

Commissioning a Piece of Music

Remarks on Alwynne Pritchard's "Don't Touch Me, You Don't Know Where I've Been"

Roar Sletteland

"He chose 'I chose it', yes"

Marcel Duchamp

Commissions are the dreariest of things. We tend to think of music as something made by a single and singular person, the composer, who writes instructions on a piece of paper that musicians transform into sounds for the audience to enjoy. The identity of the piece is given by its title and the composer's name; its substance lies in what the composer intended it to be. A happy set of relations, with the composer on top, being the piece's prime mover, obeying nothing other than her own will, letting her own talent and creativity come through, pure and unhindered. Even if interpretive freedom is given to parts of the chain, like the conductor or the soloist, it is within limits set by the composer. The musicians are errand-boys, delivering a readymade, someone else's work. The audience, at the end of the chain, is a mere receptacle, rendering the composer the sole autonomous figure in this assemblage, the one who guarantees the piece's coherence, shielding it, as it were, from the external world.

A commissioned piece is something else. Right at the outset, even before the creative act has begun, heteronomy is introduced into the composition: restrictions forced upon the composer from the outside in terms of instrumentation, duration, and of course the question of money. The piece is assigned a value based on the amount of labour the composer is believed to invest in it. The composer, once a sovereign figure, is reduced to a simple employee, fulfilling certain obligations, delivering a product whose identity others have specified, receiving her fee after the job is done. Ultimately, the very serious decision of whether the piece is going to exist or not is made by the commissioner, not the composer. The piece, then, expresses not so much the composer's ideas or aesthetics as her will to bow, her ability to comply with the pressures of the society around her.

Of course, the situation is more complicated in real life. The image of the self-sufficient, isolated genius is a romantic myth, and a bad one at that. At least since early 20th century, the network of relations between work, composer, musicians, audience and society has been a pressing issue in music, and dealt with in theory as well as in compositions. The control – and hence, responsibility for the resulting work – has been shifted in varying degrees to the musicians, allowing for improvisation and interpretation – even to the audience, as works by John Cage and Fluxus artists testify. And, on the other hand, the idea of the composer as separated from ordinary life and economy is increasingly harder to maintain in our tired but all-embracing form of capitalism. As any cultural worker knows, the major part of the work consists in securing funds for projects, often in such a way that the actual realizing of one project is disturbed by planning the next, following the rhythm of application deadlines. Composing and performing has become a luxury, a sort of holiday between the stretches of project management, which is no different from managing any other enterprise. This specific relationship between composer and society, that is, the power of the (public or private) sponsors and the corresponding submission of the creative worker, is not to be tampered with – if any treatment of this issue is at all allowed, this has to be in the form of comment or discreet, humorous subversion.

The first piece I commissioned from Alwynne Pritchard was all about money. I had for some time been pondering the correlation between a work and its financial basis, first from a practical point of view (organizing concerts, commissioning pieces, finding the correct fee) and after a while from a more conceptual angle. I wanted to find the limit, or threshold, where it stops (or starts) making sense to call something a work, in both musical and economic terms. So I asked for a piece that was one second long, written for a full orchestra, for the lowest possible fee, i.e. one British Pence. This would by definition create a conflict inside the work – between the assigned value of the work (1p) and value of the work required to compose it, between composition and composing so to speak: the fee would represent the duration of the piece, but not the time of the composer in her studio, and definitely not the full assembly of a symphony orchestra. The commission was also a silent nod to the 1989 single “You Suffer” by British grindcore band Napalm Death, also one second long, which is registered as the shortest single ever released. It seemed appropriate to reference this branch of popular culture, being both more explicitly commercial and politically outspoken than composed music tends to be – and also with a highly economical approach to the music, as the song demonstrates. I didn’t tell anyone about this reference, though.

We signed a contract one October evening at Landmark, Bergen, incidentally written on the rear side of a shopping list. In a way the project was a joke, but a serious one (as art often is), which Alwynne treated with the utmost rigor, composing a piece which was highly economical in itself, putting as much music as possible into the short time span, stretching the perceived duration by splitting it up and inserting the parts onto the other pieces of the programme. The finished piece consisted of two ½ second parts and was performed by the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra at the Borealis festival in March 2006. Perhaps aptly, Alwynne failed to comply with one clause in the contract. It stated that the title was “to be agreed upon.” Instead she invented her own title, “World Enough”, taken from the poem “To His Coy Mistress” by British 17th century metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell.

Following up on the theme of disobedience, the next commission would have only two demands, that of duration and title. The duration was not a big issue – I just wanted to avoid the boring averageness of ten-minute compositions – although the title was. We easily agreed on 30 minutes. Musicians were chosen by Alwynne herself – the ensemble Asamisamasa with flautist Bjørnar Habbestad, pianist Ellen Ugelvik, and Thorolf Thuestad on live electronics, herself reciting – as was the piece’s overall theme and structure. The project as a whole would fit quite nicely into Alwynne’s preoccupation with the relationship between written music and improvisation – being a composer and a singer in several improvising groups, the method of laying out a (written) framework for an otherwise improvised performance would come across as quite familiar. But the title would stand out from her oeuvre, at best only obliquely in sync with the other titles, which usually are short, suggestive and single-worded: Decoy, Homecoming, Graffiti, Der Zwerg, Zero, In Nomine. These titles are nouns or at least expressions, carrying content that give a hint of what the music is about or how it should be perceived. Proper names guaranteeing the pieces’ coherence, singling them out and providing them with a unique identity.

What, then, does this long sentence, “Don’t touch me, you don’t know where I’ve been” mean?

Nothing. It has meaning, of course, the individual words are no challenge at all and the sentence is in fact easier to grasp than the somewhat enigmatic titles of Alwynne's other pieces. But it doesn't refer to anything in particular. No thing or entity is described, named or denoted by those words – one might say that the sentence doesn't even point to the piece of music whose title it is supposed to be. Rather, it stretches outwards, towards someone on the outside who must not touch and doesn't know: the listener or reader maybe, instructed, warned, bullied. The title is a command, given in the imperative, hostile in tone, subjecting this other person to a speaker who is also debasing him- or herself, and at the same time introducing a distance between the two.

Who are these people? Who is the "I" saying "don't touch me" and who is being commanded in such an impertinent manner? Naturally, grasping an entity that explicitly prohibits being touched is anything but straightforward, so it is no surprise that these figures are ambiguous. First: who is at the receiving end? One obvious candidate is the audience, reading the title in the programme, listening in the concert hall, representing the end point in the communication chain. It could also be the musicians, who are the ones actually reading the score where the title is found, the ones in a submissive position, following the composer's instructions. And then it could be a message to the composer from the commissioner, who invented the title. Being the commissioner and unaware of such a message, I assume that it is not the case. But this is not for the composer to know.

Who, then, is speaking? I, the first person, singular – this could perhaps be the piece itself: after all, the sentence is the title of the piece. But a piece of music doesn't usually speak its own name; rather the title is the means of speaking about the piece. When I pronounce the title, I speak of the piece; it is the object of my speech. The piece itself doesn't speak. Still, the piece could very well be saying exactly these words. Isn't, after all, music the most intangible of all the art forms, composed solely of variations in air pressure, disappearing as soon as the last note has been struck, leaving only impressions in memory? True, we can't touch music. We don't know where it has been prior to its performance. The title would then be stating the obvious, that it is untouchable, telling the listener to do something that he would do anyway, forced by the very nature of music. A modernist approach in the Greenbergian sense, maybe, where art is defined as a thing striving towards its own essence, that which defines it as painting, music or literature, and eventually articulating only the affirmation of itself: I am music.

But then again, a title doesn't refer to the music as it unfolds in real time, but something else, a much more stable entity, although also more complex and evasive. When I speak of 4'33, Yesterday or Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, I don't mean this or that performance or recording, I mean the work itself, which is one and the same thing even if there are several performances, even when the performances sound different. Maybe the work isn't fulfilled until it is performed, but it is identified by – i.e. it receives its identity from – other, rather ambiguous components: the title, the composer, the score and so on. These are not essential by themselves, but appear in varying degrees and combinations. The work can have more than one title or a title similar to other works; it can be anonymous or have more than one originator; it can be distributed through recordings or copied by ear (like folk music) without a written score. Still, the work is fairly easy to identify, in the sense that most of the time we know what we're

talking about when we name a certain piece of music. So, what if the “I” of the title is the piece, not understood as a sequence of sounds, but as a work defined in this way? “Don’t touch” does have a score and a composer, making this interpretation quite reasonable. The title could then be a message to the audience: this is not your everyday piece of music; it cannot be treated like any other composition. Never mind the score or what you have learned about the composer, focus instead on what is actually going on during the performance: the music is nothing other than what you hear in this room, at this moment. There will never again be a piece like this. Moving away from the traditional composer-musician-audience relationship, this attitude does away with the comfort of the finished work, putting the composer, the musicians and the audience on an equal level, all of them subject to an unknown future. A likely explanation, since the double role of composer and improvising singer makes these issues a persistent concern for Alwynne. As a matter of fact, most of the music in the piece is improvised, with the musicians responding not to written notes, but to events during the performance. The score contains instructions about where, when, and with whom to play, but not what to play. In this way, the composer would place herself in a Cageian tradition, letting the sounds speak for themselves, liberating them from human control – at least from the composer’s control. Taken as a cue to the musicians, the title deals, in a paradoxical way, with the limits of the traditional command structure. Aggressive in tone it invokes the authority of the composer, but its subject matter suggests a more humble approach. On the one hand it tells the musicians to keep their distance from the “work”, to liberate themselves from the written notes and remain open to the moment; in order to truly improvise they must react only to real time, real events, not to this dead piece of paper. On the other hand the title will remind the musicians of the piece’s shameful origins. You don’t know where it has been, and you don’t want to know. Beautiful things come up from the dirt and you should focus on the beauty rather than pry into what’s none of your business. Pudenda origo. The title has the air of a mother telling off her child who has found a cat by the side of the road, where the good-looking appearance is a potential danger, concealing the animal’s alien and threatening nature. Except that the “I” would be replaced by an “it”.

The first person could also be the composer. But of course she is the first person, standing alone at the beginning, composing the piece, deciding how it is going to unfold. She is the piece’s origin. She is also the one expressing herself, so obviously the title is her expression. The composer is the one in command; hence she is the one with the power to tell people what to do and what not to do. And there she is, Ms Pritchard herself, standing in the crowd, beginning the performance with the very words: “Don’t touch me, you don’t know where I’ve been,” adding, as a sort of afterthought, “True or false?” No, not at the very beginning. Before that Bjørnar has walked through the room playing his flute, and before that, welcoming the audience as they enter the room, whispering and chirping sounds from a large amount of loudspeakers spread out among the seats, delicately imposing themselves on the audience. It is her voice all right, jumbled and distorted, spliced into many pieces, unrecognisable. No we don’t know where she has been, we don’t even know that it is her. The piece begins with her voice, which is there even before the audience arrives. This voice is not a commanding one, it is not even significant, it is sound, the human voice reduced to its bare essentials, gradually developing into something similar to song. In the beginning, the composer is already renouncing her command, gently bringing the piece into play. But before that, the commissioner, silent and faceless, making almost no choices, has done more or less the same thing, loosely pointing out a direction in which the piece may or may not evolve. And we could add the musicians, who were

already there before the commission was made, with their particular skills and interests, setting limits to the instrumentation, defining certain modes of interpretation. And then the whole tradition of music pops up, deciding in advance what it means to be a composer, or a performer, or audience, how a piece of music should be conceived and made, what particular issues a composer should be preoccupied with, what the roles of the various people involved in music are and how they relate to each other. The weight of tradition is heavy, making it almost impossible to express something that hasn't been expressed a thousand times before. The problem of beginning is one of infinite regress. No wonder that the composer declares herself untouchable – it is an expression of freedom.

True or false? Such a simple question, a simple dichotomy, should be easy enough to answer. But referring to this title, it has no answer. First, because a title in general is not a proposition; it is a name, no more true or false than “Alwynne” or “Asamisamasa”. It might, however, succeed or fail to correspond to a state of affairs, a matter of existence rather than truth. The question should then read: Does the name “Don't Touch Me, You Don't Know Where I've Been” designate? Does it represent something in reality? Well, it obviously designates a certain piece of music, but uttered at the beginning of the piece, it remains to be seen (or heard) if it really fulfils the task; and uttered as a part of the piece, it has the same fictitious character as the piece has. Second, because this specific title, even though it is a whole sentence, is not a proposition. We lack criteria for judging it true or false, as it doesn't present a state of affairs that it should be about. The question of truth is misleading. Rather, this confusion of names and propositions resembles the twisted logic of Lewis Carroll. “What in fact does it mean ‘don't touch me, you don't know where I've been?’” asks Alwynne, addressing the audience. “Must a name mean anything?” asks Alice. “Of course it must” is Humpty Dumpty's reply, “With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost”. Alwynne's problem is the same as Alice's: retaining the proper name and personal identity. The shape of the composition and the place of the composer. A double fracture has occurred in the work's surroundings: between name and work and between composer and work. Like Alice, the composer is both subject and object of the narrative, the target of uncontrollable, dream-like events and the one through which the events are narrated. Like Alice, she has lost control of the events and is struggling to re-establish it. Like with Alice, loss of control implies loss of identity. For if the events that make up the piece are out of control, how can she claim it as her own, and how can she then claim the title of composer? And when the name has such an uncertain connection with its referent, its creator, and its referent's creator, how is it possible to even get started? “How do I approach words that are rejecting me from the very start?” she asks. “A sentence that seems even to despise, if not wholly reject itself?” Rejection and contempt are rather unusual attitudes for a piece to hold against its creator. Normally, it would stay silent and do its work.

The piece doesn't seem to obey the rules of the game. When the composer has finished her work, i.e. completed the score, she is supposed to stand back and be silent. The sound of music implies the silence of the composer. There is no need for her presence, as she is duly represented through a series of substitutions. First, the score takes her place, stating her wishes. Then, the score is replaced by the musicians, deciphering dots and bars, turning them into sound with well-trained hands, control of instruments, reading abilities. As far as the audience is concerned the music is nothing but sound, taking the place of the performers, who disappear behind the music. When the music stops, the audience applauds, audibly marking the transition

between pieces, and ultimately the end of the concert. For every step, the previous one is effaced; as soon as one comes to the foreground, the other retreats into the darkness. This is the place of the composer: residing at the origin, comprising the hidden and silent power behind the music.

Of course, one might say, this is the whole point of representation: when a representation is present, the thing represented is absent. When I say “chariot”, a chariot doesn’t pass across my lips. It is a sign, invoking the idea of the chariot, having its own mode of existence. In that sense, the work doesn’t need to appear side by side with the composer. It is, in Hegelian terms, the mind’s embodiment or projection into the real world, going beyond the composer’s corporeal existence. We don’t expect to see her in the piece. But here, she is all around. The composer finds herself inside the work, not at some obscure and metaphysical origin, but present in a most physical way, running around among audience and musicians, demanding everyone’s attention. Why is that? It seems that the authority guaranteed by a score is lost, and she is working hard to regain control of the piece. “My greatest concern,” she states in her letter to the audience, “is to embody myself – strange though that may sound.” So, instead of letting the piece unfold in accord with a readymade plan, she has to supervise the process in real time, step by step. This makes her position in the piece truly awkward, at the same time at its border, looking over it and trying to put it together, and inside it, as part of the events that constitute it.

Indeed, her roles in the piece are numerous, doing everything *except* writing notes: singing, reciting, talking to the audience and the musicians, talking to the room, conducting the musicians. In a way, she situates herself among the musicians, receiving the same type of attention as they do. She sings and speaks, but her voice is also disembodied at times. The first time we encounter her voice it is chopped up and distributed across the performance space, devoid of any meaning. Later she addresses the space with these words: “If I speak these few words, Logen, will you sing?” – and the voice is recorded, played back and the playback is recorded from the room repeatedly, in the same way as Alvin Luciers seminal “I am sitting in a room.” In the end, all we hear are the resonant frequencies of the space, with only the rhythm left of her indecipherable speech. And when she finally sings in a regular way, the music is not her own – instead, she copies Bjørnar’s flute as accurate as possible. Most of the sounds in the piece don’t originate in her instructions, but come from all over the place; from the acoustics of the room, from the squeaking of the ascending light rig, providing Ellen with a “score” to play from, from the audience stamping their feet, from the 90 or so loudspeakers on the floor and surrounding the audience.

Even though the event is “categorised officially as a concert” (as Alwynne puts it in her letter), it doesn’t have the orientation of a concert, with the audience sitting quietly in one end, the musicians playing on stage, visually and aurally in the centre of everyone’s attention, and the composer lurking in some unfathomable background. The musicians are not (always) on stage, and they don’t play a lot. They move around in the room. The composer is a reciter, a toastmaster, a singer and a conductor, but maybe more precisely described as an actor playing these parts, including the part of “the composer”. She is the main character of the piece, although it is rather difficult to pinpoint exactly what character this is. The first person in the piece is as ambiguous as in the title, leaving the composer either too close (that is, inside it) or too distant (trying to control it), switching between these two mutually excluding positions.

The piece is about beginning. Or rather, it is about beginnings. It never ceases to attempt to commence. Alwynne's last words, pronounced about halfway into the performance, are "Ladies and gentlemen, jackets on. Let the music begin!" And then it begins, although it already has begun. One is reminded of the irony, or ironism, of Marcel Duchamp, who defined genius as *L'impossibilite du fer*, translated either as the impossibility of making (*faire*) or the impossibility of the iron (*fer*). His hairpiece *Peigne*, an iron comb, is the only readymade that actually obeyed his own specifications for readymades – i.e. inscribed with date, hour and minute (feb. 17 1916, 11 AM). *Peigne* means comb, but is also a verb, the subjunctive mode of *peindre*, to paint, in the first and third person. The comb would thus express the (thwarted) desire or ambition to make art, or perhaps the willingness to let other make art, maybe appearing in sentences like: I should paint, if only I could paint, let her paint. Looking backwards, so to speak, and not without melancholy, the physical object, already made, says what it cannot do, by addressing a future both all too well-known and uncertain: never to become a painting, it is still a work, and it is a work about making (a) painting, speaking about the conditions of possibility of a work. For Duchamp the painter, the comb demonstrates the impossibility of making art, the inability to put the first dot of paint upon the canvas. For Alwynne the composer, this piece demonstrates the problem of writing the first note.