

Sounds & Contexts:

The Performative SoundArt of Jon Rose

by Dr. Kersten Glandien

Anyone who heard Jon Rose improvise the solo part of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D major, op. 35, with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (Glasgow, 2006) would assume that such outstanding musicianship would be enough to last one man his lifetime. And yet, however impressive the length and breadth of Rose's musical accomplishment, it seems it is never enough for him. He constantly feels the call to extend his explorations out into the worlds that orbit variously his instrument, his playing and his audience. This creative drive led him to write, collect, invent, build and organise; seeking out unusual collaborations while always perceiving the world around him through the prism of music. In 1983, he imagined "the continent of Australia covered, not with fences, but millions of miles of string instruments."¹

This vision initiated a project that would occupy him for over a decade, shifting shape along the way as it oscillated between SoundArt and Music. Living in a re-united Berlin in 1997, he recorded an experimental work, *The Fence*, for SFB radio, in which he explored fence situations around the world. Interweaving spoken text and audio documents with string improvisations, Rose followed the dynamics of communities riven by political differences, in which "every fence is political: it's always them and us."² This piece combined instrumental manipulation with contextual exploration - adopting an offbeat angle of approach while pursuing its own distinct aesthetics. A simple shift of perspective transformed brutal border constructions into sound installations - physical structures that revealed their distinct sonorities the minute people were able to get their hands on them (the hammering sound from the falling Berlin Wall still rings in my ears). A musician at heart, Rose could hardly resist playing these reinforcements in situ, alienating the often bleak border situations while provoking or intriguing the people who had to live with them. Ever keen to seek out the weird and the wonderful in the mundane and quotidian, he drew from those dull landmarks complex soundscapes, to reveal "unexpected beauty in inherently ugly structures."³ His recordings with Hollis Taylor - *Great Fences of Australia* - bear testimony to this.⁴ To move these long-string sounds indoors and explore them in concert environments, Rose built mobile fence installations, to be played by himself, or others - the Kronos Quartet, for example. These "fences" might still sometimes bear traces of their origins, including the occasional strand of barbed wire, yet they divide nothing - except perhaps audiences from performers.

Once focused on divides, Rose discovered them not only in the outside world, but also in the human mind. In his multimedia piece *Perks* (1996), for example, he explored the psychological rift between the two hemispheres of the human brain, in this instance the brain of composer Percy Grainger. Two badminton players - representing logos and pathos - engage in a match for dominance, fronting the concert event with a sporting performance. Each strike triggers a sound sample by way of contact microphones and accelerometers built into the rackets. The speed of ball exchange controls the switching of samples and determines the rhythm of the sonic movement. The sportsmen interact closely with three live musicians in front of a split-screen video projection. A witty hybrid piece, *Perks* fuses live music, sampled sounds, moving images and corporeal action⁵, leaving the shape and tempo of the music to the unpredictable dynamics of a badminton game.

Having worked extensively for decades in free-form collaborations with an enormous number of musicians, Rose relishes the challenge and excitement of external input to his playing. Digital

interface technology provided him with the opportunity to incorporate extraneous sounds into his solo performances. Working with the technicians at STEIM in Amsterdam, Rose adapted interactive sensor technology and computer software to work with his violin bow. By converting bow pressure, positioning and speed of arm movement into sounds, he not only massively broadened his sonic palette, but also introduced an additional chance component, not to mention an eccentric performative element, into his improvisations.

The separation of sound activation from sound generation allows Rose to pass musical activities to outside agents, pushing musical performance beyond traditional musical skills. With the aid of sensors, accelerometers, contact mics, video cameras and piezo speakers, he turns data collected from human actions, or mechanical events, into music. Fitting sports equipment such as rackets, balls and bicycles with interactive technology and bringing them to community events, he facilitates an unusual kind of sound performance in which ordinary human actions or gestures are translated into sound. Midi-controllers measure single components of activities, such as speed and direction of movement, velocity of impact, spatial position, distance, and so on, which Rose then assigns to sound parameters: tempo, rhythm, pitch, timbre, texture, volume, panning etc. Any continuous activity with such equipment - a Basketball match, for instance - creates a coherent soundscape, which constantly changes as the game progresses. The specific physicality of sport inevitably introduces into the compositional process *modi operandi* that are quite different from those of the conventionally musical. Sounds are now linked directly to group interaction, anchoring them in everyday experience and instinctive game-play. Played in pairs, teams or crowds, games not only bring people together, but also utilise the self-propelling force of interaction through the rules of a game. This not only fuses music performance and performative SoundArt, but makes sound performances accessible to non-musicians. With a giant 2.4m diameter ball, manoeuvred by a large crowd, or small balls used in team games (Netball, Basketball, Quadrugby)⁶, organised sound can be brought directly to communities, "making music important for them again"⁷ while, at the same time, being intuitive and fun.

Relocating music away from its traditional sites and into more unusual locations, such as shopping malls (Shopping Project, 1993-96) or Australian sheep stations, ties in with Rose's interest in the wider contexts of music as well as his many offshoot-activities - such as collecting obscure violin paraphernalia (assembled in the Rosenberg Museum⁸), inventing musical objects and extending existing instruments (multi-string cello and violins) along with devising new ways of playing them (The Viocycle, 2004), setting up self-playing installations (Automatic Violin Quartet, 1989⁹), realising Events (Violin Bomb, 2002¹⁰) discovering obscure musical oddities (Dinky, the Singing Dingo, 2004) or single-handedly inventing an entire musical dynasty (The Pink Violin, 1992¹¹). And although performance is always integral to Rose's projects, it is not always bound to humans - or to human contact with instruments or sound making objects. In his Transmission Projects, for instance, Rose uses radio technology to allow unlikely forces to trigger sounds at a considerable distance from the place they are heard. The wind in Kite Music (2008), the mechanical movement of the arm of a hoe excavator in Digger Music (2008) and the paddle movement of a lonely canoeist on open waters in Paddle Powered Harpsichord (2008) - all act as sound initiators that generate music at long-distance by means of radio waves. But whatever the initial impulse, the challenge of creating, finding and arranging sounds that are appropriate to both the initial action and the specific environment of the events, rests always with the facilitator; and this is where Rose's musicality and aesthetic imagination prevail - with the occasional violin intervention never far behind.

Endnotes

- 1 "Music from 4 fences. The Kronos Fence". Download David Harrington on MUSIC FROM 4 FENCES. Interview by US film maker Steve Elkins. http://www.jonroseweb.com/f_projects_kronos_fence.html (15. May 2011)
- 2 Talk with author, 7 Apr 2010.
- 3 "Fences of Israel. A Diary Entry from Jon Rose". http://www.jonroseweb.com/f_projects_israel_fences.html. (15.May 2011)
- 4 Great Fences of Australia. Taylor, Hollis. post impressions. A travel book for tragic intellectuals. Potland OR, Twisted Fiddle, 2007.
- 5 see Perks http://www.jonroseweb.com/f_projects_perks.html#topdoc (15.May 2011)
- 6 see The Ball Project (Sphere of Influence, 2007)
- 7 Talk with author in Spring 2011.
- 8 Rosenberg Museum in the city of Violin in Slovakia.
- 9 Built for The Relative Violin Festival, Berlin, Academy of Art, January 1989.
- 10 First performed in Paris at Mains D'Oeuvres on February 8th, 2002.
- 11 Rose, Jon and Linz, Rainer. The Pink Violin. An Anthology of Writings about the Music of The Rosenbergs. Melbourne: NMA Publications, 1992.