

Charlie Sdraulig

we've never been so close

for solo voice and electronics

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For Joshua Hyde

Note

On proximity, intimacy and distance in technologically mediated communication.

Amplification affords privileged access to an array of otherwise unheard sounds, but translates and filters the signal—fundamentally distancing us from the sound source. A lack of amplification forces exaggeration and projection—fundamentally distancing us from the potential intimacy of the source's sounds. The performer and electronics scan back and forth between these extremes in search of a fleeting compromise.

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General performance directions, setup and technical requirements

Perform this piece from memory, standing up in front of, and close to, the audience.

Audio requirements: two microphones (one vocal microphone for the performer, one microphone placed discreetly above the audience), audio interface, laptop running Max/MSP patch, (mixer), an earbud/monitor speaker for the performer, at least one speaker for the audience.

Performer microphone signal chain: one vocal microphone → audio interface → laptop running Max/MSP patch → output to mixer via the audio interface → at least one speaker (preferably the same vocal signal is routed to multiple speakers) directed out to the audience + to the performer's (discreetly hidden) earbud/monitor.

Audience microphone signal chain: microphone → audio interface → laptop running Max/MSP patch → output to mixer via the audio interface → to the performer's earbud/monitor only!

Contact me for the latest version of the Max/MSP patch (tested and built on Windows 8.1 with Max 7.3.1): c-sdraulig@hotmail.com
The patch primarily automates amplification only.

Some subtle static EQ and compression of the vocal signal may be applied to reduce noise.

Set levels high, while avoiding feedback and minimizing system noise.

Lighting: One soft, diffuse lamp at a distance from, and to one side of, the performer, lighting their face.

Predominantly light the side of their face opposite to the earbud.

Another small light (e.g. an battery powered LED wrapped in thin tissue paper) lighting and subtly drawing attention to the audience microphone.

Allow the audience time to adjust and settle: a slow fade out of the house lighting may be appropriate before the performance begins.

Overview

The primary elements in this piece (ordered from relatively indeterminate to determinant) are:

- (1) Subtle sounds and facial movements ordered into a list of 10 numbered sections.
- (2) Two principle performance attitudes to apply/overlay on to the sounds and movements in the list.
-N.B. Particular sections from the list are sometimes cued by sounds made by audience members during the performance.
- (3) Automated amplification that determines which performance attitude to adopt.

I would suggest rehearsing and learning each of these stages separately, moving to the next stage once the previous one is memorized and embodied.

List of sounds and facial movements

The following list contains sounds and movements somewhat reminiscent of types you might make when quietly listening to someone close to you, or perhaps even when non-verbally communicating etc.

If you find yourself in these situations, making quiet sounds other than those listed below, note them down and subtly and smoothly incorporate them into the list. A word of caution though: in performance, the aim here is not to faithfully transcribe and reproduce these types of sounds, but rather to hover somewhere between suggesting their original context(s) and intimating a music, abstracted, ritualized and formalized away from these origins.

When applicable, sounds and movements may be made on both ingressive and egressive breaths.

Unless otherwise directed, lengths of each section must vary relative to one another *ad lib*.
(recommended section length: between ca. 5 – 30 seconds each).

Overall, aim for a low density of activity, incorporating pauses from time to time.

Each numbered section of the list has a bracketed title intended as a mnemonic device to assist with memorization.

1. *(blank)*

Mouth closed—adopt a neutral/blank expression overall.

Breathe steadily and almost inaudibly through your nose, with as little visible movement as possible.

2. *(twitch)*

Intermittently introduce a few tiny facial movements.

Vary your speed of execution, but generally small, slow twitching/tensing of facial muscles, mostly around your mouth and jaw.

Keep your mouth closed.

3. *(aspirate)*

Twitches and tensing may tend to cluster around the beginnings and ends of breaths.

Gradually begin to breathe audibly, in and out through your nose.

Breathe steadily and slowly.

Then, start to aspirate 'ha' (coloring your breath voicelessly with a vowel), keeping your mouth closed.

4. *(saliva)*

Introduce the odd saliva sound (small swallows/gulps), as well as very delicate tongue clicks.

5. *(varied)*

Vary breath lengths.

Introduce small, slight shudders in your breath from time to time.

Change the vowel voicelessly coloring your breath, gradually or suddenly *ad lib*.

6. *(whistle)*

Imperceptibly, barely open your mouth after a tongue click and/or saliva swallow/gulp (breathe through your mouth).

Allow extremely soft whistle artifacts to emerge as you push air through the constricted opening.

Compliment any of these emergent whistles with whistles made by bringing your tongue close to the roof of your mouth.

7. (*open*)

Very gradually open your mouth, until it almost resembles how you might smile with your lips apart. Then slowly open and close your mouth *ad lib.* between the above extreme and fully closed.

8. (*hum*)

When your mouth is fully closed, barely engage your vocal chords and make an extremely soft, short hum sound on any comfortable pitch.

You may tense the corners of your mouth when you hum initially—do so in way that could be read as a both a half-smile and a half-grimace.

9. (*combine*)

Alternate between and combine the sounds and movements of all of the previous states, varying them increasingly fluently *ad. lib.*

10. (*speech?*)

Build and shape all of these elements into state that might prefigure slow, calm speech.

Your sounds should still be mostly breaths, hums and whistles—soft, varied and combined.

Remember to pause from time to time.

Remember that not all mouth movements need accompanying sounds.

Performance attitudes and head movements

A

When you and the audience are maximally amplified:

Head down; eyes directed downwards; mouth very close to the microphone. No extraneous body or horizontal head movement.



All of your vocal sounds and facial movements should be close to your habitual movements.

Be inwardly focused, but receptive. Make sound only for the microphone; make no attempt at projection beyond that; extremely intimate (perhaps sometimes passing for *ASMR*). Make your sounds and movements with the utmost subtlety and sensitivity.

Smooth transitions between numbered sections. Unfold each new sound and section as gradually and organically as possible: unforced and unhurried.

At the beginning of the piece, start from section 1 of the list and progress towards section 10.

Once you reach section 10 of the list, head back towards section 1 etc. From this point onwards, if someone in the audience makes a discrete (nonpersistent) sound that catches your attention and is similar to a sound from the list, tilt your head slightly and briefly pause, and then, start from the section on the list where that similar sound is introduced. Initially, linger on and draw out the particular sound that is similar (ca. 5 to 30 seconds). Then, progress through the remainder of the list towards section 10. As you do so, gradually incorporate elements of the character of the audience member's sound into your performance e.g. its timbre, rate of change, frequency content etc. The aim here is not faithful mimicry, but rather to suggest the influence of others' sounds upon your activities.

Z

When you and the audience are unamplified:

Head level; eyes directed at the audience, but not looking at anyone in particular at first; mouth away from the microphone. No extraneous body or horizontal head movement.



All of your vocal sounds and facial movements should be somewhat abstracted from your habitual movements: a little exaggerated, formalized, and deliberate—a ‘magnified’, somewhat stiff, formal version of **A**, if you like.

Be outwardly focused. Aim to audibly project your sounds to the audience.

Clean, abrupt transitions between numbered sections—block-like in character.

Discrete changes and variations within sounds should predominate, often occurring at or around the beginnings and ends of breaths.

Thereafter, if someone in the audience makes a discrete (nonpersistent) sound that catches your attention and is similar to a sound from the list, turn your head slightly in their direction, briefly pause, and then, start from the section on the list where that similar sound is introduced. Initially, linger on and draw out the particular sound that is similar (ca. 5 to 30 seconds). As you linger, slowly and gradually direct your eyes towards the audience member in question. Then, progress through the remainder of the list towards section 10. As you do so, gradually incorporate elements of the character of the audience member’s sound into your performance e.g. its timbre, rate of change, frequency content etc. The aim here is not faithful mimicry, but rather to suggest the influence of others’ sounds upon your activities.

Once you reach section 10 of the list, head back towards section 1 etc.

Between A and Z

When the amplification is somewhere between the above extremes, adopt an intermediate state between these extremes. Most transitions between these extremes are either very fast or very slow.

Overall form and how to end the piece (coda)

- (1) After an initial brief 8 kHz sine tone, the piece begins with a long maximally amplified section.
- (2) After the second brief 8 kHz sine tone, the bulk of the piece consists of automated amplification.
- (3) The third brief 8 kHz sine tone from the speakers will indicate that the amplification has cut out for good.

This third sine tone signals the beginning of the coda:

Abruptly adopt performance attitude **Z** in section 1 and then over the course of a couple of minutes or so, gradually and simultaneously transition towards both **A** and section 10.

Simultaneously make a horizontal (turn away from the light) as well as a downwards head movement to accompany this transition, so that your head ends up somewhat in profile to the audience. Abruptly stop making sound when you have reached this head position.



Rehearsal recordings

Contact me for recordings of the list of sounds, in performance attitudes A and Z respectively (i.e. each recording realizes the list from section 1 to 10, performed with a minimum of interspersing/mixing of sections etc. for the sake of clarity): c-sdraulig@hotmail.com
These recordings are intended as a guide and introduction to the tone of the piece, not as models for imitation.

Make your own recordings of the list in these performance attitudes as a rehearsal technique in itself.
Personalize and adapt the sounds and movements on the list.