

# Notation, improvisation, writing: The early music of Roger Redgate

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Roger Redgate's music of the 1980s and early 1990s and its starting point relates to the composer's approach to musical notation. Due to the complex notation of his music, Redgate has been categorised in the 'New Complexity' school, a term that no associated composer feels comfortable with, since notational complexity does not imply a certain kind of music. Redgate's approach is preoccupied with the (im)possibilities of notation, whose level of detail does not aim at precision (like John Cage, he is not interested in transcribing music already heard in the mind); rather, notation is part of a broader approach to compositional systematisation and improvisational techniques. Redgate's compositional procedures, as he comments, include systems derived from notated fragments and serve to provoke a certain reaction on the composer's part. In the same way that an improviser creates a form of notation (tablature) by developing their array of performance techniques, the composer uses notation by way of creating structures that engender processes. Redgate's titles are frequently direct references to writing (*Graffiti*, *Scribble*) or point indirectly to the thought of philosopher Jacques Derrida (*trace*, *+R*, *Pas au-delà* – a deconstructive reading of the earlier *Genoi Hoios Essi*). For Derrida the question of writing (which is no longer subordinate in the binary opposition with speech) precedes, or merges with, the question of technique. The latter is thus situated between life (logos, presence) and death (writing, absence) due to the deconstructive processes and supplementarity within the binary opposition. In a similar way that the technology of the instrument is a form of writing for the improviser, notation (as the composer's instrument) informs compositional technique.

Roger Redgate's early solo music sounds *as if* it was improvised. But although he is also an improviser himself, his compositions of the 1980s and 90s are always precisely notated.<sup>i</sup> This invites us to explore the problematics of notation in relation to improvisation. By this, we do not intend to recall the idea and practice of the *open work*, or that of the "freedom of the performer" – complex issues on their own.

Redgate was a member of the Composers Forum at the Darmstadt summer school for a decade, from the mid 80s to the mid 90s, which is the period when Brian Ferneyhough was the artistic director; his style was formed in these years. The relation of his work with improvisation though, is not typical among the composers he is usually associated with. For Redgate, the problematics of notation and improvisation have also to do with his own references to philosophy and literature, especially a certain Francogerman tradition. In particular, but not only, Derrida's early work: deconstruction, differance, trace. How does deconstruction work in music? I will start with a connection to music (of the numerous, and in many texts) that Derrida points out in *Truth in Painting*; in particular, when he analyses Immanuel Kant's *Third Critique* and the widely known discussion about "free beauty", that which is "not signifying anything, not representing anything, deprived of theme and text". Music without theme and without text: this *detachment* from a concept of what the object must be, this *finality without end*, is what Derrida would later call "the *without* of the pure cut" (Derrida 1987, 97).

It is precisely in free improvisation that we can see the without-signification of music. As was widely conceived in the Western musical tradition, there was a distinction between, on the one hand, the use of styles and types of music (what came to be called "topics") and on the other, pure improvisation, free variation, fantasia.<sup>ii</sup> The Enlightenment ideal of Naturalism found its expression as "music made out of music" taken from human activities – everyday, ceremonial, entertaining, theatrical, and so on. Art imitates nature (e.g. landscape paintings) and music

imitates human nature.<sup>iii</sup>

According to Derrida, the passage from nature to art, in Kant's argumentation, serves to provide an analogy between the two: the framing-foliage, the Greek meander, the ornamental patterns of interlocking lines, have no intrinsic meaning, represent nothing, as they are not related to any concept. The same would go for the classical fantasia, the without-theme, and "all music that is not set to words" (Derrida 1987, 96-7). Therefore, music not related to any kind of rhetoric. The distinction between absolute and programmatic music would be insufficient here. Even absolute music arose from its relation to text: Baroque theorists created catalogues of musical figures and their relation to widely known vocal works relating to certain affections: this is the basis for the *Affektenlehre*.

The parallelism between the non-signification of framing functions in the Fine Arts and improvisation (the non-thematic) in Music is the point of departure for an analysis of the *parergon* in music. Such a discussion would have to step beyond the framing function of the introduction and coda (or transitions between themes and sections): we should allow for the possibility of music with no topos (in the classical tradition) or music with no concept or structure (in the avant-garde). Derrida's take on Kant's argument, allows for the deconstructive functions in the binary *ergon* / *parergon*: the decorative role of the frame is equated with music improvisation through the non-signification, the non-representation, the non-relation to any concept. The *parergon*, says Derrida, is "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work, neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work" (Derrida 1987, 9). The *parergon* thus includes the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, and so on. The paradox of non-signifying music (the *ergon*) as *parergon* is intensified by Redgate by his numerous titles, which refer to writing (*Scribble, Graffiti, Trace*), or titles of Derrida's work (*+R, Feu la cendre, Éperons*).

The performance of a fully notated work, with a heavily complex and detailed score, and its relation to improvisation poses the question of the boundaries between notation and improvisation, also in terms of material, i.e. the boundaries between compositional system and process. Redgate's compositional practice, at least in his early music, uses musical material in the form of freely composed fragments that engender structures and processes, which in turn are developed on different levels at the same time. Compositional systems are derived from these structures and in turn the composer "reacts" to the system's results; this liminal space between system and processes is where composition takes place. For example, the first 8-bar section of *+R* (1991-94, for solo clarinet) was created by freely composed musical ideas that would later be subjected to generative processes.

In an unpublished interview of 1982, Derrida problematises the possibility of improvisation; but, for the moment, let us read this in relation to notation: "there are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture" (cited in *Derrida* 2002). Redgate's response could be described similarly: a composer is given a blank page with a system of staves; this already limits the possibilities of notation. Therefore, the possibility of notating music is already culturally pre-determined (prescribed). But notation, as with writing in general, is an act of inscription. The way Redgate works is in many ways similar to the way an improviser works: they develop an approach to their instrument, in an attempt to reinvent it; they also turn their instrument into a kind of notation, or more precisely a kind of tablature – in the sense that techniques and gestures are developed as a kind of physical memory. One can notate all the possible techniques of an improviser; and this would be only a step further of what the musician does by their developing of a set of techniques. Of course Redgate's compositional process relates to structures and generative processes, whose rigour is in contrast to the act of improvisation; but considering the relation between notation and improvisation, he is interested in problematising their overlap.

Richard Barrett suggests that Redgate's search for a *grammatology of music* has not been adequately discussed (Barrett 1995, 136). A response to this prompt is offered by the relationship of writing to the binary composition/improvisation. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida talks of writing as preceding speech; his project for the deconstruction of classical metaphysics can be seen in the binary speech/writing. He talks about the possibility of overturning the privileged side of the binary, and how this possibility has been always already at work. Traditionally, writing had been situated outside and below the full presence of speech, accused for forgetfulness. As Derrida himself says in relation to classical linguistics: "If "writing" signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs. In that field a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, [...] ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted [signifiers] – hence "written", even if they are "phonic". (Derrida 1997, 44)

Improvisation and composition are regulated by equivalent functions: the presence of the improviser and the absence of the composer are the "phonic" and "graphic" elements here. The latter informs Redgate's search, in a similar way to what prompted John Cage define the musical score as "a letter to the performer". By pushing the limits of traditional notation to the extreme, by taking all or part of the possibilities of an instrument in an attempt to produce new sounds through complex notation or extended techniques, the composer "psychologises" notation: the challenged performer is no longer at ease. The musical score has a new relation to the work, thus rendering even more enigmatic the musical *parergon*.

The relation of writing in the dichotomy improvisation/composition is that of what Derrida called the "third term": it participates in both sides of the polarity. "It is at the same time, the place where the system constitutes itself, and where this constitution is threatened by the heterogeneous" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 5). Notation, as the third term, obscures the limits of what is present and what absent. The discussion here could incorporate the connection that Jean-Jacques Rousseau makes between music and language (in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*) and how the science of Harmony has caused music to degenerate: there is an originary separation between speech and music. For Rousseau it is obvious that the song is the origin of music and that itself derives from the natural inflections of speech. For him, music and song grew apart; it is a case of a degradation caused by the forgetting of the origin of music (see Derrida 1997, 199). Free improvisation requires and exemplifies the purity of speech, presence, natural language; uncontaminated by the evils of writing, cold calculation, and grammaticality.

Derrida's deconstructive strategy, shows how writing grows as a supplement to speech, at the same time substituting and adding to an internal lack. This *both/and* logic is located by Redgate in the overlap of notation and improvisation. The space of this overlap is marked by the *trace*: the condition of difference (between signs); "not only the disappearance of origin", but "the origin of the origin"; "an operation and not a state"; "the *differance* which opens appearance and signification (Derrida 1997, 61; 51; 65)". The idea of the written mark and its trace will give the title to another work by Redgate, *trace* (1996, for solo piano).

Let us now examine the consequences for free improvisation, of this comprehension of language by writing. Since writing precedes speech, what is the kind of notation that always already precedes improvisation? For Redgate, it is the instrument itself. Although writing, as the totality of what gives rise to inscription in general, cannot be reduced to technique or technology, the technology of the instrument is realised as a technique, and more precisely as an array of performance techniques. The improviser, Redgate points out, re-invents their instrument, they create a language, whose notation is the physical memory of their technique and the technology of their instrument.

For Redgate, being interested in free improvisation and free jazz does not legitimize any combinations of both notated, composed structures, and improvising: that would be too

simple. In the programme notes to *Éperons* (1988, for oboe and percussion), Redgate wrote: "Like many of my compositions for solo instruments, this work reflects my interest in free jazz. However, the music is in no way intended to be a jazz composition or to allow the kind of freedom associated with improvisation. Rather, the performer is placed in similar kinds of extreme situations characteristic of such idioms through an exploration of the limits of notation and instrumental technique, retaining a tightly directed control over the result" (in Redgate 2009, 5). It is a question of how one deals with being aware of one's influences, either by allowing or avoiding them in one's own music. In a similar discussion on the freedom of the performer, Xenakis would also point to the idea of influences, although mainly on the performer's part (Matossian 1986, 153-4).

However, before any habitual behaviour or influences that might intervene, it is the function of writing that precedes that of improvising. As I have mentioned, writing would obscure the limit between improvisation and composition, and in its general sense could incorporate any improvisational strategy. Derrida said about improvisation: "It's not easy to improvise, it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say what ever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him" (Unpublished Interview of 1982, cited in *Derrida* 2002).

What if the title were the parergon? asks Derrida in *Truth in Painting*. The title of a chapter in this book gives the title +R. Valerio Adami's drawing *Noyée* (1975), cites Derrida's *Glas* (1974): "l'angle est toujours pour moi un bord de tombe" [the angle is always for me the edge of a tomb]; "Et j'entends à mot angle son gl" [And I hear in the word angle its gl]. The *sound gl*; a writing which is neither pronounceable nor pictorial. Derrida says about this painting: "Still hanging on the hook, snatched from its element but still leaping, desire dancing for the first and last time with a start: (no) more air" (Derrida 1987, 159) with *plus d'air* and *plus air* (+R) carrying each other's trace. He then transposes the *gl* to *tr*: trace, trait, trajectory, traversal, transformation, transcription (Derrida 1987, 169). The words are different each time, but *tr* keeps a certain self-sufficiency; yet, not a proper meaning: "Neither whole nor piece, neither metaphor nor metonymy", says Derrida (1987, 171). He then decomposes the *tr* even further: "rub out the odd bar from the *t*, replace them with the traits of another consonant. For example *r*" (Derrida 1987, 174). Thus you create a "consonant + R" effect; by drawing the + you bring about the trace of the other possible consonances. The trace of the name Derrida, in that of Redgate's. The trace of the technique circular breathing (more and more air), or the circular technique of transcription and composition.

+R does not refer simply to circular breathing; although this technique is the obvious connotation, as is that of the trill, or the tremolo. The idea of the cycle is seen also, precisely in the cyclic compositional approach: the composer composes a fragment of music, subjects the music into generative processes and systems, and reacts to the result in various ways. Redgate's compositional approach allows for space for possibilities; but this does not mean to suggest any teleological realisation of these possibilities. Redgate's music does not seem finalised as if to correspond to a pre-compositional design; yet compositional systems intervene, or rather, the composer/improviser intervenes to the systematic process of composition; the space of this intervention is opened up by precisely the overlap of notation and improvisation.

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<sup>i</sup> More recently, Redgate has used improvisation in his compositional work, such as in his recent *Concerto for Improvising Soloist and Two Ensembles*, commissioned by the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and premiered on 21 November 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> The classical sonata, for example, combines of both dance (or other styles) and fantasia.

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, a judgement of pure taste is not excluded in music with clear topical references; but this is permissible only so long as the listener accedes to the free (or vague) beauty of the particular work (or performance) and not its signification (contrary to adherent beauty, free beauty does not presuppose a concept: thus it deals "only with singularities which must give rise only to universalizable judgements" – Derrida 1987, 93).