

Dr C M Foster. University of Wolverhampton: 10th Annual International Conference on the Visual and Performing Arts. Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER). 10–13 June, 2019. Athens, Greece.

To what extent do structured indeterminate procedures in musical composition share fundamental creative synergies with choreographic processes?

INTRODUCTION

In my recent compositional practice I have been exploring the interactions and negotiations that may take place between the musical composer, the choreographer and the performer in the field of indeterminacy. With reference to Derrida's notion of 'conditional hospitality', I have been examining ways in which a musical composition can clear a space or leave an 'open door', for performers to contribute to the making of a work, above and beyond the normal practice of performance interpretation. This compositional problem is being tested in two ways:

(1) Firstly, through the exploration of a variety of *compositional techniques* that embrace the contingencies of indeterminacy in performance

and secondly by

(2) Testing these techniques in a wider *collaborative context* in a series of performances with choreographer, Jo Breslin from De Montfort University (Leicester, England) culminating in the creation of a piece *Soundpoints finding a place to be*.

The specific question framing this artistic inquiry is formulated as:

To what extent do structured indeterminate procedures in musical composition share fundamental creative synergies with choreographic processes.

Since 'indeterminacy' and performance contingency lie at the centre of this research, it may be worth rehearsing some of its definitions and to clarify my own position with regards to them. I will start from the perspective of musical composition, and come on later to talk briefly about the collaboration with dance.

Firstly: A comparative test:

As Jose V. Ciprut (2008, p.1)¹ puts it:

“Determinism is the philosophical conception and claim that every physical event and every instance of human [...cognition, volition and...] action is causally determined by a continual, uninterrupted sequence of prior events”.

That is to say, a determinate act is one that is set up or predetermined by what precedes it. There is a sense of inevitability that appears to exclude the possibility of free choice or meaningful individual intervention.

From a musical perspective, in formal music making, a composer using traditional methods notates the music in full – creating a score – in which as many musical elements as possible are determined in detail. The score is then passed on to the performer, whose role – it is widely accepted – is to attempt to unpick and execute as precisely as possible the authorial intentions it supposedly embodies.

By contrast, the “conception and claim” of an indeterminate approach to the creative act, envisages an attitude that proceeds on the basis that musical parameters not be predetermined in every detail beforehand, in open works that maintain a degree of unpredictability, with outcomes that may be unforeseen, unforeseeable or non-repeatable. This does not immediately or obviously equate to ‘chaos’, but it may involve elements of creative disruption and/or surprise. (The actual degree to which absolute freedom of choice is possible is a philosophical one and open to debate, but from a technical/procedural perspective this is the position.)

As we know, indeterminate procedures and techniques are not new in musical composition (one thinks of John Cage as an obvious example). But there are differences in the ways in which these have been applied and for diverse ends – some have been radical, others more moderate on various points across a spectrum. Indeed, rather than ‘indeterminacy’ it would be more accurate to talk of ‘indeterminacies’ with a range of possibilities of application. Ontological distinctions have been drawn between different kinds. The composer David Cope, for one, posits three distinct categories:

¹ Ciprut, J.V.(2008) *Indeterminacy: the mapped, the navigable and the uncharted*. Cambridge: MIT press.

- (1) composer indeterminacy
- (2) performer indeterminacy, and
- (3) composer + performer indeterminacy

The first of these – (composer indeterminacy) – rests on chance methods in the *composition* process itself, for example, using dice, some form of random number generation or something similar to create material for a musical score. This might be exemplified by Dick Higgins, *Thousand symphonies* (1968) [where the score is made by firing a machine gun at some music manuscript – the performers then play the bullet holes in the score].

The second – (performer indeterminacy) – is located closer to the *point of performance*, rather than in the writing process. The composer here designs the essential features of the score, but builds into it open choices. The performer adds their own contribution to the making of the work, exercising various decisions about the material at the point of execution.

The third — (composer + performer indeterminacy) — implies a combination of these: that is, scores arrived at through chance procedures, but within which, choices also remain open in the process of performance.

My own interest lies in the second (and, perhaps, third) of these, seeking as I do to offer choices and engage in negotiations with performers, working together to create music that is structured at its source (and where some limits are set) but where free choices remain open in the material at the point at which that material is brought to life. This, it may be argued, is a democratic undertaking, pursued in the spirit of collective investigation and research. The outcome can be the creation of pieces that have a clear ‘indentikit’ but which are never quite the same in each subsequent performance. The composition, then, becomes a ‘field of possibilities’, where (as Umberto Eco puts it) “every performance is an articulation of it, but does not exhaust it”.

But it is my claim that this binary characterisation between the determinate and indeterminate is oversimplified. A fairly brief analysis reveals a range of

eventualities in the musical sphere. If we take a look at just one musical element – pitch – one witnesses a variety of permutations existing between the most and the least determinate possibilities.

Table 1

Managing Materials and Processes?	
PITCH?	
Least? determinate?	Most? determinate?
1. PITCH / TESSITURA	
5	1
Complete freedom of choice in pitch elements	Play pitches in exact order given, in exact tessitura given.
Play any note/ notes, in any possible register	*play the score exactly as written!*

In this table, characterises that binary from the fully controlled and determinate at the point of composition (on the right) – to the fully open to performer choice at the point of performance (on the left).

But lying between these two points, it is easy enough to see a continuum of determinate/indeterminate possibilities. On this one musical element, for example: it would be possible for a composer, if they so wished, to set fixed pitches, but to leave open to the performer, the choice of *register* or *tessitura* in which they are played. Or, to stipulate a particular pitch cluster, but to leave to the contingencies of performance, the *order* in which the individual notes appear...and so on.

When other musical elements are added to this body of possibilities, there is a consequent increase in the number of determinate/indeterminate permutations available to the composer. In this particular example, pitch, time and timbre are collated with different degrees of determinate/indeterminate treatment applied: pitches (on the right) are determined, but rhythms and timbre (or sound qualities) (indicated on the left) remain open to the discretion of the performer or the performance situation. One could go into detail about all of the other musical elements that make up the musical sphere – dynamic, attack, etc. – but the above should suffice to outline the principle.

A sound extract comparing permutations may help to clarify this practice: Two examples are given here. In the first, a series of pitches is played in the same tempo with the same durations by two performers. In the second, the order of notes remains the same, but here time is left free and open to the discretion of the performer (they select their own tempo and durations independently of each another). The result is a more spontaneous, complex, polyphonic texture. Each rendition would differ from the last, as different performers might choose different durational values, and to quote Eco again: “every performance is an articulation of it, but does not exhaust it”.

Turning now to the collaborative element of this research. In exploring these ideas from a compositional perspective, I was also struck by their potential for collaboration with other time-based art forms, and in particular, dance.

Together with choreographer Jo Breslin from DeMontfort University, Leicester, England, we have created a collaborative piece entitled *Soundpoints Finding a Place to Be*. This piece was made on the Dance Company of De Montfort University, together with three musicians: a percussionist, guitarist and pianist.

This piece works with some of the principles derived from the musical elements outlined above, but, in particular, it was an exploration to test how choices made by performers from the material provided in the score and through the choreographic directions, might unfold. We were keen to give them a stake in the making process:

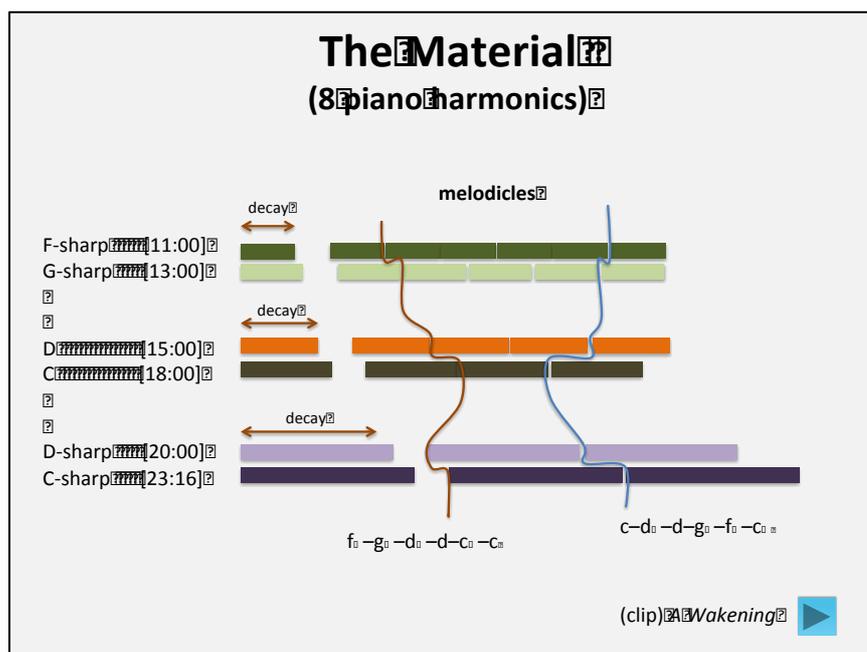
to take ownership of the material, to mould and remould it within agreed boundaries.

One indeterminate phenomenon that has always fascinated me is that of decay, the 'life' and 'death' of a musical note. The musical material created for some parts of this piece, then, have been based on this indeterminate phenomenon – the decay of the sound envelopes of a series of piano harmonics. These harmonics were recorded – the resulting soundtrack acting as a conceptual underlay for an additional layer of live acoustic music, placed above it.

The contingent element on the length of time it takes for an individual sound to die away beyond the point of normal hearing. Because of variances in the decay of each note, when each is repeated at the end of its 'cycle' it begins at a different point in relation to its neighbours.

The process produces an array of brief melodic chains, which form, shift, reform and recombine indeterminately, ever-changing in a kaleidoscope of patterns: a sort of melodic factory.

Table 4



What interests me about this in a live performance situation with dance, is the articulative qualities of the sound – the individual points in space; — where do the sounds begin and where do they end and how would the dancers response to or interact with these?

When live instruments are added, the focus shifts away from the recording towards a space mediated by the performers. And here, the music leans heavily on the performers' intuitive judgements and living responses. They are given a series of individual pitches – derived from the track – and asked to play each, in any order, allowing them to decay to a point beyond their perception, before attacking the next. The resulting melodic chains arising from the digital recording enter a live arena and a complex confluence of textures results.

(Dance) The general principle of decay governing the contingencies of the musical process also underpins the choreographic approach in the dance. The decaying qualities of a sound are mirrored by the decaying qualities of the movement, where the dancers' bring into question their own judgements and perceptions about the natural life (and death) of a movement. It produces what might be described as a 'punch and bleed' aesthetic. There is no attempt to coordinate movement and sound here, the two merely occupy the same space, happening together in time to a shared principle. A short video taken from an early rehearsal demonstrates this.

Two performances of this piece have just been given, one at Kiev in March in a slightly different guise, and the second at the Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton, in the UK, where audience responses were monitored through a round table discussion following the performance.

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