

GIVING VOICE: FOUR EXPRESSIONS OF EXPERIENCE INTO MUSIC

Dr Gerardo Dirie
Queensland Conservatorium
Griffith University

ABSTRACT

This paper presents details about the design of specific sound cues from four compositions, illustrating the artists' efforts in exteriorising into sound aspects of human experience that correlate with concepts of *the organic*. I approach my enquiry with awareness of the value that those experiences entail, and by responding to my listening with a reflective attitude and empathy for the expressions rendered in these pieces.

1. INTRODUCTION

The diverse manners in creating, performing and listening to electroacoustic music has been accompanied by a wealth of discourses from practitioners and audiences seeking to address the complex experiences that are provoked. These experiences range from the technical, logistical and architectural to the psychological, bodily, social or communal, to mention a few. The four cases presented here serve to distinguish the ways in which concepts of the organic are addressed in each composer's preferred discourse. The compositions are: *Speak Memory* (2010) by New Zealand composer John Cousins, *Abide with Me* (2009) by New Zealand composer John Coulter, *The Breaking of the Scream* (1999) by Argentinean composer José Halac, and my *Pomegranate Friends*, a recent cycle of works for mixed choir, saxophone and live electronics. These composers' concepts of "the numinous", "the essence", "syncretism", and "enfolded experience" are shown to correspond to attributes of "the organic" by means of a listening process that attends to sounds both in regard to their measurable physical properties and their psychologically implied realities.

2. THE BREAKING OF THE SCREAM

This composition was released on a CD from INNOVA in 1999 under the collective title of *Selections From Sonic Circuits VII –International Festival of Electroacoustic Music*. The piece is an expansion and elaboration of Halac's *Todo lo que nuestros ojos amaron* ('All our eyes ever loved'). My first encounter with the materials of this composition was from a few years before this release when I presented it during a music conference at Indiana University. Although that version was shorter, featuring a more direct sonic language, the most striking factor in the piece has remained, namely the tribulations of a human scream as it seeks to transform its manifestation of suffering into an

expression of this through poetry. The tortuous arrival of the scream into the poetic expression is achieved through moments of confrontation between the composer's sustained scream against two other sound sources: the composer's singing of a *baguala* chant,¹ and the composer's reading of the source poem.

Figure 1 illustrates, against a grid representing the duration of the composition, how the element of the sustained scream goes from clear sound to increased distortion. As the scream element unfolds its organic, gradually paced transformations it moves to the background of the texture as the other two elements emerge. These two new elements follow a different design in regard to distortion. The chant is first heard with relative clarity, and reappears towards the end, first very distorted and subdued, and concluding with a sudden increase in dynamic level. The element of the poem reading follows a path somewhat as the reverse of the scream, from quite distorted to enhanced presence and proximity.

Whereas the first version of the piece was a brutal, raw outcry, the revisited version or over-composed work became more clearly an act of atonement through the syncretic acts that the composer had used. The now distant original work had a recognisable moment of initial shock caused by the opening scream, followed by an increase of tension by the distortion applied to the sound of the scream. After a relatively short middle section of harmonic and spectral expansion that seemed to attenuate the energy, the scream came back, leading into the final fast paced reading of the poem. The new *The Breaking of the Scream* achieves its function of atonement by deliberately extending the transitions from scream into poetry recitation by means of intersecting the scream with three other elements, where each of these intersections could be perceived as delayed seizing of the poetry. We first hear how the scream meets with its own spectral components. It then moves to a first encounter with the poetry (or a false entrance of the poetry), before we encounter the *baguala* chanting. All these encounters are nonetheless integral, self reflective of the sound of the voice of the composer, who is the organism that renders the scream, the chant, and the poem. These all are, at the most essential level, sounds that have been *lived*. Towards the end the piece is a clear silence that allows composer and listener some distance

¹ *Baguala* is a surviving archaic lyrical genre from the Argentinean Northwest region, disseminated and urbanized throughout the country during the 20th century.

from the experience. There is an interruption in the drama, and gradually from the silence something hints at emerging, we are uncertain whether this is spectra, scream, chant or a metamorphosis. The last phrase of the chant breaks in with a *subito fortissimo* carrying the scream on its shoulders, and as the chant comes to a close, the scream blends with, or becomes the voice that now holds the words of the poem.

In my experiencing of this work, it exemplifies the organic transformation that Halac's perspective on syncretism can achieve. In Halac's works, we can follow a process of amalgamation that acknowledges more than one point of origin, and at the same time gives him the leading role in integrating those origins. In the case of *The Breaking of the Scream*, we can perceive a choreography of gradual transformations applied to each distinct element, as embodied by the composer through learning and performing, to reach an expression of change that at the end affects all and each constituent part, including the composer himself. The magical transformations in the creative space become available to the composer to reconfigure the past experience and, with time, to lessen the impact of the conditions that led to the real screaming.

3. ABIDE WITH ME

To audiences of Anglo or British Commonwealth background, the title of this piece will bring immediate associations. *Abide with Me* is a popular hymn composed by William Henry Monk (1823-1889). Scottish Anglican priest Henry Francis Lyte (1793-1847) wrote the lyrics to this hymn a few weeks before he passed away. The text is a prayer asking God to dispel the fears affecting someone who sees death approaching. This hymn has become one of the best-known pieces played in memorial services, private and institutional. It is also a popular item during Evensong, an Anglican ecclesiastical service that takes place at the end of the day.

The music of this hymn is simple and calming, expressed in quadruple meter in Eb major, organised in two balanced periods over sixteen bars of homophonic texture. The opening phrases in each period memorably trace scales degrees $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$, while the consequent phrases move higher in the scale to gradually wave downward seeking resolution, or reaching-over the initial pitches of the next antecedent phrase. The highest reaching point is on scale degree $\hat{6}$. Although these leaps (as the tune is repeated several times) give us some sense of expansion in regard to psychological association with space (high and low) or a possible shift of vantage point of an embodied persona (i.e. *this is me now* and *that was me then*), we should acknowledge that the melodic range does not reach an octave, perhaps because it cannot, or it does not want to, or does not need to. The inevitability of the organic processes set in motion in Lyte's body, as he laid down very ill, were taking due course as much as a

tonal melody that will invariably reach the tonic, appropriately in its obligatory register.

I describe the music and text of this hymn because I feel they offer much correlation to how I experienced John Coulter's audiovisual work of same name. In various personal communications with the composer, we discussed the circumstances and inspiration behind this work. John, at that time, was coming to terms with understanding the untimely death of a close relative. It goes without saying that the acts of creation in such circumstances are potent affirmations of existence at the most essential level. On the two occasions that I listened to this composition, the "story" of the *rambling tone* remained with me. The most potent expression relates to a continuous tone of similar qualities as the human voice, warm and rich, a tone with continuous pitch fluctuation that appears to ramble around the space lost, seeking without aim, and gradually gaining vector, marked by an increase in perceived *mass* (my perception here constructed this feeling on the grounds of increased volume and acceleration in the fluctuations, as well as the narrowing of a frequency band that made for an apparent "zeroing on target" effect—the equivalent of a *Fortspinnung*). This gradual process is integral to the video, featuring in this section a rambling dot of yellow/red colour, with the screen increasingly filling up with other dots, reaching to a moment where all dots converge (Figure 2). I remember that, while listening to this moment in the music while watching at the video, I was somehow reassured in my role of as a spectator, not invited nor drawn into assuming any role within the sonic world presented to me. If anything, my imaginary role was to observe the imagined attempts of this rambling sound in the hope that it will stabilise itself into a direction, move towards its target, and when this would happen, this would then give both the rambling tone and myself a feeling of satisfaction. The quality of the experience was similar to the empathic, good-willing stance that the hymn required from me, as on one hand I wished for the tune to reach the octave, and on the other I had to accept the itinerary of sounds as they were.

Several months later, the audiovisual work *Abide with Me* was presented in concert at the 2010 Beijing Modern Music Festival (BMMF). The reactions of the 500-strong audience there were akin to mine, but multiplied by their exteriorisation. According to a recollection by the composer, members of the audience spontaneously started to cheer every so-called *attempt* of the rambling tone, time after time with increased enthusiasm in a remarkable display of empathy for the embodied tone and its predicament. Metaphorically, if the Scottish priest had been incapacitated to sing a hymn, he could have expressed the sentiments contained in his verses by whistling in contours like those which occurred in John's composition. I felt that the significant effort of the composer in maintaining a conceptual frame around essential attributes of existence (evident through the relative span of the composed section, and the

abundance and refinement of organised anamorphic associations) was leaving me at the end of the piece with this question: ‘If the dots on the screen can do it, and my listening too can believe such outcome; will our souls also reach their aim?’

4. TWO HANDS OR WINGS, POMEGRANATE FRIENDS

I have adapted David Bohm’s concept of “enfoldment” in the sense that experience can be viewed as fully contained in a movement of energy or waves (2005). Other processes at a different times, can make what is contained to become manifest, or to move into what he terms as “unfolded” or “explicate order”. This notion is beautifully exemplified in his metaphor of a hologram in which ‘the entire object is contained in each region of the hologram, enfolded as a pattern of waves, which can then be unfolded by shining light through it.’ (Bohm 2005, 129). The 2005 reprint of Bohm’s writings and interviews also contain a stimulating preface by Leroy Little Bear, a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy who also served as Director of the Harvard University Native American Program. He recognised an alignment between Bohm’s ideas and the Blackfoot view of their language as process and action in synchronous correspondences with movement in flux, which in turn reflects their understanding of reality as a point of reference in the flux. I have referenced to the concepts of “enfoldment” and “unfoldment” before when describing consciousness and cognitive processes in my work *Moonless Etude* (Dirié 2009).

In the choral project discussed here, I was moderately aware of the elements that were condensing or enfolded into the music. These included being inspired by the writings of the Renaissance Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), my involvement in creating a number of works for the Fusion vocal ensemble in Brisbane, and my desire to use a small-scale multichannel set up to contribute and perhaps influence the performance practices of chamber choirs in the region. Ricci’s writings about memory and mnemonics had already influenced my other compositions, namely *The Dream of José Arcadio*, and *Hwatu, Decks & Steps*. The current project, however, developed from my encounter with Ricci’s translations of popular sayings about friendship into Chinese (Ricci 2009). The overall composition took shape as a set of three moderately short works for chamber choir and 4-channel live electronics, two of which have been completed and premiered. I was experimenting at the time with various tunings, testing my physical and psychological responses to different situations using simple configurations of sinewaves. As the exploratory quality of listening to different tunings became very important as a situated practice, I decided to include a live performer with alto saxophone to mediate between the sinewaves and the choir, while the choir mediates between the text, the performative

situation, and the architectural space. The shifting and clashing of different tunings are, for most audiences, imperceptible—although I hope they still impact as sensory stimulants. I believe that different tunings do affect our bodies and emotions in ways that our perception does not regard as deserving of detailed processing.

Despite these considerations about tunings, voices, instruments, text, and the gradual and organic integration of creative impulses and conditions, there is no *singular sound* in these pieces that condense an experience in the same manner as seen in the compositions by Halac, Cousins, or Coulter. In these instances, we see that a major effort went into shaping a sound organically and in reference to a personal experience. Retrospectively, I see that in my two choral works, the effort was applied instead to an overall musical event that presents itself under the guise of alternating simple, friendly situations. It became increasingly apparent that a metaphor of belonging and not belonging was achieved by means of prompting the performers and audiences to transiting through the given changes, hopefully weighing the possibilities of personal transformations as a result of this process. This was done, however, without a rigid imposition of method to the music, but rather in a more Cage-*esque* attitude of simulated detachment from outcomes.

The improvising saxophone takes a role of attempting to highlight the tuning peculiarities of each context, sometimes serving to integrate sections, yet always risking alienation. Conversely, the singers’ music, with its feel of normalcy, order, and gentle bearing, remains rather foreign to the other environment of natural tuning and to the more organic or barely intentional sounding of pitches from the saxophonist. These situations contributed to an enhanced experience of personal and social space that allow for different and coexisting tunings.

Comparatively, the process of living organically through this sonic metaphor also corresponds to the concept of “sounding”, through which we probe an environment by means of inflicting a stimulus and evaluating its response. My role during the performance of *Two Hands or Wings* and *Pomegranate Friends* was as laptop musician controlling the patches, yet I was mentally and emotionally shifting vantage points as chorister, saxophonist, audience, venue, city, and imagined country. The creative project became a subtle mechanism to condense, update my experiences, and to calibrate my sense of presence in an environment whose ways of resonating I still have to comprehend, and hopefully enhance or affect. All the elements in the performance remain in state of flux, while the peculiar characteristics of the work as *composed*, refer to a single moment or reality as a point in the flux.

5. SPEAK MEMORY

This composition was completed in the year 2010 at John Cousins' private 8-channel studio in Christchurch, and presented to audiences during the 2010 New Zealand Electroacoustic Symposium (NZEMS) in Auckland. The version I listened to consisted of a multichannel mix, diffused through a 24-speakers acousmonium at the Kenneth Myers Centre of the University of Auckland. *Speak Memory*, like other works by Cousins, generously and justifiably spans almost one hour in length at 57' 16".

During this span of time, the composer presents us with the voice of his mother reminiscing and recounting significant episodes in her life. The sonic language in the composition is of broad register, meaning that the approaches range from documentary style to richly transformed sonic scenes. The main narrating voice is combined with other sounds of various origin used to make the narrative more palpable, as well as to expand the boundaries of referenced realities. This may refer to what Mrs. Cousins narrates, or to what the composer adds as running commentary, among others.

Very soon into the composition, we feel certain that we are not listening about a factual sequence of events, but rather we are invited, or thrown, into an enhanced virtual world that is more effective for explaining, or for sharing how it was to live through those stories. In the process of recording the voice of his mother, prompting her into relating various stories and details, and then transforming and expanding the expressivity of the sounds, the composer included himself as another narrating voice and persona. As Mrs. Cousins memory speaks, John's memories resonate with the recreated stories. The audience is given the double bill of following at least two narratives. There is a particular segment in the composition that stayed with me long after the first listening. This is a section I informally call the "conception cue". It occurs at about 18'10" and lasts approximately up to duration 30'. Including the fireworks sounds that initiate the conception cue, the segment can be seen as occupying almost the entire middle third of the composition (Figure 4).

In the narration, we hear about Mrs. Cousins' date with Mr. Cousins senior as a soldier during a night of public outdoors celebration, and the ensuing multichannel fireworks puts the audience into a state of gasping awe about the amorous encounter. Besides the references to the encounter and the celebratory scenery, we are also presented with a new and very quiet sound, its presence emerges very high in the frequency bands amidst the exciting banging of the fireworks. The fireworks, I think, operate both as an obvious metaphor of the experience of the amorous encounter, and also as a cue for us, the respectful listeners who are graciously prompted to look the other way to avoid any indiscretion or impropriety, so to speak. As the story then moves on and out of the fireworks, we can still hear that high pitch

hovering, very innocently and cosy above all other textural elements.

In my two experiences of listening to this piece, first sitting in the centre of the circle in the acousmonium, and then standing on the side of ring and observing the audience, I quite vividly felt that I was witnessing the presence of life emerging, condensed in that high pitch. I felt that all the elements in the texture and the narrations that continued were done as an effective representation of the unawareness of the life that was suggested during the fireworks episode. The high pitch, smoothly sustained, seemed not to hold any particular interest in what was occurring in other parts of the composition, and it seemed quite content in not been heard. I felt for a moment that I might have spotted something that I was not supposed to have noticed. My short conversation with other audience members afterwards more or less confirmed that I might have simply heard things in my head. A few days after these comments had been written, I returned to the "conception cue" and produced a spectrogram, noticing that where I thought there was one high tone, there were actually two, with the cleverness of effective organic forms, parenting a soft tone through a harmonious relationship of F^7-C^9 (Figure 5). Each of these pitches, in turn, were not single discrete frequencies but very dense bands, roughly covering all frequencies from the lowest to the highest within the frequency bins for each tone (more or less spanning 5400-5600Hz, and 16400-16600Hz). One could either zoom into each of these bins and find more frequencies, or imagine that the frequencies in each bin were not originally sounded in the visible bin, but were the resonant outcomes of encounters of other frequencies taking place beyond the grasp of the spectrogram. The voice of the composer appears lower in the texture when his narration questions how emotions and intentions factor in the encounter and generation of life. The textural overlap thus comprises several surrogates of John Cousins, to the point where the notion of surrogacy itself becomes insufficient to address such imbricated encapsulations, and a wonderful pondering about the self and the emergence of life from a distant big bang. My conversations with the composer, later on, made me aware of his interest and effort in creating sounds as "recorded experience" and as manifestations of spiritual and supernatural forces; or creating to enhance the "numinosity" of sound, as he prefers to call it (Cousins 2010).

In his reflections about the benefits of organising energy over time, Henri Lefebvre stated that 'it brings compensation for the miseries of everydayness, for its deficiencies and failures' (Lefebvre 2004). In a more positive tone, the manners in which we integrate human experience into the design of sound, their rhythmic dispositions of the situations in which they unfold, help us to restore a sense of balance between conflicting perceptions and concepts, perhaps achieving a behaviour that feels organic.

6. FIGURES

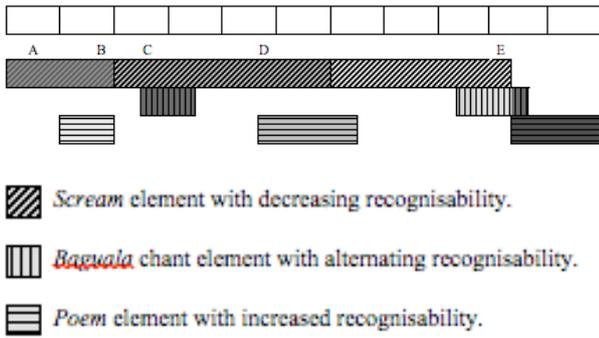


Figure 1. *The Breaking of The Scream* –relative distribution of syncretic elements throughout the 11 minutes of duration of the composition.

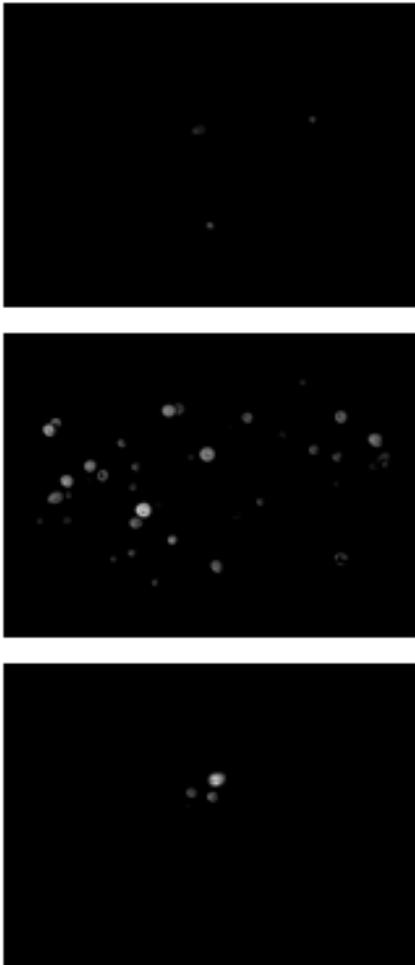


Figure 2. *Abide with Me* –three moments in the gradual eventfulness in the screen and gradual convergence of dots. (Screenshots from video selection provided by the composer).



Figure 3. The premiere of *Pomegranate Friends* – layered photos illustrating the notion of enhanced experience of personal and social space. (Photo by Katherine Chan).



Figure 4. *Speak Memory* –position and span of the “conception cue” relative to the 57’16” of total duration.

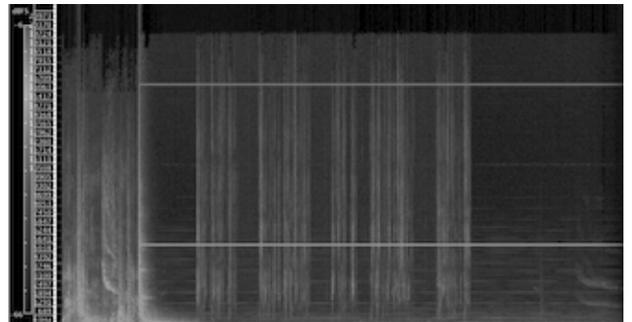


Figure 5. *Speak Memory* –spectrogram of the “conception cue” revealing the relative positioning of its component frequencies. (Produced through Sonic Visualiser).

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