

ORPHEUS

Essays on  
Sound, Score  
and  
Notation  
**Sound**  
**& Score**

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SERIES

Paulo de Assis, William Brooks, Kathleen Coessens (eds.)

# Sound & Score

## Essays on Sound, Score and Notation

Edited by  
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# Prelude

Paulo de Assis

Music inhabits the realms of the invisible. A sound, a melody, a rhythm, an harmonic field, or a cluster are never “seen”—starting from an instrument, they travel through the air, reaching the listener as immaterial vibrations of energy. The specific materiality of music-making lies on the moment of the production of the sound. After that, music exists outside of graspable matter, being perceived aurally and triggering complex systems of perceptual articulations in the listener. In the course of history, however, diverse attempts were made to render music “visible,” to establish codes of signs and symbols that could allow for graphic (re)presentation as well as invention of sonic events. Such codifications engendered highly sophisticated artefacts—sheets of paper full of graphemes, both written and drawn—which defined musical notation as an essential part in the fabric of music making. The relation of “invisible” sound to these “visual” artefacts and, more specifically, the musician’s relation to notation are the central and recurrent themes of the present publication.

The fourteen essays in this volume are selected and extended versions of papers presented at the conference “Sound and Score,” held at the Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent (Belgium), in December 2010. For that conference, and during preliminary meetings of the organising committee, other titles (like “Sound and Symbol” or “Sound and Sign”) provoked lively discussion before the final choice was made: “Sound and Score.” Understanding “score” not as a specific form of manuscript or printed music in which the staves, linked by bar-lines, are written above one another in order to represent the musical coordination visually, but in the broader sense of any artefact containing a graphic representation of a musical work, this title seemed to be at the same time sufficiently clear and specific for the general topic of discussion and open and flexible with relation to the concrete papers to be presented. Moreover, it related to a seminal research focus at the Orpheus Research Centre in Music [ORCiM]: the musician’s relation to notation. Considering “notation” as the totality of words, signs and symbols encountered on the road to a concrete performance of music, this research endeavour aims to embrace different styles and periods in a comprehensive understanding of the complex relations between invisible sound and mute notation, between aural perception and visual representation, between the concreteness of sound and the iconic essence of notation. From the silent music of the score to the unseizable momentum of the performance, musical notation seems to occupy what Brian Ferneyhough has described as “a strange ontological position: a sign constellation referring directly to a further such constellation of a completely different perceptual order” (Ferneyhough 1998, 2).

Score and sound are both sign systems. But they might also be seen as models for imitation (cf. Boucquet 2010, 72). To see something, to listen to something, is always to enter into another reality, into other systems of reference, thought and experience. What do we listen to when we see a score? What do we see while listening to music? On the one hand, the musician is capable of transcribing (representing) what he/she hears; on the other, he/she is able to project the written thing into the sphere of the audible. To notate is, therefore, representation, but also to put imagination into action, to realise an invention (cf. Boulez 2005, 558). That this invention is voluntary and the result of a more-or-less structured, conscious will (even if unveiling unconscious processes) is an essential feature of Western art music. Another is the enormous variety of notational systems and practices over diverse geographies and times. Even the conceivability of notation was not always evident.

Around the year 630 AD, Isidore of Seville (560–636) compiled the first known encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages—the *Etymologiae*, a work that is preserved in Brussels at the Royal Library of Belgium. In Book III, eight chapters are dedicated to music, and Isidore laconically states that “unless sounds are remembered by man, they perish, for they cannot be written down” (Isidore of Seville [c. 635] 1472, bk iii, chap. 15). Beyond the evidence that the Greek system of notation had been forgotten by the seventh century (at least in Isidore’s Andalusian circle), this sentence underlines the fundamental importance of memory, of an “oral tradition,” and, inspired by St Augustine and Plato (cf. *Phaedrus* 274e–277a), proclaims the impossibility of notation. Sounds are kept alive only through the use of memory. To write them down is inconceivable.

Even if we now know that the earliest documented forms of musical notation date back to 2000 BC and that there were notational practices in Ancient Greece (as in the *Delphic Hymns*, dated to the second century BC), they were rudimentary and fragmentary attempts to codify sounds in direct relation to poems. As Amnon Shiloah pointed out in relation to diverse authors/composers of medieval Arabic music treatises, “Owing to the absence of notation, no artefacts transmit the music from remote ages” (Shiloah 2007, 11). The breakthrough of music notation, a soft revolution of unpredictable consequences for the future of music history, was to happen only 400 years after Isidore’s laconic statement, on the turn from the first to the second millennium, around the year 1000 AD.

It was then that concrete forms of notation began to develop in monasteries in Europe, using symbols known as *neumes*, before Guido d’Arezzo combined them with a four-line staff, paving the way for modern notational practices. The transformation of sounds into symbols and, soon after, the rise of new sound combinations induced by these symbols was to have a tremendous impact on Western art music (cf. Stevens 1960, 211), defining a completely new way of *conceiving* and *perceiving* music, as well as establishing “the composer” as a new representative of new forms of musical thought and production. With the invention of more and more complex signs and symbols the single note became increasingly graspable and mouldable even beyond the voices or instruments that originally gave life to it. “The fixation of a flow of sound by

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means of symbolic notation caused the replacement of an irreversible time-axis by a symbolic space, the two-dimensional space of a music manuscript,” as Konrad Boehmer observed during the “International Orpheus Academy for Music Theory 2003” (Boehmer 2004, 157–158), continuing:

Without this step from an art of time into a symbolic encoded art of space, not only would “composition” be impossible (at least as we have understood it for the last millennium), but also the highly acrobatic arts of counterpoint ... would be unthinkable. (Boehmer 2004, 157–158)

Further developments in notational praxis led to more and more complex and abstract configurations of symbols, shaping “top-to-bottom” constructions, defining a divisive segmentation of time, and, finally, imposing periodicity on the flow of time. In spite of historical and geographical diversity, three elements seem to be inherent to any notational system (Ferneyhough 1998, 3): the ability to offer a *sound-picture* of the events for which it stands, the need to offer all essential *instructions* for a concrete performance, and the conflation, mutual resonance or even collision of these two elements (sound-picture and performing instructions), incorporating an implied *ideology* of its own process of creation.

The complex relations between these three elements—sound-picture, performing instructions, and implied ideology—makes two things evident: first, that “no notation can presume to record information encompassing all aspects of the sonic phenomenon for which it stands” (Ferneyhough 1998, 3); and secondly, that every period of music history used not only the best possible, but also the most adequate notation for its own music. Therefore, in addition to a continuing need to devise new notational practices for new music, there is also a need to permanently revisit and reconsider our understanding of past notational systems.

Reversing the statement of Isidore of Seville (“unless sounds are remembered by man, they perish, for they cannot be written down”), we could be tempted to say that “unless sounds are written down, they perish, for they cannot be remembered.” Between this two positions there is, however, a broad field of practice, discussion, enquiry, and experimentation.

The fourteen essays and the three interludes in this volume are all written by experts in the field, the overwhelming majority of them being performers or composers, i.e., music practitioners—researchers in the burgeoning discipline of artistic research. In an age characterised by a turn from text-based production and reflection in music to sound-based understandings, this collection of essays shifts the debate about “sound and score” from the “object/subject” dualism, from the classical distinction of sound and idea, from abstract analytical considerations, onto the immanence of sound itself as produced by the human “interface,” that vital element of integrity and synthesis.

The essays are arranged in four parts, ordered and bound together by different approaches and diverse perspectives: a conceptual approach that opens the discussion to other fields of enquiry, namely philosophy and semiotics;



a practical approach that takes embodied understanding as its point of departure; an experimental approach, challenging state-of-the-art practices; and, finally, an exploratory approach to relations with other forms of art (dance, landscape art, painting).

The first part—Score and Idea—poses general questions around the composer’s relation to his own scores (“what I say / what I do”), the performer’s relation to his own body (“what I can / what I do”; “fingerings”) and the unspeakable, unutterable aspects of music (the “mysterious”). In Chapter 1, Jeremy Cox questions composers’ intentions through the opposition “what I say / what I do,” exploring composers’ performances of their own works and reflecting upon the autonomous identity of a musical work. Are there “moral imperatives” concerning its performance? In Chapter 2, Paul Roberts investigates the “pressure” of what cannot be notated—the “mysterious,” whether seen as “inspiration or alchemy.” How can the performer divine and harness these elements, and how to communicate them? Chapter 3, by Andreas Georg Stascheit, focuses on the “I can.” Considering the body as medium between the score and the sound, musical practice becomes an extension of the horizon of the “I can,” providing access to something up to now inaccessible. The entangled relationship between “I can” and “I do” leads to a questioning of practising “as practice of permanent beginning.” Finally, Darla Crispin (Chapter 4) discusses to what extent performance annotations mediate between text and act, taking Webern’s *Piano Variations*, op. 27, as a case study.

The nature and contents of the next parts (II. Mapping the Interface; III. Extending the Boundaries; IV. Choreographies of Sound) invited Kathleen Coessens, the co-editor of this volume, to elaborate short “interludes,” presenting the single chapters but offering wider perspectives on the topics under discussion. Such interludes not only help situate the discourse but define contrapuntal moments of reflection, true *intermezzi* in the long breath of this book.

Every chapter ends with a compact bibliography, facilitating information for all those wishing to scrutinise particular topics in greater depth. At the end of the volume there is a thorough index of names, works, and concepts. Its aim is not merely to provide references but also to open new horizons, revealing possible links between certain topics, works, and concepts.

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