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Action Music and Action Painting in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: The painter Jackson Pollock reputedly claimed, “I am nature,” while George W. Bush saw himself as “a gut player. I play by instincts.” Donald Trump echoed these sentiments, insisting he was “a very instinctual person, but my instinct turns out to be right.” But can these instincts be put to good use? Perhaps one solution lies in channelling these forces into more creative endeavours, transforming the masculinist approach of Pollock into a more collaborative and joyous action in music. “Action Music” (2013) and “Action Music 2” (2017) are two compositions of mine in which I have employed both in-the-moment improvisation as well as an analytic yet abstract transcription process. Both musical scores are characterized by an alternation of highly detailed, prescriptive musical symbolism, which demand precise realization, which are set against fantastical hand-drawn and painted abstractions (some inspired by Pollock’s drip painting) which invite active creative participation. Performers are required to shift between radically opposing interpretive modes: the one highly objective, the other intuitive or emotional. A single cohesive narrative is denied, and instead, we must find meaning in the dialectic between concrete and abstract, fact and fiction.

Introduction

To Jackson Pollock was attributed the famous declaration, “I am nature,” while in 2004, George W. Bush told Bob Woodward of the Washington Post that: “I’m a gut player. I play by instincts. I don’t play by the book.” Earlier this year, Donald Trump echoed this sentiment of championing the instinctual, right-or-wrong, by claiming in Time Magazine that he was “a very instinctual person, but my instinct turns out to be right.” But can these instincts be put to good use? Perhaps one solution lies in channelling these forces into more creative endeavours, transforming the masculinist approach of Pollock into a more collaborative and joyous action in music.

“Action Music”: The First Iteration (2013)

“Action Music” (2013) began as a recorded solo improvisation using a distressed Hammond organ synthesizer patch. Dirty electrical contacts and a dying internal battery gave the synthesizer a distorted and degraded sound quality. A private performance, captured in the moment, with little forethought as to style, content or form, the recording embodies an intuitive music making approach, with an emphasis on immediacy and spontaneity. It is characterized by angular syncopation, sudden changes of texture, extensive use of tone clusters, and free arrhythmic passages. Combined with the unusual, distressed sound quality, I considered the recording an interesting sound artefact in itself. But did it represent a purely intuitive, from-the-gut expression, lacking deeper reflection? Not satisfied to end my creative
process there, I decided to treat the recording as a sketch, a starting point for a more collaborative and fully fleshed-out chamber ensemble work. By inviting collaborative participation in the work’s realization, I hoped to move beyond a mere expression of ego.

To create a musical score, I listened in close detail and slowly transcribed the recorded performance. The complex nature of the improvised musical textures and rhythms posed unique challenges for transcription, which necessitated novel strategies of musical notation. The difficulty of transcribing improvised music was discussed by influential composer-improviser Anthony Braxton in a 2003 interview:

attempts to notate the great solos from the masters of improvised music only capture maybe two-thirds of what actually happened in the music … I’m thinking of the solo by Warne Marsh on “The Song Is You” … I think as a young guy what fascinated me … I don’t know how to say it … Warne has a gravity and a vibrational presence that’s … It’s like the notes are here [waves arm horizontally] but the real logic is in the internal world [waves arm at lower level] … It’s not something that can be written out.3

I am not intending to compare my own solo improvisation with the great solos of jazz history, but through the act of transcription, I felt I was trying to come to grips with uncapturable aspects of the performance. That pursuit led me to consider how best to communicate these aspects to performers, and, to that end, I adopted experimental methods, including graphic notation, non-standard note shapes, surreal expressive markings, and a system of non-specific pitch contours. Through these means I tried to suggest a musical three-dimensionality, encouraging performers to find their own unique sound; to explore their own vibrational presence. Significantly, the intention was not to recreate the original improvisation via the musical score, but rather, to use it as the springboard for a new collaborative creation, which could echo, amplify, or even subvert the original artefact.

![Fig. 1: Excerpt from “Action Music” (measures 61-77)](image)

Figure 1 illustrates notational devices used in “Action Music.” The first two lines show the use of variously shaped noteheads, which include rectangles, triangles, diamonds, and Xs. These are accompanied by a general direction, in the score preface, to employ extreme tone qualities and techniques to match the different note shapes. Each performer is thus asked to map the potentials of their instrument, and of their own sonic repertoire, onto the structure of symbols given in the score, introducing a participatory element into the performance.
Lines 3 and 4 show the use of graphic notation in “Action Music.” In this section the musical typography dissolves into hand-drawn dots, dashes, and squiggles, which are to be interpreted freely, but with reference to the general pacing of the bar. Players are asked to shift into a different performance mode, with a goal of creating musical shapes that mirror the visual shapes and contours on the musical staff. Focus is placed on the individual capabilities and aesthetics of instruments and performers, and interplay between the musical score and improvisation. The use of graphical elements here is inspired by the scores of Anthony Braxton, who has extensively used combinations of music typography with hand-drawn graphical elements.4

“Action Music” was my first open instrumentation composition. The instructions specify that the piece “may be played by any number of instruments, in any combination, from soloist to orchestra.”5 This has had the very welcome result that performers from both classical and jazz backgrounds have performed the work. To date it has been played by mixed ensembles of four to twelve players, including Ensemble Offspring, Clocked Out, Kupka’s Piano, Aventa, the Creative Original Music Adelaide committee (COMA), and Grey Wing.6 Each grouping has brought out different qualities of the composition, according to their own backgrounds and contexts. Ensemble Offspring combined with my group Clocked Out to give the premiere performance (Audio clip 1). Highly experienced in realizing detailed contemporary classical compositions, both groups were adept at performing the intricate unison rhythms that run throughout the piece. In addition, the use of extended techniques and novel instrumental colours was foregrounded, and particularly informed interpretations of graphic materials. In contrast, the COMA band brought a more decidedly jazz approach to the work (Audio clip 2). Unison rhythms were performed with great precision, and with a strong sense of metric pulse. They fully embraced the notion of instrumental experimentation, while at the same time drawing on jazz-based improvisational strategies in their interpretation.

Audio clip 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yK0q518RwMs
Audio clip 2: https://comadaile.bandcamp.com/track/action-music

Central to the experience of “Action Music,” are sudden shifts of performative energy that mirror the boundaries between conventional and graphic notation. For the performer, executing conventionally notated, and rhythmically precise sections requires an analytical approach. Attention is concentrated on coordinating with other members of the ensemble. On the other hand, interpreting the graphic notation requires a more intuitive approach. Here the situation is reversed: one’s main focus is to create an individual interpretation, and secondarily, to coordinate with the group. Listeners are not privy to the changing visual stimuli occurring in the musical score, but nevertheless, shifts and contrasts in the musical energy are apparent and strongly shape perception of the work.

“Action Music 2” (2017): Drip Painting

Encouraged by a strong interest in “Action Music” from a number of ensembles, in 2017 I embarked upon a follow-up composition, “Action Music 2,” where I sought to explore an explicit connection with Action Painting, the innovative method of dripping and pouring paint directly onto a canvas, pioneered by Jackson Pollock.7 This is, in fact, not the first time that Pollock’s work has served as an inspiration for my music. In the collaborative piece “Lavender Mist” (2002), with percussionist Vanessa Tomlinson, we applied the principal of using physical gestures and kinetic phenomena to produce musical textures that, to us, suggested parallels with the visual textures of Pollock’s work. Vanessa manipulated four-
metre ropes, whipping and spinning them onto a floor covered with resonant objects, while I imitated the kinetic and sonic action on prepared piano.8

Pollock’s shift from painting-as-object to painting-as-action in 1947 was linked with a shift from figurative to abstract, and a focus on immediacy in his process. Kirk Varnedoe identified Pollock’s Mural (1943) as an important pre-cursor to the drip paintings, representing a key moment in the artist’s career—the moment at which he made a break from figuration to pure abstraction. According to Varnedoe, this conceptual shift allowed Pollock to focus on the physical gestures of painting: “the liberation from the demands of strict figuration … and the escape from iconic symbolism had left him free to run on, for yard after yard, variants on a few basic motions.”9 A few years later, in 1952, Harold Rosenberg coined the term “Action Painting” to define a broader trend among American painters: “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign analyse or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” Director Hans Namuth, who famously immortalized Pollock’s drip technique by filming him from beneath a pane of glass, observed the “dance” in Pollock’s painting style: “His movements, slow at first, gradually became faster and more dance-like as he flung black, white, and rust coloured paint onto the canvas.”10 Composer-improviser Cecil Taylor echoed this idea two decades later: “I try to imitate on the piano the leaps in space a dancer makes.”11

In the same way that a canvas can be seen as an artefact of performed actions, a recording can be viewed as an artefact of a musical improvisation. “Action Music 2,” like its predecessor, began as an improvisation, captured as a recording, and then used as the basis for a musical score. As in “Action Music,” when I undertook analysis and transcription of the material into a notated score, I was aware of palpable shifts of performative energy—a dialectic between what I came to consider “figurative” and “abstract” modes. In musical terms, the “figurative” was material which had a clearly recognizable melodic shape and metrical rhythms. The “abstract” material, by contrast, had no discernible melody or metre, instead consisting of varied textural ideas, which I consider parallel to Pollock’s “dispersed, omnidirectional network of incident.”12
The opposition of figurative and abstract modes is mirrored in the musical score, as seen in a comparison of two sections, labelled E and F. At E, traditional notation (with non-traditional noteheads) is used to suggest the figurative mode, which, as in “Action Music,” demands an analytic interpretive approach. At F, on the other hand, the abstract mode is signified by paint drips, suggesting a gestural approach to performance. The use of paint pouring and dripping techniques in “Action Music 2” differs in three key ways from the use of pencil markings in “Action Music.” Firstly, the use of colour adds a new dimension, with new interpretive opportunities. Will the colours be treated as separate layers in a musical counterpoint, as distinct musical parameters, or as gestalt stimuli? Secondly, the paint pouring technique places much more emphasis on continuous line, as opposed to individual marks (although individual drips are used in other sections). This could be read as a more continuous sound, or, as unbroken melodic phrases. Lastly, drip painting into the score offers a clear homage to Pollock’s work, one that provides a significant historical and cultural reference point to consider in forming an interpretation.

Most importantly, the drip paintings in the score of “Action Music 2” are not “the work.” Rather, the work is located in musical performance, and involves both interpretive and improvisational input from the performers. Central to this endeavour is navigating frequent shifts in musical texture, visual presentation, and interpretive modes. In order to realize the piece, performers must be willing to take an active role in shaping the musical discourse, both playing a part in the ensemble while at the same time putting their own individual stamp on the music.
Conclusion

By using improvisation and analysis, figurative and abstract transcription in my creative process, I employed a combination of intuitive, objective, and subjective methods to create “Action Music” and “Action Music 2.” Both musical scores are characterized by an alternation of highly detailed, prescriptive musical symbols, which demand precise realization, and fantastical hand-drawn and painted abstractions, which invite active creative participation. Performers are required to shift between radically opposing interpretive modes; the one highly objective, the other intuitive or emotional. In listening to a performance one perceives palpable shifts in musical energy and focus between the two types of material. Both performers and listeners are immersed in a relentless stream of new visual and aural information, like scrolling through an endless social media feed. The performer must approach the music with the heart of a free improviser and the brain of a careful interpreter, and the audience must go along for the ride, never getting too comfortable in any one musical space. A single cohesive narrative is denied, and instead, we must find meaning in the dialectic between concrete and abstract, fact and fiction.

Our contemporary situation reflects the elevation of individual feelings over considered analysis and facts. Whatever action is ultimately proposed or suggested by “Action Music 2,” I can only hope will reflect more than just a gut expression of ego, but perhaps an awareness of history and alternative cultural perspectives.

Endnotes

All URLs accessed Sept 2018.


4 See ibid., pp. 1–23.


8 The concept of Action Painting as applied to Pollock, and Namuth’s documentation of the painter’s “dance like” gestures, has long served as part of a repertoire of ideas which has informed post-World War II interdisciplinary art, including performance art, sound sculpture, post-object art, Fluxus music events, and so on. For a survey of some of these developments, see Adrian Henri, Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance (NY: Prager, 1974). On the Australian context, see Anne Marsh, Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-1992 (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1993).
9 Varnedoe and Karmel, p. 40.
12 Varnedoe and Karmel, p. 48