

## Panel Three – Brün's music: the challenge of counter-intuitive composition

### At loose ends with anti-communication

Allen Otte

I dedicated a little piece to Herbert for his seventieth birthday. It's called *What the Snare Drum Tells Me*. It contains a quotation from Mahler's Third Symphony, so the title is having some fun with all of those titles which Mahler gave to the movements of his symphony in the original draft: "what the forest tells me", "what the twilight tells me", "what love, the cuckoo, the child tell me..."

My birthday gesture of wanting to connect Brün and Mahler also had to do with a particular technical issue: playing the snare drum while holding four sticks – common to the marimba, but not really part of drum technique. The additional sticks in this case were to be timpani mallets, which could create the illusion of distance – again, a reference to Mahler's favorite offstage device, but also alluding to Varèse, who wrote for snare drum with timpani sticks in order to evoke that same quality of distance. So at this point I already had three of the four great snare drum composers at hand and was only missing Sousa.

Did Herbert write great snare drum music counter-intuitively? How did he write the music which he "didn't yet like" when it came time for the snare drum parts? I'm thinking especially of the twelve snare drums in the piece for piano and percussion which he wrote for us in 1974, *at loose ends*: , also of the *trio* for percussion, trumpet, and trombone, and the percussion trio with computer, *More Dust*, and finally, of the solo snare drum piece, *just seven for drum*.

These pieces are concurrent with Herbert's graphic work, though the three graphs designed as solo percussion pieces (*Plot, Touch and Go*, and *Stalks and Trees and Drops and Clouds*) are some of the earliest of his computer work. They're done in a structural and presentational manner to which he never returned (although I think a case could be made that the *Floating Hierarchies* are actually a kind of return to a graphic music which is organized and presented in such a way as to make inviting connections with readers of traditional music scores, a way in which the ever more fantastical and beautiful single picture creations did not). We should recall that he made distinctions amongst the various categories of musical composition in which he was engaged, starting from his practical work for the theater and extending to concert and/or experimental composition. But as far as the actual acoustical events were concerned – acoustical events anyway for live musicians playing acoustic instruments – all of these ideas and experiences of course come to inform one another. As I learned in writing the little snare drum solo which I dared to dedicate and play for him, it was not only OK to draw upon what I already knew

and liked about what the snare drum told me, but in fact these were the very things which I was wishing to nest in some invented (not yet known or liked) compositional context. These things, in the way I learned them from my instrument, were not going to speak for themselves, and whatever they might be saying would surely go beyond any mere intuition of my current autobiography.

One way of taking that first step – "today's creep which will become tomorrow's longed for leap", he once said – in the counterintuitive/anticommunicative sense has to be in the inventing or stipulating of context and universe, wherein elements which are indeed known by, or even loved by the composer, not only resist deterioration and cooption, but also begin to blossom into something more than that beloved state in which the composer found or remembered them in the first place.

I don't think that I should accuse Herbert of finding it easy to write and rewrite the music he already loved, but we can certainly reconstruct – compose – that little scenario in which the stipulated structure, i.e., music for the theater, a particular play, provided just such a context for the ordering of discrete elements: it was sometimes an experiment in dramatic enhancement, sometimes just a song which Mahler happened not to compose. The playwright and the director were his co-conspirators. I can imagine the fun and the challenge of wanting to transfer this system to the realm of concert and experimental music. Of course, the members of a string quartet should be – indeed must be – the composer's co-conspirators when they take up such a score, but this is not quite the same co-conspiracy as creative work, of really bringing about something which, without the input of what he came to call *coiners* ("composing interpreting performers"), would not have otherwise occurred.

These graphics considered as musical scores are not quite so readily assessed as a product of the times – that era of the 60's when there were so many quite beautiful and imaginative "graphic scores" – as would seem obvious at first. They are not just new notations to aid in describing or eliciting new sounds and techniques, nor are they aids in organizing sonic events of unpredictable form. Anyone who loved music, past and present, might have easily and intuitively followed that path, as many others around him at the time did, and, with their own reasons and talents, often did with beautiful and intriguing results.

It was rather an invitation to the world of composition, the world of co-conspiracy and the world of exploring what it was that the music and your own instrument and your technique were telling you. The fact that the three pieces for solo percussion came in 1967, very early in his computer graphics work, and the fact that they never became a genre of his computer graphic scores (there could have been more pieces for percussion, as well as for other instruments) makes me think that he was getting us started – showing us how to think about this kind of work and how he was thinking about it, so that subsequent efforts on his part could focus upon just the structures themselves. He wasn't going to spend any more time helping us find our part of the conspiratorial bargain.

So this is what Herbert was asking the first (and all subsequent) players of those three very early solo percussion graphics: What does your snare drum, or marimba, or flower pot, or old shoe tell you? What do your sticks tell you? What does your body tell you when it meets any one of these surfaces and when you move from one instrument in your collection to another? What if those instruments are very different, or only most subtly so? How might you organize different categories of your own instrumentarium, and how would you move between them? integrate them? What are you learning about yourself and your instruments and music as you crawl through all of this? And finally, what if this were thought to be "Music"? The questions are refined, and then they are asked over and over again. As the questions accumulate and the possible answers from each interpreter accumulate, the structure which Herbert and the computer arrived at helps to organize all of this into larger gestures and phrases and time cycles, arriving at the ultimate question: if this were thought to be music, do you like yourself in the presence of it?

Herbert liked himself in the presence of lots of the older music that many of us love, and he liked himself in the presence of the new music which he made. To accomplish the latter (let's say, here, in relationship to the snare drum) is to have not only enjoyed himself in the presence of their music, but also to have learned from Verdi, Mahler, and Varèse. (I leave out Sousa once again, but I'm the one, not Herbert, who grew up in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and as a player of those snare drum parts, must attest to their elegance.) Wherever one of those guys asked the question, "what if this were thought to be music", Herbert answered, "then I, Herbert, would like myself, and for that period of time during which I'm in its presence, I would love music and its systems and logics." He then proceeded to find out, or make up, what it was that the snare drum had told each of those guys, so that he could add to the ways in which the snare drum – or the bassoon, the orchestra, or banks of sine wave generators – might create a presence in which he and many others could learn how to enjoy themselves; initially in its presence, and then, having so learned, elsewhere, with others.

Mahler brought the snare drum in (literally in from outside, and not only the snare drum, but also cowbells, sleigh bells, and steel girders) for a specific referential purpose. But once in, it was no longer confined to conjuring up the military of Gustav's youth and adulthood. It was freed to contribute with the other hundred instruments in both delicate and thrilling ways. Varèse went on to know something about what it must feel like to actually play the instrument – how those rhythms and licks just fall from our stick tips, and can be used as building blocks in a grammar of articulation. Provided with a compositional forum, the snare drum and its music would indeed speak, and this speech wouldn't need to be limited to the autobiographical taste and memory of a composer.

So Herbert loved not only the snare drum and its music, but also the snare drummer. He realized that he himself and his listeners would be better off when his snare drummer was better off. What's fun and funny and challenging and rewarding can only come about by nesting the snare drum in some compositional context which will elicit from its player some or many of those reasons why he or she was drawn to the snare drum in the first place. We performers know the same history that Herbert knew, namely, the history

which the snare drum's music made for itself, and we know how good it feels to play it. With a smile and eyes wide open, we wonder, "what next?"

A gang of twelve ruffians who can't carry a tune are summoned to crash a party. They're ignored, and they stomp off as noisily as they arrived.

So many moths beating their wings on the outside of a screen door, one after another rising and falling.

A bebop drummer testing his kit.

Maybe even the military, but then it's the Salvation army on a frosty night.

An impossibly inadequate steel drum.

The purr and caress of my favorite cat.

Just a few of the things that the snare drum told me as Herbert delivered it.

He did the math and held discourse with a computer. What followed were pictures of compositional systems that were often beautiful to look at but always resistant, sometimes even impervious to facile understanding or interpretation; contexts in which co-conspirators could explore their own questions concerning the very nature of those things which they may have thought they knew and loved best in their own field. Awe-inspiringly open and deep as the invitation was and is, he did give examples to point the way. And although the analogies seem sufficiently clear and abundant throughout the computer-music works of Herbert's *Project Sawdust* series, they remain less helpful to me as exemplary "solutions" to the whole range of problems embodied in the graphic work than are my long years of living with the acoustic repertoire for snare drums, and for everything else.

I understood intuitively that to look at any one of these graphics was to be offered a lesson in aesthetics: how can I learn aesthetics – in music, in life – if I don't pay attention to Chopin? the lesson's already there in the answers to the questions which I must find for myself, but I can't rewrite Chopin in order to advance my own or anyone else's grasp of aesthetics. The only hope is to try to do in my own time and place what he did in his. Herbert's "pictures", as he often affectionately called them, were as alluring in their elegance as they were distancing and awe-inspiring in their depth of conception. They seemed to taunt, "do you dare to even try to understand the complexities beneath my beautiful surface?"

But it was counterintuitive for me to even have it occur that a backdoor might have been left ajar. I could return a challenge from somewhere I knew, like a multilingual child responding to a parent in a language different from the one in which he was addressed. This was indeed the open invitation. To the observer who speaks only one of these

languages, the synergy of the interaction between parent and child is magical. It's exactly that type of synergy and magic which Herbert managed to offer in this body of work.

Composing the music which you don't yet like – surely a counterintuitive / anti-communicative starting point – has to do with learning from music. It's not so much the imposition of a conquering thought process, but rather a supple, fluid receptivity to the touch of music and its resonances – of resonances past, from many cultures, but also, of those right at hand, if not at your very hand, then surely at the hands of a friend nearby. It's not a matter of having to confront this humbling body of work armed with the kind of intellect which brought about these graphics in the first place, but rather it's a matter of meeting them with the openness of knowing that I can be met and understood and supported by them when I begin to ask and even answer what it is that the snare drum, the piano, the cuckoo, or Music, tell me. Composer's mind, performer's touch.

Herbert closes his program note for "*at loose ends*": thus:

“Is to be ‘at loose ends: a deplorable problem to be resolved as soon as possible, or is to be ‘at loose ends: the quick and lightening moment in which hope turns creative?”

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