

Andrew R. Noble

## Re: and not Re: Artistic Research

### Something Like a Compositional Approach

Composition is the posing of questions.

Composition is a means of presenting a context in which questions are, or may be posed.

Composition is a means of engaging with questions that may or may not have been posed.

Composition is a means of discovering questions.

Composition is a means of sharing questions.

Composition is a means of sharing a condition of questioning.

Composition is a means of discovering what questions to ask.

Composition is deciding what questions to ask.

Composition poses questions.

Compositions pose questions.

Composition is research.

That said: the pure research value of the act of composition is questionable!

To greater or lesser extent I would characterize the above collectively both as a point of departure and as a given set of conditions – or determining general outlook – for the vast majority of the music that I have written. And so my music could be characterized as first and foremost ‘experimental’ in the literal sense of the word. As the term ‘experimental music’ has been used in so many different ways to describe just as many different phenomena, I would qualify that statement by saying that the music:

Presents, represents or is an expression of an experiment or set of experiments;

OR

it is the product of, or an expression of a condition of questioning very loosely analogous to that of the research experiment.

As I would assert is the case for the majority of ‘artistic research,’ this has very little to do with scientific research or even pseudo-science, not least because we are not looking for answers or delivering results. Further, the context in which such research is presented – as art, be it in the concert hall, museum, journal or elsewhere – implies a commentary not in the sense of an evaluation of one’s results, but on the very nature of the endeavor itself. Meaning that research, although it can serve as a subject matter itself, is always a means to another end when presented as art. In my case specifically, these are experiments for and acts of personal research, presented publicly (socially); or even dramatically and only very abstractly determined by a condition like “the current state of research in the field.” I am not particularly interested in contributing to a notion of progress or making discoveries of potential value to the future of music; or even interested in writing ‘good’ or ‘successful’ pieces for that matter. Rather, I am interested in – or feel obligated to – presenting a position of asking “what if.” Although generally musical, my what ifs are not (or at least not usually) music’s what ifs. They are on the one hand my way of addressing and trying to come to terms with my environment as I perceive it and on the other an expression of an outlook to which I feel an obligation. Namely that it is not only our responsibility to engage with the world as it is and as we might wish it to be, but also to do our best to engage with the world as we are not yet capable of imagining it.

The following will present a number of ways in which this perspective has manifested itself in some of my music thus far in an attempt to characterize, if not a methodology, something like a compositional approach.

## Material

Going no further than “what is musical material? Or what could musical material mean or be? How do we identify musical materials as such and why?” We would have a basic line of questioning relevant to all the work that I have done. The question of material will therefore serve here as a point of departure. Most of my music involves the creation of musical objects, fixed or changing, roughly analogous to samples and their allocation to hypothetical ‘instruments’ that then ‘play’ them.<sup>2</sup> Much of my music treats the performance situation itself and its conditions as material. Some of my music makes use of ‘pre-existing’ musical material. All of my music treats process as its basic material.

Process became my material and questioning my musical position with the composition *20 Clapping Pieces* (2003/04). In 1972 Steve Reich wrote the piece *Clapping Music* for two performers. Like so much music and art of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s (particularly in America but certainly in Europe and elsewhere as well), this little piece asserts to some degree that the process by which it is made is the composition itself, or that the how and the what are the same.<sup>3</sup> This begs questions as to what extent they are or could be. Reich only wrote the one piece. I imagined a world in which there was something like a tradition of clapping pieces, all of which constructed as expressions of the same process – as I understood it – and composed 20 of these. Are these compositions “in the style of”? Are they really different pieces? To what extent are these different than Reich’s, etc... Although at this point I would probably consider these ‘student’ pieces, they mark the beginnings of at least two aspects of my work that are relevant here: first, the asking of questions where there would seem to otherwise be a consensus, or even where there would not seem to be any questions;<sup>4</sup> and second, that which is perhaps most closely related to the conditions of research, the idea that certain questions can only be posed repeatedly. In this we also see some of the most important distinctions from such research conditions. In writing 20 of these pieces, research experiments serve as metaphor. Where any scientific experiment must be conducted a number of times to ascertain the extent to which any thesis is ‘provable,’ or in the case of more

experimental research to first observe the how or the what, here too the idea is suggested that only through repetition of something like the ‘experiment’ can certain questions really be posed. The distinction of course is that research experiments are here merely metaphorically evoked. I am not trying to prove or discover anything per se, but rather to create a situation conducive to a kind of listening or perceiving.

At approximately the same time (2003), I began working on a project in which I committed myself to writing ‘the same piece’ over and over again in order to observe my reactions to this process over time. This began with the piano composition *Meine Freude*. The initial process was the treatment of Lutheran chorale melodies quasi-canonically, expressed as a single melodic line. Over the course of about a year I wrote approximately 50 such ‘canons’ and the processes, by way of cumulative variation and development, changed considerably. So considerably in fact that I never really stopped working on this project as much as the initial processes themselves transformed so drastically that they ceased to be identifiable as such.

One recognizable byproduct of this project is the kinds of ‘samples’ that I now treat as musical objects. In expressing multiple voiced canons as a single melodic line, I became increasingly interested in finding ways of distinguishing individual voices. So that eventually for any given interval of time, each voice would be characterized by its own durational value, written dynamic, articulation, tone color etc... This kind of approach reached its current manifestation as today’s musical objects in the piano piece *The Party Line* (2005/06). Here each of the ten fingers is assigned a written pitch, dynamic and duration to form a gamut of 10 basic sounds, or objects, that make up most of the piece’s sounding ‘material.’<sup>5</sup>

Working with these kinds of ‘samples’ meant for me a re-thinking of the passing of musical time and its notation. This led to a central area of exploration in my current work: additive fractional duration. Before continuing on to discuss manifestations of process as material and engagement with process as subject matter, a brief discussion of this approach to duration should serve to make some of the musical examples that appear below clearer.

## Additive Fractional Duration<sup>6</sup>

The Western classical music tradition has long upheld a conception of rhythm principally based on the division of a whole into equal parts. A quarter can be divided into two eighths, four sixteenths, etc... Unequal divisions, while certainly as prevalent as equal divisions, have predominantly been expressed in terms of a common denominator. A quarter can be divided into a dotted eighth and a sixteenth (three sixteenths tied together and one sixteenth) or a quarter triplet and an eighth triplet (two eighth triplets tied together and an eighth triplet) etc...

One could say that such unequal divisions have then in the 'background' an equal division. Rhythm, seen in this light is then an expression of tempo. Many composers and musicians over the last hundred years (at least) have sought, in a variety of ways, more flexible approaches to rhythm and an escape from regular pulse and tempo. Unspecified durations, graphic durational notation, proportional durational notation, 'irrational' meters, metric modulation and tuplets nestled inside other tuplets are just some of the many manifestations of such searching. Though all of these approaches have their own unique expressive capabilities, there are certain kinds durational relationships that are not consistently allowed for by any of them. For the expression of such relationships we have to leave a conception of rhythm as an expression of tempo and focus our attention instead on duration.

A seminal work in so many areas of musical thought, Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* (first published in 1930) contributed one of the 20th century's most significant developments regarding duration as a compositional resource with its suggestion of a new form of rhythmic notation, in which different "series" of equal divisions of the whole note are given their own sets of visual representation (in the form of differently shaped note heads). In another of countless examples of forms of representation enabling new ways of thought, Cowell's notation, primarily concerned with equal subdivisions of the whole, led him to the brief observation "in the new notation, perhaps only one triplet note will be used between quarter-notes."<sup>7</sup> Although Cowell's notation never caught on – Cowell himself made only very limited use of it in his own mu-

sic – the impact of its thought was profound. His brief speculation about unequal fractions however has remained in large part without significant consequence.<sup>8</sup>

Additive fractional duration, in theory then, is an approach to the passing of time in music that suggests that any duration can be followed by any other duration. In practice it means using a series of proportional durational relationships, which though expressed in terms of a single tempo (or whole as it were) at any given moment,<sup>9</sup> do not have to be a direct expression of that or any other tempo. Rather than conceiving of musical duration as a series of wholes (either of equal or unequal lengths) divided into and expressed in terms of equal divisions, the assertion is that any amount of time can be divided into unequal lengths for which familiar reductions to a lowest common denominator are an insufficient or inferior means of, or basis for their reliable reproduction. In its stead, for the reproduction of these kinds of durational relationships it is not only possible, but preferable, to internalize proportional relationships expressed as fractional durations in relation to a common, primary tempo. The reasons for this are twofold:

The first is purely practical. Even chains of durations with some of the simplest proportional relationships very quickly would have to be subdivided into parts so small that their 'accurate' realization would be far more difficult than they are easily reproduced 'by ear' as it were – not to mention the far more cumbersome notation of such fine subdivisions.<sup>10</sup>

The second is more theoretical. A means of reliably reproducing durations that does not rely on expressions of equal subdivisions takes an important step closer to approaching a conception of and means of expressing the passing of time that is far more representative of the way that time might actually pass, thereby expanding the manner of ways in which we are capable of perceiving it as passing. This is of course assuming that the ways in which we notate, transcribe or represent thoughts, ideas, that which we perceive, etc... directly influences the way that we are capable of perceiving, thinking, etc... In my own case, I 'found' (that is to say found for myself) these kinds of durations as a means of creating fixed objects. After having found them then, the creation of such objects

became only one of many now-possible areas for rhythmic/durational investigation.<sup>11</sup>

EX. 1, Andrew R. Noble: *Zwischendurch* for 3 like voices (2010)

**Direct Process Pieces**

In addition to my work that deals with the music’s (or my own) engagement with process as a subject matter or dramatic element, I do on occasion compose pieces that one could call simple strict expressions of a process, not unlike much FLUXUS art or pieces by composers such as Alvin Lucier, James Tenney, Tom Johnson or like the Reich piece mentioned above, etc... These tend to be byproducts of my engagement with other pieces and although such pieces at this point occupy only a small part of my output, as they are directly related to my other work – not least in that they in some way represent and establish its hypothetical set of conditions – and as these relate recognizably to the above-mentioned tradition of experimental ‘research’ pieces, it is perhaps worth briefly discussing two of these here.

*Something About Received Wisdom* for tam tam (2008) and its sister piece *Something More About Received Wisdom* for Carillon (2010) each present a single complex resonant/sustaining sound (tam tam or four-note chord played by giant bells) played at a regular pulse with increases and decreases of tempo (performed with the aid of a click track) that happen so slowly that one cannot perceive them as they happen; one only notices them after they have happened (if this isn’t always the case?). The increasingly complex resonances created by repeated attacks work in conjunction with the accelerandi and ritardandi – as the tempo builds, so do the resonances – to build a perfectly balanced ‘classical’ dramatic arch with ‘climaxes’

approximately 1/3 and 2/3 of the way through the piece. A very traditional, structural tension and release is achieved through the simplest of means. In my experience, the expectations created by the ‘physical’ realization of what has happened and what is going to happen – which is however happening at a rate slower than one can consciously perceive – results in a clearly perceivable physiological reaction (which may also have to do with ‘static’ or ‘interferences’ created by our own pulse rates) that is remarkable and that can also be quite irritating. The title refers not so much to the recreation or use of a phenomenon or formula that works, as it does to our (or at least my own) stupidly machine-like reaction to such phenomena, regardless of whether or not this reaction is biological, conditioned or both.

The most significant difference between these two pieces is not one of sound, but rather one of context. One is to be performed in a concert setting with a visible performer, the other in a public space outdoors where the listeners may or may not be those who made a conscious decision to attend a ‘concert.’

EX. 2, Andrew R. Noble: *Something About Received Wisdom*, (2008)

The piece *In Equal Measure* (2010) presents a series of moves from A to B (and back again)<sup>12</sup>. Representations of divisions of a whole into equal parts in which duration and pitch are treated analogously. A (tempered) whole-step and a whole-note are divided into increasingly smaller (and then increasingly larger) parts. A whole-step = a whole-note, two half-steps = two half-notes, three third-tones = three half-note triplets, four quarter-tones = four quarter-notes, etc... until the whole-step and whole-note are divided into sixteen equal parts, at which point the parts begin to get larger again. The use of a rigid process in this manner – as a means or point of access to a kind of listening – is certainly a nod to Tom Johnson. In this particular case though, I was thinking a lot about Emmett Williams. I also happened to be working on pieces for Robin Hayward's microtonal tuba<sup>13</sup> and Samuel Stoll's microtonal French horn<sup>14</sup> at the time. Although the instrumentation is not specified I would like to add that Stoll premiered this piece on the horn. Although he has had quarter-tone and eighth-tone valves put on his instrument, realizing such fine gradations of pitch on the horn – between third-tones and quarter-tones for example or between fourteenth-tones and fifteenth-tones for that matter – requires a kind of 'handwork' that produces extremely diverse timbral 'melodic lines.' The direct nature of the process and its reductive, method-book-exercise character further serve to create a kind of context in which such aspects can be foregrounded, even though these have directly very little to do with the process itself.<sup>15</sup>

### Engaging with Process

The piano piece *The Party Line* (2005–2006), *Accusations in the First Person Plural* for contrabass clarinet and drum set (2009/11) and *trust* for two violins, viola and cello (2010) represent three examples of an attempt to dramatize the music's questioning and/or attempting to come to terms with the conditions of its make up and existence – or something like the situation that it finds itself in. This kind of dramatic personification as metaphor is becoming increasingly important to me as I become more convinced of my work as performance art, as an also-temporal experience or as

EX. 3, Andrew R. Noble: *In Equal Measure*, p. 1, (2010)

theatre in the broadest sense. This may seem somewhat surprising as most of the works would seem to be quite directly pieces of music (as compared for example to much of Mauricio Kagel's theatrical music). I have written pieces that are directly theatrical or that one could characterize as clearly performance art: *On the Subject of Theater* for 24 actors or *24 Trios* for natural horns in which the choreographed exchanging of crooks 'takes over' the music over the course of the piece. Further, theatrical elements that thematize the performative of the performance situation do on occasion infiltrate the pieces: the abrupt exiting and beginning the piece again with the audience's applause in *Our Shameful Complacency* for violin and cello for example. These are however merely extensions of what I consider to be the drama that is the piece itself; a drama that is the music itself and in which the music is its own protagonist. As if the music could simultaneously function as Homunculus, Faust, Goethe and the cultures in which these figures as ideas are collectively created and re-created. The sound of a piece or how a piece sounds is then a concern that has re-

ceded far into the background, and is now primarily significant in terms of how it may or may not invite or suggest a condition of or approach to listening. What are we doing if not sharing a way of perceiving?

The technical starting point is the same in all three pieces. A handful of fixed musical objects (samples) are created and presented multiple times at the outset in a fixed order. In this way each of the objects becomes identifiable as such. Further, the repeated sequence also becomes an easily identifiable musical object and something like a normative condition is established. This is the first in a series of 'zoomings out' that take place to create 'objects' or 'characters' on ever increasing macro-levels. This strategy in no small part developed out of deliberations about how one might articulate additive fractional durations. And indeed repeated assertion of this kind does address the ear's tendency to oversimplify and hear the durations as syncopations against a kind of imagined tempo, by giving it a chance to get accustomed to the proportional relationships. What also becomes clear is the extent to which these objects are not actually repeatable – I do not ever actually use recorded samples. And of course then, comparing the first measures of all three pieces, one could assert that the process itself is equally not repeatable. Not because the 'samples' are different, but because the conditions are different and therefore adopting a single strategy forces a rethinking of that strategy and an engagement with the context it finds itself in.

EX. 4, Andrew R. Noble: *The Party Line*, p.1, (2005/06)  
\*sos. to be depressed through until end of last movement. Dynamics are "absolute". All durations sustained their full value.

EX. 5, Andrew R. Noble: *Accusations in the First Person Plural*, p. 1, (2009/11)

EX. 6, Andrew R. Noble: *trust*, p. 1, (2010)

The first bar of *The Party Line* presents a monophonic 'line' in a fixed hand position, *Accusations...* the two instruments' gamuts presented 'unisono' as a collection of single sounds and *trust* all four gamuts simultaneously as a complex texture, which is not really (although it literally is polyphonic) polyphony or heterophony – the gamuts are all directly related to each other so that each instrument's gamut could be recognized as a variation on one of the other instrument's gamuts – but reminiscent of both. The repetitions at the beginning of *trust* are separated by pauses of different lengths, some of which are quite long, at once helping to define the single measure as an object and contrarily engaging the memory as a questioning agent: "is that the same thing that I heard before the 30 seconds of performed silence?"

Having established their conditions, in each case the pieces then begin to explore and flesh out these conditions by way of expanding and attempting to break out of what seems like what those conditions may be. So for example in *The Party Line* after the repeated first bar we encounter a second bar that concludes the first section. By way of its single appearance after 22 repetitions of the first bar, this second bar is accorded an almost equally identifiable character to that of the first. Over the course of the piece this bar takes on the role of 'cadence' serving regularly to conclude sections. Section two of the piece consists of ten measures, each consisting of a different ordering of the ten basic objects. Nine of these measures are repeated in succession nine times. The tenth is the cadence bar of the first section and is again heard only once to conclude the section. The two measures from the first section of the piece serve as signifiers contextualizing the newly introduced measures. At the same time, these nine measures repeated in this order become by way of repetition (willful assertion) a series of signifiers (or characters) to serve as such for the remainder of the piece. For approximately 30 minutes these characters both are the drama and are trapped in this drama. Deviations occur only in a handful of octave displacements and a few breaks from the orderings of the ten basic measures. The last deviation occurs in the form of a single measure of two voiced-texture followed by a drastic leap to the outer extremes of the keyboard and the only two pitch-classes

not once attacked in the piece thus far (which have however always been present as a 'distant' cushion of sympathetic resonances created by silently depressed keys sustained by the sostenuto pedal). And then the impossible happens: Chopin's third Ballade in its entirety. At this point it is not only a seeming impossibility from the perspective of the piece or the listener but also for the performer. There is no way to reconcile these disparate elements. Each has been redefined by its context, by its juxtaposition with the other.

This is to a certain extent a narrative of the finished piece. The piece could also be told as a series of questions surrounding the basic line of questioning by which it was made: to what extent does or can context define perception?

From this same basic line of questioning and technical approach, *trust* for four string players presents a rather different narrative. Here the piece's normative conditions are much more actively questioned over the course of the piece and are almost established as much by exceptions to the normative than the much more extreme exclusion strategies of *The Party Line*. In *trust* the processes are repeatedly interrupted by re-interpretations/re-contextualizations of objects and by complete deviation. Indeed, even the basic gamuts have been transformed by the end of the piece. The composition does however end with a similarly radical dramatic gesture addressing questions of context. One by one four loudspeakers seated on chairs are positioned on stage in front of the quartet (in the same formation as the quartet) while the musicians are still playing. The quartet is 'replaced' as it were by the loudspeakers. The performance is then interrupted and replaced by a previously made studio recording of the entirety of the piece itself.

EX. 7, Andrew R. Noble: *trust*, p. 35, (2010)

*A Shot in the Dark* for piano (2008): a single, impossibly difficult event, preceded by a long silence, followed by the complete decay of the sympathetic resonances it sets in motion.

The single ten-note chord played consists of all ten sounds of the basic gamut (ten pitches, each attached to a specific written dynamic and written duration) that make up the bulk of the material of my piano piece *The Party Line*. In *A Shot in the Dark* however, they are attacked simultaneously. This means that the pianist need not only manage each finger sustaining a different duration its full value, but also simultaneously ten different (theoretically absolute) dynamics between *pppp* and *ffff*. An action, thus far at least, that one might say is practically speaking unrealizable. Although difficult, it is not an irrationally, or radically complex action.<sup>16</sup> That is to say that there is no contradictory information to be negotiated – for example in the form of articulation markings that would necessarily alter the points of release (staccato markings, etc...). Although I suppose that theoretically each finger could be assigned a different articulation that did not contradict its duration. As written, the points of release are essential to the articulation of the different durations. Although I would say that I have never heard a pianist play that I would imagine could consistently realize such an action, I would assert that there are a number of ways that one might approach learning/practicing this piece that might bring one a good step closer to a ‘faithful representation’ – whatever that might mean – and that I believe ultimately could even improve one’s command of their instrument tremendously. Were the piece entitled *A Line in the Sand*, this might have emphasized that aspect. As it is, I am more concerned with the performative, with the performance situation itself. Waiting to perform an action that one knows on the one hand that one cannot realize, and that on the other is not entirely impossible...hopeful. A single attempt is made. Then to sit with the reality of what one has accomplished, without so much as a chance to put it into context and/or relativize one’s failure (success). The role of the audience is then not only literally voyeuristic, but figuratively (psychologically?) as well. In the best case we bear witness to a heroic act. John Cage once wrote about presenting a situation in which “impossible” difficulties are overcome in order to in-

spire. I myself find the sense of shame and wonder that I experience in the face of earnest and heartfelt failed attempts at addressing those problems that would seem so utterly hopeless, often to be the most encouraging and inspiring.

“At least I tried!”

EX. 8, Andrew R. Noble: *A Shot in the Dark* (2008)

Where the above pieces attempt primarily to present the music’s engaging with the processes of its design, the following pieces are of the kind concerned with presenting my own engagement with and questioning of the processes.

*something like the memory like an open stain* (2007–) is a performance installation piece for ensemble consisting of a number of solo pieces to be performed simultaneously dispersed throughout a large space with a mobile audience.

The project began with the ensemble piece *memory imprint* (Cage, Duchamp). A very short melodic line to be played by an unspecified ensemble “in unison,” repeated a number of times, each repetition followed by a rest of a different length. Can there be such a thing as repetition in music, given that it happens in time and the experience is therefore cumulative? Isn’t experience always cumulative? This question is further emphasized by the extensive use of additive fractional durations, notated breath marks and



extreme amount of (theoretically absolute) dynamic fluctuation.

This melodic line became the first section of the solo violin (or clarinet) piece *the memory like an open stain* (2007). Here again the line is repeated, each time followed by a pause of a different length. In this piece however, cumulative changes are written in. The piece adheres to a relatively simple but strict process in which with each repetition, one rhythmic value, one interval, and one dynamic value are changed, cumulatively. So that, as is in the children's game "telephone" (UK *Chinese whispers*, DE *stille Post*), that which you end up with is something quite different than that with which you started. 'Static' is composed into the process/piece as a dramatic element: where the process demanded 'impossible' results and where the music seemed to be unwilling or unable to come to terms with its situation. The process runs its course. The single isolated, somewhat pathetic outbreak remains on the one hand without consequence and on the other its occurrence questions the whole of the work.

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EX. 9, Andrew R. Noble: *the memory like an open stain*, p. 1, (2007)

16.

EX. 10, Andrew R. Noble: *the memory like an open stain*, last page, p. 16, (2007)

The remaining solo pieces that make up *something like the memory like an open stain*, have been composed in accordance with a similar process. Each piece was written as a hypothetical 'note against note' counterpoint to the piece composed directly before it. The dynamics and durations of all of the solo pieces are identical. In a performance of the installation piece *something like the memory like an open stain* there is no full score, there are only parts. All of the solo pieces are played within a given time frame simultaneously but without any group coordination. The durations of the pauses between sections in the individual pieces differ from those of the solo pieces. The musicians are spread out in an otherwise empty space and the audience is free and encouraged to move about throughout the hall.

The idea here was really a re-visiting and extension of the re-composition idea of the above mentioned Lutheran Chorale Canons. For each of the individual

solo pieces I have tried to compose piece specific contexts 'over' the composition itself; metaphorically framing each in such a way as to cast the process in a different light. For example, *the memory like an open strain* for microtonal tuba engages the tuba player in suspended resonant metal objects so that as the melodic line evolves, it is accompanied by ever-changing sympathetic resonances; OR in *the melody like an open strain* for microtonal horn, the performer very slowly turns one clockwise circle (to "Fünf vor Zwölf"). A snare drum turned on its side is placed appropriately so that for this piece's single outburst, the bell of the horn is placed right up next to, and played directly into, the head of the snare drum. This all creates if not a visual counterpoint to the unfolding of the process, then something like a visual time line.

In addition to the full ensemble installation and individual solo pieces, the piece is also conceived as a set of materials for the creation of situation-specific compositions. So that any two or more of the pieces can be combined to create small ensemble pieces as *out of something like the memory like an open stain*. Here as well the pieces are composed into contexts, as in my third string quartet where the individual solo pieces are performed together but the performers are placed in different, adjacent rooms (again with a mobile audience).

The image shows a handwritten musical score on a five-line staff. At the top left, it is marked '♩ = 60'. The score consists of ten rhythmic durations: 3/2, 5/4, 5/4, 3/2, 5/4, 5/4, 5/4, 5/4, 5/4, and 5/4. Below the staff, there are two rows of dynamic markings. The first row is labeled '= Performer Dynamic' and includes: P, F, MP, PP, pp, ff, PPP, PPPP, FFFF, FFFF. The second row is labeled '= sounding Dynamic' and includes: F, P, FF, MP, PP, FFF, MF, PPPP, PFF, FFFF. Below these markings are ten circled numbers: ①, ②, ③, ④, ⑤, ⑥, ⑦, ⑧, ⑨, ⑩.

#### The Piece:

- Select a "sound" for each of the ten durations/dynamics. These ten sounds, their articulation and dynamic make up the "instrument" on which the piece is to be performed.
- The list, either written in advance or improvised, should last at least 30 min.
- A performance begins with all ten sounds played in direct succession followed by a long pause. Thereafter, any combinations/permutations of these sounds may be played in any order.
- At least three sounds must be played before a rest.
- Rests are always long.
- All durations sustaining their full value. Sounds followed by rests should be abruptly cut off.
- Critical behaviors from the above prescriptions during a performance are possible. What this might mean is left to the discretion of the performer.
- The title refers to a piece by the artist Roni Horn entitled: "WHEN THE HOW AND THE WHAT ARE THE SAME"

EX. 10, Andrew R. Noble: *as if the how and the what could be the same*, Variant 3, (2009)

as if the how and the what could be the same for composer/performer/improviser (2009–) is an ongoing project in which the act of composition itself is questioned and questions of authorship, the relationship between material and composer, etc... are raised from the other side. Rather than using other people's materials or compositions as a point of departure, the pieces began with the simple question "what if somebody else wrote a piece of mine?" Or, "if someone else used 'my' materials and processes etc... what might they write?"

The piece exists in series of steps/versions, which I have called variants. The first of these is a handful of verbal instructions describing how one is to compose and perform (or improvise) a piece of music of at least 30 minutes duration. The instructions given are some of what I considered the most basic 'pre-compositional' decisions that I might make (and indeed have made). These primarily involve building a hypothetical 'instrument' of the kind used in, for example, *The Party Line*. With each succeeding variant I determine more information/ conditions. Thus far I have composed four variants. I do plan to continue this project step by step until I reach some kind of 'end' (although determining what that end might be is perhaps a whole new set of questions for the next project). I do hope someday to program multiple interpretations of a single variant by multiple performers.

The title is a reference to an installation by the artist/photographer Roni Horn entitled "WHEN THE HOW AND THE WHAT ARE THE SAME." As the title of my piece(s) implies the subject matter is really an engagement with and questioning of this very idea. Horn's own work here is an inspiration for this line of questioning. Were one to describe much of her work on the surface, it is firmly locatable in the stylistic clichés of minimalist and/or serial art, installation and photography. However, as anyone who has any spent any time with her Icelandic landscapes or serial portraits could attest, the actual pieces themselves far transcend any limitations that could be imposed by something as banal as style. I want to say: what she does, (for example serial photography) is not interesting, how she personally does it is remarkable. OR, how she chooses to make and present things is not of interest, what she makes and presents is.

With the exceptions of *Accusations in the First Person Plural*, where I actually cut a good ten minutes out of the piece in preparation for the first performance, and minimal corrections to *In Equal Measure*, I try not to change pieces after I have written them.<sup>17</sup> Each piece is in this way a means of addressing what I might consider to be the shortcomings of – or questions posed by – the previous one. Further, mistakes made in the composition or copying processes are often not only incorporated into the pieces but often become significant events to which the music itself is forced to react. A very extreme example of this would be the short piece for piccolo and glockenspiel *Something About the Best Laid Schemes*. The piece as planned was a cycle in which different length patterns of dynamics and durations were set in motion that were to go on until they lined up again. This should have lasted about 40 minutes and was inspired by some wind chimes hung by a neighbor on a tree outside our window that I listened to during a storm once. As I did all the calculations in a hurry (and am generally mathematically challenged), I made a mistake copying out the patterns. They lined up after about 2 ½ minutes. The piece is then to be performed as written and concludes with one of the performers issuing the following apology: “Due to a compositional error, the piece stops here.” So the piece became something else, became about something else. I am sure that for many listeners such a piece might seem like some kind of gag, gimmick or suspect postmodern joke but to me, presenting such a piece – which questions in practice ideas about quality, skill, accomplishment, the artist (composer) as representing some kind of position of authority, etc... – is a serious undertaking.

*Unfinished Piece #421* for Eb clarinet and cello (2008) addresses this idea of failure (mistake, Fehler) and related questions in another way with the following accompanying program note:

*This program note is part of the piece and should be made available to the audience at a performance. The piece should not be performed without it.*

*This is not the 421st piece that I have not finished, although, given the way that I work it could well be. I tend to work on pieces as long as they interest me and continue on to something else when it becomes more interesting; a luxury of the marginal position. As a result I do not finish many of the pieces that I start and in fact I have no idea how many of these unfinished (or even more or less finished) pieces there are. This piece began as a concession to some abstract – and in retrospect ridiculous – notion that I had about the kind of attitudes and approaches to music prevalent in many new music circles that I periodically come in contact with. In a moment of self-doubt I resolved to try to write “something like that.” This piece is my failed attempt to do so. Whatever failure here could mean: i.e. the piece was not interesting to me, it’s not at all like whatever my abstract notion was, I couldn’t finish it, etc... At some point it struck me that the piece as a failed attempt however, is at least as interesting as anything else that I might write and is an honest representation of my attempts to address certain questions and is therefore presented as such, with this program note here.*

*Given the socially determined nature of music in culture, I see the decision to include the program note as an integral part of the piece, as something akin to “orchestration” in the broadest sense; that is to say, that decisions about what to write, who/what to write for, how to title a piece, where to perform a piece, etc... all so strongly impact the way in which a piece is and can be perceived, that any concept about a piece of music having to “speak for itself” or “stand alone” would seem to be (at best) willful avoidance. To quote (and misrepresent by way of reinterpretation) Charles Seeger: “Music is always propaganda...”*



## Treating Existing Source Material

I have used other pieces of music extensively in my own work, always as a means of addressing questions that I see raised or raise-able by the pieces used. The questions, which might be my point of departure, and the pieces that I use serve primarily to provide a context to enable a listening condition. The initial questions may be 'about' music but the music itself is then 'music that uses music' rather than 'music about music.' There is admittedly some element of personal commentary on the sources used, this is however secondary to the role that the sources play in setting up a set of conditions or a framework. Again here I would use a sampling metaphor borrowed from electronic music. So I would characterize those of my pieces that make use of existing musical source material less as compositional/musicological research, but that musicological research or musical analysis establishes the context in which the piece can be presented. The aim is not to present a kind of academic musical commentary (although there may be a certain amount of that as well), but rather to present something like an academic line of questioning itself as music.

Thus far I have tried to demonstrate my position by using a few select representative examples. As regards these pieces that make use of existing music, a simple brief descriptive listing will probably shed the most light on the position and role of questioning I hope to articulate:<sup>18</sup>

*Process Piece Cage: Ligeti: Reich* plugs notes taken from Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata* into a Cage-like gamut and Reich-like process.

*Second String Quartet* the first ten seconds of Heinz Holliger's Streichquartett are treated as a loop that is then subjected to a cumulative process in which with every 'repetition' one pitch is transposed.

"Extensions" *Mobile and Bagatelles* treat Morton Feldman's *Extensions 3* and Anton Webern's *Sechs Bagatellen* Op. 9 respectively to processes in which sections and/or individual measures are cut up and re-ordered.

*30 Pieces and 5 Pieces for N. V.* apply the process of Duchamp's *Erratum Musicale* to pieces of the literature.

*Spielfreude* presents Liszt's Sonata performed on a keyboard with weighted piano action plugged into headphones worn by the performer with only a minimal amount of what the performer is playing audible over the sound of the keys themselves.

*The Party Line* as stated above concludes with the entirety of Chopin's third *Ballade*.

*And the Dead of Midnight* is a composed analysis of Nils Vigeland's *Evening and Night* in which the process by which the second movement is composed out of the first is strictly observed in order to compose out of the second a hypothetical third movement to the piece.

*Installation Piece* for oboe and 12 pre-recorded oboes treats Peter Veale's and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf's catalogue of possible oboe multiphonics divided up as part-scores to be read in the manner of Cage's 'Number Pieces.'

*24 Trios* for natural horns repeats a passage from one of Anton Reicha's trios for horns 24 times. Each repetition is played on horns in different keys but the music is not transposed so that the hand technique required to produce the pitches creates drastically different timbral profiles for each trio.

*A thought on Michael Finnissy's: Runnin' Wild* 'orchestrates' Finnissy's solo piece by having it played by a number of transposing instruments all playing in unison from the same score. The piece is heard then in unrelenting parallel motion.

Additionally the following works in progress may be of interest here:

*32 Questions Re: and not Re: Measure 31 of Aaron Cassidy's: Metallic Dust* for amplified bass clarinet with live video projection of the performer's mouth and fingers, is a series of 're-orchestrations' of one measure of Cassidy's piece by way of specifying and re-specifying the embouchure positions of the mouth part (notated independently of the fingers in the original).

A series of re-compositions of Ruth Crawford-Seeger's *Piano Study in Mixed Accents* inspired by Anton Reicha's *L'art de Varier* is planned for the pianist Yegor Shevtsov.

## Concluding Remarks

Having talked about and around a position of questioning I hope to have articulated if not enough to make this position explicitly clear, at least enough to suggest some directions for the imagination. It seems that some of what I called at the outset a general outlook could easily be construed as contradictory to both the pieces presented here and what I have had to say about them. Indeed I have received feedback both positive and negative in the past that would suggest that the pieces could be perceived purely as statements, absent of questions. I could understand that as implying that I did not adequately communicate my position or failed to accurately articulate it. Or even that the pieces were simply not understood. However, in spite of all said above, I am simply not that dogmatic about it. I am not designing wheels that need to roll and bear weights in order to transport things. Art is something else and I suspect it might be for exactly this reason that people feel compelled to keep making it. To a certain extent discrepancies between what one might conceive and how it is perceived would seem intrinsic to the endeavor. Although I believe and believe in all that which has been said here I would like to add that I also feel ambivalent towards many of these positions. This ambivalence is something that I take very seriously and something that I consider extremely valuable. Further, I do hope that the pieces themselves (at least on some level) convey something of this ambivalence. At best it invites re-thinking and critical re-evaluation... and this I fear might be our only hope!

## Endnotes

1. Successful in terms of achieving goals.
2. I would prefer to use the term 'meta-instruments' but that this term has already – also aptly – been applied to quite different phenomena; among others in relation to instrumental music by Richard Barrett and Mark Andre, not to mention its far more common usage in electronic music.
3. See discussion of *as if the how and the what could be the same* below.
4. With the obvious exception of the various aesthetic debates.
5. I use the word gamut here for its association to similar kinds of gamut as used by John Cage in compositions like the *String Quartet in Four Parts* or *Sixteen Dances*, as distinguished from apparently similar techniques of serial music that serve quite a different set of aims.
6. The term additive fractional duration was first suggested to the author by the pianist and musicologist Ian Pace.
7. Cowell, Henry, *New Musical Resources with notes and an essay* by David Nicholls (Cambridge, 1996) pp. 59–60.
8. Although composers as diverse as Pierre Boulez, Jo Kondo, or Nicolaus A. Huber have made limited use of durations expressed as incomplete fractions to very different ends.
9. The approach does not prohibit or limit changes of tempo any more than any other more 'traditional' approaches.
10. This in no way means to discount music that has chosen such notation, which certainly has its own aesthetic and expressive values.
11. At the moment I am planning and working on a theory and practical method of working with additive fractional durations that addresses the various issues surrounding this approach in detail.
12. A reference to the Autobiography of Andy Warhol.
13. Robin Hayward is a British tuba player and composer based in Berlin.
14. Samuel Stoll is a Swiss French horn player based in Berlin.
15. Although this kind of handwork is specific to the horn, any instrument on which the piece could be performed has of course its own set of visual and timbral characteristics, which would/could be highlighted in a similar manner.
16. I would not in any way wish to question the potential aesthetic value of such actions, they simply do not occur in this piece.
17. Excepting in some cases minor copying errors.
18. There are obvious copyright issues regarding some of those works not in the public domain. To be on the safe side I would like to point out here that those pieces that I have not received expressed permission to use have never been performed, distributed or otherwise disseminated.

## Abstract

Questions, questioning, posing questions, presenting questions, presenting a position of questioning: literally, socially, metaphorically, dramatically. A central preoccupation, subject matter and raison d'être of my compositional work presented by way of a brief survey of some its manifestations.

## Author

Andrew R. Noble (Stamford, CT. USA, 1978) is an American composer and musicologist who has been living and working in Berlin since 2003. He holds a Bachelor of Music in Composition from the Manhattan School of Music – where he also studied Jazz Saxophone with Joe Temperley – and a Masters of Music in Composition from the University of Southampton (UK). His principal composition teachers were Richard Barrett, Michael Finnissy, David Noon and Nils Vigeland. Noble recently completed a PhD in Musicology at the Technische Universität Berlin under the guidance of Christian Martin Schmidt and Heinz von Loesch entitled: *Anton Reicha's Trente-six Fugues pour le Piano-forté, A Critical Edition with Accompanying Analysis: The Subject in Anton Reicha's Trente-six Fugues* (publication forthcoming).

## Title

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