

schule für dichtung (<http://www.sfd.at>) – vienna poetry school

“fundamentals of poetry”
madrid, feb. 18 - 20, 2011

jörg piringer (aut): “sound & rhythm”

the workshop shows how to enhance poetic language through the manipulation of rhythm and sound - two main properties of spoken language. the participants will learn how to use simple but effective electronic devices and software to rearrange and modify their own voices for live performance and prerecorded pieces. the workshop will focus on play and experimentation and will not require any knowledge in computer or other technology other than writing and/or speaking.

jörg piringer



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works as a freelance artist and academic in the fields of electronic music, radio art, sound poetry, visual poetry, interactive collaborative systems, online communities, performance, sound installations, computer games, video art and poetic software. member of the vegetable orchestra. teaches “acoustic poetry” at the schule für dichtung – vienna poetry school
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Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



**schule für dichtung
vienna poetry school**

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lecture jörg piringer

When I speak

(The following was written as a manuscript for a speech, so it has to be spoken or heard or at least imagined as being spoken and heard)

What is happening when I speak? What do you hear when I speak?

You can understand me (I hope) but you also hear my Austrian accent. You will know that I am not a native English speaker. So there's meaning: You know what I am talking about. But there's more. You can hear where I come from. You might hear that I speak German as a first language. You can hear my gender, you can hear if I am tired, you can hear if I am bored or nervous. You might hear my educational or social background. You might hear something about my personality.

Some of these properties you would even be able to hear if you would not understand a single word of English. My voice communicates more than just the meaning of the words.

Sound

Foreign languages or accents help us focus on the acoustic qualities of language: because we don't understand what has been said or because we hear a language spoken with a foreign accent we suddenly become aware of them. Something seems to get in the way between the words and our brain trying to make sense of everything we hear.

When we were children we used to play a language game called b-language. The rules were simple: each vowel was substituted by the vowel then a “b” and then the vowel again. By modifying our speech that way we hoped to be able to communicate information without enabling our eavesdropping parents to understand what we were talking about. What we learned as well was the fact that we could use language as a material that could be reshaped by cutting it up into pieces, which were then reordered.

But what is the smallest meaningful acoustic unit? Or what is the smallest part of language that we are “allowed” to work with creatively? Traditional poets would say that it must be the word. The Dadaist-inspired sound poet would not go beyond the syllable and the Lettrist (and we ourselves when we were children) would vote for the letter or the phoneme. However, from the 1950s onwards, poets like François Dufrêne or Henri Chopin used electronic devices to go far beyond that last frontier of language.

Chopin started to experiment with his voice recorded on tape, manipulated the speed of the recording, added echo effects, implanted microphones into his body and used multiple tracks to create acoustic palimpsests from smaller and smaller fragments of speech or voice recordings.

sound example: Henri Chopin

http://ubu.artmob.ca/sound/chopin_henri/Chopin-Henri_2500-les-Grenouilles.mp3

There is, however, a natural limit on how small an acoustic unit we can work with. Human perception can only recognise sound events as single acoustic units that are longer in duration than 10-20 milliseconds. Recordings of sound that are shorter than this boundary seem to fuse with each other.

On the other hand this effect of fusion can be used to create sounds from tiny snippets of audio recordings by putting them in sequence or layering them on top of each other. Because they are too small to be discerned, the sound grains create a new sound.

sound example: granular synthesis (time stretch)
<http://joerg.piringer.net/workshops/rns/timestretch.mp3>

In the previous sound example all sound grains were placed in an ordered sequence but this is not the only way to structure the snippets of course. When we choose to take a more random approach we get clouds of sound:

sound example: granular synthesis (cloud)
<http://joerg.piringer.net/workshops/rns/cloud.mp3>

Or we could choose to order them more sparsely in regular patterns: then we create rhythms. Before I go on talking about rhythm I'd like to mention the missing link between sound and rhythm.

When sound artists and engineers started to experiment with tape recorders they soon discovered that they could alter the finite tape reels into infinite loops. In that way, they could create never ending repetitions of a sound recording that blurred the boundary between recognisable words and pure sound.

sound example: kette (onophon),
http://www.onophon.at/sound/mp3/kette_06_mono_2003-09-08.mp3

Rhythm

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch sdtuy at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is that the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a total mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

The human brain is capable of making sense of the words in the above paragraph by neglecting the shuffled letters as long as the first and last letter of each word remain in the original position. However, if I read the same paragraph, or tried to accomplish a re-ordering of recorded speech in the same manner, you would understand almost nothing. As in all acoustic disciplines, timing is an essential property (musicians of course know that) of language. It is so in common language and it becomes even more obvious in poetry. You can easily hear if the author of a poem breaks the meter (willingly or unwillingly).

But I don't want to talk on about iambic pentameter or other poetic forms that you are certainly well aware of. I'd rather refer to a more general definition of rhythm:

Rhythm is the "movement marked by the regulated succession of strong and weak elements, or of opposite or different conditions" (The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary II, Oxford University Press)

Whereas, in Europe, poetic rhythm traditionally referred to the meter, to a sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables, repeating phonemes and pauses, other cultures offer different views on rhythmic language structure.

People along the Congo river found a way to communicate across the waterway by drumming the tones of their language. They extend everyday words to more complex phrases which, together with the tonal qualities of their language and a known context, form complex patterns that can be distinguished to transport simple messages:

sound example: Talking Drums

<http://joerg.piringer.net/workshops/rns/Talking-Drums.mp3>

In south India, musicians traditionally went in the other direction. Instead of imitating their spoken language by drums, they invented a large set of syllables called Konnakol for the composition, communication and performance of drummed as well as spoken rhythms.

video example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leQhVgJFPfs>

Another non Eurocentric view on rhythmic language is provided by American black culture, which we are familiar with through Hip Hop and Jamaican Dancehall. A less known variant of swift rhythmic speaking is rooted in the tradition of livestock auctioneering in the US Midwest. The auctioneer repeats numbers and filling words in an extremely fast sequence, in order to sell cattle or horses:

video example: Top Livestock Auctioneers, 2008:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=croJhabLiYI>

These examples show that the combination of rhythm and language can lead us far beyond the usual verse, especially with the introduction of electronic sound manipulation tools that can extend these ways of creating rhythm by adding a plethora of new possibilities.

One of the most important is the possibility to create and use multiple tracks recorded from the same sound source. The Dadaists were the first to write “Simultangedichte” that were intended to be read by multiple voices at the same time. Henri Chopin extended this idea to the tape machine and created layers and dense textures of his own voice only by recording his vocalisations over and over again.

Contemporary recording technology enables us to record tracks or small snippets at the click of a mouse, or at the tap of a finger on a smart phone. Those recorded sounds can easily be arranged into complex compositions and rhythms. In this way, a single sound of half a second’s duration could be used to create polyphonic arrangements lasting for hours.

sound example: one of my own pieces (pakgn)

<http://joerg.piringer.net/mp3s/joerg-piringer-pakgn.mp3>

A New Kind of Poetry

In the above sections, I made you listen to some examples for how sound and rhythm could enhance and extend poetic or even non-poetic language. Before the advent of computer technology, poets had to either be musicians themselves or work with other musicians in order to make use of these “sound tools”. Today, this technology is literally in our hands when we take out our smart-phones or open our laptops. There is no longer any need (if indeed there ever was any) for instructors to tell us (as my music teacher told me) that we are not talented enough to play musical instruments. You can open the program or “app” and start recording your voice, manipulate it and arrange it to create poetic compositions that could not exist in books or on paper.

The support of traditional musical instruments has enhanced and influenced poetry ever since antiquity by reinforcing, as well as requiring, rhythm and meter. New technologies could play a similar role: for the first time, we have full control over a huge set of sonic and temporal parameters of recorded and performed language, and this could foster a completely new kind of poetry, one made up of emotion, information, language and sound.