

Reflection

Listening

(the main point here is: How my work/experience with microtones/intonation and microtonal sounds has influenced me as a pianist, and my way of working.)

Listening

Writing about listening is difficult. Listening involves scientifically analyzing and classifying sounds, as well as sounds in the consciousness of each individual, which falls within the domain of neuroscience. These topics have already been widely discussed in various fields, so I will not go into detail here.

(Listening Context comes here: Schäffer, Mayas, Thoresen...)

As a result, literature on pianists' listening behavior is difficult to find. In particular, pianists can produce the "correct" pitch by pressing keys, so they may not be as attuned to subtle pitch nuances as other instrumentalists.

Therefore, I have been continuously experimenting with this.

When working with Lasse Passage's composition "**Lieder für Nicht-Sänger und Mikrotonale Klavier**", anecdotes were interwoven between the songs, and the lyrics were created using Japanese text that had been Google-translated multiple layers, which did not make sense to me at all. Lasse encouraged me to share the spontaneous visions that arose while listening to the music and sound, and together we wrote two anecdotes/stories.

From this experience, I practiced writing down the images that came to mind when practicing, performing, or listening to Buene's "**Three Studies for microtonal piano**." This practice then connected to creating a music video based on these written images/narratives.

- Listening on "Three Studies for microtonal piano"

From my practicing of "listening". I tried to write down what my association is, when I listen to certain sound from "Three Studies."

I will try to express in writing what I was "listening to" and what I was trying to make the listener listen to when I practiced and performed each piece, using mostly the above method.

In Mæland's "**Boiling Web**", my main focus was on the articulation and the colour of the sound, the parts where the music should sound improvisatory, frequent tempo changes, the distorted rhythms, and the quick switching between all these characters. In particular, I experience that "blue notes", the expressive microtones used in jazz and blues, are used effectively, and the pitch range they belong to has its strings prepared with a stripe of gaffer tape, which also makes the pitches sound just slightly lower.

I was looking for a rounded, nostalgic sound, which I easily found on my own instrument, and on the concert grand.

As mentioned in the **Background of the collaborations**, I aimed to convey the sounds I envisioned and found interesting I wanted the composer to use, which made it easier to imagine the music and find sounds that matched my vision when the piece was completed and I worked on it.

This work uses various types of glissandos (see **process**), and in particular, the glissandos created with styrofoam are intended to have an almost metallic, harsh, and sharp shape.

Even though the same **glissando technique** is used, the glissandos in the work "**唄-媒-培**" (BAI-BAI-BAI) are used to create a soft, fluttery impression, which reflects the characteristic technique of **'guin'** from the Amami

region. The basis for this composition is to represent the unique features of Amami Island's folk singing through the use of 'guin.' To express 'guin' in a way that matches the original sound, I tried to balance the sound that comes from **the waveform's deviation**, which creates a vibrato, to achieve the desired character of 'guin'.

In Haugen's work "**Herzokino**," as described in the **process**, he analyzed Helen Keller's speech and reproduced it on the piano. Keller's speeches often consist of lots of small glissandi, and Haugen asked if it was possible to tune all the tones within the frame of an octave into f.ex. a whole-tone. Although the glissandi in this work are also based on the human voice as in Harada's work, the attempt here is to reproduce the glissandi on the keyboard.

In "**Herzokino**," he reproduced also Helen Keller's autobiographical film on the piano in the latter half of the work, similar to a silent film. The original sound was present, and he attempted to express similar sounds on the piano. In the film, there were also other sounds besides the voice, such as stomping, throwing things on the floor, closing doors, etc. Haugen suggested that he should make use of all these "external" sounds by doing the same actions as in the film. Then I thought some of the sounds would be interesting to realize with **microclusters**. (see **process**)

By ear, we f.ex. tried to find the sound of throwing a silver spoon on the floor. The pitch was close to the highest G, but not completely, so I tuned down one of the strings in the course. It got more overtones and sounded much closer to the original clean sound.

The '**Use of the una corda pedal**' is featured in works such as "**Three Studies for microtonal piano**" and "**Rawgabbiting**," where sections without overlapping microtones provide a challenging and refining experience for the ears, as they truly test whether the sounds are completely distinct. While piano structural theory suggests that these sounds should not mix, it was extremely difficult to adjust all the notes to a 100% distinct state. Indeed, it was quite common to perceive, albeit subtly, the mixing of microtones with the ear.

In "**Rawgabbiting**," during the first workshop with Ness, when I had shared my **overview of microtonal modes of playing** and demonstrated some examples of '**Non-unison string course scordatura**', he told me that it reminded him of '**musette**', and the Parisian nostalgic, warm sound immediately came to my mind. He however used this mode of playing in the very high range of the instrument. By doing this, interestingly enough, I think the character became the opposite of the image I had in mind, and gave off a "creepy" and "cold" impression.

I would like to revisit the content from the beginning of this chapter, which mentions the word 'listen', the microtone within the gap between piano keys and keyboard, and the concept of '**間"ma**', as they seem to share some common points.

The following is from the Programme note on the Simon Cummings CD, 間 (ma). :

The Japanese word 間 (ma) is one that is difficult to translate easily into other languages. The concept it embodies is a spatial one, specifically the gap between two discrete structural parts or elements, with associated connotations of an interval or pause. Steven Bindeman, in *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art*, has described 間 as "the simultaneous awareness of form and non-form ... Ma is not created by compositional elements, but takes place in the imagination of someone who experiences these elements. Therefore it can best be defined as the experiential place that is held by an interval." As such, 間 is often regarded as an embodiment of 'negative space', where the apparent absence of substance or form or sound is rendered concrete and tangible.

The word "ma" was often mentioned in Harada's comments

I believe several of the works (including Bauck's) have a "ma" esthetic; with its accents with an invisible continuous line between them.

In Japanese music, the concept of "ma" (間) refers to moments of silence or rest within a piece, which are considered important for the expression of emotion and the overall balance of the music. Japanese musicians

often view silence and space as equally important as the music itself, and these elements are intertwined to create complete and balanced compositions.

The expression of "ma" (間) in music performance encourages listeners to appreciate and contemplate music and sound at a deeper level. This concept refers to moments of silence or rest within a piece, which are considered important for understanding the details and atmosphere of the music. In Japanese music, longer periods of silence are often used to convey deeper meaning and allow listeners to reflect on the emotions and nuances presented. This creates a sense of tension and can provide listeners with a deeper emotional experience.

The conversation with Magalhães is interesting in terms of what kind of space to put the microtones in. When we talked about microtonality, we discussed that there is nothing special in itself with about microtonality. As an example, Michelle showed me a picture. It was a picture from a book about [the interaction of colours](#), by Josef Albers, in fact the husband of Anni Albers, whom I wrote about on [the process page](#). A colour is perceived very differently depending on the colour(s) around it, just as a microtone can be perceived completely differently depending on the surrounding sound environment.

Finally, I would like to focus on the act of listening to microtonal sounds and write about how the way of listening has changed through three different works by the same composer.

The 3 works by Ness mark both the beginning, the middle part and the final phase of my project, and I find it therefore relevant to mention a few words about it.

When I performed [Níþkræft](#) in 2017, I listened to these microtones as popping out as non-coordinated sounds, and this is also how I intended to play them. Ness himself told me that, since he was using the same de-tuning as in [Grisey's Vortex Temporum](#), he was conscious about including them in an opposite way of Grisey: Rather than creating rich [spectral](#) harmonies, he wanted the microtones to stand out, as he was seeking a distorting out-of-tune quality. This was my first project commission, and could it perhaps be that we were both eager at that time to show the microtones to the audience, so that no one could avoid hearing them?

The concerto [Rawgabbiting](#) from 2021 gives a similar non-coordinated impression, yet more narrative, and there is more colouration of the sound, perhaps as Ness is a very skilled orchestrator. The microtones are utilised in characteristic ways, and when the concerto was performed in 2021, I focused on colour and character of the sound while blending more with all the other instruments, and balancing the microtones rather than always making them stand out.

When I played the concerto [Cairns](#) in 2023, I expected the increased number of de-tuned pitches would result in a more distorted and disparate expression, but what I heard was rather fresh new colours and characters, and a piece allowing us listen to them for even longer. I experienced the microtones were a natural part of the music, and that the boundary between microtones and normal tuning had disappeared.

‘Ma’ Citations:

[1] <http://sound-zaidan.workarea.jp/s331.pdf>

[2] https://www.suntory.co.jp/sfnd/research/detail/2017_305.html

[3] <https://note.com/yasuhideono/n/n4f398582e530>

[4] <https://royumi.com/ja/blogs/blog-de-japon/la-importancia-del-concepto-ma-en-la-musica-japonesa>

[5] https://dalab.xyz/blog/kyoto_retreat_2/