

On using lines in *Unknown Building in Four Parts, Part I*

Past experience

Having used lines in *Conversations (Crossed Lines)* where the performance did not happen for reasons of intelligibility and cancellation due to snow, this is another attempt at incorporating lines as a medium for communicating with performers—also, importantly, as part of an exercise to cooperate with performers and cede power to them in an open-ended approach.

This is part of a project initiated in my mind by Zubin Kanga. There are quite a few difficulties surrounding such a project, mutual trust and respect, communication, technicalities of performance, performers' creativity, sharing power and creativity, as extemporizers do, yet this time between composer and performers—also, real issues to do with accreditation, fees, royalties and so forth. To a certain extent this has been accomplished many times over, yet it seems invariably composers retain their privileged position. Another issue is to do with usual performer practice, where rehearsal time is metred and they are used to asking composers for clear instructions, in other words, for them to be told what to do. This is the way they are trained. They are willing to experiment to a certain extent. However, this seems to be within tried and tested parameters.

So why lines?

Apart from the 'charging-at-the-windmill' syndrome a second time as from the abortive experience with *Conversations (Crossed Lines)*, there are several other reasons. For simplicity, these could be classified as:

1. Wishing to find and experiment with a new methodology of scribing music whilst encouraging a collaborative approach.
2. In line with my current PhD research to incorporate architectural methodologies into note and music making, where the line is a vital aspect of architectural drawing, in both manual and CAD forms of draughtsmanship.
3. Philosophically and mathematically. I have long held an interest in boundaries of objects, concepts, sets, human bodies, states or nations. The *Architectural Review* has recently been concerned with such a theme. This expresses my political concern: to question what a line is, where do a line's boundaries stop and start, what does it mean for the poor and needy sections of society when delineating buildings and circumscribing areas. They claim that lines' edges are blurred. In this context I agree. So, lines have a political import. This for me is tied up with an 'unknown' building. Also, if one were to look at a line under an ordinary microscope and then microscopes of increasing optical power, one would find that (a) the lines have definite thickness (in CAD this is easily recognised where lines have a third dimension, Z, usually set at 0, also, sometimes it is necessary, for reasons of drawing accuracy, to specify the left hand side, the right hand side, or the middle of a line), and (b) that they are quite strange. At very small dimensions, lines would have spaces and could be construed to consist of lumps, or for simplicity, dots. These dots could be analogous to musical dots, or noteheads. Where cooperation with players is

intended, this leaves some ambiguity, which can be problematic for players, interpretively, and pragmatically, time-wise. This creates a space for players to leap into and add their own dimension. It would be hoped that I as a composer could be present to explain and encourage, then remove myself to allow for the real expression of players' cooperative interpretation. This is in the heart of the issue for exploration.

Line elaboration

So, what does this mean for line interpretation in *Unknown Building*?

First, where line colours look a bit like the colour of the materials of the building, this is intentional, so that players could almost get lost and wonder where to go, make decisions, maybe even wander off the straight and narrow path and explore—and interpret. This is a literal example of the lines being blurred, or their edges. Second, the notion that one has to stick rigidly to the path of the lines as drawn is not true. If one wants to follow literalistically the lines, then they are there and can be used in such a way, but, to take political power into a performer's hands is welcomed. There are certain key points which it is hoped that performers would enter into, but this is only suggestive, not prescriptive: such as following different dimensions on the bars in the middle foreground, a philosophical discussion of the objects in the near foreground, table and chairs (in the manner of the 1960s as of, for example, Bertrand Russell)—talking could, in fact, be encompassed (or singing!), perhaps of just mentioning the words “table and chairs”—this could set up an exciting dimension in the form of rhetorical or open question/s. Already, in the score, mention has been made of ‘interpreting’ the architectural content, such as of materials—if performers wanted to make more explicit architectural statements, possibly according to their knowledge and interest in architecture, this too would be welcomed. However, it would not be necessary to be an architectural expert, merely to have some sort of opinion and reaction to the building and its environs. There is so much here, politically, semantically, ontologically, hermeneutically, architecturally. As regards interpretation of materials, per se, the model here seems to be Petra Lange Berndt as explicated by Andy Birtwistle of Canterbury Christchurch University, where power, even political power, resides in materials themselves. One needs the sensitivity to listen to this, to hear what they are saying to interpret musically.

Finally, two points. The first being: how to actually interpret a line. If I was present as a conductor composer then I could answer any first hand questions. With the blown up image of a line in mind, the lines could be seen as linear score parts where notes, rests, spaces, duration of notes would be determined by how the lines are ‘seen’. So whilst at first glance just consisting of long thin continuous objects, they are in fact lively things that can be interpreted in a manner of different ways. They could be stop: start, have long silences, consist of more than one note—and then tying up with interpretation of the building materials and architectural elements be interpreted musically as regards timbre, mode of attack, playing technique, ordinary or advanced, whether notes are repeated, slowly or quickly—and so on. Pitch is suggested by the elevation of the lines themselves, but if players wanted to ‘revolt’ and take power into their own hands and make their own decisions about pitch, or frequency, then *vivre le difference!*

The second part of this final point is as regards the ‘black hole’. This has a double edged intended meaning. There is a plain fun element, where I personally am fascinated by things scientific, especially of the universe, astronomically and

cosmologically. This ties up with part of the spirit of the experiment, that is the 'games' part, which of course ties up with experimentation. It seems just like fun to ask people to wittingly jump into a black hole. Of course it is only a circle, or ellipse, filled in with darkened material. But, having committed to the performance so far, when the lines take a vertical path towards the black hole, it may be that players want to scabble back up their vertical lines and possibly display an interesting effect of trying to resist the gravitational attraction and the inevitability of the end. Possibly, players may interpret this denouement in different way: Bartok pizzicatos, a shout, or silently accepting... I would be interested to ask players what their precise feelings were at this point.

So, the lines hold much more than just lines. For me, if to any real degree, an architectural interpretation ensued, tinged by all these other factors, political, moral and so on, then this would be a success—and hopefully it could add to the canon of collaborative projects meaningfully.