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being like water

exploring openness, intuition, and external creative tools as parts of the creative process

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abstract

How can *openness*, *intuition* and *external creative tools* be valuable assets to the creative process? In this thesis, I explore that question as it relates to three distinct perspectives: my reflections on my own approach, other artists' thoughts on the subject and the composition of my orchestral piece *let me cry* (2022).

My findings are that by integrating *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* into one's creative practice, one can more easily overcome creative blocks, come up with material, and think of original ideas while saving time and energy that would otherwise be spent on considering various options or coming up with solutions to creative problems.

I relate my findings to the Eastern philosophical concept of “being like water” — that is, accepting the ideas that arise without judgment and realising them with conviction while adapting to the creative situation as it changes.

keywords

music composition, openness, intuition, external creative tools, creative blocks, changing plans, decision-making, Eastern philosophy

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1. introduction

Over the last few years, three elements have emerged as significant components of my artistic practice: *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools*. In this thesis, I delve into those three elements, explore what role they play, and determine what makes them valuable assets to the creative process.

Before I continue, I'd like to introduce myself and describe my artistic background. I was born in 1997 in the Faroe Islands. For those unfamiliar, the Faroe Islands are a small archipelago of 18 islands situated north of Scotland and approximately halfway between Iceland and Norway. The Faroes are known for their extremely unpredictable weather and have thus become affectionately nicknamed "the land of maybe" by some (Breedlove, 2018).

I grew up in the capital city of Tórshavn, the Faroe Islands' largest settlement with a population of around 20,000. Despite its small number of inhabitants, Tórshavn has become home to a tight-knit community of artists. Frederiksen (2009) describes the Faroese art scene as "eruptive in growth" with a continually expanding scope and states that the number of professional artists living in the Faroe Islands has never been greater.

I was surrounded by music while I grew up. Both my mother and my paternal grandmother were amateur singers and guitarists, while my father exposed me to many different kinds of music and introduced me to my first digital audio workstations and notation programmes. Every Sunday, we attended the local Pentecostal church, where music played a vital part in the service.

Despite this generously musical environment and the fact that I attended viola lessons at the Tórshavn School of Music, I didn't really develop an interest in music till I was around 14 years old. As a teenager, inspired both by singer-songwriters like Lady Gaga and classical composers

like Frédéric Chopin, I taught myself to play the piano and started writing songs and small pieces — something I quickly discovered I had a talent for.

A couple of years later, I was accepted into Musikkskúla Miðnám, an advanced preparatory music course at the Tórshavn School of Music. There, I studied with the composer Sunleif Rasmussen, who taught me in all aspects of music composition. During this same period, my career as a composer received an important breath of life. The composer and musician Kristian Blak, a prominent figure in the Faroese music scene and then-president of the Association of Faroese Composers, decided to take me under his wing, professionally speaking. He urged visiting ensembles to commission music from me, and thus, some of the earliest pieces I ever composed were written on commission.

In 2018, I was accepted into the composition programme at the Malmö Academy of Music and moved to Sweden to pursue my studies. I studied with the ever-encouraging composer Rolf Martinsson while attending regular seminars with Luca Francesconi, Bent Sørensen, and Staffan Storm, to name a few. I continued writing on commission for various ensembles but also developed an interest in performing music myself.

aim and methods

During the last two to three years, my creative process has matured significantly. *Openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* have become some of the most important elements of my approach, and that's why I've decided to examine them more closely. I'll be describing my creative process in detail, contextualising it with other artists' perspectives, and engaging in some personal reflection on it in order to answer the question: "How can *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* be valuable assets to the creative process?"

The main method of exploring these elements is by analysing my internal process as recorded in the logbook I kept while composing the orchestral piece *let me cry* (2022). The logbook was a personal journal that I wrote in after every composition session, recording my thoughts and feelings as well as whether and how *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* had manifested in that day's work. While I didn't document the technical aspects of the composition, I recorded every instance of decision-making, changing plans, creative blocks, etc.

My goal with this exploration is not only to improve my own understanding but also to provide both current and future colleagues with an insight into how a more thorough integration of *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* into their individual creative practices can be an invaluable advantage.

2. my creative process

When I first started composing around ten years ago, my approach was entirely intuitive. I would sit down at the piano and let my hands play by themselves, and if I liked what I heard, I would record it and give it a title. Back then, my creative process was totally devoid of any intellectualisation.

Once I started studying at Musikkskúla Miðnám, my approach developed in an altogether different direction. Nearly every single note of any given piece had to be predetermined by a system. Looking back, I realise that this heavy reliance on systems was a coping mechanism by which I overcame frequent creative blocks and soothed my anxiety surrounding my artistic output. However, this over-reliance on a systematic approach left my music austere and lacking in heart.

I continued working with systems during my first year at the Malmö Academy of Music, albeit in a more nuanced way where I also made space for a degree of intuition. Yet, my anxiety surrounding how my music would be perceived persisted. I felt great pressure from my immediate environment that my artistic work should live up to a certain intellectual standard. In time, this pressure caused me to experience more and more creative blocks, and I struggled with nearly every piece I wrote.

During the academic year 2019–2020, I took a break from my studies at the Malmö Academy of Music and moved back home to the Faroe Islands. Over the course of that year, my artistic approach evolved considerably. I was very interested in minimalism and had been for many years, but I had never dared to write a piece in that style — I was worried it would be considered shallow or lazy. However, when I received a commission during the latter half of 2019, I decided

to take the leap and finally write a minimalistic piece. The process was frightening, but I powered through and delivered +/- (2019) for saxophone octet.

Around the same time, I became interested in the thoughts of the English musician Brian Eno. Through watching numerous talks and discussions on YouTube, I became acquainted with his approach to radical openness as part of the creative process. I also discovered a tool Eno devised jointly with the German-English artist Peter Schmidt: *Oblique Strategies*. In an article in The Guardian, *Oblique Strategies* are described as such:

The original *Oblique Strategies* (Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas), was a set of cards created by Eno and his painter friend Peter Schmidt, and published as a signed limited edition in 1975. On each card is printed an (often quite abstract) instruction, which is invoked when an artist, producer or band has reached some form of creative impasse and requires external disruptive influence to suggest new ideas. (McNamee, 2009)

The first piece I composed with the help of *Oblique Strategies* was *Sögnin um Kópakonuna í 10 Myndum* (2020) for flute and clarinet. During the composition of that piece, I made a conscious decision to sit down at the piano to improvise and use whatever I came up with as my musical material. Whenever I felt stuck, I would pull one or several *Oblique Strategies* and let them guide me. With this approach, I found myself getting stuck less and less frequently.

The current form of my creative process is the result of the continued cultivation of the approach described above. I now wholly embrace minimalism as the style in which I write music, so I tend to make use of very simple or limited base material. This material is then either

dealt with entirely intuitively or subjected to a process that causes it to undergo a gradual transformation over the course of a piece.

Openness is a vital component of my current approach. I strive to be receptive to potential directions I can take my music in, and I'm prepared to follow those paths, however unorthodox they may be. In my experience, creative blocks result from having an excessively firm conviction about what form a piece *should* take. Whenever I encounter such a block, I take it as a sign it's time to consider a new direction.

Another crucial aspect of my process is *intuition*. For me, *intuition* is more or less synonymous with *improvisation*. The method through which I come up with new ideas, melodies, chords, processes, etc., is by sitting down at a piano and improvising. I record my improvisations, listen back to them and build upon them. Frequently, I find myself with a finished piece of music after a few cycles.

External creative tools are the third essential element of my creative *modus operandi*. I've already described Eno and Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*, which I find myself using again and again. Another tool I use frequently is *coin-flipping*: Whenever I'm faced with some small, inconsequential decision during the composition process, I flip a coin instead of ruminating on the better course of action. I do this not because I want the coin to dictate my decision, but because, in the moment the coin is in the air, I realise which of my options I prefer.

The combination of these three facets is what characterises my creative process: *openness* helps me see new possibilities, *intuition* enables me to come up with musical material effortlessly, and *external creative tools* facilitate the previous two elements while simultaneously allowing me

to make decisions efficiently. Through this mixture, I'm able to compose music that I would never have come up with otherwise.

3. other artists' perspectives

There is an abundance of material pertaining to what other artists have said or written about their creative processes and what role *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* play in said processes. I've collected citations from a diverse selection of artists who work within the musical field in order to contextualise my own ideas surrounding the subject. Since the internal aspects of the creative process are not defined by musical genre, I have chosen artists from across the genre spectrum, with Western art music on the one end and pop and rock music on the other.

The artists I have chosen are Ryuichi Sakamoto, Meredith Monk, and John Cage on the side of Western art music, Björk, Sevdaliza, and David Bowie on the side of pop and rock music, and Brian Eno, who exists somewhere in the middle. These are all artists whom I look up to and whose perspectives and insights I find inspiring and applicable to my own creative work.

Though the practical composition methods may differ between individuals on either side of the spectrum, the internal processes have many similarities. All seven artists speak about the importance of remaining *open* and following one's *intuition*. Some of them are or were also known for their reliance on various kinds of *external creative tools*.

Brian Eno, whom I've already mentioned earlier in this thesis, has spoken in countless lectures and interviews about his approach to creative work. In addition to being one of the creators of *Oblique Strategies*, Eno has, at several points, emphasised the importance of remaining open to whatever possibilities arise during the creative process. Speaking on the subject, Eno said:

The way I think about it now, more and more, is that I think of myself as a gardener. So what I'm doing is making seeds, putting them together and seeing what grows out of it,

and actually not knowing in advance what that will be. I have some vague idea, but I don't know in detail what is going to happen. . .

People who haven't got quite a lot of experience of making things think that you can only make something if you already know what it's going to be. This is nearly always not the case. Very few people really have a clear conception of what they want to make, and you don't need to have any conception, actually. What you need to do, is to be alert to what is happening when you start working. (Ear Opener, 2020)

In another interview, Eno spoke about the necessity of a balance between *control* and *surrender*:

This is something that I started thinking about when I was watching somebody surfing one day . . . I watched this beautiful dance that this person was engaged in, where, on the one hand, they use a huge amount of control to get onto the wave, and then they let the wave take them. And I thought, "that's very interesting". So, there's control, to get the process started, and then surrender, this thrill of being carried along like that. (Thought Economics, 2021)

On the topic of how she approaches her songwriting, the Icelandic singer-songwriter Björk Guðmundsdóttir, better known by her mononym Björk, said, "You do the one baby step, and you go, 'Oh, okay.' Then you do another baby step, and you go, 'Okay.' Then you do another one..." She later continued, "The minute your expectations harden or crystallize, you jinx it." (Stosuy, 2017a).

In a separate interview, after describing how she works in a disciplined way during the studio process, Björk stated, "With my voice, for example, and my songwriting it's sort of the opposite

[of disciplined]. I would never let the analytical side of me in there, because it can be very destructive.” (Mollylurcher, 2012).

The Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto spoke in an interview with The Creative Independent about how he prefers to work in such a way that the results of his creative endeavours are entirely novel to him:

If I was an architect, I would be a bad one, because I don't like having blueprints. Of course, without blueprints, nobody knows what the building will be. But that's exactly what I like to do. I shouldn't know what I'm making, or what it will be. I want to make something I don't know, and that I've never done or never known. Hopefully, for me, it's going to be a surprise, and a new experience. (Stosuy, 2017b)

Sevda Alizadeh, the Iranian-Dutch singer-songwriter more commonly known as Sevdaliza, told L'Officiel Singapore about the role intuition and improvisation play in her songwriting as well as her daily life:

My creative process is based on improvisation. A lot of it is very intrinsic and intuitive. I see that in almost all aspects of my life: the way I create a piece of music and also the way I prepare dinner, a lot of times I go into the kitchen and I don't know what I'm going to do and then I end up with a meal. (Cain, 2020)

The English singer-songwriter David Jones, alias David Bowie, was a user of Eno and Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*. He used the cards intermittently while writing his *Berlin Trilogy* and extensively during the composition of the trilogy's final album, *Lodger* (Graham, 2016).

Bowie devised a technique of cutting up song lyrics and putting them back together in different ways in order to see possibilities that he would otherwise be unable to come up with (BBC News, 2016). At one point, he even had a friend develop a computer programme to perform the technique for him. Speaking about the programme, Bowie said:

It's almost like a technological dream, in its own way. It creates the images from the dream state without having to go through the board and go to sleep all night or get stoned out of your head. And it will give me access to areas that I wouldn't be thinking about, otherwise, during the day, because it'll prompt feelings and ideas that, in the natural course of events, I probably would have skirted around or just not been involved in. (BOWIElover, 2011)

Speaking in an interview with Bandcamp, American composer Meredith Monk discussed the importance of remaining open-minded while doing creative work: "I think that's so much a part of the process of creating, artistic or otherwise, any kind of creation: listen. To really be open-hearted, and to listen to what *it* wants, not necessarily what *you* want to say." (Reyes, 2020, emphasis in original).

In a different interview, Monk emphasised the value of an equilibrium between *focus* and *openness*:

I think the performances that I remember in my lifetime are the ones where I have experienced a sense of pinpoint focus and then, at the same time, the deep relaxation that comes with being able to accept anything that happens in the moment. . .

But you can also bring this balance into your daily life and your creative process. Creating something involves being patient with yourself and hanging out in the unknown. Speaking for myself, even after 50 years, I'm still just terrified with every piece that I start. I'm basically fumbling around in the dark. I might have a little intuition about where something should start, but I really don't know where I am for a while, and so there's an accompanying sense of anxiety or fear.

When you really are patient with yourself then, at one moment, a little discovery might happen. You might find a little seed. And then, little by little, that fear turns into curiosity and interest. In the process, you've really walked through fear. (Garrison Institute, 2016)

A figure whom several of the above artists have cited as an influence is the American avant-garde composer John Cage. Cage was a pioneer in the artistic field in numerous ways, one of which was his radically open-minded approach to musical composition. When asked about the purpose of so-called "experimental" music, Cage famously stated, "No purposes. Sounds." (Cage, 1961/2011, p. 17).

Cage used the *I Ching* — the *Book of Changes*, a Chinese divination text — as part of his creative approach. He used it as a tool to incorporate chance into his composition process, as he wanted to remove his personal preferences from the equation. One of Cage's most significant works, *Music of Changes* (1951), was composed using the *I Ching* (Marshall, 2009).

In his *Lecture on Something*, Cage referenced another pioneer, the American composer Morton Feldman, as he elaborated on the concept of *accepting* rather than *making*:

Feldman speaks of no sounds, and takes within broad limits the first ones that come along. He has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting. . .

When a composer feels a responsibility to make, rather than accept, he eliminates from the area of possibility all those events that do not suggest the at that point in time vogue of profundity. For he takes himself seriously, wishes to be considered great, and he thereby diminishes his love and increases his fear and concern about what people will think. There are many serious problems confronting such an individual. He must do it better, more impressively, more beautifully, etc. than anybody else. And what, precisely, does this, this beautiful profound object, this masterpiece, have to do with Life? It has this to do with Life: that it is separate from it. (Cage, 1961/2011, pp. 129–130)

4. the long and winding road to *let me cry*

The final project I took part in at the Malmö Academy of Music was an orchestral project with Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra. For the project, I composed an eleven-minute piece in one movement titled *let me cry* (2022) – my first real encounter with the orchestra. The orchestral line-up was two flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), oboes, clarinets, and bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon), four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings.

While composing, I kept a logbook where I detailed the internal creative process I went through. I recorded every instance of changing plans, intuitive decisions, improvisation, and use of *Oblique Strategies* or coin-flipping. In other words, I used the logbook to document the role *openness, intuition, and external creative tools* played during the composition of *let me cry*.

let me cry was composed between September 2021 and February 2022. During the composition process, the piece went through a few different embodiments before arriving at its final form. The following excerpts from my logbook illustrate the journey:

15/09/2021

I started work on planning this piece about two weeks ago. Back then, I decided on three reference pieces: Austin Wintory's *I Was Born for This* from the video game Journey, David Lang's *Simple Song #3* from the film Youth and Osvaldo Golijov's *Azul*. I also made a plan for the form of the piece based on the form of Wintory's *I Was Born for This* . . .

Today, I didn't feel quite happy with the form plan, so I decided to make a new one, more inspired by the form of Lang's *Simple Song* #3. I feel much happier with the new form plan.

My thoughts around the piece so far are these: it'll be more melody-based than my earlier music but will also make use of empty spaces as is characteristic for me. It'll have two major components, A and B. The keywords for A are "freer, intuitive form, more traditional, melody" while the keywords for B are "more structural and repetitive, process-based, texture".

A
Section I
 Intro 1 Intro 2 A B **Section II**
 Transition A1 C Transition

B
Section III **Section IV** **Section V** **Section VI**
 D Transition E Transition F Transition G Transition

A
Section VII **Section VIII**
 A B Transition A1 C Transition A2 C Coda

The first form plan.

A
 Intro A A1 A2 Transition

B
 B B1 C B2 B3 C1 C2

A
 A3 A3 A3 A3 Coda

The second form plan.

16/09/2021

I started work on the actual music today. I sat down at my keyboard and quickly came up with some chords for the A section of the piece. Immediately, as if on cue, there was a negative internal voice saying “these chords aren’t good enough for this intelligent music. They’re too simple — what will people think?”

I carried on, trying my chords in a few different forms and contexts, but I still didn’t feel quite happy with any of what I wrote.

I pulled some *Oblique Strategies* that got me thinking of different ways I could approach this piece. I sat on the floor with my keyboard, surrounded by the cards and quickly realised that I was stuck *because* I had a plan and certain expectations of how that plan should play out.

I realised that I had to let go and have a more open and intuitive approach to this piece.

17/09/2021

Finally, progress.

I took the advice of one of the cards: “Ask your body.” I sat down at my keyboard, improvised some chords and sang a melody. I let go of any expectations or ideas about how I wanted the piece to be.

I quite liked what I came up with, so I sat down with some manuscript paper and started sketching out some figurations. I now have a rudimentary intro to the piece and a start to the first A section. So far, I'm sticking to the form plan.

23/09/2021

I continued composing the first A section without any problems. There was a point where I was faced with a choice between two options — whether to reset a system at a new section or not. Instead of deliberating for a long time, I decided to flip a coin. I disagreed with the coin's decision and decided to go with the other option, realising that was what I wanted.

08/10/2021

I continued composing without problems today. I worked out some of the material I'll be using. I took special care to remain open to breaking the "rules" of composition, only deciding against doing something if my *ears* reacted against it.

25/10/2021

Composing went well today. I spent many hours in "the zone". Coins were flipped to make small decisions. I realised that the piece might work better without one of its main elements. I ought to be *open* to that realisation.

15/11/2021

I composed for a little bit this evening. I've been feeling a bit stuck, mostly because I never sit down to write. While writing, I improvised and came up with some gorgeous sounds that made me want to start the piece over from scratch. Should I?

20/11/2021

I am completely stuck. I feel that the only option available to me is to start over from scratch. This time, I'll work with no plan, no expectations, nothing. I'll work completely intuitively and freely. I think it's the expectation of what the piece "should be" that causes me to get stuck. I know that radical openness is the only solution to this problem. Follow the path of least resistance. Be like water. . .

25/11/2021

Inspiration has struck!

I was watching a TV show when thoughts of my latest lesson with Rolf [Martinsson] crossed my mind. I remembered how we had talked about working with the same idea across several pieces. I had said, "Imagine if Mozart only wrote one sonata." Suddenly, something clicked.

I realised that I could explore my concept from *Coming Together* (2021) further, but with different musical material at its base. The ideas struck me one after the other: I kept hearing the chords from Händel's *Lascia ch'io pianga* in my head, so I decided to use that as my material.

I feel reinvigorated.

A = Soprano
 B = Alto
 C = Tenor
 D = Bass

The numbers denote the shifts the voices go through to reach their destination (8).

A	A	A	A	A	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7
				B	B	B	B	B	B1	B2	B3
								C	C	C	C
A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8	A8
B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B8	B8	B8	B8	B8	B8	B8
C	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C8	C8	C8
D	D	D	D	D	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7

Simplified version of the third and final form plan.

20/12/2021

I continued writing today. I have the music. At this point, it's just a question of writing it down. I incorporated some extra elements (drone bass, intro), which I really think "make" the piece.

12/01/2022

I finished writing the material today. It's quite dense in certain places, but I'll make sure to free it up once I start orchestrating, which is the next thing I'll be doing. . .

14/01/2022

I started working with the orchestration today. Listening to the material I'd written, I made a rough blueprint for the whole piece. However, as soon as I got into the score, I felt like abandoning the blueprint and adding new elements. I guess I should take the intuitive approach. . .

18/01/2022

I just had the idea that I could elongate some of the notes to change the character of the piece. I've been feeling like the rhythm doesn't really work.

While I was in the shower, my idea matured. If I elongate some notes and remove others to obscure the material, I can present the voices in their original positions [as opposed to the garbled manner in which I had introduced the voices up to this point].

Brilliant! I feel excited about this idea. It's the idea I've been waiting for.

19/01/2022

I started over today. Using my voice, I intuitively composed a simplified theme based on Händel's *Lascia ch'io pianga*. I flipped a coin at one point to decide whether a certain phrase should be legato throughout. The coin said no, and I agreed.

I've realised that even though I'm basing this piece on Händel's music, it doesn't need to be obvious. In fact, I don't have to reveal it at all.

I input the new music in Dorico [my preferred notation programme] and decided to transpose everything up an octave to make it clearer.

I also just had the idea to start the piece with string harmonics and then have woodwinds gradually join them.

20/01/2022

I continued inputting the new music in Dorico. I like the way this is turning out a lot better.

I flipped a coin a total of four times: three times to determine whether certain phrases should be separate or joined, legato-wise, and once to decide if a single note should be played tenuto or not. I found myself agreeing with the coin in all instances.

It's late at night; I just finished the music for the piece. This time, I'm sure. . .

Orchestration starts tomorrow.

21/01/2022

I started orchestrating my new material today, and I'm making really good progress.

I listened to the material and wrote up a general plan, making sure to leave plenty of room for improvisation.

. . .

I'm about halfway through the piece. Orchestrating this kind of music is like solving a puzzle. It's difficult.

At certain points, I'm concerned about the density of the timbre, but I figure I'll just do as much as I can, and then I'll look over it after.

At one point, I decided to break the glockenspiel's pattern because it felt like the right thing to do. I flipped a coin to make sure I wanted that. I did.

09/02/2022

I orchestrated the end of the piece today. Because I know I want a full tutti at the very end, I had to work backwards . . . Now, I'm just missing what's between the middle and the end.

10/02/2022

I continued orchestrating. I'm working on the last section I'm missing now. In many ways, I feel like the orchestra is too small [to accommodate the number of individual voices in the piece]. But I'm doing the best I can with what I've got.

I made many intuitive decisions about which instruments to place melodies in, but, naturally, my intuitions are informed by my knowledge of common orchestrational practice.

17/02/2022

The puzzle has been assembled. I'm now reviewing the orchestration and changing what I deem necessary. I have started to incorporate an element of fluctuation, which Rolf [Martinsson] suggested.

I flipped a coin at one point to decide whether to use crash cymbals or suspended cymbal. The coin got to decide, but I later changed my mind because I intuited that the other option worked better.

18/02/2022

I continued incorporating the fluctuation idea, placing the dynamic changes fairly arbitrarily. I flipped a coin twice: once to determine something in the glockenspiel, where I agreed with the coin, and once to decide where to place my fluctuations, where I disagreed.

22/02/2022

let me cry is finished. I've reviewed the orchestration, and I'm happy with it. Small final changes were decided entirely intuitively: an octave up here, a well-placed niente there etc. I consulted the coin to see if I should have a big tremolo at the end. We both agreed that I should. . .

Thus, I found myself at the end of a long and winding road with a new work in my hands. In the end, *let me cry* turned out as a process-driven piece of ambient orchestral music. The main theme, which is a simplified version of the first eight bars of Georg Friedrich Händel's aria *Lascia ch'io pianga* from the opera *Rinaldo* (1711), is split into 16 different voices that all start out of sync with one another and then gradually sync up over the course of the piece. As the voices at various points find their correct place in the music, the orchestra swells and reaches new levels of intensity. The climax of the piece occurs at the very end, when almost all 16 voices have fallen into place.

The orchestral texture of *let me cry* is dense and characterised by dynamic fluctuations within the individual voices. Those undulations create a constantly changing orchestral timbre — reminiscent of a shimmering lake under the midday sun or the sand dunes of the Sahara being gently sculpted by the desert winds.

The image shows a page of a musical score for an orchestra, starting at bar 91. The score includes staves for woodwinds (Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Contrabassoon), brass (Horns, Trumpets, Trombones, Tuba), percussion (Tympani, Triangle, Cymbals), and strings (Violins, Violas, Violas, Cellos, Double Basses). The music features dynamic markings such as *p*, *cresc.*, and *ff*, and includes performance instructions like *div.* and *unis.*. A box labeled 'E' is present at the top left of the score.

Excerpt from the score. Bar 99 marks the first time any of the voices meet.

5. on being like water

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, three significant elements comprise my creative process: *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools*. In this final chapter, I will summarise and contextualise my reflections and findings surrounding those three elements. I will present an answer to the question “How can *openness*, *intuition*, and *external creative tools* be valuable assets to the creative process?” and relate the conclusion to the concept of “being like water”.

Perhaps I’m predisposed, as a native of “the land of maybe”, to a certain degree of openness to changing plans. I used to struggle with creative blocks but have now realised that getting stuck is a symptom of excessive rigidity, to which one solution is embracing openness to new and different ways of thinking. In my creative practice, I strive to be receptive to any ideas that arise, and I’m prepared to see them through, however unusual they may be. As a consequence, I find myself getting stuck less and less frequently.

Brian Eno, whose creative work is characterised by radical openness, has been vocal about the concepts of not knowing in advance what one is going to create and being alert to one’s internal process while working (Ear Opener, 2020). Björk, known for her unconventional musical style, spoke about not letting one’s expectations harden (Stosuy, 2017a), while Ryuichi Sakamoto stated that he prefers to work without a plan (Stosuy, 2017b). John Cage, a prominent avant-gardist, discussed the concept of *accepting* rather than *making* (Cage, 1961/2011, pp. 129–130).

While composing my orchestral work *let me cry* (2022), I continually struggled with my ideas. After a while, I recognised that I was struggling *because* I had a plan and expectations of how that plan should be realised. However, knowing that the solution to my struggle was radical openness, I was willing to start over from scratch several times and remained receptive to

changes in the fundamental constitution of the work. That openness resulted in a piece altogether separate from the one I had initially set out to write.

Initially, the plan was to write a piece with eight distinct sections with material based on an A theme, a B theme, and a C theme. Then, I decided on a new form plan with variations on two central themes, A and B. Once I decided to abandon my plans and let the piece take shape on its own, I ended up using only the one theme based on the first eight bars of Händel's *Lascia ch'io pianga* (1711).

To give some context as to why I decided to use Händel's aria in *let me cry*: As I was trying to figure out what shape the piece would take, I kept hearing the vocal melody and string accompaniment from the first eight bars of *Lascia ch'io pianga* in my head. I don't usually draw inspiration from opera, but this particular melody spoke to me — perhaps owing to its effectful use in Lars von Trier's film *Antichrist* (2009). I quickly became acclimatised to the idea that I could and should use that melody as the base for my orchestral piece.

My approach when I first started composing as a teenager was entirely intuitive and devoid of any intellectualisation. After going through a journey of creative discovery and maturation, I've come full circle and once again deeply value intuition, which most often takes the form of instrumental improvisation to come up with material. Because intuition, by definition, isn't thought out, there can be a certain feeling of insecurity surrounding its "nakedness". However, if one is able to embrace the vulnerability, effortless intuitive creation can take place.

Singer-songwriter Sevdaliza has spoken about how her creative process is very intuitive and improvisational, stating that she often doesn't know what she's going to make and that this is something that permeates her life (Cain, 2020). Meredith Monk discussed how she often starts

out with just a little seed of an intuition but is otherwise entirely in the dark, incrementally feeling her way forward when she's creating a new work (Garrison Institute, 2016).

All of the different themes I came up with for *let me cry* were composed intuitively. I improvised using my keyboard and my voice to come up with chords and melodies while also listening to my instinct when the idea to use material from Händel's *Lascia ch'io pianga* arose. I started over from scratch several times, each time becoming more and more acclimatised to the idea that I should take a completely intuitive approach to the composition of the piece where many of my creative decisions would be made simply because they "felt right".

I have nearly always made use of external creative tools in my creative work. My early reliance on systems is an example, and my current use of gradual processes could be considered one as well. I use Eno and Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* in the composition of virtually every new work while also relying on coin-flipping to facilitate my decision-making process. I use the piano as a tool to improvise with in order to come up with ideas and material which, as a result, often fit within a pianistic idiom, e.g., featuring polyphony and arpeggios. The use of external creative tools has enabled me to compose much faster and has made my creative work significantly easier.

Many other artists also use external creative tools in their artistic endeavours. I have, at several points, referred to Eno and Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*, the "over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas" which help the user come up with new ideas (McNamee, 2009). David Bowie used his special cutting-up technique to come up with many of his unconventional yet powerful song lyrics (BBC News, 2016), while John Cage famously used the *I Ching* to incorporate a chance element into his composition process (Marshall, 2009).

I used *Oblique Strategies* particularly often during the early stages of the composition of *let me cry*, and one specific card was especially significant: “Ask your body”. That card encouraged me to continue improvising using my hands and my voice in order to come up with the material for the piece. I also flipped countless coins to aid me in decision-making, especially in the later stages of the composition process, when I was finalising the musical material and working on the orchestration.

So how can *openness, intuition, and external creative tools* be valuable assets to the creative process? By incorporating these three elements more fully into one’s artistic practice, creative blocks are more easily overcome and occur less frequently. One is able to come up with material effortlessly and think of ideas that would never arise on their own. A lot of time and energy that would otherwise be spent weighing different options or devising solutions to creative problems can instead be applied elsewhere.

On an institutional level, a diversification of the creative approaches being taught could be a beneficial change. In my experience of studying at a European conservatoire, systematic approaches such as total serialism are prioritised in the classroom while more open and intuitive approaches receive much less attention. Most of the teachers and guest lecturers have backgrounds in the European modernist tradition, while those of newer or different schools of thought are scarce. Perhaps it could be worthwhile to study more intuitively composed music alongside the strictly systematic works of the modernist canon, and perhaps a greater range of creative approaches could be a valuable addition to both the faculty and the list of guest lecturers.

These benefits of integrating *openness, intuition, and external creative tools* into one’s creative work tie into the Eastern philosophical concept of “being like water”. Water does not struggle. It takes on the shape of whatever container it’s poured into. When it moves, water does so with conviction — sure of itself even though it doesn’t know its destination. Expressed in human

terms, this could mean *accepting* rather than *making*, as Cage (1961/2011, pp. 129–130) discussed in his *Lecture on Something*. It could involve adapting to the “will” of one’s work rather than trying to force it into a predetermined form. It could signify being confident in one’s ideas, however unorthodox, and acting upon them without hesitation.

The English philosopher Alan Watts, known for illuminating Eastern philosophy for Western audiences, spoke about the concept of “being like water” in one of his many lectures:

Watch the flow of water when it crosses over an area of land, and you will see that it puts out fingers, and some of them stop because they come into blind alleys. The water doesn’t pursue that course; it simply rises, and then it finds a way it can go. But it never uses any effort. It only uses weight [and] gravity. It takes the line of least resistance and eventually finds a course.

Now, we will do the same thing. (Hényel, 2011)

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