

## Dialogue with Silence: Performing Jakob Ullmann

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The music of Jakob Ullmann engages with sound in a liminal space, at the verge of self-erasure. The most directly perceivable result of this assertion of fragility is the *pianissimo* dynamic that extends across almost all of his works. This characteristic, often pointed out in isolation, in fact carries with it far more complex musical implications: *pianissimo* is not an end in itself.

For the performer, the dynamic is not only an indication of a soft volume; more radically, the soft dynamic brings about a redefinition of the relationship between performer and instrument. Striving to hold one's balance upon the line drawn between silence and sound, the performer initiates a fluctuating dialogue with her instrument, seeking unceasingly the threshold of vibrational response. The intense physical involvement required stands in inverse proportion to the faintness of the sounding result. Even if Ullmann's music may, on first listening, seem static, in fact it frames a continuous transformation of sound as the performer attempts to thread a musical texture down to the limits of the perceptible. The sonic weave thus unfolds in a permanent tension between the control exerted by the performer and the volatility of the instrumental response inherent in such fragile sounds.

In the performance of the two *solí* for bassoon, the flexibility required embraces the very nature of the reed. The wood of the reed, a living material, is sensitive to the here and now of the concert. Its vibratory mode will change as a function of the humidity of one auditorium, the temperature of another, parameters which are informed not only by the particularities of a space but also by the time of the concert. The physical presence of the musician and the listeners influences in concrete ways these thermal variables. The interpretation of the composition becomes an interpretation of the

circumstances of performance. Ullmann's music thus composes with an existential roughness; far from inscribing its evanescent sonorities in a separate space-time, it is porous to contingency and all its possible interferences.

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The risk of rupture to which the musical continuity is exposed in the concert situation is mirrored, further back, in the fragmentation which characterizes, in multiple ways, Ullmann's scores.

*Müntzers stern* utilizes a hymn composed by the controversial German Reformation theologian Thomas Müntzer. The melody, rendered unrecognizable through its temporal stretching, is presented additionally in deconstructed form. The notes of the melody are notated sporadically on a separate staff, and are to be intoned by the singing voice of the performer. They only reach the listener fleetingly, hidden behind the notes of an anomalous *basso continuo*, which, played simultaneously on the bassoon, predominates. This double technical demand changes the intonation of the melody notes, renders their sustaining impossible, breaks the original melodic line of the hymn, and affects, in turn, the playing of the instrument.

Throughout the piece the instrumentalist makes use of two different techniques of sound production: the conventional mode of attack proper to double reed instruments, characterized by a sharp attack that cuts into the pre-existing silence; and a technique which I personally perfected, in which the *onset* of the reed vibration is very precisely controlled. The lips of the bassoonist are positioned at the extreme edge of the reed; the vibration propagates slowly to the full reed, causing the sound to emerge very gradually. The sustaining sound likewise remains at a distinctly softer level than the more robust dynamics conventionally associated with the bassoon. In acoustical terms, a re-balancing is achieved in which a sound's harmonics are favored, and its fundamental de-emphasized. The

fragility that emerges from the harmonics, seemingly floating without foundation, is a central concern for Ullmann in *Müntzers stern*. Even if fundamental tones necessarily underlie the harmonics, here they are articulated only fleetingly. The composer thus brings about an inversion such that the primary plane of audibility is defined by secondary acoustical phenomena. Beyond these immediately perceptible features, the technique tends to obscure the directionality of the instrumental sound, making its source ambiguous and encouraging a confusion between the instrumental sounds and the sounds that are already present in the environment. The few isolated notes produced using a more conventional attack resound with even greater frontal impact; the alternation between these two modes of sound production can produce in the listener the illusion of a difficult-to-localize, even mobile sound source, by turns far away and close up.

The playback of a pre-recorded text, which punctuates the performance at determined intervals, introduces another element of distantiation. These successive paragraphs, from the pamphlet *Von dem getichten Glawben* by Thomas Müntzer, were read and recorded in mediaeval German by myself, who does not speak German. The words are deciphered phonetically, as signifiers voided of their signification, resonating like an archaic language to which the reading gives new life, but cut off from its meaning. In fact the recording is a mix of two readings of the same text, recorded separately, without the second reading using the timing of the first as reference. As a result, brief phase discrepancies cloud the intelligibility of the original text even more. During the concert, the fixity of the pre-recorded text contrasts with the malleability of the playing of the bassoon. The low level of the playback allows this extra-musical element to be assimilated into the rest of the performance: having become nearly a single sustained frequency, the uniformity of the spoken part supports and incorporates itself into the instrumental part. Instead of transmitting a semantic content, the text thus figures as a sort of musical pedal point, alternately reinforcing a sense of tonal stability and introducing

elements of dissonance as the pitch material of the piece unfolds.

The score of *Solo II* presents a constellation of heterogeneous elements that the performer must assemble herself, in accordance with instructions that are precise, yet not univocal and most certainly paradoxical. This collection of disparate musical fragments seems to form a strange overview of contemporary music at the end of the 20th century: side by side, one finds dodecaphonic series, graphic notations, chance procedures, traditional instrumental techniques as well as noise techniques, an intonation system mixing the tempered and the non-tempered, and a sustained A, typically the reference pitch for concert tuning, here turned into a structural axis point of the piece. These anachronistic fragments appear to pose the question to the performer of their possible reunion within a single temporal alignment. The score does not propose a closed or definite system of signification, but opens, on the contrary, a space of re-encounter in which the performer's imagination might create inexhaustible combinations. The risk that this implies seems to bank on the speculation that each montage, each new version of the score elaborated by the performer, will offer a re-reading of that complexity, resembling in this the perpetual rearrangements with which our memory -- individual and collective -- operates.

A curious archeology is thus at work: if the composer seems to have exhumed these vestiges from the depths of the past, the performer is the one who tries to give back their meaning through the procedure of first assembling and then inscribing them onto the unifying surface of a score that she herself makes for performance. The notion of *inter-pretation* thus returns to its etymology; the instrumentalist becomes the mediator between a buried musical tradition and its present listeners. But the shadow of another sense, one which could denote a possible deformation of the original, seems also to be hovering there.

The margin of freedom given to the performer in fact reveals itself to be charged with ambivalence. The concise instructions, which

govern the construction and the execution of the piece, surreptitiously reveal more equivocal designs, through which the composer seems to work toward the obscuring of their original purpose. The notes of the twelve-tone row, spread across the entire length of the work, will emerge only furtively, often in non-equal temperament, and -- with the exception of the A -- always diluted within fluid glissandi. The long duration of the piece, another characteristic of Ullmann's works, contributes to hinder the audibility of the tonal progression which is nonetheless present. The structure, having become unintelligible, can only be absorbed in the listener's unconscious. Every effort of the performer at restitution seems destined, by the composer's own intent, to remain opaque.

To this must be added the spatial dispersion in performance specified by the composer. In the present realization of the piece, the three different sound sources -- bassoon, pre-recorded sine waves, and a recording of an A bowed on a piano string -- are distributed in the concert space and situated at a distance from the listeners (or, in the case of this recording, from the microphones). The sound image is fractured and peripheral; the music seems always to remain at a distance, beyond reach. If the assembling of a score by the interpreter had momentarily created a cohesion, this cohesion is weakened anew through the act of performance.

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Jakob Ullmann's body of work articulates a fundamentally melancholic relationship to the past. Growing up in the German Democratic Republic, in a Protestant family with Jewish roots, Ullmann's work reveals a complex relationship to his own heritage. His music is not involved in researching new or unheard sonorities, but rather in drawing upon those familiar from our own musical tradition, which then appear in a defamiliarized state. A feeling of alienation toward our cultural memory expresses itself silently in his precarious sound-figures.

The pessimism which one could read into his work, however, finds its counterpart in a certain state of reconciliation. By acknowledging the breakages which have cut us off from the signifiers and meanings of our own culture, Ullmann's music refuses to take refuge in illusory flight; on the contrary, it embraces this apartness. This schism of the self finds its counterpart in the divided state into which the interpreter is thrust in the situation of the concert. The performer relates to her instrument as well as to the performance environment in a constant state of oscillation between action and reaction, experiencing, by turns if not simultaneously, the roles of both performer and listener. This doubling paradoxically gives rise to a certain pleasure. The coming and going between these two states creates a communal link between the instrumentalist and the rest of the listeners, as well as with the environment -- direct and indirect -- of the concert: the exterior noises penetrate the sphere of the composition. To this is added an intensification of the intimacy between the instrumentalist and her instrument. The search for the threshold of vibration, the resulting response of the reed, the acceptance of that response by the instrumentalist and her own response in return: the term "to play" returns to its original ludic sense, even if this "play" takes place here on a razor's edge. The detachment of the self necessary in order to interpret the music of Ullmann additionally relieves the musician of the mirage of incarnating at any price a music created by that *other* which is the composer. Most of Ullmann's scores specify that "all inner movement and expression are to be strictly avoided"; sound is liberated from all expression other than that which results from its own production. A strong commitment to withdrawal seems to express itself from all sides: neither the intentions of the performer, nor the prior intentions of the composer, should come to the fore in a volitional manner during the performance -- a paradoxical situation given the radical choices that accompany the making of the score. To interpret Ullmann is to embrace that lived complexity that marks the creative act as the site of a multiplicity of subtly dialectical relationships: volition/restraint, active/passive, effort/pleasure, freedom of choice/constraints of the instructions,

control/acceptance, strength/fragility, etc.

A remark, in concluding, on the transferability of this music to the recorded medium, a medium which could seem out of place here. Ullmann sees the recording as a document of a given performance. Made in one take, without any editing, the recording defines itself outside of the current criteria of technical perfection and their attendant artifices. Here too the possible accidents will be integrated into the composition, whether they are the products of the play of the performer or of the environment. The details of a particular passage should not be more important than the musical continuity, which can only emerge from the playing-through of the piece. In one sense, there are no mistakes, there is no "good" and no "bad" performance; there is nothing but what took place during the time of the recording, and what this fragment of past time will become when transported to another here and now, that of a future listening.

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1992-2015: *Solo II* and *Müntzers stern* form a temporal arc within the *oeuvre* of Jakob Ullmann, but also within our shared musical path. *Solo II* was composed well before we met, but a new version of the score, transferred from trombone to bassoon, followed our meeting. It is one of the first of his pieces that I engaged with. *Müntzers stern* completes -- to date -- the circle of our multiple associations. I hesitate to use the word "collaboration", since the aesthetic of distancing applies also to the relationship between composer and performer. But I could point out that, in *Solo II*, my own approach to the instrument entered into an encounter with a pre-existing score, and developed according to its demands; whereas in *Müntzers stern*, the basic premises of the composition responded to my instrumental approach, which in the meantime had become well-known to Ullmann. In both cases, however, little or no communication intruded on the two successive spheres of work: composition and interpretation remained autonomous. But this deliberate will to separate does not imply a hierarchy or a division

of labor in its alienating form. By addressing the creativity of the interpreter, this will express on the contrary a respect for, a confidence and a curiosity in, the other. I have the intimate conviction -- or hope -- that these qualities will accrue in turn to the experience, in its unfathomable richness, to which this music invites the listener.

*Translated by Charles Curtis*