

Phil Treloar *Feeling to Thought*

REFLECTIONS, PROJECTIONS

a note on my work in
Collective Autonomy

Preamble: This piece was originally written in 2000, the intention being for its inclusion in the inaugural publication of an occasional journal I had in mind. The journal, through dialogue with others, was to focus on thoughts and ideas in the general field of *Collective Autonomy*. Due to several factors well beyond my reach, the publication never materialized.

I recently revised the piece extensively but in doing so the original thoughts, feelings, and ideas, have not been altered. In essence I stand by these today. During the eight-year interim however they have taken on different forms, developed in certain respects, and this, along with fresher views and appraisals, offer a different perspective regarding their written expression. This notwithstanding, the only addition to the original piece as such is to be found at the end in the form of a definition, written in 2007.

More often than not hindsight and reflective meditation bring into view aspects and conditions inherent in human exchange not apparent in the spontaneous moment of initial happening. One gains tremendous impetus from the occasional bird's-eye-view that reveals forms and patterns which otherwise might remain concealed. Recently, a reflexive view revealed to me a cyclical pattern in my oeuvre I found surprising. Surprising, because previously it had not occurred to me that through my work, I was, metaphorically speaking, returning home. That is to say, returning to the place of my departure. But of course, now in a transformed state.

My musical journey, beginning with an improvised idiom and after many years returning to that field, has traversed creative environments of vastly differing characteristics and modes of emergence. All the while my motivation has been fired by a philosophy of life that, since coining the term in 1987, I've referred to as *Collective Autonomy*. From almost the very beginning, intuitively, I'd comprehended the essential difficulties of music making as having to do with interrelationships that obtain between intricacies intrinsic to the experience of communication. To be a little more precise, I'm referring here to creative communication and for which I take freedom to be an *a priori* property; a principle by which freedom is embraced by the recognition of mutual rights for all; that to recognize the rights of freedom for the Other is to grant oneself those same rights.

With regard the production of musical sound per se technical problems were, and have remained for me of a lesser order though nonetheless significant. It would take many years before I was able to get a handle on the crucial problems involved such that the process of generating space in and through which possible solutions might be discovered could, in practice, be accessed. I say discovered because in many respects, these crucial communicative problems have been present since time immemorial. In the meantime I was not prepared nor in fact able to accept prescriptions for any process that avoided confronting the problems. Often this has

proven to be more a case concerning the *problem* of identifying and defining The Problem. Or, put differently, while ever the problems are being confronted there will always be a positive outcome, even if it be nothing more than setting the nature of the problems into higher relief and thereby gaining some clarity. Take for example the notion of mastering style, indeed an important determination for many, perhaps most, involved in the Performing Arts. In my view, while mastery of style might be an expedient in the reproduction chain, it serves only to obstruct and obscure the path of creative unfolding. Functional knowledge of style is one thing, mastery of it quite another.

I owe my clarity of vision, such as it is and for which I am grateful, to unremitting adherence to research in, and my commitment to, *Collective Autonomy*. In consideration of my trajectory, the aforementioned circularity might better be described as spiral in form for, although my work embraces continuity, it is certainly not a case of its generating repetition. I may have returned home in the general sense of the term, in idiom for instance, but the actual environment created through work in this idiom is now quite different to previous manifestations. This difference, both in questions of aesthetics as well as what is for me a more important aspect, to wit, communicative exchange, now becomes explicit through work pursued in a field opened up to the limitless possibilities embraced when those who engage, do so with equal recognition for the Other as well as for themselves. Furthermore, and to the greatest extent possible, this *opened up to* includes to materials as well as to procedures and methodologies.

The days of catch-calls like 'the definitive performance' or 'a definitive representation' of a given creative process have passed by. Perhaps these have some relevance historically but even here I'm skeptical about the idea of a definitive performance ever having been relevant. Creative processes initiated to embrace and engage participants as real-time contributors to the actual formal process is certainly more in keeping with the community needs of our time. Rather than initiate yet another compositional system as might be found in music with, for example, Arnold Schoenberg's Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another – to be sure, an ingenious and, at the time of its inception, a much needed contribution to music, – it is crucial that we gain access to a field of pursuit so as to open up new vistas. What *is* required are conditions that will enable the immense proliferation of music now at hand to be figured, configured, and re-figured in various juxtapositions. Why would we want to do this? So that, rather than deprive existing forms of their essential and inherent strengths, just one of the many negative result of endless reproduction and emulation, the kind most often found manifest in the iteration of musical surface details severed from their cultural roots or, rather than, as John Cage considered, "hear it all at the one time" (a nice idea but ...!), better that we all give ourselves the space and the time necessary to look more deeply into just what is here and how we might participate in the pursuit of music making such that these disparate entities might coexist in a meaningful way: one that is mutually beneficial. This may not mean hearing it all at the one time but it might mean a communicative experience; one of proto-unity arrived at through the juxtaposition of entities in a way we'd never before dreamed of; a juxtaposition embracing the potential to share the one space in mutually beneficial coexistence; a proto-unity I have come to refer to as *creative communitarianism*; one that, rather than subsume and emasculate the essence of an entity so as to elevate the profile – cultural, aesthetic, or whatever else – of another, embraces communalism, doing so such that the terms of juxtaposition are left in a malleable state instead of them being reified so as to suit the covert, hierarchically structured status quo as is determined by politico/marketplace protocol. Absolutely fundamental here is that we each make for ourselves the requisite time to reflect upon our creative pursuits: How and under what conditions

these might contribute to, while supported by, our current, if complex, ethos ... in a sense, a return to a pre-memory state.

Of course, the mass market and culture industry entrepreneurs aren't going to like this idea because the marketplace, as it stands, is hardly conducive to carrying out this kind of reflection and research, particularly as sensitivity and care are among its prime requirements. Furthermore, proto-unity generated by this kind of re-search might, one would hope, procreate offspring not necessarily in the image of itself. But, over and above all this there is the possibility that, given time and reflection, large numbers of object producing and product buying people might begin to question the tastes that are being dictated, even institutionalized, by these entrepreneurs. As Schoenberg opened up new vistas by removing the dominant tritone gravitation towards the tonic from the institution of tonality, perhaps the time has come for us to take his lead and open up new vistas by removing the dominant dollar gravitation towards creative pursuit from the institution of the mass market. Looked at in this light it begins to become apparent that somewhere along the line the terms of relationship have become just a little misdirected and confused. These entrepreneurs are the ones responsible for marketing the entities they claim as their own product, out of existence and, not meaning to put too finer point on it, marketing creativity out of the creative act. No amount of money will ever buy a creative turn of mind. Pay millions for a Picasso canvas if you like but that won't create another Picasso-like turn of mind. It might encourage another ill-directed aspirant though and how many of those can the world support or really need?

But compared to the obstacles put into place by the mass market the various positions so tenaciously held by conservative traditionalists amount to mountains. Of course, there is nothing new in this. It's an old story to which there is no simple nor readily accessible counter-narrative. Perhaps this is a good thing. As I believe there is space for all, to propose a solution that removes the mountain entirely is to propose recourse to violence. Indeed, this is no solution. Rather, dialogue and exchange with the traditionalists is likely to generate some positive results because if nothing else, the traditionalists, very often, are not only well informed vis-à-vis the discipline at hand but through dialogue, those forging a new path are bound to gain a great deal in terms of adding richness to the foundation of their project. Furthermore, in the light of this enriching dialogue, it's quite likely that the traditionalists will grant the protagonist of new vistas passage over his/her mountain.

This leads us into the question of music composition. In general, when *something* is referred to by the word 'composition' it is understood to be *a* composition, signifying an object bearing a set of particular, identifiable characteristics. When a composer realizes a composition s/he, they, engage the act of setting these characteristics into place, thus denoting an entity identifiable with themselves. This is no less true for the anonymous than for the named. Further to this agent-like focus it is generally desirable that the denoted entity be repeatable and, for many, the fewer the performance divergencies from this set-down model the better. I do not deny the validity of, nor necessity for, this conception. As a creative undertaking however, it has more to do with a past, relatively insular, culture-centric ethos than with our present world. It rings bells of radical reification with overtones of monism; the all-creating, omnipotent God. This conception goes hand in hand with the idea of 'definitive performance' and I do wonder: In light of the definitive performance what space is left for people to engage further interest? What relevance does this bear in relation to the needs of communal life as we know it today? One possible answer here is that such a conception feeds the calculative minds and habits of the marketplace entrepreneurs where the game of so-called 'free trade' is played out. But what might this also mean? As is consistent with the game itself, disposability. Has not money replaced god ... any god? The reified

conception of composition is in fact ideally suited to music marketing and its entrepreneurs, if for no reason other than one recorded rendering of a composition can be played off in competition with another and in the end, one of them will become the 'definitive performance' while the other becomes redundant or devalued and for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with the creative impetus which brought 'the composition' into being in the first place. To be sure, the mass market has tapped into this kind of monism in just the right place so as to service its own mercenary ends. At the extremity one need only consider the Pop industry and its demands for note-perfect performance repetition. Even Cage, his aleatoric enterprise notwithstanding, has not escaped this fate although it's probably true that the kindergarten mentality made explicit through the 'this one is better than that one' language so generally rampant among music critics has, to date anyway, only been applied to his earlier 'prepared piano' works where the notation is, for the most part, pretty much standard and precise.

Surely we would prefer that entities brought to presence through creative processes have access to a relationship between time and space such that they might endure and develop their own history as living organisms. In this way, not only are the entities kept alive but they are continually enriched by ongoing and varying contributions. This would, I imagine, prove as valuable to the plastic arts as it does to the aural, though granted, perhaps a little easier to achieve in the case of the latter. Beethoven's work for example, is/has been wonderful but the wonder is being played and produced out of it to the extent that, by and large, only the shell of what was once a wonder-full expression remains. I doubt too many would hear 'Beethoven with a back-beat' as an enriching contribution! As far as the mass market is concerned performances of Beethoven, or, in the following case cited, Rachmaninov, now amount to gladiatorial promo like: "... a virtuoso for whom even the most fiercely applied difficulties simply do not exist." Needless to say, the difficulties referred to here concern, for the most part, dexterity and instrumental manipulation. The paradox inherent in expletive quotes like this is that the very essence of the music being promoted depends on tension and release so as to facilitate forward motion. This tension and release is created in the tonal language through the dominant tritone↔tonic relation. Furthermore, the goal orientation – the approach to, arrival at, and departure from – found manifest through the tension → release characteristic of tonal music is itself given relief through, not only voicing, spacing, and registral articulations but perhaps even more so through phrasing with its concomitant rhythmic disposition. Indeed, these are the means by which relationships between the vertical and horizontal as structural domains are precisely defined. Very often it is the rhythmic domain that determines the level of prominence given to a chunk of tonal music and more often than not, the greater the prominence the greater the rhythmic complexity; the greater the rhythmic complexity the more difficult the rendering. And, the inherent difficulty in rendering is intrinsic to the question of tension and release. The play between tension and release accounts for the ebb and flow of physical energy and its relation to thought and emotive energy during the course of a rendering.

Difficulties in rendering arise in other ways too. David Murray – a significant representative of African-American creative expression – while commenting recently on the mixing and borrowing of expressive forms, observed that "it is difficult for Europeans to play the blues, especially in the slow format." He says "it's much easier to disguise the blues when you are playing in a fast tempo." In saying this he is not suggesting Europeans have nothing to say. In fact, he holds them in high regard precisely because they tend to say it their own way. And Mr. Murray is not the only one to think along these lines. I've heard it said that if you can *really* play a ballad, you can play *any* tempo. During a recent conversation with the remarkable Australian musician, Mark Simmonds, he observed that not many play beautiful melodies anymore. Various points could be derived from these

observations but, to me, the essential one concerns the baring of one's inner-most feelings with an honesty and truth that, in its expression, precludes saccharinized sentimentality while opening up the soul; an outward articulation of these inner-most feelings and truth; forward motion enabled through tension and release as found in phrasing and breath; in depth of tone and voice-like expression.

If, as stated in the above quote, "the most fiercely applied difficulties simply do not exist", what happens to the forward motion of the music? Is there some kind of secret, privy of course to those who think and hear 'best?'; a secret mapped onto the music, one that replaces the inherent difficulties but, nonetheless, achieves the same effect? Surely, were Rachmaninov and Beethoven to have an interest in an ascension free of difficulties, whether "fiercely applied" or otherwise, they'd have written music with the all embracing characteristic of mercurial fluidity. But this is simply not the case. These composers are well aware of the various elements that inhere within the context of their music language, especially those that create tension and release. This is integral to their very expression. In light of this, what is it that the writers of those expletives think is being promoted, vis, being moved forward? And does all this, in the eyes of the entrepreneur, amount to the particular performer in question being an invincible gladiator at work in the amphitheater of monumental musical challenges? I was under the impression that the great days of Rome occurred some two thousand years ago. Just how does one correlate the lions and christians with a musical composition by Beethoven and Rachmaninov or, to be a little more current, Braxton or Boulez? Surely, Beethoven's Bonapartean musings notwithstanding, not through gladiator-ship! In fact, as one prominent music scholar has it, regardless of Beethoven's thoughts on Napoleon, the *Eroica* "cries out to be back-dated to 1789." The implication is obvious. Revolutionary inspirations/aspirations embrace emancipation and new social order; gladiatorialship ... entertainment for conservative imperialists. This kind of gladiatorial 'promo' is, literally, ridiculous. Competition does not enhance creative engagement. It hinders, and ultimately, destroys it.

For me the word composition signifies something quite different. My interest in composition turns towards the substance and sustenance of process. As mentioned above, I don't deny at all the set-down, denoted-object aspect of *a* composition. That is to say, a "Work". Quite clearly, if certain established materials are to be consistently applied to an entity and its subsequent renderings such that *that* entity is identifiable, if only in part through those characteristic materials, then a "Work" is going to result. To my mind, the significant question or questions to ask are not those that establish whether or not pre-established materials are used in a give musical rendering. Indeed, one could argue the case that any form of instrumental practice establishes patterns and if these patterns are found manifest in a given rendering then the rendering is, in the event, a "Work". And there is some merit to this point of view. Rather though, the significant question, or questions, concern the relationships that obtain between people engaged with a "Work" at the time of its rendering and the materials of that "Work": How is this relationship established? What are the conditions of relationship? Where do the participants stand vis-à-vis the characteristic materials that identify the "Work"? Is style significant and if so, how? And so on.

In my view uncovering fundamental problems in any creative process is not simply a matter of discovering a glitch in a fixed system and putting it right. While such simplistic thinking might be suitable to some forms of productive processes where, perhaps, pragmatic considerations are primary, in more abstract fields where practical concerns do, nonetheless, weigh in with a measure of decision-making influence, the plot thickens. A more open-ended, more flexible, less teleological, less purposive approach is requisite. And in music making this is crucial. The aforementioned prominent music scholar draws our attention to Beethoven's struggle around the time of his writing the *Eroica*. He sees the problem as being one of "a change in the relationship between the esoteric and exoteric elements of

musical form: between outwardly directed expression and latent structure." Beethoven's battle with the dichotomy of language/form and vision is legion. It was of no lesser magnitude for Schoenberg either. The tangible the abstract, the inner view the outer ... how do we bring balance to these weighty elements yet leave the actual balancing process open to contingencies? The elements are forever coming and going, in and out of focus, and so if the process is to be embraced by creative engagement at all, the idea of a specifically fixed predetermined result has to be let go of. This, I think, applies as much to 'thorough composition' (my coinage) as it does improvisation, albeit that the terms of creative engagement differ.

To my mind, creative communicative exchange stems from a context of agreement whereby all are *prepared* to embrace equality; to accept a result, whatever it may be, without, through any form of coercion, mapping onto the process desires for a particular, specified, guaranteed, predictable end result. A question arises here concerning difference between the two kinds of results, i.e., the one embracing equality and the other, coercion. To cause a result through an other's loss may well be beneficial for the One but certainly not the Other and so could hardly be considered a creative enterprise embracing inherent equality. Only through the recognition of the Other's as well as the One's right to contribute freely can the result be considered in terms of creative equality because then, for all concerned, the process obtains in an environment that engenders growth &/or development embraced by mutual beneficialness. The responsibility of *all* concerned is one of equality in whatever form it may take and however it may be relevant at any point in the process. Contrary to proposing a rationalized model *for* expression this, theoretically, leaves the field wide open to choice, and *to* expression. It follows that specific circumstances delimit the field. But potentially, One is at all times the Other, the Other the One. Hence my coinage, *Collective Autonomy*.

Under these terms musical composition is a becoming. Participants in real-time renderings are co-locutors. They engage in the work and process of concatenation. The material form of their locution is a *composite* of sonic elements, elements whose finite detail is of individual derivation bearing unique nuance. Interlocution, in the process of concatenation between co-locutors selectively unites these unique nuances thus creating an entity that embraces intersubjectivity. The terms of intersubjective exchange determine in no small way, the resultant forms, and because contingency is a property inherent to the life-world, these terms of exchange are themselves always open to the possibility of reformation. Thus it is that subsequent renderings of any "Work" reveal difference. The extent to which this difference becomes manifest is dependent upon elements and factors that are wide ranging and diverse in character and nature. In light of these considerations we see more clearly the essential nature of engagement in real-time rendering. Prefixed materials *per se* – figurations and structures which determine formal shape and character identified with the "Work" prior to real-time rendering – is of a different order. This difference fundamentally concerns the relation between time and musical space.

Compositional work that takes place before real-time rendering is somewhat similar to that of a composer. S/he or they assemble and put into some kind of definite order, an array of component parts and streams of information which constitute a "Work". Not until this assemblage is made manifest in real-time rendering does it function as a medium or carrier of communicative potential beyond the immediate field of the 'hands-on composer(s)'. The phase of actual composing can be clearly seen as functional at two different levels: primary and secondary. Here, primary and secondary refer to chronological events. This is not to suggest that two levels are the only possibilities. There could be occasions when only a primary level applies. Alternatively, there could be occasions when an additional tertiary level applies. Generally, it's probably true to say that two levels apply. At the primary level, material intended for rendering will be assembled into

some kind of characteristic order or shape. Nowadays, it continues to be the case that, most often the process at the primary level is carried out by an individual. There are exceptions. At the secondary level, material prepared at the primary stage is considered as performance material and perhaps rehearsed in preparation for a real-time rendering. At both levels however, those engaged with the process of compositing are not restricted to an uninterrupted linear account of the "Work". They are free to start and stop wherever they choose and to do so at whatever point in the "Work" they choose. The contrast here, as distinct from the circumstance that obtains in the real-time rendering situation, is clear. Material worked through *for rendering* and material worked through *as rendered* embrace the dimension of time in vastly different ways.

A circumstance of intentionally manifest real-time rendering requires that the "Work" is constituted by working through designated materials *as designated*. This requirement finds its ground in a form of convention; a general agreement between participants in the so called musical event. This general agreement seems to apply pretty much regardless of cultural heritage and history. I think this is the case because the dimension of linear time is absolutely fundamental to the essence of sound and its perception. We hear in terms of frequency and frequency takes place in linear time. The fundamental nature of this entity we experience as a musical entity – some characterized sound event regardless of specific constitutional characterization – is one of time. Considered in this light, one need only ponder a moment on, say, the traditional musical expressions of India, New Guinea, and Europe, to realize that the experience of passing time through the medium of characterized sound events – that is, the experience of one manifestation of time passing through another – is not only in itself a complex experience but is one potentially arrived at from vastly differing perspectives.

To what extent are we prepared to rationalize and normalize this? Do we really want to reduce our field all the way down (or up, depending on your point of view) to a common universal? I agree with Emmanuel Levinas I think it was, who suggested that a universal thought dispenses with communication. And, as should be clear from the foregoing discussion, contrary to philosophical positions that advance multiplicity and whether or not you agree with them, clearly, the 'definitive performance', like the 'universal thought', negates the need for any further exchange. The many are reduced to, or overshadowed by, the one. Is it possible to embrace individualism and pluralism while at the same time proposing universalistic concepts? This question concerning reduction is indeed serious.

Collective Autonomy is a modest attempt to begin one possible process of addressing this. The issue is not one of simply constructing an environment in which disparate entities find themselves juxtaposed but rather, it is one of *how* entities might be juxtaposed such that mutual recognition between participants is an understood *a priori* condition; an environment where the integrity of one entity is not compromised under dominance by another. The master/slave syndrome has been around for a long time and continues to be rampant in many spheres of human existence. Subsuming the will of the Other to the will of the One is seen by many to be a desirable condition. Often this holds true for all participants, master and slave alike, if for no reason other than economic viability – monetary, political, Artistic, etc. Simply put, this state of affairs amounts to being one of the master achieving his/her desire for control, power, financial gain, superiority, or whatever, while an account of the slaves' rationale might go something like: "we could be worse off". What *are* the criteria, I wonder, that grant &/or determine our 'freedom of choice'? What concerns me is not, in the end, a matter of specific, isolable results or particular circumstances but rather the ethos embraced by a community that condones the master/slave state of affairs. See it as you will, coercion is fundamentally at work here. This means that any relation between entities will ultimately come down to being one of violence. In a milieu such as this, regardless

of the subtlety of rhetoric, the project implemented will be the one that favors those who hold the power. The fuel that launches the project will be mined from a struggle for power and instigated by the powerful. There will be a loser and s/he will be the powerless. Any milieu that reduces human Being to a state of utility and mechanism is one of violence.

Whilst this mode of discourse may not be innovative, what is not so widely considered is the possibility for at least partial solutions to some of the communicative problems touched on herein to be found manifest as creative communicative exchange through music making. As Schoenberg's move liberated not only the tritone from tonality but also tonality from the tritone, perhaps our move might similarly liberate not only the product from the producers but also the producers from the product. Were this to be realized it would represent nothing less than a paradigm shift. Creative exchange in the context of *Collective Autonomy* offers a kind of 'middle way'; one that engenders exchange free from coercion; one that depends on as few reference points as is necessary to render an exchange creatively meaningful. This meaningfulness largely concerns ethical questions, particularly those that seek to understand freedom. In this, seeking freedom does not signify 'anything goes'. Rather, it designates the kind of awareness gained through a disciplined search for inner truth, and through this, discovers and releases the abiding power that, when unobstructed, expresses pure creative potential. One might dream of life as lived between humans and all other sentient beings in a similar light. Music making is not a bad place to begin.

Collective Autonomy identifies a dynamic field in which agents, exploring concepts of universality and multiplicity, seek harmonious co-habitation through processes of creative interaction, discovering both common sense and individual perception as the play of potential-bearing perspectives, and where integration is an option rather than an *a priori* imperative.

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