

The Electric Guitar as Medium in *Diversions 3*: a composer and performer's account

Introduction

The three versions of Divertissements

Electric guitar and harpsichord (2002)

Piano trio (2009)

Open scoring based around electric guitar solo (2015)

2nd was initially conceived as revision of 1st but now not so sure.

3rd *Diversions 3* is definitely co-existent with 2nd.

More flexible concept of musical work.

Mine and Sergio's Collaboration

Largely distributed, i.e. division of labour along lines of complementary skills as composer and performer.

Heavily technologically mediated - three demos (2 x audio, 1 x video), two Skype calls to discuss feedback from the demos.

No collaboration during the process of writing the piece - deliberate as interested in collaboration through the *medium* of the notation (more later).

What will happen

Me - discuss all three versions

Sergio - play pp. 9-14 and then talk about his interpretation, particularly the *electric* aspects of the medium.

Me - some conclusions

Definition of 'Medium'

[SLIDE 2] *OED definition*

“An intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; *specifically* a channel of mass communication, as newspapers, radio, television, etc.”

[SLIDE 3] Latter part of the defn leads naturally to Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message." Referring, according to Jay Rosen (1990) amongst other things to "the dominance of form over content. That is the effects of a medium will have more to do with the properties of the medium itself than with the content it carries." [45]

Michael Edmunds (2008) exemplifies this musically with reference to Glenn Gould's early interaction with technology. When first learning *Beethoven 4th Piano Concerto* by playing along to Schnabel's recording on 78s Gould claims his interpretation was influenced by the pauses necessary for the discs to be automatically changed (so-called "flip side overlap"). Edmunds comments "By using as a key element of his interpretation the silence made necessary by the technology of the medium of the record player, Gould became an exemplar of McLuhan's famous adage." [106]

[SLIDE 4] And referring specifically to the medium of the musical instrument Luciano Berio (2006) writes:

“Musical instruments are useful tools to man, but they are tools that lack objectivity; they produce sounds that are anything but neutral, which acquire meaning by testing meaning itself with the reality of facts. They are the concrete depositories of historical continuity and, like all working tools and buildings, they have a memory... The sounds produced by keys, strings, wood, and metal are in turn all tools of knowledge, and contribute to the making of the idea itself.” [25]

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the medium of the electric guitar contributed to the making of the ideas in these three versions of *Divertissements/Diversions 3*.

[SLIDE 5] Electric guitar as medium in *Divertissements* (2002)

Quotes from the previous section could all be summed up simply by saying 'a medium mediates'. In this first version my material did not consistently produce ideas that took account of this.

Some of the material traditionally stratifies texture into melody and accompaniment which has the effect of separating the two instruments. Moreover whilst the electric guitar both relies on and exploits amplification the harpsichord does not. It was both the practical difficulty of reconciling the way the two instruments were amplified coupled with the fact that the material did not really take account of this that led to my feeling that the instruments didn't really 'sit' together. I recall this as a prime motivation for the revision (although not one recorded in my journal).

PLAY bb. 55-65 [SLIDE 6] and 107-116 [SLIDE 7]

There is also a point here about performers as mediums - harpsichordist and guitarist played with very different rhythmic feels that tended to pull in opposite directions.

[SLIDE 8] The second version for piano trio (2009)

[SLIDE 9] From my journal 10/08/09: "The original idea at b. 318 is not really interesting enough to transpose to the new medium. I think, actually, that a lot of problems with the original are because some ideas are really more accompanimental in nature and don't work when at the forefront (I'm thinking also of bars 297-310)."

The above implies that I saw the revision for piano trio as a chance to achieve more stratified textures and that these would be better suited to the new medium.

But on reflection (for this paper) the passage I single out for criticism now seems one of the more successful in the original *precisely because* it does not attempt any melody/accompaniment division. To mangle McLuhan the message is right for the medium - the message (partly) being an electric guitar solo texture coloured by the harpsichord.

[SLIDE 10] **PLAY bb. 318-346 (original) and Fig. U (trio) NB** I may have to explain relation of U to original - basically the harmony is preserved and the tune heard in my first two examples [SLIDES 6 and 7] is grafted on.

[SLIDE 11] **Electric guitar as medium in *Diversions 3***

Diversions 3 is a further revision of the original *Divertissements*. This quote from my journal hints at the fairly radical structural and notational changes wrought on the original:

[SLIDE 12] “I am not re-presenting any of the recapitulated material... The whole point is to ‘listify’ the piece to remove any [trace/sense?] of conventional musical narrative.” [01/01/15]

Instead of a continuous score *Diversions 3* has 15 self-contained pages that follow the order of ‘events’ in the original. The player is given no instructions on how to progress from page to page and need to devise their own approach (the intention - though not overtly stated - is that the resulting piece be continuous).

On page #1 the influence of the *guitar* medium may be observed in the way that the semiquaver material is deployed over the full range of the instrument. This does not happen in the original.

[SLIDE 13] **PLAY bb. 1-12 (original)**

SERGIO PLAY Pages #1-#2. Show score

The electric aspects of the medium are largely ignored here as the emphasis in the notated material is clearly on pitch, not timbre. Another good example of this is page #14 [SLIDE 14] as you can see me laying out the chords with regard to the open strings. Contrast this with a piece such as Murail's *Vampyr* that utilises a gamut of electric-specific techniques and, as Ben Jameson comments, appears to take the lead/rhythm dichotomy as one of the bases of its formal design.

In the original version the specifically *electric* aspects of the medium are much more overt, expressed as references to electric guitar idioms in particular genres e.g. when it takes over the harpsichord material in bb. 119-130 it does so in relation to rock (parallel 4ths, bends) with high register interjections reminiscent of funk.

PLAY bb. 1-12 and 117-130 [SLIDE 15]

Conclusion

In *Piano Notes* (2002) Charles Rosen writes disparagingly of: “the prejudice against composition arrived at pragmatically by physically testing the sound instead of mentally planning it by logic, rules, and traditional reason and using the ear only in a secondary role to ratify the results arrived.”

The extensive sketches for *Diversions 3* reveal a great deal of head-orientated planning and thinking whilst the limited collaboration I initiated with Sergio ruled out any serious body-orientated testing.

Luciano Berio (2006) warns that “To overlook or ignore this idiolectic aspect of the musical instrument, and the host of technical details and performance styles associated with it, may be an interesting exercise from an ascetic point of view, [*note ascetic not aesthetic*] but is undeniably impoverishing.” [27]

The downplaying of electric guitar idiom and the rather abstract approach to the composition of *Diversions 3* could be interpreted as ascetic. But this overlooks two things:

- 1) that the score at times implies (although never insists on) an electric idiom with a degree of clarity. E.g. page #12 [SLIDE 17] low register continuous quavers (my journal refers to a “texture of continuously ‘chugging’ quavers”) predispose the performer towards certain decisions regarding articulation, volume and timbre. This is confirmed by the fact that Sergio’s interpretation of page #12 has remained relatively stable - loud and with heavy distortion;
- 2) the extent to which the revision was underpinned by a desire to investigate different approaches to notation. This aim is apparent in the proportion of journal entries related to the design of the score itself - six of the twelve pages devoted to the piece including just over three that try various versions of the prefatory instructions in which their tone is as important as the information they convey.

These notational approaches involved stripping out a lot of the detail found in the first two versions in order to engage the performer’s creativity in a more overt way, involving them in decisions pertaining to structure (e.g. how to get from page to page) as well as expression. *Diversions 3* is really a re-composition of *Divertissements* rather than a revision, one that re-examines the original in the light of the experimental practices of relatively open notation and indeterminacy that have been nourishing my music for the past several years.