Regaining the Body: An Approach to Corporeality and Physicality in Composition and Musical Collaboration

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REGAINING THE BODY: AN APPROACH TO CORPOREALITY AND PHYSICALITY IN COMPOSITION AND MUSICAL COLLABORATION

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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Regaining the Body: An Approach to Corporeality and Physicality in Composition and Musical Collaboration.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues of corporeality and physicality in my approach to composition, with emphasis on consciousness of, and the creative appropriation of, relationships between performer corporeality and instrument physicality. The predominant focus is music, but I also delineate correspondences between music and modern dance, focusing on Pina Bausch’s ideas about corporeality. I also discuss the social and aesthetic unfoldings achieved through awareness of corporeality and physicality in the realm of contemporary music composition, along with an analytical discussion of my piece “Emptying the Body”, for amplified violoncello.
Regaining the Body: An Approach to Corporeality and Physicality in Composition and Musical Collaboration.

Introduction

Awareness of, and the creative appropriation of the relationship between performer’s corporeality and instrument’s physicality is the focal point of the first part of this paper. Although this document is mainly about music, I have found it very productive to draw connections between music and dance, more specifically connecting — or in better words, pointing out the differences between — the ideas of the German choreographer Pina Bausch\(^1\) and music.

Beginning with Bausch’s premises with regard to corporeality, her criticism of an overvaluation of technique in detriment of expression, the consideration of the body as a carrier of individual and social experiences rather than as functional object that produces movement, I raised questions about the role of corporeality and physicality in musical contexts.

A comparison between Bausch’s concepts and the issue of corporeality and physicality in music also originates a discussion of the idea of homogeneity of sound in the Western Art music, and how this homogeneity is related to the attempt at minimizing or eliminating the instrument’s and the performer's idiosyncrasies. I also speculate about a possible basis for a homogenization of sounds and the influence it imputes socially and esthetically.

\(^1\) Pina Bausch (1940-2009) was a German choreographer, an exponent of the Neo-Expressionist form of German dance (known as Tanztheater, dance-theater), one of the most influential artists of modern dance from the 1970s until now.
I then try to explain the role of corporeality and physicality in my research, including its connection to a fundamental creative impulse in my piece “Emptying the Body”, for amplified violoncello, and the interconnection with instrumental experimentation and other collaborative work, and their impact on some notation issues, including distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches.

Extrapolating from these compositional experiences, relating the idea of corporeality and physicality with the elimination of the corporeal and instrumental particularities, and connecting this with the idea of separation between body and mind and linking this detachment with the idea of social hierarchies, I presented my point of view of some concerning issues related to the socioeconomic environment in which so-called “New Music” is circumscribed.

I. Corporeality and Physicality: some perspectives on the role of the body for Pina Bausch and their possible intersections with music.

Pina Bausch: regaining the body

Pina Bausch’s famous statement “I’m not interested in how people move, but what moves them”² forces us to rethink the role of the body in dance, and also allows us to extrapolate from dance to other artistic forms of expression, such as music. Pina’s statement can be understood as a dissonant perspective on the artistic composition; the work is not based on technique (although all her performers had extensive training and great technique), but “on emotional

² Quoted in Schmidt 1984, 15-16
ground of the performers themselves, on what made them most human”\(^3\). In the context of post-modern dance, one could consider the body as a “formal element, to be moved and manipulated through various techniques, or as a subject presence of the individual, expressing one’s involvement in society through cultural and acculturated images and attitudes.”\(^4\) The Tanztheater aesthetic, of which Pina is considered one of the main representatives, is commonly confronted with American post-modern dance\(^5\), where the movement by itself is the focal point of the artistic experience. The following statement by Nancy Goldner contradicts, almost literally, the above mentioned statement by Pina Bausch, and it helps us to better understand what might be a distinctly American aesthetic: “we dance so that we can express something but first of all we dance so we can move. The idea is to move — how are you going to move, how many interesting ways can you do it. The second idea is that movements have in themselves an expressive quality”\(^6\). In this case, the expression comes from the movement and the human body is merely a tool to extort that movement.

Jonchen Schmidt offers an interesting perspective towards the post-modern dance:

“I see a lot of younger American choreographers now doing things which classical ballet can do better. They are always trying to become brilliant and fast. I ask: Why don’t they do ballet? For me, some of those dancers and choreographers are like hamsters. These little beasts in a wheel go around and around but always remain in the same spot”\(^7\)

The idea of dealing with the body as a relevant and inherent part of the artistic creation can be addressed in different and, somehow, opposite directions.

\(^3\) Climenaga 2009: 2
\(^4\) Climenaga 2009, 24
\(^5\) The so-called American postmodern dance is associated with Merce Cunningham, Alwin Nikolais, Robert Dunn among others American choreographers.
\(^6\) Quoted in Daly 1986, 49
\(^7\) Ibid.
In general terms, and for the purpose of future comparison, we could say that for Goldner and other American post-modern choreographers the body serves the movement and the technique — derived from a traditionalist and formalist approach — should be mastered in order to better reveal an abstract composition, a set of movements that relates with itself; the body is a tool to be used to demonstrate the motion: “motion, not emotion”8. On the other hand, for Bausch the acknowledgement of the body as a carrier of personal and social history, as an accumulation of emotions, intentions, tendencies and particularities, can’t and shouldn’t be suppressed in order to produce a well-coordinated set of movements. In this case the body is considered as a whole; the movement it produces is its idiosyncrasies and its history (which also includes acquiring training, and the ability to control its movements).

Kay Kirchman has argued that for Pina:

...movement is a manifestation of what is stirring, whether it figures as ‘thought’, ‘feeling’ or ‘physical stimulus’. Her work insists that these divisions are obsolete in terms of our physical reality, that they can only be experienced as a totality. (Kirchman, 292)

In Bausch’s perspective, the individual’s experience, which encompasses the emotional, physical and social background each person carries, is the critical component expressed in corporeal terms. The role of the body is redefined from one in which it disappears into the function of creation—as happens in classical ballet and most dance—to one in which it becomes the subject of the performance. The body of each dancer tells its own story based on what it has experienced.

8 "Dance is motion not emotion", Alwin Nikolais saying, quoted in the New York Times (January 24, 1993)
Bauch’s criticism towards the classical ballet technique has its roots in the critique of dividing the body into discrete sections and the alienation between the body from its idiosyncrasies:

In the mechanisms of ballet training the alienation of the body from its own impulses has become just as manifest as the isolation of the limbs from one another. In Pina Bausch’s aesthetic, however, there aren’t any ‘parts of the body’ or movements that originate in only one part. On the contrary, in her choreographies the fragmentation of the body is always depicted and indicted as pain, grievous injury. (Kirchman, 293)

Differences between two contemporeaneous dance aesthetics, in how the body is understood and treated, might connect productively to ways of thinking about corporeality in music. The similarities between a post-modern American dance practice and notions of the body in Western Art music practice provoke a discussion about the impact of the objectification of roles of bodies in their musical contexts, and also the impact of a relative lack of interest among composers, in addressing physicality and corporeality in the realm of music.

Overvaluing technique

Pina’s criticism of post-modern American dance can be addressed to many Western Art music practices: a tendency toward overestimation of technique; a suppression of corporeal particularities; the “sanitation” of body language to represent abstract structures⁹; treatment of the body more as an objective vehicle than as a locus of experience, and finally an alienation of bodies from their owners: it is a tradition to train performers to convey some abstract

⁹ Scales are an example of what I’m, loosely, calling as “abstract structure”: I’m opposing the idea of the concreteness of the instrument and of the relationship of the performer’s body to execute a sound structure. Scales are, firstly, a theoretical pre-conceptualized organization of pitches, where the timbric characteristic between each step of the scale is meant to be as equal as possible from the previous and the next step. A musical scale is a grid in which the performers have to adapt the idiosyncrasies of their instruments and of their bodies to produce an imaginary, abstract sound, removed from the concreteness of their realities, of their bodies and the physical characteristics of their instruments.
structures, to be able to reproduce a set of rules and to obey orders without committing mistakes.

The commonplace idea of virtuosi performance is based on performers’ ability to execute physically challenging music, without making mistakes, demonstrating a flawless technique; the virtuosi are those who can extrapolate the particularities of the body and of the instrument to reproduce a rigid\textsuperscript{10} abstract structure. The cult of the virtuoso venerates high speed, the dexterity of moving parts of the body in order to execute demanding passages, and an attraction to, or at least an evocation of, meeting or exceeding the limits of human possibility. The consecration of the idea of the nearly “humanly impossible”, the suggestion of physical discomfort, the idea of naturalizing a behavior that would otherwise be unnatural, to produce a sequence of organized sounds: all these demonstrate clearly the overestimation of technique in detriment of the awareness of the complexity of the human being responsible for the materialization of the sonic structure. My motivation here is not to criticize complexity or to propose a less challenging and physically less demanding aesthetic, but rather to raise awareness about the importance of corporeality and physicality in music, to point out the emptiness of emphasizing the technique for the sake of its demonstration, and how a high consciousness of these subjects may indicate fertile directions.

\textsuperscript{10} By rigid, I mean, in this regard, an immutable structure where the performer has no right to interfere in the musical idea, where the rules are set hierarchically (composer sets the rules, performer obeys the rules) and where there are absolute rules to follow (pitches, correct rhythms, a certain timbristic quality etc).
Holistic approach

Pina’s reluctance to work under an assumption of separations among the infamous (and pre-detached) tripartite division of mind-body-soul is not merely a reflex of some fashionable mysticism: recognizing the dancers who were working with her as a “whole”, as bearers of inseparable emotions, thoughts and physical apparatus (as opposed to considering them bodies with specific abilities to move), led her work to a highly expressive and innovative path, respectful to the corporeal and personal idiosyncrasies of each collaborator and, at the same time, attentive to the integration of the collaborators as a group, bound by the integration of their multiplicities. Kirchman’s remark about Bausch’s perspective is elucidating:

[...] where people are only observed through the functions of the separate parts of the body, the essence of the body as an organic multiplicity and thereby the human being itself is fundamentally betrayed.” (Kirchman 293).

Pina Bausch found a way to address the human being both as an individual and as part of a social structure, at the same time, or, in better words, not exactly at the same time: she found a way to blend the particulars and the universals of subjective bodily experience into an indivisible expression.

Segregation between mind and body, and a hierarchical social structure in music

The same holistic perspective, supported by Pina, is scarce, or maybe absent in the context of traditional Western Art music. In general terms, taking typical and/or stereotypical perspectives, the composer is usually regarded as responsible for creating intelligent and interesting sonic structures; he (usually a middle-class, educated white male) represents the idea, the mind, and when he is
found to have executed the task economically, he’s called “genius”. On the other hand, the performer is seen as the responsible for executing as accurately as possible the sonic structures created by the composer; s/he represents the brute force, the body, and when s/he is considered to execute that task efficiently s/he’s called “virtuoso”. My comparison of the composers’ and performers’ roles above is very rough and stereotypical, in order to highlight a hierarchy between the two figures. This hierarchy, however, produces an aesthetic and social impact: its delineation of a separation between “mind” and “body” can relate to, and reinforce, separations of socioeconomic classes, where the “thinking” wealthy and educated are valued as hierarchically prime mental subjects, while poor and less-educated subjects, valued for brute labor, arising less from their subjectivity than from the fact of their physical existences.

II. Sonic homogeneity: suppressing the idiosyncrasies of the body and of the instrument.

The alienation of corporeality’s deeper implications from the artistic result, criticized by the Tanztheater supporters, is also present in the musical context. If we think about the structure that frames the realization of an orchestral piece, for example, we can easily find the same characteristics pointed out by the critics of the American post-modern dance. In the musical context, the alienation of corporeality’s implications can be enumerated by observing, among other factors, the following:

- Dismissal of the relationship between the body and the ergonomics of musical instruments—for example, when a single motive requires radically different approaches for production in one instrument as opposed to another, but these differences have no impact on the
composition itself,

• A desire to demonstrate technical competence to the detriment of observance and respect towards the particularities of the performer and of the instruments,

• Standardizations and homogenizations of musical technique, based on the predominance of two parameters (pitch and duration),

• Understanding that perfection and beauty depart from the idea of consonance and dissonance, opposed poles, where the management of this presupposed opposition is based on controlling the framework in which beauty is seen as the subordination and resolution of dissonance to the consonance,

• the similar separation and qualification of sounds between “pitch” and “noise”,

• dualistic approaches policing “musical sounds” and “non-musical sounds”, and

• a propensity to prefer the use of continuity in the concatenation of sounds, over uses of silence.

The ignorance of the relationship between the body and the ergonomics of the musical instruments, the desirability of demonstrating technical competence in detriment of the observance and respect towards the particularities of the performer and of the instruments, the “massification” of the musical technique based on the predominance of two parameters (pitch and duration), the understanding of perfection and beauty departing from the idea of consonance and dissonance, of the separation and qualification of sounds between “pitch” and “noise”, the dualistic approach between musical sounds and non-musical sounds, the propensity to prefer the use of continuity\textsuperscript{11} to concatenate sounds:

\textsuperscript{11} Some examples of the usage of continuity in the context of the traditional Western music: the intentional prevention of large leaps in counterpoint; the prevalence of movement by steps or short intervals in the melodic contour; the avoidance of large spans of silence between sounds.
these factors are related not only to the idea of the restriction of corporeality (and its ramifications) but also to the idea of homogenization in several interconnected layers, in technical, historical and aesthetical aspects.

In Mind Models Roger Reynolds explains the connection between sound, physicality, continuity, homogeneity and the historic context:

“It is not only with regard to the ways in which sounds are employed but in their very physical nature that divergence obtains. The powerfully focused musical continuum of the West from the seventeenth century into the twentieth produced an intolerant adherence to a timbric homogeneity of restrained latitude sometimes dubbed bel canto.”

He also relates the ideal of beauty with homogeneity and the relationship with the music instruments:

“[...] This ideal stressed a sedate, uniform smoothness of instrumental and vocal response and favored musical materials that best displayed these characteristics. Although notice was taken of registral properties, particularly in the case of the clarinet or the violin, for example, the professional performer aimed at an even roundness of sound. Each step up through the compass of an instrument was matched as closely as possible to the last. Discontinuities were noted and averted whenever possible in the selection of instruments and the composition of music.” (Reynolds, 73)

Beginning with the example of orchestral music, where the uniformity of the sounds is required, where a collection of instruments (string section, wind section etc.) of the orchestra is meant to sound as a monolithic group and not as a congregation of individuals, we can easily demonstrate that the singularity of the performers and the idiosyncrasies of their instruments are largely suppressed: 30 violinists must play together, but the goal is to make 30 instruments sound as equal as possible; oneness in orchestral music being among the main goals, the timbre must be controlled and unified—as homogeneous as possible. Standards of competence and high quality are related to how smooth, precise and uniform an enormous instrumental crowd can sound. A conductor is required to control the differences and peculiarities, to
deliver a predetermined ideal of well balanced, even, pleasant and beautiful sound.

The development of musical instruments and the history of their manufacture also reveal an intention to “even out” the sound production\textsuperscript{12}. Mechanical sounds and “noise” deriving from relationships between the body of the performer and the instrument (a squeak in the clarinet, the sound of the hammers of the piano, a harsh bowing in the cello, the sound of the lips touching the flute) were undesirable. The attempt to improve the instruments in order to make them sound more “smooth”, more “stable”, with less noise and more pitches, reflects not only a tendency to homogenize the instrument’s sound, but also reflects a tendency towards the homogenization of the instrumental technique as well as a propensity about a certain compositional and aesthetic decision. The inclination to emphasize the \textit{abstract} potential of the instruments originated a gap between the physical act of playing an instrument and the compositional choices; it created a segregation between the concreteness of the body and the instrument and the abstract idea of musical structures (such as scales, chords, motifs etc.).

\textbf{III. Some thoughts about my research: corporeality, physicality, collaboration and notation in "Emptying the Body".}

“Emptying the Body”, for amplified violoncello, was composed in 2012 as part of the project “Gnarwhallaby 4X4”, a CD funded by crowd sourcing, with new pieces by four Brazilian composers, in collaboration with the Gnarwhallaby quartet, an ensemble based in Los Angeles, California. This piece was premiered

\textsuperscript{12} Not coincidently the “final version” of the majority of the musical instruments was achieved by the same period that the effective orchestral instrumentation was consolidated.
in November 30th 2012, by Derek Stein and was recorded by the same performer in February 2013.

**Extra-musical aspect**

A sort of a linear narrative underlies the piece, roughly and freely based on this metaphor: a person is trying to recognize her/himself by looking at her/his interior; s/he decides that it is necessary to open a whole in the belly in order to try to be “in touch with” the material of which s/he is made of. S/he pinches her/his belly, trying to open a hole on it, without success. Then s/he sharpens a knife while meditating about the best strategy to cut the stomach widely. S/he tests the resistance of her/his skin by hitting the knife gently on the belly. After finding the best spot, s/he cuts the abdomen with the knife, sticks her/his arms and hands inside this hole, gropes the stomach, the liver, the heart, the veins, trying to feel the texture, the size, the weight of each organ, trying to perceive how they’re connected and how their mechanisms work. S/he realizes that it is not enough to understand the functioning of her/his body by using the hands; s/he rips off the stomach, the liver and the intestines and eats them.

**Physicality and Corporeality**

“Emptying the Body” is related to the struggle of trying to find something inside or beyond the body, that could not be observed at its exterior, or in its completeness, but only by cutting it, analyzing the fragments, emptying its content and, beginning from this experience, trying to rebuild it departing from this experience. This piece is connected with my research about the manipulation of time and the relationships among distinct domains of expressive potential: movement, corporeality, physicality, abstract and concrete gestures.
Movement is an intrinsic part of music making, but its relevance is not always recognized in the realm of music composition. The body moves in order to produce a sound; a physical gesture produces a sonic gesture; the body interacts with the instrument; the instrument responds and the body receives this response. Even though this description is obvious, it is important to highlight that only rarely are all the parts of this process is carefully addressed in music analysis. when a piece of music is analyzed. Pedagogical approaches to music analysis have almost always been oriented to the observance of pitches and durations, and to the examination of what is sometimes called “structure” or “form”. Focusing on two parameters and on the overall form seems to be a very inadequate and reductionist way to approach music in general and it is certainly inadequate to address my work.

The intention of giving the cello the power of reaction and decision (instead of being solely the object manipulated by the performer) was in my mind, and much of the performer’s activity is a response to the cello’s reactions towards the cellist actions. The first 9 measures are related to the idea of the cello’s reactivity and insubordination: the open strings throughout these measures somehow represent the cello’s intractability, the left hand doesn’t touch the strings to produce nodes and doesn’t control the pitch content, and—while the right hand is offering violent strokes with the wooden part of the bow—the cello strings meet the bow’s aggressive with the return force of their vibrations. This rebound was thought as a way to help the performer to have less difficulty to achieve the suggested speed: instead of resisting the string’s response and re-articulating the bow stroke, the performer should accept the
ricochet, take advantage of corporeal response to the movement originated by
the string’s reaction and let the bow bounce more freely.

The left hand gradually earns its familiar territory from measure 10 to 20
and, though the fingerboard is now being occupied, the relationship between the
nodes created by the left hand and the sounds produced by the right hand are
parametrically dissociated; all the strings are damped at the same time and a
very slow and smooth glissando in the left hand is contrasted by a fast and
striated percussive movement made by the right hand. In this passage, precise
articulation between rhythms and pitches is not required, desired or notated; the
pitches derived from the interaction between the two hands may and should
vary in each performance, not only because the simultaneous trajectories of the
two hands are determined independently but because each hand should enact a
kind of distinct intentionality.

**Compositional research**

The compositional process of this piece is related to—and, to a certain
degree, dependent upon—of the corporeality of performed gestures and of the
physical characteristics of the instrument. Measures 21 to 60 were entirely based
on my concrete experience with the cello and it derives from my learning
process and awareness of the physical possibilities of the instrument, connected
to my corporeal ability (and lack of ability, in the sense of not a well-trained performer—not being a carrier of habits derived from the specific musical training and repertoire of the cello) to relate to the instrument. These measures are probably the ones that require more electronic amplification, since one of the layers of the left hand is inevitably quiet and discreet. The constant sound produced by the left hand represents the cello’s “respiration”, and my intention was to be able to maintain the impression of a rhythmically continuous sound, that can be felt even if it is partially absent (starting in measure 33) or completely absent (as in measures 46 and 52).

The other continuous element, starting in measure 25, might resemble the impression of a blade, modulating the angle and changing the way it can cut a surface. Both hands have to disrupt their continuous movement to execute new elements: the left hand starting in measure 33 and the right hand starting in measure 40.
Starting in measure 61 and through to the end of the piece I incorporated and combined the standard 5-line staff notation with a 3- or 4-line staff notation (representing the hand’s or the bow’s movements), since the illustration of the body’s movement could be easily and efficiently contained in the description of how it should sound. From measure 61 to 82 I used solely a traditional descriptive notation, as opposed to the previous measures, where the prescriptive notation was more suitable. From measures 83 to the end I combined both types of notation.

This idea of transforming a continuous event into several discontinuous events and of morphing discontinuous events into one linear and continuous event was one of my formal guidelines for the last section of “Emptying the Body”. The continuous gestures derived from measures 21 to 60 are gradually being interrupted and substituted by 16 short, apparently disconnected, and self-contained gestures. These gestures, presented as discontinuous elements, are progressively closer to each other, and some of them gradually start to connect and produce an impression of continuity. An extrapolation of the fourth gesture
on measure 87 is a tentative way to originate a long and continuous event that combines all the three layers present in measure 83.

The compositional process of this piece started with the idea of considering the violin cello as a body capable of demonstrating emotions through its physical behavior, like a person deprived of verbal language that can solely express his/herself via corporeal language. The interaction between the performer and the instrument was thought as a struggle between the performer’s tendency of dominating the instrument (and the technique) and the instrument’s negotiation amid subordination or rebellion to respond to the performer’s attempt at domination.

The first step of my research was to acquire the instrument and study its physical and sonic possibilities. Even though I didn’t have a previous training as a cellist, I improvised with the instrument focusing on the corporeality necessary to produce a sequence of sounds. My intention was to find ways to express, via corporeal gestures towards the instrument, the emotional content of the metaphor that inspired the piece.

Three main corporeal actions are the base of the sonic universe of this piece: plucking, hitting, and sliding. The almost inaudible sliding of the left hand (starting in measure 21) and of the right hand (starting in measure 25, col legno tratto), with apparently no sound output, ostensibly demonstrates that the cello is alive, breathing. I made the decision to amplify the cello almost exclusively to compensate for the quietness of this “breathing” in contrast to the loud percussive sounds.
Notation

The compositional process of “Emptying the Body” raised important issues in notation. Notating music is, for me, always a painful task; it’s a struggle between the comfortable freedom of ideas that can morph easily into almost anything abstract in the mind, and the difficulty of fitting this enormous, free, insubordinate and shapeless abstraction into a “common language”, using tools to shape it, to “adequate” it in a format that conveys information based on a learned behavior and awareness of historic precedents. Notating music seems to be a mechanism that reduces, transforms, re-signifies and petrifies something that once we called “idea”. The score, this necessary and un-gratifying mechanism, to me, serves as a way to share experiences with others and to attempt some sort of communication; it is not as an absolute authority of how it should sound and definitely not as an ultimate representation of an artistic product.

I initially wanted to notate the piece using solely traditional music notation, just in order to communicate quickly and easily with the performer, taking advantage of previous experience with this notation. The intent to be more economical and to facilitate the performer’s job by using a descriptive notation, however, became an impasse. This notation describes the intended sonic result and not the actions necessary to obtain this result. For example, the precision of the rhythms in the opening section might normally be approached with a traditionally regimented technique, but should in this case be accomplished more generally in the physical, corporeal interaction described above. Since this piece was originated with the idea of the relationship between the physicality of the cello and the corporeality of the performer, a prescriptive
notation (a notation that emphasizes indications of how a performer should act to obtain the sound) was actually more clear, transparent and economical than the traditional descriptive notation.

My previous experience with prescriptive notation in my own music was very limited, and in the past I always tried to use traditional descriptive notation, as a “common ground” with the performers, to be as simple as possible in the notation, and I usually incorporated the indications of physical actions verbally. The first draft of “Emptying the Body” was very confusing and crowded; its descriptive notation was actually complicating more than facilitating, since I had an unwanted precision related to the pitch content and very little information about the physical acts that actually mattered to me. The first section of the piece is written in 4 lines, each one indicating the one string of the cello; in the following section (starting in measure 10) I added three more lines representing the fingerboard (nut, middle point, bridge) and a bold line representing the physical actions of the left hand, and an approximation of where, in the fingerboard, the hand should be.

In this case, the precision of the pitches obtained when the right hand hits the strings is irrelevant and the performer shouldn’t “recalculate” this prescriptive notation in order to come up with the precise pitch.

**Collaboration with the performer: concrete experiences with the instrument:**

The experience of working in close proximity with the performer, experimenting and improvising with the instrument was very fruitful for me, and
I believe that the knowledge obtained with this experience can’t be substituted by reading scores, books about the instrumental technique or listening to music. While working with Derek Stein I learned, for example, that the idea of thinking the three line staff as “nut-middle-bridge” was somehow very counterintuitive for the performer. For me, the top line representing the nut of the cello, the top of the fingerboard, was the most natural option because it seemed like the actual physical representation of the instrument; but for the performer the top line representing the lower sounds made no sense. The role of the performer’s creativity in this collaboration was not significantly different from a more traditional collaboration between composers and performers, as for example, the collaboration between Brahms and the violinist Joseph Joachim to compose the Violin Concerto, op. 77: even though the collaboration originated a more idiomatic approach to the instrument, the performer’s creativity related to the composition itself (not the performance) was not largely important and the hierarchy between the idea of composer and performer was not exactly contested and deeply re-thought in my composition; nevertheless this is a subject that is present in my artistic concerns and it will hopefully be addressed in my future works.

Another passage worth mentioning in the subject of the acquisition of experience via concrete contact with the instrument and/or performer is measures 33 to 55: the evolving combination of gestures (started in m. 33, fully achieved in m. 46) was carefully developed while I was experimenting with the cello. For example: it wouldn’t be possible to perform, in the designated speed and rhythmic precision, any other combination of the gestures in measure 46, since the sequence was developed by observing the consequences of the position
of the bow and the hands in the strings and in the body of the cello.

It would be very unfruitful and unintelligent to simply to permute the individual gestures in order to produce a string of events organized in various ways. In this regard, the concreteness of the instrument and the corporeality involved can’t be work in detriment of an abstract compositional idea of sonic organization.

The last section of this piece, starting in measure 83, also has some issues to be addressed concerning the notation, the collaboration with the performer and decisions that blur the lines between compositional and performance aspects. The middle layer of the second third of measure 83 is a combination of the “breathing” gestures of both hands, represented by a continuous arrow. The idea here was to simplify the notation (avoiding the repetition of the lines drawn on the second and third staves) and to relativize the distance between the gestures according to 1) ease of achieving the pitch written and 2) use of the graphical empty space between the gestures. The performer should slide the left hand up or down the fingerboard continuously and interrupt this gesture when it is more convenient to achieve the written pitch, combined with the convenience of the right hand in relation to the required string where the gesture is circumscribed.
It seemed both authoritarian and inefficient to try to notate the precise spot in time where any of these short gestures should occur. Notating “millimetrically” where, in the drawn lines of the “breathing” gesture, the short gestures should occur, seemed unnatural when considering the concrete action of the performer trying to reach the spot of the strings with the fingers of the left hand and the indicated string on the right hand. That notation would lack temporal malleability, and would imply a restriction of the freedom that the body has to execute certain movements, which in this case would generate an unnecessary physical discomfort, a difficulty towards the reading process and a non-intended disturbance of fluidity.

By giving the performer a choice of where in time and movement the short gestures should occur, I am both reducing my control with respect to the performer’s actions and taking advantage of his contribution in the compositional process of the piece, when he is deciding how to shape the temporality and density of this section.

The fragmented nature of parts of this piece and some parametrical independence required to perform some passages, should not contradict the idea of a holistic and “integrated” view of the body of the performer with the instrument and the metaphor behind the piece. For me, and in the case of “Emptying the Body”, fragmentation is related to the idea of disruption of continuity and/or sparse parts of the same matter. Even though the fragments cannot be seen as a homogeneous structure, they are still part of the same substance, but reshaped and re-signified without loosing the fundamental characteristics that unite them. That’s the case of the last section of the piece, where I planned to have two simultaneous and continuous events (a “breathing”
sound in the left hand and the more percussive gestures in both hands) being overlapped and sometimes interrupted by each other, where the first continuity is gradually becoming more disrupted while the sparse continuity of the second material gets gradually less dispersed and becomes a “continuity of fragments”—a continuity that is clearly not homogeneity. My goal was to question the idea of continuity and homogeneity as parallels, and the idea of continuity and fragmentation as opposites, by generating a continuous event made of fragmentations (the bottom staff in measures 83 to the end, but more clearly in the last 3 bars) and a homogeneous matter based in discontinuity (the top staff from measures 83 to the end).

**Conclusion (or an hypothetical perspective)**

The relevance of this piece in my artistic process relates to some criticism I have to offer concerning three interconnected aspects: 1) the alienation of the corporeality and physicality from the compositional process; 2) the use of a possibly noxious preconceived idea of beauty and quality inherited from this alienation, and from the idea of homogeneity; 3) the lack of interest in contesting the hierarchical relationship between composers and performers and the unfolding of this social interaction.

I believe that Pina Bausch dealt profoundly and efficiently with issues relating to corporeality, criticism of technique, social interactivity and individual expression. For Pina the body of each dancer carries a personal and indelible experience combined with a social and equally indelible background, and these experiences are inseparable among themselves and indissoluble from the corporeal expression. Pina’s motivation towards the body was considerate to the
performer’s idiosyncrasies in detriment of a cult of the technique and of an imposed abstract structure to be obeyed by the performers. Pina also didn’t believe in the separation between body, mind and soul, and this conduct leads her to artistic consequences that encompass largely the collaborative work among the performers and consequently the blurring of the hierarchical structures between the choreographer and the dancers, and between the ownership of a work of art.

I consider that Pina Bausch’s work and conduct could serve as a fertile way of observing how different, beneficial and enjoyable the relationship between musicians could be. By Incorporating awareness of corporeality and physicality in music making, and several distinct unfoldings of this attitude, potential new directions emerge in the aesthetic and social realms of the actual state of the so-called Western Art music.

Acknowledgement of the idiosyncrasies of musical instruments, and acceptance of these idiosyncrasies as integral part of the artistic decision, combined with observance and respect to corporeal aspects of music-making involved in the manipulation of these instruments can potentially alter 1) the way composers think about abstract structures in detriment of more concrete actions, 2) interaction between composers and performers and 3) the way realizations of musical works are based in social structures.

If physicality and corporeality are addressed in the process of composing, the idea of beauty related to the sonic homogeneity would be dissolved or, at least rethought and reworked; if the composer is able to think more carefully and more concretely about the performers’ and the instruments’ ergonomics, an overemphasis on technique could be reevaluated, and interaction between
composers and performers could occur in other terms, not in such unidirectional way as the following: the composer (mind) is the authority of the artistic intention and the performer (body) is the vehicle to demonstrate this intention; the composer could be more in touch with the performers and could gain/share different and more concrete experiences; the boundaries between composition and performance could be diminished, the notion of the score as some sort of “final product” and as the “ultimate authority” could be questioned and a larger malleability towards the realization of the music could be achieved; the hierarchy between composers and performers could also be mitigated and the interaction could be multidirectional and perhaps healthier; the idea of virtuosi performers could be rethought (since we would work in direct collaboration with the performers their idiosyncrasies would be faced as qualitative characteristics that adds to the music work, not as technical “defects”), and composers no longer would need to compete to have performances by X or Y famous/important performers; the dissolution of the ideal of the prestigious virtuoso would also dissolve some standardized platforms of performances such as expensive music festivals, costly competitions and privileged commissions.

It is important to remember that to be part of this social structure, which emphasizes these standardized platforms, has remarkable socioeconomic implications—it costs a lot of money to be part of these festivals, competitions, prestigious conservatories/universities, to have private lessons with important composers, to travel around countries to attend contemporary music courses etc.—and also aesthetic consequences—to be part of the “new music” universe is to be connected and sometimes subjected to X, Y or Z validated tradition and/or professor—whether it is put in the box of “new complexity”, “new
simplicity”, “musique concrète instrumentale”, “minimalist music”, “interactive music”, “experimental music” or any other aesthetic affiliation validated historically and/or academically. As important as raising awareness of these socioeconomic and aesthetic implications, we need to question who is actually benefitting from this structure, and how, and if this structure is a reliable and desirable base on which human interaction and artistic manifestation should occur.

This social structure is, regrettably, the structure in which I am circumscribed presently, and being part of this construction influences the way I perceive and interact socially, it modulates the way I feel and react emotionally, and consequently the way I try to demonstrate and deal with my concerns, dissatisfactions, expectations, and alternatives. I suspect that bringing up the subject of corporeality and physicality in music composition is not actually a way to suggest new directions, to open new doors in the same old building; rather it is a provocation, as so many other subjects could be: to raise awareness, to invite others to the discussion, to think about options to abandon or reconstruct a decadent building. Hopefully this document can be more useful than a demonstration of my (in)competence to write logically and to articulate (in)efficiently different authors and composers’ approaches and thoughts; hopefully this document can be more than a private and suffocated cry for an as-yet unclear change.

“Fear moves you. Fear makes you create because you want invent a world where your ideas and your dreams work” (Pina Bausch).
Bibliography


