

R-E-S-T and Composition: Silence, Breath and aah . . . [Gap] Musical Rest

Antonia Barnett-McIntosh

Abstract Antonia Barnett-McIntosh’s compositional concerns lie in the specificity of sound gestures and their variation, translation and adaptation, often employing chance-based and procedural operations. In this chapter, Antonia describes how her research with Hubbub investigated musical rest and its opposites, silence and noise, and rest and exhaustion, and outlines the compositional processes at work in the development of two pieces composed during her residency: *Breath* for solo alto flute (world premiere by Ilze Ikse at the Hubbub Late Spectacular at Wellcome Collection, 4 September 2015), and *none sitting resting* for string quartet (world premiere by Aurora Orchestra at BBC Radio 3’s ‘Why Music?’ at Wellcome Collection, 26 September 2015).

Keywords Compositional practice · Flute · Performance · Rest · String quartet

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none
string

Vln. I: Write letters E-T-R-S in block capitals across your instrument with your bow. Dynamics come in from nothing, then play within range *pppp* and *mp*. Duration 1:42.

Vln. II: Write letters T-R-S-E in block capitals across your instrument with your bow. Dynamics come in from nothing, then play within range *pppp* and *mp*. Duration 1:19.

Vla.: Write letters S-R-T-E in block capitals across your instrument with your bow. Dynamics come in from nothing, then play within range *pppp* and *mp*. Duration 0:14.

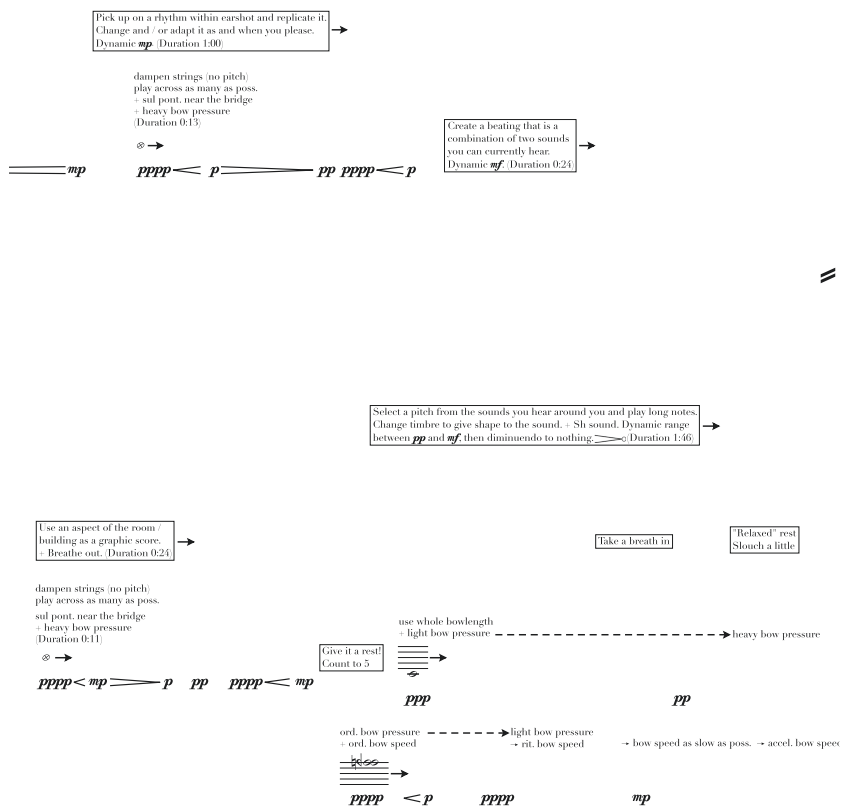
Vc.: White noise (Duration 0:11). Draw a ♯ shape across the fingerboard with your bow. Repeat. (Duration 0:17).

Double Bass: 5-beat : 0:03 rest. Create a beating that is a combination of two sounds you can currently hear. Dynamic range between *p* and *mf*. (Duration 0:29).

Fig. 17.1 Opening page of *none sitting resting* (Credit: Antonia Barnett-McIntosh, 2016)

sitting resting quartet

Antonia Barnett-McIntosh



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Fig. 17.1 Continued

INTRO

During my research with Hubbub, I contemplated relating music to the themes of rest and its opposites. What does musical rest entail? What could the opposite of rest in music mean? What are the qualities of sound at rest in music and music notation? How could one perform rest? Simply, the first two queries suggest silence and sound,¹ and so I pondered silence. . . .

The closest I've come to a silent experience, lengthy silence, took place above a remote New Zealand mountain-top's tree-line on a still day.¹ Above the trees, above the birds. In a musical setting, a more momentary silence occurs when a hush descends on an audience before an orchestra begins a piece (the conductor poised with baton in the air to ready the orchestra) and remains after (the conductor poised again with baton in the air, which is then released to signal the orchestra to relax).

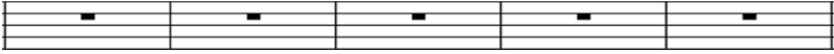
I view silence and sound not as a binary positive/negative, but as presence and absence. Where sound exists, so does silence: They permeate each other. Musical rest corresponds to sound: preceding, proceeding, creating space in the middle, as a counterpart, creating context. Thomas Clifton writes: "To focus on the phenomenon of musical silence is analogous to deliberately studying the spaces between trees in a forest: somewhat perverse at first, until one realizes that these spaces contribute to the perceived character of the forest itself, and enable us to speak coherently of "dense" growth or "sparse" vegetation. In other words, silence is not nothing. It is not the null set."² I centred my research on looking at (listening to) those in-between spaces, between the trees, so to speak, and thinking of rest conceptually. I abstracted aspects of musical rest and recontextualized them as sound objects.

COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS (AND THEMES OF REST)

When I begin a new piece, I imagine a page's whiteness as silence, the blankness as space mapped in time. I carefully choose gestures to position within that time-space, thinking of silence as the frame in which to place sound in a context.

¹ Cf. Chap. 18.

I start with pencil and paper, but even if you set the minutes of your score in notation software, bars and bars of rest appear for pages and pages laid out before you:



I use meditation-like tacticsⁱⁱ to confront the empty time-space, letting ideas bubble leisurely in the back of my brain. I recently began using my own version of Julia Cameron's 'Morning Pages'³ technique (stream-of-consciousness writing by hand, first thing in the morning, three sides of A4) to help me formulate artistic concepts. Analogue writing generates ideas I wouldn't otherwise conceive by only thinking.

These words behave as prompts, triggering thoughts for what I want, and also weeding out what I don't want a piece to deal with. I can capture certain ideas and make decisions without the pressure of thinking in finished thought. I can tether multiple concepts to focus on exactly which combinations interest me. Through committing words to paper, I eliminate superfluous elements and concentrate on important ones. This writing style enables me to articulate and realize ideas casually and encourages a concept to *pop*.

The pages often establish a list of parameters first. The string quartet pages started: 'A string quartet. Around 15 minutes long. Performed in September by players from Aurora Orchestra....' You get the idea. I labelled those pages 'String Quartet brain vomit'.

A few steps later, I plan a system to generate material using a method I call my bag process. I break down into categories aspects of sounds I want to investigate. I write variables within these categories on small pieces of paper, fold them, put them into categorized bags and then 'pull' the composition by drawing out the pieces of paper. All the categories combine to create particular notes, sounds or gestures. I call on past iterations of this process to see what has worked before and tailor the current composition accordingly. This process is at once chance based and a well-considered procedure, a kind of Choose Your Own Adventure.ⁱⁱⁱ Occasionally, I circumvent the process, depending on which combinations are possible, or not.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Chap. 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Chap. 19.

Categories can include instrumentation, pitch, rhythm, techniques, articulation, dynamics, duration and more. Instrumentation is usually decided for me. For a category like dynamics, I'll select a range and write out each variable within that range. Techniques and articulation depend on instrumentation, and I calculate choices based on the quality of sounds I'd like to use. Others, like pitch, rhythm and duration, can take on a random system, in which I trust my brain to come up with what I need, writing the variables on to the pieces of paper off the top of my head, as a gut reaction. I sit with a pile of pieces of cut-up paper and I get in the zone and just go for it, until I've composed the allotted time-space. As I go, I record everything I've pulled, in order, in a chart.

BREATH: A SOLO ALTO FLUTE PIECE

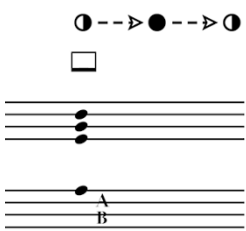
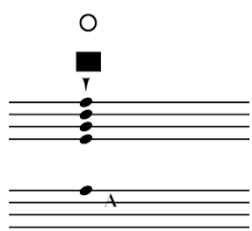
<p>3 IN 8 sec.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><i>p</i> < <i>fff</i> > <i>p</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">spoken Λ + grunt/gasp at end of breath</p>	<p>4 OUT 33 sec. ' (alap*)</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><i>mf</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">use vowels (Λ, E, I) to create gliss. effect + gravel, w voice</p>
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Fig. 17.2 In-Breath 3 and Out-Breath 4 from *Breath*. Credit: Antonia Barnett-McIntosh, 2016

In first-year composition class, our teacher played a flute piece and afterwards asked what we could say about the performer. I was struck by how little we'd noticed. I'd carefully listened to what I thought of as the composed music, not the performance. On second playing, I heard the subtle intakes of breath and realized the performer was a woman. Since then I've been interested in the in-between sounds that contribute to a performance.

For a flute player, the breath holds the pace of musical life. Reading a rest in flute music traditionally signifies the end of a phrase, at which point the performer uses the opportunity to take a breath. Breath control becomes extremely important, and flute players train for years to make breath sounds inaudible, especially when they need to take a breath quickly. Flute players have formidable stamina and lung capacity, naturally employing tactics to cope with exhaustion.

I was interested in what happened when the traditional in-breath/out-breath structure broke, and in how I could repurpose the in-between breath as a performative sound element – as the backbone of the piece and sole source of sound, rather than a by-product. I decided to write a piece exploring the breath and rest, breathlessness and exhaustion, in which the performer utilizes each in- and out-breath in the creation of sound, exposing the inhale as an equal partner to the exhale. I asked the flute player Ilze Ikse to collaborate on the piece, and together we investigated how she could handle not taking a breath for ten minutes. We measured the lengths of her breath and experimented with adding sonic techniques. In order to literally embody the sound, the alto flute behaves as a resonator for Ilze's body and breath.

The score defines each inhale and exhale as a single gesture (Figs. 17.2 and 17.3). I constructed these using my bag process. For each one, I notated duration, airflow (open or restricted throat and variables in between), embouchure (open or closed mouthpiece and variables in between), fingering (not to denote pitch but to optimize the resonance of the sound – whether a particular construct required a more open or more closed resonator), dynamic and technique (such as using the voice, singing, speaking, sss-ing, fff-ing, whistling).

The character of the breath transforms with each gesture and the performer must concentrate on combining all the variables, which often contend for priority. In a way, I'm deliberately wishing for, prescribing, failure. The performer shouldn't appear to present an unrehearsed or badly performed piece, but the quality of the sound I'm proposing lies in the attempt to achieve these combinations, and in this case, the qualities inherent in a particular kind of exertion.

The performance of *Breath* comprises other uncertainties. One performer's capabilities and breath supply differ from another's. The playing of the piece can also depend on how much the performer slept the night before, what they ate for lunch and how nervous or relaxed they feel, for example. I'm very open to these shifting variables becoming a part of the piece. Each *Breath* performance will be a unique rendition, personal to the performer.



<p>13 IN 32 sec.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">○</p> <p style="text-align: center;">□</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><i>pp</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">spoken F stuttered</p>	<p>14 OUT 30 sec.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">' (@ 12 sec. ○ for 9 sec.)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">□</p>  <p style="text-align: center;"><i>p</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">sung + "And I watched her, and wondered how she knew." (w pitch/air - high)</p>
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Fig. 17.3 In-Breath 13 and Out-Breath 14 from *Breath. Image* (Credit: Antonia Barnett-McIntosh, 2016)

NONE SITTING RESTING: A PIECE FOR STRING QUARTET

While composing *none sitting resting* (see Fig. 17.1), I worked alongside collaborators from the neurosciences, the social sciences, psychology and other artistic disciplines. And while the piece doesn't illustrate scientific ideas, my collaborators' concepts and processes permeated my work and feature in the music. For example, I borrowed the title from a poem by James Wilkes, which he generated using a linguistic corpus, a database of written and spoken language samples. James had searched the term 'resting' and the corpus returned a spectrum of English sentences containing 'resting'. I chose the shortest, 'none sitting resting'.

none sitting resting investigates the qualities of sound at rest in music and music notation. The piece comprises different concepts of musical rest. I divided the material into three main categories – musical gestures, text instructions and bow techniques. I used my bag process to generate gestures one by one. I allocated durations to each, and placed them one after another, either horizontally (in time) or vertically (in combination with other instruments). After attributing other techniques and dynamics to sculpt each gesture, I added in some 'restful' gestures – using musical

rest, performed rest, pauses, gaps, breaks ('take a sip of water'), audible breath, bodily rest ('slouch a little'), one bow length as one breath, the scrapes and scratches that happen inadvertently between sounds – as sonic material for the piece.

This score is task- or action-based, rather than results-based. Again, in-between sounds play a role – the attempt to combine particular bow techniques with impossibly soft dynamics, for example – and so the overall quality of sound becomes not polished and perfected but emerges from the playing style, which adds a certain liveness in performance. One task requires that the players write capital letters from the word R-E-S-T across their instruments' fingerboards. Another asks the players to respond to sounds and visual shapes in the surrounding space (by adding a texture, selecting a pitch, replicating a rhythm) from each other's playing, or from inside and outside the performance space ('use an aspect of the room/building as a graphic score').

The piece's length ranges between 12 and 18 minutes. I have not supplied metronome markings or accumulative time frames. Players can interpret the time-space layout of the score (where one system, or half page, could constitute roughly one to one-and-a-half minutes) as a guide. While timings have been allocated to some gestures, stopwatches must not be used. Players should estimate durations in the moment while performing, and interact with each other (though never through physical, gestural conductor-type cues), giving a sense of time stretching and contracting. This allows for numerous potential interpretations – of the sound quality of the musical gestures, text instructions and bow techniques, and of the durations of the 'restful' gestures. The performance directions state: 'Take your time. It doesn't matter if it seems like you're out of time. There's no such thing.'

OUTRO

NOTES

1. Much writing and analysis exists on the musical function of rest and silence. If you're interested in reading more on the topic, see John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961); Zofia Lissa, 'Aesthetic Functions of Silence and Rests in Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22, no. 4 (1964): 443–54; Jennifer Judkins, 'The Aesthetics of Silence in Live Musical Performance', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 31, no. 3 (1997): 39–53; David Metzger, 'Modern Silence', *Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 3 (1 July 2006): 331–74; and Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, 'Silences in Music Are Musical Not Silent: An Exploratory Study of Context Effects on the Experience of Musical Pauses', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 24, no. 5 (2007): 485–506; and Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, 'Moved by Nothing: Listening to Musical Silence', *Journal of Music Theory* 51, no. 2 (2007): 245–76.
2. Thomas Clifton, 'The Poetics of Musical Silence', *Musical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1976), 163.
3. Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee, 1992), 9–24.

Antonia Barnett-McIntosh is a composer and sound artist. Her work has been performed in the United Kingdom, Europe, Scandinavia, New Zealand and the United States – including at Wigmore Hall and The Pit, Barbican Centre (London), Arnolfini (Bristol) and DAAD Galerie and Theater im Aufbau Haus (Berlin).



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