ImpOsition

Spectral étude for improvising chamber orchestra

Score (transposed)

Martin Kay

Composed for my Doctor of Musical Arts,
Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney

Premiered by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music Modern Music Ensemble, conducted by Daryl Pratt
Music Workshop, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, October 18, 2016
Instrumentation

alto flute/piccolo
Bb clarinet/bass clarinet
alto sax/soprano sax
tenor sax
baritone sax
French horn, trumpet
trombone, tuba
vibraphone/crotales/ride cymbal
harp
piano
violin 1
violin 2
viola
cello
double bass

Duration: circa 12’
Dedicated to Damien Ricketson in appreciation
for guiding me through my doctoral studies
… a rhizome may be broken, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines.

*Deleuze and Guattari*
Performance notes

The title *impOsition* suggests a playful approach. An imp is a mischievous sprite, indicating a psychological attitude I wish each performer to embody; a playful attitude towards interpreting the score and the exploration of the capacity to surprise themselves, to create personal situations in which they must call upon resources and wiles to adapt to an unexpected situation, which they themselves produce. Impose - a word with gravity and authority - relates to the relationship between composer and the performer. The composer imposes frameworks on the improvisers, introducing constraints influencing improvised emergences. The transition from *impOsition* to improvisation reflects incremental transformative processes evolving the work.

To summarise: *impOsition* is a Spectral etude gamifying improvisation through processes of approximation, accumulation, difference, repetition and rupture. The kaleidoscope is a guiding metaphor for the work as multiple processes develop independently, creating a dense and colourful mesh of sound. For the listener, this becomes like an aural Rorschach test, as processes emerge and submerge from the texture. *Ruptures* are seismic events causing all processes to shift in unison. The opening cells of the work initiate processes driving the entire form (Figure 2).

![Figure 1: opening cells of impOsition](image)

The cello and violin 2 are linked, evolving similar material. The word loop indicates that the cells trajectory along the horizontal dotted line is one of repetition. Symbols within the cell contradict the process of exact repetition. First, the fermata is held from anywhere up to five times the length of the written note, creating a significant range of temporal options for the performer. Inevitably, the two
parts drift out of phase. Second, the natural sign in the violin part indicates that the written note is to be played anywhere up to a quartetone sharp. *Approximation* becomes a concept driving the work, creating chords and passing harmonies which shift and morph unpredictably. The challenge for both individual and ensemble is to balance these events, intuitively shaping the work. Third, the cell eventually reaches a vertical dotted line. At this point a cell will cease, shift to a new cell, or *accumulate* new information. Independently developing improvised processes pivot together: there is a *rupture*, after which the underlying processes continue, deflected but undeterred. The basis of these processes are the concomitant ideas of difference and repetition.

A final word on the improvisation of difference and change, which gives each loop a plastic quality: the performer must hold each improvised variation in their mind, as the aim for each loop is to create a further variance. The compositional imperative to maintain the improvisation of differences creates a psychological oscillation between accumulated short-term memories and the immediate interactions of the perceptual present. As the short-term memory is a limited repository, there will be an inevitable rupture in the improviser’s internal, ephemeral process, one which echoes the visible inscriptions of the score. In this way, I gamify improvisation and process in *impOsition*.

Subthemes within the work are expansion, contraction and stasis. Stasis is the role of the fermatas, where performers are still, like a cat mesmerising prey. Temporal expansions and contractions are indicated by the terms accelerando and decelerando. A temporal dissonance occurs between the evolution of metronomic seconds at the top of the page and the tapestry of flexible tempos connected to bodily motions. Durations are all marked circa, allowing for flex where needed. There is room for the conductor’s discretion with regard to the length of the sections, subject to sensitivity and surprise. In this way, the conductor too has an improvisational relationship to the unfolding temporality, master of rupture and surprise. When the conductor cues the rupture, each performer should glitch to the next section, interrupting their trajectory mid-process.
Harp scordatura

String scordatura

Violin 1 tunes to the 7th harmonic, the viola to 13th harmonic, and the cello to the 11th harmonic. The second violin tunes the D string anywhere up to a quartertone higher, a tuning remaining malleable during the performance.
Accidentals

There are five accidentals used in *impOsition* (in addition to the standard flats and sharps). Three: the 7th, 13th, and 11th harmonics, equate to the harp scordatura; the other two direct performers to improvise pitches up to a quartertone sharp or flat. These variations are improvised, differing at each iteration.

Symbols

Information not in boxes is played only once

- **Loop**
  - Loops are contained within boxes. The notes can be fixed or drawn from a pitch set. Follow the instructions in the box that accumulate along the thick dotted line. Glitch to the next section from wherever you are in the loop.

- **Sus.**
  - Sus is contained in a box. Hold the note and follow the instructions in the box that accumulate along the thick dotted line.

- **Pitch set**
  - Create melodies from given notes. Permutate order as desired.

- **Continues the action of the box. Information accumulates along the line.**
  - Broken portamento.
  - Gradually raise or lower pitch by up to a minor third
  - Gradual transition
  - Play natural harmonics
  - Freely accented

- **Improvise microtonal melodies within a third of given note. (above and/or below)**

- **GT**
  - Add voice to sound. Experiment with creating harmonies with your voice. Also by sliding the pitch of the voice.

- **HB**
  - Heavy bow pressure. Increase the noise:pitch ratio.

- **ST**
  - Sul tasto

- **SP**
  - Sul ponticello
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All cues in this section are triggered by the piano solo.

Gradually increase expressive vibrato.

Flute and clarinet phrases drift apart from each other.

Respond to piano.

Pitch set.

Notes:

Gradually increase expressive vibrato.

All cues in this section are triggered by the piano solo.

Pitch set.

Respond to piano.
Vibraphone and harp intertwine
Remain out of phase by varying the lengths on each fermata.

Impose on natural harmonics for the given fundamental.

Vibraphone and harp intertwine
Remain out of phase by increasing the length of each fermata.

Quickly blur notes together

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Impose on natural harmonics for the given fundamental.
Hit cymbal randomly with chain.

Avoid using string III (due to scordatura)

Avoid using string II (due to scordatura)

Bb clar.

9

ImpOition (transposed score)
Articulate unobtrusively. Breathe when needed. Play subtle crescendos and decrescendos throughout.(between pp and mp)
All unboxed fermatas on this page held from 5-7 seconds.

unless otherwise marked

All notes on this page are played uninflected.

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