

Some Remarks on My Composition Technique

KRZYSZTOF KNITTEL

Fryderyk Chopin University of Music, Warsaw

Email: knittel@o2.pl

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ABSTRACT

Krzysztof Knittel's text about his own composition techniques, also looking at such topics as: the influence of painting on his music (e.g. the works of Piet Mondrian and Paul Klee); truth in the musical work; the application of recycling and re-use techniques to the form of the musical work; methods of constructing the sound of the composition; links between music and historical events; *rollage* – a technique borrowed from the painter Jiří Kolář for the needs of *St. Matthew Passion*; sound installations created by Knittel with sounds of nature and civilisation; Theodor Lipps' theory of empathy (*Einfühlung*), as well as intuitive and improvised music.

Keywords: painting, form, truth, beauty, recycling, re-use, construction, *rollage*, *Passion*, *four seasons*, sound recordings of civilisation and nature, *Einfühlungstheorie*, intuition, improvisation

A French publisher asked me in the early months of 2005 to reflect on my activity related to happening and performance. I would like to begin by quoting the text I wrote in response to that request:

I play and compose. I feel safe in the world of sounds, as I have lived in the music environment since my childhood. Meetings and friendships with visual artists, film and theatre directors, actors and dancers have opened up a new creative space for me. In this new space, I no longer felt so secure. Their work has strongly impacted my music. Before my composition studies, what I composed was mostly influenced by literature, poetry, by the spoken and printed word. Later, visual arts began to exert an increasingly powerful influence on my work. Painting, installations, happening, film, video art, etc., have inspired me and penetrated the world of my music more and more frequently. I do not see myself as a performance artist. I am a musician, even if at times I express myself with something other than sounds. Sounds do not reflect ideas, do not contain meaning, and still they speak to the mind, the heart and the soul. They may also create the feeling of a certain limitation because of the impossibility of representing something physical with them, or of conveying a specific piece of information...¹

Today, however, I must confess to something more.

Painting has always fascinated me just as much as music. After graduating from secondary school, I even considered joining an art college, but music, which I had learnt from my childhood, gained the upper hand. I sometimes try to express my love of visual action in audio-visual installations and graphic scores. I will therefore begin this attempt at defining my musical language and composition technique with an analogy to the art of painting. For instance, in the works of Piet Mondrian I find a consistently followed artistic path, the development of an original painting technique

from mimetic art via Cubism to Neo-Plasticism, that is, to those abstract geometric works which nearly everybody knows and associates with his name. The central motifs of Mondrian's art unfold and transform through the process of self-limitation or reduction. In the works of Paul Klee, on the other hand, I constantly move between these different worlds and discover how mimetic art can be combined with geometric abstraction, Surrealism and Cubism. I find in them new artistic concepts and painting techniques, each time – different colours and a different brush. And though I have admired Piet Mondrian's consistent artistic path for many years, it is Paul Klee's diversity, wealth of exploration and artistic means that has always felt spiritually closer to my own stance. Incidentally, Klee's father was a musician, and he himself for some time considered becoming one.

Andrzej Dobrowolski, my beloved teacher, once compared his and my way of developing form in a composition. He would begin with the first note, and then gradually add more elements, building the whole consistently from the beginning to the end of his work on a given piece. As for myself, the Professor – with whom I do not intend to argue, as there is much truth in his observations – claimed that I started with collecting ideas, a multitude of forms and shapes, technological and performative concepts, out of which I later composed the complete musical form... From the beginning of my composition studies, I used many methods and techniques of composing, but in fact intuition always took the lead in my work, coupled with improvisation – an element quite naturally associated with my profession. The role of these two increased as the years went by, but this topic, as well as that of collective art that I have been quite deeply involved in – are a subject that I leave for a different occasion.

Thanks to the kind support of Józef Patkowski and Krzysztof Szlifirski, I was able to spend much of the 1970s working in the Experimental Studio of the Polish Radio. Electronic and computer music has taught me to approach sound in an experimental manner: I must first hear it, only then accept or reject it, or possibly further work on the result. After several years of composing with electronic instruments, I wrote a brief paper on music produced in an electroacoustic studio, which I presented in December 1983 at the 17th National Musicological Conference in Kraków. Here are some excerpts from that text:

In an electronic studio, the composer regains direct contact with sound, just as a painter has contact with the paint or a sculptor with the carving block. From the very beginning to the

¹ K. Knittel, (2008). 01/in between. In: V. Verhaeghe, M. Collet (Eds.), *mobile – album / international*. Besançon: Montagne Froide / Cold Mountain, Latre de Tassigny, p. 115.

end of work on the piece, the composer “touches” the very matter of sound, similarly to the improvising virtuosi of the 19th century or jazz and rock musicians; [...] The composer may at every moment check and confirm the image in his or her head, selecting material from an endless palette which consists of sounds of instruments, the human voice, sounds generated by electronic devices or a computer programme, as well as all the sounds of our environment, of the life around us. This is a fundamental breakthrough both in composition technique and in musical aesthetic, especially when music includes sounds of nature and civilisation, which – apart from musical parameters – also have their specific source and remind the listener about their extra-musical origin. Listeners perceive them in the same, poly-dimensional manner.²

What I emphasised as most important for myself, however, was the desire to meet and be with other people.

For me, being a musician or a composer does not just mean playing, putting notes down on paper, editing tape after tape. To be is to be – for oneself and for others. To live in music, to meet others in music, to touch you, me and us with sound. Not to rest satisfied with the silence after the last note, but rather – to play that note in such a way that it inspires other notes in other people and in myself... This is the continuity of life, rather than a “resurrection” with every successive blank page. Instead of pages of manuscript paper what we get is one long ribbon of life, endlessly unfolding in our notes, sounds and gestures of love.³

The criteria of beauty, also my personal ones, have changed many times under the influence of various aesthetic trends and fashions advocating one or another type of sound. It is a different case with truth. Still, the designates of such ideas as “truthfulness” or “true sounds” are exceedingly hard to point out in music. Instinct and Roman Ingarden show us the direction and suggest what those ideas might be reflected in. The rational mind objects, though, claiming that music is all about beauty, about the composer’s musicianship, sensitivity and knowledge... Here I will quote my polemic with Prof. Mieczysław Tomaszewski on the subject of truth and beauty, printed in “Ruch Muzyczny”: “To me, all things spiritual express themselves primarily through truth. Even the most beautifully formulated sentence seems far removed from spirituality to me if it fails to reflect the reality as it is.”⁴

At one point in my life I became interested in the idea of “recycling” and began to use this word to describe a method of composition. At the advice of Prof. Andrzej

Miśkiewicz, I later changed this term to “re-use,” that is, using the same material again. In fact I have often used the same phrases performed by the same instruments, or the same electronic sounds, but each time – in a different context, juxtaposed with other notes, with new musical ideas. The idea of “re-use” harks back to my composition *29 Staves* for 29 instruments of 1981, which I created with ink-and-paper. I poured several drops of ink on manuscript paper, which I then rotated, producing lines, glissandi, clusters and sound clouds, etc. Having repeated this action four times, I obtained four different “pictures on staves”, corresponding to the four parts of the work. I then translated those graphics into proportional notation and finally transcribed the graphic notation into a traditional score for 29 instruments.

All this painstaking work took me several months. Naturally, which instrument should play which notes, what the melodic scale, rhythmic values, articulations, etc. should be – it all depended on my subjective decisions. This composition serves as music material for a creative conductor, or – should I say – a conducting composer. To date, it has been performed several times by student ensembles from Kraków, whereas the material contained in the score of *29 Staves* has been re-used in several other compositions, where I combined it with electronic sound, spoken word, singing, and eventually – with solo instruments. The same music material (albeit in different formal variants and different contexts) has therefore found its way to several works of mine. I will now present three examples.⁵

I will begin with the *Concerto for harpsichord and orchestra*. The construction of its second movement has been schematically represented in the picture (see Fig. 1) in the form of various sound waves generated by woodwinds, brass, percussion, piano and celesta, high strings (1st and 2nd violins), low strings (violas, cellos and double-basses), as well as electronics and solo harpsichord. This movement contains nearly all the material of *29 Staves*, but divided among several instrumental groups (vertically) as well as in time (horizontally) by means of rests of varying length.

The same material had earlier been re-used in my *El maale rahamim...* of 2001, dedicated to Jews murdered in Jedwabne by their Polish neighbours. The first 64 bars include 27 out of the 29 instrumental parts (all except the piano and the celesta), performed exactly as they had been notated in *29 Staves*, but

² K. Knittel, (1986). *Autorefleksja. Przemiany techniki dźwiękowej, stylu i estetyki w polskiej muzyce lat 70*. [Self-Reflection: Transformations of Sound Technique, Style and Aesthetic in Polish Music of the 1970s] Kraków: Academy of Music in Kraków, pp. 279–80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁴ K. Knittel, (2011). Piękno prawdy [The Beauty of Truth], *Ruch Muzyczny*. No. 23, pp. 4–7.

⁵ *Idem*, (2006). *Męka Pańska według świętego Mateusza (Opis i autoanaliza pracy doktorskiej)* [The Passion of Our Lord According to St Matthew: PhD Dissertation Résumé and Self-Analysis]. Łódź: G. and K. Bacewicz Academy of Music, pp. 34–35.

now – along with electronic sound played back from CD as well as human voices: a chamber choir divided into four groups, which sings four sets of Jewish songs (in Yiddish) popular in Poland before World War II. Unlike in the *Concerto*, instrumental sounds in this work are not grouped into families or divided by rests into separate sections. Instead they are played together without rests: 27 instrumental layers one on top of another.

This is what it looks like in the first part of *El maale...* The second part incorporates an orchestral excerpt from the symphonic composition *Lipps*, with added choir and a CD recording of a man who – hidden in the corn at the edge of the village – witnessed the tragedy in Jedwabne (after the war, he settled permanently in America). This recording of the recently deceased Shmuel Wasserstein's prayer at the memorial stone in Jedwabne comes from a home-made video tape. Then comes the sound material known from the composition *low sounds*, which I composed at the Experimental Studio of the Polish Radio: three sustained low sounds produced with soft mallets on a tam-tam by Greg Ketchum (recording from Buffalo, 1978). The same material reappears in part three of *El maale...* along with a fragment of the *String Quartet* that I wrote for the 1st anniversary of the assassination of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko.

To my mind, these two tragedies are interwoven: the tragic death of the brave and righteous man murdered by the communist Security Service and the murder of Jews in Jedwabne by their Polish neighbours. Placing these two events side by side has a symbolic dimension to me. In the finale, in the fourth part of *El maale rahamim...*, we hear a prayer for the departed sung in the Hebrew original and in Polish translation by Szymon Datner. This section does not contain any quotations from my earlier works.

The third example is *The Passion of Our Lord According to St Matthew* of 2004, in which, apart from “re-use,” I also took advantage of the “rollage” technique, invented and brilliantly applied by the eminent 20th-century Czech visual artist Jiří Kolář. Sometimes artists are inspired by real events and their own experience, or by a fascination with the work of another composer. They may also, however, seek inspiration outside the world of music, in realms where different disciplines of art and science interpenetrate.

In the *Passion* musical form imitates a mode of artistic expression that has for many years been used in the cinema: namely, retrospection. Constant “flashbacks” into the past – a multi-voice narrative retelling the major events of Jesus' life in chronological order – recur in the successive entries of the choir like sepia-toned or black-and-white memories inserted between the sequences of a colour motion picture film. The present time refers

to Christ's last journey. This is interrupted by a narrative recounting Jesus' entire life. Different choir members simultaneously recall different moments and episodes of Jesus' life and teaching. These parts are not sung, but spoken by a “crowd of voices,” in which we constantly recognise various well-known passages from the Gospels. This tapestry of words is interwoven with the sound of the string orchestra and wooden percussion instruments. Thus, the tale of Our Lord's Passion (presented by the soloists in accordance with the traditional principles of musical narration) alternates with a parallel multi-voice narrative of Jesus' entire life. Not about pain, suffering, torment, cruelty, human indifference to these, about dying on the cross, but about Christ's glorious deeds as a Man.⁶

It is in these “flashback” episodes from Jesus' life that I applied, apart from the “rollage” technique, also my “re-use” method, incorporating selected fragments from *29 Staves*, but this time – only the string and percussion parts.

And the last topic. A project rather untypical of a composer's work was my 4-CD release *four seasons*, which I recorded in 2006–08 and later used as sound material for an installation bearing the same title. I recorded it exclusively in places that I have known and loved for many years, such as the village Cimochowizna on the Wigry lake, the quiet privacy of my Warsaw flat on Pryzczówek Grochowski, the mountain spa resort of Krynica Górska with its best known ski slopes on Jaworzyna, as well as the slopes of the Hintertux dale in Tirol and several beaches on Rhodes.

While selecting the methods of recording and editing the sounds of the environment, I tried to reproduce my own auditory experience as faithfully as possible. Editing depended first and foremost on the choice of suitable fragments of the recorded sound events. I used no sound transforming devices and no electronic sound processors. My only tools were: a pair of virtual “scissors” and fade-in, fade-out sections of varying length. This 4-CD album is therefore a kind of catalogue of sounds and moments in life, of situations described in the folder enclosed with the CD set. The experience of listening to sound events from different seasons of the year allows one to become immersed in a different time and space, but also – in someone else's experience, in what could be called private intimate space. It is like listening with somebody else's ears.

As a sound installation, *four seasons* makes use of four independent stereo sources, so that each “season” is played back independently from the others, and since each of them has a different duration, the probability of repeating a similar set of sounds is extremely low.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–22.

Combining sounds from different environments in one interior results in a radical change in the character of the sound. The contents of the individual recordings are no longer recognisable, and are replaced by a “holistic” auditory experience, in which the individual sounds of the phonosphere begin to function as instruments in the orchestra, or as the dense polyphony of independent parts in a string quartet. One may try to seek out with one’s ear the material of individual sound events, but at the same time listen to the whole – and it is only this whole that is perceived as the complete form of the installation.

The combination of four parallel recordings, each of which could be recognised and defined as the sound accompanying a specific activity or situation, creates a unified installation sound which is an altogether new artistic object. In its type of sound and expression, the sound installation *four seasons* suggests both *musique concrète*, works of acoustic art, as well as the complex soundscapes of some film soundtracks.⁷

I would like to finish with two quotations from my own texts. The first one concerns the perception of music:

My views come close to those of the German philosopher-psychologist Theodor Lipps, as expressed in his writings on aesthetics, e.g. the theory of empathy and the sources of aesthetic tastes (*Einfühlung*).⁸ Lipps claims that “the aesthetic experience comes from empathy – projecting one’s own feelings into objects.”⁹ If we assume that music, literature, painting, etc., conceived as Witkiewicz’s Pure Form, carry no meanings or emotions in themselves, one may conclude that the listener/viewer’s aesthetic experience, sensitivity, and even emotions are transferred onto the aesthetic object. The recipient thus “projects” his or her own states, knowledge, feelings and expectations into the artistic work, so that the impressions and emotions accompanying the perception of that work largely depend on the listener’s own sensitivity, knowledge, and even – mood at the given moment.”¹⁰

The second quote comprises my answers to questions asked a few years ago by my son Tomasz, then a student of journalism at the University of Warsaw:

What is improvisation to you?

Improvisation is everyday life. It is just like any other routine: I wash the dishes, cook, dress, shave, walk, and also play. It’s a part of my life.

While improvising, do you think more about form, or about beauty?

I do not think about beauty. I think about truth. It is only natural that one hopes to play something beautiful. It is not something one needs to talk and think about. It is taken for granted, as a foundation of all activities in composition and performance. But music is not always true. It may be too beautiful, too smooth, or too sweet. It can become a beautiful kitsch. If one just wants to shine, truth may all be lost in that glamour. But when one feels that the spirit and thought is both beautiful and true, then awkward words will not be seen as an obstacle.¹¹

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Prof. **Krzysztof Knittel** (b. 1947), DMA, habilitation degree. Author of symphonic, chamber, stage and electroacoustic works, sound installations, academic teacher, professor of the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music, co-founder of improvised music groups. Author of:

⁷ K. Knittel, (2010). *Między rzeczywistością a kreacją*. [Between Reality and Creation]. Warsaw: Fryderyk Chopin University of Music, pp. 97–99.

⁸ Cf. T. Lipps, (1904). Weiteres zur “Einfühlung”, *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie*. No. 4, pp. 645–520.

⁹ W. Tatarkiewicz, (2011). *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy], Vol. 3. Warsaw: PWN, p. 92.

¹⁰ K. Knittel, *Między rzeczywistością... op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.

¹¹ T. Knittel (2008). *Improwizacja to codzienne życie*. Wywiad z Krzysztofem Knittlem przeprowadzony w ramach zajęć na studiach dziennikarskich na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim [Improvisation is Everyday Life. An Interview with Krzysztof Knittel Conducted as Part of the Journalism Study Programme at the University of Warsaw].

