

Queered Orientation(s): Re-imagining the taxonomy and interrelation of musical materials in *The Velvet Rage* (2017)

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[Presented Version]

Introduction

At its core, this paper presents an argument and an illustration. It first *argues* that conceptual understandings of musical instruments – or what I have come to call elsewhere the *instrument-body situation* (Sergeant 2017) – can be further enlightened by considering them in relation to issues of orientation. It then seeks to *illustrate* how such a conceptualisation can permit new developments in creative practice via a preliminary exploration of my recent work *The Velvet Rage* (2017, for flute, voice, cello and electronics).

The Instrument-Body Situation

In my previous work, I have attempted to problematize, further understand and creatively activate the human/non-human relationships in notions of musical instruments (with instruments defined as liberally as possible at this stage), i.e. the *human* body and the *non-human* instrument.

What interests me is that what first appears as an easy bipartite distinction is much more complex than it first appears. Composer Timothy McCormack's oft-cited 2010 statement that 'an instrument must first be held by a human being before it *is* that instrument' (McCormack 2010 p.5, emphasis added), serves as a concise introduction to the games at play. How would McCormack consider the human voice in this regard, I wonder?

But it could be said that of late I've become more interested in McCormack's use of the word 'held'. This particular verb reminds us that both parties in the situation are matters of matter.

This realisation becomes non-trivial when we read it through the lens of the recent "material turn" in critical theory (as articulated in philosophical work expounded by Karen Barad, Estelle Barratt and Barbara Bolt, amongst many others). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost neatly summarise the new materialist position as broadly

‘[...] abandoning the terminology of matter as an inert substance subject to predictable causal forces. [...] [M]ateriality is always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us [...] to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.’ (Coole & Frost 2010 p.9)

Agency is the key term here – materiality is considered *agential* through the new materialist lens. Karen Barad’s ‘agential-realist’ framework, in particular (Barad 2006), allows us to consider musical instruments as having an agency over the sonic contents of a musical work. (I suspect this will sound familiar to anybody who has been found themselves on stage with an intermittently ‘dodgy’ cable or a strangely temperamental E-string!). But I’ve talked about such things more elaborately elsewhere (Sergeant 2016).

Here though, I wish to fold an idea of *orientation* into this situation, drawing largely upon aspects of what Sara Ahmed calls ‘queer phenomenology’ (Ahmed 2006 p.4) as a critical methodology for wider insight.

Orientation

The primary purpose of Ahmed’s 2006 text *Queer Phenomenology* is to examine notions of *orientation* within *sexual* orientation. Centrally, however, Ahmed wishes us to consider the *spatiality* of social relations.

Ahmed first unpacks such ideas by means of consideration of the term’s meaning to space. Her argument is interested not in validating divergent philosophies of space *per se*, but in acknowledging their confluence in *sociality*.

In this regard, the table and chair on the cover of the current edition of Ahmed’s text should not be overlooked. As Ahmed points out, there are an awful lot of tables in phenomenology. She notes particularly how the proximity of the table to the philosopher writing upon it renders most visible the social-spatiality of the moment, particularly with regard to Husserl’s *Ideas* (Husserl 2012).

‘Being orientated toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend on the work done to keep the desk clear. [...] One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. We can draw here on the long history of feminist scholarship about the politics of housework:

about the ways in which women, as wives and servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do [...].’ (ibid pp.30-31)

To summarise, being orientated towards or away from the table is as much a social as it is a spatial arrangement.

‘We are reminded that what we can see in the first place depends on which way we are facing. What gets our attention depends too on which direction we are facing. The things that are behind Husserl are also behind the table that he faces: it is “self evident” that he has his back to what is behind him. We might even say that it is the behind that converts “the back” into the background.’ (ibid p.29)

And to acknowledge this is to accept that purely spatial arrangements are non-neutral.

‘Kant [...] does not give equal weight to each side of the body. As he puts it, the right side “enjoys an indisputable advantage over the other in respect of skill and perhaps of strength too” (1992: 369). Indeed, we can note here that the etymology of the word left is “weak and worthless,” and Kant himself describes the left in terms of “more sensitive.” Women and racial others are associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. Further, we only need to think about “the left” as a marker or political allegiance, or of the associations that gather around the term “left field.” (ibid p.13)

Queered Orientation(s)

Ahmed’s observations regarding the sociality of space are as much about moving to offer a queer phenomenology as it is about space in its own right.

‘A queer phenomenology, I wonder, might be one that faces the back, which looks “behind” phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher’s back.’ (ibid p.29)

That which is or has been queered, Ahmed argues, emerges through and against the conflicting lines of orientation in societal space.

‘Think of tracing paper: when the lines on the tracing paper are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been traced, then the lines of the tracing paper disappear: you can simply see one set of lines. If lines are traces of other lines, then this alignment depends on straightening devices that keep things in line, in part by “holding” things in place. Lines disappear through

such processes of alignment, so that when even one thing comes “out of line” with another thing, the “general effect,” is “wonky” or even “queer.”” (ibid p.66)

Let us first read Ahmed’s wider framework into the instrument-body situation.

In the act of musical performance, the body’s orientation ‘to face’ the instrument is in-separable from a social value-judgement that both (a) empowers the non-human instrument with some recognisable usefulness for the task and (b) accepts an implicit directionality of that orientation of body *over* instrument – “the *clarinettist* holds the *clarinet*” being somewhat akin to Kant (read through Ahmed) supposing right *over* left. (The wider application of this model to acts of listening is reserved for a later discussion).

If we consider this normative body-over-instrument orientation a ‘straightening device’ within Ahmed’s terms (ibid), then a queer orientation could emerge if we offer an alternative *instrument-over-body* alignment alongside or against it. The ‘being alongside’ is important so as to observe this alternative orientation ‘coming out of line’ with its normative counterpart, rendering it queer.

To debate a more general level exactly what constitutes “queerness” is, obviously, well beyond the scope of this short paper. One could immediately point to Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Butler 1993, Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990) for more elaborative understandings, suffice to say Ahmed’s model has permitted me the kinds of thinking that follow.

To conceive of an alternate *instrument-over-body* orientation returns us to the new materialist lens that opened this paper. Remembering that the instrument-body situation can be considered as an entwinement of human/non-human agencies, this second orientation could be considered as foregrounding a *non-human* agency over the *human*, although concrete examples will follow.

As a composer, what I found creatively appealing about such a model was its potential as a new space within which to move, allowing such orientation-taxonomies (i.e. differing kinds of instrument-body alignments) to be interrelated within a state of compositional play. My first attempt at which I shall now outline via consideration of my new piece, *The Velvet Rage* (2017).

***The Velvet Rage* (2017)**

The Velvet Rage (2017) was a recent commission received from Manchester-based contemporary music ensemble, Trio Atem. Commissioned in celebration of the group’s tenth anniversary, the piece was first performed by them (in full) on June 8th, 2017 (The Wonder Inn, Manchester). The piece takes its title from Alan Downs’s famous self-help title of the same name, *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the pain of*

If we consider the discrepancy between the relative lack of activity in the score (three long strokes on a static pitch) and the vibrancy of the sonic result, my intents might become somewhat clearer. The severity of the detuning of the low string renders its pitch very unstable, especially under changing bow pressures. There are also rhythmic implications of this context. The conflict between the downward pressure of the bow and the perpendicular force in the down stroke complicates the 'stick-slip' action of the bow-on-string, creating substantial stutters.

I read this kind of situation as offering a larger operational space for the agential materiality of the non-human *instrument* than its human performer – an opposing, or queer, orientation to the normative *instrument-over-body* model.

A more normative orientation is immediately visible when one considers the cello's partner in this same passage – the vocalist. Here, the vocalist is presented with a short phonetic text to read aloud.

The additional complications the human voice brings to the instrument-body situation are marked – even the spatial delineation of instrument and body is now much more problematic. But that is not to say these further obfuscations circumvent the mattering of the matter from which the larynx, glottis, tongue and teeth are comprised. There are multiple instances within the piece where the vocalist is placed in a position of orientation with their own instrument that parallels that of the opening cello material, e.g. example 2 (below).

[illegible]Example 2: Matthew Sergeant - *The Velvet Rage* (2017) – page 10

In such vocal writing, the glottis and tongue, in particular, articulate independently-notated parametric strata. As fleshy tissues entwine and conflict in realising these strata, it is the non-human agency of the materiality of human vocal mechanism that is again foregrounded.


In contrast, the spoken material (as seen in example 1 but prevalent throughout the composition) somewhat re-orientates this situation along “straighter lines”. Here, the agential materiality of the vocal mechanism is subservient to a prescribed desire for the sound of the ‘words’, albeit in a queer sort of way. Queer because, whilst the relationship between body and sound may *seem* more conventionally hierarchical in this context, the rhythm and emphasis “required” to “communicate” such a text is, at very best, highly ambiguous. Especially given (a) the deliberate lack of punctuation; (b) the generative algorithms from which the text was constructed serve to allude heavily to phonotactic patterns associated with English in general; (c) the text occasionally uses syllables that carry meaning in English. (Although, perhaps some other time, we should talk about Anglo-centricity). So, whilst serving as a ‘straighter’ orientation of body/instrument, the purpose of spoken text throughout *The Velvet Rage* is to, in a sense, simultaneously enact a kind of precarious self-awareness of this position.

481 3.1

*Speak text as previous but now vocalise on both the in and out-breath. Continuous.

*deb dib pud ðider sididid lan tæl ðan dil sutibat nes ðit
bemp mun nð səl dæðinul nır lað sun dis ruð vað nəl danum
bedis vuð talider ðidað tas ðit sar ðuv ðas lmet nides dæð min
tuliðevæs net danat ðav sen muput sið seðiv ðenit rus visaner
læsen ðit dæres narut siv suð dilednial nuðis ves nil del tib

p

I:
w/Talkbox: 
static
ritualistic
expressionless
irat* lðet lðav

*Mouth these words (unvoiced) through the Talkbox. Stems show the onset of the given word, the duration of each word is left to natural speaking rhythm (pedal I always follows the words). Consonants may be subtly voiced to aid pronunciation.

Speak text as previous but now vocalise on both the in and out-breath. Continuous.

tæd bat bidup talin ðun ðid ren sır nəl dil neð viðuv siðev
ðæd ren dæð deb pəb pətər lit duð namup bid rud ðasəv
ðad nil ðasiner sil ðus ðis rel sinul das dæbemib peməp
tar nıð tað sil tar ðud bap tən liðet ðidunad bim nəl dıran
res ðid bet nim nur siðun savəs ðesið nelitun mib durad

p

- 25 -

Example 3: Matthew Sergeant - *The Velvet Rage* (2017) – spoken text - page 25

My presentation thus far has focussed on queer instrument/body orientations that simply invert (the Freudian reading of this term has not gone unnoticed) the original body-over-instrument socio-spatial paradigm. Such manoeuvres, provided simply for the sake of clarity of exposition, should not be allowed to permit a perspective of a something only interested in binary oppositions. Indeed, perhaps

the most appealing compositional situations that could be derived from this thinking are the *in-betweens*.

The vocalist's use of a talkbox is particularly indicative of this. More commonly associated with the electric guitar (and famously featured in the opening of Bon Jovi's 1986 hit single, *Livin' on a Prayer*), the talkbox sends electronic sound via a tube into the human mouth, where the body can manipulate and filter the sound bio-mechanically.



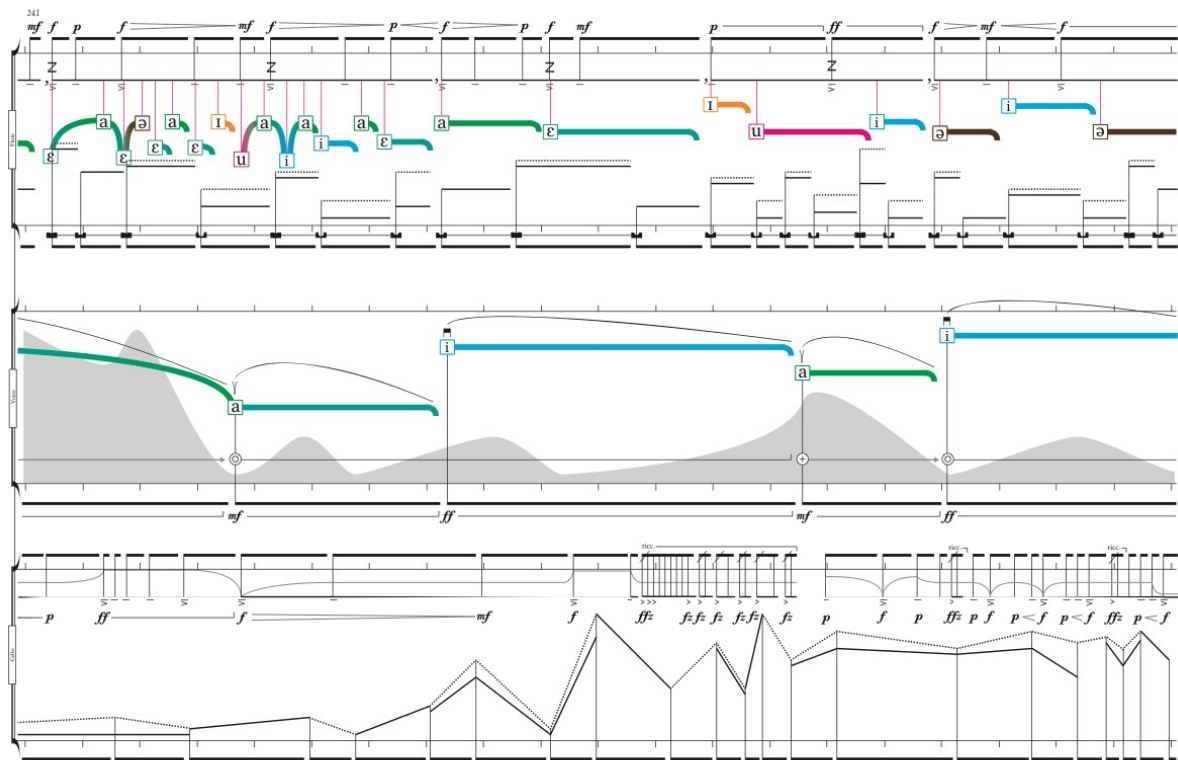
Example 4: The *Banshee II* talkbox (manufactured by Rocktron, inc.) as used by Nina Whiteman (vocalist, Trio Atem) in rehearsals for *The Velvet Rage* (2017)

In *The Velvet Rage*, the talkbox's input is a generative algorithmic patch that granulates various oscillator and noise signals, the parameters of which are probabilistically controlled in real-time.

When using the talkbox, the vocalist manipulates whatever particular sounds the patch is producing at that time. The vocalist also uses a series of volume pedals to direct the signal either into their mouth (for manipulation, which is fully notated in the score) or direct to the speakers. As such, the developmental path the patch creates for itself is continually interrupted and transformed.

The material agencies of the vocalist's body and the talkbox's tube are certainly in dialogue here. As are the "wills" of the performer's mouth and the acousmatic 'movements' of the patch's algorithms. The orientation of body as an instrument in such a situation is, at best, problematic – suffice to say that even within this context the non-alignment of agencies is most certainly queer.

Similarly, the flautist, who has not featured here so far purely due to reasons of time, also often finds themselves in further queered positions.



Example 5: Matthew Sergeant - *The Velvet Rage* (2017) – flute material - page 13

In the above example (example 5), for instance, the flautist superimposes vocal and instrumental activity within the same passage. Here, the non-human components of the situation are more multidirectional, human agency entangling with both the non-human agencies of tissue (larynx) and metal (flute). A larger non-human space of operation by virtue of number of inhabitants, perhaps.

Re-imagining Material Interrelations in *The Velvet Rage* (2017)

Ahmed's allegory of traced lines, out of phase with their own background, for queering is again useful: something is queered against a *something else*. As such, in *The Velvet Rage*, the mutual interrelation of materials' differing/non-differing taxonomical positions is as much a subject of play as the materials themselves.

Superimpositions and juxtapositions of different instrument/body orientations form a scaffolding for the music's medium-scale paragraphs. The opening page of music (example 1), discussed previously, I am sure, has already been noted as superimposing divergently-orientated taxonomical positions in the cello and vocalist. In a sense, they are 'out of alignment' with one another.

But these initial orientations are not static. Medium-scale trajectories are forged that rotate and transition these body/instrument relationships.

Example 6: Matthew Sergeant - *The Velvet Rage* (2017) – page 6

By page six of the score (rehearsal mark 1.0), for example, a move has been made to rotate the opening interrelation. As the music progresses from page one, additional physical constraints are introduced to the vocalist's reading (such as speaking on *both* the in and out breaths). Likewise, increasingly gestural activity on the cello 'gets in the way' of the instrument's own non-human agency. Thus, upon reaching page 6, the cello has reached a position of "straighter" alignment, whereas the voice has been queered.

Intricate discussion of that larger form is reserved for a later date, although as a brief window into such concerns, the piece pivots around a central prolonged moment of electronic sound, disembodied from the mouth of the vocalist and sent at maximum amplitude directly to the speakers. This moment of complete sonic disembodiment serves an apex to a structural journey that, overall, generally follows the vocalist into a queerer and queerer place.

Concluding Remarks

Actively engaging with ideas of 'queer art' has never specifically motivated me artistically. Attempting to render sonic such ideas as David Halperin's 'gay aesthetic' (Halperin 2012) or Jack Halberstam's 'queer art of failure' (Halberstam 2011) always seemed an enforced or arbitrary departure from what I have considered an obligation to follow and service the needs of my evolving meta-musical ideas. And yet, with *The Velvet Rage*, I appear to have arrived in a very queer place indeed.

If I offer anything to the world I have found myself in at this stage, I suppose it is something that composer Michael Finnissy knew all along. 'Write the piece! Not a description of the piece!' his students have anecdotally referred to him as saying in their composition tutorials. So rather than argue for (increased) musical *description* of the socio-political discourses (e.g. Anzaldúa 1987, Bersani 1987, Butler 1990, Foucault 1978, Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, etc.) that populates much of LGBTQI+ critical scholarship - it is hoped this paper illustrates an application of critical theory's queer gaze to further develop notions of *actual* musical queerings, achieved here through and of the taxonomies and interrelations the materials of a given work might contain.

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