

Matthew Shlomowitz, *The Automaton Approach*

Labels are tricky, but I think The New Discipline is a good one. I understand Walshe means 'discipline' in terms of applying skill and rigour to composition for the body, but I think we can also apply it in terms of field: a new way of thinking about the discipline in which the broader, non-musical, context of music making is emphasised and composed with. There are antecedents, such as Tom Johnson's *Failings: a very difficult piece for solo string bass* (1975) and Vinko Globokar's *Corporel* (1985), so this way of thinking is not exactly 'new', but there is now a concentration – such work has moved from the periphery to being a mainstream concern with new music.

In the past decade many composers, including myself, have made pieces for the concert hall that, as Walshe says, are rooted in the “physical, theatrical and visual, as well as musical.” The ‘concert hall’ designation is important: rather than ‘music theatre’ works, these are pieces extending the compositional, aesthetic and performance practice pursuits of work made for a setting in which audiences debate whether it is better to listen with eyes opened or closed. And Walshe's expression, “are rooted”, is important too. There is a long history of purely musical work *about* the non-musical, such as instrumental pieces with titles indicating that the work represents an aspect of the world, whereas here the non-musical is embodied *in* the materiality of the work. As Paul Craenen explores in his recent book *Composing under the skin, The Music-making Body at the Composer's Desk*, a range of approaches and intentions have emerged in works engaging physicality. Other theatrical works are less concerned with the body and more on the textual, interactive and visual, such as Johannes Kreidler's lecture-piece *Fremdarbeit* (2009); focus on human behaviour via real-time decision making in James Saunders's *things to do* series (2012+); the meta and autobiographical in Trond Reinholdtsen's *Concert Music Piece* (2008); and the imagistic in Joanna Bailie's camera obscura work *Analogue* (2011). The aspect I will focus on is what I will call the ‘automaton’ approach.

Walshe mentions Kagel, and I think he is the key progenitor for the rise of performativity in concert music. In particular, his notion of *Instrumental Theatre* as

work that reveals the inherent theatricality of musical performance with attention to elements usually overlooked. An example is the silent movement from his *Sonant* (1960), where the musicians 'play' fully notated parts to the point just before producing sound, drawing attention to both the physicality of performing music and chamber music communication. I am less convinced by Kagel's more actorly theatrical pieces, such as *Atem* (1970) for solo woodwind player, where the performer plays the role of a retired musician obsessively repairing their instrument whilst searching for the musical phrase that will free them forever. The notion of theatre here strikes me as naïve and undeveloped. In general, I think most interesting performative composition expands musical thinking into the domains of the visual, choreographic and theatrical through bringing out performative qualities already inherent in music making (as in the silent movement from *Sonant*), or by applying typical ways of thinking about musical organisation (e.g. post-serial parametric approaches, phasing, *Musique Concrète Instrumentale*) to non-musical elements. Another issue with *Atem* is that it requires an excellent musician with substantial acting skills. In recent performative concert work composers have taken a more cautious approach to extending the skill sets of musicians through building on existing skills, such as the ability to read notation and execute 'events' precisely in time. A lot of work has steered away from asking musicians to play character roles and towards a conception of the performer as automaton.

In art, the term 'automaton' is sometimes synonymous with 'humans simulating robots', but this is not the aspect I wish to emphasise. The Webster Dictionary defines an 'automaton' as "an individual who acts in a mechanical fashion" and that follows "a predetermined sequence of operations". Broadly speaking, I think 'automaton' defines the performance aesthetic of Samuel Beckett's television play *Quad* (1981), Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's dance work *Fase* (1982) and Michel Gondry's music video for the Daft Punk song *Around the World* (1997). And it defines a lot of recent New Music work involving physical movement, such as Michael Beil's *Blackjack* (2012); Natasha Deil's *Second Nightmare* (2013); Alexander Schubert's *Sensate Focus* (2014); and my own *Letter Pieces* (2007+). Here physical movement is often expressed in extended forms of musical notation and rhythmicized to co-exist within the same template as the musical elements. In some

cases the word 'mechanical' is an exaggeration, but 'quasi mechanical' then, in the sense that the physical movements are short and fast, with a crisp and rhythmically precise performance style that is defined by a deadpan comportment. And it's a 'task based' approach, where the performer enacts an often challenging predetermined sequence.

The automaton approach allows for dispassionate exploration where the performer is not a character, but rather facelessly enacts content. The automaton approach, perhaps, sublimates Romantic notions of subjectivity and ego that have underpinned the past few centuries of Western culture to reveal new and more modern forms of subjectivity. In Beckett's *Quad*, the performers repeatedly articulate geometric patterns, which are beautiful and mesmerising as well as existentially suggestive. The approach can also be playful and humorous: when looped, a seemingly abstract physical action can transform into the ridiculous (and ultimately the exhausted); silly content (slapstick gestures, whoopie cushions) can be reframed and repurposed within a rhythmicized grid; and there is both compositional and amusement potential in coupling/decoupling/recoupling audio-visual and cause-and-effect relationships.

A decade ago the automaton approach was one obvious way to open up composition to aspects such as physical movement. It allowed composers to expand typically compositional ways of thinking and present musicians with parts that played to musical strengths whilst pragmatically expanding into the non-musical. And the expansion of musician skill sets has led to new and spectacular forms of interdisciplinary virtuosity. We can hope that these extensions of musical approach have contributed more broadly to theatrical practice by proposing new theatrical models that elevate the role of sound in cross art dialogues. A decade later we are now in a better position to consider other approaches. Every approach has its boundaries and one limit within the automaton is that the denial of subjectivity is also a denial of the particularity of individual bodies. I think future work will engage and draw attention to such specificity.