



Palette of Theatrical Gestures Based on Extended Oboe Technique in Free Improvisation

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Abstract: This study's objective is to create a palette of theatrical gestures based on extended oboe techniques. Traldi et al.'s (2007) definitions of 3 types of gestures: Musical, Incidental/Residual, and Theatrical, are used and expanded upon. *Oboe Unbound* (VAN CLEVE, 2004) is utilized for techniques, and "Individual Experimentation Workshops", within the context of free improvisation, are recorded and analyzed. Ideas taken from Rudolf Laban's work on movement analysis are used in the process of gesture selection. Composers and improvising oboists alike can utilize the resulting palette of theatrical gestures.

Keywords: Oboe. Extended technique. Theatrical gesture. Free improvisation. Palette of gestures.

Paleta de gestos cênicos baseada nas técnicas estendidas do oboé na improvisação livre

Resumo: O objetivo desse estudo é criar uma paleta de gestos cênicos baseada nas técnicas estendidas do oboé. Traldi et al (2007) definiram 3 tipos de gestos, Musical, Incidental/Residual e Cênico, que são utilizados e ampliados nesse estudo. O *Oboe Unbound* (VAN CLEVE, 2004) é utilizado para as técnicas; e as "Oficinas Individuais de Experimentação", dentro do contexto da improvisação livre, são gravadas e analisadas. Ideias extraídas do trabalho de Rudolf Laban são empregadas no processo de seleção de movimentos. A Paleta de gestos cênicos criada pode ser utilizada tanto por compositores quanto por oboístas/improvisadores.

Keywords: Oboé. Técnicas estendidas. Gestos cênicos. Improvisação livre. Paleta de gestos.

1. Introduction

Modern extended oboe techniques present a variety of new challenges to today's oboist, with difficult and demanding movements of the fingers, lips, tongue, and mouth. As new music specialist/oboist/composer Christopher Redgate (2007, p.179) points out, these new extended techniques have necessitated a re-inventing of the sound world of the oboe. Oboists must not only heighten their aural awareness to include new textures, timbers, intervals (micro), and sonorous effects, but amplify their technical abilities as well. Several handbooks and manuals have been written to help the oboist conquer these technical developments, such as: "Oboe Unbound" by Libby Van Cleve (2004) and "The Techniques of Oboe Playing" by Peter Veale and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (1994).

These books contain extensively detailed explanations on how to execute and notate specific techniques such as flutter tonguing, multiphonics, glissandi, etc. They are designed for both oboists interested in studying these new techniques and composers

interested in utilizing these techniques within their compositions. These handbooks are very helpful for studying the mechanical aspect of these techniques, but do not provide material for the performing oboist to study the techniques in a “musical” context. There are few *étude* books written for the oboe using modern extended techniques.

In a previous study, the author established the field of Free Improvisation to be a legitimate *étude* supplement, helping to fill the need for an open minded, “rule free” musical space in which to practice and perform extended oboe techniques. During that study, the author also found that when she focused on the new bodily gestures required by the techniques themselves, giving each subtle variation of movement it’s own purpose and intention, the embodiment of the sound resulted in a better quality sonorous production.

The current study is in effect a continuation, now honing in on the *Incidental Gestures* (TRALDI et al, 2007) involved in the execution of extended oboe techniques. According to Traldi et al, an *Incidental Gesture* (IG) is “the result of the natural and inevitable body movement of the interpreter, specifically the head, and the arms, in the instrumental performance.”¹ The research performed here examines how these IG’s, inspiring other movements through augmentation and creative modification, can potentially add expressive content to music, be it fixed or improvised. The idea was to select a group of techniques and assign each a specific movement (an augmented and creatively modified version of the original IG) moving beyond the mechanical and into the expressive realm. However, during the study the author concluded that some of the IG’s utilized in the execution of certain techniques were not easily exaggerated and amplified, due to the nature of the instrument. In these cases, the creatively modified movements were chosen based on the character and quality of the sound produced by the extended technique.

All of these expressive movements fall under the category “Theatrical Gestures”, according to Traldi et al (2007). They constitute the “Palette of Gestures Based on Extended Oboe Technique”. This palette can be used as a tool by composers in producing future works involving the oboe as well as by the oboist interested in adding a new dimension to improvisation.

2. Expanded gestures for Oboe

Studies on the importance and meaning of gesture in music have been conducted, and a number of different gestural categories have been defined (see DAVIDSON, 2009; DAVIDSON and SALGADO CORREIA, 2002; SEDDON, 2005). Davidson uses the following categories in her study on singers: Emblems, Illustrators, Affect displays,

Regulators, and Adaptors. (for definitions, see DAVIDSON AND MALLOCH, 2009, pg.569).

Works for percussion and for cello such as: *Touch And Go* (1967) - Hebert Brun; *Rebus* (1979) - Michael Kowalski; *Corporel* (1985) - Vinko Globokar; *Duas Linhas em cello e papel de seda* (2009) – Marcus Siqueira, among others, incorporate specific extra-musical movements into the body of the piece (TRALDI et al., 2007; ZERBINATTI et al., 2013). Professional oboists use body gestures while playing, commonly “Regulators” for cohesion of ensemble playing and “Illustrators” for musical expression. But unlike other instruments such as percussion and cello, there are very few pieces written specifically for the oboe that notate and utilize specific theatrical gestures as part of the work. Carl Stockhausen adapted a version of *In Freundschaft* (1980) for oboe, while Mauricio Kagel wrote *Atem* (1969/70) for one player and three woodwind instruments. Some other composers who utilized theatrical gesture in pieces written for oboe or woodwinds are: Vinko Globokar (1934), Gilbert Amy (1936), and Heinz Holliger (1939).

The author of this study has chosen to work with the categories defined by Traldi et al. (2007) using Kumor (2002) as reference, as they approach gesture not only from a linguistic point of view (as a means of non-verbal communication) but from a practical and performatic point of view, allowing for the use of gesture as a creative addition to the musical content. As the definitions are written specifically with fixed music in mind, the author of this study has expanded the specified perimeters to include the field of free improvisation. The author has also made a few additions allowing for application to other instruments. Traldi et al. places the gestures found in musical performance (specifically percussion in their study) into 3 categories (*words in italics are additions made by this author*):

- Musical Gesture (MG): different temporal patterns defined by sonorous structures varying in time and that are produced by musical instruments under the action of an interpreter, given a specific musical notation, utilized in a specific interpretive context. *In the case of Free Improvisation, there may or may not be a specific musical notation given, and a specific interpretive context may or may not be defined.*
- Incidental or Residual Interpretive Gesture (IG): the result of the natural and inevitable body movement of the interpreter, specifically the *fingers, wrists, head, mouth, torso,* and the arms, in the instrumental performance.
- Theatrical Interpretive Gesture (TG): the interpreter’s action when faced with the [composer’s] notation, and the specific utilization of a certain type of movement that is not directly linked to the act of playing the instrument and carries its own

autonomous meaning. *In the case of Free Improvisation, the performer fulfills the roles of both composer and interpreter, and the TG's are not notated but are executed as part of the performer's creative and spontaneous musical flow.*

When Incidental Gestures (IG's) used to execute extended oboe techniques are exaggerated, amplified, and altered creatively, or when the character of the sounds produced by the extended techniques inspire other movements, they can become Theatrical Interpretive Gestures (TG's). When they become TG's, they take on a new expressive quality, emerging from the embodiment of the sounds produced by the IG's. The movement of the fingers, wrists, arms and mouth are no longer just IG's used to facilitate the production of new sounds. They are now inspiration for meaningful expressions thoughtfully and intentionally performed by the interpreter, such as in the TG associated with the technique "Glissando", in the Palette of gestures based on extended technique (see detailed explanation below).

3. Methods and materials

Using the extended oboe technique handbook by Libby Van Cleve, "Oboe Unbound", a set of 5 techniques was chosen:

- a) Flutter tonguing: rapid fluttering of the tongue - not touching reed;
- b) Glissandi: sliding between notes;
- c) Harmonics and alternative timbers: alternate fingering, producing a harmonic or different timber of sound;
- d) Multiphonics: multiple notes sounding at once;
- e) Double trills: trills twice the speed, involving two trilling fingers instead of one.

During a series of "Individual Experimentation Workshops", the author explored different techniques and attached a variety of extra-musical movements to each technique. The workshops were recorded on video and analyzed by the author, assisted by the concepts of Rudolf Laban (LABAN, 1978). A selection of movements was made based on these video recordings, and the palette of gestures was created.

4. Discussion and partial results

Due to the nature of the instrument, oboists are somewhat limited in the type and size of movement they can execute while playing. Jumpy, jerky gestures are risky, as they can cause the reed to slip in or out of the mouth, which would disrupt playing and possibly

damage the reed or the musician. Fast walking, running, jumping, and skipping are therefore extremely difficult if not impossible to perform while playing. Hence, the movements chosen were mainly stationary movements, originating from a standing position.

4.1 Expanded gestures and eye movements

The fingers can inspire movements to be carried out by the arms, legs, head, and torso, but they themselves do not have much freedom to move outside of their required positioning. The main body parts utilized in the palette of gestures are the arms, legs, head, torso, and especially the eyes. The author was surprised and excited by the quality and quantity of meaning carried out by the eyes.

In a performance of fixed music where the musicians are reading off of scores, the audience does not experience much expression displayed by the eyes themselves. Other parts of the face can be extremely expressive – the eyebrows and forehead in particular, but the eyes themselves, if looking at a sheet of music, do not give an expressive reading. When the eyes are actively participating in the expressive movement of the piece, the effect is quite poignant. For this reason, the author has included specific instructions for the eyes in each movement contained in the palette of gestures.

As the original idea of using the IG's of each extended technique to inspire the TG attached to it wasn't always possible due to the nature of the instrument, the author opted, in those situations, to utilize the character of the sound produced by the technique to inspire the relative movement. To assist in the task of determining what and how different sorts of movements might characterize a sound, the author explored the ideas of movement specialist Rudolf Laban. In his book "The Mastery of Movement", he presents four questions to determine and describe bodily action (LABAN, 1978. Pg.55-56):

1. Which part of the body is moving?
2. In which spatial direction or directions is the movement taking place?
3. At what speed is the movement being processed?
4. What level of muscular energy is used in the movement?

Answering these questions helped the author explore how the characteristics of a sound might translate into a movement. How the parameters of a certain sound (dynamic, pitch, duration, quality, etc.) can be expressed by determining the speed, direction, size and intensity of a movement.

4.1.1 Expanded Gestures

The selected techniques along with their expanded gestures, including eye movement, are as follows:

- Flutter Tonging: both elbows up and out, eyes looking up;
- Glissandi up: oboe down and close to body at start, while “glissandoing”, move oboe in half circle to left in upwards motion. Eyes follow same movement;
- Glissandi down: reverse of glissandi up;
- Harmonics and quiet timbers: oboe and head down, and in towards body, arms in towards body, eyes looking down, knees turned inward and touching, feet shoulder width apart;
- Multiphonics (loud): squatting position, arms out, eyes up;
- Multiphonics (soft): squatting turned 90 deg, arms out, eyes down;
- Double Trills: hold instrument out to the side at 45deg angle, head and eyes following same angle.

4.1.2 Notes on each gesture

When Flutter Tonging, the tip of the tongue flutters up and down near the front of the mouth, never touching the reed, (one of three types of flutter tongue execution, as described in both handbooks mentioned previously) rapidly and almost uncontrollably. The movement chosen by the author was inspired by the sound produced by the flutter tongue – an intense, frantic, electric sound. The gesture asks for both elbows to be rapidly pushed up into the air and held throughout the duration of the flutter tonging, creating inward and outward tension, and for the eyes to be looking up to the sky in angst.

The execution of a glissando (up/down) requires the fingers to slide off/on keys horizontally and/or lift/depress keys slowly. The embouchure also adjusts by either starting 1. relaxed and open, gradually closing and tightening, or 2. vice versa. The movements indicated on the list are extensions of the fingers’ IG’s and the actions of the embouchure.

Harmonics and quiet timbers are executed through alternative fingerings and slight adjustments with the embouchure. The sound of these techniques, generally quiet and introverted, has inspired the movements chosen.

Multiphonics are also executed through alternative fingerings and adjustments with the embouchure. We can produce loud, dense multiphonics or soft, airy multiphonics.

The density of the sound has inspired the squatting position, and the turning of the body $\frac{1}{4}$ away from the audience is inspired by the soft, inward sound.

Double trills are fast and intense, involving the use of a finger on each hand to execute the trills (in most cases). The angular movements were inspired by the sound produced by the technique.



Image 1: Flutter Tonguing: both elbows up and out, eyes looking up



Image 2: Glissandi up: oboe down and close to body at start, while “glissandoing”, move oboe in half circle to left in upwards motion. Eyes follow same movement

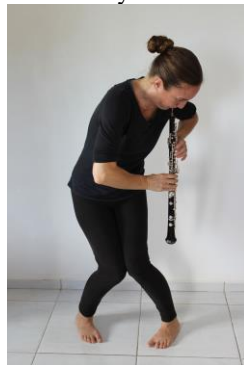


Image 3: Harmonics and quiet timbers: oboe and head down, and in towards body, arms in towards body, eyes looking down, knees turned inward and touching, feet shoulder width apart



Image 4: Multiphonics (loud): squatting position, arms out, eyes up



Image 5: Multiphonics (soft): squatting turned 90 deg, arms out, eyes down

5. Conclusions and research projections

In this article we have sought to explore the phenomenon of sound through the study of musical gestures implicit in performance. Our current hypothesis iterates that: when theatrical gestures are incorporated into a musical performance, they can create an added dimension of visual expressivity, in turn enhancing the listener's and the performer's aural experience, as well as give performers a new dimension for expressive output. The palette of theatrical gestures based on extended oboe technique gives oboists a starting point at this crossroads between gesture and sound, as this particular interdisciplinary journey has been minimally explored.

Maintaining the flow of the improvisation, while incorporating pre-existing gestures into it was one of the difficulties encountered in using the TG's in the free improvisation context. The brain must re-learn the specific techniques with the added movements, so that the improvisation remains organic and "free". Perhaps once pre-determined gestures are brought into the free improvisation context, we can no longer call that context "free improvisation". Though the music is spontaneously generated, the fact that there is a pre-existing relationship between sound and gesture may bring this type of improvisation closer to Butch Morris' *Conduction*®, for example. "Conduction® (conducted improvisation/interpretation) is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition..." (STANLEY, 2009:



ii).

Composers in their compositional process writing for the oboe can utilize the palette of gestures based on extended oboe technique, as can oboists fulfilling the double role of composer/interpreter during sessions of free improvisation. The author intends to continue this study by creating additional theatrical gestures based on extended oboe technique adding to the palette of gestures started here; working directly with a composer in the creative process of incorporating these gestures into a new work for the oboe; and determining an appropriate name for this type of musical/gestural “free” improvisation while practicing the usage of these gestures within that context.

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¹ Translated by the author from Portuguese.