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# REBUILDING BABEL: ON FRAGILITY AND THE PALIMPSEST IN JAKOB ULLMANN'S *VOICE, BOOKS AND FIRE*

Oliver Thurley

## ABSTRACT

This article serves as an overview of Jakob Ullmann's *voice, books and FIRE* series, providing an examination of the cycle's scores, and the fragmented memories contained within. *voice, books and FIRE* stands monolithically in the composer's catalogue. The music—Ullmann refers to it as an 'imaginary folklore'—is presented through an elaborate notational system: partly effaced by layers of religious iconography, abstract imagery and fragments of religious texts and lists of names. The series (currently unfinished) serves as an elaborate memorial to the victims of Stalinist persecution as well as the demise of religious and cultural traditions across European history. In Ullmann's most ambitious and striking body of work to date, the score is encountered as a palimpsest—an overlaying and effacement of memory. The notion of the palimpsest is also traced through the music's performance and subsequent recording, assessing Ullmann's use of extreme quietness—a partial erasure—as a destabilising force for the performers, which ultimately renders the work fragile.

There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror,  
that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god.

— Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*.<sup>1</sup>

There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document  
of barbarism.

— Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.<sup>2</sup>

In the book of Genesis, the Tower of Babel symbolises the achievements of a united humanity, working together through a single language. Once language becomes fractured the people scatter, creating a multiplicity of languages and becoming isolated from other groups whose tongue they no longer understand. For Jorge Luis Borges, this confused din of language was abstracted to become his *Library of Babel* (1941): a collection of an 'indefinite, perhaps infinite' number of books.<sup>3</sup> Each book a methodical permutation of characters, the library contains both an infinite volume of knowledge, and conversely, of noise. *voice, books and FIRE* (1990–) represents Ullmann's attempt to hush the din of Babel; his fragile

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel' in *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 248.

<sup>3</sup> Borges, 'The Library of Babel', 65.

‘imaginary folklore’ is not unlike Borges’ lexicon of the infinite—‘the mighty name of a god’ from this article’s epigraph—or the monument of Babel’s abandoned tower.<sup>4</sup>

As a composer known for his unrelenting quietness, Jakob Ullmann’s (b. 1958) ability to balance at the fringe of inaudibility and control creates a profound sense of fragile disquiet for both performer and listener alike.<sup>5</sup> It is this disquiet—a fracture and point of tension that creates restlessness for both performer and listener—that ultimately undermines the quietude of the music. *voice, books and FIRE*, however—a cycle which stands monolithically in the composer’s catalogue—represents a different type of fragility: not merely through its quietness and instability, but through its fragility of form. Ullmann describes the project as the result of his ‘reflections about the relationships between music and language, language as sound and language as text’,<sup>6</sup> which is explored through the composer’s fragmentation of texts from a variety of cultural and religious traditions. Through his idiosyncratic notational style—an elaborate collaging of partially destroyed fragments of documents—Ullmann creates a dialogue between disparate cultures of past and present as traditions develop and others disappear. Over the course of European history, cultural, spiritual and religious traditions have shifted, grown and disappeared, whilst also bringing about the destruction of other traditions and persecution of others’ cultures. *voice, books and FIRE* is therefore dedicated both to those victims who ‘have been upholders and witnesses of these forgotten and dismissed traditions’, and at the same time those traditions themselves.<sup>7</sup> The cycle is a memorial for fractured cultures, forgotten or destroyed, and a requiem for those lives lost as a result.

The fragility of *voice, books and FIRE* is not necessarily a vulnerability or precariousness of *sound*, but fragility as *form*. As will become apparent, form in Ullmann’s music is ineffable; continuously fracturing, effacing and overlaying its material, it obscures itself. The scores present densely woven traces, not framed by traditionally informed musical forms or structures, but as an incoherent and fractured palimpsest. It is the ill-fated task of the performer then, to give the music its form, decrypting and drawing these various traces up to the surface from the babel of the palimpsest. Fragility, in *voice, books and FIRE*, is therefore the tension that exists in each moment these incoherent traces emerge. Briefly brought into focus, these faint traces immediately threaten to rupture and collapse back into their fragmentary state, partially-erased and half-forgotten.

This article will first introduce the concept of the palimpsest in its relation to Ullmann’s work as well as the contextual background to the *voice, books and FIRE* cycle. In order to give a holistic view of the project, the article will follow each of the constituent parts—which, given

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<sup>4</sup> Borges, ‘The Library of Babel’, 73. Ullmann describes his work as ‘imaginary folklore’ in his accompanying essay to *voice, books and FIRE II* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Thurley, ‘Disappearing Sounds: Fragility in the Music of Jakob Ullmann’, *Tempo* 69, no. 274 (October 2015): 5-21.

<sup>6</sup> Jakob Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II*, accompanying essay to scores, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the scale of the cycle will form the majority of the article—tracing common themes between parts and providing a unique insight into the materials and construction of the cycle.

## **PALIMPSEST, ANNA AKHMATOVA AND THE SAMIZDAT VOICE**

Form in *voice, books and FIRE* is often fragile, and, as will become apparent, a product of the performers' interpretation and interaction with fragmentary traces rather than subject to strict formal structures. Ullmann, in his fracturing and superimposition of material composes for the most part without a strict framework beyond the individual functions of performers. Each part of the cycle is largely homogenous and static, yet also extremely quiet and timbrally unstable, lacking any *telos* or distinct temporal markers by which to orient the composition's form. Instead, it is the task of the ensemble to create a coherent synthesis of these fractured elements. In further considering the role of fragmentation and erasure in *voice, books and FIRE*, the concept of the palimpsest surfaces.

The palimpsest is a document (typically parchment) where text is superimposed over older layers that have been effaced and overwritten. Often, the document still bears traces of its older layers, remaining partially visible *through* the more recent layers and may therefore obscure or alter the reading. For Max Silverman, 'the palimpsest captures most completely the superimposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialisation of time central to the work of memory'.<sup>8</sup> Conceptually then, the palimpsest offers a view of memory which is cumulative, allowing the past to be read *through*—and indeed influence—other traces; in effect collapsing the history of these multi-layered traces, themselves tools of memory, onto a single page. This palimpsestic layering and partial erasure of fragments is present throughout Ullmann's work. As these inscriptions are transformed by an accumulation of traces, one's understanding of them becomes fractured. Where the context of these spatialised traces or fragments—which may already be unclear due to their erasure—becomes increasingly abstracted, they must be interpreted in relation to their new consolidated (or, perhaps, collapsed) form. This 'interaction of different inscriptions' crystallises as one considers the role of the palimpsest in Ullmann's notation.<sup>9</sup> For Frank Hilberg, 'an Ullmann score seems almost like an assemblage of fragments whose former coherence has been obliterated and whose original meaning is now obscure'.<sup>10</sup> It is this obscurity that the performer must attempt to decipher and reinterpret in order to overcome the cycle's fragility of form. Like the palimpsest, *voice, books and FIRE* holds fixed traces, 'the work of memory', within its score, albeit without a permanent or coherent form.<sup>11</sup> Instead, these partly effaced and buried fragments rely upon the ensemble's interpretation—

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<sup>8</sup> Max Silverman, *The Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Frank Hilberg, CD liner notes in *Jakob Ullmann: Komposition Für Streichquartett / Komposition für Violine / Disappearing Musics*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson, Wergo, WER 6532-2, 1996, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Silverman, *The Palimpsestic Memory*, 4.

its reading *through* these fragile layers—in order to consolidate these frayed traces into a coherent reading and give the composition its form.

‘Palimpsest’ is also the title given to one of Ullmann’s works: *Komposition à 9: Palimpsest* (1989–90). In writing the piece, Ullmann has spoken of hearing a radio broadcast from outside East Germany.<sup>12</sup> The fragmented transmission was the voice of a woman reciting the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*. Composed between 1935–61, Akhmatova’s cycle of poems were not written down for fear of discovery by the NKVD.<sup>13</sup> Instead they survived secretly,<sup>14</sup> carefully committed to memory and communicated by word of mouth or other forms of samizdat until it was finally published in Munich in 1963.<sup>15</sup> If Akhmatova’s poetry had been discovered during the Yezhovshchina period—the so-called “Great Purges” that took place in Russia between 1936 and 1938—the consequences would certainly have been grave. Despite this risk, the importance of the message—a documentation of horror and witness for the outside world and for the future—is addressed in a note which opens the *Requiem* ‘in lieu of a foreword’:

In the fearful years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day somebody ‘identified’ me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): ‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘Yes, I can.’ And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.<sup>16</sup>

Here, the oral tradition allows a culture to live on as witness to horrors that would otherwise be censored and erased from history with little resistance. Given Ullmann’s own persecution by East Germany’s Stasi,<sup>17</sup> hearing a distant transmission of Akhmatova’s poetry—broadcast in the oral tradition, which had allowed it to survive and escape the ‘Great Purge’—perhaps resonated with the composer’s personal experiences of restriction and censorship. This theme of fragmentation and fracturing of text and voice is explored in *Komposition à 9: Palimpsest*, through the setting passages of “Crucifixion” and “To Death” from Akhmatova’s *Requiem* cycle alongside a number of smaller fragments including lines from Sophocles’

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<sup>12</sup> Ullmann grew up in the German Democratic Republic, and spent his early composing career behind the Iron Curtain. For further information on Ullmann and his peers see Gisela Nauck, “Ferment and New Departures: The Last Generation of East German Composers.” *Contemporary Music Review* 12, no. 1 (January 1995): 41–75. Ullmann mentions his experience hearing the radio broadcast in Jakob Ullmann, CD liner notes in *Maderna / Ullmann / Hespos*, trans. by Lynn Matheson, work in progress - Berlin, wipb 001, 1996, pp. 14–15.

<sup>13</sup> ‘People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs’, the USSR’s secret police from 1934 to 1946. Previously known as the OGPU (‘Joint State Political Directorate’).

<sup>14</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Anna Akhmatova (London: Vintage Classics, 2009), xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Translator Robin Kempl notes that when *Requiem* was first published—outside Russia, in Berlin—it followed the ‘laconic *absolutur*’: ‘This cycle of poems has been received from Russia and is published without the knowledge or consent of the author’. Robin Kempl and Anna Akhmatova, ‘Anna Akhmatova’s “Requiem, 1935–1940”.’ in *The Russian Review* 33, no. 3 (July 1974): 303.

<sup>16</sup> Anna Akhmatova, ‘Requiem’ in *Selected Poems*, trans. D. M. Thomas (London: Vintage Classics, 2009), 87.

<sup>17</sup> For a personal account of Ullmann’s mistreatment, see Nick Cain, ‘Jakob Ullmann: East of Eden’ in *The Wire* 350 (April 2013): 38–43.

*Antigone*, Psalm 130 and the Apocalypse of St. John (i.e. the book of Revelation).<sup>18</sup> Akhmatova's *Requiem* cycle deals with the poet's fear for her son who is arrested, and the profound grief and loss of those around her during the Stalinist regime. The mezzo-soprano vocal line principally consists of sustained notes articulating the lyrics and occasional small *glissando* deviations. Ullmann sets up a chiasmus form in which the voice and instruments repeat each other's actions. Instrumentalists switch roles with the singer, speaking and breathing audibly amid their playing, whilst vocal melodies mimic the instrumental parts. The 'palimpsest' of the title is invoked through the subtle blending of roles, partly effacing and overwriting both the vocal line and its source. Through its subject matter and approach to text, language and music, *Komposition à 9: Palimpsest* can be seen as the starting point for the *voice books and FIRE* cycle.<sup>19</sup>

Ullmann's earlier treatment of figures like Akhmatova resonates throughout the score to *voice, books and FIRE*, where each fragment of musical material forms a new layer of a dense notational system, which must be deciphered and interpreted by the performers. Through his palimpsestic layering and erasure of materials—religious texts, iconography, fragments of poetry and abstract graphics—Ullmann creates his imaginary folklore from this composite of traces that form a fragile and wholly alien sound-world.

## AFTER THE FIRE; AN OVERVIEW

The *voice, books and FIRE* cycle casts a long shadow across Ullmann's career. The most conceptually ambitious of all the composer's music, the project spans nearly three decades and yet currently stands incomplete with one remaining piece, Part II/3—the cycle's central piece—still to be written. The constituent parts of the cycle form a sprawling set of compositions, speaking only in their own idiosyncratic language, and crystallise into a dense elaborately woven project. As a result, individual elements of *voice, books and FIRE* become difficult to discuss without some wider understanding of the project as a whole.

Structurally, *voice books and FIRE* is complex, comprising three main parts (1, II and 3), wherein the second part constitutes five discrete sections (II/1–II/5).<sup>20</sup> Whilst it is difficult to be specific regarding the dates of composition (Ullmann generally does not include dates in

<sup>18</sup> Ullmann had previously worked with Akhmatova's writing, setting text in his 1984 piece *MNIMA auf texte von Anna Achmatova*. See Ullmann, liner notes in *Maderna / Ullmann / Hespos*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Komposition à 9: Palimpsest* is not, however, Ullmann's first politically concerned composition. Gisela Nauck highlights the 1987/88 work *La Canción del Ángel Desaparecido* whose not only title, but very dealing with sound calls attention to the "Desaparecidos"—the victims of forced disappearance, torture and murder—under military dictatorships of Central and South America. Gisela Nauck, 'Hörräume gegen das Vergessen oder Zur Verantwortung der Musik: Einige Gedanken zu dem Zyklus "voice, books and FIRE"', (2009): 2, [http://www.gisela-nauck.de/texte/2009\\_Vortrag\\_voicebooksfire.pdf](http://www.gisela-nauck.de/texte/2009_Vortrag_voicebooksfire.pdf) (accessed 13 April 2016). Ullmann would continue to explore these themes in the follow-up piece *La Segunda Canción del Ángel Desaparecido* (2011–13), and his setting of Borges' 1943 short story "The Secret Miracle" in *PRAHA: Celetná - Karlova - Maiselova* (2004–7) as well, of course, as in the *voice, books and FIRE* project.

<sup>20</sup> It is notable that there is some irregularity in the numerical system of numbering these pieces. Properly titled, *voice, books and FIRE* is written in three parts—1, II and 3—where the first and final parts are numbered with an Arabic numeral system, whilst the second part features a roman designation followed by an Arabic numeral for each subdivision (i.e. II/5).

the scores), the project was roughly composed between 1990—when Ullmann started Part 1—and 2006, when Part 3 was completed. The full cycle, which, if played together in sequence would run to over seven hours, is structured thus:

<i>voice, books and FIRE 1</i>	1990–95
<i>voice, books and FIRE II</i>	
— II/1	1993–94
— II/2	1991–93
— II/3	not yet written
— II/4	1996–99
— II/5	2001–03
<i>voice, books and FIRE 3</i>	2004–06

These dates are, however, simply approximations and should not be regarded as concrete. The scores' lack of dates are not part of a concerted effort by the composer to obfuscate the project, but rather a result of its fluid process of construction. Many of these pieces were composed palimpsestically, with Ullmann revisiting scores years later to add additional layers. Whilst the majority of Part II/2 was composed around 1991–93, the elements of spatialisation and graphics for the speakers' parts were not added until later, at the end of the nineties.<sup>21</sup> The score of Part 3 features pages from Part 1 which, partly destroyed, have literally been painted over to give colour and new life. Given the fluidity of Ullmann's process, it perhaps makes sense that these parts were not necessarily written in strict order, and—given their duration—are not performed together or as a series. Part II/2 was started and completed before II/1, and completed before Part 1. Despite Part 3 being completed, at the time of writing (early 2016) Part II/3 remains to be written.<sup>22</sup> Part 3 is also the only part of the project to have received a commercial recording and release. With performances rare, and scores difficult to obtain, this makes the Edition RZ recording of Part 3 the only readily available element of the whole project.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the nomenclature, then, it is perhaps misleading to consider these pieces as a sequential cycle, but rather as a set of interrelated works that link common themes and aesthetic concerns of voice, language and history.

None of the *voice, books and FIRE* pieces features a standard score and parts for performers, and the pieces utilise very little in the way of standard notation. Instead, Ullmann divides his scores into varying styles, conveying different performance techniques or modes of interpretation. Almost all of the scores make heavy use of pages of abstract visual elements: collages constructed by Ullmann which employ colour, religious iconography, complex notational systems and—most significantly—text in a variety of languages, torn from ancient books and superimposed onto the score. *voice, books and FIRE* requires its performers to

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<sup>21</sup> Ullmann, e-mail correspondence with the author, 16 April 2016.

<sup>22</sup> A tentative date of completion is set for 2019, drawing the series to a close just shy of three decades. Ullmann, e-mail correspondence with the author, 6 January 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Jakob Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE 3*, recorded by Ensemble für experimentelle Musik, Edition RZ, Ed. RZ 2005, 2008, compact disc.

decipher their own performance score, and as such, provides only the materials and guidelines for their interpretation, rather than a clear and lucid traditional score. With this in mind, the following is an attempt to outline those materials—those torn fragments and splashes of primary colour—and orient them alongside Ullmann's instructions to give a better impression of the fragile form that holds these pieces together.

I

***voice, books and FIRE 1*** (1990–1995), ca. 75'

Having been officially declared 'lost' by Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE 1* (1990–1995) for voice(s) and optional instruments now only remains as a trace within the overall cycle. Whilst some fragments and a few poor-quality copies have survived, the original score was lost and the only remaining copies and sketches in Ullmann's possession were damaged or destroyed.<sup>24</sup> When production of further performances became impossible, Ullmann set about developing a new part—*voice, books and FIRE 3*—rather than attempt simply to resurrect or rewrite the original. Part 3 was thus born as a re-imagination of the first part, utilising many of the same elements—even fragmentary pages from the damaged original—but developing or erasing others.<sup>25</sup> Whilst no longer extant in its original form, Part 1 survives as progenitor of the series and it is possible to find traces throughout the following pieces that bear its resemblance.

As with the other parts of *voice, books and FIRE*, Part 1 contained a multitude of texts from various religious, canonical and liturgical traditions from across European and Middle Eastern history. Central to the score of Part 1 however was the work of Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), 'the twentieth-century Russian Leonardo Da Vinci',<sup>26</sup> whose seminal thesis *The Pillar and Ground of Truth: an Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (1914) formed the background of each page of the vocal score and continues to feature throughout the rest of the *voice, books and FIRE* project.

Florensky, a Russian Orthodox priest, theologian, art historian, scientist and mathematician, wrote *The Pillar and Ground of Truth* during the period of Russian Symbolism which may account for its form. Translator Richard Gustafson notes that Florensky constructed the work 'not as a philosophical treatise, but as a series of twelve letters addressed to an

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<sup>24</sup> This is not the first time Ullmann's scores have been lost or destroyed. The version of *A Catalogue of Sounds* (1995–97) that remains today is only a trace of the original. With the final score and sketches lost, Ullmann had to re-write the piece and solos from memory or the few surviving sketches; an outline of the original.

<sup>25</sup> From remaining information, it is clear that Part 1 was comprised of fourteen pages of notation for the voice(s) and twenty pages for the optional instrumental parts, with a total duration of approximately seventy-five minutes.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, foreword to *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius; The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Russia's Unknown Da Vinci*, by Avril Pyman (New York: Continuum, 2010), xviii.



unidentified “brother,” “friend,” “elder,” and “Guardian,” who may be understood symbolically as Christ’.<sup>27</sup> *voice, books and FIRE 1*, which also made use of unconventional form and symbolism, used pages from the second letter of Florensky’s *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, entitled ‘Doubt’, which biographer Avril Pyman notes deals with the ‘undoubted existence of Truth, [...] and its inaccessibility to “subjective” reason or the “objective” evidence of the senses or [...] “subconscious” mystic intuition’.<sup>28</sup> This text reappears throughout the cycle, forming a key element of *voice, books and FIRE*.

Florensky would eventually be arrested by the Soviet Union’s Joint State Political Directorate (*Obyedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye* [OGPU]) in 1933 on false charges of acting as ‘ideologist to a monarchist-fascist conspiracy’ against the Soviet Union and sentenced to ten years’ hard labour.<sup>29</sup> In 1937 Florensky was accused of ‘counter-revolutionary Trotskyite propaganda’ and condemned to be shot.<sup>30</sup> Florensky was executed on 8 December 1937 and buried in a mass grave in Toksovo.<sup>31</sup> ‘If this was martyrdom,’ Pyman notes of Florensky’s execution, ‘it was the very twentieth-century, existential martyrdom of a sentient, living human being, ground down to silence and consigned to an anonymous grave’.<sup>32</sup>

The disquiet of Florensky’s fate, all too common in the course of recent European history resonates throughout *voice, books and FIRE*. As will become explicit in Part II, the cycle functions as a memorial to those persecuted for speaking out against forces of oppression and fascism. Whilst still and extremely quiet, *voice, books and FIRE* can be viewed as an attempt to break through the silence of this ‘existential martyrdom,’ and give voice to those lost to anonymous graves.

## II

*voice, books and FIRE II* is written for vocal ensembles of varying sizes arranged into diverse constellations. As previously noted, Part II is subdivided into five concert-length parts, making it by far the most substantial section of the *voice, books and FIRE* project. Each of these five subsections bears some connection to the Divine Liturgy, the Eucharist service of Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

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<sup>27</sup> Richard F. Gustafson, ‘Introduction to the Translation’ in *The Pillar and Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, by Pavel Florensky, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), xi–xii.

<sup>28</sup> Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius; The Tragic and Extraordinary Life of Russia’s Unknown Da Vinci* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 73–74.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

Throughout *voice, books and FIRE II*, a pair of speakers, isolated from the ensemble, read from a list of names: the victims—like Florensky—of the gulags, to whom the work is dedicated. The two speakers, sitting at separate tables, read from this prepared list of around 1100 names 'of victims of Stalinist terror.'<sup>33</sup> Instead of re-enacting the horror of the Yezhov period, *voice books and FIRE* retraces its shadow: the void left by those victims. As a result of lost and incomplete records, any such list is fragmentary and incomplete, constituting a partial erasure of these names. As the speakers inscribe these names into the performance, the role of Part II as a requiem becomes unmistakable. Whilst it is obviously only a fraction of the total number of victims, Ullmann attempts to include these names, correcting where obscured and leaving pauses for those that are missing. Despite this effort to give the victims a name and to prevent their memory becoming completely forgotten, the erasure of time has already done its damage and holes appear in the palimpsest.

The speakers make no effort to interact with the rest of the ensemble; there is no dynamic variation or structural cueing that takes place. The two speakers are totally independent from the rest of the music and, as a result, must agree prior to the performance upon a set reading speed and relative lengths of caesurae. Read in a quiet but clearly audible whisper, the two speakers read together from the same list of names. Though they begin together, they are encouraged to read independently; moving slightly out of sync with each other but never straying by more than one name from each other. The effect is a monotonous but sobering stream of names of the dead, which, as the two speakers move out of sync become effaced by each other and the voices of the ensemble. Ullmann allows the speakers to use microphones, indicating that their voices may be spatialised throughout the performance space, so their presence is of great significance throughout the piece. As listeners, one becomes keenly aware of the presence—and indeed significance—of these names and voices, but their intelligibility is masked and reduced at times to indecipherable sibilance and plosives.

### *II/1* (1993–94), ca. 50'

*voice, books and FIRE II/1* divides its ensemble into three main elements: two choirs (groups A & B), and the pair of speakers. Of the two choir groups, both are further split into smaller sections with group A splitting into three (I–III) and group B into five (I–V) smaller sections. The sizes of these choir subsections are variable with each of group A requiring a minimum of three voices whilst each section of group B requires a minimum of two voices. The two speakers are positioned centre-stage, sat at tables and facing each other as they read from their list of names. The three sections of choir group A are distributed across the stage, behind the two speakers,<sup>34</sup> whilst group B form a wide arc spreading across the back of the stage.

Choir group A's score material consists of two main elements: thirteen graphic pages with a small set of transparent lines, and a temporal structure which functions as the main score.

<sup>33</sup> Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II/1*, score, speaker's instructions. Ullmann sourced the names from MEMORIAL, the International Historical-Enlightenment Human Rights and Humanitarian Society. Noting the obvious incompleteness of the names, as well as some incorrect or missing information, Ullmann has attempted to highlight or correct where names have been partially or completely erased.

<sup>34</sup> AI: down-stage-right; All: centre-stage, behind the speakers; AIII: down-stage-left.

The ancillary set of graphic pages are the same for all three of the choir subgroups, whilst the score itself differs. The fragmented text set for Group A is taken from the poem “A young Levite among the priests” (1917), by Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938). A Russian poet, Mandelstam—like Florensky—was persecuted, arrested, exiled, and ultimately died in a Soviet camp at Vladivostok transit point. The poem tells of the young Levite who, ‘having broken with the old priesthood, [...] turns to a new order,’ one that ‘does not preside over what has already passed’.<sup>35</sup> Mandelstam’s ‘young Levite’ who beckons: “Night has already fallen over the Euphrates; run, priests!” perhaps raises a similar sense of unease towards these ancient texts in *voice, books and FIRE*.<sup>36</sup>

[INSERT fig. 1]

Figure 1: A page of graphic notation from *voice, books and FIRE II/1*’s choir group A. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag.

Each page of the graphic portion of the score includes two strips of paper placed at the left margin of each page. A number of ornately drawn and graphically abstracted letters appear on one of these, whilst a transliteration on the adjacent sheet reveals them to in fact be words. The graphic score thus fragments lines of Mandelstam’s poem into syllables, abstracted from their poetic and linguistic function and dispersed about the page. Each of the graphic pages also features torn parchments marked with the outlines of various abstract formations stained red, like overlapping archipelagos. In preparing the score, performers must scatter a number of lines—marked on strips of transparent paper—across these amorphous shapes to determine the rhythmic construction and timbral manipulations of the pages’ fragmented syllables at points where the straight lines intersect. Nothing, however, can be determined from the graphic pages alone, as they must be used in conjunction with the main temporal structure.

The main score parts for Choir A’s groups I, II and III provide not only the temporal framework for the piece, but also details of the timbral transformation and pitch of the voices. Each system is arranged as a fixed duration which may begin within a given time bracket. Through a basic system of symbols, the score directs the timbral manipulation of voices, shifting between various air and breath sounds, whistling, deep growls and the static G-natural tone which Group A centres around. The text from Mandelstam’s poem is here set in its original Cyrillic, which requires interfacing with the graphic pages to decipher both the rhythmic and phonetic information. Here, the score also signals articulation effects, accents, microtonal deviations and various combinations of effects.

As a means to further fragment the text, Ullmann ‘passes’ a number of events from one group to another, in effect, echoing them across the stage as they are sung. Using a simple notational system of coloured branching markers, the three groups of choir A determine which group they are to pass the event to, or receive from (at a slight, specified, delay). These

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<sup>35</sup> Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 135.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

can either be an inconspicuous continuation of a word, or with a slight variation. For example, on the first page of each group's score, Group III's second action—a wordless tone—is passed on to Group I at a three second delay, and then Group II two seconds later. The slight temporal ambiguity of where these events begin (a result of Ullmann's use of time brackets) creates a tension between the groups. Here, the positioning of Choir A across the stage becomes key to the antiphonal arrangement of the text. Ullmann is able to break up the text and pass these fragments between the groups, which appear to echo across the stage as they pass between the three groups. Ullmann sets each group slightly different fragments of Mandelstam's poem, which, together, gradually move through the poem with each page of the score until the final page where the final line: 'Erusalima noč i čad nebytija' ('Jerusalem's night and the fumes of non-being'<sup>37</sup>) is held between the groups for almost a minute and a half before falling back into the sound of quiet breathing at the end of the piece.

[Insert fig. 2]

Figure 2: A page of the temporal framework from *voice, books and FIRE II/1*'s choir group A. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag.

In contrast to choir A, no type of syllabic distribution of these phrases is provided for choir B. Instead, Ullmann leaves this decision to the performer, affording them flexibility in their interpretation. The score material here is divided into three types: five transparent pages of text, five transparent pages of temporal structure (system lines, dynamic markings etc.), and five graphic sheets. Enacting the palimpsest, then, these various sheets must be combined in order to realise the part, with each layer both adding and subtracting opportunities for possible interpretation. The graphic pages feature amorphous dark-red painted shapes, resembling the fainter stains of Choir A's score. Over these shapes are pasted fragments of text, cut out on translucent paper, alongside burnt and charred shreds. The violent evocations—blood and fire—of these pages are the first direct visual clue to the chilling history of violence that lies at the heart of *voice, books and FIRE*.

The transparency pages which provide the temporal framework distribute thirteen system lines amongst five subgroups {3, 3, 4, 2, 1}. Vertical lines act as bar-lines (each bar equates to a minimum duration of fifty seconds) whilst static pitches are assigned to each of the system's horizontal lines. Unlike Choir A's collectively static G-natural, in Choir B's score each system line represents a single static pitch from a dodecaphonic tone-row. Where the fragments of text intersect or pass close to these pitch lines determines when, and at what pitch, one must sing. Unlike the spatial passing of events between the members of Choir A, here pitches are static and confined to a single, fixed location for the duration of the piece. The text for Choir B is a setting of the Great Litany section of the Divine Liturgy that begins: 'In peace, let us pray to the lord...'. Ullmann sets the text, fragmented and interpolated with the Kyrie Eleison, in Greek, Russian and Georgian on the transparent pages, written in their native alphabets, with a transliteration to aid pronunciation.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 130.

*II/2* (1991–93), ca. 30'

Whilst the speakers remain isolated, *voice, books and FIRE II/2*—unusually for the series—groups the notation for all its six choir groups (A, B, C, D,  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ) and soloist ( $\delta$ ) onto a single score, rather than as separate elements to be assembled or deciphered (Figure 3).<sup>38</sup>

[Insert fig. 3]

Figure 3: Page 6 of the ensemble score for Part *II/2*. No individual parts are given, except for the two speakers. Note the introduction of 'soloist'  $\delta$  in the middle of the page. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag.

Group A is the largest of all choir groups in Part *II/2*, requiring a minimum of six performers. Reading from the Beatitudes, the group is directed to execute a number of slow, precise *glissando* passages. Additionally, many of these tones are manipulated with their pitch movement through a number of vowel transformations making this one of the most texturally rich choir groups in Part *II/2*. Group B, in contrast, performs only sustained B-natural tones, set to a text that is often part of an Orthodox funeral service. The tones vary between two octaves, whilst occasionally transforming into breath noise. Choir group C is charged with an even more arduous task: sustaining a single note—F-natural—for the duration of the performance, without faltering, as still as possible. Throughout the performance the group (a minimum of two singers) must carry the note in a relay, attempting to make the change between voices as inconspicuous as possible. The difficulty of this technique is compounded as the timbre constantly evolves through shifting vowel shapes.<sup>39</sup>

Group D performs a series of more complex harmonic actions, notated in a simplified version of Ullmann's 'waypoint' tuning system whereby pitches are specified, not to a traditional tempered system, but relative to preceding locations in pitch space or intervals. In this simplified version, Ullmann notates a set of fixed pitches in a cell at the start of each page, and then graphically plots the motion of pitches relative to these points.<sup>40</sup> While the pitches of Group D tend to be sustained with only slight *glissando* ornamentation, Group  $\alpha$ —reading from the Beatitudes—makes use of more ostentatious *glissando* motion. As a result, the pitches are less specific, instead signalling only a single 'central' pitch, with a range of possible octaves for the performers.

Group  $\beta$ , which is split into two ( $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$ , placed either side of the performance space) sings Psalm 126, or Shir Hama'alot in Hebrew. Ullmann separates the pitch material from the text by placing the text next to a repeating musical action (centring around an F-to-G *glissando* for  $\beta_1$ , and an E-flat-to-D *glissando* for  $\beta_2$ ), indicating that the musical cells are to be read left-

<sup>38</sup> A feature common to a number of Ullmann's scores, parts are drawn in oblique projection, allowing a degree of three-dimensional notation.

<sup>39</sup> This technique can be seen later in *"Ορος Μετεωρος. dramatisches fragment mit Aischylos und Euripides (Horos Metéoros)* (2008–09). I have discussed its significance and effect elsewhere. See Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 16–17.

<sup>40</sup> This technique—which builds upon melodic features from Byzantine music—can be seen to develop from *Komposition für Streichquartett* (1985–86) to its most rigorous exposition in *A Catalogue of Sounds* (1995–97), but can also be found in *voice, books and FIRE II/4*.

to-right, whilst the Hebrew text is read right-to-left. It is left to the performers therefore to decide upon the precise phrasing and interpretation of the notation. The placement of these parts is also left more or less to the participants with  $\beta_1$  leading and  $\beta_2$  following after a short breath.

The soloist ( $\delta$ ) only enters the piece at page six, two-thirds of the way into the piece. Reading from 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17, the soloist begins at a low F, and slowly rises in quarter-tones with each section of speech. The soloist's recitation sonically links the sung material of the ensemble with the two speakers. Unlike the other parts of *voice, books and FIRE II*, in Part II/2 the two speakers do not read from the list of victims' names. Instead, the two speakers read simultaneously (although, again, with no synchronisation) from the second letter of Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of Truth*, the central text to *voice, books and FIRE I*, this time filtered and largely directed by a chance preparation procedure.

Each speaker receives the Russian text arranged, in blocks, across five transparent pages. The pages are then overlaid onto a series of graphic pages comprising various blocks, scattered in different arrangements. The temporal structure of the speakers' parts instructs them to whisper only those passages of text which fall within the bounds of these graphic blocks. The text that remains outside these blocks is followed—but not read aloud—creating caesura within the performance. Here, Ullmann has the performers re-enacting the palimpsestic process: where layers of material erase the reading of a text. Though read in order, only partial fragments of the text surfaces during the performance, creating a new and distinct structure and interpretation of the original text, one now devoid of its historical context.<sup>41</sup>



Whilst electronic manipulation does not typically form a part of Ullmann's music, Part II/2 includes an uncharacteristically prominent role for live-electronic spatialisation of the voices.<sup>42</sup> Ullmann provides a dedicated graphic score—one that must be prepared and carefully deciphered prior to performance—for the arrangement, spatialisation and electronic diffusion of the choirs. This spatialisation score includes a room plan (Figure 4) and nine brightly painted graphic pages, with smaller black ink-blotted abstract shapes.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ullmann indicates in the performance instructions that the intelligibility of the text is less important than the whispered delivery. Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II/2*, score, 1991–93.

<sup>42</sup> Whilst electronic manipulation appears to be of little concern to Ullmann—some limited experiments with pre-recorded tape parts appear in *Komposition für Streichquartett* (1985–86), *Symmetries on aleph zero 2 (Komposition für Violine)* (1986–87) and later in *PRAHA: Celetná - Karlova - Maiselova*—a keen sense of spatial theatre can be found in Ullmann's work. *voice, books and FIRE* makes some effort in its careful placement of voices within the performance space, but Ullmann's most extreme spatial experiment is found in the operatic *Horos Metéoros*, where performers move about outside the performance space, hidden from the audience. Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 19–20.

<sup>43</sup> The room plan—a geometrically obscure diagram featuring tetrahedra intersecting each other and (seemingly without explanation) floating abstract shapes—includes an orthographic aerial view of the performance space relative to clock position. It is these clock positions to which the diffusion codes relate, allowing Ullmann to specify areas of the performance space in which to pan sounds. For example, the sequence 'R 9[11, 7, 6, 3]' calls for the random movement between locations 11, 7, 6 and 3, whilst periodically returning to position 9. The instruction '6 $\rightleftharpoons$ 11' would simply signal a moving back and forth between positions 6 and 11.

Below each of these black daubs is written a short sequence of numbers: a code for spatial behaviours, locations and directions in which the sound should be diffused. To prepare these manipulations, the main choir score—printed on a transparent page—is overlaid onto the graphic pages, palimpsestically modifying the original: the score is read through the lens of the electronics' score, revealing the piece from a new perspective.

[Insert fig. 4]

Figure 4: The room plan for sound spatialisation in Part II/2. © Ariadne Buch & Musikverlag.

The spatialisation effect itself is, however, subtle, as one might expect from such a minimal and restrained music. Ullmann does not aim for elaborate or violent spatial gestures characteristic of acousmatic diffusion performance practice, but rather a more immersive experience in which various locations may be faintly highlighted. For the majority of the performance, the sound is balanced around the space. The primary coloured backgrounds of each graphic page correspond to sections of the room plan to indicate the areas in which each choir groups should be located. At the point where the score intersects with the dark blots, however, the sound of the relevant choir becomes focused or narrowed into specific points or behaviours. Of course, Ullmann's notation is vague: colours blend seamlessly into each other, any use of shape is amorphous, perhaps deliberately defying any sort of rigorous or precise execution and encouraging a more fluid interpretation.

The amplified sound of the two speakers is also manipulated, albeit according to their own score. Here, the type of shading in each of the graphic boxes denotes how the voice may be timbrally manipulated (though the specifics of what form this manipulation should take is left to the decision of the performer/diffuser). Whilst the whispered speaking should, for the most part, be diffused uniformly across the performance space, as with the choir groups the use of colour in the speaker's scorer signals key locations in space where the diffusion should be focused.

Throughout *voice, books and FIRE* the use of loudspeakers functions, not to add intelligibility to the voices (as seen with the two speakers in Part II/1), but rather to dislocate sound from its source. A precursor to Ullmann's later experimentations with the figure of the *acousmètre*—the disembodied voice—Ullmann seeks to render the voice incorporeal, further blurring the field of audition by adding subtle motion or depth to the sonic space.<sup>44</sup> It is worth reaffirming that throughout this electronic modification, the volume of performances should still not exceed *pianississimo*: sound is not amplified as a means for magnification, but rather dispersed by the loudspeaker; restricted and at all times extremely faint. Here, the listening experience becomes fragile as audiences attempt to orient themselves and focus upon fractured half-heard sounds, which, due to their omnipresence, seemingly have no source.

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Chion, 'The Acousmètre' in *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 17–29. As noted, Ullmann later experimented with incorporeal performers in *Horos Meteoros* wherein ensemble members were located outside the performance space inhabited by the audience. Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 19–20.

The din of these many voices, each whispering and murmuring incoherently, becomes overwhelming for the listener who is inundated by this ghostly babel.

### **II/3** (currently unwritten)

Whilst at the time of writing *voice, books and FIRE II/3* remains unwritten, it is still possible to speculate upon its function within the overall project. Considering the cycle as a whole, part *II/3* forms the centre point, falling between both Part *I* and *III* as well as the interrelated *II/1* and *II/5*. According to the composer, the proposed plan is for Part *II/3* to be performed by seven choir groups, with an estimated duration of approximately eighty-five minutes.<sup>45</sup> This would make the part the most significant, both in terms of size and duration, of all the parts of *voice, books and FIRE*. Ullmann notes that Part *II/3* will relate in some way to the Hymn of the Cherubim or Cherubikon, the troparion which traditionally accompanies the Great Entrance in Byzantine Divine Liturgy.

### **II/4** (1996–99), ca. 60'

*voice, books and FIRE II/4* features some of the most ornate notational systems in the whole of the cycle, splitting the ensemble into three main choir groups which are further subdivided, whilst the two speakers resume their role reading from the list of victims' names. The piece primarily relates to the Nicene Creed, a profession of faith from Christian liturgy also sung during the Divine Liturgy of Byzantine Rite, whilst also including recitations from Genesis, and fragments from the Gospel of John.

Members of choir group A—requiring a minimum of twelve male and female singers—are divided into three subgroups. Ten graphic pages each with corresponding transparent pages then provide the structural framework for all three sections of group A. The transparent pages dictate the timing, duration and type of action, as well as the passing of events (a development of the technique in Part *II/1*) between the groups. The graphic pages—each of which feature map fragments of Russia—provide the text to be articulated as well as information for the timbral transformation of sounds (through the blending of colour). The performance techniques range from breath sounds, whistling and growls, to a clear and static sustained B-natural tone. These have become the standard lexicon of technique for the *voice, books and FIRE* cycle, but the reference to “unclean” singing is perhaps significant here.<sup>46</sup> The technique calls for tones that are microtonally (though not specifically tempered) de-tuned from the static B-natural pitch. When this is performed by several singers, the timbral effect is blurred and complex, yet remains static. Ullmann refers to these as ‘miniature clusters,’ which are starkly contrasted by the ‘trio’ formations that frequently intersect the score.<sup>47</sup>

The transparent pages of Choir A's score system are frequently traversed by shaded blocks marked with an index and a duration, referencing one of the ‘trios’ of Ullmann's auxiliary tuning systems—a development of the system used by choir group D in Part *II/2*. Here,

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<sup>45</sup> Jakob Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II* accompanying essay to score, 2004.

<sup>46</sup> Jakob Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II/4*, score, 1996–99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



performers adopt the Byzantine-influenced tuning system, navigating their unique harmonic and melodic phrases.<sup>48</sup> The timbre of these trio parts are, however, still subject to the main framework score, and thus are liable to change timbre whilst they are carried out. For each system, a set of pitches is given along with a pair of limit pitches (minimum and maximum), functioning as reference points for the adjacent chart. The precise details of Ullmann's waypoint tuning system are discussed elsewhere,<sup>49</sup> suffice it to say that here Ullmann divides the octave into sixty-eight units, forming tetrachords from groups of twenty-eight units.<sup>50</sup> Compound sets of these tetrachords are then split into steps (unit groups of 7, 9, 12 etc.) to create eight alternatively tempered scales. Ullmann is thus able to compose at this 'microscopic level', prompting performers to navigate pitch space 'relative to waypoints of the scale intervals' and focusing upon intervallic relationships rather than to any traditional notion of temperament.<sup>51</sup> As I have argued previously, this method of reconstructing pitch relationships re-enacts the palimpsestic process as traditional equal temperament pitch systems are 'partly effaced and written over,' and in turn 'pitch space is transformed through the presence of a new fragile trace'.<sup>52</sup>

An associated transparent page which communicates pitch and time-space temporal framework is attributed to each page of choir group B's graphic score. Contrasting the complex system of Choir A, Group B's main purpose is to sustain a series of steady pitches, articulated by slight *glissandi*. The graphic pages again include the text material to be articulated, as well as the iconography and torn fragments of text that are emblematic of the *voice, books and FIRE* project. Although not split into separate groups, Choir group B does include discrete roles to the main group. Reprising what has become a common vocal device for Ullmann, at least two voices sustain a static B-natural (though in this instance, the two voices may be independent, singing in different octaves) for the duration of the performance, as previously seen in Part II/2's Group C. Choir group B's "soloist" counters this static pitch, by slowly climbing in pitch throughout the performance.<sup>53</sup> Ascending in quarter-tones from a low F-natural to the B-natural below middle C, the soloist makes gradual steps, sustaining an even pitch as they trace and articulate the opening passages from the Gospel of John in Greek.

The score material for Group C—which requires a minimum of six voices—is self-contained and unlike the other choirs in Part II/4 does not require assembly, although preparation is still required to parse the complex wealth of information on each page (Figure 5). Across seven pages, the score for Group C contains a time index, a passage of Hebrew text (from the

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<sup>48</sup> See Egon Wellesz, "Byzantine Musical Notation II: The Neumes" in *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 261–310.

<sup>49</sup> In reference to Ullmann's use of the system in *A Catalogue of Sounds*, though it is worth emphasising that here, the effects of the system become more pronounced as the voices employ these systems for harmonic, rather than simply melodic use. Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 10–13.

<sup>50</sup> As a point of comparison, in standard twelve-tone equal temperament, a semi-tone interval would equate to around 5.8 of these units.

<sup>51</sup> Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 10–11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ullmann notes that due to the length of the performance, it may be necessary to use more voices. Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II/4*, score, 1996–99.

book of Genesis), pitch structure as well as other fragments of texts, pages of books, and abstract shapes and diagrams.

[Insert fig. 5]

Figure 5: Score page for Choir group C in *voice, books and FIRE II/4*. Reproduced by permission. © Jakob Ullmann.

The text on each graphic page (Hebrew passages from the opening of the book of Genesis) are set—at the performer's discretion—to the *glissandi* system in the upper-left corner of each page. Additional text, isolated in a small corner of each page, may also be spoken concurrently, or interpreted according to the rules Ullmann ascribes to the more abstract graphic elements of the page. Here, Ullmann suggests that one might interpret the graphic elements as instructive of an overall direction for the realisation of each page, placing the overall form of the interpretation upon the performer. Similarly, vertical movements, as one might predict, would indicate small changes in pitch—relative to a static B-natural—or to subtle timbral or dynamic changes.

*II/5* (2001–03), ca. 55'

*voice, books and FIRE II/5* largely resembles Part *II/1* and so might also be thought of as closing the smaller cycle of Part *II*. Again, the ensemble is split between two main groups and arranged on stage as in Part *II/1*, with the two speakers facing each other, centre-stage. Group A returns to its original formation, subdivided into three groups (though this time the groups are larger, each with a minimum of five voices) and each with a structural score that corresponds to a series of graphic pages, now more focused than at the beginning of the cycle. The text comes from fragments of *The Poems of Yuri Zhivago*, the twenty-five poem cycle that draws Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* to its close.<sup>54</sup> Ullmann sets passages from five of the poems that deal overtly with stories from Christian lore: “In Holy Week”, “Evil Days”, the two “Magdalen” poems and the close of the cycle, “Garden of Gethsemane”.<sup>55</sup> Group A's pitch remains static, this time centring around a static A-natural, and morphing between discernible pitch and breath noise, whilst all groups attempt to maintain a constant audible breathing sound. Once again the graphic pages include torn sections of handmade paper with shapes and coloured stains, and strips of vellum with printed Russian text (Figure 6). The process for realisation is again similar to that of Part *II/1* with the passing of events between groups, though this time without the cryptic deciphering of words. Instead, simple reference points mark where text should be interpreted from the graphic pages. Again, the groups must prepare their events in advance by throwing a measured line onto the graphic page. The shapes drawn onto the torn paper fragments determine the state (whether spoken or sung) of the event as well as how the event should unfold timbrally. The distance between the point at which the line intersects a fragment of text, and the point at which the line reaches one of the torn paper parchments determines the duration of these events according to a set scale.

<sup>54</sup> Pasternak was a close friend of both Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam.

<sup>55</sup> There are two further religious poems in the cycle—“The Star of the Nativity” and “Miracle”—though Ullmann does not set them here.

[Insert fig. 6]

Figure 6: Graphic page of group A's score material. The text excerpts in the lower left and middle of the page come from Pasternak's "Garden of Gethsemane" and "Holy Week" respectively. Reproduced by permission. © Jakob Ullmann.

Group B—requiring at least twenty-six singers, two for each pitch—opens with a sustained dodecaphonic chord, dispersed across the range of the choir. Over the duration of the piece, these pitches gradually divert themselves through a series of long-sustained tones and slow *glissandi* towards a static A-natural. The pitch structures (scored on transparent pages) are arranged vertically on the page and once again overlaid onto graphic pages in order to determine the text to be articulated and any timbral modifications. The text fragments of Group B's score are taken from the Pater Noster prayer and are sung in Greek, Russian, Georgian, Armenian and Latin, each written in their own alphabet and without transliteration; Ullmann asks a great deal from his performers.

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Ornate title pages have always played some role in Ullmann's scores—whether graphically notated or not—and the *voice, books and FIRE* scores are no exception. Each part includes a title page that is in some way evocative of the overall aesthetic of the project. Part II/5 follows this theme with its dense layering of imagery that includes partial reproductions of photographs and book pages, an apparent ghostly outline of Florensky and Ullmann's abstracted title text. However, both choir groups are also given their own title page, which includes, rather inconspicuously, a short poem by Osip Mandelstam, written in January 1931:

Lord: help me to live through this night.  
I'm in fear of my life, I'm afraid for Your servant.  
Living in Petersburg is like sleeping in a coffin.<sup>56</sup>

Here, Mandelstam fears his inevitable arrest—like Florensky, and Akhmatova's son—by the NKVD. Ullmann's decision to place this inscription as a preface to his setting of Pasternak's retelling of Christ's final hours in Zhivago's "Garden of Gethsemane" is telling. Ullmann reflects upon the fear of so many under the Stalinist regime with this plea for survival, its futility implicit throughout *voice, books and FIRE II* as the music bleeds through the whispered names of the dead.

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<sup>56</sup> Osip Mandelstam, poem no. 223 in *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, trans. Burton Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 188.

## III

***voice, books and FIRE 3*** (2004–06), ca. 75'

*voice, books and FIRE 3* closes the cycle as a recapitulation of the (now absent) beginning, just as Part II forms its own smaller cycle through parts II/1 and II/5. As already noted, Part 3 was constructed after the loss of the original scores for Part 1, making it a reimagining or development of that piece rather than a direct copy or reconstruction. Some of the original material survives in Part 3 as fragments that were rescued and could be scanned and modified by the composer. Since, however, there remains no original material for comparison, I will avoid attempting to identify such material and instead discuss Part 3 in its own terms.

The most significant departure from Part II is found in Part 3's instrumentation. Scored for 'voice(s) with or without instruments,' the piece might conceivably be performed as solo for female voice though the composer notes that more voices are preferable.<sup>57</sup> For the most part—including the recorded version released by Edition RZ—Part 3 has been performed by multiple voices and a small number of instruments.<sup>58</sup> Unlike the second part of the cycle, where the ensemble was split into multiple groups running concurrently and forming a complex polyphony, Part 3 has a largely homogeneous structure for its vocal part. Performances must be carefully prepared in advance so that they can be precisely coordinated and, where necessary, liaise with the instrumental parts to decide upon matters of form. For the singers, Ullmann calls for a '*modified unisono*' in performance where no matter the number of voices, all participants form a single voice.<sup>59</sup>

The notation of Part 3 is some of the most abstract and 'graphic' in the whole *voice, books and FIRE* cycle, eschewing any sort of temporal structure or framework beyond the sequence of pages. From their fourteen graphic pages, the singers may decide to perform either the whole piece (lasting at least seventy-five minutes), or only a smaller part of it (a minimum of five pages). The instrumental score meanwhile consists of twenty-two coloured sheets, with five transparent overlays. The coloured pages may be divided into five categories based upon the type of sound called for: clear tones, soft multiphonics or triple-stops for strings, sharp multiphonics, short percussive sounds, and sustained noise textures. Each page (at least three-and-a-half minutes per page) specifies only a single event type (Figure 7), though there is no specified order in which the pages must be arranged or selected. For the pages with a clearly defined pitch, the available tones are: {A-flat, G, C, D, E} whilst the pitches for the other sound types are left open.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE 3*, score, 2004–06.

<sup>58</sup> The Edition RZ recording features eight female voices and four instrumentalists: flute, saxophone, viola and cello.

<sup>59</sup> Ullmann notes a particular exception here; where more than five voices are available—'especially if male voices take part'—then one or more voices may hold a given single tone for the duration of each score page as a kind of '*bordun-singing*'. Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE 3*, score, 2004–06.

<sup>60</sup> Ullmann suggests in his performance notes that a minimum of three instruments are required in a performance that will include instruments. The preference is clearly for those instruments which are able

[Insert fig. 7]

Figure 7: One of the stable pitch (C-natural) pages of Part 3's optional instrumental score. Reproduced by permission. © Jakob Ullmann.

Ullmann gives two possible methods of organisation for the instrumental part, which vastly alter the physiognomy of a performance. Instruments can be organised as either an ensemble of soloists—each playing independently and from different pages simultaneously; or, alternatively, as an ensemble of groups, in which each group performs cohesively as a single voice. Similarly, the composer gives two possible methods of relating the instrumental part to that of the voices, ranging from dividing the performance into a series of movements, where parts correspond to the vocal score; or, a performance where instruments and vocals prepare their scores independently. In any case, the duration of the piece must be the same for each performance, maintaining a disciplined and even sense of time for all performers.

The 'rhythmic constellations' of the performance are determined through the interfacing of transparency and main coloured graphic.<sup>61</sup> On each transparent sheet is drawn a number of graph plots, flurries of lines and other markings as well as a set of erratically arranged notes which serve to direct additional events in the performance. Performers assign durations to these graph lines in advance, to form the required total duration for a performance. Where the graph lines of the transparency intersect with the lines and other abstract shapes of the main sheet, an event is triggered or re-articulated.

The score pages for voice are each given an individual pitch that forms the tonal centre of each page (Figure 8). Each of the fourteen score pages for voice are given a single pitch, which forms the tonal centre of the page. Each pitch in the chromatic scale is used, with D-natural appearing twice and an additional page that does not include a pitch. Here, Ullmann instructs that the page should be interpreted 'in such a way that all possibilities of voice for the transitions between singing and speaking, singing and breathing [...] are to be used'.<sup>62</sup> Some pages feature small rhythmic fragments which may be interpreted, though for the most part pages are to be performed as continuously as articulation of the text allows. The remaining graphic 'constellations'—which are fixed, unlike the transparencies of the instrumental part—are used to guide the direction in which the page is read, acting in the first instance as a path across the score. These graphic elements are used to interpret subtle alterations of pitch and timbre, a technique seen throughout the cycle.<sup>63</sup>

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to sustain tones, particularly stringed instruments which are given precisely notated fingerings to execute triple-stopped chords with artificial harmonics.

<sup>61</sup> Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE 3*, score, 2004–06.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Visually, many of the abstract graphics found throughout the *voice, books and FIRE* project are evocative of Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) Bauhaus period (1922–1933), which dealt primarily with geometric shape and form. Works such as *Blue* (1922), *Black Relationship* (1924) and *Heavy Circles* (1927).

[Insert fig. 8]

Figure 8: A page from the vocal score of *voice, books and FIRE 3*. Note the main pitch (E-natural with note-head size signalling the octave designation) in the upper left, and the rhythmic constellations in the lower-right section sections of the page. Reproduced by permission. © Jakob Ullmann.

Whereas Part II relates specifically to the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine rite and the victims of Stalin's regime, Part 3 deals more broadly with religious texts, incorporating a range of materials from various cultures across Europe and the Middle East, combining them through his palimpsestic overlaying. The vocal score includes text in a variety of languages and alphabets, amongst them: Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Chinese, Coptic, English, German, Georgian, Greek, Latin, and Russian. Alongside sections of Florensky's *Pillar and the Ground of Truth* (which feature on each page), fragments of various religious texts are found sporadically throughout the score; remnants from the Bible are found in a range of languages and suras from the Koran appear in Kufic script. In Part 3, Ullmann continues to explore the 'relationships between music and language, language as sound and language as text' more widely, as well as 'the numerous relationships between texts of different cultural and religious traditions'.<sup>64</sup> In overlaying text from geographically and temporally distant cultures, interpolating them into a single voice; abstracting and recontextualising them so as to eliminate points of contrast.

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In much of Ullmann's work, that which at first appears open or vague can often conceal great complexity or restriction. As I have noted elsewhere, the palimpsestic nature of Ullmann's scores makes it 'impossible to view [a] piece from a single perspective' since the scores are themselves often bound in paradoxes which threaten to unravel the piece.<sup>65</sup> Throughout *voice, books and FIRE*, the programme notes indicate that intelligibility of the vocal parts is not a prime concern. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the score for Part 3 where text is often damaged or obscured to the point that it is almost entirely illegible. Only a few words on the 'B-natural' page, for instance, remain visible, forcing performers to sing fragmented or otherwise distorted phonemes as they encounter them. Other pages include text which has been inverted on the page or overlaid with different languages, encouraging creative interpretations from performers. However, this is not to say that where detail or clarity is eroded, performers are given free rein.<sup>66</sup> Performances are methodically prepared in advance, and not simply improvised interpretations of the scores.

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<sup>64</sup> Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE II* accompanying essay to score, 2004.

<sup>65</sup> Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 7.

<sup>66</sup> In Part 3, the effect of the performers' interpretations of these obscured materials are attenuated by Ullmann's caveat that all changes must be carried out continuously and very slowly. This ensures that sharp or incongruent transitions—which might otherwise disturb the quiet and largely static nature of the performance—are avoided, and performers must in turn interpret their obscured notation in a controlled and ascetic manner.

Curiously, text appears in the background of the instrumental scores as well as the vocal parts (Fig. 7). Unlike the earlier *Komposition à 9: Palimpsest* where instrumentalists were periodically required to sing, layering and effacing the solo voice part, here Ullmann's inclusion of text is not a performative device, but an interpretive one. Ullmann suggests that the inclusion of text here helps to confuse any clear rhythmic structure one might intone from page's graphic lines.<sup>67</sup> Whilst it can be argued that the inclusion of text obscures any obvious rhythmic reading, the text may also provide the instrumental performers with supplementary information, not communicated as rhythm *per se*, but rather as a language foreign to both typical Western European musical structures, and to the more abstract graphic elements. In this case, the text—though obscured and incoherent—might take on new significance as parametric or even neumatic notation in their reading of the score. Regardless of its function, the background text of these pages functions as a reminder of the fragile form that Ullmann creates as he effaces and dislocates his score materials: a reminder that this music is alien, both evading and erasing traditional musical structures and forms.

The systematic undermining of clarity in Ullmann's vocal parts extends beyond the literal effacement of his score materials, as evidenced by the single-note relays groups of Part *II/2* and *II/4* or the two speakers' subtly whispering the list of name out-of-sync throughout Part *II*. In both cases, the score's instruction is simple, but Ullmann's precarious arrangement of the situation ensures that the voices are fragile, likely to obscure each other and fracture their clarity and in some sense perhaps, their significance. As noted earlier, even where Ullmann makes use of amplification the purpose is not necessarily for the clarity and intelligibility of the vocal material, but rather to highlight the presence of the voice (or, as in the case of Part *II/2*, to dislocate a voice from the corporeal presence of its source).

This fragility of sense in the vocal material relates to what I have previously referred to as the 'paradox of quietness', which is central to Ullmann's music: 'quietness causes instability, but also renders listening vulnerable to disruption from that instability'.<sup>68</sup> In *voice, books and FIRE*, this instability is manifested in the fragile intelligibility of the voices: the listener's focus is drawn into the music, searching for the clarity and meaning in these quiet, whispered fragments of text. However, as soon as such a fragment comes into focus it is torn away, leaving the listener with the disorienting and incoherent traces of a phrase or phoneme rather than an intelligible voice which might form some clear narrative. Whilst the performers must navigate their own palimpsestic notation, it is left to the listener to orient themselves around this fragile collage of fragmented voices.

## CONCLUSION: IMAGINARY FOLKLORE

Ullmann writes in his performance notes that any stylistic copying of existing cultures is to be avoided. The intention is not to mimic existing musical cultures, but to create a new one—a new language of Babel. Any such 'style,' Ullmann requests, should instead be that of an 'imaginary folklore'.<sup>69</sup> One is reminded here of another of Borges' short stories, *Tlön, Uqbar*,

<sup>67</sup> Ullmann, e-mail correspondence with the author, 16 April 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Thurley, 'Disappearing Sounds', 18.

<sup>69</sup> Ullmann, *voice, books and FIRE* 3, score, 2004–06.

*Orbis Tertius* (1940) in which the narrator discovers an encyclopaedia of an unknown—and fictional—reality:

Now I held in my hands a vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet, with its architectures and its playing cards, the horror of its mythologies and the murmur of its tongues, with its emperors and its seas, its minerals and its birds and fishes, its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversies.<sup>70</sup>

Through his palimpsestic layering and erasure of materials—religious texts, iconography, fragments of poetry and abstract graphics—Ullmann creates this ‘imaginary folklore’, a composite of fragile traces which form a wholly alien sound-world. *voice, books and FIRE* is not simply the reproduction of fragments from various European traditions, but a unique and unfamiliar culture of its own imagination: a music which, like Borges’ encyclopaedia, intersects histories to synthesise its own idiosyncratic existence. In his abstraction of materials, Ullmann palimpsestically reconstructs these fragments into something new which, whilst bearing a likeness to those original cultures, ultimately forms its own ‘vast and systematic fragment of the entire history of an unknown planet.’<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ in *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 2000), 11–12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*