Framing New Music:
the effect of preparatory conditions on audience response to Morris's *Clear Sounds* (2013)

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live performance:

Robert Morris *Clear Sounds Among Hills and Waters* (1989, rev. 2013), 11 minutes

Daphne Leong, piano

Highly complex modern music has continued to pose difficulties for the general concert music audience. Music by composers such as Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Anton Webern, and others, despite its acknowledged importance, is often disliked or misunderstood, even if a modicum of listeners enjoy this music.

In what ways can performers, composers, and scholars facilitate audience appreciation and comprehension of such repertoire? DeNora (1986, 2003) and others argue that perception of a musical performance is conditioned by the context—described variously as "framing," "preparatory set" (Meyer 1956) or "contextual cues" (Gumperz 1977)—in which the performance occurs. When the music is new or unfamiliar, these preparatory cues may play a particularly influential role. Our study therefore examines audience response to a complex new piece of music under five different preparatory conditions.

slide The piece is Robert Morris's composition *Clear Sounds Among Hills and Waters*, premiered by Daphne Leong on 25 September 2013. *Clear Sounds* takes its title from a handscroll depicting a landscape, by the Ch'ing dynasty artist Hsiao Yun-ts'ung.

Please see ***handout Fig.1.*** The five preparatory conditions (abbreviated C) are shown here. [Summarize Fig.1, including ***slides*** for C3 and C4.] As I will refer to C1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 often during this morning's presentation, it will be helpful to remember that C1-2 consist of written information—simple identification, and program note—and that C3-4 are composer videos—aesthetic/visual (with scroll), and structural/aural (at the piano); C5 combines C1-4. These conditions represent versions of three common concert preparations: simple identification, program notes, and verbal introductions from the stage.

Subjects who had never heard the piece received one of the preparatory conditions, prior to gathering as an audience to view a life-size video ***slide*** of Leong performing the piece. (The use of the video approximated concert conditions while preserving methodological rigor.)

slide Subjects then answered a questionnaire in which they judged their liking for and interest in the piece; its affect and expressiveness, logic, complexity and comprehensibility of various aspects, features such as soft/loud expressed in binary oppositions, formal characteristics; performance difficulty, and their familiarity with the style. If the reputed inaccessibility of complex modern music results in large part from its complexity (see Berlyne 1971), greater enjoyment would be achieved by reducing the music's perceived complexity by providing listeners with keys for understanding.

Our study attempts to answer the questions: ***slide***

1) Can common concert preparations increase appreciation for and understanding of a 'difficult' piece of modern music?

2) How will exposure to analytical information of a reasonably sophisticated nature affect audience response?

3) What effects will structural and aural information have in comparison to aesthetic and visual information?

4) How will the effects of the preparations delivered by the composer on video compare to the concert default preparations of written program notes or simple written piece identification?

Method

Participants

slide A total of 80 adults participated in the study. Subjects were recruited from the general public and the students, staff, and faculty of an American Western state university. Please see ***handout Fig.2.*** Subjects were divided into two groups: more or less musically sophisticated. The figure shows, for each group, (from the 5-point self-report scales used on the questionnaire) the means for musical experience of various types—overall, listening, playing, composing, and background knowledge.[1]

Results and Discussion

slide Our results were of two types: 1) statistical analysis of responses to the questionnaire's 23 quantitative items (of which the first three items, A2-liking, A3-listen again?, A4-held attention?, were of primary interest) and 2) qualitative analysis of responses to the questionnaire's open-ended questions. The quantitative analysis yielded no significant results, but the qualitative analysis strongly suggested answers to our research questions. I present and discuss the quantitative analysis first, followed by the qualitative analysis.

slide 1) Quantitative analysis

[1] The current study required a broader picture of musical sophistication than that available with existing musical sophistication indices, such as the Ollen Musical Sophistication Index (http://marcs-survey.uws.edu.au/OMSI/), which privilege performance experience.

In order to examine the relatedness of the quantitative items and reduce their number, principal components analysis followed by varimax rotation was performed on the 23 quantitative items of interest. These 23 items reduced to 9 components, that together account for 69.93% of individual variance, indicating the robustness of these 9 components as a core model for the 23 items.

Please see ***handout Fig.3***, where the components are summarized with loadings for their constituent items. After removing from interpretation items that fell below the chosen .56 cut-off for meaningful component loadings, each component was labeled with what appear to be its core features.

Component 1 combines aspects of whether the piece makes sense and is logically structured, with whether it seems to express different feelings. The comprehensibility of the piece seems to associate with expression of emotions.

Component 2 associates two features of the *music* (the degree to which it contains surprises, whether it is expressive or inexpressive) with one of its *performance* (how difficult the piece is to play), and suggests that surprisingness and expressivity depend to some extent on how the piece is performed.

Components 1 and 2 explain 10.259% and 9.218 % of individual variance respectively. Thus the greatest amount of individual variance in the responses can be explained by components that seem to appeal to understanding (that is, logic/feelings) and expression (performance), perhaps, in a more abstract sense, to *communication.*

slide A factorial MANOVA was performed using the 2 groups (musically more/less sophisticated) and 5 preparatory conditions (C1-5) as the independent variables, and component scores from the principal components analysis as the dependent variables. Neither the 2 levels of musical sophistication nor the 5 preparatory conditions had a statistically significant effect on the

dependent variables except that musical sophistication affects Component 8 (familiarity with the piece's style).

2) Qualitative analysis ***slide***

Please turn to ***handout Fig.4.*** This figure summarizes the topics found in participants' responses to the Questionnaire's open-ended items, and tallies the number of comments for each topic. "Comments" includes all comments, both "Questions" and "Observations;" "Questions" refers to requests for more information; and "Observations" refers to statements made. Topics include, for example, questions about the composer's motivation for writing the piece, whether the music accompanies any plays (i.e., theater); and observations on the complexity of the music, on listening strategies, and on a desire to rehear the piece, among others.

(The table does not include comments pertaining specifically to performance. These were uniformly positive, regardless of preparatory condition.)

The table is organized by preparatory condition (C1-5), listed in the top row. The second row lists the number of participants in each condition. Tallies within the chart refer to comments, not to participants. For instance, if a single participant made two different comments on structure, they are counted as 2 comments. The left column under each condition lists the raw tally of comments for each topic; the right column scales that tally by dividing it by the number of participants in the group. For instance, group C1 produced 11 questions about the composer, or .79 questions on this topic per participant.

The bottom portion of the chart summarizes the raw and scaled numbers of Comments (total), Questions, and Observations, as well as the ratios of Questions to Observations. It then numbers and scales the Types of Comments, Questions, and Observations, each topic listed in the chart above counting as one Type.

Maximum and minimum scaled tallies for each row are shown by bold and italicized numbers respectively. For instance, of the five groups, C1 asked the most questions about the composer, **.79** per participant, while C3 asked the least, *.06* per participant. C1 asked the most frequently about the piece's meaning (**.57** questions per participant), while C3 and C5 asked least frequently (*.06* questions per participant in both cases).

Handout Fig.5 slide summarizes these maxima and minima, showing the conditions (C1-5) in which meaningful maxima 1 and 2 (the highest and second-highest points) and minima 1 and 2 (the lowest and second-lowest points) for each topic occur. For example, C1 has the min1 of comments, and the min1 of types of comments ("t-comments"); the italics here mean that it is the minimum by far—no other group comes close.

Arrows point from max1 to max2 and from min1 to min2 of a given topic; lines without arrowheads link the numerically-close points labeled a and b. (For instance, "max1 questions" in C1 ***slide*** point to "max2a questions" in C4 ***slide*** and "max2b questions" in C2.) The strongest relations occur between ***slide*** C3 and C5, and between ***slide*** C2 and C4; ***slide*** a secondary relation links C4 and C5. ***slide*** An order relation <C1, C4, C2> is shown by the arrows leading from max1 (C1) to max2a (C4) and max 2b (C2).

As will be discussed shortly, the qualitative data display a large gap between C1 and C2-5. Viewing C1 as a control group, and C2-5 as the treatment groups per se, will help interpret the relations shown on this figure. For the treatment groups, ***slide*** the scroll visual and aesthetic discussion are defining elements: those conditions that contain them—C3 and C5—relate strongly, while those that do not—C2 and C4—also link closely. The conditions that include an aural demonstration of structural harmonies, C4 and C5, display a secondary linkage. Thus aesthetic and visual information trumps structural and aural information in its effect on audience

response. It also overrides the separation of written information only (C1 and C2) from composer-delivered information on video (C3, C4, C5).

I now (briefly) explore relations among the five conditions more fully. ***slide*** Participants that received only minimal information (C1) demonstrated an almost desperate need to comprehend basic aspects: what motivated the composer to write this piece? what does the piece mean? C1 elicited (out of the five groups) the fewest comments and observations, the most questions, and by far the greatest proportion of questions to observations. The lack of information seemed to contribute to an inability to look beyond the most basic types of questions and observations. Thus, C1 produced by far the least variety of comments: these were restricted to the two types of questions referenced above (about the composer and meaning) and to three types of observations (on a lack of sense, on the piece being dissonant, and on a lack of liking/interest).

slide C2 and C4 group together. It seems that both conditions provided audience members with points from which they could proceed, but which they did not quite know how to apply or interpret. After C1, therefore, these two conditions produced the most questions and many questions about composer and meaning.

Since participants were not sure how to interpret or apply the information they received, they extrapolated from it in many ways. C4 and C2 stimulated the greatest variety of comments and observations. Although they received the least visual information after C1—no visual of the scroll—only they commented specifically on visual imagery (stimulated by the written description of the scroll or by the piece's title). One C2 participant, for example, wrote that "when the piece started, I felt like I could see the misty harbor and the monk in the cave" (#2).

C2 and C4 were also the only two groups that specifically referenced a "story." With one exception, only C2 participants wrote explicitly about listening strategy: "told myself to be open to a different type of music than I would listen to which helped" (#54), "When I couldn't find a clear story, I stepped back and just envisioned the images suggested on the form, listened to the music, and enjoyed it. I found it quite beautiful once I stopped trying to make sense of it" (#2), "I was trying to hear clusters or patterns relating to 12 tone theory"(#52).

slide Conditions C3 and C5 also link strongly. Participants had no trouble interpreting and applying C3's information. Indeed, the clear expectations raised by viewing the scroll conflicted for many with the music subsequently heard.

Thus C3 and C5 elicited few questions and many observations—the lowest ratios of questions to observations of the five groups. These two groups had the most to say about three aesthetic issues: mood, the scroll, and liking. C5 offered the most observations about mood: "dark," "intense/emotional," "very crisp," "frenetic and Charlie Chaplinesque," "choppy," "rigid," "smooth." #75 "felt that the piece started very light and progressed to a dark tone. At the end it was a sad tone." #80 said "it is very different from music I have heard before. The notes and sound seem to stand out more somehow."

The music's perceived incongruity with the scroll visual elicited criticisms. ***slide*** C3 participants made the most observations about the piece's lack of sense, and by far the greatest number of observations about the scroll, 8 of 10 saying that the music did not match the scroll, being heavier, harsher, or more disjointed.[2] One of these (#55) even said that the video may have been intentionally misleading.

[2] 1 of these commented on a mismatch with the title rather than the scroll itself.

Yet more than any other group, C3 participants commented on the helpfulness of the preparatory information and its application to their listening. “This piece is intriguing. It was initially hard to listen and focus on it, but it works much better if considered in the context of the scroll and the ‘walk’ that you take through it and the impression it evokes. However, I’m not sure I would have made any connection with the nature / clear sounds elements if I had not been told about them” (#4).

Although conditions C3 and C5 grouped together most closely, they diverged on a number of points. ***slide*** These points can be traced to C5’s inclusion of the C4 video demonstrating harmonic structure. C5 and C4 elicited the fewest questions about structure. C5 and C4 also produced the fewest observations about lack of sense. The structural and harmonic information given in C4 seemed to satisfy and forestall questions and judgments on these issues.

slide The less one-sided conditions (that is, those including both aesthetic and structural information), C2 and C5, were the only ones that produced explicit observations about the complexity and challenging nature of the piece. For instance, one C2 participant described it as “complex, dense, beautiful, evocative.” Only C2 and C5 evoked requests to rehear the piece.

To conclude, C5 seems to combine the benefits of C3 and C4 while mitigating some of their problems. It balances the weight of one type of information (aesthetic/visual) against that of another (structural/aural), and provides a more variegated approach in which one aspect of the piece is refracted through the lens of another. The richer depiction that results may appeal to a wider array of audience members.

slide C5's benefits are suggested by rankings on the three main items of interest, A2, A3, and A4. Only C5 participants awarded the top ranking to A2 "how much do you like the piece?" These three participants also gave the top ranking to A3 "would you listen to this piece again?" and A4 "the music held my attention." In no other group did any participant give more than a single top ranking to these three questions.

The findings we have discussed imply an ordering of information most helpful to a listener of this piece. The broader questions of context, meaning, and significance need to be answered first; questions of structure then help flesh out the 'how' of the piece's purpose. For instance, C1, faced with a dearth of information, asks first about questions of context and meaning (and not at all about structure).

slide Audience liking for and interest in Morris's *Clear Sounds Among Hills and Waters* would seem, very roughly, to be helped in increasing order by

C1 – simple identification (written)

C4 – structural/aural information (composer video + C1 and C2)

C2 – program note with information on handscroll and structure (written + C1)

C3 – aesthetic/visual information (composer video + C1 and C2)

C5 – all of the above in combination

The qualitative analysis does show that listeners who receive deeper and broader information demonstrate greater understanding, more nuanced questions and comments, and perhaps greater appreciation.

However, the stylistic unfamiliarity and complexity of *Clear Sounds* seems to require much more than simple pre-concert preparations to significantly increase appreciation. Considering that some participants did not even feel competent to rank how much they liked the piece—for example, participant #9 (who received preparation C5) wrote "I cannot say I like or

dislike it because it is so different from my past experience that I don't know how to judge it"—a certain amount of familiarization with the style and its broader context would be beneficial. Furthermore, participant responses suggest that mere *knowledge about* the piece is helpful but insufficient; such knowledge must translate into *experience* (felt, heard, etc.) in order to make a true impact.

Thus with complex modern music, it may be that more far-reaching interventions, including exposing children to such styles, or offering interactive learning opportunities, are required to break the sound barrier. In our study the clear distinctions between groups in the qualitative analysis, and the lack of statistically significant differences in the quantitative analysis, suggest that the effect size of the preparatory conditions is small. Yet the majority of participants indicated a desire for greater learning. ***slide*** #69, who received preparation C4, wrote, "Unsure what to take from the performance. As someone unfamiliar with the music I did want to know more. I'm curious about the sound, the emotion and the overall significance… I came in unfamiliar and left curious."

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