

DECIDING

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An improvisation piece for 5-8 musicians and one prompter

Materials

To perform "Deciding" the following items are required:

- 5 clear funnels
- Rubber tubing to fit the funnels and small taps to fit the tubing *
- A large board to attach the funnels, tanks, and tubing to **
- Two large clear tanks to act as reservoirs. One of the two should have a tap.
- Paper stickers for use as signs, or another way to demarcate the funnels
- Food colouring or dye, in quantity
- A ready supply of water
- A marker pen
- Any music-making materials as chosen by the musicians

* tubing and connectors for repairing fridges are a good fit, as they're small, standardised, and cheap

** "tool boards" of the kind used for workshop storage (sturdy, with large holes, and sold with matching metal hooks and connectors) work well here. If a tool board cannot be sourced, scrap wood and carpenters nails will suffice.

Assembly

1. Set up the music-making space to the satisfaction of the musicians.
2. Secure the large board vertically, in a place where it will be visible to all musicians (and the audience, if there is one). There should be room for the prompter to stand nearby and to reach all parts of the board comfortably.
3. Fix the 5 funnels to the board in a horizontal line. Label them as follows, starting from the left -
BROUHAHA
ZEAL
SCATTER
DISCURSION
WOOZE
4. Fix one reservoir to the top of the board and one to the bottom. Attach tubing and taps such that the top reservoir may drain into any of the 5 funnels, each of which may drain into the bottom reservoir, or (with its tap closed) retain its cargo indefinitely.
5. Mix water and food colouring in the top reservoir.
6. Drain enough water into each funnel that the length of tubing above the tap is full, so that even a small amount of water from the top reservoir will start to fill the funnel itself.
7. Draw lines on the BROUHAHA funnel marking empty, 1/6 full, 2/6 full, etc. mark each with a dynamic, from fff at the top through ff, f, mf, mp, p, and finally o (silence)

Performance

The piece is about finding agreement - in times of plenty, or otherwise. The level of water in each funnel represents the intensity of a musical parameter. The prompter fills or empties funnels throughout the piece and the musicians improvise accordingly.

The parameters are carefully chosen to present complex group decision-making problems.

They are -

BROUHAHA - an overall volume/density parameter. Players play at or around the marked dynamic. For every 2 players currently making sound, the dynamic is marked down by one.

ZEAL - the general emotional intensity with which the performers play and interact (without specifying any particular emotional content)

SCATTER - the "timbral-textural width" - high levels admit extreme registers, noises as well as notes, and unpredictable extended techniques. At low levels the register narrows, and when empty even vibrato or variations in articulation are disallowed.

DISCURSION - The level of "pitch class entropy" or "pitch class disagreement". At high levels each musician may sound any pitch at any time. When the funnel is empty ONLY A SINGLE PITCH CLASS MAY SOUND, across the whole ensemble.

WOOZE - the level of rhythmic-metric entropy/disagreement. High levels admit polymetres, wide rubato, changing or multiple tempi, etc. Low levels require synchronisation, through visual cues or metric agreement. When the funnel is empty the players start and end each note/sound simultaneously.

Starting and Ending the Piece

The piece begins with the stage or music-making space in silence and all eyes on the prompter. With an air of authority the prompter sets the starting positions of the funnels however they wish. The musicians start playing only when the BROUHAHA parameter is raised above 0.

The piece ends when the BROUHAHA parameter again fails to zero. Usually the prompter exhausts the top reservoir first, but there is no obligation to do so. If water remains in any of the funnels, the prompter silently and ceremoniously empties them - only when this is complete is the piece finished.

The top reservoir is not emptied even if it has water remaining.

Advice to Prompters

NB: the performers do not see this page.

Move slowly. A skilled improviser can make musical decisions in tenths of a second - the consensus-forming processes that this piece explores might take minutes or more.

Changing two funnels at once (one filling and one emptying) might present an interesting environment - three or more is likely to become unfocused.

Not all funnels need to change their value during the performance.

Planning your actions beforehand is completely acceptable, as is an improvised approach. The performers should have no knowledge of what is going to happen.

Power dynamics are a key object of study here - you are not to make explicit attempts to control the ensemble, resolve disputes, etc, but nonetheless your clothing, bearing, and attitude will have significant effects on the outcome. Many approaches are possible - indifference, bluster, aggression, absurdity, exuberance. Experiment!

Practice with the apparatus will be necessary. In particular, the amount of water in the top tank sets a rough length for the performance and this needs to be calibrated.

The SCATTER parameter is designed as a kind of "escalation mechanism". At low SCATTER levels the other dynamics become more pressing. The musicians can't hide from a low DISCURSION by making unpitched sounds, for example, or spice up a low WOOZE environment by playing with articulations. Use this information wisely.

Don't tell the audience (if present) too much about the inner mechanics of the piece. The drama on stage will be more exciting to watch if it remains unpredictable.

Advice to Performers

Pay close attention to the prompter and the other performers. This is about what happens between you as much as the specific sounds you make.

It's a performance! You can be yourself, or play a role. Either is fine.

It's OK to be mean or self-serving. Power relationships are a key object of study here. Just make sure your actions are causing some sort of change, intensification, or advancement.

Relatedly - young or vulnerable ensembles might want to take a "rehearsal zero" to talk through what they're comfortable with.

It's not at all required that the piece reaches some kind of happy or "democratic" resolution. How beautiful if it does.