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Music, complexity, and embodiment in performance: In conversation with accordionist Andreas Borregaard

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Music, complexity, and embodiment in performance: In conversation with accordionist Andreas Borregaard

As part of the Copenhagen workshop of the *Evaluating Methods of Aesthetic Inquiry Network*, which took place from the 6th to 8th of April 2017, the organisers invited accordionist Andreas Borregaard to give a performance of two contemporary pieces for the accordion: *De Profundis* by Sofia Gubaidulina, and *Sequenza XIII (chanson)* by Luciano Berio. The performance was followed by a discussion on musical complexity and embodiment, chaired by Jonna Vuoskoski. The event was conceived along similar lines as the handling sessions at the Hunterian and Pitt Rivers Museums as a means of allowing the researchers involved in the network to engage with specific works of art and reflect collectively on the experience. It was also a way of continuing with the network's commitment to furthering new thinking by fostering not only the dialogue between different academic disciplines, but also with art practitioners and performers. Finally, the performance was part of a series of discussions that took place on the first day of the Copenhagen workshop that were concerned with the notion of complexity and how it may be brought to bear on aesthetic issues. [Footnote 1: In addition to the present special issue, the *Evaluating Methods of Aesthetic Inquiry Network* is also working on an edited volume entitled *Aesthetics and Complexity*.]

Andreas Borregaard describes the two pieces performed in the session:

Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931): De Profundis (1978)

De Profundis means "Out of the depths".

The title comes from chapter 130 in the Book of Psalms:

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord

O Lord, hear my voice..."

De Profundis begins in an infinite abyss. The shivering cluster-chords are prevalent and intense. This beginning has always inspired me as it foretells the magnitude of the piece and immediately addresses the fundamentals of human existence.

From the depths, the music moves reluctantly towards the absolute contrast of darkness: the shining light. The cluster-chords give way to pure harmonies reminiscent of church chorales. But existence is not black and white. *De Profundis* primarily unfolds in between these two worlds where opposite forces intervene and contend for dominance. The lines of the music strive up but are constantly held back by the downward movements. The resulting tension drives the piece forward through long and persistent phrases: from the dark beginning, past the heavenly chorale and through uncertainty, doubt and frustration to the final confrontation, maybe even to infinite forgiveness.

Notable in *De Profundis* is the use of the accordion's bellows. The opening, the later shaking vibratos, the grinding build-up for the climax and the desolate emptiness that follows are all borne by the bellows, the lungs of the accordion. It gives an organic expression to the complex sounds and breathes life into instrumental effects that would otherwise be dead and empty.

Luciano Berio (1925-2003): Sequenza XIII (chanson) (1995)

The word "chanson" (song) suggests a lyrical atmosphere. Furthermore it relates to one of the composer's inspirations for the music: memories of childhood jaunts to the Italian countryside where songs were accompanied by accordion.

As happy memories often give way to thoughts that wander freely here and there, *Sequenza XIII* allows the beautifully singing theme to develop unhindered in different directions. One idea anticipates the next in an almost improvisatory manner and suddenly the music is far from where it started. However it is soon reminded of its origin; the melody returns, only to evolve alongside other strains until the theme is brought back yet again - a modernised rondo.

Referring to Berio's idyllic countryside recollections, the warm tremulous effects of the music give an impression of a hot Italian summer day. Everything shimmers in the strong light, while one indulges in the pleasant circling thoughts of daydreaming.

Berio wrote a series of "Sequenzas" for different solo instruments. They are all very virtuosic - the utmost is demanded from both the instrument and performer. In his accordion work the use of the pre-fixed chord system in the bass provides a wonderful new palette of colours. However the piece is not merely a challenging technical exercise; it is truly one of the most tender and beautifully sounding accordion pieces I know.

Speaker key:

JV - Jonna Vuoskoski

AB - Andreas Borregaard

RH – Roddy Hawkins

EC – Eric Clarke

BB – Bev Best

JV: I would like to start by discussing the concept of complexity in music. In the

fields of music cognition and psychology, complexity is typically conceived in terms of information processing, with features like unpredictability and event density contributing to high complexity. How does this view resonate with how you – as a musician and a performer – experience or understand complexity in music?

AB: I think it resonates quite well, actually. I think complexity in music can be many different things, and whether something is complex or not depends on the person playing it or experiencing it. Rhythms can be complex when various rhythmical layers are put on top of each other, or harmonies can be complex when many different notes are sounding at the same time. For instance, a cluster with ten different notes is more complex than a C major chord. Or is it? Even though a rhythmical pattern or a chord is complex on paper, the sounding result can be quite uniform and simple. And the degree of experienced complexity will depend on the listener's background. But the way I see it, as a performer, is that what you strive to do is to eliminate the complexity as much as possible, to simplify everything. Playing the accordion - or any other instrument really - is a very, very complex task where you have to join together so many different muscles and actions in one particular way to create the sound. And since you cannot focus specifically on each and every one of these different aspects at the same time and control them individually, you need to automatize a great deal of the actions – through practising – and understand what the complexity consists of, and find the underlying simplicity on which to focus when playing the music. Essentially, that is most often a combination of the musical expression you are aiming for – what exactly it is that you want to communicate, what character, atmosphere, emotion, colour – and something basic like the pulse. Pulse is a very fundamental thing to focus on instead of all the things happening on top.

JV: So, complex pieces require a bit more effort on the part of the performer in order to work out what the meaningful parts are, and to emphasize and bring out whatever it is that you find meaningful in the piece; to communicate that to the audience?

AB: Yes, and you often have to do that simply to be able to play complex pieces. And that involves basic practice work, such as playing things very slowly and analysing what is happening, slowly getting your fingers to push the right buttons at the right time, and then at some point that will become an automatic thing that is related to the simpler fundaments. While practising, you might think that you do not need to find and activate the foundation of simplicity – because everything is always much easier in the practise room – but things are different when you are on stage. The adrenaline kicks in, you might get nervous, the focus of your mind can easily flicker, and tunnel vision and fear of making mistakes can occur. All of these inhibit the muscles from doing what they are trained to do, and therefore hinder free musical performance. To avoid these unwanted reactions it is essential to control the mind - much like in elite sport performances. And for this purpose you need to focus on something simple and fundamental instead of something complex and detailed.

JV: Indeed. There is some interesting research being done in the field of music psychology regarding an audience's perception and experience of musical performance, and how the gestures and body movements of the performer actually play an important role. And it seems that the more complex the piece – like atonal music without a pulse, for example – the more important the gestures of the performer become from the audience's perspective. The performer's

gestures help to convey the expression and phrasing of complex pieces more effectively. And I guess the crucial thing is that these gestures are not typically performative in a deliberate way, but serve a cognitive function for the performer as well. Do you ever think of your body as a communicative tool while performing?

AB: No, not unless it is musical theatre or something with a specific performance aspect in it. Any movements that I make have to come genuinely from what I play. Otherwise it feels fake. Maybe it would work differently for someone who is also a very good actor, but I think that the right movements will come naturally when you are as close as you can to being one with the music. Basically, that is what all musicians strive for – to eliminate the instrument and eliminate yourself and really just have the music sing through your body. And I understand why it is a big help for the audience. For instance, you mention pulseless atonal music, which can be hard to relate to, but when the musician produces gestures with the body, then suddenly it is relatable – because it is a body. Just like the music example earlier with the voice changing – it was very clear because it was a voice, we all have a voice, we all know the feeling of singing, or we did once at least. So that is why we can relate to it so easily. I think this is particularly interesting when it comes to contemporary and more abstract, atonal or experimental music. To be able to perceive it and to experience it and be genuinely captured or maybe even moved by it, I think it has to have some kind of relation to the body of the person listening to it. And that means that the performer has to put some of his or her body into the music. Otherwise where would it come from? You could just read the scores of course, but that would take a different set of skills – and it would not be the same result at all.

JV: That resonates exactly with what recent empirical research is telling us; that our perception and understanding of others' actions is based on internal simulation of those actions. So, in other words, the way in which we make sense of musical sounds and gestures is through embodiment and bodily resonance. We have an embodied understanding of the force and intentionality of the body movements that produced the sounds we hear, as well as the movement qualities we perceive in musical contours. [Footnote 2: See Leman, M. (2008). *Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; and Overy, K., & Molnar-Szakacs, I. (2009). Being together in time: Musical experience and the mirror neuron system. *Music Perception*, 26(5), 489-504.]

RH: I was really struck by your response just now saying you do not want to add anything theatrical or extraneous to the music as it is represented in the score, and then you also mentioned the body. But I was thinking that having the instrument as a kind of extension or integration of your body, it is incredibly theatrical to have the gestures of the vibrating accordion in the opening of the Gubaidulina piece, and then in the next section – much, much quieter and gentler – the instrument expands. So actually there is something about the space that the instrument occupies and that there is so much air going through it that has something to do with this question of embodiment – even though it is not your body, strictly speaking.

AB: Yes, that is true – the accordion has the benefit of being a symbol of the torso

with the bellows in the middle, placed right in front of my actual lungs. So there is a very clear connection there. But sometimes the composer – or myself as a performer – can also decide that I want the instrument to be fully extended at a certain point; that this would make good sense in terms of the character of the music and the expression that I want. However, just as often it is purely a practical consequence; if you want to scream as loudly as you can for a long time, you simply need a lot of air. And if you want to make a shivering sound, you will have to shake the bellows.

BB: When you play pieces like the ones we just heard, is it a narrative for you; do you narrativise the pieces in any way? Or is it visual; do you see images that might help you in terms of movement through the pieces? To go back slightly to what Roddy said, what made me wonder this was the point almost midway through the Gubaidulina piece where it seemed as if the accordion was breathing. It did sound like a breath, like it was catching its breath and then started again.

AB: Yes, I normally do. It depends on the type of music, but both of these pieces invite that kind of practice very strongly. I try to do it as much as possible, because it is a way of opening your imagination as a performer, to find out exactly what kind of articulation, dynamic, sound, tempo, etc., you want to use to create the musical character. All these 'tools' which actually exist in indefinite nuances. From the shortest staccato notes to completely smeared legato, there are many different ways of articulating one note – so which one to choose? There may be a dot in the score indicating that the note should be short – but how short? To decide on the exact nuance and to be able to perform it, I think we

need to activate our imagination and link the music to something which is just as indefinitely nuanced in expression – such as images and stories. Sometimes I am actually making up a story for myself: This is the image in the beginning, the scenery where this piece takes place or starts out, and then in the following section maybe a person enters, or just a different image, given of course that the piece invites this sort of narrative approach. For instance, Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* does not do that in the same way because it is so static and mathematically constructed.

This whole thing about notation is a tricky thing. I suppose the notation is just a summary of what the composer has in mind as sound, and although black dots and lines on paper is very far from living sound, it is the best system we have to communicate instructions to the performer. But many things are missing. For instance, in the beginning of the Berio piece it only says which notes are where and that they are slurred, so you should play it with legato articulation and piano/pianissimo lontano (very quietly), and that is it. But it could be played in many different ways. However, if I have this image of someone looking at the shimmering ocean, it is very warm, you can smell the grass, and it is pleasant and very loving and free. Then I would naturally shape the melody in a way that is not written down simply because you cannot notate exactly where to increase the loudness by 0.1 decibels and then where to go down by 0.002 decibels and so forth. It would be too much information. So all these complex micro-adjustments are what you have to add as a performer to make the music come alive. And deciding how and when to do it – and managing to do it in real time in the performance situation – has to come from the layer of simplicity – like an image.

JV: I would like to add a quick comment regarding the listener's perspective here;

this kind of tendency of hearing narratives or even conjuring up visual images is quite typical for listeners as well when they are immersed in the music, so it does tell us something fundamental about how we approach and understand music.

AB: Yes, because a note alone is completely abstract, so we need something that we understand to give it sense or to make it give us sense.

JV: And these narratives can also function as vehicles for emotional experience. It is thought that narratives and imagery are grounded in bodily experience and the embodiment of the actions and gestures we hear in music. And not only the actual, overt gestures, but also the kinds of shapes within music that imply physical gesture and how people might move when they are expressing or experiencing a certain emotion. The physical energy of the gesture, and whether it is smooth or abrupt; all these things correspond to our physical bodily experience and expression of emotion, so this is one way through which we can have these mappings to narratives or images. [Footnote 3: See Bonde, L. O. (2006). Music as metaphor and analogy: A literature essay. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy, 16*, 57–78.]

EC: In the Berio piece, I was really struck by the kind of extraordinary virtual spatiality of the music, the different registers, particularly in your right hand. Because the different registers have different spectral properties, they appear to be in different planes of space almost, some of them more remote, some of them more present, and some of them in the middle distance. You described the Berio piece as having a strong sense of nostalgia because of the chanson theme that is constantly present in various ways in the various registers. That sense of things

being veiled by different degrees of memory or present reality seems to be brought out very powerfully by these different registeral and spectral properties.

AB: There is an acoustic difference between right and left hand normally; the left hand is a little bit more muffled, and it is also the left hand that has the chord system used to makes this sound bed of chords which just sounds distant. Compared to that, the right hand probably seems even more present. Perhaps this room's acoustics brings forth some frequencies more than others.

Making meaning: response to a performance by Andreas Borregaard of contemporary music for solo accordion(ist)

Roddy Hawkins (University of Manchester)

Luciano Berio, *Sequenza XIII (chanson)* (1995) 10'; Sofia Gubaidulina, *De Profundis* (1978) 12'.

As we entered the room for this performance, in the middle of the floor was the accordion: lifeless, neatly buttoned up with its insides concertinaed together. By a happy coincidence, which bears some comment, this room happened to be the old anatomical theatre in Copenhagen's Medical Museion, formerly owned by the Royal Academy of Surgeons in Denmark. Today, the museum is attached to the

city's main university, and the theatre, or 'auditorium', 'is used for teaching, lectures and doctoral defences, and also [as] a concert hall and a venue for different kinds of cultural activities.'[1] One way or another, then, the room remains a site for dissection, an analogy which bears particular emphasis given the main object 'on display' in this particular instance: the classical accordion — an object which needs, as it were, to be spoken in order to speak, which breathes, which conjures and obscures a host of musical and cultural references beyond the classical tradition, and which literally opens itself up in the process.

In those heady days before the royal academies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of the earliest medical collections in Renaissance Europe were hardly collections at all, at least not in the passive, static and archival sense usually associated with the term. Before detached publics and the highly disciplined paradigms of early-twentieth-century museum practice and medical training — not to mention the parallel concert rituals of western art music — the earliest medical museums were more *open* about their bodily and chemical experiments (Arnold 1999, 146). They included objects which 'were weighed and measured, tasted, scratched and sniffed, and even set fire to' (Arnold and Olsen 2003, 374). Recovering the history of these 'theatres of experiments' has provided both subject and inspiration to contemporary curators attuned to the material culture and postcolonial politics of the rooms, boxes and categories, as well as the objects, which mediate twenty-first century forms of knowledge, historical awareness and public debate (2003, 374–76). As a quasi-private performance of contemporary (if not strictly *experimental*) music that comprised

[1] As documented on the museum's website: http://www.museion.ku.dk/facility-rental/

introductions from Andreas **Borregaard** to each of the two works performed (hardly unusual) as well as a follow-up Q&A (less usual), this performance remained recognisably a concert and yet not quite a lecture-recital. Fittingly, perhaps, it was simultaneously public exhibition, experimental display and pedagogical demonstration, with a bit of nineteenth-century museum culture in the background for good measure. So: what kind of knowledge was engendered by this performance? What kind of museum practice and display was at work? Where were all the body parts? Some tentative responses are suggested by a comparison of the two compositions performed by Andreas, and in particular the web of inferences within which the accordion — and accordionist — were captured, and within which they could be imagined, heard, seen, felt — in short, put on display.

He picks up the instrument, and places it on his lap — not yet fully strapped in.

After a few words of welcome by the session chair, Jonna Vuoskoski, the performance in Copenhagen began with more words, this time from accordionist Andreas Borregaard who explained the technical and biographical background to the first piece, *Sequenza XIII (chanson)* written by the Italian composer Luciano Berio in 1995. The Sequenzas are among some of Berio's better-known compositions, a series of studies — 'sequences' — in virtuosity and the exploration of compositional technique. Many of them are also a study in the virtuosity of particular instrumentalists since, as with so much music in the western art music tradition, the works were mostly written for specific performers capable of specific and novel instrumental — which is to say bodily

— techniques (Gartmann 2016). Andreas told us that one of the main innovations in *Sequenza XIII* concerned Berio's switching between the two modes available in the left-hand of the 'free bass' classical accordion. He was keen to assure us, however, that the composition was not a mere technical study; noting that it was the only one of the fourteen Sequenzas to include a subtitle ('*chanson*'), he also told us that in order to approach the work holistically — to strip away the layers of complexity, to chart a route through the music which can be envisioned from the start — he liked to think of how the piece might be infused with, or even *about*, the aging composer's nostalgia for the accordion-accompanied street songs heard in mid-century Italy.

Whatever its source, this narrative helped Andreas to navigate the detail of the score by largely ignoring it, and thus enabling muscle memory to do what he had practiced it to do: to see the wood for the tress. Nevertheless his evocation of a blurry sun-drenched seascape was now, also, each of ours. And with it the programmatic convention of the classical concert had been duly discharged; before we heard a note, the entanglement of sensory experience and discursive practice, there from the moment we entered the room, was, if not uppermost in my mind, certainly in the air. (Indeed, before the performance, we — this unusual audience — had spent the previous session discussing music both in respect of its capacity to affect our bodies in the nanoseconds of pre-linguistic immediacy and, as Eric Clarke remarked in his talk, on our almost immediate and 'virtuosic capacity to say something about it'. As an audience we were thus sensitized in quite a specific way, maybe even 'looking for' something *about* complexity.) But Andreas's reflections on the subtitle are helpful in capturing —

months later, and in words — the unfolding musical language deployed here by Berio. With the title inverted the idea of a 'song sequence' neatly captures the linear, sequential temporality within which more or less identifiable, sentence-like units of meaning — in this case, perhaps, memories of song — are recognised as such, just as when we approach the shoreline we might squint to make out the emergence of individual waves from the flux and swell of the ocean long before we hear them break.

He places the second strap around his other shoulder and fastens the buckle. Final minor adjustments. Stillness — focus — descends. He lowers and rests his chin on the top of the accordion's body; waits; waits some more, staring at the score in front of him; then, purposively raises his chin to begin — necessary trigger movements.

Indulging the audio-visual dimension of this analogy, the first thing we hear is the 'song memory': a descending melodic phrase accompanied by two harmonically incongruent, interwoven lines. Incongruent does not presuppose incoherence; rather, there is a certain strangeness and perhaps also sadness to this opening gesture which results from its interweaving. But the effect is also strikingly visual: Andreas moves the bellows slowly, almost imperceptibly, so as not to release too much air and ruin the very quiet dynamic marked in the score ('*sempre ppp e lontano*'). Here and in subsequent iterations, these 'distant' lines ebb and flow to nowhere in particular and typically end with a gentle shudder of the bellows, producing enough of an exaggerated vibrato or 'wobble' in pitch to

mark the end of the phrase.[2] In addition to its syntactical function Thomas Gartmann claims that the rhetorical use of vibrato heard here 'references light music's use of the vibrato' and, furthermore, '[b]y plainly adding on vibrato […] the abruptness of its interruption suggests [Berio] is denouncing it' (2016, 292). The bellows tend to recede from view in this account, as the focus on vibrato reveals the social dimension of music criticism. The other, idealized accordion in this performance is, as it were, captured in the background of the image — not quite scrubbed over, not quite unfigured, but only dimly recognizable somewhere which always seems to escape the vectors which the eyes is invited to traverse across the canvas.

Written nearly two decades previously, in 1978, Sofia Gubaidulina's composition *De Profundis* opens with gestures which are diametrically opposed to those employed by Berio, though she too uses the 'bellows vibrato' of this large, classical accordion. Here, however, it is deployed in such a way that the instrument sounds as if something else entirely: no longer the gentle or abrupt shudder at the end of phrase and more of a sustained convulsion. To produce the required dynamic and effect the accordionist has to exert the kind of physical effort which cannot be performed — and this is no slight against Andreas — with the appearance of control that the disciplines of virtuoso performance and the discourses of genius demand. As a result the gesture draws attention to the bodies producing it because its seemingly massive sonic rotations fall outside

[2] Vibrato is the name given by western culture to that area of sonic production which conventionally 'warms' the disembodied 'purity' of, as it were, unaffected pitch: it is in the movements of a string player's left-hand or the movements stemming from the diaphragm muscle of the singer or wind player. In the history of western art music, it became normalized in the early to mid-twentieth century at the same time that recording reached critical mass and the music industry responded to and cultivated aesthetic preferences of warmth, presence and emotional directness. Whatever the tradition or genre, vibrato is inextricably bound up with the human and non-human bodies which produce it.

what we might consider to be the voice's range of expression. (In one respect this produces a literal sonic rendering of the depths implied by the title, setting up a contrast of darkness and light familiar to Gubaidulina's music, one which dominates the often misogynistic reception of her music (Medic 2012, 103–105). So far as 'light' goes, somewhat 'muffled' quotations of a Bach chorale (BWV 38/6) provide one explicitly intertextual reference.)

A second gesture later in the piece underscores Gubaidulina's passion for an instrument that 'breathes' (Kurtz 2008, 134). Emptied of air and stretched, seemingly to the point of the accordionist's full arm extension, we strain to hear air passing through the bellows. Here again, the physical properties of the instrument draw attention to the music's means of production; but far from undermining the religious symbolism that the title and reception of Gubaidulina's work encourages, such avant-garde 'effects' are the means — the making — through which that strand of meaning is generated. The score, and its notational marks, is neither 'the work' nor a veil for it: it is assembly instruction, and later, with practice, a mnemonic. The entanglement between the score, Andreas and bellows simultaneously serves up a symbolic rendering of the title *De Profundis* and brings into sharp relief the prosthesis of the accordion(ist).

The direction of attention 'into the inside' is very much reinforced visually and aurally by the layout and material properties of the room: the tiered, semi-circular rows of cramped wooden benches, the large glass windows opposite, and the high, dome-shaped ceiling above us, all served to focus visual and aural attention on the metaphorical cabinet of curiosities in the centre of the floor.

Despite the obvious opening up — the incisions — at work in Gubaidulina's piece, the history of theatres such as this reminds me that in every display something is necessarily covered over, excluded or lost, a point perhaps *felt* even more keenly in the act of listening to contemporary, or new music. In the case of the latter, Seth Brodsky argues that, for composers of new music '[t]heir crafts, often of tormenting complexity, are honed to stage non-appearances, and to repeat this staging — to make non-appearance a sustainable resource' (2017, 331). What is ultimately repressed is 'old music': its nineteenth-century traditions and its museum of works (Brodsky 2017, 327), a point which resonates with James Harding's conviction that experimental performance is necessarily shaped by its encounter with the ghosts of the vanquished, which it itself excludes (2013, 179). Such that the works performed here each revealed something different about the affective production of representation — staging non-appearance in Brodsky's terms — this encounter was also an object lesson, to use a tired but apposite pun, in the value and importance of *listening* to the production of performativity: not (only) to think through it, but to (re)live it. With making folded into reading, the latter will, in Eugenie Brinkema's view, 'uncover what was never expected and what is not fixed or certain or obvious before the time and activity of interpretation' (2014, 179).

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