sumtone

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michael edwards

altogether disproportionate

for piano and computer
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programme note

“We are not a young people with an innocent record and a scanty inheritance. We have engrossed to ourselves - an altogether disproportionate share of wealth and traffic of the world. We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in the unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.” (Winston Churchill, 1914)

It is simultaneously satisfying and disturbing to read that such a powerful man as Churchill clearly understood the nature and causes of the staggering disparity of wealth between his country and those from whom it stole. At the same time, and like most of our leaders, it is to our shame that he did so little to redress the imbalance. In fact, writing only five years later about possible solutions to the Iraq problem of his time, Churchill would appear to be quite a different man from the one we might imagine--more related to Saddam Hussein, perhaps: “I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes”, he wrote in 1919.

Altogether disproportionate, no? At the time of writing (October 2010), the proposed cuts to the UK military budget are 8%; those to the higher education teaching budget, 80%. The widely broadcast US military deaths since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 number more than 4300; the almost always ignored Iraqi civilian deaths caused by the war, circa 100,000. The cost to US tax payers of each Taliban fighter’s death in Afghanistan? $50 million, according to one estimate. Such depressing statistics were taxing me whilst writing this piece, along with a Diane Arbus image of one of the ‘patriots’ she photographed during the Vietnam War. Not the more famous one, with the maniacal expression on his face, but the stiff boater wearer, sporting the almost illegible lapel badge which implores “Bomb Hanoi.” Pleasant young man. Proportionate? Hardly.

As for the music: Per Rundberg asked for it. He told me he wanted something similar to my ensemble piece, cheat sheet, that he co-premiered in Austria in 2007. He enjoyed--or so he said at least--the very fast tempi that drove the performers to almost skim through the vast array of notes--16000 odd in that piece I believe; only 3000 or so here-careering into each other and into all sorts of unplannable serendipities that are usually found only in free improvisations. He also expressed a desire for music with political content, something that was abundant in cheat sheet. So here we are.

I was further mindful of various conversations Per and I have had over the last thirteen years about works for piano and electronics. It was Per who pointed out to me that one of the difficulties of using amplification is that musicians perform not just in, but with the architectural space of a concert hall; that they learn to project their instrument’s sound into that space, and loudspeakers disturb this relationship. So although I nevertheless wanted to write for piano and computer, this time I didn’t want to make a piece which demanded amplification through a PA system. My solution was to use loudspeakers under the piano. This allows me to excite the piano’s sound board with electronics; mix the instrumental and electronic sources acoustically, in situ, rather than electronically, in a mixing desk; and allows Per to perform without microphones, balancing sound levels according to both the acoustic properties of the piano and the hall he plays in.

I can’t resist ending with a quotation from the composer Helmut Lachenmann. His inspiring writings go some way towards explaining the presence here of so much political comment in what should be a simple concert programme note: “The experience of the beautiful is indissolubly connected with making perceptible the social contradictions in our reality; because to make them perceptible is to make them surmountable.”
key to symbols

- finger nail pluck (or use plectrum if preferred)

+ damp notes(s) with finger(s) near the beginning of the string(s)

\(\triangle\) damp notes with the crotale on the strings

crotale strike on indicated strings (approx.)

crotale turn on indicated strings (approx.; no strike implied)

strike metal body of piano with object: front always metal; rib always knuckle; back always wood; see inside piano graphic for attack points

half-depress keys before playing (result always very quiet)

slap strings with open palm at the approx. position indicated

tc tre corde

uc una corda

\(\triangledown\) res. catch the resonance of the previous attack with the pedal

\(\triangle\) indicates the 3/8 (dotted) portion of a meter such as 7/8

+whooping! (optional): call out excited screeches of delight (!) at appropriate moments of an indicated passage (ad lib)

trigger point at arrow: the numbers indicate trigger number (bar number): sound file

beginning of computer-piano synchronisation zone: rhythm/tempo precision essential for synchronisation of the two parts, e.g. letter L: sound file starts with silence but has loud accents in the next bar.
performance requirements

- laptop computer with the performance software (unless Macintosh, this will need MaxMSP 5; ‘runtime’ version acceptable)
- good quality sound card (stereo output)
- one or two powered speakers positioned under the piano and angled towards the sound board and audience
- stereo analogue volume control knob (optional)
- crotale or finger cymbal with strap for holding, preferably c#, c. 10cm diameter
- megaphone of sufficient power to sound fff with loud speech
- wooden implement/block to strike metal piano frame at back

computer setup

A computer is used during the performance to trigger overlapping sound files played on two speakers mounted underneath the piano. These should be angled so that direct sound will reach both the audience and the piano soundboard. The concept is to have more of an extended piano than a piece for piano and electronics. Both acoustic and electronic sounds should be localised by the listener as emanating from the same source, rather than from piano and speakers, as is usual in pieces of this sort.

The sound files have been mixed so that they balance well with the live piano at the point in which they are playing. No gain adjustment should be necessary during performance, i.e., no sound engineer (and no PA) is required. There is however provision for setting level curves in each of the sound files. See the readme.txt file that comes with the software for more details about this and other aspects of the playback system.

Overall gain should be set during rehearsal using either the gain slider on the software provided, or, preferably a stereo analogue level control knob (this will offer instant and secure control over levels should the computer or sound card crash). The levels should be set so that the loud sound files at letter O are the same level as the fff piano and megaphone voice.

Trigger point arrows (and some cue details: see below) are indicated in the score in blue. The trigger number, bar number, and sound file to be triggered are also indicated for reference (e.g. 36 (666): 1.21 refers to trigger 36 which occurs at bar 666 and starts sound file altogether1.21.wav). Triggering is done by pressing the space bar with the left hand (hence all triggers are at a point where the left hand is free, and the computer should be just to the left of the piano) but a pedal or some other triggering device could be used. Note that some sounds start several beats after the trigger so may not be immediately audible.

Sound file rhythm cues indicated in blue are for orientation purposes only and encompass only the most audible events.
notes

Accidentals carry throughout the bar but are repeated in parentheses as deemed necessary.

Accidentals do not repeat at octaves in either chords or melodic lines.

Bar numbers include repeats e.g. a two-bar phrase repeated three times will increment the bar count by six, not two.

The score presents a mixture of rest bars and pause signs. Rest bars should be counted through with a sense of liveliness, as if the performance is continuing silently. Pauses should be interpreted in the traditional manner, with the actual length determined by the player’s taste and the acoustic environment.

The megaphone is used only once (page 23) but should be ‘interacted with’ during the long pause on page 17 (and at other rest points before page 23 should the performer wish to). ‘Interacted with’ means something along the lines of picking it up, stroking it, making it visible/showing it to the audience (perhaps with a menacing grin) etc. etc.

Duration c. 18 minutes.
We begin with some silent theatre: Exaggerate piano stool adjustments; when it becomes clear to the audience that this is no longer normal, start moving up and down—only slightly at first i.e. just inches up from stool, then more and more—from sitting normally to reaching inside the piano to strike the strings (first event of score). Be quite fast and energetic about this and the ensuing events of the score, but at the same time nonchalent and ‘businesslike’ (as if everything were completely normal behaviour). Up to letter E the rests may be filled ad lib with lengthwise string rubbing, either with the fingers/nails or the wooden or metal object. NB if some event combinations prove impossible with the given rhythms/tempo, move as quickly and fluently as possible (with panache).
martellato, tenuto (tempo primo: \( \frac{4}{4} = 176 \))

(over repeats)

\( \text{+whooping!} \)

whooping!

(over repeats)

ff

keep resonance of string slaps
(half pedal where necessary)

ad lib.
little to no pedal

stop whooping

rit. until F

becoming more and more staccato

una corda
staccato, leggero

3x

(over repeats) mf

p sub

pp

ppp

12 (326): 1.03

sost

13 (334): 1.04

14 (336): 1.05

mf

mp

pp sempre

pp

pp

res.
Meno mosso ma vivace* \( \textit{d}=160 \)

* despite rests, think vivace and imbue the few notes given with that spirit.
very long pause c. 30"

interact with megaphone

senza Ped
start blurring with pedal more and more until bar 786
alternatively, release the pedal after a significant pause, pause further in silence, then proceed to the next section

stop whooping
Hold pedal down and point megaphone into piano to create resonances (or out towards audience, ad lib.). Speak given text loudly (fff with the aid of the megaphone) but without shouting. Aim to have text last as long as the two accompanying sound files (but certainly not longer).

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