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Towards the Aesthetics of Coexistence in Disagreement

An introduction to the premiere performance of the composition *A History of Musical Pitch* (2020) by Seamus Cater with Anne La Berge, Marielle Groven, Koen Nutters, Fredrik Rasten, Germaine Sijstermans, Sander Breure and Seamus Cater.

18.12.2023, 19:00, Rijksacademie, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Writer, music critic, political and cultural theorist and philosopher Mark Fisher complained that there was no new genre or development in pop music after drum and bass. He claimed that all subsequent pop music is somehow reviving old styles and genres, fostering cynicism that creates a difficult situation for establishing the urgency of the present time as a meaningful presence. Fisher considered this phenomenon a symptom of a general crisis of imagination, extending beyond the realm of pop music.

Staying with music and reaching beyond solely pop genre, I would like to claim that the focus on tuning as musical material, and not as a given infrastructure for any pitch based musical expression, presently offers possibilities for establishing openings that produce space and time for stepping out of the established norms, behaviors and expressions. This, in turn, provides vibrancy, freshness and agency in terms of aesthetic, ethic and philosophical imaginations.

In the composition at hand - *A history of musical pitch* by Seamus Cater - this is achieved by approaching musical pitch with sensibility that is not part of any existing system, and that also does not aim to establish one.

Let us begin at the beginning. In the programme notes we read:

'A History of Musical Pitch' is a music work by the Amsterdam-based composer Seamus Cater. It was devised as part of a re-sounding of the explorations of Alexander J. Ellis, a Victorian polymath who within numerous avenues of interest invented the musical cent and is commonly thought of as the initiator of comparative musicology.

The 74 tuning forks used in this piece were tuned by Seamus to represent Ellis' research, The History of Musical Pitch (1880), where he gathered 223 instances of the note 'A' from intact historical organs and assorted instruments and makers from across Western Europe. The A's ranged between what we now call F# and C#. A History of Musical Pitch explores these micro-tonal sounds, while moving through a historical timeline of 1495 to 1880.¹

Tonight we will be exposed to 74 different pitch frequencies, each coming from one of 74 different tuning forks that Cater meticulously adjusted, shortening them by micro-millimeters, in order to make them vibrate at desired frequencies.

Each of them nominally represents the same musical note "A" that Ellis measured during his research. In other words, we will be exposed to local and temporally specific, independent tuning references, hence measuring units from the period before

modernity and standardization of measure. Accompanying these frequencies, we will hear sustained tones that harmonically shadow the current A's as they microtonally drift through temporary consonances.

What Ellis comprised as an empirical and documentary research, Cater approaches as a meta score from which he derives instrumentation, pitch material and temporal structure for the composition. By modifying Ellis' measuring tool, a set of tuning forks is transformed into the principal instrument, sounding selected pitches according to Ellis' measurements. Their temporal order follows the timeline of their origins, that is, the creation years of the measured instruments which is compressed into duration of approximately 50 minutes.

The piece therefore, is an articulation of re-visiting the past. However, this act of looking back is not a nostalgic attempt to return to, or to bring back the past. By transforming the specific empirical evidence into a qualitative and musical experience, Cater's orientation towards the past serves as a tool for transformation of the present by proposing radical de-centering.

In terms of pitch material one could say that Cater compiled a scale that consists of 74 found frequencies. Yet, this is a strange and irrational scale. Usually a scale covers a range of an octave, and at least in Western traditions it consists of roughly 5 to 12 different musical notes. Cater's scale consists of 74 different frequency renderings of only one musical note 'A', spanning roughly the range of half an octave.

This scale is a dirty assemblage – a bricolage of non-related renderings of the same note. It is a scale where each tone is the same and at the same time out of tune with all the other tones that are the same tone. As such, it doesn't provide the infrastructure that accommodates conditions to perform dramaturgy of tension and release based on the hierarchical relations between consonance and dissonance, cause and effect, expectation and realization. It rather sets the conditions where each consecutive note erases the memory of the previous one, weaving a drifting thread of non-relations. One could say that this scale outlines a nonlinear plane, where the tones do not follow one another, but rather very closely pass by one another.

This nonlinear plane evokes another intersection, an artwork by artist stanley brouwn which reads:

“a distance of 312 feet and an imaginary distance of 587 feet
intersect each other in such a way that the intersection
divides each distance in two equal distances on tuesday
19 july 2005 at 20.55 in africa”²

Leaving this intersection behind and returning to Cater's composition:

The piece that unfolds in the confines of the given intersection invites us to listen to the intervals in-between different systems, tunings, beliefs and convictions – instances that usually cannot exist side by side. By bringing them together, the piece materializes the

negative spaces of non-relations between them – nooks and crevices that do not belong to any system but that nevertheless insists in their presence. These tiny microtonal intervals, I would like to claim, present an opening to the qualitative space that exists within, besides and around measured, regulated and ordered Cartesian spaces and relations. This zone is akin to something that philosopher Erwin Straus calls “wide openness” – a quality of a “dance space” – that is, an experiential and qualitative space that one generates and inhabits while dancing. This space “(...) is not determined by distance, direction, and magnitude”³ but by movement, intention, intensity and imagination.

Establishing such a space and performing microtonal dissonances might stimulate the sensibility towards the minuscule differences in the nominal sameness, extending beyond solely musical paradigm. This, in turn, proposes the possibility for the act of listening to otherness with appreciation not rooted in understanding and approval but enacted as a dance with difference, without the desire for resolution. Perhaps proposing the aesthetics of passing by, or the aesthetics of coexistence in disagreement?

To conclude I paraphrase Gertrude Stein’s thought on sameness, difference, repetition, time and history by substituting words related to sight with words related to hearing.

I paraphrase:

*The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is **heard** and what is **heard** depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are **listening to** very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it **listens**, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is **heard** as it is **heard**. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing **heard** and that makes a composition.*⁴

¹ <https://www.rijksakademie.nl/en/public-programme/2023-12-18-a-history-of-musical-pitch-seamus-cater> (accessed on 8 January 2024).

² Stanley Broun, *A Distance of 312 Feet and an Imaginary Distance of 587 Feet Intersect Each Other in Such a Way that the Intersection Divides each Distance in Two Equal Distances...*, 2005, offset lithograph on paper, 16 x 16 cm, 74 pages, (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum; Barcelona: MACBA, 2005).

³ Erwin Straus, *Forms of Spatiality in Phenomenological Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 35.

⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Composition as Explanation* (1925), at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69481/composition-as-explanation> (accessed on 8 January 2024).

The original text is: *The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition.*