

Robert Guthrie

Spawn
(2024)

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Spawn is a piece composed using graphic notation with a focus on the structure of the classical sonata form. Free from the shackles of any specified instrumentation, the compositions aim to explore the power of graphic, indeterminate notation as a means to intimately interrogate the function of a well-consolidated formal structure. Whilst sonata form uses a relatively simple three-part macro-structure, its nuanced harmonic and tonal relationships create precise and characterful inner workings. In the composition of *Spawn*, various elements of the form are abstracted through various notations and motifs, which create an indeterminate and, possibly, more human, visceral music. Umberto Eco referred to this effect of notational indeterminacy in *The Open Work*: “The poetics of the ‘work in movement’ (and partly that of the “open work”) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society.”¹ This ‘new mechanics of aesthetic perception’ keenly reflects the intention of this composition to redefine a form.

The use of an entirely graphic notation also removes the barrier to entry from the piece, as it doesn’t rely on ‘standard’ notation with its prerequisite rules and implicit musical parameters. Further, the unspecified instrumentation allows a performer, or group thereof, to interpret the work through any forces they see as fit for the task. Thus, the graphic notation in this composition allows a recognised and historically established form to perhaps be perceived through eyes which are free from the restrictions imbued by a prior understanding of the context and technicalities of the form.

Before discussing the content and technicalities of this composition, I think it is first important to consider the idea of a score and what it represents.

The purpose of a score is to act as a stimulus, be that in the manner of a map, a guide, or a dangling carrot, which communicates the ideas and visions of the composer to the performer, who in turn can project them as music for the listener. Therefore, the use of certain notations, be them crotchets, colours, letters, textures, frogspawn or pondweed, are the result of a musical decision by the composer to convey an idea. As with any indeterminate notation, it is understandable that questions arise about the meaning attached to a certain symbol or element of notation. In the instance of *Spawn*, similarly to Cardew’s *Treatise*, there are no exact rules and minimal suggestions as to any kind of musical parameter (perhaps the roman numerals could be interpreted to suggest harmonic relationships – though they may equally be interpreted as abstract shapes, a temporal guide, nothing at all, or anything else.) Thus, these notational decisions invite (and require) the performer to musically connect with the score as a whole entity and actively read and translate the notation into music.²

Jonathan Feist writes in the introduction to *Berklee Contemporary Music Notation*:

*“Notation is not music. Notation is a haphazard Frankenstein soup of tangentially related alphabets and hieroglyphics via which music is occasionally discussed amongst its wonkier creators. The music itself towers infinitely over the anemic scribbles that attempt to describe it. The best that notation can and should do is to be a good servant and get the hell out of the music’s way and not confuse it into a monkey-brawl of an inky mess.”*³

Whilst I agree with the soup and the hieroglyphics and that notation is not music itself, I must disagree with the latter half of this statement in the case of *Spawn*, and any graphic or indeterminate work. Whilst still acting as a vehicle between composer and performer, the innate musicality of graphic notation is exactly as important as the music. For, the existence of this notation allows the soul and essence of this music to exist and to be realised. As John Cage claims, “A performance of a composition which is indeterminate of its performance is necessarily unique. It cannot be repeated.”⁴ The result of this is the reliance on the notation to maintain the work in perpetuity, as, rather than a recognisable sonic or immediately musical characteristic, it is the essence of the score and its notation which connects one performance to another, the music’s energy and musicality exists in its notation.

Spawn’s conception was in part thanks to visual poetry, in particular the work of Scott Helmes, whose ‘Haiku’ poems and their collage style inspired the initial aesthetic basis of the composition. Helmes often abstracts a poem away from its content, leaving it looking as it might to someone who doesn’t understand quite understand. This premise directly inspired my employment of sonata form in this work. The distinct three-part structure is clear, with the duality of the exposition, the colourful, textured, twisting and turning development and firm tonality of the recapitulation all easily identifiable. However, to someone who isn’t aware of or educated on the function of the form (or even, likely, people who are), it appears abstracted and therefore susceptible to infinite alternate interpretations. This highlights the paradoxical nature of form itself – allowing it to be entirely paramount to a composition, yet barely, if at all, perceptible to the listener. Mobile forms, in both music and visual art, present a similar formal incongruity. For example, the kinetic essence of Alexander Calder’s mobiles means that they are constantly seen from many different perspectives, always taking on a new and original variation of their form.

This leads to the question of how one might actually see and interpret the structure and any notational element, subject or theme of *Spawn*. Despite its obvious reference and twisted relationship (as described in excess here) to a strict form, the purpose of the chosen compositional techniques is intended to liberate this from any defined direction. Whilst this opens the opportunity to argue that there is no ‘correct’ performance of *Spawn*, I would suggest that more pertinently there is, categorically, a wrong approach to performing the work, and simultaneously infinite variations of a perfect realisation.

1 Eco, U., Cancogni, A. and Robey, D. (1989) *The open work*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 22-23

2 Cardew, C. (1971) ‘*Treatise handbook* : including Bun no. 2 for orchestra & Volo solo’. London: Peters.

3 Feist, J. (2017) ‘*Berklee Contemporary Music Notation*’, Hal Leonard Corporation, Winona. Accessed: ProQuest Ebook Central. [23 April 2024].

4 Cage, J., 2004. *Composition as process: indeterminacy*. Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, pp.176-187.

