



# Quiet is beautiful: the poetics of soft sound today

## INTRODUCTION

The title is a response to the current popularity of soft sound in contemporary music. While there are many kinds of music with soft sound, there appears to be a tacit agreement about the significance attached to soft sound as if it is one of the aesthetic blueprints of our time. This article attempts to unravel this significance from the performer's point of view in order to shed light on the changes in the mode of communication that soft sound is bringing to contemporary music.

Soft sound, or quiet music, is of course not a new phenomenon. Lute and guitar music have traditionally been discussed in terms of soft and quiet sounds, existing in 'the undefined territory where music shades into silence' (Dixon 2007, 195). Nor is the appreciation of soft sound as a reaction to the noisy environment new. Noise levels in cities have been high since they were first measured (Labelle 2010, 16). What is new is the normalisation of rich and opulent soundscapes in classical music enabled by large orchestration, large concert halls and opera theatres, and the subsequent development in the projection levels of musical instruments.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of soft sound in contemporary music may best be described as a response to issues raised in *HyperNormalisation* by Adam Curtis (2016), i.e. that it is an effort to regain a sense of self – subjectivity – and a sense of the 'real world' in an increasingly diversified and extraordinary environment where real, fictional and virtual converge into one.<sup>2</sup>

What is 'soft sound' as a category? 'Soft' is not simply the opposite of 'loud'. 'Soft' pertains to neither low volume nor intimacy. Far away sounds are often soft. 'Soft' may not be gentle. Low-volume sound can be harsh. String players of Baroque music are particularly deft in using a variety of soft sounds and may serve as an appropriate example in demonstrating the complexity involved in this concept. Many Baroque instruments have less projection power than their modern equivalents and have a smaller dynamic range, but Baroque musicians are very artful in compensating for this. One example is the way the Ensemble Giardino Armonico accompanies Cecilia Bartoli (1999) in Vivaldi's arias. While the orchestra never overwhelms the singer, the players produce a whole dynamic range – their 'loud sound' is full of

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Rosselli (2000, 101) for statistical details.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'hyper-normalisation' comes from Alexei Yurchak in describing the effect of maintaining the pretense of a functioning society in the Soviet Union in its last decade.

noise, and their ‘soft sound’ is so ‘round’ that it almost melts in the air. In their case, it is a particular kind of playing that produces this soft sound, although the volume of their playing is not quiet: it is actually full of vitality. They make their sound ‘sweet’ by giving finesse to the tone production.

Musicians of early music have taught us much about how to produce contrast, showing that contrast can be created in many dimensions and can form the substance of musical expression.<sup>3</sup> The strategy for articulating soft sound is one such instance. Their performance practice demonstrates tacit knowledge of the complex relations between the phenomenal or experiential soft sound on one hand and the technique of soft playing on the other. This is an expertise that may easily escape the attention of the listener as well as modern instrument musicians. The expertise lies in their understanding of how to combine technique and effect. Through innovative combinations, they manage many qualitative articulations that span across the dimensions of volume, timbre, texture, phrasing, gesture, character, blend, and others. Their practice suggests that soft sound is one phenomenal category amongst many, whose articulation involves a number of qualities and is realised through a number of technical means. In other words, ‘soft sound’ is not an independent essence but a phenomenon arising from complex relations between tonal qualities and performance skills.

If we accept that softness is not merely about small amplitude but involves complex perceptual articulations, that suggests that we may need to fundamentally reassess the ways in which we conceive of music and performance – much in the way Arnold Schoenberg hinted at the potential expressive power in composing with timbre in *Theory of Harmony*.<sup>4</sup> Schoenberg recognised three characteristics in a musical sound: pitch, colour and volume. His contribution in the domain of pitch has had a significant influence in classical music as is well known. The development in the second domain, timbre, became prominent in the course of the twentieth century in subject areas as diverse as total serialism, historically-informed performance practice, spectralism, and the assimilation of non-Western musical idioms and instruments in the West. The third domain, volume, has received less attention to date. With the possibility of soft sound possessing a critical power that may revise some fundamental assumptions about music, I wish to look closely at what kinds of softness are currently included in the practice of contemporary music, what functions they serve within it, and ultimately to which changes the current practice of soft sound is directed. The following exploration focuses on the performance of late-twentieth and twenty-first century Western classical music, though the observations may apply to cases in other musical genres as well.

<sup>3</sup> It is rather telling that, when students of modern instruments are asked about different kinds of contrast, they mention loud and soft first, then fast and slow, but the list stops fairly soon. This seems to reflect some of the preoccupations in the learning and teaching of the standard repertoire – students focus first on getting notes and rhythms right, and then add effects to ‘make it interesting’. The question was asked in many of the violin or strings group classes that I led at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in 2013–2016.

<sup>4</sup> The subject of the three characteristics is mentioned on page 421 of the translation (Schoenberg 1978).

## SOFT SOUND IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ACOUSTIC MUSIC

The first example is the quiet music of Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino. In taking his music as an example, I am not implying that his aesthetics of soft sound is in any way representative of late twentieth-century music. Rather, his example points to a particular *politics* of musical production and listening in which he has been engaged as a composer. This politics can be seen among a number of composers in the late twentieth century despite their different aesthetics.

The work in question is *Per Mattia* (1975) by Sciarrino.<sup>5</sup> It consists of three lines of music lasting less than two minutes, and can be divided into two sections of A and A', of five phrases (in A) and six phrases (in A'), where phrases are separated by either a comma or the end of a slur. The majority of the notes are harmonics and played with a *tremolando* bowing. The written dynamics range from nothing to *piano*. *Per Mattia* precedes *Six Caprices* (1976), a larger work for solo violin, which is often considered as one of his most representative works; the composer says that *Per Mattia* was his inspiration to write the *Caprices*.

The principal material remains the same over *Per Mattia* and *Six Caprices*: violin harmonics and tremolando (either in the left-hand or right-hand, or both). *Caprices* are not always quiet, but soft fragile sound resulting from the quivering harmonics is the most prominent feature of the work. My work with Sciarrino on the *Caprices* is discussed below in order to draw parallels between the quiet sound of *Per Mattia* and the insight I gained on *Six Caprices* from the collaboration.

*Six Caprices* by Sciarrino is a twenty-five minute work, consisting almost exclusively of violin harmonics. While the use of harmonics is not new to the violin, the work presents a novel application of this existing technique on the violin. What makes it novel is the extent of the application: harmonics are used not as an additional timbral effect but as the main composition material to create a new sound-world. When I first learned the piece twenty years ago, I used to play it not-very-soft to ensure that the harmonics were clearly heard while remaining 'soft'. Then came an opportunity to work with the composer. After hearing me play the second *Caprice*, he sighed and said: 'You don't understand my music.' Back then I thought I was playing exactly what the notation stood for. But I quickly realised that what he meant by writing harmonics was not what I had understood as the sound of violin harmonics. He said my playing was much too loud, so I played more softly, but still it was not what he was looking for – it simply made the sound lifeless. He sighed again. With the mutual realisation that technical explanation wasn't going to help, we searched for metaphors.

One of the memorable references Sciarrino made was his description of an experience as a young man in Palermo of going to listen to Debussy's orchestral music

<sup>5</sup> See my demonstration performance at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Rn9VI6G4NY> (accessed 12 January 2020).

conducted by Sergiu Celibidache. In the middle of the performance, the orchestra became so soft that young Sciarrino couldn't hear it. 'What are they playing?' He leaned forward and tried to perceive the music through the surrounding noise of the concert hall. Translating what I understood from his comments into technical terms, I have found the following: first, the soft dynamics refer to the overall level of sound which includes harmonics as well as noise (such as the friction noise of the bow against the string), and not to the dynamic level of the harmonic sound (the pitch); second, the complex quality of sound needs to be retained throughout so that it has the power to draw in the listener to the sound. In playing this piece, I have also become acutely aware of the silences in-between the phrases, but not as places where I can relax and prepare for the next phrase. It has consequently led to the challenge of how to make the silences musical. One of the key features in the performance practice of Sciarrino's music is to sustain a lively control over the threshold of silence and sound.

All of the observations directly apply to the performance practice of *Per Mattia* as well. Given the slow pace and generally quiet amplitude, the sound needs to be intensive to sustain the musical narrative. Some of the harmonics don't speak well, and the level of intensity needs to be kept within an appropriate amount of friction noise. The silence between the phrases, and how one breathes before the start of the next phrase, carries as much information as the sound.<sup>6</sup>

As in the Sciarrino example, the novel use of existing technique, or the use of newly discovered extended technique, has contributed to the increased vocabulary of soft sound on the violin. Many other composers, contemporaries to Sciarrino, such as Morton Feldman, John Cage, Luigi Nono and Helmut Lachenmann, also contributed to this development.<sup>7</sup> Each composer had a markedly different aesthetic and produced distinct effects with soft sounds. However, their compositions share a very similar desire to engage the musicians and audience in a new mode of experience for musical sound, through the use of soft sound as a medium for expressing new poetics. My personal discussion with Sciarrino about the sound-world exemplifies this: each composer wants the performer to understand his aesthetic paradigm of sound, without which no amount of performance intelligence or dexterity in executing the music comes to fruition. An appropriate production of soft sound is critical in this context because soft sound is deeply embedded in the individual composition as an expressive *enabler* of its own aesthetic paradigm. It is not an exaggeration to say that some late twentieth-century music stakes the aesthetic value of beauty on soft sound, as in Sciarrino's example.

<sup>6</sup> This is very similar to the way in which John Potter (2000, 159) discusses breathing in ensemble singing.

<sup>7</sup> Amongst a considerable amount of scholarship on the aesthetics of avant-garde music in the late twentieth century, the chapter on Morton Feldman in the doctoral thesis by Tanja Orning is of particular interest to the topic, as she investigates the nature of the ecological interface between sound production and sound perception from the viewpoint of a performer (Orning 2014, 65–129).

This is where the politics of musical production and listening becomes significant. Many composers started to work directly with the performers to establish, often collaboratively, an agreed operation mode through which a performance may realise a composition. While it is often said that this is due to the musical notation being insufficient to communicate the work, it is more often the case in real practice, as in the Sciarrino example, that the composer's vision extends to the production and listening experience. The poetics of the new aesthetic paradigms, enabled by varied soft sounds, could no longer be identified through composition alone. It required new performing and listening practices for its articulation. I should mention, as one example of this approach, Luigi Nono's aesthetics of listening, which is also known as the 'tragedy of listening', the subtitle to his opera *Prometeo*. This opera is more like a sonic installation, focusing on the minutiae of individual voices, textures and sounds while also exploring the world of our own imaginations and ways of hearing. Nono was critical of the uni-directional communication that was prevalent in classical music, comparing it to command-heavy, social-political systems. He was tireless in critiquing our listening capacity through his composition. The sustained interest and development in the poetics of soft sound in the late twentieth century prepared the ground for a wave of interest that would take place in the twenty-first century.

### **EXAMPLE A: SOFT SOUND WITH AMPLIFICATION/COMPRESSION**

The effect of technology on the appreciation of music in the contemporary world is so widespread that most of the music we come into contact with in daily life is electronically mediated. The next two examples are works of electroacoustic music, composed for acoustic violin and electronics. The first example features processes of amplification and compression, and the second diffusion.

Audio signal amplification and compression are electronic processes applied to a voice or instrument while controlling the input level. Amplification simply increases the level, while compression both increases the low signal level and reduces the high signal level by 'narrowing', that is, compressing the dynamic range of audio signals. The process of amplifying an acoustic input signal often involves a type of audio compression to prevent louder 'peaks' from becoming distorted. The main purposes of audio compression are to ensure that sounds remain within a comfortable audible range and to keep the listener's attention. Today the omnipresence of audio compression is not only in our listening environment but also in our creative environment. Young composers often find it challenging to balance acoustic instruments for example – because their composition software plays back sounds in perfect balance using already-compressed files from their sample library.

The violin doesn't usually need amplification: it is an instrument known for its penetrating projection power to carry sound to the back row of a large concert hall. Many composers take advantage of this and use only sound diffusion for the violin to create a new sense of space. But amplification/compression can be used on subtle and very quiet sounds, to make them audible so that the listener can appreciate their quiet complexity. When I make a whispering sound on the acoustic violin, I project it just enough so that you can still hear me at the far end of the room and, as in Celibidache's example, you are compelled to listen to the sound I'm producing. But I can also play the same material in another room, with a microphone attached to the violin. You will see me through a window or on a screen and hear me play to you over headphones. If I give you two such demonstrations in sequence, you would instantly recognise the two musical fragments as the same, but your impression of them would be very different; what you initially heard live as naturally projected, soft sound, appears in the headphone version to be very close to you, as if I'm whispering right next to your ear. The difference is not the loudness. You hear them as two different textures where the difference lies in their *proximity* to you – the differing degrees of intimacy. Actor and director Simon McBurney performed a show called 'The Encounter' in 2015 using this formula as an expressive tool by making each audience member wear headphones.<sup>8</sup>

*The Whispers of the Phoenix* for violin by young Russian composer Alexander Khubeev explores the effect of amplification and compression of soft sound and realises an original musical expression.<sup>9</sup> Played on the violin with metal thimbles, the piece calls for a small degree of amplification in a concert hall to create a sound-world particular to this composer. The piece is about eight minutes in duration and has three sections followed by an epilogue. Each section starts soft and grows busier, repeating the process three times before the final section.

Metaphorically speaking, this music is about the relationship between the listener and the sounding material. Its expressiveness comes more from what the listener does with the material, how the listener configures her experience or her understanding of it, and less from the material imposing itself on her. Listening to this music is as if looking into a microscope, finding small objects, slowly zooming in and out and trying to make sense of them. The beginning of each section is very soft, and the listener's hearing goes into an intimate mode, much like the way Sciarrino's music positions her. Then the music develops into something busier and more intense, but it is a kind of intensification with an implosive power, growing inward rather than outward. This is due to the limitation of metal thimbles as a sound-producing tool, a limitation which provides an important aesthetic frame. The sonic world that the listener experiences is a direct result of the combination of resources

<sup>8</sup> [www.complicite.org/productions/theencounter](http://www.complicite.org/productions/theencounter) (accessed 12 January 2020).

<sup>9</sup> A video of my live performance of the work at Gaudeamus Muziekweek 2015, produced by Gaudeamus Foundation, is available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GILwXRDfnYs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GILwXRDfnYs) (accessed 12 January 2020).

(metal thimbles and a small amount of amplification). The amplification has a critical function in constructing that effect.

This kind of climax-building is not reliant on conventional compositional techniques such as increased harmonic complexity and volume or thickening of a texture. If anything, it resembles a science-fiction style of transformation. It is initially a simple discernable object but gradually becomes strange and unfamiliar, leading ultimately to its own self-destruction at the end of each climax. The material is in such a chaotic state during the climaxes that its expression is almost incomprehensible, but it doesn't erupt or explode; instead, it remains somewhat detached and contained – as if its energy is becoming subverted through the process of its very expression. In such a sound-world, 'musical expression' must be found outside conventional domains. Tactility, for instance, plays a significant role in this piece. It is not only how the player feels the strings, but also how the listener feels the metal and fingerboard. The music's quietness does not imply softness. In fact, the sound traverses the whole spectrum between soft and hard within the quietness. The noise that accompanies the pitch is a significant component, too – as is the gesture that causes the noise and pitch. They are all mingled together, regardless of whether it is actually heard or merely imagined.

The way in which musical expression operates in this piece suggests two ideas. First, the poetics of this music is not evident in the compositional design but emerges only through a critical performing and listening experience. In other words, it is not necessarily identifiable in the score because it depends on what others involved in the music-making (performers and listeners) *do with it* through imaginative participation. Second, as a corollary to the first idea, this music questions a fundamental assumption about the role of the composer as the author of the musical work. The composer 'sets up' a platform with the material in which the participants negotiate imaginatively between the realm of abstract scheme and that of a real world of musical experience.

In 2015 Khubeev won the Gaudeamus International Composers Award in the Netherlands, at which occasion the jury declared, 'Khubeev has a perfect balance between his sonic universe and the written realization. He has a brilliant way of expanding advanced techniques, and creates a mysterious and profound sound-world.'<sup>10</sup> The piece encapsulates his original sound-world, whose form of expression reflects the changing *expectations* in the production of musical experience.

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<sup>10</sup> [gaudeamus-muziekweek.prezly.com/alexander-khubeev-wins-gaudeamus-award-2015](http://gaudeamus-muziekweek.prezly.com/alexander-khubeev-wins-gaudeamus-award-2015) (accessed 12 January 2020).

## EXAMPLE B: SOFT SOUND WITH DIFFUSION

The second example of electroacoustic music concerns sound diffusion. Sound diffusion is a control process applied to the output sound and has an ability to ‘spatialise’ it. It can create a virtual location for a sound to be detected by the listener; this is enabled by discrete mapping of multiple audio channels to a given set of loudspeakers (which may include virtual ones, too). The earlier example of hearing a closely-recorded whispering violin sound over headphones is also a type of sound diffusion, where the sound source is moved nearer to the listener. As this example indicates, it is possible to move a sound source without involving a complex diffusion system. By virtue of its capacity to control space as a malleable entity, sound diffusion has raised interesting questions about the expressive vocabulary in music and affected the performance practice of electroacoustic music.

In room acoustics, diffusion is frequently used to ensure that you have more or less the same hearing experience wherever you are in the room. In art, we manipulate this hearing experience by moving sounds, and such manipulation adds another dimension to the creative practice. Antiphony was one of the earliest tools of this kind, positioning performers or sound sources spatially as part of a musical design. Today a sound diffusion system with multiple loudspeakers can position sounds anywhere within a space. A sound can literally ‘roam around’ the space, making spatial movement a significant *expressive* dimension. As in the example with the headphones, a small electronic alteration to the input signal allows us to experience intimacy by changing the perceived distance between the sound source and ourselves. Likewise, moving sounds, produced by a diffusion system, give us a new sensory experience. Moving sounds can also affect your physical sense of balance, similar to riding a roller coaster (if the sound is moving fast) or sitting in a boat. It is distinctly different from the sensation you experience when driving a car yourself or riding a bike. It is your environment that is in charge of the movement, not you.

There are more performance venues with sound diffusion systems today, and there are more musical works created for them. *Anthèmes II* by Pierre Boulez (1997) for violin and multi-channel surround sound system is one such example. Here a number of electronic effects are organised in modules and spatialisation is used extensively throughout the piece. The first part of section VI features spatialisation in a relatively simple, concentrated manner, where recorded violin sounds travel around the room in conversation with the live violin-playing.

There are three sound sources in this section: the live violin sound played by the on-stage performer, and two sets of sampled violin sounds. The two sets of samples are differentiated according to the musical material: the first set contains cascading legato phrases, and the second staccato passages with alternating high and low notes. Each sound source (the live violin, the first sample set, and the second sample



set) has its own spatialisation programme. They move independently, sometimes crossing each other in their paths.

A number of questions arise from the on-stage performer's point of view: what does it mean to be 'in ensemble' with moving sounds when the live violin-playing is stationary? The on-stage performer's input is moved around, though she would not hear it from where she stands. How does she gain an understanding about the spatial movement of her sound as heard by the audience? How does she learn to characterise her input to make her spatialised sound 'in ensemble' with the other sets of sound and their movements? What kind of expressive qualities need to be featured in her input sound? How can it be played as live actions on her part?

The solution we found was to relate primarily to the 'gestures' produced by the moving sound.<sup>11</sup> Moving sound often leaves a sonic *trail*, like the smoke of fireworks, creating ephemeral threads that disappear within seconds. In order to gain understanding of the produced gestures, instead of standing still on a fixed point in the circle of loudspeakers, I stood in the middle while playing my material during rehearsal. Thus, I learned the moving gestures. Next was the translation: understanding the sonic movement as 'gestural shapes' suggested that I should articulate the movement mostly through changes in tone colour and bowing speed, rather than in dynamics or intensity. We also discovered that emphasising the dynamic shapes more than the dynamic levels such as *mp* and *ff* was more effective within the context of this section. This was perhaps because shape could highlight the expressive agency in movement, and my articulation of the dynamic shapes seemed to relate more directly to the experienced quality of the moving sound at a moment-to-moment level. This may be comparable to the effect of a fairly soft sound passing by very quickly, the sensation of something 'whizzing' by very closely (like a mosquito at night), rather than observing quick crescendo–diminuendo shapes from a distance at differing loudnesses. Bringing out shapes in this gestural manner meant adding an 'interpretive layer' to the notation, particularly with regards to written dynamic levels and their durations, meaning that dynamics had to be relatively softer in general and the crescendo–diminuendo shapes had to be more exponentially formed.

What does this example have to do with soft sound? The point of reference is that shapes perceived through the sound's movement in space have a very different content and feel from those produced by the stationary performer or loudspeakers with amplitude alone; furthermore, that soft sound gains an expressive quality hitherto seldom encountered – a kind of disembodied lightness and speed – in an electronically spatialised environment. This is a new quality, available in the combination of diffusion and soft sound, thus expanding the expressive vocabulary in music. This point may also explain why, in the more recent music with electronics, what used to be articulated as changes in volume in the not-so-old acoustic music

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<sup>11</sup> My team consisted of Daniel Schorno and Ulrich Pöhl. We did extensive work on the performance of this piece in autumn 2015 in preparation for the Boulez Festival in December 2015 in TivoliVredenburg, Utrecht.

is more often expressed as changes of location in space. The Boulez example is one such occasion, where I realised the potential of spatialisation and its effect on other musical parameters and experimented with how I could relate my own playing to it within my control. But the fact that a sound diffusion system can produce perceivable softness/loudness with changes in distance to the listener, with no change in the volume level, shows how critical the location of the listener is (or which listening environment she is in). This is a question that goes beyond the control of the performer or sound diffusionist, as well as the scope of this article.<sup>12</sup>

Signal compression and sound diffusion are often used alongside each other as if the reduced range of acoustic energy (reduced by compression) is compensated for by the energy acquired by dynamic diffusion. The two examples of electroacoustic music practice above suggest, though in very different ways, a shift in the perceptual dynamics enabled by music technology. They suggest a new sonic sensibility, expanding the late twentieth-century aesthetic paradigms of soft sound.

## NEW SONIC SENSIBILITY

Salomé Voegelin (2010) discusses how we engage with near-silences in music in her exploratory book about the practice of contemporary sound art. Her most revealing insights, from the perspective of this article, are her descriptions of listening to very loud sound and very soft sound.<sup>13</sup> She starts her discussion with Cage's *4'33"* and describes how Cage frames the emptiness and renders it visible and audible through the articulation of discursive context. In experiencing these near-silences, Voegelin observes a shift of production responsibility 'from the conventions of the composition/ the artwork onto the individual audience member, who becomes audible to himself in the contingent context of his listening practice' (Voegelin 2010, 82). She explains the shift thus: 'composing silence is to build a [...] frame around the experience of these sounds' and 'it happens on the composer's wish but the desire of the audience to hear fulfils it' (ibid. 89).<sup>14</sup> She is here referring to how the work 'stages' listening and makes sense as sound art through balancing this staging on one hand and perceiving the staged silence on the other as equal parts in the experience. In doing so, she touches upon the topic of 'sonic subjectivity', how 'silence makes apparent the consequences of intersubjective listening', and 'politicizes sound' (ibid. 94).

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<sup>12</sup> This refers to both where the listener sits in a performance space as well as the challenge of listening and imagining the space in the standard transmission in stereo.

<sup>13</sup> Listening to loud sound has a similar effect to listening to soft sound because the volume forces us to revise our relationship to the audible. Voegelin's discussion of the effect of listening to loud sounds or 'noise' is memorable for the description of how the external loudness generates internal numbness that is silent.

<sup>14</sup> In this context the word 'silence' is used to describe nearly inaudible sound or aural emptiness, rather than total acoustic silence.

A closely related topic of inter-subjectivity in the experience of playing and listening has been discussed by Naomi Cumming (2000) in a very different context. Hers is a study on music semiotics, and the principal claim in her book *The Sonic Self* is that the subjectivities of the performer as well as the listener form a rich tapestry of musical meaning and signification beyond the work and its so-called critical interpretations. Although Cumming does not discuss soft sound or the kind of new music within the scope of this article, she is profoundly concerned with the production of musical experience, which *is* of relevance to the present discussion. She uses the phrase ‘sense-making’ for the process of shaping musical experience. She illustrates from a number of perspectives how varied modes of engagement through which the subject interacts with the musical work become a necessary part of the sense-making.

While there are numerous discussions on the dichotomy between the subjective experience and ‘formal’ approaches to music, Cumming’s focus (and basis for argument) is on strategic details for musical experience as a means to balance and relate the two opposites.<sup>15</sup> She is not merely observing the states of dichotomy and how people may bridge the gap, but also thinking creatively about the potential in which a ‘rapprochement’ could be mapped out. She uses the term ‘encounter’ to describe our entering into ‘a relationship in which the humanly ‘personal’ does not hold power ... and yet it is still possible to have the sense of being ‘addressed’ (Cumming 2000, 286).

For Voegelin (2010, 110–111), staging silence and listening to the staged silence are two ‘contingent’ acts and often contain ‘moments of coincidence’ where the two ‘meet’. This is similar to Cumming’s ‘encounter’, and both authors put the point of this collision between the work and perception at the centre of musical discourse. What is implied by both authors is that the engineering of such meetings is *performative*. A close reading of their arguments supports the view that new ways of constructing musical discourse require new ways of realising it. We need to develop knowledge and tools to make musical encounters as meaningful events because using conventional tools does not guarantee that we can render the magic. This view confirms the learning curve I experienced in the three works mentioned above.

As in Voegelin’s example, the border between soft sound and no sound (silence) provides a critical point where the collision between the work and perception takes

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<sup>15</sup> The dichotomy between experiential subjectivity and abstract musical work has been discussed from many perspectives, including a feminist viewpoint in Suzanne Cusick (1994); ecology in Eric Clarke (2005); voice and ethics in Nanette Nielsen (2012). The perspectives of shared creativity have been the most productive approach in observing inter-subjectivity in action, as in Georgina Born (2005); Keith Sawyer and Stacy DeZutter (2009); Eric Clarke, Mark Doffman and Liza Lim (2013); and Eric Clarke, Mark Doffman and Renee Timmers (2016). The authors who hold the perspectives of shared creativity reveal sociological leanings in their insights; they excel in elucidating the practices and problems involved in how people and society behave in and around music-making. While these findings clearly show the relations and interplay between subjectivity and musical work, it is often outside the scope of discussion to explore how the dichotomy may be turned into strategy in articulating music.

place as ready-made experience. Quiet music showcases this collision by virtue of entering the outside zone of the normalised louder sound-world. The new aesthetic paradigms in the late twentieth century can be seen to have featured this collision, paving the way to the development of a new sonic sensibility which highlights the active role of the performer and the listener in ‘sense-making’.

The contribution of music technology to contemporary music in this regard is that it has increased the extent to which sonic quality can be controlled, rather than merely being a given. We live in a world where every e-device comes with a ‘mute’ button, and silent pianos are common commercial products. We control the loudness of most sounds, and silence them at will. The relationship between the sound source and produced sound is no longer fixed in a very real sense. Electronics has ushered in a new era of volume control, where cause and effect is no longer a given relation. What we often forget is that every manipulation of sonic ‘presence’ is closely followed on by a revision of, or small readjustment to our sonic sensibility.<sup>16</sup> To what extent does that affect music-making in contemporary music? For the on-stage musicians who produce sound and silence (and near-silences), what consequences will these changes have on their practice in the future? What skills and knowledge will become important for them?

## SONIC ARTICULATION

Jonathan Dunsby (1995) highlights this challenge – new ways of realising new musical discourse – in his discussion of musical design by saying that ‘musical design has to be *animated* in performance’ (Dunsby 1995, 84 [his emphasis]). Identifying new sonic sensibility as applicable knowledge is all good, but just knowing its existence won’t do for musicians. It is debatable whether musical design is what composition gives or what becomes perceptible through performance, perhaps collaboratively created; it is also debatable whether or not this culturally implied teleological expectation becomes the performer’s mission. But the performer gains a design at some point, however abstract that may be, and has to put it in motion – regardless of questions such as what kind of design it is (pre-conceived, improvised, borrowed, out-of-contingency, or other) and who has conceived this design (composer, performer, listener, or a set of given circumstances).

How do we identify appropriate performance strategy for enacting a design, and

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<sup>16</sup> In his article published more than twenty years ago, Simon Emmerson (1994, 98) asks ‘how do we reestablish – through the acousmatic dislocations – what is “live”?’ He is positioning the term ‘live’ against ‘real-time’ and his question is posed for the community of acousmatic and electroacoustic music. But this question holds significant relevance when we consider it in the present context discussing the ‘optimal’ volume level: what criteria does the user follow when trying to re imbue something with ‘presence’?

which knowledge is necessary to find it? Identifying performance strategy, or gaining knowledge of 'how to do it', is based on experience. 'Reflection-in-action' is a phrase coined by Donald Schön (1983). He searches for patterns of reflection-in-action amongst professionals in different fields, and labels characteristics which enable their interactions with society 'reflective'. The relevance of his insight to the present discussion is twofold. First, he observes that the professional practitioner gains knowledge and develops skills for that knowledge as the professional practice continues in action. He shows that it is an essential part of the practitioner's work that it responds to the unique and unforeseen attributes that each moment or circumstance brings in the process. Second, he establishes a link between expertise and reflexivity as a sign of excellence in any practice. Schön's view of the role of expertise is echoed by Richard Sennett (2008), who advocates for craftsmanship instead of 'embodied knowledge' in order to give expert skills and knowledge a clear function in a practical context (Sennett 2008, 44). Expert skills matter in finding appropriate performance strategy, and the quest for them through action may be considered a research activity in the academic context.

Each professional develops a certain methodology for solving challenges, as I myself have done in the preceding examples. Performance methodology differs from performance strategy in that the former is a system of distinct and usually well-tested methods for completing a task through procedures, while the latter is an action plan. A set of good strategies often becomes part of a good performance methodology. The process of finding appropriate strategies is therefore a critical part of establishing my methodology. Yet every strategy has to be engineered through reflection-in-action when dealing with a new idea. The poetics of quiet music, as I have encountered in the performance of new music, does not take place by default, does not 'make sense' so easily. We try to shape it with our hands, see if it can be 'animated', but many strategies actually fail. My first strategy for Sciarrino's soft sound didn't work, though the strategy was not unsound; it took a while to find a strategy for the right kind of intensification for the 'dramatic' narrative in the Khubeev. My colleagues had to tell me that my initial strategy, in the Boulez, for relating to the moving sounds of electronics wasn't working. Through assembling strategies that work, I gradually formulate a methodology for approaching each musical work, piecing together information and skills, some of which are sometimes esoteric.

I am aware that some of my solutions reveal more about my musical background and aesthetic outlook than the nature of the challenge each piece poses regarding the production of soft sound. Nevertheless, my work with soft sound reveals the importance of the 'contingent' moment and of finding an appropriate performance strategy for it. It explains the role new sonic sensibility plays when articulating the poetics of soft sound in recent music and what we may miss unless we, the performers and listeners, get it right. Through my observations and personal experience, I have spelt out what kinds of soft sound we have today, what their characteristics

and differences are, and how new aesthetic paradigms with soft sound are gradually pushing musical discourse to a new direction. My argument outlines the significance of a new sonic sensibility, and highlights the complex challenge of *articulation* for the new poetics.

## CONCLUSION

The different kinds of quiet music discussed here show distinct performance strategies: each has a different expressive system through which soft sounds are made meaningful. My final contention is that sound in contemporary music in recent decades has transformed itself from being an object that communicates music into being a subject through which we experience music.

In the case of the quiet music of the late twentieth century, this work presents sound primarily as a communicative object: in making this object ‘quiet’, it has found an expressive power that grows in inverse proportion. The expressive system is carefully made to work by the performer, and she possesses a critical level of control over the acoustic outcome as the prime producer of music. In this performative process, soft sound gains a subjective dimension and introduces to the listener a new mode of engagement.

In contrast, more recent quiet music (that which uses electronics more often) assigns the listener a vital role from the conceptual outset because the work is more in the perceived experience rather than in the acoustic outcome. It proposes through electronic manipulation a new sonic experience that emphasises personal engagement. It suggests that music doesn’t exist as an external ‘thing’, but rather inside us through our experience of sound as musical subject. The implication in terms of aesthetics is that we won’t get to know the music of this type until it sounds out, precisely because we don’t know how we may respond to sound with subjectivity in advance.

There is a philosophical movement led by thinkers such as Marcel Cobussen,<sup>17</sup> Naomi Cumming, and Salomé Voegelin, who promote, in their own individual ways, new sonic sensibility involving subjectivity and sonic materialism. They move away from the traditional notions of representation and signification in music, and emphasise the emotional and personal engagement with the act of listening as communication. The multi-modal, experiential practice constitutes the core of their aesthetics and philosophy of music. But much of the discussion is still focused on the aesthetics, rather than the production of music. We need more information on strategies for articulating new poetics in order to consolidate its practice as performance.

<sup>17</sup> I have omitted Cobussen’s discussions of ‘relational subject’ (2012, 113–115), despite its relevance to the present discussion, in order to retain focus on the performance of composed music.

Quiet music comes with lively poetics today. Soft sound permits a willing engagement with musical experience, allowing the listener to participate and explore the act of listening and contemplating music. Perhaps this is the reason why soft sound continues to abound in contemporary music. Its quiet challenge is effective.

As for articulating different aesthetics of soft sound, there are many differing strategies. Each quiet music has its own means through which to present and stage soft sound for a specific encounter. Their difference stems from their differing purpose, that is, what the sound is for. One personal consequence of this enquiry is that it has heightened my awareness that my skill set as a musician needs to keep evolving as our relationship to sound gradually transforms. The artistic discourse of quiet music is fragile yet open: it exposes the aptitude of my skill set and keeps me alert when shaping new musical experience. We are indeed at the beginning of a new age of musical expression with 'volume' as its critical parameter, a possible course of development which Schoenberg contemplated a hundred years ago.

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