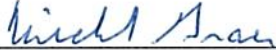BERLIN WALLS: SOUNDS OF STREET ART

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Berlin, Germany is a place known for its history and for its change. A multitude of cultural and political landmarks recall previous eras along the trajectory towards its modern identity. Walking the streets of Berlin, signs of the past and signs of the present converge. Today's Berlin is perhaps more colorful than ever: murals sprawl across exposed firewalls, graffiti adorns the facades of Weimar-era tenements, and the largest open air art gallery in the world—the East Side Gallery—stands famously as a monument to the end of a generation of division.

Sociologists Natalia Samutina and Oksana Zaporozhets describe today's Berlin as 'saturated' (2015:36). Their use of the term 'saturation' describes the gradual infiltration and acceptance of graffiti and street art into everyday life in Berlin. Graffiti and street art are, in essence, expressions in public space. In their original forms, these practices can be democratically empowering, despite their often illegal status. In Berlin, political graffiti on the West side of the Berlin Wall was the iconic genesis for what has since ballooned into a network of tags, writings, images, and murals on surfaces across the city (Heinsohn 2015:120; Pinto 2017:63-5). While much of Berlin's 'saturation' has indeed occurred in illicit forms, a significant portion of it can also be attributed to public art projects featuring commissioned and approved designs and images.

This artsy, "Creative City," marketing of modern Berlin may not encompass the full role of graffiti and street art within its history; however, there is no doubt that the popular recognition of Berlin as a hub for urban art attracts countless tourists every year. Street art walking tours are routinely offered by organizations such as Alternative Berlin and Berlin Street Art. Events like the Backjumps Festival have brought the works of world-renowned street artists such as Os Gemeos and Blu to the city's walls. Chunks of the former Berlin Wall displaying traces of paint are regularly sold as souvenir trinkets or are attached to post cards. And the murals at the East Side Gallery constitute one of the most popular and well-known tourist attractions in the city. According to German Studies scholar Bastion Heinsohn, this "selective distribution of city images as commodities" has helped create a *Stadtbild*, or city image, of

Berlin as a "creative city with an edgy avant-garde scene," (2015:128). Indeed, in 2006 UNESCO named Berlin a City of Design.

This 'saturation' of Berlin, notably, is a particular feature of the city since the Reunification of Germany in 1990. My capstone project aims to engage with this aspect of Berlin's current visual landscape by creating three musical pieces based upon three specific works of street art or graffiti in the city. These visual works include 1) the anonymous text graffiti "DIESE STADT IST AUFGEKAUFT!!!" in Prenzlauer-Berg, 2) the Kreuzberg mural "Astronaut / Cosmonaut" by Victor Ash, and 3) the "World's People" mural by Schamil Gimajew at the East Side Gallery. In my musical creations, I am particularly concerned with drawing inspiration from both the visual aspects of style and from the content of each particular work. I aim to present musical accompaniments that complement, according to the medium of sound, the aesthetic qualities of the original work. In doing so, I hope to ultimately create a dialog between myself and the setting of Berlin.

Since the late-19th Century, numerous composers, painters, critics, and scholars in the Western world have theorized about specific relationships between the visual and musical arts. Particularly during the Impressionist period, an increasing shift towards abstraction in the visual arts began to coincide with an interest in the 'musical' qualities of painting (Lockspeiser 1973). The perceived boundaries between various artistic media began to soften and overlap at this time, which can be seen in the following quote from 19th century poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire:

> "What would be truly surprising would be to find that sound *could not* suggest colour, that colours *could not* convey the idea of a melody and that sound and colour were *unsuitable* for the translation of ideas," (quoted in Vergo 2010:18).

By the early 20th Century, the artist Paul Klee was creating visual analyses of music (Vergo 2010:235). At the same time, composers such as Debussy were breaking traditional rules about harmony

and musical form, in favor of eliciting coloristic, textural, or otherwise visual qualities in their compositions (DeVoto 2003). However, as the innumerable theories on audio-visual correlation show—some of which are outlined below—there is no single way to draw comparisons between the art forms.

Color is perhaps the most discussed visual element when it comes to translation into a musical quality. The painter Wassily Kandinsky considered it the most musical aspect of painting and likened it to instrumental timbre (Kaliakbarova et. al 2019:593; Vergo 2010:175). Similarly, the composer Hector Berlioz considered instrumentation and color to be analogous (Lockspeiser 1973:22). On the other hand, Henri Matisse and Georges Seurat likened color to harmony (Kaliakbarova et. al 2019:595; Vergo 2010:51-2), while the composer Josef Matthias Hauser—a collaborator of Bauhaus master Johannes Itten—contended that colors were akin to musical intervals (Vergo 2010:235). Painter Stanton McDonald Wright spoke of the "harmonization of color" and of 'consonant' and 'dissonant' color relationships (Vergo 2010:8), while the painter Eugene Delacroix equated color with mood, and stated that colors and forms of a picture "seen from a distance reach the most intimate regions of the soul and convey…the music of a picture," (Lockspeiser 1973:41). Famously, the synesthete-composer Alexander Scriabin invented a 'color organ' for use with his 1910 composition *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*.

Aside from color, various correspondences have been drawn between music and elements such as line, spatial organization, and shape or form. Line has been equated with melodic style and phrasing (Karanthi 1991:405; Stillman 2007:18; Vergo 2010:51-2), but also with rhythm (Karanthi 1991:402), and mood (Vergo 2010:165). Use of space has been described as the visual analogue of time in music (Karanthi 1991:401), but it has also been compared with density of sound (Mozgot 2012), with musical form (Backus 1988:180-1), and even with tonality (Vergo 2010:185). Visual forms and figures have been connected to musical forms (Russ 2014:233), rhythms and sequences (Vergo 2010:60, 235), and polyphonic characteristics (Vergo 2010:242-6).

One of the most influential musical concepts to come out of the late-19th Century was that of Wagner's leitmotiv, and, in relation to his idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the ability of musical elements to

convey extra-musical meanings. The 19th century art critic Teodor de Wyzewa devised his own theory of "Wagnerian painting," stating that elements of art can be used for either their descriptive (or narrative) qualities, or for their 'musical' and 'emotional' functions (Vergo 2010:27-8). Wagner himself separated the use of the voice to express what is 'specific and clear,' from the use of the orchestra to convey general emotion, unconscious longings and desires, and deeper feelings (Vergo 2010:40). Wyzewa went on to deem the use of abstraction and non-depiction in art as 'symphonic' (Vergo 2010:41). At the same time, certain musical features can be described as having a 'visual' quality to them. Such an example could be drawn from the low, plodding chords used by Modest Mussorgsky to emulate oxen's lumbering footsteps in "Bydło," from his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

My primary challenge as I began this project was to come up with a method of working that would provide a useful framework and set of constraints for my project, while still allowing myself adequate flexibility and creative license. Kandinsky once said, "No art can be constructed on the basis of ready-made theories. If it were possible…art would immediately cease to exist…" (Vergo 2010:174). Given the sheer number of varying theories on the relationships between specific visual and musical elements, I did not want to constrain myself to any strict set of rules on how to "convert" a visual work into a musical one.

Instead, I drew my main creative process from the ideologies of the Interart Aesthetic, as described by Peter Dayan in his book *Art as Music, Music as Poetry, Poetry as Art: From Whistler to Stravinsky and Beyond* (2011:1-3). According to this early-20th century Western European trend, each work of art should be seen as a 'new reality' that derives its meaning not from what it 'says,' but from what it *is*. As such, anyone attempting to relate a new work of art to a former piece should not try to convey the intentions of the original creator, nor can a creator determine the meaning of their work for those who observe it. Additionally, there is no such thing as a direct and unproblematic translation between the arts, because any equivalencies between two different media are 'incalculable.' Most

importantly, the only way to convey these 'incalculable' relationships is to describe "work in one medium as though it were operating in another," (Dayan 2011:3).

In the scope of my project, this would be exemplified by the analogy "art as music." Accordingly, I began the work on each of my pieces by describing my interpretation of the visual work as though it were a piece of music. I achieved this by describing the visual pieces according to musical parameters such as tempo, timbre, rhythm, texture, mood, line form and phrasing, overall form, harmonies (including consonance/dissonance), motifs, and other expressive elements. Additionally, I gave myself guiding questions to help focus in on the larger thematic content of my work: What story am I telling? What are the most characteristic or stylistic elements of this work? What is the scene I am portraying? Lastly, I prompted myself to consider the difference between descriptive and 'symphonic' musical elements that I could use. This process functioned as my main method of creative inspiration and idea generation. In the following sections, I will outline how each of my three musical pieces ultimately took shape according to their respective visual works.

DIESE STADT IST AUFGEKAUFT!!!

Figure 1. Graffiti text on the side wall of a building located along Schönhauser Allee in Prenzlauer-Berg, Berlin. The text reads, "This city has been bought up !!!"

My first musical piece involves the work "DIESE STADT IST AUFGEKAUFT!!!" (fig. 1). It is located in Prenzlauer-Berg, previously a part of East Berlin. Amid run-down tenement houses, this district was once the nexus of underground East German countercultural groups, as well as the "peaceful revolution" that led to the overthrow of the East German Communist regime (Hockenos 2017:285-9). The above, anonymous work stands as one of the longest-lasting illegal graffiti texts in Berlin (Heinsohn 2015:133-5). A clear commentary on privatization and gentrification, the text translates to, "This city has been bought up !!!" Its location in Prenzlauer-Berg is significant, as Prenzlauer-Berg is among several former-East city districts that have been facing rapid rates of redevelopment, rising rents, and demographic changes. In fact, between 1991 and 1997, around 65,000 residents were displaced from this former working-class neighborhood and were replaced by 70,000 new residents who were generally younger and more highly educated (Drissel 2011:29).

Visually, this text is plain, blocky, and bold, and located high up on a grid-patterned wall. This grid-like context, lack of color or flair, as well as an upwards directionality were some of the most apparent characteristics that arose during my brainstorming session. All of these elements seemed to come together to suggest themes such as the counting of money, formulaic or business-minded behavior, top-down planning, the devaluation of human creativity and individuality, and rising costs of living. Of my three pieces, this work was composed most heavily in a top-down manner, which I believe has led to a less organic sound than that of my other two works.

My composition for this work begins with repetitive, rising eighth-note arpeggios, in keeping with the upward and grid-based visual characteristics. The driving nature of the arpeggios is also meant to give a sense of the constant movement, change, and economic processes within a city. The arpeggios take place in a higher register, indicating the superficiality of positive city branding, which often comes from the highest and most powerful tiers of society. By contrast, a second melodic theme with a grittier sound design soon enters at a lower register, displaying a downward melodic motion. This theme was meant to align syllabically with the phrase "Diese Stadt ist aufgekauft," and its downward direction indicates the negative consequences of this stated reality. Not only that, but its placement in a lower register alludes to the fact that these negative consequences are disproportionately felt by individuals and communities that occupy the lowest social and economic positions. As the first section of my composition develops, more layers appear and interweave with each other, symbolizing building and expansion, as well as the chaos of urban change and the reality of parallel individual experiences.

A second section, brighter and more positive in sound, begins just after the one-minute mark. This recalls the attractive images and promises of redevelopment, and the whitewashing of urban ills that accompanies gentrifying processes. Yet, tense, rising chromatic passages—first appearing in the previous section—begin to break more clearly into the texture at this point, indicating larger discontent just below the surface. Eventually these fragments break into the forefront as a full chromatic scale that leads into the next section.

Based on its thematic role, I would call this next section a chorus. This chorus section begins around one minute and forty sections, and features a bold, downward-leaning theme; I will refer to this as the "subject theme." The subject theme is placed amid various background voices, some of which appeared in earlier sections. At points, percussion hits hint at the booming sounds of building construction and demolition, while the subject theme aims to reflect the bold visual design of the graffiti text, as well the severity of its message. The immediate centrality of the subject theme, in contrast to other sections, suggests large, corporate powers and monopolies, and the theme's downward motion suggests the destructive elements of redevelopment.

The rest of the piece follows with a repetition of these three sections, with some variation. The repetition of the first section is only a few measures long, before the more pleasant second section re-emerges and interrupts it. I wanted to capture a feeling of sudden change, much like crisp new facades and advertisements can shut out signs of inequality, poverty, and urban neglect from the visible realm. However, this reemergence of the second section brings with it an even more chaotic arrangement of sound layers, reflecting an increasing prevalence of disruption and displacement.

In the final appearance of the chorus section, rather than continuing the theme of 'building up,' I chose instead to focus on stripping away layers until only the subject theme is left, with the percussion losing steam and fading out. This focus on thinning out the arrangement is meant to reflect the destruction of local communities, local character, and local histories that can be the ultimate result of a gentrified neighborhood.

Astronaut / Cosmonaut

Figure 2. "Astronaut / Cosmonaut" mural by Victor Ash (2007). Located near Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg.

My next piece is based on the stencil mural "Astronaut / Cosmonaut" by Victor Ash, completed in 2007 (fig. 2). This mural is located in Kreuzberg, an area formerly located along the west side of the Berlin Wall, and which was home to a significant immigrant population (primarily Turkish) as well as a thriving youth counterculture including squatters, punks, and anarchists (Drissel 2011:25-6;

Heinsohn 2015:119; Hockenos 2017:95-9). These demographics are still present today, although

Kreuzberg is one of the former-West city districts that is increasingly threatened by gentrification today

(Drissel 2011:20, 32-3; Heinsohn 2015:129; Hockenos 2017:288-9). Ash's mural was painted during the

third Backjumps Festival, which is a recurrent city event promoting the creation of murals and urban art

in Berlin. Ash has cited the Space Race, David Bowie, and the desire for escape as inspirations for this

work (Goethe-Institut).

My brainstorming session for this piece focused on the cold, muted style conveyed in the black

and white stencil. The astronaut is suspended as though floating up on the wall, oddly out of place within

the urban landscape. I found this contrast to convey a sense of isolation, particularly given the helmeted face and anonymity of the astronaut. Yet, while the astronaut may seem out of place, paint from the stencil drips down the wall, almost like a tether to the real world. In keeping with the starkness of the mural and the theme of space, I aimed to create a vast, flowing, melancholy soundscape. I also wanted to create a storyline in which the 'space' surrounding the astronaut could be interpreted as figurative, where the realization of the astronaut's connection to (and physical location within) Earth can be seen as a solution to a psychological form of isolation. Using Berlin as an example, East and West Berliners lived in such close proximity, yet in vastly different realities for decades—and to some degree this East-West divide (often called "Mauer im Kopf," or "Wall in the head") continues to pervade the city (Drissel 2011). Much like political and social divisions can have ramifications beyond those purely attributable to geographical differences, the psychological element of my interpretation of this piece is intended as a central focus.

The composition begins in near silence, with a growing rumble-like noise. This was intentional, to place the listener in the vast vacuum of space. The rumble gradually morphs into sounds that become recognizable as a harmony. To me, this represents the recognition of the astronaut as a distinct entity within the expanse of outer space. One of the first, and most lasting, elements to emerge is a droplet-like sound. This symbolizes the small scale of an individual and is suggestive of the sound of a sonar signal. This underlines a desire to navigate through a dark and mysterious environment. Importantly, these droplets also recall the stencil's dripping paint that seems to connect the astronaut with the real-world ground.

Melodic keyboard- and synth-driven sections follow the quiet beginning, which aim to portray the perspective from inside the astronaut's space suit. Changing timbres reflect the textures of the sights— various stars, planets, and other celestial formations. Shimmering sound qualities point to illumination and amazement, while a darker tonal quality juxtaposes a more somber mood with this spectral setting.

The sounds and timbres slowly morph with time, imbuing a sort of free-flowing quality to the work. Despite the dripping 'tethers' mentioned earlier, the perspective of the astronaut remains "lost in space," so to speak. Around four minutes and twenty seconds into the piece, a French horn-like voice enters, taking on a melodic role. The bright, shining quality of the horn is like a beacon, suggesting perhaps the guiding light of a star. However, the tone of the piece becomes increasingly frantic in the subsequent measures, reflecting a storyline in which obstacles accompany the way 'back home'.

Near five minutes and fifty seconds, I used an eight-bar chord progression to modulate from the original key of B minor to G minor. While many of the chords used here are still minor chords, the quicker chord movement lends itself to a more energetic and purposeful sound, contrasting the free-floating quality of earlier sections. The astronaut has now found a way down to Earth. The chord progression moves steadily downward, reflecting the astronaut's path, before 'landing' decisively in a very different tonal area.

The final section represents, then, a return to Earth, and a return to the wall in Kreuzberg, on which this mural is painted. As the music fades out, sound clips of people, cars, and various other city noises emerge. These sounds come directly from the area in Kreuzberg in which this mural is located, an area called Kottbusser Tor. This was an intentional move to call in the listener to the same physical space as the astronaut, to a real point on Earth, and to a place of proximity to many other individuals and their own daily lives.

World's People

Figure 3. A section of "World's People" by Schamil Gimajew at the East Side Gallery (1990; restored in 2009). The portion shown is roughly one seventh the length of the full mural.

The final piece I created is based off the mural "World's People" by Schamil Gimajew (fig. 3). This work is located at the East Side Gallery, a commemorative stretch of the Berlin Wall, which was decorated with commissioned murals by artists from nearly two dozen countries in the spring of 1990. While illegal graffiti on the outer western side of the Berlin Wall during the era of division was a notable phenomenon, the East Side Gallery is located on the side of the Wall that would have faced inward to the 'death strip' before the barrier fell in late 1989 (Pinto 2017: 67). Since the works displayed in the East Side Gallery are neither politically transgressive, nor are they representative of pre-Reunification-era

graffiti, it is important to make a distinction between the works displayed as a part of this monument, and the earlier, unsanctioned or illegal forms of street art and graffiti that originated the tradition.

The "World's People" mural covers a panoramic stretch of the Wall with a flurry of rainbow colors and swirly, psychedelic sketches of faces, hands, and other shapes and symbols that seem to arise out of an intertwined mess of curvy lines. There is hardly a blank surface on this stretch of the Wall; even the rounded upper edge of the barrier is inscribed with a poem. This poem lists a series of divisions and in-betweennesses, as seen in the excerpts below (German original, my translation):

> "The Wall between Berlin and Berlin, Germans and Germans, between East and West…"
> "…freedom and slavery, love and hate…"
> "…between the stars, sun, and moon…"
> "…between music and painting, art and kitsch [*Kunst und Kitsch*] …"

The poem ends with the message: "Don't live in between, live completely, like Germany now does too!!!"

This theme of division and reunification was central to my initial conceptions of this work. As I progressed, however, I found my composition taking on more of a panoramic quality, much like the mural itself. That is to say, rather than dealing strictly with dualities, the development of my piece is largely a series of progressions from one texture, mood, or sound, to another. This is rounded out in a symmetrical fashion with a reprise of the introductory material at the very end. To me, the opening and closing portions of the piece represent unity, whereas the middle sections represent a series of social and political reorganizations, such as Germany experienced to a great degree in the 20th Century. In keeping with the sheer size of this mural, out of my three pieces, the number of distinct sections in this one is the greatest.

Regarding the visual style of Gimajew's work, I was drawn to the way that the textures and figures all seem to morph into one another, as well as the rippled line style in which the lines seem to echo and repeat the shapes of others in proximity. Regarding these qualities, I wanted to give a meandering, shifting quality to the sounds I used, and to implement delay, chorus effects, doubling, and

other such tactics to lend a shimmering sort of quality to the texture. Reflecting the largely curved or swirling lines in this work, I also inserted motives that included trills, ostinatos, wandering lines, or other melodic content that could portray this sense of roundedness. Additionally, much as the figures in this mural seem to both appear from and disappear into the background, I aimed to blur the distinction between background and foreground at times in my own piece. Lastly, the density of the visual material indicated a dense musical arrangement—of my three pieces, this one indeed contains the most individual instrumental layers.

The overall mood of the visual work is quite bright. I wanted to portray these positive and colorful tones particularly in the intro and reprise sections—the sections portraying a period of unity. In between these points, there are five distinct internal sections (A through E), which reflect a semi-symmetrical pattern from this brighter sound, to a darker one, before returning to the vibrancy of the introductory material. In the A section, which begins at 0:36, the light mood largely remains, but the voices present begin to shift; new ones fade in and out and, at times, overtake the roles of other layers. I used this same tactic throughout a number of the sections, in order to portray the foreground-background ambiguity of the mural. The B section follows, shifting into a slower tempo at around one minute and fifty seconds, giving the impression of a lullaby. This was intentional, to capture the dream-like quality of the visual style. Yet, as this section repeats its material, not only do the sounds of the voices shift around, but the tempo increases dramatically, which brings an almost circus-like quality to the music. I believe this matches a certain absurdity in the style of the mural, and it also develops tension that leads into the next section of the piece.

The C section, beginning at 2:48, is the longest and most elaborate. The point of transition is notable, accompanied by a sweeping, wind-like percussion effect. This indicates a significant transition, such as a period of great political change. A primary feature of this section is the simultaneous passing of multiple motivic materials throughout the full cast of voices. This method of fragmentation and echo, as well as the constantly shifting dynamic prominences between the layers, is meant to portray the rippling

visual characteristics in the mural, the ambiguous separation of background and foreground, and the general theme of transformation. The chaotic arrangement and minor tonality present in this section also indicate a period of disunity, and of conflict. To emphasize this disunity, I featured two bass voices, panned to the left and to the right, which play the same part, but are offset from one another.

Given the semi-symmetrical layout of my composition, section C is followed by two more sections that show a notable shift back towards a lighter mood. The D section that enters at 4:08 presents a relaxation of tensions, and no more shifting or morphing of sounds. It consists of a number of ostinato-like motives, the regularity of which lend a soothing quality to the music, and which reflect a significant focus on the vibrant textures and colors of Gimajew's mural. The ostinato patterns eventually die down and lead into the E section near 5:25. This portion of the piece begins with a thinner texture than many previous sections, starting off with a repetitive Eb major arpeggio pattern that is played by two keyboard voices and accompanied by the bass. This arpeggio morphs and expands through a series of chord changes, raising both the energy and the mood. The sound quality and tonality are quite warm, and they present a full transition back into a brighter realm.

The E section abruptly winds down into silence in its final seconds. From this silence, the introductory keyboard material re-emerges around 6:17—a sort of rebirth that mirrors its initial appearance. However, a new voice appears in this reprise: a very high, meandering keyboard melody. I consider this voice to be somewhat like a path towards the future—hopeful, if not always certain of the exact direction. The end of the song, while expressive of one sort of completeness, seems to leave off with a question.

The creation of these three musical pieces reflects a creative process that was directly inspired by the visual and contextual characteristics of the graffiti or mural works upon which they were based. However, it is important to emphasize the role of my own interpretations of these works, which has

imbued my final products with their own character, even absent of the visual inspirations. This process entailed a great deal of contemplation of these visual spaces, and in the same way I have responded according to my own identity in the "recreation" of these spaces within my project, the visual landscape of Berlin has had its own impact on me, too. My connection with this location has become deeper and more meaningful amid the context of this creative, and at times philosophical, work.

I do believe it is possible to create stricter, or more ekphrastic, musical interpretations of these three visual works. Ekphrasis is described by musicologist Michael Russ as the creative representation of an object or work via a different medium, in a way that is both externally recognizable, and which goes beyond a simple personal reaction to the original. Yet, Russ states, genuine acts of ekphrasis do not simply describe, but they also present "something new, and something genuinely artistic in the new medium," (Russ 2014:231-2). While I did bring some of my own interpretations and storylines to my musical portrayals of the visual works, most of my compositional decisions were nonetheless based in the visual styles and contents of the original pieces. In this way, I believe I still achieved a level of ekphrasis that would go beyond simply using the visual works as an inspirational starting point, and which reveals more than a surface-level form of depiction. My broader goal was to go beyond an attempt at replication, or 'transmedialization,' and rather, to reflect a creative conversation with the works, much as street art and graffiti can be considered conversations within an urban visual landscape. And in much the same way each passerby engages uniquely with an image found sprayed along the street, the ultimate products of my project reflect what I saw between myself and these walls in Berlin. In this way, my own work intertwines itself with the setting of Berlin, and ultimately, brings a part of myself into its space.

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