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The Netherlands

Between Freedom and Fixity: Artistic Reflections on Composition and Improvisation
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The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/81819 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

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Issue Date: 2019-12-11

Conclusion

In this thesis I have focused on the concepts of freedom and fixity as the central topic of my artistic practice and thinking. The case studies discussed in the four main chapters are different paths on a journey to find musical identities which are as explicit as they are open: even though my works contain concrete shapes and hard-coded components, they aim to trigger open-ended processes rather than be restrictive; they evoke perpetual transformations of musical elements rather than demanding slavish adherence to notation. In this sense, the pre-composed materials become sites for exploration, inviting musicians and audiences to a real-time investigation of their latent potentials.

By addressing these musical works through various freedom-and-fixity narratives – embodied in such concepts as free improvisation, notation, instrument design, and computer systems – I have established a number of musical perspectives which are generic enough to become useful tools for other musicians and scholars. The terms "freedom" and "fixity," and the relationships between them, suggest new approaches to listening to, playing, or analyzing a musical work. These concepts provide a way of thinking about a work's components, structure, and the way these are realized during performances. For example, the inherent tension between an attempt to follow a notated score and the real-time decisions of the musicians on stage can become key to understanding the inner dynamics of a work.

The concepts of freedom and fixity are in fact abstractions, placeholders for musical agents such as rhythm, notes, structure, timeline, electronic instruments, and computer systems. In each of the case studies I have discussed in this dissertation, the two concepts are embodied differently, thus different relationships develop between them in each piece.

In *Modo Recordar, Modo Olvidar* improvisation forms a continuation of the notation, the latter determining the players' approach to their parts. By setting out several ideas to be elaborated improvisationally, the composition's structure is not just realized – faithfully constructed by the musicians who execute the notated template as accurately as possible – but developed, in the sense that the composition triggers off real-time processes that will evolve into a complete musical structure. The way in which the musicians developed the outlined structure by improvising led me to the idea of a flexible timeline: an approach to notation that can present pre-composed ideas – fixed starting, ending, or even middle points of musical processes – without having to compromise the real-time freedom of the performers.

In *[Untitled, 2012]*, the structure is based on a fixed timeline – a pre-recorded soundtrack. While the performer has to synchronize the notated part with the fixed timeline, the musical material itself is flexible: it can be stretched or compressed, providing a certain amount of freedom to the performer. Furthermore, although the soundtrack is fixed, its interpretation remains free to a certain extent: how the player responds to the electronic sounds, and extracts from them the musical beat is open.

Acknowledging freedom at the level of listening – instead of merely concentrating on freedom in playing – is another way of encountering freedom within fixity: even if the material is entirely pre-determined, the performer can still navigate freely within it.

In *The Instrument*, the interactivity of the computer system is central to the composition. By interacting with the computer the musicians create a musical structure in real time. Just as in *Modo Recordar, Modo Olvidar*, the prescribed form is flexible: although it features a predetermined set of sounds that are organized in a particular order, the computer processes and triggers the samples according to the live actions of the musicians so that the overall result remains largely open. More than in the other case studies, technology here is essential. By evoking open-ended – rather than pre-determined – interactions, the computer system presents a particular relation between freedom and fixity: hard-coded elements next to live interaction and pre-determined responsive patterns next to randomness.

In *hasBara* the role of free improvisation within composition is explored. In this piece I created a dialogue between free improvisation and notation, in which freedom is a thematic element within the composed structure. The tension between freedom and pre-composed elements charges the performance with a creative drive: it evokes a struggle between the tendency to remain within the realms of already established musical patterns and the attempt to break these patterns and head towards the unknown.

The subjects of this research are of course the practices of musicking: composing, performing, improvising, human–computer interaction, co-creation, and so on. But the discourses I have been dealing with also address other issues: extra-musical, general questions concerning human interaction and the function of communication and creativity within collaborative processes. The relationship between ideas and actions which are set in advance and those that are created on-the-spot is one such important notion. My work demonstrates the dynamic interrelationships between these two channels of creativity, rather than their contradiction or exclusion. The marking of an aesthetic space does not restrict the potential depth of the creative process; on the contrary, it opens up unforeseen paths and plants the seeds of new directions and possibilities. In this sense, my compositions provide contexts and frameworks in which emerging and fluctuating situations are fully integrated within pre-existing conditions. The way in which freedom and fixity, in all its complexity and diversity, coexist in my compositions can set an example for human interaction in all its complexity. Real-time choices, actions, and interactions – what I have referred to in this dissertation as "freedom" – are integral to any creative setting and always evolve in conjunction with predesignated, "fixed" parameters. Sensitivity to the interdependency of freedom and fixity is suggested as a general approach: it embodies a personal and collective responsibility, as much as a liberating attitude, through which playfulness receives a fundamental role within any activity. This thesis suggests ways to rethink this relationship, not, however, by implying predetermined, prescribed recipes, but, rather, by applying the integration of freedom and fixity and emphasizing how these two terms are complementary to each other, rather than contradictory. This observation can shed light on the inner dynamics of creative processes of whatever kind – artistic, academic, or simply any exchange of information through human dialogue; furthermore, more concrete ideas may arise regarding education,

management and organizational practices,[43] political systems, urban planning, or any other activity that involves the exchange of pre-existing information together with the generation of new information.

I will – very briefly – discuss three examples, two concrete ones on a micro-scale and a more abstract general one. After discussing my ideas concerning freedom and fixity with a university professor and literature scholar, she told me that she decided to re-structure part of her teaching in such a way that the students can decide on the subject of each seminar, choosing one part out of the entire course's curriculum in advance. In my opinion, the dialogue and negotiations between the students' wishes, the teacher's reaction to the flexible situation, and the responsibility to the "demands" of the course subject and the overall curriculum, have some resemblance to the dialogue between performers, composer, and musical material. Although there are of course fundamental differences between a university course and a musical work, the freedom-and-fixity narrative can provide a useful approach also in education. Another example is the work *hasBara*. *hasBara* was composed from the viewpoint that musicians could, and should, take positions in debates concerning moral issues, and, as such, this work can serve as an example of how freedom and fixity exist also in an extra-musical context. A serious discussion about how music can present political, ethical, or social ideas is beyond the scope of this thesis. At the same time, it is important to note that the relationship between freedom and fixity, or, as it is rendered in this work, between free improvisation and precomposed ideas, can reflect also on such issues. The division of the ensemble into group and soloists refers to the individual "responsibility" of each citizen to contribute their effort to the propaganda machine by functioning as an active voice.[44] The way in which this responsibility should be discharged is represented by the deconstruction of notated structures, literary disassembling the original message and substituting it with the musicians' own voices. The way musical structure emerges through improvisation serves as an example for the power of the collective, and the way self-organizing structuring is entangled with pre-composed material demonstrates the agreement between freedom and fixity, rather than their contradiction. More generally speaking, some musical ideas developed in this dissertation could materialize in any cultural field in which encounters or negotiations between various agents – participants, ideas, objects, physical conditions – take place, by bringing together the different forces I discuss into a coherent yet contingent assemblage. The dialogue between freedom and fixity could provide a guideline by which the various agents engage with each other, and develop an awareness of the possible points of tension, balance, and interaction within the relevant context. By deconstructing the opposition between freedom and fixity and by pointing out the perpetual

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[43] As suggested by Erlend Dehlin in relation to improvisation and management theory, for example by pointing out the inherent nature of improvisation, and by not excluding it as a separate approach, in the sense that it can exist together with other organizational practices: "improvisation is an inextricable feature of human practice, and hence, of organizing processes. From this stance I seek to overcome a perspective on improvisation as an either-or phenomenon" (Dehlin, 2008, p. X). See further discussion about Dehlin's ideas in *hasBara* part 3.3.

[44] The title *hasBara* literally translates from Hebrew as "explanation," or, more specifically, "an act of explanation." This is also the name of the department of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is responsible for communicating the policies and actions of the state of Israel to the media abroad. Hasbara has been suggested as the personal responsibility of any Israeli citizen abroad to explain and justify the actions of the (currently right-wing) government to a supposedly non-understanding, "hostile" environment.

interaction of the two concepts, I have attempted to make a useful contribution to already existing artistic practices and theoretical discourses.

One final question which might be asked is: what next? What could form the next step in the freedom-and-fixity narrative? In my recent composition *Stations and Journeys* from 2018 (commissioned by Ensemble Modelo62) the musicians walk between several "stations" – moving from one notated part to another at different locations on stage. The constant movement of the musicians between the stations gradually re-arranges the instrumentation in each section as the group accumulates and breaks apart, and the emerging combinations between the various simultaneously played parts create a free-flowing spatial setting for the performance.

[MEDIA: Stations and Journeys, video excerpt (played by Ensemble Modelo62).]

In this work, the musical perception of the players is also addressed: they are asked to "capture one idea [while walking between the stations] – a sound, a gesture, a musical expression – and bring it to the next station" where it will be incorporated into the score. I have used the symbol [IMAGE] in order to incorporate the players' own ideas into the notation, for example:

[IMAGE: Stations and Journeys, score excerpt.]

The result is musical as much as theatrical: it combines improvisation and notation, physical movement (between different locations on stage) and movement within the parts (the musicians can freely "travel" between the staves of each part while playing), and allotted paths alongside spontaneously emerging combinations. *Stations and Journeys*, which was written for a large ensemble, can be seen as a direct continuation, effect, and consequence of the research presented here. In a sense, it can be understood as a summary and artistic translation of many of the concepts I have been dealing with: free improvisation, open notation, interaction between structure and flexibility. I tried to articulate my ideas so that they will not only open *musical* paths but also *physical* paths on stage, embodying freedom and fixity in the movement of performers in space. In this sense, this composition offers a next step in the encounter between freedom and fixity.

What to explore further? How to imagine new compositions and new conceptual paths that might go beyond the scope of the four case studies? In a certain sense, my research has only scratched the surface of integrating freedom and fixity into contemporary composing practice. The discourses I have explored can certainly offer more possibilities than what has been demonstrated in my work so far: the dynamic relations between, for example, score, computer system, and soundtrack, on the one hand, and structure, notated ideas, and timelines, on the other; the identity of the work, comprehended as a concept that does not suggest a single, but multiple paths; and the notion of the work as a tool or an instrument, which opens up new ways of thinking and doing rather than determining a means to a particular end; and so on. Together, these discourses – which have both theoretical and practical components – suggest an approach

to the act of composing which can perhaps be described as "modular": the various elements of a work as well as the different concepts that contribute to the identity of a work can be assigned and re-assigned to several pieces, thereby hinting at a compositional practice which is more open than a simple chain of single compositions with distinct identities. Musical identity thus becomes a fluid notion, shifting between different works and different performances. In this sense there can be no clear beginning or end to a musical work, the ultimate consequence being that there is no need for this concept to start with. Instead, I imagine a compositional practice which facilitates a constant metamorphosis of materials, ideas, manifestations, enactments, and explorations of unforeseen possibilities. The practice of composition can thus be understood in terms of tool design – notations, musical concepts, performance processes, and so on – which can be used to create events, which in their turn might become new tools. In its essence, the interaction between free and fixed elements I have described in this thesis gives rise to this kind of approach to composing, which is based on processes of change as much as on stability.

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