

# Choreographic Music Performance: Connecting with Place

## KEYWORDS

Spatial music, site-specific, choreography, acoustic ecology, antiphon

## I: INTRODUCTION

### ABSTRACT

The last few years I've been increasingly involved in choreographic music performance as a way to connect with place and the history of the place in question. These choreographies differ from most site-specific performance practice or field-recording in the way that sounds move around in a semi-predetermined way in a constant state of flux, creating an overall form and an intimate relationship with environmental sounds and accidental events to which participating musicians react. They aim at contextualizing the relationship between musicians themselves as well as between musicians and the place in question. I examine the history of music performance involving movement of musicians and describe some of my own concepts.

### DEFINITION

What do I mean by 'choreographic music performance'? Usually, what is referred to as 'spatial music' is either electronic music spatialized via a number of speakers, or groups of musicians in predetermined fixed locations within a performance space. With choreographed music performance I mean: *live music made by musicians who work with physical movement within a certain space in a choreographed fashion*. My main interest is compositions/concepts in which musicians listen and react to aural events from either other participants or the local environment (such as wildlife, cars, wind, playground, shopping centre, public announcements, etc.).

## II: HISTORIC CONTEXT

### EARLY HISTORY

In early church music, composers, such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (Italy, c. 1525 - 1594) and Alessandro Striggio (Italy, c. 1536 - 1592), often used a call and answer principle (antiphon) in their music via a spatial setup of a number of choirs. A spatial way of working with music can clearly be seen in, for example, Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium* (c. 1570), a 40-part motet for eight choirs (five voices each). During the start of this piece, choir I starts on the outer side of the church in question, and slowly goes via all choirs to choir VIII on the other side.

In *Das Echo* (1761), Joseph Haydn (Austria, 1732 - 1809) takes it a step further by placing two trios (consisting of two violins and cello each) in two different rooms. The second trio echos the first trio (where the audience is situated), thus sounding like an echo coming from outside the performance room.



FIGURE Excerpt from Tallis' *Spem in Alium*<sup>1</sup> in which one can clearly see the music moving from choir II (via III, IV, V and VI) towards choir VII, and the first page of Haydn's *Das Echo*.<sup>2</sup>

Marching bands (fanfare orchestras, pipe bands, etc.) move around in a certain space (battle field, town, stadium, oval, etc.). These bands usually have a primarily military and/or ceremonial function in the honour of a country or, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, institution (school, foundation, sport club, etc.).



FIGURE Ottoman picture from 1720 of military bands, and a 21<sup>st</sup> century performance at the highly choreographed Edinburgh Military Tattoo (Scotland).

## 20<sup>TH</sup> - 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY ART MUSIC

Although there are many spatial compositions from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, I will use only a small selection relevant to this writing. In 1908, Charles Ives (USA, 1874 - 1954) wrote *The Unanswered Question* for trumpet, flutes and strings (revised in 1930-35). Haydn used a secondary room in *Das Echo* to emphasise the echo effect and similarly, *The Unanswered Question* has the trumpet play from outside the performance space. When composer Henri Brant (Canada, 1913 - 2008) witnessed a performance of *The Unanswered Question*, it triggered an interest in spatial concepts and from then on he built a vast oeuvre around this compositional methodology. One of his first spatial works is *Rural Antiphonies* (1953) in which five large musical groups are situated in different (widely spread) parts of the performance hall. Some other examples of works relevant to this paper are:

- *Hieroglyphics I* (1957) - The soloist (viola) has three different 'stations' during the piece.
- *Windjammer* (1969) - This piece works with the opposite of the previous piece: the soloist (horn) is stationary whilst four other (wind) players have to keep moving in specific patterns.

<sup>1</sup> Tallis, Thomas, *Spem in Alium*. Oxford University Press, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Haydn, Joseph, *Das Echo*. Thom-Berg.



Yannis Xenakis (Greece/France, 1922 - 2001) composed *Eonta* (1964) for piano and five brass instruments<sup>6</sup>. The score prescribes a number of different positions in which the five brass instruments should position themselves: spread out at the back wall, next to the piano, sitting on their chairs or individually walking around whilst playing (for which a second conductor is used).

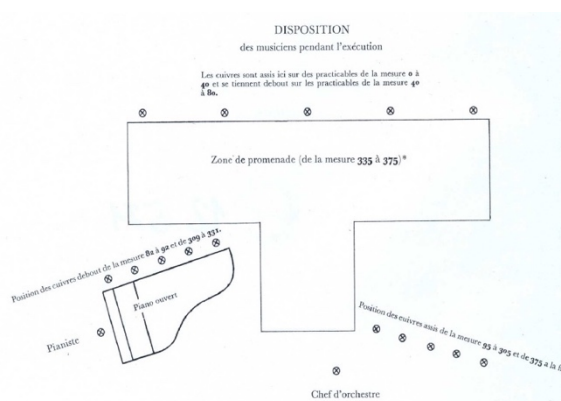


FIGURE The three main positions for the trombones in *Eonta*.<sup>7</sup>

Karlheinz Stockhausen (Germany, 1928 - 2007) was a composer who often worked with spatial concepts as an independent parameter in pieces such as *Gruppen* (1957, for three orchestras) and *Carré* (1960, for four orchestras and four choirs). In his *Helicopter String Quartet* (1995) he takes the spatial aspect to a three-dimensional level by having a string quartet play in four helicopters which fly in a circular pattern (radius six km) and at the same time continuously change altitude<sup>8</sup>. But, what was Stockhausen aiming at?

### Amsterdam: Brant vs Stockhausen

Living in Amsterdam, I was in a position of partly witnessing/noticing both Brant's *Bran(d)t aan de Amstel* and Stockhausen's *Helicopter String Quartet*. As a student on my bicycle, I accidentally saw one of the boats with flutes involved in Brant's piece (but unaware what was going on) and living a stone's throw away from where Stockhausen's world premiere took place, I heard the helicopters very clearly. Brant's piece could be performed only in Amsterdam as it was written specifically for the city's canals, streets, instruments (barrel organs) and buildings. Stockhausen's piece however, has been since performed at a number of locations. This makes it clear to me that Stockhausen's piece was a spectacle on its own, not relating specifically to a place and time, despite its three dimensional score.

## III: MY OWN PRACTICE

### TRIPLE DUTCH PERFORMANCE

Before I moved to Australia in 2010, I was a member of 'Magpie Music and Dance Company' for over 10 years. With this ensemble, almost solely based on improvisation, we used to explore the spatial potential of a performance space, musicians as well as dancers. When one of the members, dancer Michael Schumacher (USA, 1961 -), asked me in 2003 for a duet as part of the Holland Dance Festival, I wanted to approach it

<sup>6</sup> Two trumpets and three tenor trombones.

<sup>7</sup> Xenakis, Yannis. *Eonta*. London, Boosey & Hawkes, 1967.

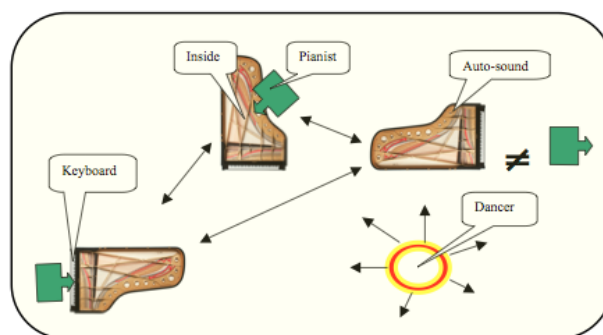
<sup>8</sup> From Wikipedia: "The piece is played as follows: A moderator, who may be the sound projectionist, introduces the quartet, and then explains the technical aspects of the piece. The players then walk out, always being visible to the auditorium audience via the video cameras that follow them, until they have all arrived at and boarded their helicopters. From the moment of take-off until disembarkation the musicians and helicopters remain constantly in the view of the cameras, with video and audio (using three microphones in each helicopter) of each string player transmitted to his assigned group of television monitors in the auditorium. "The earth can be seen through the glass cockpit of the helicopter behind each player". Then the piece begins. The helicopters circle at a radius of 6 km from the auditorium, changing altitude constantly to create the 'bounce' of the piece. All twelve incoming signals are controlled by the sound crew. The descent lasts five minutes, with the decreasing sound of the rotor blades acting as a background as the quartet re-enter the hall. The moderator then takes questions and leads applause."



as a *trio* for dancer, pianist *and piano*. In hindsight I was addressing a number of issues I was dealing with around that time:

- The heavy load on a pianist's shoulders of the heritage of piano repertoire from Haydn and Debussy to Art Tatum and Bill Evans.
- Why did jazz pianist Thelonious Monk often step away from the piano and dance around it in the middle of a concert?<sup>9</sup>
- Tactile intimacy versus detached spectatorship as musical parameter.
- Moving away from the expectation of 'soloist with musical accompaniment' towards a more holistic relationship.

For our concept certain conditions were needed: a grand piano, sounds from the piano without the necessity of my physical presence, and a floor allowing free movement of the piano. By moving the piano around in an improvisational fashion, I would explore and shape the space which consequently the dancer could use as anchor for his actions. In this way we were able to give the piano an equal role in the performance, somewhere in between Cornelius Cardew's *Memories of You*, Monk's dancing and an automated coin-piano.



**FIGURE** The piano and pianist alternating between placement and between relationships: via keyboard, via inside and independent/separated, all this juxtaposed with the actions of the dancer as 'soloist'.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than commanding the piano and have it follow my instructions, I collaborated with it as equal partner and engaged in a discourse whilst shaping the performance hall into various forms. By doing so I was able to throw off some of the burdens of 'the historic piano virtuoso' and start anew.<sup>11</sup>

## SPLINTER STRATEGIES

With the Splinter Orchestra<sup>12</sup> I have performed a number of open choreographic concepts for movement of musicians (and thus the sounds they produce) within a space or landscape. I will describe one example called *Air Hockey*.

In *Air Hockey*, a performance area (the 'arena') is defined beforehand. The participants go, in a more or less straight line, from somewhere on the borderline to another point on the borderline, whilst playing a more or less constant sound. They alter their sound when 'bouncing off' the borders of the arena. Whenever two (or more) people accidentally 'collide' they stop and play together whilst others join them to form a cluster of musicians creating a musical event. This process repeats itself multiple times during a performance in an improvisational fashion. In this way, independent, individual sounds continuously occupy the space as a

<sup>9</sup> An example of Monk dancing: Thelonious Monk, *Bolivar Blues*, Japan, 1963. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTijrDIU-m4>, accessed 02/06/2015.

<sup>10</sup> The performance can be seen on: Schumacher, Michael with Han Bennink, Cor Fuhler and Wilbert de Joode. *Triple Dutch*. Amsterdam: Holland Dance Festival/DataImages 01, 2003. DVD.

<sup>11</sup> This text is taken from my PhD thesis *DISPERSE AND DISPLAY, Structural Strategies for Modular approaches in Compositional and Instrumental Practice*, 2016, chapter II - 18, p 84.

<sup>12</sup> The Splinter Orchestra, formed in 2002, is a large-scale ensemble, consisting of a fluctuating number of members with various backgrounds. The leaderless and conductor less orchestra usually hovers around minimalism, and is based on a social, democratic, gender equal, and non-egotistical view towards cooperation via improvisation, conceptual ideas and site-specific conditions. Over the years, Splinter has become a social and artistic meeting point and a way to test and recalibrate one's own ideas.

whole, and a clear overall musical form is generated via the ‘co-op clusters’ and their musical statements. In 2016, during rehearsals and recordings in Mungo National Park, this concept was used a number of times in a number of different spaces, mostly outside.<sup>13</sup>

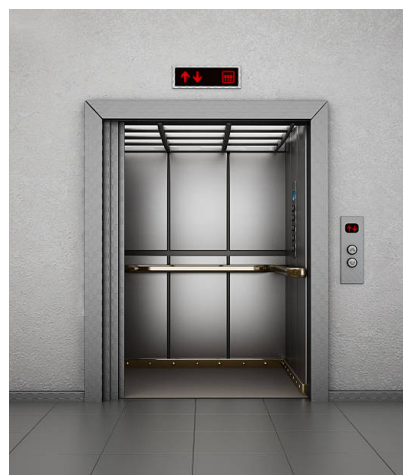
After our time in Mungo, we made an overall plan for a 70 minutes long performance of *Air Hockey* as the ‘kick-off’ of Tectonics Adelaide 2016 in the Adelaide Town Hall. There are three defined areas: 1: ground floor including outside the entrance; 2: 1st floor and balcony; and 3: The Auditorium (the main hall). Also the elevator and other niches were used. These areas and time slots were guidelines only and morphed into one another, whilst rogue members, following their own spatial path, were part of the concept.



**Figure.** A ‘clump’ of four during *Air Hockey* on the first floor of the Adelaide Town Hall.

The performance was confusing for the audience (and sometimes ourselves) as it was not always clear what was part of the planned performance and what was part of accidental occurrences (such as an obtrusive pizza eating man and a person fainting, injuring his head). For the orchestra members, moving around in a straight line and clustering was challenging because of a large audience (400) occupying the same space. The finale arrived when the orchestra after a state of consensus, standing against the walls surrounding the then seated audience in the main hall, unexpectedly started a giant turning wheel by walking anticlockwise around the outer edge.<sup>14</sup>

## THE ELEVATOR SERIES



**FIGURE** An open elevator as invitation to relocate.

I find an elevator a fascinating tool in a choreographic context. Travelling in a TARDIS<sup>15</sup>-like machine, partially excluded from the outside world, one is suddenly transported to another space. It’s a personal favourite because of its ‘*beam me up, Scotty*’ factor and its juxtaposition to gradual transitions. With this in

<sup>13</sup> The results can be heard on: Splinter Orchestra, *MUNGO*. Sydney, Splitrec 27, 2016. Triple CD release.

<sup>14</sup> This text is taken from: Fuhler, Cor. *Splinter at Mungo, the Art of Communication*, a research paper about Splinter’s trip from Sydney to Adelaide via Mungo National Park in early 2016.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Time And Relative Dimension In Space’: the imaginary telephone-box shaped time machine in the sci-fi series Doctor Who.

mind I created *The Elevator Series*, 12 choreographic concepts for large music ensemble involving an elevator (see appendix). It consists of 12 pieces: 4 for two floors, 4 for three floors and 4 for four (or more) floors. I will use the instructions from the first piece (*The Elevator Series A*) as example to show some of my strategic thinking.

#### ***A: 2 Floor Piece I***

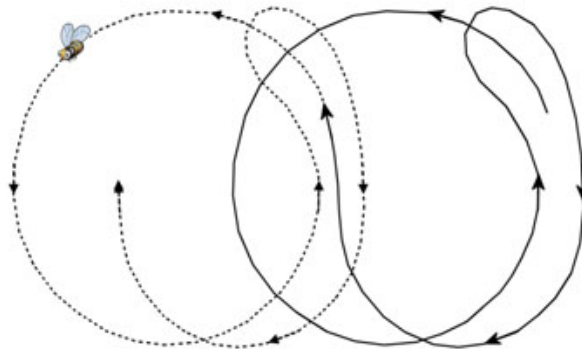
- Approximately half the ensemble starts on the upper floor, half the ensemble on the lower floor. All participant *must* use the elevator *once* (and once only) during the performance, staying inside the elevator for ad libitum length, after which they must exit on the *other* floor from where they entered.

These instructions cause all participants to have played with everybody else and at the end the two ensembles will have swapped floors turning back into the same configuration as during the start.

In general, one could argue *The Elevator Series A - L* are not so much compositions but means to instigate creativity and to find different ways of playing together and relating to one another.

## IV: CONCLUSION

After a performance in a community garden, the Splinter Orchestra was once described as ‘bees looking for pollen’. Just as a bee must go about and find some pollen (it can’t wait for the pollen to come to it), choreographic music performance increases the chance of encountering special sounds/objects which can be utilised within a performance. Open foraging and searching leads to more flexibility, more opportunities and a deeper connection with place.



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## THE ELEVATOR SERIES

*12 choreographic concepts for large music ensemble involving an elevator*

### **A: 2 Floor Piece I**

Half the ensemble starts upper floor, half the ensemble on the lower floor. All participant must use the elevator once (and once only) during the performance, staying inside it ad libitum, after which they must come out at the other floor from where they entered.

*All participants will have played with everybody else and eventually the two ensembles, in the same configuration, will have swapped floors.*

### **B: 2 Floor Piece II**

The ensemble minus one, starts on upper floor while one person plays solo on the lower floor. Each person on the upper floor goes individually down the elevator once and swaps with the person on the lower floor who then must immediately go up. When all have played solo at lower level, all participants on the upper floor go more or less simultaneously to the lower floor, either by elevator or stairs.

*The whole ensemble minus one or two will play upstairs, whilst downstairs forms a situation of exchanging solos until the end, when all reunite at the lower floor.*

### **C: 2 Floor Piece III**

Ensemble on lower floor, solo or no one on upper floor, and a permanent duo inside the elevator. Participants from both floors can enter the elevator and form a trio. During this trio nobody can enter the elevator (except the audience of course) until one of the three persons leaves the elevator. The upper floor can only be solo or no one (silence), therefore, one can enter this floor only when there is no participant present.

*Make sure to leave enough space for the audience inside the elevator and also open the door yourselves without people entering or leaving so an audience can hear the duo or trio. The single person on the upper floor can only leave when there is a duo in the elevator.*

### **D: 2 Floor Piece IV**

Ad libitum, but continuously think of either yellow or purple *unfolding* flowers.

### **E: 2 Floor Piece V**

Participants may use both floors but should mainly situate themselves on the stairs. Only a duo (two people, no more, no less) can enter and leave the elevator (together). When leaving the elevator, they both *must* play a long *mf - ff* sound.

### **F: 3 Floor Piece I**

Establish a trio inside the elevator (each has a number 1, 2 and 3), the rest resides ad lib on all three floors. When a fourth person arrives inside the elevator, number 1 goes out (preferably on the same floor). After this the procedure repeats itself: number 2 goes out, then number 3 and after that the one that has been in there the longest. (The trio members can not leave on their own accord.)

*Make sure to leave enough space for the audience inside the elevator and also open the door yourselves without people entering or leaving so an audience can hear the trio.*

### **G: 3 Floor Piece II**

2 Ensembles (upper and lower level) and 1 solo (middle level). When a new person arrives, one person on the floor in question *must* leave. The solo on the middle floor can only leave when someone arrives.

### **H: 3 Floor Piece III**

Each participant chooses beforehand three different ways of playing, each associated with one of the three floors. Move ad libitum. Inside the elevator, one must play a *pp-ppp* continuous sustained sound and/or use one's voice.

### **i: 3 Floor Piece IV**

Create an installation inside the elevator and choose one participant (they can swap with others during the piece) operating the elevator to move continuously (and sometimes stopping the doors from closing). At the start the participants are evenly spread over the three floors and each individual may use the elevator only twice.

### **J: 3 Floor Piece V**

Evenly divide the ensemble in three sub-groups. The sub-groups can start and end on any floor. A sub-group *must* stay together whilst going in-between floors using either elevator or stairs.

*If the elevator is too small for the sub-group as a whole, the stay-behinds must join their group asap.*

### **K: 4 Floor Piece I**

Start with 1 ensemble on the lower level and 3 duos on the other levels, let this last for a few minutes. For the end: make sure all groups/duos end up in exactly the same formation on *another* level as where started. Let this last for a few minutes as well.

*In case of eight participants, these will become four duos.*

### **L: 4 Floor Piece II**

The whole ensemble starts on the low level. One can only go *up* in the elevator and only go *down* on the stairs. The piece ends with *all* participants on the top floor.

### **General Notes**

In all 12 pieces, the overall length is ad lib. However, it is advisable to establish an approximate time frame beforehand (e.g., 5 - 10 minutes, around 20 min, approximately 1 hour, one afternoon, etc.) depending on the situation. The total number of participants should be no lower than eight. However, a higher number (up to around 30, depending on the level, aims and situation) is preferable.

Some of the pieces may be performed in either a 2, 3 or 4 level elevator. E.g. in the situation of a 4 (or more) floor elevator, choose two for a 2 floor piece, etc. In case of a 2 floor elevator, choose two additional areas for a 4 floor piece (and walk in between them as you would on a staircase), etc. In general, be spatially creative.

Cor Fuhler, Wahroonga, June 24/25, 2017.