



EXTRA > Conversation with Joel Peterson

EXTRA compiles miscellaneous research materials generated through the activities of RWM. This section includes conversations with artists and curators, additional documentation and transcripts of programs, with the aim of offering a more complete vision of the different research lines of the RWM project.

On January 6, 2012 composer and improviser Joel Peterson performed a selection of the seventeen graphic scores from Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama* at INCA Detroit as part of the *Letter* programme, curated by Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas.

This email conversation between Joel Peterson and Anna Ramos documents the event and discusses his approach.

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Joel Peterson is a musician, composer, sound artist based in Detroit, MI. Peterson's work encompasses many styles and traditions – free improvisation, through composed art music, ethnic folkloric, rock, experimental, jazz and early music. As a composer, he developed his craft by seeking composers and musicians whose work he admired, starting with locals like Faruq Z. Bey and Frank Pahl, and engaging in practical music making with them. His work with his ensembles, collaborators and guest appearances can be heard on dozens of CDs, LPs and cassettes, on independent labels like Qbico, Sagittarius A Star, Edgetone, Schoolkids Records, Phonetic Records, Acidsoxxs Musicks and others.

Conversation with Joel Peterson

In 2009 QUADERNS D'ÀUDIO unearthed a series of previously unpublished graphic scores, which the Valencian composer Llorenç Barber had created in Yokohama (Japan) in 2005. American composer, improviser and sound artist Joel Peterson performed them live at INCA, Detroit, in January 2012. We talked to him about the challenges of graphic notation and other related issues.

01. Conversation with Joel Peterson

Can you briefly explain your main aesthetic values and your purpose as a performer?

Leaving 'fingerprints and brushstrokes' in the work is pretty important to me as a performer. I learned from other people whose music I admire to concentrate on the creative portion of process, instead of devoting the majority of time to polishing earlier work. Some of that is good, but you can't short-shrift new ideas for it. I'm drawn to all types of music and sound, and the variety of work I do reflects that. There's a different satisfaction I get from different musical activity – I go with what interests me.

And can you share your main interests with us?

Folkloric music of every stripe, free improvisation, microtonal music, home-mades, jazz, early music, ancient music, ancient jazz music, 1978–82 punk rock, twentieth century art music. Recently I've been writing a good deal of chamber music that is through-composed. I've had four performances of them so far.

How did you come across Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama* and why did you decide to perform the scores? What drew you to them?

I was actually presented with the scores by Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas, who invited me to interpret them musically at an opening at INCA in Detroit – a Norwegian artists' residency house. I liked the fact that Barber's scores referenced enough actual notation to be partially playable as-is, but then demanded a different approach as things became more whimsical and poetic. I was interested in the challenge of thinking of them as actual graphic scores, instead of a representation of a score as an art piece.

Llorenç Barber's graphic scores were not conceived as an instruction set. Llorenç sees them as more of a visual, metaphoric and poetic exercise that combines musical language with visual poetry. How did you deal with that?

Just by interpreting what was on the page. Freed from conforming to a set of instructions, I constructed a small vocabulary for each piece, trying to stay consistent when similar ideas or images reoccurred in different scores. In a way, it is simply a musical commentary on the artwork of Barber, but unlike many similar commentaries, it connects more directly to the inspirational source.

A graphic score opens a wide window for interpretation, and it's puzzling for non-musicians to understand how to deal with one when it is being interpreted. Can you give us some clues from your own experience?

For example, in Barber's scores the notes often fall down, or float up off of the staff, way out of most instrumental range. I interrupted this by going for notes beyond or below the normal range of the guitar – mostly via extended technique. Another example is that many notes are sliding or wavy and bent. These scores I played on a cheap guitar that I had the frets ripped out of as a teenager, allowing me to use slides and swoops and indefinite or microtonal pitches – a pretty 1:1 musical equivalent of the imagery.



[Joel Peterson's performance of Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama* at INCA Detroit, January 6 2012. Photo by Aeron Bergman]

As far as I know, there was no exchange of impressions between you and Llorenç Barber, on how to perform these scores.

Yes, he was informed I was doing it by Aeron and Alejandra, but we never discussed an approach or any details. Although I would welcome the input, this was done more as one artist interpreting another, rather than a collaboration. But I'd love to do it again another way. Barber's own take on it would produce another set of fun challenges and a pretty different result.

The scores were accompanied by a bunch of texts in Spanish, which were also very poetic. Did you use them as inspiration?

My Spanish is quite bad and I had no translation, though I believe I could get the gist of many of them. Others not so much. Some of the more declamatory stuff about music I could follow. It added to the mood, but I was mainly inspired by the scores/images. I would love to translate all of them, or ask Alejandra to!

Have you worked with graphic scores before? What triggered your interest in this particular way of conveying musical language, which challenges musical conventions so much?

My first experience with graphic scores was as a teenager with one of my early musician friends, Gabe Imlay. We had heard of graphic scores without actually seeing any, and started making our own. Later, I used them a bit with saxophonist Carl Smith in his group ECFA. And I've certainly played a lot of traditionally notated music that uses indeterminate or improvising instructions mixed in the structure. The main appeal is that these types of scores are actually more useful for realizing certain types of music. It's not merely novel or thumbing one's nose at tradition. It's something that evolved out of a need.

Were there any unanswered questions you'd have liked to discuss with Llorenç while interpreting his scores?

Whether he imagined particular sounds when he made the drawings. It's interesting, given that he actually is a composer and can write music.

I did ask Llorenç, and this was his reply:

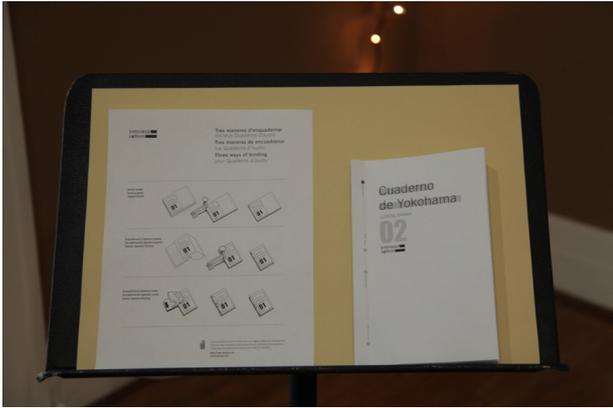
«I see it as a mix of everything, depending on which 'score' we're talking about. And within the 'freedom without conditions' that I often work in – particularly when I draw a sonic situation –, there are often some very specific stimuli before, during or after the act of drawing that help me shape the score. Sometimes it's about concentricity, the weight, or the trickiness, or about the transmigration of one colour, register or attack to another, etc. And with others, there is a purely visual point of departure, which, at the moment of writing, gradually turns into sound and is expressed through a logic that is born in the same way as the drawing was. Therefore, every drawing has or reflects its own story, which I may even quickly forget. Nevertheless, it retains an aroma of something that leads me to the act of its birth, which remains in there. But only for me, and often without the need to put that stimulus or story into words. So whenever somebody translates my sonic drawings into sound, I am puzzled, and I don't see many similarities unless they explain them to me. I usually just let myself get carried away by the results, even if I can't identify the thread, or the connection with the particular score. I'm just happy to help somebody to concentrate on something that we find useful or pleasing. And sufficient.»

Any comments on that? Is it what you had imagined?

Yes it's as I had expected, in that these 'scores' seem to be intimate creative acts – a poetic urge being expressed in a raw state, across mediums. There's really no way to emulate his inspiration, and I don't know Barber's work – let alone Barber himself – well enough to even attempt it.

Can you share some other examples of graphic notation you find inspiring?

The first I saw was some George Crumb. Then a little later *The Book of Heads*,



[Joel Peterson's performance of Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama* at INCA Detroit, January 6 2012. Photo by Aeron Bergman]

Zorn's book of graphic compositions for Eugene Chadbourne and then, of course, Partch. I've never spent a lot of time delving into the world of graphic scores though – despite using them occasionally.

Do you read classical scores? What are their limitations, from your point of view?

I read and also write "classical" through-composed scores. One of the most literal limitations of standard notation is its lack of rhythmic flexibility. Take triplets (or any compound rhythmic length): they represent a division of time into three equal units – three notes to one beat or three notes to two beats etc. But in standard notation, you cannot separate out a single triplet duration and mix it freely with other time values – all three triplets are always written together in a row. At most, some triplets may be made rests, but they are still connected to the sounding triplets, right in a row. Given that standard notation cannot handle mixing these simple rhythmic relations (3:1, 3:2, 3:4), you can imagine it's even worse with higher compound rhythms, like 7:1 or 9:2. The composer Henry Cowell devised a comprehensive system of notation to handle these rhythms, but it has never really been adopted. I don't really see why. Given that Western art music rhythmically lagged behind illiterate agrarians for hundreds of years, I don't know why this system hasn't been taken more seriously.

One of the most interesting values of graphic scores/notation is that they ask the performer to project his or her own values while the 'composer' declines that responsibility. Looking back now, what do you think was in the minds of the first composers who began challenging the established notation system in the fifties?

I think they were tiring of the ego-driven individualism that had pervaded music-making in the West. It was an attempt to restore the division of composer, performer and audience member to bring music back to a more collaborative spirit. The loosening of discrete control over individual parts through a change in notation is just an expression of those values. It was the easiest way to symbolize the idea of what was supposed to unfold. Cowell was more of a direct challenge to the notational system, in that he wasn't using graphic scores or indeterminacy, but pointing out fundamental flaws in the standard system and demonstrating a more exact system for notating time values.

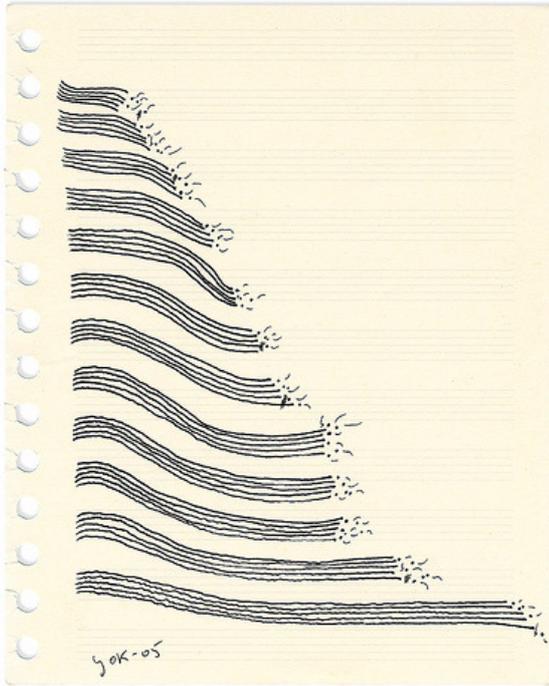
Last but not least, can you reflect on the experience of improvising vs. interpreting a score? How complementary (as in this case) or different is the approach?

In this case, very little difference exists. I interpreted the scores in the sense that I came up with a general vocabulary of elements and then I improvised with each score. I would mention that the video clip you've probably seen captures about half the performance, and a good portion of it is the scores in which I deviate the most from the plan. This was due to a couple of the scores being less related than the rest. One score/drawing was essentially a tree and I used it as an opportunity to play some finger-picking guitar that Americans would associate with being in the woods. I did that because my father was in the audience for the first time in ten years, and I thought I'd throw in something that he might relate to. Other than deviating from the bulk of the material as that drawing deviated from the bulk of the scores, that choice had little to do with interpreting Llorenç.

Even more problematic though, is the executant who loses sight of the fact that all notation evolved illogically and has many variations around the world. Many 'good' performers can't look at anything but 'standard' notation – if they see something else, they think it doesn't make sense. They don't understand that these are all just ways of inducing you to make certain sounds and there is no right or wrong. This is why it took so long for Ives to get noticed – 'serious' orchestral musicians looked at his scores and thought they were nonsense. But then someone like Mahler could recognize Ives' value right away. Of course, a common language is efficient and offers quick control over parts. But if reading that way is all you can do, you aren't an actual musical thinker.

02. Related links

Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama*
rwm.macba.cat/en/quaderns-audio/qa_yokohama_llorenc_barber/capsula



[Score from Llorenç Barber's *Cuaderno de Yokohama*, 2009]

Cuaderno de Yokohama on Flickr

www.flickr.com/photos/arxiu-macba/collections/72157626581982774/

Letter, INCA Detroit, January 6 2012

www.inca institute.org/letter.html

Video: Joel Peterson performs Llorenç Barber at INCA, Detroit

<http://vimeo.com/35313052>

03. Credits

Interview by Anna Ramos, with the collaboration of Llorenç Barber, Barbara Held and Roc Jiménez de Cisneros. Proofreading: Núria Rodríguez.

04. Acknowledgments

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