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# Some Thoughts about Pre-composition

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Pre-composition has been a ‘hot potato’ topic among composers for the last one hundred years. One need only compare the seemingly opposite compositional philosophies and methods of Stockhausen and Feldman or Babbitt and Ives. Either it is the sacred gospel according to Fibonacci, the apparent patron saint of ‘formalist’ composers, or else pre-composition is the profane plague attacking the true and inspirational nature of the real art of composition. Since both sides acknowledge the established masterpieces of formalists—take a composer such as Bartók (who has certainly paid tribute to the Fibonacci altar; but more on this later)—why would the idea/notion of pre-composition still be questioned as a viable creative method? Music requires a pre-compositional plan.

Requires a pre-compositional plan? Here, too, there are diverse strategies ranging from those obviously simplistic to more complex notions of pre-compositional choices. Is choice of instrumentation considered pre-compositional? How about the length of the work? Melodic and harmonic language? Rhythmic structures? Compositional style and aesthetic? Form of the work? Structures within the form? Title choices? Text choices? Must there be an enigmatic plan that alone would ensure the work’s success?

Enigmatic plans are intriguing for puzzle-lovers and chess players but are they not just abstractions for both composer and listener? Here are two scenarios. Composer X is inspired by a lovely poem about the phenomenon of spirals. X composes something and begins randomly with a motive of D, F, B $\flat$  and proceeds to compose a piece. Composer Y is inspired by a lovely poem about spirals as well. Y structures the parameters of the entire work around the equation of a spiral, which happens to be an exponentially decreasing function. Y proceeds, much like an architect would, building around the initial inspiration. Y chooses D $\sharp$ , E, F $\sharp$  because they are part of the pitch collection that results when the aforementioned equation is mapped onto a pitch continuum. Both points of departure for the composers are equally abstract. Neither approach guarantees a successful work, yet the choice of a pre-compositional plan, however seemingly enigmatic, would only be an aid. Without programme notes, there is very little

chance that a listener would guess that the music was articulating an exponentially decreasing function. What role, then, does inspiration play in the whole pre-compositional framework?

Creation of artistic works is often romantically imagined. The familiar stereotype, as disseminated through the mass media, poses the tortured artistic type in his cold and drafty attic room being 'inspired' by some beautiful idea that he's just dying to express. He lets inspiration take over with no thought whatsoever to the final product (or his failing health) as the last candle burns out. Music and art are, of course, about expression, but inspiration is really only a small portion. Thomas Edison stated that, in any creative endeavour, it's one per cent inspiration matched with ninety-nine per cent perspiration. How can we further define this perspiration process? In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, graphic artist Scott McCloud lists six steps that he feels any art work in any medium will follow: idea/purpose, form, idiom, structure, craft, and surface. The fourth step is *structure*, which he clarifies as 'how to arrange, how to compose the work.' The fifth is *craft*, during which the artist applies 'skills, practical knowledge, invention ... getting the 'job' done.'<sup>1</sup> These are just similar terms for pre-composition (how to) and composition (getting the job done).

Or, to elaborate further the idea of 'perspiration,' Pierre Boulez discusses, in his essay 'Aesthetics and the Fetishists,' how music is at the same time 'an art, a science and a craft.'<sup>2</sup> He, too, states that everyone agrees on the idea of art as a means of expression. However, as soon as intellectuality and craft are mentioned, the profane accusations start to fly:

Only too often we hear or read that the quality of a work depends first and foremost on 'what the composer has to say,' regardless of the means he may choose ... And how in fact can a composer conceive his 'message' without a morphology—a formal scheme—capable of communicating it to the listener? This whole concept of an abstract 'message' is in fact no more than a cheap sophistry, employed only to conceal a profound misunderstanding, or indeed complete ignorance ... of the means of expression at the composer's disposal. This sort of myopia is a relic of romanticism in its pathetic final stages, and it reveals an inability to understand the real relationship between vocabulary and expression.<sup>3</sup>

Pre-composition is a critical facet of the creative process.

Molding the individuality of expression, with some kind of plan or process that follows Boulez's suggestion of a required morphology would seem ideal. Many composers, such as Bartók, Stockhausen, Schoenberg, who have successfully achieved this balance do not simply rely on some formula, but have that plan as the source and guiding material that they then mold and shape to create a self-sustaining universe. Years ago I listened to sounds produced by a computer program that generated random pitches according to a fractal equation. The first few seconds were exciting but slowly the aural experience became boring. There was no relationship between pitches or their lengths, no audible form, no understandable structures or gestures. There were only 'chaotically' generated pitches. This is not composition. This was pre-composition stopped dead in its tracks. This is exactly the banal and meaningless result

<sup>1</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993) 170–71.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Boulez, 'Aesthetics and the Fetishists,' in Jean-Jacques Nattiez (ed.), trans. Martin Cooper *Orientations: Collected Writings by Pierre Boulez* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986) 33.

<sup>3</sup> Boulez, 'Aesthetics and the Fetishists,' 34–35.

expected and labeled as profane by those who criticise pre-composition. There was no creation involved. These sounds were not a piece of music.

Predetermined plans when isolated are, therefore, not enough. No composer worth his or her salt would blindly stick to a formulaic realisation if it did not yield an acceptable aural effect. Take for example Stockhausen's *Kontakte*, a serial work in moment form with neither a structural 'beginning' nor 'end.' However, after the first performance Stockhausen was not happy with the 'beginning' and composed two additional opening sections for the piece. Why would composers knowingly restrict their music through an inflexible rule of their own making instead of manipulating those rules to suit their needs and the needs of their own ears? Robin Maconie even noted when discussing *Kontakte* that 'ending a permutational form is nearly always a matter of taste, not design.'<sup>4</sup>

**Planning + rule making = pre-composition**

**Rule manipulation + taste + craft = composing**

Organic integration resulting from the above equations is also expressed in Goethe's idea of *urpflanze*. In his 1790 paper, 'The Metamorphosis of Plants,' Goethe discusses how the genetic characteristics of a tree are encoded in a single leaf.<sup>5</sup> Translated into music and art, this sort of relationship is not accidental. This macro- to micro-level planning is what pre-composition attempts to do. In his essay 'But is it Art?' Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman beautifully discusses this idea as he explains why he learned to draw:

I wanted to convey an emotion I have about the beauty of the world. It's difficult to describe because it's an emotion. It's analogous to the feeling one has in religion that has to do with a god that controls everything in the whole universe: there's a generality aspect that you feel when you think about how things that appear so different and behave so differently are all run 'behind the scenes' by the same organization, the same physical laws. It's an appreciation of the mathematical beauty of nature, of how she works inside; a realization that the phenomena we see result from the complexity of the inner workings between atoms; a feeling of how dramatic and wonderful it is.<sup>6</sup>

These 'behind the scenes' or pre-compositional structures actually assist in gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of a work.

Structures in music and their perception can only aid a listener's understanding of what a composer is trying to express. In *Musical Time: The Sense of Order*, Barbara Barry points out that 'perception can be considered as the ability to sort out and structure often complex information into coherent patterns ... Loose bits of information and arbitrary facts without connection to a central idea are liable to be lost, like small change. In order to be retained, ideas need to be related to each other in some kind of system or construction, at the core of which is a central principle or idea.'<sup>7</sup> There must be some central purpose so that patterns may emerge for us to recognise.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Maconie, *Stockhausen* (London: OUP, 1976) 143–44.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Perry, 'Music, Evolution and the Ladder of Progress,' *Society for Music Theory* 6.5 (November 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Richard P. Feynman, 'But is it Art?' in Edward Hutchings (ed.), *'Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!' Adventures of a Curious Character* (New York/London: Norton, 1997) 261.

In order for us to perceive sound as music, we must listen actively rather than hear passively. This implies the use of intelligence. Leonard Meyer discusses this notion: 'It is well to remember that music is directed, not *to* the senses, but *through* the senses and *to the mind*. And it might be well if more serious attention were paid to the capacity, behavior, and abilities of the human mind.'<sup>8</sup> The intellect is vital for more composers to acknowledge and support in their work.

Time is obviously one of the essential parameters during which we perceive these patterns. However, plans and structures must not be perceived above all else or to exclusion of all else. These plans are part of an integral universe where multiple layers and multiple processes make up the temporal listening experience. How can there be music without time? Separating them would be like removing someone's brain and then insisting they dance! Meyer so aptly put it:

an account of the repertory of materials ... used in a piece of music and their manipulation cannot serve as an analysis of the work of art itself. To 'explain' a piece of serial music by discovering its row structure and detailing its permutations and combinations in the work is almost as pointless as trying to explain a joke by discussing theories of humor.<sup>9</sup>

He insists that for the success of a musical work, it needs to be 'experientially relevant and influential, knowledge must be, not of the rules per se, but of their manifestation as perceivable processes and relationships.'<sup>10</sup> We are not creating Frankenstein's monster, but allowing the brain its proper place facilitates our ability to dance.

It would be beneficial to return to and look again at Bartók and Fibonacci. In the first movement of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* both the formal and melodic structures can be seen as a result of Fibonacci points. Melodically the opening phrase and high points of the melodic contour occur at Fibonacci numbers. The phrase length itself is a Fibonacci number (the phrase has a temporal value of 34 quavers) until the next voice enters with the subject. Whether or not one realises this while listening to the piece is, however, unimportant. While it may be of interest—intellectually, the listener may realise how precise a plan Bartók used to create such a simple, beautiful and seemingly meandering little melody—this knowledge is not necessary to appreciate the work. This careful craftsmanship within a system (also known as pre-composition) provided Bartók with a structure within which to compose such an integrated subject. At the other end of the spectrum is the overall form or structure. Ultimately, it doesn't matter that the climax of the work is at the golden mean or golden proportion of the entire piece. What does matter is that this tremendous climax on E $\flat$  does, in fact, feel like the correct culmination of the previous fugal buildup. Yet, this climax has been carefully crafted and structured. We could argue that this pre-compositional choice of Bartók's to climax at E $\flat$  at the golden mean, which is harmonically the furthest point from

<sup>7</sup> Barbara R. Barry, *Musical Time: The Sense of Order* (New York: Pendragon, 1990) 23.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 271.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, 268.

<sup>10</sup> Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, 270.

the beginning A pitch centre before his merging of the subjects back to A, is simply great craftsmanship.

'Organises,' 'plans' and 'pre-composes' are synonymous verbs. Whether audible or not, the *raison d'être* for pre-composition is the foremost consideration for a composer. It is for them to organise an organic musical universe within which to work and express their ideas. It may simply be a game they play to keep themselves amused. Or, it may be both. Ultimately pre-composition, known or unknown, perceived or not, is the fourth step in McCloud's artistic process. This pre-compositional phase is one of the necessary steps on the path that leads to a successful piece of music.

Notes for curious readers: you will notice there are fourteen letters in the word pre-composition. There are also fourteen paragraphs in this essay. Symbolist J.E. Cirlot says that in symbolism, 'numbers are not merely the expressions of quantities, but idea-forces, each with a particular character of its own.'<sup>11</sup> He identifies the number fourteen with fusion and organisation. This is perhaps just a happy coincidence, but an interesting one for those intrigued by symbolism. Coincidentally, if you take the first letter of every paragraph you will get the word 'PRE-COMPOSITION.' If you take the first word of every paragraph the following sentence is created: 'Pre-composition requires enigmatic creation or molding predetermined organic structures in time: it organises notes.'

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<sup>11</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, transl. Jack Sage (New York: Dorset, 1991) 234.