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Spatial Relationships and Directionality in Katharina Rosenberger's *PERIPHER*

If the immediacy of spatial relationships in music is inversely proportional to the primacy of directionality, the metaphor of perceptual space in compositional practice is perhaps most relevant and useful when temporal linearity within and between musical gestures is negated. Katharina Rosenberger's *PERIPHER*, at least at times, exemplifies this, negating goal-orientated narrative relationships in favor of affine geometrical paradoxes. As the name of the piece implies, *PERIPHER*'s musical material is nebulous but concentrated, lying on the boundary between contradictory perceptual spaces. This will be illustrated using four sound examples taken from the premiere, which was performed by l'Orchestre de Chambre de Genève in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, and at which the author was in attendance.

Sound example #1 – Opening

[The sound examples and score excerpts are available online:

<http://www.sonograma.org/2012/04/spatial-relationships-and-directionality-in-katharina-rosenbergers-peripher/>]

Rosenberger's work is in nearly every respect a percussion concerto with chamber orchestra, fulfilling most of the traditional interrelationships between soloist and ensemble. Yet in lieu of flashy virtuosic cadenzas, the percussion part is dominated by simple gestures, albeit potent and often iconic. The first two minutes of the work, for instance, primarily features a resonant Japanese woodblock, struck forcibly in spaced, isolated attacks. It is sound as body – the body of material, the body of the performance hall, the body of scale. Space is embodied and conditioned, perceptually and physically. "Attacks", as mentioned above, may not be the most accurate of descriptors for this passage, for although the woodblock is played emphatically, almost fervently, the feeling is also one of a religious provocation. With the near constancy of tone and force, one can imagine an accompanying invisible chant, but jittered from a slightly nonuniform, slightly irregular periodicity, creating a sense of time and space that hangs on the edge between static and fluid states.

If the percussion woodblock notes form the dexter on this musical escutcheon, the rest of the ensemble collectively forms the sinister. The strings play in noisy, yet muffled masses that the composer calls "clouds". Part gas, part liquid, like so many of the textures in this work, the string parts here reside in between states of being. One can at times hear a distinct line emerge, but more often an indistinct blur remains. Even the bowing technique indicated in the score suggests this, for the composer asks the players to bow (or strike) the strings in such a way that they are vibrated by the wood of the bow as well as the hair of the bow. Half noise, half pitch. The winds behave similarly, mixing breath (noise) into the played pitch, modifying their embouchures to incorporate more noisy elements, or playing so softly that the gestures are mere mists of sound on the brink of inaudibility. Thus a dense but wispy, amorphous antithesis to the percussion part drifts in and out of view.

Sound example #2 – Measures 82-90

This sound example features the collision between two juxtaposed perceptual spaces, where, for the purposes of this analysis, the phrase “perceptual space” will be used as a metaphor to describe the perceptual sensibilities engendered by hearing a coherent musical identity, especially as related to temporal directionality or the lack thereof. The first half features an active, vibrant array of competing and interacting melodic vectors. The portimenti in the timpani are mirrored in the cellos and basses. The pointed high notes in the marimba spur on similar melodic passages in the upper strings and woodwinds. In fact, a dichotomy quickly emerges between the registers, a smooth hollowing out of the space from the inside out.

It is a short spirited frenetic passage that contains several characteristics of directionalized movement. Yet this suddenly and drastically changes in measure 87 when the bass drum emerges alone and a somber three-note percussion solo appears, negating the climatic expectation. The solo is, arguably, less a response to the immediately preceding activity than an immediate shift in perspective to a different space. In geometric terms, this is a voyage around the periphery of a form with acute angles, whereby the turning of each corner leads to a new face and a new viewpoint. There are three features of this little percussion solo that suggest this. First, the lower conga drum is introduced for the first time. Second, there is a shift from distinct to indistinct pitches. Third, the use of *senza misura* notation, which before was reserved only for moments of pause. *PERIPHER* at select critical moments such as this negates a responsorial continuation and offers instead a juxtaposition of perceptual spaces. These in effect potentially lead, as in the above example, to paradoxical relations: a coexistence of spaces that though behaving symbiotically, each contains its own set of truths that contradict a previous set.

Sound example #3 – Measures 138-168

This is a watershed moment. The “clouds” of the opening section, with their noisy, *col legno* attacks, have now truncated in diversity and unified into a solid body. The homorhythmic collective power of this passage, and its monolithic stature, is unprecedented in the piece. It is fierce and unyielding, yet it represents a nearly frozen turbulence. For instance, though waves of violent attacks keep crashing, the sonorities within the strings and woodwinds – dominated aurally by a clash between D# and E in the first appearance, and E, Bb, B in the second – remain essentially static. Further, the rhythmic attacks in the strings alternate unpredictably between two perceptually similar, but distinct, durations (between exactly 1/2 and 2/3 of a second). If the section initially sounds like the “March to the Scaffold” from Berlioz’ *Symphonie Fantastique*, the listener quickly learns that if this is a march, it is a stilted march in place, denying forward movement in favor of a brutal sustained moment of self-reflection.

The perceptual space is made complex and slightly dichotomous through a competing mild directionality caused by both the role of the brass and the structure. The latter is comprised of a slightly collapsing alternation between two textures: monolithic walls of repeated attacks, and concomitant snaking chromatic lines. Similarly, while the brass initially enter with only crescendoing dissonant chords, the parts gradually become increasingly rearticulated and take on characteristics of the pulsating woodwinds. These two elements combine to generate a subtle increasing sense of urgency and, perhaps, instability.

In spite of the sheer force and violence of this passage (that rarely dips below *forte*), it maintains the sacred and pensive quality of the beginning. The strings especially seem to conflate the aggressive and earthy woodblock attacks with the noisy mass of the “clouds”. Likewise, the percussion part contains spaced, succinct, pointed gestures reminiscent of the opening as well, but now the timbral range has been slightly increased to include marimba, metallic tubes, and, eventually, bass drum. Harshness and turbulence may sit at the frothy surface, but the

syncretic nature of the work stirs below. Hence, it may be in a brutal manifestation, but this section never strays far from the perceptual sacred space that opened *PERIPHER*.

Sound example #4 – Measures 186-216

This longer section arguably forms the climax of *PERIPHER* and provides the only appearances of sustained chords in the piece. It is in two distinct parts: the first dominated by a sustained chord in the winds, the second dominated by a sustained chord in the violins. The former is ca. 35 seconds and, not unlike the previous example, embodies a space comprised of the joining of discreet elements, and resides again within that fragile periphery of mobility and immobility, of either linear directionality or stasis. Examples exist within each instrumental grouping. The fixed, semitone-laden chord in the brass and woodwinds, though initially played at *fff* and with vicious energy, attenuates in a staggered manner to silence. The cascading minor 3rd flourishes in the violins and flutes, which outline an octave at the outset, gradually truncate to a single descending minor 3rd interval. Aligning with the end of a select group of these cascading gestures, and perhaps acting as noisy, percussive extensions, the cellos and basses bring back the violent *jeté* attacks from the previous example; however, once a stable, interlocking rhythmic pattern emerges, they vanish altogether. Finally, the percussion part is comprised of boisterous cymbal crashes and crescendos that eventually yield, rather abruptly, to a fading three-note drum roll; a phrase surprisingly reminiscent of the percussion solo in sound example two.

A graceful transition carries the listener seamlessly to the ethereal second part of this section (mm. 200-216). As above, it features the gradual deconstruction of material through texture and timbre, and abuts, or perhaps fuses, perceptual spaces through the obliquely-related attributes of reflection and inflection – of history, of mobility, of impermanence. It is an intoxicating passage, meditative in its stillness, with the stratospheric, non-vibrato violin chord resembling a spirit invoked and embodied, or a dramatically slowed point in time that leads one to examine the grain of the orchestra's voice. Its timelessness and its manifest spatial profile harkens back to earlier examples. Additionally, punctuated around this chord are fleeting but forceful moments of nestled activity quasi-aligned between percussion, harp, and the strings. The short bursts in the marimba are reinforced by several of the string players, who play with a timbre complimentary to the marimba by striking the wood of their bows against the string. Indeed, the entire second part of this sound example exhibits a focused timbral space characterized by wood and string, played in the highest registers.

As in the previous examples, if there can be considered movement here, it is a steadfastly restricted one, confined to a given perceptual space, or between two contradictory spaces. While directionality within the work is indeed often negated on the more immediate – and certainly the more traditional – domains, Rosenberger ensures that the dominance of this perspective is continuously threatened, facilitating a perceptual multiplicity between mobile and immobile (i.e., directional and static) forces. Perhaps then it could be argued that this dualistic nature of the composition coupled with the sacred, almost transcendental qualities described above allow the music of *PERIPHER* to exist between body and spirit, between the nominal and noumenal, at times embracing one over the other, but always striving for reciprocity.