This is the published version of a paper presented at International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition, 14th Biennial Meeting in San Francisco.

Citation for the original published paper:

Falthin, P. (2016)
The Meaning of Making: Mapping Strategies in Music Composition.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kmh:diva-2304
The meaning of making – Mapping strategies in music composition

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Abstract—One way to think of creative processes is as recontextualizations of perceptions and conceptions of reality. Impressions and ideas are seen from new perspectives and connected in new ways before entered into a new context in a different form, which may or may not include shifts in modality or form of representation. This study is about how composition students give musical expression to extra-musical phenomena and how they relate their musical thinking to other forms of representation. It involves studying what mapping strategies the student composers develop in order to establish relationships between different forms of representation, but also to study the meaning making processes in both the analysis and synthesis phase of the restructuring of concepts.

The how-questions imply a qualitative approach and method. Data comprise a wide variety of sketch material, as well as scores, performances and recordings of the finalized compositions, and in-depth interviews with the student composers in relation to these materials. In all the studied cases, composition process began with extramusical considerations in the form of narratives, imagery or some kind of physical phenomena (e.g. geometrical concepts, acoustical phenomena and tactile qualities). Typically there would appear several creative processes in different modalities converging into musical form along the composition process. Results suggest that these students intend their music to represent extramusical phenomena and concepts as far as they take that as points of departure for developing compositional concepts, but also for shaping musical expression. To a varying degree, these extramusical considerations are meant to be conveyed in the music.

Keywords—Composition, Mapping strategies, Musical meaning making, Symbolic representation

I. INTRODUCTION

Music is one of the many ways humans try to make sense of the world; to comprehend, form, and express aspects of meaning. Musical meaning making can be seen in a multitude of ways. In focus for this study is representational and symbolic meaning making in the course of the composition process and as part of musical expression.

The purpose of this study is to understand the complexity of the esthetic aims and developments of student composers at university college, particularly in terms of symbolic representation, how and to what ends it is applied, and the nature and role of semiotic process in musical meaning making. These meaning making processes emerge in the course of composition and operate on several levels. In the projects in this study, these meaning making processes typically serve to connect aspects of thinking about worldly or extramusical matters to musical structure, for inspiration to render seed material, for structuring musical form and for expressive purposes.

The research question is: How do composers use mapping strategies to integrate source material into their compositions, and to convey musical meaning to musicians and listeners?

II. APPROACH AND METHODS

The study was inspired by ethnological methods in the sense that it was longitudinal and strived towards an ecological understanding of the objects, and functions of the meaning making processes[1]. Three composers took part in the study. Composition processes often stretch out in time and pass through different stages and consequently learning and development in composition are long term endeavors, which is a reason this study has stretched over seven years, from February 2010 to May 2016. During that period the participants have developed and refined the techniques and methods for composing, and esthetic principles displayed in this study as well as their musical knowledge in a broader sense. At the beginning the participants were undergraduate students in music composition at a university college, but since then they have all finished their composition studies and are now professional composers. One of them has also taken a masters degree in music composition and another is about to finish a master’s degree in mathematics.

Methods for data collection comprised interviews, analyses of scores, sketch materials, performances and recordings. The results presented in this paper constitute but a fraction of the total data material, and were selected to represent the particular foci of this paper – mapping strategies and how meaning emerges from activities of making.

The musical analyses, including analysis of the compositional techniques used, were to a large degree done in dialogue between composer and researcher in the course of the interviews. The outcome of these analyses were subjected to semiotic analysis and structured along three different strands: 1. Aspects of extra musical meanings used for inspirational...
purpose or to generate seed material for composition. 2. Sketch materials or models to structure musical form or regulate construction principles. 3. Symbolic representations to make extramusical references as an integral part of the musical expression.

III. MUSICAL TOPOLOGY

Relations between spatial notions and music can be approached from different angles. That physical gesture is inherent in musical gesture was a point of departure for Smalley when developing spectromorphology, as a technique for notating gestural qualities of sonic events[2]. Smalley mentions four orders of surrogacy that can be engaged whenever a physical gesture is propagated in sound, going from concrete to abstract relations, and discusses the problem of source-bonding as limiting to extrinsic meaning making in music.

Tim has developed techniques for graphical sketching of musical ideas, based on an experienced strong connection between spatiality and music. The sketches employ symbolic representation with a certain degree of conceptual flexibility. The symbols have a kind of nodal structure that is context dependent. According to Tim, items in the drawings represent topoi in the composer’s mind that correspond to certain musical expressions. Sometimes the sketches imply a time axis, other times their function is more geographical, like mind maps over musical ideas and their contexts. In order to elaborate the technique and esthetic principles, Tim practiced this kind of sketching separate from compositional work, as a discipline in itself "to develop a language of musical drawing" as he put it. Sketching in this way offers a kind of abstraction; a meta-level for organizing musical thinking with an option to infer quite specific musical ideas prior to designing the musical activities to shape the musical expression.

Tim has developed the sketching into notation technique, often used in combination with elements of traditional notation. An important feature in the early phases of this was a grid to guide the musician in the awareness of different degrees of presence in the music by means of a simple spatial model. The degree of presence in the music could concern such different aspects as the freedom of improvisation in relation to the score, or a sense of abstraction of being in the world.

IV. GENERATIVE STRUCTURE

Generative structures are commonplace in music composition and typically engage computerized algorithms that mimic some aspect(s) of creation in nature, often inspired by evolutionary theories[3][4]. Ultimately it addresses the question ‘what is life?’ and problems of the existence of a free will. In a series of composition Vincent has dealt with a different approach to generative structures for in music composition, wherein a set of instructions enrols the musicians as generators of musical events and gestures. The overarching structure of the instructions together with the actions of the musicians provide the local and global context; the form of the piece.

Vincent has provided very few sketches within the frame of the study. Instead his mapping strategies go right into the scores that typically focus musical activity rather than convey an image of a musical idea. Some of his pieces have a game-like structure where the actions of the musician have a major influence on the musical structure. This is true in a piece for any instrument, which is setup like a maze where the musician is faced with a series of choices. The choices made, lead to a path that brings certain obligations and then to new forks in the path.

The design resembles that of geographical maps, but in addition to displaying possible pathways it provides a framework for musical improvisation.
V. SYNTHESIS AND COMMUNICATION

Liv’s compositional process sparks from finding commonalities or correspondence between seemingly disparate phenomena, sometimes of musical origin and sometimes from extra-musical sources. The different source materials are processed through each other to render materials for the composition and the compositional process, often in several different dimensions, e.g. time proportions, harmonic structure, instrumentation (sometimes even redesigning of instruments) and design of the composition process. A literary dimension is integral to Liv’s approach to musical meaning making and compositional work. Mapping strategies in Liv’s work always include transformation; the different materials actually change and new meanings emerge.

In a series of works connected through internal heritage, where the resynthesis of source materials rendered stuff to become a seed for the next piece and so on, there was a piece for violin and electro acoustics that employed complex sketching in multiple layers. One set of sketches concerning rhythmical proportions and gesture, involved calculations for phrase length and metric development. Another set of sketches regulated the spatializations of the electro acoustic part. There were sketches concerning development and application of a folk tune used as source material and sketches to deal with the distribution of playing techniques and a drawing of the disposition and proportions of the parts in the large scale form. But lastly there was a drawing to steer to what extent some of the other drawings and sketches should be followed in the compositions process. This way, there was a conflict introduced between the strictly regulated parametrical schemata and randomly assigned instances of free will.

The mapping strategies here involves both symbolic representation, mapping aspects of extrinsic meaning to musical entities, and an intricate web of mapping different aspects of the composition process together.

References