

Eva-Maria Houben

Musical Practice as a Form of Life

How Making Music
Can be Meaningful
and Real

[transcript] Music and Sound Culture



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Eva-Maria Houben

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How Making Music Can be Meaningful and Real

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How is musical practice connected with everyday life? Eva-Maria Houben shows that performing music as an activity – indeed, as playing – is a meaningful shift from an approach based on structural analysis. Musical practice, Eva-Maria Houben contends, can be understood as open and never finished. Such an emphasis on repetition offers freedom from perfection, productivity, and purpose, thus allowing meaning to unfold in specific situations, places, and relationships. Musical practice can become a form of life and a reality in its own right. The study includes musical examples from the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries as well as contemporary music.

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Preface

What do we need music for in our lives?

“Sound is given. There is sound, there are sounds. It becomes still and quiet. That’s all I know when asked about the nature of composition.”¹

Are musical practices forms of life? This question shifts the emphasis from the structure of a composition to the activity of the performers. To a lesser degree the composers and listeners, and to a greater degree the performers, find themselves in a listening situation of doing something and letting something happen. As a performer I am also a listener at the same time. Listening can be an active process, but it also can happen to you—it also can hit you. When talking about performance we focus on the performers’ activities. As soon as silence comes into play (and not only in this case, but in quiet moments it may become more obvious), the situation of being together or of being alone with oneself (for example during the performance of a solo piece) becomes acute, too. As a performer I can drift between activity and letting loose. I can experience that I cannot control everything. The situation opens the door to events and participation.

The performers do not only play an instrument or sing, but they also find themselves in a certain situation and expose themselves to this situation. They develop relationships to other players, to people who are present or might even be absent. István Zelenka, a Suisse composer and performer of Hungarian and Austrian descent, points out a certain attitude of the performers:

“The ‘musician’ should, with equal intensity, bring his instrument to life and listen to his environment, or look at it. This sequence of actions (called composition) is intended to promote peacefully attentive viewing, intense listening and reflection as a process of tirelessly asking questions.”²

1 | E.-M. Houben: Hector Berlioz, 188.

2 | E.-M. Houben/I. Zelenka: 1 Milieu, 216.

Therefore, performance includes many types of activity. But it might also include inactivity. This situation becomes just as important as audible and/or visible activities. Let it happen in silence! And during silence let the disappearing sound happen! This attitude means exposing oneself to that which can happen and come to pass in this situation. Antoine Beuger emphasizes the connection between silence and event and considers silence as the calm before the storm or even after the storm.³ He insists on a clear distinction between “being” and “taking place”. An event takes place and afterwards things are different than before: “such a difference can be life changing or of historical significance.”⁴ This difference can trigger great resonances, it can change an individual life or be of historical significance. “there is silence: speechlessness; absence of images; vanishing of any representations, that might have been effective before, but suddenly obsolete now; loss of concept.”⁵

In silence we experience our physicality. This is true as well when playing the instrument and when singing, but it is perhaps even more evident in silence. Here everyone is completely present in their own physical existence. Everyone who performs has this existential experience of disappearance first-hand whilst performing. Performing, listening and composing consume time in one’s life. In one’s own life, everyone experiences how they are not alone, but rather how they are always present in the world simultaneously with others. Every musical practice means the experience of a “We”. Even the practice of being on one’s own performing a solo composition (*per se*) is embedded in commonality. What do we need music for in our lives? When I ask this question, an existential experience is at stake.

When Beuger considers silence and events, he does not only refer to long pauses within a piece, but also to the silence before and after the performance. As soon as I leave the concert hall, I walk back into the daily life step by step. When does a musical situation come to an end? This question is not easily to discuss. It is perhaps as complex as the questions: Where is music? Where does sound go to? Anyone who wants to get involved in music can come across the piece; but an encounter only happens temporarily. We can bring the experiences made in musical practice into life and we can be so deeply touched by experiences made in musical practice that these experiences continue to echo in life. Where, then, is the threshold between musical practice and (everyday) life?

What do we need music for in our lives?

Maybe the question can be refined: Why do we think of the musical practice as a form of life? Together or alone, we do something meaningful for ourselves with sounds; we would like to repeat the actions or the activity. A meaning arises

3 | A. Beuger/S. Vriezen: Asking questions, trying answers, 36.

4 | *Ibid.*

5 | *Ibid.*

for us through the activities and events in their corporeality and sensuality; this meaning does not need to be verbalized. We understand the world and understand each other in non-verbal communication, in meaningful activities focused on repetition.

What do we need music for? In posing this question, we can trust in the transparency between music and life. Music could become a form of life and give us something to know about life. We understand something through meaningful performance.

How real are musical activities and musical events? Are there two worlds—a world of everyday life and a world of art, of music? Does musical performance take place in a closed-off aesthetic area? Or—looking at the possibility of an “artistic form of life”⁶—do we act once on this side, then once beyond a border between music and life? How real is music?

What do we need music for? This question perhaps leads to music figured as “music itself”⁷ that does not create meaning by signs or concrete sounds, neither by material or structures, nor programmatic and verbal references, but by the presence of people, things and sounds – by relationships and events in a certain situation, in a specific place, at a specific time.

*

The chapters in Part I follow the paths that lead me to the topic and the investigations. Can we consider composing as composing practices? Can we consider making music as a perception of a practice that transforms a composition into an offer? Following these questions, we can try to encircle the term musical practice. Which overlaps, which focal points would be worth mentioning? How can we discuss the question concerning the border between the world of music and the world of everyday life? How can we talk about experiences, memories and hopes, about encounters and relationships that arise while performing, while dwelling in a special place? Do you have to speak at all? A way to find a common language emerges. The question of intersubjective interpretation leads Alfred Schutz to his portrayals of the lifeworld and meaningful experience as well as to his distinction of “sub-universes”—ideas which open up possibilities of bridging the worlds, especially as Schutz has dedicated himself as a philosopher and sociologist to the subject of “Making Music together”. In view of Simone Mahrenholz’s approach metaphorical speech is presented and reflected. Mahrenholz does not explicitly look at the performers. Nevertheless, her approach contributes to a kind of transparency between the world of music and the (everyday) life world.

6 | K. Stockhausen: SPIRAL, 136.

7 | W. Rihm: ... zu wissen, 147.

The chapter “Keys” at the beginning of Part II leads to a description of the physical access to the instrument in order to differentiate heterogeneous playing situations. The following chapters present different constellations of players and different sizes of ensemble: solo, duo, trio, quartet, ensemble of several players or many players, and an orchestra. Here we can find various situations. The concluding two chapters (“Beyond Borders” as well as “In the ‘Ark of the Moment’”⁸) are intended as overviews. They once again show us specific situations that can arise while performers are making music.

*

This book was the result of year-long discussions with friends. I would like to thank all of you for your suggestions and ideas. I also want to thank the contributors at the TU Dortmund (Institute of Music and Musicology), who have read the manuscript and contributed to the creation of the illustrations: Andreas Feilen, Gabriel Vishchers and Lucas Badouin. Antoine Beuger and István Zelenka are among the circle of friends who encouraged me. Antoine Beuger supported me with critical inquiries, discussions and valuable references to literature and music; István Zelenka participated at the study during many years of exchanging ideas and as co-author of the publications “1 Milieu – ein Buch nicht nur zum Lesen” and “und/oder. 1 Sammlung”.

Above all, I want to thank Evan Soni and Jennie Gottschalk for their support. They corrected my translation from German into English, and they helped me with valuable clues. In addition, Evan Soni lent his assistance for the translation of quotes from books in German language.

8 | “In der Arche des Augenblicks”; see N. Sachs: *Fahrt ins Staublose*, 50.

1. Access to the Topic

1.1 A MUSICAL SITUATION: TO DO AND TO LET GO

The performance of *Stones* (1968) (from *Prose Collection*) by Christian Wolff might evoke a situation such as that in a quiet library. Everyone works alone—quiet, busy, absorbed in action:

„Make sounds with stones, draw sounds out of stones, using a number of sizes and kinds (and colors); for the most part discretely; sometimes in rapid sequences. For the most part striking stones with stones, but also stones on other surfaces (inside the open head of a drum, for instance) or other than struck (bowed, for instance, or amplified). Do not break anything.”¹

Every single performer is on their own and currently amidst all the other performers. The place: a place where you reside. A place to act—but also a place inviting you to be there, to become quiet and silent. The participants find themselves in a specific situation and process, live together for a certain time. They devote themselves to a practice in which they experience meaning, and they want to repeat it. They live in this place within the heart of the whole group, and they express this life amidst all the others by performing. More than communication, this situation is characterized by coincidence. The performers leave space for each other and do not look for a contact. They surrender to a quiet activity and become sensitive to the quiet situation. They perform in the middle of (many) others who are engaged in a similar activity. It is not just the activity “making sounds with stones, out of stones” that characterizes this situation and this togetherness of the participants, but also their being still. Those who are not doing anything are involved in their bodily existence. Interaction processes are not suggested by the score. The lack of a binding communication structure characterizes this special practice.

The collection of verbal performance instructions *Prose Collection*, to which *Stones* belongs, was written in the years 1968 to 1974. In 1969 Cornelius

1 | Chr. Wolff: *Stones* (*Prose Collection*), in: Cues, 464-81, 470.

Cardew, Howard Skempton and Michael Parsons initiated the Scratch Orchestra, an orchestra made up of composers and artists of different genres, including amateurs and laymen. The ensemble initially had the purpose that even people without special training could participate in a performance.² “They [the participants] were musical ‘fringe figures’, so to speak (I do not like to use that term), exceptional people who did not fit in the so-called normal music life; for them this was not the most important thing.”³

Wolff had the idea for *Stones* on a beach walk:

“The origins of *Stones*, though, was simply this: a day at a stony beach during which I tried out the sounds different stones make struck against one another, and found them (the sounds) surprisingly various, distinctive (and beautiful) in the qualities of their resonances. With that memory I wrote the piece half a year later, and, showed it to Cornelius Cardew, who, smiling, showed me Paragraph 1 of *The Great Learning*, which he was just working on, and which includes the chorus members’ use of stones to improvise sound gestures guided by the shapes of Chinese characters, from the Confucian text his piece was setting. He had gotten the idea from the use of tuned stone slabs in classical Chinese music.”⁴

A performance of *Stones* can give the performer the experience of being one of many, one of many others. The practice is characterized by a place of common action and a time spent together; experiences are made that interconnect with the life experiences of each individual participant.

In a musical situation like this, one will create a world that belongs to us and can become part of our life. Thus, not one or the other interpretation of a composition is worked out, but—addressing a composition—the question must be asked: Which practice do you provide?

1.2 MUSIC: TO WHAT END IS IT GOOD? — FACED WITH...

WARUM AUCH?

Als nun ein solcher klarer
Tag hastig wieder kam,
sprach er voll ruhiger, wahrer
Entschlossenheit langsam:
Nun soll es anders sein,

2 | Chr. Wolff: *Stones* (1968), Program Note, in: Cues, 494-97, 494.

3 | Chr. Wolff, in: E.-M. Houben: immer wieder anders, 27.

4 | Chr. Wolff: *Stones* (1968), Program Note, 494, 496; see Chr. Wolff: What Is Our Work? On experimental music now, in: Cues, 210-31, 212.

ich stürze mich in den Kampf hinein;
ich will gleich so vielen andern
aus der Welt tragen helfen das Leid,
will leiden und wandern,
bis das Volk befreit.
Will nie mehr müde mich niederlegen;
es soll etwas
geschehen; da überkam ihn ein Erwägen,
ein Schlummer: ach, laß doch das.

Robert Walser's poem⁵ shows the pain in view of the suffering in the world—and the slowly arising decision to finally get over injustice and suffering. “And it must occur ...” But considering the struggle and pain this decision is disturbed by a sudden slumber: “Oh, just stop that!”

Why should there be music? This question determines the starting point of all subsequent considerations. “Warum auch?” “Why at all?” Robert Walser's poem relates to an interest in the question of the status and character of musical practice if I like to read it in this way. In addition to the openness of the conclusion, an extension of the last sentence is conceivable: “Oh, stop that.” “Oh, let it be.” “Oh, let it happen.”⁶ The word “geschehen”, “to happen” (“something should happen”), is isolated and placed as the first word in the penultimate line. There is always reason enough to intervene, to do something with “firm resolve” – and there is always the chance for letting it happen. The poem is fluctuating between two standpoints. A self-moderation is to be heard, a common modesty. The poem is not a call to do nothing, it does not say to stop doing anything. Rather, it is situated between a will to change and a longing that does not express passivity but carries on a yearning and a hope—hope that a practice could bring change.

The poem is moving between the desire for something to happen (in the face of the suffering, of the injustice in the world) and the hope for change. Thus, the poem traverses the threshold between actively doing something and letting it be.

When faced with what simply just happens, the practitioners are driven to action. They say: We follow practices when faced with existential situations and feelings, when faced with the state of the world, with wars and famines, with concrete fears. What happened in the past? We look at a field of disasters. Walter Benjamin, inspired by a picture of Paul Klee (*Angelus Novus*), described the “angel of history”, who walks backwards and, facing the past, looks at a story

5 | R. Walser: *Die Gedichte*, 9.

6 | See E.-M. Houben/I. Zelenka: *und/oder - 1 Sammlung*, 118.

full of disasters. The angel cannot put together the ruins, he cannot heal the wounds. A storm blows from Paradise and drives him inexorably:

“There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken from the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.”⁷

Why should there be music?

Walser’s poem inspires those who look at the musical practice to ask more questions. Questions concerning the structure of a composition or the quality of a specific interpretation do not go far enough when speaking about musical practice.

*Music as an Existential Experience*⁸ stimulates questions concerning the musical practice, which could make us sensitive to longings and hopes, to all the precious moments in which the gaze into realities and opportunities may occur: That’s how we are, how we could be, too. Life could be like that. Helmut Lachenmann traces the meaning of music to the power of pointing out further realities and possibilities: “Music only gains meaning by pointing beyond its own (musical) structure to structures and contexts, that is to say, to realities and possibilities around us and in ourselves.”⁹ “I cannot see any other meaning of music than to point beyond the experience of listening and beyond the own structure to structures, that is, to realities, and that is, to possibilities around us and in ourselves.”¹⁰

But—thinking of uprisings against dictatorships, revolutions, global climate protection, curbing hunger in the world, sensitization to injustice: Which

7 | W. Benjamin: On the Concept of History, 392; emphasis in original. “The reference is to Paul Klee’s ink-wash drawing *Angelus Novus* (1920), which Benjamin owned for a time.” Ibid., 399 (note 13).

8 | See H. Lachenmann: Musik als existentielle Erfahrung. “*Musik als existentielle Erfahrung – Music as an Existential Experience* – is the title of his collected writings (1996) and may be regarded as Lachenmann’s artistic principle”. Helmut Lachenmann’s 80th Birthday. Nothing is given; emphasis in original. <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/mus/20657996.html>; 15.03.2018.

9 | H. Lachenmann: Vier Grundbestimmungen des Musikhörens, 62.

10 | H. Lachenmann: Nono, Webern, Mozart, Boulez, 278.

power, which social energy could musical practice have? Lachenmann warns of the confidence in one's own strength and power; he warns for a relapse into the 19th century, where one saw the artist as a kind of prophet in the sense of the Wagnerian genius and expression cult.¹¹ And he adds: "Karl Kraus, who understood this, called such undertakings in relation to Hitler's seizure of power 'spitting into the crater'."¹²

Perhaps we could ask in a different way: What is the meaning of a musical practice for us in view of a certain world situation? Can we find inspiration by musical practice? Do we find affirmation by musical practice? Musical practice wants to inspire people – to do what? For what do we stand up? What do we affirm? Of what do we want to remind each other? What are we hoping for?

In his confrontation with John Cage concerning Cage's idea of "art identified with life", Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht writes: "Isn't art precisely art because it is allowed to be itself? On the other hand, isn't the utopian idea of art-identified-with-life separate from life precisely because life has yet to change?"¹³ Music! To what end is it good? This question implies the idea of a relationship between the everyday life world (including world events) and the world of musical practice and does not exclude the discussion about power and impotence of musical practice. Is it possible to consider the world of everyday life and the world of musical practice separately from each other? How are they connected to each other? Can we observe mutual relations? These questions will accompany the study of musical practice. At this point, however, it becomes clear that the question of the purpose of a musical practice cannot be the question of its expediency. Musical practice is not an activity to achieve or to create something, but an activity that remains without a definitive conclusion, that remains open to the future.

1.3 INVENTING/FINDING PRACTICES

Cornelius Cardew: *Sextet – The Tiger's Mind* (1967)

Cornelius Cardew is interested in social situations and in pursuing the following questions: What happens among people? What is being done? What is to be done? He tells a story that picks up on different roles; the performers can take on roles that they feel comfortable with and that fit into certain social structures. With this composition Cardew invites us to develop the plot in different possible directions.

11 | H. Lachenmann: *Komponieren am Krater*, 3.

12 | *Ibid.*; see K. Kraus: *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht*, 10.

13 | H. H. Eggebrecht: *Understanding Music*, 130.

“Daypiece

The tiger fights the mind that loves the circle that traps the tiger. The circle is perfect and outside time. The wind blows dust in tiger’s eyes. Amy reflects, relaxes with her mind, which puts out buds (emulates the tree). Amy jumps through the circle and comforts the tiger. The tiger sleeps in the tree. High wind. Amy climbs the tree, which groans in the wind and succumbs. The tiger burns.

Nightpiece

The tiger burns and sniffs the wind for news. He storms at the circle; if inside to get out, if outside to get in. Amy sleeps while the tiger hunts. She dreams of the wind, which then comes and wakes her. The tree trips Amy in the dark and in her fall, she recognizes her mind. The mind, rocked by the wind tittering in the leaves of the tree, and strangled by the circle, goes on the nod. The circle is trying to teach its secrets to the tree. The tree laughs at the mind and at the tiger fighting it.”¹⁴

The score carries the hope of execution as a “continuous process”: “Interpretation of this piece is to be viewed hopefully as a continuous process.”¹⁵ This focuses on the practice of the performers who expose themselves to different situations. A transparency between the aesthetic world and the everyday world has also come into view. Further notes: The two parts “Daypiece” and “Nightpiece” should be performed on varying occasions, and the performer is recommended to memorize the text; new actions and situations not explicitly mentioned may be added; even new texts could – after some experience with the performance – arise; even the number of participants (in the sextet it is Amy as a person, the tiger as an animal, the tree, the wind, the circle and the mind) can increase or decrease. The notes regarding the characteristics of the six are to be understood according to the score as follows: “The following notes on the six characters are not limiting or definitive. They are intended primarily to encourage and assist prospective performers in the assumption of their roles.”¹⁶ So, this is a composition which defines itself as unfinished and wants to inspire processes; which encourages people to develop relationships and to realize those relationships during a performance.¹⁷

One of Cardew’s most well-known compositions is *The Great Learning*, the seven “paragraphs” that originated between 1968 and 1970. Each one is written for a specific cast; it is always a relatively large group of performers, and some of them are untrained musicians. The piece of music and social processes mingle.

14 | C. Cardew: *Sextet – The Tiger’s Mind*, score, 1. © Peters Edition Ltd, London. With kind permission of C. F. Peters Ltd & Co. KG, Leipzig.

15 | *Ibid.*, 2.

16 | *Ibid.*

17 | See Beatrice Gibson’s film project.

Istvàn Zelenka: “und an 5 frei gewählten aufeinander folgenden Tagen” – für 1 Pianistinten¹⁸ (2008)

Istvàn Zelenka proposes a specific practice with each new composition. With the following composition the performance is completely merged with the everyday life of the performer.¹⁹ The full-length title is: “und an 5 frei gewählten aufeinander folgenden Tagen, zu 5 unterschiedlichen, eigenständig bestimmten Tageszeiten zwischen Frühhmorgen und Spätabend, spielen Sie per se pro Tag je eine der 5 Sequenzen dieser Komposition mit beliebiger Reihenfolge der einzelnen Seiten” [and on 5 freely selected consecutive days, at 5 different, independently determined times of the day between early morning and late evening, you play *per se* per day one of the 5 sequences of this composition – with the single pages in no particular order].

Fig. 01: Istvàn Zelenka: “und an 5 frei gewählten aufeinander folgenden Tagen...” für 1 Pianistinten (2008) (one sequence)

© Istvàn Zelenka. Manuscript. With kind permission of Istvàn Zelenka.

18 | Istvàn Zelenka invented this word that combines (in German) the male and female form (for 1 pianist).

19 | See E.-M. Houben/I. Zelenka: 1 Milieu, 125-30.

The five sequences, which can be played in free order over the course of five days, last 20 minutes and 20 seconds respectively, and they are played with a stopwatch. The number of sounds varies considerably: one sequence consists of seven sounds, one of five sounds, one of three sounds, one of two sounds, and one consists only of a single sound (see Fig. 01).

Anyone who performs this composition falls into a special activity. The performer does not have rehearsals, does not aim at a performance. The repetition belongs to the performance, and this practice is inscribed in the title. You maintain this practice during “5 freely selected consecutive days, at 5 different, independently determined times of the day between early morning and late evening”. The repetition creates continuity. The performance of this composition is interrupted by all kinds of (everyday) business, but not disturbed or even stopped. The everyday life and the musical practice form a unity. Each time you play on your own; you abandon yourself to the performance of the selected sequence.

Antoine Beuger: *gentle traces of transient being* for 10 players (2016)

Antoine Beuger has, so far, written four compositions accompanied by a text which describes in each case a practice. The author of these texts is a fictional person named RN. These texts are intended for the performers; an audience is not necessarily acquainted. The four pieces in chronological order are *desert into dwelling place* for seven players (2014), *modes of dispossession, levels of affinity* for string quartet (2014), *... of being numerous* for a number of players (2015), and *gentle traces of transient being* for 10 players (2016). The score of *gentle traces of transient being* also refers to the fictional source: “this piece is strongly inspired by (if not an attempt to reconstruct) a musical practice called GENTLE TRACES OF TRANSIENT BEING, hitherto unknown, but documented in ‘*The memories of RN*’.”²⁰

“The memories of RN” is a text that belongs to the score and that gives the performer references for performance practice. It can hardly be accommodated in a conventional performance instruction because still more attitudes of playing and hearing, situations, and interactions are described. In *gentle traces of transient being* the practice of playing and singing small, inconspicuous phrases is followed. At the beginning there were – according to the fictitious text from “The memories of RN” – only a few who joined in (three of them are mentioned). Over time more and more people (up to ten) took part.

“Our phrases were nothing special, not at all meant to be surprising or impressive. Just a few tones, just occurring, just little moments, disappearing as gently as they appeared.

Humble phrases, nothing grand or deliberately novel.

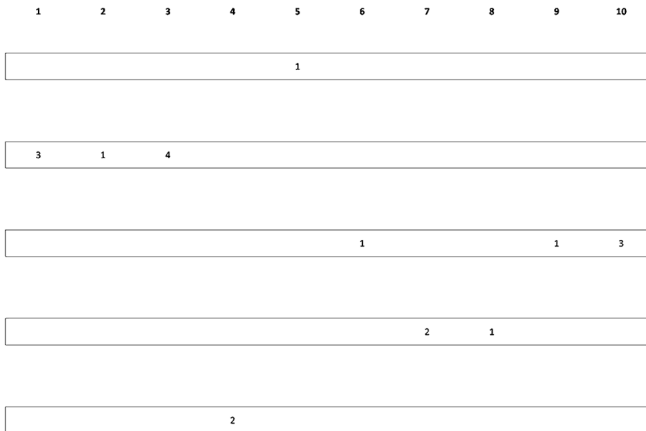
The charm, the beauty, the grace of these ephemeral moments, of these modest phrases, was only in their transient being, in their passing.

Their beauty was in their humility: the less they would insist on permanence, the more their passing would be touching.

A non-insisting, short-lived existence, diffusing grace, bestowing beauty, only by passing through our garden.”²¹

The performers, dwelling in a quiet room, are silent most of the time and become listeners: “Each of us would most of the time just be silent and listen.”²² The score contains several pages that can be played in freely chosen amounts. Each page consists of five phrases, each phrase giving either one or two or three players the opportunity to sing or to play one or two or three or four notes, but no more. The pitches and durations are free; all sounds enter freely. For ten performers who sing or play an instrument, seven, eight or nine remain silent per phrase.

Fig. 02: Antoine Beuger: gentle traces of transient being for 10 players (2016), 5



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²¹ | Ibid.

²² | Ibid.