

MEMOR

2.26.12

an essay for
viola and
electronic sound

Otto Muller
2017

Introduction

To the listener:

First: I am grateful to have this moment (across many moments) to sit together and share some thoughts, some discomfort. I do not know who you are as I am writing, but I already imagine you. (Perhaps with too many assumptions—this is a piece of new music, so I imagine you among that audience with its limited demographic, and strange dialects.) I welcome you regardless of who you are and I value your time.

Please listen to the piece (either recorded or live) while reading the “score” that I’ve prepared. The notes that the viola plays are there, along with the inquiry that yielded them.

[Two tracks are provided in the accompanying CD, a track with my own rendering of the viola part and a track without the viola part, that a violist might play along with.]

To the violist:

While I value each listener’s time and thoughtfulness, I value yours most of all. The score provided is inconvenient. I recognize that. Fragments of notated music are interspersed with reflection, instruction, excerpts of academic prose, image, etc.

My goal here is to share an experience with you, of working through some thoughts around music, bodies, murder, and complicity that are uncomfortable and unresolved—to use the performance of music not as a *representation* of ideas but as a secret language for embodying them: a choreography of affects.

Of course I do not expect you to share my own perspectives and experiences. We have not met—at least not in this way—before, and we have lived different lives in different bodies.

I just want to be really honest with you about where I’m coming from in the hopes that there can be some dialogue. I welcome any range of interpretation, including outright disagreement. (Honestly. The audience has the score. If you refuse to play what is written this only adds layers.)

The viola part is built out of my own exploration of the instrument and a track is included that is pieced together, a patchwork of recorded attempts.

The viola was a gift from a lover.

I was supposed to practice it—to learn a new instrument as an adult—but I haven't.

It remains an uncharted field to me, high with brush.

*I am not out to discover unknown territory, of course—
the resources are well mapped; its grain and metals already
marked and exploited—
but for its hidden meadows. Like a child in a cousin's yard,
while they are away.*

There are some extended techniques, but nothing too extreme:

There is scordatura: the entire viola is tuned down a half-step. A second staff is provided beneath with the resultant pitches.

There are harmonics and harmonic trills (pressure trills between the harmonic and fingered pitch or the harmonic and the open string). In a few places, a pressure between normal finger pressure and harmonic finger pressure is used to get traces of both resultant pitches.

There is some diagonal bowing: hold the bow at an angle with the frog much further sul tasto than the tip. As you bow a down-bow, the point of contact between bow and string moves from molto sul tasto to ordinario.

There are triple stops in a few places where a fingered string is sandwiched between two open strings. At a molto sul tasto bow position, all three strings can be bowed at a low volume.

Again, I want to thank you for your time, your thoughts, your willingness to share this inquiry with me. If you have any questions I am happy to talk: [muller.otto@gmail.com]

In gratitude:

I also want to thank many people who have been a part of my own continuing exploration of identity, culture, poetics, music, and white supremacy, including: Baco Ohama, Herukhuti, Suiyee Wong, Jen Hofer, Jill Magi, Arisa White, Karen Werner, Muriel Shockley, Emerson Whitney, Chanelle John, Simone John, Khalil Dalton, Trina Powers, Allise Hewes, Suzahn Ebrahimian, D. Edward Davis, Amnon Wolman.

They should not be blamed for those faults that lie in the work below, but I credit them entirely for any missteps avoided.

A content warning:

The text and audio of this work deals explicitly with racist violence, and the embodied experience of white privilege. It documents ongoing reflection on my own lived-experience of whiteness in relationship to violence, identity, and culture, and grapples with the question of how a white person can (and cannot) respond to the murder of Trayvon Martin.

1.

It seemed like a revelation to me at the time, when I told her that my own relationship to music has so little to do with joy, so much to do with loss, alienation, regret, and mourning.

She just said:

“Yeah, I know. Your people are really into that, huh?”

0:00 - 0:45

slowly lift your finger so
it no longer touches
the node; find
the moment where you lose contact with
the pulse of the string
(play the gesture three times
each time slightly faster)

Viola

IV

III

IV

p

<mp>

<f>

repeat 2x

White people.

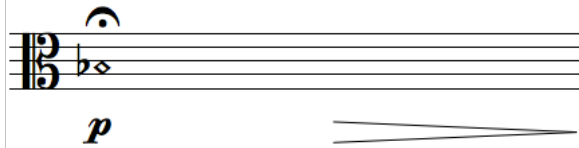
Perhaps it's true.

These hand-me-downs
were forged in the burnt terrain of
conquest and World War.

Modes of mourning: ceremonies
to animate the hollowed out places

0:48 - 0:58

bow slowly and
with light pressure
caution and hesitation audible

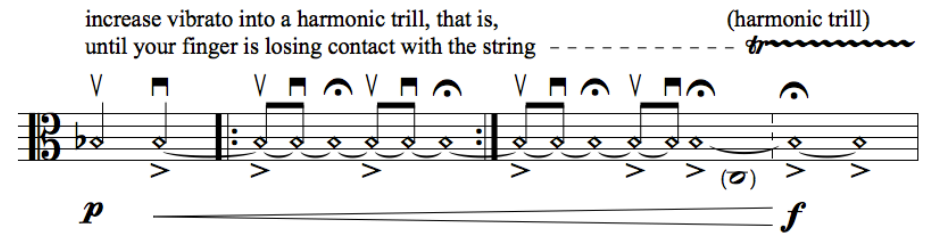


A note regarding **scordatura**:

The entire viola is tuned down a half step. This adjustment is in response to the source recordings, an adaptation to an environment. But with the entire instrument detuned it becomes easier to forget that slight difference between intended action and result.

The upper staff shows the pitches as they are played; the lower staff shows the resulting sound.

1:00 - 1:28



Or maybe the music does not result from an identity but creates one:

African American historian Bernice Reagon Johnson visited a Maori community and [...]

described her own community as one held together by song rather than by territory [...]¹

On the music of Helmut Lachenmann, John Cage, and others, Elke Hockings has written of

silence, equilibrium and quietness [...]

used to refuse communication and to manifest defiance against the industrious performance of our century [...]

understood as disruption or confrontation but also as an act of opening.²

*(In this confrontational, opening silence:
my own community as one held together by
anxious whispers
rather than by song.*

A shared complicity.)

1:28 - 1:48

1:50 - 2:00

Hollowed out places:

Cathedrals
Concert halls
Factories (now vacant)
Caves and caverns
The body of a viola
The room I am sitting in
The barrel of a gun
The chest—is it more
hollow when I hold
my breath, or
after I exhale?

Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* (1969) uses his speaking voice to animate the resonant frequencies of a space. He records his voice, plays it into the room and re-records it. Each time, certain tones are amplified, others muffled. Eventually all that is left is a shimmering chord rippling with the ghost of his words.

2:08 - 2:22

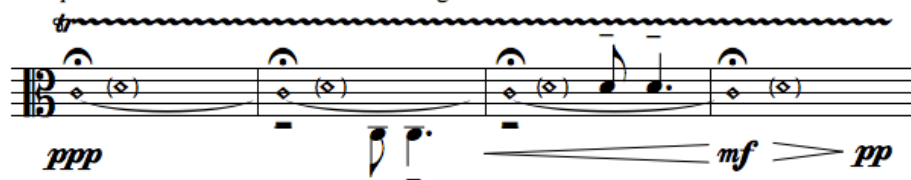
A note regarding **repetition**:

Sometimes a gesture is repeated more than once. The number below the repeat sign tells how many times to repeat it *after* the first iteration.

In writing this piece, repetition was often a means of finding, of feeling out the shape of a gesture. Even in performance, this piece permits the *attempt*.

2:25 - 3:05

bow as close to the bridge as possible, so that the fingered harmonics barely speak over the hidden content of the string



In this piece I reproduce Lucier's experiment
but the words are not my own.

They were spoken by George Zimmerman
on the night that he murdered Trayvon Martin.

I chose to pour these words into my living room
against the window panes that look out on maples and yard,
against the floor where I play legos with my son,

Hanging in that air until it was inseparable, until I could hear my part in
this.

3:08 - 3:24



A note regarding the **electronics**:

The electronic score consists of acoustically manipulated and digitally processed recordings of George Zimmerman's call to 911, and two other 911 calls from Sanford, Florida reporting the gunshot.

There are also digitally altered materials from an earlier version of this piece, performed by D. Edward Davis and Antoine Beuger in Düsseldorf in 2014.

(I've been trying to write this piece for awhile. I'm still not sure how to.)

2.

In response to Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's body, Hannah Black wrote an open letter to the curators and staff of the Whitney Biennial, stating:

In brief: the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time.

[...] those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights.³

3:50 - 4:15

bow slowly
hesitant, unsure

increasing resolve,
a touch of vibrato,
warmth

mp

p

pp

4:16 - 4:26

barely speaking
light finger pressure
rubato

allow both the harmonic
and the fingered pitch
to speak; make it unclear
which result is unintended.

III II IV

I cannot know black suffering, or
the taut caution, brought daily
against the assault of white supremacy,
in its most banal and brutal forms.

Instead I try to make audible to myself
the shapes that I inhabit.
At the foot of the bed, the laptop
propped on a laundry basket.

In my sweatpants and white skin
as Zimmerman gets out of his truck once more.

My body is
complicit when

on unknown
Chicago
streets,
silhouettes are
met with
involuntary
exhale and
tingling palms,
felt as a need
for systems of
surveillance
and policing;

complicit when

the lips purse
and eyes avert,
joining a choral
silence of
unease, in
response to
others' lived
truths: spoken,
left hanging,
disrupting
the self-
assuredness of
a white space.

4:28 - 4:35

III

4:35 - 4:45

IV

III

A note regarding **repetition**:

In writing this piece, repetition was often a means of finding, of feeling out the shape of a gesture. Even in performance, this piece permits the *attempt*.

But repetition can be re-inscription, the hardening of living systems into prison walls—and some attempts are unacceptable.

(To erase Zimmerman's voice, I had to play the recording into the room ten times.)

When the 911 tapes were released, in a trial that never led to conviction,
I listened over and over again

I hope it was not spectatorship, but witness, that kept me transfixed—
feeling those sounds in my musculature and pulse,
the grain and squint of guilt,
of terrors carried out in my name.

4:45 - 4:50

4:50 - 4:57

What is your
emergency:
police, fire, or
medical?

Police, please.

For what address
or location?

*Um, I'm at ____.
There's someone
screaming
outside.*

Is that what you
are at?

*Yeah, hurry. There
was a gunshot.
Hurry up.*

Okay. _____?

*Yeah, Sanford
Florida 32771.*

Okay. Do you see
anybody? I
don't need you
to go outside.

*There was someone
screaming. I
just heard
gunshots.*

Okay. Do you see
anything? I
don't need you
to go outside
but do you see
anything? Do
you hear
squealing of
tires or
anything?

*No, like, hurry up
they're right
outside my
house.*

Okay, we have
police coming
emergency
okay?

*Hurry, hurry,
hurry, hurry.*

4:58 - 5:06

5:07 - 5:15

A note regarding **time**,

I've chosen time brackets over more precise tempi, rhythms, rests,
to allow more interpretive space while maintaining coordination with the
electronics.

Also to evoke the chronologies of events—which occur without counting.

On affect: Sara Ahmed writes that

emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space [...]

Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways

5:20 - 5:50

III

slow bowing,
light bow pressure

II

mp *pp* *p*

This musical score is for the 5:20 - 5:50 segment. It features two staves: a bass staff on top and a treble staff on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece is divided into three sections labeled III, II, and III. The first section (III) starts with a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic. The second section (II) is marked with a crescendo hairpin and includes dynamics of pianissimo (*pp*) and piano (*p*). The third section (III) continues with the piano (*p*) dynamic. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

5:50 - 6:05

III

II

III

slow bowing,
light bow pressure

mp *p* *ppp*

This musical score is for the 5:50 - 6:05 segment. It features two staves: a bass staff on top and a treble staff on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece is divided into three sections labeled III, II, and III. The first section (III) starts with a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic. The second section (II) is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a triplet of eighth notes. The third section (III) is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a crescendo hairpin leading to a pianissimo (*ppp*) dynamic. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

6:08 - 6:23

II

p *pp* *p*

This musical score is for the 6:08 - 6:23 segment. It features two staves: a bass staff on top and a treble staff on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece is divided into two sections labeled II. The first section (II) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a crescendo hairpin leading to a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The second section (II) continues with the piano (*p*) dynamic. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks.

I do not know the taste of bile, audible in Zimmerman's contempt,
but the breathless fright in the voice of that woman
this my throat can remember.

This affect that arms the neighborhood watch
that projects Others in alleyways,
and trains killers to puncture bodies
I will never see.

This musculature I am trying to reshape
with an extended exhalation.

3.

Of course it is inadequate to write music.

A boy was murdered.

6:55 - 7:10

III II

mp

And just days ago in Charlottesville, the city swarmed
with petulant Zimmermans
klansmen and nazis spoiling
for a fight

a boy slammed his dodge into a crowd
of people who came to say no
came to say that Black Lives Matter

7:12 - 7:24

III II

mp

p *p*

But also Audre Lorde has written:

In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real.

[...]

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like) on Sunday morning at 7 AM, after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth⁴

7:25 - 7:30



7:37 - 7:50

bow so far over the finger board that the fingered string is level with the open strings on either side of it

II III IV III IV II III IV

mp *ppp* *p*

Some thirty years later, writing about brown people regularly slain by police and their imitators, Simone John says:

There is no redeeming nature metaphor here.
No plot twist to leave you feeling lighter.

Just more names
you have already forgotten.
Just more bodies.⁵

7:52 - 8:02

bow very slowly, delicately,
with just the edge of the hair
touching the strings
very close to the bridge



Of course it is inadequate to write music, but emotions do things.

Quietness:

in defiance to industrious performance
as an act of opening
as only a new way of making them felt
is the mode of mourning that I know

a way to remember names in litanies, in requiems

a way to keep discomfort soft,
the fascia pliable

8:07 - 8:20

bow diagonally
MST ----- Ord.

a way to softly disrupt the solace of a
cloistered room, deep
in the thick white walls of the
imperial citadel, and say

here too,

in the abstract choreography of
fingers and hair on the
metal of string—taught
across brown bodies
of resonant spruce and willow

here too, they are dead:

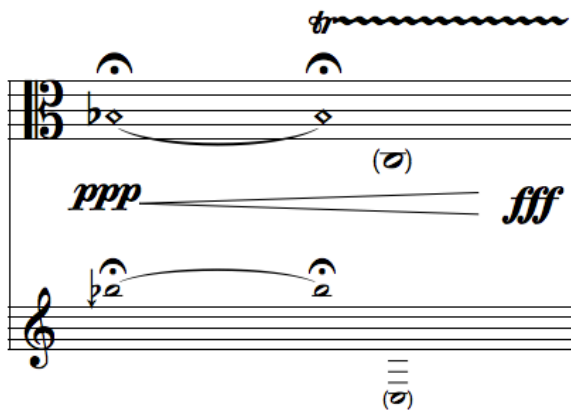
8:21 - 8:31

bow slowly, explore
the results of
harmonic fingering
near the nut

III

9:00 - 9:49

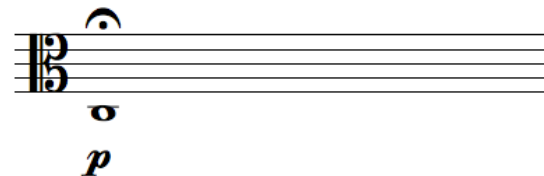
starting from the softest and most unstable sound
begin a harmonic trill allowing the open string to
speak with increasing fierceness try to drown out
Zimmerman's voice with this harmonic trill
at this point it no longer matters what pitches
you are playing, your bow technique, the tone,
it is just a means to an end.



9:49 - 10:35

the instant the recording stops:
a single sustained pitch
bow close enough to the bridge to release
whatever pitches are left in the string

sul pont.
non vib.



bow diagonally, start
so far over the
fingerboard that the
bow doesn't touch the
fingered III string

bow diagonally

MST- - - - Ord.

The musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is presented in two systems. The first system consists of a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clef). The vocal line begins with a half note G4, followed by a half note A4, then a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The piano accompaniment starts with a half note G3, followed by a half note A3, then a quarter note B3, and a quarter note C4. The second system continues the vocal line with a half note D5, followed by a half note E5, then a quarter note F5, and a quarter note G5. The piano accompaniment continues with a half note D4, followed by a half note E4, then a quarter note F4, and a quarter note G4. The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mp* and *p*.

The material here is
the grain and squint of guilt
grief seeking a language

there is no plot twist or Picardy third
nothing achieved through this unease

the dead are dead
and there is no power
in this pallid gaze
to make their murder meaningful.

I do not feel better having written this
and I hope you do not feel better either

but it has so little to do with joy.

10:54 - 11:08

bow diagonally

MST - - - - - Ord.

$$\begin{array}{cc} & \text{III} \\ \text{II} & \text{II} \\ \text{IV} & \text{IV} \end{array}$$

bow barely touching the strings

III

The musical score for 'The Little Boat' is presented in two systems. The first system is for the vocal part, and the second system is for the piano accompaniment. Both are in 3/4 time. The vocal melody begins with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a half note B4. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and a treble line with chords and triplets. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, and *ppp*. The score concludes with a final chord and a fermata.

Notes:

¹ Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd., 2013. 126.

² Hockings, Elke. "Helmut Lachenmann's concept of rejection." *Tempo* 193 (1995): 8.

³ Hannah Black, (qtd. in Greenberger, Alex. 'The Painting Must Go': Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work" *ARTNEWS*. 21 Mar 2017.

<http://www.artnews.com/2017/03/21/the-painting-must-go-hannah-black-pens-open-letter-to-the-whitney-about-controversial-biennial-work/>

⁴ Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is not a luxury." *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press, 2012.

⁵ John, Simone. "Things I Don't Say to the White Audience at the Poetry Reading."