In the last few years percussionist Håkon Stene and composer Henrik Hellstenius have been investigating how music can enter into a dialogue with our everyday surroundings. – The goal has been to find new ways of expanding the palette for both composers and performers, says Håkon Stene.

An expanded palette

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Bergen International Festival, 26 May 2016: a curtain of sound opens the work *Instrument of Speech*. On stage is the *asamisimasa ensemble,* in the audience the work's composer Henrik Hellstenius. Into the soundscape are woven samples of a 45-year-old speech. A well-articulated Oxford English voice can be heard uttering phrases such as

When we use the word language we inevitably associate it with verbal language [...] We think of speech as being the instrument of language

How should these samples be interpreted? And why have they been incorporated into this work of music?

A COMPLEX SIGN SYSTEM

– The phrases are taken from a lecture given by the English philosopher, physician and mystic John G. Bennett in the 1970s, explains composer and NMH professor of composition Henrik Hellstenius.

He is project manager of the artistic development project *Music with the Real* in which five composers are contributing new works incorporating audiovisual samples from everyday situations in a dialogue with instrumental music. Instrument of Speech is Henrik's contribution. In the work we can hear the sound of someone scribbling and leafing through books and samples of the spoken word in the form of conversations, lectures, shouting and crying. The speech is also displayed in writing on a large screen.

– My approach to the project is that I want to explore the relationship between language and music, both as concrete material and as a manifestation of meaning. In his speech Bennett points to how common it is to see the spoken word as the most important means of making yourself understood. I find such a hierarchy of meaning interesting. The sound of speech is also interesting to me as a composer. In semiotics speech is described as the most complex sign system there is. There are infinite potential combinations between sound and semantic meanings. I wanted to investigate how new meanings can emerge when concrete language enters into a dialogue with abstract music. Navigating this field is a big artistic challenge, partly because different sign systems are prioritised differently by human perception, says Henrik.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH GROUP

One stated goal for the *Music with the Real* project, which is part of the *Artistic Research Fellowship Programme,* is to develop compositional and performing practices through multimedia works. The group of researchers comprises:

• Clemens Gadenstätter, composer, professor of music theory, analysis and composition at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz , and visiting professor of composition at the Musikhochschule Dresden. Contributed with the work *Daily Transformations*.

• Carola Bauckholt, professor of composition at the Anton Bruckner Private University, Linz. Contributed with the work *Oh, I See.*

• Johannes Kreidler, composer, writer and lecturer at the Musikhochschule Hannover. Contributed with the work *Fantasies of Downfall.*

• Matthew Shlomowitz, composer, associate professor at the University of Southampton. Contributed with the work *Popular Contexts, Volume 8: Five Soundscapes in Modern Percussion.*

• Henrik Hellstenius, composer and professor of composition at the NMH. Contributed with the work *Instrument of Speech.*

• Håkon Stene, performer and researcher at the NMH and professor of percussion at the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg.

Over four years the composers have created one work each in collaboration with project founder and percussionist Håkon Stene and the instrumental ensemble *asamisimasa*, which comprises Ellen Ugelvik (keyboards), Kristine Tjøgersen (clarinets), Tanja Orning (cello) and Anders Førisdal (guitars) as well as Håkon Stene himself. The artistic contributions to the project range from solo works with video and electronics to chamber groups and ensemble/solo pieces. The research group has also participated in a number of symposiums in different countries.

– Large amounts of text have also been created by us and external contributors over the four years. We are now nearing the final phase of the project and will upload all the documentation to musicwiththereal.com. Once the project is completed, the website will include reflections, articles and background material along with recordings of concerts, workshops and seminars, Håkon explains.

FATIGUE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC WORLD

Music with the Real officially launched in 2014, but Håkon says the theme of the project goes further back in time.

– The project is a counter-reaction to the sound fetishism

that exists in modern music. Modernist composition practices are very much focused on sound, pitch and the duration of rhythms, a phenomenon we believe has led to fatigue and constraint in contemporary music. One key question to us is whether we can use referential, maybe even banal, signs and still operate within the complex framework of art music. Compared with other art forms, which have transcended traditional genre boundaries in their innovativeness, a lot of art music has become stagnant in terms of style. In my doctoral thesis on the role of the performer in contemporary music I argue that a vast array of objects can be used as instruments, be it visual material, or acoustic and electronic sound sources. *Music with the Real* is a continuation of that argument, says Håkon.

In 2013 he approached Henrik, who had included non-musical elements in his works on several occasions. The project then began to take shape and has evolved into a major initiative within music and aesthetics.

– Henrik was interested in using linguistic material, while the other composers have taken different approaches to integrating everyday ingredients in their works. Bauckholt uses scenic, visual objects such as balloons to create a face that stares down at the audience, while Shlomowitz's work plays on pop culture references and humorous sound collages. The fact that there are different ideas about how music and non-musical signs can interact gives the project energy, says Håkon.

However, two elements are at the heart of all five compositions: Håkon Stene as the performer and interpreter, and the sampling aesthetic as an expansion of the instrumental palette.

– As a percussionist, I have always dealt with a large number of instruments and sound sources, but with modern music technology the availability of sound sources that can be integrated into an instrumentarium is virtually unlimited. You can get all sorts of sounds — physically or digitally — and calibrate or expand them in various ways. Our artistic goal is to initiate a play of meanings and highlight the everyday through an artistic performance, Håkon explains.

FROM TYMPANIC THUNDER TO DIGITAL SAMPLES
Including real-life sounds in art music is of course nothing new. It has been done with instrument-generated sounds that imitate reality such as thunder created by timpani and birdsong rendered by flutes in a string of classical operas as well as sounds created using specific objects such as Tchaikovsky's cannons in the *1812 Overture* and Verdi's iconic anvils in *Il trovatore* (representing workers in the forge).

One thing that has created numerous turning point in terms of including real-life sounds is technology. The first watershed came with the development of recorded sound and electronic devices such as the radio. This radically changed the possibility of reproducing sounds from real life. Respighi was amongst those who explored this new method by using a recording of a nightingale in his tone poem *Pines of Rome* in 1924. Even more important were the works of composers such as Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage, who pursued a more radical investigation of new record-

ing technologies in the 1940s. Especially Schaeffer's theory about *musique concrète* has continued to have an impact and helped spur on experimentation with sounds from everyday life. The second turning point came with the development of digital technology in the 2000s. Schaeffer's techniques of sampling and looping have now become infinitely more flexible and accessible.

– The sound quality may not always be great, especially with things you find on the internet, but the breadth of selection is ridiculous. As a performer, this new sound material has posed new challenges in terms of mastering my instruments. Creating the samples and playing them back is not enough; you have to know which musical intonation to give them and ideally also how they can allow for interpretation, says Håkon.

ROOM FOR CO-CREATION?
In the early stages of the project Håkon envisaged that he would be able to replace samples when interpreting the different pieces. The idea was met with a mixed reaction by the composers.

– I was interested in how to change or renew the soundscape in a work by replacing certain samples during each performance. That way, we could prevent the work from becoming a fixed sculpture — that was my hypothesis, Håkon says. He believes that leaving the door open for interpretation will always benefit artistic projects.

– In practice not all the composers were open to this. Although my contribution would be minimal, most of the composers felt that it took the role of the performer too far and that it could become problematic in terms of copyright, for instance. However, both the ensemble and I were able to provide some input in the creation of the different works through feedback and workshops. The fact that I did not get the artistic freedoms I'd envisaged at the start of the project is just one of the compromises you have to make when you're involved in a group collaboration. Both Henrik and I have discovered many new aspects to this issue, and we're proud of the artistic outcomes that the project has generated.