Music Without Sound (1966)
thirteen graphical scores by Meyer Kupferman (1926–2003)

Preface

Music Without Sound is an experiment in musical perception based on a diagrammatic approach to the organization of sound. The heart of the idea is neither entirely new nor revolutionary; today, for example, even a cursory glance at Die Reihe, Sonda, Score, Perspectives of New Music, or Gravesaner Blätter would indicate there are an impressive number of composers all over the world who are involved with some form of diagrammatic notation—generally for music of an aleatoric or improvisational nature. Also, many musical game-forms require visual charts for the details of the game plan and instrumental scoring. "Fantasies" in musical analysis—just look at those curious illustrations of Heinrich Schencker—are beautifully encapsulated in images resembling an architect’s blueprint; and this for something as harmless as a Mozart sonata. If we move further back in time we find that the genesis of diagrammatic notation may recall many aspects of the symbolic musical short-hand methods used by ancient musicians in Eastern and Western cultures.

The main difference between the diagrammatic scores of the past—the aleatoric, improvisational, and game-form charts, etc.—and Music without Sound, is that the former is intended for performance while the latter is solely for the inner ear of the viewer. “…a kind of meditative exercise.” The composer creates drawings of silent, non-existent, but vividly imagined musical thoughts (after all, he is a composer!). These picture-scores, if studied over a period of time, may stimulate a highly complex pattern of thought-sounds even if the viewer is not a musician. This is essential like an unfinished idea. The viewer takes over, transforms the lines, curves, dots, and geometric patterns into a very personal kinetic energy: he hears rhythmic formations usually at first; then the colors of the instruments enter the picture, deploying melodic fragments, accents, harmonies, and bits of musical textures in a way that he can understand. Thus, the viewer completes the music.

Conventional musical symbols employed in some of these score-images are set adrift in a totally nonfunctional context. The viewer may be confused for a moment, almost preferring the non-musical geometric drawings to the specifics of clefs, staves, notes, sharps/flats, etc. And to add to his confusion, music signs may provide an unwelcome touch of anachronistic humor and gentle disarray. But the viewer is quickly reminded he is dealing with the aesthetics of music rather than painting or drawing. He may make surprising associations with these symbols recalling phrase of familiar melodies, a drum beat ostinato, wailing on a favorite instrument, or even the whole gamut of sensations surrounding a previous musical experience. Naturally, these will emerge out of context. Hopefully the viewer will try to fashion a bond between his associations and the visual sound-forms he sees before him. When this begins to happen he will be rewarded with the simple enrichments of creative action. Thus, the viewer completes the music.
Observations over a fifteen year period indicate that composition students find the diagrammatic method for blocking out a musical design particularly valuable in two areas of study: orchestrational and compositional ideation. The complex problems of acoustical balance, for example, involved in orchestrating a work for symphony orchestra are enormous; the endlessly changing mixtures of woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion require the skill of an experienced sound engineer for even the most fundamental maneuvers. Add to this dynamics, accent, phrasing, tempo, and texture—and it seems hopeless to all but the most gifted students. The picture score method, however, enables the student to graph the different choirs of the orchestra in a quick, easily workable short-hand system. He can, in this way, review the balances in all the key sections before embarking on the huge task of the final orchestral score.

Often the idea for a new piece is so illusive that its design may evaporate before the student has a chance to complete its notation. The diagrammatic method permits the composer to make a quick symbolic drawing of its principal features and execute the details of the score later. Electronic music leans heavily on the diagrammatic method for mapping out the designs and intensities of an electronic composition. Ultimately, each composer arrives at a private glossary of graphic symbols which he may employ over and over again. A square might represent a chord; if it is filled in black, it would be quite loud; if it were placed high on the page, it would be heard in the treble range; obviously, it would follow that placed on the bottom of the page it would be heard in the bass. A dot might be a short note; a straight line might be a sustained tone; a wavy curved line might represent a melody, with the rise and fall of the drawing suggesting a parallel rise and fall in the tune.

A growing number of the same symbols are being shared today by many different composers. This phenomenon seems to have come about by accident, by chance, by the curious similarity of needs and, of course, the friendly practice most composers have of exchanging scores with each other. As a result, our conventional system of musical notation is breaking down. In fact, new dictionaries of symbolic musical notation are appearing each year.

*Music Without Sound* requires the same measure of intensity as in reading a poem, examining a piece of sculpture, or listening to a live string quartet. Only when the viewer makes a reasonable effort at concentration—blocking out all extraneous thoughts—will these score-images begin to generate musical impulses. It is interesting to note in closing that children relate to picture-scores with great enthusiasm, particularly when the drawings are in color. A child who draws his own picture-score and gifts it to a friend to interpret at the piano will be pretty clear about what he has composed; a wrong note may cost the player a bloody nose! Clearly, performance is not the main thing “...to capture the essence of a musical idea on paper—that's what counts!” In most cases the child would rather create his picture-score and give it to someone else to look at rather than play. It is not the composer, player, or listener, but the viewer who completes the music.

Meyer Kupferman, 1966
“Music Without Sound” — Transformed into sound / Performance Suggestions

These picture-scores may be used as a basis for thirteen improvisational pieces, either for one instrument or for ensembles of different sizes. First, however, it is essential for the performer to experience the impact of the “visual message.” Some measure of quick analysis is called for—this, so that the soloist or ensemble players can make spontaneous determinations about matters of rhythm, tonality, melodic profile, dynamics, style, and intensity. Also, a practiced eye for such perceptions will soon become familiar with the layout of the score. Keep in mind that diagrammatic notation can be read in any direction, for example: from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, in a circular motion (clockwise or counterclockwise) or in various diagonal directions. On occasion a score may call upon a multi-directional approach by the performers.

When doing a chamber improvisation it is suggested that each artist select, at random, his own particular small portion of the score; concentrate intensely on that area alone, then move along to some symbol or position on the score-page that seems related to the evolving sound of the music—or that seems to suggest sounds that are in sharp contrast to the continuity or instrumental balances. Usually, the same score can be employed over and over again to provide extra movements for an improvisational piece. The players can exaggerate the differences between them, like doing a “loud” version of something that was first played very quietly or doing a “slowish” version of something originally played quite fast. Also, certain symbols can be expressed in different ways.

Meyer Kupferman, 1978

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