

commentary for junkspace – progress?

Nikolaos-Laonikos Psimikakis-Chalkokondylis

Junkspace – progress? is a concertante piece scored for solo piano and an ensemble of thirteen performers (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, french horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion [woodblock, guiro, suspended cymbal], 2 violins, viola, violoncello and double bass). This composition was conceived of in many different layers, which were then translated into the technical aspects of composition (rhythm, harmony, form, notation, and orchestration) to express the underlying concepts and ideas of this piece. The commentary will take the form of outlining the **theoretical** and then the **technical** aspects of the composition, and how they are inter-related.

Two key readings which have led to the conception of this piece are Rem Koolhaas' essay "*junkspace*", and Jay Griffiths' writings, in particular "*A Sideways Look at Time*".

THEORETICAL ASPECTS

This piece is concerned primarily with concepts of cyclical time (versus linear time), and by extension sustainability, and at the same time acts as a protest against development and progress.

1. *junkspace*

*"If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, Junk-Space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet. The built (more about the later) product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization is in progress, its fallout."*¹

Junkspace is a word used by architect Rem Koolhaas in his essay with the same title, first published in *The Harvard Guide to Shopping* (Taschen, 2001, ed. by Koolhaas). As Hilary Powell (an artist currently doing her PhD on "*junk space*" at Goldsmith's University, London) explains it,

[Koolhaas'] *junkspace* describes an excess of 'non places'- shopping mall, precinct, leisure space - an accumulation of conditioned and conditional space. These constitute the fallout or meltdown of modernisation- a programme of entropy not progress offering a 'seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed' built to fall or fail. ²

Hilary goes on to say that the word "*junk*" implies there is a potential for re-use, a recycling of

1 Koolhaas, Rem, *Junkspace*, OCTOBER, Vol.10, Obsolescence (Spring 2002), p.175

2 Powell, Hilary, *Junkspace*, LINK

those 'waste' spaces in terms of use and function, to re-enter the urban environment and be transformed – an contemporary urban narrative of Nature's own cycles of creation and destruction where there is no such thing as waste: one animal's waste is another's food, and one animal's death is another's life.

This idea of recycling is one that is essential to the composition, as material comes back both within the score, but also there is a physical element of repetition, as the players go back to the beginning and go through the same material (apart from the pianist who chooses different material each time). The essence of “*junk*” is also evident in that the players seem to have completely unrelated material, and are in no way coordinated or have anything to do with each other: each player's material is a piece of junk-music, if you want, which is mixed together with everything else to create something which is music.

2. *cyclical time vs. linear time*

Junkspace – progress? deals with protesting against linear time, against the Newtonian concept of the immutable, straight, forward-going time and acts as a call for a more cyclical conception of time, a time that comes and goes, that moves in never-ending circles and which is evident everywhere in Nature, from the cyclical aspect of constant creation and transmutation of energy to particles at the microcosmic level, to life itself and the life-death cycle, or to precipitation cycles, the rotation of the earth around itself (day and night) and around the sun (seasons), larger environmental cycles (ice ages), or even cycles of star- and galaxy-formation, and perhaps even of the Universe itself.³

This composition is a **protest** against development without taking into account the long-term (or far-away) consequences, against progress in the linear, phallic manner that the West has

3 A book that has been very influential in this respect is Jay Griffiths' *A Sideways Look at Time*, where she talks about time in many different aspects: in terms of history, imperialism, colonialism, anthropology, psychology, science, religion, and provides a great insight in how indigenous peoples the world over have diametrically opposite conceptions of time than we do and at the same time puts across the point that these conceptions are as valid as ours and we should not disregard them simply on the grounds that all these cultures are not as 'developed' as we are.

conceived of it, at the expense of thousands of indigenous cultures and now the planet itself, against modernity as it manifests itself in unimaginable amounts of waste and junkspaces, and against the imposed, linear time that the clock dictates our everyday lives with. It highlights the differences between linear time (*past is dead*) and cyclical time (*past is alive*), and at the same time is a **call** for sustainability, a call for a cyclical conception of time, an acceptance of the natural way of things and a going-with-it attitude. It **questions** the concept of *progress* as something being inherently good and unavoidable, and tries to show that there can be change without necessarily development at the expense of the total, and that we do not have to attempt and perceive everything as a development of something else that has come before it, because development takes as much place *longitudinally* (across time in the same place) as it does *latitudinally* (across space in the same time).

3. *Concertante form*

Lastly, the brief for the composition is that we compose a *concertante* work for a solo instrument and up to thirteen performers. I chose piano as the solo instrument mainly because I play the piano, but also because the piano provided some interesting bases on which I could build the rest of my composition.

To begin with, the way I improvise (and by extension, compose) on the piano is completely different than 'improvising' or composing on paper. I have been playing the piano for about seven years, and because of the particular kind of compositions I am used to playing (baroque, classical, romantic, early twentieth-century composition and jazzs), my hands instinctively go where they are used to going, and the sounds I come up with are a lot more like the sound of these pieces than the sounds I would like to play. There is a particular soundscape that accompanies my 'free' piano playing (e.g. my favourite keys on the piano is those of C minor and F minor – because I've played many compositions in these keys and I am very familiar with them, as well as because most of the

jazz pieces I've learnt were in those keys).

On the other hand, as I have only relatively recently started composing on paper, I haven't had the time to be influenced by a habit of writing in a particular manner. Therefore, when I try to compose on paper, I have a much more uninfluenced way of composing than composing on the piano, and this is a contrast I explore in the composition: the piano part was composed/improvised on the piano, while the ensemble part was composed entirely on paper, and the contrast between the two different characters is not only evident throughout the piece, but forms the basis of the sonic elements that consist the composition.

Without going into detail, the notion of a “concerto” has changed significantly over time and has gained a completely different meaning in the 20th and 21st centuries. To me, the only sine qua non for a concerto is the idea of contrast (a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one), and this aspect of concerto writing I have tried to explore the most in my composition, while perhaps neglecting the virtuosic element that is apparent in many concertos in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Therefore, *junkspace – progress?* explores primarily exactly that contrast mentioned earlier, between *improvisation* and *composition*, but also a *dionysean* vs an *apollonian*, an '*instinctive*' vs a '*civilised*' way of composing, '*play time*' versus '*work time*', and in terms of the physical relationship of the pianist to the ensemble, the '*individual*' versus the '*collective*'. Using the piano is also very helpful as it makes these contrasts much clearer, and the electronics have partly been used to enhance this difference in soundscape between the piano and the ensemble.

The pianist's **choices** in the score are also very important in the structure of the piece: depending on the choices the pianist makes, the audience will interpret the composition differently. For example, if during the first time through the pianist chooses to play the alternating chords in bar 23 instead of the repeated single notes, the audience might think that the alternating sharp chords at the end of the piece (between piano and ensemble) are a '*development*' of that. On the other hand, if the pianist chooses the other option, the audience will hear the sharp chords (at rehearsal mark L)

first, and then when the pianist goes back to bar 23 (and therefore now has to choose the alternating chords) may hear the alternating chords as a development of the crashing chords which they just heard.

Moreover, the third time the pianist makes a choice in the beginning, the audience will either go “Ah, that's just like the very beginning” (if he chooses the option he chose in the very beginning) or they'll go “Ah, that's just like last time the piece started again” (if he chooses the option he chose after the first repeat), which again is there to enhance the feeling of non-linearity: the possibilities of a performance of the piece (16 different interpretations, without accounting for all the different possible ending places) exist at the same time and only collapse at the moment of performance – but each one of them is equally my piece as any other.

The way and reason this is set up like this is exactly to nullify any concept of development, by showing how our reaction to things and our attempts at making sense of things in terms of development and cause-and-effect are susceptible to misunderstanding and are not the only way in which we can perceive our experience of the world.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

HARMONY

I don't have perfect pitch. This is something that has affected my compositions in a very fundamental way: if I can't hear something in a composition, it is irrelevant to me. On one hand there is Messiaen's *Modes des Valeurs et d'itensites*, which is a brilliant example of a very interesting technique which is extremely audible and discernible (perhaps not on all levels to the first listener). On the other hand there is Boulez and his *Structures*: I admire the dedication he has put in the structuring of the whole compositions based on mathematical formulae and matrices, and when I listen to the pieces I may as well enjoy them, but the techniques he used are completely irrelevant to me because I just can't hear at all what he does: for all I care, he could have picked his

notes randomly and come up with the same result, and it wouldn't have made a difference.

For this reason, I have always strived to compose music in terms that are relevant to what I can hear. As I said, I cannot tell if a particular note is right or wrong – however, I can tell if there is a particular harmonic feeling in the music, and when that harmonic feeling changes. If there's a piece in C minor, I can tell when it goes to E-flat, although I might not be able to tell all the notes that have gone in between, or which notes are currently being played.

In terms of harmony, I created a group of five four-note chords. At any one point in the ensemble writing, there is a maximum of two (adjacent) chords sounding at the same time, and that is in the transition from one chord to the next. These changes in chords are further accentuated by a *sfz>p*: every time an instrument plays the 'next' chord for the first time, it marks this change with a very loud and sharp beginning, before going back to the previous dynamic.

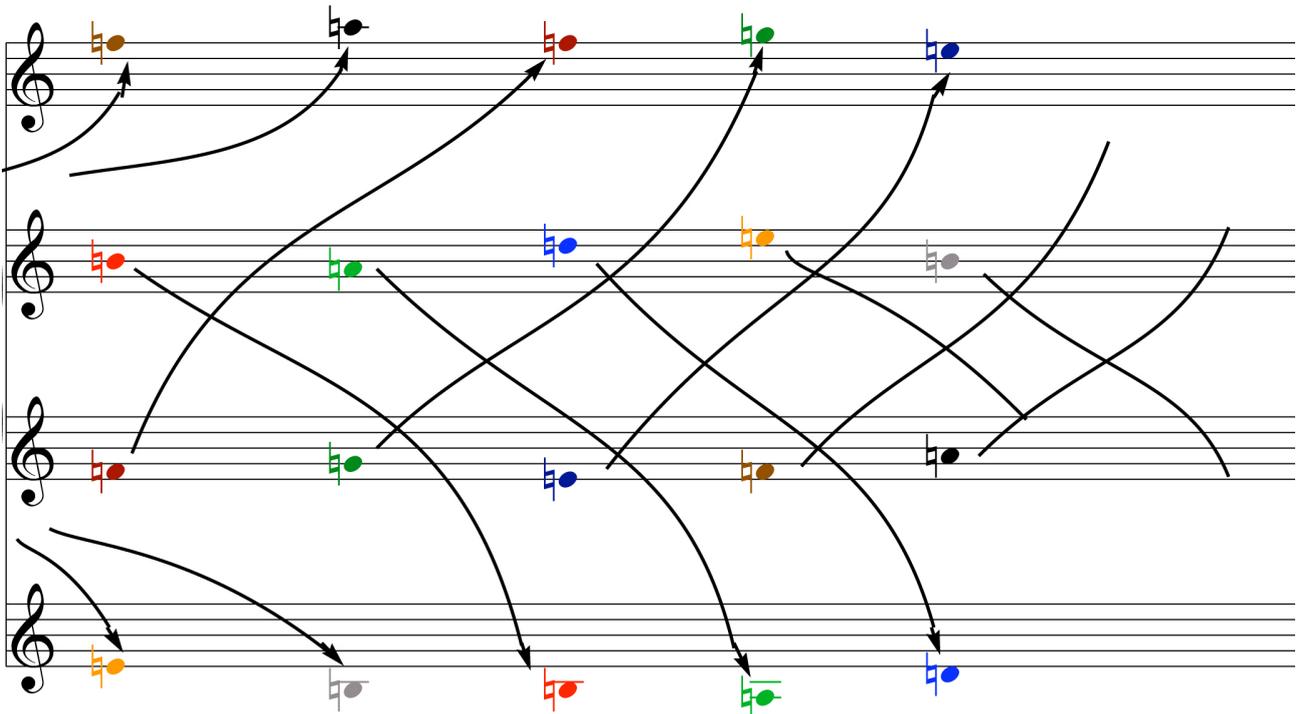
To arrive at these chords, I started by creating my own counterpoint rules to help me create a particular kind of soundscape and harmonic field (for example, I really like sevenths and ninths):

1. Between the outer two voices (soprano and bass), only intervals of minor/major sevenths, minor/major seconds, and of the tritone (and their compounds) are allowed.
2. No interval between the outer two voices can be immediately followed by the same interval.
3. No note from the outer two voices may be repeated in the outer two voices.
4. The outer two voices must move parsimoniously (no jump larger than a fourth).
5. For any two adjacent chords, there must be no notes in common.

I would first attempt at creating musically interesting two-voice counterpoint, and then fill in the remaining notes. After spending weeks of writing down attempts of chords that satisfy all of the aforementioned conditions, I eventually came up with the following five chords:

#1 #2 #3 #4 #5

One of the most interesting aspects of these chords is that they form a kind of harmonic musical Möbius strip: the inner two voices of any chord become the outer two voices of the second chord from the right. (The alto part becomes the bass part, and the tenor part becomes the soprano part). What's more, these chords are cyclical: chord #1 follows chord #5, and the 'sequence' could start at any point. (In fact, the chords have only been assigned a number for a matter of convenience, not due to any structural significance.)



Every time the ensemble comes in, the material in total is very similar, but slightly different (different instruments have different rhythms, and the pitches are always different). The structure of each "chunk" of ensemble music is as follows: (a) a small 'introductory' passage, and a loud chord; (b) strings only; (c) the whole ensemble; (d) winds and brass only. The reason for that is that, as the strings can play very softly, they can prepare the entry of the wind and brass instruments in a much more fluid and organic manner.

The reason the ensemble "chunks" are very similar in character but slightly different each time is to challenge the notion of "development" (and by extension "progress"): each "chunk" could

be a 'development' of any other chunk. As we have a tendency to think of something with regards to what has come just before it, the repeat signs act to turn this upside down, by making the audience hear the beginning as a potential "development" of any other ensemble chunk somewhere else in the piece, thus rendering any sort of attachment importance to the beginning or ending of the piece meaningless.

There were other issues in terms of orchestration, mainly that there is single string instruments against single wind and brass instruments, which poses an issue in terms of balance. I tried to tone down the dynamics of the wind and brass writing, as well as mute them for some of the passages, to make sure the difference in volume will not affect the musicality of the ensemble writing.

The way the harmony is structured in the piece is as follows:

Bar numbers	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
1 to 26	chord #5	chord #1	chords #1 + #2	chord #2
36 to 63	chord #2	chord #3	chords #3+#4 then chords #4+#5	chord #5
76 to 101	chord #5	chord #1	chords #1+#2 then chords #2+#3	chord #3
104 to 125	chord #3	chord #4	chord #4+#5	chord #5
126 to 138	<i>(this section is different in that the whole range of chords is present in those bars)</i>			

The harmony is structured in such a way so that each ensemble section harmonically 'dovetails' into the next one, by restating the last chord that was played by the ensemble and then by moving through the circle of chords I created. The repeat mark is just after (a) of the ensemble section from bars 76 to 101, so that dovetailing also works with the repeats.

FORM

With the development of institutionalised music education and the rise of music theorists and analysts, composers have often found ways of composing through tools of analysis, whether aiming at re-creating the music of the past (e.g. David Cope's EMI, which analyses music of a particular composer in terms of counterpoint, harmony etc, and then re-creates a piece of music based on the same guidelines), or creating “music of the future” (e.g. Boulez, using methods of analysing 12-tone music to compose his own music in the 1950's).

In the past, form has usually been a product of some other aspect of my compositions and I haven't focused on form in itself as an important aspect of the composition. With this composition, I reverse this and place form in the foreground, as it is primarily form through which the ideas behind the composition are expressed. I deliberately used Tenney's ideas with regards to musical form in the 20th century.⁴ The piano music consists of different *sequences*, each one of which is characterised by a distinct *clangs*. The elements of those clangs are of little structural importance, as they were improvised and not composed per se – however, the clangs, and by extension the sequences, are very important in structuring the piece. I deliberately chose very distinct clangs which a non-specialist audience can identify and remember: (a) the arpeggios in the first few bars; (b) the repeated notes; (c) the alternating chords; (d) the plain chords; (e) the jazzy line; (f) the quite quicker jazzy line; and (g) the sharp chords. These elements are very distinct so that when they come back, the audience will be able to relate them to what they have heard before, and the piano writing is not entirely virtuosic at all times, firstly because I don't believe the virtuoso performer has the same place in our society as he/she did in the 18th and 19th centuries (where the concerto form proliferated), and because my concerto is not focused on the skills of the pianist but rather on the ability of the pianist to actively engage and transform the audience's experience of the piece.

In Tenney's terminology, therefore, my composition would be described as having a

⁴ Tenney, James, *Form in 20th Century Music*. An edited version was published in the Dictionary of Contemporary Music (1973), but I used his original version (1969-70), found online:

metamorphic structure, and being a kind of cyclical windowed ergodic form with extrinsic limits (the conductor's will) with regards to its (performance) closure.

I am also very fond of the physicality of “going back to the beginning” that the repeat marks carry with them. I could have written the whole piece out straight, but it would take away that very essential underlying idea of cyclical time, and of sustainability: the ensemble music survives by starting and ending again in a similar manner, not by attempting to stay on the foreground forever.

NOTATION:

For this composition I decided to return to traditional notation for most part. I avoided using extended techniques for the piano or the ensemble, as the main focus of the composition is not to exploit the particular soundscape that these instruments can make (although this is, of course, explored in the ensemble writing), but rather lies in the form and structure of the ensemble writing and the use and exhibition of the harmony.

Early during the piece, I was intrigued by the idea of using actual repeat signs, and having the whole composition repeat, preferably more than once. That's when I realised that, despite my intense interest in notation and my exploration of the notational aspect of composition in the past, I have never used repeat signs in the past.

I think repeat signs are very intriguing notational symbols. Composer and theoretician Thomas DeLio talks of traditional notation as being 'structure-agnostic':⁵ traditional notation does not serve the structures or forms of compositions, but rather what we fill these structures with, i.e. notes and rhythms (and expression marks). He goes on to demonstrate how an awareness of the importance of structure in composition resulted in the invention of new notations in experimental american music (that of Cage, Feldman, Wolff etc) which were structure-aware. He mentions repeat signs as one of the very few traditional notation symbols which are not structure-agnostic.

5 DeLio, Thomas, *Sound, Gesture and Symbol: The relation between notation and structure in American Experimental Music*, Interface, Vol.10 (1981). pp.199-219. The journal has now changed name to *Journal of New Music Research* and is published by X.

There is also no final barline in the composition. Apart from being a result of my desire to have a slightly 'open-ended' composition (in terms of when it ends, not how), it is also significant in that it does not define the composition. We usually perceive of something as linear when it has a clear beginning and a clear end, but when there is no such thing as end, and the beginning loses its function as it later on becomes part of the middle and part of the end of the piece

ELECTRONICS

The reason I chose to use electronics for this composition is threefold: firstly, I wanted to further differentiate the sound of the piano from that of the ensemble even further; secondly, I wanted to add a very literal element of 'junk' sounds, which is done by the 'dirty' sounding electronic soundscape; and thirdly, as the piano writing is relatively simple, I wanted to add to the complexity of the resulting sound by adding the electronics.

The reason I used delays is also to enhance the feeling of cyclical time on yet another level – things keep coming back, whether in the long run (overall form of the piece), medium run (within one repetition of the piece) or the short run (electronic delays).