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Between Freedom and Fixity: Artistic Reflections on Composition and Improvisation

Ziblat Shay, I.

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Cover Page



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Author: Ziblat Shay I.

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Summary

This thesis focuses on the concepts of freedom and fixity as two central topics of my artistic research. I present, analyze, and contextualize four of my works which have explicit links to freedom and fixity and which demonstrate the dynamic interrelationship between the two. By looking at the musical contents of these works, by reflecting on my initial intentions for composing them, and by dwelling on the ideas emerging during the composition process and their subsequent performances, I contribute a distinct musical perspective on freedom and fixity which can inspire other musicians and researchers on their theoretical and/or practical paths.

The compositions demonstrate my interest in establishing, on the one hand, a specific aesthetic – a musical identity which is, at least to some extent, fixed. However, on the other hand, they keep this identity explicitly free by creating dynamic relations between the musicians themselves and between them and compositional elements – structure, pitch, rhythm, and so on. Integrating freedom and fixity suggests an approach to musical structures as open processes which evolve in real time. Conversely, it excludes neither an explicit description of musical materials nor the existence of tangible musical shapes.

By asking questions regarding the relationship between freedom and fixity and the role they play in musical works, I make observations about the nature of each of the concepts. How can they be embodied, practiced, and performed in composing music? Which elements of each of the compositions discussed in this thesis are primarily fixed and which are primarily free? How can musical compositions express the tensions and balances between freedom and fixity and how is this effectuated in each of the four case studies? How do the relations between freedom and fixity shape the performances of these works? The various ways in which these two concepts are embodied as musical shapes, the dynamic relationship between them, and the understanding that their existence is inherent to any musical work, marks them as essential elements in a creative dialogue – in musical as well as extra-musical contexts.

In order to contextualize my works and ideas I have studied the work and writings of musicians active in the fields of composition, improvisation, and electronic music. I have analyzed their terminology and perspectives, and I have reflected on the ways in which they deepen my understanding and practical adaptations of freedom and fixity in music. To broaden my perspective I also looked at scholarly ideas which belong to non-musical disciplines, for example philosophy and technological studies. This wider context also points towards the omnipresence of the concepts of freedom and fixity: their combination should also be comprehended as a social, philosophical, and even ethical – rather than a strictly musical – issue. My observations could be applied in such disciplines as education, socio-political thinking, or organizational theories, and suggest that freedom – explained as the individual's ability and responsibility to invent, interact, and adapt to dynamic situations in real time – can integrate with pre-existing intentions, ideas, and structures, and that this integration can establish a creative and productive approach.

My research revolved around three general domains, each of which forms a path towards understanding the musical works: composition, improvisation, and technology. I suggest that the role of the score and of musical notation is not only to fix, but also to evoke the creation of musical material in real time, thus establishing a link between composition and freedom. The term “work-in-movement” is introduced, indicating a certain incompleteness in composed works, and a way to create an ongoing dialogue between composer and performers. I examine the relation between structure and improvisation, either by looking at improvisation as an element within a composed framework, or by focusing on it as a musical practice in its own right by addressing the term “free improvisation.” I point out the perpetual dialogue between the musicians themselves and between them and musical elements, and the emergent, self-organizing, and continuously evolving structures brought into life by this dialogue.. The relationship between technology, structure, and freedom is discussed, for example by rethinking technology as an open-ended concept which can reveal multiple paths rather than providing determinate means to a particular end. Three of the four compositions use the computer as a musical instrument, a fact which provided me with the opportunity to understand the computer as a tool for creating musical freedom, and through which the relationship between freedom and fixity can be reflected.

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each presenting one case study which forms a distinct perspective on the freedom-and-fixity axis. Together, the four case studies form a multilayered investigation of possible correlations between freedom and fixity, approached through different levels of the musical process – notation, performance, design of the electronics and the interaction with the computer, etc. – and by using text, scores, and audio/video material. The work *Modo Recordar, Modo Olvidar* (for viola, contrabass, and computer) addresses the relation between structure and improvisation. *[Untitled, 2012]* (for bass and pre-recorded soundtrack) brings fixity into focus as a central compositional thread. The pre-recorded soundtrack in this work is discussed as a notion of “total fixity,” suggesting a framework around which freedom is weaved. *The Instrument* (an interactive electronic system, for any instrument(s) or sound source) focuses on the idea of the computer as a musical instrument, an interactive system, and an autonomous improviser, asking how the concepts of freedom and fixity are embodied in this live-electronics composition. In *hasBara* (for ensemble) the discussion will focus on free improvisation and on notation and improvisation as two contrasting elements.

Obviously, theory has affected my artistic work: a strong focus on the concepts of freedom and fixity has left its traces on the compositions themselves, on the development of notation, and on the design of the SuperCollider code. However, by composing, performing, and reflecting on and through my experiences as a musician, my artistic work simultaneously contributed to theoretical discourses: transposing my knowledge from the practical domain to a scholarly discourse offered a distinct perspective which highlights the important role of freedom and fixity, and the inherent quality of the dialogue between them. By taking into consideration the personal and collective responsibility for both freedom and fixity, we can remodel the way we think about dialogue and exchange of information, not only in the musical domain but also in relation to many other creative processes. The continuous re-adjustment of structures

and content, which is the result of the constant negotiation between the participants of a social framework of any kind – teachers and students, designers and executors, or the different positions and functions of a working institution, to give a few examples – permits a continuous evolution of knowledge, and prevents a state of stagnancy and rigidity which is unsuitable to deal with an ever-changing reality.