



*Ripe for Embarrassment:
For A New Musical
Masochism*

*a lecture by Matador Owen
translated by Adam Overton*

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Introduction: The Forbidden String

In 2005, while a composer and student at CalArts, I witnessed the premiere of a piece by my good friend, Adam Fong, who now lives up in San Francisco. That piece, titled *Forbidden String* (2004), and its subsequent performance, inspired this lecture, but it's taken me several years to finally collect my thoughts all in one place. And since then, my thoughts on the topic have expanded in some fun directions.

According to Fong's description of the text-based work on his website, "The score of this piece instructs the performer what *not* to do."¹ It presents a se-

¹ Fong, from his website: "The score of this piece instructs the performer what *not* to do. This creates an environment for structured improvisation where the composer and score dictate the boundaries of the player's available material and techniques. The balance of freedom and limitation in the piece creates a challenging psychological situation, where the performer must bear in mind the increasing number of things she cannot do." – *Forbidden String* (2005) – <http://shaketheair.com/work.html>

quential and cumulative list of dictates, in the form of forbidden strings and nixed-out techniques—"not too fast ... Do not play louder than mp. ... Do not play with vibrato. ... Do not play on the 1st string. ... Do not play staccato. ... Do not play on the 2nd string."—and so forth. The player here finds her- or himself oppressed by a score cruelly tightening its vise of musical options.

The thought of such impending doom, of the performer slowly being suffocated to silence, is a striking one. In other words I can't help but desire some kind of rebellion on the part of the performer—to either subvert the sad ending to this piece, or to at least go out in a blaze of glory.

Interestingly enough, by the end of that 2005 performance of "don'ts" I found myself equally aghast with the violist's interpretation—the piece was by all memories of it one of the more succulent things I'd ever heard.

My reaction at first appeared to be an embarrassingly common response to a violent act, wherein one doubly victimizes the victim by asking such insensitive after-the-fact questions like "Why didn't you fight back?" But before leaving the concert hall that night, I came to realize that I hadn't actually witnessed any attack; instead, the performer and composer were very obviously in cahoots, they were collaborators, and in this performance, even with results unknown to the composer, their relationship had been entirely consensual.

This only ruffled me more. It became clear that the sadistic, directorial tone of Adam Fong's *Forbidden String* had been a ruse—the composer isn't actually punishing the performer, and really has very little control over the ultimate interpretation of the work. Put another way, of the near infinite options from which the performer has to choose, there are really only 18 they must avoid. *Only two rules*—one in the form of the title, and another in the form of the technical jargon used throughout the score—suggest what *should* be

FORBIDDEN STRING

Adam Fong

2004

Each rule applies to its own and all succeeding measures.
Do not use a scordatura.

Not too fast

Do not play louder than *mp*.

Do not play with vibrato.

Do not play a tremolo.

Do not play on the 1st string.

Do not use double-stops.

Do not play *sul tasto*.

Do not play *col legno*.

Do not play on the 2nd string.

Do not play staccato.

Do not play *sul ponticello*.

Do not play long notes.

Do not play on the 3rd string.

Do not play harmonics.

Do not play *arco*.

Do not play any equal-tempered pitches.

Do not play on the 4th string.

done, that a string instrument be used... and that's only if you wish to take Fong literally. The rest of the scores maxims are *open* to the performer's interpretation.

Upon this realization my post-adolescent mind gleefully imagined a more delightful extreme: *shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit*, ... an alternate universe where we might witness an equally clever and virtuosic performer adhering just as well to the disciplined calls of the composer and the score, reaching into the same grab bag of possibilities provided, but pulling from it the most depraved sounds and actions the performer's anus could muster.



I spoke with Adam afterwards about my fantasy, asking him whether he'd find such a "shitty" interpretation embarrassing, *and* acceptable. He grinned widely and bravely stated that indeed it would be alright, and that, no, he wouldn't be embarrassed. Despite what seemed like an honest admission, it seemed clear that he himself probably wouldn't push an instrumentalist for such a "shitty" performance, and I quietly wagered that if presented again in a similar setting, without forewarning from a more sinister violist, he'd likely break a sweat quite unlike the one he might have experienced during its premiere.

Indeterminacy: An Introduction

In the world of experimental composition, we call the openness to widely differing interpretations of a work *indeterminacy*. Popularized by the likes of Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and others in the 1950s and 60s, the principle of indeterminacy was simple: the performer is given a hand in making important choices as to how certain elements of a work will be realized. He or she is often presented with a range of options—"for any instrument"—"for 1 to 100 players"—"for any duration"—"perform some, all, or [n]one of the following: ...". As a result, the landscape of indeterminacy is populated with *re*-performances of works that barely, or in no way, resemble previous incarnations.

This approach serves as one of the primary foundations of what we might think of as a Cageian *experimental* practice—that the realization of a work might, or even *should*, produce unforeseen results, perhaps surpassing the expectations of the composer. As Cage himself states, "I write in order to hear the music I haven't yet heard."²

² Cage, 1991 : <http://newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html>

For Cage, this process of opening oneself to the universe of possibilities was a Buddhist strategy of freeing oneself from the shackles of one's own likes and dislikes,³ by relinquishing one's desire to make "interesting," sentimental, or "important" work. At first glance, this Buddhist sublime is much less dramatic than the more God-fearing versions of the West—here, instead of explosiveness, we often find the boring and the bland, a zone where sound is simply sound (or even silence), where performers perform disinterestedly, and the listener is confronted with a work drained of any intentional narrative.⁴ And as Christian Wolff points out, a submissive Cage "was constantly looking for strategies for making that [unpredictability] happen by some force other than his own decision"—turning to the chaos of chance by flipping coins to compose his works; and then turning to the indeterminacy of the performer when he wanted them performed.

Hold on to that thought...

A Conservative Indeterminacy

Despite all this lofty experimental talk of shifting decisions from the composer to performer in order to create strange and surprisingly banal new renditions of the same work, in practice indeterminacy has in my experience rarely ever been used to its most awe-some, *or* awe-ful, potential. Through decades of exposure, composers and performers alike have grown comfortable with a *conservative indeterminacy* that produces pretty predictable results that don't sound all that bad.

³ Kostelanetz, 2003 : p. 102: *John Cage*: "the freedoms I've given have not been given to permit just anything that one wants to do, but have been invitations for people to free themselves from their likes and dislikes, and to discipline themselves." (1975)

⁴ Cage, 1956 : pp. 94-95: "We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we do is determined by each one who sees and hears it... I may add there are no stories and no psychological problems."

Contemporary composers and performers can share the blame for engaging in such *faux*-indeterminacy. For instance, in some cases the ability of indeterminacy to surprise us has been dampened by composers who implement it in small predictable doses—as indeterminate flourishes—or by providing a slim buffet of options from which the performer has to choose. Such tendencies also subtly indicate an underlying paranoia about working with reckless performers. In this latter case, Christian Wolff kindly models for us the mindset of the wary composer, who checks their piece for sabotage-worthy loopholes by asking her- or himself, "well, what's the worst I could do with these freedoms that I have here? What could I do that would be totally unacceptable to me."⁵



It is of course within the rights of the composer to shape the parameters of their work. That *is* the work. However, the dangers of the "chaotic" performer of the last half-century are perhaps a bit overblown. In fact, musicians

⁵ Oteri, 2002 : "4. Compositional Intent"

have traditionally been the most conservative, resistant anti-force in experimental music, who have often tended again and again to betray their blindness to the liberties afforded them in indeterminate works. They're much more well known for simply failing to read and then follow the instructions.

Perhaps the most common fault of instrumentalists are their inability to “smell themselves.” Even the best, most determinedly indeterminate instrumentalists are frequently unable to escape the beautiful sound of their conservatory training. As a result we still tend to hear a lot of Schubert at a Cage concert.

Other instrumentalists who are less blind to the shackles of their discipline tend to beat back these conservatory-tendencies with the use of extended techniques and other odd sounds from their instruments. The result, however, is usually a disruption of the highly sought-after *Cageian blandness*, sounding more like the discovery of the hidden prize within the composer's scavenger hunt.



photo credit: Allan J. Cronin

In the least common, but still occasional case, the instrumentalist decides “FUCK THIS SHIT” and becomes a clown. As Christian Wolff reports, “[Morton] Feldman had this happen to him a number of times with those graph pieces. People would just play tunes.”⁶

But before we completely crucify the performer, let's step back to the composer, specifically to Cage. As Joe Panzner points out, as an avant-gardist Cage was born of a time wherein his work was actively deplored by audiences and instrumentalists alike. As a result he too found himself facilitating in hierarchical ways that limited the scope of his indeterminacies. For instance, as he often lacked performers who would take his work seriously, he was forced to work with his small, incestuous coalition of the willing, who in his mind harbored the “discipline” to study and learn the work. The majority of Cage's work during this time in the 1950s and 60s was therefore performed by his close and highly-skilled friend, pianist David Tudor. Though brilliant, through repeated collaboration Tudor's interpretations likely became a known and trusted quantity to Cage. In other cases, especially after Tudor left his side in the 1970s to pursue his own work as a composer, Cage didn't just hand out his scores and then disappear—he worked very closely with his initiate performers, helping to shape their interpretations via rehearsal, dialogue, and disapproval of choices that didn't fit his agenda or taste.⁷

In at least one situation that we'll look at in a moment, where Cage made himself (and his work) exceptionally vulnerable to the indeterminacy of the performers, he found himself lashing out against an interpretation of his work that, in his mind, was perpetrated in *bad faith*.

It's important to note that for Cage, his well-known Anarchist position was in fact *not* in favor of modeling individualistic chaos onstage, but instead

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Panzner, 2003 : http://www.stylusmagazine.com/articles/weekly_article/john-cage-crises-of-authenticity.htm

emphasized a form of personal responsibility and self-respect, wherein the performer, though free primarily from their own tastes, also attended to the various interests and intents of the composer as illustrated and implied in the work. A relationship therefore was formed as the composer and performer would consent to collaborate, with the score acting as a starting point. As collaborator Petr Kotik recalls, once the performer had considered both the score's written instructions, *and* the context in which the work would be presented, Cage would then help shape the work further by acting as a coach or dramaturge, communicating a “third level” of instruction—in a sense, an unwritten meta-score. It was his job to point out the performer's latent zones of self-interest or habit that might emerge during rehearsal, or gestures that might seem too culturally-significant when presented onstage. According to Kotik, the only way of getting to this “third level” was by working directly with Cage or one of his close associates.⁸

Such an approach is oddly familiar in the work of Marina Abramovic, whose *Seven Easy Pieces* has a similar “third level” meta-score overarching the performance of her works. As she commanded a friend of mine in a cease-and-desist email in 2005:

there are similar rules for re-performing my performances:

- 1. Ask original artist for permission.*
- 2. Understand the concept of the piece through the conversation with artist (if still alive), and study available documentation.*

*Only then, when you have written permission from me, would it be possible to make your own interpretation. What you are doing is not right!*⁹

⁸ Havelková, 2003

⁹ Abramovic email to Adam Overton, 2005. For more info, see Re: Seven Easy Pieces, Adam Overton, October 28, 2011, Independent Curators International – http://curatorsintl.org/posts/re_seven_



photo credit: Marco Anelli

I personally think such an approach—that of applying, or requiring, a “third level” meta-score to some or all of one's actual written scores—is terribly interesting, and in fact many of my favorite contemporary composers write many such meta-scores as a practice unto itself,¹⁰ and so I don't in any way claim that it's misguided. I of course fear what may become of a work of

easy_pieces_adam_overton

¹⁰ <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/Keywords/Overlay>

mine in the hands of others, assuming wrongly that they will all share my sensibilities and experiences, and will magically get the implied messages that I've forgotten to write directly into the score. In the case of Abramovic, her meta-score simply emphasizes the discipline of her physical practice, one which she has tied to the discipline of a court painter hired to create portraits for the king, Pope and other divine beings.¹¹ For her, such holy work requires an equal amount of pious research and self-sacrifice on the part of the performer. Both Cage's and Abramovic's practices are united in their severe, disciplined, self-denying Buddhist nature.



Now back to Cage. Though often thought of as a “gentle anarchist,”¹² Cage too has exhibited righteous indignation in defense of the perceived misuse of his work. According to Kyle Gann, the most well-known instance was in 1975, when composer Julius Eastman used his indeterminate discretion to deliver an odd lecture¹³ while performing Cage's *Song Books*: “Never shy

¹¹ Denegri, 1998 : p. 23: *Marina Abramovic*: “I have been influenced by the writing of Cennino Cennini, who explains how an artist should prepare himself to create a work of art commissioned by the Pope or by a king: he should stop eating meat three months before, stop drinking wine two months before, for a month he should plaster his right hand and then, when he is about to begin to paint, he should break the plaster and be able to draw a perfect circle.

“My conception of “cleaning the house” follows this tradition.”

¹² Panzner, 2003

¹³ a transcript of Julius Eastman's lecture, on the *Sideway-and-Sensitive System* of love: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yyp5VuDsnZOdo2v8ZFV9qEL261Jc2QaCYIMtRDMrVpM/edit>

about his gayness, Eastman lectured on sex, with a young man [his boyfriend] and woman [his sister] as volunteers. He undressed the young man onstage, and attempted to undress the woman, who resisted.”¹⁴ Though Cage himself had emphasized that the work in this concert not be rehearsed, therefore ruling out anyone knowing ahead of time what the performers might do, he was still furious afterward about the incident, stating, “No matter how many times I say, “You can't do what you want, *but* anything goes,” everyone interprets it as “I can do any GOD DAMN THING I WANT!””¹⁵

I obviously didn't witness the performance myself, and have only caught a glimpse of the performance via a recording that documents only Eastman's voice and the audience's nervous whispering and giggling.¹⁶ I'm sure it was an uncomfortable moment for Cage, and I respect that what happened—all mythological descriptions and hype aside—likely seemed, or maybe even was,

¹⁴ With no interviews with Julius Eastman about his performance seemingly in existence, it's a bit of a challenge pinpointing exactly which of Cage's 90 *Song Books* solos he might have actually been performing. None of Cage's solos seem to directly resemble or prompt a lecture similar to what several eyewitness accounts have described. Kyle Gann reported that Eastman was interpreting the instruction “Give a lecture,” but this seems to be mistaken, as there is no instance of this instruction anywhere in *Song Books*. Cage left the concert under the impression that Eastman was performing *Solo for Voice 8* (0'0"): “In a situation with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action. / With any interruptions. / Fulfilling in whole or in part an obligation to others. / No attention to be given the situation (electronic, musical, theatrical)” (see Cage's lecture from *June in Buffalo*, June 5, 1975). That said, there are a couple other solos in *Song Books* that, if interpreted loosely enough, could have in theory also possibly informed the performance that viewers described having witnessed that day: *Solo For Voice 78* – “What can you do? “I can take off my shoes and put them on.””; *Solo for Voice 46* – “Prepare something to eat.”

It should be noted that according to the “Instructions” page of *Song Books*, all of the subsequent solos are supposed to be guided (or guarded?) by the overarching command, “We connect Satie with Thoreau.” Eastman's supposed omission of this instruction was, to Cage, one of the more damning elements of his interpretation. It is, however, quite arguable that the instruction may have in fact been very present within the score—and just unnoticed by Cage—as a homoerotic read of Cage's ambiguous instruction.

¹⁵ John Cage, from his lecture at *June In Buffalo*, June 5, 1975, the day after the S.E.M. ensemble's infamous performance of *Song Books*; available in the Music Library at SUNY Buffalo.

¹⁶ available in the Music Library at SUNY Buffalo – *June in Buffalo*, Concert 2 (June 4, 1975), JB5: <http://library.buffalo.edu.gate.lib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/music/spcoll/june.html>

unnecessarily disrespectful, or undisciplined, at some level. However, what disturbs me most about Cage's response is the sinking feeling that perhaps the exciting *Indeterminate Project* he began might never have fully taken off. It seems to me that true indeterminacy might not be possible unless one is willing to risk getting one's feelings hurt, willing to endure the sublime embarrassment of the failure of one's score to fend off a saboteur.

So, having witnessed Adam Fong's indeterminate score be so unnecessarily beautified by a violist in 2005, and then having learned of John Cage's allergic response to embarrassment, and hence to an updated and potentially more potent form of indeterminacy, in the years since I've begun to desire a new kind of relationship between the experimental composer and performer. The stirring in my loins tells me that instead of the performer acting submissively to a domineering composer, we might now imagine a *new musical masochism*—with the composer as a bossy-bottom, opening him- or herself to a consensual act of humiliation with the performer, who punishes the composer for the lax, unclear, or imprecise instructions of their score.

The Masochistic Alliance and The Score



This *new musical masochism* I envision springs forth from the tradition of its namesake, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the Austrian writer and pervert (1836–1895). For the uninitiated, it's worth noting that masochism according to Masoch had nothing to do with the sadism of the French author, Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), born a century earlier. Today's *sadomasochism* mostly resembles Masoch's system of role-playing, where the sadism (if he would even permit that term) is highly calculated

and simulated. de Sade's was quite the opposite and focused on describing one sordid violation after another, usually without the consent of the victims. Masoch's writing is instead Romantic courtship fiction at its best, at its most suspenseful, at its most sexless, where pleasure is postponed for as long as possible.¹⁷

What makes this postponement so strange is that it's the supposed victim who desires and composes this play of perverted, pitiful martyrdom.¹⁸ As Masoch's submissive narrator in *Venus in Furs* puts it, "The comic side of my situation is that I can escape but do not want to."¹⁹ In fact, contrary to appearances, it is via his or her direction—as outlined in a written or spoken contract—that all of the mistress's actions and appearances are governed. Gilles Deleuze, who wrote at length about Masoch's work, describes this "masochistic hero" as being the one "who forms her [the mistress], dresses her for the part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him. It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer, without sparing himself."²⁰

¹⁷ Deleuze, 1967 : p. 33: The masochistic process of disavowal is so extensive that it affects sexual pleasure itself; pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed. The masochist is therefore able to deny the reality of pleasure at the very point of experiencing it, in order to identify with the "new sexless man." ... In Masoch's novels, it is the moments of suspense that are the climactic moments....

¹⁸ Masoch, 1870 : pp. 178-179: "That is not all," I continued. "As you know, I am a supersensualist; with me everything takes root in the imagination and finds its nourishment there. As a sensitive and mature youngster of about ten, I came across the *Lives of the Martyrs*. I read with a horror mingled with intense pleasure how they suffered the worst torments almost with a smile, how they languished in prison cells, were tortured on the rack, pierced by arrows, cast into boiling pitch, thrown to wild animals or nailed on the cross. To endure horrible tortures seemed from then on the highest form of delight, particularly if the torturer was a beautiful woman, for to my mind the poetic and the diabolical have always been united in woman. I turned this idea into a veritable religion. Sensuality took on a sacred quality, indeed it seemed the only sacred principle, and woman in her beauty became something divine, since she was called upon to perform the most important function in life, the continuation of the species. Woman seemed to be the personification of Nature, she was Isis, and man was her priest and slave; she treated him cruelly just as Nature casts aside whatever has served her purpose as soon as she has no more need of it."

¹⁹ Masoch, 1870 : p. 202.

²⁰ Deleuze, 1967 : p. 22.

Masoch's *contract*²¹—or for our purposes, his *score*—which appeared in his books, and in his personal life as well, serves then to educate²² the mistress as to the particular laws and conditions under which he is to be enslaved. This desire to contract with one's torturer in this way highlights the very consensual aspect of the composer-performer's masochistic alliance, as well as the exceedingly manipulative pleasure the composer receives upon successfully seducing the instrumentalist to perform his or her piece.²³ However, while this pact fleshes out the minimum mistreatment to be administered, what the masochist ideally desires is a *sublime* punishment that ultimately exceeds the limits of his own imagination, setting the stage for a game of calculated and improvised cruelty within a field of *masochistic indeterminacy*:

²¹ Masoch, 1869, "Contract between Mrs. Fanny von Pistor and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch," in *Masochism* : pp. 277-278. On his word of honor, Mr. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch undertakes to be the slave of Mrs. von Pistor, and to carry out all her wishes for a period of six months.... On her behalf, Mrs. von Pistor shall not demand anything of him that would dishonor him in any way (as a man or as a citizen). Moreover, she shall allow him six hours a day for his personal work, and shall never look at his letters and writings. On the occurrence of any misdemeanor or negligence or act of *lése-majesté*, the mistress (Fanny von Pistor) may punish her slave (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch) in whatever manner she pleases. In short, the subject shall obey his sovereign with complete servility and shall greet any benevolence on her part as a precious gift; he shall not lay claim to her love nor to any right to be her lover. On her behalf, Fanny von Pistor undertakes to wear furs as often as possible, especially when she is behaving cruelly.... We, the undersigned, hereby confirm this contract, Fanny Pistor Baganow, Leopold, Knight of Sacher-Masoch... Came into the operation 8th of December 1869.

²² Deleuze, 1967 : p. 75, The masochist appears to be held by real chains, but in fact he is bound by his word alone. The masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his ability to persuade, and his pedagogical and judicial efforts to train his torturer.

²³ Deleuze, 1967 : pp. 20-21, The sadist thinks in terms of institutionalized possession, the masochist in terms of contracted alliance. Possession is the sadist's particular form of madness just as the pact is the masochist's. It is essential to the masochist that he should fashion the woman into a despot, that he should persuade her to cooperate and get her to "sign." He is essentially an educator and thus runs the risk inherent in educational undertakings. In all Masoch's novels, the woman, although persuaded, is still basically doubting, as though she were afraid: she is forced to commit herself to a role to which she may prove inadequate, either by overplaying or by falling short of expectations.

"... you have brought my dearest fantasies to life," I [Severin] exclaimed. "They have lain dormant too long."

"And what are they?" She [Wanda] put her hand on the nape of my neck.

A sweet dizziness came over me on feeling the warmth of her little hand, and on meeting the tender, searching gaze that she let fall on me through half-closed eyes.

"To be the slave of a woman, a beautiful woman whom I love and worship."

"And who in return ill-treats you!" laughed Wanda.

"Yes, who fetters me, whips me and kicks me and who all the while belongs to another."

"And who has the impudence, after driving you mad with jealousy, to confront you with your happy rival, to hand you over to his brutality. Why not? Or does the final picture appeal to you less?"

I looked at Wanda in horror. "You exceed my wildest dreams."

"Ah, we women have fertile imaginations," she said. "Beware, if you do find your ideal you may well be treated more cruelly than you anticipated."

—Masoch, *Venus in Furs* (1870), p. 180

Throughout Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (1870), once the pact has been consummated, the reader witnesses again and again the masochistic roleplay between

Wanda and Severin. At first Wanda struggles to conceal her care for Severin, but it is her devotion to him and to their agreement that pushes her to continue treating him so callously. In this masochistic game we discover that clumsiness—most likely intentional—on the part of the slave[/composer] is often common cause for triggering the mistress[/performer]’s whip, and we witness again and again Severin stumbling into various infractions.²⁴

In the early tryouts of their new roles, we find the cruel mistress postponing any pleasure for her lover via a sequence of commands, but then finally relenting and rewarding her slave with kisses and other affections by the end of the display. Here we see that it is ultimately agreed that however treacherously the performer acts while faithfully executing the masochistic score, both parties will continue to demonstrate their indebtedness via eventual acts of forgiveness.

Love knows neither virtue nor merit; when we love, we forgive and forget everything, for we have no choice.

—SEVERIN, in *Venus in Furs* (1870), p. 198

As one last stimulating scenario illustrating Masoch’s fantasy, he describes his desire to be sewn up in wolf-skins and then “hunted like game” by his mistress. I discovered that a similar fantasy emerges within Zackary Drucker’s *Lost Lake* (2010), as the trans-protagonist heads into the woods, gun at her side, for some “pervert hunting,” shouting, “Perrr-vert! Perrrrrrr-veerrrrt!! Gonna git-chu. Gonna git-chu!”²⁵

²⁴ Masoch, 1870 : p. 206-207. In this instance, Wanda’s whip is triggered after Gregor momentarily forgets—perhaps purposefully—to address her as “mistress.”

²⁵ 3-minute excerpt from Drucker’s *Lost Lake* (2010) – <http://zackarydrucker.com/portfolio/lost-lake/>



Van Barnes, hunting for perverts, in Zackary Drucker’s video, *Lost Lake* (2010)

Proposal: For A New Musical Masochism

It is indeed pervert-huntin’ season in Composer-Country. The *composers-I’d-like-to-hunt* are ripe for embarrassment. I propose a new musical masochistic landscape full of indeterminate peril, that continues where the avant-garde fantasies of our fore-mistresses left off.

Having initially proposed this fantasy years ago, it’s been surprisingly challenging for my imagination to make any headway beyond that post-adolescent dream of a “shit, shit, shit” performance. While satisfying on one level, I’ve continued to wonder what other wooded footpaths the performer might tread while out walking the hounds, their gleaming clarinet slung over their shoulder, on the lookout for clumsy composers. It’s taken me some time but I’ve discovered it’s possible, in fact, to go in several other rousing directions. The following list is by no means exhaustive, and hopefully represents just the beginning of our *composer-hunting* fantasies.



Punishment #1. Scat Play and other Post-Adolescent Indecencies

We've already talked about this one, which might also be termed *Scatological Absurdism*. It's worth noting that though Cage has been greatly glorified for his charitable work toward *letting-sounds-just-be-sounds*, his perhaps more important contribution has been to expand the field of music to welcome the non- and extra-musical. As a result, it can be argued that experimental music today is populated more with requests for actions (and in-actions) than for sounds themselves. It's in this spirit that we here publicly reward any and every clumsily indeterminate instruction with the basest interpretation possible. Excrement is of course a great starting point, but we're also quite open to other humiliating forms, up to and including the realms of *Beavis-and-Butthead*-esque psychodrama.

The next handful of punishments are based on a labor tactic known as *Work-to-Rule*, or *Malicious Compliance*, that in a workplace environment “generally means restricting output, undermining quality, or cutting back service by working strictly by the book.”²⁶ This kind of strategy is often most desirable in situations where striking could result in mass firings; so instead:

In a work-to-rule campaign . . . workers strictly follow company rules and the contract, and do only what they are told to do. They “leave their brains at the gate” and make no extra efforts. They ask their supervisors how to solve problems rather than solving them themselves. They forget the shortcuts they have developed to speed production. They ask managers for help with every job. They perform every task meticulously. They follow all safety procedures to the letter. They do not start work a second before they must and they do not work a second longer than required. They refuse voluntary overtime and take every minute of every break. They grieve every dispute, no matter how trivial. In short, they use management’s rules against the company.²⁷

Punishment #2. Malicious Compliance: leave your brain at the factory gate

Such strategies can be used against the masochistic composer in multiple ways. One option is to “leave your brain at the factory gate” during rehearsals by subtly refusing to make any choices yourself, instead asking the composer again and again for advice in interpreting their score. Our ultimate aim in this endeavour is to eventually perform a work whose indeterminacy has been greatly influenced, or perhaps even completely ruled out, by the composer him- or herself. One such example where this appears explicitly is

²⁶ Brenner, 2005 : 127.

²⁷ Ashby et al, 2005 : 128.

in Adam Overton's *bits & pieces, no. 01: a constant noise* (2010), where all the score's instructions are to be interpreted with the caveat: *don't make any decisions of your own*.²⁸ In this case, and wherever else you'd like to apply it, the rule is: ask the composer what they think, and contribute nothing. *Be a frigid fuck.*

Punishment #3. Malicious Compliance: Weingarten Rehearsals

We can also follow the thread of malicious rehearsal strategies in another direction by performing my friend Mikal Czech's, *(55) Weingarten Rehearsals* (2012),²⁹ a meta-score based on the Weingarten Rights. Established in 1975 by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), Weingarten Rights give workers the right to have union representation during conversations that they believe could result in adverse affects on him or her, and provides a short script that can be read in order to momentarily halt any aggressive employer in their tracks.³⁰ Czech rewrites the Weingarten Rights disclaimer, motivating the performer to refuse speaking with the composer or director without an audience or live videostream present:

*If this discussion could in any way lead to my being
influenced or disciplined (in the Cageian sense),
or affect my personal performance conditions or habits,
I respectfully request that audience members, spectators,
or live streaming video be present at this rehearsal.
Until my witnesses arrive, I choose not to participate in
this discussion.*

²⁸ <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/AdamOverton/BitspiecesNo01AConstantNoise>; It should be noted that this piece was made of bits and pieces of other people's scores, and so the instruction to "[not] make any decisions of your own" most likely belongs to the work of another composer.

²⁹ <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/MikalCzech/55WeingartenRehearsals>

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weingarten_Rights

It should be noted that Czech's work in this case is a direct response to John Cage's practice of calling one-on-one meetings in 1958 with orchestra-members who were about to perform his highly indeterminate piece, *Piano and Orchestra*.³¹

These first two methods of *malicious compliance* primarily work to prolong and chill the atmosphere of rehearsal. In the next two forms of *work-to-rule*, we aim to punish the composer for clumsy, overly indeterminate instructions in their scores.

Punishment #4. Malicious Compliance: boring beyond belief (BBB)

With the *boring beyond belief* strategy, we start by adapting the "leave your brain at the factory gate" approach by refusing to interpret indeterminate instructions in any interesting way, and opting for silence wherever possible. For instance, instructions like "as quietly as possible," "barely," or "choose a low pitch," can all be interpreted as inaudible events. This is similarly applied anytime the duration is indeterminate, in order to produce a performance that is inordinately long, potentially prompting audience members to leave before the work has finished. The hope is that the maltreated audience won't notice the role of the idiot performers so much as the composer's ego, and will instead project their psychic wrath upon her or him for "that gratuitous, boring-ass piece-of-shit 70s performance art bullshit that we were just forced to sit through."

³¹ Cage, 1967 : p. 136. <http://books.google.com/books?id=24ufmNzMlplC&pg=PA136&ots=dN-5P1x55P&dq=%22a%20year%20from%20monday%22%20%22My%20problems%20have%20become%20social%20rather%20than%20musical%22&pg=PA136#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Punishment #5. Malicious Compliance: malicious minimalism

The final malicious compliance strategy we'll outline here is that of *malicious minimalism*, wherein the work is collapsed inward on itself into its tiniest, most insignificant, most featureless form. Think of it as a kind of bondage for scores. Adam Overton's meta-score, *A Musical Minimum Festival or Event* (2009) outlines this exactly:³²

. if the work allows for the determination of instrumentation, materials, and/or actions, always choose the simplest ones...

. if the work allows for the selection of how many tones to play, perform the minimum number of tones...

. if the work allows for the determination of durations, ... always perform the shortest one(s)...

. if the work gives the performer the option to choose their own dynamic, always choose the least audible one...

. if the work gives the performer the option of not playing/performing/acting, remain onstage for the duration of the performance without playing/performing/acting.

. etc

In February 2010, performers did just this with a concert at the wulf. in Los Angeles³³ by realizing thirteen scores as minimally compressed as possible, including all 49 of Overton's *posture series* pieces. For example, the *posture*

series works³⁴—all hand-drawn graphic scores with extremely open instructions—were interpreted by a performer whose quick glance barely traced them with his eyes, and probably covered the entire series in a little under a minute's time. So, the *malicious minimalism* ideal is akin to boiling the fat and flesh off the score's bones, rendering them as pared down, unrecognizable, and unmemorable as possible.

Here are a few more simple punishments with which we might lavish the composer:

Punishment #6. Cage Compression

Perhaps one of lowest forms of scorn that can be hurled at a composer today is to compare them or their work to the great Daddy composer, John Cage. *Cage Compression* then follows in the tradition of *malicious minimalism*, but with the performer attempting to collapse or arrange the composer's indeterminate work to the point that its realization greatly resembles Cage's infamous 4'33" (or some other recognizable Cageian opus).



³² <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/AdamOverton/MusicalMinimumFestivalOrEvent>

³³ a recording can be heard on the wulf.'s website: <http://thewulf.org/media/legacy/music/2010/28feb10/28feb10.mp3>

³⁴ <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/UDP/Search?list=nocorenoevents&fmt=%23SearchPageFmt&action=search&q=%22posture+series%22>

Punishment #7. Forcible Narrative

Forcible Narrative is outlined in Adam Overton's as-yet-unperformed meta-score, *summer pond, placid morning* (2010).³⁵ In this case the ears of the concert audience are poisoned by the performer's re- or mis-naming the composer's work with a narrow, colorful, cinematic title before it's printed in the program. The unwitting audience is hence encouraged to imaginatively destroy the work.



Punishment #8. Tomb of the Unknown Composer

Yet another lash to the composer's ego is to remove his or her name entirely from the works listed on a program... or to claim that they were composed

³⁵ *summer pond, placid morning* (2010) : <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/AdamOverton/Summer-PondPlacidMorning>

by someone else altogether, perhaps someone the composer severely dislikes.³⁶ This and the last punishment are united via a post-Cageian understanding that the titling of a work and/or the identity of its composer radically affect how the listener hears the work in performance.

Punishment #9. Composer/Conductor Lockout

Finally, in Mikal Czech's piece, *(54) Composer/Conductor Lockout !!* (2012),³⁷ we find yet another useful labor resistance practice that can work well within the new musical masochistic domain. In her work, Czech outlines a recipe for temporarily suspending a composer and/or conductor from attending and participating in a concert by positioning some locked-arm audience-activists at the door before showtime, who only open the line for audience and performers. Here again we postpone any kind of pleasure the composer might stand to face, and subject them to humiliation in the face of their friends, audience, and performers.

³⁶ *Tomb of the Unknown Composer* (2012), Adam Overton

³⁷ *(54) Composer/Conductor Lockout !!* (2012) : <http://uploaddownloadperform.net/MikalCzech/54ComposerLockout>



*Composers
Go
Home!*

The Death of the Composer: Score-Play and Spirit-Abuse

With a draft of our masochistic menu now begun and our leather instrument-cases freshly polished, I wish I could say that this proposal ends here. But if you'll bear with me, I wish to prolong what we've got going here between us with just a couple more short statements regarding one last, important issue we must address.

Though I've tortured you these last 30- or 40-minutes with fantasies of reigniting the passion between consenting composers and performers, I think this form of play has one gaping, perhaps unzippable hole that I've failed to mention. With all this hot talk, we may have distracted ourselves from the reality that a composer's presence, consent, or their even being alive, has never actually been required to perform a score. You, the performer, are indeed free to do with these scores as you please, with or without the composer, before or after their death, as disciplined or as foolishly³⁸ as you desire. Having the composer present so that you might witness the humiliation spread across their dour, cringing temple is a sublime fetish all its own, but not a requirement precluding your own pleasure. In their absence, we needn't heed the composer's supposed and anxious "third level" innuendos anymore, nor those of their honorific sepulchral guardians like Petr Kotik, who threaten to strangle us with Cage's invisible "umbilical cord"³⁹—unless of course that just happens to turn you on.

I would argue that there continue to be many pleasures to be had alone with the *masochistic score*, that promise us prolonged evenings of textual, performative ravishment as we twiddle with the possible meanings of its instructions, and tickle-torture the spirit of its author. For these reasons I suggest we in-

³⁸ Cage, 1967 : p. 136.

³⁹ Havelková & Kotik, 2003.

voke the great ghost of Barthes,⁴⁰ and call now for the *Death of the Composer*, hoping that our interpretive humiliation might cross that great expanse to where our heroes are rolling in their graves, and so that *we* might now live to haunt *them*.



*Dear Severin,
down on your bended knee,
our secret Master,
we performers join you now
in this new musical masochistic age,
aching to cure your heart.
Our whip awaits your command.*

⁴⁰ Barthes, 1977: http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf

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