

PERFORMING THE COMPOSITIONAL ACT WITH BOUNCY CASTLES, SOAP AND SHH

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ABSTRACT

My practice-based research has led to a rethinking of the relationships between composer, performer and listener in my own creative work through an interpretation of a diagram by experimental composer George Brecht. Through the reconfiguration of this diagram I have developed a framework in which the act of composition can be performed via the activities of ‘reading’, ‘performance’ and ‘playing’, with the focus on an expanded notion of traditional score-reading that makes the act of reading manifest onstage as part of the physical theatricality of musical performance. This approach can be used as a site for further experimentation by other interdisciplinary creative practitioners.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Western classical music the performers are most likely to read notation onstage. This is true even in the case of famous examples in the history of experimental music, a tradition “characterized by its radical opposition to and questioning of institutionalized modes of composition, performance, and aesthetics” [1]. When interviewed about performing John Cage’s *4’33”*, a piece which has no notated sounds and requires the performer(s) to sit in silence onstage, pianist David Tudor stated: “I was looking at the first movement and I was turning pages because I was reading the score in time” [2, p. 86]. Tudor’s statement shows that even a piece with no notes to play can still have something for the performer to read. In my own experience of watching live performances of experimental music I want to know what is written on the pages in front of the players, especially in the case of graphic scores such as *Treatise* by Cornelius Cardew [3] (figure 1) and *Kandinsky Studies* by Deborah Pritchard [4] (figure 2) where the visual content of the score is as compelling as its sounding result.

However, in performances of such pieces the visually interesting score is hidden from the view of the audience. The content of the score is only communicated via sound, so that the graphic score may as well be written in traditional musical notation or completely ignored. Composer and writer G Douglas Barrett suggests that

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Manfred Werder’s piece *2010* specifically alludes to this “hiddenness of the score in performance, its physical absence from the view of the audience” whilst describing scores themselves as laying “along the edges of the musical frame” [5, p. 57]. Scores and notation are neither the music itself, nor are they completely outside the music. They remain unseen by the listener during performance and translated by the performer via sound. As a practitioner interested in the theatrical and visual aspects of musical performance, I want this act of reading to be demonstrated to the audience directly. I want to explore the relationship between composer-performer, notation and audience by making the act of score-reading part of the theatre of musical performance itself.

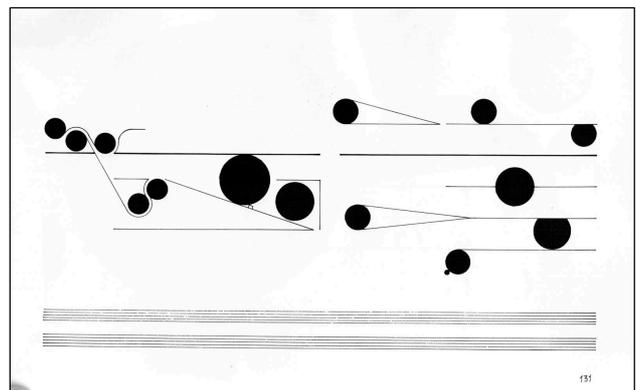


Figure 1. *Treatise* (1967) by Cornelius Cardew [3, p. 131].

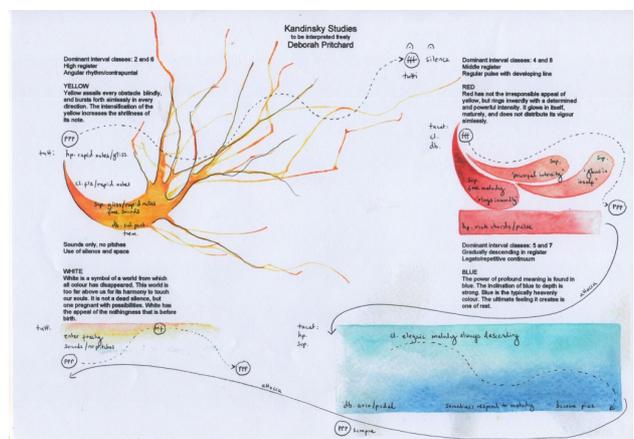


Figure 2. *Kandinsky Studies* (2016) by Deborah Pritchard [4].

Musicologist Adam Harper, in his 2009 blog post *What is a composer*, describes how the act of reading is an under-explored area of musical practice: “[Text-based formats] allow the act of reading the text to occur at the level of performance as well as listening, so that the two activities begin to merge. This is a rich and currently pretty esoteric area of aesthetic possibility, with few listeners appreciating music in this way” [6]. Harper is referring specifically to written text, but in this paper I take a broader view of ‘text’ to mean anything that can be read onstage as part of a musical performance; both words and notation in the broadest sense. Musical scores are compelling documents in which a great deal of information can be encoded and displayed. The merging of reading and performance allows for such information to be communicated with an audience, and for this area of experience to be opened up to people who may not be able to read written music. This has the potential to remove the need for spoken explanation of the works prior to, or following, performance, allowing for the possibility of an enhanced aesthetic experience of the music and compositional act.

2. RELATIONALITY

Musicologists will often discuss the relationships between notes and sounds, but musical situations are made up of a multitude of different relationships. Barrett calls for a focus upon these relationships in *After Sound*, suggesting that music is “inherently premised upon structures of collaboration and social relationality” [5, p. 134], whilst percussionist Greg Stuart states that experimental music in particular “attempts to radically rethink the relationship between composition, performance and listening” [7]. A creative practice rooted in experimental music is thus in a strong position to challenge notational conventions in performance by reconsidering such relationships. This is affirmed by Christopher Small who, in his study of African-American music-making *Music of the Common Tongue*, remarks that: “Genuine musical innovation, as we have seen, is a matter not just of new sounds or techniques but of new forms of relationship” [8, p. 319].

Small questions the relationship between notation and the creative compositional act within classical music: “It is only in the classical tradition that notation has taken over as the medium through which the very act of creation takes place” [8, p. 43]. However, I posit that notation can be re-framed as an integral part of the theatre of a musical performance, bringing the creative compositional act onstage, without recourse to the discourse of free improvisation. By doing so the composer can undertake the act of creation live as a performer, blurring the roles of composer and performer to become composer-performer.

3. PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

I am an experimental musician who develops unusual methods of composition that blur the line between composer and performer, and conduct practice-based research

into how the legacy of certain types of experimental music from the 1960s can lead to the formation of new approaches to composition through the creation of original works. My practice-based approach is best summarised by the following statement from Graeme Sullivan’s *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*: “An artwork is a form of individual inquiry ... Art practice is theoretically robust, ideas-based, purposeful, and strategic, and it makes use of forms and methods that are connected to, but distinct from, traditional systems of inquiry” [9, p. 244]. My inquiry is into my own practice as a composer-performer, and is conducted through that practice. Alternative approaches to musical composition and notation can arise through direct reflection on and reaction to the creative outcomes of this practice.

3.1 Shh

An example of how I have approached the integration of scores into the theatricality of a musical performance in my own creative practice is a 1-minute piece for solo vocalist and audio backing track called *Shh*. In *Shh* I intervene in a radio broadcast by repeating a single vocal sound to change the meaning of a phrase. I achieve this by cropping together all the occurrences of the ‘Hit Music’ identifier on British commercial radio station CapitalFM during a typical hour-long broadcast to make a 1-minute audio track, then saying ‘shh’ every time the identifier appears in order to blur the two sounds and create the phrase ‘shit music’. The piece was originally conceived as a video work with a close-up shot of my lips producing the sound, but is now often performed live.¹ The meaning of this piece is ambiguous: the audience could infer that I am saying pop music is shit, or alternatively that my own performance is shit. When performed alongside other pieces in a concert setting it could look like I am trying to say that the other music in the concert is shit. I prefer to maintain this ambiguity: if the audience are questioning what I mean then I consider them to be active, rather than passive, listeners.

The vocal sound ‘shh’ is ordinarily used to tell people to be quiet. Classical concert audiences are conventionally supposed to sit quietly during a performance, and people might tell each other to ‘shh’ if they fail to abide by this convention. This sound is thus a by-product of musical performances, an aspect of the ‘extramusical’ which is foregrounded in this piece. The only live musical action that takes place in the performance is the synchronisation of the ‘shh’ sound with the beginning of the phrase ‘Hit Music’ on the audio track. Traditional score-reading produces a synchronised sound-image of written music, and I see performing acts of synchronisation as an expansion of this traditional practice. The pre-recorded track serves the purpose of an audio score that is used to indicate when the ‘shh’ sound should be made. In my performance I follow this audio track in the same way that a score of written musical notes would be followed. What I realised from *Shh* was that the score, in this case a backing track, can be the

¹ Original video work of *Shh*: <https://vimeo.com/230430041>

source of aesthetic experience in the performance. The score is the primary musical material, and my reading of the score through the synchronisation of the ‘shh’ sound serves as the reason to play it.

3.2 Waschen

A development of this idea is demonstrated in another solo performance entitled *Waschen*.² Here the score material can be read by both the performer and audience simultaneously, with the audience being able to follow the score-reading process in a very direct way. Information is communicated to the audience both sonically and visually in a way that goes beyond the purely sonic experience of *Shh*. I perform *Waschen* as a solo, untrained singer, and read my body in a mirror, with the image of my body serving as musical notation to be read in real time. The word ‘waschen’ is written all across my body with thick black marker pen. The words are written in a seemingly arbitrary fashion with no formal pattern, but serve the purpose of written music notation as something to be read onstage during a performance. As I perform the piece I take a bar of soap and wash the words from my body whilst reading aloud the words in a mirror. When I touch a particular part of a word I sing it, reading my body as though it is a musical stave, shown in diagrammatic form in figure 3. The higher up my body the word is written, the higher I sing, and the lower down it is written, the lower I sing. When the ink is dark I sing *forte*, and as the ink fades I *diminuendo*. When the ink has completely disappeared, no sound comes out of my mouth. This process should become clear to the audience as the piece progresses.

The text on my body is not just a score for reading, but forms an essential theatrical part of the performance itself. The act of reading and responding to the written text musically can be followed by the audience, and through this process the act of reading onstage is made manifest. The audience are not required to join in because this would be overly didactic, but instead it is possible for them to remember the process of the piece and recreate it themselves. In this way the piece is akin to a brief Fluxus text score that can be easily memorised and recreated, such as Alison Knowles’ *Nivea Cream Piece* (1962, figure 4) [10] or George Brecht’s *Flute Solo* (1962) [11, p. 24] which contains just two words: disassembling, assembling.

4. FLUXUS

Fluxus was a loose international grouping of composers, poets and artists who began working with indeterminate methods of art-making in the late 1950s. Some met at John Cage’s composition class at the New School for Social Research in New York, although Cage himself is not considered a member of the group. Fluxus composers created much of their work through text scores that describe musical or performative actions in brief poetic terms and engage the performer in a straightforward act of reading (see figure 4).

² Video documentation of *Waschen*: <https://vimeo.com/230645019>

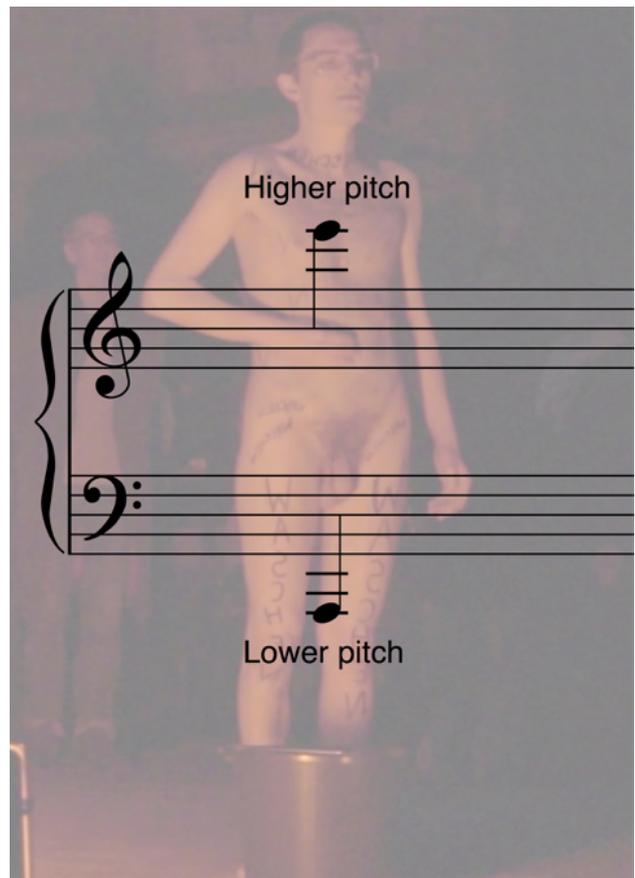


Figure 3. Screenshot from video documentation for *Waschen* (2015) showing how I read my body as a score.

#3 —
Nivea Cream Piece (November, 1962) — for Oscar Williams

First performer comes on stage with a bottle of hand cream, labeled “Nivea Cream” if none is available. He pours the cream onto his hands, and massages them in front of the microphone. Other performers enter, one by one, and do the same thing. Then they join together in front of the microphone to make a mass of massaging hands. They leave in the reverse of the order they entered, on a signal from the first performer.

Premiered November 25th, 1962 at Alle Scenen Theater, Copenhagen, at Fluxus Festival.

Figure 4. Text score by Fluxus artist Alison Knowles [10].

Fluxus works were irreverent towards the institutionalised musical establishment of the day, and the indeterminate nature of such works led to a blurring of boundaries between artistic disciplines, which practitioners termed ‘intermedia’. Fluxus had a significant influence on much conceptual and performance art, and still resonates today – particularly in relational and participatory practices that focus on the experience of the viewer. It is the experience of the viewer that I suggest will be enhanced by an expanded approach to score-reading within musical performance. Art historian Hannah Higgins summarises: “Through the overlapping of touch, taste, smell, sound, or speech, Fluxus intermedia works have, at some level, the principle of directness, non-mediation, and unprocessed experience at their core” [12, p. 73]. Higgins’ description

of Fluxus work as being based in “directness, non-mediation, and unprocessed experience” can be used as a description of practice-based research, and is how I approach my own compositional-performance activity. Although this paper is in itself a mediation between the reader and musical works, my use of a first-person account of the creative outcomes reflects the directness of a Fluxus-informed practice.

5. GEORGE BRECHT DIAGRAM

Fluxus offers a clear reference point through which to rethink the relationships between composer-performer, notation and audience in the form of a diagram by one of its leading composers, George Brecht. Brecht codified all the relationships within a musical performance in the diagram that he drew in his notebook in 1959, shown in figure 5, illustrating how each role is related to every other role. His diagram shows the figure of the composer being related to the other protagonists through the activities of composition, criticism and improvisation. I am concerned with the figure of the composer-performer, someone who integrates both roles at the same time in order to bring the creative compositional act onstage. Brecht’s original pentagonal diagram can thus be reconfigured to put composer and performer together, making composer-performer, with the relationships rearranged accordingly. This results in a square with an intersection in the middle, shown in figure 6.

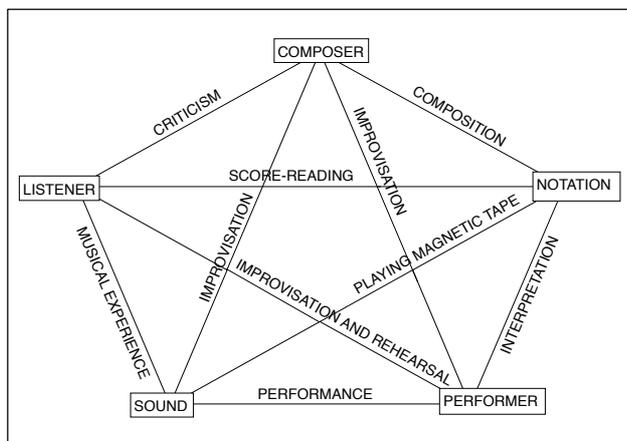


Figure 5. Computer-processed version of George Brecht’s original hand-drawn diagram from 1959 [13, p. 127].

In the middle of this new diagram there is a meeting point where improvisation, performance and score-reading collide. These terms can be used as a starting point to better define the activity of a composer-performer. Through reconfiguring Brecht’s diagram, a conception of the composer-performer is revealed as someone who combines the activities of improvisation, performance and score-reading into a fully integrated practice, shown in a triangular frame in which musical works can be plotted according to how much of each characteristic they embody (figure 7). These characteristics were already occurring independently within my creative work, and the reconfiguration of

Brecht’s diagram suggested that the focus on the performance of score-reading should be combined with an improvisatory approach if the creative compositional act was to be successfully performed onstage.

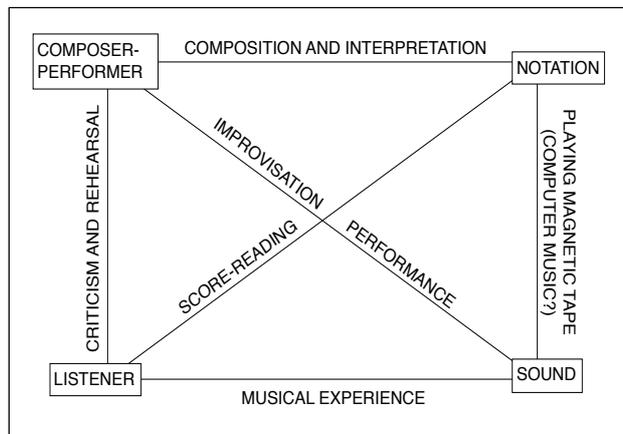


Figure 6. Square-shaped rearrangement of Brecht’s original diagram.

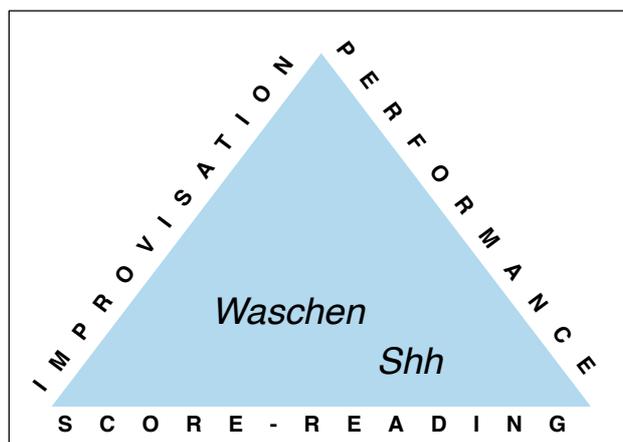


Figure 7. Triangular frame with *Shh* and *Waschen* plotted according to how much of each characteristic they embody.

Prior to reconfiguring Brecht’s diagram I considered the non-written parts of my work as being ‘indeterminate’, coming from my experience as a practitioner of experimental music. ‘Indeterminacy’ was the term favoured by John Cage for pieces that gave the performers a significant degree of choice in what they played. However, the three terms emerging from the diagram suggested that the familiar activity of improvisation could be more relevant to the conception of the composer-performer who performs the creative compositional act onstage. Small remarks that: “Composition and performance are [...] part of a single act which Europeans call improvisation but others call, simply, playing” [8, p. 46]. This provides a better term for improvisation in my work, one that more clearly defines how I use it: ‘playing’. I offer a blend of the meanings of the verb ‘playing’ in my work, which refers to both playing music or just playing by engaging in an activity for the sake of enjoyment.

6. MAKE EACH FACE A LIVING NOTE

To experiment with a more playful approach to reading in performance I developed a new piece entitled *Make each face a living note*. This piece was developed for other musicians to perform, rather than for me to perform myself. So even though the three terms arose from my thinking about being a composer-performer, they were now applied to the more conventional situation of a composer creating a performance for other musicians.

In *Make each face a living note* a large white bouncy castle is presented as though it is a musical score that is to be read and performed live in a participatory outdoor performance by an assembled group of brass players. The people bouncing on the bouncy castle, who could be considered the 'audience', are read as musical notation, and a 5-line musical staff is held in front of them using thick coloured rope. Passers-by are invited to become a unique part of an ever-changing musical score by bouncing on the castle as the musicians interpret their heads as musical notes in real-time. The event begins with a soloist, and gradually the other musicians join until the piece finishes with a full ensemble playing together, whilst two performers holding the 5-line staff move it up and down to suggest that the players should alter their register. By presenting the audience as the notation to be read by the players in real time

the piece challenges the traditions of what a musical and choreographic performance can be.

In video and audio documentation of the piece the people on the bouncy castle can be seen and heard reacting to the instrumentalists by bouncing higher to encourage the playing of higher pitches or seat-dropping to elicit sudden low notes.³ I noticed that I did this myself when I joined in on the castle, participating as an audience member. During the performance the people on the bouncy castle have the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the players in front of them, which is in contrast to interactive sound installations such as *LINES* (2016) by Anders Lind [14], which provide a situation akin to a large musical instrument that can be played by an audience in their own time. Although such interactive sound installations offer a highly satisfying musical experience, there is no connection to a live human musician, and it is this connection that marks out musical performance as distinct from sound installation in terms of the type of interactivity available.

A score for the piece, shown in figure 7, was made retroactively and is presented in the style of a children's colouring sheet with empty speech bubbles that leave room for different groups of musicians to significantly reinterpret the performance. Only the framework of bouncers being read as notation is maintained, with suggestions as to how

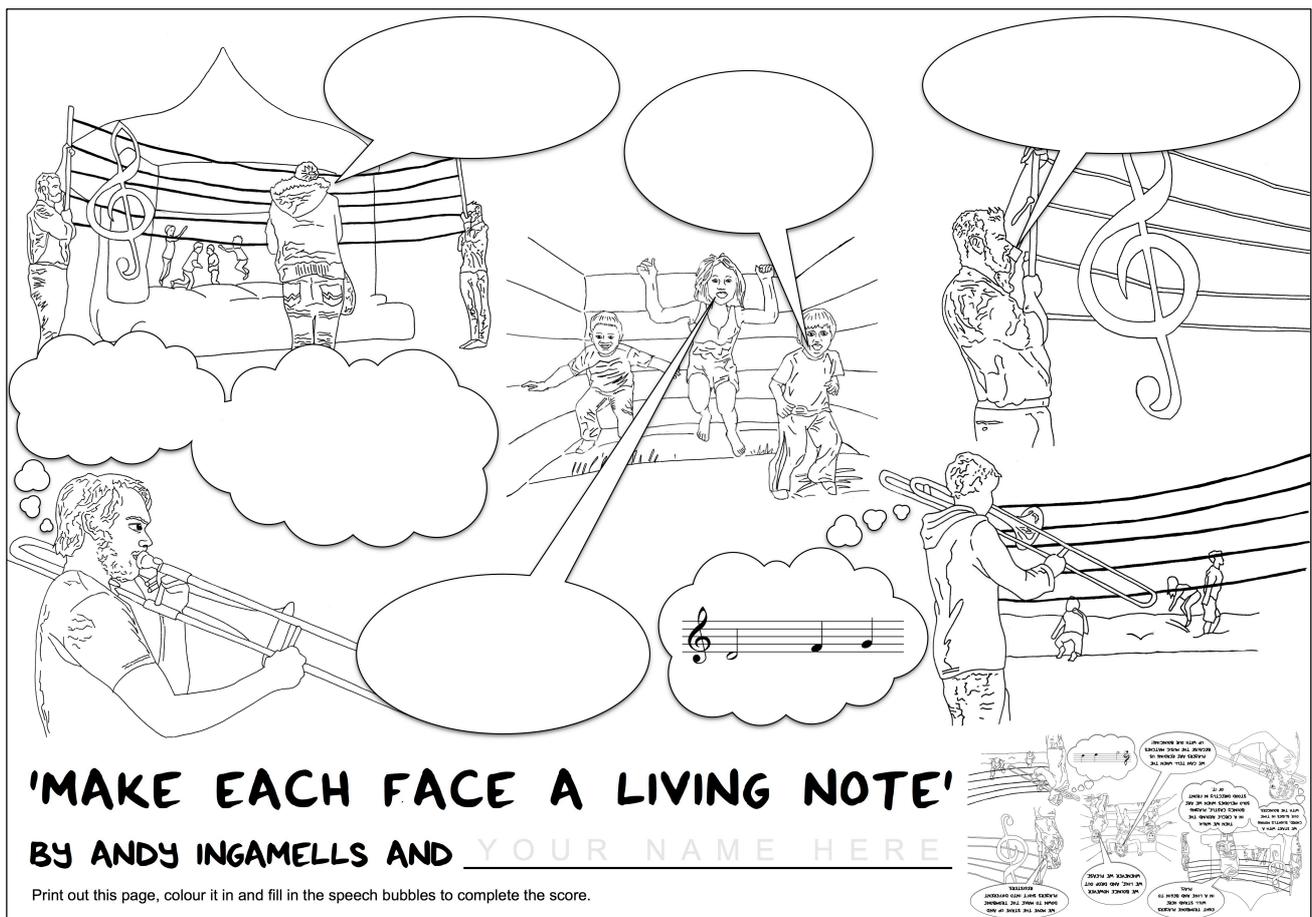


Figure 8. Open score for *Make each face a living note*, created following the first performance (2018).

³ Video extract showing a small part of the first performance of *Make each face a living note*: <https://vimeo.com/299722995>

the piece can be staged given in the bottom right-hand corner based upon the outcomes of the first performance. In this way the colouring sheet serves as an outline for a situation in which musical sounds may occur, but does not prescribe any precise musical activity such as melody, harmony or rhythm beyond a very brief example.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The creative works presented in this paper are practical examples of ways in which notation can be reframed to become an integral part of the physical theatre of a musical performance, rather than something hidden behind a music stand or completely removed through memorization. This act of reframing is presented as part of a process of reimagining relationships within musical performances, rather than in the context of technical innovation or novelty. In these works, the act of reading is integral to the theatre of musical performance. When explored alone this approach has the potential to give insight into the compositional process, as in *Waschen*, and when combined with a playful improvisatory approach it can enable audiences to interact directly with the musical outcome, as in *Make each face a living note*. Making the act of reading manifest within performance establishes the possibility of notation being enjoyed for its performative aesthetics, as in *Shh*. An interdisciplinary compositional approach such as this, which blurs the boundary between the roles of composer, performer and listener, can expand the creative possibilities of classical music performance in unusual and unexpected ways. Such a practice engenders active relationships between composer, performer and listener, rather than passive ones. It can also open up the myriad possibilities that notated music offers to people who might not be classically-trained and have little access to the aesthetic experience of reading musical notation. If, as Christopher Small says, notation is the medium through which creativity takes place in classical music, then the act of making, reading and interpreting notation should be celebrated directly in performance.

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