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(De)Composing Immersion

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Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation, diverse approaches towards immersion and open work were transformed due to their relocation into a practice-based research context developed from a composer's perspective. The arguments of this dissertation arose from blending together my informed-intuitive ideas about immersion and open work (which emerged from my compositional practice) with existing theories and philosophical (phenomenological) perspectives on those topics. By encountering these existing theories from and through my artistic perspectives, a new space was opened to reflect about the subjects discussed.

Most of the arguments presented in this dissertation were developed from discoveries that appeared within this new space as a result of the productive encounters of academic research and artistic practice. During my research, I recognized that these encounters related to my proposal that immersion, as an experience of multiple realities, occurs due to the (sometimes conflicting) relations between the artistic proposal (music) and the context (cultural, psychological, social and spatial) that conditions our ways of experiencing art.

I did not intend to offer definitive conclusions, but to open a space of reflection and to present diverse creative perspectives which relate to notions of immersion. Perhaps the relation between musical practice and artistic research led to an argumentative structure that does not work as conclusively as might be expected from academic research. The literature that I studied during my research was used in a way that resembles the use of musical material. In general, the characteristics of musical material can be identified and understood before the material is used to create a composition. However, the way in which we perceive and understand these materials is transformed according to the way they are used in a composition. The musical styles and approaches in which given musical materials are used, are extremely diverse. For example, a composer could use the same algorithm or rhythmical patterns to create a reggae song, a complex new music ensemble piece, a spectral composition, or an electronic piece of *musique concrète*. Each of these musical outcomes transforms the way in which we perceive the characteristics of the musical material. In much the same way, the "original meanings" of the literature used, changed according to the subjects and artistic works to which they were associated. The resemblance of my research process to composing with musical material is furthermore reflected in the tendency to reuse the same references, quotes, and my own arguments throughout this whole dissertation. In each case, "similar" information appears from different perspectives and is related to different notions.

In the first chapter, I discussed how sight conditions the way in which we perceive sound and, vice versa, how sound affects visual perceptions. Most of the authors used as reference for contextualizing this notion are aware of this relationship. However, they mainly emphasize the differences between visual and sonic experiences; they discuss the differences between visual and aural perspectives, in order to give a phenomenological contextualization from which they can develop their ideas on listening in relation to immersion. Perhaps the main difference in my approach towards immersion in relation to sight and listening is the composer's perspective from which I have developed my arguments. My artistic work points towards a compositional attitude that considers visual and sonic elements simultaneously in order to produce a specific sensory effect; both elements are integrated. Every sound is affected by its visual gesture and visual context,

and, conversely, every image is conditioned by the sonic environment. In contrast, composers such as Mauricio Kagel and Heiner Goebbels mainly use visual aspects with a theatrical emphasis. As I perceive it, in these cases the visual aspects are somehow superimposed on the music. To be sure, this approach also affects the way in which sounds are perceived, but the perceptual effects in these theatrical cases are more affected by the psychological and sociological associations created by the visual aspects than by the physical and psychoacoustic relations between the heard and the seen. In order to compose music with an immersive goal it is important for me to take into consideration the always-existing dynamic interaction between aural and visual elements. Especially in Chapter 1, I have demonstrated how my awareness of this relation affected the way in which the musical processes were developed. This awareness is reflected in a musical aesthetic and in an attitude towards composition which does not exclude vision from sonic perception.

An audio-visual approach is also common in the design and research of virtual realities (VR) and new media. In the case of VR, the audio-visual approach generally aims at aiding the simulation of real experiential conditions which creates a self-contained reality. In this way, the natural correspondence between the aural and visual can be used to achieve an experience that dissociates listeners-spectators from reality. However, the immersion that I propose aims at an experience where the introjected correspondences between visual and aural perception are transformed and presented in an entangled way that does not presuppose a separation from our everyday environment and reality. The goal is not to create a dissociative or virtual effect, but to expose what we would usually perceive as normal. In other words, through my works, I attempt to evoke immersive experiences that do not separate the aesthetic experience from a perception of reality. In this way, reality is thought of as a coexistence of multiple experiential layers (multiple realities). I have related this notion to Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Being Singular Plural*, his main argument being that existence is always coexistence, that being is always "being-with". By approaching being as a singular-plural ontological condition (as suggested by Nancy), immersion moves away from a sense of dissociation or separation from reality.

In Chapter 2 and 3, I mainly discussed spatial issues related to my approach on immersion. By defining, differentiating, and relating virtual and physical spaces, I questioned the tendency to think of a musical space as a framed space. To give examples of a "framed" approach towards space, I discussed two pieces by Iannis Xenakis and his ideas on spatial composition. Xenakis seems to describe and aim at immersive intentions. However, the sonic characteristics of the surrounding physical space appear for him to be an obstacle in designing the desired sonic spatialization. As a consequence, Xenakis' approach towards spatialization reveals his interest in creating a self-contained space that is composed by the virtual dimensions of sound. This concern also seems to be present in pieces in which he integrates existing or newly constructed architecture into his musical compositions. In these cases, the buildings become the musical world. It seems that for Xenakis the building as building has to disappear and merge into the aesthetic space he imagines. This can be connected to a perspective on immersion as dissociation. I have presented a contrasting idea in which the processes and sonic results of, for example, *La línea desde el Centro* and *Eufónica* show a blending of multiple spatial perimeters with a virtual sense of spatiality. For example, the spatial perimeters of *La línea* are the platform where the conductor stands,

the space defined by the surrounding guitar players, the area of the hall where the setup is placed, and the hall itself. The virtual sense of spatiality relates to Eric Christensen's thoughts that listening to transformations and movements of "musical dimensions" such as timbre, pitch height, or rhythm evoke spatial impressions in the listeners' mind as a virtual musical time-space (see Chapter 2). *La línea* and *Eufónica* propose immersion as an experience of coexisting multiple spaces, both virtual and real.

In Chapter 3, I also explored the differences and similarities between the perception of sound underwater and in air. Underwater localization of sound reveals a transformed perception of sound. Being underwater means being in an environment that belongs to one's physical reality. In other words, water does not represent another or a virtual reality. Through diving, people perceive sensorial transformations that expose the sensory diversity of their physical reality.

I have noticed a certain analogy with my artistic practice here. My musical compositions are not perceived as self-contained experiences separated from reality either. My music can be (or perhaps even should be) approached as a transformation within our perceptual reality. This perspective invites and incites the audience and the performers to perceive my music as a transitional experience that exposes multiple realities.

In chapter 4, I discussed my piece *A Bao A Qu*(M). With this piece, I intended to offer an aesthetic aural experience which is open and plural, and which integrates multiple layers of reality. One goal of the piece is not to present itself as a virtuality or as an experience that is separated from reality. Despite the fact that it carries the burden of its name (the resulting objectivity highlighted through the naming of a work), and that the audience will identify some sort of characteristic sonic result, its ultimate goal is to offer an experience in which the listeners do not focus on the objective characteristics of the piece's identity, such as form, material, functioning, style, etc. The conventional aspects of the performance space, of the score, and of the performative attitudes are transformed and only used as tools to activate the audience to achieve a multiple-directed sensory experience. In this chapter, I demonstrated how the conventions of musical practice and of musical presentation are used as focus points and intentionally transformed in order to absorb the listeners' attention towards the multiple sonic and spatial fields which are present in the musical experience.

At the end, in their transition back to the "normal" world, the audience, attending a performance of *A Bao A Qu*(M), perceives their own sensorial experience rather than focusing on their appreciation of the work itself. When we dive, we feel the temperature and the influence of the currents on our bodies. When we come out of the water, the wind cools the water on our skin, reminding our body that it is in resonance with the environment. In much the same way, the multiplicity of experiential layers of *A Bao A Qu*(M) reveals a non-alienating space where immersion is proposed to exist as a transitional experience between overlapping realities. The immersion into a musical reality exists simultaneously with the possibility to immerse into every layer of the world. Immersion is not a particularity, it is a continuous transformation, also happening outside aesthetic events in our everyday lives.

In all of my pieces discussed in this dissertation, I identified a sense of openness that resides in the lack of visual representation that the scores offer. This resulted in various reflections on this subject. In the process of rehearsing *What about Woof?*, the performers discover a visual choreography of movements through the performance of a traditionally notated score; it is not possible for them to deduce a visual representation of the composition by just looking. In *La línea desde el Centro*, the conductor and performers can only discover the sonic outcomes of the piece through their interactions. In *Eufónica*, the impossibility of precision due to the use of an invented musical instrument that is difficult to control, creates unexpected sonic results in each performance of the work, despite the precise notation in the score. In this case, the openness resides more in the instrument-as-problem than in the interactive relations such as in the previous two examples. Finally, in *A Bao A Qu(M)* a combination occurs of the performative issues of *La línea* and *Eufónica*, showing both interactive and instrumental openness.

The lack of representation in all of these pieces aids performers to regard the sonic result as a process of discovery. What this process reveals is that the scores only function as tools to achieve a performance and musical experience. However, this idea can be related to the working of any musical score. My approach mainly has a difference of degree with other scores. For example, in *La línea* each individual part contains hardly any musical information. The performers cannot practice their parts individually because the score is constructed in such a way that the piece can only be performed through interactive actions between performers and conductor. It is not possible to imagine a potential sonic outcome by looking at the general score or its individual parts. In the case of more traditional scores, musicians can play and practice their individual parts, and conductors can look at the general score and internally hear the notated signs. With these traditional music scores some levels of representation are possible. Conversely, the interactive actions of *La línea* communicate most of the musical information in real time. In this way, the perceived music separates itself from the "objectivity" that the score might offer. The openness that arises from this phenomenon relates to the notion that immersion does not occur as a separation from reality but as an experiential transition.

The sense of unexpectedness derived from structural mobility in open and mobile works (as proposed by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*) can be related to the notion of invisibility (the sonic results that cannot be seen or represented in and through the score). Invisibility offers an experiential ground upon which the players discover themselves by performing, in an unknown musical world. The score serves as a focus point which takes advantage of the performers' conventional habits to transform their own performative musical experience. The notion of invisibility invites composers to consider fixed scores as tools to induce modes of openness and immersion. By proposing this compositional approach, I imagine that other composers can further investigate how one might create scores that induce open and immersive modes through experience, and not necessarily through open elements that are visible or communicated in the instructions of the score.

Musical experiences always transform our perception of the environment and, inversely, the environment always affects the way in which we perceive music. This interaction is what induced me to rethink immersion as an experience of multiple realities, in which the musical

time-space and the surrounding reality equalize their roles. I have shown that there is a tendency to approach and understand immersion as a form of dissociation and as the experience of a new, self-contained reality. Through my musical works, I have presented phenomenological perspectives that questioned these views. The musical processes developed in these works reflect my (sometimes unconscious) intention of guiding the listener to focus more on that which surrounds the musical time-space. This relates to a musical experience where the listeners are immersed through a music that does not necessarily capture in itself their main attention, but rather allows them to aesthetically perceive the reality and environment in which they exist. As a consequence, immersion does not necessarily aim at creating a new reality but serves as a medium for perceptual transformation. This approach proposes immersion as an experience in between worlds, a space where diverse layers of reality are exposed and aesthetically transformed.