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The Metaphysics of Notation (review)

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Notes, Volume 68, Number 1, September 2011, pp. 172-173 (Article)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: [10.1353/not.2011.0103](https://doi.org/10.1353/not.2011.0103)



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Mark Applebaum. *The Metaphysics of Notation*. DVD. Directed by Robert Arnold. St. Paul, MN: Innova, 2010. 787. \$20.00.

This single DVD contains a brief documentary that chronicles the inspiration, creation, and rendering of Mark Applebaum's graphic score, *The Metaphysics of Notation* (2008). Additionally, the disc contains performance excerpts, two scrolling versions of the score and a set of stills excerpted from the notation.

The first item, Robert Arnold's brief documentary film (lasting less than twenty minutes) is provocatively titled "There's No Sound in My Head," and begins with the composer stating, "I'm really tired of sound." With this declaration, Applebaum calls into question immediately the nature of art, of music, and of realizing notation.

Applebaum's work, a series of 12 panels and two hanging mobiles, revisits the challenge musicians have always faced when rendering pictographs, whether they be in "traditional" notation or in other formats. Remarkably, given the beautiful design of the graphic work and the aesthetic results, Applebaum has no formal training as an artist. This does not mean he does not have experience in communicating a musical idea, as manuscript preparation is a part of the composer's training. However, in *The Metaphysics of Notation*, the medium is innovative, and in it, Applebaum has created a new musical code.

While on display at the Cantor Arts Center Museum at Stanford University, the work received weekly musical interpretations over the yearlong exhibit. Applebaum's work demonstrates his understanding that visual arts and music are one and the same. Of course, even in this, there are more questions than answers including the idea of authorship, since in rendering this work, the performers are actually creating (composing?) the piece. In the film, a variety of scholars, performers, administrators, and Applebaum himself weigh in on this complex issue. Ultimately the composer offers no answers, but gracefully allows the performers, audience, and himself to examine the question in the moment.

Applebaum's previous compositions provide examples of traditional, non-traditional, and hybrid notation (combining determinate and indeterminate indications). His *Metaphysics of Notation* is a depart-

ure from determinate notation, however it does have certain characteristics that speak to musical understanding. The panels contain some organic or culturally understood shapes (hearts, dots, shamrocks, stars); some items look like visual representations of a theme being broken down into component motives, which are then reassembled into something that looks completely different. The performance excerpts reflect a common cultural understanding. For example, the musicians who rendered the score read from left to right, the more detailed sections in the panels encouraged the performers to play more notes with smaller note values, and the denser designs were interpreted at a louder dynamic. Shapes that were higher on the panel were interpreted at a higher pitch and shapes that were lower were played at a lower pitch. The lack of detailed instructions allowed the performers to follow the lines emotionally, and encouraged all involved to ask a variety of questions, while at the same time offering no answers. Some performers chose to actually write out their interpretations in traditional notation and render the score from their own transcriptions, while another composer brought in one of his own works that he felt related in some way to the Applebaum display.

The indeterminacy of Applebaum's work is motivated by the absence of verbal or written instructions. This process reminds me of the Mind Institute's spatial temporal math education program, "Jiji," wherein children learn math concepts by helping a penguin leave a room. *Jiji* engages students in ways not possible with traditional instructional methods anchored in formalized language, much in the way Applebaum's score encourages performers to think beyond the indications of traditional notation. The communication barrier inherent in a traditional score is not present in *The Metaphysics of Notation*, allowing his design to successfully reach interpreters at every level of expertise. (SPOILER ALERT) His preschool aged daughter presents the most notable interpretation.

The second item on the DVD, the *Metaphysics Mix*, is a series of one-minute performance excerpts that are drawn from the

forty-five performances of the work in 2009–2010. The DVD offers two sound options: stereo or 5.1 surround sound.

Performers in the *Metaphysics Mix* were mostly soloists, and the players utilized strings, brass, electronic instruments, a “cell phone orchestra,” laptop computer, electric bass, soprano saxophone, early music instruments, singing bowls, and noticeably little vocal interpretation. One of the few vocal realizations came from DJ Lars who rapped about the visual stimulus, actually describing what he said in verse. All of the performers were actually trained musicians, however I do not believe that in order to realize this piece the performer needs to be a musician at all.

The reaction of the non-performers in the series of clips is priceless. Some bystanders were clearly present intentionally, while others were surprised by the events.

The final item on the DVD is *The Metaphysics of Notation*, which contains two scrolling versions of the score and a collection of forty-eight still images from the score. The non-verbal communication

theme is continued on the menu in this section as the faster scrolling version (8:00) has an airplane icon on menu and moves quickly when selected, while the slower scrolling version (16:00) has a walking human icon on menu and moves half as fast as the airplane option. The scrolling images both move right to left.

This linear rendering of the work encourages sonic focus much in the way a Bhutanese mandala encourages spiritual focus. When stacked vertically however, the twelve panels exhibit a vertical logic that is fully equipped with polyphonic potential. I was hoping for a polyphonic rendering that unfortunately only happened briefly in the performance by the Stanford new music ensemble. My polyphonic expectations were addressed on the “meta” level by composer Brian Ferneyhough, who stated in the film that in Applebaum’s work, “He creates a polyphony of the different aspects of himself.”

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Fig. 26.—Performers of Funeral Music. (Copy of a Picture from a Tomb at Thebes.)