

Studies in black
and white

Henry McPherson

2018

Studies in Black and White is a series of 24 graphic improvisation-stimulus scores, originally created for pianist Maria Sappho.

Each panel has been produced using a combination of white and black acrylic on white or black cartridge paper, painted using three flat thick-bristled brushes, a single curved palette knife, and fingers. The majority of the panels were produced using a single stroke or gesture, with no further alteration.

This collection serves as a series of practice-pieces for improvising musicians. For pianists, it represents a set of exercises in piano technique, a teaching aid for exploring the sonification and musical interpretation of visual media, and an exploration of the possibilities of musical and visual synchrony. Each panel has been conceived of, or composed, as a musical entity in its own right, with concepts such as texture, line, tone, colour, velocity, and gesture forming the focus of the creation of the work.

The pieces can be interpreted by any ensemble. When interpreted for piano, the pieces should be played by one pianist only

Suggestions regarding interpretation and performance

There are no strict rules regarding the interpretation of these pieces. However, the following are some guidelines and suggestions to aid in practice and performance:

“Reading” and Translating

The player(s) may interpret the content of each panel as they wish, in whichever musical language(s) they choose. It may be beneficial to experiment by interpreting one panel in several languages or musical styles, to explore how stylistic restriction might affect interpretation.

The panels may be “read” or “played” in any direction – left-to-right, top-to-bottom, centre-to-edges, in multiple directions, or as a single

image. One suggestion might be to experiment by reading collections or groups of figurations as a single object, or exploring micro-details of particular strokes or lines.

The duration of each panel can be as long or short as desired. In the practice-room it is suggested that pianists experiment with playing panels for very short durations – several seconds, to a minute or so – and very long durations – perhaps over ten minutes, or even up to an hour.

While there is no one way to translate or sonify visual media, improvisors of all levels might attempt to find correlation between visual and musical concepts. The idea of musical and visual synchrony – that is, direct translation from one media to another – is the driving force behind this work. Some concepts to consider might be:

Position and Layout

In Western notation, “up” frequently denotes “high” and “down” denotes “low”. How might this be applied to each panel? How might this be subverted or altered? The pitches of the piano, for example, ascend from left-to-right. How might this correlate with information on the score? How might this be affected when approaching a panel from an alternative direction?

Direction and Duration

Reading linearly is only one way of interpreting information. If one were to interpret a panel from a non-standard direction, how might this affect duration, and the performer/audience’s experience of time?

Depth

How might perceived layers or textures within the score be applied to musical layers, textures, or voices?

Density

How could one explore the density of material on the score, and how might this translate into sound? How would this be affected by changes in duration?

Tone and Colour

Changes in tone, colour, or texture in the score could be reflected in changes of timbre on the instrument. How might one explore variation of musical colour? What kind of sounds or extended techniques might the performer relate to the visual material on the score?

Gesture and Physicality

The gesture, implied gesture, or stroke of each figuration may be imitated physically by the player(s) to produce sound. Many of the panels have an inherent gestural feel, as most were produced using only one physical movement.

If one were to imagine the rectangular shape of the panel overlaid across an instrument, or group of instruments, one could follow the lines of the panel with the body – the hands, the arms, or even the torso – exploring what sounds can be found by physically replicating gestures from the score.

Conversely, the player(s) might also experiment by imitating physical or gestural elements of the score to produce no sound at all – that is to say, solely moving in the space. A direct gestural-visual translation, from score to body, can allow for explorations of physicality and embodiment not restricted by reliance on learned technique or muscle-memories, and may provide new understandings of the relationship between performer and instrument.

How might changes in physical gesture affect sound-production, technique, or the relationship with the audience? How might a gestural approach be affected by altering duration or speed?

Association and Emotion

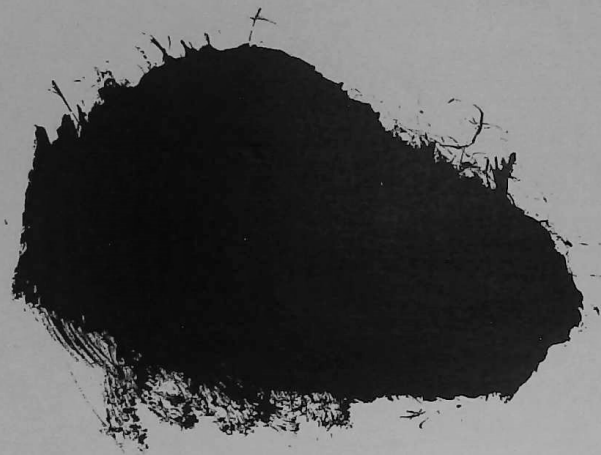
What feelings or emotions does the panel elicit from the performer?
What kind of images can be seen in the panel? Might the strokes be representative of real-world objects, letters, common images, or other associations?

Performance

In performance, any number of panels may be played in any order, with any duration, from any direction, and each panel may be repeated or reinterpreted as many times as desired. The only stipulation is that while elements of an individual panel may be focussed on in practice, the panel in its entirety should be interpreted in performance.

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My thanks go to Maria Sappho for her support in the creation of this work, and her unfaltering drive to explore new ways of making music.

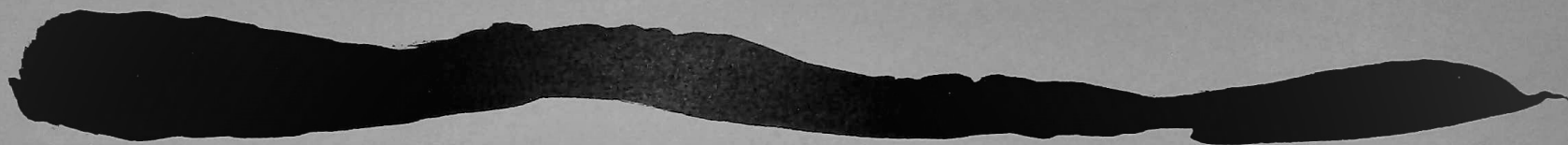






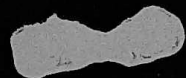








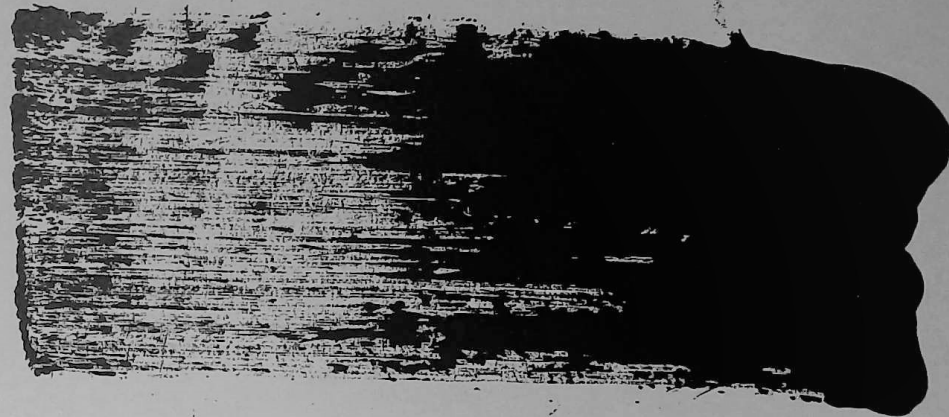


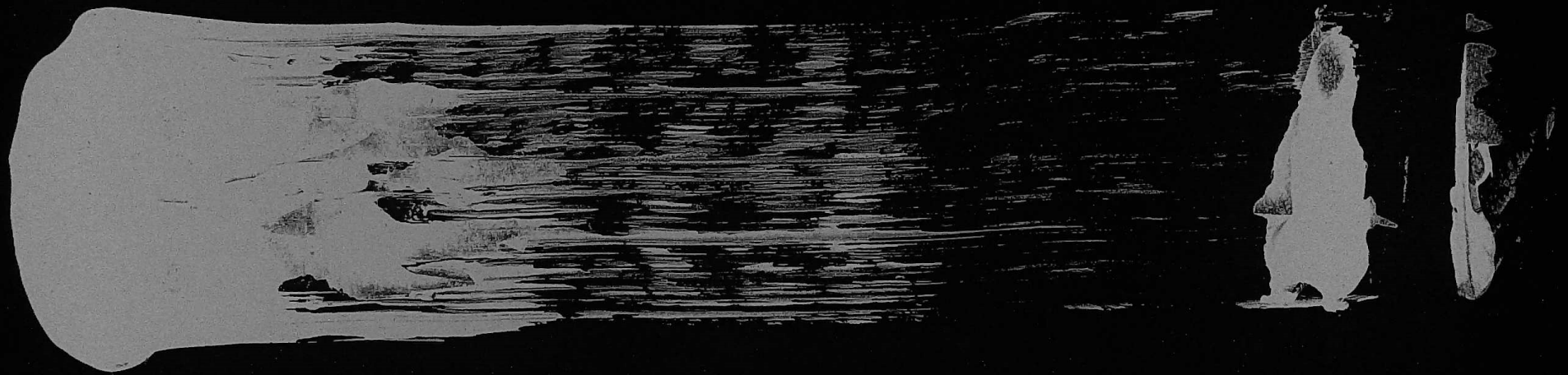




























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