

Proposal: European Platform for Artistic Research in Music – Conference 2015

Proposers:

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Abstract:

Vulgar Display: Inscribing the Incompatible

We propose to deliver a presentation documenting our collaborative research, referencing existing outputs and featuring short live demonstrations, the ultimate underlying principle of which is artistic antagonism. Here, irreconcilability informs mutable modifications to specific aspects of our musical practice through the new music ensemble Vulgar Display (formed in 2012). Indeed, it was the conflicting impulses of our individual work as composers that gave rise to Vulgar Display in the first place, viz. apparent timbral incompatibility married to the musico-semiotic valences of vulgarity and sophistication (particularly those of extreme metal as against contemporary classical music).

Our work as an ensemble seeks to advance a negative dialectic in which fractures, polarities or fissures unstably maintain themselves; and this has involved the commissioning of a series of professional and student composers whose brief was simply to 'fail' to integrate the ensemble's component parts (i.e. downtuned, heavily distorted electric guitar, percussion batteries and classical piano trio). In as much as each work posed its own 'problem', militating uniquely against itself, the longer term consequences of the project as a whole have been multiple, not least the introduction of metal as a module strand of the Royal Northern College of Music's undergraduate programme and its implications for the interrelationship between the college's classical and popular music strands at all levels. Naturally, this has led to a re-evaluation of our own artistic directions and goals.

Amongst the more oblique of Vulgar Display's associated developments however has been an unusual extension of its tendencies into philosophical domains, specifically its musico-semiotic references as strategic devices and operative concepts within both deconstruction and critical theory. And it is here, indeed, that the implications of our work thus far can be seen to inform the further modification of our musical practice; the thematisation of the displacement of musical topics as philosophical *topoi* must now, reciprocally and in turn, inform once again musical aesthetics. Both 'sophistication' and

'vulgarity' may here, as a consequence, be understood as rigour, as logic compelled to contend with their own limits, *at the point at which they no longer function*. Our presentation seeks, on this basis, to interrogate the implications for musical practice of the failure of musical rigour, of musical logic in just this sense.

Research Outlook

Our work demonstrates that diverse composers creatively respond to the challenge of writing for seemingly incompatible instrumental groups. Through interrogating the nature of ensemble stability, new musical ideas and compositional problems are discerned and disseminated.

This sense of antagonism as a creative impetus, indeed, informs our own practice: *Horne Discharge*, *Daedalus in Flight*, *Clarke Lashing Out at You*, *Derrida and Topic Theory: Musical Semiotics Folded Back into Philosophy* (as an article). It enriches our teaching, both in terms of composition and general music curriculum development, i.e. the introduction of an undergraduate metal module. Our work has impacted on colleagues and students, furthermore, both through commissioning new works for Vulgar Display but also in provoking reassessments of the 'classical' ensemble within a conservatoire environment, particularly at a time when the longstanding boundaries of instrumental and compositional specialisms are being breached.