



The Composer Essay Project

Caroline Shaw, musician.

By Christopher Mayo

Notation is odd.

Musical notation is so ubiquitous that it's easy to ignore just how odd it is. Not so much the constantly evolving lexicon of actual dots and lines and arcs and squiggles on the page—though these *are* odd, and kind of wonderful and elegant—but the relationship we have to notation as composers, performers, and audiences. This oddness is so obvious, and right in our faces—and something that composers and performers are considering, consciously or unconsciously, all the time—but it's worth just reiterating. How *odd* it is that we've evolved this art form where one person writes instructions, which are simultaneously very specific and completely vague, in a weirdly-secretive coded language that some other person, separated by possibly thousands of miles and hundreds of years, needs to decode so they can follow these instructions to make some music. It is odd.

This oddness informs the relationship that we all have to notation. Performers are judged by, on the one hand, how faithfully and accurately they can follow the instructions and replicate the notes on the page, and, on the other hand, how far they can stray from the instructions to bring an interpretation which is expressive and personal.

Composers must choose whether to be bound by the relatively limited lexicon of notation and struggle to express increasingly complex ideas through a palette of inadequate instructions, or to opt out of using conventional notation entirely and be faced with a litany of quite different complications, albeit complications of their own devising. For composers, notation prevents so much, but it allows so much more. It can be amazingly, exactingly precise and yet there is so much that it is utterly, utterly useless at expressing. It is a relatively inflexible medium, forcing composers to fit their ideas into its mould, even as that mould, the lexicon of notation, is constantly refreshed and extended.

Notation has played a defining role—perhaps *the* defining role—in shaping the narrative of western music history and giving us our idea of what a composer is. Music that was notated had the benefit of being passed down over hundreds of years with the attribution of singular authorship firmly attached. Music which was not written down may have fortuitously survived the passage of time through oral traditions, but authorship of such music is perceived as collective, untraceable to a single, authoritative composer. Since only music which was written down could be attributed to a composer, only people who wrote music down—or had their music written down by others—could be considered composers. Notation was, for hundreds of years, the defining element of what made you a composer. Being a composer *was* using notation.

Play something similar to this.

When Caroline Shaw won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2013 for *Partita*, one of the narratives which the press eagerly picked up on was that she did not identify herself as a composer. “Not only is Caroline Shaw the youngest winner of a Pulitzer Prize for music, she doesn’t even call herself a composer,” reads the subheading to Zachary Woolfe’s *New York Times* profile. This reluctance to self-identify as a composer stemmed from a feeling that the generally held notion of what a composer does was not reflective of her own practice. She is a violinist, a singer, and, yes, a composer too, but she felt that “musician” was a better, truer, less exclusive descriptor. In addition to this mismatch of taxonomy, Shaw also eschews many of the characteristics that we historically associate with composers, characteristics inherently linked to the interconnected history of composition and notation.

She dislikes the specificity of notation and is constantly looking for ways to subvert its exactitude. In some cases, she achieves this by simply instructing the performers to not adhere too closely to the notation: “What’s written is just a guideline - not exact” (*Gustave Le Gray*, mm. 79); “This is an approximate rhythm. Play something similar to this. If you find the ends of the bars need to be stretched or compressed, that’s completely fine. The exact rhythm is not important” (*Lo*, Movement II, mm. 32).

Shaw also shuns the expected universality of notated music, that the notation should allow for anyone, anywhere to pick up the score and be able to perform the music. *Partita* was written for the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, of which Shaw is a member, and though it has been performed by other ensembles, Shaw still thinks of it as something which belongs to her own group. “It’s not written to be mass produced by standard ensembles,” she said in an interview with the CBC. “It’s sort of written for this band. I mean, there have been covers lately, from a lot of groups who like to sing it. I’ve been sort of careful about letting it out of the nest.” In other works, this avoidance of universality is evident from the first page of the score in Shaw’s tendency to use performers’ names instead of (or as well as) instrument names to label the staves: Mike and Hannah (*Boris Kerner*); Adam, Eric, Jason and Josh (*Taxidermy*); Lorna, Caroline, Sage and Shay (*Valencia*).

Shaw’s work, often created in collaboration with performers—frequently the other members of ensembles to which she belongs—resists the notion of the composer as a singular author. This focus on collaboration also means that many of Shaw’s works are in a constant state of evolution and flux. Because of this, the finality of the written score is something which Shaw shies away from. As observed by Craig Wright, “Shaw puts very little emphasis on the work of art notated for all time; some of her compositions, such as *Ritornello* (2012-ongoing), remain intentionally unfinished so that they will continue to evolve through performance.”

At the surface, Shaw’s avoidance of these historical notions of “the composer” seems to fit into a growing, wider trend of breaking down the barriers between composition and performance, providing more space for collaboration and different modes of creation. Shaw’s active career as a performer only heightens these tendencies. Looking closer, however, Shaw’s approach to notation, instruction and composer-performer communication goes deeper. It is not simply a byproduct of her being both a composer and a performer; her music shows careful, considered thinking about the nature of instruction and communication in music and art.

The detail of the pattern is movement.

As someone who is consciously questioning the role which notation plays in communicating instructions to performers, Shaw's choice of texts in her most famous work, *Partita*, is extremely apt. The two texts which begin "Allemande," the first movement of *Partita*, both explicitly concern instructions communicated by an artist to others who follow these instructions to ultimately create a work. "Allemande" uses as its opening text a clever interplay between square dance calls and extracts from wall drawing instructions by artist Sol LeWitt.

The juxtaposition of these two texts highlights their commonalities, bringing out the physicality of the wall drawings and the spatial geometry of the dancing. The interaction and transformation between these two texts specifically draws attention to the different ways in which artists can use instruction in their work.

A square-dance caller is certainly not an "author" but rather a facilitator. Scholar of traditional Appalachian dance Philip A. Jamison describes the caller as "master of ceremonies, choosing the dances, teaching the figures where necessary, coordinating with the musicians, and finally calling out the figures during the dance." The role of the square-dance caller feels much closer to a bandleader—or in fact a conductor—than it does to a composer, and much research has suggested that it has an explicitly musical heritage. In *The Afro-American Transformation of European Set Dances and Dance Suites* John Szwed and Morton Marks suggest that the American culture of square dance calling "is at least partly rooted in the older tradition in which African master drummers signal and direct dancers."

Sol LeWitt (1928-2007) was an American artist whose prolific body of work included more than 1200 *Wall Drawings*. LeWitt's *Wall Drawings* are in fact sets of instructions for the creation of a work which will be carried out by draftsmen. For instance, the instructions for *Wall Drawing 154* (which is one of the texts used by Shaw in "Allemande") reads: "A black outlined square with a red horizontal line from the midpoint of the left side toward the middle of the right side." LeWitt's wall drawings are explicitly about instruction, or at least, they use instruction to address questions about the nature of art and the nature of the artists.

This use of instruction in the wall drawings importantly brings LeWitt's role as an artist as close as possible to the role of composer: a creator not of art, but of instructions to make art. In describing the nature of these wall drawings in *Art Now* in 1971, LeWitt could almost have been describing the relationship between composer and performer:

The artist conceives and plans the wall drawing. It is realized by draftsmen, (the artist can act as his own draftsman.) The plan (written, spoken or a drawing) is interpreted by the draftsman.

There are decisions which the draftsman makes, within the plan, as part of the plan. Each individual being unique, given the same instructions would carry them out differently. He would understand them differently.

The artist must allow various interpretations of his plan. The draftsman perceives the artist's plan, then reorders it to his own experience and understanding.

The draftsman's contributions are unforeseen by the artist, even if he, the artist, is the draftsman. Even if the same draftsman followed the same plan twice, there would be two different works of art. No one can do the same thing twice.

The artist and the draftsman become collaborators in making the art.

Each person draws a line differently and each person understands words differently. Neither lines nor words are ideas, they are the means by which ideas are conveyed.

The wall drawing is the artist's art, as long as the plan is not violated. If it is, then the draftsman becomes the artist and the drawing would be his work of art. But art that is a parody of the original concept.

The draftsman may make errors in following the plan without compromising the plan. All wall drawings contain errors, they are part of the work.

The plan exists as an idea but needs to be put into its optimum form. Ideas of wall drawings alone are contradictions of the idea of wall drawings.

The explicit plan should accompany the finished wall drawing. They are of equal importance.

Replace the word "artist" with "composer" and "draftsman" with "performer" and one could be reading a straightforward, if remarkably *aware*, description of the relationship between a composer and a performer. Transferred to another art form, this relationship seems alien and extreme, and helps us to remember how odd the composer-performer relationship truly is.

The text of "Allemande" pivots from square dance to Sol LeWitt with a slight change of wording: "through the middle" becomes "through the midpoint." It moves from the participatory facilitation of square dance calling to the distanced prescriptiveness of the wall drawing instructions. It is interesting that Shaw is herself somewhere on this journey from collaborator and facilitator of new works for groups she performs with to an external composer creating works for strangers. Where is she now on this spectrum from square dance caller to instructor of draftsmen?

The answer is, somewhere in the middle, which is a bit of a non-answer, but it's somewhere *special* in the middle. Shaw's interest in instruction and communication has led to her developing intriguing strategies for communicating her intentions to performers.

Like a photograph slowly developing on waxed paper.

One of Shaw's strategies for communication with performers is the use of text instructions which are full of strong suggestive imagery and conversational familiarity. Shaw is careful and considered with markings in her scores; occasional dynamics or articulations gain great weight and import simply through their relative scarcity. She makes up for this lack of precise, moment-to-moment instruction with these evocative text markings.

Gustave Le Gray (2012) for solo piano opens with the marking “like a photograph slowly developing on waxed paper.” Later, one phrase is marked “like an expensive Hermès silk cravate?” another “a linen hymn,” yet another “like the fragmented hem of a song from long ago.” These words have strong, incongruous imagery yet carry no *literal* meaning for a performer; they are not explicitly instructive in any meaningful sense and anyway, to quote Sol LeWitt, “each person understands words differently.” But the imagery, for instance, of a photograph developing on waxed paper is immensely evocative and suggests a gradual progression from a blank page to an image which is hazy and unclear. Its lack of explicit meaning is also an invitation for the performer to find their *own* meaning. It is a message from Shaw to the performer which establishes how she wants them to interact with her notation. She wants their input. She wants their engagement, and this is her way of communicating that directly to the player.

To modern ears, the idea of a photograph developing on waxed paper seems like an artfully constructed simile. Forgetting that, in a digital age, photographs are unlikely to be developed *at all*, those who remember the process would find little connection between photographic paper and the wax paper in their kitchen drawer. It reads as a purposeful juxtaposition of unrelated ideas to illicit an emotional response in the performer, as could equally be said of “a linen hymn” or the “hem of a song.”

Photography on waxed paper is, in fact, a reference to the work of the French photographer after whom this work is titled. Gustave Le Gray was one of the most significant early pioneers of photography and the author of an important treatise entitled *Photographic manipulation: the waxed paper process of Gustave Le Gray* published in 1854. This marking in the score is not merely invoking an image to inspire one's performance, it is a specific allusion to a wealth of external material which the performer can choose to follow up or not. If they were to choose to, looking deeper into *Gustave Le Gray*, photography and particularly Shaw's own words on photography would yield several interesting insights into this work.

Though the title of the work suggests photography as its subject, the piece is actually about Chopin, specifically the a-minor *Mazurka, Op. 17, No. 4*. This is not a veiled reference, the mazurka is directly quoted in *Gustave Le Gray* and the presentation of this quotation in the score is particularly evocative. At the first appearance of a direct quotation (mm. 109), the Chopin mazurka is literally cut and pasted on top of Shaw's score. It is such a minor detail, but it immediately draws the performer's attention to the different quality of notation between the imperfect engraving of the Chopin and Shaw's modern computer-typeset score. It very effectively highlights the distance between the source material and this contemporary setting using only the minuscule, almost unquantifiable differences in typesetting.

Different performers of *Gustave Le Gray* have taken radically different approaches to how to incorporate the Chopin. Amy Yang, for whom the piece was written, includes only the small quotation of Chopin pasted into the score. The performance by Italian pianist Enrico Maria Polimanti, however, includes the entirety of the mazurka sandwiched into the middle of Shaw's piece, an arrangement which feels even more in line with the photographic techniques of Gustave Le Gray.

Le Gray was a pioneer of combination printing, a technique where single images are actually created from multiple different negatives. This was done to overcome technical limitations of photography at that time. Concerning Le Gray's c. 1856 photograph *View of the Sea: The Brig*, Michelle Facos writes in *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art*:

Because the exposure time for sky was shorter than for land, images printed from a single negative often had bleached skies devoid of clouds. Although combination printing solved this problem, the process was not easy. Many photographs using this method have disturbing inconsistencies between sky and water, inexplicable reflections in the water, two different times of day reproduced together, or obvious seams at the horizon. Le Gray, however, was a master, and no such discrepancies are evident.

Polimanti's performance of *Gustave Le Gray* is reminiscent of this combination printing technique. The Chopin and the Shaw are like two different negatives skillfully pasted together, the seams carefully hidden. The audience is able to hear these two radically different elements as one: a unified whole without one or the other bleached out or overexposed.

Gustave Le Gray is replete with numerous additional references and allusions to Chopin's mazurka, but one of these stands out in particular. At mm. 78, Shaw introduces a figure which consists of numerous repeated 'B's (variously from two to twenty-nine) followed by an upward leap of a minor seventh. This figure refers to a particular, slightly incongruous repeated-note decorative figure which appears twice in Chopin's mazurka, first at mm. 28-29 and then again at mm. 52-53. Its incongruity seems to be of some importance to Shaw, as this is the figure marked with the curious instruction "like an expensive Hermès silk cravate?" In the pervading hazy atmosphere of a slowly developing photograph, this vivid, implicitly colourful imagery certainly qualifies as incongruous. Like the "waxed paper" simile, this evocation of vibrance and decadence initially seems constructed solely to illicit a response from the performer. However, looking at Shaw's other work concerned with photography and her own words on the subject, this seems to be an oblique reference to something very specific.

...Chopin's a-minor mazurka | Op. 17 #4 ...



Shaw's 2009 (rev. 2013) string quartet *Punctum* is also on the subject of photography. Her program note states that "*Punctum* is essentially an exercise in nostalgia, inspired by Roland Barthes' description of the 'unexpected' in photographs and in particular by his extended description of the elusive 'Winter Garden' photo in his 1980 book *Camera Lucida*." *Camera Lucida* is an in-depth exploration of the nature of photography and our relationship to it. One of Barthes' central ideas is the notion of *studium* and *punctum*. To grossly oversimplify, the *studium* is general subject of the photograph, complete with its wider social and cultural connotations while the *punctum* is some

specific, conspicuous element which, to quote Barthes, “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer.

Or, to quote Shaw's own description in an interview with Frank J. Oteri:

The studium is sort of like what the photograph's about, like a photograph of three people sitting around the table, playing cards, and looking at each other. And you can see a mom, a husband, and a child. So that's what the photograph is about. But the punctum in that photograph is maybe the man's tie which is a particular color that's just really striking, or the way that the little boy is looking off to the side. That's the moment that actually grabs you and that you remember.

The link between this man's tie and the expensive Hermès silk cravate seems clear. For Shaw, this mildly incongruous moment in Chopin's mazurka “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” her. This figure is the *punctum*.

But what significance does this have for the performer? *Gustave Le Gray* is a work that is rich in external references, invites the performer to research and explore, and rewards them for doing so. Some of these references are at the surface, others are slightly deeper but easily revealed. Some are deeper still, oblique and tenuous. In the same interview with Oteri, Shaw said concerning her notation:

When I have the choice to put information in a score or not, there's always a careful thought about whether it's necessary. If I didn't put this here, would it give a sense of freedom to the performer to do something informed by the rest of the music? And is there enough other information there to give them a context to make a decision that they feel excited about?

It would seem that Shaw's ability to keep information out of the score is directly linked to her tendency to put information *in the music*. Her work is informed and inspired by photography, philosophy, landscape gardening, three-phase traffic theory (her 2012 work *Boris Kerner* is inspired by the book *Introduction to Modern Traffic Flow Theory and Control*) and, above all, other music. That some of her veiled references yield easily to investigation invites the assumption that *all* her markings in the score could be access points to vast troves of information. Is “a linen hymn” just an evocative image, or does that too have some specific meaning? Shaw's music rewards curiosity but it also engenders curiosity. Some markings are even *posed* as questions: “like an expensive Hermès silk cravate?”

Gustave Le Gray is only one example of this. Shaw's recent string quartet *Blueprint*, premiered by the Aizuri Quartet in April 2016, overflows with evocative text and references to other music: “like a marble bust stoic & grand & still but with a little wink or some side-eye;” “extravagantly Schumannesque;” “Tim Burtonesque warped technicolor Western;” “goopy rallentando to a lugubrious half-speed, like wearing heavy wool;” “brunchy gossip;” “Quaker meeting vibe.”

One passage is marked “yay opus 18 partay,” a phrase that reads more like a text message than a score marking. But this too manages to be extraordinarily rich in meaning. It sets up Beethoven's *String Quartet Op. 18, No. 6* as a musical point of reference, but also manages to subvert the common hierarchy between composer and performer, and not only through its colloquialism. It's a tiny turn of phrase that says to the performers, this music that you know so intimately, that you love playing, I know it and love it too. Don't be fooled by all these dots and lines, I'm one of you.

Wall Drawing 305.

In the fourth movement of *Partita*, "Passacaglia," Shaw returns to the Sol LeWitt wall drawing instructions as her source of text, specifically *Wall Drawing 305*. In this case, the text is not exact instructions of what to draw, but rather "a vocabulary and geometric lexicon to guide the mapping of the points." The draftsman is instructed to place 100 points randomly on the wall, within certain guidelines, and to describe the placement of the points using the provided lexicon. For instance, "the tenth point is located equidistant from the ninth point, the third point and the midpoint of the top side." Or, as appears in "Passacaglia," "The eighty-sixth, eighty-seventh and the eighty-eighth points are located symmetrically across the vertical axis of the wall, from the forty-fifth, the twenty-eighth and the sixty-fifth points, in that order." Like Shaw, LeWitt is giving a sense of freedom to the draftsman to do something informed by the rest of the drawing, providing information to give them a context to make a decision that they feel excited about.

If the text in "Allemande" represents Shaw's journey from participatory facilitation towards more distanced prescriptiveness then "Passacaglia" represents her arrival at a midpoint. Shaw's notation is loose enough to provide performers with the space to express themselves, but it is also full of hints and clues, trails to follow, threads to pull. Shaw's work is richly allusive and deeply layered; it rewards the curious performer and the curious listener.

Shaw is a multifaceted musician who cannot be defined by any one of her roles, be it singer, violinist, or composer. She is reluctant to *identify* as a composer and yet this very reluctance has led her to ingenious solutions for how to actually *be* a composer. She writes music with an immensely literate core and an ebullient, joyous surface and proves these things need not be mutually exclusive.

Christopher Mayo. May 2016. Toronto, Canada.

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