

Fluid Public:
Composing for participating audiences

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Imagine a concert hall with beautiful acoustics, resounding to audience members sounding two stones together in accord with an ensemble of musicians. The stone players - audience and musicians alike - clap their stones softly when directed revealing the concert hall to become an entire resonant space.

Gradually these sounds of the audience clapping their stone softly, blend with the sounds of the musicians as they now play their instruments. These participatory interventions by the audience continue throughout the work. The audience creates text for improvised passages, plays small bells, plays whirled tubes, and crumples aluminium foil: all performed foil as they along with their musician accomplices in a musical and spatial exploration of the hall itself invoking a poetic and always shifting musical and spatial exploration of the venue. *Night Shift* was premiered at the Berliner Philharmonie in 2021

In 2019, I attended *Faust* by the visual artist Anne Imhof (2019) at the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. It was a four-hour immersive event, with performers placed under the ceiling, beneath them glass a floor with the audience below this looking up. The performers peered into space, sometimes singing and moving, occasionally evocatively and mysteriously, often straightforwardly. For most of the time they seemed oblivious of their role, blending in with the audience until suddenly emerging to perform. It was a strange experience to realise the small division between audience and performer as if any moment an audience member could themselves choose to adopt the performers mysterious performance and consciousness.

Recently, I conceived a musical work entitled *Fluid Public*. It was a rehearsed public intervention which I conceived especially for the Boulez Saal and its public in Berlin and designed to be performed throughout the foyer and other open of the house. Passersby stopped to join in the workshop, curious about what we intended to undertake together. The fact that they would be involved in a drop-in workshop preparation of 45 minutes and then partake in a public performance didn't deter them. In fact, people changed their plans, deciding spontaneously to become participants, crossing the threshold from the workshop to fully immerse themselves in the intervention. This led me to develop a new series of public engagement and participatory works called Fluid Public which, alongside other compositional commissions, I am excited to explore.

The common thread weaving together the performances and interventions mentioned above, is the active involvement of the audience as participants. They bear witness to the evolving performance practices of contemporary visual and acoustic artworks - breaking the conventions of the fourth wall to merge the traditional roles of audience and performers, and allowing the

exploration of transformative experiences. For example, inviting the audience to move during performances, devising extended duration shows that can be visited and revisited over several hours, or expanding the staging and sound beyond conventional frontal orientation. Thus leading to fresh perspectives and new formats of engagement between performers and audience.

However, both opening up the parameters of time and space and reshaping the roles of the audience and artist, present new challenges regarding the conception and presentation of such new works. The technical crew must plan for the integrated lighting of multiple performance areas and ensure safety precautions are taken for all action included in the performance, and the venue itself must effectively communicate and publicise the nature of the performance in advance.

In the case of *Faust*, the audience was informed about its four-hour duration and the freedom to enter and exit at their convenience during that time. In *Night Shift*, the audience was invited to either choose to listen or actively participate, with the freedom to switch between the two, avoiding a possible feeling of coercion to join in.

For the composer, audience participation has its place in a musical score, adding wonderful new acoustic and musical possibilities but on the other hand it has unknown outcomes. Just thinking about dynamics - like how loud is the sound of 400 people making wind sounds with two sheets of paper? Or, will the sound of 100 feet tapping softly equate to a cello section playing pizzicato? Will the sound of a viola bow drawn along its bridge be audible alongside 10 people whispering a poem? Or for example, how can the sound of people crumpling aluminium foil softly and slowly be played or arranged over time, in a large space, to suggest the sound of footsteps moving in snow or even glass underfoot? Uncertainties are bound to arise when we let go of the trusted parameters of "concertising".

As a composer, I ask myself if when the line between artist/composer and audience becomes less distinct, does the way we listen to contemporary music change? How does our perception of the role of the composer change? Must we, as composers, step back from wanting to retain immaculate control over the sounds of a composition by inviting musical exchange with others?

As part of my compositional process, I do feel compelled to approach this blurring and to invite participation and challenge the received division between artist and audience. Breaking down the divide can create a sense of equality, even a democratising of the concert space, but it can also create a magical ambiguity in the location and timing of sound. Where is the sound coming from, where does the sound go to, when was it played and who made that sound? Is there perhaps then a socio-musical relation formed, that perhaps initiates new sound, new music?

And here lies also the crux, perhaps a dilemma for the composer – the relinquishing of that total control over each last moment of each sound. This dilemma might be mitigated if we renegotiate the practice of composing in a new way – partnering with people outside our compositional parameters working with them as creative listeners, sound makers, fellow composers, fellow art-makers. But is it still art? I say yes, but that’s another chapter.