

Discerning Music, or About Being All Ears

Llorenç Barber

Between 1969 and 1970, I somehow experienced an accumulation of uplifts and encounters. I had just come across Cage's *Silence*, and excitedly witnessed an event/concert in my native Valencia, by that time a literal desert as far as new musics¹ were concerned. The show was authentically perilous, as Zaj,² the Spanish equivalent or extension of the Fluxus movement, performed for an audience that was at first astonished and eventually impatient. The show turned into a battle between the public and one absolutely mute but thoroughly obstinate musician, Walter Marchetti, provocative in his senseless gestures and behaviour. There was some bloodshed, and the show was ultimately interrupted. In those years, I also attended two new music³ summer schools in Darmstadt, being additionally lucky enough to visit Hans Sohm's great exhibition *Happening und Fluxus: Materialien* in Köln.

After these experiences, the music I played for my final piano examination (Anton Webern's *Variationen, Op. 27*) totally receded to the background of my interests. As a consequence, when we formed Grup Actum in 1973, our sheet music and our 'concerts' would, in their own way, not only reflect certain indeterminacy twitches after Cage, but also display a fair amount of resources of simplicity and variable rings pertaining to the minimalist sensibility. In this context, our scores greatly differed from the pentagrammatic world, making place for words, images, forms, and free modes of expressing whatever discourse they still contained.

Pieces such as *Comic* by my colleague Josep Lluís Berenguer were created between 1973 and 1978, where the scores consisted of consecutive strips, each with its own icon, which had to be translated into gestures, actions, sounds, etc. In the same vein, I created *Quod tibi magis delectabilis*,

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- 1 As opposed to the usual term 'new music,' in this case I prefer using the plural 'musics' as I believe it better reflects the diversity of the manifestations.
 - 2 Zaj was formed in Madrid (1964) by musicians Juan Hidalgo, Walter Marchetti, and Ramón Barce, joined years later by performance artist Esther Ferrer. Zaj performed mainly in streets, bars, and galleries in events considered as pertaining to Fluxus. (See more about this in Barber 2019).
 - 3 These summer schools were announced with the term 'new music,' i.e., in singular: *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik*.

One of the advantages of not being a pioneer is that you are allowed to explore the unknown without taking yourself too seriously. You use what you see, contemplate, like, sing, and contradict, or add whatever surrounds you. And people translate it in their own way. Since then, and until today, many of my ‘scores’ have constituted, entirely or partially, instructions (textual musics),⁴ graphics, all kinds of graphs, including, among others, the revered pentagram, or any mixture of all this. They have been enacted in their most natural function.

Nothing exceptional, only music, emancipated, soaring freely, adhering to the pleasure, virtuosity, or simplicity of whoever feels inclined to approach it, with whatever intention, at any time. Every ‘drawing’ is like a prism. An array of ‘readings’ open up for who is observing them or wants to give them voice. Initial graphics and the ways of becoming sound turned weird through refractions.

In the late 1990s, plastic artist Fuencisla Francés would become attracted by my scores, because she appreciated a visual component that to my earnest astonishment she believed should be exhibited. From this emotional event (visual musics are “disappropriated writings – to read is to create”) she took a fundamental creative decision, namely, to raise funds and have the many scores framed, organising a huge exhibition at the Centre de la Nau of the University of Valencia. It was a founding act of generosity and expansion. Twenty years later I want to acknowledge here my gratitude to her. This singular action concretizes the assertion that the different ramifications of sound liberation and the corresponding hearing processes we call sound art do not have native soils, nor exclusive authors. They are migrant musics, lacking a territory in which to take root.

Later, in 2008, a selection of these scores would be featured in an exhibition called *Posibilidad de acción. La vida de la partitura* organized by the MACBA museum (one of the curators would be flutist and performer Barbara Held).⁵ The museum would subsequently dedicate one of its *Quaderns d'audio* (no. 2) to the publication of the *Cuaderno de Yokohama*, a series of graphic scores I drew while I was in Japan preparing my *Pocket Naumáquia* that would close the *International Triennial of Contemporary Art* in December 2005. Certainly, an exhibition that featured the unstable

4 I prefer to use the plural here for the same inclusive reasons previously mentioned.

5 This piece can be integrally and freely downloaded from the following link: https://rwm.macba.cat/uploads/qa/QA_02/QA_02.pdf.

lives of rebellious scores was a first in Spain, and very few Spanish authors were included.

In May 2009 I wrote an addendum to the *Cuaderno de Yokohama* for the occasion, which featured brief sentences such as:

Solfège is air-conditioning. Graphics are irregular eco-conditioned breath...

Sound does not need anything, as Cage proved some years ago...

Scores are something which demands translation. Graphics, on the contrary, can go, maybe even here, straight to the point...

The epiphany of a visual music cannot take place if there is no generosity and no will to go beyond the instrument...

All visual music is a celebration in indisputably real time. Here, unlike what occurs with sheet music, there is no differed or representational time...

Hearing is desire without restraint or formula. Albeit populated by spiderwebs, a certain intimacy surrounds these graphics of very remote ringings...

Visual musics demand an amphibious connective thinking, associative, inclined to the furtive, unusual, floral, visionary...

My best visual music instrument is the 0.4 pen...

To me, the period of the *Cuaderno de Yokohama* stands for the emancipation of scores to a fantastic drawing not as a shift in hierarchies but as a recognition of the potential of what we hold in our hands to create a new, non-subjugated kind of knowledge, like the un/taming of transversal living in thoroughly irregular and indocile concomitances.



Image 2: *Cuaderno de Yokohama*, International Triennale of Contemporary Art, Yokohama, Japan, 2005 (personal archive Llorenç Barber).

Audioreality: A New Kind of Knowledge

Around the same period (during the late 2000s), the Area de Cultura del Ayuntamiento de Tarragona organized an exhibition called *Músicas de buen ver* that featured a significant number of my graphic scores. Sound artist and critic Miguel Álvarez Fernández, who is probably the most insightful of our intellectuals practicing radiophonic sound art, wrote the following text for the exhibition catalogue:

Llorenç Barber's writing intensely confronts us with the impossibility of representation. The emptiness that mediates the being and the representation of the being tends to escape us daily. Maybe we would lose our minds if we had to continuously remember that those moments we so thoroughly identify with life itself, meaning life in its most complete extension, have to be channelled by some form of language (of *symbolisation*, as some would say) in order to become integrated to what we usually call reality, to be able to remember, and therefore share them.

Maybe Llorenç is a lunatic. This hypothesis could explain the inadequacies between what is featured on the scores – let us call them scores – presented here and now, and that other, what they represent, the radical and overflowed moments, unrepeatable and ineffable, which we inevitably relate to Llorenç Barber's music (to call all this music is a kind of excess of language, albeit a minor excess if compared to the act of calling the document we refer to 'scores.' In any case, the reader must have noticed that both these images and the others are, precisely, marked by excess) (Álvarez Fernández 2008, 2).

Maybe the critic was not considering at that time that all writing, that is to say all representation, is precisely that: inadequacy. An emptiness, a leap... something that seeks to bridge the separation between the being and its symbol, but ultimately and at best only ascertains the existence of that inadequacy (maladjustment, misalignment), of this slip between the one and the other. We believe that the cause of the vertigo produced by those visible scores might be located here. And if this is true, the curious thing about the case would then be how this sheet music can so silently transmit a hunch of this vertigo; how those paper reams seem to push us towards the abyss (happy, but still an abyss) of this music.

Sheet Music, Bells, and Cities

In the early 1980s I started to work on my bell concerts, after discovering some old industrial metal pieces in an ironsmith workshop in Madrid. By activating their rims with well-chosen yarn, wooden, or brass mallets I could produce a sound that was very close to that of certain bells in public spaces, either in urban settings or in valleys. I entered the world of brasses, with their echo, resonances, formulas (fixated in *consuetas*), and memories that inspired me to build a 'portable bell stand' to emulate resonances such as that of the wind harps we can hear from afar when their sound is randomly carried by winds and echolalias, iridescent and filtered by the distance. Besides this event that clearly changed my life and my projects as a sound artist, I soon worked on concerts that merged the metallic sound of my pseudo-bells

with a very diphonic harmonic singing learned through my closeness and friendship with Tran Qûan Hai, Charlie Morrow, and Glen Velez. About this type of approach, sound artist and musicologist Isaac Diego wrote:

In this kind of work, Barber develops a sort of mnemonic notation that allows to plan these directed improvisations. He keeps using *open scripts*, in which pitches and rhythms are not totally defined but globally suggested. He often uses rings, small, repeated structures signaled with brackets. Another familiar aspect of Barber's scores is the addition of *instructions* to describe actions. In general terms, it could be said that the different resources developed in his writing allow him to develop a minimalistic, repetitive, and diatonic poetics where indeterminacy and action remain very much present (Diego 2018, 312–316; transl. A. G. Z., italics in original).

Image 3: *El Jove Jardin* (personal archive Llorenç Barber).

In 1988, after years of doubts and uncertainty, I presented the first *City concert* with bells in Ontinyent. In the beginning, this more-than-adventure, this intervention in an urban public space featured traditionally chronometered scores. Something similar to Edgar Varèse's design for the scores of his *Ionisation* (1929/30) for percussions ensemble. From there, the temptation of complexity and the fact that this type of concerts tend to attract local volunteers who are, for the most part, not readers of traditional solfège (why would they be?), the writing soon acquires mixtures, signs, and unconventional graphics. Diego described it as follows:

For these gigantic works, the composer uses two kinds of scores. The first is topographical, describing space and its characteristics, and the movements and transfers of interpreters, or the routes of sound, among others. A very early example of this type of notation is *Monte Tallado* (1984). In this piece, the map of the church that will be intervened is the score itself [...] The second kind of notation is more traditional. Compared with the topographical scores, these feature only what the musicians must interpret at every moment [...] Generally speaking, Barber's musical writing for these enormous compositions allows him to plan the displacements of the different sound devices and the resulting textures along the urban space in dilated temporal frames (Diego 2018, 312–316; transl. A. G. Z.).

I want to note here that in this period of my life – maybe as a way to liberate myself during the seven (!) years of working with the great singer Montserrat Palacios in the preparation (gathering of material and data), writing, and presentation of our book *Fly Behind the Ear. From Experimental Music to Sound Art in Spain (La mosca tras la oreja. De la música experimental como arte sonoro en España, Madrid, 2009)* – between projects, then, the greatest and most enjoyable part of my time was dedicated to the creation of hundreds of small, postcard-sized visual scores (8 x 16 cm).

Beyond signification, many of these postcards feature my exploration of all kinds of graphic drawing, freely and willingly ignoring every possible and arbitrary boundary. By means of weird graphics, I sought to dive into a kind of beyond-what-is-possible in order to provoke an uncertain soar towards a place further than what is conventional. At best, I always strove towards otherness by inhabiting my own proposals and imagining routes that were either a bit or very unlikely. The outcome of this endeavour is an array of visual proposals (music is already and always something more than sound) for those who wish to approach them. Their number and variety, their having no more condition than that given by their possible 'reader/seer' endow them with a sort of open field in which hypothetically

The Thought From the Outside

Sometimes, when we come up with something, there is a kind of mutual tension between the proposing self and what is projected. This can reach such a degree of presence and urgency within us that we no longer know who presides over what, the self over the theme/idea, or the idea over the self. Poor self. And immediately, the moment we set ourselves at work, previous calculations fall apart, others come up, caught by the head or the tail, and sometimes reach such an importance as to dissipate doubts and turn conflicts into solutions. Something lightens up the scenario from that 'outside' which intruded into the process.

A thousand times, those very 'outsides' enable the disappearance of the gap that divides listeners, interpreters, proposers, knowledgeable people, and 'communicators.' In any case, it is with visual musics as with most aspects of sound art: its practices imply and activate something transforming that in its very undefinition escapes codes, since a code, any code, creates boundaries. They are predefined immobilizers that redefine inputs and outputs. Conversely, we suppose visual music has a fair amount of poetic power, capable of provo(ice)king the reopening of the undefined, the disturbing, and even the dazzling, be it useful or a new error to be corrected. Still, always using the language of no-interchangeability... since it includes some upheaval, some heterothings, some – let us not be afraid to name it – pulsing and generated deregulation. It is an escape from the ruled domain that imitates the mythical “*dérèglement des sens et des mots*” expressed by young Arthur Rimbaud.⁷ There is, therefore, something pirical about much non/music today, i.e, much that stems from today's sound art – unzipped – has expanded through the power of emancipation of so many of its resulting proposals, so often out of so-called 'legacies' in composition, and other scholastic and formal contraptions.

Alvaro Díaz, presented several readings of the *Yokohama Journal*. Three cases stand out: on 9 December 2015 at the Foro Experimental del Centro Estatal de las Artes, in Ensenada (<http://vimeo.com/148641123>, 6 November 2021), Centro Cultural Bodegas de Sto. Tomás, Ensenada, 2017 (<http://vimeo.com/234365148>, 6 November 2021), at the Sala de Exposiciones CEART, Mexicali, alongside works by Thierry Riley, James Tenney, and Alan Curtis, 2019; Barcelona (Spain), The Juan Naranjo Galería de Arte & Documentos in June 2018; Valencia (Spain), The Centre del Carme, (2018) and the Palau de la Música (2019), in the framework of Festival Ensembles; León (Spain), Fundación Cerezales 2019; Alicante (Spain), Centro Cultural Las Cigarreras, 2019.

7 In Arthur Rimbaud's *Lettres dites "du Voyant"* (1871). Consulted in *Documents*. <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/Documents1.html> (16 July 2019).

By contrast, a good ‘reader’ of visual musics needs to be a perpetrator. Their achievement is not confined to audibility, but very close to concrete situations that arise from objects, people, techniques, movements, or even strange meanings from diverse origins. In a way a gardener (but not a carpenter, as this would imply very different skills), the reader of hearable drawings, like those who venture into transmuting drawings into sounds, must face the mystery of germination as well as the slowness of maturation, etc. And all this while enduring compostations and other risks which do not guarantee a satisfactory success other than the Machadian “the path is made by walking.”⁸

Art has become ubiquitous. Graphics require the renovation of what is called artistic sound, to endow it with new opportunities. If so, or if we seek it to be so, the visible invites to oblivion, to the guessed feeling, to peeping into what overwhelms us with complexity and the unheard of. In the same way, those musical hands – this ink turned chords, this *appoggiatura*, and even cluster – draw synaesthetic reckonings which renew and take over everyone and everything. Indeed, a great amount of music that was never-conceived by cabinet compositions comes from trained and fine artists, which can stand before us, face our skin (all skin is eye and ear!) so we can savour the music through inciting and suggesting visible/audible graphics!

Actually, a drawing, a picture, or a painting is as much to be listened to as to be read without being heard or listened to. There is something of ‘transubstantiation’ in this art, since the listener’s bread/and/wine disappear to make room, heart, and life, and even something of divinity for the synaesthetic miracle of the unsuspected process of becoming ‘other.’ We should remember that what actually stands between the image (and its suggestions) and the sound, more than correspondence, is emptiness, gap, darkness (we mentioned it earlier) which penetrates through the eyes and illuminates the act of being penetrated by sounds. Under the surface of that non-score, there is another world. The more you dig, the more diverse worlds appear... There is, then, nothing more than digging. And to dig, like thinking, is – and oh how true this is! – already music.

Obviously, approaching praxis and readings of visual musics does not make sense if what they yield is the same conventional music that the slow

8 I am referring to one of the famous verses taken from “Proverbio XXIX” by Spanish poet Antonio Machado, as part of his “Proverbios y Cantares” of 1912 (Machado 1975).

symphonies sing for us in their pentagrams and their baton and anacrusis compasses in those gigantic auditoriums. For us, diving into graphics is articulated with:

- a) The extensive techniques of symphonic instruments and their contexts, of which the users free themselves to run away with post-Cage, post-Fluxus, technological, contextual indeterminacies (those humidities, caves, reflections, echolalias, winds, whirlwinds and distances, etc.).
- b) The praxis of free improvisation and its asyntactic behaviour, with its brutal cuts, silences, leaps, rests, raging spasmodic starts, etc.

However, there is no user manual. When you go along with a type, a mode, a colour, an electric vibration, or a determined pitch mass, you should not be looking for any kind of correspondence or objectivation. There is, rather, an (un)certain fidelity to something more profound: I settle for something “because I believe in it”. Yet, I do this as someone who “believes in a dream”, a pre/monition, an idea that reaches me... and as a creator I am loyal to my intuitive imagination, even if we perceive it as being wrong or uncertain or simply catastrophic. And it grows upon this fragility, upon these far from innocent bases. Again, in Borges’ words: “Sometimes I have enough courage and hope to believe it can be real: that even if all men write in time, wrapped in temporal circumstances, accidents, and frustrations, it is possible to somehow reach a *little bit of eternal beauty*” (Borges 2015; emphasis Llorenç Barber).

On the other hand, from within the darkness (*Ay! que vida tan oscura*, goes the song) reigning solemnly between the visual proposal and the sounding action, it is possible to start hallucinations and ignite deliriums, for everything can happen, as Agatha Christie explained, the best crimes for her novels came up while doing the dishes!

A thousand times, then, this living from one excess to another brings many of us to draw insinuating situations from which, to escape, you have to sink into a muddy and suffocating sandbank, as great Fluxus artist Dick Higgins used to say, a very uncomfortable ‘danger music.’⁹

9 Dick Higgins, artist, printmaker and co-founder of Fluxus, also a personal friend with whom we shared dinners and conversations in the New York of the 1980s. He invented the concepts of *Intermedia* and *Danger music*, among others, and composed fantastic textual symphonies where the instruments were cannons, ships, etc.

Eventually, visual musics are a way of unpredictably practicing the creative art of “weaving up”, going completely into the absolute instant which by living in ‘audiovision’ utterly eradicates the self, while also freeing us from ‘the weariness of obedience’ and placing us at the mercy of the ‘voix libérée,’ of this ‘parole en liberté.’

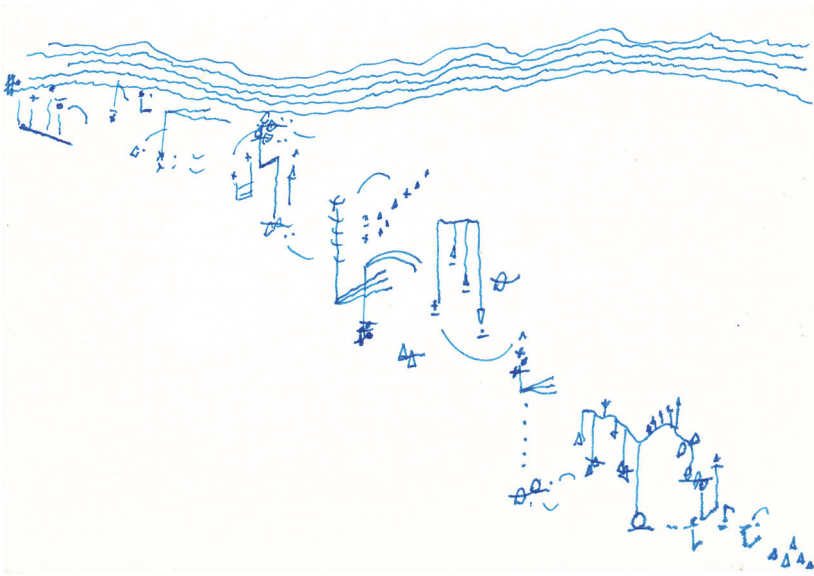


Image 5: *Son-ido* (Example of sound drawing) (personal archive Llorenç Barber).

A Music Without Free Ending

Ultimately, visual musics create a sound like traveling, tension/going towards... a flaring passing over the keys without touching them, pure electrifying caress, the way Scriabin taught us in his *Vers la flamme* (1914).¹⁰ Leaving behind all the versions that follow economic logics and that use the codes and the dictatorship of benefits excessively. Also leaving behind the game of distractions. The Scriabinian *Toward the flame* posits its own scruffy ways to enter the imprecise, the darkness... that original which is,

10 *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72 was among the last pieces for piano written by this visionary composer who left us his mystical musics and resonant synaesthesias. In this particular case, Alexander Scriabin refers to the unending transformation of energy in sound and light. This is what I mean by the absence of ending mentioned above.

again, the beginning. Old intellectual Karl Kraus said that “the origin is the goal,”¹¹ which is why this proposal is scattered with the quality of what is intemperate, what befalls us unexpectedly, paralysing the natural course of events, breaking the flow of time with its inconvenience. It even happens outside of adequate or convenient time. This is therefore an extemporaneous proposal, a hanging out of temporal flow. These are, we insist, very irregular ‘distemporal’ musics.

Only *tabula rasa* works. Twisting, no mincing, nor looking back. No reading of visual music is innocent: either it is committed and engulfs us, or it is nothing. Not even silence; only redundant trash.

To exit codes and start mixing diverse languages, to cross dailyness to translate it into gestures is one of the discoveries of Valencian filmmaker Josep Renau, friend and co-worker of Mexican muralist Alfaro Siqueiros. When going to East Berlin to work for TV, Renau started practicing what he called the ‘Zeitgezeichnet’ technique (drawn time). What Renau drew was precisely time! But not Scriabin’s eternal and mystical time, not even immortal Borges’ time, but the daily time of life. His outlines translated the news... he drew in front of our very eyes in real time while the speaker went over the events of the 1950s in a media as popular as TV.¹²

This reflection is precisely about these visual musics, a way of annotating in scores, but also in drawings, music that stands away from the usual codes, sound that searches for the extemporaneous and out-of-time. Music that requires, both for the one proposing it as for the one who is seeking to make it sound, a considerable strand of madness, effort, audacity, and imagination, very much like abandoning the safe ground we stand on and fly away.

“The moon has a very inspiring, dreamlike existence. Secretly all I want to do is to let people fly,” sings Laurie Anderson.¹³ A considerable imaginative act. Etymologically, this term comes from *sideral*, and is therefore related with the cosmos, the stars, and the planets. These are attentively observed by humans who want to find positive omens in them. And if they are observed from close distances, surely no one forgets any of their details,

11 Originally “der Ursprung ist das Ziel” (Kraus 1959, 59).

12 Some of these drawings can be seen in a Renau exhibition at the Reina Sofia Museum of Madrid: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aD8UdXErXms> (16 July 2019). On this same topic see Miró 2019.

13 *To the moon* is the title of Anderson’s latest show performed on Saturday 11 February 2019: <http://mif.co.uk/whats-on/to-the-moon/> (7 November 2021).

flaring, wounds, and scars. This is how they influence us, and at the same time they definitively free us from the free ending, inviting us to “race against time,” as Mexican writer Juan Rulfo would say (Rulfo 2002, 81).

Each of us supposes in their own way there is an urgency to deconstruct behaviours, in order to empower the access to new types of breath/reality. As the great Peter Brook said a few decades ago: “We must remain within the concrete, the practical, the quotidian, in order to find indications of what is invisible through the visible” (in Ordoñez 2019) All treasured music is an invitation to fly. And there are ways of discerning that change your life entirely.

Cancún, dawn of July 16, 2019
Translated by Ambar Geerts Zapien

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