Ritual in the context of contemporary music performance

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The concept of ritual has often been applied as a research tool in the context of ethnomusicological studies, focusing on the ritual dimension of traditional-music performance. This theoretical approach is rarely applied to Western-art musical performances, in spite of the fact that there is a clear connection between the concept of ritual and some current patterns of presentation involving composers, performers and audiences. The study of the role of ritual within this framework has been limited, as the concept of the autonomous work has conditioned musicological studies, in particular until the 1980s, and led to a focus on formal analytical studies or structural approaches that preclude contextual aspects. Sociological and anthropological issues have since become more widely researched, but there is still a marked lack of ethnographic-based models that explore the relationship between composers, performers and audiences in Western-art musical performance. A 1995 article by Martha Feldman, a ritual view of *opera seria*, pointed out that, "despite its status as a chronic musicological trope, the ritual paradigm has taken no firm shape in music histories"[1]. This paradigm is still mostly restricted to ethnomusicological studies, and this article by Martha Feldman, albeit mostly focused on historical issues of reception, is an exception among musical studies in the way it presents an integrated outlook on production, performance and reception informed by the ritual paradigm.

Contemporary art-music works are often centred on the exploration of alternative presentation models. This quest for novelty may be found, to different degrees, in all of the three current strands of literate musical composition singled out by Richard Taruskin: the "traditional modernists (…),

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[1] Martha Feldman, "Magic Mirrors and the Seria Stage: Thoughts toward a Ritual View," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 424.

who maintain the literate tradition at its most essentially and exigently literate," the "vastly overpopulated stratum of composers (…) who avail themselves of new technologies that presage the dilution and eventual demise of the literate tradition," and the "small elite of commercially successful caterers to the needs of a newly ascendant class of patrons who currently control the fortunes of the mainstream performance and dissemination media."[2]

Taruskin's description is centred on a composer perspective, but the success and/or relevance of these strands is partly based on their capability to adapt to specific types of audiences and performers; this context can thus provide a basis for understanding performance reception issues as well. Works that focus on technology to such an extent that the performer is excluded do not provide a relevant study basis for an ethnographic approach to performance. Otherwise, all three strands, the 'modernist', the 'technological' and the 'commercially successful', rely on creative patterns that seek a performer's mediated communication with an audience. That communicative intention may seek approval and may intend to appeal, or it may deliberately aim for scandal or a disapproving reaction (a belated aftermath to the transgression aura of early 20th-century avant-garde movements). In all instances, the performer(s)' role is essential as he/she/they often embody implicit or explicit sets or patterns of behaviour, not necessarily strictly musical, which are essential for a successful reception of the work. Composers are aware of the ritual dimension implied by this fact, and their creative work is often informed by the knowledge of the impact that these patterns have on performers and audiences alike.

Aims and context

This research addressed the theoretical implications of applying ethnographic tools of ritual analysis in the context of art-music performance in two specific instances involving works by Sara Carvalho, co-author of this paper. It aimed at demonstrating the pertinence of adapting anthropological models, such as the model proposed by early 20th-century folklorist Arnold van

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[2] Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 5 vols., vol. 5, The Oxford History of Western Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 528.

Gennep (1873-1957) and its adaptation by anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983), to art-music performance, establishing a connection between the concept of ritual and the concepts of narrative and transgression.

The rise of the concept of the musical work as an autonomous entity, derived from the defence of absolute music (that is, non-programmatic music) by critics such as Eduard Hanslick, and promoted by composers from the Romantic generation, led to a focus on the work (as represented by a score), which apparently rendered less relevant the role of the performers and the public. This focus on the work and its composer, rather than on the alleged contingencies and variability associated with performance, was decisive in the establishment of standardized patterns of public musical presentations that crystallized in the early 20th century. These patterns still subsist, to this day, in most Western-art musical performances, focusing on the work as represented solely by its sonic aspect, and minimizing the variability or informality associated with earlier performance patterns.

Current standardized patterns that are noticeable in several aspects of live Western-art performances include, for instance, the average duration of a concert, the choice of repertoire sequences (which follow criteria such as chronology, increasing level of difficulty or volume impact), or the types of works presented (seeking contrast through juxtaposition of works of different eras or character, or seeking thematic or authorial affinities). Other patterns affect the performers: dress rules, sets of specific gestures (such as discreet for expressive, dignified repertoire, or ample and exaggerated for virtuosistic works), or behaviour models towards the audience. But the audience is also conditioned by specific rules: silence during performances, applause at designated stops only, cough at appropriate moments, and indignant stares at prevaricators.

These rules affect concert performances of Western-art historical and contemporary music alike, but the influence of multimedia productions, along with composers' and performers' growing involvement in projects that also include non-musical means of artistic expression, are gradually changing some patterns of musical presentation. The use of theatrical and multimedia resources alter the conventional view of absolute music as represented through the score. The fact that some works deliberately create non-musical references

represents an alternative trend in contemporary Western-art music, parallel to the existence of works that retain the absolute-music paradigm. Art-music patronage and state funding, albeit severely limited, is nowadays, specially in European countries, receptive to this type of alternative proposals, partly corresponding to Taruskin's 'successful caterers' category. This reliance on theatrical devices is characteristic of a referential trend, a trend that often challenges prescriptive ritual features that are embodied in standardized performance patterns.

Ritual analysis

This paper focuses on two pieces that present theatrical features composed by Sara Carvalho. *Sound bridges*, for flute, marimba and double bass (audio example 1: *Sound bridges*), was planned as a pre-ordered set of ritualised moments and conceived as a narrative; score indications in this piece enact a set of actions and a dramatic sequence. The piece consists of a series of 6 blocs of music, cyclically interrupted by compositional devices that break the musical flow, disrupting the expected musical syntax. These compositional devices include a mobile ring tone during the performance, performers looking through score pages unexpectedly out of order, players' coughing and interrupting the concert, and abruptly abandoning the stage before the end of the piece. The narrative sequence challenges conventional patterns by introducing transgressive gestures and actions, but this planned deception relies on the performers for its efficacy.

The second piece, *The Anchorite*, for solo bassoon, is inspired by a type of hermit, ritually enclosed and permanently set apart both from lay society and from regular religious life (audio examples 2 to 4: *The Anchorite*). The piece was commissioned for performance at music festival in Portugal and the concert was held in the Baroque church of a monastery (the choice of venue was made taking into account Sara's work concept; the piece is divided into 3 sections entitled Ritual I, II and III). Lanterns were distributed among audience members prior to the performance of the piece, but no exact instructions were given to the public regarding its use (music example no. 1).

Example 1: Sara Carvalho, The Anchorite (Ritual III), measures 60-63.

Ritual III

The overall lightning, however, was purposefully dimmed at selected moments during the 3 sections of the piece, so as to induce the audience to light the stage area in order to be able to see the performer. The second and third sections of the work, in particular, present several theatrical indications (music example no. 2). While earlier composer instructions required the performer to be barefoot and dressed in a robe, this idea was discarded because of the performer's unwillingness to follow these indications, due to practical reasons. Other theatrical movement indications, such as: "slowly lower your head", "lift your head", or "start moving about on stage", also had to be discarded by request of the performer who did not feel comfortable with most of them.

Example 2: Sara Carvalho, The Anchorite (Ritual II), measures 54-59.

Some theatrical indications were not totally discarded, and, as a result, the lighting did not function as expected because of its connection to these indications. Finally, it was decided that two friends among audience members would lead the use of the lanterns in order to correct this problem.

Whereas the first piece played on the concept of transgression as expressed through interruptions that are normally considered unacceptable in a concert situation, the second piece explored the sharing of a musical experience in which the audience actively contributed to an important scenic element. In both cases, the performer or performers play an essential role: in the first piece, the effectiveness of the transgressive gestures or events depended on the performers' role-playing skills; in the second piece, the unwillingness of the performer could have compromising the final result because of the changes he imposed regarding indications planned for this performance.

The analysis of the interplay between compositional choices, its mediation by the performers, and audience participation and perception, displays a marked parallel to ethnographic models of ritual analysis.

The ritual paradigm

The concept of ritual used as ethnographic model derives mostly from Arnold van Gennep's ethnographic writings and his proposed three-phased structure of ritual action, which includes preliminal, liminal and postliminal stages[3]. The liminal phase has been particularly addressed in anthropological and ethnographic studies, as it corresponds to the actual acting out of a rite or, as defined by Richard Schechner, to "a period of time when a person is 'betwixt and between' social categories or personal identities."[4] Victor Turner used the term 'liminoid' to distinguish voluntary activities (including the arts and popular entertainment) from "liminal,' which refers to rites of passage exclusively. As pointed out by Richard Schechner, during the 'liminal' phase, intervenients in the ritual "become 'nothing,' put into a state of extreme vulnerability where they are open to change,"[5] experiencing a sense of belonging that induces the spirit

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[3] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge Library Editions - Anthropology and Ethnography (London: Routledge, 2004), 11.
[4] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2 ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007; reprint, 2007), 66.
[5] Ibid., 66.

of *communitas* (a term coined by Turner to "characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition"[6]).

Ethnographic descriptions usually address situations quite diverse from contemporary Western-music concerts. The focus is mostly on the performers, audiences and context, as the notion of authorship is often a non-operative concept. Anthropologist Roy Rappaport's definition of ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers,"[7] while describing general characteristics of ritual, stresses the estrangement of the performer from the encoding process. Rappaport's definition belongs to a study on the sacred aspects of ritual and therefore underplays the active contribution of the individual performer. It raises, nevertheless, a relevant issue, namely the production of meaning and encoding of performances as ritualized gestures, sounds or actions. Encoding in Western-music performance, and particularly in musical theatre pieces such as Sara's, depends on all participants and engages all creative practices involved in the composer - performer - audience triad.

In both pieces, Sara had to deal with aspects of function and experience, projecting the compositions' impact on performers and listeners. The development of the ritual dimension in composition involved the organization of performance concepts and imagined dynamics, meaning and modes of performance, both transgressive (as in *Sound bridges*), or normative and participative (as in *The Anchorite*). Performers had to think about the manner in which they were going to present the ritual, how to use the given space and, most importantly, how to enact that same ritual.

This description is not, however, restricted to a mere instance of composer – performer collaboration. As pointed out by ethnomusicologist Gerard Béhague, "the ethnography of musical performance should bring to light the ways non-musical elements in a performance occasion or event influence the musical outcome of a performance. Practices of performance result from the relationship of content and context. To isolate the sound contexts of a

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[6] Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*, ed. Victor Turner, Symbol, Myth and Ritual (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 274.

[7] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 24.

performance and call such an operation 'performance practice' is no longer justifiable."[8]

The 'liminoid' phase, as enacted during the public performance, is the focal point where ritual, as mediated by the performers, involves the listeners as participants in the ritual action. Turner's descriptions of the ritual process depict a journey from 'separation', understood as delimitation in time, space and context, through the liminal/liminoid stage, to 're-aggregation', both in liminal and liminoid contexts. Rituals can encompass both transgression and normative practice; thus, this linear process is similar to the ritual-like procedures involved in the performance/reception of the two pieces: in *Sound bridges*, the initial estrangement and disbelief towards the transgressive interruptions and gestures during the performance led to a gradual understanding and complicity (depending, of course, on a efficient performance); in *The Anchorite*, the lightning conditions affecting the performer induced a participative behaviour by the audience, thus leading to a *communitas* spirit. In both cases, the composition process itself involved a pre-planned practice involving performer(s) and audience in order to reinforce the ritual outlook.

Encoding and meaning in this ritual-like context could be interpreted according to different perspectives, depending on the preferred methodological outlook. A performance-art oriented perspective, such as Richard Schechner's or Victor Turner's, would emphasize the play element as a "liminal or liminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes, essentially 'elusive' - a term derived from the Latin ex for 'away' plus ludere, 'to play'; hence the Latin verb eludere acquired the sense of 'to take away from someone at play,' thus 'to cheat' or 'to deceive'."[9] Our perspective, however, would preferably focus on narrative, as a model of meaning construction through interaction between verbal and musical modes of creation, communication and perception.

Richard Schechner has pointed out that "performing a ritual, or a ritualized theatre piece or exercise, is both narrative (cognitive) and affective"

[8] Gerard Béhague, "A Performance and Listener-Centered Approach to Musical Analysis: Some Theoretical and Methodological Factors," *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 27, no. 1 (2006): 14.

[9] Victor Turner, "Body, Brain and Culture," *Performing Arts Journal* 10, no. 2 (1986): 31.

and that "these work together to form the experience of ritualizing."[10] The use of verbal and non-verbal tools in both pieces allows for the construction of a participative musical narrative, and that process can be partly controlled and reinforced by the composer and performer(s), either through transgression or participation.

Conclusions

The fact that the concept of ritual can be successfully manipulated by the composer and the performer, particularly in the context of contemporary music, demonstrates the pertinence of applying models derived from van Gennep's and Turner's analysis to contemporary musical creation, performance and reception. The extension of this ritual analysis to the concept of musical narrative also allows for a description of ritual and narrative as agents of transformation used by composers and performers, linking thus ritual to both traditional and transgressive concepts of musical narrative that connect composing, performing, and listening activities.

The use of ritual as a model of analysis can also contribute to develop further lines of research on procedures of collaboration between composers and performers involving a jointly and systematically planned impact on audiences, not centred on an autonomic outlook of the musical work.

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[10] Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), 240.

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