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(De)Composing Immersion

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Citation

Clerc Parada, M. (2014, November 25). *(De)Composing Immersion*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29928>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: (De)Composing Immersion

Issue Date: 2014-11-25

Introduction

In this dissertation I explore various perspectives on the term *immersion*, and its relation with, and transformation through, my musical work. I began to use the term immersion to describe in a concise way the type of experience that I felt my music was progressively tending to produce. Therefore, my musical work is taken as the point of departure to investigate on how *immersion* works as a key term to interconnect diverse aspects of musical practice and experience with their various phenomenological and ontological implications.

To develop a musical approach towards immersion I use as a reference model the human experience of diving underwater without the aid of technology. I imagined the relation between diving and listening to music after listening to some of my own works. This reveals the musical origin from which I developed the model. Through this model I found a language to verbalize my compositional concerns which have already materialized in my later works. The phenomenological description of the diver's model derives from my artistic practice and from my experience as a composer/listener.

Underwater

Bodies of water (from oceans to small pools) are part of a diver's environment and physical reality. Before diving, the specific body of water is simultaneously present, and coexisting with the air environment; it is not "another reality" in the same way as, for example, a virtual reality. Only when the diver is underwater, he/she is able to experience the new sensory conditions that result from the fluid medium. The sensory transformations that occur underwater are discovered through the diving experience. But the diver of course also needs to breath. Consequently, the external environment (the air environment, the normal breathing space) is still present, it is only observed through a transformed sensory perspective. Conversely, when the diver fully emerges, the body of water does not disappear and continues to coexist with the environment. Through submerging and emerging, the diver experiences sensory transitions within a reality that appears as multiple and coexisting physical spaces. These experiential transitions affect the diver's sensory awareness. By submerging, the diver feels his/her body exposed to the environmental transformations, because, being underwater, the density of the fluid limits the diver's freedom to move. When emerging from the water again, the diver will experience a temperature change on his/her skin. So, each transition reveals and enhances the diver's perception of his/her resonance with the environment.

In this research project I – sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly - relate the phenomenological characteristics of this diver's experience to my ideas of immersion through music. The diver's model is thus reflected in my artistic practice and in the compositions from which the model was initially emerging. This reveals a continuous interaction and feedback loop between my artistic practice and the theoretical concepts I use to reflect on this practice. As a consequence, the phenomenological characteristics of the diver's model also describe perspectives and goals of my compositional practice.

The main characteristics that the diver's experience presents and (thus) have led and continue to lead my artistic practice are: 1. A non-dialectical relation between the immersive environment and the surrounding environments. 2. The immersive environment

is not perceived as a different or new reality but as a part of a multilayered reality. 3. The experienced transitions expose and amplify the diverse coexisting layers of reality through physical sensations. 4. The immersive transformations and transitions are mainly perceived and understood through sensory perception.

What becomes evident from the above list is that I want to emphasize the importance of the sensory experience, affects and non-referentiality in my compositional practice. With this I do not intend to ignore or neglect other phenomenological and musical aspects that may be present in musical immersive experiences, such as referential elements or cognitive processes. The diversity of cultural backgrounds, personal histories and the diverse factors that condition the listeners' perception of daily life, make that each individual relates to musical experiences in his/her own particular way. To perceive references and to make associations through artistic experiences is unavoidable. My emphasis on the non-referential and sensory characteristics of an immersive experience relate to my point of departure that immersion in music can be achieved by diminishing the critical awareness of apparatuses or media that produce this sensation, such as loudspeakers, computer screens, musical instruments, the environment, etc. I associate the possible recognition of these apparatuses or media during immersive experiences with the recognition of referential and structural elements in music while listening to music. I acknowledge that referential and conditioning elements are always present and at work while listening. However, I will emphasize my interest on non-referentiality and sensory experience as a way of searching for more open musical results.

Composing immersion

As should be clear by now, my point of departure is not primarily on listeners' experiences but on my compositional practice (action) of which listening (perception) is of course an integral part. The composer Horacio Vaggione describes this constant switching between composing and reflection-through-listening as the action/perception feedback loop.

The composer as a listener is the correlate of the composer as a producer: in order to produce music, an act of hearing is necessary, whether it be the "inner hearing"(the silent writing situation) of pure instrumental music composition, or the "concrete hearing" of electroacoustic music composition. These situations involve variants (there are many others) of an "action/perception feedback loop" which can be defined as an instance of validation proper to musical processes (Vaggione 2001: 59-60).

Here the term feedback refers to the development of the compositional process through time. However, for composers, listening and composing can also be thought of as simultaneously occurring actions. Once the feedback loop starts, it is difficult to establish a strict dual relation between listening and composing. The notions on listening that are discussed in my research project derive from this creative loop and they are contextualized with the help of philosophical literature. My arguments are therefore not primarily grounded on empirical research on listeners' experiences but stemming from ideas articulated in and through my own artistic practice as well as in contemporary philosophy.

Music influences, directs, mediates or otherwise accompanies many of our daily activities and relations to our environments, others and ourselves. In *Everyday Music Listening*, Ruth Herbert explores how music in an everyday context mediates our perception of reality. Her research describes how diverse psychological traits, conscious modes, and perceptual abilities operate in our daily life.¹ Her arguments reveal the flexible and adaptive nature of our consciousness to relate to the surrounding stimuli and also provides evidence to the notion that many perceptual situations that we can describe as virtual, aesthetic or transcending can be perceived within the familiar routines of our daily life. The experience of multiple and diverse shifts and overlaps between virtual and physical worlds is a common part of everyday normality. That is why I insist that, in art, immersion can also be rethought as an aesthetic medium and as an immanent experience that reveals our relation with reality, rather than as a form of transitory transcendence within multiple virtual layers and events. Hence, for me, immanence refers to an aesthetic and multilayered experience that is perceived within the real world. This contrasts with the sense of separation from the physical world and the elevated connotation that is perceived through the meaning of the term transcendence. In this sense, immanence is not thought of as a closing upon oneself, but as an experience of a "singular plural" ontological condition. With this I refer to the main argument of the book *Being Singular Plural* by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in which he proposes that being is always being-with, that existence is always or by definition co-existence. From this perspective immersion can be thought of as the experience of "being-with" the world, pointing towards a non-alienated encounter with the world.

Conjointly, through my artistic work I will question the tendency to think about immersion as the experience of a self-inclusive space which is separated from an external reality. I will also reconsider the aesthetic quality and potential that is commonly associated to this separation. I maintain that the physical and sensorial conditions that surround the performance time and space, can be thought of as transitional aspects, causing an overlap between performance time and physical space. From this perspective, immersion can be rethought as a continuous transitional period where different layers of experience interact simultaneously and are thus perceived as an elucidation of reality, rather than as a separation from that reality. Therefore, immersion can be approached as a medium to achieve *disalienation*, a more or less conscious perception of oneself and of the multiple layers that built reality. I consider this approach on immersion as a creative necessity, and a critical reaction towards the socio-economical and communicational context of art. The physical conditions that surround the performance time and space are essential and basic parameters in my creative process. The relation of music performance with the physical space has a crucial role in my creation of immersive environments. For this reason, spatiality (both physical and virtual) will be a recurrent subject throughout this dissertation. Being aware that this is not a completely new concern, I will argue that when immersion is not thought of as an emulation or representation of the world, but as an actual experience of the world, new aesthetic and experiential results may occur, even when using traditional elements of music creation and performance.

¹ I will describe immersion and openness as processual models. For this reason I will refer to them as "modes", implying their transitional nature, rather than as "states" which refer to more static and discrete moments of consciousness.

My main goal is thus to propose new insights on immersion through music, where immersion is thought of as a state of being which occurs simultaneously with experiencing other layers of reality and which produces a transparent experience of being-in-the-world.²

³ Although my argumentation takes place, first of all, in and through my compositions, contextualizing these new insights will also come from philosophy, e.g. the books *Listening* and *Being Singular Plural* by Jean-Luc Nancy. As mentioned above, in *Being Singular Plural* Nancy proposes that being is always "being-with". "Being-with" is immediately and always exposed through the relation with others. In this way, Nancy argues that existence is essentially coexistence. I associate this idea with the way people experience their sense of being through immersion in and through (my) music; music is thus presented as "the other" and as a medium for being with the other.

In *Listening*, Nancy explores the phenomenology of "being" through listening. The book opens with the question: "Is listening something of which philosophy is capable?" (Nancy 2007: 1). This question refers to the problem that thinking in a philosophical manner about listening might impose meaning on certain aspects of aural experiences which are beyond discursively articulatable meaning. Nancy refers here to the inherent sensory characteristics of listening. He anticipates the risk of falling into an objectivity that might not always fit with the way we listen.

The main term that Nancy uses to describe his phenomenology of listening, is "resonance". When we listen we resonate; this can be understood as a sense of sharing and plurality. For Nancy, the mechanism of resonance has "singular plural" implications.

Listening (...) can and must appear to us not as a metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access, a reality consequently indissociably "mine" and "other", "singular" and "plural", as much as it is "material" and "spiritual" and "signifying" and "a-signifying" (Nancy 2007: 12).

The sensory experience of listening, as described by Nancy, allows listeners to perceive themselves in resonance with the multiple stimuli of the environment. Listeners "occur" as they listen; we are "being-with" in the experience of listening. Sounds cannot be observed as available *objects*; we listen within the sonic *event*. Nancy proposes that we experience the "*contemporaneity* of the audible" (Nancy 2007: 16).⁴ From this point of view, listening always appears as a sharing. The social perspective of the argument of *Being Singular Plural* can therefore be associated with the phenomenology described in *Listening*. The experience of being, described in *Listening*, can be connected to the condition that Nancy imagines as the inherent sense of *Being Singular Plural*.

² "Transparent" refers to a state of disalienation in which a sense of self is clearly perceived.

³ It is important to note that, when I write in this philosophical context, I do not consider terms such as audience, music, and listener as universal categories nor as empirical entities/realities but rather as linguistic concepts.

⁴ Nancy differentiates simultaneity (relating it to a visual phenomenology) from contemporaneity (relating it to an aural phenomenology). This will be explained later in the text.

Throughout this dissertation, these arguments will be developed and associated with my rethinking of immersion and to musical practice, my own as well as that of others. I will also relate immersion to arguments proposed by authors such as Peter Sloterdijk, Frances Dyson, and Salomé Voegelin. Although they all have different approaches towards the relations between humans and sound, the idea of a resonant-subject, the body as a vibrating skin, and listening as an immersive (physical) experience, are some of the ideas that cross over between these authors. Furthermore, Nancy, Voegelin, Sloterdijk, and Dyson all have similar ideas regarding the phenomenological differences between sight and hearing. All of them depart from a viewpoint that relates objectivity to sight, and subjectivity to hearing, where hearing is described as a form of immersion. Reflecting on their ideas, I will not only explore the physicality of immersion from the perspective of musical practice, but also criticize the hierarchical opposition these authors create.

Immersion and openness

Besides rethinking immersion through music, I will present how - by relating compositional processes to the phenomenology of musical performance and listening - the idea of openness can be associated with immersion. Open and mobile works, as for example defined by Umberto Eco, refer to musical works in which the composer leaves specific elements of the work to be completed by performers or audience. In my research, I have studied openness, not in the sense of structural or mobile characteristics of notated musical works, but from a performer or listener's experience when confronted with open works: what do listeners and performers perceive as open? My focus has been on those aspects of a work which induce a mode of openness, disregarding whether the *formal* elements initially presented in a work are open or not. I thus relate to openness from a composer's perspective. I argue that there is a correspondence between a listener's experience of openness and music that induces the performer to consciously achieve an open mode. To contextualize these ideas, I will use as a main reference Eco's *The Open Work*, additional essays, and musical works by others.

Moreover, I argue that the relation between openness and immersion resides in their common lack of rigidity, and that an immersive experience is in itself open. In an immersive experience, a listener has his/her critical awareness and objective thinking diminished in relation to external stimuli. As a result, an immersive context offers an open space containing undefined and multiple sensorial entry points.

As mentioned above, my compositions reveal my primary interest in the non-referential aspects of music. However, this does not mean that, in my opinion, music with clear referential elements cannot be or become immersive. Any musical practice can induce listeners to immersive modes. However, my interest on the non-referential aspects of music points towards a reduction of the possible recognizable elements that may lead listeners to make conscious identifications or specific associations. In this way, the compositional process is approached in relation to the notion that immersion occurs when the immersants lose some critical awareness of the sound sources.

As regards performers, I will emphasize that a score that does not allow for a visual representation of the intended sounds invites the performer to discover the piece only in and through physical actions. This kind of score mainly (re)presents a set of instructions, and not the sonic events that musicians would imagine from a traditional score when they can mentally associate the symbols to specific sounds. Therefore, I propose that invisibility is a form of fixed openness, and openness is the perception of actions without an assignation of an expected effect. The sounding action is perceived as an ontological event, without elaborating on any pre-existing mental interpretation. I argue that this instantaneous experience of the event is a form of both openness and immersion.

Structure

This dissertation reflects the tension that is generated when trying to verbalize a compositional thought which freely, subjectively, intuitively, emotionally and simultaneously associates biological, cultural, political, and phenomenological ideas within the musical practice. In this fashion, the main ideas of this dissertation will be presented from diverse perspectives dependent upon the musical context to which they are associated.

My methodology results from a certain friction between fixed and objective research schemes on the one hand, and more subjective, open characteristics of my musical practice on the other. The research process can be described as proposing a basic set of hypothetical ideas, which, when associated to the musical practice, produce new and diverse perspectives, both on the music as well as on the ideas themselves. Accordingly, the structure of each chapter results from a constant feedback loop between theoretical investigations and concrete musical elaborations. I present the reflections on my own musical works in a chronological order. The first two chapters deal with two pieces written before I started this study. These chapters will reveal how the arguments on immersion and openness, derived from these works, could only be articulated afterwards, as “the right words” to describe what I perceived through these pieces were lacking until I discovered the relation with the diver’s experience which led me to look for literature on immersion. So, I retrospectively investigated the immersive ideas and the characteristics of an open work within them. These earlier works reveal how I progressively and intuitively developed musical ideas and contexts that relate to the topics and problems discussed here. The next two chapters deal with compositions created during the research period. Therefore, these compositional processes are experimentations with a clear investigative intention, and they reveal the effects of the context of this research. Additionally, each chapter presents various musical works by other composers to comment, compare, and give a broader context to the arguments proposed.

Chapter 1 considers the phenomenological differences between sight and hearing. This chapter departs from the question “how is sight immersive?”, and extends this problem into a musical practice through the question “how can the visual aspects of a musical piece aid in achieving an immersive experience?”

The main goal of this chapter is to argue against the dominant idea that listening can be better associated to the characteristics of an immersive experience than visual experiences. I will claim that sight can also contribute to immersion because of our *introjected* ability to

relate to virtual and real images.⁵ In this chapter I will also describe how listeners and performers may achieve a mode of openness due to the visual setup of my musical works. Furthermore, I will introduce the notion that a fixed score can induce a sense of openness when it does not offer the possibility of creating a clear visual-to-sound representation. The last part of the chapter reflects on the relation between a performance environment and openness by describing the experiential differences between varied contexts in which the referred piece was performed. The main reference work in Chapter 1 is *What about Woof?* for five percussionists.

Chapter 2 introduces the spatial attributes of an immersive experience. The differences and relations between the virtual characteristics of the musical time-space and a given physical environment are described in relation to a compositional process. The main goal is to show how a compositional process may end in a piece with immersive characteristics as a consequence of the initial intention of creating a musical time-space that is designed in reference to the real physical space.

In this chapter I will also describe how a focus on the surrounding physical context affects my approach towards the use of harmony, timbre, rhythm, dynamics and space. Various aspects of the compositional process of the referred work will be presented in order to demonstrate the effects of composing in concern with the physical space. I argue that there are musical approaches and characteristics which tend towards producing immersive experiences, Chapter 2 concludes with a description of the open characteristics of the work under discussion. The main reference work here is *La línea desde el Centro* for twelve guitarists and a conductor.

Chapter 3 introduces the main ideas behind the composition *Eufótica* for six percussionists and tape. This chapter exposes theories of underwater sound perception. Having the underwater model as an intentional reference, the goal of this chapter is to show how, through the compositional processes and results, it is possible to interconnect and further develop the arguments about space, listening, and sight, and their connection to musical practice.

Referring to underwater experiences, *Eufótica* intends to create an immersive environment that is sensed as an extension of the physical reality. The underwater model works as a virtual proposal that can have diverse uses within the musical practice. In *Eufótica* the physics of underwater sound perception are relocated into a musical and compositional space. By performing *Eufótica*, the virtual-spatial characteristics of the compositional model are projected into the physical world as an aesthetic result, more than as an accurate emulation of an imagined environment. This emphasizes my focus on rethinking immersion

⁵ "Introjection" is a term used in psychoanalysis that is defined as "the unconscious adoption of the ideas or attitudes of others" (Oxford Dictionary). This term is also used to describe the incorporation of practical, psychological, and physical abilities that appear as demanded by the social context. In this way, the term is not necessarily pointing towards the incorporation of specific behaviors of other people, but towards the incorporation of behavioral tools related to a practical adaptation. Rather than finding this term in literature about psychoanalysis, I found it within the book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* by Umberto Eco, where he describes how the way we relate to mirrors is an introjected phenomenon. In this dissertation, I use the word from this phenomenological perspective.

as an aesthetic event that happens in reality, rather than as the experience of an aesthetic event separated from that reality.

Chapter 4 will encompass all of the issues previously discussed and presented in relation to my ensemble piece *A Bao A Qu(M)*, which can thus be regarded as a concise musical reflection of the ideas developed in this research from its own particular musical perspective.⁶ By describing this composition, I intend to present the idea of immersion as a multilayered event. *A Bao A Qu(M)* operates with diverse forms of interaction and communication between musicians and conductor, and it considers various layers of sound production in time and space as part of the performance. The goal of presenting these interactions is to show that they are responsible for creating an immersive environment.

This final chapter describes how the sounds outside of the hall, sounds of the audience entering the hall, non-intended sounds during the performance, imperceptible sounds, acoustic sounds of instruments (with all of their dynamic, rhythmic and harmonic connotations), and prerecorded spatially amplified sounds were all considered in the compositional process and thought of as an essential part of the work. All these elements are combined to create a multilayered reality. The description of *A Bao A Qu*'s compositional process will serve to understand the musical origin that gives form to my argument about immersion as a singular plural experience. In this chapter I propose that the sense of "being singular plural" is experienced in an open, immersive and musical context, not as the acknowledgement of what it means to be "singular plural", that is, not as a programmatic description nor as an exposition of the condition as it happens through language, but as an actual sonic embodiment of our singular plural condition.

⁶ I will refer to my piece as *A Bao A Qu(M)* to differentiate it with the *A Bao A Qu* from the story. The M thus stands for music.

