

The world of fragments according to the

OPENING PERFORMANCE ORCHESTRA

“The World is just an endless multitude of fragments: some already present and some not yet born,”

says the Prague-based ensemble Opening Performance Orchestra, which operate with certainty on the fields of digital noise music and avant-garde music of the 20th century. In recent years, the ensemble has also secured its position internationally. This article by Petr Ferenc considers the various aspects of the ensemble based on the author’s personal experiences and an extensive e-mail interview.

In their music, a distinctive compositional approach meets awareness of their own identity, with the addition of patience and a distaste for ad hoc “side projects”, flippant levity, and improvisation. All their enterprises are carefully thought out to the last detail, precisely defined, and executed with gravity and belief in the result. If the consensus is imperfect, the project is postponed. CDs are only published once the situation and form are perfect, including the graphic design and booklet texts. “I don’t like irony,” said the recently deceased poet Jaroslav Erik Frič, “because people should stand firmly behind what they say and do.” The Opening Performance Orchestra (OPO for short), whom he knew as an organiser of underground music, consistently follow this maxim.

They first began performing in 2006, but the foundation of the group is not that easy to establish. “We are not a group created for a particular occasion. We all know each other from long before the Opening Performance Orchestra was established,” explain the members - while their identities are not especially secret, in interviews or album covers, we find only the members’ initials, if there is any indication of personal authorship at all.

“Our group’s members are linked by a friendship that started in the mid ‘80s. A feeling of togetherness and solidarity is important. Even as we participate in more and more public activities, we still put on a number of private events and rituals - for example, our yearly celebration of spring, which we first organised in 2005, a year before OPO was born. Later, the *Spring Series* recording series became a tangible result of these events, along with the field recordings we make, which then serve as material for future performances.” This is how the Opening Performance Orchestra summarised their musical position in the e-mail interview that is the source of all the quotations in this text unless stated otherwise.

Despite the frequency and prominence with which the group has attracted public attention, it still retains the life-giving secrecy of private events. We only learn of the existence of such events as *Proní akce s pátým MacBookem (First Event With Fifth MacBook)*, *Rozloučení se sklepním studiem (Farewell to the Basement Studio)*, or the mysterious *12 pro 2 (12 for 2)* retrospectively from their website.

FRACTION OPENING

During performances, members of the Opening Performance Orchestra stand on stage, barely moving behind a row of computers, while their uncompromising sound walls are accompanied by video projections. OPO approach their central topic – broadening the musical field to include concrete noises – as children of the digital age, in which “it is unnecessary to construct physical instruments or undertake complex operations on computers that take up entire rooms – instead, small and efficient laptops can be used to achieve the desired result. This is our starting point, and it is from here that we undertake various journeys – into recent and more distant musical history, to a time when the musical avant-garde wasn’t set in stone, when it was new and alive instead.”

The group has self-published thirteen albums in a series of visually unified CDRs. On most of these, they present themselves in their most uncompromising form as architects of seemingly completely compact digital monoliths of sound whose multi-layered nature is only revealed gradually. I admit that it is because of these recordings that for a time, I considered the group a bunch of malicious conceptualists.

OPO attempted to push the boundaries of noise music with what they call fraction music. In short, it is a strict application of the maxim *no melody no rhythm no harmony*. “We leave the rest intentionally open to the fantasy and courage of the listeners. We act as a mirror for the recipients, providing them with a space in which they can resolve the situation in their own way, either accepting the extreme sonic material and giving themselves over to it, or walking off having been entirely untouched by it. In theory, any sound or continuous sound recording can serve as material for our pieces. Most often, these are field recordings from various environments made during our events. We recorded a lot of material during our concert stay in Tokyo. But silence, seeing as it is never absolute, can also serve as material. Every place – natural or urban – has its unique sonic characteristic and typical sonic properties. Nevertheless, we emphasise the fact that such a recording is never a final result for us – it is only the first step; material for further processing. We use various software and hardware instruments to decompose the original material. There is no set method – it is always a matter of feeling, intuition, and our idea about the resultant form. The transformation itself – of sound material to fraction music – takes place in several phases: from the collection of the sonic material, through its deconstruction/

decomposition, to the reconstruction, i.e. the creation of new sonic material.”

An interesting manifestation of fraction music is the group’s latest self-released album, *Fifty Experiences*, which presents a continuous block of sound featuring one minute from every live performance that took place between 2006 and 2015.

AVANT-GARDE PERFORMANCE

Since 2015, the ensemble’s discography has expanded considerably in collaboration with labels based abroad. The most frequent partner is the Belgian publisher Sub Rosa, which has consistently published both new and archival recordings of avant-garde, experimental, ethnical, and other marginal musics since the mid-’80s. It is a mark of the congeniality of this collaboration that although at present, vinyl is the fashionable format for experimental music, the publishers respect the group’s wish to put everything out on CD – “We are digital people,” claim the group.

On the 13th of June 2020, Sub Rosa published OPO’s latest outing: a seventy-two-minute piece titled *Radio Music Extended*, inspired by John Cage’s *Radio Music* (1956), in which the composer instructs the performers – who operate radio receivers – on when to tune to fifty-six frequencies from 55 kHz to 156 kHz. The original usually allows for snippets of voices and music, but this new version is much more abstract and noisy, composed of highly amplified interferences and hums. The radiophonic origins, however, are unmistakable. “Over the past 60 years or so, the content of the broadcast band of the airwaves has changed significantly, yet the acoustic environment has remained highly variegated, providing a novel quality of sound.”

Radio Music Extended was recorded during a private live performance in the Tesla Museum in the small Moravian city of Třešť. The group used thirteen receivers constructed between the 1930s and ‘60s. While this is one of the most direct inspirations the group has picked up from Cage, it is certainly not the first time they have approached the composer’s legacy.

There is no record of the chess game played on the 5th of March 1968 in Toronto between Cage and Marcel Duchamp. The chess board was modified so that whenever a piece was moved, the square it was set down on activated a different electronic sound source – the resultant piece, *Reunion*, was thus composed in real time following the rules of the game of chess.

Performing *BROKEN RE/BROKEN*, 2020

In 2012, the year of the Cage centenary, the Opening Performance Orchestra used a different match to reconstruct this famous encounter on the space of sixty-four minutes. Each of the sixty-four minutes represents a time field in which recordings of Cage's works are triggered by an algorithm. OPO premiered this piece, titled *Chess Show*, at DOX, a private gallery in Prague, on the 24th of May 2012 as part of the opening of an exhibition dedicated to Cage's legacy, *Membra Disjecta*.

Five years later, the group put together a new concert version for the Ostrava Days festival, this time featuring pianist Reinhold Friedl. Around the same time, the group joined Friedl's ensemble *zeitkratzer* in the studio to record another version of the piece. If these recordings are ever published, listeners can look forward to two sets of eight-times-eight minute sonic "landscape" populated by more or less random encounters amongst the most varied of sounds, noises, voices, and musical motifs. The borders between the live and the played back are erased (*zeitkratzer* perform on acoustic instruments using various extended techniques); there is no accompaniment or foreground.

It is through projects like this one – less static and anonymous, more collaborative, sonically appealing, and connected to the living past of the musical avant-garde – that the Opening Performance Orchestra has attracted the most attention in recent years.

The Czech scene only really took notice of them after their realisations of pieces for the *intonarumori* – instruments invented early in the 20th century by the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, who wished to hear an entirely new music made of the noises and roars that so fascinated him. The mechanistic acceleration and aural laceration of the end of the Belle Époque, which was followed by the progressive and noisy symphony of the First World War – all this fit into Russolo's wooden boxes. They remind one of a barrel organ, but as soon as the handle turns, they begin emitting screeches, squeaks, and other noises caused by various taut strings inside the box whose sound can be regulated by the speed at which the handle is turned. The Opening Performance Orchestra thus took its place among the few artists to develop the potential of the *intonarumori* in this century. They commissioned replicas of three of Russolo's eight instruments



OPO – *Inspirium Primum*
(self-release, 2006)



OPO – *Spring Ceremony*
(self release, 2006)



Milan Knizak & OPO – *BROKEN RE/BROKEN* (Sub Rosa, 2015)

and began building a repertoire. This part of their activities culminated last year with the premiere of *Trio No. 1* at the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe. In November 2017, OPO joined forces with the Italian Cultural Institute in Prague, Czech Radio, the National Gallery, and other institutions to organise a “Futurist Week”, which included concerts, lectures, and special radio broadcasts.

The group also performed in Miroslav Pudlák’s *Intonarumori Concerto* for the howler, scraper, and crackler (ululatore, stropicciatore, crepitatore) and ensemble, premiered in 2018 by the Berg Orchestra and published last year on Pudlák’s CD in the Composer Portraits series (attached to CMQ 2019/4). Pudlák also took part in the making of OPO’s album *The Noise of Art*, this time as a pianist. The album, published as an eighty-minute CD and also, unusually, as a double LP (it was not created on a computer – it was born in concert performances and in the studio and includes acoustic instruments and human voices), contains only music for the intonarumori. In addition to the ensemble’s own music, there are also pieces by the Berlin-based poet and electronic composer Fred Möpert or music by Luciano Chessa and Blixa Bargeld. These last two also appear on the album as narrators.

While Chessa has been working with futurism as an artist, musician, and theorist for years (he published *Luigi Russolo, Futurist: Noise, Visual Arts, and the Occult* in 2012), Bargeld has been the leader of *Einstürzende Neubauten* for four decades – a group whose remarkable sound, often placed under the “industrial” label, was built in large part on original musical instruments built from various found materials ranging from metal and plastic

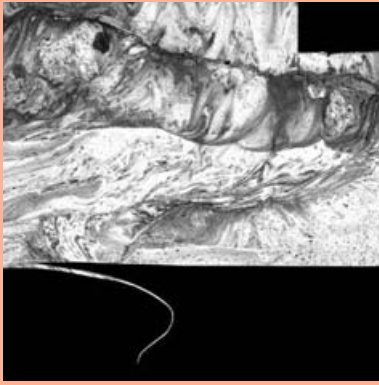
through construction materials to the turbine of a small jet plane.

Some of the seven pieces on *The Noise of Art* were featured in various concerts. The one to receive the most performances is the twenty-minute *Futurist Soirée* (the version on the recording is the one recorded during the Futurist Week), which features the intonarumori, violin, piano, and two narrators reading extracts from the *Futurist Manifesto* (1909) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the *Manifesto of Futurist Musicians* (1910) by Francesco Balilla Pratella.

The author of this text is often tasked with reading Pratella’s text, while Marinetti’s is read on the album by Luciano Chessa. One of the previous narrators was Pavel Zajíček, a Czech poet and leader of the utterly original underground music group DG 307, which, in its first creative period in the mid-1970s, operated on the field of noise music made using non-musical instruments, not unlike *Einstürzende Neubauten*.

Unlike other pieces by OPO, the music for intonarumori allows for the possibility of “unplugged” performances – the least amplified version of this piece was performed in June 2016 at the opening of *Enrico Prampolini, Futurism, Stage Design, and the Polish Avant-Garde Theatre* in the Museum of Art in Łódź, while one of the most opulent versions was recorded by Czech Radio.

At a certain point, OPO decided that everyone who was meant to see and hear the intonarumori had already done so. They put them away to focus on new projects and develop their idea of fraction music – they certainly do not wish to be labelled a historical instrument ensemble. The photogenic



OPO & Merzbow – MERZOPO
(2 CD, Sub Rosa, 2018)



OPO & Blixa Bargeld & Luciano Chessa
& Fred Mõpert – The Noise of Art
(2 CD, Sub Rosa 2019)

nature of the commissioned instruments (which were even exhibited as part of the *Sounds, Codes, Images* exhibition at Prague City Gallery) was so striking that this danger turned out to be very real. Audience reactions, which focused on the “curious” nature of the instrument at least as often as the music itself, only confirms popular notions that visual elements often stand in the way of sonic ones.

There will clearly be more encounters between the Opening Performance Orchestra and various protagonists of the avant-garde scene both at home and internationally. Last summer at the Ostrava Days festival – in contrast to their previous outing at the event, which was in the spirit of Cageian intentional irregularity – they performed a progressively denser and strictly linear interpretation of the works of New York composer and multimedia artist Phill Niblock. Their piece was scored for computers and video, which was prepared by the Czech multimedia artist, composer, and organologist Milan Guštar, another of their frequent collaborators.

As for collaborators at home, Pavel Zajíček, already mentioned above, is one of the most important. Thanks to the Opening Performance Orchestra, his characteristic, slow reciting style extended beyond the generally rock-based framework of late-period DG 307. With OPO, as with DG 307, Zajíček plays the part of the reciting or reading soloist, a frontman whose charisma lies in his very presence on the stage. He does not, however, read his own texts. *Acid Lands* was a piece prepared in 2014 for the Pohyb - Zvuk - Prostor (Movement - Sound - Space) festival in Ostrava to mark the occasion of the centenary of William

S. Burroughs. In this piece, Zajíček reads from Burroughs’ *Western Lands*, while the composition *Vteřina a věčnost* (*The Second and the Eternity*) is based on texts by the Czech philosopher Ladislav Klíma (1878–1928).

Finally, there are OPO’s collaborations with the versatile artist Milan Knížák. *BROKEN RE/BROKEN*, which maps a sonic journey from Knížák’s destroyed vinyl records to digital destructions of the already destroyed, received five live performances, the latest at the Czech Museum of Music. The March 2014 performance at the MaerzMusik festival in Berlin was published on CD a year later. Another joint project is *Aktuální univerzita* (*The Aktual University*), a setting of a text by Knížák from the 1960s, when he was highly involved in possibilities for communitarian and otherwise “alternative” arrangements of social life. OPO’s setting draws on the aesthetic of musique concrète and the text is read by its author. Finally, part of the Opening Performance Orchestra also took part in recording, producing, and publishing Knížák’s string quartets. For more on the quartets and *BROKEN RE/BROKEN*, see my text in CMQ₄/2019.

NOISE ORCHESTRA

The Opening Performance Orchestra proposes that the common denominator of the musical avant-gardists and underground noise performers is an attempt to emancipate all the sounds and noises that wind their way through the music of the 20th century and “continue inspiring artists today. The first to approach this topic radically were the Italian futurists – not only musically, but also theoretically in their manifestos, particularly Luigi Russolo’s *The Art of Noise*. The avant-garde music



PHOTO © ZKM KARLSRUHE, SERGIY PTUSHKIN

Performing Trio No. 1, 2019

of John Cage, French *musique concrète*, the Fluxus movement, the beginnings of industrial music in the 1970s, and early-'90s Japanese noise – all these are striking contributions to the debate.”

In the quoted enumeration, Russolo and Cage, who have long since found their place in the textbooks of 20th-century art, meet the only recently “academicised” scene of Japanese noise, which represents probably the most extreme form of electronic music. Thanks to projects like Hijokaidan, C.C.C.C., and Merzbow, its roots stretch back to the early 1980s. In the ‘90s, “Japanoise” was considerably invigorated by the arrival of digital technology.

And although for a brief period at the turn of the millennium, noise became a relatively popular genre that considerably enriched the vocabularies of free improvisation and rock-oriented spontaneity, key figures in Japanese music have maintained an aura of inaccessibility and severity, either in spite of or due to their extensive discographies and legendary status. The noises which they structure in blocks or spread out into drones are often harrowing and/or painful for listeners. The music’s total expressivity is frequently accompanied by a shocking visual accompaniment, including various combinations of sex and violence (although Merzbow, whose covers and booklet texts once focused on themes such as bondage, has now given all these means over to veganism and the struggle for animal rights). Humour and aloofness are neither present nor appropriate.

OPO engages in creative collaborations with noise musicians, including with the stars and co-founders

of the Japanese noise scene, Masami Akita (Merzbow) and Hiroshi Hasegawa (Astro, C.C.C.C.). Although both albums revealed the unforeseen openness of OPO’s seemingly impenetrable fraction music, the collaboration mostly took place on a conceptual level – the individual protagonists made their own pieces on the basis of a shared idea.

Live on stage, the Opening Performance Orchestra’s collaborations have included the Czech power electronics duo Magadan or the solo project Instinct Primal. Many performances take place within OPO’s concert series NOISE ZONE, an open project mapping the extreme electronic scene with the aim of introducing various methods and results of experiments with sound material. Since 2010, there have been eighteen instalments. In addition to artists such as Merzbow, Astro, and Milan Knížák, who were mentioned above, the series has also featured noise artists including Napalmed, Einleitungszeit, and Schloss Tegal.

We should also add that the visual layer of OPO – album covers, videos used in concert performances, and photographs – is “created through the principles of *fraction music* and also give rise to opaque visual structures (both static and moving) that may be difficult to comprehend. They also yield connections with the apparently trustworthy known world and with another world altogether. Sound and images are two distinct means of expressing a single originating thought.” One can peruse the Opening Performance Orchestra’s photographic oeuvre through their regularly published calendar, though there were also two exhibitions at Kávovarna, a café in Prague: *Tremors of Music* (2012) and *Reflections of Time* (2016).