unmute’.
- Pictographically; this would encompass all techniques that are divorced from the reality of the object, such as harmonics. As this is a very broad category, it can be broken down further:
 - Pictographically with symbols, such as our harmonic example.
 - Pictographically, with mappings to physical objects, such as the pedal sign representing the lifting of the pedal, or the half-hole representing a partially occluded hole.

4 Pre-existing notation

Maintaining compatibility with existing Western music notation is only possible if we follow the rules that are set out in existing symbols and structures. This means that we cannot mutate existing symbols, or ascribe a different meaning to their common one; there are to be no uses of the piano pedal symbol to indicate a patch change on an electric keyboard. Similarly, we cannot expect the user to intuitively understand symbols that don’t follow the existing design language.

We first establish that if using a pictographic notation, that there is a point at which the instrument’s window cannot be occluded any further. This would, logically, follow the pre-established convention of filled in black representing ‘more’. Further more, we know that there is a point at which there is no occlusion; the exact opposite. However, the precise point of this point is variable.

Pictographic notation is most useful when there are elements that cannot be conveyed succinctly with text; while it is true that you could notate it as ‘cover window with hand to produce high pitched seagull sound’, it would be cumbersome to read and interpret quickly. Reducing that to ‘cover window’ might result in unfortunate misinterpretations. Those examples also treat the act of covering the window as a binary; Claire described how the sound can change when you cover it partially, fully, or even stick your finger inside the window, blocking the free passage of air slightly to create a wholly new sound. So, we can safely establish that it is not feasible to use a textual direction with some degree of certainty; minute differences between covering the window from 30 percent to 50 percent and back to 20 percent would be unnecessarily verbose, or filled with numbers that were divorced from contextual information.

An aural equivalent can be drawn from double bass repertoire, in which a high harmonic on the bridge glissandos rapidly down to a lower partial, producing a ‘seagull’ like effect. These are notated as regular harmonics, sometimes with ‘seagull effect’ above the line. The double bass seagull effect is largely timbral

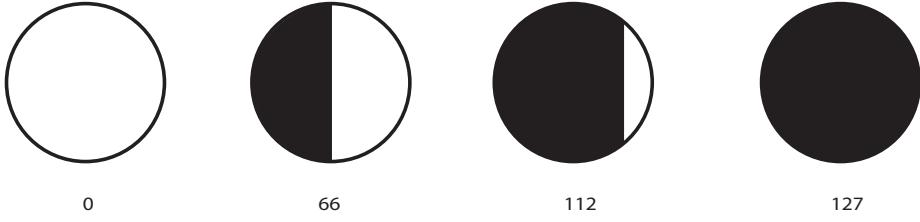


Figure 1: Half-closed circle style

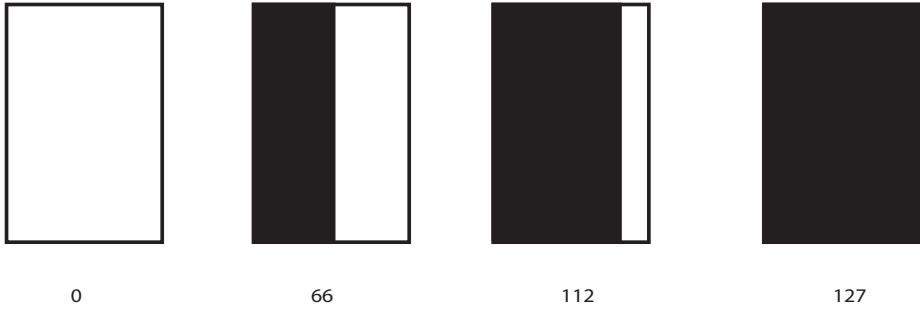


Figure 2: Modified to a rectangle

though, and its efficacy of communicating the desired effect lies not in the notation, but in the unary nature of the intended resultant sound; a rapid dropping of a high pitch to a lower one. It is tied to a real world parallel, and is thus easily mapped onto the instrument.

Action parallels include the stopping of a horn with a hand, and covering windpipes on clarinets and flutes; see Figure 1. These are closer to the intended action, and indeed the recorder lowers a tone on full occlusion of the airway much like the horn. However, Claire noted an issue with the typical notation; the open circle, half-closed circle, and fully black circle had no relationship to the instrument. The half-occlusion of the circle was confusing as the window is a square, and fingering holes are round. Claire was attempting to map a horn technique onto a recorder, with predictably confusing results.

I modified the notation to a rectangle, to represent the rectangular window, and added black to it to represent occlusion, moving from left to right as with the half-closed circle notation; see Figure 2. For the sake of convenience, the level of occlusion has been mapped to a MIDI rate, of 0 being totally un-occluded, with 127 being fully occluded.

However, this was obviously inappropriate, as the action of occluding the window is not a left-to-right action. I changed it so the black increased upwards as the notation dictated further occlusion of the window as seen in Figure 3. This mapped similar to how a MIDI expression level is displayed as a bar graph in DAWs.

But this too posed difficulties, as the instrument's window wasn't on the

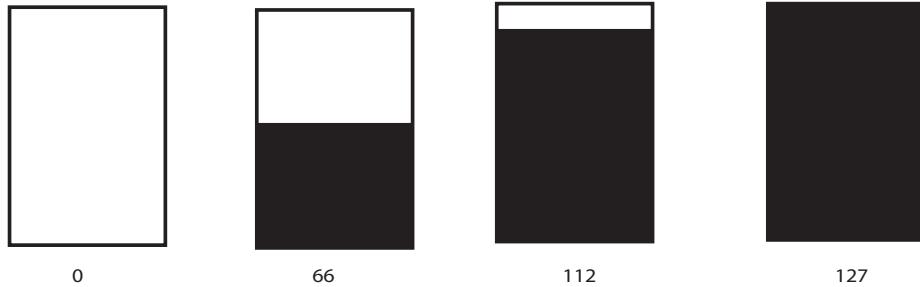


Figure 3: MIDI style range

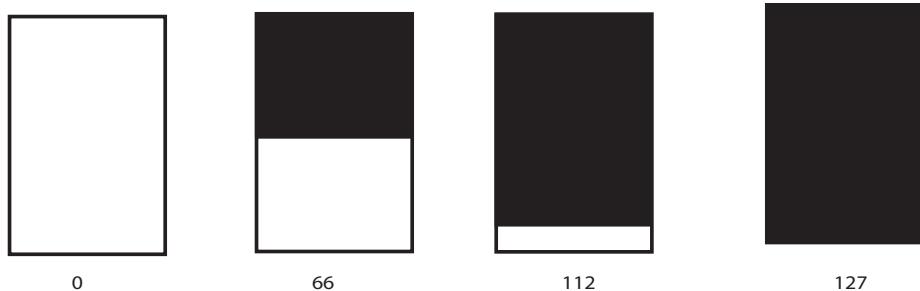


Figure 4: Inverted MIDI style range

bottom of the instrument, and the hand comes *down* to occlude the window. Rotating the image 180 degrees, I found the clearest notation yet; a picture that mapped both the intended one dimensional attribute of occlusion, as well as the action onto the instrument.

And yet, we found there was still an outlying use-case that was not accounted for; the action of pushing the finger (or, indeed, abstracted out to any object) into the window. This posed an interesting issue, as it challenged our one-dimensional range attribute with needing to either accommodate the inclusion of a further attribute, or a method of delineating the cutoff point for total occlusion and where the ‘further in’ position began. Further compounding the issue is the fact that there is no self-evident physical point at which further insertion is impossible; while the occlusion has a constant point where no further occlusion is possible (i.e. the window is a finite opening that can be eclipsed totally), one could theoretically put objects into the window as far as physically possible. Further attempts were made, experimenting with a perspective representation of the window to communicate a ‘further in’ style in the single symbol;

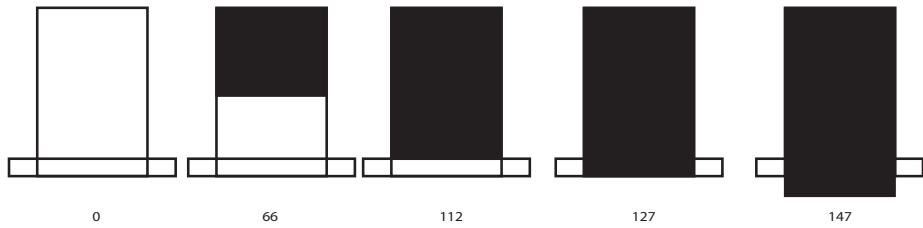


Figure 5: First attempt; without upper limit

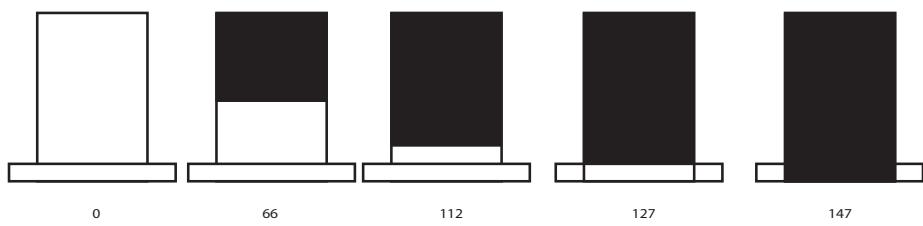


Figure 6: Second attempt; upper limit defined

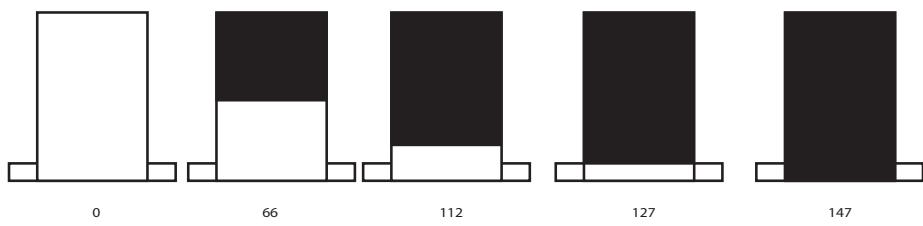


Figure 7: ‘Imaginary ghost finger’ single perspective

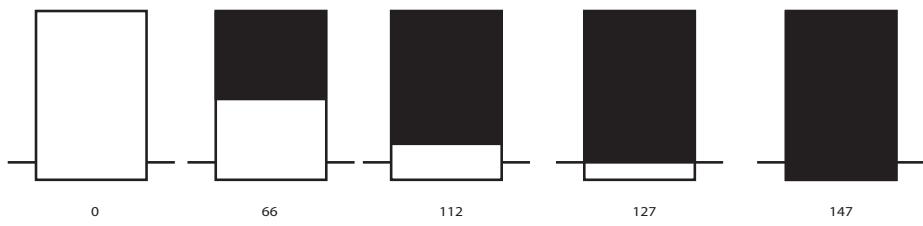


Figure 8: Side view, upper limit defined

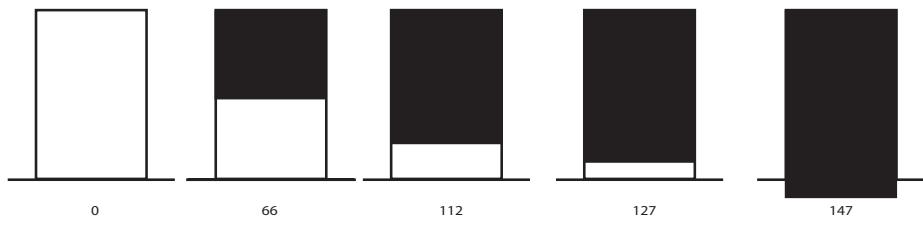


Figure 9: Side view, without upper limit

5 Frank Zappa, Kate Soper, and Pepe Silvia

David Dockery is a drummer that went viral years ago with his unique style of drumming in time to speech patterns of TV shows. The effect is not dissimilar to that of Frank Zappa's song "The Dangerous Kitchen" amongst others, from his album "The Man from Utopia". This effect of speech being done in time with the music can also be seen in Kate Soper's work "Only the Words Themselves Mean What They Say". Transcribing speech patterns and quantizing it to conform to a metrical grid is well established as a technique of introducing off-kilter rhythms that feel natural, however as Dockery's drumming shows, the works that are most in line with regular emotive speech contain multiple tempo and meter changes- showing that speech patterns are not typical iambic pentameter.

These transcriptions give us an insight into the mind of the composers, and I posit that the notated rhythms are notated thus not because the rhythms are important, but because the Western notation system does not give us adequate tools to notate speech-like cadences. In order to communicate the intended speech-like effect, the composers notate using the tools available, fitting their isochronous rhythms to the grid of Western notation. This relies on either an explicit statement that the rhythms are unimportant, or the performer interpreting the subtext of the work correctly and surmising that without explicit direction. This transcription process is lengthy, though, and when the intent is to mimic a relaxed and conversational style of speech, and not to reproduce those exact rhythms as notated, there is a degree of specificity of rhythm that is unnecessary, needlessly complicating the work.

My suggested notation is similar to non-barred music, as found in the works of Berio's Sequenzas. It involves the removal of barlines, and stems of notes. Rhythms are derived from the lyric line underneath the stave.

One of the issues with this is that it assumes both a level of flexibility in the rhythms, and a level of uniformity in how performers will interpret it; if the performer differs dramatically from the composer's rough intended idea, the work may fall out of 'sync' with itself. Mitigating this is the second version of notation, in which the beams are slightly wavy, contouring in the same manner as the

approx symbol. This reference to a pre-existing symbol for the notation of 'approximately' is intended to aid comprehension by not reinventing the wheel. This wavy-beamed notation can be used in existing Western style barred music, as well as convey a rough sense of intended rhythm when it differs from how a text would be spoken out loud. This is useful because it gives the composer a way to 'override' the performer's natural diction, without retreating back to the traditional Western notation system, which as discussed, is sometimes not suited for the notation of unfixed rhythms.

Composers that wish for a slightly more granular level of control of the rhythms can use the modified staving as notated

One of the benefits of this notation system is that it maintains compatibility with the traditional Western notation system, and can be

The simplest and most evident example of this technique's potential is when

it is used with an instrument that can be spoken into, such as the recorder. In the example work provided, the text is legible, but also can be used in tandem with regular notation systems, in a manner similar to that of Lutoslawski's stochastic aleatoricism. Like Lutoslawski's system, there is

