

Celebrating Disassembly

On William Engelen's Musical Works in the Context of Visual Art

There can be no doubt that William Engelen is a composer. He writes scores, works with musicians, plans concert-like performances of his works, records and releases them. And yet his pieces set themselves off in a surprising way from customarily composed music. Why? At first one is intuitively tempted to respond that Engelen creates music, but does not make use of traditional musical methods, instead employing strategies borrowed more from visual art.

A good example is *Falten für Percussion* (Folds for Percussion) from 2013. The recording of the percussion piece is featured in the exhibition. For the recording, the sheets of music were folded in order to visualize the proportions of time and space in the notation. These folded notes are now displayed on music stands in the show. The artist draped them in a way that wouldn't allow them to be played, since the folds prevent reading all of the notes. At the same time, the carefully arranged sheets refer to a moment in the concert that we do not perceive as artistically structured, namely, when the musicians mindfully place the notes on their stands. Engelen makes reference to this instant that precedes the actual performance, stating: "It all looks as if the stands were provisionally set up or located in a waiting room until being picked up or until the musicians arrive with their instruments."¹ If this moment is understood as part of the musical act and with an almost frivolous intention, the meticulously and nicely arranged sheets become an Engelenian scenario: as the exaltation of a musical triviality.

Exalting trivialities could be one of the principles that lead to Engelen's works, which distinguish themselves in a disturbing and often also humorous way from music as a predetermined manifestation. Many of the pieces could be traced back to parameters, which are usually worked out in the composition process, being regarded as less significant—while parameters that we take for granted, that are generally not specifically worked out and that we attribute no greater meaning to, become essential. One example is operating the bellows of an organ. The organ is usually supplied with sufficient wind, but when, as in *Today the Organ Has Played Beautifully Again* (2018), the bellows are operated manually and the organ subsequently struggles with a veritable dyspnoea, when the sounds suffocate and fade, our perception of organ music in general shifts from the facture to mechanics.

The combinatorics in *38bpm* (2016) could also be an indication of this, with the percussionists navigating their own route through the score featuring dots of various sizes, and giving rise to ever new sound combinations. "There will be no polyrhythmic patterns or movements, no change of pulse, no out-of-sync playing," Engelen writes on the composition.² The percussionists play totally synchronously, beat for beat, after setting up their instruments according to resonance. When they read a large dot, they choose the

¹ <https://www.william-engelen.de/project/falten-for-percussion/index.html> (last accessed May 2, 2019).

² <https://www.william-engelen.de/project/belval/bpm/index.html> (last accessed May 2, 2019).

instrument with the longest resonance, while a small dot signals one with a correspondingly shorter resonance. It is not that Engelen had not composed the piece in a traditional sense as well: He wrote a score, developed a course, and defined the frame for the performance. Yet he dispenses with many common aspects of percussion music, including polyrhythm, changes in tempo and synchronization. As a listener, one figures out the principle according to which sounds are only played in unison and based on a predetermined temporal pattern, that is the tempo of 38 bpm (beats per minute). Then something wonderful happens. One suddenly concentrates on entirely different aspects of the music: the timbre and the decaying resonance of each instrument. This shift in listening makes us realign not only our ears but also the way we conceive music.

Another example: The private lives of the musicians do not play a role when they perform on stage, where their personalities disappear behind the music. But when the composer asks the musicians to give him detailed daily routines and then sets them to music, aspects of these personalities are revealed in the music. This is the case in Engelen's *Verstrijken voor ensemble* (Verstrijken for Ensemble), which has been performed at a number of museums since 2008.

Rehearsals are usually not public either, but take place behind closed doors. The perfection of the concert then frequently obscures the arduous origination process. But when rehearsals are held in the museum as part of the exhibition, like in the frame of the solo show *32 bpm* at the Kunsthalle Mannheim, this aspect of the musicians' lives also becomes the subject of artistic contemplation.

Alongside the individual parameters that Engelen works out or deliberately refuses to work out, it is frequently the framing of the performance that lends his works their unique character. The fact that his music is played rather seldom in concert halls is significant in two respects. On the one hand, it indicates that Engelen and the way he understands music are perceived outside of the music scene, and that he seeks this openness. His pieces are presented and performed in museums and galleries, in public spaces and other non-art-specific locations: in a Cologne allotment-garden area, in the city garden in Aachen, in a blast furnace of a steel plant in Luxembourg. Sometimes, the musicians open a window and play to the street, with the audience sitting on chairs in front of the building façade. The works are conceived with regard to the site. Engelen explains that he derives the parameters of his compositions from the respective locations. This can be comprehended quite well in cases when a work is performed in a different space and is thus lent a new shape. To take the acoustic conditions of the atrium of the Kunsthalle Mannheim into account, *38 bpm* now became *32 bpm*, a slower piece, then, that additionally works with more resonant instruments than the predecessor, including tubular bells and Indonesian gamelans. The music auscultates its space. The venue of the performance manifests itself in the sound. The space carries the music, the music carries the space.

On the other hand there is also another, related reason why the works do not resound in a concert hall. For only by decontextualizing aspects of the musical act does Engelen reveal them. The concert hall obscures the numerous ritual acts, since it is conceived with them

in mind and we inevitably associate a concert hall with rituals, while in locations more foreign to music, the mechanisms of the music world become visible. In other words, when a musician places the sheets of music a bit awkwardly on his stand, we would probably laugh, but not call the gesture as such into question. Only in a context having little to do with music, like a museum, do the unusually arranged sheets refer to their role in the act of music-making. This distinguishes the works of Engelen from those of Mauricio Kagel, for instance, who also ironized many customs in the life of music, but always integrated these deviations from the norm in the performance, turning critique, for the most part, into humorous punch-lines. In contrast, Engelen's disassembly of the musical act is literal, conceptual, and fundamental. When a blackbird twitters Beethoven, because it imitates the corresponding ringtone of a cellphone—a project that Engelen developed for the Beethoven Stiftung in Bonn under the title *Oh Freunde, nicht diese Töne!* (Oh Friends, Not These Tones!) in 2007—then even the boundaries between art and nature are blurred.

His pieces also distinguish themselves substantially from those of visual artists engaging with music. The *School of Velocity* installation by Rodney Graham or his iconization of the album cover of the Deutsche Grammophon come to mind; or Janet Cardiff's staging of a 40-voice motet by Thomas Tallis; or Yves Klein's attempt to translate his monochrome paintings into an orchestra sound, or the conversations that the artists group TK holds as a band on stage. They all celebrate aspects of music. But Engelen does not celebrate. He disassembles, exposes, calls into question, reveals.

William Engelen's works do not take on a single form, but often exist in multiple manifestations. The ontology of a piece of music is usually exhausted in its score and its performance. New Music may have added further facets, such as the tape piece or the sound installation, but the musical work mostly continues to result in a singular form. It is an orchestra piece or a laptop performance, but not both. With Engelen, however, a work cannot only assume a number of shapes. He already develops his concepts with regard to diverse manifestations. The idea for a piece initially finds expression in a score. On the one hand, customary scores are visualizations of a musical thought, on the other, they are also performance instructions. But they are usually not artworks per se. For Engelen, the score already possesses an artistic value, as in *Falten for Percussion* (2013) that goes beyond its purely instructive character. The scripting of music, the handling of script, is an elementary subject matter in Engelen's approach. In a second step, the score is performed. But this does not exhaust the way in which music comes into existence. The performance is audiovisually recorded to make it the starting point of a multichannel installation, as was done with the piece *32 bpm* created for the Kunsthalle Mannheim. The music is experienced both ephemerally in a concert and permanently as an installation. Both versions are valid manifestations of the work. The installation does not document the performance, the performance does not supplement the installation. This is also true for the subsequent version—the release of an album.

Additional recordings are often made for record releases so that the album contains not only the recording of the performance. For *Today the Organ Has Played Beautifully Again* (2018), for example, Engelen experimented with the instrument in a variety of ways and recorded versions for the album that complement the concert. Therefore, the record is an

independent manifestation of the work. The high-quality design of the album released in a limited edition lends it the character of an art edition. In general, the ontogenesis of the work reminds one of procedures common in the art and museum world: The conceptualization (score) is followed by the opening (performance), the show (installation), and the catalogue or edition (album). Nevertheless, this comparison is inadmissible for the reason that one cannot distinguish between central and peripheral aspects in Engelen's case: All forms of the work are a work or the work.

Perhaps the question of whether William Engelen is a composer must be considered from this perspective. Through composing, Engelen questions the concept of the composer. So one could also say that Engelen might not have been regarded as a composer in the pre-Engelenian world, but that he has expanded our notion of the composer to such a degree that the answer to this question can only be: absolutely!

Björn Gottstein