One Stone for Hermione Levi

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Seeking to develop an enhanced awareness of how sound is heard and interpreted “One Stone for Hermione Levi” is an original composition exploring the relationship between spontaneity, creativity and improvisation. Using sounds that are often left unheard, this composition begins and ends with the composer’s heartbeat, creating opportunities to realise the potential of using digital technologies to record, sample and create new sounds using human sources. In this paper, I consider a number of compositional possibilities that may begin to define and recognise the importance of silence as a means to a compositional end. There will be silence, interspersed with bursts of sound, multi-layered to create an illusion of movement through the application of real and virtual instrumentation. Computer-aided compositional strengths and weaknesses will be explored as the concept of presenting sound without visual imagery is discussed. Exploring the uniqueness of sound as a means of expression and individual interpretation, One Stone for Hermione Levi considers two primary questions: ‘what do I see when I hear this sound?’ and ‘how do I find stillness in a multi-sensory world?’

1. INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that the methodologies involved in creating an original composition often undergo a common developmental sequence, beginning with the essence of an idea that may, or may not, be directly linked to the materials and technologies currently available. And, in my experience, the idea is likely to occur when I least expect it, creating an opportunity to consider developmental methodologies at a later date. For me, the idea is always the first part of the process and very rarely as a result of needing to meet a specific objective.

One Stone for Hermione Levi began as a creative and spontaneous response to the memorial wall of the Börneplatz Synagogue (Frankfurt 2004). Walking from one small memorial to the next, I was drawn to a plaque inscribed with the name Hermione Levi. In line with tradition I balanced a small stone in recognition that I had visited and that Hermione had been remembered. There was no other reason for doing this except that this was the only stone placed above Hermione’s name. I photographed the wall, watched tumbler pigeons traverse the skies between tree top and what remained of the old Jewish cemetery and left for home.

2. CONCEPT AND COMPOSITION

The concept of a sound composition began at this point although it would be years before the technology enabled the current version of this idea. The relationship between the wall, stillness and sound became the focus of this piece. Fragmentary in nature, improvisational by design, the composition emerged from a disorganised approach to creativity. If an image is strong enough it will remain with me. This is how I begin to find a way to access this material. The name carried me forward, nudging me to do something in recognition of one thought, one idea, one memory that returned to me time and time again.
3. RECORDING

This representation of *One Stone for Hermione Levi* was created on 24th February 2016. The features are self-explanatory, with the gaps representing stillness between sounds. Nothing is what it seems.

The heartbeat, recorded using a piezo mic taped to the chest, the voice altered, edited and processed using *WavePad*, the heart electronic beat, created using software providing a rhythmic thread. The relationship between digital processing and traditional instrumentation is represented by the guitar section. Originally recorded as an improvised instrumental on an open tuned guitar, small samples were transposed, altered using echo, repeat, reverb and reversed to create a new sound. The stillness remains between each element of sound with uneven timing designed to unsettle the listener.

The original recordings, before editing and transposing, remain as independent and useable soundtracks. The guitar piece contributes to a promotional CD featuring improvisations, poems and soundscapes (Osmond 2015). The heartbeat has been applied to short films produced in association with Renchi Bicknell’s *A Darshan of Starlings & Beautiful Word Birds* (Osmond/Bicknell 2013). These pieces are not out-takes. They form part of a body of work that is only possible through digital applications. The way that sound can be manipulated, sampled and blended is entirely reliant on digital processing. Without *WavePad* and *Cubase*, these compositions would remain in a more traditional format.

The heartbeat can only be really heard through the application of computer processing. Using ECG technology, it becomes audible when played back through the software and hardware applied to this soundscape. It is an unsettling experience to playback the rarely heard sound of my heartbeat. I recorded it not knowing what the unpredictable outcome would be. In this case, it highlighted a possible medical issue, since resolved.

The capacity of digital technologies to emphasise and explore the nature of the human body provides an enormous variety of raw material for creative interpretation. In a sense, this is the core of my current work. Heartbeat, voice, silence or even the rarely heard sound of the human smile (Osmond 2011) all contribute to how I “hear the world”.

Taking a closer look, it is possible to emphasise the stillness between phrases, as illustrated by this screen capture of the first section that follows. The detail is difficult to view in this context although the approach to the compositional process indicates how this composition is structured.

4. COMPOSITIONAL VISUALITY

How does this visuality contribute to sound composition? The concepts surrounding visualising sound are complex and it is occasionally worth printing a read-out of how a specific sound looks. This is of particular interest as a means of establishing the rhythmic and tonal patterns of sections of a recording, or, of a composition. These are often still frames although by muting a composition in development it is possible to view each section as a moving image or animation.

This remains a confusing thought – that sound may be viewed visually without the soundtrack being audible. Why would a composer choose to engage with a visual representation of their composition without hearing the sound? This may reflect structural intent. There are ways to compose without hearing sound that will contribute to how the final composition is heard. In other words, using computer software may provide a greater awareness of the overall integrity of the composition.

5. A COMPOSITIONAL PRINT

Is it playable? It is merely a transcript or a print from the original. It not something that can be
played in any form but a system of continuous signals to the composer as to what happens next. (Thorpe Davie 1953)

Labelling may aid interpretation but only when heard in association with the soundtrack. Like a listener following a printed score as a musician plays their way through a specific performance piece. As a compositional aid, it provides an additional perspective on the appearance of sound. Creatively limited, it does give some indication of what happens within the rendered work. It is an appendix to its development, rather than an important part of the compositional process.

Does it help to explain how stillness works? Without access to headphone or speaker technologies the composer is left with the overall sensation of stillness. Viewed with sound muted, editing software can provide an overall animated view of how the sound, stillness and cadence are presented. Without muted sound, the track becomes a visualisation of the score heard and seen in association with volume and stillness.

What is the benefit of this approach? Compositional integrity relies on the composer's experience. The need to ensure that a composition maintains some form of recognisable structure is important. In improvisation, the same considerations apply. How the sound is heard is just one of several concerns including length, time signature if appropriate, instrumentation, rhythm, pause, pace and timbre are equally important. The use of periods of stillness as a compositional tool provides tension and the need to reflect on what has gone before but without opportunities for reflection, one segment rushes into the next, creating a wall of sound without metaphorically pausing for breath.

6. SOUND AS MOVEMENT

Developing ideas concerning the harmonic structure of sound and motion, John Whitney Sr recognised that the content of music is really motion. Compositional intent revolves around generating and resolving tensions. (Whitney 1972) This is equally apparent when considering the need for stillness in One Stone for Hermione Levi. Placing a small stone on her memorial plaque was a meditative act. The quietness associated with this action provided an opportunity for reflection. Just how this would be captured in sound was only through the imposition of stillness. Movement creates stillness and it is apparent that the need to achieve stillness in musical composition is often superseded by a desire to perpetuate interest by ignoring the role of silence as a means of compositional progression. The audience are interested in silence before a performance to indicate that something is about to happen. When it does, there is an audible sigh of relief. The stillness and movement associated with this composition is created through breaks in the flow of sound. Unevenly presented, it is possible to create some form of restless expectation. These periods could have been longer but time is so often of the essence.

7. CONCLUSION

In the end, all composition is a compromise. The desire to complete the task within a particular timeframe drives its completion. There will always be time to render, re-record, edit and return to the theme over the coming months. The desire to complete is enhanced by the freedom that digital technologies provide. I can return to these sounds as many times as I wish. I can re-enter a stage of post-audio production at the click of a mouse. Why not leave these notes open to further editing, if I wish. The cut and paste initially employed using words can now be easily applied to editing sound. The combinations are endless.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One Stone for Hermione Levi uses a variety of digital technologies to create the final composition including a H4 Zoom digital recorder with a Rode NTG2 external microphone for guitar and voice. Additional recordings were made at the composer's studio in Hampshire (UK) featuring a Tanglewood six string guitar in open tuning. The heartbeat was created by taping a small piezo microphone to the chest and recording the outcome. The final composition was produced in association with Cubase and WavePad to create an MP3 soundtrack. All of which would not have been possible without Hermione Levi and the opportunities taken as an eDesigner working on an EU project in 2004.

9. FUTURE WORK

One Stone for Hermione Levi remains unfinished as a multi-sensory experience. There is still further work to complete using a variety of materials including sound, stencilling, haiku and abstract animations for smartphone. It continues to be a source of creative exploration. The words are simple but the potential for exhibitions and original artworks means that this archive continues to grow.

What follows is just a small tip of this archival iceberg.
10. REFERENCES


Whitney, J. Sr (1972), *Screening Room*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaW4DTKNI1A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaW4DTKNI1A)