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ENGAGING WITH SOUND WRITING

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How can forms of sound writing be used for a project in artistic research? Based on the author's own experimentation with sound writing for the clarinet, this paper argues that sound writing is a manner of engaging with sound that strengthens the link between practice and theory in artistic research.

> The stage floor shines bright against the backdrop of ruby-red seats. Row A and B closest to the stage platform have the same colour, but row C, D, and E slowly fade to blood-red and then to darkness. The platform of lined wood planks has different nuances of light-oak to light-brown. Apart from the scratch marks of force exerted on the intertwined wood planks, everything else is bathed in silence. Without warning, a low sounding drone enters the space creating a base tone of sound. After a couple of seconds, it needs to compete with a quick pitch disruption sounding a couple octaves higher. The battle of pitches is won by the higher tone as it sings with a vibrato, bending higher and lower and higher and lower and drops into the middle ground tone between the opposing forces. The sound is held in the middle ground until it plummets to the low sounding drone fading into the empty space. Sneakily, the clarinettist stationed outside of the camera shot has not moved his finger-setting to change pitch. He could've changed his finger-setting on the clarinet to create these pitches. However, he chose to keep the low sounding G finger-setting and with a versatile embouchure control and airflow, produced a variety of sound combinations out of the instrument.[1]

In the book *Theorizing Sound Writing*, Deborah Kapchan begins the opening chapter with a short, written section. Once you have read this short section, you quickly come to understand that this is her version of sound writing. Directly after, she dramatically proclaims that "sound knowledge [is] a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of listening."[2] She goes on to write that "sound writing [is] a performance in word-sound of such knowledge."[3]

In this edited volume, numerous scholars were approached with a simple question: "How [can we] theorize sound writing?"[4] How do scholars engage with sound knowledge when the focus of writing is turned towards engaging with sound knowledge in the form of sound writing? Would it be possible "to speak to new realities" if we engage with sound writing, a question posed by Jacques Attali in 1977?[5] Lauren Berlant, the social theorist, follows the same discerning need as presented in this book, "to invent new genres for the kind of speculative work we call 'theory'."[6]

Each of the 14 contributors to the book engages with the idea of sound writing by conversing about their field of study and their experience of engaging with sound knowledge. Their description of sound knowledge, in the form of sound writing, however, is often limited to a short amount of words of sound writing within their individual contributing parts. What results from a short section of sound writing, is often enough for each of the contributors to write extensively about their object of investigation, which is brought to life through their sound writing. This they do through acts of listening, so as to engage with Kapchan's prompt, through Sartre, to consider "the experimenter [as] part of the experimental system."[7] Their object of investigation, which features as a theme and a section of sound writing, is used to intertwine the knowledge of the subject and the object conceptually. This form of investigation, Kapchan argues, brings a stronger connection between theory and method, which Henk Borgdorff also associates with the work of artistic research.

Borgdorff writes that "research in and through the arts" reduces the distance of the object of research, and poses the possibility that the object of research can become oneself in the creative and artistic process.[8] In order for a feedback system of sound knowledge and sound writing to occur, sound writing engages with a process of translation from listening to a source or an object. This listening process must include a form of re-imagination of the source or object from which the sound comes, in what Kapchan terms "metaphor as method."[9] According to Michelle Kisliuk, whose chapter 'Writing the Magnified Musicking Moment' features in *Theorizing Sound Writing*, thinking about the metaphor is one thing, but when it comes to working with sound

and metaphoric engagement we "conceptualize emotion" and constitute "aspects of our experience in the process" as to assist the transmission of sound knowledge in sound writing.[10]

With that said, David Henderson poses a question in his contribution to the book: 'Why would we wish to theorize and experiment with the print medium in the digital age? Why write, rather than do something else?"[11] The discourse of western performance practice music criticism and music scholarship has also expanded into the interdisciplinary field of sound studies writing about soundscapes, acoustemology, sound curatorship, sound ecologies, and sound art criticism.[12] However, due to the contradictory nature of the term "sound writing," the potential lies in its imaginative possibility and potential to "listening and writing to transform experiences of temporality" and ephemerality.[13]

At the start of my integrated PhD in music, I set out with the idea to translate one sound world to another sound world, as an experiment with the translator's voice being the clarinet and the clarinettist. The coming together of different sound worlds will then show if it is possible to create a new sound world that could be used as material and data for a composer to write a solo composition for the clarinet. Sound experimentation in this project would then be part of a creation process of sound knowledge, which in its nature would be temporal and ephemeral. It is with that in mind that the sound knowledge, in its temporality, needed to be recorded in order to then engage with the same process of listening and writing as has been done by the contributors of the book, *Theorizing Sound Writing*. What is different in this PhD project is that the person creating sound knowledge would also be the person translating that sound knowledge into sound writing. This brings into play what Borgdorff refers to as the object of research becoming oneself, in the form of sound knowledge production by the self. However, before creating sound knowledge, a method of practice was required to delink me from my western performance practice sound world. The sound knowledge created in this process would then be the sound resulting from this delinking process.

My method was the practice of free improvisation. Free improvisation is ephemeral and temporal in nature. Once fully absorbed, free improvisation allows the clarinettist to engage with sound without thinking of the notation, interpretation, and the restrictions and devices of composition, often created by the composer. Free improvisation, in practice to create sound knowledge, links to what Kapchan says about the process of creation associated with sound writing: "It is not writing [sound] that is a prison house per se, but our modes of perception, of listening and translation, that must be broken through."[14]

It was on 28 June 2019 that I started with the free improvisation process in the Endler Hall of Stellenbosch Konservatorium. The Endler Hall presents a space for western performance practice, where the final product of an artistic process is performed, while the process of preparing for that performance is often neglected. As part of the process of delinking from that sound world associated with the Endler Hall, I considered that the space should present a departure point for confronting a sound world and working through that sound world with free improvisation as a process of creating sound knowledge.

This act presents a complex system of accepting, processing and making choices in the artistic creation process, which Kathleen Coessens says is embedded in a "web of artistic practice."[15] The "web of artistic practice" presents one way of viewing moments in a creation process where the artist is seldom aware of the tools and their dimensions within the artistic idea, but they are there, nevertheless. Coessens

goes on to say, "The tools of the artist, knowledge, expertise, experiences and actions, present in his or her creative endeavour, remain in the background of this act. It is often only after the act of creation, that some reflection or recollection, as a kind of re-enactment of the background, is possible."[16] My form of reflection from these free improvisation sessions resulted in journaling and rough writing about the improvisation session of the day. Later, on the same day, I would re-watch the video and listen to the free improvisation session in order to start imagining how to translate what happens in the video, in both visuals and in sound, into words.

This translation process presents a second confrontation with the style of writing associated with western performance practice and the clarinet. How would I write about my own clarinet sound and sound creation without using the devices of music notation? How would I describe the sound of the clarinet without referring to the existing jargon of describing a clarinet sound? The clarinet sound has thoroughly been researched and, through this research, created literature with a jargon of containment associated with both Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) and the origins of the clarinet created and built in Austria/Germany and France. The clarinet sound, from this literature, can be described as "warm," "fuzzy," "sweet," "open," "closed," "big," "small," and "thin" to give but a few examples. This sort of description is noted by Roland Barthes in 'The Grain of the Voice,' as "our writing on music that has ever been dictated to our conversation and criticism of music in the form of the adjective … this music is *this*, and that execution is *that*."[17] Barthes' writing, even though it rules out the adjective, is still captured in a mode of listening where the object and the subject are separate from the creation process of sound. Since I made the artistic choice to delink from an existing sound world as a process to create sound knowledge—with the intention of having the capacity to communicate that sound knowledge to a composer, which was part of the initial process of this project—the listening process towards the videos drastically changed.

The videos engage with both movement and sound, and as an experiment, it was worth exploring with the idea to write a verbal description of the movement and a narrative description of the sound. What started out as a lot of scribbling—attempting to find a tone to sound write from the created sound knowledge—resulted in re-listening to the videos over and over again, identifying phrases, structures, techniques, and playing styles, which may not have been possible to identify in merely reflecting on the free improvisation sessions without the video recordings. The listening process gave me the opportunity to identify familiar concepts in my existing sound world and, with the writing process, it was possible to delink from the familiar concepts and discover new sounds and new descriptions. Although those sounds might have existed before, as noted by Coessens as she refers to the artists' "web of artistic practice," it was through the process of sound writing that they could be identified.

Because Kapchan writes that "sound writing is a performance of word-sound of such knowledge," a style of writing, in the form of "reading sound from performance" was something that naturally occurred in the writing. Where the contributors of *Theorizing Sound Writing* only wrote short sections of sound writing in their individual contributions, I found it difficult to describe everything taking place within a three-minute solo clarinet free improvisation video. This resulted in writing a rather large chapter containing sound writing sections per video. During this sound writing, I could identify and index of sounds, almost like a reward for the compassionate listening process to the creation process. From creating sound knowledge as a way to delink from an existing sound world, to listen to that sound knowledge, to

write sound writing, came a re-identifying and re-listening of sound knowledge that created a different sound world.

To repeat Henderson's questions: "Why would we wish to theorize and experiment with the print medium in the digital age? Why write, rather than do something else?"[18] The practical and written work is part of an experiment to engage with a process of delinking, which also resides under the concept of "decolonial aestheSis." In their observation of the decolonial work being done in the humanities, Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez write about the term decolonial aestheSis as a "visible sign of underground conversations and activities taking place following in the trajectory" of the decolonial option as praxis.[19] What is clear from their observation, however, is how the term "decolonial aestheSis" was coined only after viewing and noticing the defiant practices of embodied knowledge that speak directly to a space of compassionate listening, which exist between modernity and coloniality. This space presents an opening where those artists, scholars, and academics can engage in a defiant process of experimenting with the containment of aesthetics associated with aspects of the colonial matrix of power. The implementation of sound writing for free improvisation, artistic experimentation in artistic research is a confrontation of the colonial matrix of power as it exists in western performance practice. In this way, the methodology can be understood as defiant, emancipating knowledge systems—and, in my project, sound knowledge systems—to create another option among the existing sound knowledge systems. Mignolo tells us that the term "decolonial aestheSis is not just an indictment of the universal validity claim of modern/colonial aesthetics, but that it asserts itself as an option" among many other options.[20] What would the implications be if we take the aforementioned concepts and bring them into discussion with the idea of compassionate listening, for compassionate scholarship in decoloniality?

> The empty stage floor is entered by a barefoot walking clarinettist. As his feet touch different wood planks, his movement is paced by a repetitive clarinet sounding motive. The step-by-step motion changes the sound reception feedback to the clarinettist. With the twelfth step taken towards the right side of the invisible audience, the clarinettist activates a squeak in the floor. Only on the fourteenth step does he reverse to retrace his foot motion to find the squeaky floorboard. Once he has found it, there is an interaction with the sound of the floor. The squeaky floorboard has a small range in pitch, which is enough for a conversation with feet pressure. This conversation causes the clarinettist to react and repeat a clarinet sound-pattern like a pendulum, swaying from left-foot to right-foot, testing his reception of the floorboard conversation. Once the discussion is over, the clarinettist walks away from the spot and makes a slow 180-degree turn to come to a halt.[21]

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Notes

1 Excerpt from a draft chapter of my PhD.
2 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 2.
3 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 2.
4 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 2.
5 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 2.
6 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 2.
7 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 3.
8 Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 24.
9 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 6.
10 Kisliuk, 'Writing the Magnified Musicking Moment'; described in Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 7.
11 Henderson, 'Traffic Patterns'; described in Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 9.
12 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 9.
13 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 9.
14 Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 10.
15 Coessens, 'The Web of Artistic Practice'.
16 Coessens, 'The Web of Artistic Practice', 69.
17 Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 179.
18 Henderson, 'Traffic Patterns'; described in Kapchan, 'The Splash of Icarus', 9.
19 Mignolo and Vazquez, 'Decolonial AestheSis'.
20 Mignolo and Vazquez, 'Decolonial AestheSis'.
21 Excerpt from a draft chapter of my PhD.

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