RESONANCE AND WONDER: SUSAN PHILIPSZ’S ‘STUDY FOR STRINGS’

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Abstract
This article offers a reading of Susan Philipsz’s sound work Study for Strings (2012) informed by two notions proposed by Stephen Greenblatt: resonance and wonder. In considering resonance, I present the strong historical influences identified in the location the artwork was first commissioned for — Kassel Hauptbahnhof, during dOCUMENTA 13. I also present the traumatic events that led to the composition of Pavel Haas’s Study for Strings Orchestra in Theresienstadt, and its appropriation by Philipsz. The use of silence, or absence, in a sound piece features as a fundamental element in the understanding of the work as a certificate of disappearance. Nevertheless, viewed through the lens of John Cage’s 4’33” (1952), Study for Strings will also be examined as a musical composition in its own right. It is here, and in the spectator’s first encounter with the work, that the presence of wonder will surface.

Keywords: Susan Philipsz, sound art, resonance, wonder, Theresienstadt, dOCUMENTA 13

Sound is an activator of memory which appears to easily break through temporal barriers. At this moment we are in the present, occupying a physical space that allows us to hear, but we are just as quickly transported to a memory — a memory residing in the past. What I would like to consider in the following pages is whether sound might activate something outside of personal memories; if it might, as Marconi came to believe, evoke ghosts; if it can recall historical events. If so, then whether such might be accomplished solely by individual notes scattered across a train platform. If it might be achieved by Susan Philipsz’s Study for Strings (2012)? In these questions I am already putting forward one of the notions that will inform this article; Stephen Greenblatt’s resonance. Written regarding the visual arts and the politics of museum display, Greenblatt proposed two models in his 1991 text that I find to be applicable to the reading of Philipsz’s project: on resonance and wonder. According to Greenblatt:

By resonance I mean the power of the [...] object to reach beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer [or listener] the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer [listener] to stand. By wonder I mean the power of the [...] object to stop the viewer [listener] in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an excited attention (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42).

But in a piece in which resonance so quickly emerges is it possible to as easily encounter wonder?

On the 7th of September 1942 a train, headed to Theresienstadt camp, left Kassel Hauptbahnhof station, carrying within it some 755 Jews. Kassel, located at the centre of German territory, was not just a point of convergence of a deadly railway network, it was the home of the engineering company Henschel & Sohn. By 1942 this German locomotive manufacturer was producing the Tiger I and Tiger II tanks, and had become a significant supplier of armaments to the German army. Around this time there were 6,000 forced labourers working in the Henschel factory (London, 2014, p. 206). By the end of the Second World War the city had experienced heavy bombardments from the Allied Forces, leaving much of the town’s ancient buildings destroyed. In 1955, in an attempt to reintroduce modern art to the German public — a public that had not seen a modern art exhibition since the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich in 1937 — Arnold Bode organised documenta. With its success the exhibition became a staple in modern and contemporary art, with new editions taking place every five years in Kassel for the duration of one hundred days.

Theresienstadt, now Terezín, is a city located in the Czech Republic that was first constructed as a fortress in the late-eighteenth century, capable of housing up to 11,000 men and contemporary art, with new editions taking place every five years in Kassel for the duration of one hundred days. Around this time there were 6,000 forced labourers working in the Henschel factory” (London, 2014, p. 206). By the end of the Second World War the city had experienced heavy bombardments from the Allied Forces, leaving much of the town’s ancient buildings destroyed. In 1955, in an attempt to reintroduce modern art to the German public — a public that had not seen a modern art exhibition since the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich in 1937 — Arnold Bode organised documenta. With its success the exhibition became a staple in modern and contemporary art, with new editions taking place every five years in Kassel for the duration of one hundred days.

Theresienstadt, now Terezín, is a city located in the Czech Republic that was first constructed as a fortress in the late-eighteenth century, capable of housing up to 11,000 men during wartime. In 1938 it was occupied by Nazi Germany, being quickly adapted to a concentration camp and to a prison in 1942. “The camp, which the Nazis also described as a

1) Born in 1965, Susan Philipsz is a Scottish artist currently based in Berlin. Although she originally trained as a sculptor, she works predominantly with sound, having been the first artist to win the Turner Prize for a sound work in 2010. Through her projects Philipsz explores themes of longing and loss, as well as the capacity of sound to evoke emotions and memories.
and crew, including Haas, were deported to Auschwitz, where many were gassed on arrival. Although the original scores were lost, Ancher, who survived, succeeded in reassembling the orchestral parts after the war.

For dOCUMENTA 13 (2012)³ Susan Philipsz chose to return to the train platforms from which so many departed, to produce Study for Strings.2 Taking the reconstructed composition as a starting point, the artist had a viola and cello players play their parts one note at a time:

³ Held between 9 June and 16 September 2012, the thirteenth edition of dOCUMENTA was curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. It had no specified theme, nor specified concept, instead its foundation was laid with two elements distributed to the commissioned artists: a Klein bottle and a sentence, “The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, charging, rolling, comforted and lasting for a long time”.

² A recording of the piece can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_yMZJkzbcw. Last accessed 11 October 2017

At regular intervals, the otherworldly notes from the strings intermingled with the blurt ‘live’ voices that periodically interjected to announce trains ready for departure. As the trains moved past the end of the platform, they disrupted the relative calm of the listeners, as the train disappeared from view, the sound of the strings re-emerged, rendered even more poignant by the feeling of departure (London, 2014, p.206).

Each note would resonate across the tracks, where eight individual speakers had been installed, surrounding them. Each note mingled with, and yet overtook, the sounds of the present. Nevertheless, sound was not the sole component of Study for Strings; there was also recorded silence between notes. Yet, in truth, and as Susan Philipsz pointed out, such was closer to a recorded absence: the absence of all of the musicians in the original orchestra save two.

The sound/silence dichotomy has figured as a significant presence in sound art, not least in John Cage’s (1912-1992) seminal composition 4’33”. First performed in Woodstock, NY, on 29 August 1952, by pianist David Tudor, the piece – which Cage later called his ‘silent piece’ (Cage cited in Gann, 2010, p.16) – was composed of three movements of varied lengths – “30”, “22’3” and “140” – that in their sum completed 4’33”.

Setting himself at the piano on the wooden stage of the Max-Erck Concert Hall, Tudor proceeded to close the keyboard lid over the keys, careful as to not make any sound. He turned the empty pages of the music sheet and, to sign the ending and
the beginning of each movement, opened and again closed the keyboard lid. At the end of the performance Tudor rose to receive his applause. In the silence the audience was urged to listen to itself and to the surrounding environment. As Salomé Voegelin points out, “[t]he silence of 4’33” is a musical silence not a sonic silence. Cage’s interest in silence lies in establish-
ing every sound within the musical register. It does not invite a listen-
ing to sound as sound but to all sound as music” (2010, p.81). Yet, by having the piece performed in an open-air space engulfed by the forest of the Catskill mountains, Cage might be considered to have also been asking “his audience to lis-

tening to itself and to the surrounding environment. As Salomé Voegelin pointed out: “Hearing does not offer a meta-

position; the silence of 4’33” is a musical silence or sound, “is continuous” and “only listening is intermit-

tent” (Cage, 1981, p.3).

Nevertheless, if one only reflects on the powerful resonance one finds in Study for Strings, there is a risk of the aesthetic value of the work being buried under the context in which it was produced and to which it refers; the risk of only reading the work rather than experiencing it (Voegelin, 2010, p.180). Wonder, the quality of the object to stop one in one’s tracks, as Greenblatt explains, might find itself being sacrificed at the altar of resonance (1991, p.54). Nevertheless, there is an ad-

vantage to Philipps’ piece, it is a sound installation, and as Voegelin pointed out: “Hearing does not offer a meta-position;

there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard. However far its source, the sound sits in my ear. I cannot hear it if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not the screen but sound as sound itself” (2010, p.xii). Listening is always pre-conditioned by presence; to experience sound, “distance is not an option I] joint time is demanded as the circumstance of experience” (Voegelin, 2010, p.48). Time and place must be shared with the object even if it is “by insisting on the presence of its past” (Voegelin, p.158). Sound can be recorded in an attempt to escape its ephemeralism, “but the recording of audio elements of art does not function in the same way as photographs have come to be employed [when registering visual artworks], as stand-ins for the art objects themselves,” as Caleb Kelly has acknowledged (2011, p.19).

In choosing sound as her artistic tool, Susan Philipsz “takes us on a journey which leads us beyond what is visible. She emphasizes the perception of sound and of the body in space” (Arrehnious, 2014, p.59).

For dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel Hauptbahnhof was the loca-
tion of not one but two projects in which sound featured as a chief element: Philipsz’s Study for Strings, and Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s* Alter Bahnhof Video Walk (2012)*. Known for her audio-walks Cardiff, with Miller, included a vi-

sual component to their Kassel station project. In exchange for a form of identification, participants were given an iPod and headset, and instructed to sit on a specific bench at the station. From here Cardiff’s voice would direct the visitor’s movements, direct their interaction with the space, their read-
ing of the space, by coaching them to “try to align your move-

ments with mine”. Yet participants aligned more than the screen; they aligned their step with hers, aligned their bodily experience of the space with hers. Slightly disorientating, the project overlapped the viewer’s present experience with the artist’s recorded experience. The binaural audio used contrib-
uted to this intermeshing: a barking dog that a visitor might anticipate to be behind him or her is found to be solely a re-
cording; the sound of a train leaving the platform would be heard even if no train could be found. At times the video-walk worked as a form of hypertext: in a section devoted to a Horst Hohetselt’s Denk-Stein-Sammlung Memorial Project (1968-1995), to commemorate the Jewish people who were transported to concentration camps from the station, Cardiff zoomed in on a book, documenting the victims who passed through Kassel Hauptbahnhof, inaccessible to the viewer; she flipped the pag-
es in the video providing further information to the two pages the visitor was able to see for herself in the monument. Al-

though every participant followed the same video, the experi-
ence of the work was not shared, nor was it concurrent to everyone else’s. During the exhibition, what would regularly be seen inside the station were visitors focused on their paths, interacting with the recording and the space, but not with any other participant that might cross their path. One would begin the walk sitting with others, friends or strangers, but in turn-
ning on the device one would be told to rise, an instant that would occur at different moments for each person, depending

———. 1981. La Biennale di Venezia Special Award and the Benesse Prize with their project Paradise Institute.

5) Janet Cardiff (b.1957) and George Bures Miller (b. 1960) are a Canadian artistic duo, currently based in Berlin. They are known for their sound works, particularly their audio walks, narrated by Cardiff. In 2001, the artists represented Canada at the 49th Venice Biennale, where they won La Biennale di Venezia Special Award and the Benesse Prize with their project Paradise Institute.

6) An excerpt of the work can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kQEy7m31F. Last accessed 11 October 2017

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on when the start button had been pushed. Suddenly, a sec-
ond or two would lapse between one person’s walk and an-
other’s, causing some initial awkwardness until each became
immersed in their own walk. Here what Cardiff and Miller
prized were “the subjective localized practices of the individu-
al in realizing a personal interpretation of the space” (Gorman,
2003, p.91). Although, such claims of a personal interpretation
might anticipate a relative freedom for the visitors’ interaction
with the station, Cardiff’s whispered instructions would insist
uate themselves into the participants’ heads, commanding them
to follow a predetermined, closed, circuit.

It is here that one finds a distinct approach to sound and
participation between Cardiff and Miller and Susan Philipsz.
The duo favoured an individual participation; an audio-visual
immersion with a clear beginning and end. Philipsz, on the
other hand, promoted a chance encounter with her work. A
timetable was available at the beginning of the platform but
what was found was that many visitors were not even aware
of the presence of her work until they ran into the sound, and
in encountering it they would then be seduced by the spectral
information surrounding Kassel Hauptbahnhof, or even
Theresienstadt, forthright, Philipsz’s piece allowed the visitor
to simply enjoy the sound as sound, as a musical composition
in its own right.

As we have seen in regard to Cage’s 4’33”, even silence might
have distinct musical movements and, as in the ‘silent piece’,
both Pavel Haas’s and Susan Philipsz’s compositions follow
a three-movement structure. Haas’s Study for String Orchestra
begins with insistently repetitive triplets and very dense folk
melodies layered on top of each other. The second section
consists of a lyrical and tension-filled adagio. The final move-
ment brings back the repetitive triplets and dense folk melo-
dies of the first section. Whereas, as Philipsz describes it, in
Study for Strings:

Looking [or listening] may be called enchanted when
the act of attention draws a circle around itself from
which everything but the object is excluded. [...] To
be sure, the [spectator] may have purchased a cata-
togue [of] read the inscription on the wall [...] but in the
moment of wonder all of this apparatus seems mere static (Greenblatt, 1991, p.49).

So rather than presenting the participant with all the histor-
ical information surrounding Kassel Hauptbahnhof, or even
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expanding and extending the recordings into the
space has the effect of abstracting the individual
notes from the composition as a whole. The begin-
ing is reminiscent of industry or the sound of trains
moving along the tracks. The middle section is more
melancholic with individual notes calling across to
each other and finally the pizzicato seems to animate
the cables above the tracks (Philipsz, 2012).

Thus, one might suggest that whilst resonance is fundamen-
tal in Philipsz’s piece, wonder is no less relevant. One might
even propose that it is wonder that beckons the visitor to ex-
üance the piece in the first place. It might even be, as Green-
blatt suggests, “wonder that then leads to the desire for res-
o nance” (1991, p.54). For, in enacting the participant through
her musical composition to a traumatically changed location,
Philipsz is overcoming temporal barriers, allowing historical
times to be interwoven with present experience.

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