

J a m e s W h i t t l e

f i v e t a b l e a u x

f o r f i v e m u s i c i a n s

Programme note

This piece of music theatre originated from an idea by the composer and is intended to be devised collaboratively in rehearsal.

This performance was devised...

[Performers are encouraged to write their own programme note, incorporating, if applicable, any part of the following, which was used for the first performance.]

... through identifying and exploring similarities and differences between our instruments and the nature of the physical characters that could be created or intrinsic. As five games and characters developed their identities, we began sculpting specific actions to see and/or hear. Now there are five tableaux, linked through a narrative told through focused sonic improvisation. In rehearsal conversations, words such as 'individual' were used, and 'identity', 'collective', 'assertion', 'confidence'; there are no words spoken here.

five tableaux for five musicians

James Whittle (b. 1989)

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Space, Sound, Duration

This piece is a self-conscious exploration of the sight and physicality of musical performance.

It invites the inspiration of musicians to flourish, as they explore their instruments' physicality through improvised, refined, and thus devised, musical and physical actions.

It is a sculpted improvisation of sight and sound.

The sights and sounds should lose their sense of improvisation as they become focused through rehearsal.

The musicians should all be continuously active in searching for the emotional, character-driven motivation behind these actions, all of which are to be seen as performative, as well as the overall narrative (linear or otherwise) which they may wish to communicate in their performance.

Tableaux (and transitions) may be of any, and unequal, durations.

There is no specified duration for any one tableau or for the total of all five.

More than one performance of the piece may occur simultaneously, or overlap with another.

No words are to be uttered – spoken, sung or otherwise – throughout a performance of this piece.

Potentially, resulting performances can be completely different.

Staging

There is a straight line across the stage at any angle, of (an) object(s) suitable for five people to get onto and sit on safely, without assistance. It can be at any distance from the audience. Multiple objects can face in either the direction of the line or perpendicular to it. (In tableau A, musicians are “seated” on the object(s).)

Any staging, costume, lighting, background or multimedia may be used which seem appropriate to the total character of a performance.

The stage should not be reset during performance.

The Musicians

This piece is for any five musicians, including vocalists. A performance must have one of the following:

a: an instrument which requires lateral movement as a primary method of sound production, distortion or modification.

b: an instrument which requires assembly, which can be taken apart into more than once piece.

X, Y and Z: three instruments which have a common quality, but differ in size.

The reasons for, and relationships between, these distinctions are to be determined by the musicians and communicated through their aural and physical actions. An 'instrument' can be incomplete, particularly if it is not a portable one.

Vocalists can make any sound with their body and voice, except for complete words (if words are fragmented to generate material, the words should not be conspicuous or perceptible). Since vocalists would be, ostensibly, two instruments, whichever second instrument they have, the main focus of their sound should be their voice: their self is their instrument.

X, Y and Z should also each have some kind of long, thin implement with which they are comfortable playing their instrument, such as a string instrument bow (as was used in the first performance). These may be used inquisitively, or assertively, against anything, or anyone, at any time. The score refers to these implements as 'bows'.

At the performers' choice, a director can supervise individual and collective musical and physical (theatrical) improvisation. This individual can be either a performing or non-performing musician, or a non-performing non-musician.

The Tableaux

The five tableaux happen in five separate, distinct positions in the performance space.

Tableaux may be performed in any order. [They are presented in the order devised for the first performance.]

Each tableau is a physical situation, the cause, meaning, and material of which is to be devised by the musicians. Each musician is conditioned by an overarching movement which develops.

Tableaux are begun and ended when musicians reach a collective point of synchronisation.

They are static and patterned in nature.

Transitions

Transitions are moments of individual transformation. They may occur between none, some or all of the tableaux. They begin when any musician first breaks away from the pattern of a tableau, and end when the last musician reaches the state of the next tableau. Hence, the start and end points for any transition are different for each musician. Their function should be either:

- to continue any narrative progress.
- to discontinue any narrative progress.

In either case the desired effect is of a seamless, collective physical shift from one tableau to another, comprising individual movements (if desired by the musicians, this can also be an aural shift). The performative physical and aural theatre of performance should not be broken.

The theatrical rhythm of individual movements can be devised. Using specific visual and/or aural cues, musicians can signal to each other of the need to advance the performance with collective shift in tableaux.

tableau A **'bow'**

[*abXYZ* are seated. *A* has his instrument; *b* has part of his. The bows of *X*, *Y* and *Z* are somewhere on stage within a hand's reach from their seat. The instruments of *X*, *Y* and *Z* are scattered somewhere on the floor, out of a hand's reach from their seat, but within reach with the bow.]

All but one are static, stretched, systematic. Aural material grows slowly.

tableau B **'ground'**

[*abXYZ* are all spread out on the stage and on the floor, as close to the ground as possible. Each is near his/her instrument.]

Search for your instrument's identity. Find a sound. Find another. Find other similar sounds. Playfully look for similarities with others.

tableau C **'draw'**

[*ab* and *XYZ* are huddled in two clusters clutching their instruments.]

Become more interested in another, bigger instrument. Be inquisitive. Be daring.

tableau D **'tessellate'**

[*abXYZ* are as close together as physically possible, in a tight cluster. The bows are elsewhere.]

Play each other's instruments wildly. All become unified, ecstatic: a collective, conscious, confidence.

tableau E **'identify'**

[*abXYZ* are all stood up facing the audience. Their normal performance postures are distorted crookedly.]

Play every audience member (in any order) in a short spontaneous burst.

For each one, turn to look at them, smile blissfully, then play, then stop.

When every audience member has been played, stop motionless with a smile.

Description of the first performance

During the period March-June 2012, the composer directed himself and four other members of The Assembled at the University of York, for a performance of this piece on Monday 18th June 2012.

The instrumentalists were accordion (*a*), flute (*b*), acoustic guitar, viola and cello (X, Y and Z), and were arranged left to right (as the audience saw them) *a, b, X, Z, Y*.

No formal text was used in the devising process: instead, the performers used discussion and analysis of their improvised explorations of the tableaux in order to focus their physical movements and aural material, in short, to devise their characters.

After the first performance, the composer made the present score, from materials (preparatory notes and instructions) used in devising the first performance.

five tableaux: Notes for the First Devised Performance

A line of five black chairs are set upstage, parallel to and facing the audience. Musicians are sat up straight on the chairs in the order (audience left to right), a b, X, Z, Y. Their heads are bowed. A lighting change should occur at the beginning of each tableau. Changes should be swift (1-2 seconds). No change for transitions. Start with a blackout, fade up swiftly. Apart from tableau E there should not be too much light: only on stage, ghostly, not straight on. On the first fade up, musicians raise their heads to look straight ahead. They have blank expressions throughout the piece, except in tableau E when they should smile.

tableau A 'bow'

[abXYZ are seated. *A* has his instrument; *b* has part of his. The bows of X, Y and Z are somewhere on stage within a hand's reach from their seat. The instruments of X, Y and Z are scattered somewhere on the floor, out of a hand's reach from their seat, but within reach with the bow.]

Static, synchronised movements, little or no variation. Silence. Peacefulness. Repetition.

a: Begins playing air only, exceedingly slowly and calmly. Gradually begin introducing limited pitch material (clusters, high, quiet) sometime after *b* begins their first action.

b: Throughout tableau I, at any point: stand up suddenly, simultaneously tapping two pieces of your instrument together; stand motionless and upright; sit down just as abruptly and repeating the simultaneous tap. Repeat *ad libitum*, remaining independent to *a*, X, Y and Z throughout this tableau.

X, Y, Z: Take up bows with the right hand. Together find a synchronised movement which can match the rhythm of *a*.

After a while, shapes with the left hand may be introduced in response to *a*, and used in dialogue with the bow.

a: Begin expanding the pitch material (clusters, spilling high-low, bass pedals, moderately quiet).

X, Y, Z: Begin to move away from the rhythm and unity with *a* and each other by reaching towards your instrument with the bow. Do so slowly, straining, evolving out of your initial shape and movements. Remain on the chair.

transition 1

a, b, X, Y, Z: All begin moving to instruments on floor; *a* and *b* to begin after 1,2,3 have begun.
First: exploring from afar with the bow, un-pitched sounds
Then: reach far enough to make pitched sounds. Reach out with LH.
Then: gradually move body from chair to floor, still behind the instrument.
Then: up close to the instrument, as low down as possible.

[*Lighting change.*]

tableau B 'ground'

[*abXYZ* are all spread out on the stage and on the floor, as close to the ground as possible. Each is near his/her instrument.]

Child-like playfulness, learning.

a, b, X, Y, Z: Explore your instrument's sonic potential. Start noisily, find a pitch. Find another of a similar timbre. Find others. Move gradually from close proximity to your instrument to holding it in any unconventional way.

b: Find other parts of your instrument and rebuild it incorrectly. Rebuild it correctly.

a, b, X, Y, Z: Find sounds that sound like something someone else is playing. Stick with these.

tableau C 'draw'

[*ab* and *XYZ* are huddled in two clusters clutching their instruments.]

Similarities; the other.

ab and *XYZ:* In two clusters. Musicians become more interested in the largest instrument in the cluster and move towards it. Start to try to play it uncertainly.
Become more inquisitive.
Become confident. The instruments' owners become more assertive.

transition 2 'assert'

a, b, X, Y, Z: The owner of the larger instrument force the others away. They lead a shuffle to the stage centre. The others retake their own instruments and resume their unconventional posture with it, but are more crooked.

[*Lighting change.*]

tableau D **'tessellate'**

[*abXYZ* are as close together as physically possible, in a tight cluster. The bows are elsewhere.]

A conscious, collective, crazed confidence.

a, b, X, Y, Z: At slightly greater height, physically close cluster.
Playing each other's instruments noisily, seemingly at random, a dense texture.

Gradually interest wanes and individual confidence begins to show: begin to become more assertive, showing signs of wanting to break away from the cluster mob.

transition 3 **'stagger'**

a, b, X, Y, Z: As if the bubble has burst, break away from cluster, moving erratically, even more unconventionally and crookedly – but highly individual. Notes as you move become frenetic and stuck.

Upon reaching the front, at your most confident, lift up your head to face the audience. When you see them, a sudden surprised freezing or stage fright seems to overcome you: a general pause.

[*Lighting fade up across audience.*]

tableau E **'identify'**

[*abXYZ* are all stood up facing the audience. Their normal performance postures are hideously distorted.]

Play whatever you see.

a, b, X, Y, Z: All are stood in front of the audience (as close as safely and unrestrainedly possible; the position should be straight ahead from your original chair.)

Play every audience member once, in any order, for as long as necessary. For each audience member, turn to look at them and smile blissfully; invent new material for that person alone. Do not attempt to correspond with any other sound.

When you have played every audience member, stop motionless with a smile.

[*Blackout.*]