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Some Preliminary Thoughts on
Chiyoko Szlavnic's Music
Makis Solomos

Listening to Chiyoko Szlavnic's music opens up broad questions having to do with music, aesthetics, and human existence. The Canadian composer achieves significant depth in dealing with these questions in a variety of works, including chamber-orchestra music—*Heliotrope* (2007); pieces with electronics—*Constellations I–III* for piano and sine waves (2011); chamber music, such as the recordings collected here; and multichannel sound installations. Her compositions also vary widely in duration, ranging from short pieces, such as the five-minute-long chamber-orchestra piece *Wind in the Ceiling* (2004–2005), to longer ones, such as the forty-five-minute *Interior Landscapes II A* for sine waves (2010).

Chiyoko Szlavnic clearly positions herself within the recent North American tradition of such composers as Morton Feldman and James Tenney (Szlavnic studied with Tenney)—a practice that eschews the old tradition of development, replacing it instead with a new world of "immersion in sound". This is an aesthetic shared by many European composers, including, [among many others,] Giacinto Scelsi, György Ligeti (especially the early works), and Gérard Grisey. The fourth composition on this CD, *(a)long lines: we'll draw our own lines*, is reminiscent of Scelsi's music, without making direct reference to it: the composition brings splendid individual sounds and sound combinations to the fore. The aesthetic of immersion in sound is not limited to matters of timbre and sound. I would like to propose that Szlavnic's music consists of *composed sound textures*. The compositional process develops two components in particular: pitch intervals and glissandi.

The pitches in Szlavnic's compositions are defined by using just-intonation ratios from a network of related overtone series. The simpler of these ratios produce certain consonances, i.e., beatless intervals. With such pitches, in juxtaposition with more complex ratios, Szlavnic is able to produce smooth and static surfaces, in a meditative mood. She uses a staff-notation system of accidentals for just intonation named, "The Extended Helmholtz-Ellis JI Notation".¹ The glissandi in Szlavnic's works are generalized in a manner similar to Xenakis' approach in the 1950s, when he said that a fixed sound ("fixed" in terms of pitch) is simply a special kind of glissando, one for which the "slope" (the interval of the glissando divided by the duration) is equal to zero. Since the glissandi in Szlavnic's music arise from drawings, as I will later discuss, they form *sound morphologies*, rather than figures. These morphologies—created by often extended glissandi over long durations—produce a sensation of very fluid, almost imperceptibly changing textures.

The relationship between just-intonation pitches and glissandi produces extraordinary effects for the listener. When the music focuses on fixed pitches, a sensation of fullness (consonance) dominates, as if one were in the presence of a Being in the Parmenidian sense of the word. But when glissandi are also present, the ear learns to discern an infinite number of "hidden" pitches beyond the fixed pitches. Suddenly, the reality of that Being is called into question—it seems to have been an illusion, and one adopts the Heraclitean vision of a world in perpetual motion. All of Szlavnic's music can be understood as a (non-dialectic) relationship between being and becoming.

I described the relationship between pitches and glissandi as producing effects for the listener. In some sense, an integral part of Szlavnic's music is not composed; rather, it emerges as a *direct result* of what is composed. For example, harmony is a very important dimension of Szlavnic's music, as the listener will immediately realize while listening to *(a)long lines: we'll draw our own lines* and *Gradients of Detail*. The harmony in her work, however, rather than being through composed, is a consequence of the composer's work with intervals and glissandi.

More generally, Szlavnic is interested in what we call psychoacoustic phenomena—i.e., sensory realities with particular qualities that arise from the nature of our perception, rather than from acoustic reality. The string quartet *Gradients of Detail*, for instance, works with the concept of a critical band—a psychoacoustic phenomenon already explored by James Tenney in his piece *Critical Band* (1988). A critical band is a frequency bandwidth within which pitches—due to their proximity—are not perceived individually, but rather as modulations of loudness. When pitches within a critical band are played simultaneously, beating and low-pitched difference tones

¹ Marc Sabat, Wolfgang von Schweinitz, "Helmholtz Ellis JI Pitch Notation Introduction and Legend, version with accidentals up to 23-limit", 2005/9. (<http://www.marcsabat.com>)

may be heard. These phenomena are more pronounced between homogenous timbres, such as a string quartet or pure sine waves. Szlavnic has analyzed these phenomena in an article with the self-explanatory title "Waves, Ripples, Beats: Psychoacoustic Phenomena Produced by Electronic Means as Compositional Material, and the Potential of Sine Waves to Trace the Acoustical Properties of a Given Room (Heightening the Listener's Awareness of Her/His Own Location in It)".² Her music is concerned with the intimate relationship between the listener and the sound, with the ways in which sound affects the listener. As she writes, "This direct experience of how sound affected my neurological processes opens up an area which still begs for research: to what degree do forms of music and sound affect the body's processes and chemistry, and how do they affect the imagination and thought processes?"³

Chiyoko Szlavnic also uses a special compositional method: drawing. Her works are sonic translations of abstract drawings that consist of horizontal lines (which become fixed pitches in the sonic translation) and transversal lines (glissandi). The lines might be solitary (monodies or unisons), or multiple (polyphony). Szlavnic explains how, for quite a long time, she listened to music with her eyes closed, in order to fully concentrate on the music. This then triggered mental images, which primarily consisted of lines.⁴ In a kind of reverse process, she began drawing compositions in 2000, and consolidated the method in 2004 with *(a)long lines: we'll draw our own lines*: "The very sensitive, fragile music that emerged in this work was quite stunning in its austerity and beauty, and hearing it in concert gave me the courage and desire to continue using this method".⁵ Furthermore, she explains, the ability to use drawings to create structures for the long, sustained sounds helped to prevent them from sounding like drones.⁶ The drawings consist of primary forms, hence the predominance of the line: "Inscribing the 'inner' on paper through a non-mediatory, most primitive form of demarcation: lines. These lines are almost like breaths, inscriptions of being: 'I am here, alive, this line proves this. Here is my being in time and space'".⁷ Szlavnic explains that the musical translation of the drawings is an arduous but exciting process, consisting of four phases: definition of the global scale by placing horizontal and vertical grids on the image; setting regions by adjusting the grid and the image; setting the local pitches using just-intonation ratios and orchestrating them; and, finally, producing a score in more or less traditional notation.

For Szlavnic, this method has had an emancipatory character. It allowed her to release herself from working directly with meters and meter-based rhythmic units. It also allowed her to trust her imagination: "Suddenly there was a freedom in hand, and it emerged that I had a kind of imaginary sound world, which I could 'draw out' on a page, and translate into music".⁸ This emancipatory character of the method affected the fundamental level of the content. Composing with drawings—that is, making a clean sweep of conventional methods—allowed Szlavnic to distance herself from traditional points of reference in creating her music: "The absence of a mediatory symbolic language (traditional building blocks) right at the beginning of the process allows me to create music which itself is, I hope, unburdened by historical signification, tradition, ideology—or expectation. This music—stemming from curving shapes, contours, and drawn lines, which themselves create a unique dynamic on the page where they exist—is an abstract expression of the limitless potential of ratios, and the detail of sound—and our ability (willingness) to hear it".⁹ Through this abrogation of conventional content, Szlavnic released herself from the heavily connoted world of *expression* and *subjectivity*, just as Cage demonstrated in his own work. In an attempt to dismiss "the violent drama of the ego in material",¹⁰ her scores have indications such as,

² Presentation to the Toronto Electroacoustic Symposium (TES), Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 2011.

³ Chiyoko Szlavnic, "Opening Ears. The Intimacy of the Detail of Sound", *Filigrane. Musique, esthétique, sciences, société* n°4, 2006, p. 42 (<http://revues.mshparisnord.org/filigrane/index.php?id=3711>).

⁴ Cf. Chiyoko Szlavnic, "Opening Ears...", *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁵ Chiyoko Szlavnic, notes for the program of the concert *Frau musica (nova)*, Kammermusiksaal, Deutschlandfunk, Cologne, 5th February 2012.

⁶ Cf. Chiyoko Szlavnic, "Opening Ears...", *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁷ Chiyoko Szlavnic, notes for the program of the concert *Frau musica (nova)*, *op. cit.*

⁸ Chiyoko Szlavnic, notes for the program of the concert *Frau musica (nova)*, *op. cit.*

⁹ Chiyoko Szlavnic, "Opening Ears...", *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁰ Chiyoko Szlavnic, "Opening Ears...", *op. cit.*, p. 40.

"Dramatic moments should be avoided";¹¹ "Expressiveness should be avoided—the form of the material is the expression. No vibrato at any time";¹² "The dynamics may naturally (or collectively) exceed those that are in the score, due to register, density, or structural dynamics; however, individual expressivity (solos) should be avoided".¹³

By releasing herself (and the listener) from expression, Szlavnic's music casts off the oppressive universe of "feelings", and rejuvenates the rich and light world of *emotions*.¹⁴ her musical works convey notions such as movement or energy, rather than images and representations. To use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, she composes a music that has to do with *sensation*, which liberates the "affect".¹⁵ Hers is a music which stimulates our senses, which shows us the pleasure we can have by simply being, without the need to impose ourselves on anything at all. It is a universe in which everything that exists is of equal importance. That is why Szlavnic focuses on detail, achieving it by slowing down textures. Her very first compositions (such as the saxophone quartet *Papyrus Bending*, 1994) already exhibited a calm, slow tone. In the pieces that followed, this tone asserted itself. It shows both a great fragility and an infinite sweetness—which is partly achieved by her use of just-intonation ratios, and by indications such as (for stringed instruments): "bow changes should happen naturally, and should be subtle".¹⁶ This shares some features with Alban Berg's tone, of which Theodor W. Adorno writes, "the authority lies in the absence of any authoritarian character".¹⁷ In a similar way, it is as if the subject behind Chiyoko Szlavnic's textures, which are so liquid, flexible, and evanescent, voluntarily disappears—and the listener willingly does so, as well. This kind of disappearing, itself, has nothing to do with morbidity; it might, nonetheless, allow one to be less helpless in the face of death.

¹¹ Chiyoko Szlavnic, score of *The First Place: At the Entrance (with their fur around him)*.

¹² Chiyoko Szlavnic, score of *Gradients of Detail*.

¹³ Chiyoko Szlavnic, score of *(a)long lines: we'll draw our own lines*.

¹⁴ The difference between "feeling" and "emotion" is developed by Antonio R. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, London, William Heinemann, 2003.

¹⁵ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Paris, Minit, 1991, chapter "Percept, affect et concept".

¹⁶ Score of *(a)long lines: we'll draw our own lines*.

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, Cambridge, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1991.