Fall 12-15-2017

Music from the Harpsichord House

Julie Zhu

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Music From the Harpsichord House

by

Julie Zhu

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

Dec 15, 2017
Date

Paul Ramirez Jonas
First Reader

Dec 15, 2017
Date

Daniel Bozhkov
Second Reader
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Figure 1: The sale of *A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal* attributed to Johannes Vermeer through Sotheby’s in 2004 for $30 million.

You are sitting in the audience with the same number of rows in front of you as to your back. Every seat is taken. There are an equal number of people to the left and right of you.

The room is chilly, drafty. The room is stuffy and you can’t breathe. The room is too extreme so reverb is pumped in secretly. You are at a contemporary classical, new music concert.
The piece you’re listening to suddenly gets very quiet. You freeze. Spit starts to fill your mouth because you’re afraid swallowing will be too loud. As more spit accumulates, the less likely you can get away with dealing with it noiselessly. Your right leg is falling asleep because you last sat cross-legged and now you can’t move. Your left arm is getting tired from holding the program in mid-air because if you placed it down, it would crinkle.

Now there’s real silence in the piece but the piece isn’t over because the violinist’s bow is still raised. You notice the sound of the lights and appreciate that you have noticed them.

The concert hall is a trap, but you reach a higher level of consciousness. Your body has always been a prison, and here, at least, you have awareness. And, you think, this imprisonment is for the public good; silence is good for all, or rather, noise is bad for all. When Marina Abramović gave each audience member a reclining sofa chair circling the pianist playing Bach’s Goldberg Variations on a rotating stage, she removed all discomfort and distraction and all that makes us human—discipline, self-control, guilt.

You are trapped at a concert and that is good.
Figure 2: First Google Image Search Result for “Contemporary Classical”

Figure 3: First Google Image Search Result for “Contemporary Classical Music”
Dear Fjóla,

How nice to send an email to you! I’ve heard about you from Robert, and I’m excited to meet you in person.

I am putting up my MFA thesis show this December. Instead of paintings/sculptures, I want to put together a concert of new music for harpsichord installation. What is harpsichord installation, you ask? Well, I’m going to build a small house around the harpsichord so that the keys are inside the house and the strings are outside. I am collaborating with the amazing keyboardist Robert Fleitz, as you know. He will be performing all of the pieces inside of the house, hidden from the audience, but his face will be live-projected larger than life on the side of the house during the performance. See below.

The installation is about the chamber (as new music becomes more experiential and intimate), about performance, about cages, and old things still playful. But practically speaking, what’s going to happen is that the gallery will offer free space for a concert, hopefully the school will offer money for recording (and if not, we’ll find a way), and we’ll all have a ball!
I’m writing you because Robert and I admire your work. Are you interested in writing a harpsichord piece (can include screaming, props, let your mind run wild)? It can be as short as two minutes to as long as twenty (or more!). Robert and I can offer a performance and recording. And lots of laughs, since Robert’ll be stuck inside this box.

The harpsichord is a single-manual (A1 to D6). Originally made to be able to fold into a box, it has been lovingly passed around harpsichord students until Willard Martin did some work on it and put in his own jacks. There are no stops, and for string-play, Robert will have to exit the little house from a little door and run around to the other side, but you can totally make him do that in the piece. Here it is (I’m in the background with helmet hair).

The Hunter College MFA Thesis Show will take place at 205 Hudson St. in TriBeCa, and the opening is Thursday, Dec 14 when we’ll advertise the concerts and do a little preview. We can have as many shows as we like after the opening, so let me know your availability so we can program something that you can make. The programming will also be a creative endeavor, so let us know what your piece will need, and we can make it fun and work with everything else. There will be other things in the show by other people, but in general, those will be paintings.

Please let us know in a week if you’re interested and we can finalize the commission! As part of the work, I’ll be making custom commissioning papers for each composer (which might include stamping one’s ear instead of fingerprinting ha!).

Love love, Julie & Robert.
Music from the Harpsichord House
A Master’s Thesis in Art, Fall 2017
Julie Zhu

Project Summary

I want to put together a concert of new music for a harpsichord inside of a house. The keys are inside the house and the strings are outside, so the performer is inside the house, and the audience is outside, but the performer’s face will be live-projected larger than life on the side of the house during the performance. I will work with fifteen composers as they make new compositions for the installation, and curate three performances at the Hunter MFA gallery at 205 Hudson St.
Background Information

The installation is about the chamber—as new music becomes more experiential and intimate—about performance, about cages, and old things still playful.

The harpsichord is a baroque instrument, from before the piano was invented. Each key on the keyboard plucks a string to play a note. Nowadays, it’s used in “historical performance,” recreations of what Bach might have sounded like in his time, on historical instruments. New harpsichords are rarely made, and usually for hobby or practice. The harpsichord is imprisoned by its historical baggage, and in this installation, so is the performer.

New Music is a term used for contemporary classical music composed in the last fifty years or so. It’s growing, despite classical music audiences shrinking. Still, composers have a hard time getting their pieces played, and like artists, most end up doing something else. The only way to survive is to latch onto an institution.

Having arrived at the culmination of my MFA, I have come to doubt my inspiration; it is not as innocent as it may seem. I came into the program labeled as a painter, and out with an absurd hat made from many hats: composer, carillonneur, writer, sculptor, artist. Even if multi-disciplinary is not the future for art in general, it is for me. Bringing together composers and musicians in a constructed performance space at an institution for art is part of this pursuit.

Budget

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Maker: Dongsok Shin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation of harpsichord</td>
<td>Blanket, Bungee, dolly, uber with friend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cardboard for House: 40x48x2” honeycomb</td>
<td>Uline: 338, shipping: 100</td>
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<td>Building materials</td>
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<td>Videographer</td>
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<td>Thesis Grant</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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</tr>
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Notes:
1. I have asked to rent a harpsichord from multiple sources, but when they hear that the harpsichord will be housed inside a small house that appears to cut through the instrument, no one will agree to rent, which is why I must buy a harpsichord, and this is the least expensive, performance-ready harpsichord I could find.
2. The cost of the project after the grant ($4,088), I will pay for with savings (~$2,000) and taking on more work (~$2,000).
Two stones lie at the bottom of a hole. During the trip, the little girl always had one stone in each pants pocket. When she found one she liked more, one pocket rock was left and the new rock was pocketed. These two stones were the ones who made it home and buried as treasure. They are continuing the hole to the center of the earth as they converse about music and art.

1: I would caution against trends. There’s too much to prove, it’s too easy to counterexample. What about Stravinsky’s art circles? How would you categorize Schoenberg’s artwork alongside his music? The ghosts of John Cage and friends menace.

Figure 5: First Google Image Search Result for “Multidisciplinary”

2: Gottfried Leibniz, inventor of calculus, was known for his optimism, for thinking that the universe was the best one that God could have created. He said that music is the pleasure the human mind experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting.

1: In the art world, music has always had a place, as muse, as decoration, as partner. The Velvet Underground playing at Warhol’s Factory. Philip Glass and Robert Wilson collaborating on Einstein on the
Beach: minimalist music and avant garde theatre. Meredith Monk: voice and movement and video. Anri Sala: location and film as score. Iannis Xenakis: architecture as score. Forgive the vast generalizations. But we should list them all and find which combination of genre and media is missing and then do something that hasn’t been done before. Fill in the gaps.

2: In mathematics, some proofs in history are described not as clever or genius, but as beautiful. There is almost no other word for the brilliance and surprise of each step, created by logic, but almost defies logic with creativity. There is a statement to be proved, and one could brute-force the result with lemma after lemma or with a computer, but any believer in mathematics would want to write a beautiful proof.

1: There are too many artists. There are also too many composers. Young composers pay close attention to how their score looks, because maybe visual appeal helps the piece get played—attractive new symbols and artistic placement of gesture, grace notes, time signature—a work of sophisticated visual composition (Figure 1). Two composers may have the same musical idea, but the more beautiful score will have a better chance of being performed, and most likely, a better performance too.

Figure 6: Excerpt from *Amaranthine*, by Peter Kramer
2: Why is there so much beauty?

Why do male painted buntings look like a fauvist palette? Because female painted buntings like it. Sexual selection is not just for fitness—peacock feathers cannot possibly be explained by honest genetic signaling of health, so therein lies an inexplicable end to our questioning. Why do female painted buntings like useless, colorful feathers? We don’t know. The preference of the female painted bunting includes a preference for something other than a stronger, healthier, smarter mate—this something can be called beauty, or perhaps art?1 And so we stones, like the female painted bunting, have preferences for art, and culture evolves to our tastes. The strong, dull-colored male painted bunting never reproduces.

1: Yet contemporary classical music lives in academia. The trickle up (since music theorists are small), but the more analysis there is, the more normalizing happens. New music is becoming more experiential and you can’t access it digitally. It’s group experience. If anything saves contemporary music, it’s the experiential aspect. Like a séance, full body experience. Ex. Jack quartet playing a john luther adams in the dark with lots of harmonics, no one in the audience coughed, everyone was quiet. The big audience is over. Philharmonic orchestras will die and let them.

2: “Beauty” can be replaced with Adorno’s “truth content” when talking about music analyses.2

The truth content is not necessarily a literal, empirical truth but rather a dynamic, motivating truth designed partly to anchor listening in specific socio-cultural and historical moments even while - and this is the paradox of it - releasing the analyst from the dubious responsibility of having to establish the authenticity of the analysis.3

1: From the very beginning, classical music was niche. Classical music was always for the rich. Folk music was music for the people. Today, with radio and music videos, it may seem that classical music is dying, but the population of listeners is probably the same. So much of music is in memory – recognize that, the individual memory of performance, cultural memory. If it’s not currently active, then it’s in decay, or forgotten, which is why we are in constant resuscitation for the classics, like Beethoven and Brahms...

2: Yet beauty comes with sensory deprivation. We close our eyes when we kiss in order to let the brain properly focus on tactile sensation. Researchers Sandra Murphy and Polly Dalton determined that visual distractions can detrimentally influence our cognitive perceptual load, but that auditory systems can still function effectively even when perceptual demands are high. So if we are blind, we are more attuned to sound and touch and smell and taste.

![Figure 7: The artist’s projected face in the installation](image)

1: So why do audience members want to see the face of the performer? Why do the left side seats get taken first during a piano concert? If you’re a true purist, then sound is all you care about. Yet Met HD Live, the live broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera’s shows on the big screen, where the camera can get binoculars close to the soprano’s

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face, is more popular than actually going to the opera. People want emotion. People want to get as close as they can. People want their content projected at them.

2: Paul Ekman, the American psychologist who studied emotions and categorized 10,000 facial expressions, demonstrated the universality and discreteness of emotions in a Darwinian approach. He claims that he is the world’s greatest human lie detector. Is the performer lying as they exhibit sadness when playing a sad piece of music? And if the viewer can’t hear anything, will they interpret the face the same way?

The stones continue their conversation as the sun sets. They are a few millimeters deeper in the earth.
iv. two invitations

Figure 8: Take-away invitation in gallery
MUSIC FROM THE HARPSICHORD HOUSE
{ JULIE ZHU + ROBERT FLEITZ }

PERFORMANCES OF NEW MUSIC FOR THE HARPSICHORD HOUSE:
@ 205 HUDSON ST IN TRIBECA
ENTRANCE ON WATTS ST

DEC 15--8pm
DEC 19--9pm
DEC 20--8pm
JAN 6--8pm
w/ WINDUP ELEPHANT

COMPOSERS:
KRISTS AUZNIEKS
LINDA DALLIMORE
FIJOLA EVANS
ROBERT FLEITZ
DANIEL FOX
ZACHARY GREEN
ROSS GRIFFEY
GIANCARLO LATTA
JENNA LYLE
POLINA NAZAYKINSKAYA
NICKY SOHN
HARRY STAFYLAKIS
FORREST TANG
CONRAD WINSLOW
JOE YOUNG
JULIE ZHU

Figure 9: Poster and email invitation
Bibliography


Vermeer’s A Young Woman Seated at the Virginal, google image search result: http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/images/intractv/rolinsale.jpg
Image List: Installation Views

1. left side of harpsichord house installation
2. right side of harpsichord house installation

1. left side of installation
2. right side of installation