

The “Mirage” of the Composer: A Performer’s Musical Decisions

Alexander Petrenko
Faculty: Gerald Scholl

Department of Music, College of Fine Arts

Abstract. Up until recently, the Western art music tradition has privileged the composer as the best authority concerning issues of performance practice. This view was ingrained in the nineteenth century with European composers who sought complete control of their musical score. In the realm of Japanese contemporary music, the pieces do not conform to Western notions of cadence, phrasing or even harmonic structure. The performer furthermore has to make decisions which conflict with what the composer wrote. The piece "MIRAGE" for marimba (1971) by Yasuo Sueyoshi (b. 1937) will be discussed in the context of suitable methodologies to bring out the composer's ideas. The composer emerges as a "mirage" blending with the performer in order to create the final work.

1. Introduction

The larger context for this work lies in the performance of non-tonal music - music without a home key - and the performer's intervention in such a performance so as to communicate musical ideas to a general audience. Percussion performance specifically has benefited from a wide scholarly attention. For example, in a recent book analyzing the performance and theoretical structure of modern percussion works, the idea of performing complex notation is inseparable from its purely musical effects.¹ One of the aims of contemporary music research is to learn how a maximum amount of musical information can be transmitted effectively to a listenership unacquainted with these unconventional parameters. *Mirage*² is a fundamental example of a piece which poses this challenge. My idea further emerged from a background of performing virtuoso works which needed a lengthy theoretical explanation before the performance.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

The question was whether it was possible to communicate non-tonal repertoire purely through the music itself. Over a multi-year process, several pieces which did not conform to traditional musical syntax were chosen and played to an audience unfamiliar with the music. Out of those works, the piece *Mirage* was chosen because it presented considerable technical difficulties for the player and constituted a fundamental example of an important

post-tonal piece in three distinct areas: melodic fragmentation, dissonance and harmonic fluctuation. The instrument Sueyoshi chose for his composition was a marimba, a large, multi-octave percussion keyboard instrument which is similar in layout to a standard piano. *Mirage* has a structure which is based on: a) fast ornamental-like flourishes, and b) clusters of dissonant chords. Both of these are developed on the first page of the printed score. The piece has two main slow sections which serve as introductions to the fragmentation of the melodies they underline. *Mirage* also has a character of Japanese impressionism, rather than a pointillism (serial music in Europe and America since 1945) or minimalism (music with overly repetitive structures). The decision was taken to highlight this in the performance by paying careful attention to the solo voice during the slow section of the piece. This slow section is the closest example in the piece to a Western-style connection with an impressionistic composer like Debussy for example, so it was ultimately determined that this historical connection should not have the final say in my performance.



Fig. 1. One of the two opening motivic devices.

One of the intentions of the actual performance of *Mirage* was to see if the motivic material located at the beginning of the piece could be retained through to its conclusion, in the aural sense. It was absolutely necessary to perform in an acoustic space which had ample resonance (for example, a non-carpeted floor) to achieve this. The idea of resonance was further developed by letting the sounds have ample time to decay. *Mirage* is permeated with an assortment of fermatas (musical pauses), aural commas, and breath-marks – some of these are very hard to justify musically. The speed at which the player moves onto the next section after the pause will dictate: a) the resonance of the sounds, and b) the connection to the next part of the music. Providing connection between the silences, a

cornerstone of modern “art” music, was a key goal. Of significant pertinence to the experiment was the movement of one’s body in space, either to draw sole attention between the pauses or draw continuity to the space in between the pauses. Another goal was to see how the sections in “a-1” and “a-2” of the score are maintained melodically but not rhythmically in section “c-1” of the score. During the piece, the musical decision was taken to employ different mallets (sticks with which the marimba is played), to achieve a wide variety of different colors. Specifically, the faster sections needed more articulation and intensity. These sticks must be used to play the end *motive*, or musical idea. The end motive, which makes its appearance throughout the piece, is: A, E, B-flat, G, D-sharp, F-sharp, the skeletal outline of which already can be seen in Fig. 1. Sueyoshi’s goal is to outline the span of a major seventh interval, which is a dissonant interval. Seen on a keyboard layout, there is a D-sharp minor triad in root (closed) position in the middle of this motive which remains at the end of the composition. This is an example of the further mirage of tonality which exists in the piece, the other example being the ascending motive C, D, and E-flat, or, scale degrees 1, 2, and 3 in a C-minor scale. Sueyoshi inserts a pause between these three notes and the next B-natural in order to emphasize the separation of tonality and alternate lack of tonal centers. The major seventh makes its appearance throughout the entire piece as a double-stop (two notes simultaneously). The Euro-centric history of tonality is subverted.



Fig. 2. Sections requiring harder mallets (sticks).

In the above section labeled Fig. 2, it was decided to give priority above all else to the quintuplet motives amidst the subtle chaos of the clusters. Near the end of the piece, a largely unplayable sequence of chords along with a final virtuoso passage explodes before the listener is ushered into a calm *non-resolution* of the material. Several musical decisions were again taken here which would normally be only the decision of the composer, such as the splitting up of a passage into more distinct units and the changing of tempos and dynamics, or gradations of

loud and soft areas. Changing tempos and/or dynamic indications has been one of the riskiest alterations that performers of art music have done in the past. The significance of all this is that the intensity, spontaneity, and ferocity of the musical material must seem to be *totally improvised*, as opposed to calculated, even though the piece is, as I have shown, highly structured.



Fig. 3. “Unplayable” passage on last page.

3. Conclusions

Current inquiries into contemporary music rely less on the separation of a performer and his or her listenership and more on a connection between the two. The performer is increasingly called to communicate musical ideas which have little conventional materials. It was hypothesized, and shown, that in an optimal acoustical space the results would be audible to a listenership which was unacquainted with the music. A performer’s musical decisions can, and should, collaborate with a composer’s initial written material because: a) the complexity of the notated material allows more than one separate interpretation, which is different from an established Euro-centric history, and, b) the excessive discourse about musical technique can be subverted in favor of a distinct musical expression.

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[1] Schick, Steven. *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

[2] Sueyoshi, Yasuo. “Mirage” score in *Modern Japanese Marimba Pieces, Vol. I*. ed. Keiko Abe. (Tokyo: Tomo Sha Publishing, 1978).