Chapter 14

Composing נבול (Border)

Composing גבול (Border)

Dr. Dániel Péter Biró is an Associate Professor/Førsteamanuensis at the Grieg Academy, University of Bergen. After studying in Hungary, Germany, and Austria, he completed his PhD at Princeton University in 2004 and taught Composition and Music Theory at the University of Victoria. He has been commissioned by major festivals and venues and won international composition prizes. He served as Visiting Professor at Utrecht University (2011) and Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University (2014-2015). Biró was elected to the College of New Scholars, Scientists, and Artists in the Royal Society of Canada in 2015 and awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017. His compositions are performed around the world.

Introduction

In 2016 – 2017, I wrote the three-movement work *Gvul (Border),* premiered by Ermis Theodorakis at the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp in Aix-en-Provence, France, on July 25, 2017.[1] In this chapter, I will discuss the process of composing the work, how the composition deals with specific notions of recent European history, and the conditions for the performance in the context of the 2017 *Narratives of Memory* summer school at the University of Victoria.[2]

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1 The piece was explicitly written for Ermis Theodorakis, who has developed a very scientific methodology towards complex rhythms, proving himself to be one of the great musicians of our time. Before the concert of the work *Gvul (Border)*, a panel discussion took place with Dániel Péter Biró School of Music, University of Victoria, pianist Ermis Theodorakis from Leipzig, Germany, Prof. Gunnar Hindrichs from the Department of Philosophy, University of Basel, and Helga Hallgrimsdóttir, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria. The commissioning of the piece was made possible through grants from Art Mentor Lucerne and the Canada Council for the Arts.

2 The course integrated students from Canada, Hungary, Germany, France, Korea, Pakistan, the U.S., and the Ivory Coast in the fields of music, law, the social sciences, and the

The task of writing for the Camp des Milles presented me with a conceptual challenge in terms of writing for such a space of historical and lasting significance. Les Milles camp functioned first as a French internment camp between 1939 and 1942. In Vichy France, Les Milles became a deportation camp for Jews.[3] In the initial stages of creation, I set out to explore the history of the camp from a contemporary perspective via the formation of musical material and form, seeking to explore the space as both a historical site of violence and trauma as well as to experience its present reality as a negative space, thereby investigating the contemporary sonorous ontology of the space. In planning the structure and conceptual framework of the composition, I proceeded to "translate" both the historical dimensions and the acoustic properties of the spaces within the Camp des Milles into musical material and form.

Gvul (Border), scored for piano and electronics, explores the limits of memory, as it examined relationships between musical form, sonorous material, and historical perception.[4] The instrumentation for the composition became important in the context of the *Narratives of Memory* project, which aimed to investigate contemporary global issues through the visitation and study of historical places of violence and trauma.

In *Gvul (Border)* the piano is explored as both a resonant space and an object of history. The piano has existed, since the 18th century, as the representation *par excellence* of bourgeois music production, playing a significant role in the development of European art music. In writing for the piano as a historical entity, I purposely decided to investigate the "shadow world" of this instrument, as it corresponds to its history

humanities. At each location, lectures, discussions, pre-concert talks and post-concert talks accompanied the performances. The lectures dealt specifically with the relationships between music history, memory, and trauma. As this was a multidisciplinary group of students, the discussions were fruitful, as each student brought their own perspective from their own discipline. While in Europe, students learned about historical sites that dealt specifically with the Holocaust and the current migration crisis; in Canada the focus shifted to the current Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings of the Canadian government. Music was directly woven into the fabric of the course discussions and learning outcomes.

3 For more on the Camp des Milles see United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Les Milles Camp." *Holocaust Encyclopedia.* Accessed 29 January 2019. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/les-milles-camp.

4 The Hebrew word גבול (Gvul) can pertain to space (borders between regions), time (the border to the Sabbath), limits, and thresholds. In this piece, the term works to define the limits of memory and the threshold between environmental noise, sonorous space, and musical form.

as a bourgeois concert instrument of the nineteenth-century salon and concert hall. The composition *Gvul (Borders)* thus explores the piano as a place of ruin of previous centuries, and even as a place of historical trauma to be discovered in our own century, as depicted in the following excerpt of a poem by Celan originally published in German in 1959.

> **Negative Space**
>
> *Taken off into the*
> *terrain*
> *with the unmistakable trace:*
> *Grass. Grass, written asunder.* (Celan 2002, 119)

The composition of a piece of music entails both the creation of and a response to the history of sound. A piece of music can serve to awaken memories that have been repressed or forgotten. The composer, in creating a musical form for the listener, forms a dialogue between subject (composer), object (listener), and observer (listener). Simultaneously, the listener creates a personal form by "reading into" the composition. In the case of *Gvul (Border),* such interpretation becomes heightened, as the materiality of the composition centres around absence or, in architectural terms, "negative space."

In architecture, negative space relates to the hollowing out of a solid object that already exists.[5] Such "negative spaces" can be found in many central European cities, which have been formed in the course of history by countless wars, revolutions, demolitions of state planning. In terms of the Holocaust, negative space plays a central role in the architecture of the camps. In the visitation to Ravensbrück, during the *Narratives of Memory* field school, the ruins of the Siemens *Arbeitslager* present the negative space of the buildings, the visitor's imagination needing to be informed by the description of the camp to imagine the larger context of the conditions within the camp during the National Socialist period.

Such a "negative space" was once found in Budapest as well. With each passing year, the ongoing renovation of buildings filled with bullet-

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5 The term "negative space" is understood here as used in contemporary art and architecture. See Zdeněk Kočíb's "Quasi-Negative Space in Painting" in *Leonardo* 19, no. 2 (1986), 141–44 and Wolf Prix and Coop Himmelblau's "The Tower of Babel Revisited" in *ANY: Architecture New York, Writing in Architecture* (May/June 1993), 26–29.

holes, missing spaces, and other traces of the violence of the past century disappear, allowing for a sanitized city to be part of a general historical amnesia. While renovation can serve to improve and preserve historical buildings, the ruling Fidesz regime's practice of renaming street names (often naming streets after politicians of the fascist era), means that new generations become more ideologically aligned with the present regime's right-wing narrative of history and forget the previous system of so-called socialism.[6]

The concept of "negative space" in *Gvul (Border)* is initially investigated via the resonance of piano. In the composition, resonance is used to present traces of sounds that "were there before" by means of "ghost instruments," resonating acoustic instruments that become activated by computer processing, in this case the piano itself. Investigating concepts of absence and memory, convolution is employed (a procedure in which the timbral information of one instrument gets processed by that of another instrument, acoustic space, or sound) in coordination with resonant instruments, which create sonorous "shadows" of corresponding instruments played by performers.[7]

In writing for the specific space of the Camp des Milles, I decided to incorporate the piano as an architectural entity, as "space of resonance" that would correspond to the very space of the performance. In so doing, I set out to create a form that would act as an analogy to the visitor's experience of the space as a historical entity, as well as processes of individual and collective memory that corresponded to such a place of traumatic experience.

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6 According to Daniel Nolan in the *Guardian* "among the contentious figures now on the map are writers and alleged war criminals Albert Wass and József Nyírő, alongside the less divisive, such as 1950s footballer Nándor Hidegkuti and actor Imre Sinkovits. Names forced to make way have included Köztársaság tér (Republic Square), Moszkva tér (Moscow Square), Roosevelt tér and Ságvári Endre utca, a street named after a communist resistance leader who was gunned down by a military policeman during the Arrow Cross rule towards the end of the second world war." "Hungary Drops Plan to Name Street after Antisemitic Author Cécile Tormay." T*he Guardian* International edition, October 7, 2013. Accessed 29 January 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/07/hungary-drops-street-antisemitic-author-cecile-tormay.

7 The electronic processing for the electronic components of *Gvul (Border)* was created in coordination with Sam Wolk. I am very grateful for his assistance in this project.

> Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living — especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier." (Adorno 1973, 362-63)

In writing a music composition for such a space as the Camp des Milles, the composer must consider and respond to the unimaginable experiences of the individuals who were interned in the camp. My main purpose with recording the rooms of the camp was to allow the space to speak for itself. In so doing, the composition functioned to translate experiences of trauma into musical form and narrative.

Trauma as experienced by individuals and collectives are often accompanied by lapses in memory. In visiting the architectural spaces where traumatic events occurred, one can set out to investigate the nature of the space in its past and present existence and functionality. Therefore, I set out to incorporate the resonant nature of the spaces of the Camp des Milles into the compositional framework. First I created impulse response files of the various rooms within the camp. With convolution reverb, an audio signal–processing algorithm, based on the properties of a given space such as the rooms of the Camp des Milles, simulates the reverberation of a given acoustic space. In *Gvul (Border)* the impulse response becomes activated through the piano, and the virtual, recorded spaces of the Camp des Milles undergo a convolution process with the incoming acoustic signals (Hass 2013). Simultaneously, the musical form of *Gvul* shows a process of trauma, much like an

individual struggling to remember traumatic experiences of the past. The three movements present three types of analogy to memory loss.

The sound production in the first movement functions to re-enact a situation of complete memory loss, as the historical sound of the piano is negated. Here, the pianist produces only sounds related to hitting various parts of the piano (hitting the inside supporters with a hammer, striking with the palm on the wood underneath the piano, hitting with knuckles on the wood at the end of the keyboard, dragging a tuner along the tuning pegs and dragging guitar picks and knuckles along the keyboard). Each action relates to a proportion derived from the Fibonacci series. This sets up the proportional structure for the following movements.
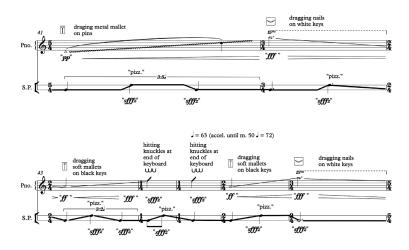

FIGURE 14.1. *Gvul (Border)*, movement 1 mm. 41-47. (Biró, 2017)

The second movement incorporates resonant pitches, which are pressed down silently at the beginning of the piece and activated by the sustain pedal. The movement integrates a cannon process, which presents polyrhythmic lines of pitches moving from the lowest to the highest note of the keyboard, the rhythm of which being determined by an increasing and decreasing prime number series. Also here, negative space becomes integrated into this complex musical process, as the rising line avoids articulation of the pitches pressed down with the help of the sustain pedal.
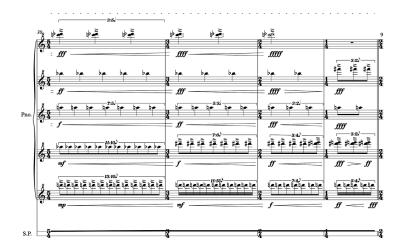
FIGURE 14.2. *Gvul (Border)*, movement II mm. 36-39. (Biró, 2017)

In the third movement, the piece forms a dialogue with Schubert's last piano sonata, *Sonata in B-Flat major*, D. 960. This composition, written in the last months of the composer's life, acts as a kind of sonorous ruin.[8] In the course of the third movement of *Gvul (Border)*, isolated moments of the first movement of the sonata appear as single fragmented events, which are determined, once again, as the actions in the first movement, by the Fibonacci series. Here, musical form and memory acts as an analogy for traumatized memory, as Schubert's composition is revealed in mainly shorter, sometimes longer flashbacks. Simultaneously, other types of musical material, serialized pitches based on the resonant pitches of the second movement as well as noise elements, serve as an analogy to memory dissociation, the blurring of memory, identity, or perception, a psychological process related to traumatic memory.[9]

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8 It was written in the spring and summer of 1828.

9 For more detail on the processes of traumatic memory in psychology see Katharine Krause Shobe and John F. Kihlstrom, "Is Traumatic Memory Special?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 6/3 (1997): 70-74, as well as Lynn Nadel and W. Jake Jacobs, "Traumatic Memory Is Special," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 7/5 (1998): 154-57. I have also discussed how such processes of making analogies to historical trauma in the article "Remembering and Forgetting Lizkor VeLiskoach for String Quartet after Schubert" in *Circuit*, 18/2 (2008): 39-60.

FIGURE 14.3. *Gvul (Border)*, movement III mm. 103-106. (Biró, 2017)

The Past in the Present

When Schubert composed his last piano sonata, he was living in a time of state control within the Austrian police state of Metternich and its reign of oppression, complete with artistic censorship, suppression, and surveillance.[10]

The act of composing music today, as authoritarian structures gain power and take hold in Europe and beyond, requires, in my mind, a different kind of composing, one that investigates history while forging the new. Following this trajectory, *Gvul (Border)* represents an attempt to bridge the past, present, and future in a critical and reflective manner.[11]

At the Memorial Site of Les Milles Camp, the organizers of the *Narratives of Memory* field school were confronted with the problem of not being able to announce the concert to the larger public. Eventually, we learned that the southern section of France was put on a high security alert during that time period. In the end, the administrative staff could only allow a private invited audience including the students of the field school.

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10 For more on the political culture of Schubert's Vienna, see Raymond Erickson's *Schubert's Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

11 For more on historically reflective modes of composing, please see "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, The Future of Historicized, Nonrepresentational New Music," in *Perspectives for Contemporary Music in the 21st Century*, edited by Dániel Péter Biró, Kai Johannes Polzhofer (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2016). For more on critical composition, see Dániel Péter Biró's "Emanations: Reflections of a Composer" in *Schönheit* (Konzepte 2), edited by Gunnar Hindrichs (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2016).

In this way, the goal of the *Narratives of Memory* course, to present "the past in the present" with all the implications of historical trauma, was realized both in the artistic and social-political realms. The difficulties encountered in putting on concerts in Hungary and France gave both educators and students a sense that the project of creating art, which critically responds to the history in the present, is needed more than ever.

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