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Encounters: System for Creative Improvisation

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ENCOUNTERS
SYSTEM FOR CREATIVE IMPROVISATION

by

DRAKE RALPH ANDERSEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Encounters System for Creative Improvisation

by

Drake Ralph Andersen

Advisor: Joseph N. Straus

Encounters is an indeterminate musical composition or, more precisely, a flexible system for creative improvisation. Performers improvise and interact with one another through four possible games whose instructions are laid out in the performance materials. This version of *Encounters* includes parts for flute, clarinet in B-flat, violin, viola, cello, double bass, percussion and piano, reflecting the performing forces of the premiere. However, the instrumentation is open, and any of the parts can be adapted to other instruments contingent upon the range and transposition of the particular instrument. The duration is indeterminate.

The premiere performance, given by members of Contemporaneous in April 2019, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLzKWulPk0c>. This link is archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20200414181122/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLzKWulPk0c>.

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ENCOUNTERS for chamber ensemble (fl, cl, vln, vla, vc, cb, perc, pno)

ENCOUNTERS is a flexible system for creative improvisation. Performers improvise and interact with one another through four possible **games**. Preparation occurs in three phases:

1. Learn the **basic materials**: the **staff** and the **color/duration spectrum**. This is the basis for all improvisation within the piece.
2. Learn (and, if possible, memorize) **how to play** each of the four **games**.
3. Learn how to create a **performance** by beginning, joining, playing, and ending the **games**.

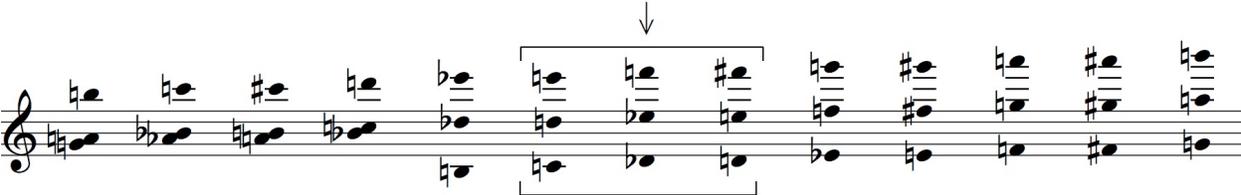
Preparation

This performance of this piece **does not** require a conductor. However, the conductor will be an integral part of **the rehearsal and preparation process**. The following is a guide to the preparation of the piece.

1. Introduce the **basic materials**.
 - a. Introduce the **staff**. Have musicians improvise freely, creating melodies and phrases from the **stacks** and **clusters**.
 - b. Introduce the **color/duration spectrum**. Have musicians improvise freely combining the notes on the staff with the **color/duration spectrum**.
2. Introduce the **games**.
 - a. Go over the **rules** to the **first game** together. The basic materials described above are always in effect. Once everyone is comfortable, practice the game as an ensemble for a few minutes. Pause, discuss, and clarify the rules. Play again. Repeat as necessary.
 - b. Repeat for each game. If time allows, experiment with simultaneous performances of the same game for different subsets.
3. Prepare the **performance**.
 - a. Go over how to **start** a game using hand signals. Have different musicians practice **starting** each of the games for the entire ensemble.
 - b. Practice **transitioning** from one game to another as an ensemble. If difficulties are encountered, plan the order of games in advance and “walk through” transitions verbally.
 - c. Practice performing **multiple games simultaneously** and transitioning between **different instrumental combinations**. Practice **joining, leaving, and ending** games.
 - d. Focus on the performance **objectives**. Decide on the final **duration** of the performance.

1. Basic Materials

The Staff



The **staff** gives all the possible notes of the piece. Each vertical grouping of notes is called a **stack**. Begin at the center stack (indicated with an arrow). Improvise a phrase using only the notes in this stack and the stacks immediately to the **left** and **right** (indicated with brackets). This grouping of three stacks is called a **cluster**.

(The above is an **example**. Your staff may be different. The notes for some instruments are given on two staves for legibility, but this does not affect how the piece is played.)

Example melody:



The example above gives one of **many possible** melodies or phrases that could be generated from the first cluster of three stacks. When improvising freely, after you complete a melody or phrase, you may remain on your current cluster, or choose to shift your cluster one stack left or right (imagine shifting the arrow and brackets left or right). Play another melody using the notes of the new cluster. Continue like this.

The Color/Duration Spectrum

All notes played should be according to the following **color/duration spectrum**. If you play a relatively **short** note, it must have one or more of the qualities listed on the left. If you play a **long** note, it must have one or more of the qualities listed on the right. Most notes will be somewhere in between the extremes. The intensity (and number) of the qualities is **relative** to the position between the extremes (i.e. the longest and shortest possible note).



2. The Games

“Any note” means any note from the staff, following the rules of the color/duration spectrum.

Game #1. “Free” (solo, open-ended)

1. Start from the center stack.
2. Play any note, melody, or phrase from within the cluster.
3. Rest for at least as long as your note, melody or phrase lasted.
4. You may shift stacks, or remain on the same stack.
5. Play the next note, melody, or phrase. Repeat.

Game #2. “Holding Pattern” (variable)

1. Start from any stack. Cue is fist in air.
2. Play any (single) note at least **four seconds** in duration from stack. Count note length.
3. **Rest for at least twice the duration** of that sound. Count rest length.
4. Repeat sound and rest exactly, at least **three** times.
5. After repetitions, shift **one stack closer** to center stack. Return to Step 2.
6. When you reach the center stack, continue note/rest pattern (same note).
7. The game ends when all players have reached the center stack.

Game #3. “Avalanche” (variable)

Leader:

1. Raise fingers indicating how “big” avalanche will be (1-5 followers).
2. Play any short sound. Rest for at least 5 seconds. Count the length of the rest.
3. Play identical sound with identical length of rest. Listen. As you gain followers, hold up fewer fingers (i.e. if you start with 5 and 1 person joins, hold up 4 the next time).
4. Repeat until full number of followers join. Stop when full number is reached.

Follower:

1. If you want to join the game, choose any moderate-to-short sound and play it in a **fixed, unchanging** rhythmic relationship to the leader’s sound.
2. For example, you always play your sound 2 seconds after you hear the leader’s sound.
3. After full number of followers joins, leader drops out. You can continue the avalanche by raising hand with a new number and becoming leader, or drop out ad lib.

Game #4. “Frozen” (duet)

If you hear someone else playing the same (sustained) note as you, you can “freeze” them. This automatically pulls them out of whatever game they are playing into this game.

If you freeze someone:

1. Freeze someone by making eye contact and emphasize the note loudly in a burst of short sounds from within the current stack.
2. Once you freeze someone, to keep them frozen you must only play notes from the current stack.
3. If they play the same note as you, they are **unfrozen**.

If you are frozen:

1. When frozen you can only play notes in the same stack in which you were caught.
2. Duration of first note when frozen is at least 2 seconds. Follow with rest of equal duration.
3. All subsequent notes until unfrozen must have same duration, and be followed by same rest.
4. You become **unfrozen** when you play the same note the freezer is playing.

3. Preparing the Performance

The performance consists of many games played in many combinations, often simultaneously or overlapping over a given duration. Ideally, the decisions are made spontaneously by the performers during the performance.

Starting the Performance

The duration of the performance is open, but should be set in advance. Stopwatches may be useful. Practically speaking, the performance can begin with any of the first three games (**Free**, **Holding Pattern**, or **Avalanche**). The performance does not have to begin with the full ensemble. For example, a subset could begin one game, and some time later another subset begins another.

Starting the Games

Free: No signal is necessary. Performers can simply begin on their own at any time they are not involved in another game. It is a kind of **default** state.

Holding Pattern: Raise a fist if you want to start a game (“leader”), and allow a few seconds for others to join. If you see a raised fist and want to join (“follower”), raise your fist. When the leader lowers their fist, the game is closed and all who raised their fist begin playing.

Avalanche: Begins with the leader using fingers to indicate how many performers will initially be part of avalanche. As performers join, continue to

Frozen: Initiated suddenly and always played by two people (the “freezer” and the one who is “frozen”). This game interrupts and supersedes other game(s) for the duo.

Example Continuity

A performance might begin with the flutist raising a fist to indicate the start of **Holding Pattern**. Within a few seconds, the violist and pianist notice and also raise their fists to indicate that they want to play. The flutist lowers their fist and all begin to play. As the flute, cello, and piano continue, the vibraphonist, cellist, and clarinetist independently begin to improvise freely according to the staff and spectrum (**Free**).

The clarinetist notices that the cellist is playing the same note as they are, and plays a burst of loud, short notes emphasizing the shared pitch to “freeze” the cellist (**Frozen**). They exchange eye contact (acknowledgement), and both begin to improvise within their stack. The cellist is restricted in their rhythm per the rules of the game, making it difficult to “unfreeze.” The clarinetist strategically plays in the high register for a while so the cellist can’t match pitch and “unfreeze.” Eventually, they find themselves playing the same note and the cellist is automatically unfrozen.

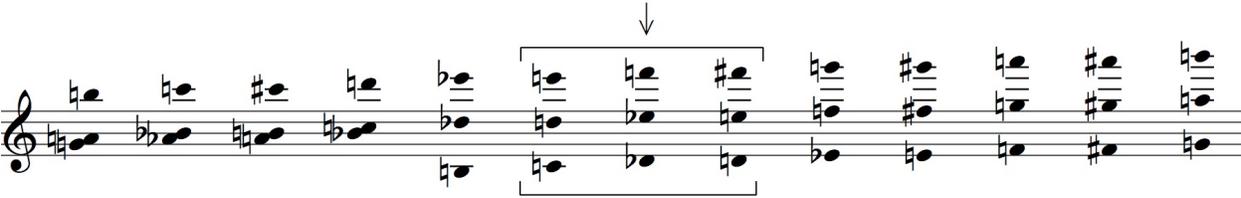
The double bassist raises five fingers to indicate the start of **Avalanche** with five followers, then plays a short sound. The bassist rests for seven seconds but no one joins, so they raise five fingers again and play the same note. In the meantime, the opening game of **Holding Pattern** has ended, so the cellist joins the bass’s game. On the next repetition (another seven seconds), the bassist holds up four fingers...

Objectives for the Performance (for each performer)

1. Play each game at least once.
2. Play in a group with every other member of ensemble at least once. Aim for various combinations (duos, trios, quartets, etc.). It’s OK to sit out. There should be at least one *tutti* game.
3. Create a compelling form. A brief discussion about what this means to the group (i.e. repetition, symmetry, beginning and ending with tutti) may be helpful, but this can also be approached spontaneously.

FLUTE

STAFF



SPECTRUM



GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
Shift Per Phrase
(No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
After x3, Shift Center
(Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

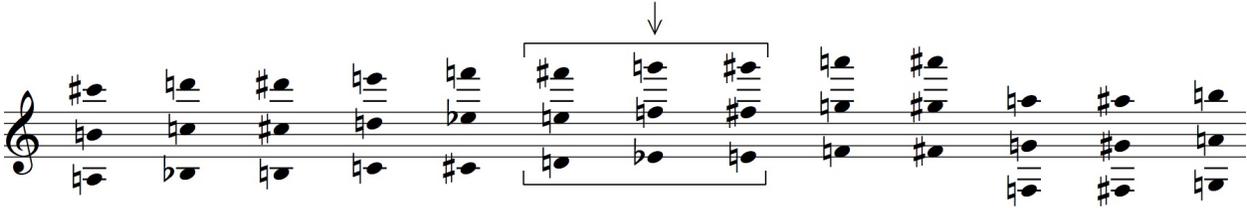
Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
Join Gradually
(Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

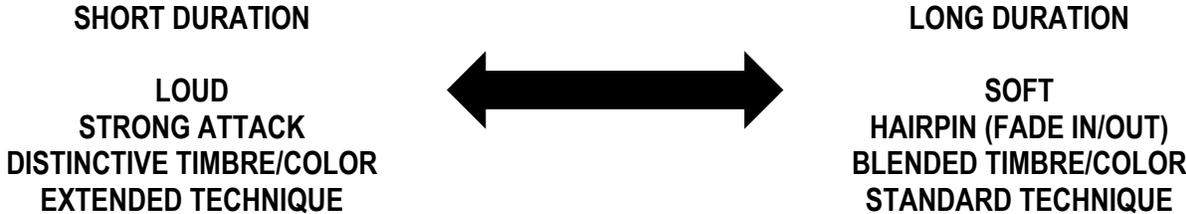
If Same Note, Stay Stack
Match Again to Unfreeze
(Loud Burst)

B \flat CLARINET

STAFF



SPECTRUM



GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
Shift Per Phrase
(No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
After x3, Shift Center
(Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

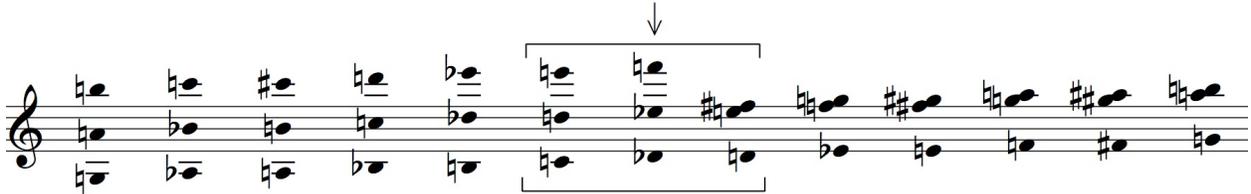
Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
Join Gradually
(Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

If Same Note, Stay Stack
Match Again to Unfreeze
(Loud Burst)

VIBRAPHONE

STAFF



SPECTRUM



GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
Shift Per Phrase
(No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
After x3, Shift Center
(Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

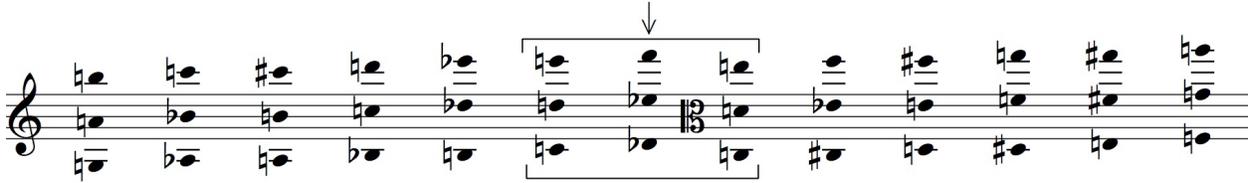
Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
Join Gradually
(Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

If Same Note, Stay Stack
Match Again to Unfreeze
(Loud Burst)

VIOLA

STAFF



SPECTRUM

SHORT DURATION
LOUD
STRONG ATTACK
DISTINCTIVE TIMBRE/COLOR
EXTENDED TECHNIQUE



LONG DURATION
SOFT
HAIRPIN (FADE IN/OUT)
BLENDED TIMBRE/COLOR
STANDARD TECHNIQUE

GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
Shift Per Phrase
(No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
After x3, Shift Center
(Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

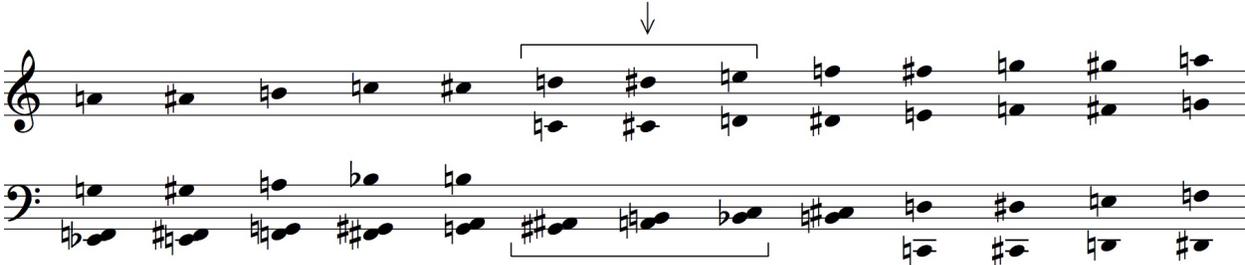
Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
Join Gradually
(Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

If Same Note, Stay Stack
Match Again to Unfreeze
(Loud Burst)

CELLO

STAFF



SPECTRUM



GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
 Shift Per Phrase
 (No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
 After x3, Shift Center
 (Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

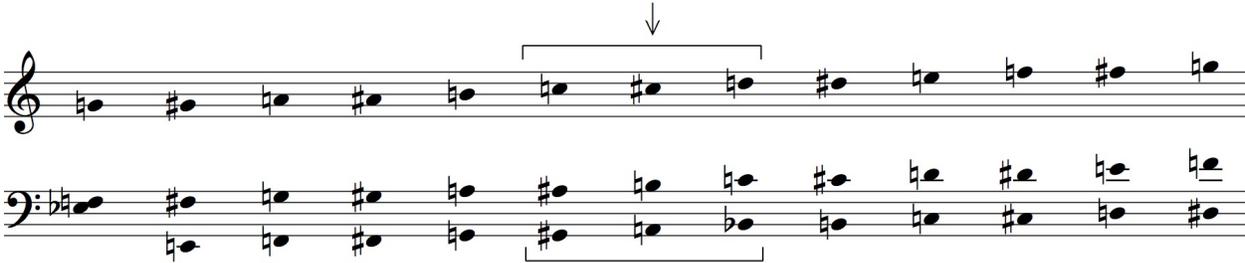
Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
 Join Gradually
 (Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

If Same Note, Stay Stack
 Match Again to Unfreeze
 (Loud Burst)

DOUBLE BASS

STAFF



SPECTRUM



GAMES

#1 Free

Free, Within Cluster
 Shift Per Phrase
 (No Signal)

#2 Holding Pattern

Note/Rest Dur. 4+ Sec.
 After x3, Shift Center
 (Raised Fist)

#3 Avalanche

Short Note, 5+ Sec. Rest
 Join Gradually
 (Fingers for Number)

#4 Frozen

If Same Note, Stay Stack
 Match Again to Unfreeze
 (Loud Burst)