Traces of Oblivion – a dialogue

Ole Lützow-Holm and Stefan Östersjö
Springing from a conversation on e-mail during the summer of 2018

Audio paper manuscript

Traces of Oblivion for 11-stringed alto guitar materializes as a kaleidoscopic, incomplete outcome of extensive dialogues with the guitarist and researcher Stefan Östersjö. Through practical as well as conceptual elaborations we explored endless procedures inspired by the instrument's characteristics with regard to timbre and architectural design. Gradually, two particular aspects came to play a significant role: On the one hand a construction feature of the alto guitar with five scale-tuned strings in the bass followed by six chord strings (simultaneously proposing, as it were, historical resonance *and* unbiased experimentation) and, on the other, a scordatura whose micro-tonal deviations constitute the acoustic habitat of the music. The core organizing principle is made up of carefully chiselled gestures, some of which are recorded sound files layered in loops and activated in the course of the performance as an archive – memory and oscillation at the same time. Moving through transient, winding passages and circular patterns, it is as if *Traces of Oblivion* evoked images related to a sense of loss.

Dear Stefan

Thank you for accepting my invitation to engage in a dialogue about our collaborative work on *Traces of Oblivion*. It seems natural to continue with the dialogical format since the entire composition and performance process was based on the principle of call and response.

I would like the model for our exchange of thoughts to be a *stream of consciousness*, in that it has no specific target, other than being vigilantly awake in search of aspects, be they minor or major, that might (or might not) shed light on the transient repercussions engendered by our efforts to articulate another music. The conversation will not have an agenda and we are not essentially *heading* anywhere. We are not going to explain, let alone *prove*, anything. In the best of worlds, the options how to approach *Traces of Oblivion* will have multiplied and the acknowledgement of its potential matured; the text itself might also have gained and accumulated some extra fuel when it comes to performing it. So, let us begin:

In his essay *The Death of the Author* from 1967, Roland Barthes, reflecting on the act of reading, proposes a strategy where one's attentive empathy connects with the shared discourse that the literary work generates over time as a result of a continuous sedimentation of contradictory meaning and understanding – rather than with the biographical imprint of the author. Barthes rejects the idea of a finite message of the work and what he calls the *tyranny of literary critique*.

A couple of years earlier, Susan Sontag draws a similar conclusion in her essay *Against interpretation*. There, distancing herself from what might be labelled the sickness of speculative pursuit of content and biased over-interpretation by critics, Sontag is encouraging us to let the work *work* and to sharpen our recognition of how it appears and *does whatever it does*. She opposes hermeneutic strategies and finishes with the notorious appeal: *In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art*.

In Julia Kristeva's pioneering text, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, it is primarily the exposition of the concepts *genotext* and *phenotext* that interests me. Furthermore, her ideas about *rupture* and *Mimesis* are indeed persuasive with regard to a different musical awareness, as well as how Kristeva defines *feminine* as every single action that undermines the authoritarian *masculine* discourse – in other words: that which excites freedom. Finally, the temporalities attributed to her theory of the *semiotics* – the being before language – are so close to music.

Departing from these rudimentary meditations and inspired by another essay by Barthes, *From Work to Text*, I have considered various possibilities of thinking about musical composition in terms of a *rhizomatic archive*. By that I mean a place, rather than a narrative – a process, rather than an artefact. Barthes makes a distinction between *work* and *text*, suggesting that the work refers to the physical object – the book, the canvas, the score – and the text to the accumulated layers of significance, interpretations and discourses contained within the work.

I set out to conceive of a non-linear music, the accomplishment of which was founded on the image of exploring a terrain, choosing at any given moment one's path through a topology of constituent, very distinct elements that occupy a strong identity. Another important property was the notion of *ambiguity* – of unfinishedness, uncertainty and doubt – and of being *in between*. I wanted to investigate the potential of a musical *text* that never winds up.

All the best /Ole

Graz, May 27

But perhaps *Traces of Oblivion* is less a representation of the death of interpretation, and rather a journey into the nature of interpretation in musical practice. The seemingly endless amounts of drafts, etudes and sketches that constitute the majority of the scored materials connect to the origins of musical notation in mnemonic signs, representing only a framework within which the individual components were part performed from memory, part improvised. At the same time, the scored elements providing detailed and precisely shaped materials are always unfinished, with no beginning and no end. A different way of describing the same materials is to see them as traces of listening, as fragments of an imagined music. Different modes of listening, could be another way of describing the processes in musical creativity that sometimes are referred to as interpretation and sometimes as composition.

Gothenburg, May 29th

Before reflecting on your response, let me clarify one important detail related to my opening statement: I am by no means proclaiming the death of interpretation or that of the interpreter. My critique is first and foremost addressing the *Romantic* concept of the composer as the divine creator, corresponding to how Lydia Goehr distinguishes the situation historically in her essay, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. Thus, one of my major concerns applies to what I profoundly view as a *fundamental instability* of the musical artefact: its fragile nature as an ephemeral, contingent arrangement where the frailty seems to suggest an *epidemic methodology*. The text remains a contagious weave beneath a porous veneer.

Having said this, I can only comply with your idea (as I choose to read you) about the mnemonic potential of the notations of *Traces of Oblivion*. How they were literally left behind – as if adrift and deserted – is perhaps exactly that, which stimulates an interpretational approach of playing from memory *and* improvising – thereby fluctuating, as it were, between orality and literacy. It's like story telling in a way: remembering and inventing at the same time.

Although the fragmentary condition of the manuscript was never intended initially, the unsorted pile of etudes, protocols and models, sketches and scribblings (in themselves evidence of a shortcoming) nevertheless appears to generate a particular kind of polyphonic attentiveness that calls for something other than rendering sign for sign what is prescribed in the score. Is that what you are implying when you talk about *fragments of an imagined music*? And what Barthes refers to when uttering: *The Text is plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing. The plural of the Text depends not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers.* (Barthes 1971)

Indeed, I think in a sense, *Traces of Oblivion* actually emerges out of the (continuous) failures to give the composition a final shape. This, to me, seems to be part of the beauty of the piece. What instead emerges is a composition which very specifically draws its identity from its performative nature, and essentially, through collaboration. Herein the project addresses questions raised by Goehr in her critique of the (mis)conception of the musical work as a fixed entity, defined by the score. I tend to think of the act of musical collaboration as a negotiation of voice. The voice of the composer and of the performer, manifest through the writing of scores and through performances and recordings. Such negotiations take place each time a musician engages with a musical score through performance and lead to the development of a third voice, what David Gorton and I have called "the discursive voice". This process can also be seen in chamber music performance as well as in improvisation. In a joint paper, Gorton and I argue that "while a performer's voice emerges essentially from the concrete listening of performing, and the live, bodily interaction with an instrument, a composer's voice may rather emerge from the inner listening of the writing situation, through the identification of particular ways of shaping music, of solutions to musical problems that have a bearing on form and the physical nature of music as performed" (Gorton & Östersjö, 2016, p. 589). That, however, is a crude over-simplification, as can be seen in the process of making *Traces of Oblivion*. First, an essential component in the piece is the extensive archive of recordings, improvisations, tests, versions of scored materials and tape compositions, which situate the compositional process in a field between concrete listening and inner hearing. Second, the line between composition, interpretation and improvisation is impossible to draw since interpretation is inherent to any activity of listening or of musical creation. Throughout the making of the piece, such micro-processes of creation and interpretation constitute the very fabric with which the piece is woven and recreated anew in each performance.

Your thoughts about the making and the performance as well as the reception of *Traces of Oblivion*, all of which one way or another are conditioned by the faculty of listening, are both relevant and illuminating, in that they frame the identity of the work within a set of equivalently interacting properties that mutually destabilizes *Traces of Oblivion* as *a fixed entity*.

You mentioned the mnemonic features of the script. One would I guess, at a first glance, regard them as a support structure for memorizing. And they do serve that purpose, indeed. But maybe there is a secondary function embedded in the compilation of rigorously notated score fragments, paired with sketches and illegible scribblings, that is about *forgetting*. And that this is where the archive acquires its meaning and becomes a focal component as the memory of the imagined music. Then, the playing becomes the dying – a disappearance through erosion.

In his book *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong makes the self-evident but yet striking remark that *[s]ound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent […].* And continues: *There is no way to stop sound and have sound. I can stop a moving picture camera and hold one frame fixed on the screen. If I stop the movement of the sound, I have nothing […]. There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound.* (Ong 1982)

Even though Ong's observation may be inaccurate in many respects and taken out of context, it resonates with musical matters that I've been striving to solve. Hence, one way of looking at our piece could be to see it as an attempt to make a compositional still shot. There *is* no doubt the key notion of a music outside of time in the sense that the score entails neither specific directions nor a dynamic form. Which is, of course, illusory and exists merely as a theoretical backdrop, for as soon as you start negotiating the material in a performance, my listening is immersed with direction, form, narrative and time. Perhaps one could hear the piece as a hesitant swinging on the threshold between *thinking* and *writing*, as I proposed earlier.

Hamburg, 12 June

I would suggest that the invention of recording technology constitutes the sonic equivalent of the "still image" that Ong is discussing. As pointed out by Pierre Schaeffer, audio recording technology has shifted the listening of musicians as well as of audiences. While not being literally a still image, recording technology allows for the exact repetition of a sound object: "since the recorded tape indisputably gives the same physical signal each time it is played, the listener can perceive the same sound object. Then his repeated listening acts as a series of rough sketches. He is working on his ear as the instrumentalist worked at his instrument" (Schaeffer, 2017, p. 270). And, isn't this where the notion of the archive first interferes with the thinking and writing model? The identity of *Traces of Oblivion* is found in the physical signal in the audio recordings, in any activation of the tuning on the 11-stringed alto guitar, just as it also draws its identity from the thinking which is connected to writing.

Lisbon, June 15th

If you don't mind, I would like to step down for a moment and zoom in on the five separate main materials of *Traces of Oblivion*. I imagine that we might be able to enlighten some of our deliberations by taking a closer look at the potential of each one of them, experimenting, trying them out and listening to what they have to say. I then want to argue that one of the reasons why these principal components all have a strong identity, is an effect of the idiosyncratic shaping of the individual modules combined with the specificity of the scordatura.

The way I understand you – and as you poetically pointed out earlier – the particular quality of the attributes that coalesce either explicitly, disguised or modified is the *very fabric with which the piece is woven and recreated anew in each performance*. So, let us to begin with examine the terrain of what we still wish to name *a piece* and visit the individual *topoi* that occupy it – and later return to how they may mutually correspond.

1. A two-voice, polyrhythmic etude – in the upper part a melodic line of high harmonics; in the lower a cantus firmus played on the open five bass-strings. The etude serves as a material for improvisation and various expansions in discretely progressive steps:

Melodic and rhythmic modification of the top voice, where the order of pitches may be altered, motives looped and agogics applied, bending the carefully articulated rhythmic patterns. Variations of the bass voice by means of articulation, dynamics and timbre, having it climb the register in flageolets through the over tone series. A similar procedure with the top voice – though opposite, going down the register, producing textures where they both blend.

2. A set of two broken 6-tone chords that are woven together – one of which, played on open strings, may be transfigured into harmonics. The organization of the chord tones gradually permutes, causing a sliding effect and a slow transformation of the gestural contour.

3. A winding chain of flageolets that slowly ascends via all eleven strings through the entire range of the instrument from deep resonances to the brightest treble frequencies – and attached to the ascending melisma there is a composed accelerando. As with the two-part study, the configuration is meant to be a springboard for modifications of different types.
The melodic material is made up of eight 11-tone series and the rhythmic design of the accelerando, based on a similar principle, comprises a progression of eight cycles that begin with even quavers and culminate in a dense polyrhythmic figure. Again, the mutual order of the pitches may permute and be coupled with any of the rhythmic cycles.

4. Another element provides a series of 4-voice chords that are combinations of a total of 24 fingering positions on the strings 1-4, 2-5 and 3-6 by way of six chromatic steps. The chords are broken and performed in close succession – tempo and arrangement of which are left open.

5. The final material is a constellation of two contrasting models – one exposing a set of variations on a group of thirty-second notes in pianissimo, and the other a hovering, irregularly broken shape of ringing flageolets on the lower strings played as loud as possible. Here, the performer may exercise an interplay as well as a merging of the two gestures.

Now that we have traversed the topology of *Traces of Oblivion* and explored its individual elements one by one, and before we inquire deeper into how they may eventually connect when in a state of flux and interaction, I suggest we dwell for a moment on the implications of an archive. To what extent is it a genuine property that is essential to the working of the piece? What does it signify? How does it have an impact on our understanding of the music?

Hamburg, 19 June

The clearest realization of *Traces of Oblivion* as an archive was carried out in collaboration with Jakob Riis. He devised a max patch which plays back materials from the compilation of audio recordings randomly, but with an algorithm which also brings into the exhibition space portions of the tape part we created from the recordings made with hand held fans. This tape part helps to structure the sonic representation of the piece, which consists of the many improvisations using the tuning, which we generated in the years leading up to the premiere of the piece in 2011, as well as recordings of the five materials presented above.

In my understanding, this representation of the piece as an archive with an essentially open structure, in the more radical sense of the term, such as the notion of the open work was first discussed by Eco. When the archive is activated in an exhibition space (or elsewhere), the only guiding formal principle is the recurring tape part, which is played once every hour, and the limits of duration in the randomized playback of other materials.

However, the possibility of entering this archive as a performer, making choices in the moment as to how a certain material can be brought into play, developed and eventually brought to a (temporary or conditional) sense of closure is equally fascinating. Both of these possibilities are in my understanding reflections of the identity of the piece as drawn from the multiple materials stored in the archive.

Gothenburg, June 21st

Which, in turn, reminds me of the fact that our inceptive point of departure was actually a chamber work of mine that you had once performed: *Blind Evidence* for flute, oboe d'amore, viola, percussion *and* a similarly retuned *six-string* guitar. And to get me going, you composed a series of elaborate studies in two-part counterpoint based on that scordatura. It was long before I responded – and only much later that you suggested to expand the range of colours with the 11-stringed alto guitar. But your inspirational input at that point left its decisive mark.

Stefan [inserted, Hanoi June 29]: Already before I wrote the etudes using the scordatura from Blind Evidence, we were talking about creating a version of the piece that would allow the performers to unpack the through-composed score and reassemble its parts. I had discussions with Ensemble Recherche about this project idea, but it never came to anything.

Ole: I view the non-linear, labyrinthine and distracted formation of *Traces of Oblivion*, among other circumstances, as a facet of the archive's coming into being and, to some extent, its raison d'être. Moreover, my inquiries at the time about the unstable nature of musical works perfectly suited the notion of a hypertext in the form of an unlimited storage space and memory bank.

Then Jakob Riis entered our sheltered workshop and accomplished an exquisite sonic realization of the archive by randomly distributing the audio recordings through a max patch. That was a beautiful moment, I recall. It instantaneously energized, as if by magic, some of the deeper objectives contained within my compositional project. But so far, as you rightly bring up, we have not yet explored strategies how to involve a live interaction of yours with the archive. It should not be a far-fetched alternative. Nor would it be unfamiliar, bearing in mind the dialogical methodologies that are in play on so many levels. It might also draw attention to a more explicit exchange of the performer's endeavour with memories of the forgotten.

Ideally, *Traces of Oblivion* owes its potential gravity and consistency to an inexhaustible aggregate of possible approaches that are all true in the sense that they embody points of reference and trajectories whose predominant purpose is to maintain a discourse.

Stefan (Hanoi June 29): In later years I have also been toying with the idea of introducing more instruments in *Traces of Oblivion*, which could have created a larger piece of the same

kind as Blind Evidence might have become in the performance we wanted to realize with Ensemble Recherche. I imagine this could be a way to accentuate the potential for multiple manifestations emanating from inside the archive.

Let me briefly come back to a significant detail that you mentioned in your previous comment – namely the handheld fans – which correlates with the discussion about there being an acoustic equivalent to a still shot or not. That, too, was a magical moment, when you first touched the strings with the spinning propeller and caused the scordatura to reverberate like an aura. In my ears, it was as close as one could get to an image of a sonic still shot – or, why not: sonic *still life*. It made me think of Stockhausen's use of the rotating recording head in *Gesang der Jünglinge*, designed, as it were, to trigger an illusion of the heat of the fiery furnace. Another feature, corresponding to the concept of capturing the flight of sound, is of course the general application of reiteration and loops – the principle of *again and again and again*.

Hanoi, June 29

The principle of repetition is central to André Lepecki's proposal of the body as archive in contemporary dance. Through a discussion of Julie Tolentino's practice of archiving onto her body, through repetition of a choreography performed by another artist, in the case discussed, a choreography by Ron Athey. Lepecki continues: "It is in and by the originating artist's non-Orphic, non-nostalgic, and certainly non-paranoiac return to a piece already performed, it is during and thanks to Athey's repetition, which is re-repeated by Tolentino, that the archiving of the work into/onto Tolentino's body takes place" (Lepecki, 2010, p 33). Clearly, the archive which constitutes the identity of *Traces of Oblivion*, to a large part consisting of digital audio files, is of a rather different nature than the choreographic works discussed by Lepecki. Still the idea of an embodied archive makes perfect sense here too. This archive is embodied by the three artists who currently have been creating it. But the embodied archive is complemented by the scores and sketches, and of digital audio. Aden Evens argues that digital media is "trapped in the abstract" and further claims that "the pure digital operates at a remove from the vicissitudes of concrete, material existence" (Evens, 2005, p 79). It only comes alive by drawing a line which connects the human with the digital, or perhaps, speaking with Barthes, when it is "operated", just like the reader operates the language in a book.

But isn't that exactly what we have been trying to achieve and critically process: to found a *circular* procedure as the very modus operandi of the unfolding of the archive, going back and forth between the abstract and the concrete? Moreover, it appears to me that the ontology of this particular archive cannot simply be reduced to a matter of digital media. Yes, by all means, it is digitally stored and has a documentary value, but it lives off of and gains meaning only

through being incessantly revisited and inspirited, questioned, renegotiated – and in the end perhaps even lost. Consequently, for the archive to come alive, it must be disarranged. In that sense, it takes almost a metaphysical perspective to fully appreciate the paradoxical mix of abstraction and materiality simultaneously operating in *Traces of Oblivion*. Which, parallel to Lepecki's analysis, is conditioned by the originators' – the composer's as well as the performer's – willingness to give up paranoia and nostalgia with regard to an authentic preservation.

May I propose, prior to making another go at drawing a line between the human and the digital, that we once again zoom in on the hard materiality of the piece? What is there to report, from your point of view, concerning the given elements' specificity and idiosyncrasy?

Amino, Kyotango, July 6

To me the very essence of *Traces of Oblivion* lies in the *incompleteness* of its elements. Since each of the five "essential materials" are notated without beginning or ending, it is always necessary to take several steps away from the letter of the notation in performance. The part which is notated might then occur after several minutes of playing, or sometimes, perhaps not at all. And still it is possible to identify the material at hand. In order to perform the piece, you must forget the writing, and enter into the flow of events as they unfold from the archive.

Oslo, July 9th

Totally true! The incompleteness – or, to speak with Michail Bachtin: the *unfinishedness* – of the score is that which literally authorizes a disarrangement of the idea of ownership and at the same time gives prominence to the listener-reader-spectator's *response-ability*. But – and I might want to challenge you on that: I am sceptical about an *essentialist* approach *and* we need to make a distinction between ambiguity and capriciousness. I am not in any way insinuating that you be ignorant of these issues but since we are about to add to the archive yet another version of the piece, I invite you to describe in short some of the measures or properties you would like to set in motion, as part of a performance strategy, that could contribute to the discourse.

If I were to account for aspects that played an important role while working on the premises on which to build the music, the instrument itself – a sounding body with technical, acoustic and historical attributes – was at the core of my interest. Thus, the scordatura, with its characteristic quarter-tone deviations, constitutes a particular modification of the alto guitar that produces a distinct sonority when brought to vibrate. The five materials, on the other hand, may be perceived as five discrete articulations voicing, as it were, the architecture and micro-tonal alteration of the instrument. Together, they signify specific connotations, and if there is any hidden meaning in *Traces of Oblivion*, it has idiomatic rather than conceptual implications.

But then again, the moment you activate the material in a performance, my cognition is unavoidably immersed with direction, form, narrative and time. And I thoroughly approve of that.

Malmö, 19 August

I couldn't agree more. Perhaps there is a "hidden meaning" in *Traces of Oblivion*, embodied by the idiomatic properties, the affordances and resistances of the alto guitar, with this exact tuning system. There is a particular resistance in the two chordal structures in the second material, since the left hand fingering of the chord which is modulated with the open strings is essentially impossible to play in its entirety at any given moment. I believe that in the effort of addressing this issue in constantly shifting manners, the constraints define also the undulating arpeggio patterns across the eleven strings. On the other hand, we discovered early on that the rapid figurations of the fifth material can be transposed from the original register (and idiomatic characteristics) on strings 2-4, down to the entire range of the bass register. Here, the widened range of possibilities instead creates a situation in which the performer needs to avoid a complete resonance with these possibilities, in order for the material not to be transformed beyond its original identity. Hence, a central component in any performance of the piece becomes a negotiation of an ethics of resonance and resistance. Either a resonance with the affordances of the instrument with the given material, or the opposite attitude of a more critical engagement, drawing new manifestations of the scored material through the application of further constraints. In the forthcoming recording sessions, I would wish to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of this relation between resonance and critique in a performance of the piece, but also, to engage the entire archive in this exploration, an activation which also involves the encounter between voices of both composer and performer on the threshold between the now of the recording situation and archived material dating all the way back to 2004!