PART II

Techniques

Compositional technique is the deployment of skills, knowledge, and experience to create musical and sonic objects. How technique manifests will depend on a composer's artistic objectives as well as the contexts and requirements of specific genres and conditions. For example, the technique of writing a solo instrumental work involves finding ways to create convincing material within a solo idiom, knowing the practical requirements of the instrument, and an ability to produce a set of notated scores for the performer; whereas the technique of writing music for a video game might be more focused on understanding how to build evocative sonic worlds in response to visual cues, working within the technical requirements of a dynamic system, employing project managements to work in a team (and to tight deadlines), creating realistic synthesised demos, and recording and producing live instrumentalists. There are, however, some essential elements of compositional technique that span most genres and situations. The first is understanding the needs of specific situations, and how the composer's aims and values resonate with the expectations of other people within those situations (e.g. commissioners, collaborators, audiences, and so on). David Metzer calls these situations 'compositional states', observing that each state

involves the shaping of the musical language in a work so as to emulate a specific ideal. The ideals can be sonic in nature, such as ... the mutability of sound, or conceptual, such as purity, complexity, and the fragmentary. An ideal governs a piece. It provides sounds, behaviors, and the structural patterns to which the musical language adheres. ... The exploration of a compositional state fans out into many directions: how the material can be molded to fit an ideal, the associations of the ideal, and the formal and sonic explorations spurred on by a state.[1]

Musical ideas are created from – and for – real-world situations, and therefore embody the contents of the world from which they emerge, being 'enacted within the fabric of the work ... [in] its technical construction'.[2] Everything from the types of sounds selected by

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a composer to the way they are processed, shaped, and structured is in dialogue with the compositional logic of a state, whether by working in harmony with that state or by rupturing expectations. Perhaps the most obvious (and certainly most commonly discussed) type of compositional state is historical context. This might be manifest in the use of a received model, 'language', or approach to composition, or perhaps a more 'generalisable method of stylistic connection and allusion' that evokes an aesthetic affinity with existing idioms, traditions, or habituated modes of thinking.[3] Historical context might lead to earnest practices of self-referentiality – in the tradition of thinkers like Theodor Adorno, who posits that to 'create artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them'[4] – or might result in more playful and irreverent modes of quotation, reimagining and 'creative borrowing'.[5] As Robin Holloway observes, recycling the past comes in many forms: 'imitation, stealing, eating, transformation . . . are [all] absolutely normative, and always have been.'[6] A composition might display its relationship to historical context at various structural levels – including harmonic processes, formal sensibilities, development techniques (e.g. counterpoint), and sonorities – but might also challenge or destroy received paradigms to avoid reinforcing antiquated ideologies and values.

Another type of compositional state is the social function of a piece of music. Whether this is explicit (e.g. music composed for a religious institution or collegiate wind band) or implicit (a symphony orchestra performing for an affluent audience in an ornate concert hall), the cultural connotations of a performer or ensemble will be deeply enmeshed with any performance of a new work. This social dimension also relates to conventions of performance practice, where understanding what performers' bodies do when they perform music, and the capabilities and pedagogies of the instruments they are playing is essential. No matter how deeply a composer thinks about the aesthetic challenges of their work, practical issues will usually force ideas beyond the theoretical, whether that be how to voice a specific chord so that it balances instrumental timbres and registers or ensuring a MIDI interface or similar piece of technology works in performance every time. Practical considerations also apply to the use of notation or verbal communication to express complex and abstract instructions. The register, grammar, and 'style' of communication from composer to performer will affect the psychological processes of the performer as much as things like their training or predisposition.[7] Social function also applies to listener expectations, and how specific cultural knowledge or coded signs might convey meaning, which is a topic explored by several authors in this section of the book.

Another essential element of compositional technique is the use of appropriate resources to craft and shape appropriate musical material. Jürg Frey suggests that all these resources sit somewhere between the methodical, formal state of the 'path' where the composer 'approaches the musical material with meticulous precision ... [as] the inventor of situations',[8] and the more responsive state of 'space', governed by listening and tuning in with the world. In the state of the 'path', composers set up processes of material generation, treating musical parameters systematically (pitch, duration, dynamic, etc.) to determine how a piece unfolds either 'on paper' or computationally (e.g. in visual programming environments like Max/MSP or SuperCollider). Berys Gaut validates this state by arguing that creativity flourishes with imitation and rule-following and that 'rule-orientated' methodologies provide the most useful templates to frame the more unpredictable creative activities,[9] whilst Thor Magnusson notes an interesting and stimulating tension as composers move from 'composing works' to 'inventing systems'.[10] In the state of 'space', composers take more instinctive and responsive routes by investigating personal responses to gestures, melodies, shapes, harmonies, and sonorities to propel a piece's development forward. This approach prioritises a more sensorial and affective approach and emphasises an ability to 'trust your ears' and creative instinct.[11] As Corey Mwamba highlights, it is often the ideas that first appear to be mistakes that create the richest and most interesting and satisfying musical results.[12]

This leads us to the final element of compositional technique, which is being able to listen: whether this be on a grand scale – tuning in to the world and encountering it sonically – or in specific situations like working with musicians. Listening allows us to locate and respond to artistic and practical problems, which is a vital skill for composers. As with every technique mentioned here, practice is crucial. Pauline Oliveros suggests that composers should work hard 'to make finer and finer distinctions in tone, sound, and rhythm. The slightest nuances accumulate and refine one's aesthetics ... [since] all sound provides us with information and forges connections.'[13] A theme that reappears several times in this section is the importance of hearing music played live by performers (e.g. in rehearsals or workshop contexts) to build up the composer's 'inner ear'. Regardless of the idiom a composer is writing in, expression is necessarily mediated by how they understand and perceive music: material can be structured in any way (repetition, variation, contrast, flow, transformation, stasis, etc.) but those organisational elements are reliant on their relationship with the musical syntax, procedures, and ideologies of a composer's aural imagination.

Notes

1. David Metzer, *Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8.
2. Samuel Wilson, *New Music and the Crises of Materiality: Sounding Bodies and Objects in Late Modernity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021), 2.
3. Ed Hughes, 'On musical texts and living affinities: An introduction to Composing the Historical', *Composing the Historical: Historical Texts in Music of Today* (2021) www.reframe.sussex.ac.uk/composingthehistorical/historical-texts-in-music-of-today (accessed 1 February 2023).
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1970]). See also Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
5. See Kenneth Gloag, *Postmodernism in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
6. Robin Holloway, *On Music: Essays and Diversions 1963–2003* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 398.
7. See John Lely and James Saunders, *Word Event: Perspectives on Verbal Notation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
8. Jürg Frey, *And On It Went*, trans. Michael Pisaro (self-pub., 2004) www.wandelweiser.de/_juerg-frey/texts-e.html (accessed 1 February 2023).
9. Berys Gaut 'Educating for Creativity', in Elliot Samuel Paul and Scott Barry Kaufman (eds.), *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 265–88.
10. Thor Magnusson, *Sonic Writing: Technologies of Material, Symbolic, and Signal Inscriptions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
11. See Paula Wolfe, *Women in the Studio: Creativity, Control and Gender in Popular Music Sound Production* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019).
12. Corey Mwamba, 'The Mistake as Material', in Andy Hamilton and Lara Pearson (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Music and the Arts: Spontaneity, Flaws and the Unfinished* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 212–24.
13. Pauline Oliveros, *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings 1992–2009* (New York: Deep Listening Publications, 2010), 6.