



## Dialogue on Writing Music

MALIN BÅNG, JULIA H. SCHRÖDER

This conversation is related to the essay by Julia H. Schröder, «As if you were holding a bike handle». Malin Bång's transformation of the everyday into music included in *Nuove musiche*, no. 6, 2019, in the context of the project *Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973-1983* (G. Albert, A. Valle, eds., *Nuove musiche*, 5-7).

JULIA H. SCHRÖDER To continue our dialogue, I would like to raise two important issues in your music, which have not been discussed extensively in my article, that is, first, your close work with your ensemble Curious Chamber Players, and second, the specific sound of your music.

The fact that you co-founded an ensemble seems important for the way you work, namely testing each sound quality and playing technique for instruments as well as objects. It also occurred to me that there is a rhythmic force in your composition *Arching* which might stem from the subject of the violin-making, but may also be part of other compositions. Or are there completely different aspects, which are even more important and have not yet been mentioned at all?

I would also be interested in a verbalisation of how you extract the musically interesting aspects from a sounding object – what it is that catches your attention. Do you have an example for this part of your compositional process? Would you declare it a part of the development of your material or already part of the main compositional process – if one can separate the two?

MALIN BÅNG *Curious Chamber Players* (CCP)

When we started CCP during the last year of my Composition Master in Stockholm, the aim was mostly to have a platform for creating continuous projects, once we were outside of the academic context. We also noticed that existing ensembles in Sweden performed mostly their friends' music, so that the repertoire consisted by composers in similar generation and who are residing in the same city. We immediately wanted to have

an awareness of discovering music that we didn't know of yet. So for the first concert project we invited composition students from Malmö, Göteborg and Piteå to write new pieces for us. To organize this first concert was very exciting and we did everything meticulously ourselves – from getting silver coloured paper and printing poster on our ink printer to producing tickets, finding an agreement to use a nice hall for free, to getting audiences in all generations coming. CCP functioned from the beginning as a creative community for the persons participating, where we shared very democratically all chores that needed to be done to prepare the concerts. And in a bigger perspective we still work like that – we discuss how we would like to rehearse, what artistic direction we would like to take, how we shape each concert, and so on. And we have quite consciously avoided to develop into an institution. The members in CCP are both extremely passionate for contemporary music and very experienced, and loyal in the way we help each other, and enjoy every production. Through CCP it has been easy for me to meet up with specific musicians and together try out different sounds, to do workshops on microphone placements, or multi-layered playing methods. And gradually all members got more and more used to playing objects, since in my music they have entered from all angles! I think my music has been very influenced by CCP's individuals; how exactly our cellist would perform a specific scratch; how to develop the articulation for wind instruments by producing a specific mouthpiece in collaboration with our experimental clarinetist; how our pianist would perform inside piano actions with strong friction and engaged phrasing. With CCP my focus is always on several layers at the same time; to find younger experimental composers who are also exploring alternative sound worlds for mixed ensemble; to be in contact with festivals and concert arrangers, to develop concepts for future projects; to make funding applications. So, my own composing for the group is like the cherry on the top, and I need to consciously create time and space for this focus in the whirlwind of production based issues.

### *Rhythmic force*

I am interested in movement, in all the different patterns of motions that exist in our everyday reality. When I shape the gestures and the rhythmical structure of a piece it is based on motion that relate to the concept of the piece. When I composed *Irimi* (2012) for example, I immersed in the movement patterns of martial arts. I studied a few basic aikido techniques and translated both the character of each gesture – a fist action translated into a strike, sweeping and straight motions were performed by playing the instruments with sweeping and straight motions. The specific rhythm of breathing entered the wind instruments' air sounds. I notated the exact duration of each small component in the aikido techniques. And then I created three versions of them – one in real time, one in half the speed, and one where the speed is half of the half speed, so a very slow motion version of the original. For other pieces I have observed the motion pattern of certain animals with strong contrasts in how the move – like squirrel, cheetah and penguin. And in *Arching* it is the motion of the tools that create string instruments that are in focus. The rhythm, friction and sound of a hand saw are merging into a musical gesture performed by the percussionist. The contrast of the hand calmly and carefully touching and examining the wood afterwards. I would say that the notions of sound, rhythm and gestural direction are always closely entwined in my music. And since I base these aspects of existing organic or mechanical motion the shape of gesture is usually

quite simple – either accelerating or retarding, staying in a static repetition or in a subtle circular motion. And often relating to the raw physicality of performing an instrument, searching towards the extremes of breathing for example, or very exaggerated motions of vertical bowing, *col legno* bouncing, sweeping and scratching.

### *Objects/sound*

When establishing the sound world for a piece it develops as the consequence of the concept. What is needed to represent the different aspects and layers of the idea? When composing a new piece, the instrumentation is often decided beforehand, depending on the size of the group. I then expand the possible sound palette by adding acoustic objects that can also be performed by the musicians. The ultimate object is resilient and can range its actions from creating soft background sound layers to gradually switching into becoming foreground and generating active and articulated gestures. The musician shouldn't need any prior experience with the specific object, but you use your general musical and instrumental experience to perform the object and explore its possibilities. In *Splinters of ebullient rebellion* (2018) there are several symbolic objects that represent the concept in different ways. The orchestra performs static and rigid, bright and dark blocks, representing the top of an hierarchy. These blocks are then gradually changing character by the influence of different individuals expressing their strive for change. Three music boxes are playing fragments from recent songs that have become symbols for democracy and human rights, a unifying force in the fight against different types of discrimination around the world. Another influencing element is the typewriter; for me the ultimate symbolic representation of dedicated writing of carefully reflected texts, used by courageous individuals who are quietly opposing a current oppression.

The sound layer of the music boxes are growing through the piece, it is augmented by six harmonicas, played by the flutists and oboists, and also by the voices of the orchestral members. The voices first appear as individual initiatives from a distance, forming collective clouds of noise, and grows by humming the music box melodies and in a continuation singing out loud as a cluster-like multi-layered chorus. The typewriter layer is also growing, starting by one person typing and ending with four typewriters, in interaction with percussive, damped piano keys and slaps on the wind instruments. As a conclusion the choice of objects are both closely linked to the need of a specific sound, and to the associative field surrounding the object, and its possibilities of interacting with the instrumental sounds of a piece. This process also works in the other direction – the instrumental actions are chosen to represent a certain conceptual aspect, but they are also shaped to easily blend with the sounds of the objects.

J. H. S. If we relate your compositional strategies to the subjects of this journal as they were formulated by Giacomo Albert and Andrea Valle in the call for articles, your practice would fit the category of “extended techniques in search of new sounds/practices” and “the use of ‘extra-musical objects/devices’ in composition: objects from outside the compositional space”. You explore objects from extra-musical spheres and their sound possibilities in relation to the sound possibilities of musical instruments. The latter are played mostly in extended techniques. Thus, both objects and instruments come into a sounding dialogue – or may form meta-instruments for certain musical passages. Amplification is necessary for many of the objects and extended techniques.

In your music theatre works, multimedia is part of the composition. One could argue, that even your instrumental and orchestral compositions tend toward music theatre because of the inherent theatricality of object playing. The way your objects are chosen for their sound but are always set into an environment rich of references – like the typewriting in *Splinters of ebullient rebellion* – gives them narrative meaning. One could even speak of “a tool as a co-subject in composition”, following actor-network theory, even though your tools are certainly neither algorithms nor do you practice Computer Aided Composition. To turn toward the “Writing” in relation to technology, your compositions are written down in musical scores in the traditional sense. The score organises the coordination of the sound producing gestures and prescribes their sounding result. In your case, I would not speak of “writing as an attention shift towards the formal/symbolic side, as it requires an abstraction effort in relation to objects that are typically not conceptualized in musical terms”. Do you agree? Certainly, abstraction is a vital element in your practice but your experimentally grounded use of objects as instruments seems to be a technique of extension, namely, extension of the traditional range of instruments.

The abstraction I can find in your transfers from other spheres into music. You describe such a transfer in *Irimi* where the gestures of Aikido inspired the gestures of the instrumental playing and consequently their expressive quality. It is equally found in the transcriptions of your time and space specific field recordings of different places in *Structures of molten light*. In the excerpt from the score you even describe the original sound of the garbage collection in the morning in Stockholm’s Högdalen area (see *fig. 1 on the next page*): There is the *glissando* of the truck loading the bins, the rattling of the collected bins etc. This transformation of our everyday surrounding into art is a form of technology, and writing, more precisely, musical notation is the medium.

M. B. It is interesting that you mention the theatrical angle in relation to the use of objects. From my point of view there is nothing theatrical about playing an object. A theatrical perspective appears when you project a specific emotion while playing, or use the object to express a certain psychological state, or a human condition. But in most of my compositions you perform the object just as you play an instrument. You are instructed to use a certain playing technique to generate a specific sound. But an important point is the world of associations that the object suggests. If you observe a rusty sculpture on a stage your musical expectation will be very different compared to if you see a flute and a piano. We relate to our own experience of the object and its potential history within the artistic field or from a completely different context.

Just as in *Arching* the objects are often chosen both for their visual representation of the concept and their sound. In some cases the symbolism of the object calls my attention and I can alter the aim of the sound to the possibilities of the specific object, but mostly this process is very much entwined – the sound and the idea that the object represents are conceived together. When these two angles meet – then there is a seed for a new composition!

The possibility of using any existing item for generating sound evokes a sense of liberation – I can compose with anything at hand – a wall, a toothbrush or a violin – and they can all create music on equal terms. This is also the reason for how I treat the different voices in a piece – objects and instrument have very similar parts – they have the same amount of details, the same demand for precision and the same importance for the process and

the energy levels of the piece. My aim is that all participating sounding bodies merge and create the sonic reality as one unity.

I often compare composing with a general communication chain. Any communication starts with a “sender”, then goes to the next phase “message encoding” through the “channel” to reach the “receiver” who does a “message decoding”. In the message encoding phase, I often choose to write down a score to transmit my original “motivation” from the sender phase. I try to notate in a way that represents my ideas as closely as possible, but which also presents the best possibilities for the musician – my channel – to grasp the idea and interpret this as true as possible to my original sender message. The challenge is to have the concept very clearly formulated first, before starting the encoding procedure, since there are several filters along the way before the music reaches the last decoding phase. And one of the most fascinating moments for me as a composer is when I get a chance to hear about the encoding process – how a listener has interpreted the sounding result of my idea and how the listening opens a universe of possible associations.

Fig. 1: excerpt from the score of Malin Bång’s *Structures of Molten Light*, for alto flute, bass clarinet, percussion, guitar, violin, cello (2011), p. 3, mm. 15–24. (See linked article on Arching.)

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