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(De)Composing Immersion

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Summary

This dissertation explores various perspectives on the term *immersion*, and its relation with, and transformation through, a composer's practice. Departing from the questions "how does music mediate people's perception of reality?" and "how does reflecting and studying this mediation affect the compositional practice?", *immersion* is presented as a key term to interconnect diverse aspects of music practice and listening. *Immersion* through music is proposed as a transitional experience that exposes and interrelates multiple layers of reality, thereby criticizing the tendency to think *immersion* as an experience within a particular or self-contained space (in music, in a book, in a virtual environment, in thoughts, in water, in a music hall, etc.). Musical experiences always transform one's perception of the environment and, inversely, the environment always affects the way in which music is perceived. From this premise, immersion is rethought as an experience of multiple realities, in which the musical time-space and the surrounding reality equalize their roles.

My artistic practice is essential in the development of this investigation. Through my musical compositions discussed in this dissertation, 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 relate this notion to the main argument of Jean-Luc Nancy's book *Being Singular Plural* 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.

Besides rethinking immersion through music, I discuss how - by relating compositional processes to the phenomenology of musical performance and listening - the idea of openness can be associated to immersion. 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. Immersion in music can be achieved by diminishing the critical awareness of apparatuses or media (e.g. loudspeakers, computer screens, musical instruments, musicians, etc.) that produce sensory stimuli. As a result, an immersive context offers an open space containing undefined and multiple sensorial entry points.

Open and mobile works, as for example defined by Umberto Eco, refer to music in which the composer leaves specific elements of the composition to be completed by performers or audience. Departing from the question "what do performers perceive as open?" I focus on the receptive and performative side of openness rather than analyzing structural or mobile characteristics of notated musical works. From this perspective I introduce and elaborate the idea of openness through "invisibility". Invisibility refers to 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.

My compositions *What about Woof?* (for five percussionists and video installation), *La línea desde el Centro* (for twelve guitarists), *Eufónica* (for six percussionists and tape) and *A Bao A Qu(M)* (for nine musicians and tape), analyzed and developed throughout my research trajectory, have been the main artistic sources to develop my ideas on immersion and openness. The compositional processes described and the reflections

about *immersion* derived from them, offer different perspectives on the practical and phenomenological aspects of music composition, performance, and listening.

The main reference work in Chapter 1 is *What about Woof?*. 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?” Throughout this chapter I argue against the (still) dominant idea that listening can be better associated to an immersive experience than visual experiences. I will claim that sight can also contribute to immersion because of the *introjected* abilities to relate to virtual and real images. I also describe how listeners and performers may achieve a mode of openness due to the visual setup of my musical works. Furthermore, I 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 contains a reflection on the relation between a performance environment and openness by describing the experiential differences between varied contexts in which the referred piece was performed.

Chapter 2 introduces the spatial attributes of an immersive experience having as its main reference work *La línea desde el Centro*. I analyze and reflect on the differences and relations between the virtual characteristics of the musical time-space and a given physical environment in relation to a compositional process. Various aspects of the compositional process of *La línea* are presented in order to demonstrate the effects of composing in relation to physical space. The chapter ends with a description of the open characteristics of the work under discussion. In *La línea* each musician’s part is incomplete in itself and can only be completed through the interaction between performers and conductor. This feature of the work is presented to intimate the relation between invisibility and interaction.

Chapter 3 introduces the main ideas behind the composition *Eufónica* for six percussionists and tape. This chapter exposes theories of underwater sound perception. Having the underwater model as an intentional reference, this chapter shows how, through the compositional processes and results, it is possible to interconnect and further develop the notion of immersion as an experience of multiple realities and its relation to my musical practice.

Chapter 4 encompasses all of the issues previously discussed, and presents them 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. This 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 are 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(M)*’s compositional process serves to understand the musical origin that gives form to my argument about immersion as a singular plural experience. In this chapter I also 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.