

Music and Text: Centre and Absence



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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines Boulez's notion of 'centre and absence' in relation to his use of text in composition and how his ideas have acted as a springboard for my own compositions. Boulez's writings about 'centre and absence' are investigated as well as its implementation in two vocal works: *Improvisation II* of *Pli selon Pli* and *Cummings ist der Dichter*. This is followed by a detailed commentary on my own music, demonstrating why and how I became interested in Boulez's notion of 'centre and absence' and the effect this has had on both my vocal and my instrumental music. The culmination of this study is my work *Sense of Place*, for large ensemble, which uses the novel *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino as a 'centre and absence'.

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Preface

When a composer embarks on a work involving text, the compositional process must be adapted to consider both musical and textual components. In contrast with purely instrumental music, the composition of music with a text introduces new artistic stimuli which a composer must decide how to employ. Decisions must be made regarding the extent to which the structure, rhythm, prosody, content and mood of the text should infiltrate the music (and vice versa) to shape the final work. The use of a text, as with other extra-musical influences, can provide a valuable source of inspiration to a composer; however, in practice this can be a complex balancing act between the demands of the words and the demands of the music.

As a composer I am deeply interested in utilising text, in particular poetry, when I compose. Much of my musical output to date involves the voice and I had come to have a *modus operandi* when working with a new poem. However, I started to feel certain limitations in the way I was working; my vocal output consisted of pieces where the audibility of the text was prioritised and as such the rhythm, prosody and emphases of a poem were respected. However, sometimes this resulted in musical compromises that limited my creative impulse. This dissatisfaction with my current working methods led me to explore how other composers have worked with text and what has been used as an alternative to the model of textual primacy.

There is a host of literature on the relationship between music and text, going back as far as the Ancient Greeks with each successive age yielding numerous pronouncements on the subject from composers and theorists alike.¹ Gaining an in-depth knowledge of this historical background has

¹ Useful early examples of this can be found in Strunk, O., ed., *Source Readings in Music History*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950: V. Galilei, from 'Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music', C. W. Gluck, Preface to *Alceste*, Plato, from *Republic*, G. Zarlino, from *Institutioni Harmoniche Book Four*.

been enriching for my musical appreciation, whilst also providing a good foundation for me to develop my own ideas. In particular, it has been instructive to understand the origins of textual primacy and mimesis, and then, much later, the divergent paths that composers took in the Twentieth Century.² However, I do not intend to provide a history of the literature on the subject here, but rather to focus on a particular discovery during this exploration that has had a profound effect on my music.

Whilst delving through scores and essays of composers and theorists on the nature of the relationship between music and text, I came across Boulez's writings on 'centre and absence'. His way of approaching poetry in his vocal music immediately resonated with me. Here was a composer who did not concern himself with presenting an intelligible text to the audience and yet still he managed to respect the properties of the poetry upon which he was basing his work. I decided to explore how he achieved this, through studying his writings and works that used poetry as a 'centre and absence'; I hoped that through doing this I would clarify certain aspects of my own process and perhaps find alternate ways of approaching the complex relationship between words and music. I was not looking for a compositional model but something that would trigger my own creative instinct to approach the relationship from a different angle. As a result, I do not see any similarities between the sound world of my music and that of Boulez; however, exploring his music has been a cornerstone of my development as a composer over the past few years and works such as *Sense of Place* and *Its Day*, could not have come into being without it.

² In particular see: Carvalho, M.V., 'Towards Dialectic Listening: Quotation and 'Montage' in the Work of Luigi Nono', *Contemporary Music Review*, 1999, vol.18, part 2, pp.37-85; Lessem, A.P., *Music and Text in the works of Arnold Schoenberg (the critical years 1908-1922)*, Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1979; Britten, B., *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea, Oxford University Press, 2003; Stacey, P.F., 'Towards the analysis of the relationship of music and text in contemporary composition', *Contemporary Music Review*, 1989, Vol.5.

Introduction

*For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

Excerpt from *The Snow Man* by Wallace Stevens

In this poem Wallace Stevens explores the notion of absence, 'the nothing'. This absence is meaningful and significant, particularly in the realm of listening. It is possible for everything to hinge upon something that is not physically present; permeating every corner of an experience but without making itself known. As a composer, I believe that writing music is as much about shaping silence as it is about shaping sound.

Although I cannot seek to control how my music will be perceived, I can control the creative head-space in which I work. I inhabit this space during the act of composition filling it with musical and extra-musical 'collectibles', prizing some and later discarding others. The music borne from this process will be steeped in the essence of those things I held dear whilst inhabiting this space. Though this essence may not be known to others, absent in the musical manifestation, the artistic work could not have come into existence without it.

This study is concerned with the interaction between the composer and those collectibles we appropriate during the act of composition, in particular the appropriation of text. To begin with, the study focusses on Boulez's writings about 'centre and absence' and his approach to working with text. In his writings, Boulez goes into detail about his opinions on the various issues that face a composer when working with a text. Following that, I examine how Boulez uses the poetry of Mallarmé as a 'centre and absence' in the second improvisation of *Pli selon*

Pli. In this chapter I will show how Boulez finds parallels for certain features of the poetry in his own music. Later, I show how Boulez uses poetry as a ‘centre and absence’ in *Cummings ist der Dichter* but in a very different way to *Improvisation II*. Here, the visual aspect of the text on the page is crucial to the poem and Boulez translates this into the texture of the music.

The final part of this work is an attempt to demonstrate how Boulez’s notion of ‘centre and absence’ has influenced my own work. First I look at my vocal music output and assess the impact of my study of ‘centre and absence’ on the way I write for voice, then I go on to analyse *Sense of Place* and *Its Day*. *Sense of Place* is a purely instrumental work that uses Italo Calvino’s novel *Invisible Cities* as a ‘centre and absence’. *Its Day*, for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and string orchestra, takes the notion of ‘centre and absence’ as a starting point but goes in a different direction, utilising the tenor as both a narrator and a singer.

Chapter I

Centre and Absence

The phrase ‘centre and absence’¹ describes a way of working with text whereby it is both integral to the musical work and yet either inaudible or unintelligible in performance: it is ‘both recognisable and unrecognisable - both a core and yet absent’². There are two key essays by Boulez that mention ‘centre and absence’; ‘Sound and Word’³ and ‘Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music’⁴. ‘Sound and Word’, a shorter essay published in 1958, introduces many of the issues that are explored in more detail by ‘Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music’. The latter essay was first given as a lecture on *Poésie pour pouvoir* (for tape and orchestra) at the new music festival in Donaueschingen in 1962.

It is unusual that it is in a lecture on *Poésie pour pouvoir* that Boulez talks about ‘centre and absence’ in great detail because in another interview he describes the relationship between Michaux’s poetry and *Poésie pour pouvoir* as ‘irrational’ and ‘emotional’⁵, whereas in ‘Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music’ he derides such a relationship as ‘the vaguest and most diffuse kind of “correspondence”’⁶. Given that *Le marteau sans maître* (1953-55 revised 1957) showed signs of moving towards a theory of ‘centre and absence’ and *Pli selon pli* (begun in 1957) was very much in keeping with it, *Poésie pour pouvoir* (written and performed in 1958) seems not to fit the

¹ Boulez has appropriated this phrase from a poem of Michaux’s entitled ‘Entre centre et absence’.

² Pierre Boulez, ‘Poetry- Centre and Absence- Music’, *Orientations*, p.198.

³ Boulez, ‘Sound and Word’, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, Trans. Stephen Walsh, OUP, pp.39-43. ‘Son et Verbe’: originally published in *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault*, 22 and 23 (May 1958), 119-25. A fuller version of the text, with a modified and extended introductory section, appeared in German as ‘Ton, Wort, Synthese’, *Melos*, 25/10 (Oct. 1958), 310-13; repr. In French as ‘Son, verbe, synthèse’, in Boulez, *Points de repère*, ed. J. J. Nattiez (Paris, 1981), 164-70; Eng. Trans. M. Cooper, as ‘Sound, Word, Synthesis’, *Orientations* (London: Faber & Faber. 1986), 177-82.

⁴ ‘Poésie – centre et absence – musique’, lecture on *Poésie pour pouvoir* at Donaueschingen in 1962. Published in German in *Melos*, Vol. Xxx No. 2, February 1963, pp.33-40. Translated in *Orientations* from the original French publication *Points de repère*.

⁵ Boulez, ‘An interview with Dominique Jameux’, *Orientations*, p.202.

⁶ Boulez, ‘Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music’, *Orientations*, p.195.

pattern. The work was withdrawn after only one performance; one suggested reason is that 'it did not advance Boulez's theories of the relationship of poetry to music.'⁷ Boulez himself expressed his dissatisfaction with the piece in a conversation with Célestin Deliège⁸.

One way in which *Poésie pour pouvoir* can be seen to use 'centre and absence' is through the obscuring of the text on tape through electronic manipulation. In this way the text can be seen to be 'absent' because the intelligibility of the words is obfuscated. However, the lack of emphasis on form and structure⁹, coupled with the reasons for withdrawing the work after its premiere, suggests that it does not conform with Boulez's idea of 'centre and absence' in the fullest manner. Rather than being about *Poésie pour pouvoir*, the content of the lecture focuses on the direction in which his musical thought was already heading, even if it was not realised in the current composition. This is further demonstrated by the opening of the essay, which features a discussion of a quote of Mallarmé, who is at the heart of *Pli selon pli*. Moreover, he had already started work on *Pli selon pli* by the time *Poésie pour pouvoir* was performed.

'Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music'

Boulez chooses to open 'Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music' with the following statement from Mallarmé's 'La Musique et Les Lettres':

⁷ Peter F. Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987), p.76.

⁸ 'from the very start I was not pleased with my work on the tape. That is why I have consigned it to an oblivion from which I have no desire at all to rescue it.' *Pierre Boulez: Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, (London: Eulenberg, 1986), p.108.

⁹ 'In Char and Michaux, whose works I used before coming to *Pli selon pli*, I found many sources of inspiration, but they were hardly obsessed with formal preoccupations. Char's main preoccupation is rather with the selection of an extremely pregnant vocabulary and density of expression; with Michaux it is the development of an extraordinarily original poetic imagery.' Ibid. p. 93

Music and Letters are alternating faces- one spreading here into the darkness and the other glittering there with certainty- of a single phenomenon. I called it the Idea. One of these modes inclines toward the other and disappears into it, only to reappear with borrowed riches: by this double oscillation a whole genre is achieved.

Boulez decides to call this alternating phenomenon 'centre and absence'. This suggests that the concept was sparked by Mallarmé, even if the phrase 'centre and absence' is from a poem by Michaux¹⁰. But of the two faces to which Mallarmé refers, which is spreading into the darkness and which glitters with certainty? One of Mallarmé's poetic aims was to emulate the allusive nature of music in his poetry and therefore it might seem unlikely that he would choose to praise 'certainty' in the context of poetry. However, it is precisely this certainty - the intelligibility of the language of poetry - that for Mallarmé, gives it superiority over other art forms. Mary Breatnach argues that the referential nature of verbal language is an essential aspect of Mallarmé's poetry, because it is used as both an anchor and a point of subversion¹¹.

Nor is the use of the opposition of darkness and light altogether clear. Is the reference to oscillation denoting an alternating spotlight on each art form? Or instead, is the image of darkness and light referring to the specific nature of each art form, in particular their differing modes of communication? The idea of oscillation relates to the alternation between one art form inclining towards the other and gaining 'borrowed riches'. If we apply Mallarmé's ideas to Boulez's work, poetry has inclined towards music and 'disappear[ed] into it' and the riches that result are manifested in the musical work. Why did Boulez choose to open the essay with this quote? Is it just window-dressing, given Boulez avoids critiquing it himself? The quote is incredibly allusive, like Mallarmé's poetry, and could be interpreted in a number of ways. Perhaps this is the reason Boulez chose to open with it: beautiful in its expression and malleable enough to act as a launch pad for his own ideas.

¹⁰ Boulez never directly refers to the derivation, suggesting it is merely a borrowed phrase rather than a reference to Michaux's poetic thought.

¹¹ Mary Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé: A Study in Poetic Influence*, (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), p.28.

Turning from this quotation to Boulez's own title, his use of the words 'centre and absence' is significant in itself. The word 'centre' suggests that the poetry is integral to the work; the words are at the core of the compositional activity. 'Absence' acknowledges the role of the words whilst expressing the fact that they are not entirely communicated in performance. When one talks of the absence of a person, it is because their presence was expected or desired. The person is seen as part of the whole but they are not physically present. Rather than choosing to use two binary terms such as 'centre or periphery' or 'presence or absence', neither of which truly capture the role of the text in his work accurately, the chosen phrase is an 'and' statement. The text is never 'peripheral' in his vocal music nor does the word 'presence' encapsulate how integral the text is to the construction of the work. 'Presence' only suggests the physical manifestation of the text in performance whereas saying the text is at the 'centre' of the work clearly expresses how important the words are to the piece in all respects.

The practice of using text in composition must be examined from two perspectives: that of aural perception and that of the compositional process. In 'Poetry - Centre and Absence - Music', Boulez addresses both perspectives and the various issues that arise for each. This creates a foundation for discussing his own compositional process when working with text. In terms of perception, Boulez identifies two fundamental questions that must be addressed, if not necessarily solved: 'Is music capable of communicating the *meaning* of a poem or a dramatic text? And is it possible- and if so, obligatory- by using an appropriate prosody to ensure, at all costs, the intelligibility of that text?'¹²

¹² Boulez, 'Poetry- Centre and absence- Music', *Orientations*, p.189.

Music, Text and Aural Perception

Taking the weighty question of communicating 'meaning' first, Boulez discusses programme music, which he finds to be problematic because it conditions the listener by forcing them to concentrate on whether they can 'hear' the programme within the music. The result is that the success of the piece is determined by whether the programme is conveyed or not via the music, which is impossible to gauge fully. It can limit the composer to using certain musical clichés and also limit the listener who may try to assess the success of the piece based on the presence of such clichés. Boulez sees the likely result of this to be 'primitive and absurd comparisons'¹³. He then puts forward the opposite argument: should composers then focus on 'pure', that is to say, abstract music? Boulez sees this distinction between 'pure' and 'illustrative' as masking the actual problem. He argues that there is plenty of 'pure' music that could be reduced to 'illustrative clichés'¹⁴ without having any explicit reference. However, Boulez cites certain obscure musical titles and inscriptions such as *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* which can stimulate rather than dictate the listener's imagination. Boulez is trying to highlight the difference between a programme being imposed on the listener at the start and conditioning the way in which they listen to the music and one which is less direct, so that the connections between music and text are not pre-empted but can be ruminated upon. The piano preludes of Debussy, where the titles are given as postscripts, provide an apt example of this.

Later in his essay Boulez returns to the issue of meaning and explains that a composer can put any text to any music because music by its very nature is 'devoid of *direct* meaning itself'.¹⁵ He goes on to clarify that music cannot claim exactly the same semantic function as spoken language, instead the sense it communicates is *parallel* to, rather than *identical* with the sense

¹³ *Ibid.* p.185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.185.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.189.

communicated by the words. In order to explain this further, he uses an example of Boris de Schloezer who says that in a mass setting, the words 'Credo' and 'Non credo' can be interchanged without making the music seem absurd. Boulez argues that music cannot state 'affirmation or negation' but it can transmit a sense of conviction behind either of these professions of faith. Music can also distinguish the quality of such conviction, something that the written word is not able to do without specifying the speaker's tone of voice, which relates back to music. He says sounds and words are governed by similar linguistic laws for example the word 'Cruxifixus' which evokes images of suffering, will suggest similar musical effects to different composers¹⁶. Boulez is not arguing that music is incapable of expressing meaning. Rather, he argues that there are fundamental differences between music and text that result in the sense communicated by music to be parallel, rather than identical, to that of language. From the perspective of the composer, it is a choice between utilising this parallelism, as in the example of 'Cruxifixus' or not, as in the example of Boris de Schloezer.

The second question Boulez raises concerns the importance of intelligibility of the text. How important is it for the audience to be able to hear and understand the words in performance? Boulez states that for dramatic works this is very important so that the audience can follow the story. Although, if one considers the traditional roles of recitative and aria, it is clear to see that the level of intelligibility can be varied depending on the nature of the moment. In a recitative, where intelligibility is desired in order to convey the narrative, the setting of the text will closely resemble speech rhythms and the musical continuity will be preserved but at a secondary level. Arias, on the other hand, often focus on the expression of an emotional state so musical parameters can take greater prominence, particularly through the use of melisma. Recitative and

¹⁶ There is an interesting study of composers' responses to the 'Cruxifixus' text by Jasmin Cameron, which she refers to in her chapter 'Rhetoric and Music: the influence of a linguistic art' in *Words and Music* ed. John Williamson, 2005. The full study can be found in her publication *The Crucifixion in Music: An Analytical Survey of Settings of the 'Cruxifixus' between 1680 and 1800*, Scarecrow Press, 2006.

aria, in their purest forms, exemplify what Boulez calls ‘action and reflection’, two states that can utilise two different levels of intelligibility¹⁷.

Historically, both ends of this spectrum have been explored. In the case of polyphony, ‘the number of parts, the sheer contrapuntal density, hampers the understanding of the text, though its general meaning is heightened and given a new fascination.’¹⁸ The use of melisma too, can impede comprehension and Boulez discusses how both were used extensively in the sacred music of the Renaissance, until the Reformation, and then the Council of Trent, set out guidelines to control the floridity of church music¹⁹. Cantus firmus is given as an example of how text can be obscured through elongation of the syllables. However, Boulez fails to mention, in the case of sacred music, that the texts are often known because they are standard parts of the liturgy, so if they are obscured in performance, it will not necessarily be to the detriment of the congregation’s comprehension. For the layperson, at times when the mass was not given in the vernacular but in Latin, the text of the liturgy would have been difficult to follow anyway. In this case, the text can be considered as an ‘esoteric language’, where only a select few are privy to its meaning. Today, both the vernacular and Latin are used and most regular members of the church will be familiar with both, so again intelligibility in performance is not crucial. Sacred music that uses polyphony and melisma is still a worthwhile example when considering intelligibility of the text, but because the audience (particularly when it is performed in a religious context) attend with prior knowledge, the issue is less pressing.

¹⁷ This refers to the archetypal forms of recitative and aria. In practice, these are fluid forms, which composers adapt to suit the given work. However, in the context of this study, considering the archetypes is a useful way of illustrating the spectrum of text-setting options available to composers.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.191-192.

¹⁹ For detailed discussion of the effects of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on Church Music in England see LeHuray, Peter, *Music and the Reformation in England, 1549-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) and Willis, Jonathan P., *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2009).

Boulez discusses the conjunction of music and text in the German *Lied* and French *mélodie*, which he says presents ‘a typical case of a “musical reading”’²⁰. He explains how the tempo, articulation and accentuation of the vocal line all stay within the bounds of speech. The musical accompaniment is designed to act as a pedestal upon which the text is given pride of place. Boulez says that in songs of these genres the ‘vocal line excludes all virtuosity’²¹ in order to convey a comprehensible text. But the precise usage of the term ‘musical reading’ is problematic: it most likely denotes a work which Boulez feels is akin to a poetry reading with music. This is a little contentious and many would argue that there are a number of songs in this repertoire that would be considered virtuosic for both the singer and the pianist. For example, Schubert’s *Erlkönig*, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* or Poulenc’s *Il Vole*.

Similarly problematic is what Boulez means when he speaks of the ‘musical context’ being ‘more or less descriptive in character’. Surely, given his discussion of the extent to which music is capable of conveying the meaning of a text, he should clarify exactly what he means by ‘descriptive’ in this context. Nevertheless, it is important to consider this genre of vocal music because it highlights an alternative way of working with text to ‘centre and absence’. It is not a case of one art-form being subservient to the other, but a prioritising of the intelligibility of the text in conjunction with musical invention.

Later in the essay, Boulez considers the implications of using translations instead of original languages to aid intelligibility in performance. He sees it is a decision between the relative importance of the phonetic values of the original text and its literal sense. This can depend on the level of comprehension required for the scene concerned- is it active or reflective? If it is active

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.192.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.192.

and it is important to convey the verbal message then it would seem better to use a translation. If direct comprehension is less important, in reflective passages where the music is acting as a commentary, then translation may prove more problematic because the vocal line will have been constructed with consideration of the sonority of specific verbal sounds. However, in the case of dramatic works, it would be absurd to change the language for each scene depending on the level of intelligibility required. In the case of song, the text can vary between being active or reflective within a single work so once again translating only active text does not help matters. Boulez's consideration of translation is a useful theoretical point of discussion but it does not provide any viable solutions in practice.

Music, Text and Compositional Process

Up until this point, most of Boulez's essay has addressed the issues of combining the two arts from the perspective of the listener; that is, what impact the conjunction can have from a perceptual point of view. Now Boulez goes on to discuss the conjunction from the perspective of the composer, who needs to be satisfied from a procedural point of view, as the craftsman of the work.

Boulez quotes French poet Claudel: '[t]he intelligence has ears quite as exacting as those to be found on either side of our heads.'²² Boulez says we must satisfy both sets of 'ears' when composing with text: the intellect and the aural sense. When working with a text, Boulez is interested in occasions where 'the literary theme clashes with the composer's original idea and forcibly modifies it'²³ forming a reciprocal relationship between the two art forms. Boulez describes this situation as his own 'personal utopia' and this seems to have been the case in his

²² *Ibid.* p.195.

²³ *Ibid.* p.195.

encounter with Mallarmé. Looking back to the Mallarmé quotation he cites at the beginning of the essay, it is the 'borrowed riches' that each art form takes from the other that excites him.

There are a number of levels at which music and poetry can interact, the first of which is the descriptive or expressive level. Boulez sees this as the vaguest of correspondences where 'it is simply the initial impact'²⁴. For Boulez, it is through structure that poetry and music can form a deeper connection. This emphasis on structure makes use of properties that are common to both art-forms such as 'time (rhythmic quantity and vocal technique, or prosody in the widest sense) and form (reciprocal structures in determining duration, phonetic regulation and the ordered disposition of the different formal components).'²⁵ Using structural aspects of the text is an acknowledgement of the poem beyond the emotive response it elicits in the reader. Even though Boulez seeks this deeper conjunction between poetry and music he does not reject the possibility of an affective relationship and views the poem as an 'irrigation source'²⁶ where any or all of its attributes can influence the music.

Using a poem as both a centre and yet absent from the piece will mean that the text, while integral to the composition, will not be directly intelligible for the audience. Either the words are sung but the manner in which they are sung negates comprehension or the words are not made audible at all. In both instances the audience is denied direct access to the poem. Some might ask, why a composer uses words at all if they are to be obscured to the point where the audience cannot comprehend their meaning? Boulez responds to this challenge saying "if you want to 'understand' the text, then read it, or get someone to speak it for you: there will be no better

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.196.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.196.

²⁶ Boulez, 'Sound and Word', *Stocktakings*, p40.

solution.”²⁷ In saying this Boulez is making clear his aims in composing with poetry. He sees it as the responsibility of the audience to familiarise themselves with the poetry in its original form, this is not something he aims to provide in the musical work.

Returning to the idea of action and reflection, Boulez identifies that the time within which a poem can exist in music can take two forms: “[t]he time taken to read a poem is a single, exact datum; but musically speaking there are two times, one for the poem as action and one for the poem as reflection...’action’ at its most realistic implies a maximum clarity of comprehension, whilst reflection at its most ‘ideal’ means sacrificing at least part of the ‘message’ in favour of non-rational resonances.”²⁸ In his music, Boulez has chosen to explore as fully as possible, the poem as ‘reflection’, going far beyond ‘text-setting’ in order to find new ways of combining the poetry and music in composition. He is happy to compromise on a direct verbal message in order to allow the conjunction of music and poetry to be explored to its fullest potential. For Boulez, the concept of action and reflection and the way in which a composer chooses to address these two, is a fundamental concern when combining poetry and music.

Boulez goes on to discuss the difference between speech and music, this time from the perspective of the composer and what he must consider when composing with text:

Speaking belongs fundamentally to a different order from that of musical structures- and by this I mean all forms of speaking, from the whisper to the shout- different in organization and quality of sound-structure as well as in grammar. The intervals in musical sound belong to a hierarchy arranged according to different degrees of tension, or pregnancy; and this is not true of speech. Rhythmic values are instinctive in spoken declamation, whereas they conform to rule in instrumental music, even in the case of

²⁷ Boulez, ‘Sound and Word’, *Stocktakings*, p.42.

²⁸ Boulez, ‘Poetry – Centre and Absence – Music’, *Orientations*, p.196-7.

“free” improvisation. The mere fact of verbal emission makes verbal time different from musical time, two separate phenomena capable at most of imitating each other.²⁹

By appreciating the differences between speaking and singing, a composer can make a more informed decision as to how to utilise poetry in composition. How much an audience will understand the text in performance depends on how closely the singing style is to speech in terms of rhythm, pace, accentuation and articulation. Composers must decide how important this is for them and whether they are willing to forgo ‘part of the “message” in favour of non-rational resonances’. There is also the role of the voice within an ensemble to consider. Either it can be accompanied by the other instruments or it can be part of the ensemble. Again, it is the difference between the voice as an instrument and the voice as a communicator of the text.

Boulez has found the properties that both art forms share and their points of departure. In choosing structure and form to be the main point of conjunction, he is creating a bond between them that keeps them on an equal footing; neither has to be subservient to the other. He is also bypassing the issues of intelligibility by choosing for the two art forms to interact at a level deeper than descriptive or expressive correspondences. Much of the essay discusses the perceptual concerns of using poetry in music but in reality Boulez’s theory of ‘centre and absence’ is able to bypass the issues of whether music can transmit the meaning of the poem and the importance of intelligibility in performance because he has actively chosen to address the conjunction of music and poetry from a different angle.

If a poem is ‘absent’ in performance, intelligibility is lost and some may argue this could present a barrier for the audience when they try to engage with the work. This may be so; the audience may find that it is harder to engage with the work fully if the text is absent. However, the expectation

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.197.

is on the listener to become acquainted with the poetry in its original form, separately from its existence within the musical work. Just as religious texts, when obscured in performance through polyphony or melisma, are still understood because the congregation attend with a prior knowledge. There are examples such as these throughout music history, where text has been obscured in performance, through engaging with the poetry as 'reflection'. While there might have been protests against such practices at the time³⁰, today we still value such repertoire. Boulez takes this idea of poetry as 'reflection' to its extreme but it can also be seen as a progression from musical practices that have existed for centuries. The idea of 'reflection' affords composers the opportunity to engage with all aspects of the text. They do not have to concern themselves with just conveying the meaning of the words. The structure and formal components of the poem can be explored within the musical work. The following chapter looks at 'Improvisation II' of *Pli selon pli* to examine how Boulez's idea of poetry as a 'centre and absence' is put into practice. This piece was composed in 1957 and first performed in 1958, the same year 'Sound and Word' was first published. The second *Improvisation* is also the only one of the three *Improvisations* that has not been subject to revised publications in later years. Therefore, not only was it written around the time Boulez first mentions 'centre and absence', it also exists in its original form today. Boulez's response to Mallarmé's poetry and the nature of the relationship between text and music in this piece will be examined.

³⁰ For example, the Council of Trent of the sixteenth century, the Artusi controversy with Monteverdi and *seconda pratica*. Or even Stockhausen's challenging of Nono's *Il canto sospeso* (Stockhausen, K., 'Speech and Music', trans. Ruth Koenig, *Die Reihe*, Vol. VI, 1964, pp.48-49).

Chapter II

Improvisation II of Pli selon pli

There are a number of ways in which poetry and music interact in *Improvisation II*. The poem's form, rhyme scheme, imagery and Mallarmé's poetic thought are all at the centre of the piece. Musical structure, instrumentation, texture, the interactions of the ensemble and the vocal writing are all related to and are derived from these elements of the poem. Many of these interactions between poem and music occur on a deeper structural level, so while the words of the poem are often obscured in performance, the poem is still central to the piece. In order to understand how Boulez uses Mallarmé's poetry as a *centre and absence* in the *Improvisation*, I will examine in detail the Mallarmé sonnet used in *Improvisation II*. Given Boulez's declared interest in Mallarmé's wider aesthetics, this too will be examined to better understand the musical response.

Pli selon pli

The second *Improvisation* is the central movement of *Pli selon pli*, a work of five movements, composed and revised over a span of thirty two years (1957-1989). Each movement is based on a poem by Mallarmé:

<u>Pli selon Pli</u>	<u>Movement</u>	<u>Based on</u>	<u>Date of Composition</u>
1.	<i>Don</i>	<i>Don du Poème</i>	1960-62 (revised 1989-90)
2.	<i>Improvisation I</i>	<i>Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui</i>	1957 (revised 1962)
3.	<i>Improvisation II</i>	<i>Une dentelle s'abolit</i>	1957
4.	<i>Improvisation III</i>	<i>A la nue accablante tu</i>	1959 (revised 1983-84)
5.	<i>Tombeau</i>	<i>Tombeau</i>	1959 (revised 1960)

The titles Boulez has ascribed, prepares us for the way in which he has chosen to engage with the poetry and the nature of his musical aims. The main title is taken from the sonnet 'Remémoration

d'amis belges' and does not feature in the work, but encapsulates Boulez's intention for the composition: 'The words 'Pli selon pli' are used by the poet to describe the way in which the mist, as it disperses, gradually reveals the architecture of the city of Bruges. In a similar manner the development of the five pieces reveals, 'fold upon fold', a portrait of Mallarmé himself.'³¹ Likewise the three Improvisations are denoted Improvisations *on* Mallarmé, suggesting that Boulez wished 'to reflect directly not only on the poetry but also somehow on the poet himself.'³² Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett comment on the use of the word 'Improvisation' suggesting the three inner movements are 'not so much songs with instrumental comment, but an improvisation on the fusion of words and music.'³³

Boulez chose each of the five poems³⁴ for their 'emotional' resonance and each had 'a very precise meaning'³⁵ for him. This personal engagement suggests that Boulez, despite his desire to connect music and poetry on a structural level, was not against engaging with the affective qualities of the poems. In all five of the movements Boulez can be seen to use the poetry as a *centre and absence* to a lesser or greater degree. The two outer movements only audibly present one line of their respective poems: Peter Stacey calls these an 'epigrammatic setting'³⁶. The central three *Improvisations* set all of their respective poems³⁷ but the text is often deliberately obscured, creating an interplay between clearly audible words and those that are used as sound material for musical elaboration. There is also a progression through the *Improvisations*, whereby

³¹ Boulez, 'Pli selon pli', *Orientations*, p.176.

³² Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p.123.

³³ Bradshaw and Rodney Bennett, 'In Search of Boulez', *Music and Musicians*, Aug 1963, p. 18.

³⁴ Mallarmé did not conceive of them as a set, Boulez has compiled them for *Pli selon pli*.

³⁵ Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p.94.

³⁶ Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept*, p.87.

³⁷ *Improvisation III* in its 1982 version only sets the first three lines of the poem. Since then it was revised in 1989, where all of the poem is now set. However, this version is not currently in publication and most analyses of the work are based on the previous version. Arnold Whittall's article "'Unbounded Visions": Boulez, Mallarmé and Modern Classicism', *Twentieth Century Music*, 1/1, (2004) pp.65-80, looks at the new version in detail and makes some comparisons between the two. Also see Edwards, Allen, 'Unpublished Bouleziana at the Paul Sacher Foundation', *Tempo*, no. 169 (June 1989), pp.4-15. Without access to the most recent score, I will refrain from commenting on the use of the poem in this version of *Improvisation III*.

Boulez engages increasingly with the structure of the poem so that they 'become an analysis of the sonnet structure, in a more and more detailed and more and more profound way.'³⁸ The first *Improvisation*³⁹ engages with the strophic structure of the poem; the second goes to 'the level of the line and the verse itself'⁴⁰. The third, in its 1982 version took this even further and worked with the line and its position within the sonnet⁴¹.

Boulez was drawn to Mallarmé's poetry for its 'extraordinary formal density' and the way in which the poet 'tried to rethink the foundations of French grammar.'⁴² In the conversations with Célestin Deliège, Boulez explains how he wished to utilise Mallarmé's poetry:

*What interested me was the idea of finding a musical equivalent, both poetic and formal, to Mallarmé's poetry. This is why I chose very strict forms from Mallarmé in order to graft on to them a proliferation of music sprouting from an equally strict form; this enabled me to transcribe into musical terms forms that I had never thought of and which are derived from the literary forms he himself used.*⁴³

The structure and form of the poetry is clearly very significant to the way in which *Pli selon pli* was conceived. Mallarmé's combination of strict form and innovative use of language prompted musical parallels Boulez wished to explore. As well as this, Boulez also admired Mallarmé as an artist and for the ideals he pursued for his poetry. Therefore, both the practical and theoretical aspects of Mallarmé's poetry should be considered in order to better understand Boulez's response in *Pli selon pli*.

³⁸ Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p.94.

³⁹ For a detailed discussion of the relationship between poetry and music in *Improvisation I*, see Célestin Deliège, 'The Convergence of two poetic systems', in *Pierre Boulez: A Symposium* (London: Eulenberg, 1986) pp.99-125.

⁴⁰ Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p.95.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.95.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.93.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.94.

Mallarmé- Poetry, Music and Aesthetic

Examining the way in which Mallarmé's poetry is constructed is not without its challenges, in fact his poetry is known for its extreme difficulty. Valéry identified this difficulty as stemming from the contrast between 'the *appearance* of these lines, their *physical* presence, and the resistance they offered to immediate understanding'⁴⁴. McCombie characterises this well in the introduction to the *Collected Poems and Other Verse*:

*The pull between the structural function of a poem's form, rhymes, and rich phonetic patterning, which can overwhelmingly suggest that there is or ought to be an order of sense, a semantic completion produced from the poem's whole; and the concurrent, conflicting story of fragmentation and discontinuity, of syntactical and textual interruption, and affronts to semantic coherence.*⁴⁵

For the time in which Mallarmé was writing (1842-1898), his work was unique for this deliberate tension between formal clarity and semantic obscurity. When Mallarmé wrote the 'Triptyque' (the three octosyllabic poems- 'Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir', 'Surgi de la croupe et du bond', and 'Une dentelle s'abolit') other poets such as Gustave Kahn and Émile Verhaeren were pioneering the concept of *vers libre*⁴⁶. Mallarmé, whilst both interested and supportive of his fellow poets, did not wish to abandon traditional versification altogether, hence the extensive use of verse forms such as the sonnet, seen in his *Poésies*. He believed '[p]rose poetry depends for its effects on the pre-existing conventions of prosody 'against' which it is written.'⁴⁷ The boundaries Mallarmé wished to challenge concerned other aspects of poetry.

⁴⁴ Cited in the introduction to Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p.ix.

⁴⁵ Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, pp. ix-x.

⁴⁶ For detailed discussion of *vers libre* see Clive Scott, *Vers libre: The Emergence of Free Verse in France 1886–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁴⁷ Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé: The Development of a Poetic Art*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996), p. 237.

In his lecture 'Music and Letters',⁴⁸ Mallarmé expresses his wish to reclaim certain aspects of music for his own art. As alternate faces of 'the idea',⁴⁹ he believes the two art forms share the common aim of disclosing the nature of this phenomenon. However, he distinguishes between the two, seeing literature as having the upper hand through the intelligibility of its language. What he wished to appropriate from music was its allusiveness, the ability to suggest rather than to describe. Mallarmé saw a distinction between 'literature' and 'reportage' through their use of language. 'Reportage' encompassed narrative, didactic or descriptive text and was considered unrefined and direct, whereas 'literature' was classed as essential.⁵⁰ He saw it as the poet's role to remove obvious relationships to the material world- '*non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit*'⁵¹- so that poetry would be allusive and suggestive, like music. In this way, words that would in one context have no literary value could be transformed.

He saw a line of poetry to be analogous to a musical scale and that "just as in diatonic music a note's musical significance is dependent upon its position in the scale, so the meaning of a word in a line of poetry is dependent on the whole constituted by the line. Thus, in the context of a line of poetry, a word ceases to exist, and therefore to mean, in its own right".⁵² Mallarmé aimed to create a reciprocal relationship between the individual words and the whole poem. Multiple reflections and interpenetrations of meaning occurred throughout the work. This reciprocal relationship between the words of the poem is what Mallarmé called the 'rhythm between relations',⁵³ creating 'a silent, structural music'.⁵⁴ For example, in 'Une dentelle s'abolit' (see below for the text) the image of the lace curtain appears and disappears throughout the poem. Its

⁴⁸ Given in Oxford on 1st March 1894. For full text see: Mallarmé, *Divigations*, tr. Barbara Jonhson (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ The 'idea' is discussed in detail in Chapter I.

⁵⁰ Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p.27.

⁵¹ Mallarmé, *Correspondences*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), i. p.137 (letter from Oct.1864) (Mallarmé's emphasis).

⁵² Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p.27.

⁵³ Cited in French in Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p.243 ('rythme entre des rapports').

⁵⁴ Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, p. xvi.

presence is felt in lines 1,3,5,7,8 and 12 permeating the other images but only momentarily. The lace curtain is introduced in the first line but its appearance from then on is only suggested, for example the words 'n'entrouvrir', 'blanc' and 'flotte' conjure up the curtain without mentioning it explicitly.

The elusive and allusive quality of Mallarmé's poetry demands an active participation on the part of the reader. The poems move between sound and sense, with what sense one can grasp being only one of many possible threads that can be followed. These threads of meaning create forms of their own, as well as the phonetic or metrical forms that present themselves more clearly. This parallels the demands Boulez makes when he uses a text as a *centre and absence*. Neither Boulez nor Mallarmé offer direct comprehension through their art, be it concerning semantics or audibility. As such one can see how Boulez feels an affinity to Mallarmé for his poetics as well as poetry.

‘Une dentelle s’abolit’

Une dentelle s'abolit
 Dans le doute du Jeu suprême
 A n'entrouvrir comme un blasphème
 Qu'absence éternelle de lit.

[A lace abolishes itself
 In the doubt of the supreme Game
 Half-opening like a blasphemy
 Only a bed's eternal absence.

Cet unanime blanc conflit
 D'une guirlande avec la même,
 Enfui contre la vitre blême
 Flotte plus qu'il n'ensevelit.

This unanimous white conflict
 Of a garland with the same,
 Fled against the pale window-pane
 Floats more than it buries.

Mais chez qui du rêve se dore
 Tristement dort une mandore
 Au creux néant musicien

But, within him who gilds himself with dreams
 Sadly sleeps a mandora
 With hollow nothingness musical

Telle que vers quelque fenêtre
 Selon nul ventre que le sien,
 Filial on aurait pu naître.

Such that towards some window
 Depending on no internality but one's own,
 Filial one might have been able to be born.]

The sonnet consists of two quatrains and two tercets, forming a binary structure and each line consists of eight syllables. All four lines of the first quatrain run into one another to create a single sentence. The same occurs in the second quatrain but with a comma halfway through. The tercets combine to form the last sentence. The minimal use of punctuation unclutters the poem belying a simplicity that the lines themselves deny. There is a regular rhyme scheme and within this there are also a number of internal rhymes that serve to unify the poem⁵⁵. The pattern of rhymes can be schematised as:

Quatrain 1	Quatrain 2	Tercet 1	Tercet 2
ABBA	ABBA	CCD	EDE

Table 2.1

The rhymes within this poem create a very specific sound-world when the poem is recited, another facet of poetic experience. For the reader when the sense is blurred the sound can take over creating a work increasingly removed from the referentiality of the material world.

⁵⁵ Roger Pearson traces the use of ‘or’ as a lexical unit in this poem and in the ‘Triptych’ (the three octosyllabic poems- ‘Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir’, ‘Surgi de la croupe et du bond’, and ‘Une dentelle s’abolit’) in *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p.200.

The imagery of the poem is centred on the image of a lace curtain floating towards a glass window. Mary Breatnach notes that a lace curtain 'half hides and half reveals'⁵⁶ and in many ways this same phrase could be applied to the nature of Mallarmé's poetry. The image of the lace curtain permeates the whole sonnet so that 'the poetic world we enter as we read the poem is one in which vision is contaminated with a kind of translucency.'⁵⁷ In some readings of the poem, commentators have seen the 'birth' image of the poem as depicting the creative act⁵⁸ and many of the other images of the poem can be related to the art of poetry itself and Mallarmé's aesthetic:

the lacework of the poetic text is a combination of silent spaces between homophonies, those 'unanimous' yet 'conflictual' units of sound which are twisted in triumphant (and nuptial) garlands and knotted in terminal rhymes. At once black garlands of 'vers' and white, fugitive wisps of 'espace blanc' which threaten to vanish into the pale background of the white page, the poetic text is ...a 'fenêtre' in which the 'vitres' of interstitial spaces (visually evoked by the interrupted word 'n'entr'ouvrir') are organised by the frame of the sonnet form, itself a 'jeu-croix'...of seven rhyme pairs...Such text does not so much abolish or shroud the 'world' but rather (like net curtains) 'floats'- that is, oscillates and wafts ('doubtfully') in the breeze of polysemy.⁵⁹

The other strong imagery suggested by the poem is that of colour or the absence of colour. The lace curtain itself immediately suggests whiteness and indeed the word 'blanc' also features in the poem. Other words that have white connotations are 'la vitre blême' ('pale window-pane') and 'flotte' ('floats'). Like the lace curtain, this whiteness seems to saturate the whole poem. From the quote above, Pearson has connected this whiteness to the white of the blank page, an unfulfilled creative act. Similarly the words 'absence' and 'creux néant' ('hollow nothingness') and the tense of the last line reinforce this unfulfillment whilst also contributing to the 'whiteness' or indeed the

⁵⁶ Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p.119.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p.205-6. Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p. 120.

⁵⁹ Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, p.206.

opposite darkness of an empty space. If the white of this poem is indeed the blank page of an unsuccessful attempt to 'give birth' to a new poetic work, then both black and white contribute to the same idea of emptiness. In spite of this, the poem has an aspirational feel as well, suggested by the first line of the first tercet. This coupled with the lightness brought about by the imagery of lace and white suggests this is not a poem of despair but of expectancy.

This poem is an apt choice for *Pli selon pli*, not least because it demonstrates Mallarmé's preoccupation with the very act of artistic creation, a concern we know Boulez shared for his own work. As we will see the imagery, structure and sonority of the poem are all integral to Boulez's musical response in *Improvisation II*.

Improvisation II

In the essay 'Constructing an Improvisation'⁶⁰ Boulez outlines the main way in which the musical and poetic structures meet. The whole piece is built on two contrasting 'structures' which Boulez calls, quite simply, A and B. A is 'ornamental' and the melody is highly melismatic. Boulez acknowledges that such melismatic writing will result in a certain unintelligibility of the text but he says 'this is deliberate. The poem is in fact for me an object of musical crystallization.'⁶¹ Structure B begins in the second strophe and it is characterised by a syllabic style of declamation. The metrical values of the poetry are stretched but the proportions of the line are maintained. This stretching can also result in an obscuring of the text when the syllable are elongated to such an extent that they become sound material rather than carriers of meaning (for example at bar 66). At bar 67 the two structures meet and from this point onwards they begin to merge together. The way in which these two musical structures are made to interact elucidates the poetic structure within the musical work.

⁶⁰ Boulez, *Orientations*, p155-173.

⁶¹ Ibid. p169.

In the first quatrain intelligibility is not lost entirely and the overall shape of the poem is followed. The phrasing of the melodic line follows the lines of the quatrain. Taking the first line of the poem for example (bars 12-15), even with the ornamentation of the vocal line, the natural stresses of the words are maintained; each syllable has been lengthened beyond normal speech rhythms but not to the point where they convey sound rather than sense. However, in the second quatrain intelligibility gradually disappears as the syllables are separated out even further. The first line of the second quatrain, bar 45, is marked *Senza tempo* and 'as slow as possible and without breathing'. In the second and third lines of the second quatrain (beginning at bar 55), the syllables are subdivided into two groups of four. The first half of the fifth line is accompanied by 'sparse instrumental resonances'⁶² and the second half with a version of the opening Andante- Alla breve 'lace' music. The soprano's notes are echoed, Breatnach uses the word 'absorbed', into the instrumental lines.

In the seventh line the eight syllables are divided into 2+5+1. The final word 'blême' (meaning 'pale') is sung *fff* on a top C with the instructions to hold it as long as possible, this word is separated from the other words of the line by a rest. In terms of the meaning of the word, it seems unexpected to choose to set it in this way, however from a structural perspective, the word occurs just before the two musical structures begin their merger, making it a pivotal moment. In the eighth line the word 'flotte' sees the merging of the two vocal styles accompanied by another version of the introductory music.

⁶² Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, p.129.

The tercets begin with the word 'mais' which creates a change of perspective within the poem. The first two lines are sung with melismas but the difference between the two 'structures' has been obscured. Breatnach lists the ways in which this is achieved, showing that the tempo markings (*calme, tres calme*), the rhythmic patterns and the absence of grace-notes which had been a feature of structure A all contribute to this merger. As a result, when the last line of the tercet is set syllabically, the difference when compared with the first two melismatic lines is less apparent. The second tercet continues to alternate between the two 'structures'. The intervening instrumental passages gradually appear at slower and slower tempi so that by the end the tempo of the instrumental music is very close to that of the melismatic vocal music.

If the events detailed above are presented visually, one can clearly see how Boulez has fused musical and poetic structure during the course of the work:

Line	Syllabic divisions	Rhyme scheme	Musical 'Structure' A/B	Tempi
(maracas) (introduction)				♩=66-63
1		a	A	♩=46-48
2		b	A	
3		b	A	
4		a	A	
(maracas)				♩=144-231 (accel.)
5	8	a	B	Senza tempo
6	4+4	b	B	Senza tempo ♩=66-63 (voice <i>sempre senza tempo</i>)
7	2+5+1	b	B	Senza tempo
8	2+1+1+1+1+1+1	a	A+B	Senza tempo ♩=66-63
(maracas) (tam-tam)				♩=144-231 (accel.)
9		c	A	♩=46-48
10		c	A	Calme, Très calme
(maracas)				♩=144-231 (accel.)
11	4+4	d	A+B	Senza tempo
(maracas)				♩=72-108 (accel.) ♩=66-63
12		e	A	♩=46-48
(maracas)				♩=66-63
13	5+1+1+1	d	A+B	Senza tempo ♩=58 Senza tempo ♩=52 Senza tempo ♩=48 Senza tempo
(maracas)				Senza tempo
14		e	A	♩=38-40
(maracas) (Coda)				♩=66 ♩=72-108

Table 2.2

From the table it is clear to see that the maracas, or the instrumental passages that are characterised by the maracas in particular, serve a structural function in the music. They mark the

divisions between the strophes and then towards the end they increase in frequency as the musical structures A and B are merged. The tam-tam is first heard at the start of the tercets, so it too has a structural function. The merging of structures A and B can be seen to relate to the interweaving of the rhyme patterns in the tercets. Also the significance of the 8 syllable lines⁶³ can be seen in the way that Boulez respects their divisions even when the words are being stretched out. From the table it is also possible to see how the changes in tempo contribute to the merging of the structures, where the *senza tempo* passages clearly delineate structure B. An aspect of the tempo not yet accounted for in the table is the free, improvised sections, which require separate consideration.

In bars 65-68 smaller noteheads are used to denote an 'improvisatory ensemble' not in a jazz or aleatoric sense, rather where the '[p]itches and rhythmic groupings are notated, but the performer's realization is freed from the conductor's direction'⁶⁴. What Boulez calls 'a forcible insertion of a free dimension.'⁶⁵ These smaller noteheads had appeared in different guises before: in bars 1-31 they were grace-notes; in bars 45-64 they were inserted more freely and 'are to be played not within a given tempo but at the performer's discretion within a duration signalled by the conductor.'⁶⁶ The difference in bars 65-8 is that they constitute the texture of the passage, whereas in the previous section the pedalling meant that they contributed to a polyphonic texture in combination with sustained lines, here they are a played *sec*, resulting in a pointillistic texture. The other difference is that these small notes are often shared between instruments so that 'two or more players must cooperate in the free placing of these notes in a given duration.

⁶³ Boulez: 'all the important and most audible events relating to the enunciation of the verse itself have as their basis the figure eight...the very numerical structure of the sonnet served as a basis for the musical structure' Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p.95.

⁶⁴ James McCalla, 'Sea-Changes: Boulez's *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*', *The Journal of Musicology*, vi no.1 (Winter, 1988), p.98 (footnote).

⁶⁵ Boulez, 'Constructing an Improvisation', *Orientations*, p.155.

⁶⁶ McCalla, p.98.

The “improvisation” is to be that of the whole ensemble, not of the individual performers.⁶⁷ This use of a certain kind of improvisation has parallels in the poetry of Mallarmé whereby he aimed to create a reciprocal relationship between the individual words of the poem and the poem as a whole. This interaction between local freedom (multiple allusive meanings of individual words) and global structure (the sonnet form) is paralleled in Boulez’s use of improvisation within a controlled overall musical structure. Separately from this, Mallarmé was also deeply interested in chance operations as demonstrated by his work *Un coup de dés*⁶⁸, where multiple readings of the same poem were invited through the use of spacing, typography and obscurity of the language.

The last tercet and Boulez’s response to it, demonstrate the way in which the poem has infiltrated the music at all levels. After a succession of verbs in the present tense, the verb in the last line is in the conditional past (‘one could have been born’) but like the self-destruction of the first two quatrains, this is an unfulfilled and indeterminate idea. This uncertainty subverts any sense of closure the poem might have had and as such, Boulez too has subverted closure in his *Improvisation*: ‘With regard to the end I should like to point out that there is no “conclusion” in the strict sense of the word. The last thing that the listener hears is a noise that, musically speaking, has no suggestion of finality. The two maracas close no frontier and the work could perfectly well go on.’⁶⁹ McCalla observes that ‘[f]ew poems of Mallarmé are unidirectional narrations, depictions, or mediations; one is constantly thrown back or pitched forward by the diction and especially by the syntax...No Mallarmé poem therefore, is ever “finished”, no reading is ever “ended”. The texts themselves prevent that.’⁷⁰ This is part of the challenge of reading Mallarmé’s poetry; while the poems are discrete forms in themselves and they operate within fixed structures that we are familiar with (such as the sonnet), they are just like the lace curtain,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.98.

⁶⁸ Mallarmé, *Igitur/Divigations/Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003.

⁶⁹ Boulez, ‘Constructing an Improvisation’, *Orientations*, p.171.

⁷⁰ McCalla, ‘Sea-Changes’, p.101.

half hiding and half revealing. Boulez has attempted to capture this open-ended quality in the final moments of *Improvisation II*.

Instrumentation

The choice of instrumentation and the way in which these instruments interact can be related to the way in which Mallarmé sees the interaction of words within a poem. As previously mentioned, Mallarmé's poems utilise words for their individual meanings and also the reciprocal meanings that are possible within the poem as a whole. There is both the individual word and its two-way influence on the other words of the line, the verse and whole structure. This can be seen in the instrumentation of *Improvisation II*, where we hear the characters of each instrument individually and also their penetrations upon one another to create new sounds. They 'lean' towards one another, to reveal a new aspect of the ensemble as a whole.

The ensemble consists of soprano, piano, celesta, vibraphone, tubular bells, harp and four percussionists playing instruments of indefinite pitch. The pitched instruments are able to overlap in sonority with the un pitched percussion and the un pitched percussion are able to expand the resonant capabilities of the pitched instruments. In his essay 'Constructing an Improvisation', Boulez explains the reasons for the disposition of the instruments that he specifies in the preface to the score. The ensemble is separated into three categories: accurately pitched (piano, harp), partially pitched (celesta, vibraphone and tubular bells) due to varying degrees of extra partials that can blur the fundamental, and un pitched 'noise'. The plan for how these instruments should be arranged on stage takes into account these qualities. For instance the celesta has the shortest-lasting sound so it is positioned near the front and likewise the harp too, since it is often utilised for *secco* chords and harmonics. The set-up is logically organised so that the ensemble is balanced

acoustically in performance and maximises the qualities that Boulez aims to bring out in the orchestration.

The instrumentation is employed on the full scale from resonant↔dry↔noise. The combinatory aspect to which I refer comes from instruments moving towards different ends of this scale within their own compass. For example by adding the gongs and tam-tam to the low register of the piano (bars 90-92), Boulez transforms the sound so that it is difficult to distinguish the three instruments, as the percussion magnify and alter the low sonorities of the keyboard. Also, in bar 55 the vibraphone and bells are added to the piano to create, in Boulez's words, 'a remarkably homogeneous complex of sound'⁷¹.

The resonant end of the ensemble encompasses the pedalled vibraphone and piano, *laisser vibrer* harp and the resonant use of percussion such as the tubular bells, cymbal, gongs and tam-tam. The suspended cymbal is often used as a transition to and from the instrumental (maracas) passages, for example from bar 105, where, played quietly, it contributes to the resonance of the pitched instruments but is also part of the 'noise' end of the spectrum. Gongs and tam-tam can be seen as a sonic extension of the suspended cymbal, in the same way the crotales relate to the tubular bells. The dry sounds exploited on the harp (playing near the sound board and harmonics) and the short sharp chords on the piano lean towards the percussive end of their sound capabilities. In this manner, all the instruments can extend one another or act as separate sound entities within the music.

⁷¹ Boulez, 'Constructing an Improvisation', *Orientations*, p.162.

The use of maracas is significant because they are used in a non-blending capacity. They enter as a structural signpost within the work. Sometimes they overlap with the vocal sections but again, this colours the text by anticipating the instrumental section to come. Even with these overlaps the sound of the maracas acts as a separate layer, it is not merging or being merged with. The claves too have a structural function. They enter at bar 96, with just one note just before the phrase 'with hollow nothingness', then at bar 110 before the next tercet, then between lines 12-13 and 13-14. They operate in a similar manner to the maracas but with more subtlety, articulating the emptiness of the poem with an unpitched sound and marking the structure of the remaining lines of the tercets. The gongs and tam-tam can also be seen to act structurally as their first appearance coincides with the start of the tercets.

Boulez highlights specific words such as 'white' and 'absence' that he claims to have a 'certain sonority in music that is directly associated with such ideas'⁷² demonstrating that he is interested in engaging with the imagery of the poem as well as its abstract structural properties. 'White' and 'absence' are both strong images in the poem and it is possible to read certain musical choices of instrumentation and texture as a response to these⁷³. For example the filigree instrumental writing in relation to the image of lace, the *secco* chords and use of percussion to suggest emptiness through an emptiness of pitch and the extremes of register could be a move towards whiteness. These may or may not be deliberate acts of the composer but given his openness about responding to the imagery and emotional content of the poem, it is possible for such correspondences to exist. The dichotomies in the poem of lace and glass; floating and burying; absence and birth, could have their parallels in melismatic and syllabic settings; pitched and unpitched instruments; and resonant and dry sonorities.

⁷² Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p. 94.

⁷³ Susan Bradshaw notes such correspondences in 'The instrumental and vocal music', in *Pierre Boulez: A Symposium*, (London: Eulenberg, 1986), p. 181.

Conclusion

Boulez sought to find deeper connections between poetry and music through his notion of *centre and absence*. One can observe this quite clearly in the structural connections between the poem and the music. Boulez verbalises his desire to go beyond affective and descriptive correspondences to work with the two art forms on a structural level. He has in fact gone even further than this by engaging with the poetic thought of Mallarmé. There are parallels to Mallarmé's role of the word within a poem in terms of its multiple meanings and musical improvisation. The instrumentation also acts in this way by emphasising individual and combinatory sonorities. The idea of local freedom and global structure is found in the poetry and in the music. Boulez has put, not only the poem, but the poet as a *centre and absence* in the musical work.

Chapter III

Cummings ist der Dichter

This chapter is a study of Boulez's *Cummings ist der Dichter* focussing on the relationship between Cummings' poem and Boulez's music. In order to examine Boulez's use of 'centre and absence' in *Cummings ist der Dichter*, firstly I will analyse the poem upon which the piece is based. Using this analysis, I will be able to show how Boulez has responded to various individual features of the poem and in what ways he has treated it as a 'centre and absence' within the musical work.

Boulez composed *Cummings ist der Dichter*, for sixteen solo voices and orchestra, in 1970 and later revised it in 1986. Although John Cage introduced Boulez to the poetry of E. E. Cummings in 1952, it took many years for him to feel ready to work with a poem that was not in his native language⁷⁴. One of the qualities which drew Boulez to Cummings's poetry was a feeling that Cummings had gone a step beyond the poetic innovations of Mallarmé: 'Mallarmé arranged his words in a new way and tried to find new syntactical ways of combining them, but Cummings enters into the vocabulary itself'⁷⁵. Boulez was fascinated by his inventive use of word-play, punctuation and typography and he sought to 'find a transcription of his world in my own'⁷⁶. In this way, his idea of 'centre and absence' takes on a new dimension; in *Pli selon pli*, poetic structure was infused into the musical structure of the work, in *Cummings ist der Dichter* Boulez goes one step further to include parameters other than structure such as typography, punctuation and spatial layout.

⁷⁴ Célestin Deliège, *Conversations*, p. 97.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

The Poem

Given Cummings was a painter as well as a poet, it is not surprising that this poem and others in Cummings' output show an interest in layout and typography. Many of his poems, including this one, can only be fully appreciated when seen on the page since the spatial element of the creation is not possible to convey through hearing it read aloud. Whilst one critic has noted that Cummings uses the page like a canvas⁷⁷, another says that this particular poem 'becomes a sculpture'⁷⁸ upon the white of the page. Both acknowledge the visual aspect of his work and reinforce the idea that the poetry is for the eye as well as the ear.

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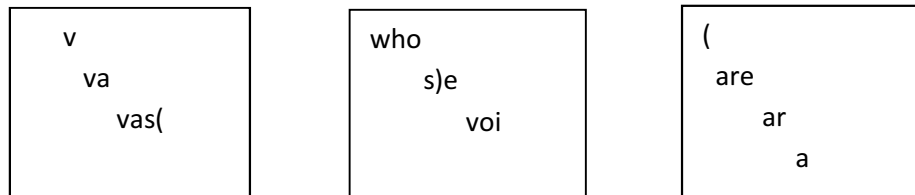
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⁷⁷ Friedman, Norman, *e.e. cummings: The Art of His Poetry*, London: OUP 1960, p.123.

⁷⁸ Goldberg, Clemens, 'How to Compose the White of a Page; Reflections on Boulez' Cummings ist der Dichter', *International Journal of Musicology* 1, 1992, p.347.

This poem appears in a chapter titled 'Poetry of the Eye' in 'Selected Poems of E. E. Cummings'⁷⁹. In the introduction to this chapter, editor Richard S. Kennedy discusses Cummings's interest in contemporary art and its influence on his poetic practice. The Cubist concept of 'break-up and restructuring'⁸⁰ can be seen to have infiltrated his poetry. In fact Cummings once extolled 'The Symbol of all Art is the Prism...The goal is unrealism. The method is destructive. To break up the white light of objective realism into the secret glories which it contains.'⁸¹ In the poem above, words are dismantled and rearranged on the page in order to heighten the imagery of the poem. This dismantling creates an ambiguity lending itself to multiple readings, although, the overriding image of birds in flight is not in doubt. In fact, the way in which we are unable to grasp a clear reading of the text, combined with the way the words are broken up and trail away off the page, is itself suggestive of flight, of disappearing into the distance:



The poem is not unusual in its subject matter- the image of birds in flight- yet the means by which it is presented is far less familiar. Words are dismantled and trail off, creating a visual shape suggestive of flying away. This shape also leads our eyes into the white spaces of the page.

The use of space is one of the most striking aspects of the poem. The poem is laid out in short lines, centralised on the page, leaving an expanse of white space surrounding the text. Our eyes

⁷⁹ Cummings, *Selected Poems of e.e. cummings*, ed. Richard S. Kennedy, Liveright, New York, 1994.

⁸⁰ cf. 'E.E. Cummings Revisited', Chapter 3, 1994 where Kennedy further discusses the Cubist influence in Cummings' poetry.

⁸¹ Cited in Kennedy, *Selected Poems*, p. xvi.

are encouraged to engage with this space. The empty lines⁸² create further space in the poem. One might assume these empty lines act as structural points of division, creating stanzas of length: 5, 7, 5, 3 and 6. However, dividing the text into stanzas does not seem to be an important aspect of reading this poem since the text appears to be continuous. In fact, the stanzaic form does not coincide with any of the punctuation. For example, the division between the second and third stanzas breaks up the word vastness and the full stop is placed midway through the first line of the third stanza. The empty lines make more sense simply as spaces within the poem rather than serving any structural function. These spaces slow down the pulse of the poem. They also act as a visual evocation of the 'air' described in words. The page itself is part of the poem. Cohen aptly describes the white of the page in the poetry of Cummings as 'an active protagonist, complementing the black print thematically and structurally. Where print becomes silent, the white space grows eloquent.'⁸³

Another way in which Cummings utilises space in the poem is through the use of punctuation. The use of open parentheses is another way of involving the space around the poem in the world of the poem itself. Other sorts of punctuation⁸⁴ can also be seen to create space within the poem although this is temporal rather than visual space. Owing to the fragmentation of the text, its layout and the unconventional placement of punctuation, attempting to read this poem could be daunting for a reader. However, the punctuation, whilst placed unexpectedly within the poem, still maintains its usual function. Commas, full stops and semi colons all denote a length of pause and guide the reader as to how Cummings wishes for the poem to be paced. Likewise, the fragmentation of certain words such as 'vastness', a word that itself refers to space, forces us to take extra time to read and to process the word. As well as this, the fragmentation of the word

⁸² Lines 6, 14 and 20.

⁸³ Cohen, Milton A., *Poet and Painter, the Aesthetics of E.E. Cummings*, Wayne State University Press (1987), p.111.

⁸⁴ See various uses of ;, and .

coupled with an empty line midway through it, means that it takes up more space on the page, and therefore acts simultaneously as a visual and temporal expression of its meaning.

The dismantling of words within the poem draws our attention to the individual syllables that comprise each word. These individual syllables are able to function as units in their own right as well as composite units of a whole word. For instance in lines 4-5, breaking up the word *using* into 'U' and 'sing' gives the extra meaning of 'U' as a shortened form of *you*. As a result song and birdsong in particular, become part of the imagery of the poem. Additionally, the use of perceptual ambiguity, where multiple meanings are possible, dramatically alters 'the speed and manner in which a line is perceived.'⁸⁵ There is a tension between the different themes as they compete for dominance within the mind of the reader. In the last third of the poem the fragmentation increases, breaking words down beyond syllables and into single letters. These fragments draw our attention to them as units of sound as well as forcing us to reread and reconstruct the words from which they have come. The fragmentation of words found at the end of the poem also further contributes to the imagery of birds in flight as the poem drifts into abstraction in a way that is suggestive of the birds disappearing into the distance.

The use of abstraction in this poem and in others by Cummings is not borne out of a desire to negate meaning; rather, he is attempting to unlock new connections between words, sounds and shapes. Both the visual and the aural parameters are being explored and as Cohen explicates in his work on Cummings' poetry and painting, 'far from wanting to divorce the visual and the aural from the thematic, he seeks to join them to make his poems mean at all levels simultaneously.'⁸⁶ One could ally such aims with those of Mallarmé who we have seen was deeply interested in finding ways to make poetry 'mean at all levels' through his allusive use of words and syntactical

⁸⁵ Cohen, *Poet and Painter*, p.109.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.101.

originality. In this way it is easy to see how Boulez could be drawn to the poetry of Cummings after his work with Mallarmé's poetry in *Pli selon pli*.

The other effect of fragmenting the text to such an extent is that the words which are kept whole stand out. In particular the middle section which uses the words 'be', 'look', 'now', 'come', 'soul' in succession, provide a point a focus after the disparate setting of the word 'vastness'. The first word 'Be' is given a capital letter which gives it extra emphasis and also puts the reader at the centre of the poem. The use of 'U' earlier in the poem has a similar effect. The poem becomes an event in the present, going beyond describing the image of the birds, pulling the reader into the action.

Cummings ist der Dichter

My examination of *Cummings ist der Dichter* focuses on how the original poem is used as a 'centre and absence' in the musical work. Unlike previous studies⁸⁷, I will be using the later version of the score from 1986.

Boulez chooses to set the text up to the word 'soul', leaving the last portion of the poem unsung. This last part of the poem, as discussed above, moves into abstraction as the birds take flight. Leaving this unset is an apt musical choice. From figure 28 to the end, the voices have sustained pitches. The basses are instructed to use their head voice and the altos at the eleventh bar of 28 are instructed to sing *bouche fermée*. The dynamics of this last section are very quiet. The voices meld with the orchestra and audibly disappear before the words of the last section can be articulated.

⁸⁷ Analyses by Stoianowa, Stacey, Bradshaw, Morton and Goldberg all use the earlier version, titled 'First birds'. Of these, only Stacey and Stoianowa discuss the relationship between poem and music in detail. These studies were written before the newer version of the score was published; I have chosen to work with the most up to date version of the piece currently available.

Boulez chooses to use a lot of repetition of the text within the work. The words and sounds of the poem are introduced in the order they occur on the page but they are meditated upon, creating a sense of stasis. Boulez is not looking to colour each word individually in the manner of word painting, instead the words contribute to and are part of the overall texture. In this way there is an emphasis on the voices as instruments as well as communicators of the text (see Ex. 3.1).

Fl. 2

Fl. 1

Ob. 2

Ob. 1

Cl. 2

Cl. 1

Fag. 2

Fag. 1

Cor. 2

Cor. 1

Tpt. 2

Tpt. 1

Tbn. 2

Tbn. 1

Hpe. 3

Hpe. 2

Hpe. 1

Lent, très calme
♩ = 48

2/4

Vl. 2

Vl. 1

Vla. 2

Vla. 1

Vcl. 2

Vcl. 1

Cb. 2

Cb. 1

S. 2

S. 1

A. 2

A. 1

T. 2

T. 1

B. 2

B. 1

UE 30 503

Ex.3.1 first bar displayed above is the second bar of figure 13.

Following Cummings' lead, Boulez plays with different ways of fragmenting the text. The ambiguity of certain phrases such as 'using' versus 'U sing' provides ample material for vocal play. For example, at bar 11 Boulez uses two different phonetic symbols- (z) and (s) - to highlight the two options of this particular double-meaning. The passage from figure 9 shows how Boulez dismantles the words into their phonetic building blocks in order to create a musical texture of contrasting layers. The open-ended vowel sound of 'va' and 'li' are sustained while the percussive qualities of 'tw(a)', 't(e)', 't's(e)', 'v(e)' are used to create accented interjections (see Ex. 3.2).

There is a lot of space in the poem, both between different sets of words and within words themselves. Boulez does not translate these spaces directly into the music by placing them exactly where they occur in the text but takes the notion of space and works this into the musical structure. The most obvious translation of space is in the frequent use of silence, for example bar 19. These moments are not interruptions nor do they disrupt the flow of the music, rather they are features of the piece in the way that the white of the page is a feature of the poem (see Ex.3.3).

Silence is not the only way in which Boulez creates a sense of space in *Cummings ist der Dichter*. Moments of stasis, through the use of sustained pitches, also suggest space; for example the trombones and tuba at figure 4 (see Ex. 3.4).

UE 30 800

Ex.3.2 From figure 9

Ex.3.3 bars 13 - 19

These act as a precursor to the *suspendu* passages that occur later in the piece where the whole texture is made up of sustained chords. The use of sustained pitches marks out a space in the music. At times these sustained pitches are spotlighted, as in the second bar of the piece, and at other times they provide a core of sound around which other musical events can happen. This can be seen in the third bar of figure 6 and at figure 7 (see Ex. 3.5).

From the second bar of figure 15 there are recurrent passages marked *suspendu*, which create a sense of stasis and of space. Both Goldberg and Stoikanowa discuss these sections in terms of the dichotomy between stasis and movement, and incision and surface. The sense of space is heightened by the way Boulez uses this contrast of textures, putting *incisif* directly before or after a passage marked *suspendu* (see Ex.3.6).

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Fl. 1
Fl. 2
Hrn. 1
Hrn. 2
Cl. 1
Cl. 2
Bsn. 1
Bsn. 2
Tpt. 1
Tpt. 2
Tpt. 3
Tpt. 4
Tbn. 1
Tbn. 2
Tbn. 3
Tuba
Hrp. 1
Hrp. 2
Pno.
Viol. 1
Viol. 2
Vla.
Vcl.
Cb.
Sopr.
Alto
Tenor
Bass

3/4 Modéré accélérer... 2/4 peu à peu... 3/4 Plus rapide $J = 96$ Sub. Modéré accélérer... 2/4 Plus rapide rev. à 5/8 Modéré accélérer... 3/4 Plus rapide ralentir 2/4

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Ex.3.5

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Très modéré $\text{♩} = 66$ $\frac{3}{4}$ Sub. Plus rapide $\text{♩} = 96$ $\frac{4}{4}$ Sub. Très modéré $\frac{3}{4}$ Sub. Plus rapide $\frac{4}{4}$ Sub. Très modéré $\frac{4}{4}$ ralentir

7

UE 36 500

Ex.3.6

Boulez creates a sense of space both overtly and covertly. Silences can feel like breaths, natural and entirely integrated. Sustained pitches hint at the space within more active passages and the *suspendu* sections bring space to the fore, confronting the listener with a moment as if suspended in time. Given the way in which space and the white of the page play such an important role in the reading of the Cummings, Boulez's use of space, through silence and sustain, is an artful translation of the poem into music.

Boulez's vocal writing in *Cummings ist der Dichter* often contrasts short, angular phrases with the *sostenuto* lines characteristic of the static passages described above. Taking the opening soprano 1 line as an example, Boulez uses short phrases of two notes, often leaping to create the sense of something fleeting, light and spacious (see Fig. 3.1). He evokes bird-like flutters in contrast to the gliding music of the sustained passages to come. From the second bar of figure 1 longer phrases create an increasing sense of continuity until the brief hiatus at the bar preceding figure 2.



Fig.3.1

The vocal writing in this piece is not primarily concerned with line since the piece does not aim to convey the literal meaning of the text. It is concerned with translating the world of the poem into the world of the music. The image of the birds, the use of space, the fragmentation of the text leaning towards abstraction, the white of the page, are the elements which Boulez is responding to rather than the literal meaning of the words. The text is used as building blocks to create a texture and the role of the voices is as instruments rather than communicators of the meaning of the words. Their currency is sound derived from language, in preference over language itself.

Cummings ist der Dichter is a development of Boulez's notion of 'centre and absence' and an innovative way of using voices and orchestra. Multiple voices are never the most efficient conveyors of intelligible words and this piece plays to their strength as an instrument. Boulez's musical response suits the unique nature of Cummings' poetry, where suggestion and atmosphere are paramount. This work demonstrates how the notion of 'centre and absence' can be usefully considered beyond the structural concerns of poetry to include other parameters such as punctuation, typography and spatial layout. 'Centre and absence' is a mode of working with text that allows the composer to feel the utmost freedom; issues of intelligibility and audibility of the text need not restrict the creative process. The following chapters will show how I have adapted and incorporated this mode of working in my own compositions.

Chapter IV

My Vocal Music

In this chapter I will demonstrate how my exploration of ‘centre and absence’ has influenced my own vocal writing. I will begin by looking at a piece, *Half Moon*, which was written before I began to think about Boulez’s writing and ideas, and then show how my approach to vocal writing has changed in some of the works that followed. This is not a linear narrative where I studied Boulez’s music and then began to utilise a similar approach in my own. Rather, I was already in the process of exploring different ways of working with text and gradually discovered that my compositional aims were in line with the notion of ‘centre and absence’. Even though I felt an affinity to this way of considering text, it took me some time to find a way of incorporating it into my own practice.

Half Moon and Utterance

Half Moon was commissioned in 2012 by Pop-Up Circus⁸⁸ for a cross-arts event. I chose to set a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894):

The Half moon

The half moon shows a face of plaintive sweetness
 Ready and poised to wax or wane;
 A fire of pale desire in incompleteness,
 Tending to pleasure or to pain:-
 Lo, while we gaze she rolleth on in fleetness
 To perfect loss or perfect gain.

Half bitterness we know, we know half sweetness;
 This world is all on wax, on wane:
 When shall completeness round time’s incompleteness,
 Fulfilling joy, fulfilling pain?-
 Lo, while we ask, life rolleth on in fleetness
 To finished loss or finished gain.

⁸⁸Pop-Up Circus is an arts organisation that put on multi-disciplinary arts events in East London.

The poem has a very clear structure of two stanzas each of six lines and a rhyme scheme of ABABAB. The poem contains many oppositions, everything is in halves:

wax/wane
 pleasure/pain
 loss/gain
 bitterness/sweetness
 completeness/incompleteness

Through the imagery of the phases of the moon, Rossetti addresses the various ways in which life presents us with two sides. In particular, I responded to the feeling of loss and bereavement, and of pain borne out of happiness. I attempted to create a musical parallel to these dichotomies using several techniques. Harmonically, there is a move to the sharp side at bar 14 and the word 'fire' initiated by the introduction of E natural; this is in contrast with the F minor-centred harmony of the opening. The opposition between the flat and sharp sides of the harmonic palette of the piece continues throughout with the return of the sharp side at bar 38. The alternation between solo lines for the voice and the cello are also indicative of the sense of duality that is present in the poem. Together they create the musical work but they have very separate identities. The song is a duet rather than a piece for voice with instrumental accompaniment.

The setting of the poem could be considered traditional in the sense that the music was written so as to elucidate the text. There are few melismas, only on the word 'half', 'fire' and 'incompleteness', allowing for the text to be communicated clearly and directly to the audience. The cello line also spotlights the voice in terms of register and chord spacing. The soprano is always at the top of the texture and therefore it is not obscured by the cello.

poco rit.

p

49

Sop.

Lo, while we ask, life rol-leth on in fleet - ness. To fi - nished loss or

vc. *f* *p*

Ex.4.1

The limitations of the compositional approach used to set Rossetti's poem are related to the nature of the vocal writing in particular. In striving to make the text intelligible, the vocal line is not rhythmically engaging and is restricted to the bounds of speech rhythm as much as possible. It is neither florid nor harmonically intricate and the extremes of register are kept to a minimum. The top A flat is used at the climax of the piece and occurs on the word 'Lo' which has a vowel sound well-suited to singing at a high pitch (see Ex.4.1 above). The features listed above are not problematic in and of themselves, and I was very satisfied with the resulting musical work. However, I also felt that there was much more of the voice to explore beyond the confines of this type of vocal-writing, the challenge was to consider how to reconcile this exploration with the demands of an intelligible text.

Composed later the same year, *Utterance* uses a poem I wrote myself:

Twilight Circles

Dismantling in the early hours:
An urgent slideshow screens again.
Obediently spun and
Habitually spinning,
Done and undone.

Flashes through a fractured channel
A theatre of reprise.
Scintillas of doubt gain weight
In the umbra of the mind,
Truth refracted
Reason eclipsed
Done and undone.

In this song the vocal line is more experimental than that of *Half Moon*, utilising a wider range of the soprano tessitura and extended vocal techniques such as whispering and humming. However, I still attempt to make the text intelligible for the audience throughout; when I employ extremes of register, such as the closing passage for the voice, I use repetition to make sure the words are conveyed before they transform into a hum. The florid parts of the vocal line such as the passage at bar 7, are set to the vowel sound 'ah' so there is no loss of text. The cello part is also much more experimental and uses many extended techniques including rapid half harmonics, *ultra sul tasto* and bowing on the bridge. However, even with these extended techniques and some aggressive passages, the cello does not obscure the vocal line.

Using my own poetry inevitably has an effect on how I have treated it in the composition. The benefit of using my own poem is that I know how it was constructed; I have a close understanding of the structural and aesthetic features of the poem, which provides me with ample material with which to work musically. It is likely that I am less precious about the poem given it is my own; ownership begets a freedom with the material.

Whilst *Utterance* has a wider range of instrumental timbres, both for the voice and the cello, the text is still always communicated to the audience. I was trying to find a way of reconciling my interest in instrumental timbre and my desire to use poetic text in composition. However, the notion of 'centre and absence' was not employed in my compositional process and the text is still very much in the foreground during performance.

Glimmer

*Glimmer*⁸⁹ for soprano and orchestra, a work that predates both *Utterance* and *Half Moon* (and before I had studied Boulez's writings in depth), does nevertheless begin to engage with the issues of 'centre and absence'. Whilst there was no conscious decision to utilise 'centre and absence', my own compositional journey led me to produce a piece after a poem by W.B. Yeats, which was absent in performance. The brief for the project was to compose a setting of the famous Yeats poem below. However, the poem felt complete already and I could not see any space for music. This is not an uncommon dilemma for composers; as Brian Ferneyhough describes in an interview with Paul Driver: 'The selection of texts is extremely problematic. Not all texts to which one actively responds are suitable for musical treatment, frequently because their inner coherence and particularized sonorities are resolutely impervious to further commentary.'⁹⁰ In my case, I decided to compose a musical response to the poem by creating my own text based on fragments of the Yeats. This was a way for me to capture the world of the poem, as I saw it, in the music.

Lawrence Kramer discusses this notion of space within poetry for music in his chapter on Song in *Music and Poetry*⁹¹. He cites Rilke as an example of a poet who was against the setting of his poetry to music. Rilke's aim was to 'fill with my own creative output the whole artistic space that offers itself to an idea in my mind.'⁹² The thought that there could be space for another art form after this, was highly disturbing to him and he believed it suggested a weakness in the original work. There is also a further issue when a well-known poem is used as the basis for a song, such as Shakespeare's Sonnets, or the Yeats I was asked to set. The audience will listen with expectations based on their own readings and the readings of others they have heard. This can result in a comparison which finds the song to be expressively inferior to the original poem.

⁸⁹ This work was composed for the Canterbury Arts Festival in 2011.

⁹⁰ Ferneyhough, Brian, 'Speaking with tongues', *Contemporary Music Review*, 1989, 5:1, p161-162.

⁹¹ Kramer, L., *Music and Poetry*, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 125-170.

⁹² *Ibid.* p.128

Kramer suggests that in order for a composer to successfully set a well-known text, they must suggest a new interpretation so that 'the music becomes a deconstruction of the poem.'⁹³ In *Glimmer*, this was my approach. I dismantled the poem and then took fragments of it to build a new work, the result of which is my reflection upon the original poem. The musical work is a personal reading of the poem.

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Glimmer

Blue
 The blue
 The blue and the dim
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths of night
 Of night
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths of night
 And light
 Golden and silver light
 Of night and light and the half-light
 Blue
 Dim
 Dark
 Night
 Enwrought with golden and silver light
 And the half-light.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p.146

The Yeats contained many words relating to light and colour. I took these words and constructed the text above. The poem can be divided into four sections:

Blue
The blue
The blue and the dim
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths of night
Of night
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths of night

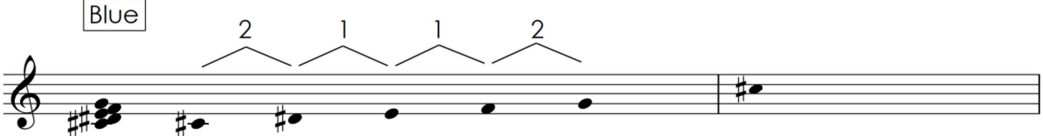
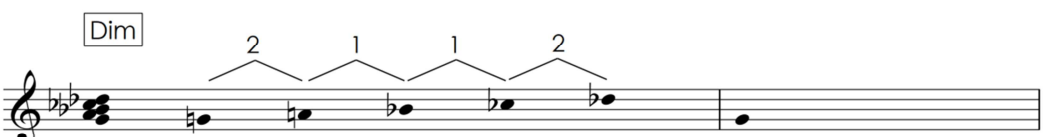
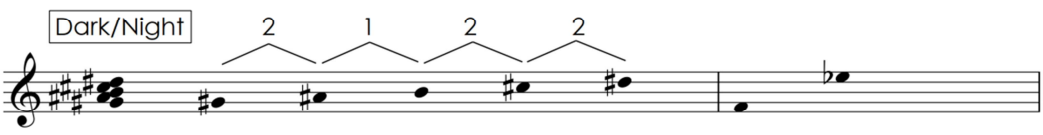
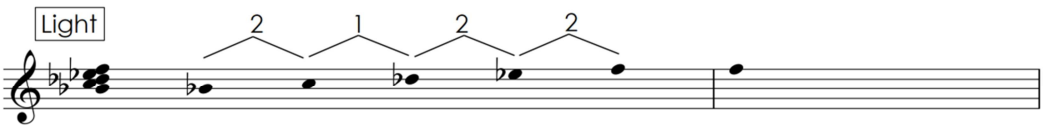
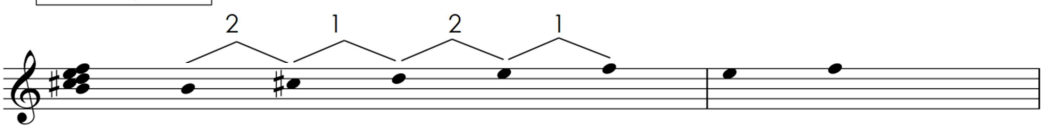
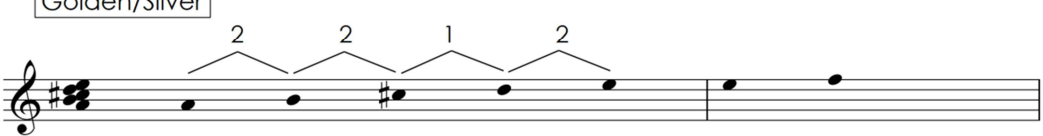
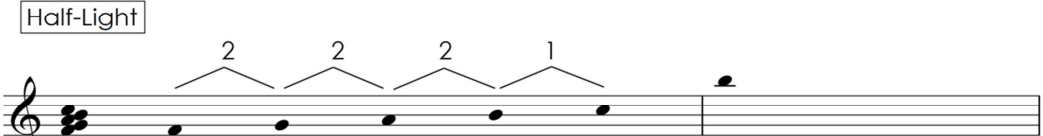
And light
Golden and silver light
Of night and light and the half-light

Blue
Dim
Dark
Night

Enwrought with golden and silver light
And the half-light.

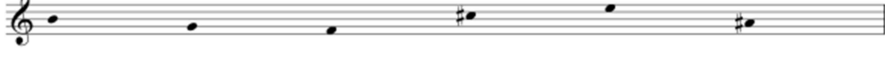
These sections are defined musically through the use of harmony and register. There are eight keywords in the text⁹⁴ and each of these has been allocated a cluster chord and a pitch (see Ex.4.2). The cluster chords underpin all the melodic material and the vocal line is centred on the allocated pitches. Initially the clusters are heard in closed position with some embellishment in the higher registers. From bar 11 the range of the music begins to expand downwards. From figure C the clusters are opened up even further. The last section from figure D utilises the low register for both the voice and the orchestra. The pitches for the keywords are all heard an octave lower and the voice becomes part of the instrumental texture. The clusters in the last section are blown apart, but they still maintain their allegiance to the keywords. In this way, harmony, melody and form are all inextricably linked to the text.

⁹⁴ *blue, dim, dark, night, light, golden, silver, half-light.*

	Cluster	Pitch (vocal melody)
Blue 		
Dim 		
Dark/Night 		
Light 		
Golden/Silver 		
Golden/Silver 		
Half-Light 		

The vocal line is the main melodic thread of the work and all the instrumental lines are derived from it to create a nebulous heterophony. As a result, all of the melodic material of the orchestra is an embellishment or an echo of the soprano. There are six main melodic motifs that occur in the piece (see table 4.1). The vocal line is centred on the pitches specified above and around these are embellishments and decorations based upon these motifs. At times the voice behaves instrumentally and melds with the orchestral texture and at other times the singer will convey a coherent part of the text. Thus the voice moves between its two roles as a musical instrument and as a communicator of the text.

Table 4.1

Melodic Fragment	Example
	bar 13 clarinet
	bar 10 soprano
	bar 9 violin II
	bar 11 flute
	bar 3 soprano
	bar 2-3 soprano

Without realising it at the time, my compositional process was beginning to move towards the idea of using text as a 'centre and absence'. I was trying to find a way of possessing a well-loved poem without feeling bound by the expectations that come with familiarity. In creating a musical reading of the poem utilising fragments of the text, a fresh perspective can be offered to the listener. The piece acts as a window through which one can reconsider the poem. There is

sufficient distance from the original text to respect it as an artistic object but there are connections that can be perceived if the listener chooses to do so. The poem acted as a springboard for the piece but the poem and the piece can also be viewed independently; they still have their own separate identities.

Recollection

This piece was composed for a project with Vocaallab in Ghent (2013) exploring experimental techniques for vocal-writing. Written for mezzo-soprano and Paetzold contrabass recorder, the piece is a setting of one line of text:

‘A panoply of echoes’

The text is my own. I decided to use such pared down means in order to focus on the sound quality of the individual syllables. The sound of the words is as important as its meaning. The Paetzold recorder has a breathy quality and this contributes to a voice-like aspect of its sound production. The piece uses the individual syllables of the words as sound units to be explored by the voice. For example, the opening passage uses these units to create a sustained vocal line and creates variety through the different vowel sounds which are sustained. From bar 7-9, the emphasis is on the consonants of these units. The voice and the Paetzold recorder are using the percussive end of their sound spectrum (see Ex.4.3). The last three bars drift away with increasing amounts of audible breath used by both instruments.

a loud whisper with a little pitch

7

M-S.

sputato, double tongue, percussive

p

Ex.4.3

Throughout the piece both pitched and non-pitched sounds are explored by the voice and recorder. The use of the words as sound units allows the voice to explore being an instrument as well as a communicator of the text. In this way, the voice can meld with the recorder, finding points of unity in their sound spectra. At other points they can diverge. *Recollection* builds on the work I began in *Utterance*. This time however, both instruments are able to have an exploratory role within the piece. The line of text is central to the piece, suggesting the idea of memory and the feeling we have when we try to remember a past event. The music is an evocation of this state of remembering rather than a communication of the text which describes it.

Conclusion

From the earliest work, *Glimmer*, it is clear to see that I was preoccupied with finding a way to work with text that went beyond the surface correspondences of a mimetic relationship. However, this was and still is a continuing journey of discovery.

Each of these vocal works can be placed on a continuum to demonstrate their relationship with a coherent text:



It is also possible to plot the changing coherency of the text within each work. However, it is worth considering that coherence is a complex quality to measure. Audience perception is dependent on many factors, some controlled by the composer, some controlled by the performer and the vast majority dependent on the listener and their environment. Considering what we can be certain of, which is the intention of the composer, the continuum pictured above places each work where I believe I intended it to be at the time of composition. Whether this position remains the same at the point of performance is a different matter.

Whilst *Recollection* has the most obscured text in performance, it is not necessarily the closest ally to Boulez's notion of 'centre and absence'. Although I was using the text in a less conventional fashion, there was a lack of engagement in the structural aspects of the text. If one considers structural engagement to be an important factor when using a text as a 'centre and absence' in a composition, then *Glimmer* is the more adherent example. At the point where I composed *Recollection*, I was still exploring ways of connecting words and music. 'Centre and absence' had sparked my interest, but I was yet to find my own way of applying these ideas in my compositions. This application needed to be meaningful and relevant to my practice, and not merely an exercise in utilising Boulez's process. Unexpectedly, the point at which 'centre and absence' suddenly became entirely relevant to my own work was when I encountered the work of the author Italo Calvino. The piece that resulted was purely instrumental but had at its centre the novel *Invisible Cities*. The next chapter will examine why and how this connection occurred and the manifestation of this in my piece *Sense of Place*.

Chapter V

Sense of Place

In this chapter I will show how Italo Calvino's novel *Invisible Cities* was used as a 'centre and absence' in my piece *Sense of Place*, which was commissioned by the Philharmonia Orchestra and premiered on 31st May 2014 at the Royal Festival Hall.

Invisible Cities

When I read *Invisible Cities* for the first time, I was immediately struck by the way it challenged my perceptions of what defines a novel, both in terms of structure and narrative. It is a work that defies classification in formal terms, engaging with elements of historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, magical realism and prose poetry. In many ways it is an investigation of story-telling itself.

Published in 1972, Calvino's novel consists of a series of dialogues between Marco Polo, a Venetian traveller, and Kublai Khan, who wishes to learn about the cities in his empire. Interspersed between these dialogues are accounts of cities that Marco Polo has visited. However, these cities are not ones the reader will recognise, they are fictional creations, each bearing a woman's name. These episodes should 'give rise to a reflection which holds good for all cities or for the city in general'⁹⁵, encouraging us to contemplate both the astonishing plurality and destructive power of a metropolis.

⁹⁵ Calvino, Italo, 'Italo Calvino on "Invisible Cities"', *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, No. 8, 1983, p.37.

Structure

While the content of the city accounts stretches the reader's imagination to the extreme, their organisation within the novel has a clear, fixed structure. In fact, like Boulez and Mallarmé, Calvino creates local freedom within a global structure.

The novel is organised into nine chapters, each beginning and ending with a dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. Within each chapter are a number of city accounts:

Table 5.1

Chapter	Number of City Accounts
1	10
2	5
3	5
4	5
5	5
6	5
7	5
8	5
9	10

Calvino assigns each account a category: *Cities and Memory*, *Cities and Desire*, *Cities and Signs*, *Thin Cities*, *Trading Cities*, *Cities and Eyes*, *Cities and Names*, *Cities and the Dead*, *Cities and Sky*, *Continuous Cities*, *Hidden Cities*. The occurrence of each category is systematised using a simple mathematical series (see table 5.2 and fig. 5.1). Chapters 1 and 9 provide a frame to the structure, mirroring one another in the way they introduce and close the series of categories. This is

essential otherwise the pattern that plays out in the internal chapters (2-8) would carry on indefinitely.⁹⁶

Table 5.2

Chapter	No. City Accounts	New Categories Introduced	Categories Removed
1	10	Memory Desire Signs Thin	
2	5	Trading	
3	5	Eyes	Memory
4	5	Names	Desire
5	5	Dead	Signs
6	5	Sky	Thin
7	5	Continuous	Trading
8	5	Hidden	Eyes
9	10		Names

⁹⁶ Discussion of the structure of *Invisible Cities* and the impact on the role of the reader: Springer, Carolyn, 'Textual Geography: The Role of the Reader in Invisible Cities', *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 15, no.4, Autumn 1985, p. 291.

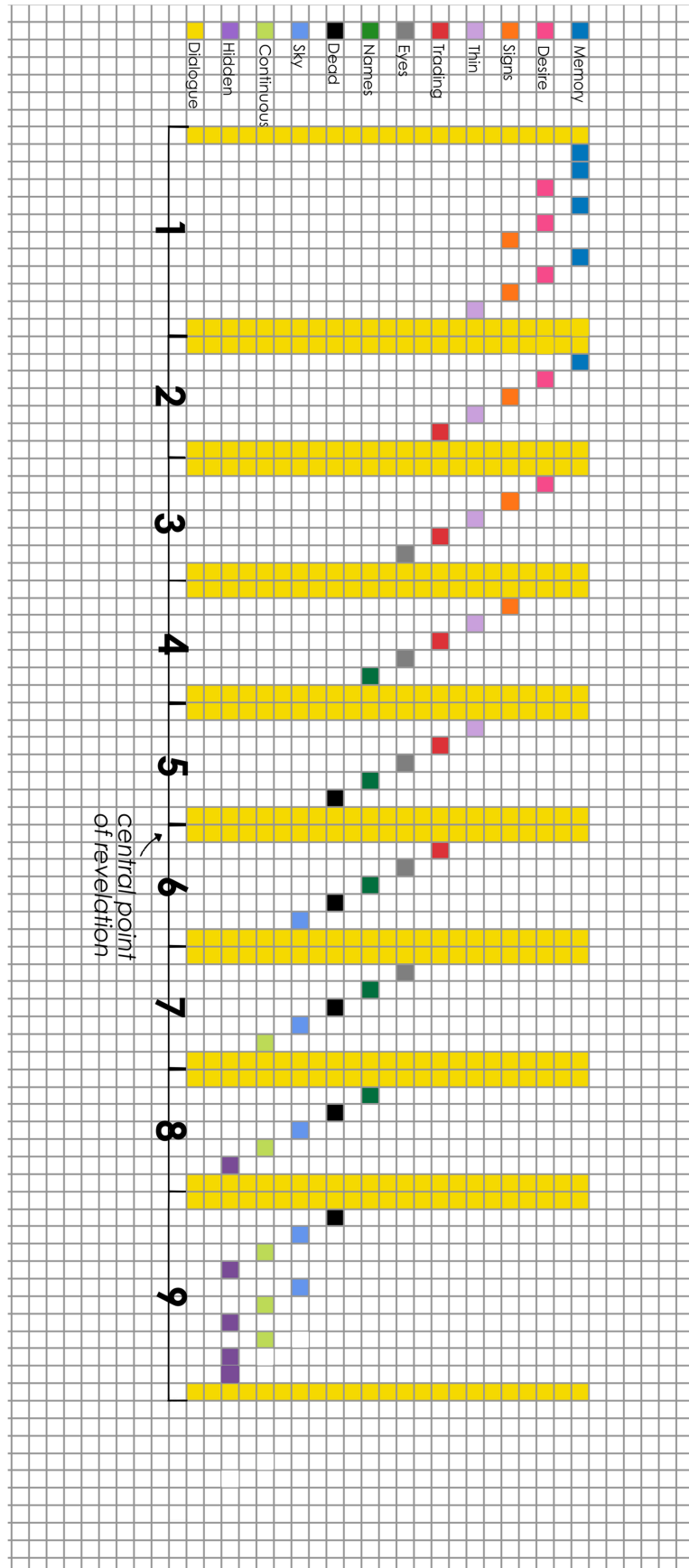


Fig. 5.1

Symmetry is a very prominent feature of the novel, both in terms of the structure and the content of the narrative. Marco Polo describes a number of cities which have ideas of symmetry, reflection and duplication at their heart. The city of Valdrada, for example, is built by a lake and this gives rise to the theme of mirroring. The city of Raissa highlights the dichotomy of city living, of happiness and sadness. There are other cities that play on these conflicts, where aspirations of grand architecture are fulfilled, only to collapse into desolate images of a 'boundless rubbish heap'⁹⁷. Calvino adeptly conjures up the mixed results of urbanisation and while there are some beautiful images of what he calls the 'celestial' city, the infernal is never far away.

At the start of the sixth chapter Marco Polo makes a startling admission to Khan; he has been describing all these different cities to him but in reality, he has been telling him about Venice. Venice is both a centre and an absence. The position of this revelation is particularly interesting. Occurring just over halfway through the novel, the reader is suddenly placed in an odd position; suddenly everything you have read up to this point has to be reinterpreted in light of this admission. The city accounts after the revelation are coloured by the knowledge that everything Marco Polo describes is actually a facet of Venice. Placed at just over halfway through the novel, Marco Polo's admission ensures that the novel's narrative arc is disrupted. There is no sense of tension and release, since there has been no overt suggestion that Marco Polo is building up to his revelation. Starker than that, the reader has to readjust their perspective and take on this new information, just as Kublai Khan must, in order to understand Marco Polo's real intentions. This device engages the readers by inviting them to participate in a collaborative act. They are not passive observers of this story but must actively construct their own journey through the novel.

⁹⁷ Calvino, Italo, *Invisible Cities*, Vintage Classics, 1997, p.103.

The structure of the book allows for more than one mode of reading in that it is not necessarily important to read the book in a linear fashion. There is a table of contents at the start (see appendix) which invites the reader to explore the book in ways other than the chronological approach of start to finish. This table acts as a map, giving the reader the benefit of a bird's eye view of the structure. The reader could choose to read the book by heading category or by chapter. The brevity of each description, coupled with the loose sense of narrative, also allows the reader to dip in and out as one might with a poetry anthology. However, the dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, when read chronologically, provide a sense of progression within the book as one observes how their relationship develops. Moreover, the character of Khan sits in a similar place to the reader as he listens to Marco Polo's stories; the reader will have their own reaction to the cities described but they are also privy to Khan's reaction, who is also hearing these things for the first time. Therefore, both linear and non-linear modes of reading are possible. Perhaps the reader may switch between the two, beginning in a linear fashion and then, when they understand the 'rules' of the book, will 'traverse and explore the text in any order he pleases'⁹⁸. The city accounts may be treated as discrete objects whereas the dialogues provide a sense of continuity within the novel.

Italo Calvino on *Invisible Cities*

Italo Calvino gave a lecture at Columbia University in 1983, in which he stated that *Invisible Cities* was written over a number of years, during which he carried a notebook to jot down ideas of imaginary cities⁹⁹. The result resembled a diary, charting his preoccupations at the time of writing. In the lecture he gives a general explanation of how he ordered the stories, categorising and then interlacing them within the chapter structure. In an earlier essay, Calvino describes his attitude

⁹⁸ Springer, 'Textual Geography: The Role of the Reader in *Invisible Cities*', p.293.

⁹⁹ Calvino, Italo, 'Italo Calvino on "*Invisible Cities*"', p.37.

towards structure and in particular the way that he organises his ideas as a kind of 'intellectual agoraphobia'¹⁰⁰ where he finds a sense of reassurance in what is systematised and controlled. The systematic ordering of the city accounts interspersed with the dialogues, allowed Calvino the framework within which the fantastical imaginings of Marco Polo's travels could take flight. Kerstin Pilz¹⁰¹ describes this dichotomy between order and chaos in terms of the opposing topographies of two cities that feature in Calvino's work: New York and Venice:

New York, the planned city with its grid-like layout illustrates the ambitions of modernist thought of order, rationality and clarity. Venice on the other hand, Marco Polo's hometown...mirrors the topography of Calvino's hometown San Remo. The labyrinthine space of the Kasbah-like old centre...and the irregular and fragmented space of the surrounding coastline...is Calvino's own innate point of reference.

These two city models epitomise the two competing facets of creative endeavour- the free-form and intuitive creative impulse versus clarity, rationality and the ordering of material. Artistically, both are necessary, requiring a fine balancing act. Calvino leads the reader into the labyrinth but not before giving us a map of its main construction. The characters of Khan and Polo also embody these two modes in their approach to knowledge; Khan desires objective knowledge, wishing to know his empire through Marco Polo's stories. However, Polo's stories are oblique descriptions and his character, above all, champions subjective knowledge.

Calvino has said that the novel is questioning why men and women choose to live in a city. He describes *Invisible Cities* as a 'last love poem addressed to the city, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there.'¹⁰² He sees the city as comprising many things- memories, words, desires, exchanges- and yet while all these things draw us in, the overgrowth of cities is a

¹⁰⁰ Cited by Pilz (below), taken from an essay by Calvino, trans. Bruce Merry, 'Appunti sulla narrativa come processo combinatorio', *Twentieth Century Studies I* (1970) pp.93-101.

¹⁰¹ Pilz, Kirsten, 'Reconceptualising thought and Space: Labyrinths and Cities in Calvino's Fictions', *Italica*, vol. 80, 2003, 229-242.

¹⁰² Calvino, Italo, 'Italo Calvino on "Invisible Cities"', p40.

threat to the natural world and it is leading us to a point of crisis. The last line of the novel characterises what Calvino calls the ‘Utopian’ city and emphasises that even if we do not know it, we should search for it: ‘seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, and make them endure, give them space’. However, despite the epigrammatic weight of this closing line, Calvino says in the lecture that it is not meant as a final conclusion. In fact, he feels there are conclusions to be found throughout the book. He encourages the reader to find these for themselves, as he, the author, is just one of many readers. Calvino gives a beautiful description of the novel as a genre, which is particularly apt for *Invisible Cities*, encompassing the role of the reader and the organised chaos of creation:

It is a space which the reader must enter, wander around, maybe lose his way in, and then eventually find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own.¹⁰³

Invisible Cities and Sense of Place

The structure of the novel was essential in the conception of the musical structure of *Sense of Place* and as well as this, my affective response to the city accounts fed into the composition of the corresponding sections. I began by allocating to each category of the novel a particular musical identity (see table 5.3). I then arranged these into the following structure:

Table 5.3

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
DIALOGUE	DESIRE	THIN	TRADING	EYES	NAMES	DEAD	SKY	CONTINUOUS	HIDDEN
		Dialogue	Dialogue	Dialogue	Dialogue	Dialogue- REVELATION	Dialogue	Dialogue	Dialogue
MEMORY	SIGNS	Memory	Desire	Sign	Thin	Trading	Eyes	Names	Dead
		Desire	Signs	Thin	Trading	Eyes	Names	Dead	Sky
		Signs	Thin	Trading	Eyes	Names	Dead	Sky	Continuous
		Thin	Trading	Eyes	Names	Dead	Sky	Continuous	Hidden
									Dialogue

¹⁰³ Calvino, Italo, ‘Italo Calvino on “Invisible Cities”’, p.38.

This diagram illustrates the ten sections of the piece. The headings in bold signify new material. These are more prominent and longer in duration. In particular, *Memory*, as it is a focal category at the start of the novel is given the alto flute solo, which is one of the most significant themes of the work.

Subsequent appearances of each heading may be short and fragmentary, an echo of its previous occurrence as a dominant musical idea. For example, *Memory* is first heard at bars 12-30 and then as a small echo at bars 59-60 in the alto flute and 61-63 in the marimba. As the piece progresses, these fragmentary entries of the identities become even shorter, merely a suggestion of their former statement. For example, between the main entry of *Names* and *Dead*, there is a quick succession of fragmentary entries. Some of these entries are just one note, such as the sustained D in the horn part which is a fragment of *Eyes* (see the second page of Ex.5.1).

Citties & Normes
Thin Cities

accel.

115 $\text{♩} = c.72$

Fl. *mf* *p*

Ob. *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *mp*

Cl. *mf*

Bsn. *fp* *p*

Hr. *fp*

C Tpt. *p* *fp* *mf* *mf* *p*

Tbn. *fp*

Dialogue

Perc. 1 *mf*

Perc. 2 *f* *p* *f* *mf*

Pno. *f* *p* *f* $\text{♩} = c.72$ accel.

Ex.5.1

G Cities & the Dead

Dark
Subito meno mosso
 ♩ = c.52

123

Fl. *mf* *p*

Ob. *mf*

Cl. *p* *mf* *p*

Bsn. *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *ff* *mf* *espress.* *5*

Cities & Eyes

Hn. *mp* *mf* *p* *sim.*

Cities & Names

C Tpt. *mf* *fp*

Tbn. *mp* *mf* *p* *sim.*

Perc. 1 *mp* *mf* *p* *snare* *p* *f*

Perc. 2 *f* *cymbal bowed* *f*

Trading Cities

G

Dark
Subito meno mosso
 ♩ = c.52

Pno. *mf* *mf* *p* *82*

Table 5.4 below shows the musical identities I allocated to each category in *Invisible Cities* including the dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, and the point of revelation. Instrumental colour was a primary concern during the compositional process, and as such these identities are predominantly defined by orchestration. It is possible for the listener to follow a number of paths through the piece created by the distinctive instrumental colours of each category. In this way, the structure is aurally defined by the orchestration. For example, the use of tuned gongs in the dialogue passages is easily discernible at each point of entry. They act as aural signposts for the audience. At the point of revelation, bar 131, the piano harmonic appears for the first time coupled with crotales. This musical identity continues to be present until the end of the piece, a parallel to the revelation about Venice which colours the chapters that follow.

The various characters of the different cities within each category influenced the nature of the corresponding musical identities. The most obvious example is the identity of *Dead* which utilises a low register and a rhythmic motive suggestive of a dirge. The categories of *Signs* and *Names* have a trumpet solo which is both clear and direct in its theme and its delivery. The alto flute solo of *Memory* is coupled with marimba (played with bass drum beaters) and the flautist is instructed to use a breathy tone. The resultant atmosphere is distant and ethereal.

Table 5.4

Category	Musical Identity	Bar Number of First Appearance
Memory	Alto flute solo, marimba tremolo with bass drum beaters.	14
Desire	Animato. Bassoon multiphonic, clarinet tremolo, alternating solo clarinet and ensemble. Snare rolls.	31
Signs	Solo trumpet. Cymbal with hand	39
Thin	Lively. Flute, clarinet and marimba material taken up by piano and xylophone.	46
Trading	Tutti. Rhythmic ostinati. Snare drum. Clarinet glissandi.	64
Eyes	Slower tempo. Chordal texture. Low register.	97
Names	Solo trumpet, similar to 'Signs' but with more accompanying instrumental parts.	116
Dead	Bassoon solo. Low register (horn, trombone, piano), rhythmic motive: 	125
Sky	Chordal texture. Similar to 'Eyes' but now both low and high strati.	135
Continuous	Alto flute solo (shorter than 'Memory') with subsequent entries overlapping.	146
Dialogues	Tuned gongs, bass drum tremolo and tam-tam	1
Revelation	Piano harmonic and crotales.	131

Several musical identities recur with variation in different categories: *Memory* and *Continuous*, *Signs* and *Names*, *Eyes* and *Sky*. This reflects the interpenetration of city accounts, where ideas bleed into one another. The recurring themes and similarities between cities prod the reader to wonder if they are encountering the same city more than once. As well as this, the novel is able to create a sense of ultimate unity through the reference to Venice and through the universality of its themes. Calvino tells us of many imaginary cities, referring to one specific city while simultaneously providing a commentary on the *idea* of the city. In *Sense of Place* the interpenetration of musical identities serves to unify a structure made up of many constituent parts. There are thematic ideas within the piece, for example the solos for alto flute, trumpet and

bassoon but they are not treated developmentally. Rather than a linear 'narrative' a sense of collage is the aim.

Harmonic Material: Near, Far, Remote

The alto flute solo was the first part of the piece to be written and it was through composing this solo that I worked out the pitch material I wanted to use for the piece:



Ex.5.2 Pitch material

The alto flute solo gradually introduces new pitches and it is these that constitute the groups 'near' and 'far':



Ex.5.3 Flute solo

The pitches from the 'remote' group only gain prominence in the chordal passages (*Eyes, Sky, Dead and Hidden*). In fact, they do not appear at all until the first appearance of *Eyes* at bar 97. Grouping pitch based on an idea of distance is not that dissimilar to tonal thinking. In this case, the notion of harmonic 'distance' was a response to the novel, which is centred around the journeys of Marco Polo. Distance, space and travel are all dominant themes within the novel and were constantly in my thoughts during the compositional process. No matter how remote the location, Marco Polo is always within the bounds of Khan's empire; it is the notion of a multifaceted 'object', idea or place that is the main creative impulse.

The diagram below illustrates the harmonic outline of the piece. The 'near' pitches are established first, in the introductory dialogue and the alto flute solo. The 'near' pitches are the bedrock of the piece and are ever-present. The alto flute, as shown above, gradually introduces the 'far' pitches, which are then featured in the subsequent sections- G and E flat from figure B, F sharp from figure C and E from figure D. The E flat is heard (enharmonically as D sharp) with greater prominence in the latter part of the piece, where it colours the compound major third interval of the piano harmonic. The music at figure E and H is predominantly chordal in texture and it is here that the 'remote' pitches are used. The 'near' and 'far' pitches are still present but with the addition of the 'remote' pitches, new colours are possible. The B flat, in particular is allowed to remain, as part of the chord shown at figure G. From the point of revelation, marked by the piano harmonic, all subsequent harmonic material is heard with this A-C# interval as a pedal. As well as colouring the harmony, the piano harmonic combined with the crotales, is a distinctive timbre within the piece.

Annotations for the musical score:

- 'near' pitches established first and ever-present
- 'far' pitches introduced gradually in alto fl. solo (bar 14-)
- tpt solo (bar 39-)
- poco più mosso
- chordal texture: first appearance of 'remote' pitches
- tpt solo plus... (bar 116-)
- chordal texture
- piano harmonic colours the harmony until the end

Ex.5.4 Harmonic outline.

Below is a harmonic reduction of the chords used in *Eyes and Sky*. Using a colour key to examine the prevalence of each pitch group, it is possible to see that the 'near' pitches continue to dominate the chords. In fact exactly half of the total number of pitches (56 out of 112) are 'near'. The 'far' pitches account for 27% of the total pitches and 'remote' pitches constitute the remaining 23%. These proportions mean that new colours are possible while still remaining within the realm of the 'near' pitch group. For example the penultimate chord of each group is the most distant, with only one 'near' pitch in the third occurrence. By the time the listener reaches the chordal sections of the piece, it is envisaged that the 'near' pitches are aurally established so that the introduction of the 'remote' pitches provides a striking change of colour.

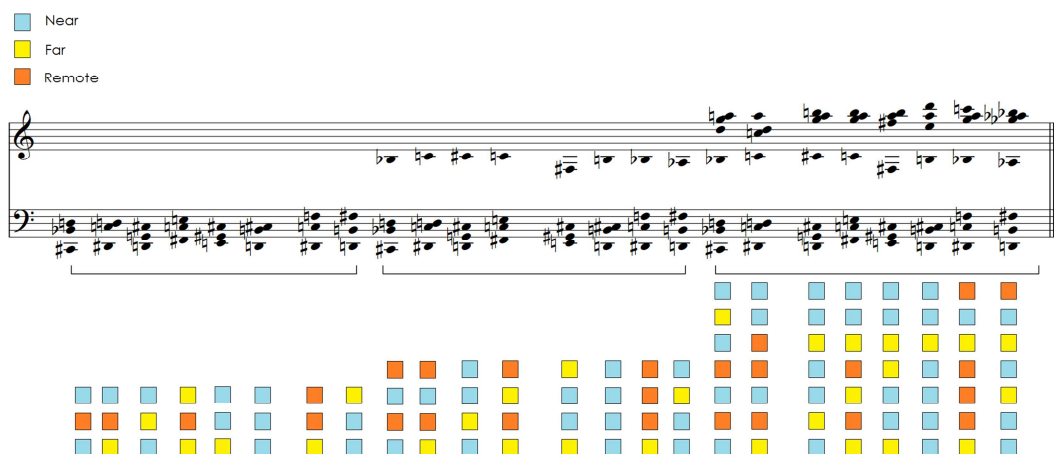


Fig.5.2 Harmonic reduction of chords used in *Eyes and Sky*

Rhythmic Pairing

Ideas of symmetry and the prevalence of the number 5 within *Invisible Cities* influenced the rhythmic organisation of *Sense of Place*. Taking 5 (the number of accounts in the internal chapters and the number of occurrences of each heading) and 9 (the number of chapters), I used a technique called Rhythmic Pairing¹⁰⁴ to generate some of the rhythmic material of the piece. Rhythmic Pairing is a way of ‘rationalising’ tuplets by using the lowest common multiple to subdivide the total duration. So 5 against 9 can be broken down into:

5⇒	5	1	2	3	4	
9	4	5	3	5	2	5

Fig.5.3

Notice the symmetry around a central axis. These sequences can then be used to generate rhythmic relations by assigning a note value as a primary unit.

Fig. 5.4 Primary unit of a quaver, for example the gongs from bar 4:



The pitches B and G# are assigned the bottom row of values from the rhythmic pair and A is given the top row.

¹⁰⁴ I discovered this technique through the music of Emmanuel Nunes. I attended a conference in Lisbon (November 2011) where Nunes' piece *Wandlungen* was discussed: *Time, Space, Intentionality- on Emmanuel Nunes's 70th Anniversary*.

Fig. 5.5 Primary unit of a crotchet, for example the trumpet from bar 85:



In this case the rests are part of the durations and therefore the rhythmic pairing is used to articulate points of attack rather than full durations.

As well as the use of rhythmic pairing, the number 5 features in a myriad other ways. For example the use of quintuplets throughout the piece and the ‘near’ pitches listed above are a group of 5. In this way the novel has influenced the piece from a numeric perspective.

The Aura of a Place

As discussed, *Invisible Cities* is at once many cities, one city and a reflection on the ideal of the city. Calvino takes the subject and looks at it from different angles, displaying it in different lights. Through the imaginary and the fantastical Calvino evokes the aura of Venice. Most of the cities he describes sound nothing like Venice, but within all of them one can find a seed that contributes to the evocation of this aura. The notion of an ‘aura’ is elusive, and to describe it would be impossible. And it is through indirect means that Calvino captures an idea that seems beyond language. *Sense of Place* is as much about this evocation of the ‘aura’- that site-specific yet elusive atmosphere we feel in very special or significant locations- as it is about translating the unique structural characteristics of the novel into musical equivalents.

German philosopher Gernot Böhme, first theorised in the mid-1990s about the notion of ‘atmosphere’ in relation to the distance between the object and the viewer. He saw atmosphere

as the 'common reality of the one who perceives and the object which is perceived'¹⁰⁵ His concept of atmosphere draws on Walter Benjamin's idea of 'aura' in his well-known essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'¹⁰⁶. Benjamin does not attempt such a succinct definition of 'aura', but what both essays have in common is the idea of distance and of a multi-sensory response; an immediate and immersive experience. Appreciating the difficulty of expressing the idea of 'aura' in words, I was keen to attempt an evocation in music. The allusive nature of music, as Mallarmé put it, lends itself to such an endeavour.

One further influence on my composition was an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts this spring (2014), *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined*. Seven architects from around the world were commissioned to create immersive installations for spaces in and around the Royal Academy. These installations explored 'the impact of built space on our lived experience'¹⁰⁷, encouraging the public to think about how we react to built spaces, how they make us feel, and what they provide beyond the purely functional. Walking around the Royal Academy, I was acutely aware of how the spaces had been shaped, and the impact this had on my experience. This had a lasting effect and I continue to feel this heightened sense of awareness for the spaces in which I inhabit day-to-day, both physically and emotionally. The emotional response is a reaction to the aura of a place but the aura is both immediate and at a remove. It feels close due to the immediacy of our response but it is also beyond our grasp because it is not tangible. It is this response that prompted the title of this piece. Experiencing the aura of a place requires all our senses and in complex combination; we know a city not just by sight but with all our senses and through our interactions with it. Calvino encapsulates this multifarious relationship between

¹⁰⁵ Gernot Böhme, trans. Philip Ursprung, *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p.34.

¹⁰⁶ Originally published in 1936.

¹⁰⁷ Extract for the text on the cover of *Sensing Spaces*, the book which accompanies the exhibition, Royal Academy Publications, 2014.

man and the metropolis within the pages of *Invisible Cities*. *Sense of Place* has the Calvino at its heart, both in terms of its structural features and the musical content itself. Through this piece, my own kaleidoscopic relationship with the city is evoked.

Conclusion

Invisible Cities acts as a 'centre and absence' in *Sense of Place*; the novel was integral in the construction of the musical work but without prior knowledge the audience would not be able to discern this in performance. Unlike *Pli selon pli* there is no singer, so there is not even a partial presentation of the text in performance. Also, unlike Boulez, the novel was not the only creative stimulus that contributed to the work; my interest in architecture and my experience at *Sensing Spaces* were crucial in the conception of *Sense of Place*.

My aim was not to tell the story of *Invisible Cities* with a musical accompaniment, rather I took the aspects of the novel which made the most striking impression upon me and found musical parallels for my own work. The structure, harmony, rhythm and atmosphere of *Sense of Place* were deeply influenced by the novel and therefore it is at the heart of the composition. The experience of reading *Invisible Cities* had a profound effect on me and creating this piece provided a way to 'possess' the novel and respond to it artistically. As Venice is a 'centre and absence' in *Invisible Cities*, so too is *Invisible Cities* in *Sense of Place*.

Chapter VI

Its Day

I composed *Its Day* in the Autumn of 2014. It was a commission from Aldeburgh Music and the first performance was at the Britten-Pears Studio on 26th October 2014. It was premiered by Aldeburgh Young Musicians, conducted by Jay Crossland and the solo tenor was Alex Aldren. The performance was part of the Britten Weekend and it was programmed alongside the Britten *Nocturne*, which is for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and string orchestra. I was asked to write a piece for the same instrumentation and to respond in some way to the nocturne theme.

One of the challenging aspects of the commission was the varied abilities of the performers. The ensemble comprised of players ranging in age from 14-25. The majority were from the Aldeburgh Young Musician Scheme¹⁰⁸ and these were supported by a few Britten-Pears performers¹⁰⁹. In addition, there were a number of musicians from Egypt and Jordan who were participating in an educational exchange scheme, co-run by Aldeburgh Music and the British Council. Not only was there a mix of abilities, with some not speaking much English, but also the performers had not played together as a group for any substantial time before the premiere. I was mindful of these varied circumstances whilst composing the piece; I wanted the piece to be both accessible and adventurous for this group of musicians.

¹⁰⁸The Aldeburgh Young Musicians Programme is aimed at gifted musicians up to the age of 18. <http://www.aldeburgh.co.uk/aym>

¹⁰⁹The Britten-Pears programme is aimed at early career professionals. <http://www.aldeburgh.co.uk/bpp>

The Text: Its Day

The text I used for this work was written by a long-time collaborator, Benedict Morrison. The text is a prose poem in three verses:

The sun's collapse. The beast's list, lilt, and fall. Dandelion-down, parcelled life, caught in the red remaining light, totters on the breeze. The sun gives a final scarlet gasp. The eyes' blacks deepen, colours fade. The hazing horizontal of the distance wavers as the sun's remaining tip is lost. A sudden cold. The sky is pinker for a sigh, before the blaze is drowned in grey.

The dark is charcoal solid, in streaks that meet at seams of double depth. The eyes' coronas' white's unseeable in all this dark. Days of blind-eyed bliss, once, when eyes were sealed and mouth was locked on milk. The air gallops in draughts of black, punctured here and there by blurs of moonlight. Beneath the subtle light, erupting in a slop of red, caught in savage starglow, a violence on the greys that fill the world, the solid flow of the drowsy tongue oozes onto soil as though colour were water and this a desert. Clouds suffocate the moon. Darkness stiffens.

A break. A hesitation of light. A disappointment always. The unpeopled world may seem indifferent, but frame by frame, the world assumes a clarity, shaking off its cold and looking up. A name is called. The frantic world looks down. And the naming of the day revives the pomegranate-purple to a slow convulsion of its tide. Stilts across the land in spotlight strides. A name is said. A naming of the day. The dark is done with, and there will, perhaps, be other days.

It tells a simple narrative: the story of a dog's collapse, approach towards seemingly certain death, discovery by its owners, and the hope of its restoration to health. However, Morrison has clouded the simplicity of the narrative using the following two-fold process:

Firstly, I found a conventional (even banal) image for each moment in the stark narrative (typically a metaphor or simile). Then, to destabilise the operation of the narrative, I withdrew the tenor from each metaphor. This process allows the narrative to remain but disrupts its metonymic structure; the binds between the metaphoric shapes which remain are opaque. Thus, the 'brittle black' and 'punctured penny piece' which is 'now as dry as a whore's morning mouth' and the 'slop of red' are untethered vehicles without the simple tenors (nose and tongue, respectively).¹¹⁰

The result of this process was an emphasis on colour imagery rather than any clear sense of narrative. The progression from night to day is still evident but beyond that the poem feels more like a series of images, richly coloured. I read the poem before I knew that the underlying narrative was about a dog and my musical response was very much tied to my initial response. In a sense, Morrison has used the narrative as a 'centre and absence'. The story facilitated the creation of the work but in performance (be that read silently, spoken, or a musical setting) it is the evocation of the images that is in the foreground.

Composing *Its Day*

On reading the text aloud, I was particularly taken with the sound of the words as well as the vivid imagery they evoke. I felt strongly that I wanted the audience to hear and comprehend these words in performance. However, I also wanted the freedom to explore a musical response to the text without the restriction of an intelligible vocal line. My previous explorations of 'absent' text

¹¹⁰ In conversation with Benedict Morrison about his creative process when writing *Its Day*. Some of the quoted passages of the text refer to an earlier version which he later abridged.

had been very fruitful but because I wanted the audience to apprehend the text in performance, I did not feel this was the right approach for this piece. Instead, I decided to explore the use of spoken text. I devised a structure which would allow me to alternate between prioritising the audibility of the text and the freedom of the music; in some movements the singer narrates and in others he sings:

Table 6.1

Movement	Instrumentation	Sung/Spoken	Section of text
Reflection 1	Flute, harp	No text	No text
Verse 1	Tenor, strings	spoken	Verse 1 complete
Reflection 2	Tenor, clarinet, bassoon	sung	'list, lilt, and fall' (from verse 1)
Verse 2	Tenor, strings, timpani	spoken	Verse 2 complete
Reflection 3	Tenor, timpani	sung	'Dark, Charcoal, clouds, blind, black' (from verse 2)
Reflection 4	Tenor, oboe, horn	sung	'Darkness Stiffens' (from verse 2)
Verse 3	Tenor, flute, harp, timpani, strings	spoken	Verse 3, all but last three lines
Reflection 5	tutti	sung	Last 3 lines of verse 3

In the *Verses*, the words are spoken by the tenor. These are interspersed with musical reflections upon the words. The first *Reflection* has no singer, the middle three are for small ensembles from within the larger ensemble and the last is the only movement for the whole ensemble. In the *Verses* where the text is spoken, I tried to make sure the orchestration allowed the text to be audible throughout. For example, in *Verse 2*, the biggest crescendo of the piece begins after the word 'violence' (figure 12) and does not reach its apex until after the spoken phrase is complete. The narration begins again at figure 13 when the diminuendo has already begun.

In the *Reflections*, the role of the singer changes from narrator, where he must communicate the text directly to the audience, to instrumentalist, where his voice is part of the ensemble. For this reason, I chose to give the singer words or syllables of words from the verse that preceded it. For example *Reflection 2* takes words from *Verse 1* and *Reflection 3* and *4* take words from *Verse 2*. By using text the audience will have heard before, I could focus on the sound quality of the words. For example, in bar 5 of *Reflection 2*, the tenor sings two syllables: 'fa' and 'li' which are taken from the words 'fall' and 'lilt'. Within this line there is a contrast between the high floating execution of the syllable 'li' and the legato melisma of 'fa'. In *Reflection 3*, many of the words have vowel sounds that are favourable to sing such as 'dark', 'charcoal' and 'black'. Coupled with the slow tempo, the tenor has the opportunity to really explore vocal colour in the execution of each word. The fifth *Reflection* is an amalgamation of the two roles of the singer: an instrumentalist and a narrator; it is the only time the singer sings text we have not heard spoken first.

This is the first piece I have written which uses spoken word and so I was interested in exploring the different ways of notating spoken words with music. I decided to combine two different

approaches within this work; the first approach, used in *Verse 1* and in *Verse 3*, was to notate the speech rhythms and include bar lines and time signatures (see Example 6.1). This proved to work well for the coordination of ensemble and narrator. Whilst the rhythms are notated exactly, the priority was to have a naturally delivered text, so in rehearsal I told the singer to use the rhythms as a guide. The overall placement of the phrases should be as written but slight fluctuations within this were not a problem if it meant that the text flowed naturally in performance. Everybody's speech is nuanced, with differing emphases and pauses; I wanted to preserve this as much as possible and avoid a robotic performance.



Ex.6.1 *The opening vocal line of Verse 1*

The second approach, used in *Verse 2*, was to leave the score more open. This was because I wanted to achieve a freer, more nebulous musical character for this movement. Speech rhythms were not notated but the placement of the start of each phrase was coordinated by the conductor (see Ex.6.2). Words printed in bold in the score were also used as landmarks for the instrumentalists and the singer in order to coordinate specific events. This method gave more responsibility to the conductor to pace the movement. It allowed the singer to deliver the text as they wished once they were cued in. This was a successful approach in performance but required more work in rehearsal to make sure the pacing was right. Both approaches- notated and open- worked well; the key difference amounted to who had most control: the performers or the composer. In future pieces the decision concerning whether to notate the rhythm of the narration will depend, as it did in this case, on the nature of the musical material and how much control I wish to give to the performers.

7 3 4 5 9

Ten. *The eyes' coronas' white's unseeable in all this dark.* *Days of blind-eyed bliss.*

Timp.

Hp. *fast, scuttling*
bibbig. *ad. lib. length of silence*
p *ff*

Vin. I

Vin. II *pp* *fff*

Vla.

Vc. *sofho voce, fast, scuttling*
p

Cb. *p*

Ex.6.2 Verse 2 from fig.3, the vocal rhythms are left to the performer

The *Reflections* provide space for the music to 'speak'. The priority is not on the communication of the spoken word but on the musical response to those words. As well as this, they provide an opportunity for the instrumentalists to act soloistically. The opening *Reflection* has no text and sets the scene musically for what is to come. The flute and harp music of this *Reflection* also reappears in the final movement (*Verse 3* and *Reflection 5*), most notably in the flute part of bars 34-39 and the last two bars of the work.

In all cases I tried to strike a balance between writing instrumental lines that were attainable for young performers whilst still providing a challenge. However, I did not want to compromise on the musical expressivity of the lines nor my own musical language. For example, in the second *Reflection* the clarinet, bassoon and tenor all have brief moments where they have a solo embellished line, in bars 1, 3 and 5. In particular, the last bar of this *Reflection* is for solo clarinet and ends very high and very quietly- difficult but not outside the realm of what a talented young performer can achieve with practice. In the case of the fourth *Reflection*, the oboe and horn also have solo lines. Alas, in this case, the oboist found the transposition up an octave at bar 6 too difficult to execute in performance and so we put this back down to the same octave as the preceding phrase.

The last *Reflection* continues straight on from the last *Verse*. It is a coming together of various strands of the piece: The tenor's roles are amalgamated and he sings full lines of text for the first time and musical material from the preceding movements reappears. The opening section of the last *Verse* gradually transitions from the music we heard in *Verse 2* - the agitated low strings figure - to the calmer music we heard in *Verse 1*. By the time the tenor enters with the words of *Verse 3*, the strings have fully returned to this calmer realm with the addition of flute, harp and timpani.

In between the *Verses* and *Reflections* the tenor moves to stand at different locations within the ensemble. When he is speaking he is stood in front of the ensemble, giving the best chance for the text to be communicated clearly to the audience. For the *Reflections*, where the tenor is part of smaller ensembles, he moves to stand with them. In this way he is embedded in the ensemble and his role of orator changes to instrumentalist. The walking itself adds an element of theatre, giving a visual cue for the audience that his role is changing. In order for this to happen smoothly, the layout of the ensemble was devised in order to allow space for this physical movement.¹¹¹

Revisions

After the premier of *Its Day* there were a few revisions I wanted to make to the piece as a result of working with the musicians at Aldeburgh and the experience of hearing the piece live. Overall, these revisions were related to the pacing of the work. In performance, I was not happy with how the last movement breathed. I felt that the music needed more time at the start of *Verse 3*, before the entry of the spoken voice, and also before the singing begins in the fifth *Reflection*. Both tenor entries felt as if they arrived too soon. So I revised the opening of *Verse 3* and added 22 bars of instrumental music¹¹² which is based on the low string material of *Verse 2*. This acts as a transition of mood, moving from the uncertainty of the night to the clarity and hope of day described in the text.

I also reworked the entry of the sung tenor line at bar 59. Given this is the first time we hear the tenor sing a continuous lyrical line, there needs to be sufficient space from the spoken text in order to avoid a jolt in performance. The tenor also needs time to prepare for this change in his

¹¹¹ For details of the tenor's movement and position, see the preface of the score of *Its Day*.

¹¹² Previously there were only 8 and a half beats before the entry of the tenor.

voice. In the original version there was only 5 beats between the end of the spoken text and the start of the sun text, which was far too brief. In the revised version I extended this to 12 bars.

The last revision was the addition of a new *Reflection* for tenor and timpani. I felt that in the original version all the other obbligato instruments (flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, horn and harp) had had the opportunity to be a soloist but the timpani had not. I also felt there was space for another *Reflection* in between the second and third *Verse*. With this last addition, the proportions of the piece were much better balanced.

Conclusion

Through the composition of *Its Day*, I discovered a way for me to work with text and music that allowed an alternating spotlight on each art form. This alternation afforded me a greater sense of freedom whilst composing.

The use of spoken text allowed the communication of the words to be the focus during the *Verses*. It also extended the role of the singer to encompass that of a narrator and an instrumentalist. The *Reflections* were the chance to explore a fully musical response to the text without being hampered by the need to communicate the text because the audience had already received this textual information in the preceding *Verse*. The *Reflections* were also a chance to provide solos for each of the instrumentalists.

This approach to Benedict's text felt wholly appropriate. I was so beguiled by the sound of the words and the sensation of hearing them read out aloud that I wanted to preserve this in performance. Whilst my compositional approach was not entirely the same as previous works

that utilise the notion of ‘centre and absence’, certain aspects were in line with this thinking. The use of the Verse/Reflection structure was clearly influenced by reading Boulez’s writings on text as ‘action and reflection’:

The time taken to read a poem is a single, exact datum; but musically speaking there are two times, one for the poem as action and one for the poem as reflection... ‘action’ at its most realistic implies a maximum clarity of comprehension, whilst reflection at its most ‘ideal’ means sacrificing at least part of the ‘message’ in favour of non-rational resonances.¹¹³

In the case of *Its Day*, the *Verses* were the ‘action’. There is also precedence for such a structure in the archetypal model of recitative and aria. In *Its Day*, there isn’t dramatic action in the operatic sense,¹¹⁴ but the use of spoken words fulfils the role of communicating new and direct textual information to the audience, in the mode of a recitative. In contrast, the *Reflections* provide a chance for the music to elaborate with its own language of ‘non-rational resonances’, as one might expect from the music of an aria.¹¹⁵

I found working with the Verse/Reflection structure deeply satisfying. The words and the music were not competing for ground but shared it. The alternating spotlight freed me as a composer to let the music ‘speak’ on its own terms without concern of clouding the text. The use of spoken word in this work opened a door to a compositional approach that I am keen to explore further. With hindsight, *Its Day* was a real point of arrival. After absorbing so much of Boulez’s writings on text and music, *Its Day* felt like the point at which I found my own way to take the essence of ‘centre and absence’ and couple it with my own creative impulse.

¹¹³ Boulez, ‘Poetry – Centre and Absence – Music’, *Orientations*, p.196-7. This is discussed further in Chapter 1 of the thesis.

¹¹⁴ Other than the tenor moving to different locations around the ensemble between movements.

¹¹⁵ See page 10-11 of Chapter 1 for further discussion of recitative and aria archetypes.

Conclusion

‘Centre and absence’ is an approach that allows an artist to combine art forms without the need to compromise. In the case of music and text, issues of intelligibility are negated because the primary focus shifts from conveying the text in performance to placing the text at the centre of the process. Perhaps more broadly than Boulez intended, this approach can be applied to any art form, not just text. It is a way of appropriating extra-musical stimuli, respecting their attributes and yet not feeling obliged to declare them overtly in performance.

This concept has profoundly changed how I compose. Whilst I have always put extra-musical stimuli at the centre of my process, I am now consciously delving further into the art form or object I am appropriating to find ways of connecting it with the music on a deeper level, avoiding a reliance on surface correspondences. In *Sense of Place* this involved translating the structure of Calvino’s novel into a musical structure. Although the words of the novel are not heard in performance, they were central to the process of creation.

There are other composers of the 20th and 21st Century, who could be described as using text as a ‘centre and absence’, for example Luigi Nono¹¹⁶ and Luciano Berio¹¹⁷. Both composers experimented with fragmentation of text and dismantling words into their constituent sound-blocks. Nono went even further with his quartet *Frammente Stille* (1980), where there are fragments of text in the score but they are not supposed to be recited in performance. Nono refers to them as silent ‘songs’ that the players may ‘sing’ silently as they experience them¹¹⁸. Going further back, Satie was deeply interested in the unspoken word in his music and found

¹¹⁶ For example Nono’s *Il Canto Sospeso* (1955-56).

¹¹⁷ For example Berio’s *O King* (1968).

¹¹⁸ Programme note from the CD recording of *Frammente-Stille, An Diotima* made by the La Salle Quartet, Deutsche Grammophon, 1986.

unusual and eccentric ways to incorporate them into his work¹¹⁹. Robin Holloway, describes his use of text in purely instrumental music as ‘supressed vocalisation’¹²⁰, whereby poetry was used to derive melodic lines and then removed. However, it is not just about an *absent* text, it is about a text that is put at the *centre* of the composition. In his writings about ‘centre and absence’, Boulez talks about utilising specific structural elements of the text in his own practice. As well as this, he managed successfully to infuse the expressive qualities of the text in the music. In coining the phrase ‘centre and absence’, Boulez has given us a way of considering the relationship between music and text, to include any and all correspondences that the composer wishes to recognise. By removing concerns about intelligibility in performance and focussing purely on the creative process, the composer is at liberty to consider artistic parameters of the appropriated text or art form other than those most easily apprehended in performance.

The essays by Boulez I examined in the first part of this study are collated musings on the relationship between text and music. But his essays are not rigorous analyses nor are they prescribing a particular compositional method. Their significance for me was that they acted as a trigger for a particular frame of mind that released me from the pressures and rigidity of an audible text. The essays also showed that besides the words themselves, there are many more attributes to a piece of text - structure, typography, layout- all of which can act as stimuli for a composer.

Within this scope, there are further avenues to explore. In opera, where, more often than not, the audience must follow a story, an absent text becomes problematic. How then can one expand the operatic form in a similar way whilst preserving the intelligibility of the plot? Does this involve

¹¹⁹ For example *Embryons Desséchées* (1913) contains evocative textual fragments throughout, which are for the performer but not to be read out aloud in performance.

¹²⁰ See *Evening with Angels* (1972, rev.1983, 1985), which he describes as a ‘textless song-cycle’. For further discussion see Holloway, R., “Word-image-concept-sound”, *Contemporary Music Review*, 1989, p.260.

redefining opera or is there a way of reconciling musical innovation with the demands of a dramatic narrative?

Be it for the purposes of a dramatic narrative or just a sheer desire to communicate a text directly, an absent text is not always appropriate. In certain works, such as *Sense of Place*, I was happy to have the text absent in performance, but this will not always be the case. How then would I balance my creative impulse with an intelligible text? It was not until I composed *Its Day*, with its alternating spotlight on text and music through the Verse/Reflection structure, that I was able to reconcile this inner conflict. Now I can see the beginning of a possible avenue for theatrical works utilising a similar approach. I still want to find deep connections between the music I write and its extra-musical stimuli, but I wish to couple this with the exploration of spoken text within a musical context. Periods of spoken text allow for direct communication of the words to the audience. Interspersing these passages of spoken words with moments of musical flight allows my music to respond to the text but without the constraints of intelligibility.

Where am I at the end of this period of artistic exploration? I am more acutely aware of the extra-musical objects I appropriate during the creative process. My attitude towards them is one of a deeper curiosity and respect. This engagement has given me greater confidence as a composer and I feel I have a clearer sense of direction in terms of my practice. I understand better what motivates me as a composer and as a result I feel my music has greater focus. After having written a number of works that utilise poetry and prose, I am keen to explore composing for stage. This will be the next phase in my exploration of working with text.

Appendix

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