

# **140 Spectacles**

for clarinet, piano and silent orchestra



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- An orchestra is present with the two soloists. Their role is simply *being* and they should behave not much differently from any other performance, the only difference being that they will not make any intentional instrumental sounds. The size of the orchestra is unimportant but the presence of instruments, music stands and familiar performance attire is. The manifestation of a conductor might be a projection, a model or a real person.
- The composition consists of one-hundred and forty spectacles, lasting around five-and-a-half hours and must be performed in full and in order, with preferably little time between the spectacles. The audience should be free to come and go as long as the performance is not disturbed.
- Clarinet phrasing is merely indicative of musical trajectory, and does not have to be adhered to literally. The clarinetist may stand near the piano but should not direct sound directly into it. All items of musical interest, (dynamics, articulation etc.) should come from a consideration of the tempo and short instruction at the beginning of each movement. It should also arise from a contemplation that the music should always sound like someone is speaking, however fantastical and outlandish the notations dictate: the properties of the human voice should be deeply established in the soundscape. The part is transposed and will thus sound a major second lower than written.
- The pianist should hold down the sustain pedal at the beginning of each movement and release at the end, regardless of whether they play or not. This is NOT shown in the score, nor is the continuation of the sound apparent over the empty bars – much depends on the attack of the notes, which may be spontaneous, planned in advance, or taken from the instigation of the clarinetist.

The very idea of utilising a silent orchestra will inevitably be a politically loaded one, so let's not ignore that. It's also a comment on the concerto, on a voyeuristic society, it's a happening, a psychological experiment, it's a representation of futility and pointlessness, war, genocide and political prisoners, it's an endurance piece of avant-garde performance art, it's a surrealistically ponderous good look at ourselves, and thirty-seven other things – let's just keep an awareness of all this potential and be glad the piece doesn't suffer the sinful double-pun title of 'CONcerto For Orchestra' (NONcerto has been done). It is also quite shit as well – it's unquestionably important to remember that almost everything falls into this category; so again, let's try to be as open as possible and not deceive ourselves. Whilst that is true, it is also paradoxically the case that there's no such thing as bad art or music – our minds are far too receptive: the physical impossibility of bad Art in the mind of someone living? Back to the silent orchestra, do you think the idea is highfalutin? To be honest, I just wanted to use that word – can we all start to use it more? Anyway, it is also conceptually misleading, as we shall see in this little digression. Taking apart the title; seemingly equal roles are given to each player; the clarinettist, the pianist and the orchestral performers. That the first two play lots of meticulously notated notes and the latter plays none is actually of little consequence. Silence isn't golden, it's ununpentiumen - pretty unmanageable and if you're reading this, you probably know your Cage (*"Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it." Indeterminacy*), so let's leave that alone for now. It's worth pointing out that a photograph of an orchestra is technically silent (unless your listening apparatuses are tuned to the pizzazz of cellular and atomic intensities) but even here; the *potential* for sound is still a noteworthy (ho ho!) element. If a person stares at a silent orchestra for long enough, with enough desire, she will hear timbres, textures and structures more rewarding than the Turangalila Symphony. In a concerto when the soloist is involved in their inevitable cadenza, the orchestral players are silent and we don't think it abnormal. We could think of these spectacles as a surreally inflated version of that situation.

The score itself shows no sign of the orchestra – it could have been marked out with dense empty bars and instrument names, but I trust the decision is conceptually apt. An orchestra can be taken to mean the obvious, an organisation combining brass, percussion, strings and woodwind, often with a conductor, or it can be interpreted as the *space* where the orchestra plays, or the Greek chorus choruses. This isn't a history of the orchestra or an etymological escapade, so let's just recall that orchestras have continually evolved over the last thousand years, significantly so in the last four hundred or so. At each time many factors have played a part: the availability of materials and technology for instrument production, evolution of notation, want of players, financial readiness, social intermingling, sagacity of composers etc. but generally, they've got bigger and players have got better, extensions have been added, instruments have had glittery makeovers; what was once a single creation now has a vast range of brothers and sisters, from the contrabass-double-ground-shakers to the soprano-piccolo-octava-heaven-seekers. Calls for headline

grabbing super orchestras, and even pairs and threesomes of orchestras, sometimes with added choirs have equalled and dwarfed audiences. So, having established that orchestras have constantly changed the dimensions, there is room for flexibility – a cosy Lully orchestra or one of Wagnerian proportions, it isn't particularly important to me – that they are real orchestral musicians with their instruments out for all to see IS. They are still performing, just not in a conventional manner. I picture a standard setup of orchestra surrounding the clarinet and piano and then the audience, but there is scope for experimentation. The audience could sit *with* the instrumentalists, perhaps one-to-one. In a way, the audience and orchestra share the similarity of having their minutiae observed – it's almost inevitable that the orchestral players will watch the audience. The clarinetist and pianist could be situated behind the orchestra, although they would probably need amplification. The role of a conductor is a mysterious, seemingly superfluous one, which unfairly becomes the face of the players through which power and gratitude is conveyed. They are jesters, fools on the stage; which is not to diminish their role – try naming a Shakespeare play without a fool? Okay, so there's several, but the majority do have them! I don't particularly like the notion of a conductor, though of course I understand the occasional importance of their role. My idea is to hide them from the audience, put a box around them, so that they can be seen only by the players.

The act of artistic voyeurism, of looking at people and watching them – you could stare for hours at a person and get completely the wrong idea of what they are. Who are the audience, who are the performers? I know it's becoming an archaic question, but it still has some validity. I know I'm not alone in concentrating, during performances, on the resting players, or those that probably think they cannot be seen – in fact I often take more pleasure in watching the audience – they are my silent film, receiving an improvised backing. It's impossible to tell the difference between composed and improvised music and the distinction is not a truly significant one for a listener. The bodies and instruments of the orchestra will act as resonance buffers and bouncers, they will heat the surrounding air, they will cough and sneeze, swallow and smile – they may faint during performance or leave the area before doing so, they could fall asleep, they could fall off their chair, they could fall into Hades, they may need to use the bathroom, they may catch another person's eye and share a smile, or even, Thor forbid, a giggle? They are there to look at, so there is more happening than just the instruments – I don't think there's anything wrong with that; in fact, when looked at from that angle it worries me slightly, that I've added something that might make the music easier to digest.

The use of the word 'spectacle' in the title is a reference to the prodigious organism that was Stuart Sherman, whose concentrated dramatic productions, usually performed on a small portable table, he named Spectacles. At this point, it's worth saying that there will be people, whom upon reading the title, have no problem with it whatsoever – "what a sweet

gimmick!" they may say, but my intention is anything but. The idea came over a year ago, like a button being pressed, and as is my custom, I forgot about it - if a good idea is worth its Percy Pepper, it would return, a sort of natural selection if you will. It did come back and I have spent ample time worrying over it; trying to visualise the impact, physically and philosophically. Perhaps two things came to your mind about this; the existing Silent Orchestra, who provide backing for silent films and of course, that little devil, 4'33''. Putting aside the first; Cage's influential (understatement) creation is perhaps one of the least understood pieces ever written and unfortunately will never, I suspect, be anything else - the time has gone. Again, as this is not a history of the orchestra, it is also not an analysis of that 'silent' piece. So what the hell is this then? Perhaps it is a sort of rationalisation or a pre-emptive defensive justification or maybe it's just a bunch of writing to make things seem like things have been explained - anything that has an accompanying essay must be taken with an erudite seriousness, RIGHT? When I have mentioned this to my people, the main response is usually one of currency - who's gonna pay for that? This reminds me of I. I. Rabi's response upon the discovery of the mu meson: "who ordered that?" And now I'm on a tangent; Michael Finnissy writes notationally intricate music and once said "I don't sit down in the morning and think 'how can I write the most complex thing that's ever been written' [...] can you imagine anything more stupid?" I had no idea that this piece would be five and a half hours long until way after I had begun - it started as a sweet little innocent little piece for a little clarinet and little piano with the idea that the clarinet notes would be translated from texts - it was so long ago that I don't even remember what the texts were, but there must have been 140 of them. [May I quickly clear something up about 'chance' music? It's a little misleading, but the following analogy should clear things up/~~increase needless complexity~~: Evolution by Darwinian Natural Selection begins with an initially random catalyst (a mutation by cosmic ray for example) which then gets 'worked on' by **non-random** Selection. The only thing I leave to chance is my personal hygiene. Thank you for indulging me.] I quite like the concentrated-withering way of composing, Stephen King does the same thing with his novels - he doesn't do a great deal of planning, but simply lets the characters talk and see what *they* want to do. A Louis Pasteur quotation would fit nicely here; you know the one I mean. No, not the bottle of wine one, the chance favouring the prepared mind one. Moving Jonathanly on, these lines of music would reflect idiosyncrasies of the written word, attempting to notate speech as I understand and adore it - something that is floating, swimming, fucking and drowning in music - I love palindromes, word games and anagrams, anything that teases a little something out of the words. (For example, I think this is neat: **Tough-Though-Through-Thorough**). Certain words get used more often than others, take the word AND, that's a pretty well used word, so when translated to music becomes an A followed by a D which is half as long, because it contains three letters and the N is contained within the A. That word could also be AID. But if the word HAND comes along, then a rest lasting a quarter of a bar followed by the notation for AND. If HANDY pops up, then as above, but the final D will last 2/5 of the bar. SHANDY? The initial rest now lasts for 1/3 of the bar, etc. These words and composites resemble leitmotifs.

(SPECTACLE would be transcribed as a rest lasting 2/9 of a bar, a single E, a C lasting 2/9 of a bar, a single A, another C lasting 2/9 and a final single E). Therefore, familiarities arise – the language is English and it has a barn full of rules. The clarinettist is SPEAKING to us. I could have devised a cipher to translate every letter, which I have done in many other pieces, but I was keen to retain clarity – when we listen to words we break down mainly into syllables anyway, so my method continues this impression. I'm not going to explain all of the rules I have used, needless to say, the above is only the tip of the iceberg; (subtle reference to the Second Viennese School there – see if you can find the sentence which cryptically mentions the First Viennese; it's playing hide-'n'-seek though, so you'll have to search hard!). If you don't want to know about the piano part, then please remove the cassette and play SIDE B (go to the next paragraph) now. The pianist never plays directly at the same time as the clarinettist, only when there is an empty space, which equates to about eleven-hundred bars and arises from translating a word without the letters A-G, like RHYTHMS (also the longest English word without vowels), creating a gap in the clarinet part filled in by the piano. The material for the piano part comes from an array of thirteen chords, each of sixteen notes. These chords were then divided, bottom to top into sets of three to eleven-note chords which results in 1176 (the 48<sup>th</sup> triangular number) chords, the closest to the number I desired. Imagine the set (1,2,3,4,5,6) which when divided into smaller sets of three becomes (1-2-3. 2-3-4. 3-4-5. 4-5-6.). If this is done with thirteen chords of sixteen notes; 182 three-note chords are created, 169 four-note chords etc., all the way to 78 eleven-note chords. When I was in my second year of suffering undergraduatism I started to write down all the vertical combinations that could be contained within one octave, starting with the seventy-two dyads and going up to the one thirteen-note cluster. In passing, I mentioned this to Malcolm Singer and he informed me that this has already been done, in the year of my birth, in the form of The Chord Catalogue by Tom Johnson who I was lucky to meet a few years later. Back to my chords – they are placed within the allocated bars, eleven-note chords first, (almost two years after having finished the clarinet line), with a freedom which depended on my fancy at the time, but without any attempt to formulate any continuous self-referential landscape, to diverge from the calculated clarinetting. Metronome marks are a direct consequence of the length of each spectacle; the number of bars was multiplied by two in all but roughly the final third of the piece where the multiplication is by three to create an increasingly animated tempo marking.

It's sometimes assumed that I'm *trying* to be an enfant terrible. "What is the *point*? You're just *trying* to be different!" they shout at me through my bathroom window as I'm scrubbing my toothies. Yes, this is the history of creativity. Evidently, it's unhelpful to ask this 'point' question – what was the point of investigating electromagnetism, or gravity or radioactivity? We do not know the impact of a thing until afterwards – we cannot predict which way this impact will go - the world would be a boring place if we routinely did so. Anyone could put a urinal in a gallery, make a silent piece of music, make their dirty bed into an exhibit or throw paint at a canvas, but it's the people that wanted to do those things that

did them and only afterwards did the comment arise regarding its ease. This view isn't new, but god-dammit, it needs constantly repeating. You may be thinking that I am under the impression that this piece is ground-breakingly revolutionary – I am not and it is not. Anyway, precious verbomaniac; I am not trying to be anything other than myself, which, even though you only have my lemon curd for it, I can assure you the case is none other than I describe. (Lemon curd is rhyming slang for word **and** turd, so, yes - you be the judge). "It's just quite funny isn't it? You know, having all those people there, not doing anything, it's almost naughty, isn't it, isn't it naughty Matthew?" they say, impressing their face onto mine. I'll let you in on a secret – I dislike the way that people often find humour in music that doesn't have a shred of comedy in it. Stravinsky, in his autobiography wrote: "For I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all." That titter at a particularly placed solo timpani hit, or two clarinets playing a semitone apart or a suggestive trombone slide – BUT I like to see this as a strength; I'm not trying to make people do anything and actually, if someone does laugh, then I'll just stare at them, wondering how I failed, even though I have an inkling of the complexities of why a person laughs at something (misunderstanding or mishearing, nervousness, boredom, pretentiousness (wanting other people to see that they 'get it' (most likely)), or a particular sound might instantly recollect a recollection from the vast library that is our memory bank, or they might remember a joke they heard earlier about cheese looking at itself in the mirror). Why am I being this honest? Well, I'm starting to think, as I type this up on my Sholes & Glidden Typewriter, that for this piece to work, you might need to know more about what I think – I could be wrong, in which case, quick, stop your reading this very instant! You're still reading so I'll assume you agree. My standard way of listening to music at home is to have two, sometimes three different playlists going at the same time, usually in set patterns, like duration (I practice the piano to this background, as David Tudor used to) – currently, I'm listening to a new work by Finnissy called Remembrance Day, which I just realised is quite apt as it's the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. This is set against any Bach recording of less than sixty seconds, mainly cantatas at the moment. These combinations are unique and once heard, will never be heard again and I am very aware of this as I listen. I have written pieces where failure is built in, in terms of pure impossibility or simply asking too much of a player. As I experiment more, I realise that this may be the way forward – instead of writing pieces to spec, I want to **annihilate** the possibility of a performance, a factor that is always considered, but progressively less vital – if a decision comes down to prioritising a musical idea against one of practicalities, the former wins every time; which explains my gradual receding from the concert stage. 140 Spectacles can be viewed as an object of intense nihilism. (Incidentally, every single piece of my own music in my iTunes playlist is rated one-star). It is not impossible, five and a half hours, with almost constant clarinetting, intermittent pianoing (but with constant held pedalling) and *existing* orchestra – it's admittedly tricky. It would only be done if someone really *wanted* to do it (which would have my approval) or if someone wanted to do it as a one-off attention-grabbing gimmick (which would receive my concentrated death-stare). I don't have any expectations. The

theoretical physicist Paul Dirac knew a good equation when he saw one, he looked for mathematical beauty first and if there were even slightly ugly abnormalities he knew it would fundamentally fail at the experimental stage. He was not always right and suffered similar problems to Einstein of an incredulity towards new ideas, but this makes me admire him all the more – I love a soul heavy with contradiction. Why isn't the performance important? It seems to be a question so stupid and obvious so as not to be worth asking – a composer writes a piece to be heard, surely? We are so used to preconceived ideas about what a person should or should be or do, that when a challenge comes along to shake the ship, we are highly dubious, but we should always question normality – not doing so has being a major disability of our species in the past. I am not going to march down Whitehall dressed like Dr Frank-N-Furter belting out 'I Am What I Am', but I am a little disenchanted with contemporary music – I recognise the scene as something that is desperate; something that is either so old and stale or so shiny and new that it's difficult to look at. The most astonishing stuff does not happen within the confines of an organisation that is ultimately controlled by funding and to think otherwise is piss-poor naivety. Composers should sit in front of a mirror and ask themselves the question "what am I writing for?" until the words hold no meaning. Overemotional applause (which I dislike), smug performers (annoying) and smug composers (unforgivable) are cooked in an ether of honesty which makes the Russian government look like the love-child of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, carrying composers on airs of compliments to their heat-deaths. Dirac (yes, him again) was not interested in the practical applications of his work, he simply searched for the "pretty mathematics" and like Feynman, wanted to turn down his Nobel prize, but realised that he would receive more publicity by turning down the award. Feynman dismissed accolades, claiming that the pleasure of finding the thing out was sufficient. I compose because I have to and it gives me no pleasure. I recently found myself in a conversation that illustrated a fundamental misunderstanding of why a composer composes – it is not something done for pleasure and nor is it by choice. It is very much a debate of semantics, I suspect, but to call what I get from writing 'pleasure' is to miss the point. I'd certainly go so far as to say that a composer who does write for pleasure is a composer whose music I almost certainly do not care for, but that pleasure for them is important – it helps them win all those really very terribly important competitions and vital awards!

An unsavoury consequence of severe depression is the hyper-sensitivity to and the magnification of the plethora of cancerous inadequacies that style my consciousness, and if I have ever written anything that begins to expose this devastating condition, it is this.

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London, 29<sup>th</sup> November 2014