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## Codex: Embodied communication in Richard Barrett's scores for improvisation

### Abstract

This paper examines the process of preparing Barrett's codex V (2007) and codex XV (2015) and their performance on Saturday 18 June, 2016, as part of the Ghent Advanced Master in Contemporary Performance Practice (ManaMa) academy examinations in Brussels, Belgium. This project involved the development of deep collaborative relationships with a number of other performers, the study and interpretation of alternative notational practices, and the invention of a variety of ad hoc solutions to issues of coordination and ensemble unity, with a particular focus on clear physical communication. Reflections on my own process of preparation and rehearsal are supplemented by content from a series of interviews with leading performer-improvisers, many of whom are long-term collaborators with Barrett. These are: Richard Barrett himself, Milana Zarić, Arne Deforce, Sylvia Hinz, and Daryl Buckley. This investigation highlights the variety of strategies employed by improvisers while working within these composed structures. It also asks several questions about the performer's body in the space of a structured improvisation, including: What is different about the bodily experience of improvisation as compared to ensemble performance of fully notated scores? How is the body a key tool for musical communication when decisions are being made moment-to-moment? And finally, in what ways do the musicians' physical communications develop as they progress through the stages of learning a codex score?

## **Codex: Embodied communication in Richard Barrett's scores for improvisation**

**Hannah Reardon-Smith**

On Saturday 18 June, 2016, I led a public performance as part of the SMOG concert series at the Projection Room in Ixelles, Brussels. Along with my fellow students in the Advanced Masters contemporary music program<sup>1</sup> through the University College Ghent and some external colleagues, we presented two of Richard Barrett's *codex* pieces – *V* and *XV* – alongside works by Rebecca Saunders, Sarah Nemtsov, and Hanna Kölbel. To play these works, a preparation period of some months involving a core team of players was followed by an intensive two days of full-ensemble rehearsal ahead of the performance. This paper documents this process and my reflections on it. I also conducted interviews with Barrett and a number of his close colleagues – harpist Milana Zarić (Serbia), cellist Arne Deforce (Belgium), recorder player Sylvia Hinz (Germany), and guitarist Daryl Buckley (Australia) – and some of their observations have also made it into this paper.<sup>2</sup>

Composer Richard Barrett has long pursued what he refers to as “two almost mutually exclusive activities: writing music on paper and performing improvisation” (Barrett and Zarić, 2016). His notated compositions are detailed, complex works, exploring extended technical abilities of acoustic instruments, often interwoven with live electronics. Rhythmic and textural complexity is a common component. But building complexity has also been the prevailing goal in his improvised work, particularly in his long-time electronics duo with Paul Obermayer, FURT. This work, says Barrett, “is really neither free improvisation nor composition, but some very twisted hybrid between the two” (ibid.). So, while Barrett often explores composition and improvisation completely separately, it is one of his fundamental beliefs that there is an underlying unity between the two domains. In his article *Notation as liberation*, he states: “I don't oppose composition and improvisation: instead, I view improvisation as a *method* of composition, one which is characterised by spontaneous musical actions and reactions” (Barrett, 2014, pp. 61-62, emphasis in original).

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1 Also known as “ManaMa”: master after master, an academy under instruction by the musicians of Belgian new music ensemble ICTUS.

2 This paper is a somewhat adapted and abbreviated version of the thesis submitted as part of my Advanced Masters degree, which also includes full transcripts of the interviews and a more in depth exploration of Barrett's music in relation to other composers of scores for improvisation. For a copy of this thesis, please contact the author.

For many classically-trained musicians, improvising presents unique challenges. For the most part improvisation does not form a part of our training, nor have a great many of us studied composition, in some ways the close cousin of improvisation, in any real detail. However, it is also the case that performers of contemporary Western art music are required to develop creative skills that go beyond the usual requirements and training of the 21st century classical musician, whether that is deciphering an unusual notation, exploring different ways to make sound on their instrument, learning complex polyrhythms, or even leaving their instrument behind and being asked to reach into the realms of theatre or dance. While undirected free improvisation might still be a stretch for many classically-trained performers, scores such as *codex* can perhaps allow players to engage with a composer in a way for which they are well prepared, while also giving them the opportunity to explore and extend their own creative potential through periods of complete freedom from the page. For those who have undergone classical training, whether performers or composers, stepping from the relative comfort of established practices into this realm of mutated roles and responsibilities provides new and exciting possibilities.

In his *codex* scores, Richard Barrett takes improvisation as a starting point for composition. Creative performer contributions form an important structural component, as he stated in an interview with me:

For me free improvisation is the fundamental matrix on which the structure is built. The score isn't intended as a series of boxes of various sizes and shapes and colours into which musical content needs to be poured, but to focus people's attention in various ways so as to encourage them to do things in an improvisation that they wouldn't normally do in their own work. (Barrett and Zarić, 2016)

This kind of inherent recognition of the potential of performer input is also appearing in contemporary music by composers such as Natacha Diels (U.S.) and Jennifer Walsh (Ireland). Walsh, in her brief essay *The New Discipline* (2016), notes that: "Perhaps we are finally willing to accept that the bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they're present, they're valid and they inform our listening whether subconsciously or consciously. That it's not too late for us to have bodies." This explicit disruption of the classical music hierarchy of composer as creator and performer as executor led me to a number of questions about those bodies on stage, that I found myself exploring throughout the process of preparing *codex V* and *XV* for performance in Brussels: What is different about the bodily experience of improvisation as compared to ensemble performance of fully notated scores? How is the body a key tool for musical communication when decisions are being made moment-to-moment? And in what ways do the

musicians' physical communications develop as they progress through the stages of learning a *codex* score?

## **Preparation stage**

Our preparation for the SMOG performance began in March. A group of six of the final twelve musicians met most Fridays at the ICTUS studios or in my living room for two hour-long workshop sessions. In this time, we went through the scores, ensuring everyone fully understood the “game rules”, assigning the full list of performers into groups and roles, and improvising together. These six became the core team, who took leading roles in each group and provided a knowledge hub to which the other musicians could direct questions.

These core members were: myself and three of my ManaMa colleagues – cellist Hanna Kölbl (Germany), pianist Carlo Prampolini (Italy), and flutist Sara Baldini (Italy) – along with Brussels based musicians Tom Jackson (England) on clarinet, and Susanna Hood (Canada), a vocalist and dancer completing postgraduate training at the Rosas dance company academy (P.A.R.T.S. Research Cycle). While all accomplished performers, these players ranged widely in terms of improvisation experience, from virtual beginners (Carlo Prampolini and Sara Baldini) to improvisation specialists (Tom Jackson and Susanna Hood).

Our Friday sessions involved many little experiments to develop our ensemble rapport and comfort with group improvisation. For the sake of brevity, I will give just one example: our process toward becoming comfortable with silences. I noticed in one of the first sessions with just Carlo and Sara that we tended to let the energy drop at points when we “ran out of ideas”, and then one or more of us would panic a little and introduce a new or old sound, but without a proper feel for the context. I suggested that we consciously include periods of silence in an improvised session – for instance in a ten-minute improvisation containing at least three silences. The silences should arrive naturally, but when we became aware of them we should hold them, consciously making them a coherent part of the musical progression.

At first our periods of silence were still quite short, reflecting our discomfort. Even in composed modern music I often notice that performers (myself included) are not really sure what to do with themselves during silences. Staying still, instrument in position, definitely helps to confirm that the work is not ending, but the body language that keeps the silence within the character of the piece is much more subtle and takes careful consideration. It is the same in improvisation, except that you are holding the silence in a state of openness – anticipation without expectation. A silence is laced with electric possibility. One person may suddenly take full control by deciding that the piece is here ended, or restarting gradually or abruptly, with call-backs to earlier material or something

completely new. Or – sometimes by happy coincidence, though often via barely-perceptible physical cues that the performers themselves may not be fully conscious of – two or more musicians might express a spontaneous musical agreement. Our little exercise led to us rapidly gaining an appreciation of these potent moments, and we no longer hurried to fill in the gaps, and nor did we let the energy collapse.

### *codex V*

*codex V* (2007) was commissioned by Contemporary Music for All (CoMA), a UK-based organisation open to musicians of all ability levels for participation in contemporary music performance. A principal that Barrett attempted to bear in mind when writing this piece was that “professional performers of it would not be placed at any particular advantage (or disadvantage) relative to amateurs” (2016, p. 15).

For *codex V* the twelve or more musicians (exactly twelve in our case) are split into three groups of equal size with mixed instrumentation in terms of type and register. The score is structured around a continuous single line of melody. Three tracks appear beneath this line, one per group, each containing fifteen "events" – that is, a box of instructions with starting and ending points indicated in relation to the melodic thread (see Figure 1, below). The melody is played by at least one group at any one point, although in several cases it is warped almost beyond recognition – this is indicated in the score by an encircled capital “M”. Therefore, it is possible to perform the work without conductor, and this melodic continuity becomes the reference point for all players.

This melodic line is constructed in such a way that it gradually contracts in on itself, then expands outwards in an almost mirrored rhythmic form. At the climactic halfway point from measure 80, the full ensemble plays a compact pattern of straight eighth-notes in total unison, first *fortissimo* – a unique moment of clarity and unity – and then *piu pianissimo* at a faster tempo, already breaking apart into octave transpositions. From there it is immediately taken up by a soloist, recalling the opening solo (we chose to emphasise this by reinstating the same soloist, in this case it was vocalist Susanna Hood) in a faster and more dynamic variation. From there the rhythmic contraction of the melody reverses. The textures thin out on the last page, bringing the work to a gentle close.

Figure 1: *codex V* (Barrett, 2007), measures 13-18.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: *codex V* (Barrett, 2007), measures 13-18.<sup>3</sup>

The score appears relatively simple – the fixed melodic and rhythmic material is not especially difficult and the directions given are clear. However, there are several challenges that may not be immediately obvious, particularly for those unaccustomed to reading multiple lines of music at one time (which was most of us, pianist and perhaps percussionist excepted). Each player must stay aware of the progression of the melody, following whichever group is carrying it, as well as being prepared to enact the directions given to their group, which may appear as much as 10 cm below the notated melody. Event directions are given in a combination of text instructions, fragments of pitch notation, and musical indications such as dynamics or Italian terms. There are also some markings unique to Barrett's writing (and occasionally to this score alone), such as the capital "M" melody indication, and an infinity symbol ( $\infty$ ) – indicating free improvisation. In addition to this information, the score also requires some pre-performance decisions, such as assigning members of each group specific solos, duos or trios. There is a great deal of information to try to read, comprehend, and enact all at once, making the score impractical for sight reading.

Therefore, one of the most important tasks for our core team was to make decisions as to who would be in each group, and to designate the solos, ensuring that everyone got a turn in the spotlight in an "event" that would suit both their instrument (register, articulation and sustain capabilities, and so on) and

<sup>3</sup> Used with permission from United Music Publishing Ltd.

individual skills. We did this through a series of negotiations over several sessions, assigning two of the core members to each group and then creating “teams” of assorted instruments and personalities. In this instance the pairing of core members followed the introductions above; Group 1 was led by Susanna and Hanna, Group 2 by Tom and myself, and Group 3 by Sara and Carlo. It was, however, very difficult to properly prepare this work ahead of having the full ensemble present, on account of the assigned changes and necessary melodic continuity. We knew that we were leaving ourselves open to some difficulties as we approached the two days of intensive rehearsal ahead of our performance.

### *codex XV*

*codex XV* (2015) was written after Barrett realised that one ensemble had successfully involved a conductor in a performance of *codex I*, which triggered his thinking about the possible extended role a conductor might play. Originally written for Desmond Clarke and Chimera Ensemble, it is a transferable score. This is the first of his *codex* scores that explicitly asks for the involvement of a conductor, and the actions required of this individual are quite different from the usual role a conductor might play (such as ensemble cohesion, precision of rhythm and tempo, balance, and so on). Here, the conductor is her- or himself a creative improvising member of the ensemble, managing timings and cues, but also making decisions about what material stays a while or passes by, which performers take solos and for how long, and the frequency of certain events.

There are many things in the score which the conductor does not have control over, but which can then help inform her or his next creative decision – for instance, certain dynamic events, any performer’s decision to deviate from the instructions of the score, exact choices of pitches and material, and so on. On the other hand, for the performers, the conductor’s presence adds a layer of unpredictability they might not have otherwise encountered in a *codex* score. The choice to break into a solo no longer comes either from instructions on the page or an individual decision, but can be triggered in real time by the person directing them – in this way, response times may be changed, and the ability to personally prepare one’s material might be disrupted. In certain cases, this might lead to a more authentically spontaneous music-making experience.

The score for *codex XV* appears challengingly complex, with a great deal of small text instructions and unfamiliar graphic symbols. It takes some time to read through all the text and to gain an understanding of all the rules necessary to stage the work. However, we found that the conductor could help the ensemble a great deal by taking responsibility for this understanding, while at the same time staying open to differing interpretations that other musicians might have.

As with many *codex* scores, *XV* appears as a kind of lesson in formal construction, which the musicians can freely fill with their own choices of materials. There are four material types/constructions, labelled clearly as A, B, C, and D. The complete 15-minute form is as follows, a rondo that is also a kind of “mirror form”: A1—B1—C1—B2—D—B3—C2—B4—A2.

Both A sections consist of two types of material – firstly dense and chaotic improvised sounds (moving through the full range of the instrument, featuring complex sounds such as multiphonics and scratch tones), followed by a kind of stillness. In A1, this stillness was marked by freezing on the whatever sound was currently being produced and then moving slowly or quickly in a kind of glissando to one of two given pitches (different for each group, with each group's two pitches spaced a Major 14th apart). In A2, players made an immediate change to one of six given pitches, creating a sustained cluster. These materials, cued by the conductor using the left and right hand respectively, are cycled through roughly six times each A section, to meet the length suggestions given. Another major difference between the two A sections is the dynamics – A1 begins *tutti fff* with a gradual decrescendo to *mf* over the six iterations, while A2 is *tutti ppp sempre* throughout.

The B sections are the most common in the work, appearing between all other sections. Each has three circles with a number of points prescribing different events, as seen in Figure 4 below. As with Richard's other works, the infinity symbol is used to indicate free improvisation. The pitches, dynamic range, ordering of events around the circles, the time between cues (given by the conductor), and the total duration vary between each of the B sections, but otherwise the instructions remain identical. While the musicians are cued as their whole group (1, 2, or 3), they make individual decisions about where to begin a circle, then continuing clockwise around it on each new cue. This creates a complex web of different materials sounding at any one time, and while there is the possibility of group or ensemble silences these are in no way guaranteed.

While the instructions for the B sections take a bit of time to fully comprehend – as may be seen below in Figure 2 – in practice these sections are simple and effective for conductor and performers.

The two C sections once again present a set of pitches for each group, six apiece. Detailed instructions above this give three distinct directions per group, marked (a), (b) and (c). These directions are in fact the same for all three groups, just in a different order. Each group cycles through the directions on the conductor's cue, much like in the B sections. In both instances of C, one of these three directions is a freely improvised solo, requiring a single soloist to be chosen for the entirety of each C section. The other directions utilise the given pitches in various ways to create a delicate carpet of sound underscoring the soloist/s.

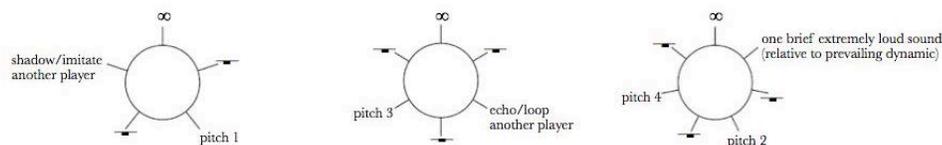
Section D is a singularity, and the central point of the piece. It also requires a little more preparation and memorisation for the performers than other sections. Here we are once again presented with a set of pitches for each group, but they are interspersed with “headless notes”, that is, stems with no specified pitch or sound type. For these, performers can freely choose pitched or unpitched effect. Performers cycle through this material (the PM – “Principal Material”) on loop, varying their speed between 30 and 240 eighth note beats per minute: as stated in the score, “each instrument varies tempo individually, irregularly, constantly, creating [a] multicoloured, multiperspectival texture of points”. Variety should also be found in each note or sound’s colour, dynamic, and attack.

**B2** (duration approximately 1'30" from entry of third group)

conductor: cue one of the groups **every 3-9 seconds**, responding to the changing combinations and textures (and silences).

instrumentalists: dynamic range in this section **ppf**. On the conductor's first cue to your group (two groups will already have been given this cue towards the end of section C1): choose freely a point on one (again freely chosen) of the three circles below and play (or not) as suggested. On the next cue to your group, go clockwise to the next point. When you have completed a circle, choose another at the next cue and continue clockwise around it. When you have completed all three circles, begin again with a freely-chosen point on a freely-chosen circle, and so on.

∞ = free improvisation  
pitch 1, 2, 3, 4 = sustain this pitch from the selection for your group, possibly with microtonal and/or timbral and/or dynamic changes and/or rearticulations (the other indications should be realised in a different way each time!)



conductor: somewhere in the last quarter of section B2, cue two groups in turn to begin section D

Figure 2: *codex XV* (Barrett, 2015), section B2.<sup>4</sup>

In section D the conductor no longer gives cues group by group, but instead uses the left hand to cue subsections numbered 1-7, and the right hand to cue individual players at designated intervals in subsections 2, 4, and 6. The left hand cues give block dynamic changes for each subsection, as well as specifying what happens when a player receives a right-hand cue. In subsection 2, the cued performer accelerates their PM (Principal Material) over a period of 4-8 seconds to “as fast as possible” with a dramatic crescendo. In 4, the performer sustains the

4 Used with permission from the composer, self-published.

next specified pitch in their pattern for 4-8 seconds with a diminuendo starting from *fff*. In 6, the performer may freely improvise, once again for just 4-8 seconds. After the performer enacts their cue, they return to cycling through the PM as before.

While there were less decisions for us to assign in the manner of *V* ahead of time in our workshop session (besides the make-up of the three groups and the solos in the C sections, everything relies on the cues of the conductor during performance), we prepared ourselves for this work by practicing some of the sections in isolation. This was helpful for me especially, as I was to take the role of the conductor. I could test out ideas and see where I would most need to prepare myself.

### Working towards effective communication

Something we found in our preparation sessions of *codex XV* is that while the instructions in the score for where the conductor should give cues are very precise, it is unclear how exactly to designate cue changes, such as between sections. Even the indicated left/right hand divide can be quite unclear to most musicians in the ensemble, especially with short rehearsal times and busy material that involves several stimuli at once. Because of this, I devised a number of distinct symbols to help clarify my directions as conductor, and in our rehearsals just before the performance we tested these and together made decisions for any that needed to be altered in some way. For the left and right hand cues of sections A, I marked left hand cues (chaos) with a flat palm, blade of the hand cutting downwards towards the floor, and right hand cues with the palm facing straight down, and the blade of the hand drawing a slow straight line out to the right, as shown below:



Figure 3: Left and right hand signals for section A.

To cue individual groups for the changes from section to section, I used a one-handed manual alphabet (sign language). As AUSLAN (Australian sign language, with which I am familiar) uses a two-handed alphabet, I first turned to American Sign Language for one-handed symbols. As we met together as a group, it was very interesting how many of the musicians knew basic sign language from their respective countries! We ended up using a composite sign language, utilising the one-handed symbols that would be most clear, taken from the Italian and Canadian/American manual alphabets, along with our own invented signs. These were as follows:

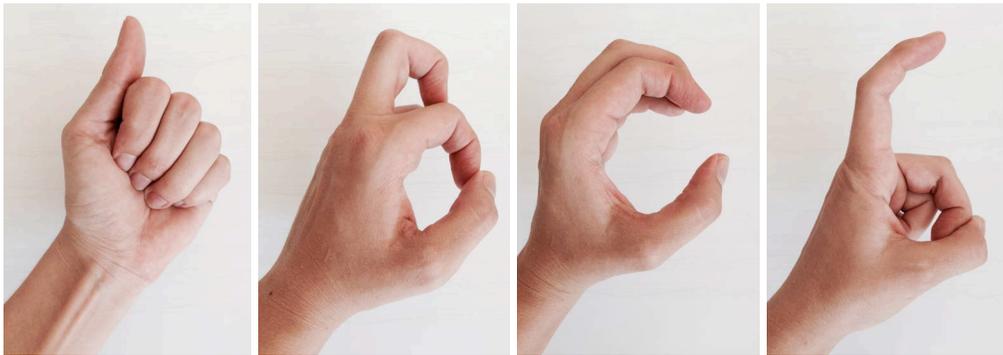


Figure 4: The signs used for sections A, B, C, and D, respectively.

Using these signs I was able to clearly mark a section change with my left hand while cueing a group with my right, as many of the changes involve groups transitioning individually into the new material according to the conductor's directions.

For section D, I held up left hand number continuously, starting with my index finger for 1, but then with my thumb as I moved from subsection 5 into 6. I would give a large downbeat and then sweep my left hand around the whole ensemble to make the change clear, as the musicians have quite a bit of juggling to do at this point – reading the given pitches, creatively varying a number of elements and inventing different sounds, while remembering what dynamics and cues were possible in the given subsection – and tended to get a bit more stuck in the score than in other sections. My right hand then cued individual players for their solo variations.

Eye contact was particularly important for cueing, to ensure the effectiveness of the transitions. This is especially true of the cues to individual musicians. In my experience, one thing that works particularly well in this piece is the continuation of one or two of the groups while another group suddenly enters, drops out, or changes material. The texture can shift dramatically according to the whims of the conductor, so long as the performers are ready to go along with her/him. This creates quite a different dynamic to other *codex* pieces, in that the

spontaneous decisions of an individual conductor leads to coordinated group transitions that would be rare in the situation of more “democratic” group improvisation. There is a sense of both the conductor playing with the performers and vice versa – both are playing with the expectations of the audience.

## Crunch time

Our final ensemble featured a diverse mix of instruments, personalities and nationalities, including my G.A.M.E. and ManaMa peers and some other close colleagues. Alongside our core team of the six players introduced above were the following musicians: Rubén Martínez Orío (Spain) on glockenspiel/cow bells and a strung drum of his own design; Primož Sukič (Slovenia) on E-guitar; Kaya Kuwabara (Japan) on viola; Pieter Pellens (Belgium) on alto and baritone saxophones; Heather Roche (Canada/Germany) on contrabass clarinet; and Rowan Hamwood (Australia) on bass flute.

Due to the busy-ness of twelve professional and approaching-professional musicians and the different cities some would travel from, we finally all came together just one day before the concert. Friday 17 June consisted of a full day of rehearsals with coaching by cellist Arne Deforce.

From the preparatory workshop sessions, I had come to the realisation that *codex V* would be significantly more difficult to put together than *codex XV*, despite the much simpler appearance of the score. The running thread of the melody would only work as a kind of “conductor” if everyone knew it well enough to tail smoothly one to another, and to keep a consistent pulse through the ensemble. On top of that we would be dealing with many complex instructions for variations, elaborations, and deviations. Therefore, we began our rehearsal with *codex V*. Over the course of the two days of rehearsals, I was proven correct and realised that this work could have benefited from a more spaced-out rehearsal period to ensure we could be secure as a group, which would have given us more freedom to play with the events and materials.

My plan was to start by running through the melody, unadorned, as an ensemble – observing only the handing over of the musical line as per the assignments made previously, from group to group, from instrument to instrument. It quickly became clear that even those people who had worked on this melody in their preparatory practice struggled somewhat with the irregular rhythmic patterns and jagged melodic shapes, and those who had not heeded my emailed warnings and turned up unprepared held us back even more. My fears were realised, and it was challenging for the group to stay amicable and focussed when what we had all perceived to be a relatively straightforward task turned out to be quite difficult. I could feel tension sitting high up in my chest, which worked

against a feeling of groundedness and security and made both sensing and indicating a steady pulse much trickier.

We slowly began to construct the piece over the following hours of rehearsal, working in smaller chunks, feeling each other's pulse, and assigning cue signals before beginning to add the various elaborations. Arne assisted us by lending an external set of ears, making suggestions as to who might most easily cue certain moments, and conducting for a time where necessary. When things got a little tense we took a lunch break and returned to give it one more go.

One thing that I personally found particularly challenging, and that I noticed my colleagues struggling with as well, was continuing to follow the notated melody while freely improvising. In music where things could change quite significantly each play-through, aural cues were difficult to secure. Meanwhile, free improvisation – already difficult enough when restricted to such short bursts of exactly designated time – requires a full immersion in the sonic landscape around you and a certain distance from the score. By following the melodic progression closely, it was much harder than usual to unleash a creative, inventive mind; if you gave yourself the space to be free it was very easy to lose your place on the page. With more time, I expect that establishing a system of organised cueing could allow the improvising players to extract themselves more fully from the score. In our case, each of the musicians solved these problems for themselves – either organising a cue with fellow players, finding an aural marker, or ensuring they were fairly certain about the length of time they would play.

This struggle called to mind the conversation I had had with Deforce about the difficulties of improvisation, and how a performer could turn a perceived failure into a moment of opportunity.

A thing which is also nice ... with Richard's music, the aesthetics of his music, is that the battle or the fight against the material can go in two directions, in the sense that you become a conqueror and you win the game but also that you go into total failure, but a failure that is so authentic and interesting that it becomes also a winning situation. But that needs a little bit of experience, to go into the region where you know you will fail, you know, it's for sure, you know you will fall down. And the whole question is practicing to learn to fall as best you can, to make the best possible fall. (Deforce, 2016)

I had asked Deforce how and why he would advise practising this kind of failing. His response went deeply into how the body of the musician needs to be able to operate differently when improvising than when performing meticulously prepared, notated music:

The reason why I have to practise that, for example fast fingers, is to discipline somewhere my fingers again to be able to fall freely, rather than

in a cramp. Because if I fall because there is a cramp between the fingers and bow or something, then I'm not happy because I think "oh shit, this was not it". And when you fall and there's a sense of liberation, freedom, something interesting. ... You go with the movement, you just let go, so the reason why you have to practice is you have to be able to let go within that energy. Sometimes it gets you further and then sometimes something new happens, you say "my god, did I really play that, how is that possible?" And the only way it was possible is through the prism of this notation, or the prism of this rule. This rule or sometimes this complex notation Richard has, on the edge of the possibility of playing, acts as a kind of vehicle by which we can go through a prism and there is again this discipline of learning how to fail as best, to fall as best. Then it's no longer a fall, it's a creation. (ibid.)

Back in our rehearsal, things were starting to settle. As familiarity was built up, bodies relaxed and it became easier to hold onto a unified pulse. Personally, I felt quite far from Arne's "falling" with freedom, but I noticed that some other members of the group – those more practised in improvisation in particular – were more comfortable, and able to more confidently assume a leading role.

We finally moved on to *codex XV* with just an hour and a half to spare from a full-day's work. Thankfully, I was also correct in thinking that this *codex* would prove somewhat less problematic. As noted above, I had chosen to take on the role of conductor, and in this instance my own preparatory work helped alleviate some of the responsibility of each individual player. We went through each of the formal section types (A1 and 2, B1 to 4, C1 and 2, and finally D) ensuring that everyone fully understood the instructions and could engage with the musical game. One particularly important factor that we emphasised was the variations between number sections of the same type. While we did not have so much time to work into the details, it quickly became apparent that it was necessary for all the performers to sit mostly on the low side of the dynamic ranges given in order to allow those quieter dynamics to actually be part of the resulting textures. Before we called it a day, we looked at the transitions between sections, clarifying my cues and signs and making sure everyone knew how the piece would run.

I went home Friday night concerned but hopeful that we would "pull it out of the hat" the next day. The fact that *XV* had gone so well and that we had established clear signals I could use to cue the groups helped bolster my confidence significantly.

Saturday afternoon, when we came together once again, we began by just playing through *V*. I had suggested that we start with the first two pages, but we in

fact continued beyond that as it seemed to be going well, and ended up getting right through to the end! Suddenly it seemed to work, as if by magic, but probably through a combination of a little bit of home practise and the notes settling in everyone's minds overnight. Everyone seemed slightly shocked by the radical change from the previous day's rehearsal, and we made a quick re-assessment of our progress and what needed to be done as we approached concert hour.

One of the more useful preparations for *V* was just playing through it a few more times to get used to the pacing and the transitions between groups and individuals. It had taken us a bit more time than I had expected, but we had passed from the first stage of *codex* preparation that Barrett had outlined to me (concentrating on individual parts) and into the second (focussing on the connections and getting a sense for the piece as a whole). We were able to play through the work without it crumbling, and could play with some musical interactions between players. This was also evident in our physical communications: everyone was better able to cue and watch one another, and was moving more freely with the music. Arne arrived slightly later and was also pleasantly surprised by our progress, suggesting only that we might consider some issues of balance more carefully. By the time of the performance I believe we had achieved something approaching Barrett's third stage (making structural connections across the whole work), however this piece would have been really interesting to work on over a longer period to ensure all ensemble members were able to participate in such creative real-time composing.

With *XV*, the important things were clearly to solidify the transitions between sections and begin running it so players could get a sense for the work as a whole, rather than as a succession of parts. The group-by-group transitions between sections (cues being given to one group at a time to change to the next section, while the other groups remain on their previous material) meant that it was not difficult to create a natural sense of continuity. With Arne's help, we focussed on the importance of the changes in dynamics in creating a sense of evolving form. It was necessary to once again reiterate the importance of playing on the softer side most of the time. *codex XV* ends with a one bar "coda" of a fully notated, layered scalic pattern in a rhythmic ratio of 7:6:5 between the three groups (see Figure 5). This is extremely effective when played so soft as to be almost on the border of audibility, which means that for certain instruments (such as the contrabass clarinet and baritone saxophone) many notes in this passage might not sound.

As the rehearsal period reached its close I was confident that we would give the two works a solid performance, and especially *XV* (which may have been because I felt more in control of the shapes, materials, and continuity).

The image shows a musical score for the final measure of *codex XV*. It consists of three staves labeled 'group 1', 'group 2', and 'group 3'. Above the staves, there are time signatures: '7:6' for group 1, '5:6' for group 2, and '5:6' for group 3. A box at the top left indicates 'final bar: ♩. = 45'. The music is written in a complex, rhythmic style with many notes and rests. The dynamic marking 'ppppp sempre' is written below each staff.

Figure 5: *codex XV* (Barrett, 2015), final measure.<sup>5</sup>

## Concert: The body in performance

Our performance was a program lasting just over one hour, opening with the works by Rebecca Saunders (*Molly's Song 3 – Shades of Crimson*) and Sarah Nemtsov (*Briefe.Puppen*), before the two *codex* pieces, interspersed by Hanna Kölbel's *Minigolf*. The venue in which we were performing (The Projection Room in Ixelles) allowed us to stage parts of the concert in different rooms of the venue, creating a parcours that moved the audience with us through diverse ambient spaces as well as through different musical textures and experiences.

It is difficult to gauge the success of a performance like this when you are a part of it, except in very intuitive terms. One way I personally experience this intuition was through the feelings that arose in my body during the concert, in particular the degree of groundedness (or tension and lack of control), comfort (or discomfort), energy (or fatigue), excitement (or dullness), and connectedness (or disconnect) between my own body and mind, and between myself and the bodies and choices of others. These are feelings that also arise for me when performing fully notated compositions, but in those instances I can judge them against the feelings I have experienced during preparation and especially during practice performances, where I try to “pre-create” the pressures of being on stage. In improvised or semi-improvised performances like this, it is impossible to anticipate how things will feel or play out, and so the bodily sensations and emotions are heightened and experienced from a place of curiosity and awareness. On the one hand improvisational elements place new stresses on the performer (the unknown is often stressful), but on the other hand they can alleviate some of the main pressures of performing from the composer's score, giving room for chance and uncertainty and performer creativity.

<sup>5</sup> Used with permission from the composer, self-published.



Figure 6: Heather Roche on contrabass clarinet performing *codex XV* with G.A.M.E. at SMOG, June 18, 2016. Photograph by Sophie Saporosi.

During the concert, I observed these different experiences of my body during performance as opposed to rehearsal. Many of the little stresses – mistakes, anticipation, attempts to wrangle control, communications (or lack thereof) – were amplified, finding their way into the fingers, the shoulders, the airways, as well as seemingly inconsequential body parts such as the hips or the toes. Instances of tension appeared as members of the ensemble struggled to balance attention to the score and their fellow musicians with individualised freedom and creativity: an improvised entrance without respect to the prevailing ensemble dynamic, someone missing my cue in *XV* because they were buried in their score, and some hairy, on-edge tempi. It is a practised body and mind that meets this stress with relaxation; with Arne’s ideas of “falling”. I noted a few instances of practised action (even in our short burst of intensive rehearsal) taking over where stress and tension had come into play: a missed cue in *codex V* was quickly recovered through an instantaneous ensemble decision, and my own initially frantic-feeling free improvisation quickly settled into a thematic movement rather than a sounding result, producing something quite new to me. Overall, moments of panic or inattention were rare and as a group we recovered well each time.

A more objective way to judge such a performance is to listen back to a recording.<sup>6</sup> In doing that I was satisfied that our *codex* preparations were demonstrably solid, and that we gave a convincing and engaging performance of both works. While there was no official written review, we later received positive feedback from our mentors in the ManaMa program and from peers in the Brussels music community on the blend of the diverse sounds and the shifting colours. I also sent the recordings to Barrett, and he responded that “both [*codex V* and *XV*] sound very committed and convincing, and they make a good combination I think. ... I haven't yet had a chance to listen with the scores but of course in pieces like this the traditional notion of "accuracy" has a more limited application than in fully notated music” (2016, personal correspondence).

### Some conclusions

The observations made in this paper go some way towards an answer to the questions I posed early on regarding the differences of bodily experience during improvisation compared to performance of fully notated compositions, the body as a tool for musical communication (especially in the case of decisions made in the moment), and the development of such communications over the course of preparation. I have found that the freedoms and possibilities of improvisation open up an awareness of my body – both its comforts and tensions – that is rarely present in performance of meticulously notated works. The use of the body as a communicative tool is on the one hand weighted with more importance while playing *codex*, but can also be something of a hindrance to a sense of uninhibited and intuitive response (hence many improvisers may be observed playing with their eyes closed). As familiarity with the score was achieved, performers were at once able to engage in more clear, confident, and frequent physical communications and achieve a greater freedom in improvisational moments. These questions will provide me with ongoing points for exploration, with Barrett's *codex* scores being only one vehicle for such inquiry, and here I have presented a very personal account of my bodily experiences. My hope is that this paper might encourage other performers and composers to explore aspects of improvisation in their own practice, and to experience the wealth of possibilities it may open up for them.

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6 Recordings from this performance are available to stream online:  
<https://soundcloud.com/hanneflute/richard-barrett-codex-v>;  
<https://soundcloud.com/hanneflute/richard-barrett-codex-xv-1>

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