

CONCEPTUAL MUSIC

The artist Sol Le Witt has defined Conceptual Art as:

“(Art in) which the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work”⁽¹⁾

Thus, in conceptual *music* the idea or concept is more important than the sounds, which may or may not actually happen. Conceptual works are more like “scenarios” outlining actions or situations in which sounds could occur if the instructions are followed. On the other hand, the sounds may exist only in the imagination of the creator or recipient of the work.

It could be said that, in its first stage, all composed music begins as conceptual music: the composer starts with an idea of something needing expression, an emotion or mood, or the need to depict in sound a verbal or pictorial image. However, in the act of composition the original concept is soon overtaken by the notes as they are put on paper, and finally by the performance. Except in works using improvisation, there is a “fixedness” about composed work: the specified pitches must be played in the order and with the durations and dynamics requested by the composer. The slight differences in tempo, timbre and expression which inevitably occur between each performance of a work are called “interpretation”. In traditionally composed works the only *permitted* differences are those which do not go against the composer’s instructions: shades of dynamic intensity or personal choices as to tempo where a specific tempo is not indicated (as in Bach, for example)

By 1960 some younger composers were reacting against this traditional type of composed work. Improvisation, which had been dormant in Western classical music for 200 years, but which was very much alive in jazz and other non-European music, began to be seriously considered, along with such liberating devices as open-form- in which sections of a work may be played in any order, aleatoric music- in which the order of events is determined by chance, and graphic scores- in which notes are not written but the performers react to symbols and diagrams presented by the composer.

Conceptual music shares with many other forms of musical experimentation the desire to involve the performer more in the creative process, and to undermine the perceived role of the composer as a “commander” whose function is to give orders to those lesser mortals-instrumentalists and singers, in the creation of (hopefully successful) “works of art”. But it goes further along the road of effacing the traditional role of the composer as “note-writer” to one of “sound imaginer”. Indeed, one does not have to have any training in composition to create conceptual musical works.

Nevertheless, the reason why conceptual music should be taken seriously lies in the perception, that I am certain we have all experienced at some time, that the *anticipation* and *memory* of actual events are often more pleasurable than the events themselves.

A parallel to conceptualisation can be encountered in dreams, in which very much heightened forms of actual possible events may occur. I once had a vivid dream of part of Brahms’ 2nd symphony. But it was a dream of a performance “out of this world” in intensity and beauty. The *reality* of a performance by a few dozen well-trained musicians and a conductor with all their human limitations and imperfections could never match the perfection dreamed of.

SOME EXAMPLES

In the offerings appended to this brief essay it will be seen at once that they are not “compositions” or even music at all in the accepted sense of the word. Rather they seek to focus on what I term “Ur-sounds”, that

is those sounds which are timeless and not subject to changes of fashion or style, namely:

The Human Voice Stones Shells Wood Water Wind

Of those instruments which have such a long history as to be classed as “timeless” I would include:

Flutes and pipes Harps and zithers Drums and claves Gongs and bells

They are very much verbal pieces because, in the words of author William Malpas (2)

“...*Conceptual artists are much concerned with writing and written texts.*”

And there are few commands in these fragments, but rather suggestions of actions which, if carried out, would result in sounds being produced, and possibly musically satisfying sounds, depending on the aural imaginations of the participants. There is also a deliberate vagueness as to detail. In the event of any of the pieces being performed, choices regarding structure, timing, rhythm and duration would have to be made either by myself or the participants.

In *Conch-erto* (1996) a shell found on a deserted tropical beach becomes a musical instrument. There is no notation, just a description of the finding, fashioning and possibility of sounds. The “music” is in the whole poetic idea of the events, which may or may not actually take place.

In *Sounding Stones* and *Forest Music*, the idea is to make musical (i.e. organised) sounds with natural objects- pebbles and wooden sticks, the most primitive “instruments” and therefore timeless.

Mountain music does use man-made instruments of metal, and small enough to be transported by hand. The main point in this piece is the specified location of the performance: on a mountain top (i.e. above 1000 feet).

The *Overtone Study* comes nearer to being a traditionally composed work, except that there is no notation, but only verbal instructions

At present the final two pieces *Eclogue* and *Commagene* are still in the conceptual stage. However, these are preliminary sketches for works which would need to be realised electronically, and were this to happen, they would no longer be conceptual but actual works.

CONCH-ERTO

On a deserted tropical beach find a conch, clean and fashion it into a musical instrument and make music with it in praise of the oneness of all things.

(1996)

SOUNDING-STONES

Take a handful of small pebbles

Music may be made by

Shaking a few of them in closed fist(s)

Tapping two of them together

Pouring them at varying speeds- quick, moderate, slow-
onto various surfaces

Cloth

Paper

Wood

Metal

Pouring them into water

Dropping them one by one onto various surfaces

Grinding a few of them together in closed fists.

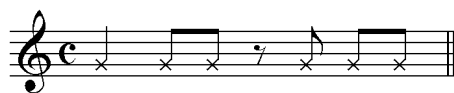
In other ways not specified above.

FOREST MUSIC

From a wood or forest collect sticks, dead branches with leaves intact, pebbles, seed pods, cones.

In the studio one or more performers make music with them.

Employ simple rhythmic patterns such as:



(Other patterns may be invented).

Each performer may either repeat one pattern or may switch to other patterns during the course of the piece.

Duration: c.5-10 minutes.

MOUNTAIN MUSIC

For any number of performers on hand-held metal percussion instruments.

The performer(s) should climb to a high place 1000 or more feet above sea level.

Begin with very quiet, widely spaced sounds, un-damped. Gradually decrease the time between successive sounds while increasing the dynamic level. Attain a climax of dynamics and activity and stop suddenly. All performers should endeavour to stop at the same moment. Allow sounds to vibrate until they die away.

(Duration c7 minutes)

(August 1994)

OVERTONE STUDY

One or more guitars

Any melodies or fragments of melodies remembered by the performer(s) played slowly and entirely in harmonics.

(2-4 minutes)

ECLOGUE

A work using recorded sound. An evocation of the sound world of Virgil's Eclogues.

Background:

Wind in trees - cicadas, birdcalls, sheep, goats

Foreground:

Occasional vocal cries (as of shepherds to their sheep), fragments of song, flute music (very simple and modal), spoken Latin (indistinct) possibly from the text of the eclogues.

Duration: c 5 minutes.

COMMAGENE

The image of Yeats' "Lost Kingdom" (in his play "The Dreaming of the Bones") was the starting point for "Commagene" named after an Armenian kingdom which flourished briefly 2000 years ago but is now almost forgotten. *Commagene* stands for any lost realm; I used it because I like the name and am fascinated by the eerie giant stone heads which remain on the sanctuary of Mount Nemrut in Eastern Anatolia (but which I have only seen in photographs).

The sounds of *Comagene* are the wind, howling over an immense expanse of barren land, cries of birds of prey, fragments of human speech in Greek & Armenian, a few notes on flute and harp (very indistinct). The notes gradually form into a high pitched and sinuous melody (using microtones). An indistinct vocal chanting is heard, but no words are clearly audible. All very reverberant and distant sounding (as if dreamed).

Duration 2-4 minutes.

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FOOTNOTES

1 Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, *Art Forum*, June 1967

2 Richard Long, *Crescent Moon* 2008