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## **Introduction: The Music of Human Systems**

The term “human systems” has appeared in many different contexts over the years. Not knowing that the term already existed, I started using it in the early ‘90s, forming the Human Systems Performance Group. I later discovered that the term was already popular in areas of ergonomics, psychology, logistics, and sociology, among others.

I use the term to refer to the interactions of people within sets of rules or defined parameters, whether the structures were developed intentionally or unconsciously evolved. It can be applied to sports, behaviour in traffic or at parties, or, as here, in musical performance.

Scores for human systems compositions often involve quite minimal material. These scores attempt to create situations in which people are freed to do their best work, establishing systems that guide them through performance tasks, and dealing with problems that could get in their way. (These same principles hold in such other areas as designing user interfaces and conflict resolution.)

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In simpler terms, people performing these pieces work together, creating movement and sound. Each person contributes to the whole by exploring new challenges, using known talents, and developing new skills. Whether or not you have any conventional music training, you can probably perform most of these scores. (While trained performers may have a larger vocabulary of things that they know how to do, new players often contribute unexpected actions and materials that many trained performers have forgotten.)

Most of these scores are in the form of game rules, establishing materials (such as sets of sounds) and procedures for performing. These sometimes include methods for recovery if things go wrong. In general, they proceed from early pieces specifying quite specifically what is to happen to later scores with fewer and fewer rules. As in editing text, I enjoy removing elements bit by bit from specifications until I arrive at just what is needed to make the piece work. (Jon Matis provides a *reductio ad absurdum* as an epilogue to this book, as a humorous look at what might happen if you chop away too much.)

Others, such as John Zorn, have done a lot of work with game rules as musical scores (though, from what I can tell from the few of Zorn's scores that I have seen, his pieces employ a factor of combativeness and competition that I prefer not to use). These pieces have also been influenced by the work of my teachers in college (Daniel Goode, Phillip Corner, and Barbara Benary), by John Cage and his circle, by the well-known minimalist composers, by the group of composers (including Brian Eno and Gavin

Bryars) who were presented on the Obscure record label, the Deep Listening practices of Pauline Oliveros, and by the sounds of theatre and jazz-related artists such as Meredith Monk, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, and Ornette Coleman.

The music has grown in performance, as the scores changed in the intense scrutiny of rehearsal with a wide array both of recognized musicians and of people who would not refer to themselves as such. As Meredith Monk has said of her processes, performers are the compositions' midwives, and the scores would probably have evolved quite differently if developed with different people.

As Edwin Schlossberg<sup>1</sup> has put it, these scores are tools, not objects. Only a few of them indicate any exact pitches to be played. Different performances of a single score probably will not share any melodic material (though they should be identifiable as the same piece because of the game rules they follow, much as you can recognize a football game when you see people playing it).

While composition (establishing rules and materials for people to follow in performance) is an intrinsically conservative act, my impulse is more liberal: where the rules conflict with the people performing them, the people, wherever possible, should win.

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1. Schlossberg, Edwin. *Interactive Excellence: Defining and Developing New Standards for the Twenty-first Century*; New York: Bantane Publishing Group, 1998.

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If, in performing one of these pieces, you find conflict in working with the composed strictures, consider loosening the stricture if doing so will not lead to further conflict. If loosening the rule creates a situation with so few parameters that it becomes free improvisation, that's fine if the performers agree.

If loosening or changing a stricture creates a new situation that is markedly different from or unrecognizable as the original, you can consider it a new composition and give it a new name. If you do so, I'd be pleased if you'd mention in a program or recording note how and from where the new piece evolved, if just to let curious listeners backtrack to the sources and understand the process by which it came about (perhaps inspiring them to work with materials in the same way).

Of course, I'm not ready to let go completely of concepts such as copyright and authorship, but I recognize these mutations as the progression of methods and ideas as they pass through human minds.

Much of this music hinges on goodwill—some of the structures are fragile and depend on people being attuned to what is happening and adapting in the moment to their environment. If something happens to break the structure of the piece, it is better to assume that it was an honest event or error, and to continue working together to bring the piece back together. If that isn't possible, let the piece fail gracefully, preferably without exposing anyone as the cause of the performance breakdown.

(I am continually surprised and pleased by incidents of goodwill among people. Somehow, travelers moving in different direc-

tions through crowded train stations manage not to collide. And in one striking moment some years ago when most of the traffic lights failed throughout Dallas, I saw drivers obeying the traffic laws at intersections and, in situations where it was not clear what to do, wordlessly negotiating a careful high-speed ballet of cars without damage.)

I do not intend most of these scores to convey any predetermined emotional content. I don't feel that it is necessarily my role as a composer to determine the emotions that a performer is to portray in performing. Similarly, as a performer, I would rather not have to mimic an emotional state nor, as a listener, have one imposed upon me. Freed from such external imposition, a performer's emotion in the moment can come through in the performance, if he or she wishes it to, and the audience is free to experience whatever emotion they have at the moment, possibly (though not necessarily) inspired by the performance. People tend to find emotion (and sometimes, even narrative) in the most abstracted material, so I prefer to get out of the way and let the feelings happen.

Of course, much as many of these scores say more about interaction than about sound, the sounds that they create are also important. As John Kamman (from my ensemble SciDolomRah) puts it, learning the rule set of a piece is only the beginning of the process; once we have done that, we still have to "find the music in it".

My preference, in most cases, is for the music to be "beautiful", whatever that may mean in the appropriate context. While

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I'm interested in the abstract structural aspects of the pieces, I still am interested in doing music that people can *like*. Ideally, the sounds should be accessible and enjoyable without knowledge of how they were produced.

A clear sign that we haven't connected is when people tell us "That was... umm... interesting". In a sense, while the pieces are not designed to impose specific emotion, we hope that the audience does have an emotional experience, and a positive one at that.

And my favorite reaction is when people tell us that they want to learn how to do what we do. We eagerly teach people the basics of what we do and distribute our scores. (As I write this, I'm on my way to Texas for a series of performances, in each of which we hope to include people from the communities in our pieces.) I've compiled this book so that people can easily get at the collection of scores, to perform these pieces and to be inspired to create their own.

In a sense, this book is like a cookbook for performance. I have tried to maintain a consistent structure for the scores (considering, however, that they range over more than twenty years and a variety of methods and materials) with general notes about performance and materials preceding the rulesets for how the pieces begin, continue, and end. Additional notes about the context and evolution of the pieces appear as footnotes on the first page of their scores.

This book was designed, most importantly, to be used. Wherever possible, two-page scores, or pages of longer scores which

should be viewed together in rehearsal, appear on facing pages. I've tried to keep page breaks from disrupting the flow of text.

Since, for the purposes of this book, usability trumps historicity, I've tweaked most of the scores in various ways, mostly for clarity. Our goal is that both conventional musicians and people who do not consider themselves musicians should be able to understand and use the materials in it. The earlier versions of the scores still exist, though, in my archives (as of this writing, a wall of cardboard boxes in my garage).

As with my earlier book, *Shekhinah: the Presence* (also from Metatron Press), much of this text was edited by Claudia Crowley, an exceptional and exacting editor who doesn't let me get away with anything. The page design is modeled after the design championed by Jan Tschichold in his *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*. The fonts (for those who are interested) are Times New Roman, Arial, and Courier. This first edition of the book, at least, is being printed via a print-on-demand system by Lightning Source.

The images on the front cover are from the dance/theatre piece *Shekhinah: The Presence*, performed by the Human Systems Performance Group in 1992 (although, paradoxically, none of the scores for that show are in this book, since the music was created directly to tape). I have, however, lost track of who photographed them. The cover design was developed with Brian Fending. (You can find more of Brian's design work at <http://www.brianfending.com>)

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Early versions of the scores were written in plain text form, Microsoft Word, and LaTeX. This book was put together in Adobe Framemaker (under Linux and Windows 98).

The name of this book came from a conversation with electronic composer Gilmore (of, among other things, the group t\_spigot). When I asked him what he enjoyed in the music of Aphex Twin, he replied “He surprises me with beauty”. I have appropriated his statement as a title, with his permission, since I recognized that as also being the goal of much of my own work.