

Some Gaburo thoughts

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In an essay he wrote several years ago, David Dunn talked about some of the changes that Kenneth Gaburo's thinking went through over the course of his life. In this essay, though, I'd like to deal with some of the things that remained constant in Gaburo's work throughout those changes. Some of these, I think, show real insight into his compositional thinking about theory and its uses.

One of the central questions Kenneth was continually asking was “How far can we push things before they lose whatever-it-is that makes their identity and become something else?” Although one of the clearest illustrations of this is the Minim-Tellig videos in which nursery rhymes have various phonemes substituted until they almost become abstract sound poetry, I see this kind of “testing the limits of perception” as one of his recurring themes. In the early instrumental and vocal works, he's testing the kinds of structures he can build with his chosen techniques, and in the later pieces written with the “Scatter” technique, he's also testing the limits of the body, sensory deprivation, and applications of those to compositional output.

Another aspect of this was a question he originally asked of me in reference to electronics, but which has much broader compositional applications: He asked “What are the compositional implications of a particular piece of equipment, process, situation?” This also applied to imperfections in material or in performing ability etc. The questions were, “What have you got? How can you use it? How far can you push/develop it?” An example – he once told me of an experiment he did when building small electronics. He took resistors, and very gently hit them with a hammer. The idea was to crack the graphite just enough to make their behavior a bit unpredictable. Of course, he had to throw out a lot of resistors he hit too hard, but he said that he ended up with some fairly nicely unpredictable circuits. At the time I was building very crude digital to analog converters, which rely on resistors of varying levels for the accuracy of their output. I tried this technique, and got some very unique DACs. Since I was using these for random control voltage outputs, the use of this imperfection enabled a degree and kind of randomness I couldn't have gotten any other way.

Today, when there is a real glut of resources for the composer – how many new plugins appear each week? - Kenneth's idea of carefully examining each new tool for possible new directions it could lead you in seems almost quixotic. There are so many new tools, one could spend a lifetime evaluating them all. Still, as a general principle, it's something that has stood me in good stead for several decades so far.

I had stopped studying with Kenneth by the time he developed his “Scatter” process, so I only know it through his writings and conversations (always too short) with him. Others, like Catherine Schieve, who studied with Kenneth during the time he developed this idea, and who has a voluminous set of notebooks about these lessons, which I hope will be published someday, would be able to describe the genesis and application of “Scatter” far better than I. However, as I understand it, in Scatter, the body is primary – as a source of information its much richer than any machine or mathematical process. I don't think its coincidental that he developed Scatter during/after his encounter with Partch's Bewitched and Partch's ideas of corporeality. As Kenneth said, his use of this technique was one way of getting beyond any “licks” he might have had – and the sensory deprivation processes he put himself through in order to get the output that he then realized into his scores were designed to make contact with a deeper sense of order and structure that the body had – one which presumably lie beneath the more “surface” concerns that we have on a daily basis with our sense of gesture and communication.

A mild example of a sensory deprivation process: Once, while visiting Iowa City in the 1980s, we walked from the University to his house (about a ½ hour walk) without saying a word – could we do it, he asked? Two blabbermouths like us? It was hard, but we did it – the first words were like gasping for air.

I don't think we should forget one aspect of Kenneth's musicality – he was, all his life, a choir conductor. His involvement with singers was primary. Again, as in “The Flow of [U]” in which three people sing a note in as much of a unison as they can, and we observe all the tiny beats and phasings that the necessary (and desirable) imperfection of human performance has, can we see another aspect of his working intensely with people to see how far an idea can be pushed.

And of course, one of the masterpieces produced by this pushing of an idea was Maledetto, where the distinction between speech, music, and language is blurred to the point of composition. For me, that moment near the end where the 6 chorus performers suddenly start singing, intensely, on the phoneme 'oo', is electrifying. After all the speech, half-speech, half-singing etc of the past 20-25 minutes, suddenly the sung voice breaks through. A lovely moment – and I'm sure he asked himself – how long can we wait before introducing this?

His interest in phenomenology and medieval writers and perception was all of a piece with his interest in physicality – what is “the thing” - what is it we hear/perceive – how do we hear/perceive – but at the same time, he wasn't fooled by scientists with hypotheses – his “Brain – Half a Whole” was an elegant very early refutation of the pop sci idea of brain hemispheric specialisation. It turns out that both the scientists and Kenneth were right – there IS a lot of lateral brain specialisation, but in musicians, and dancers, there is a lot more connections between the hemispheres than in other people. Any early rhythmic sound or movement training will help the brain become more holistic in its manner of operation. (So Plato, that old fascist, was right – after a fashion....)

And Kenneth, who very early on decided that he liked the idea of “both/and” as opposed to “either/or” would probably have been very pleased with that finding.

Another example of questioning how far things can be pushed was his use of the structure of one thing (like language) used for another (like music). For example: the Bachian monophonic voice doing n part counterpoint. Can this technique be applied to words? Can there be two different performing styles, two different verbal contents, and can you cut between them – as in his 1965 poem Situation. And then, juxtapose lighting and poses by dancers on that as well, to make a complex object for perception. This was the basis for 'Lingua I: Poems and Other Theatres.'

Other examples of this were his pieces for solo instrumentalist from the late 1960s. Because they involved the whole performer, playing speaking singing gesturing, I would say they are for instrumentalist rather than simply “instrument.” Consider Mouthpiece for solo trumpeter – a fairly abstract poem about the mouth is articulated, phoneme by phoneme, with six different techniques / registers through the trumpet. Slides are projected, word by word, so that the audience can see what words are being articulated – can they be perceived? That's one of the puzzles, and one of the essential aspects of the piece. Also – as in “Inside” for solo double bass – there is a four part counterpoint being articulated by a single voice. How far can counterpoint be pushed – timbrally distinct lines, no less, before it breaks down into a klangfarbenmelodie blur? These pieces endeavour to push those limits. Kenneth was very interested in research on perception, but he felt that one shouldn't rely on scientific studies of perception to limit what one could do – one should write a piece which challenges the research – and see if you CAN hear the “difference.” This also calls for virtuoso listeners to match the virtuoso performers. Something he was looking for all his life – whether early middle or oven late.....

Another example of the embedding of a familiar object in an unfamiliar context – pushing perception, was his use of the Dies Irae, which formed the backbone of 'Mangrove', his free-jazz workshop piece which he made with improvisation students at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne in 1987 or '88.

Another essential idea of his was the idea that a composer composed more than music – the creativity that music called for should be applied to other things, like composing a life, composing a venue, composing a situation within which work can live, etc. He didn't always succeed, but the idea of the composer as a self-organizing, community-involved, interactive identity was always a strong one with him.

Here are a few rememberings of things that happened in individual lessons or group classes. They seem to have relevance to our concern here:

Once in a composition lesson, I presented him with a piece and said, “It's based on the Fibonacci series. Of course, you can't hear that, but....” I got no further. “What do you mean, you can't hear it?” he asked. “It doesn't sound like Mozart, does it?” I was flummoxed, but admitted that no, it didn't sound like Mozart. The point he was making was that the structures we use inform the sound of a piece, even if one can't “recognize” them as such. (So much for the old chestnut about the non-validity of the 12-tone technique (among many others) because you can't “hear” the rows, structures, etc.)

Another time, in a Compositional Linguistics seminar, he gave us a sheet with a large number of the techniques of English language poetry on them. He said we were to write a poem where we tried to use as many as possible of the techniques in the poem, and be prepared to read them in class and tell where the various structural devices were used. He also said we should bring in a love poem, or other poem we had written in high school. The next week, we read our structural poems and explained them. Then he had us each read our intuitive poems from high school and, always the show-off, he proceeded to do a real-time analysis on each poem showing that there were a huge amount of those structural devices in these poems as well. Mostly, things we'd never even suspected were there in our adolescent gushing. The point, he said, was that now that you see that structure is there, in whatever it is you do, you don't need to be afraid of either including it, or not including it. You were free to consciously use as much or as little of a given technique as you wanted – but underlying structures would be there, anyway. Awareness might help you push them, but they would be there whatever you did.

In 1973, I wrote a drone piece with the Moog. I used lots of beating oscillators and made very smooth consonant harmonies with them. I presented it to him a bit diffidently, uncertainly – I wasn't sure that this was a musical path that I wanted to pursue, or that I felt totally comfortable with. He told me that not only should I not be ashamed of sounds like this, or afraid of presenting them, but that with this piece I was showing a more gentle side of myself, and that I should be confident in presenting those feelings which were an essential part of my nature. Both/and again. One could have both the spiky and energetic, and also the consonant and meditative.

Another example of extracting compositional potential from the output of the body: In 1973, I wrote my sound poem Nighthawk. I showed him the hand written manuscript, full of cross-outs, scratchings, mistaken pen strokes. He said that this manuscript was a score, and that, verbal as I was, I had to perform it, and the scratch-outs should also be considered part of the score and should be performed as well – since I was doing research into extended vocal techniques at the time, the scratch-outs became vocal multiphonics, and these, together with a choreography derived from the punctuation used in the collage manuscript, became the basis for the live performance of the work.

A final story: Once while visiting Iowa City, the University Opera Workshop was putting on a performance of Ravel's "L'Enfant et les sortilèges". I said to him that this was one of my favorite operas, and he said it was one of his. He arranged for us to attend a dress rehearsal, which was wonderful. On the walk back to his place we were like two kids, singing the tunes to each other, enthusing over particular details of the staging, set design. The intersection of Dada, Surrealism, Freudianism, etc. in both the libretto and the staging blew us away. Kenneth often talked about music as 'transporting us,' but this was one of the rare occasions when I experienced both of us having this kind of 'transportation' at the same time. I think "Scatter" was one way in which he tried to contact this inner ecstasy, and then transmuted it into different forms – objects for perception.