Three Questions: A Short Position Statement on Compositional Making

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1. What is it to make?

I don’t recognize hylomorphic models of making as evident from my practice, where forms are simply applied to inert (‘willing’) materials. I share Tim Ingold’s perspective that making is an intransitive verb (Ingold 2013), proceeding forwards without a concrete object. Sure, there is pre-compositional planning in the rituals of my process, but I’ve come to understand such preluding as having a catalytic role more than anything else.

When I make, my own creative will is locked in continual dialogue with the materials of a given piece. These materials have an agency. They shape what emerges as much as me. As such, I have found making to be a process of involvement, a participation within a mesh of agencies that comprises both human and non-human participants.

Liza Lim describes the situation well when she outlines her idea of hylaemorphic making, where hylae refers to the mycelial underground fibres of fungi that form a network of ‘fermentation, decomposition, diffusion and re-composition’ that connects ‘trees and other plants, decomposing matter [and] the soil’ (Lim 2014 p.2). The fruits on the surface appear self-contained but are really just protrusions of the ongoing entwinement beneath.

To colour Lim’s understanding, I’d turn my attention to the soil itself – a hy-loam-orphic model, perhaps. Soil is an entwinement of the organic and inorganic. To separate those components would be to change what soil is through an arbitrary instigation. This is a crude metaphor for what Karen Barad calls intra-action. ‘That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.’ (Barad 2007 p.33) Read in these terms, I like to think of making not as an action that creates work(s) but as an intra-action, through which the distinct agencies of maker and material themselves emerge.
2. What is it your work is made from?

The word *material* is problematic in sound/music. Sound is indeed material in a physical sense - it is a vibration. But people also use the word to apply to things that have been abstracted – pitches, durations, and collections thereof etc. I’m increasingly uncomfortable with this second usage. Such parametrization seems only to neglect the full hapticity of sound in its mattering. Saying musics are made from notes seems as useful a statement as saying sculptures are made from solids. (Marble or bronze?) I find it difficult to imagine my music being made from notes any more.

I think about working with material in the literal rather than the abstracted (‘musical’) sense – the material physicality of movement, the agential behaviours of matter.

Much of my recent work displays a penchant for instability. I like to work in contexts where the tethering of input action (a performer’s movement, a digital signal) and output sound is, at best, grossly slackened. A severely detuned cello string serves as a primitive example of such an environment - “Do X and you might get anything from Y to Z.” Many of my instrumental scores thus instruct input actions rather than sonic outputs. This is not to explore the musicality of choreographic action itself (as is the case with other composers), instead I am interested in foregrounding the non-human agentiality of that which sound-making apparatuses (cellos, speakers, human tissues, etc.) are comprised.

The actions in my scores serve as a kind of playground on which agential materialities can perform. The final sonic surface of a piece aims to be primarily the result of such a non-human performance – it is the response of the (destabilized) apparatus to the action that forms a given sonic instance of a piece. In essence, my work is made from kinds of offerings - inverted affordances from the human to the non.

3. What have you come to know about that which it is made from?

Barbara Bolt makes the distinction between an artwork and a work of art, the former considered as a noun, the latter as a verb (Bolt 2004). In this sense, my work is made from verbs, from doings. Doings in the sense of performative actions – sometimes, yes – but also doings in the sense of the independent doings of material agencies within those doings, and the entwined doings from which such doings are themselves made. Everything seems to be active.

As such, I’m coming to learn that my work is not so much made out of sound, but that sound is made out of my work. Whilst such a pretense may appear as something of an inversion, it really is more of an externalization – an acknowledgement of my claim to making as an involvement, not something from ‘within myself’ but is somehow ‘over there’ – a place to which ‘I might go too.’
Ultimately, I’m coming to think of what I do as a making of sites of making, sites where the work comes to make itself. At least that’s what emergent from the site I’ve made today.

References


