

OPEN SCORE (1)

by Howard Jones

"In the beginning was the score ..."

an overview

This is an essay about composed music – the literature that composers write and performers realise in sound. There are other ways in which we experience sound as music, but I want to explore specifically the nature of the relationships in contemporary music between composers, performers and listeners, and how these are affected by the ideas of the CoMA 'Open Score' project.

Works written for Open Score are flexibly-scored, which means that the parts are not instrument-specific; instead, the composer specifies the range of the instruments (for example, high, medium and low) and it is up to each ensemble to distribute the parts to suitable players.

My opening paragraph may have given the impression that the musical world is divided into three tribes – composers, performers and listeners – but in fact all these attributes apply to all musicians. We are all, to be sure, listeners; listening (either physical or internalised) is the primary activity without which music cannot exist. We are all performers whenever we participate actively in a musical situation. And we are all, to some extent, composers when we apply our individual creativity to the production of sounds.

Much of the time we are conditioned to believe that these roles are each the preserve of highly skilled specialists. As composers we learn the craft of manipulating sounds. We learn the characteristics and ranges of different instruments without much regard for the differences between the many people who play them. We learn how to create interesting timbres, ignoring the logistical problems of assembling the instruments and performers necessary to produce them. Our relationships with performers may become demanding and confrontational, as we expect them to render our conceptions perfectly in the smallest detail every time.

As performers we learn to play pieces written by other people, most of them long dead. We receive praise for the accuracy with which we produce the sounds represented by their marks on pieces of paper, seeking the insight to express the meaning of every last dot and squiggle. We seek guidance from our teachers and leaders – "slurred or detached?"; "on or off the string?"; "where do we breathe?" – and we wield our pencils. But all too often we play on without really listening, even to ourselves. We become mistrustful of composers who don't appear to understand our technical problems, and wary of listeners who never appear to be satisfied with what we can do.

As listeners, brought up in a world where mechanical reproductions are the primary source of musical experience, we assume that there is only one version of the truth. We lose the ability to appreciate a performance for what it actually is, and instead we critically compare it with our favourite 'one true' interpretation – a somewhat reductive form of appreciation.

Open Score challenges and changes all this. The old hierarchical relationships of composer, conductor, performer and listener give way to a new paradigm, which is collective, consensual and co-operative in nature. It demands a new set of disciplines, no less demanding than those we apply to more traditional composed music, but more holistic, and more related not just what we can do, but also to who we are as musicians.

In future articles I want to look in more detail at the individual responsibilities of composers, performers, conductors and listeners, and how the ideas behind Open Score can affect not only how we write, perform and listen, but how we relate to one another through music.

OPEN SCORE (2)

by Howard Jones

“What I have written, I have written ...”

a composer’s view

When my kids were small I used to tell them the tale of the Three Little Pigs. Sometimes I would read from a story book, sometimes I would tell it by heart. It was never exactly the same twice, because that is the nature of such stories. As long as the salient facts about straw, sticks and bricks were mentioned (and a suitable amount of huffing and puffing went on), the story worked, the wolf got what was coming to him, and everyone went to bed happy.

Writing music is sometimes like telling stories; at other times it’s about creating atmosphere, mood, ritual, song, dance, drama, poetry, patterns – the list goes on. As a composer I have to make decisions about what’s important in my music. This varies from one piece to the next, and sometimes at different points within a single piece, but quite often the notes themselves don’t matter all that much compared to other aspects. This may come as a bit of a shock to those who have been brought up to treat the written score as sacrosanct.

However, there is no question of abdicating responsibility for how the music turns out. It’s still my job to provide the performers with all the information they need to prepare and perform the music that I have conceived, but there may be a broad range of possible sonic outcomes that represent ‘the piece’ as I originally envisaged it. If I invite the performers to make decisions that affect that outcome, I must make sure that they understand the basis for those decisions, so that they avoid ill-advised choices that conflict with the true nature of the music. Trust is very important. It is nerve-racking to entrust one’s music to the tender care of performers, however expert and well-intentioned they may be.

And who will those performers be? The Open Score philosophy implies that my piece might be played by a string quartet or a brass band, or anything in between. Asking a brass band to play ‘col legno’ is a bit pointless, so I may have to set aside ideas that rely on specific techniques or timbres for their effectiveness. When the audible ‘surface’ of the music is so unpredictable, the composer must work with other elements such as form, narrative structure, rhythm and harmony.

In the musical collaboration that is Open Score, the composer’s role is quite different from the traditional (and occasionally confrontational) “I’ve written it – now you play it” approach. Sometimes compromise is needed in order to enable the music to be performed. Notes may need to be transposed, harmonies re-voiced, alternatives provided, dynamics adjusted, until a workable version of the music emerges that satisfies both composer and performers.

Similarly, one’s approach to virtuosity needs to be tempered with a healthy dose of realism. There are some exceptionally good players associated with CoMA, so why not give them something to get their teeth into? But there are obvious drawbacks to writing music that only one person can play. I’m reminded of the words of Samuel Johnson. After listening to a tiresome virtuoso firework display from a famous violinist, a friend remarked that the music was “very difficult”. “Difficult do you call it, Sir?” the good Doctor replied with ill-concealed irritation, “I wish it were impossible!”

This is not to say that it’s necessary to ‘dumb down’ one’s music, or that it’s wrong to challenge performers, both technically and expressively. Open Score demands resourcefulness from all participants, and a positive spirit of co-operative good will between them.

Just like life in general, really.

OPEN SCORE (3)

by Howard Jones

“Don’t shoot the pianist ...”

a performer’s view

Many years ago I heard a magnificent performance of a Bach cello suite given by a virtuoso – on the tuba. He made no apology. “When Tortelier apologises for playing it on the modern cello, I’ll apologise for playing it on the tuba”, he said. Such music transcends the medium of performance as much as it transcends time and space. (And how exactly should the ‘Art of Fugue’ be performed ...?)

In Open Score pieces, performers are often faced with choices that demand great awareness both of oneself and of the performance situation. It’s not enough just to play what you see in front of you and trust that the composer has calculated everything. Often, there is no way the Open Score composer can predict even the number of players involved, let alone the precise instrumental line-up. So each performer has to be creative in finding an approach to his or her part that will help to make the ensemble performance the best it can be. That approach may not be the same every time. We are all at different places in our musical development, so what is right for one performer may not be right for another, or even for the same performer in a different performance.

Here are some examples.

To play, or not to play? – that is the question. Sometimes silence is golden. As a performer I need to decide whether I can make an appropriate sound for the musical context. Is the texture too delicate for my sound? Is it too high or too low for my instrument or my technique? How confident do I feel? Moments of musical magic, or mayhem, may depend on such decisions.

Should I play exactly what is written? This may sound like a strange question, but sometimes the performer’s individual creativity can complement and even enhance the composer’s intention. Maybe by playing an octave higher or lower I could solve a technical or balance problem that is interfering with the optimum realisation of the piece. Maybe I just can’t play all those semiquavers, so rather than make a mess of them, perhaps I can adapt the part ever so slightly (or even quite a bit) to make it more playable for me. Believe me, even in more traditional music this goes on – just talk to any orchestral string player or rehearsal pianist.

What tone colour is appropriate? Maybe I should use a mute here and there; that forceful phrase would sound good if I use all down-bows; that sharp staccato might benefit from being pizzicato. Remember that the composer should have indicated everything essential to his conception, but may have purposely left some decisions of this kind up to the performers.

What are the performers around me doing? In a chamber music context I might find myself playing alone, making my own decisions, using my own musical sensibilities. But if I find myself sharing a part with one or more others it’s good to compare notes (pun intended) so that we develop the best collective approach to the musical material, for example when it comes to lines that divide, or taking solos. Joint effort and division of labour are good principles to bear in mind.

What you may have noticed in reading this is the emphasis on collective responsibility. In Open Score, no performer is an island; everything we play needs to be tested and validated in terms of its contribution to the whole. For that contribution to work requires imagination, creativity and occasionally some experimentation with the musical material. And (of course) practice!

There are people around who can help us as performers to achieve all this – they are called conductors – and I shall be looking at their particular role in Open Score in my next article.

OPEN SCORE (4)

by Howard Jones

“When I nod my head, hit it ...”

a conductor’s view

As a mediator between composer and performers, the conductor has a special role and significant additional responsibilities in an Open Score piece. Managing the transition from notation to sound is difficult enough in normal circumstances, but with Open Score the conductor must sometimes feel like a clairvoyant trying to herd cats.

The first problem is choosing a piece, which involves weighing the nature and technical difficulty of the music against the resources and capabilities of the ensemble. Fortunately, thanks to CoMA’s encouragement to composers, and its extensive music library, there is a wide range of music available, from delicate instrumental miniatures to dramatic choral and orchestral epics. Whatever is chosen, the conductor not only has to explain and direct it, but may have to ‘sell’ it to the ensemble as well in order to achieve a committed performance.

Understanding composers’ intentions is vital to creating a true representation of their music, and this is sometimes challenging because of the widespread use of ‘extended notation’. At one end of the spectrum there are graphic scores that provide a visual stimulus to the imagination, but very little other information to guide their realisation as sounds. At the other extreme there are pieces with copious verbal instructions ranging from the super-technical through the ultra-philosophical to the hyper-mystical. Anyone with a passing acquaintance with the works of Stockhausen will recognise his influence on the vocabulary of contemporary musical notation.

On a practical level, the conductor has to take charge in matters of ensemble, which involves a lot more than just providing a clear beat. One of the most common problems with open score pieces is achieving a satisfactory tonal and dynamic balance. Conventionally, many Open Score pieces are written in four parts, 1234 being roughly the instrumental equivalents of SATB. A typical problem is a dearth of bass instruments to play part 4, though sometimes an electronic keyboard can fill the gap. If flutes and recorders are assigned to the alto part 2, they may spend most of their time in the lowest register, struggling to be heard. Conversely, many of the loudest instruments such as horns, trombones and saxophones operate in the tenor register of part 3, and may simply overwhelm not only the valiant lone viola player but the rest of the ensemble as well. So the crude solution of assigning equal numbers of players to each part may result in an unbalanced sound; a better approach is to aim for dynamic rather than numerical equivalence.

Another useful technique is to use octave transposition, which most players can cope with given a little preparation. As long as this does not do violence to the composer’s conception, octave displacement, with instruments playing in their most natural registers, can result in a richer and more interesting texture, and is often technically easier as well.

Reducing the size of the ensemble at certain moments can also be a good idea, both for dynamic effect, and because it provides respite to the ears of the listener as well as the muscles of the performer.

Walking the tightrope between the composers’ intentions and the performers’ capabilities is part of the conductor’s remit in Open Score. A clear beat is essential, and a flair for orchestration and a good sales pitch are also useful attributes to have. But above all, it is the sense of music as a collaborative artistic endeavour that marks out the true Open Score conductor, one who can get the best out of the performers under his baton and bring those dots and squiggles to life in performance as a meaningful and memorable musical experience.

OPEN SCORE (5)

by Howard Jones

“All the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order ...” a listener’s view

When I tell people I write music, they often ask me, “What kind of music?” My stock answer is, “You’ve heard of ‘popular’ music? – well, I write the other kind.” Anyone who attends a concert to hear challenging contemporary music performed by an amateur ensemble must be searching for an experience that they can’t find anywhere else.

In his book “Noise”, Jacques Attali refers to our present time as the age of “Repeating”. He goes on to describe the contemporary commodification of music through the production, sale, stockpiling and solitary consumption of replicas of past performances.

As consumers, we are conditioned to treat live performances as a ‘product’ too, and commercial interests encourage us to do so (witness the stack of CDs on sale in the foyer). If I listen to Mozart performed live by the Anytown Symphony Orchestra, and the horn player cracks a note, I know enough about Mozart from previous experience to realise that an unintentional sound has just been made. In spite of myself, I automatically register it as a ‘flaw’ in the ‘product’. Even the emotional impact of the live performance is somehow distorted by my remembered experience of previous performances, and if those are mostly from recordings they will be repeated hearings of the same performance.

But still we long to be part of something unique and non-reproducible – the live performance, with all the excitement, atmosphere, and risk that it entails. Attali traces this longing back to our ancestors’ participation in the atavistic rituals of sacrifice, but that’s another story.

Open Score provides the opportunity to experience the music in a new way at every performance, perhaps hearing new lines brought out in a different timbre, or different blends of sound shedding a new light on familiar harmonies. A new Open Score performance is exactly that – not a formulaic attempt at a repetition of a past performance, but a rebuilding of the music with a combination of old and new materials. Listeners to an Open Score composition are truly hearing music being created at first hand. The experience is significant because they are not consuming a standardised product so much as experiencing the outcome of a unique process.

You sometimes hear listeners complain, “How can I tell whether they’re playing it right or not?” What is ‘rightness’ in music, and why should we value it so highly? In Open Score, the concept of ‘rightness’ does not necessarily mean literal accuracy; it actually demands more from the performers than just the ability to convert symbols into sounds efficiently. Playing the ‘right’ note in an inappropriate way can actually make it sound wrong to the listener.

So responding to Open Score music demands the same kind of open-mindedness from the listener as it does from the performer. When composer, conductor and performer all share a common conception, the music will be ‘right’ to the listener, whatever it happens to sound like.

For Attali, music is a harbinger of social change. According to him, we are leaving the age of “Repetition” and entering the age of “Composition” in which individual creativity and imagination will supplant the mechanistic, rule-bound, assembly-line mentality of the “Repetitive” age. For us, it is one of the most significant ways in which we relate and communicate with one another.

Open Score may even be a blueprint for something beyond music.