

Ming Tsao

## **Refuse Collection**

### **Notes towards a reworking of Arnold Schoenberg's *Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (Opus 34)**

“Drohende Gefahr, Angst, Katastrophe” (Threatening danger, fear, catastrophe), the words that preface the score to Schoenberg’s *Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (Opus 34) from 1930, suggest that only music as a non-conceptual medium can convey such sensations to a listener. Straub-Huillet’s *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (1973) is a desynchronized reaction to this music – itself an accompaniment – by dialectically montaging and thereby critiquing a number of representational strategies (such as interviews, photo montages, documentaries, texts, etc.) in the attempt to create an “image” that captures the sensations of Schoenberg’s music through a “refuse” of the homogenized forces of representation.

A more recent example is given to us by the poetry of J.H. Prynne, particularly his “Refuse Collection” (2004) whereby the parataxis of a lyrical poetic language with documentary quotations from the everyday language of capitalism and media representation attempts to create an “image” of another catastrophe, the atrocities of Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Such a poetic language is conveyed through a formal sense of poetic rhythm in a similar vein to Straub-Huillet’s formal sense of filmic rhythm. Akin to the tension created about and across the montage between shots in Straub-Huillet’s film, Prynne situates the tension about and across line-endings where there is a kind of dialectical unsettling because line-endings and verse divisions work into and against semantic overload. I think that the parameters of rhythm and meter and their potential for enacting energy, force and violence become key characteristics of both Prynne’s and Straub-Huillet’s work and a parameter that informs much of my own musical compositions.

My musical composition for 18 musicians, “Refuse Collection,” is an attempt to bring together Schoenberg’s music, Straub-Huillet’s film and Prynne’s poem under the rubric of a speculative music that transcribes Schoenberg’s Opus 34 through the rhythmic and metric forces of Prynne’s poem in such a way that a listener comes to hear a counter-melody against the original music as *Begleitmusik* (accompaniment) to the forces of the original work. The very idea of a *Begleitmusik* begins to show the scars of the original music under pressure of the forces of homogenization and not as accompaniment to them (as is brilliantly conveyed in Straub-Huillet’s film). Indeed, speculative musical composition is exemplified in Schoenberg’s theoretical writings that display the true nature of “accompaniment” as counterpoint (an inherently “working against”) so that sufficient resistance is encountered in the act of listening to meet the continuing demand for palpable texture in human affairs.

The nature of my composition “Refuse Collection” (2017) suggests the recuperation of discarded materials as “waste” through a discontinuous montage of musical fragments all based on Schoenberg’s music but whose nature is informed by Prynne’s poem. Waste signifies noise, excess and rubbish, which stands as a rebuke and challenge to instrumental systems because rubbish is what is left when the operation of the forces of homogenization are complete and nothing should be left. Indeed, the noise that is a product of music’s materiality can tune into the accumulated layers of signification accrued through music’s evolution and reactivate past codes as the contamination of damaged forms. Such a reworking of Schoenberg’s Opus 34 attempts to provide another “image” of “Drohende Gefahr, Angst, Katastrophe” that is defined through the cracks and rough textures of Schoenberg’s original music.

The sounding result, I hope, would suggest a materialist music, akin to Straub’s notion of a “materialist image” – a sound world outside of consciousness rather than a sound world fully

endowed with consciousness thus placing the listener in a space where we are required to rethink our personhood within a larger domain of history and cultural life. I believe that music composition today should ask listeners to listen beyond anthropocentric terms, including the ways in which the resistance of the world – its conflicting and dynamic materiality – exceeds both conceptual thought and technological control and to provide a counterpoint to our contemporary understanding of place, where musical lyricism is sensitive to relations between human impact and presence in our more-than-human world.

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