

**"Prelude and Echo"**

for Quartet Noir

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Composition concept Mela Meierhans

after 5 poems by Anne Blonstein from:

"the blue pearl",

published by SALT  
(Cambridge, UK) 2003.

## **"Prelude and Echo"**

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## **"Prelude and Echo"**

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### Theme

Silence as the echo of a "textbody",

i.e. the relationship between text, pause und modeled silence (space).

### Form

Five text fragments provide, through letters/words and spaces, the structuring element of the composition:

"I've been pondering that there are distinctions to be drawn between a 'pause', which, by definition, is a space between two sounds, and 'silence' per se, which is something more than and different from not-sound." (1)

### Space and text as signs

The **gaps/spaces** in the text should "resound." They are the shadows which the next word or phrase draws behind it or throws forward. They are its echo. How to animate these "silences" should be a mutual exploration among the musicians (and composer).

In the transformation of the **text** into music, the linguistic semantics are important. Certain letters are assigned musical parameters: "The association of body and language, not of sense and language," or "writing in sound". (2)  
The sense and content of the words - of the entire text - should be projected into their echo, i.e. into the **gaps/spaces**. The means chosen to construct a musical rendering of the text are left to the improvising decisions of the musicians, within the given framework.

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(1) Anne Blonstein mail correspondence with M.M.

(2) Doris Kolesch: Roland Barthes, Reihe Campus 1997

## **3/1 Concept**

### Text as sound material

The **words/letters and signs** are to be converted into noises and sound, i.e. sound and noises will be generated out of the text. For this purpose, up to six color-marked parameters are indicated, from which a **selection** has to be made. The selection of the parameters should be influenced by the content of the text (title!). Noises and sounds in a wide **dynamic (ppp-fff)** (see performance directions text).

### The modeled space

**Gaps and spaces:** silence should be constructed in the sense of " 'silence' is something more than and different from not-sound." (1) Noises (also the attack on notes) and sustained sounds at a low (but nevertheless very intensive!) **dynamic (ppp)**, (see Performance directions space).

**The distinction between text and space** should always be clearly heard and seen.

### Fixed parameters

Each of the 5 text fragments has 24 **lines** of the **same length**.

Duration of a line : 6"

Duration of a page: 2':24"

Total duration: 12'

Time: 6/4 ( ! = 60)

As far as possible, this pulse (resting heartbeat) should always be perceptible (without technical aids, e.g. a stopwatch).

To prepare for rehearsal, it may be helpful to read the text - taking into account the gaps/spaces - out loud (with a 60 pulse-beat).

For practising, only, a metronome can be used.

[Variation: the measures (the pulse) can also be varied from part to part, e.g.

Poem 1: 6/4 = Tempo 60,

Poem 2: 9/8 = Tempo 90,

Poem 3: 12/8tel = Tempo 120 etc.]

### Sequence

Each of the 5 sections/poems should be 'conducted' by one of the musicians in whatever way s/he chooses:

Part I: musician 1

Part II: musician 2

Parts III+IV: musician 3

Part V: musician 4

### Arrangement of instruments

At the première in Lucerne, the saxophone will be positioned in one of the echo chambers. In part III, he will move from one echo chamber to another and remain there until the end. The other instruments should be placed as far apart as possible, but so that good contact is still maintained.

### **3/2 Performance Directions Text**

#### Text as sound material

**Words/letters and signs:** sounds and noises are generated out of the text. For this purpose, up to six color-marked parameters are indicated, from which a *selection* has to be made. The selection of the parameters should be influenced by the content of the text (title!). Noises and sounds/notes in a wide **dynamic (ppp - fff)**.

#### Text

- *Not every* single letter must be played.
  - The notes (letters) *can* also be *held* max. until the next pause (.) or space.
  - Letters can be combined (chords or double-stops or "melodic lines").
  - Every instrument speaks in its own 'language,' in which the same words need *not* necessarily sound the same but could recognizably resemble each other (context).
  - At least *one* instrument should *always* "play the text."
  - From part I through part IV, the arrangement of the text should move from as dense to as open as possible (see scheme).
  - . indicates a pause (no sound).
  - . always played with the same effect/sound, chord or interval etc.
- The coordination of the lines occurs approximately within the recommended 6".

Exceptions:

Signs + o < >

These four signs should always be played by everyone *precisely in unison* and *fortissimo*.

#### Schematic representation of the relationship space - text

	<b>Teil I</b>	<b>II</b>	<b>III</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>V</b>
"Silence"/ Space	---	---	---	---	---
	---	---	---	---	---
	---	---	---	---	---
.....					
Text	---	---	---	---	---
	---	---	---	---	---
	---	---	---	---	---
	---	---	---	---	---

### **3/3 Performance Directions Space**

#### Space

In contrast to the text, this comprises just 2 levels (folded into each other), both moving at the limits of audibility. In this way, the space must contrast clearly with the textual level.

The search by the individual musicians for the sound(s) (and their interaction) to express the space(s) is of particular importance. It is the search for the non-representable.

**Level 1: suppressed noises, attack on notes,**  
always pianissimo, but nevertheless very intensive.  
(It is also possible to perform a movement without sound).

**Level 2: sustained sounds,**  
(‘dissonant’ intervals, microintervals between the 4 instruments),  
as in level 1, always pianissimo, but nevertheless very intensive.  
Bass e.g.: flageolet  
Drum e.g.: bow/brush  
Sax e.g.: multiphonics  
Piano: EBow - absolutely essential for this piece (see below\*)

such that the noises (level 1) gradually and increasingly pass over into the sustained sounds (level 2):

	<b>Teil I</b>	<b>II</b>	<b>III</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>V</b>
"Stille"/ Leerraum	---	---	---	---	---
<b>1</b> Noises: .. ....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
<b>2</b> "Tinnitus"	-	-	---	---	---

#### Associations

for level 1: suppressed noises, attack on notes:

As if in hiding: no loud sounds/noises can be made because of the danger of being discovered, but all the atmosphere, feelings, anxieties are there, but suppressed, i.e. extremely intense within the narrowest space and level!

for level 2: "dissonant" sustained sounds:

Like a tinnitus, which, though not becoming necessarily louder, gradually swells, becoming more and more intense, more penetrating, and even when the text returns again in part V, never again totally disappears.

#### **\*Special: Performance directions Space Piano: the EBow**

This is a guitar accessory, which when laid on the (middle) strings causes them to vibrate (direct string synthesis, a single feedback loop directed at a single string = sustain!)

- a) Hold the pedal down (note resounds; if pressure is put of the EBow, the note resounds more quickly);
- b) Hit the note silently (simultaneously placing EBow on strings; no pedal);
- c) combine a+b.

Important: Experiment! (see instructions for use of EBow); the best strings vary from piano to piano and so have to be determined anew for each instrument.

## **4/1 "Prelude and Echo"**

## **Appendix**

The poet Anne Blonstein and I have been working together since 1997 ("canthus to canthus", "vérité verirrte vérité", "4S"). A close collaboration which has resulted in reciprocal influences on the form and structure of our "compositions". The current work is a further extension of this intensive ongoing dialogue: between text and music, form and content. A new development in the discussion, in which the musicians of Quartet Noir are now invited to participate and extend.

### **On Theme**

#### **On the text by Anne Blonstein**

*Employing phrase and space as elements of equal force, "the blue pearl" recombines discourses - e.g. those of (auto)biography, biology, archaeology - and temporalities - ancient Egypt, the twentieth century, the immediate - into 3 x 33 versions of a today mindful of destructions and dislocations, cautious and open in adopting the voices and colours of their incompleton.*  
Anne Blonstein

### **On Form**

#### **Text as sign**

..."and thus Roland Barthes also appreciates the concrete, graphical appearance of a word, its sound in a musical sense, and finally all those aspects of a sign that constitute its material presence in time and space."

"Language cannot be reduced to communion."

"The letter as graphical materiality, (..) as can clearly be seen in Far East, where the word-image possesses real culture-engendering power."

(Doris Kolesch, Rolande Barthes, Reihe Campus 2003)

### **Gaps and space**

The variable qualities of silence, as Echo Echo Echo of the text.

The spaces, the gaps between phrases, an answer to the question how to express silence without using the word "silence" . . . ?

*To 'see' a silence (demarcated space/gap) on a page is very different to reading the word silence [and I continue to be deeply perplexed by words that purport to represent an absence].*

*Though gaps can represent loss, absence etc. , they are also the spaces through which the 'reader' enters into and can interact with the text.*

*I've been pondering that there are distinctions to be drawn between a 'pause', which, by definition, is a space between two sounds, and 'silence' per se, which is something more than and different from not-sound.*

*And, again, I'm wondering if the opposite/antithesis of 'sound' is 'anti-sound' or 'non-sound' and not silence; and the opposite of 'silence' is 'anti-silence' or 'non-silence' and not sound. So that sound is not the same as non-silence. Nor silence the same as non-sound.*

*I wrote that **the gaps are spaces into which a reader/listen can enter**. They are also, of course, unwritten/uncovered places from which 'something' might emanate . . .*

4/2

**On Concept**

**Content/historical setting of the text**

The numbers indicate the following years

'2201=1936

'2211=1939

'2221=1942

''0001=1945

''0011=1948

*I appreciate the 'problem' about the 'hidden' historical context of these five pieces. Anyone reading the entire section in the book with attention and care should 'get it' (eventually, if not already informed), but with this 'extract' it is not clear. I think it probably (??) is important to specify the context because these are specific silences associated with the Shoah - dark (?) silences ...*

*I think one of my reasons for choosing **space/silence** to represent the war years is less to indicate my muteness in the face of the horror of the Holocaust, more to suggest its (as yet and maybe forever) unresolvedness. I still feel quite strongly that there are more, and important, ways to think and respond to the Shoah which we haven't come up with yet. And we need to create spaces in our heads to do this.*

*And, as I said, after the war pages, the spaces intrude into the lefthand margin of the following poems, unlike before. This is v e r y important.*

*the spaces that intrude on the left: In "0011, before "what", "a body" and "graffics" there are gaps between the words and left margin. This never happens in the pages before WWII, only on those afterwards, and **these spaces have a special 'quality'** -- they are the intrusion of the war silences into the present and beyond.*

*The spaces in "the blue pearl" play a constructive role, (..) (As someone, woman and Jew, born after WWII, writing/how to write 'after' Auschwitz is my concern, not writing 'about' it). However much we try to retrieve from (redeem?) the past -- we must acknowledge the losses. And as important, perhaps, we must acknowledge our own blind spots, admit that we know we cannot see everything.*

*The emphasis on sight as our major sense is an additional problem here, since our visual fields are always full. I think this is where music has a very important role to play today [though it is a problem that can also be addressed by visual artists], because it is perhaps (?) easier for us to hear than see gaps.*

## 4/3

### Certain parameters

#### Numbers:

24 lines: Duration of each line: 6"  
Duration of a page: 2':24" (total duration 12')  
Division of a line into e.g. 9/8 time (tempo 90)

***Twenty-four lines each page = one contemporary day,  
one line then represents one hour.***

#### Day and year

*Throughout the entire book (i.e. in all three sections), I 'marked' the day on which the poem was written with the tabs at the beginning of each stanza. So, for example, on page '2201 where the tabbing is 3-3-5, this means it was written on the 335th day of the year, i.e. 30 November (2000). The tabbing on "0011 is 3-3-9, i.e. 4 December.*

*Thus, yet another way of visually representing/encoding a conceptual presence [a whole day - but what ARE 24 hours? And what of any one day does each of us remember? Yet we believe every moment of our lives impacts on us - but how and where are the traces left?] with absence.*

#### The number 3

*tripartite structures (..)*

*as a way of conceptualizing away from dualities. In a way, a representation of dialectic structure: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.*

*(..) a stable three-legged stool, and the importance of a third party or mediator in a conflict situation. And so on...*

#### Title

Prelude and Echo (instead of "Prelude and Fugue")

Prelude (from Lat. praeludium 'something played before'; Fr.: prélude; Ger.: Vorspiel)

The French and German verbs for improvising are préluder and präledieren

.."the prelude first appeared when written scores for instrumental music began to appear, but in both origin and intention it is a genre of *i m p r o v i s a t i o n*. Its element was that of free development, directed more towards the discovery of new performing possibilities than to the exposition of a fixed form (...)"

"In 17th-century France the prelude was especially cultivated on the lute, for which a distinctive style was developed that resulted in minimal notation of rhythm and metre, while the pitches were completely specified."

..."the prelude was primarily interpreted as an improvised, freely constructed work (and according to Capellmeister Mattheson [1717] ... the highest practical peak in music... )" (from *The Oxford Companion to Music*, and *Riemann, Sachbuchlexikon Musik*)

### Explanations for certain words

**Anilineated** [the title of the section of "the blue pearl" from which the composition's texts are taken is 'anilineated dreams']. A neologism. Anilines are used to make dyes. The word 'Anil' comes from the Arabic for indigo, indigo being perhaps the oldest dye used by humans, and 'the' "dark" blue of this section of the book. It was of course extensively and beautifully used by the Egyptians to decorate their linens and cottons. Not quite sure, but I think the first synthetic aniline was made here in Basel by Ciba (and or Geigy). I also hope that readers will hear 'annihilated' ('vernichtet') when they see/hear this word.

The **aspidistra** is the Schusterpalme. The reference in this verse is to George Orwell's novel "Keep the Aspidistra Flying", published in 1936. Orwell was wounded in the throat when he went to fight in the Spanish Civil War (started in 1936) to which, obviously, I am making reference in the verse above as prelude to WWII. In fact Orwell died of I believe tuberculosis in 1950.

'**draw(n) by**' can be read in such ways as (a) aufziehen or (b) heran- or herausziehen or (c) zeichnen

**Cattle feed** -- yes, Viehfutter

'**issues**' can be read as a verb -- e.g. austreten -- though perhaps more sensibly as a noun - - 'Fragen/Themen'.

'**Gaze**': der Blick (big word for feminist film theorists!)

'**Graffics**', just(?) a mis(s)spelling of 'graphics'. I think because there seems to be a tendency for 'f(f)' to replace the Greek 'ph' in English words, the Americans often use 'f' for the English 'ph': sulfur instead of sulphur for example.

In any case -- ff -- is very musically connotated is it not (and I suspect this was on my mind, because there is much reference to music in the last stanzas on the pages of the last section of the book)?