

# SIGNS AND SCENES

## ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC COMPOSITION AND MEANING

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Mix the rumble with a note to  
avoid the drops (8)

As a composer, my work is focussed on exploring the communication of meaning and music through a multimedia approach to text. This article will discuss this approach to composition, in which sound, words, image and the concert experience all contribute to the communication of a central meaning. Through examining two of my works, *S:NP-VP-NP* (and its companion piece *words*), and *At Mii-Dera*, it will touch on ideas of the score and live realisations as independent objects, and a structural compositional approach that runs through each layer of a work, from electronics to performance.

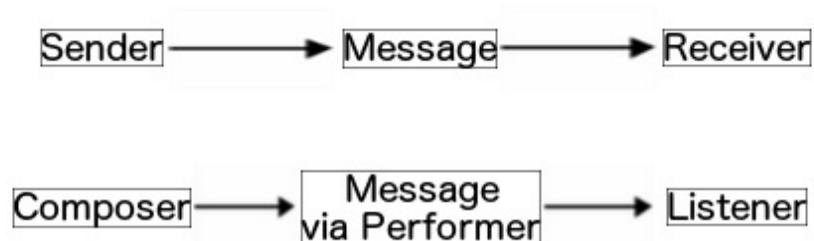
## Scores and Signs

As someone who is interested in the interplay of music and words, the area of music semiotics holds a fascination for me both as a lens through which to examine the communication of meaning and an architecture and stimulus for composition [1].

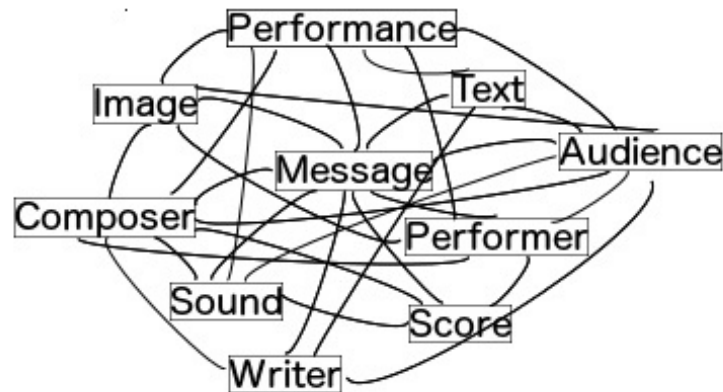
Semiotics is the study of signs and their interpretation, generally associated with linguistics, and how we associate words or sounds with their real-world objects. Music semiotics, then, is a musicological approach that treats music as a system of signs which references both the internal and external [2], whether this be the meaning of a theme within a piece, or a particular motif as a symbol of love or death. Generally, semiotic approaches revolve around the work of linguists such as Ferdinand Saussure, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Charles Sanders Peirce via musicologists and philosophers such as Eero Tarasti, Raymond Monelle, and Morag Josephine Grant [3] (who argues convincingly for an approach that divorces semiotics and linguistics in experimental music).

Thinking of music this way also poses a number of questions with both aesthetic and theoretical implications, which through examination can reveal different ways of considering the communication of meaning through music. Consider: a score consists of signs that communicate an idea to a performer, a performance consists of aural gestures which communicate something to the listener, a listener feels an emotional or physical response which may manifest in physical expression. Or question: when does a sequence of notes signify only something in reference to the piece of which it is part, and when something outside itself? Is the music itself the message, or its medium (in linguistic terms, is it 'parole' or 'langue')?

These questions manifest in a number of dialectical pairings, as fundamental to musical analysis as that of tension↔release: signifier↔signified, architectonic↔processual, emergent↔formal. One of the most stimulating of these is that of the musical text (score) or act (performance) – or in Tarasti's terminology, enunciate and enunciation[4]. In other words, when we are looking for musical messages, in which should we be looking? The further we explore these paths of signification, the more it challenges the accuracy of the model we have held of musical communication:



Thus, music semiotics also touches on the areas of ontology, phenomenology, artistic intentionality and liveness in a way that is rich with artistic potential. My work with music and text explores how we use music to communicate the meanings of texts through finding deeper structural, symbolic connections between them: as well as a means of analysis, semiotics can give a structural framework for the creation of music that communicates textual meaning. Music which exists instead somewhere in this tangled web:



Perhaps philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson best articulated it when writing about the phenomenology of music [5]: “what a composer creates is only the beginning, not the end...a music ‘work’ is something that takes shape over time”.

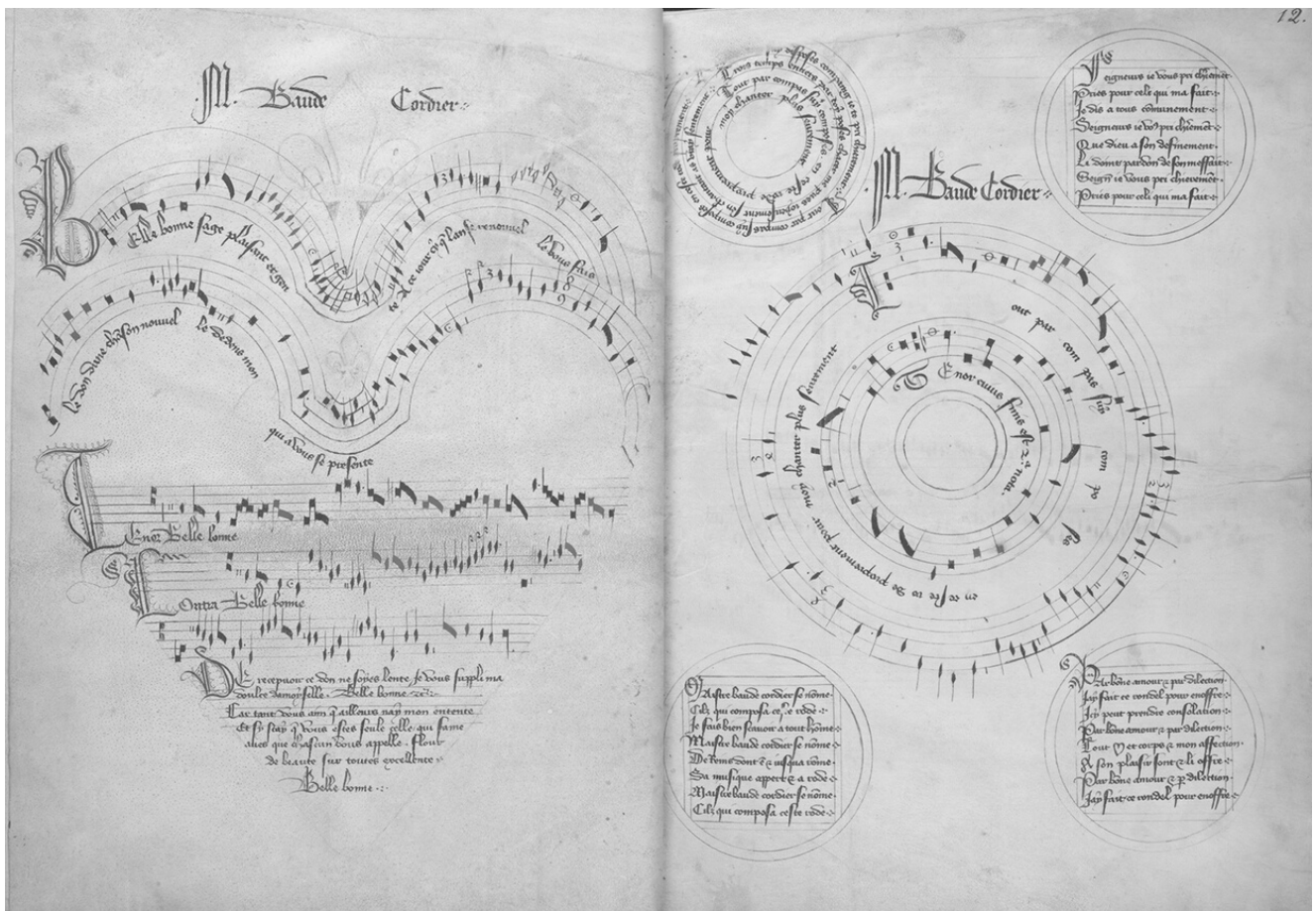
Consider, guess – like statues  
eating (7)

## A Puzzle to be Solved

All that said, the connection between linguistics and music in my work for harpsichord and live electronics *S:NP-VP-NP* (commissioned and performed by Dublin Sound Lab for Music Current Festival 2018) is a literal one; it uses the highly logical analytical methods of linguistics as a structural basis for an exploration of nonsense. Rather than searching for and expressing the meaning of a single text, it uses cryptic crossword puzzles [6] to explore the interplay between words, music, meaning and play. The meaning exists in the act of realization, in the solving of the puzzle.

Musical puzzles are not a new phenomenon – some best-known examples are probably J.S. Bach's puzzle canon, or the instructions of Josquin des Prez's *Missa L'homme armé super voces musicales* (1502), though my personal favourites are those of the late 14th-century 'eye music' [7], in which scores are highly visual, but in which these visual elements are not apparent to the listener. These works are fascinating because they are a kind of six-century presage of multimedia thinking, where visual and textual elements are found at every level of a work.

Baude Cordier's (c1380-1440) *Tout par compas suy composés* ('With a compass I was composed') is a kind of eternal circular canon, with the notation printed in the central circle, and texts in the surrounding smaller circles – one of which also includes the instructions for realising it.



Baude Cordier: Belle, Bonne, Sage (left), and Tout par compas suy composés (right)

Also found in the same collection, the Chantilly Manuscript, is *Belle, Bonne, Sage* ('Beautiful, Good, Wise'), in the shape of a heart, with the additions of red notes and even a heart in place of the word in the text. These pieces are not only beautiful both to hear and see, but contain a sort of gorgeous levity, a touch of brightness and joy in the act both of composition and performance. *S:NP-VP-NP* too is a puzzle that must be solved to be performed; and like Cordier, attempts to introduce a little levity through the contrast between the seriousness of its musical content, and the nonsense of its textual content.

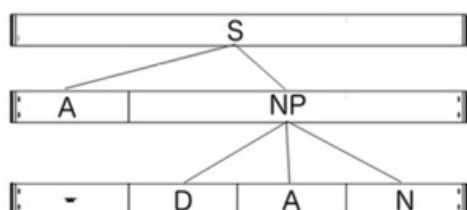
The piece as a whole is based on the adaptation and application of a number of simple principles from various threads in the study of linguistics, such as Saussure's *langue/parole* division of language into the abstract system of rules and their actual use in context respectively. While the harpsichord represents the *langue*, or the mechanical system of this musical language, the electronics, representing *parole*, provide context and additional interpretive expression through the creation of artificial spaces and effects in response to the cryptic clues and their answers.

The score itself consists of musical cells analogous to phonemes and their allophones [8] (versions of the same cell with minor, 'impertinent' changes, i.e. changes in sound which do not alter meaning [9]). The analysis of the clues via constituency-based parse trees, breaking them down into nouns, articles, adjectives etc, forms the work's structure – hence the title, short for *Sentence=Noun phrase – Verb phrase – Noun phrase*. The performer (in this case, harpsichordist) selects cells that correspond to these grammatical elements to slot into this structure.

## Example:

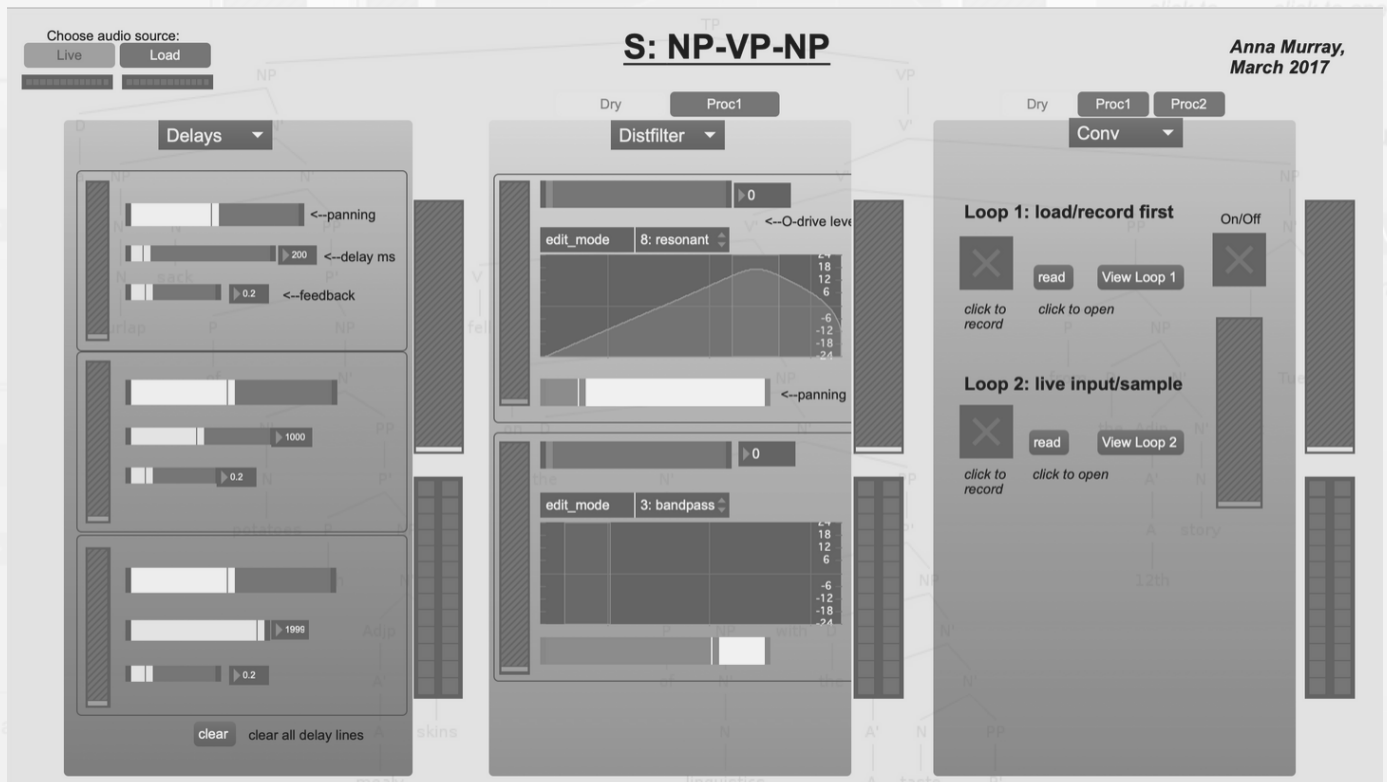
Harpsichord only, without repeats. Read from lowest line upwards.

1. Quiet, one quiet vessel



Extract of score with example realisation

The electronics also reflect this approach of modular deconstruction and reconstruction, consisting of a system of modular processes/elements which can be moved or reordered, creating from the basic grammatical cells, different sounds and moods. Thus the two performers work together to create a 'solution'.

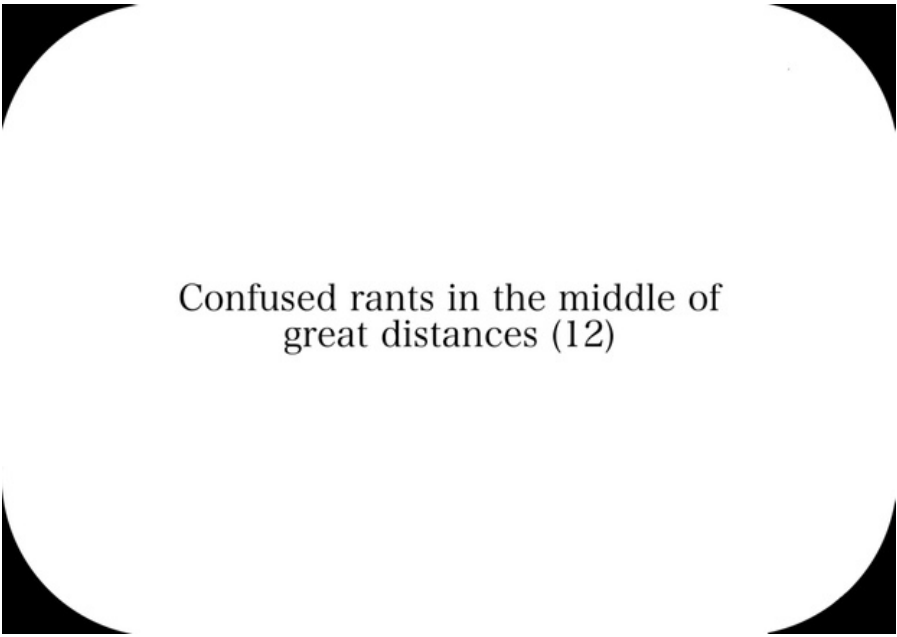


Screenshot of Max MSP patch for live electronics

In performance, the audience was also given copies of the cryptic clues, however their experience is necessarily only of the answers as they were solved by the performers. True, the audience at each performance should in theory hear a different answer (not at all how cryptic crosswords work in practice of course!), but the question remains, how are they to know what they have heard is a puzzle at all? What difference does it make to an audience member how the piece was derived? The question was put well by Katelijen Schiltz [10]: “as soon as a riddle is sung, it is no longer a riddle...the sung version of a musical enigma is a paradox par excellence: it is and is not (or no longer is) a riddle”. Perhaps this means that *S:NP-VP-NP* also counts as eye music.

A consideration of this question led to the creation of a companion piece (created for Kirkos Ensemble’s FluxFest 2016 alongside an actual crossword based on Fluxus-related words), based on more cryptic crosswords. Rather than featuring complicated strict musical instructions, *words* is simply a set of cards, with the clue on one side and the answer on the back. They can be anything, used any way: Kirkos Ensemble have already performed it in a number of ways – as randomly selected text scores for a small ensemble piece, or, memorably, as the basis for a game of charades, with audience members acting out either side of a card, and the players responding musically. In contrast with *S:NP-VP-NP*, with *words*, clue or answer, puzzle or not, it really doesn’t matter.

You, now, are also performing it, by answering, or even just thinking about the clues featured throughout this article. Maybe you’ll even respond out loud, your own private realisation.



Confused rants in the middle of  
great distances (12)

## **Hypnagogia and Structural Ambiguity**

Similar semiotic processes for analysis and composition can be applied in less strict ways where the connection is not solely linguistic. Instead, a similar application of the study of signs and signification can serve the needs of atmosphere, impression and the senses above those of structure. Such is the case with the Japanese tradition of Noh, an artform of atmosphere and the sensory.

Noh is a form of total theatre, with chant (performed by a primary actor, a secondary actor and a chorus), movement, music (consisting of three drums and a flute) and costume. It is extreme in its austerity, mannered in its ritual, and beautiful in its severity. The experience of Noh is one of a kind of “somatic arrest” [11]; the slow, steady solemnity leads the audience into a kind of hypnagogia – indeed it is common even to sleep during a performance. It is characterised by a unique type of hypnotic stillness, emphasised by the steady ritual of its pace. Even the movements of the main actor betray a kind of planar staticness, as throughout even an extended dance, the performer’s centre of gravity follows an utterly straight line, devoid of vertical movement [12]. Rather than drama and fast action, Noh is a collection of exquisitely constructed scenes, of frozen moods. Jan Kott [13] described it as nature “floating; a movement stilled in its final gesture”.

To create this single stilled gesture, Noh has its own language of signs, a unique system of symbolic musical, visual and movement gestures, using a ‘vocabulary’ and ‘grammar’ that was ritualised and then frozen in time hundreds of years ago. This is most obvious in the 型付 – katatsuke, the movement patterns: the dance of Noh is comprised of the combination of these individual katatsuke, each a defined and named gesture. For example, perhaps the most well-known of these is ‘shiori’, a gesture where the hand, slightly cupped as if catching tears, is held in front of the masked face, which is tilted slightly downwards. This gesture indicates crying; performed with two hands it is called ‘morojiori’ and expresses profound grief.



This approach is typical of each element of the whole – voice, drums, flute, or dance, each is composed of similar cells, whether motive, melodic or rhythmic. These cells exist independent of context of particular play, retaining their meaning regardless; the meaning of a particular play is found in how the cells are combined, aligning with each other according to a strict set of grammatical rules, ultimately in service of expressing the underlying message of the text. The presence of such rich symbolic language, as well as a natural system of signs, means Noh naturally lends itself to a semiotic approach to analysis – and thus to a semiotic approach to the composition of Noh-based music.



*At Mii-dera* live. Performed by Máire Carroll 2017. Commissioned by Kirkos Ensemble.

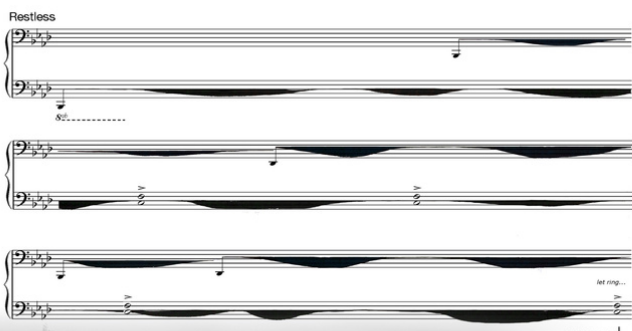
*At Mii-dera*, my work for piano and live electronics based on a scene from the play 三井寺 – *Mii-dera Temple*, recreates one of these ‘frozen’ scenes. At an Autumn moon-viewing festival at Mii-dera Temple (where women are forbidden), a mother, driven mad by the loss of her son who has gone missing, appears. She climbs the bell tower and begins tolling the bell, telling poems of the bell and the moon, associated with Buddhist teachings. At the heart of the scene is a play on words: 撞く – ‘tsuku’ meaning to toll a bell, and 月 – ‘tsuki’, the moon. The madwoman’s ranting is full of imagery of beautiful contrasts, of the moon first hidden by clouds then illuminates the world with its pure light. It is also full of pathos, the wisdom of madness.

This piece interprets the scene by using a structure of cells with symbolic and visual meaning. The electronics, consisting of gong and bell sounds, represent the moon, while the piano – which also borrows some of the tonal and rhythmic gestures of Noh – takes on the roles of clouds, trees or birds, which occasionally obscure our view. Sometimes the clouds rumble across and block it entirely from view, sometimes it is just flitting birds creating a kind of harmony. We as audience members are the participants in this moon-viewing party, while the grieving woman describes through sound the effects of light and shade as she tries to ‘wake from ambivalence’.

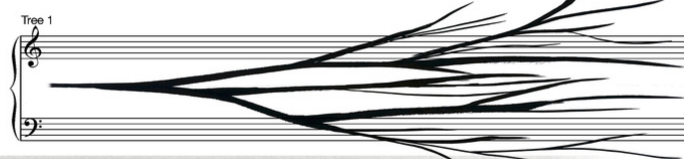


The scene is a beautiful example of ‘aimai’, a kind of ambiguity, vagueness [14] – specifically, 朧月 – ‘oborotsuki’, a phrase that is used to describe the kind of haziness of a moon behind cloud [15]. Behind the woman’s apparent madness is her clear and pointed desire to find her son; she rings the bell so all things can be made illuminated. It is this sense of aimai that *At Mii-Dera* attempts to recreate. Unlike the Noh itself – and indeed S:NP-VP-NP – which is an image painted from many fine details, *At Mii-Dera* recreates this scene in broader strokes. There may be musical motifs which represent its elements (see the score below for sections corresponding to birds, trees, clouds), but these are in the form of gestures rather than the granularity of Noh’s ‘kata’-like cell structure. There is also an element of freedom, even of randomness, in its performance that does not exist in Noh. The bell sounds of the electronics are triggered by the pianist, but the actual sample that will play is randomised, meaning the bell or gong that will sound could be any pitch and any length, and requiring a certain degree of reactivity from the pianist.

I feel restless because I cannot wait to see the moon



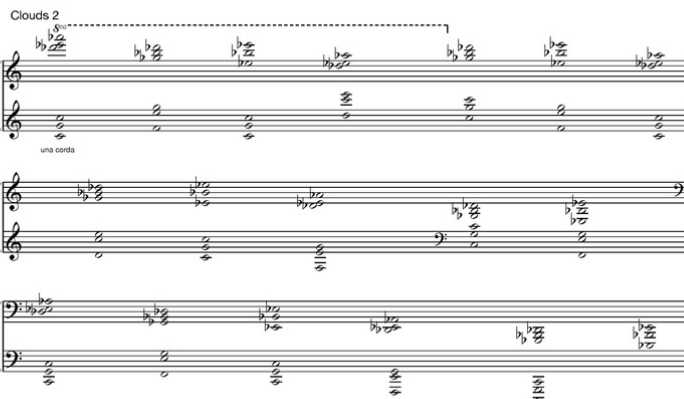
The moonlight shines silver like frost at night



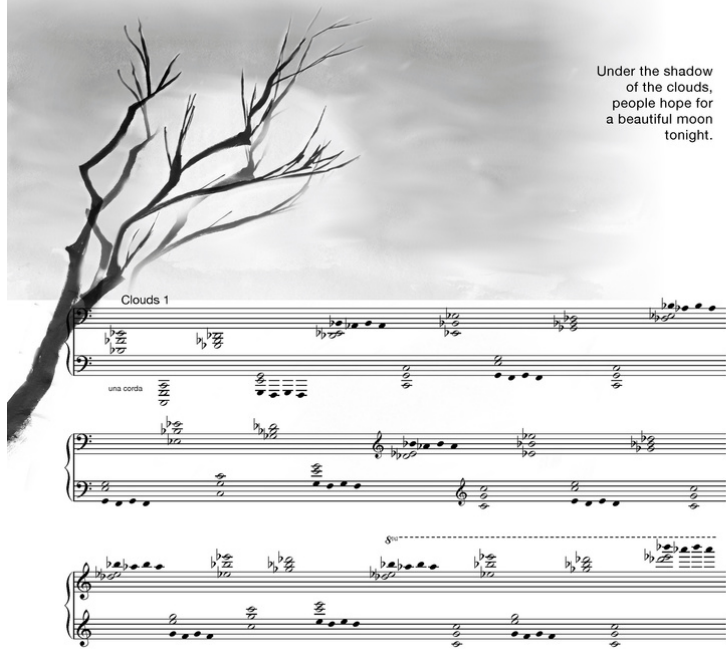
Under the shadow  
of the clouds,  
people hope for  
a beautiful moon  
tonight.



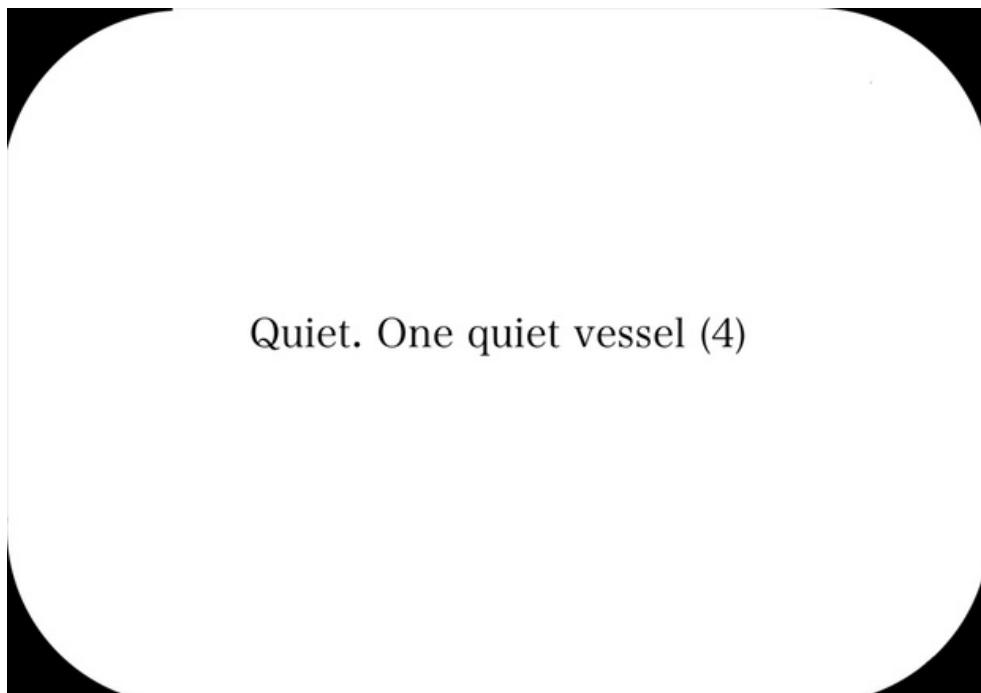
The sound of the bell will clearly echo under the shining moon



The round moon leaves the strait and slowly proceeds behind clouds



More than this, all aspects of the score, whether scored notes, images or text, are open to being interpreted aurally, in any order the performer feels. Sections can even be omitted entirely; the score itself is a part of a realisation of the 'piece', it is an active visual component of the scene of *At Mii-dera*. Any given performance is just one of any number of possible iterations of a musical work; the 'score' represents yet another of these possibilities. It is more than just a guide for the creation of sounds in a live setting with a musician, it is a kind of textual performance that exists frozen in time, awaiting the collaboration that is a live interpretation. Thus, it is a constant work, "taking shape over time".



## Conclusion

As can be seen from the two examples above demonstrate a 'multimedia' approach to composing with text, using musical semiotics as a theoretical frameworks for the layering of meaning throughout a work, from the first written note, to the production of a score artefact, to the performance and the engagement of the audience in that realisation. In *S:NP-VP-NP*, applying the rules of linguistic semiotics allowed the exploration of meaning through structure that would be otherwise impossible in the nonsense a strict framework for the exploration of a fundamentally nonsensical text – albeit one that had an 'answer'. In *At Mii-dera*, the semiotic approach has been applied in a more free-hand way to understand both the musical and visual elements of Japanese Noh theatre, and the results applied to new material to recreate a 'frozen' scene from a play.

As we have examined above, this framework allows us to create works in which score and performance ('enunciate' and 'enunciation') both carry communicative weight, and examine the question of where in music can we situate meaning – or in other words, create works that allow meaning to take shape over time.

## Endnotes

1. The following is significantly indebted to the work of Eero Tarasti (especially Tarasti (2002)), and Raymond Monelle (especially Monelle (1992)).
2. My definition.
3. Grant (2003)
4. Tarasti (2002)
5. Based on Roman Jakobson's functions of language communication model.
6. Gracyk/Kania (2011)
7. Created by collaborator Jamie McHugh.
8. "Musical notation with a symbolic meaning that is apparent to the eye but not to the ear", Dart (2001).
9. Somewhat analogous to Philip Tagg's definition of the 'museme' (Tagg (2012)), however that term usually refers to a minimal unit of musical meaning, akin to a linguistic morpheme, and therefore an order smaller than these.
10. In this case, these 'impertinent changes' can include small pitch changes such as a flattened/sharped note, or a changed articulation that does not fundamentally alter the gesture. The final arbiter of what constitutes a pertinent or impertinent change is the performer, according to their own realisation – indeed, this can be considered them performing in their own 'accent'.
11. Schiltz (2015)
12. Kott (1974)
13. See the extraordinary diagrams of dancers' movement in Yamanaka (2015).
14. Rather ironically, Japanese has a huge array of words that are used to define the exact type of vagueness being discussed.
15. Kott (1974)

**Anna Murray** is a musician and mixed media composer whose work explores language and text-based composition, graphic scoring and collaboration. From Ireland and living in Tokyo, she is a Japanese Government MEXT Research Scholar and a student at Tokyo University of the Arts where she is studying Noh theatre under Professor Takeda Takashi. She also holds an MPhil in Music and Media Technologies from Trinity College Dublin.

Anna regularly performs improvised electronic music, both solo and in collaboration with other musicians, and ran an experimental/improvised music concert series in Dublin called Kontakt. She recently gave a talk about electronic music, random processes and liveness at Nerd Nite public science event in Tokyo. Recent works include 'my little Force explodes', written for Michelle O'Rourke and Lina Andonovska, commissioned by Ergodos as part of Morning Rituals at the New Music Dublin Festival 2019.

Anna is a former concert promoter and artist manager, and ran the Association of Irish Composers for a number of years, including concert series, talks, and acting as Irish delegate to the annual ISCM Festival and Assembly. She has also worked as manager for experimental music group Quiet Music Ensemble, managed the NMDX international delegate program at New Music Dublin Festival 2018 and 2019.

Dedicated to music communication and discussion, Anna has worked as freelance music journalist for a number of publications, and was Assistant Editor of *The Journal of Music*, an online magazine of musical life.

In early 2020 she released her second album of ambient improvised electronic music, *Rndr II*, her first album of beats-based electronica, *These Are The First Words I've Spoken*, and an indie rock album *Goodbye Iowa* with her band The Manhattan Syndrome.

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Answers: umbrella; suppose; remonstrates; ship  
All crossword clues created by Jamie McHugh.