

# RESONANCE AND WONDER: SUSAN PHILIPSZ'S 'STUDY FOR STRINGS'

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## Abstract

This article offers a reading of Susan Philipsz's sound work *Study for Strings* (2012) informed by two notions proposed by Stephen Greenblatt: *resonance* and *wonder*. In considering resonance, I present the strong historical influences identified in the location the artwork was first commissioned for — Kassel Hauptbahnhof, during dOCUMENTA 13. I also present the traumatic events that led to the composition of Pavel Haas's *Study for Strings Orchestra* in Theresienstadt, and its appropriation by Philipsz. The use of silence, or absence, in a sound piece features as a fundamental element in the understanding of the work as a certificate of disappearance. Nevertheless, viewed through the lens of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), *Study for Strings* will also be examined as a musical composition in its own right. It is here, and in the spectator's first encounter with the work, that the presence of wonder will surface.

**Keywords:** Susan Philipsz, sound art, resonance, wonder, Theresienstadt, dOCUMENTA 13

Sound is an activator of memory which appears to easily break through temporal barriers. At this moment we are in the present, occupying a physical space that allows us to hear, but we are just as quickly transported to a memory — a memory residing in the past. What I would like to consider in the following pages is whether sound might activate something outside of personal memories; if it might, as Marconi came to believe, evoke ghosts; if it can recall historical events. If so, then whether such might be accomplished solely by individual notes scattered across a train platform. If it might be achieved by Susan Philipsz's *Study for Strings* (2012)?

In these questions I am already putting forward one of the notions that will inform this article; Stephen Greenblatt's *resonance*. Written regarding the visual arts and the politics of museum display, Greenblatt proposed two models in his 1991 text that I find to be applicable to the reading of Philipsz's project: *resonance* and *wonder*. According to Greenblatt:

By *resonance* I mean the power of the [...] object to reach beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer [or listener] the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer [/listener] to stand. By *wonder* I mean the power of the [...] object to stop the viewer [/listener] in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Greenblatt, 1991, p.42).

But in a piece in which resonance so quickly emerges is it possible to as easily encounter wonder?

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 1942 a train, headed to Theresienstadt camp, left Kassel Hauptbahnhof station, carrying within it some 755 Jews. Kassel, located at the centre of German territory, was not just a point of convergence of a deadly railway network, it was the home of the engineering company Henschel & Sohn: "By 1942 this German locomotive manufacturer was producing the Tiger I and Tiger II tanks, and had become a significant supplier of armaments to the German army. Around this time there were 6,000 forced labourers working in the Henschel factory" (London, 2014, p. 206). By the end of the Second World War the city had experienced heavy bombardments from the Allied Forces, leaving much of the town's ancient buildings destroyed. In 1955, in an attempt to reintroduce modern art to the German public — a public that had not seen a modern art exhibition since the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich in 1937 — Arnold Bode organised *documenta*. With its success the exhibition became a staple in modern and contemporary art, with new editions taking place every five years in Kassel for the duration of one hundred days.

Theresienstadt, now Terezín, is a city located in the Czech Republic that was first constructed as a fortress in the late-eighteenth century, capable of housing up to 11,000 men during wartime. In 1938 it was occupied by Nazi Germany, being quickly adapted to a concentration camp and to a prison in 1942: "The camp, which the Nazis also described as a

1) Born in 1965, Susan Philipsz is a Scottish artist currently based in Berlin. Although she originally trained as a sculptor, she works predominantly with sound, having been the first artist to win the Turner Prize for a sound work in 2010. Through her projects Philipsz explores themes of longing and loss, as well as the capacity of sound to evoke emotions and memories.

'paradise ghetto' [...] was intended as a place where they could send wealthy or prominent Jews, particularly those they felt it would be more difficult to make disappear" (Prager, 2008, p.179). Close to 150,000 Jews passed through Theresienstadt during the war, and at its peak over 50,000 people were held at the camp. Of these, only 17,247 survived.

In October 1943 Hitler ordered the arrest and deportation of all Danish Jews. In a daring effort the Danish Resistance Movement and general population were able to evacuate the majority of the Jewish population. Nevertheless, some 450 were captured and sent to Theresienstadt. Immediately after, the Danish government sought to examine the living conditions in the camp and, with added pressure from the International Red Cross, was granted permission to do so but not before the Spring of 1944. Such would be the necessary time the Nazis would require to undertake a campaign of beautification, which included deporting thousands of prisoners to Auschwitz to make the camp appear less overcrowded:

They ordered the Jewish prisoners to paint the house-fronts, clean the streets, dig flower beds, erect a playground for children in the park and a music pavilion on the square, fill the store windows, refurbish the ghetto café and the ghetto bank, and transform the former Sokolovna gymnasium into a community centre with a stage, prayer hall, library and verandas. The embellishment project went on for months (Margry, 1992, p.146).

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1944 the International Committee of the Red Cross arrived for the visit. The examiners were led by Nazi Officials on a tour of the camp and ultimately, based on a visit that lasted only between 6 and 8 hours, the conditions of the camp were considered to be humane. Later, while Maurice Rossel, the Swiss representative in the Committee, contended that "he could not have been expected to see beyond what the Nazis intended him to see" (Prager, 2008, p.187), survivors argued that "[t]hey [...] only saw what the Nazis showed and presented them" (Caro cited in Prager, 2008, p.188), looking for nothing more. The success of the visit prompted the development of a staged documentary film: *Terezin: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area* (also known as *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*), of which only excerpts survive. The film, directed by Kurt Gerron and featuring the detainees as cast and crew-members, displayed the model-life led by those in the camp, including their access to musical and cultural performances. One scene featured the newly established String Orchestra performing a composition by Pavel Haas (1899-1944), *Study for String Orchestra*, and conducted by Karel Ančerl (1908-1973). The players on stage, who had been lent suits for the occasion, were surrounded by potted plants in order to hide their bare feet. The audience featured a number of prominent inmates, the *Prominenten*, whose names Gerron would list in his daily reports to the SS<sup>2</sup>. At the end of the performance Haas is seen being called upon to receive the appreciation of the applauding audience. However, only two days after the completion of the shooting of the film, most of the cast

2) The orchestra scene featured Dr Ernst Rosenthal of the Berlin Jewish community, Dr Fritz Guttmann, Dr Julius Moritz, theatre director Karl Meinhard and banker Karl Löwenstein from Berlin; Dr Leo Löwenstein from Aachen; Professor Saudek from Leipzig; Dr Heinrich Gans and Dr Heinrich Dessauer from Vienna; industrialist Öve Meyer and Morits and Melanie Oppenheim from Copenhagen; Dr Franz Kahn and Robert Mandler of the Prague Jewish community; chief surgeon Dr Erich Springer; Elisabeth Czech, widow of a former Czech minister; composers Hans Krasa from Prague and Pavel Haas from Brno. This scene was not just crucial for Susan Philipsz's project; it was also central in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), in which the main character searches for his mother in the filmed audience.

and crew, including Haas, were deported to Auschwitz, where many were gassed on arrival. Although the original scores were lost, Ančerl, who survived, succeeded in reassembling the orchestral parts after the war.

For dOCUMENTA 13 (2012)<sup>3</sup> Susan Philipsz chose to return to the train platforms from which so many departed, to produce *Study for Strings*<sup>4</sup>. Taking the reconstructed composition as a starting point, the artist had a viola and cello players play their parts one note at a time:

a process that involved each musician identifying the first note in his or her part of the score and then play that note every time it came up across the entire composition, keeping pace but leaving recorded silence between notes. The player would then move to the next note and repeat the process until all of his or her notes had been laid down on 12 separate channels. The same process was then applied to the second player, so that when all 24 channels were replayed simultaneously all the notes would, in theory, be heard in the right order (Philipsz, 2013, p.64).

Yet, the process of fragmenting the piece also extended it, from the original eight minutes and 55 seconds, to thirteen minutes. Time became a crucial element in Philipsz's exhibition of the work. For, in its length and in its repetition twice every hour, its rhythm:

echoed the timetable of the trains leaving the station.

3) Held between 9 June and 16 September 2012, the thirteenth edition of dOCUMENTA was curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. It had no specified theme, no specified concept, instead its foundation was laid with two elements distributed to the commissioned artists: a Klein bottle and a sentence, "The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted and lasting for along time".  
4) A recording of the piece can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s\\_yMZJkzbcw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_yMZJkzbcw). Last accessed 11 October 2017

At regular intervals, the otherworldly notes from the strings intermingled with the blunt 'live' voices that periodically interjected to announce trains ready for departure. As the trains moved past the end of the platform, they disrupted the relative calm of the listener. Gradually, as the train disappeared from view, the sound of the strings re-emerged, rendered even more poignant by the feeling of departure (London, 2014, p.206).

Each note would resonate across the tracks, where eight individual speakers had been installed, surrounding them. Each note mingled with, and yet overtook, the sounds of the present. Nevertheless, sound was not the sole component of *Study for Strings*, there was also recorded silence between notes. Yet, in truth, and as Susan Philipsz pointed out, such was closer to a recorded absence: the absence of all of the musicians in the original orchestra save two.

The sound/silence dichotomy has figured as a significant presence in sound art, not least in John Cage's (1912-1992) seminal composition *4'33"*. First performed in Woodstock, NY, on 29 August 1952, by pianist David Tudor, the piece – which Cage later called his 'silent piece' (Cage cited in Gann, 2010, p.16) – was composed of three movements of varied lengths – 30", 2'23" and 1'40" – that in their sum completed 4'33". Setting himself at the piano on the wooden stage of the Maverick Concert Hall, Tudor proceeded to close the keyboard lid over the keys, careful as to not make any sound. He turned the empty pages of the music sheet and, to sign the ending and

the beginning of each movement, opened and again closed the keyboard lid. At the end of the performance Tudor rose to receive his applause. In the silence the audience was urged to listen to itself and to the surrounding environment. As Salomé Voegelin points out, “[t]he silence of 4’33” is a musical silence not a sonic silence. Cage’s interest in silence lies in establishing every sound within the musical register. It does not invite a listening to sound as sound but to all sound as music” (2010, p.81). Yet, by having the piece performed in an open-air space engulfed by the forest of the Catskill mountains, Cage might be considered to have also been asking “his audience to listen to the murmur of American nature as music” (Gann, 2010, p.28). In fact, in his description of that first performance, Cage emphasised the musical rhythms conjured by the soundscape – the totality of an environment’s sound – in each movement: “You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out” (Cage cited in Gann, 2010, p.4). Thus, even in a silent piece, sound overcame silence. However, we might come to a different conclusion if we consider the spaces left between notes in *Study for Strings* as depicting absence rather than silence. Voegelin proposes that: “Silence frees the work to embrace the soundscape and make it resonate in its composition” (2010, p.89). What I propose is that in absence the soundscape is overtaken by what is not there. Thus, absence serves as a reminder of a past that cannot be undone. Much like Barthes’s “ça a été” (*the thing has been there*) (1993, p.76), in which “[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence” (p.87), the recorded absence in Philipsz is a certificate of *disappearance* – the musicians had been there but are there no longer.

In *Study for Strings*, the individual notes faintly heard at the beginning of the train platform draw the visitor further and further to its very end. Distanced from the daily hubbub of the station, engulfed by the empty space, by the occasional rattling of the trains, by the faint chirpings of nature, and by the longing notes. Here, all one faces are the desolate tracks, the last point the Jewish deportees headed to Theresienstadt would have seen, if they had been able to see the exterior of an overcrowded carriage. If it is true that ghosts “have a well-known penchant for becoming talkative whenever the inventions of technique propose new means of exploration of an unknown world” (Rancière, 2011, p.125), one might also consider Guglielmo Marconi’s proposition that “all sounds that have ever occurred are still vibrating, however faintly, somewhere in the universe” (Neset, 2013, p.19). If such is the case then it is possible that somewhere the missing notes of Haas’s composition are still resonating, ready to occupy the space left in Philipsz’s piece. One might even put forward Cage’s dictum –cited from Henry David Thoreau – that music, or sound, “is continuous” and “only listening is intermittent” (Cage, 1981, p.3).

Nevertheless, if one only reflects on the powerful resonance one finds in *Study for Strings*, there is a risk of the aesthetic value of the work being buried under the context in which it was produced and to which it refers; the risk of only *reading* the work rather than *experiencing* it (Voegelin, 2010, p.180). Wonder, the quality of the object to stop one in one’s tracks, as Greenblatt explains, might find itself being sacrificed at the altar of resonance (1991, p.54). Nevertheless, there is an advantage to Philipsz’s piece; it is a sound installation, and as Voegelin pointed out: “Hearing does not offer a meta-position;

there is no place where I am not simultaneous with the heard. However far its source, the sound sits in my ear. I cannot hear it if I am not immersed in its auditory object, which is not its source but sound as sound itself” (2010, p.xii). Listening is always preconditioned by presence; to experience sound, “distance is not an option [...] joint time is demanded as the circumstance of experience” (Voegelin, 2010, p.48). Time and place must be shared with the object even if it is “by insisting on the presence of its past” (Voegelin, p.158). Sound can be recorded in an attempt to escape its ephemerality, “but the recording of audio elements of art does not function in the same way as photographs have come to be employed [when registering visual artworks], as stand-ins for the art objects themselves,” as Caleb Kelly has acknowledged (2011, p.19). In choosing sound as her artistic tool, Susan Philipsz “takes us on a journey which leads us beyond what is visible. She emphasizes the perception of sound and of the body in space” (Arrhenius, 2014, p. 59).

For dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel Hauptbahnhof was the location of not one but two projects in which sound featured as a chief element: Philipsz’s *Study for Strings*, and Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s<sup>5</sup> *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (2012)<sup>6</sup>. Known for her audio-walks Cardiff, with Miller, included a visual component to their Kassel station project. In exchange for a form of identification, participants were given an iPod and headset, and instructed to sit on a specific bench at the station. From here Cardiff’s voice would direct the visitor’s

movements, direct their interaction with the space, their reading of the space, by coaching them to: “try to align your movements with mine”. Yet participants aligned more than the screen; they aligned their step with hers, aligned their bodily experience of the space with hers. Slightly disorientating, the project overlapped the viewer’s present experience with the artist’s recorded experience. The binaural audio used contributed to this intermeshing: a barking dog that a visitor might anticipate to be behind him or her is found to be solely a recording; the sound of a train leaving the platform would be heard even if no train could be found. At times the video-walk worked as a form of hypertext: in a section devoted to a Horst Hoheisel’s *Denk-Stein-Sammlung Memorial Project* (1988-1995), to commemorate the Jewish people who were transported to concentration camps from the station, Cardiff zoomed in on a book, documenting the victims who passed through Kassel Hauptbahnhof, inaccessible to the viewer; she flipped the pages in the video providing further information to the two pages the visitor was able to see for herself in the monument. Although every participant followed the same video, the experience of the work was not shared, nor was it concurrent to everyone else’s. During the exhibition, what would regularly be seen inside the station were visitors focused on their paths, interacting with the recording and the space, but not with any other participant that might cross their path. One would begin the walk sitting with others, friends or strangers, but in turning on the device one would be told to rise, an instant that would occur at different moments for each person, depending

5) Janet Cardiff (b.1957) and George Bures Miller (b. 1960) are a Canadian artistic duo, currently based in Berlin. They are known for their sound works, particularly their audio walks, narrated by Cardiff. In 2001, the artists represented Canada at the 49th Venice Biennale, where they won La Biennale di Venezia Special Award and the Benesse Prize with their project *Paradise Institute*.

6) An excerpt of the work can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOkQE7m31Pw>. Last accessed 11 October 2017

on when the start button had been pushed. Suddenly, a second or two would lapse between one person's walk and another's, causing some initial awkwardness until each became immersed in their own walk. Here what Cardiff and Miller prized were "the subjective localized practices of the individual in realizing a personal interpretation of the space" (Gorman, 2003, p.91). Although, such claims of a personal interpretation might anticipate a relative freedom for the visitors' interaction with the station, Cardiff's whispered instructions would insinuate themselves into the participants' heads, commanding them to follow a predetermined, closed, circuit.

It is here that one finds a distinct approach to sound and participation between Cardiff and Miller and Susan Philipsz. The duo favoured an individual participation; an audio-visual immersion with a clear beginning and end. Philipsz, on the other hand, promoted a chance encounter with her work. A timetable was available at the beginning of the platform but what was found was that many visitors were not even aware of the presence of her work until they ran into the sound, and in encountering it they would then be seduced by the spectral notes onto the platform. Several spectators might conjoin on the same spot; a shared impression of longing and sorrow would be transmitted without the need of instructions, solely by sound, and by the capacity that sound has to arrest you, to slow you down, to make you "pay attention to the place you're in, and the state you're in" (Lingwood and Franzen, 2014, p. 5). So, rather than make one walk, *Study for Strings* made one stop. It was here, in this unexpected encounter, that Greenblatt's sense of *wonder* was found — just as easily as *resonance* — for:

Looking [or listening] may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws a circle around itself from which everything but the object is excluded. [...] To be sure, the [spectator] may have purchased a catalogue [or] read the inscription on the wall [...] but in the moment of wonder all of this apparatus seems mere static (Greenblatt, 1991, p.49).

So rather than presenting the participant with all the historical information surrounding Kassel Hauptbahnhof, or even Theresienstadt, forthright, Philipsz's piece allowed the visitor to simply enjoy the sound as sound, as a musical composition in its own right.

As we have seen in regard to Cage's *4'33"*, even silence might have distinct musical movements and, as in the 'silent piece', both Pavel Haas's and Susan Philipsz's compositions follow a three-movement structure. Haas's *Study for String Orchestra* begins with insistently repetitive triplets and very dense folk melodies layered on top of each other. The second section consists of a lyrical and tension-filled adagio. The final movement brings back the repetitive triplets and dense folk melodies of the first section. Whereas, as Philipsz describes it, in *Study for Strings*:

expanding and extending the recordings into the space has the effect of abstracting the individual notes from the composition as a whole. The beginning is reminiscent of industry or the sound of trains moving along the tracks. The middle section is more melancholic with individual notes calling across to

each other and finally the pizzicato seems to animate the cables above the tracks (Philipsz, 2012).

Thus, one might suggest that whilst resonance is fundamental in Philipsz's piece, wonder is no less relevant. One might even propose that it is wonder that beckons the visitor to experience the piece in the first place. It might even be, as Greenblatt suggests, "wonder that then leads to the desire for resonance" (1991, p.54). For, in arresting the participant through her musical composition to a traumatically charged location, Philipsz is overcoming temporal barriers, allowing historical times to be interwoven with present experience.

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