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Analysis of ‘Open Forms’: Problems and Approaches

ABSTRACT

Background

Some of the most important and challenging works of the post-war period have been composed using the procedures of ‘open’ forms. Such works challenge the teleological tendencies of musical compositions though, of course, any particular instantiation might display directional structures at local or global structural levels. There are, broadly speaking, three main types of ‘open’ forms (‘hybrid’ forms are also possible). One is ‘variable’ form. An example is Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Zyklus* (1959) for solo percussion. In this work the succession of musical events are fixed globally but are open to the decisions of the performer at a local level. Thus, although the spiral-bound score can be read in two directions, once the player chooses the starting point the score must be followed in sequence until it is reached once more and the performance is concluded. However, on every page of the work choices regarding details must be made by the performer as s/he progresses through the page. Thus, we can describe the work as being fixed globally but indeterminate locally. By contrast, ‘polyvalent’ form (also called ‘mobile’ form) adopts the opposite strategy. Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück XI* (1956) can be cited as an example of this type of ‘open’ form. The score consists of a large sheet on which nineteen relatively short fragments of music are distributed. The pianist starts with one fragment and then proceeds (in theory without predetermined deliberation) to another fragment. The same process is repeated until one fragment has been played three times. This concludes the particular performance. Thus, some fragments can be played once, twice or even omitted entirely. As a result this ‘open’ form can be regarded as fixed in terms of the individual fragments which must be played precisely but indeterminate as far as their actual position in time is concerned. I should also mention that there is also what can be described as a form that is open on both local and global levels such as John Cage’s *Fontana Mix* (1958). This type of ‘open’ form will not be considered in this presentation as my principal concerns are the dualisms of global/local and fixed/indeterminate. The analysis of works in ‘open form’ presents particular problems. Given the vast number of possible instantiations of a work, what precisely can be analysed? In fact, the description provided above does not convey the subtleties of the composer’s role. For example, in *Klavierstück XI* the pianist will choose a particular tempo, form of articulation and dynamic level as a new fragment is played. These indications are provided at the conclusion of the fragment that has just been played. Thus, the fragments that are repeated (which is inevitably the case) will be played in different ways

during the course of a realization. This is an example of the difficulties confronting the analyst. Either we evaluate specific performances in order to identify and compare moments of tension and release, formal divisions with closure etc. or the score is subjected to scrupulous examination with the intention of elucidating the choices offered by the composer to the performer.

Aims and repertoire studied

I intend to base my paper on the second strategy as outlined above. The scores of ‘open’ works indicate a wide range of compositional approaches. For example, as indicated in the previous section, even though the form of *Zyklus* is fixed globally, a determined path through the composition can only be initiated once the performer decides where to start and which way round to read the score. Thus, works in ‘open’ form display complexity and subtlety which can be analysed and evaluated both musically and aesthetically before any actual performance is initiated. The implications of an ‘open’ form work can be revealed by analysing the potential of the composition in the state of tension preceding any actual performance. An additional issue is related to the current debate regarding the viability of analysing performances rather than relying on the traditional musicological/analytical approach of analysis solely by the score. In my view even though score-based analysis might be regarded with suspicion much valuable work can be done in this way and can even direct subsequent performance-based analysis.

Methods

I shall examine various examples of ‘open’ form compositions concentrating on selected ‘variable’ and ‘polyvalent’ forms as outlined above. Examples will be chosen from works such as: *Zyklus* and *Klavierstück XI*, as well as *Rituel* (1975) by Pierre Boulez and *Scambi* (1957) by Henri Pousseur. By identifying what Eco called the ‘open’ work’s ‘field of possibilities’ I shall attempt to formulate a more differentiated typology than the three types referred to in section 1. To the best of my knowledge little analytical work has been undertaken on the aesthetic and musical consequences of ‘open’ forms. Reference will also be made where necessary to specific recordings thereby addressing issues of authorship as performers negotiate their path through the demands set by the composer.

Implications

While my research is mainly based on instrumental compositions from the 1950s and 1960s the use of technology has implications for the manner in which forms are articulated and realized. For example, my choice of *Scambi* (a work with

which I am familiar from previous research) exemplifies the use of studio technology in the realization of an ‘open’ form composition. (*Scambi* is still highly unusual in being an ‘open’ electroacoustic composition from the 1950s.) Today it is increasingly common for composers using digital media to produce algorithmic music. The analysis of such music would, I believe, benefit from the kind of methodology I am proposing. In conclusion, the openness permitted by the composer raises questions regarding the role of the performer and authorship. I believe these issues are relevant to all researchers interested analytical issues surrounding contemporary music.

Keywords

Musical language; musical epistemology; mathematics and formalisation; contemporary music; structure

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