Re-voicing Rameau: borrowing practice in Tom Armstrong’s JPR

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Introduction

My aims for my paper are relatively modest; it is essentially a contextualisation of my piece JPR in practical and theoretical terms. I also aim to give some insights into the compositional process behind the piece.

Practice Context

The difficulty in contextualising one’s work within the practice of musical borrowing is that it covers virtually the entire history of Western classical and popular music as a look at the index of Burkholder’s Grove Music Online article demonstrates. [SLIDE] One helpful way of delineating what I am doing involves leaving aside borrowing in popular music; as will become clear the connections with these types of borrowing practices including sampling and remixing are far less strong in my piece JPR than with practices found in classical music. Another is to investigate only those precursors in which complete pieces are borrowed; JPR uses material from every piece in Jean-Philippe Rameau’s set of Pièces de clavecin en concerts (published 1741) with the exception of Menuet 2 from suite #2 and Tambourin 1 from suite #3. Yet another is to investigate borrowing techniques that involve some kind of erasure of the original material and it is some examples from this repertoire that I am going to focus on as providing a lineage (as Robin Nelson puts it) for my practice in JPR. (Nelson, 2013)

Borrowing existing music is not without precedent in my own output and I have used several of the approaches outlined by Burkholder in All Made of Tunes, his monumental tome on Ives’ use of existing music. (1995: 3-4) Akin (2008) for violin and piano is a type of modelling in which the proportions, formal shape, rhythmic characters and harmonic structures of the track Fracture by King Crimson are the starting points of the piece. Damascene Portrait (2003) for brass quartet is a transcription of a Syrian lute improvisation and The Chief Inspector of Holes (1994) for narrator and piano trio features both the paraphrase and cumulative setting of a ‘ditty’ composed by my father to accompany a childhood storybook of mine (Patrick by Quentin Blake). [SLIDE]

JPR borrows all sixteen movements (not counting the individual pieces Menuet 2 and Tambourin 1) from Rameau’s collection of five suites (the Pièces de clavecin en concerts), it assigns each piece to a particular player (in the form of their part), heavily filters each piece resulting in the erasure of large quantities of material and superimposes the results to form a new set of five trios each containing pieces from three different suites performed simultaneously. [SLIDE] As is common with much musical borrowing JPR resists easy categorisation: it involves literal quotation in varying degrees of recognisability and, of Burkholder’s fourteen types of borrowing found in the music of Charles Ives, probably bares closest resemblance to quodlibet (at least the first part of the definition) - “combining two or more existing tunes or fragments in counterpoint or in quick succession, most often as a joke or technical tour de force.” (1995: 3-4) [SLIDE] The music often presents a collage-like surface but without the base material, e.g. the scherzo from Mahler’s second symphony in the third movement of Berio’s Sinfonia, that serves as the musical equivalent of the surface on which the collage is assembled.

Erasure has precedents in classical music before the 20th century. The conclusion of the funeral march from Beethoven’s Eroica symphony achieves a comparable effect through the insertion of silences between segments of the opening theme although there is also genuine deletion here of the two Ds at the start of bar 5 of the original. [SLIDE] Beethoven uses the technique again in variation 13 of the Diabelli Variations; in William Kinderman’s words, “…the harmonically static bars of Diabelli’s opening theme are suppressed altogether, obliterated into silence behind rhythmically charged chords.” (Kindermann, 1987: 70) [SLIDE] Less parodistically but also, like Beethoven, as
an ending gesture, Schumann gradually erases each note of the rising scale figure of the opening number of *Papillons* at the conclusion of the work’s finale. [SLIDE] More radically than Beethoven, every note is finally removed leaving only the accompaniment. As part of the final cadence the dominant 7th chord of D major has its notes withdrawn one by one - melody by deletion. Moving into the 20th century, the collage of quotations that form the third movement of Berio’s *Sinfonia*, partly by necessity and partly by design (David Osmond-Smith identifies “incremental obliteration” as one of the main formal strategies of the movement), erase the elements of the Mahler scherzo that forms the base material. (Osmond-Smith, 1985: 39)

Two slightly more recent works approach *JPR* more closely in terms of technique and aesthetic. Paul Whitty’s *thirty-nine pages* (2009) borrows the entirety of Franck’s *Violin Sonata in A major*. Using the Henle Urtext Edition of the piece, Paul performs a series of what he terms mis-readings of the score in which the notation is seen as an inventory of events rather prescribing a linear sequence of actions. Typical of this is page 14 in which each instrument simply plays a list of each note in their part ordered from highest to lowest. [SLIDE] Although there is no erasure as such (every note on the page is eventually played) the atomisation of each note into an isolated event and the lack of coordination between violin and piano creates an ungainly instability that is a hallmark of *JPR* also. [PLAY] Page 14 depends on time] Bearing a closer resemblance to my approach is page 43 in which only the appearances of the pitch class A are included. [SLIDE]

The piece (pieces) that bare closest affinity to *JPR* though are Cage’s compositions based on 18th century American hymnals such as those by William Billings. The first of these, *Apartment House 1776*, employs a diverse set of materials as a ‘musicircus’ including a set of 44 ‘Harmonies’, 18th century American hymns subjected to a subtraction process. Chance procedures were used to determine whether notes from individual parts should be sung or replaced with a rest, then to determine their length (if sung). This hard-won technique, according to James Pritchett, allowed Cage to “break the bonds of harmony” of the originals, he goes on, “Each tone is also surrounded on both sides by a silence. Together, these two factors - the breaking up of harmonies and the floating of individual sounds in silences - create the effect of each tone being exactly itself…” (Pritchett, 1993: 4) [PLAY Harmony 1: Cookfield-Lyon] Although the sense of each sound as itself is not as strong in *JPR* the idea of making tonal music ‘float’ is one that crops up many times in my working journals. The role of silence ‘bracketing’ sounds is also important.

The filtering procedures in *JPR* are applied to individual parts selected from each piece and their function is to erase often a large quantity of pitches. They are ‘informal’ procedures meaning that they should be distinguished from more abstract post-serial techniques such as Maxwell Davies’ various ‘sieves’. I compiled a list of 13 filtering procedures and quickly found that particular parts were amenable to certain approaches and not others. I worked autonomously, not attempting to balance filtering across the three parts in each trio. In my first trio, *La Laborde* (from Rameau’s second suite in G) provides the material for the viola da gamba part. The extract from my sketch shows three different methods of filtering the original gamba part: 1) extracting a distinctive figure or motive, 2) extracting only material from cadences, here 1) and 2) are alternated, and 3) taking ‘anonymous’ material from inner parts. [SLIDE] The final version of the part includes a further filtering of notes with a genuine bass function. [SLIDE] Like Cage’s *Harmonies* my filtering respects Rameau’s formal structures, making no attempt to disguise the many, often quite large, gaps created in the originals. Silent bars, of which there are many, are noted without rests in order to draw players’ attention to them as integral parts of the music - silences, not rests. In the 11th piece from *On Memory* (as the title suggests, a work replete with borrowings, here a beautiful elision of Bill Evans’ *Peace Piece* and Chopin’s *Berceuse*) Michael Zev Gordon similarly emphasises an interruptive bar’s rest with the marking “a sudden hold, a gap never to be filled”. The function of the empty bars in *JPR* is less rhetorical, they are essentially a written out version of Cage’s time brackets, essential to obtaining the floating quality of the materials I was looking for.

**Theoretical Context**
Theoretical context for the discussion of borrowing in JPR is provided by Björn Heile’s 2004 paper ‘Transcending Quotation…’ on Kagel’s *Pieces of the Compass Rose*. Heile is interested in Kagel’s use of cross-cultural representation as a means by which Kagel critiques Western music’s tendency to ‘other’ non-Western cultures through its modes of representation. In the *Compass Rose* pieces, on the other hand, Kagel seeks to emphasise “interconnectedness and reciprocal influence instead of supposedly essential attributes”. (Heile, 2004: 60). He does this through the construction of synthetic versions of the music of a host of cultures representing the eight main compass points but not all viewed from the same vantage point. [PLAY Östen - klezmer represents Eastern Europe from a non-defined vantage point]

To help explain Kagel’s approach to representation Heile draws on aspects of Bakhtinian dialogics (not an uncommon approach amongst postmodern scholars) in particular the concepts of represented and authorial discourse. The klezmer allusions in Östen are represented discourse heard in “imaginary quotation marks” as Heile puts it (2004: 65) whilst the non-tonal harmonic context and serial construction of the harmonic and rhythmic elements of the accompaniment are part of Kagel's authorial discourse. This results in the double-voicing characteristic of this form of representation - Kagel is not simply appropriating klezmer but inflecting it and imbuing it with new meaning.

What is useful for understanding JPR is that in Östen and most of the *Compass Rose* pieces Kagel does not frame the represented discourse with his personal voice (his 'own' music). Instead his authorship mainly lies in “the selection, combination and inflection of pre-existing musical idioms.” (2004: 68) The filtering of individual parts and their polytonal superimposition already described are part of my authorial discourse and achieve the necessary aesthetic distance, the quotation marks, characteristic of represented discourse. This ‘stylisation’ (Heile’s term for the difference between the reference to an idiom and its putative source) works in two directions - my authorial discourse leaves traces on Rameau’s music whilst his idiom ‘bleeds through’ the dissonant harmonic context.

Heile concludes his article with a typology of seven kinds of musical representation bounded, essentially, by direct quotation (smallest amount of stylisation) and “abstract, almost imperceptible allusion” (greatest amount of stylisation). (2004: 70) Those that apply most strongly to JPR are #1 literal quotation, #3 conceptual representation and #4 perceptual representation. [SLIDE] Conceptual representation refers to “the application of abstract structural properties of a source music, not necessarily connected to idiomatic semblance” (2004: 73) and, in JPR, describes the way that Rameau’s formal structures are preserved intact which, in conjunction with filtering, often produces significant amounts of silence. In perceptual representation idiomatic semblance, the sound character, of the source takes priority over structure and, in JPR, is linked to the preservation of Rameau’s instrumentation.

The instrumental parts in JPR are combined relatively loosely. Each musician plays at their own tempo (sourced from a 1999 recording of the suites) and are only asked to coordinate the entries of their parts. The parts are combined into arrangements of different ‘shapes’ and these constitute a large part of what differentiates one trio from another in JPR. [SLIDE] The decision as to which pieces to combine was made on various grounds - shared formal structure, tempo, meter, character or duration. Interestingly the choice of tonality had nothing to do with the selection (other than wanting three different keys each time) - given baroque instruments' sensitivity to key this was a potentially risky oversight although it fortuitously seems to have turned out alright.

JPR aims for a similar non-hierarchical dialogue between Rameau’s and my idioms as Kagel, in Heile’s view, achieves between the represented discourses in the *Compass Rose* pieces. However there are different degrees of friction throughout JPR. E.g. in Trio #4 the same meter, similar tempo and tonal proximity of *La Cupis* (flute) and *La Boucon* (viola da gamba) as well as the fact that, initially, the flute plays Rameau’s melody intact, create quite a mild feeling of dislocation. In the much denser opening of Trio #5 there is a far more ‘chaotic’ quality that approaches a more ironic, parodic treatment of the source.
Compositional Process

JPR has two points of origin: hearing Trio Aporia perform the 1st and 4th of Rameau's suites in July 2015 (this was my first encounter with these works); and an earlier workshop session with the group that same year. Hearing the pieces in July I was attracted not only by their soundworld but also their open nature; in the French edition of 1741 Rameau provided solo harpsichord arrangements of single pieces from all except the final suite. In the preceding workshop we had been working on a controlled improvisation exercise. [SLIDE] I had envisaged the performers working through each module in the same order but, instead, they chose independent paths through the material; the resultant polytonality was as interesting as it was unexpected - when I made the decision (quite early in the process) to superimpose pieces from different suites I already had some sense of the soundworld that would result. [PLAY excerpt from workshop]

My first journal entry about working on JPR is on 10.07.15. A day later the following elements of the piece were in place:

- basing each instrument's part on a different movement
- preserving Rameau's tempi, meter and formal structures
- using empty bars notated without rests
- taking a relatively literal approach to the original material [SLIDE]

My approach then took a different direction in several respects, the most important of which involved a fairly subjective method of selecting materials from each piece, listening incessantly and constructing a table of "ear-catching" moments. [SLIDE] This did not produce good results. [SLIDE] This disappointment prompted establishing more objective selection criteria (the 13 filtering procedures mentioned earlier) and to ensure that a consistent polytonality was obtained from the combination of parts in each trio. In late August came decisions about which Rameau pieces to superimpose in each trio according to the criteria mentioned earlier.

Once I had started working on filtering individual movements (early September) I made the decision not to try and plan what the result might be but to work on each part individually finding a filtering technique that worked, i.e. produced a result I approved of. Only trios #4 and #5 were in any way planned out beforehand. The time structures for each movement (showing the performers how to align their parts) were the final elements to be decided. They really make the piece - several months ago we experimented with abandoning them, giving performers free reign to begin each piece when they liked; the result lacked the diversity and incident of the structured version.

Conclusion: what is JPR?

I think the best way to describe JPR is a homage. Sean Beavers defines musical homage as “...a composition that pays conscious tribute to the music of the past” using a variety of approaches that can include quotation. (Beavers, 2006: 13) In his thesis he uses the term “to describe works that in some way have an intentional compositional similarity to the works of another composer, usually clarified by titular reference.” (2006: 13) To be sure the term never appears in my journal although I have used it in rehearsal, however there are clues as to this intention scattered through the pages, in particular references to the need not to interfere too much in Rameau’s materials. [SLIDE]

Earlier I contextualised JPR theoretically through ideas commonly associated with postmodernism. If JPR is postmodern I hope it takes on the gentler aspect of borrowing referred to by Burkholder at the end of his Grove Music Online entry as characteristic of the last decades of the 20th century. Whilst it may not be possessed of the subtlety of allusion present in Kagel’s Compass Rose pieces I hope the piece holds Rameau and myself in productive balance.
Re-voicing Rameau: borrowing practice in *JPR*

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Practice Context
1. Types of borrowing

2. Medieval monophony

3. Polyphony to 1300

4. 14th century

5. Renaissance mass cycles

6. Other renaissance sacred music

7. Renaissance secular music

8. The baroque era

9. Reworkings and issues of originality

10. Late 18th century

11. 19th century

12. 20th century art music to 1950

13. Art music after 1950

14. Popular music, jazz and film music

15. Research on borrowing

Burkholder, J. P. ‘Borrowing’, *Grove Music Online*. 

‘Ditty’

Paraphrase (bb. 150-159)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JPR</th>
<th>Pièces de clavecin en concerts</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trio #1</td>
<td>La Lapopliniere (A major)</td>
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<td>Trio #2</td>
<td>La Livri (C minor)</td>
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<td>Trio #3</td>
<td>La Forqueray (D minor)</td>
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<td>Trio #4</td>
<td>La Cupis (D minor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trio #5</td>
<td>La Marais (D major)</td>
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Quodlibet

“…combining two or more existing tunes or fragments in quick succession, most often as a joke or technical tour de force.” (Burkholder, 1995: 3-5)
‘Eroica’ - Marcia funebre

bb. 0-8

bb. 238-246
Diabelli Variations (var. XIII)

Schumann: Papillons (no. 1)
Whitty: *thirty-nine pages* (page 14, violin)
Whitty: *thirty-nine pages* (page 43, extract)
Cage: Harmony 1: Cookfield - Lyon
JPR Trio #1 La Laborde (Viola da Gamba) sketch detail

1) motive/figure
2) cadential material
3) inner part
La Laborde (Viola da Gamba) Rameau and Armstrong

Rameau bb. 0-7

Armstrong bb. 0-35

4) bass line
Theoretical Context
Mauricio Kagel: Östen from Die Stücke der Windrose für Salonorchester
Representation in *JPR*

From Heile’s Typology of Musical Representations (2004)

- #1 Literal quotation
- #3 Conceptual representation
- #4 Perceptual representation
Compositional Process
Controlled improvisation for workshop with Trio Aporia 05.06.15 (sketch score with working notes)

- 3-note collections in different keys
- Minimal instructions
- Anticipated performers would work through material in an agreed order.
“I’m keen to not take a too ‘modernist’/‘avant-garde’ approach to the original material by using filters, serial techniques, transformational processes, etc. However, I’m also not interested in post-modern parody - I want to avoid simply a patchwork of Rameau quotes… I will definitely change notes at times, turning Rameau’s harmonic system into a modal field, [NB this did not happen] but on other occasions I think simply divorcing a line from its harmonic context may be enough… I don’t want to write a neo-tonal piece, I want something more free-floating.” (Armstrong research journal, 11.08.15.)
List of “ear catching moments” after repeated listenings to *La Laborde* (August 2015)
“A really disappointing day today. Almost as soon as I started looking at the original Rameau and writing out the bar structures it just felt wrong. The main problem was that the material I had selected felt so sparse... My sense was that that coincidences of tempo and key (which turn out almost always to involve tonic major/minor juxtaposition) [NB at this point I was combining different movements from the same suite] just would not produce anything of great interest - I want to be surprised by what is thrown up and, instead, my feeling was that what would be produced would be rather dull, uninspiring fragments without any real sense of juxtaposition.” (Armstrong research journal, 17.08.15)
Conclusion
“I feel it is important to try and maintain the ‘literal’ approach to extracting material and to assembling precompositional materials... The difficult thing to maintain will be a middle-ground between ‘quotation music’ and parodic distancing.” (Armstrong research journal, 12.08.15)
References


• Burkholder, J. P. ‘Borrowing’, *Grove Music Online*.


