Failure of *Prometheus*; an Exploration into the Evolution of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', Contemporary Music and Instrumentation from the Mid 19th- Mid 20th Century

Introduction

The term 'Gesamtkunstwerk' was popularised by Richard Wagner, a German composer, in the mid 19th Century[1], its idea was to become a multisensory form of art that was a "consummate artwork of the future ". It translates roughly to 'total work of art' and laid the foundation for an exciting period of compositional history that aimed to bridge the gap between performance and music. Throughout this period there were some crucial developments in technology and music that we can still learn from today, using Scriabin's 'Prometheus; Poem of Fire' as an example. This music inspires me to create performance work in a style that pays homage to these composers and their productions of contemporary opera and multimedia art. I will analyse music of Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin and how the failed performance of 'Prometheus; Poem of Fire' (op.60) shows the difficulties of staging a multimedia performance for the right audience. I will look briefly into important figures of post-Romanticism and how they have shaped my own practice as a music based performer and filmmaker.

Gesamtkunstwerk

The idea of a Gesamtkunstwerk first came about from Richard Wagner, a German composer most well-known for his operas and huge late romantic orchestrations. The fully realised 'Ring Des Nibelungen' was a 4-day opera cycle that is the largest existing example of a Gesamtkunstwerk. Written originally as a Heroic story of a Mythological story (Nibelungslied)[2], Wagner developed this into an opera, and then 3 more as he wanted to tell the whole story of its central character, Siegfried, between 1856 and 1874.[3] The scale and timescale at which pieces this size were written are fascinating, reflecting an artist's vision over the course of many years. In the age of consumerism and increasing demand for creative output that we live in now, I think it is a refreshing idea to engage with and something I want to explore more within my own work- developing ideas over a few years and realising them within a wider time frame.

One of Alexander Scriabin's last and most ambitious pieces, his 'Mysterium' was never finished. Started in 1903 and written until his death in 1915,[4] Intended to be a Gesamtkunstwerk the world had never seen before, a 7-day long performance in a custom built structure in the Himalayan mountains that would end in the total annihilation of the universe as we know it in a new age of human. Different to Wagner's Ring Cycle, every single attendant was participant- bells hanging from clouds would summon every creature, man to insect, to partake. It was said that 'If all went according to plan, the first and only performance would immentize the eschaton, thereby annihilating space and melting reality; no one would have to pay the band.'[5]. This, of course, was a monumental undertaking and what remains is the 'Preparation for the final mystery', a semi completed prelude for his final Mysterium that was transcribed to a three-hour version. Only a handful of recordings have been made.[6]

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[1] The Art Story (2023) 'Gesamtkunstwerk Definition Overview and Analysis'

[2] Schwarm, B. (2023) 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'

[3] Schwarm, B. (2023) 'Der Ring des Nibelungen'

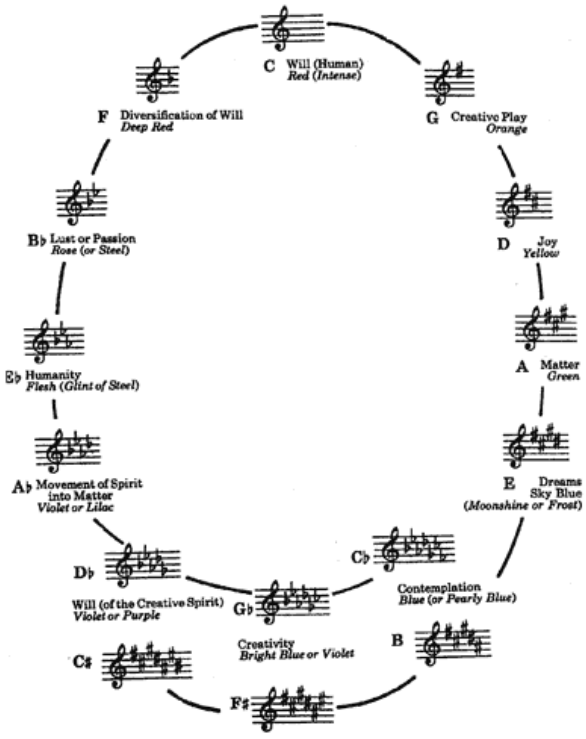
[4] Wikipedia Contributor (2023) 'Mysterium (Scriabin)'

[5] Hall, O. (2014) 'Scriabin's '*Mysterium*' Music to Destroy the Universe'

[6] Bergande, W. (2016) ' The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art'

Scriabin: Prometheus; Poem of fire (op.60)

The years before the Russian Revolution were filled with unrest and expanding artistic horizons[7]. Prometheus was no exception to the changing times. Written in 1910, 'Prometheus' was a predecessor to Scriabin's intended final but unfinished 'Mysterium' that was a smaller scale trial of a Gesamtkunstwerk. Arguably much more successful as a Gesamtkunstwerk, its instrumentation featured a 'tasteria per luce'- a light keyboard that played light instead of sound. Each note corresponded to a coloured light that would flood into the concert hall, using colour and visuals as a language to supplement the auditory stimuli. For this reason, it was known as a 'symphony for sound counterpointed by a symphony for sound'[8].



Musica- Chromo- Logo- Schema, developed by Sabaneev and Vanechkina

Creating a colour- tone chart that had both musical and spiritual meanings, the *Tastiera Per Luce* was effectively able to influence emotional undercurrents and create a visually dramatic piece that became much more than just a piece of music. By using musical notation for the light, the accuracy in which Scriabin had detailed the performance instructions far exceeded the technological capabilities of the early versions of the *Tastiera Per Luce*, made by the technician Alexander Mozer[9]. This would prove to be true throughout history, as every reproduction failed in some aspect to truly capture how Scriabin had intended, his death in 1915 making it impossible to visualise exactly how he had planned.

Production			Placement of lights	Realization of published *luce* part			Effects		
Orchestra	Year	Conductor		Fast *luce*	Slow *luce*	Notes	Dynamics	Effects/Imagery	Notes
Berlin Philharmonic Video Excerpt	1992	Claudio Abbado	Use of hazing medium; orchestra and audience immersed in light	yes	yes	Fast and slow *luce* parts blended visually; traditional theatrical lighting inhibited rhythmic accuracy in fast passages	minimal	none	Movement of lights throughout the space
Latvian National Symphony Orchestra Video (3 parts)	2003	Andris Nelssons	Lights projected on a screen behind the orchestra	selective	selective	Fast and slow *luce* parts blended visually; harmonic rhythm obscured by slow fades	minimal	some	Computer-generated textures
Tokyo NHK Orchestra Video	2006	Vladimir Ashkenazy	Lights and effects projected on a screen behind orchestra and into the audience	no	selective	Slow *luce* reduced to blue-violet, red, and yellow; no realization of fast *luce*	yes	yes	Dramatic special effects: strobe, projections, lightning flashes
Russian National Orchestra Video	2009	Vladimir Tartarnikov	Lights projected on walls of concert hall	selective	selective	Fast and slow *luce* parts blended visually; red projected instead of blue-violet at Color Stage VII	yes	yes	Light projections and images

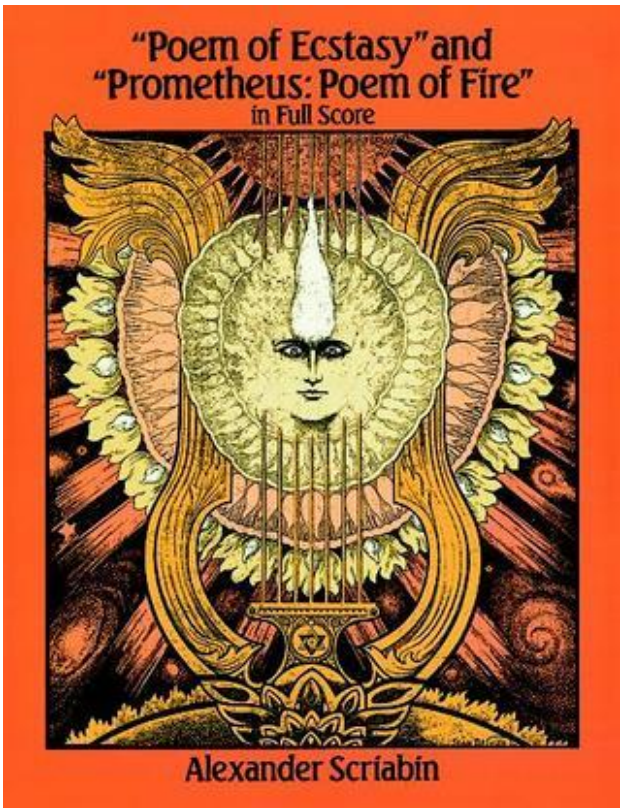
[7] Southbank Centre (2023). 'Scriabin's Prometheus and Rachmaninov's The Bells'

[8] Alina Ivanova- Scriabine (2016). Critique of Subjectivity: An examination of Vospominaniya o Scriabine [Reminiscences of Scriabin] by Leonid Sabaneyev'.

[9] Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

This chart [10]compares different recordings of this piece and what they captured.
There were many different advancements throughout the 20th Century that made it gradually easier to stage an effective light part- as concert halls grew in size, more advanced technology would have been required to light up a bigger room. Tungsten lights were becoming popular in the 1910s, but the colour changes were too slow to follow the faster sections of the music and it wasn't until the advent of lasers and LEDs[11] that the more subtle changes were able to be picked up.

Scriabin's use of colour went far deeper than just convenience- the colour informed the root of each chord- allowing for much easier analysis of the music. Harmonically, Scriabin had come up with a chord known as the 'mystic' or 'Prometheus' chord- built upon a whole tone scale in which any degree is sharpened or flattened[12], he also created a new circle of fifths, called the mystic circle of fifths. Due to the composition of the chord, it was often difficult to follow key changes, however the *Tastiera Per Luce* was a visual guide in the harmonic structure of the piece, as well as being a visual agent of control.



Original Poster for Scriabin's last two symphonies, or tone poems.

A lot of Scriabin's third period of compositions (op.59-74) have strong influences of mysticism and theosophy. Inspired by Helena Blavatsky's ideas on mysticism[13] and using eastern philosophies, his belief was that 'Mystical experiences defy the rational mind with feelings of ineffable bliss, ecstasy and oneness with the universe or the divine'[14]. During the early 20th Century more people began to question the religious ways of understanding the world, as taught to them by religion, and believed that the rapid progression of lifestyles was leaving humanity's needs unfulfilled. Scriabin believed that music would fill this void and thus he began his journey of mystic music.[15]

With performing this piece, Scriabin hoped to lift the barriers between performer and audience, inspired by his reading of Nietzsche's 'birth of tragedy'[16]- Nietzsche noting that in Greek tragedies the chorus would be mediated by actors and audience, occupying interstitial space and playing the role of both performer and spectator[17]. In the 2010 performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the singers were placed in the audience, enacting the transformation from observer to participant.[18]

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[10] Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

[11] Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

[12] Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

[13] Wills, Matthew (2016). 'Spiritualism, Science and the Mysterious Madame Blavatsky'

[14] Dotsey, Calvin (2018). 'Body and Soul: Scriabin's Le Poème de l'extase (The Poem of Ecstasy)'.

[15] Dotsey, Calvin (2018). 'Body and Soul: Scriabin's Le Poème de l'extase (The Poem of Ecstasy)'.

[16] Torabi, I (2019). 'Music, Myth and Modernity: From Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy to Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus'

[17] Torabi, I (2019). 'Music, Myth and Modernity: From Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy to Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus'

[18] Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

Ultimately, however, the first performances in the early 1910s were seen as a failure, one of the reasons being that the *Tastiera Per Luce* part played a very insignificant role in the overall piece[19], but was this due to the inadequate technologies available to correctly put Scriabin's theory into practice? Other criticisms were that multimedia music was not correctly performed in a concert hall; a space reserved for the enjoyment of music alone. The culture of going to concerts is seen by traditionalists as only for seeing music- and many critics felt that it was improperly placed. However, this was never how Scriabin intended, Prometheus focused just as much on light as well as sound, so by only giving one of those elements attention, the piece would never be realised fully. His reasons for combining light and sound were based on Helena Blavatsky's 'The Secret Doctrine' in which she writes that Akâsa, an energy that is a vibration containing multisensory elements, flows throughout the universe and by using this energy it could produce an impact of spiritual proportions[20]. Scriabin wanted to be able to use Akâsa to create a multimedia piece that would have a mystic impact on the soul and therefore transform reality[21].

On 11/01/05 I went to see *Prometheus* performed live at the Royal Festival Hall at the Southbank centre. This was including a light show and I was very excited for the opportunity to be able to experience first-hand months of research and a Gesamtkunstwerk performed in its most modern capacity. Some observations that I had before the piece started was that the choir was wearing all white, to reflect the light streaming down on them further, and that the orchestra was considerably larger. The show was spectacular- a 24-minute piece that was a masterclass in tension building- the tone of each section changed completely for me as a different colour illuminated the room. Towards the end, as the *Tastiera Per Luce* part became more intricate there were multiple colours flashing around the room (sometimes multiple times a second) with smoke machines enhancing the changes. The piece ended in a final climax after 24 minutes in which every musician was playing their loudest. Although a historically criticised piece and performance, to me it is a piece written well ahead of its time and the performance I watched was effective in not only being a 'symphony of light and sound', but as a Gesamtkunstwerk it was an experience that felt much more immersive than had it not had the light show.

In summary, the failure of Prometheus was due to a lack of appropriate technology to correctly execute Scriabin's vision, along with improper setting and audience. However, a piece that was intended to be an all-encompassing mystic experience that lies in mystery still would require technologies that perhaps do not exist today. 'Prometheus embeds a particularly modernist paradox: it was a vision of the future, so only in the future can an "authentic" production be realized- a statement perhaps as true today as it was a century ago'[22]

Birth of Post- Romanticism

Around the turn of the 19th-20th century, following WWI, artists and composers became disillusioned with the 'old' ways- romanticism in music was starting to be seen as a glamourisation of a life of excess and greed- expressionism was on the rise.[23] Features of this music such as sprawling melodies and a heightened sense of emotion were no longer appreciated. Pioneering composers from different countries began to develop styles outside the boundaries of traditional western classical music. The three main revolutionaries were Igor Stravinsky with '*Rite of Spring'*, Claude Debussy with '*Jeux'* and Arnold Schönberg with '*Pierrot*

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19 Cook, Nicholas. 1998. Analysing Musical Multimedia.

20 Wills, Matthew (2016). 'Spiritualism, Science and the Mysterious Madame Blavatsky'

21 Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

22 Townsend, Anna M. Gawboy and Justin (2012). 'Scriabin and the Possible'

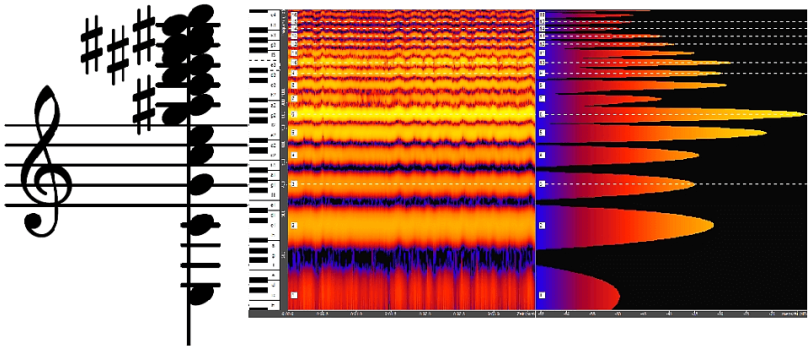
23 Jarman, Douglas (1989). Alban Berg Wozzeck.

Lunaire'[24]. Stravinsky attributed to modernising ideas of rhythm, Debussy with form and Schönberg with harmony. These new ideas came with much controversy- the 1913 premiere of '*Rite of Spring*' in the Theatre de Champs Elysees by Dhiagilev's Ballet Russes was met with rioting in the Parisian audience.[25] Wanting to mock the nobility of the traditional French audiences, Stravinsky wrote a story about a group of Slavic tribespeople that find a girl to be sacrificed to herald the arrival of spring. To fit the disjointed music which plays constantly repeating chords, the ballet was also very contemporary and angered the French audiences.[26] This piece was a main inspiration in my unit 6 film, 'The Delivery Boy', not just through the story but through my proposed music for it- using polychords and repeated chords at odd rhythms.









My practice is often approached with music in mind, and another reference for this film was Spectralism. Although hard to define, with its roots being attributed to the work of Debussy from the 1910s onwards, it wasn't until the late 1960-70s that Spectralism was coined.[27] Focusing on the overtones and timbres of sounds, it explores the natural properties of notes and focuses away from traditional elements of composition like melody and rhythm but looks at pitch and gradual changes to shape the music. 'Pitch and Timbre are no longer separate concepts but different aspects of the same phenomenon'[28] I have used this method not to such a scientific degree but I have played overtone chords on my piano and let the resonance

Top Left: Schönberg '*Pierrot Lunaire'*. Top Right: John Cage and the Prepared Piano
Bottom Left: Original staging and costume for Stravinsky's '*Rite of Spring'*. Bottom Left: Spectral overtones of a chord

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[24] Griffiths, Paul (1978). Modern Music. A Concise History Debussy To Boulez.

[25] Team uDiscover (2022). 'The Riot at Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" Premiere'.

[26] Team uDiscover (2022). 'The Riot at Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" Premiere'.

[27] Leone, F.D (2014). 'Spectral Music'.

[28] Classical Nerd (2022). 'Spectralism: An Introduction'.

sound for a long time, listening to small changes and how different notes fade away at what times- developing this into using techniques by John Cage for the ‘Prepared Piano’.

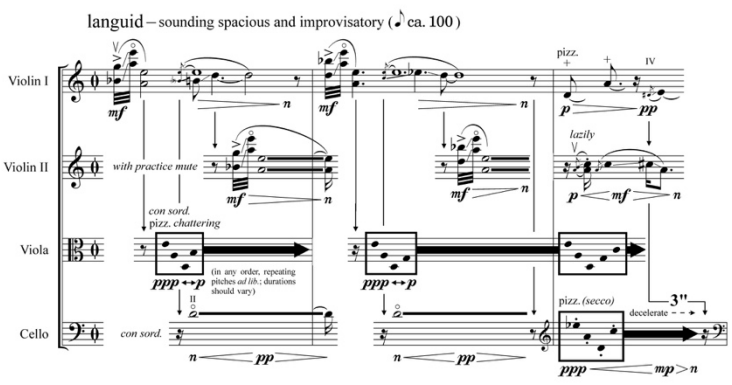
The ‘Prepared Piano’ was a concert grand piano that had various items placed inside it to alter the sound quality of certain notes. Intended for a modern dance performance, Cage couldn’t find a method of creating the exact sound he wanted. Coming to the conclusion the fault lay with the piano not him, he started to experiment with different objects. Nails stayed in-between the piano strings and apart from a few rubber bands and rubbers, most of the changes were made with nails, to a total of 45 altered notes.[29] The resulting sound was that with slight timbrical changes, something that I enjoyed greatly. During this time is also when advancements in electronic instruments were being made.
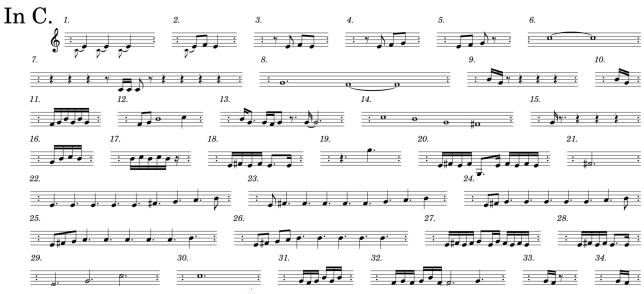
Technology, Notation and Performance

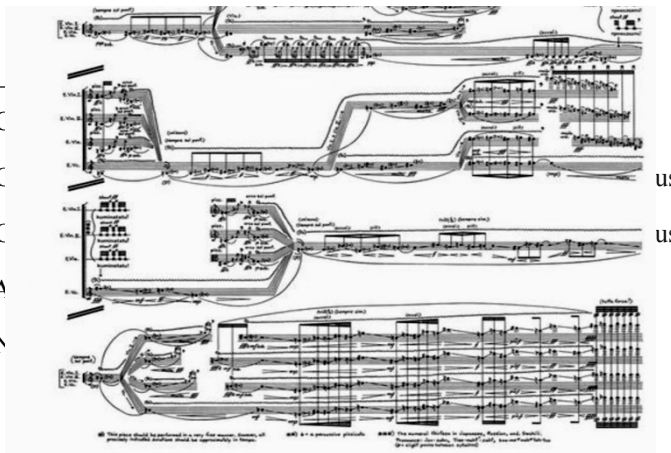
As technology was advancing and the post WWI was developing, contemporary classical music was also evolving. Tonal music seemed even more out of place, even that of composers like Schönberg who’s ‘late tonal works, heavy with nostalgia, looked to an age irrevocably lost’.[30] It was said that the ‘century of the aeroplane deserves its music’[31]. New instruments were being developed by composers as a way of distancing themselves from the now outdated concepts, such as the *Thérémin*, by Leon Thérémin, the ‘Ondes Martenot’ by Maurice Martenot and the ‘Trautonium’ by Friedrich Trautwein.

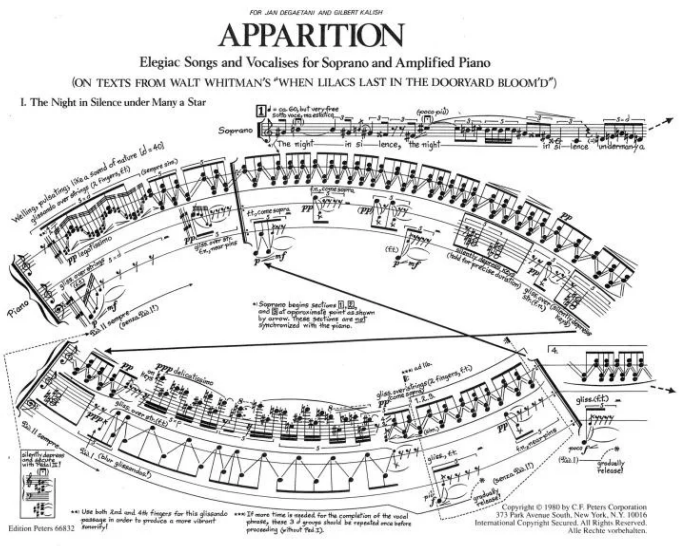
This has led me to look at musical notation as performance language, the accuracy in which a score is able to give performers instructions on how to play music and how Scriabin has used this method to go beyond musical performance is intriguing to me. A method that has been developed for hundreds of years since the dawn of western classical music would be able to give effective instruction to anyone able to understand that language. This is further proven through scores from modern composers that used more contemporary methods to communicate how a piece should be played, turning the score itself into a piece of art. As post romantic music split off into a plethora of unique and nuanced musical styles, so too did the scores. Aleatoric music- music that is performance specific and gives the decision making to each individual player to determine how to move through the score[32], creates unique performances each time. The score lacks any bars or time signature and, in some cases, like ‘In C’ by Terry Riley[33], it is comprised of 53 different musical

Below: Different examples of modern scores, from Terry Riley ‘In C’ to George Crumbs ‘Apparition’









29 (

30 (ussy

31 (ussy

32 A

33 N

phrases that each performer goes through in their own time repeating a phrase or moving forward. This differs greatly from scores by George Crumb, whose scores are art in themselves and contain shapes that the player moves through[34]. I wonder how scores can be used to create a performance that isn't directly music related, but helps to influence and provide a brief in different visual terms to how a performance should happen. To me, it is a language I understand very well and respond to much better to than music, as it provides a linear layout that includes time, instruction and a much wider range of time-based responses.

Conclusion

To conclude, much of this year has been spent researching and working out how my own interests in music can be translated into film and performance. My research into 20th Century music that started to blur the lines and expand the definition of music into a broader, more performance focused direction has been hugely influential in how I plan on continuing my practice. Upon reflection of Stage 1, a lot of what I created felt somewhat directionless and lacked a realisation of my personal interests. I was interested in 1920s Berlin and the performers that came from that era but there was a disconnect in how I linked my theory with my practical work. However in stage 2, my personal and university projects show a much clearer synergy of my research and personal interests with the films that I have made. My sinfonietta film was completely based on the music- my shot list being an annotated music score and this was developed further in my film project outcome where I took inspiration from Stravinsky's '*Rite of Spring'* and Scriabin's '*Poem of Ecstasy'*. The concepts discussed in this essay, specifically ideas of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' to the light show part in '*Prometheus'* and the works of John Cage and the Spectralists are forming the foundation to what will be my CSM Alive show next year, where I aim on writing a short 10 minute atonal opera, also drawing influence from Schönberg's '*Pierrot Lunaire'*, Alban Berg's '*Wozzeck'* and Philip Glass' '*Akhnaten'*. The journey that I have taken myself on throughout this year researching music from the mid 19th-20th centuries was one that I wanted to feel unrushed and a natural process, stopping at pieces and times like the post WWI era to explore and realise how I was relating my own ideas to this. I feel that the foundation that is built from this going into stage 3 will help guide me through and support the work that I intend on creating.

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[34] The Official George Crumb website (Unkown). 'The Official George Crumb Website'

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