ONE INCH EQUALS 25 MILES: PROSE GENERATES MUSIC

Melody Sumner Carnahan, c/o Burning Books, P.O. Box 2638, Santa Fe, NM 87504, U.S.A. E-mail: <mschrbnx@nets.com>.

Sound samples related to the discussion are available at <www.highmayhem.org/OOC-oneinch>.

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In the collaborative effort described here, my intention was to ignite a collective interplay between my latest book of stories, One Inch Equals 25 Miles [1] (Frontispiece), and Dino J.A. Deane’s “conducted improvisation” ensemble Out of Context (OOC) for a real-time live musical composition [2]. We hoped to merge music, vocals, electronics and words in a way that would spark further narrative and musical collaborations.

In most of my collaborations with musicians and composers over the past 20 years, voice has been primary. With some, however, the music takes over. All play upon my words in different ways that I enjoy [3]. One Inch Equals 25 Miles, as broadly interpreted by OOC, presented words and music in an unusual balance. The ensemble includes 10 performers with diverse backgrounds in music and theater [4]. OOC is dedicated to live conducted improvisation based on 28 hand signals that can be directed to one or several musicians or the entire group. The signs do not convey verbal directions but are “pictographs” that allow for multiple interpretations. As Deane describes it: “After the first decision, starting the piece, I make no choices. The ensemble makes them for me. The music is revealed to the audience at the same time it is revealed to us. Nobody knows where it’s going. We all—players, conductor, audience—get there at the same time” [5].

Deane’s method is gestural. So is mine. After hearing OOC play for the first time, I handed Deane a copy of my book, saying, “You are Rio.” In the book, Rio “conducts” a tour for a group of diverse characters, each with a story to tell. Deane “conducts” a group of unusual performers, each with a unique approach to music. Deane found in my words a description of the ensemble’s method: “chaotic with purpose” (Fig. 1).

Two avenues were explored to turn words into music: The ensemble met to play together from noon to 3:00 p.m. the second Sunday of each month. Everyone was given a copy of the book from which to choose a different story for her or his musical solo, and the group experimented with various ways to “mine” the words for music. To bring in more voices, Deane suggested “teas with Melody”: Thursday afternoons from 3:30 to 4:00, two or three friends sat at my kitchen counter and read informally from the book. Simultaneously, out-of-towners interrupted with readings via phone answering machine. Deane would record nonstop for the half hour. Later, a “Tragic Greek Chorus” read as a group the stories that had not been done.

Molly Sturgis chose “Invitation” from the book for her vocal solo: “The language in ‘Invitation’ is informative and instructive. I chose to use only the vowels for their lyricism and softness, as if to say, look what exists inside of this” [6]. John Flax had access to four stories at once, which he could flip through intuitively to find sections with the potential for juxtaposition. Others in the ensemble worked from the emotion of the text and/or the rhythm of the sentences.

All the “tea” recordings were saved, with mistakes, re-takes and overlapping reads. Deane and C.K. Barlow (who did the sampling) had individual access to a total of 38 recordings for the live performance. Deane grouped them sequentially, allowing each story-based recording to play for 2½ minutes before bringing in the next one, in order to fill the whole into the 1-hour time frame. He took that straight, real-time layered recording and cut it into six 10-minute blocks, which were then manipulated with a program written by Barlow. She elaborates: “With Max I
Heaven is a hand. Lord where no
other besides. Great and to be
feared are all idols. Stretched out
to the firmament to command the
formed. For my self alone I declare
praise for there can be no medi-
ator between demons. Believe
that and shudder. Those who
say in their hearts there is good
do deeds and look down to see
if there are any who
are wise. For what
can be known is
plain to them
ever since the
invention of
nature and philosophy,
invisible though they
have been and are seen
through. This will hap-
pen. From the skies
in blazing foam those
who do not obey, not
even one shall fall
short of the wages.
Mankind is destined
to face nothing known.
What cannot be re-
vealed. And the days of
our span soon gone and
we fly away. boast about
what a day may bring.
You cannot know what
appears for a little
while then vanishes. Our
needs, our tires, everyone believes
while we are born. Governments
of all kinds, called wonderful
counselor, will save your house-
hold. Come you who are burdened
and give ear. I ride alone on the
only escalator. Let my voice open
unto you. Truth and lies come
through me, born of sin, and
through you, slave to eternity. I say
you must eat the righteous. Bring
your own dust back with you.
Watch your step and wave
to all foreigners while from
the lake of torment you
ascend. Retrieve the life, not
through religion or salvation,
but to make our world
more elegant and con-
vincing. Two men in the
field. One descends and
takes up a bride and
surely the most distressing
of human history would
not want to be living during
the shocking outcome.
Many professing diligent
washing will have disasso-
ciated. I tell you a mys-
tery: hydrochloric acid
melts iron but not the
surface of this delicate
lacquer bowl I hold
in my hands. Accord-
ingly we will not all
sleep but we will be
rearranged. When
things begin to dis-
appear, you will see
the current gen-
eration rushing
for the nearest subway station.
I say wait for a second salvation.
Arrive late at the summer of don’t.
Spend your eternity now so as
to improve our destiny. Where
there you be deliver this moment.

Reference and Notes

1. Melody Sunner Carnahan, One Inch Equals 25
Miles, Michael Sumner, designer (Santa Fe, NM:

2. A 1-hour live conducted improvisation was
presented at Outpost Performance Space (in part-
nership with WordSpace: NM Literary Arts) in
Albuquerque, 10 December 2004, to launch the pub-
lished book. The performance was recorded for a CD
release in 2005; see <www.burningbooks.org>. Sound
samples are available at <www.highmayhem.org/
OOC-oneinch>.

3. Beginning in 1983, my words have formed the ba-
sis for Laetitia Sonami’s “performance novels,” and
I’ve worked with other composers and artists who
present my writing “off the page,” including Robert
Ashley, Joan La Barbara, Barbara Golden, Morton
Subotnick, Woody Vasulka, Evisible Lauten and Larry
Polanski, resulting in performances, audio works, ra-
dio broadcasts, videos and CD recordings.

4. The Out of Context ensemble is: J.A. Deane (con-
ductor/sample/live sampling), Jon Baldwin (corset), C.K.
Barlow (sampler/live sampling), Stefan Dill (oud/
electronics), John Flax (acting/voice), Katie Harlow
(cello), Sam Rhodes (bassoon), Molly Sturges (vo-
calist), Alicia Ulan (viola) and Jefferson Voorhees
(drums/percussion).

5. Dino J.A. Deane, conversation with author, 29 De-
cember 2004.

6. Molly Sturges, e-mail correspondence with author,
31 December 2004.

7. C.K. Barlow, e-mail correspondence with author,
30 December 2004.


© Burning Books Bassoonist Sam Rhodes based his solo on this story as part of the Out of Context ensemble’s “conducted improvisation” performance of the book.