Sound Mass
& its political orientation
Sound Mass for _____Tet, Woodwinds, Strings, Percussion and Electronics

Orientation

The “individual” is merely a rhetorical construct. That is, as soon as we start to describe the individual, even on a biological level, we quickly find that we also have to describe that which generates, sustains, and shapes them. From this philosophical basis we can start to think about the many ways that the concept of the individual, used on its own at any substantial length, impoverishes artistic, philosophical, and political discourses. What I’m briefly describing is the foundational folly of the bootstraps narrative.

There is a particularly insidious brand of conservatism and bootstraps individualism, as well as faux-radical reactions against it, that permeates the various art worlds. These both function as avenues and justifications for the uncritical accruement of exchange value: i.e. exclusionary economic and social structures, and spectacle production. One of the insidious aspects of this is that the full implications of these modes of practice often become psychologically repressed in the practitioner. This is the definition of ideology: the racist truly believes that they are not being racist, the abuser truly believes that they are not being abusive, the artist truly believes that economic success sets them free, etc.

I personally struggle often with these ideologies, as we all must because the accruement of exchange value under capitalism is a necessity for survival. But, it is a problem when our main mode of expression falls to the logics of these ideologies. We must be careful here.

In more recent years I feel that I have asked music to politically be more than it can possibly be, which is a common pitfall amongst progressive/radical minded artists. More specifically for me that meant attempting to produce spectacle with radical aesthetics; spectacle as an absurdist parody of itself. This has a potential for sincerity, and can serve as poignant critique, but it is a tricky line to walk as sincere critique can easily become nihilism and/or delusion (e.g. Sun Ra vs. Jerry Rubin founder of the YIP party, respectively). In climates of mass political and cultural confusion clear communication of ideas
becomes increasingly critical. In short, pessimism and nihilism are not radical.

If we are to be responsible artists we must clearly and emphatically state that it is beyond the scope of artistic activity alone to achieve liberation from class based society. This is a problem with the nature and distribution of power and resources. Therefore, liberation is contingent on the struggle for democratically controlled political and economic power. Stating it here now it seems obvious, but it must not be so given the heights of importance to which art is often raised by its practitioners.

Art and culture are most certainly an important component of this struggle, but they must be a part of a scientific political program [read as non-dogmatic, adaptive, etc]. It is well within the scope of cultural activity to both posit alternative value systems and show what creative activity and social relations might look like that are not attached to capitalist [patriarchal, imperialist, and white-supremacist] ideologies, and to offer emotional and spiritual catharsis. This latter point is what I am interested in here. I think that it is important to cultivate cathartic practices that are non-escapist. This kind of emotional liberation can serve as a prelude to and inform the framework of non-reactionary social transformation. A central part of the material liberation I’ve been talking about includes the time and freedom for all people to take part in creative activity. I hope that activities like this one can contribute more to struggles for material liberation in large part through clear articulations of their scopes and purposes.
The Healing Nature of the Musical Drone and the Aesthetic Expression of Musical Community

As improvisors we experience the tension with the above described ideology of individuality in a visceral way when we “freely” improvise. This manifests internally as the struggle between our personal musical desires and tendencies, and what is best for the collective musical statement. We are engaged in the real time negotiation of small scale musical frameworks.

I personally feel that lots of free improvisation without breaks of playing through some kinds of explicit frameworks can make me fall into unwanted repetition. That is, instead of allowing myself to listen to and be reactive to a musical moment, to come to a truly collectively decided framework, I default to an individually satisfying thing when I have not given myself adequate musical restriction. What an explicitly stated framework can provide an ensemble is a symbolic reference point for improvisational communication that enables the building of structures that would not, or could not, otherwise be reached, particularly when the ensemble is of a larger size. In terms of size, there is an analogy here for what happens when human groups exceed Dunbar’s Number (groups of 150 humans). At this point of growth, humans need more complex collective myths to be able to function. Historically speaking this has meant laws, money, religion, etc.

I’m interested in frameworks of various restrictive qualities, but here I would like to explore a framework that is simultaneously very restrictive and very open: the musical drone / sound mass (a term from Anthony Braxton’s Composition Notes). I want to explore this framework for reasons relative to what I articulated in the last section: 1) Its tendency to induce cognitive shifts and spiritual/emotional catharsis i.e. its meditative qualities (e.g. as have been used in the Byzantine chant tradition). 2) As it is created and improvisationally navigated by a large ensemble, it is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts in which, by its nature, the individual sonic activities must melt into the whole . And 3) Its potential to be a simultaneously very restrictive yet open ended structure. As you will see, the tension between freedom, collective responsibility, and restriction will put the group into a very subtle predicament. It will be the testing of the
boundaries of this predicament that will yield interesting outcomes.

**Score**

Although written with what’s been specified in mind, the group can be made up of any configuration of instrumentalists and/or vocalists of any level of experience. It can be done as a participatory collective meditation and/or as a performance. If done as a performance the group will set up in an arc of some sort, which can consist of several layers if need be. Where possible, all players will play acoustically, or where necessary or when integral to the player’s sound, with small personal amplification stationed closely to where they are physically.

The group will strive to channel, sustain, and collectively end a sound mass. This mass of sound can potentially be contributed to with any type of sound that the player is able to produce on their respective instrument, but the sounds should be produced firstly with the intention to project a healing energy, and secondly with the aesthetic quality of blending [interpreted however the player likes] with the rest of the sound that is being produced.

This should be a solid sound mass, albeit one whose shape, texture, and overall dynamic quality should strive to be ever changing and evolving, but nonetheless unfragmented. Think of different ways to obscure your attack and release, avoid attack sounds or find ways to integrate them into the whole. Put more poetically: contribute with conviction but never aim to stand out, instead always melt into the whole and allow the distinction between yourself and the individuals around you to blur. The air that you are moving is what it is in large part because of the air that they are moving, and more fundamentally you are what you are in part because your relationship to them. Support them, but not in a patronizing or overbearing manner.

This should last from around 30 to 45 minutes. Timers should be used, but don’t need to be dwelled upon.