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## WITH.
## The significance of a preposition in music and practice.
## (or: towards an ecosystem in music)

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See under https://www.eavesdropping.london/archive-1/
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*Abstract*

Examining the word com-posing, we find the term *with* [Latin: *com*] right in the prefix. In essence, my practice is an *activity*: as an artist I *do* something – often *with* others. When I refer to my *practice*, I am referring to composing, performing, and conducting artistic research, mainly in the field of music theatre and scenic music in the most inclusive sense. My interest is to compose music *with* space, or, I could say, space *with* music. What kind of relationship or activity could be described by the preposition *with*? In my presentation, I will go over several levels, or stages, of the way I understand and use '*with*'. These stages are not separate perspectives; rather, one stage flows into the other as they intersect with each other. Together, they interact and form a systemic structure – an ecosystem of music. Looking into ecosystem ecology, I can further systematise my findings. The discourse about the necessity of this paradigmatic change intensifies considering the pandemic crisis and the state of the Earth. In the Anthropocene, it could be that the picture is not complete without our personal stories. Thus, the *with* turns into a personal and intimate urgency. Arguments from ecosystem ecology bring further insights about the manifold interconnections in my practice, and enlighten the process of decision making in times of complexity. For composers, decision making is a key resource in their practice.

**WITH**

Over the last few years, my relationship with the environment has changed considerably and, in parallel I have observed a change in my practice. When I refer to my *practice*, I am referring to composing, performing, and conducting artistic research, mainly in the field of music theatre and scenic music in the most inclusive sense. My interest is to make, and to compose, music *with* space, or, I could say, space *with* music. Usually, my pieces involve multiple collaborations with other artists from a variety of disciplines. What I have recently noticed in my practice is that relationships and interactions continually make their way into the foreground.

In essence, my practice is an *activity*: as an artist I *do* something – often *with* others. For that reason, I prefer to use descriptive expressions such as interaction, interference, pollution, filter, collaboration, or cooperation in the context of my work. In general, words that connote an active exchange of materials – an *embodied* exchange. On the other hand, I have always conceived my practice as *situational*, meaning that my work and process are *grounded* in a certain situation and context. However, I find that the term *situational* still implies that there is a separation between myself and the situation. The word *with* is more precise. It describes a relationship that is equal, balanced, and reciprocal, instead of hierarchical. Examining the word com-posing, we find the term *with* [Latin: *com*] right in the prefix. This is why I prefer to use the phrase 'I practice *with* a situation' or 'my work and research emerge *with* an environment.'

The origin of this change in my awareness is rooted in a number of artist residencies in unique environments and societies. I worked in Tehran (Iran), Reykjavik (Iceland), Brussels (Belgium) and Wellington (New Zealand). More recently, residencies allowed me to explore the fragile natural ecosystems of a Finnish National Park on the tiny island Örö in the Baltic Sea, as well as the Canadian National Park in the Rocky Mountains at Banff, and the remote village Poschiavo high up in the Swiss Alps. Throughout the course of these situational interactions, I became more sensitive to urgent environmental issues. In my own home country of Austria, political transformations were also having an impact – such as a terror attack in downtown Vienna last year. Of course, the Covid-19 crisis has amplified this change in awareness.

In every situation, I have observed and analysed the way that my practice has manifested, as well as what kind of performances and collaborations have emerged. It is not only the professional environment which has an influence; it is the environment in its entirety which interacts with my practice and vice versa. Again, the word *with* describes this interaction most precisely. My practice and my process interact *with* the entire situation and community: the place, the people and culture plus manmade technologies, the terrain (including plants, animals, the ground, earth and rocks).

**Composition is the great *With*.**

What kind of relationship or activity could be described by the preposition *with*? In this presentation, I will go over several levels, or stages, of the way I understand and use *"with"*. These stages are not separate aspects; rather, one stage flows into the other as they intersect with each other. Together, they interact and form a systemic structure – an ecosystem of music. Recently, I began to look into ecosystem ecology, which I find very inspiring and which I want to connect with my practice, in order to systematise my findings.

Literally, *ecology* is the study of organisms 'in their home' (Greek *oikos* - house, place to live). Historically, the conception of an *ecosystem* as a system that couples not only the "organism-complex,

but also the whole complex of physical factors forming what we call an environment" (Tansely, 1935 in: Frid, Ch. & Raffaelli, D. G., 2010) was brought up by botanists and refined over time. Their idea was adapted and expanded upon as more scientific disciplines were included. Eugene Pleasants Odum, the pioneer of ecosystem ecology, describes *ecology* as the "science of the interrelations between living organisms and their environment" (Odum, 1971). Presently, the term ecosystem includes many disciplines and provides models for a number of purposes, even in the fields of economy, philosophy, and humanities. I use an ecological concept of music in order to weave all these aspects of *with* together in a meaningful way.

**The *with of the ear* – perception and acoustics**

I am a person who defines herself by the act and practice of listening – first and foremost, I use my ears to connect to my environment. Listening is the tool I use to actively investigate the world and communicate *with* it. There is an auditory field all around me, to the front and back, above and below, on all sides. I cannot close my ears; the sounds penetrate and enter me, they can become painful. The artists and researchers into listening Salome Voegelin (2010) and Murray Schafer (1994) propose that there is no distinction between a loud noise and the one who listens to it: in listening perception, *with* becomes a nexus. Listening goes under the skin. Listening perception borders on touch. It is possible to listen *into* things and materials: tapping my fingers on the table, I listen *into* the material of my body parts, the surface material of the table, and the material inside the table all coming together, producing the short noises that act on me. Acoustically, according to Albert S. Bregman's *Auditory Scene Analysis* (1990), every sound is perceived along with all of its echoes – these echoes are reflected by whatever materials are present in the environment. In this way, all materials, including living beings like ourselves, plus the carrier medium that transports the sound waves, contribute to the acoustic information about an environment. By bringing sounds and echoes together, spatial information is created. My ears recognise the sounds and echoes from living and non-living sources, as well as from their interaction: I listen *into* an ecosystem.

On the other hand, listening can be investigated from the position of neuroscience. In this field, 'enactive perception' is used to describe how the process of perception re-creates the world. The creative potential of enactive perception is clear when discussing the act of listening. Listening is not passive: it is an inventive activity that reaches out into space. It is helpful to consider aspects of neuro-materiality: here, we find a conception of listening that includes aspects of culture, society, cognition, and behaviour. I would say listening mirrors the compositional process. As listening becomes composing, I interact *with* the world in a direct and personal process, just as the world interacts *with* me.

What I'd like to say with all of this is that the *with of the ear* defines my primary communication *with* the world, a communication that I experience as direct and immediate. It is an activity that is artistic,

fluid, and very personal. We compose soundtracks of our lives *together with* the environment. The *with of listening* is unique in that it enables me to perceive the world as polyphony: every single sound or noise finds a place within the multi-voiced total experience, every single sound contributes to the sonosphere. It is my choice as listener whether to direct my ears towards the entire polyphony at any particular time or towards singular occurrences. From a compositional way of thinking, this is what characterises a listening to a polyphony. Listening is the perfect practice to explore a multi-voiced ecosystem.

### *With* the community - a philosophical approach

Here I would like to look more closely into the aspect of community and my relation with a community, or audience, as individual. Community is especially interesting in terms of music theatre and performative arts: both are fields which have the effect of generating a community in a public performance situation. The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that " the 'place of community' – in other words, the place of a specific existence, the existence of 'being-in-common' " is always political. He speaks of an *exposition* that takes place in human communication: "finite existence exposed to finite existence, co-appearing before and with it" (Nancy, 2015). The intimacy of an 'inside' is confronted *with* an 'outside' (Nancy, 2015). Per Nancy, we can think of the audience forming a community that co-appears with the exposition of the performers on stage.

Much in the same way, the Mexican author Octavio Paz pointed out that in Baroque performance practice the society presented a mirror of itself: the audience and the performers were acutely aware of their participation in a community ritual as a kind of 'social theatre' performance. There was a notion of respect of everybody's role in the interaction. Together, the audience and the performing artists established a social choreography; in their ritual, the community empowered themselves and unified their social contract (Paz, 1994).

The feminist author Rosi Braidotti (2011) mentions that "all communities are imaginary constructions". While imagined, they are still "densely material structures that weigh down on us and brand us". This is interesting in terms of our imagined community as listeners, at this moment. Braidotti proposes that we can rethink community in a nomadic feminist way, as a collective figuration that is grounded in "a commonly shared and argued politics of location" and guided by imagination as well as situated knowledge (Braidotti, 2011).

The aspects of community and shared space which I have addressed are essential elements of the performance that I am giving in real life right here at home, in front of a microphone. In streaming my recorded talk, am I really sharing my finite existence with a community, following the concept of Nancy? As I speak right now, I have you, the audience, in mind: my feelings and my voice extend outwards towards *our* fictitious community. Is *this* a 'place of community' or not? I would argue that

yes, it is. There is a sense of doing something together and a sense of being exposed that feels very real to me, at least, in this moment.

**_With_ the planet**

Travelling extensively and living in remote places as well as in urban centres, I have found that humans have made their mark on ecosystems everywhere – to an extent that is quite shocking. It feels violent. My body is touched. I feel an urgency, a drive to act. The urgency fires my practice, I feel driven, but I don't exactly know how this process will unfold. It is an open-ended process. Interestingly, the philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour (Davis & Turpin, 2015) describes similar experiences in a recent interview about art in the Anthropocene. Latour mentions that he observes a kind of _urgency_ being expressed, when he talks with scientists and artists. He says that in these conversations he notices a 'narrativity' in what people explain - meaning, that it seems to be important to include one's personal experience when talking about the Anthropocene. It could be that the picture is not complete without our personal stories. Thus, regarding the planet, the _with_ turns into an intimate and personal urgency.

Music is a forest and I'm a tree of my own within this greater living entity. I stand apart, but could not – and would not want to – thrive without others of my kind. This could be the Anthropocene throwing its shadow onto music theatre and composition: the ecological situation of the planet makes me realise how interconnected things are – there are interdependencies and interferences everywhere. At this stage, _com_-position meets _com_-passion: I experience both as activities guided by an awareness of others around me, of the entire environment, of the ecosystem that I am a part of.

(*Whispered, in the background*)
*I'm with the stone bench in the garden, with the snails, with the compost, with the stove, the church bells, the helicopter and the rain, with the grass and the plum tree. With the plastic waste and the virus. Nobody can escape. We have become entangled beyond repair. The Anthropocene will never again go away. It will be with me until I die. I will never be free from pollution any more.*

**The feminist composer's _with_ - engagement on a personal level, _com_passion**

The final _with_ that I would like to explore is the feminist _with_, which is a _with_ of political and cultural engagement. I see feminism as an activity, not a perspective. Feminism is manifest in the way I take decisions and act. The term _feminism_ is a label for a kind of compassionate practice. This _with_ emerges from an in-depth connection driven by compassion rather than an interest in producing 'feminist action' or 'feminist art' or nominally 'feminist works'. I see feminism as the desire and will to effect change: it is not enough for me just to observe, criticise, or protest. I also want to take action towards building a future society and culture. I see my activities as guided by a certain direction and a

certain mode of thinking, one which is oriented around the idea of a more inclusive, open, and equal culture. This applies to my compositional process and artistic production as well as to my everyday life.

The feminist aspects of music and music production form the foundations of my artistic research. In order to be able to compose genuinely, I felt the need to become socially active in my own way. There is a need for women* (that is, people identifying as female in the widest sense) to represent themselves, artistically and politically. I resonate with the term '*feministing*' proposed by the curator and art historian Gill Park (2020) as well as with her position that artistic experimentalism, theory, and activism belong together. Following Park's position, one could say that I'm interested in the experiences of women* "while investigating urgent theoretical questions about art and our social relations" (Park, 2020). This is particularly important now, during the pandemic crisis. All over the world, women* are stating their ideas and needs with renewed urgency. On one hand, the pandemic crisis affects women* in many ways: often they are involved with providing care for others. On the other hand, they continue to be engaged in environmental and social activism, with women* bearing the majority of the burden of environmental changes.

**Summary**

While fields such as listening, feminism, or community have been widely explored as separate fields of study, the concept of an ecosystem allows me to bring them together and look at a larger systemic structure. Thus, it is possible to understand how they interconnect and influence each other. It is interesting to observe both humans and any non-living elements such as venues, instruments, and technologies together as a single ecosystem in music. The paradigmatic shift to ecosystem ecology brings a new awareness into my practice: in life, in art, in culture, in music.

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