

Composing anti-acousmatically: an autoethnography

This autoethnography documents my compositional process of discovering new artistic possibilities by challenging the aesthetic concept of acousmatics as proffered by Pierre Schaeffer (2017). I define this “composing anti-acousmatically” as composing that is informed by acousmatic aesthetics also but intentionally guides the listener’s attention toward the audio source, unlike acousmatics. It can be seen as one of the post-acousmatic practices (Adkins et al. 2016). I composed *Žižek Says!* anti-acousmatically by referencing ventriloquism and the game of “Simon Says”, both of which choices were inspired by Slavoj Žižek, or his pop culture presence. *Žižek Says!* was composed for a singing saxophone player, Joonatan Rautiola, and a speaking accordionist, Niko Kumpuvaara. The 10-minute piece represents experimental music theatre, and was commissioned for its premiere at the Tampere Biennale in April 2024.

THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC LENS AND TOO MANY ŽIŽEKS

Autoethnography has shown considerable potential for putting into words the experiences of artists, especially musicians (see Carless 2020; Beirnes & Randles 2023; Liu et al. 2024). More specifically, Scarffe (2020) and Fornhammar and Hyytiäinen (2025) have used auto-ethnographic and duo-ethnographic methods, respectively, to analyse the experiences of composers working in a transdisciplinary manner. Gouzouasis and Wiley (2025) have explored an even broader spectrum of possibilities for reflective forms in the field of music, including, but not limited to, analysing the artistic processes of composers, performers – i.e., singers, instrumentalists, and conductors – and even creating autoethnography as art.

In this research, autoethnography is employed in a somewhat conservative manner, emphasising the documentation of the process through a working diary while also reflecting on the aesthetic choices that lead to “composing anti-acousmatically”. This has guided the path of finding the right flavour of autoethnography for this pursuit. Ellis et al. (2010, 1) characterise autoethnography as a text or method “to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)”, which has been my very crude starting point. Adams et al. (2015, 1), on the other hand, list the following six characteristics

of autoethnography (numbered here for readability): 1) the researcher's personal experience describes and critiques cultural beliefs and practices, 2) relationships with others are acknowledged, 3) there is self-reflection on the intersection between self and society, 4) the nature of the research is processive, 5) balance is negotiated between intellectual work, emotion, and creativity, and 6) the need to strive to make our lives better.

This definition has accompanied me in reflecting on many focal aspects of this work. I will describe the background in detail later, but for now it is sufficient to say that the primary data provided are derived from my personal experience as a composer of contemporary classical and experimental music theatre, in relation to that of performers and other composers. To maintain their authorship, the article refers to artists by their names, and they have had the possibility to read and correct the parts concerning them.

Another corner of the methodology of this project comes from the work of Slavoj Žižek, but it is used artistically more-so than academically. In *Žižek Says!* roughly half of the spoken or sung text comes from Žižek himself, with his idea of voice as ventriloquism being used for the dramatic structure of the piece. Here, Žižek is a caricature or a symbol – one of pop culture's žižeks endlessly copied on t-shirts and memes – rather than the actual Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek referred to in an academic context. This can be understood on different levels: starting from the name of the piece, Žižek is Simon (Simon Says!) or, in the Finnish version, The Captain ("Kapteeni käskee!"). This Žižek-Simon-Kapteeni is the one issuing the commands. As in the original children's game, there is no time to consider the task's validity or meaning: authenticating Simon is all that is essential. However parodied the superstar-philosopher is here, the quotes come directly from a source, namely from the popular TV programme *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* written by Žižek (Fiennes 2006).

Chart 1 illustrates the structure of the final piece, enabling the reader to understand the text references and the results of the composition process. "Sax." stands for saxophonist and "Acc." for accordionist. The text is quoted as it is in the score. Sections marked with "Žižek" are my own transcriptions from *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Fiennes 2006); the other texts are written by me.

Žižek speaks here of the human voice as a visitor that possesses the body, reminding him of the act of ventriloquism. This is not the first occurrence of his theory; ten years earlier he wrote: "It is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks 'by itself,' through him" (Žižek 1996). This idea inspired the music theatre work on many levels: scenic actions, where the musicians were the ventriloquist and the puppet; musical gestures, such as the "Žižek Says!" motif, or extreme vocal material that possesses the body; and the material overlapping those two, such as the game of Simon says! providing the format. These are described in the chapter on the composition process.

Chart 1. The structure of *Žižek Says!*

Part	Initiation	Connection	Description and text
Prelude. Not an organic part	Acc. speaks the correct signal	Sax. as a ventriloquist puppet for acc.	Žižek: “Voice is not an organic part of a human body. It is coming from somewhere in-between your body.”
1. Foreign intruder	Acc. speaks the correct signal	As above, but getting some freedom in the end	Žižek: “[...]the human voice, not as the sublime, ethereal medium for expressing the depth of human subjectivity, but the human voice as a foreign intruder.”
2. Sing, move and speak	Acc. speaks the incorrect signal Miika says	Sax. is free to move and sing from the power of acc.	“Instrumentalists are proper musicians, but we can easily change that: make them sing! Only one thing could be worse: make them move and speak!”
3. Chords	Sax. sings, correct	Musically together	-
4. Quickies 1	-	Short musical bursts that the players try to mimic	-
5. Domesticate it	Acc. speaks, correct	Sax. sings the message of the text	Žižek: “Or, since we cannot simply get rid of it, how to domesticate it, how to anyway transform this voice into a means of expressing humanity, love, and so on.”
6. Acc. is not fooled	Sax. sings, incorrect	Acc. does not follow	-
7. Vibrati	Acc. speaks, correct	Musical mimicry	-
8. Obscene dimensions	Acc. speaks, correct	Sax. sings the text and emotions	Žižek: “[...] but who possessed her? A voice. A voice in its obscene dimensions.”
9. Acc. looks like a puppet	Acc. plays, incorrect	Sax. mocks acc.	“Accordion already looks like a weird puppet that the player tries to control, but it just screams!”
10. Quickies 2	-	As in number 4	-
11. Chords 2	Acc. plays, correct	Musically together	-
12. Phallic object	Acc. speaks, correct	Sax. performs the text, using the instrument as if it were a puppet	“Thank god the saxophone goes peep, that is the only excuse to hang around in public with such a phallic object.”
13. Sax. is bored	Acc. plays, incorrect	No connection, Sax. does social media	-
14. Breathing	Sax. sings, correct	Musically together	-
Postlude. The key	-	Musically together	-

ACOUSMATICS

Using the above-mentioned methods, I attempt to shed new light on the much-used concept of the acousmatic, finally abandoning it in favour of the working method of “composing anti-acousmatically”.

In 1966, Pierre Schaeffer published *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines* (*Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines*), in which he presented the concept of “acousmatic” and left his permanent mark on how we write and think of sound. In the chapter “Acousmatics”, Schaeffer (2017, 64–69) opens with two definitions from the *Larousse* dictionary: “Acousmatic’ as in the name given to students of Pythagoras, who were not allowed to see their teacher, and later, ‘Acousmatic’, as an adjective: a noise that is heard without the causes from which it comes being seen” (Schaeffer 2017, 64). Schaeffer saw the potential of repurposing this ancient word in a modern context, not only because of his background as an audio engineer, but also as a composer and developer of *musique concrète* – a compositional technique that uses recorded sounds as raw material. Audio technology, which had been advancing by leaps in the preceding years, had allowed for the recording of sound, superimposing it on other sounds or on itself, changing the dynamic, pitch, and speed, techniques that Schaeffer and other composers quickly applied artistically, an evolution which can be seen in their writings (Schaeffer 2017).

As the separation of sound and its source was given a name, Schaeffer further developed the theoretical idea of a “sound object”: pure sound, independent of its source (such as a saxophone or a voice) and the possible technical medium (such as magnetic tape or a memory stick) full of artistic potential, as a compositional material according to the newly-found techniques. The technical and aesthetic have intertwined, as Windsor describes: “The acousmatic was intended not just as a description of how listeners would perceive sounds, but of an attitude composers should develop towards their material” (Windsor 2000, 8). This research relates more to the aesthetic aspect. There has been a plethora of literature on different facets of the concept, such as acousmatic listening (Barreiro 2010; Marty 2019), music (Gorne 2024; Camilleri 2024) and composition (Andean 2014), and as electronic music is now a prominent part of the composer’s conservatory education, Schaeffer’s ideas are also included in curricula worldwide. Adkins et al. (2016) show that this has created an aesthetic with an evolutionary process and reactions of its own. “This definition considers the ‘acousmatic’ not merely as an approach to listening but also as one towards the treatment of sonic materials and their presentation in concert – in essence the establishing of a well-defined musical practice” (Adkins et al. 2016). Because of the magnitude of the literature, only a few aspects can be highlighted.

Acousmatic sound can be intriguing or powerless

In the original mythos of Pythagoras' academy, hiding the teacher guarantees the student's focus on the speaker's words. Analogously, the core of Schaeffer's idea is that we can concentrate on acousmatic sound optimally and not be disturbed by things that should not play a role in the listening experience. Roger Scruton and Erwin Straus go further by arguing that music primarily exists when the sound and the source are detached, either by being acousmatic or by becoming detached in our perception (Kane 2014, 136–137). Chion (1999) and Kane (2014) are less idealistic about the human reaction: while they admit that hiding the source of the sound might enhance the concentration on the sound object, they also emphasise the opposite. Kane (2014, 81–83) presents an example of people in a small village hearing acousmatic choral voices and interpreting them as supernatural. This phenomenon captured the interest of the villagers, and later even the national press, but the focus was on the invisible sound source rather than the sound object.

Acousmatics uses different technical and, more rarely, practical means of detaching the sound from the source. In the case of acousmatic music, this detached element is usually the instrument or the singer's body. *Musique concrète* was born from this detachment and flourishes with it, but there are also non-electronic examples of creating acousmatic music for reasons that do not seem to be purely musical.

Kane (2014, 99–113) paints a partly covered historical *tableau* in front of our eyes: in Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was forbidden for a nun to be seen outside of her convent, and the sight of nuns doing physical exercise, such as playing an instrument or singing, was especially problematic. Still, there were extremely musically talented and educated nuns in the convents. As a result, walls were created in the performance venue, allowing the audience to experience the music being played and sung by nuns without the sexually provocative and, hence, disturbing sight of their bodies. Interestingly, when the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau attended these concerts, he drastically yearned to see the performers that he eroticised in his mind, thus exemplifying the counterbalancing technique mentioned above (Kane 2014, 108–110). Similarly, in the case of *Žižek Says!*, I used an unclear audio source to guide the listener's attention toward finding it.

The special relationship between acousmatic sound and voice

As in the previous story, voice plays a special role in *Žižek Says!*. Indeed, working with voice has influenced my professional identity, so discussing it in the context of acousmatic sound and composition is justified. After referring to Pythagoras' veiled voice, Schaeffer's (2017) emphasis seems to be on audio sources other than voice. Luckily, the acousmatic voice is further analysed by different authors: Dolar (2006) proposes a new theory of voice grounded in philosophy and developed from the ideas of Lacan. Before analysing the voice in Kafka's and Freud's works, he refers

to Schaeffer and Pythagoras. According to Dolar, voice creates the most straightforward mechanism of pure spirit without the body, and hence it is of great power and beauty. The potential of singing even troubles him, because it reverses the hierarchy and allows the voice to dominate the meaning. In *Sound Unseen* (2014) Kane writes about the history of acousmatics, including an in-depth analysis of the minute variations in definitions he cites from different sources, which has been a source of inspiration for this article. Other researchers of acousmatic voice may also be interested in his analyses from Husserl and Heidegger to Derrida, as well as in the psychoanalytic voice in general.

Chion's *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), on the other hand, provides an endless source of interesting references from early cinema, which was fascinated by the relationship between voice and image. He lists Mabuse in *The Testament of Mabuse* (1933), the mother in *Psycho* (1960), and the wizard in *the Wizard of Oz* (1939), which he parallels with Darth Vader in *Return of the Jedi* (1983) as "acousmètre", French for acousmatic being. They are all characters with acousmatic voices that give them special powers. Curiously, they also lose these powers in the process of "de-acousmatisation", where the veil that makes the sound acousmatic is suddenly torn off to reveal the source in all its physicality (Chion 1999). After showing some central aspects of acousmatics, I will now define composing anti-acousmatically and contextualise it.

FROM ACOUSMATIC LISTENING TO COMPOSING ANTI-ACOUSMATICALLY

Composing anti-acousmatically

After introducing these earlier theories, I now present the concept of "composing anti-acousmatically" as follows: *composing informed by acousmatic aesthetics and intentionally guiding the listener's attention towards the audio source*. Being informed could involve dialogue with acousmatic aesthetics or even the utilisation of some of the tools of acousmatics. This definition does not comment on whether the sound itself is acousmatic; the audio source may be visible to the audience or not. The definition also allows ample freedom in the composition's medium, as demonstrated below.

I want to illustrate the definition with two examples. Mozart composed a concert aria, "Popoli di Tessaglia", to showcase the exceptional skills of Aloysia Weber, his sister-in-law (Gidwitz, 1991). Clearly, Mozart did not compose anti-acousmatically, as he wanted to emphasise the performer's skills for their own merit, not to challenge the Schaefferian aesthetic, which had not yet been invented. For another example, let us imagine a contemporary composition based solely on a recorded and manipulated composer's voice describing the recording process and commenting on how it feels to produce the material: "Oh, it does so hurt to sing this high!" This

is composed anti-acousmatically, because we can assume the composer to be aware of the acousmatic inventions and to challenge them intentionally, asking us not to observe the sound as a pure sound object. Quite the opposite, the words make us aware of how it feels to create the sounds. Interestingly, we could also slightly adjust the imaginary composition to make it analogical but still acousmatic (the composer-performer sings live from behind a screen) or even non-acousmatic (the composer-performer sings and is visible). These variations are also composed anti-acousmatically.

At this point, I want to draw a comparison with established terminology from theatre. Brecht (1964) describes *Verfremdungseffekt* as acting “in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play” (Brecht 1964, 91). Ergo, the director, or the other people involved in the production, make the audience aware that they are watching performers playing roles. For Brecht, the distancing allowed the audience to focus on the play’s political message, often aiming to impart a more active role for the proletariat (Morgan 2013). Analogously, in *Žižek Says!* the audience is invited to notice the audio sources, the performers’ bodies, and made more aware of the musicians’ creative role in the artistic process. Still, this is just an analogy, and there are many differences as well.

Before proceeding to contextualise this definition, I want to add an autoethnographic comment. Composing precisely in this way was my intention from the very early stages of this production. At first, it was just a somewhat vague idea, but quickly the more concrete manifestation emerged. Simultaneously, putting the definition into words has been one of the most challenging parts of this process, and it required numerous rewritings.

On terminology and context

After defining the process, I will now contextualise it using existing terminology and theories. “Anti-acousmatically” seemed like an intuitive choice of name, because I was intentionally composing against the acousmatic aesthetics, but I am obviously not the first researcher with somewhat similar ideas. Adkins et al. (2016, 108) suggest “Post-acousmatic practices” that are influenced by, augment, or critique Schaeffer’s heritage. They suggest five “nods”, a loose categorisation of musical parameters, that differentiate specific post-acousmatic practices from acousmatic ones. The nods and their respective original acousmatic descriptions are 1) Time (linear musical time), 2) Performance (separating compositional and performance time), 3) Form (avoiding simple forms and regularity), 4) Production (valuing the craft of quality and sound design), and 5) (Dis)functional harmony and melody (ignoring the concepts of harmony and melody) (Adkins et al. 2016, numbering and description by me). The article then lists examples of post-acousmatic works and practices that

decisively operate against the nod in question. For instance, post-acousmatic works by Richard Chartier, Taylor Deupree, and TU M' that extend the traditional linear temporality are categorised under the first nod.

Later, Holbrook and Rudi (2022) suggest a similar approach, concentrating on the term “computer music”, which makes it challenging to apply their terminology more generally. An analogous, earlier argument is presented by Simon Waters (2000), who promises to go “beyond the acousmatic” by thematising the different cultures of using sound: either acousmatic (sound as abstract material) or sampling (concerned with context) (Waters, 2000, 56). According to him, sampling culture has problematised the acousmatic one, which has led to a cultural shift. Although Waters raises the social question of the background of the sound that the composer uses, his examples of sampling culture seem like comments on Schaeffer's work rather than an actual critique from the outside.

These cases are interesting, but somewhat distant from *Žižek Says!*. Examples of post-acousmatic practices still assume the use of electronics and the digital manipulation of sound, closely related to Schaeffer. It could, nevertheless, also be argued that acousmatic composition as an aesthetic movement and style has gained such importance that its effects are no longer tied to the original medium: it affects all living composers and also the way we can sometimes hear analogical music as sound objects, forgetting the performer. As a result, it can also be challenged from the outside, using the non-digital tools of music theatre rather than its own native tools of electronic music. With this concern in mind, it seems that “composing anti-acousmatically” belongs to the category of post-acousmatic practices, although it is not a typical one.

The exact concepts “anti-acousmatic” or “composing anti-acousmatically” have been used surprisingly seldom, considering the seminal role of acousmatics in studying sound in the academic context. Vincent Tiffon (2006) mentions that the use of sonography provides a paradox of acousmatic music and an anti-acousmatic analysis method (“une méthode d'analyse anti-acousmatique”) but does not define it further. Outside of academia, I found isolated references to the “anti-acousmatic” from artists of different disciplines. Ricardo Cilment (2014) claims that in his *Silent Era*¹ (2002) he “wanted to evoke a sense of ‘anti-acousmatic composition’ by sculpting a gesture-less musical work as a continuous single movement evolving through time while setting points of no return.”

Composer Asbjørn Blokkum Flø (2010) mentions planning “anti-acousmatic Schaefferian sound structures” for the Grønland Chamber Music Festival in 2010. He explains: “[In] *Everyday Filter* (2010), I wanted to explore a harsher sound-world. At the time, I found large parts of the canon of electroacoustic music to be too nice, pretty, dry and academic. Also slightly manipulative on a musical struc-

¹ In a ironic twist, EMDoku has categorised this work as “fixed media, acousmatic” (www.emdoku.de/en/work/emdoku/23652)

tural level” (private communication, 22 January 2025). For Flø, “anti-acousmatic” is a reaction to the overly-polished acousmatic aesthetic. As an interesting side note, the transdisciplinary influence of acousmatics is evident in Christine Sun Kim’s *The Grid of Prefixed Acousmatics* (2017). It is a collection of clay figures named Acousmatics with various prefixes (Hood Museum website 2018).

I summarise here, and in Chart 2, the above-mentioned concepts related, contrasting, or analogous to “composing anti-acousmatically”: Acousmatic sound is an abstract starting point for the aesthetic field of acousmatic composition, to which “composing anti-acousmatically” is opposed. “Composing anti-acousmatically” can also be seen as a special case of post-acousmatic practices, although the examples above emphasise the use of electronic media. Deacousmatisation of the Voice and *Verfremdungseffekt* are techniques of film and drama, respectively, that function in a way analogous to “composing anti-acousmatically”, just for different goals. “Composing anti-acousmatically” forbids acousmatic aesthetics to reveal the performer’s authorship; the deacousmatisation of the voice forbids the acousmatic voice to reveal the character’s powerlessness; and the *Verfremdungseffekt* forbids the audience’s identification with the characters to reveal the political power structures.

THE COMPOSITION PROCESS

In the following chapter, I describe how the new concept is used in praxis; but first, I will give some autoethnographic context for my relation to the performers and the audience, which affected the composition. In many ways, I represent the cliché of a composer: I was born into a middle-class Finnish family in 1982 and am a homosexual cis man. I graduated with a master’s degree in mathematics and a bachelor’s in musicology from the University of Helsinki, followed by a diploma in composition at the Berlin University of the Arts. I completed my doctoral degree at the University of the Arts Helsinki, in the DocMus doctoral school. It involved creating the Voice Map Method, which enhances singer-composer communication. My income comes from various sources, and my work history is somewhat fragmented. As for the performers, Joonatan Rautiola and Niko Kumpuvaara seem to come from the same social bubble as I do, working partly as freelance artists, partly academically, and in international contexts.

Composing for a specific performer and recognising their skills, personality, and body in the tailoring of the composition is the cornerstone of my creative process. I have previously shown that, paradoxically, this method creates music that can also be performed by other musicians (Hyytiäinen 2022). This has been evident in dance, theatre, and music theatre, where pieces are often created in close collaboration (Rymer 2017; Chu 2021). As for their relationship to the audience, composers –

Chart 2. Relationships of different terminologies related or analogous to “composing anti-acousmatically”.

Name	Description	The user	Example	Motivation for utilising this technique
Acousmatic sound (abstract)	An abstract <u>description</u> of sound, its source and the source's visibility	Not eligible	A person hears a sound coming from another room and can not see the source.	There is no general motivation, as acousmatic sounds can occur intentionally or unintentionally.
Acousmatic composition (aesthetic)	A <u>composition</u> of acousmatic sound in a way that relates to other acousmatic compositions	Composer	As part of their studies, a student creates an acousmatic composition of digitally manipulated recorded sound.	Following Schaeffer's ideas, acousmatic compositions have guided the listener's attention towards listening to sound objects.
Post-acousmatic practice	<u>Practices</u> related to the Schaefferian historical heritage	Composer, performer, etc.	A group improvisation jam that combines live singing, pre-recorded material and digital manipulation of sound.	Using the artistic possibilities of acousmatic composition but recognising the artistic and technical possibilities that emerged since Schaeffer.
De-acousmatisation of the voice	A <u>technique</u> for creating a dramaturgical art of a character	Author, etc.	When the Wizard in <i>Oz</i> only exists as a voice, he seems mighty; when his body is revealed, less so.	The fall of a character is underlined by first giving it all the might of the abstract voice and then forcing it to the limitations of the body.
<i>Verfremdungseffekt</i>	A <u>technique</u> used in dramaturgical work to make the audience aware that they are watching a performance	Director, etc.	The choir is commenting on the theatrical piece they are performing.	Making the audience aware that they are watching a performance helps to project the social message.
Composing anti-acousmatically	A <u>technique</u> to make the listener aware of the audio source	Composer (director, librettist)	In <i>Žižek Says!</i> , I emphasise the sound coming from the performer's body to make the audience more aware of the performer.	By directing the audience's attention to the performer (rather than the abstract sound objects), I emphasise the performer as an active subject.

indeed all artists – have specific approaches, and many claim that they do not think of the audience at all (see e.g. Sloboda 2015; Zobl 1983).

The collaboration and chronology of creating the piece up to the intended premiere are outlined in Chart 3.

Although the first artistic initiative came from Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, and me, the production was planned in collaboration with Minna Leinonen, the artistic director of the Tampere Biennale. It was Rautiola who asked for the Voice Map Analysis, because he wanted to learn more about his registers. The Voice Map Method was created exactly for this kind of collaboration (Hyytiäinen 2022), but I thought I already knew the voice well enough. In reality, many register changes inspired sur-

Chart 3. Production schedule.

When and Where	What	Who
June 2022 Helsinki, Finland	Practising other vocal music by Hyytiäinen	Hyytiäinen, Rautiola
Early 2023	Kumpuvaara suggests a collaboration	Kumpuvaara, Rautiola, Hyytiäinen
March 2023 online	Production (application for money from Teosto)	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, Hyytiäinen, Minna Leinonen
May 2023 online	Grant is issued / Official agreement from Tampere Biennale	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, Hyytiäinen, Leinonen
June 2023 Helsinki, Finland	Practising other vocal music by Hyytiäinen	Hyytiäinen, Rautiola
August-December 2023	Planning the structure and text	Hyytiäinen
January 2024 Helsinki	Meeting for testing the instruments and scenic options	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, Hyytiäinen
February 2024 Kaukonen, Finland	Planning the structure, text and musical motives	Hyytiäinen
Mid-February 2024 Helsinki	Voice Map Method	Hyytiäinen and Rautiola
March 2024	Composition of the piece	Hyytiäinen
April 2024 Helsinki	Musical rehearsals	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara
9 April 2024 Helsinki	Final rehearsals	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, Hyytiäinen
10 April 2024 Tampere, Finland	Premiere (planned)	Rautiola, Kumpuvaara, Hyytiäinen

prises, and this also made the production atypical. When I was doing preliminary research for the composition (from late 2023 to early 2024) I realised that I would like to write about the process as an autoethnography, so while reading theoretical texts to better compose the piece I was simultaneously creating the theoretical basis for this article.

In the writing process, it became evident that a lot of work was needed. I mention this since it must have affected my compositional process and how I recorded it. At first, I made short, easily quotable remarks with witty language for my journal. After realising this, I started to swear a lot, just to make a difference, albeit a pointless one. These stylistic nuances show how, with the autoethnographic method, the process of being a researcher and simultaneously part of the process being analysed can be complex and self-referential (Butz & Besio 2009). The artistic process was not always simple, as demonstrated by the following notion triggered by my preparations for meeting both performers simultaneously for the first time.

Here we go again! Yet another middle-aged, white cis-man is telling people what to do. And how am I any better as a composer, commanding people to do things with their bodies? I'm also one of the "žizeks" — a game of Kapteeni käskee where Hyytiäinen and Žižek are each one of the "captains", or "simons", who are in command.² (Working Journal, 10.1.2024)

The plan was that I would test the technical possibilities of the instruments and experiment with the performative or scenic aspects. Exploring the possibilities of the instruments is a typical part of many composers' processes (Zembylas & Niederauer 2017), and since this piece was to include some specific theatrical aspects, it was essential to also learn their typical body movements, both individually and in relation to one another. To offer a concrete example, I gave the fractionally taller Rautiola the role of the puppet and the somewhat shorter Kumpuvaara the role of the ventriloquist, which created a comical effect. When revisiting the entries for this day and the preceding days, I was able to locate the source of my insecurity: in the performance, I would ask the performers to not only play their instruments and sing (re: Rautiola) but also to play a specific role and to enact the choreography and speaking (re: Kumpuvaara). The abstract and complex repertoire planned for the premiere must have blinded me, as I had already seen them individually perform their hearts out during theatrical performances.

This movement was then tested on how Kumpuvaara and Rautiola would look as a ventriloquist and a puppet, respectively. While testing different positions, they intuitively used sounds and movements that were short and had strong attacks. I composed this material for the prelude, as seen in Example 1, where Kumpuvaara recites the text in a staccato manner while Rautiola opens his mouth as if he were the one speaking.

$\text{♩} = 66$
mechanically, fake happy
 V. $\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{6}{8}$
 Acc.
 Voice is not an or - ga - nic part of hu - man bo - dy.

Example 1. Measures 4–5 of *Žižek Says!* (Hyytiäinen 2024), the accordionist’s spoken staccato material.

A second task was to find a musical motif that I would use as a “Simon Says!” of the game, which will be explained a bit later. The motif has components of timbre, rhythm, and pause or inhale that can be produced by both instruments, the speak-

²This and all the following journal entries were written originally mainly in Finnish, translated by me.

ing (acc.), or singing (sax.). Examples 2a, 2b, and 2c show this “Žižek Says!” motif spoken by the accordionist, sung by the saxophonist, and played by the accordionist.³ Example 2d is a faux version of this.

♩ = 112 speak, proud
10 **f** *Besserwisser* **mf**
Voice
Accordion
Ži - žek says: the hu man voice

Example 2a. Measures 10–11, “Žižek Says!” motif spoken by the accordions.

♩ = 66 **f** **mf**
Voice
Saxophone
3 i 3 ε k (ho) s ε ε ε z:
ref: [Ži žek Says]

Example 2b. Measures 27–28, “Žižek Says!” motif sung by the saxophonist.

Accordion
f

Example 2c. Measures 110–111, “Žižek Says!” motif played by the accordionist.

Finding the musical material was rather intuitive, but settling on the right choreography and positions was not always easy; this proved to be an important source of energy and intensity in the piece, as the following excerpts from the working journal testify.

These musicians are dudes. Being in each other's arms is intimacy, and thus a bit awkward, testing the natural distance between Finnish straight men. Perhaps that is why it is also intense and interesting. We try it out in the rehearsals, and when I take a picture of the situation for my own reference, the accordion player fools around and makes a vic-

³ The saxophonist never plays the motif in the final piece. We found a very nice way for the instrument to play it, but finally it was not required dramaturgically.

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Voice Saxophone, starting at measure 55 with a tempo marking of ♩ = 66 and a dynamic of *mf*. The melody is in 6/8 time and features a series of eighth notes with lyrics 'i ε i ε i i ε i ε i'. A red 'X' is placed above the first measure. The bottom staff is for the Accordion, which remains silent until measure 57, where it plays a single note marked *pp*. A text annotation 'look at the sax player skeptically, that wasn't "Zizek says!" motif' is placed between the staves, pointing to the saxophone part. Another text annotation 'play without even noticing it avoiding eye contact with Sax' is placed below the accordion staff. A final annotation '8va' with a dashed line indicates an octave shift for the final note of the accordion part.

Example 2d. Measures 55–57, the saxophonist singing a fake version of the “Žižek Says!” motif.

tory sign to lighten up the situation. [...] Technical competence is also a theme, one of the symbols of success. However, it is passed over quickly, and people are prepared to take risks and show themselves to be in the risk zone. (Working Journal, 18.1.2024)

It would be interesting, although unfortunately beyond the scope of this study, to thoroughly analyse why this closeness – one person controlling the other like a puppet master, and a voice coming out of the body – feels so extreme in a somewhat uncomfortable but also intriguing way. I can only try to classify certain components that I find crucial to the set-up: the performers are on the concert stage mainly as musicians; the intensity of the sensation would drastically diminish if the piece was contextualised as performance art, theatre or opera. My claim is that the audience tends to see the musician purely as a musician. While people are not used to perceiving “the accordion player” as a role, this leap comes more easily in regard to singers – after all, singers have a role in operas. However, when performing an art song singers also often act with their voices, and to some extent with their bodies (Pallanch & Amaral 2022).

The matter is further complicated by the different hierarchies between instrumentalists and singers, especially when one person performs both functions. Finally, the fact that both persons involved in this particular piece are cis-male ups the ante on the intensity of the performance. This closeness between male bodies makes us aware of them in a way that we are not accustomed to. Rautiola’s body, as the puppet, is being controlled by Kumpuvaara’s body, as the ventriloquist. Surely, as a homosexual man, I might be differently aware of the intimacy between men, which I can utilise as a tool of composing anti-acousmatically.

Anti-acousmatic composition in Žižek Says!

From these descriptions, we arrive at the specifics of the anti-acousmatic composition. I knew that many composers would attend the premiere, and that the piece would be performed in concert and festival settings alongside other contemporary works. This lent a certain gravity to the composition process, and in the journal I used some fairly dramatic phrases like “my statement” and “What do I want to say” (“Mitä mä haluun sanoo”, Working Journal, 9.12.2023). This gravity was further intensified by reading Kane’s *Sound Unseen* (2014), which exhausted me with its extensive theoretical input, mentioned above.

How did acousmatic [thinking and composing] influence contemporary music, and, for instance, the Darmstadt School? The pressure must have been tremendous for various reasons: 1) historical – the need to move away from communal singing and the performers’ bodies, 2) Schaeffer and co. are strongly present, aesthetically and technically, and 3) the whole world became “acousmatic” as radio and tape recordings became commonplace. Perhaps that influenced how vocal music is used and how it treats the singer (e.g. by forgetting the singer and thinking of them almost acousmatically). (Working Journal, 22.1.2024)

That somewhat jumpy journal entry reveals some of my own simplistic analyses of complex historical and aesthetic developments, which may be worth a closer look. It states that the so-called Darmstadt School was oriented toward acousmatic thinking and composing, placing less emphasis on the performer’s embodiment. The composers sought to distance themselves from the communal singing that the preceding national socialists had misused. I leave this claim to the mercy of music historians. The idea that the abstract aesthetic of Schaeffer fit the Darmstadt and that the time was right has more basis, although the relationship between the French and the German was not an easy one (see e.g. Palombini 1993; Toop 2014).

The last claim is that contemporary composers often try to compose abstractly, almost forgetting the singer and their body. This comes from my critical view of what young composers usually learn about voice, and the general problems with communication (Barker & Huesca 2018; Fornhammar & Hyytiäinen 2025; Hyytiäinen 2022). There are also striking examples of composers who have aesthetic roots in the Darmstadt School but have still been able to communicate splendidly with singers and to consider them when composing (Mösch 2017). On the subsequent page of the journal, this tantrum has already found its creative manifestation:

Who commands and why? Create a game about which sound or voice is which > force the audience to look for the source of the sound or voice and to find it > force them to listen in an anti-acousmatic way (in a way that is idiomatic to you). (Working Journal, 22.1.2024)

This quote is a good description of anti-acousmatic composition, and the line “force them to look for” is a first try at describing my intention: I wanted the audience to be aware of the body that produces that sound, and some kind of manipulation was needed from my side. One method would have been the de-acousmatisation of Chion (1999, 23), reconnecting the acousmatic voice to its original source, as mentioned before. It would have been dramatic to start the piece behind curtains or screens, and only at a certain point reveal the performers. However, I felt that an acoustic concert would not have been the right place for this. More importantly, I assumed that the practical aspects of theatre would have taken up the audience’s concentration and that the voice would have been somewhat secondary. I preferred the performance to take place in the context of chamber music, although with some concealed theatrical elements.

Instead, the trick is ventriloquism, heavily inspired by Žižek’s idea of voice as ventriloquism, or the possessing of a body. At first, in the Prelude and Part 1, Kumpuvaara speaks and Rautiola moves like a puppet. Later, in Parts 9 and 12, Rautiola holds the instrument like a puppet as he sings. In both cases, the ventriloquism trick makes the audience aware of the sound source because they notice the simple trick very soon, or at least by the end of Part 1, when Rautiola starts to move independently of the spoken text. The trick itself is childish, but the point is not to fool the audience – quite the opposite, it is to assure them that they are very much aware of the sound source.

As for the game, I created a musical version of “Simon Says!”, which I already hinted at. The game’s signal was musical (see examples 2a, 2b, 2c), and the command was always the same: “Repeat what I’m doing.” After performing the correct signal, the musician would perform different music that the other person would have to mimic as closely as possible. If the signal was wrong, this mimicry would not occur. The game would make the sources evident, as the different instruments and voices had to mimic each other. In a way, the ventriloquism was a special version of this, where mimicry happened without any delay. Also, here the system is simple, literally a children’s game, but it was not about making it challenging to follow who is doing what.

On the contrary, in this type of game, with its clear rules, it is even more evident that the first sound comes from the first player and is then mimicked by the second. At a very early stage I did play with the idea that the performers would somehow actually play the game, that they would not know if the signal was correct and whether they would need to mimic the music. I decided I still wanted to maintain control as a composer, but Parts 4 and 10 are concentrated versions of this earlier idea, as the musicians jump to random boxes and need to follow each other. Nevertheless, the uncertainty of the game’s nature would remain for the audience.

Although these two musical ideas or games are implied, one more fundamental aspect was necessary for them to work and to grab the audience’s attention. Al-

though both performers were highly skilled in playing instruments, they were also willing to do the scenic aspects. The accordionist was also willing to speak in various expressive ways, but, most significantly, the saxophonist would sing some rather complex music, including using extended vocal techniques and extreme range. He is also trained as a tenor, and through the Voice Map Method I identified certain striking ranges and effects in his voice. Even though the programme booklet mentioned a singing saxophonist, the first, and later the most extreme notes, must shock the audience at the premiere: to hear that the person they know as a contemporary saxophone player also has a trained tenor voice (see e.g. Healy 2018; Livorsi 2023; Schubert & Wolfe 2016).

This was part of my anti-acousmatic plan – the audience is more aware of the saxophonist’s body when, surprisingly, it is simultaneously the singer’s body. The surprises function on different levels: the accordionist’s speaking changes the aural function from music to speaking (Healy 2018). For the saxophonist, the aural function remains the same: both playing and singing are making music, but the change from the saxophonist to the singer undergoes a different transformation, especially since, during the piece, he does much more singing than playing. One way to describe the difference between bursting into song and starting to speak is described by Chion (1999), who explains how the silent film acquired sound. He mentions filmed operas as some of the very first examples of movies with sound, but “[s]inging is one particular mode of vocal production. For singing, the entire body mobilises around the voice [...]” (Chion 1999, 128.)

In contrast, “the spoken utterance, which conveys words, emotions, or a message, makes all the more apparent the cinema’s diversion of attention from the ‘whole’ human being to just its [sic] voice” (Chion 1999, 128; italics omitted). *Žižek Says!* functions very differently from film, but this description captures the essence of how I wanted the surprise to function. My goal was to emphasise the performer’s body and personality behind the role, giving them authorship.

To conclude, I employed at least the following techniques to compose anti-acousmatically: In the performance, the musicians were contextualised as instrumentalists, then I extended the function of the accordionist to that of a speaking actor and the saxophonist to a singing actor. The musicians’ bodies were closer to each other than the social norm would allow, making us more aware of them. The theme of ventriloquism sets the stage for questions of who is playing and what is being played: first, the saxophonist is a puppet for the accordionist, then the saxophone is played like a puppet by the saxophonist. According to Žižek, the chain of control continues, though, and the saxophonist’s body has been solely a puppet for his voice all this time. The game of “Simon Says!” raises questions about roles again: are the musicians really playing, or is it all an act?

THE FUTURE

The uncontrollable nature of composition was present in the production of *Žižek Says!*. It is humbling to be reminded that, as much as we imagine composing for future generations, or simply attempt to plan how the audience will react to the music in the premiere performance, there are many steps between our imagination and reality, many of which we cannot foresee. We scheduled only one proper rehearsal of the piece, the day before the planned premiere, but Rautiola was rather ill. Still, he played and sang his part skilfully. All possible preparations were made, but the following day it was evident he was not fit to travel to the festival or to perform there.

The rehearsals went very well, but [Rautiola] was tired and a bit ill. “Miika says!” does not apply; [Rautiola] cannot recover just because I say so. It is scary to lose control, but also kind of comforting. If a performer cannot perform due to illness or whatever, the whole piece does not exist. My responsibility has, in a way, ended. (Working Journal, 9.4.2024)

At the time of writing, there are plans for a premiere in Paris in 2026. It is even possible, although fortunately unlikely, that the piece will never be premiered. Composers can plan and set up the musical dramaturgy in a certain way, but the performance, and moreover, the audience’s experience, is fundamentally out of our control; furthermore, it is not something we can ever thoroughly know. Studying the audience’s experience is relatively new and still developing. Burland and Pitts (2014) collected some of the most convincing techniques and ideas between the early 1990s and 2014, and since then the evolution has been ever more striking (Emerson 2023; Tschacher et al. 2023; Young et al. 2023).

Achieving the abstract level at which I was operating made me question the whole nature of the project. I was using acousmatic tools to go beneath the veil and reach anti-acousmatic composition, but would the audience follow me, or would they remain in the comfort of something they were used to?

As continuous reflection is very much a part of the creative process in art (Guillemier 2016), artistic research (Kanno et al. 2022; Mäkelä et al. 2011), and autoethnographic research (Adams et al. 2015), I questioned my motivation. Why did I find it necessary to develop and put into use the process I call composing anti-acousmatically? In the Working Journal entries that led to the intended premiere, I was at times critical of my motivation, and I challenged it in order to refine its intellectual and emotional background. In the entries quoted above, I have problematised some of the social issues that can arise with acousmatic composition (Working Journal, 22.1.2024), and also with mindlessly following the commands of the composer, or anyone with too much power (Working Journal, 10.1.2024). Even if this early reflection duly alters the process of composing anti-acousmatically, it never truly ques-

tions whether I should compose in that way. I recognise this structure, as it applies to most of my larger-scale artistic processes; they begin with a non-musical concept or idea that is developed but never abandoned.

Thankfully, the autoethnographic process has given me the opportunity and the tools to further reflect on these processes. In light of this, I find creative energy and much potential – some of it realised – in the arguably dogmatic idea of composing anti-acousmatically. It can make the performer's agency more evident and give new options for the composer's authority by embodying the music-making. I hope that this manner of composing resonates intriguingly, if not irritatingly, with other musicians and researchers.

Conclusions

Challenging, and even opposing, acousmatic sound has created interesting dissonances in the creative process and helped me articulate my intentions and the challenges that lie ahead, prior to their realisation. Composing anti-acousmatically has allowed me to view the rehearsal and performance process more empathetically. This wrestling has a value of its own, since the composer's thinking process is seldom shown in public. Also, it created a natural flow of drama in the piece, with some fruitful frictions. Combining the game-like structure with simple musical structure created a novel dramaturgy, a music theatre hide-and-seek.

This rather proves that composing anti-acousmatically is not simply composing against a specific theory for petty personal reasons. Instead, adding the “anti-” in front of acousmatic can be seen as a positive constraint, forcing the artist to look ever deeper for artistic ideas, meta levels, and references, such as Žižek's theory of the ventriloquist voice. Defining composing anti-acousmatically has also shed new light on what it means to compose acousmatically, and to perform contemporary music in an embodied manner that gives agency to the musicians. Curiously, this also created a potential link between acousmatic composition and the challenges for the system of higher education of composers and singers, a theme still too little studied. More research into the audience's experience and the composer's artistic process is also much needed. Still, I hope my input, at times personal, has brought us a step closer to better describing and understanding compositional processes.

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