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# DISAPPEARING SOUNDS:

## FRAGILITY IN THE MUSIC OF JAKOB ULLMANN<sup>1</sup>

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OLIVER THURLEY

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**ABSTRACT:** The music of Jakob Ullmann (b. 1958) is notable for its protracted structural stasis and delicacy; its fusion of rigorously engineered notational systems, abstract graphical elements and Byzantine iconography; and—above all—its unrelenting quietness. This article offers a rare view into Ullmann’s compositional practices, with a specific focus upon the role of fragility in the work. Exploring this concept of fragility as a musical feature, this article considers a number of Ullmann’s works from the perspectives of the compositions and their scores, the performance and the agency of performers, and finally how audiences may listen to this fragility. The paper concludes with a consideration of the importance of fragility to Ullmann’s oeuvre, and of how it might help us to further understand his music.



### PRECARIOUS SOUNDS AND FRAGILE MUSIC: INTRODUCTION

The work of German composer Jakob Ullmann (b. 1958) operates at a point of liminality. Quiet—often to the point of near-inaudibility—it constantly balances on the brink of fracture and self-effacement. The scores obscure themselves: they are otherworldly lexical palimpsests for the performer to decode, with each composition employing its own idiosyncrasies and paradoxes. Frequently operating in extreme quietness, Ullmann’s music is vulnerable, and on numerous occasions this has proven its own undoing in performance. Easily perforated by the smallest sound, concerts have been aborted due to audiences’ interruptions in the face of such unrelentingly quiet music.<sup>2</sup> Despite its fragility, however, the music is uncompromising and demands the complete focus of its performers and listeners alike. Perhaps then this mysterious and delicate music is a reason why

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jakob Ullmann for his patience and kindness in our correspondences and to James Lavender for his invaluable thoughts on early drafts of this research.

<sup>2</sup> After an aborted attempt in 1990, *Son Imaginaire III* (1989) was only successfully premiered in 2013 at the Huddersfield contemporary music festival. Abi Bliss, ‘Jakob Ullmann: quiet please’, hcmf// 2013 programme material <<http://www.hcmf.co.uk/Jakob-Ullmann-quiet-please>> [accessed 14 April 2015]

Ullmann's work has been largely overlooked beyond mainland Europe. Only in recent years have sporadic performances outside Germany and a number of acclaimed recordings on the Berlin-based record label Edition RZ contributed to a slowly rising murmur of interest in Ullmann's music. Yet still relatively little remains known of the composer and his work.<sup>3</sup>

Son of the theologian and politician Wolfgang Ullmann (b.1929 – †2004), Jakob Ullmann was born in Freiburg, growing up and beginning his career behind the Iron Curtain. Ullmann—who is currently professor at the Hochschule für Musik, Basel—studied church music in Dresden, and after being denied entry to the academy of fine arts studied privately with Friedrich Goldmann (b.1941 – †2009). Like many in East Germany during this period, Ullmann's career was stifled by the political situation and his access to the works of composers from Western Europe and America was limited. Ullmann was persecuted throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s by the Stasi and imprisoned repeatedly for his refusal to undergo military service.<sup>4</sup> Listening to Ullmann's work, one immediately notes a subdued and struggling atmosphere, and it does not require a significant stretch of the imagination to draw links between the socio-political circumstances of his early career and the subsequent characteristics of his art.

This article aims to situate fragility within the music of Jakob Ullmann, as well as to provide something of an introduction to the inner workings of his compositions. By examining a number of potentially fragile situations in Ullmann's compositional practice, related performance issues, and finally the precariousness involved in listening to such quiet and static music, I hope to develop a clearer conception of how the music may be understood in relation to this notion of fragility.

In order to begin, an initial working definition of musical fragility is necessary as a point of orientation. A musical situation may be considered fragile if the normal functionality of a sound—or the means of its production—is somehow destabilised and placed at risk of collapse. Fragility, then, can be understood as a precarious state in which sound is rendered frangible and susceptible to being destroyed or disrupted. To compose a fragile sound or musical event would therefore involve organising a system either: a) vulnerable to disruption by some small external force; or b) positioned upon an unstable foundation such that the system collapses under its own weight.

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<sup>3</sup> In the UK particularly, a cover profile in *The Wire* magazine has done a good deal towards introducing new audiences to Ullmann. See Nick Cain, 'Jakob Ullmann: East of Eden', in *The Wire* magazine (Issue 350: April 2013), pp. 38–43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

## I

### THE SCORE AS LABYRINTH: LAYERING AND FRAGMENTATION IN SOLO III

To consider closely the compositional aspects of fragility in Ullmann's practice, it is necessary first to turn to his scores to better understand his communication of the music. Visually striking and meticulously detailed, the scores often combine traditional notation and abstract graphic elements; they are ornate systems layered with fragments of mystic iconography and runes, effaced or buried by the traces of elements torn from ancient religious texts. At first glance one might draw comparisons with the scores of John Cage,<sup>5</sup> Horațiu Rădulescu or Sylvano Bussotti—albeit steeped in Byzantine rites and other liturgical traditions.

In many of Ullmann's scores the notional palimpsest—superimposed writings which obscure older material, spatialising memory—is never far away.<sup>6</sup> The layering of musical traces throughout the scores efface and obscure other fragments, creating a labyrinth of parts which one must read between, each trace layer recontextualising and imposing upon the others around it. Each score is rigorously constructed and requires careful decryption on the part of the performer to decipher its subtleties and idiosyncrasies, and to solve its puzzles. Despite its quietness and fragility, any notion of Ullmann's music as minimal is deceptive—the scores reveal a Byzantine complexity. Reading between the layers of the score, it appears that Ullmann's compositions are alive and evade petrification at every point, often remaining prone to interpretation and paradox, the various traces making it impossible to view the piece from a single perspective. Each score thus exists in a metastable state that, once dissected, quickly unravels to reveal a complex lattice of fragile elements. Here, then, the score is encountered as a fragile assemblage of musical elements, interwoven and vulnerable to misinterpretation, relying on a performer's careful reading and delicate touch to prevent the music from collapsing in upon itself.

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<sup>5</sup> The importance in particular of Cage's influence upon Ullmann should not to be underestimated and deserves greater discussion. Their—for Ullmann, profound—meeting is succinctly commemorated in the work *Meeting John Cage under the Tropic of the Late Eighties oder Wir Überholen die Moderne* (1988-89).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, 'palimpsest' is also the title of Ullmann's work *Komposition á 9 (Palimpsest)* (1989-90), inspired by a fragmented radio broadcast of Anna Akhmatova's poetry. In Ullmann's *voice, books and FIRE* series (1990—), the palimpsest is manifested literally: the score is formed by layers of torn scraps of religious texts and cryptic icons, abstract shapes and colours burying musical instruction. The *voice, books and FIRE* series stands as a major coup in Ullmann's catalogue, and one I shall reserve for closer attention at a later date in another place.

Ullmann's *Solo III* (1992–93, revised 2010/12; part of a series of five works to date) offers us an example of a fragile and fragmented composition. Written for organ, the piece is modular in its format. Lasting for any duration over 25 minutes, *Solo III*—like the other pieces in the series—may be performed as either a solo,<sup>7</sup> a solo with electronic modification, or alternatively in combination with any other pieces from the *Solo* series.<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 1. Structure  $\beta$  1.1-1.2 page excerpt from *Solo III*. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag. Used by permission.

The score to *Solo III* is presented not as a unified linear representation of the piece, as is common with the majority of Ullmann's scores,<sup>9</sup> but rather as a deconstructed assemblage of parts. The task presented by the 'score', then, is to construct the piece in order to realise it. In its unadorned solo version, the piece is typically quiet and consists of multiple parts: a faint pedal tone is suspended

<sup>7</sup> The nomenclature 'solo' here is perhaps deliberately misleading, especially when considering that even a standard 'solo' organ performance requires an additional 3 assistants to operate all the manuals and stops as required.

<sup>8</sup> The Edition RZ release, *Fremde Zeit • Addendum [1-3]* (2012) features a recording of Solos I+II+III performed together, and an additional disc (*Fremde Zeit • Addendum 4 • solo III für Orgel* (2013)) was later issued, featuring a solo performance of *Solo III* lasting around 66 minutes.

Jakob Ullmann, *Fremde Zeit • Addendum [1-3]* (Edition RZ, Ed. RZ 1026-28, 2012).

-----, *Fremde Zeit • Addendum 4 • solo III für Orgel* (Edition RZ, Ed. RZ 1029, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> A number of Ullmann's larger works make use of some form of time-space notation, often employing time-brackets reminiscent of Cage's later number-pieces to breathe a temporal flexibility into the structures.

throughout the entire piece, whilst a central slow-motion *cantus firmus*—a 13-tone row with radial symmetry—dissolves between shades of tonality and air-noise. Occasionally, the piece is perforated by brief, almost granular flurries of isolated notes which organist Hans-Peter Schulz refers to as ‘a chaotic vortex, a kind of sonic dust’,<sup>10</sup> (see figure 1). These structures also employ transparencies to determine elements of pitch or rhythmic content. Finally, a number of pages of graphic systems—in which colour becomes an important notational variable—use a different set of scattered transparencies to plot durational vertices and various structural features of the piece (see figure 2). In addition to these main compositional elements, separate notation systems are included to govern control of the organ’s stops and the degree of movement of the keys (see figure 3). Through its fragmentation, the score to *Solo III* deconstructs the organ as an exploded view diagram; a manual for reassembly in performance.



FIGURE 2. Graphics page 1, from *Solo III*. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag. Used by permission.

Ullmann’s scores are never to be interpreted freely or used as material for improvisation; instead they require the performer to carefully prepare their interpretation ahead of performance, deciphering according to the rules and material provided. Depending upon the desired duration of the performance, sections of *Solo III* can be scaled,

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Peter Schulz, ‘About *solo III*, accompanying essay to *Fremde Zeit • Addendum 4* (Edition RZ, 2013), p. 1. <<http://www.edition-rz.de/Media/3/195/1/4348.pdf>> [accessed 14 April 2015]

repeated, or certain alternative decisions can be made from the available material according to Ullmann’s instructions. This flexibility allows the form of the piece to be recombined and manipulated—giving the performer a degree of autonomy—without altering the sonic character and identity of the piece: the physiognomy of *Solo III*.

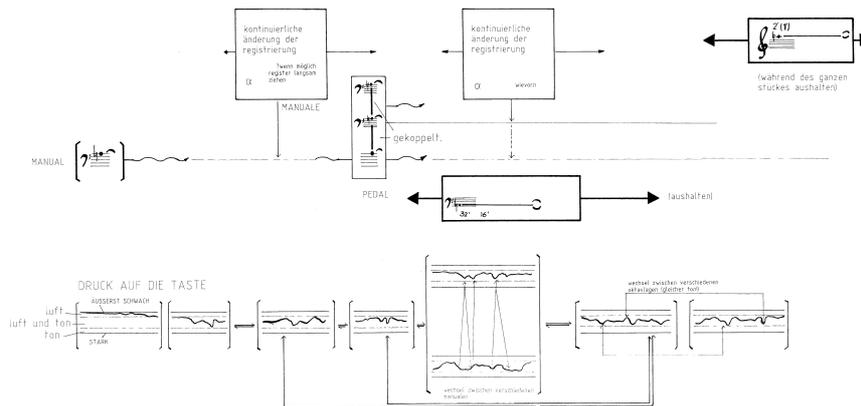


FIGURE 3. Manuals and key pressure page from *Solo III*. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag. Used by permission.

In fragmenting the score, Ullmann has founded the composition upon unstable ground, rendering it fragile. Presented with the pieces of a fractured score, it is the task of the performer to reassemble the piece into a multidimensional yet cohesive version of events, and to prevent it from collapsing into noise over the course of the performance. In their independence, isolated score fragments have the potential to break up the wider continuity of the piece, or—as we shall see later—to destabilise the air flow within the organ’s pipes depending on minute variable of the particular combination of parts chosen. In its deconstruction, *Solo III* is already rendered fragile as the score itself has been destabilised and made vulnerable to disruption by other trace layers of the score. Once again, the concept of the palimpsest is crucial: the score is spatialised and requires the interpreter to ‘overwrite’ the various traces or fragments of the piece, recontextualising the various separate threads of the score whilst all the time maintaining the extremely quiet dynamic level which veils the entire piece. In his framing of the score as an already fragmented work, Ullmann has effectively surrendered agency of the piece to the emergent behaviours of the instrument, creating fragile sounds which falter and risk collapse as the instrument resists the performer. The very process of reconstruction in performance becomes a precarious activity as the piece ultimately attempts to survive in a perpetual state of coming apart.

### THE SCORE AS MICROSCOPE: TETRACHORD TUNING SYSTEMS IN A CATALOGUE OF SOUNDS

Considering the fragmentation and layering in works such as *Solo III* as a macroscopic perspective of structural fragility in the compositions—a fracturing of the music’s form—it is also important to assess how fragility manifests itself at the microscopic level of Ullmann’s work. Through the incorporation of hyper-precision into elements of his more traditional notation, Ullmann uses the score as a microscope in order to ‘zoom-in’ on the sound-world of his music, and to explore fragility from a new perspective.

Throughout a number of his scores, Ullmann works at this microscopic level, using elaborate notational systems—often centring around parametric charts—to control musical variables such as pitch, bow pressure and movement, breathing and timbre changes. The constant fluctuations and meticulous nature of the notation requires a continuous readjustment of playing technique. At the macroscopic level the structure often seems static, avoiding any formal *telos* or expression; close-up the music is, in fact, in perpetual motion beneath its surface. It is the constant movement of these tiny variables in performance which causes fragile disruptions, as musical events are constantly tampered with and undermined or destabilised. Pitches are never allowed to settle, but instead waver uneasily; dynamics are not even, but shake erratically. In dogmatically following the notation’s degree of precision, there is no leeway for the performer to stabilise events should they begin to collapse. As will become apparent, Ullmann’s music never allows performers to drop their guard or get comfortable, and the fluctuations and precise tremors in the scores give the music much of its unsettling energy.

*A Catalogue of Sounds* (1995–97) is written for string ensemble of thirteen instruments and up to three optional soloists.<sup>11</sup> Despite the ‘catalogue’ of the title, there is little in the way of indexical elements: the piece functions as a largely static and homogeneous texture—a macroscopic monolith of microscopic fragments woven together. It is in these fragments that Ullmann’s use of notational precision and parametric charts reveal a disruption and emergent fragility in greater clarity. Throughout *A Catalogue of Sounds* and a number of his other scores,<sup>12</sup> Ullmann—influenced by Greek-Byzantine tonal sys-

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<sup>11</sup> There is some confusion surrounding the *A Catalogue of Sounds* score and parts. The original score was lost and although the sketches are no longer extant, Albert Brier notes that the earlier version featured up to 13 additional solo parts. Parts 1–10 remain lost, whilst 11–13 have been recreated using fragments and extrapolations of the remaining string ensemble parts, creating a rather different role than the original versions. Albert Brier, ‘The Learning of the Ear: On Jakob Ullmann’s Composition *A Catalogue of Sounds*’, CD liner notes in *A Catalogue of Sounds* (Berlin: Edition RZ, Ed. RZ 1017, 2005) pp. 8–9.

<sup>12</sup> The system also prominently features in various forms in *Disappearing Musics* (1989–91), *Horos Metéoros* (2008–09), *La Segunda Canción del Angel*

tems—employs a novel approach for navigating pitch space within a tetrachord. Positioning pitched material upon a precarious and unstable foundation, Ullmann appears to render the navigation of pitch space fragile and vulnerable to disruption. The system subdivides the octave into 68 equal units (with tetrachord as 28 units), and charts out 9 scales in the score’s instruction pages (see figure 4). Each scale is constructed in steps of the new units, signalled in the score by a corresponding number and rune marking to signal permitted degree of fluctuations. For example, in *A Catalogue of Sounds* the eighth scale of the system comprises interval steps of {9, 12, 7, 9, 12, 7} units (Fig. 4). These scales are then mapped onto a chart in the score, whose boundaries are specified by the preceding interval shown on a standard clef. From here, a plot on the chart signals the pitch motion over time, relative to waypoints of the scale intervals (see figure 5). Essentially, Ullmann provides a close-up in the score of an initial fixed interval, and then directs the movement of pitch according to various non-traditional subdivisions of that interval. Whereas *Solo III* created a figurative exploded view of the organ, here Ullmann seems to zoom-in on the resolution of the traditional staff; providing a new perspective and more room for movement within a smaller space.

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*Desaparecido* (2011–13) with a more primitive version appearing as far back as the first *Komposition* für Streichquartett (1985–86).

system der oktavunterteilung

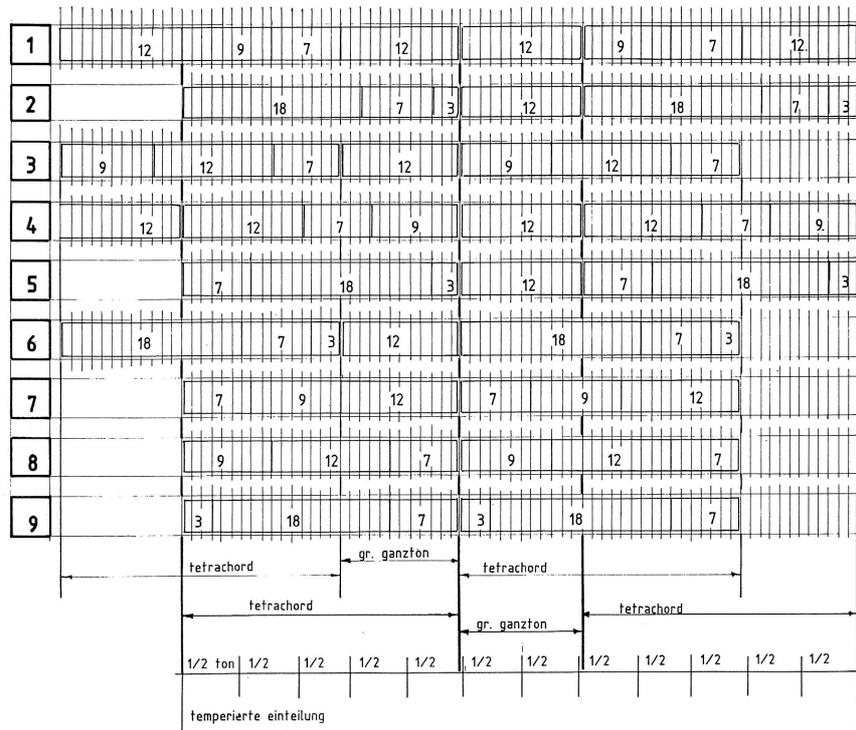


FIGURE 4. Octave subdivision system from *A Catalogue of Sounds*. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag. Used by permission.

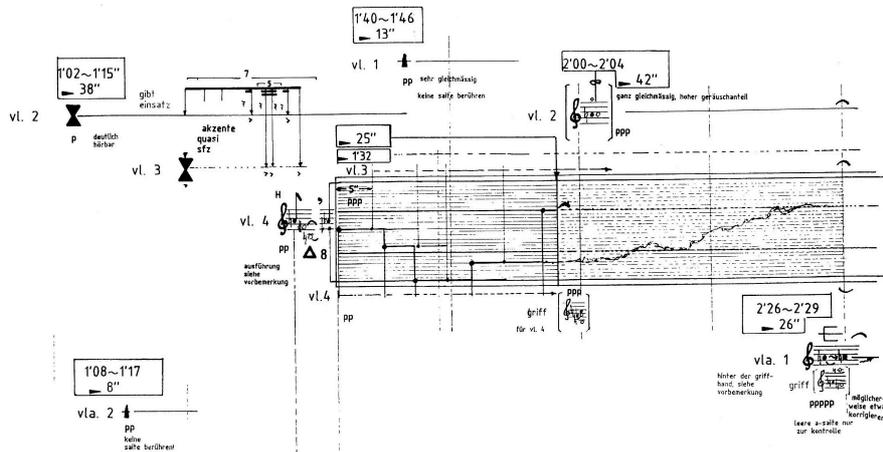


FIGURE 5. Excerpt of page 1, showing the chart notation of the 68-unit octave subdivision (scale  $\Delta 8$ , see figure 4) for violin 4; from *A Catalogue of Sounds*. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag. Used by permission.

Operating with such precision, Ullmann's notation is able to eschew calcified notions of traditionally tempered pitch, instead shifting focus to a movement through pitch space guided by unfamiliar waypoints. Each point on the pitch chart is gauged relative to an imme-

diately preceding position rather than a central tonal dogma, destabilising and decentring the music's prevailing tonality. The plotted traces never move smoothly, or with clear intent; they are fragile and in a constant state of flux, trembling and making hesitant deviations from their course (Fig. 5). Ullmann notes that microtonality and alternative tunings are not his concern here, but rather a move to erase the memory of specific locations in pitch space.<sup>13</sup> The palimpsest reveals itself again; the traditional pitch system is partly effaced and written over, and in doing so, our conception of regular pitch space is transformed through the presence of a new fragile trace. What is interesting in this system is Ullmann's use of relatively constrained focus of the manipulations. The fluctuations of pitch are rarely flamboyant gestural glissandi in the manner of Iannis Xenakis,<sup>14</sup> but rather smaller, delicate fluctuations between limited intervals.<sup>15</sup> This compositional asceticism further maintains the sense of fragile stasis and homogeneity prevalent in Ullmann's work; a subtle disruption to an otherwise straightforward technique.

By using the score as a microscope, Ullmann is able to notate tiny dynamic tremors in pitch that at any other scale would seem inconsequential. Here, fragile sounds appear explicitly in the score: tentative and unstable fluctuations of pitch that destabilise both traditional pitch systems and the evenness of sustained tones which form the work. In composing in such minute detail, Ullmann focuses attention towards these tiny sounds—which at this volume may or may not be audible and/or intentional—and coaxes them to the foreground of the piece. Through the exhausting physical requirements and the microscopic detail of these parts there is a sense that this fragile nature brings about a new relationship between the performer and their instrument. Rather than simply compose a single sustained note—requiring no real instrumental proficiency—Ullmann's scores demand a back-breaking amount of effort to bring about relatively small rewards. The instrument is reframed and instead of disappearing from awareness and simply becoming an extension of the performer's being, it makes itself all too present: an obstacle which must be negotiated with and fought against, even where success is unlikely.

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<sup>13</sup> Jakob Ullmann in email correspondence with the author, 28 September 2013.

<sup>14</sup> The influence of Xenakis' UPIC sketches is clear throughout Ullmann's use of graphics. It is also worth noting that Xenakis mentions a similar adoption of Greek-Byzantine pitch systems in his book *Formalized Music*. Iannis Xenakis, 'Towards a Metamusic' in *Formalized Music*, rev. edn (New York: Pendragon, 1992), pp. 180-201.

<sup>15</sup> In the score to *La Segunda Canción del Angel Desaparecido* (2011-13), Ullmann employs a system of notation for small fluctuations in pitch, this time glissandi deviating (often within constraints of less than a quarter tone) relative to a proximal pitch.

## II

### RESISTANCE, BARGAINING AND TORTURE: OVERCOMING THE INSTRUMENT

The realisation of Ullmann's work requires its own degree of virtuosity and calls for performers to approach their instrument from a new perspective. Whilst the complexity of the work is not immediately confrontational or particularly theatrical in its difficulty (in part, no doubt, due to its quietness), often what is called for in the music requires an exhausting struggle against various constraints and obstructions. As with the fragmentation of *Solo III* and the microscopic fluctuations in *A Catalogue of Sounds*, this strain creates an atmosphere of fragility in performance: a tension that the piece could collapse at any moment. Indeed, the extreme quietness of performance functions as an additional source of fragility, as many of these techniques are rendered vulnerable to even the smallest disturbance. In many fragile scenarios, Ullmann appears to exploit some vulnerability within the performer-instrument relationship, placing a strain upon it or calling for the performer to operate beyond the limits of the system. In doing so, the performer's instrument becomes as much a burden as it does an enabling prosthesis.

Under normal circumstances, the instrument should perhaps not present itself as an obstacle to performance, but facilitate it, withdrawn from the performer's direct attention, behaving as expected. Ullmann's music on the other hand begins to metaphorically break the instrument, forcing it to the forefront of the performer's attention as it is no longer able to carry out its intended purpose. The destabilisation of the instrument's regular functionality renders it fragile, and it becomes precarious: the performer must take extra care to overcome the resistance of the instrument. Rather than take the instrument (or performer) for granted as a simple opaque tool, this fragility calls for a more nuanced relationship between performer and their instrument, forcing the performer to reassess the limitations and vulnerabilities imposed by the music. Ullmann's music tests the fragile boundaries of what the instrument (and performer) can do before sound loses cohesion and slips either into noise or collapses into nothing. In the following examples, situations are examined in which instruments actively resist performers, leading to negotiation and a trade-off between control and accuracy. Ullmann's performers must learn to overcome the fragility of their instruments.

Oboist Molly McDolan speaks of such a confrontation with her instrument when performing Ullmann's work, referring to a requisite

‘torture of instruments’<sup>16</sup> in her approach. In *Ὅρος Μετέωρος. dramatisches fragment mit Aischylos und Euripides* (2008–09) [hereafter referred to as *Horos Metéoros*],<sup>17</sup> Ullmann writes above the stable range of the oboe da caccia rendering the performance fragile as pitch becomes precarious and prone to collapse. This destabilising required McDolan to fight against her instrument and make various strenuous efforts to achieve the desired pitches and quiet dynamics, albeit at a cost to control.<sup>18</sup> McDolan refers to the sonic results as a ‘wondrous realm of instability’,<sup>19</sup> wherein sustained tones tremble and glissandi become unstable as they falter and strain against collapse. Unlike the carefully notated tremors seen in the score to *A Catalogue of Sounds*, here similar instabilities appear unintentionally, brought about through a destabilisation of the instrument and the performer’s attempt to coerce it into cooperation. Such a struggle to achieve relatively muted results in performance is indicative of much of Ullmann’s work. Often the compositions presuppose the limitations of an instrumental system, exploiting vulnerabilities and pushing performers beyond the possibility of an accurate performance. This ensures that fragility is audibly manifest as a tension between performer and their instrument. By creating and applying pressure to these ‘weak-spots’ in the performer/instrument relationship, Ullmann can increase the chance of rupture during performance, or reframe the performer’s relationship to their instrument, rendering it an obstacle to content with. As in the case of the oboe da caccia part in *Horos Metéoros*, if a particular sound is ostensibly possible it may only be the case under certain constrictions (i.e. through use of preparations, ‘extended’ techniques, or limited dynamic range). Alternatively, a sound which is typically performable may be undermined and destabilised by external conditions (such as extreme quietness), resulting in the emergence of fragility.

McDolan’s comments resonate with Frank Hilberg’s liner notes to the 1996 Wergo portrait CD, which also alludes to a ‘tortuous’<sup>20</sup> nature embedded in Ullmann’s music. In the first instance, this may seem a strange analogy for such a restrained and soft music, but, for

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<sup>16</sup> “[E]ine Art Folterung des Instruments” [author’s translation] Molly McDolan quoted in Michael Kunkel, ‘Ankunft Basel, Badischer Bahnhof in Kunkel, Liesch, and Petry (eds.), *Dreizehn 13 - Basels Badischer Bahnhof in Geschichte, Architektur und Musik* (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 2012), p. 151.

<sup>17</sup> *Horos Metéoros* is written for solo soprano, 3 choir groups, 3 auloi, oboe da caccia, percussion, and string trio.

<sup>18</sup> This includes changing reeds, using tape to partially cover fingering holes, biting down on the reed, and searching for alternate fingerings, which allow certain glissandos and overtones to sound. Kunkel, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> “Damit bin ich im Wunderreich der Instabilität” [author’s translation] McDolan quoted in Kunkel. p. 151.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Hilberg, CD liner notes in *Jakob Ullmann: Komposition Für Streichquartett / Komposition für Violine / Disappearing Musics*, trans. by J. Bradford Robinson (Wergo, WER 6532-2, 1996) p. 21.

all its quietness, the music remains unrelenting. This notion of a tortuousness in performance is particularly clear in Ullmann's writing for strings in works such as *A Catalogue of Sounds*, *Komposition für Streichquartett 2* (1998–99), and the more recent *La Segunda Canción del Ángel Desaparecido* (2011–13). In addition to the labyrinthine notational systems discussed previously, techniques employed by Ullmann often involve performers attempting to overcome technical and mechanical difficulties and then protracting them to the point at which they become physically gruelling. In the writing for strings, difficult fingering positions (often a combination of awkward stretches, open strings, and harmonics) and methodical bow movements become painful when prolonged for an extended period and restricted to such quiet dynamics. Over the course of a 70-minute performance, this near-continuous discomfort is not to be underestimated. Any fluctuation in the player's hand position or musculature may therefore cause these precarious sounds to falter or even collapse completely; Ullmann places the production of sound at risk of being crushed by the very system he has constructed.

#### FAILURE, OR: SOMETIMES THE SYSTEM WINS

During the recording of *Solo III*,<sup>21</sup> Ullmann recounts that organist Hans-Peter Schulz was at first unhappy with his performance on the recording, due to the unpredictable behaviour of the instrument:

I told him that he misinterpreted the title of the piece. I said: “this is not a solo for an organ-player” it is a “solo for organ”. So the o r g a n played the piece. You only helped the organ to produce sounds. The piece is composed in a way that it is really impossible to control what happens.<sup>22</sup>

The solo is constructed such that despite all preparations and efforts of the performer, the system remains fragile and will inevitably act according to its own agency, breaking up or producing various combination and difference tones and overtones. In *Solo III* the organ relies upon so many fragmented variables that, as Ullmann points out, it is ‘impossible to control what happens’.<sup>23</sup> In these situations, the best a performer can hope for is to attempt to constrain the instability of the system that Ullmann has set in play, accepting that sometimes the instrument will defeat them.

As noted earlier, the score strikes a balance between its openness in how performers may approach the piece, and retaining its own

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<sup>21</sup> Jakob Ullmann, *Fremde Zeit • Addendum 4*, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Ullmann, in email correspondence with the author, 25 March 2014. [Ullmann's emphasis].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2014.

identity through an elaborate system of rules. The outcome of the piece remains open in exactly how the various inevitable chaotic behaviours will unfold during performance. The score's instructions note that 'any form of expression must be strictly avoided', and Schulz notes that in following the score directions closely, 'the performer's interpretational leeway in pressing the key is thus reduced to approximately one millimetre.'<sup>24</sup> Despite Ullmann's call for precision and stability in the performance, this asceticism only serves to tie the hands of the performer, removing their ability to control (and potentially tame) the destabilisation of the instrument. In the performance of *Solo III*, the quietness results in an insufficient amount of air moving through the instrument's pipes, inevitably causing instabilities in pitch and a breaking free from the performer's control. The implication of the piece being 'for organ' underscores the notion that audiences are not listening to the performer but rather the instrument itself.

In attempting to overcome the instrument's resistance, Schulz notes that *Solo III* calls into question the identity of the organ as a traditional keyboard instrument and 'driving instrument in the development of Western European polyphony.'<sup>25</sup> In pre-empting the instability of the organ, Ullmann evolves the instrument from a tempered system into one capable of performing an 'aleatoric and intangible glissando-polyphony'.<sup>26</sup> The layering up of the fragmented score systems produces unpredictable results through 'the superposition of the different chaotic oscillation processes within the pipes and wind channels of the historic instrument.'<sup>27</sup> *Solo III* transforms the organ into a fragile wind instrument: unstable and resisting attempts to control it. The imperfections of the instrument and its resistance of the performer's will are the foreground of the music. In Schulz's recording then, audiences are listening to the instrument struggling to breathe: the death rattle of the organ.



In the operatic *Horos Metéoros*, Ullmann again exposes the vulnerability of an instrument. He calls on the second choir group (one male, one female voice) to sing their part as a single, uninterrupted pitch (E3) between themselves for the performance's entire duration. Over the course of 50 minutes, lyrics become blurred and where one player pauses to breathe, the other must takeover continuing the same pitch and avoiding any interruption in the tone. As with many of the techniques already discussed, the concept is deceptively simple, yet the execution is incredibly taxing on the performers. Over

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<sup>24</sup> Schulz, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

the course of the piece, fluctuations of pitch inevitably occur as the pair becomes fatigued and the timbral differences within each voice become more apparent to the listener. Unlike the microscopic tremors of *A Catalogue of Sounds*, fragility emerges from the macroscopic event. On paper, the score part has zoomed out, condensing the entirety of the piece into a single bar (see figure 6). However, during performance—by protracting the note *ad nauseam*—focus is drawn inside the tone, exposing all the complexities and blemishes within. 50 minutes is a long time for a single sustained pitch and tension gradually builds between the performers as they inevitably drift and strain to prevent any breaks in their continuous tone.<sup>28</sup> In the examples discussed above, the instrument has been the obstacle to performance—presenting itself as a point of resistance to the performer’s execution of the score. For the second choir group of *Horos Meteoros*, however, resistance stems from the performers themselves. Unable to break their continuous tone, the performers rely on each other in a fragile relay system. If this relationship breaks down, the other performer is left gasping and the tone collapses.

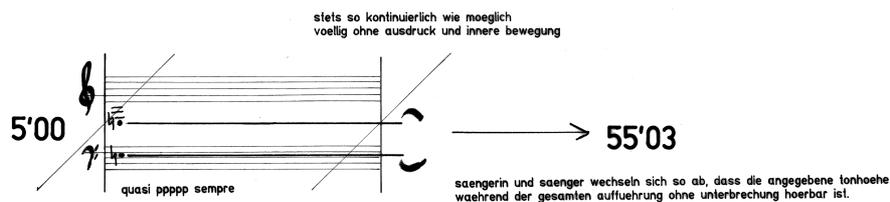


FIGURE 6. Choir group 2, bar 1; excerpt from *Horos Meteoros*. © Jakob Ullmann. Used by permission.

In each of the musical situations assessed so far, a sense of precariousness in performance has been common throughout the appearances of fragility. Ullmann’s music appears sparse because of its quietness and stasis, but one quickly discovers that beneath its surface the music requires an excruciating effort to prevent it from imploding. This is a fragility of intention: the composer has called for a musical event which may not be possible without back-breaking effort and a compromised stability (as in *Horos Meteoros*), or it may easily collapse in on itself during performance (as in *A Catalogue of Sounds* or *Solo III*). Each of these pieces exhibits some form of fragility, which manifests itself audibly as the tiny tremors and momentary destabilisations of sound that become amplified as both points of focus and tension in our listening. In these fragile performance situa-

<sup>28</sup> One is reminded of Marina Abramovic & Ulay’s performance artwork, *Breathing In / Breathing Out* (1977) in which the two performers—mouths connected and noses plugged—share each other’s oxygen. With one breathing in as the other breathes out, eventually the pair runs out of oxygen.

tions, instruments resist musicians, reframing their traditional roles as obstacles to be reckoned with rather than simple tools. In doing so, performances of Ullmann's music break away from calcified notions of performance and virtuosity, instead working towards the creation of music that is more nuanced and fragile.

### III

#### LISTENING: QUIETNESS AND FOCUS

The works discussed so far exemplify Ullmann's propensity for extreme quietness throughout his work. This quietness holds an important function of fragility in the music, not simply in its role as a destabilising mechanism in performance, but also in the reception of the work. In considering the act of listening in Ullmann's work, a paradox appears which has remained unaddressed until now: quietness draws the listener's attention into the music, revealing new dimensions, yet the music simultaneously attempts to evade focus through its quietness and static structure. The strain of such protracted performances in quiet stasis is not only gruelling for the performer; the music requires a similar effort on the part of its audience and should not be underestimated.<sup>29</sup> The music never makes any sort of expressive gesture; it remains brittle throughout, presenting the listener with a constant and unrelenting soundscape that balances precariously at the brink of perception: a fragile listening experience.

Listening to such quiet music, audiences must attempt to focus their full attention in order to immerse themselves in—and thus experience—the work. Barthes and Havas make the distinction that '[h]earing is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act.'<sup>30</sup> To consider 'listening' as being predicated upon 'hearing', it follows that if one's ability to hear a piece of music clearly is disrupted then listening cannot take place. Quiet music requires careful and sustained concentration; if a listener loses their focus, they lose their grip on the work and are forced outside of the music. In this sense, the extreme quietness of the music renders the listening experience fragile through its reframing of audibility—typically a given for audiences—as a precarious element of the music. In their strain to hear (physiologically), listeners (psychologically) become more attentive to these smaller sounds in performance. Noises that may otherwise prove inconsequential become amplified from the listener's closer, more intimate perspective, or disappear where concentration (or au-

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<sup>29</sup> It is worth nothing that these are not short pieces, but ambitious undertakings for both performers and audience: Ullmann's compositions since 2000 each have an average duration of just over 60 minutes.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes and Roland Havas, 'Listening', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1985), p. 245. Emphasis in original.

dibility) falters. In this sense the conditions of performance (the quietness, the protracted durations, etc.) destabilise and undermine not only the performance but also the act of listening itself, making it a more arduous task.

This is the central paradox about the fragility of Jakob Ullmann's work. The music's quietness requires great focus to reveal its intricacies, yet in being so quiet it makes focus all the harder and destabilises its intricacies by restricting the performer's actions. In turn these unstable sounds cause more complexities in the sonic texture, yet remain quiet and thus difficult to focus upon. Ullmann's scenario has a fragile foundation; one which begins to crumble over the course of performance. This paradox of quietness underpins the fragility involved in listening to Ullmann's music: quietness causes instability, but also renders listening vulnerable to disruption from that instability. Bernd Leukert notes that '[l]oud music forgoes the subtleties of perceptible sound. Thus, Ullmann creates a quiet music in order to give himself and his listeners the opportunity to hear more, and better.'<sup>31</sup> A wonderful paradox: it is the audience's hearing less that encourages them to listen more and discover hidden details within the music.

#### HOMOGENEITY AND STASIS

Listening to *A Catalogue of Sounds*, the notion of its three 'solo' parts seems—as in *Solo III*—somewhat peculiar since the music functions as a vast, singular sonic object that remains broadly static for over 70 minutes as slowly-bowed sustained tones make glacial fluctuations into and out of noise, infrequently punctured by small percussive sounds. Like many of Ullmann's compositions, *A Catalogue of Sounds* favours a form of structural stasis built around protracted homogeneous textures. Within these unwieldy static blocks of sound, however, a timbral fragility remains apparent as an emergent property of smaller musical fragments inherent instability. Each individual part in the ensemble behaves according to its own fragile situation (some navigating an alternative pitch space, others encountering tortuous fingering positions), all weaving together at times to create a complex and impenetrable sonic gestalt, which obscures and veils its own identity. For the listener, the music presents itself as sound in constant flux, which although constantly moving, has no clear *telos* and never goes anywhere. This stasis too is a function of the fragility in Ullmann's work as one's ability to listen to the work is made precarious, vulnerable to a temporal disorientation rather than disturbance or collapse.

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<sup>31</sup> Bernd Leukert, CD liner notes in *Fremde Zeit • Addendum [1-3]*, trans. by Laurie Schwartz (Berlin, Edition RZ, 2012), p. 10.

In much the same way as the quietness of Ullmann's performances calls for a heightened attentiveness in the audience's listening, the structural stasis of the pieces accentuates the listener's sensitivity to the most subtle changes in the texture. In *A Catalogue of Sounds*, the role of the solo initially seems attenuated, almost evading focus rather than attracting it. In its quietness and glacial movement, the solo appears simply a thin sonic trace; rarely protruding from the general homogeneous veil of the ensemble to state an intention. However, in the listener's heightened state of attentiveness, and against the relative structural stasis of the piece, even the faintest emergence above the surface of the music such as this can have a relatively profound effect. Although the role of the solo survives then, the results are disorientating: it too is fragile because of a perceived vulnerability and precariousness in its positioning amongst a static homogeneity. Only becoming apparent for fleeting moments, as instruments surface and call attention to themselves, the solos soon fall back into the static abyss of the ensemble. Here, works such as *A Catalogue of Sounds* blur the listener's ability to identify what is being heard in a densely fused homogeneous stasis. For instance, parts sporadically become unthreaded from the group. It is only then that a listener is able to focus upon elements of the soundscape, separating them from parts blurred and obscured by the quiet timbral homogeneity and structural stasis.

The delicate nature of Ullmann's work leaves only a faint trace upon the listener's perceptual memory; the extended durations and structural stasis play a key role in the blurring of one's ability to recall and separate out distinct moments of the piece. This apparent temporal stasis in Ullmann's music makes it difficult for audiences to pick out moments by which to orientate their fragile listening experience; further obfuscating and distorting the temporal experience.

### **DISLOCATED SPACE IN *HOROS METÉOROS***

For the audience at the first performances of *Horos Météoros*, a sense of space was dislocated, rendering the listening experience fragile as once again the paradox of quietness appears. Ullmann specifies that the performers must remain hidden throughout, preferably located in a separate space from the audience. The piece thus attempts to actively destabilise the audience's attention whilst also requiring devoted attention to the smallest sonic details. Written for the centenary of Basel's Gare du Nord,<sup>32</sup> Ullmann situates the performers in rooms adjacent to the audience, whilst the percussion is located below the audience for a spatially immersive performance. During the performance, musicians move (whilst playing) between the various

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<sup>32</sup> A former railway station, now a performance centre for arts and new music in Switzerland.

locations, creating an unseen, spatially dynamic listening environment for the audience. In the staging of *Horos Météoros*, Ullmann creates an anti-proscenium performance, a theatre of the invisible, alluding to the Pythagorean notion of the acousmatic. With the vocal parts in particular, this produces the unnerving effect of an eternal, omnipresent acousmètre:<sup>33</sup> an unseen haunting voice imparting fragments of Aeschylus and Euripides' tales from beyond the visual field.<sup>34</sup>

By removing any visual presence of the performance from its audience, *Horos Météoros* eschews clear identification, and with it one's ability to orientate and parse exactly what is being heard and from where creating a fragile, easily disturbed listening experience. Here it is worth considering the piece in the lineage of Cage's 4'33" which opened up the concert space to redefine all sound as musical. In *Horos Météoros*, the music comes from *outside* the performance space, calling into question the role of the concert hall itself as the medium for performance: as with Cage's silence, the audience is forced to treat all sounds which permeate the membrane of the hall as equal and worth listening to. Timbrally, the obstructing architecture of this fractured concert space also has an effect upon listening as the sounds of instruments and their spatial location become masked by walls, corridors, ceilings and floors. One's ability to distinguish individual sound sources is only further distorted by this acoustic veiling of performers which, to some extent, highlights the homogeneous nature of the music's texture. The sounds heard are disembodied, and by lacking a visual referent to tie the auditory and visual field together, *Horos Météoros* engages the audience's auditory imagination, but makes the listening experience all the more vulnerable to disruption as sounds disappear or become effaced. In avoiding and obscuring its own identity in this manner, Ullmann's work seems to occupy a strange interstitial space, outside—even in spite of—normal space and time.

### FRAGILITY IN CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the feature of Ullmann's music which contributes most to its sense of fragility is its quietness. Constraining performers' actions and beckoning audiences to strain and focus their attention in order to hear, this quietness heightens their immersion into the piece. This precarious sonic environment, together with a composed structural stasis in the work, serves to enhance the state of temporal

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Chion, 'The Acousmètre', in *The Voice In Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 17-29.

<sup>34</sup> Specifically, they are both Aeschylus and Euripides' telling of *The Suppliants*, sung in the original Greek.

obfuscation in the listening experience, creating a fragile tension with the listener's heightened focus.

Fragility itself is not a feature clearly found within the scores, and to some degree it evades easy analysis for this reason. Instead, the scores make space for fragility to occur in the performer's interpretation through the fragmentation and palimpsestic layering. Performers must attempt to decipher the score into a playable form and in doing so create a foundation for the piece upon which not all the material is strictly performable. A surfeit of precision in a number of pieces also seeks to destabilise the performer in a similar way: restricting the player's space for interpretation and guiding them into unstable scenarios. Situations also occur in which Ullmann appears to push beyond the regular limitations of an instrument in order to bring about fragility during performance. By exploiting these boundaries—or, as seen in the strings, protracting uncomfortable techniques—Ullmann's music becomes fragile, transforming static tones into faltering, shaking or gasping sounds in spite of their quietness.

Fragility, then, is bound up in this seemingly contradictory play: focusing audience attention into small sounds, yet at the same time evading this attention. The quietness, structural stasis and homogeneous textures evade clear focus; whilst the tension created as performers wrestle with their instruments to overcome instabilities, draws listeners into the music—caught up in the drama of this fragility. It is here, in this paradox of quietness, that the work truly is placed at risk of collapse: not at the hands of the performers, but from its listeners. If the audience is unable (or unwilling) to immerse itself in this paradox, then the music finally collapses.

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