The Complexity of Experience

Thomas DeLio

"in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to
one; daring; a fall; the clouds resolved into a sandy sluice;
an enforced pause;"

William Carlos Williams
Paterson, Book I

It seems to me that the essence of experience lies not only in its process but also in its particulars, and the interesting artist is one who tries to capture those particulars as accurately as possible. The artwork reflects the uniqueness of the artist's sense of self in the world and, in turn, reveals all of the inharmonious complexities of his perceptions. What else could be the purpose of one's art if not to define oneself and to do so by rooting oneself in one's own experience? Herein lies the complexity of art, as I see it.

I have always tried to make music that is defined by its own concreteness (tried to do so, it seems, long before I finally realized, consciously, what it was I was after). This seems to be my personal obsession. The concreteness of the sonic experience, unclouded by the exigencies of process and language, leads me to a clearer sense of experience itself - not of "experience" in some universal manifestation (of which I am a confirmed disbeliever) but in its most particular and personal sense.

The most complex task for the perceiver involves immersing himself fully in each composer's unique and utterly personal sensibilities as delineated in his works. The perceiver, then, is an observer, trying to catch a glimpse of a world which cannot be his own (for no one's experiences are identical to another's). Communication, it seems to me, is the central fallacy of so many of our definitions of art, for making art seems not so much about communication as about the definition of oneself through one's art. Thus, the most complex task for the composer is to

delineate his experience as carefully and accurately as possible; to delineate every nuance of his sense of himself as part of his world. In contrast, the most complex situation for the perceiver is to immerse himself in the re-creation of the artist's experience cast as an abstraction - namely the artwork.

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Let us read

and digest; the surface
glistens, only the surface.
Dig in - and you have

a nothing, surrounded by
a surface,

Paterson (Book III)
William Carlos Williams [1]

As William Carlos Williams once said of Gertrude Stein: "Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean." [2] I too admire Stein for this reason and, following in the footsteps of those who have tried to do the same for sound, would like to be rid of gesture and process and get sound back "clean." My approach to composition, to which I came quite subconsciously, involves reducing the music's surface to just a few disjunct sound events separated - pushed apart - by large quantities of silence; sound events pushed into isolation. Typically, my compositions are constructed from discrete segments of music which, though they coexist as a group, never become fixed with respect to one another through hierarchical relationships; in this respect my pieces are never organic. I strive for this condition in order to avoid as much as possible the expression of subjective priorities from which such hierarchies are engendered. In addition, I always try to avoid constructing transitions linking individual events. I avoid anything that might convey a sense of continuity and connection. I want everything to be segmented, halted, separated. I have no interest in memory, which seems to me an illusion. Only the direct perception of the moment seems important to me. Thus, I find myself less and less interested in creating states of either order or disorder. Rather, I find myself only interested in reconstructing the gray area that separates them. [3]

between (1991) for flute and percussion (the full score of which is reprinted below) is typical of my recent works.[4] Though it is only three minutes long I do not consider it a sketch or a miniature in any sense. Rather, it is a full-scale work which consists of a few highly compressed sound events surrounded by a silence which is activated by those events. In this work I have tried:

- to replace development and evolution with presentation (both
  in the macro-form and in the process of the piece):
    form to be discovered phenomenologically,
    poised as a possibility

- to rid sound of gesture (both in the macro-form and in the
  process of the piece): experience is always unfinished - potential

- to straddle the line between order and chaos; to simply
  find it and stay on it; not go anywhere

- to make all connections as tenuous as possible

- to barely cohere

In a more recent piece, *Than* (1992) for orchestra, I have tried to achieve these goals by approximating the sense of a work-in-progress (though *Than* is indeed a finished composition).[5] In one sections, for example, its pitch structure, is based upon a series and its partitions, as well as various multiplications of those partitions with one another. However, the series itself remains incomplete and full of repetitions and redundancies. Then too, the partitions and systems of multiplications remain incomplete, in various stages of movement toward a state of completion – a state of completion that, I should emphasize, never occurs over the course of the piece. This same sense of the work-in-progress characterizes other aspects of the composition's structural and

expressive designs and enhances, in a new way I think, the non-hierarchical, non-organic nature of my music. I continue, of course, to use long silences and so place each sound event on a trajectory moving toward isolation. All of this is perhaps a roundabout way of saying that, for me, any complexity that may be involved in either creating or appreciating a musical work has little to do necessarily with the complexity of that work's surface. In fact, if the surface merely re-states the gestures of the past (even in some greatly intensified fashion) then the experience undoubtedly will be far less than   complex. In fact, it will probably seem stale and unconvincing. So, I argue for wiping the slate clean and rediscovering sound beneath all the rhetoric and dated mannerisms which have accumulated over so many years and, in the process, really coming to grips with the nature of our own experience - a complex task indeed.

between, instructions and score (pages 1-3)

between
by Thomas DeLio

Instrumentation

flute

piano

percussion
(three players)

percussion 1

maracas
bongos — h, m
tom-toms — h, m, l

percussion 2

iron pipe*
snare drum (high)
bongos — h, m
tom-toms — h, m, l

temple blocks — m, l

*iron pipe – approximately 12" long, 2" diameter, 1/8" thick, suspended by a string run through the pipe; held by a string and struck by a hammer (available on rental from the publisher).

vibraphone
chimes
glockenspiel
(sounds two octaves higher than written)

percussion 3

bamboo wind chimes
claves
tom-toms — h, m, l

wood blocks — h, h

cymbal
tam-tam — m, m
triangles — m, l
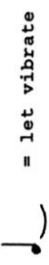
Duration = approximately 3 minutes

Notes

Flute:

1. All grace notes precede beat.

2. ⊙ explosive "t" sound with tongue; no subsequent breath

3. flz. = flutter tongue

   n ⟶ flz = gradual shift from normal tone to flz

4. b = <u>very breathy</u>

   n ⟶ b = gradual shift from normal tone to
   b ⟶ n   very breathy tone (or vice versa)

5. = blow through flute without producing tone

6. n ⟶ flz.
   b ⟶ n   = gradual shift from air sound without tone to pitched sound articulated with flz.

Percussion:

1. = let vibrate   ⊕ = damp

2. tom-tom mute = thick towel placed on top of drum; strike drum through towel.

Piano:

1. = let vibrate

Performers must be absolutely quiet and still during silences.

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between

Thomas DeLio

between (continued)

between (continued)

* In this system placement of notes in time is approximately proportional to placement on the page.

3

4

Footnotes

1. In his masterpiece *Paterson* William Carlos Williams rejects the organic; he rejects the processes which link and connect (and this, of course, is the key to reading Paterson itself). Instead he juxtaposes objects (physical, linguistic, temporal/historical): "No ideas but in things" - again the concrete. For Williams there is no meaning to be revealed, hidden beneath the surface. Meaning is the surface.

2. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions), p. 163.

3. For more detailed discussions of my compositions, in addition to the essays included in the present collection, the following essays are suggested: "Toward a Morphology of Presence: The Sound Installations of Thomas DeLio," Michael Hamman, *Interface* (Vol. 16, Nos. 1 and 2); "Against the Silence...," Christopher Shultis, *Percussive Notes* (Vol. 27, No. 1); "Dismantling the Silence: An Exercise," Thomas DeLio, *Interface* (Vol. 18, 1989); "contrecoup...: Nonlinearity and Computer-Aided Composition," Thomas DeLio, *Interface* (Vol. 20, 1991); "A Draft of Shadows," Wesley York, *Percussive Notes* (March, 1984).

4. *between* has been recorded on the *3D Classics* label (Paris: 3D-8014) by the University of New Mexico Contemporary Music Ensemble, (Christopher Shultis, director).

5. *Than* has been recorded on the ERM*Media* label (ERM-6692), by the Philharmonia Bulgarica, Robert Ian Winstin, conductor.