

# AFTER #[unassigned]: an Interview with James Saunders

Dominic Lash and James Saunders

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**Abstract:** I have long been intrigued by the way James Saunders' music is at home both in the more canonical new music contexts (such as the Darmstädter Ferienkurse, Donaueschinger Musiktage or Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival) and in more underground, fugitive contexts. This may be because – unlike so many composers who tip the scales to one side or another – Saunders is equally interested in relationships between sounds and relationships between people. The following text explores the ways Saunders' work has balanced these interests; it originated in an interview initiated by Simon Reynell to accompany the CD release of Saunders' composition *assigned #15*, performed by Apartment House, on Reynell's *Another Timbre* label. We subsequently followed up with a second interview extending the discussion to more recent work.

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## Interview I: Bristol, 22 May 2015

**DL:** Could you explain a little about the #[unassigned] series and how it turned into the *assigned* series?

**JS:** #[unassigned] was a project I worked on from late 2000 to mid-2009. It changed over those nine years, but the essence of it is a pool of short modules for solo instruments. Some of these were short pieces that were gestural, mostly using extended techniques, and longer drone modules that were scalable to different durations; so, a mix of shorter, event-based material and longer sustained sounds. That was the basic material, and every time we did a performance I'd make a new arrangement of it. Typically, I'd take some existing modules, and then combine them with some new ones and make a new time structure for the players to place those sounds in. The pool of modules was always being added to, so each performance of the piece was different: the performance on one day by one ensemble would have a certain arrangement of material and then, a month later, different people, different place – or even the same people, different place – there would be a different grouping.

**DL:** Was that most of your compositional activity at that time?

**JS:** It was the only thing I did for nine years. I didn't do anything else, although there were some versions within the project that with hindsight were not a very good fit. They pushed the framework, and subsequently I've remade them into separate pieces. There's a piece called *with paper* that I did with Tim Parkinson in about 2006, which we did then as an



James Saunders

#[unassigned] but subsequently I've made it into a separate piece. One of the reasons I stopped doing #[unassigned] was that around 2007 to 2009 I increasingly wanted to do other things, and it was becoming too automated. I came up with a time structure and then just rearranged things I'd already made. I wanted a bit more of a challenge, so I started doing other things and stopped the project in 2009.

**DL:** But now you've revisited it?

**JS:** The legacy of that project was that these pieces were performed only once – that was it and they were gone. I think I made 175 or so versions over nine years, and some of them I quite liked, so it was a shame that they were gone. At the end of the project I looked back over those versions and chose my favourite ones, the ones that for me worked best. I made those into a separate series called *assigned*, and they are then re-performable. It's exactly the same music but you can play them again rather than not, that was the distinction. You played a double bass one, which was originally written for Chris Williams.

**DL:** When I was doing my PhD I was really interested in #[unassigned], so I was interested that you've come back to it. At the time there were all sorts of things that resonated with me, partly that thing about the fact that any composition is somehow arbitrary. No matter how systematic, there's some arbitrary point where it's just 'I've chosen this because ...'.

**JS:** As Tim Parkinson says, and this is one of my favourite comments about music, 'It's all just made up'.

**DL:** For me it relates to improvisation too: either there's this unique performance or there's this piece which is somehow unique which is repeated. What thoughts do you have now looking back, or in relation to what you're doing now with the *assigned* series, about the difference between the fixed and the unfixed?

**JS:** It was a really odd thing to do, because there were six years between finishing the #[unassigned] project and making this version. Simon Reynell asked me and I'm at a stage where, although the work I'm making is mostly process based, I still enjoy engaging with the aesthetic quality of sound and trying to manipulate it. I've moved away from a focus on specific sounds in a number of things I'm doing but it's something that still interests me, so it was a good opportunity to re-engage with that. Making the piece was an odd experience because when I was making the #[unassigned] series I was actively

Example 1:  
*assigned #15* (2015), cello part  
 (excerpt)

making new material; then it felt like a living project, whereas now it felt more like revisiting a museum exhibit, like archaeology perhaps.

**DL:** Did you write any new material?

**JS:** No, no new material at all, except shortwave radio. I had used longwave radio before, but shortwave radio was something I wanted to play with.

**DL:** In the process of doing it have your thoughts changed about the relationship between uniqueness and individuality?

**JS:** Yes, now I'm not so hung up on that. I'm quite happy with it being a piece that's fixed and repeatable; I'm less precious about that. In the original project the concept was that 'each of these is done once'. The idea was for a unique configuration, whereas now I've finished that, so it's just another articulation of that material. Uniqueness is not as important here as it was.

**DL:** Would it be true that the distinction was always strongest for you, weaker for the people who played them more than once, and then least for the audience?

**JS:** For people who heard it once there's nothing to compare it with, of course, so in a sense I was the person who had the best overview of that.

**DL:** In the light of the music you've been working on since you stopped the #[unassigned] series, is there a disjunction or even a conflict between your interest in procedures and your interest in sounds?

**JS:** Yes. For the last three or four years – since I started working mostly with instructions and processes rather than staves – I’ve felt a split between work which is focused on the beauty of the sound and work which is about processes. I like creating aesthetic objects that have that sense of craft, of something honed, something that has beauty. And then, on the other hand, I like working with processes where it’s about the interaction and the way that those inputs are manipulated and constrained and processed to produce the resulting music, where sound is perhaps just the medium through which that process is articulated. A lot of the pieces I’ve done recently, the sounds – because they’re mostly using kind of junk instruments, found sounds, arbitrary categories of sound – are just there to represent things in the process, and it has a certain characteristic as a result. In these pieces I’m less interested in the specific control of those sounds. It’s more the variety and the multiplicity of individual people choosing this enormous range of small sounds that are then combined, and it’s that which produces the complexity of the texture. So there are those two extremes really, the focus either on the quality of the sound or on the quality of the process, or the interaction between people. In the new *assigned* piece I just wanted to explore the beauty of sound again; I’m still oscillating a little bit between those two poles. There may be a middle ground where I make process pieces that have a more specific sonic characteristic, and that’s probably where I’ll end up. Rather than saying you can use any sounds and this is the process, I could actually specify what the sounds are and the process as well.

**DL:** In terms of the context of the music, this piece sits very well with the kind of thing we associate with *Another Timbre*. But there are all sorts of connections with pieces of yours like *everybody do this*, where performers shout instructions at each other, and I would be surprised to see something like that turn up on *Another Timbre*.

**JS:** Yes, it’s a different aesthetic I think, isn’t it?

**DL:** But there are similar ideas about construction in your older and newer work, aren’t there?

**JS:** There’s certainly consistency in relationships between sounds, but I think that shift is more now towards relationships between people, and that’s really become my interest.

**DL:** I was going to ask about performers and about virtuosity and non-virtuosity. Even with this piece, given your interest in, say, unstable string sounds, if you had untrained string players, wouldn’t they produce even more unstable sounds?

**JS:** Quite possibly, and I’ve made versions of *#[unassigned]* where that was the case. It’s the sort of impetus that the score gives to create a certain type of unstable behaviour though. The string writing in particular is technically difficult to play in places – very high register, very small movements, very specific, very controlled – and the results come from the great skill of the players. But there are other modules I’ve made where similar results could be achieved with a lower level of skill. I mean

I've played the violin in some of my pieces and I'm not a bowed string player at all, I've absolutely no ability there.

**DL:** I remember a piece at Colston Hall for clarinet and dictaphones, with Roger Heaton, that really dramatized the virtuoso/non-virtuoso contrast, because all you did was press buttons at the right time, while he played these very difficult things, but it . . .

**JS:** It all gets distorted through the network of dictaphones.

**DL:** And you end up producing these microtonal chords which you couldn't get a group of clarinetists, however virtuosic, to play. But then in *assigned #15* it feels like the auxiliary part is doing a kind of gluing?

**JS:** Exactly. There was no real sense of foreground in the electronics parts in this recording. And I think that's a general thing that happened over those nine years, that they moved from being sparse, gestural, pointillist textures to these laminar masses.

**DL:** This is sort of monochromatic. Tim Parkinson talks about single image and multiple image pieces.

**JS:** Yes, one of the things that links #[unassigned] with what I'm doing at the moment is that they're single image pieces. I've tended to make one-idea pieces, framing things in a very clear way, so that the clarity of the structure or the process is there; the complexity comes from how that process or that structure is articulated, rather than structures which are difficult to comprehend. In that sense, it is single image, but as soon as you start to recognise things like that, or recognise that process is primary or sound is primary, then my reaction is to try and do the other thing, so there's always an oscillation.

**DL:** Formally it sounds to me as if the majority of it is additive and subtractive: textures which you could imagine in a different sequence but with a similar effect – but then towards the end, when you get the steady rhythms coming in and then they don't really resolve, they . . .

**JS:** They just drift apart . . .

**DL:** They break up; that feels distinct from the way it's been behaving earlier.

**JS:** Yes, it does. The way I made the #[unassigned] pieces was to have a grid of squared paper on which I put timings and the instruments, and then I just draw the blocks to show where everything goes. In the later versions all the blocks are a minute long, so it's quite easy to make: it's kind of Lego-like, plugging things together. I tend to look for similarities of sound-type, and they drift from one sound-type to another. There are occasional moments where more coordinated things happen, but on the whole it's that kind of gradual drift, and those sections could be in different orders. It's quite intuitive, there's no method there other than just trying to plan that change of sound over time.

**DL:** But the nature of the material means that at some points you get things that create a certain kind of tension that might not otherwise be there.

Example 2:  
Plan for #280402 (2002)

**JS:** Yes, that's intentional, definitely. But they could be in a different configuration.

**DL:** Why don't you give the alto flute any low notes? Speaking as a bass player . . .

**JS:** Some of it is. A lot of it is low register. There might be some harmonics and overtones that come through. Probably the low tones get subsumed into the general mush of noise.

**DL:** It's a bit of a facetious question, but I remember hearing in New York Manfred Werder doing a quartet version of his *stück 1998*. Manfred was playing his little pitch pipe, and there was very high guitar, and melodica. There's a tendency to do that, it seems, and I think it'd be wonderful to hear that with a tuba and a contrabass clarinet, and there's no reason why not . . .

**JS:** With *stück 1998* it would because it's octave specific.

**DL:** But the lower the instrument the bigger the range, in many cases. . .

**JS:** Yes, in that case you'd just get a different selection of notes that are unplayable.

**DL:** But there's something about low pitch . . .

**JS:** It's probably one of those new music affectations, isn't it? People like high sounds or low sounds. Register has been important for me in #[unassigned], certainly. Extremes are important because once you push instruments towards extreme registers, particularly high register rather than low, their behaviours start to falter

a bit. So it's not an interest in 'high music' or 'quiet music', where pieces exist on boundaries for the sake of it. It's not that sort of affectation; they need to be in that area to get that kind of unstable sound. If you play mezzo forte in the middle of the instrument, it's quite stable, with a good player.

**DL:** I guess strings can do those subharmonic things.

**JS:** Of course you can do that, and it's possible. It's often the amount of energy that's put into the instrument and the register. It's a balance between those two. So it's normally one or the other I tended to work with, or both. If it is mid-register it's likely to have very low energy going into the instrument to create that instability.

**DL:** Michael Maierhof uses those sorts of sounds, such as string subharmonics, but they have a very different quality, although on paper you have a lot in common.

**JS:** He's great.

**DL:** Yes, I'm a fan . . . but it does give it a different feeling . . .

**JS:** His work I think is a little bit more discrete in terms of sound, whereas those pieces that I made are a bit more blurred.

**DL:** They're kind of like transparent bits of paper on top of each other.

**JS:** Yes, exactly.

## Interview II: Portishead, 16 June 2015

**DL:** We talked last time about how some pieces cropped up while you were working on the #[unassigned] series but didn't quite seem to fit, and how they subsequently turned into pieces in their own right. Was that how that series came to an end and something else started?

**JS:** I think I got to the point where I'd been making work in that way for about nine years, and I needed to do something different, because although it was quite a flexible system and my view at the time was that it could encompass everything I wanted to do, I discovered it didn't! So, from 2009 I worked for two or three years on pieces that in many ways had the same sort of sound world as #[unassigned], but I structurally started to explore other methods. And then in about 2011–12 I started writing pieces that were more concerned with process. I think that period from 2009 to 2012 was a kind of transition from being concerned with the quality of sound towards being more interested in the quality of a process that organizes those sounds. Structure had always been central for me as part of a modular framework, but it became the real focus at that point.

**DL:** There were structural things that you wanted to do that you felt you couldn't do in the #[unassigned] series, but they weren't immediately based on these ideas of cueing, and so on?

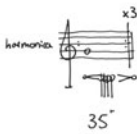
**JS:** No, it was more that at the point of finishing #[unassigned], the working method had become too automatic, and I needed to



harmonica, radio

radio: on  
40"

[41]



5"

35"

5"

[40]

Example 3:

PART OF IT MAY ALSO BE PART OF  
SOMETHING ELSE (2009), excerpt

have a new working method. So although the pieces for a couple of years afterwards could well have been versions of *#[unassigned]*, it was the way of making them that was a change, even though the end results were perhaps quite similar. It was that change in working method that was a catalyst for making the pieces that I've been developing for the past three or four years.

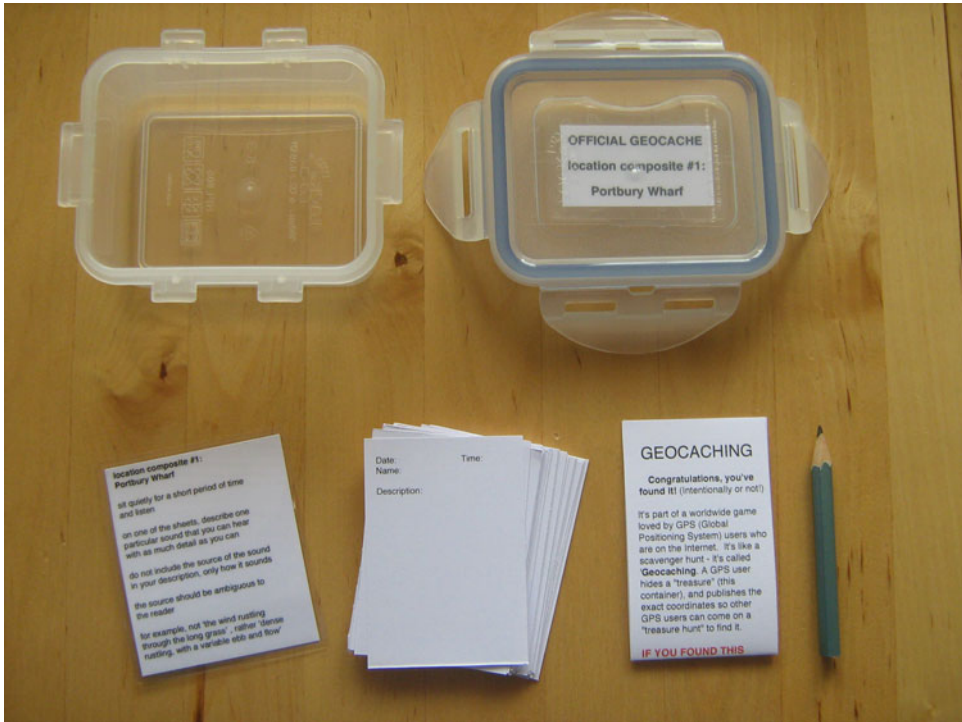
**DL:** So which piece, or pieces, started off the trajectory, which I think, from the way you talk about it, is still continuing?

**JS:** The first pieces (that I've kept) were in the series *divisions that could be autonomous but that comprise the whole*. In that 2009–12 period I tried lots of different things, and some of them worked and some of them don't exist anymore! Or at least they changed the nature of their existence . . .

**DL:** The prerogative of the composer to withdraw pieces!

**JS:** Yes, exactly. But that was a useful process for me. In many ways I don't think there was any work in particular there that pushed me towards working with cueing and distributed decision-making. One of the groups of pieces I made in 2011 was the *location composite* series, which started to involve other people creatively in some of the decision-making in the pieces. This was a series of, initially, geocache pieces. Geocaching is a pastime where people hide small boxes around the countryside and post the GPS coordinates on the web, and other people then take those GPS coordinates and try and find the boxes. It's like a GPS treasure hunt and it's quite a well-known practice now. It's good fun – great to do with the family! So I made three pieces that involved hiding a geocache along the River Avon near where I live and each cache contained a score which had a simple instruction to spend a





Example 4:  
*location composite #1: Portbury Wharf*  
 (2011), geocache materials

minute or so listening to the sound environment and write down a description of the sound. And then I harvested all those descriptions to be used as instructions for performance. One of the important things for me in that piece, and also around that time more generally, was an increased interest in verbal notation. I'd been writing a book on verbal notation with John Lely and through that process became more interested in other ways of explaining what I wanted to happen in pieces. Before writing the book I was writing carefully notated stave pieces and John was writing verbal scores, and by the end of the project we'd swapped! But for me really the key thing in *location composites* was the distribution of creativity away from the composer to an extent.

- DL:** Would it be fair to say that one of the things that's emerged from that and led into various pieces and series of pieces is the idea of instructions, particularly instructions incorporated as musical material because they're often audible to the audience, as the musicians actually call instructions to one another?
- JS:** Definitely. From about 2011 I started to work pretty much exclusively with instruction pieces. I'd become interested in how people react as part of a group, how they respond to each other, and how increasingly that response is the material of the piece. In any musical ensemble there's communication, cueing and interpersonal communication, which is the nature of performance of course, but using that as the material of the piece is a different thing, I think. It generates the material. So really I try to prescribe relationships between people as a starting point for the pieces. I made an orchestra piece for

## THINGS WHOLE AND NOT WHOLE

[for large ensemble]

Each player selects a wide variety of different noise-sounds, each as different as possible to those chosen by other players.

Sounds should be generally very short; one sustained sound (10-30") may be included by each player.

Each sound must be consistent and uniform throughout its duration.

Players respond to sounds made by other players by:

1. choosing a player whom s/he has not previously chosen
2. making a sound as soon as possible after the chosen player makes a sound (or stops making a sustained sound)

Each player's sustained sound may be used only once.

If nobody is playing, anyone can make a sound.

James Saunders  
January-September, 2011  
(revised October, 2012)

Example 5:

*things whole and not whole* (2011)

Donaueschingen in 2010 which did that in a limited way, giving the players some amount of choice, but it was really the piece I did with the Basel Sinfonietta in 2011 which uses cueing in a more focused way. That piece, *things whole and not whole*, models the way that birds flock, or at least the way scientists who watch these things and study them feel that bird flocking behaviour emerges. They suggest three rules: there's an awareness of the distance between each bird, so a bird doesn't fly too close to another one; it doesn't fly so far away that it becomes separated from the others, so it's like a magnetism there perhaps; and then there's the third rule which governs the ability to match speed. So by playing with those three – and they were making computer models of this in the 1980s – it generates flocking behaviour naturally without any sense of a top-down control. It comes from the individual choices or reactions of the birds, and that's something that's always fascinated me. I translated aspects of that behaviour into ways the musicians relate to each other. They listen to each other and make sounds very quickly after one of the other players makes a sound, so it produces these chains of activity. And then it all grinds to a halt for a bit, and then starts again; little sporadic utterances, I suppose.

**DL:** It's a kind of guided or limited improvisation, very different from what went on with *#[unassigned]*. You could probably analyse any group improvisation and find those kinds of procedure going on, but you focus the musical activity on them. I suppose in performances of that piece, if one was to analyse them without thinking about your score, there will be other things going on – all sorts of unforeseen relationships and things.

**JS:** The link there with improvisation is a grey area, I think. It's possible to make pieces where the intervention by a single author is

so slight that essentially it's irrelevant, and there are interventions where that guiding principle has enough weight of authority behind it for it to create a distinct identity as a piece. And I guess, as with everybody, pieces that I make fit at various points along that continuum. With that piece in particular, although you could find those sorts of behaviours sporadically in any improvising group, I think it's unlikely, unless there's a conscious decision, that that would *be* the piece. For me that's the difference.

**DL:** All I really meant was that for me as a performer – because I've played *things whole and not whole* at Cafe Oto with Murruration – it's quite close to a number of Wandelweiser-type pieces (even though the specifics are different) in that, as a performer, you never confuse it with improvising, but it draws on the same skills.

**JS:** I never feel comfortable as an improviser. I don't consider myself an improviser, even though I could be in a situation where you might say I'm improvising. I think – it's a kind of mind game – if I can create a situation where I don't feel I'm improvising, then that's OK, even though the work I might be doing is improvisatory.

**DL:** It emphasizes the process of decision-making; some improvisers, I think, try to do the same, whereas others probably do all they can to de-emphasize it.

**JS:** Perhaps that's one of the differences – obviously we're talking about free improvisation here – in that those strategies that people have are individual; there may be some discussion in some situations, but I think then you're drifting into composition territory. It's difficult to talk about these things because they're so enmeshed anyway, but in a sense it's the result of the work that's the interesting thing rather than how you define it.

**DL:** It's also finding possibilities in restriction, the efficiency of the minimum number of rules for a given output.

**JS:** And I think, going back to our previous discussion, the thing that I do at the moment is to give a lot of space to the choice of sound material. In that sense, it does allow people who've developed a very clear personal identity as improvisers to do their thing. But it's also open to a classically trained violinist, or somebody who's found a pile of junk that they want to use as sound sources. Those are all equally valid sonic contributions in these pieces. I really don't want to appropriate improvisers' work – that would be unethical – but rather to create frameworks in which they are free to contribute in that way if they wish. Increasingly I'm thinking about really trying to fuse the very careful control of timbral material in the #[unassigned] pieces with this way of working with interpersonal relationships, to create pieces which have an identity both in terms of the interaction between the players and in terms of the sounding material.

**DL:** I want to push you a little about whether you have any further thoughts on what you said last time about the two poles of the sonically beautiful and the procedurally interesting. Are they actually best seen as poles like that?

**JS:** I think that's just how I'm seeing them at the moment, to help me think it through; probably there's no separation there. Perhaps it's more about a degree of emphasis, that I tend to think of one or the other as the thing that is the idea that drives the piece. Recently we did a piece with [rout] at Audiograft in Oxford in the Holywell Music Room. Because it's such a noisy, wooden space the piece uses the creaking of the floorboards as the players walk around the space; the link to 'squeaky gate music' was intentional. So in that piece both of those aspects are relevant: the players walk around the space and find creaky places on the floor and articulate those whilst making equivalent kinds of click sounds on instrumental resources. But there's also a small amount of interaction between them; they have to be aware of the movement of the other players, with some restrictions as to whether they can make sounds if other players are walking, and the need to find places in the space which other players have been to. In that piece really the starting point was the sounding floor of the Holywell Music Room, and the interaction between the players became a way to structure that. More recently, it's been the other way round: the interaction has been the starting point, and then the sounds have come in as a way of articulating that process.

**DL:** I suppose I ask because it's a bugbear of mine that there's a certain way of reviewing this area of music – usually on CD – where things are either beautiful and uncomplicated, because everything's been solved, and there's nothing to say about it, or they're hard work to listen to, difficult, but cutting edge and challenging. I'm not sure that that dichotomy is the most interesting way of thinking about things, that something has to be painful to be interesting, or if it's beautiful that that's the end of the story.

**JS:** I'm increasingly attracted to work which is both difficult and interesting and incredibly engaging and approachable. So it does all the things which we've been told new music is supposed to do, it's supposed to be bad medicine – good medicine, sorry, whichever it is! Recently lots of composers have found ways to make rigorously challenging work which nevertheless offer audiences an immediate experience, perhaps because it communicates the idea of the piece and its method in a way that is transparent, rather than hiding the system. This goes back to Steve Reich – that sense of being able to experience the process while experiencing the result of the process. People like Matthew Shlomowitz, Joanna Bailie, Stefan Prins, Peter Ablinger, Jennifer Walshe or Johannes Kreidler – many others too – are doing that in very exciting ways at the moment and that for me has been such an important influence. We can have it all: we can make pieces that are perhaps funny or involving for audiences, aside from the complexity of the orchestration and the reference to existing musical languages.

**DL:** In pieces like *things whole and not whole*, if you didn't have the score, the process wouldn't be immediately apparent, would it?

**JS:** I think with *things whole and not whole* you get the sense of what's happening because you see people freezing, looking at



Figure 1:  
Instrument setup for *I tell you what to do* (2014), Spitalfields Festival,  
London, 16 June 2014

each other. You don't get it on a recording, but in performance you can see people reacting to each other and that becomes material and creates some kind of meaning for people experiencing the piece. It certainly does for players, I hope, and I think with all of these pieces there's an analogy with some sports, like golf for example. It's fun to play, although I only play it very occasionally; but watching it can be less involving. And I think some process pieces can be like that, they're really involving for players but not so engaging to watch.

One of the groups of pieces I've been working on recently is called *things to do*, and it has two factors. Firstly, each player has a series of sound-producing materials in different categories, and those categories include things like noises, pitches, processes, recordings, devices and so on. Each is numbered, so if you have in your set-up eight noise sounds, then they'd be numbered noise one, noise two and so on. Everybody has their own set-up, and normally it's the same number of those sounds in those categories for every player in the group. The second component is a series of cue words, which are spoken by players. For example, if noise seven is given as a cue, somebody says 'noise seven' and certain players make the sound 'noise seven'. So the organizational process of the material is also part of the sounding material of the piece.

There are about eight pieces in this series at the moment, and the difference between them is who gives the instruction and





Figure 2:  
*you say what to do* (2014), Mark Knoop and Serge Vuille with audience volunteers, SPOR, Åarhus, Denmark, 14 May 2014

who responds to the instructions. In a piece like *I tell you what to do*, the one with Stewart Lee at Spitalfields, one person gives cues to the whole group, so it's one-to-many. Then a piece that Mark Knoop and Serge Vuille have done quite a lot, which is *you say what to do*, is the reverse, many-to-one; each player has a group of audience volunteers, about four or five each, who give them instructions, four or five people giving instructions to one player. In other pieces, like *everybody do this*, it's a large ensemble – we did it with a group of about 25 players – and everybody gives instructions and responds to those instructions (many-to-many). The difference between these lines of communication results in different social structures between the players.

**DL:** In terms of composing the different pieces in the series, there seems to be a kind of permutational logic at play. Is that more a legacy of serialism or seventies minimal visual art?

**JS:** Or just me being too Spock-like! I started making the pieces with one that was many-to-one, so I thought, now we need a one-to-many piece, and the pieces evolved in that way. The first few of them were just playing with the permutations of those combinations of people, but more recently I've started to look at more playful and disruptive ways of grouping those. There are pieces where there are different groups in a more competitive situation. It's not quite got to a game-like situation of point scoring, but there are aims within these pieces now, rather than just general making sound and interaction. The players have targets to achieve.

**DL:** Do you see a relationship between it and things like Zorn's *Cobra*?

**JS:** Yes, that's certainly in the background. The thing I like about *Cobra* is the way as a listener you can see the interaction between the players; but I suppose going back to what we said earlier, *Cobra*'s a late piece for Zorn as part of that series of game pieces, it's almost the compilation of all the previous work. At that point, it's almost the catalogue of those techniques, and some of them are quite generic things: following people, playing duos, those sorts of ideas, you can't really break them down much more. What I'm trying to do in this piece is to develop a different language for that communication. In *Cobra* it's cue cards and requests for cues by the players; here it's a common language which everybody uses, like a *lingua franca*. It means nothing outside the world of the piece, but it becomes really the only way of establishing communication between the players.

**DL:** Are all these pieces up until now solely based on 'on' cues, or are there 'off' cues as well? All the ones I've played are about when to make a sound and what sound to make; I don't remember any where you're told to stop making a sound.

**JS:** No. I'm at the beginning of this, and there are other things that I'm exploring. That's a very particular group of pieces that does one thing using that mechanism, so in a slightly different way something else I've been interested in recently is ways of forming consensus within a group, non-verbally. Another piece, with a title confusingly close to those *things to do* pieces, is *everybody doing what everybody else is doing* – I can still just about remember my titles now, which is a bonus! Everybody has the same sound resources – perhaps ten or so ways of making sound, as far as possible the identical ten things – and the instructions are simple in that you're making sustained sounds; they could be long drone sounds or they could be shaking sounds, tremolo-type sounds. The process involves listening to what everybody else is doing and making a sound which is broadly similar to what you feel most people are doing. But then there's a condition which pushes it the other way: when the texture gets too uniform, so everybody is doing the same thing, then you need to make a different sound. It's like the situation where two restaurants are next to each other, one really empty, and one really busy. You might go into the busy one because it's clearly more popular and probably better, but there comes a point where it becomes so busy that you'll never get served, so you go into the quiet restaurant. Or you might just like quiet restaurants! That sort of thinking is embedded in the piece. And then more recently there is a piece called *all voices are heard* which is more directly involved with consensus. Again, everybody should have the same sound resources – we did it with lists of words just so it was easy from a practical point of view, but it could be anything – and on a cue everybody reads out a list of those words or, if it's with sounds, plays sounds on the materials to hand, and then stops. And then a second cue is given and everybody does the same thing again, but they can make changes. And the idea is to end up with everybody doing exactly the same thing, the same sequence of sounds played in unison as if it's one player. And you can do that either by sticking to what you did before and hoping that other people will follow you, or you can change what you do to more closely match what other



people are doing. You could play something entirely different so you completely disrupt it and start again, or you can remain silent. These four rules shape the different strategies that people could take for ending up doing the same thing.

**DL:** Maybe this has been true of your music for a long time, but in all of these pieces it seems that there's a shortcut between microstructure and global structure. I don't know of any piece of yours where it's 'do this for a while and then when we're all here we'll all move to section B'.

**JS:** That's very true. I think that's a common feature to everything I've done for probably about the last 15 years. They're one-idea pieces, I think that's fair to say. Sometimes things change during the piece, but a lot of the time it's about listening in to that environment rather than waiting for the change to a different environment.

**DL:** Any of them might well produce a structure that you could describe, after the fact, as sectional.

**JS:** But more recently that would just be emergent from whatever choices individuals make and how that amplifies out to the global structure of the piece. I think there are things that will interest me over the next few years and one of them will be to generate these processes that have more extreme types of change within them. With some pieces, once they start you've got the idea, and they just go on for a time and then they stop. But developing those sorts of processes that have boom and bust a bit more in them, so there's the possibility of change emerging, or possibly processes that generate other processes, which would then take the piece in different directions. But that's something next I think!

**DL:** To ask a devil's advocate question about what you were saying earlier about making the process apparent to the audience: certain people might very much enjoy the pieces in performance but would treat the sound as entirely incidental, so they might think it was an enjoyable performance to sit through, but wouldn't go near a recording of it.

**JS:** I think that's OK, because that's the nature of what the pieces are trying to do. They are, I hope, social experiences in that sense; they show people's character. Ethically that could be a difficult thing in some situations because I think in discussions we've had after some of these performances a lot of the conversation is about 'it was interesting how that person did this', or as a group this is what happened, so that's the thing that is primary; the discussions aren't about 'that sound was beautiful', because that's not what the pieces are trying to do. I don't think they work as audio recordings. Increasingly I'm trying to get better video documentation of pieces. I think that can communicate an aspect of a piece, but it's always disappointing looking back, because it was much better at the time! You ask any composer and they'll say the same thing, I think.

**DL:** I'm interested in them as recordings precisely *because* there's an occlusion of why things are going on which means you can get things that are actually rather intriguing to listen to.

**JS:** It may be that I'm obsessed with the interaction side of it, and they do have an acousmatic presence too.

**DL:** Is it just because you're a composer that they're all sonic? Because if we're talking about behaviours and so on, there's no reason why the pieces couldn't be ...

**JS:** ... theatrical.

**DL:** Take your shoes off, put your shoes on.

**JS:** Exactly.

**DL:** Dance-based, movement-based ... light-based.

**JS:** Yes, that's again something that I've been thinking about, because there's a sonic trace in these pieces, because I do sound. And they could equally well work in other situations. I mean, the consensus piece uses words in the performance we did. The difference between that and perhaps a theatre piece is not that distant. Again, I'm fine with that, I'm still interested in sound, but it's the social processes I'm becoming increasingly interested in, so I don't know what that will result in. What I would say is that on the whole musicians get this way of working. But that said, it works with lots of people. *you say what to do* uses audience volunteers; some might have musical backgrounds and some might never have stood on a stage before. I did a version of *all voices are heard* at a conference with people who were games designers and business people and they got it straight away, it was fine. So it's not necessarily a specialist skill. But I think musicians working in this area implicitly understand what to do, which is just quicker.

**DL:** Is there a tension between what you've just been talking about, this openness and directness and accessibility to anyone, and the things you were saying earlier and last time about choosing the sounds with a bit more care and specificity? Are those two strands of future work or is there a way that they can entangle?

**JS:** Rather than strands, I think they're layers. So the way I'm seeing it increasingly, talking in terms of games, there's a core mechanic in each of these pieces, a way that things relate to other things, and how that is then articulated in performance. And that can exist in perhaps a slightly more abstract way; so the question is then at what level do I start to assign content, material – musical material – to that process. What I've been doing over the last four years is saying anything is fine, which makes it completely open; this is good from an accessibility point of view because it means that people with a wide range of musical skills can be involved, but it doesn't stop me making versions of those pieces for which the material is more specified, and perhaps virtuosic in that sense, without compromising the idea of the piece. I've done that with *things whole and not whole*, and made a piece about a year ago called *on bare trees* which took exactly the same process but gave players a series of pitches, so there were pitch sequences that they followed in a kind of heterophony. It was exactly the same interaction, it felt the same, but there was a sense of pitch movement associated with that. So that was an example of how that different articulation of the same mechanic might be something I do in the future.