

## THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE OF TIMBRE IN TYSHAWN SOREY'S *AUTOSCHEDIASMS*

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**Abstract:** *Autoschediasms*, the American composer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey's conception of spontaneous composition, casts the participants as equals. The decision-making power is balanced between Sorey and the instrumentalists. Focusing on the 2020 performance of *Autoschediasms* by Sorey and the contemporary-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound, presented as part of the ensemble's Video Chat Variations series, this article limns the experience of *Autoschediasms* and asks: what is the sensory counterpart to Sorey's democratic ethos? In *Autoschediasms*, I argue, it is timbre that synchronises the performers' interactions, in all their care and openness, with the pressures and freedoms of listening. Timbre activates absorbing, unforeseen, manifold variation in the composition. This sonic impression of democratic music-making around and across difference comes to reflect the conditions of radical humanity and vulnerability inherent in spontaneity. Through close listening, and in dialogue with critical improvisation studies and timbre theory, I suggest that *Autoschediasms* illuminates the ethical dimension of timbre: what timbre can do for the aspiration towards musical inclusivity.

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12 September 2020. In a studio in Philadelphia, flashcards are strewn across a desk. On the desk, a laptop and three monitors are lined up. Before the screens sits the American composer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey (b. 1980), two webcams facing him. The screens show the contemporary-music ensemble Alarm Will Sound. Sorey is inhabiting several roles at once: an organiser of instrumentalists sharing in decision-making; an interlocutor challenging the players and encouraging them to challenge him; and a leader, guiding the group with his flashcards towards new sounds and psychic spaces.

Sorey and Alarm Will Sound are performing *Autoschediasms*, Sorey's conception of spontaneous composition. This 2020 performance comprised the second episode of Alarm Will Sound's online series entitled Video Chat Variations.<sup>1</sup> Launched in August 2020, at the

<sup>1</sup> Tyshawn Sorey and Alarm Will Sound, 'Tyshawn Sorey & Alarm Will Sound – Video Chat Variations Episode 2 (Autoschediasms)', 30 October 2020, <https://youtu.be/JdhM4libBkQ> (accessed 7 October 2021).

height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the series featured music performed remotely through the internet. According to Alarm Will Sound's director, Alan Pierson, in *Video Chat Variations*, the ensemble sought to 'harness the artistic and communicative possibilities of the technologies we're all living with now'. The series was meant to embrace 'quirks like delay, latency, jitter, and glitching' and to 'transform video chat from a stop-gap, content-delivery medium into meaningful artistic material that will capture and therefore outlast the pandemic'.<sup>2</sup>

In a *New York Times* review, Seth Colter Walls detailed the logistics of the virtual performance of *Autoschediasms*. The instrumentalists were spread across several states and four home offices and professional studios. Each 'pod' of musicians was synchronised by two internet conferencing applications: LiveLab, which arrayed the musicians in squares similar to Zoom, and the audio program Jamulus, where the musicians' microphones were fed into a mixing board. The participants were muted on LiveLab and audible on Jamulus.<sup>3</sup>

### On timbre and improvisation

Sorey has led *Autoschediasms* with different ensembles in different contexts. There have been performances by the International Contemporary Ensemble, Crash Ensemble and the Banff/NYC Improvisers Orchestra, and the practice is featured on Alarm Will Sound and Sorey's album *For George Lewis/Autoschediasms*, released with Cantaloupe Music on 27 August 2021. I focus here on Alarm Will Sound's *Video Chat Variations* performance as it is a relatively recent rendition of *Autoschediasms*. I am drawn to the heightened intimacy and transparency of this virtual performance. The immersive, accessible format of the online collaboration shines a special light on the work of perceiving timbre, and of perceiving the musicians perceiving timbre, in *Autoschediasms*. Under virtual conditions, timbre is a field of interpretation and play; with the kind of concentrated attention online listening demands, timbre matters all the more.

*Autoschediasms* casts the musicians as equals. Pierson told Colter Walls that in the performance, Sorey is 'receiving information as much as he's giving information', and Erin Lesser, a flautist in Alarm Will Sound, said the composition 'creates a level playing field'. 'He demands that every player jump in and be bold. So we're all beginners and we're all experts in what we bring,' Lesser added.<sup>4</sup> Sorey, for his part, has furnished some key details about his technique in *Autoschediasms* and has invoked the concept of responsibility when discussing the live action. Yet, as he told the composer Patrick Marschke, he does not want to give people too much information about his process, because he would 'rather they experience the music itself'.<sup>5</sup>

I'd like to limn this experience by discussing the sound of *Autoschediasms*. What is the sensory counterpart to Sorey's democratic ethos? To answer this question involves following Sorey's lead in his sensitivity to the parametric organisation of music, while leaning into the event's abstract shape. In *Autoschediasms*, I argue, it is timbre that

<sup>2</sup> Alarm Will Sound and Aleba & Co., press release, 13 July 2020, <https://mailchi.mp/ale-baco/aws-video-chat-variations?e=972b74fa91> (accessed 18 May 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Seth Colter Walls, '17 Players in Five States, Composing Over the Internet', *New York Times*, 30 October 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Marschke, 'The Sonic Universes of Tyshawn Sorey', *Liquid Music*, 4 January 2019, <https://www.liquidmusic.org/blog/tyshawn-sorey> (accessed 7 October 2021).

synchronises the performers' interactions, in all their care and openness, with the pressures and freedoms of listening. The modulations of timbre in *Autoschediasms* demand hyperawareness and constant recalibration as listeners negotiate between the event's oneiric flow and the immediacy of the instruments' materialities. In *Autoschediasms*, timbre activates absorbing, unforeseen, manifold variation. This sonic impression of democratic music-making around and across difference comes to reflect the conditions of radical humanity and vulnerability inherent in spontaneity.

While *Autoschediasms* counters the racial-capitalist frame of jazz, something of the association of Black improvisational practices with freedom – practices ranging from jazz to orchestral experimentalism – does pertain to *Autoschediasms*.<sup>6</sup> The composition breaks boundaries of categorisation and is liberatory in its latitude for self-expression. Sorey himself identifies with the idea of 'mobility', an idea he learned from Lawrence 'Butch' Morris, whose method of Conduction inspired *Autoschediasms*. For Sorey, mobility 'represents not adhering to any particular musical model or institution'. Mobility is the 'freedom to move between different models from moment to moment'.<sup>7</sup> Considering what it means to listen to *Autoschediasms* and seeking out the composition's social possibility can help underscore the forces of agency and resistance that motivate Sorey's creativity.

Thinking about *Autoschediasms* should also happen at the ecumenical intersection of improvisation and philosophy. This is a vital intellectual site developed by varied musicians and scholars, among them George Lewis and the philosopher Arnold Davidson, and it is a site shaped with the knowledge that listening to improvisation can lead to rethinking, as Davidson puts it, 'what responsibility is, what freedom is, what creativity is'.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Sorey himself eschews the word 'improvisation' because he thinks it does not fully define 'what is really going on'; he prefers to call *Autoschediasms* 'a spontaneous composition'.<sup>9</sup> Thus the text that follows emphasises the identity of the performance as a composition, while existing against the scholarly backdrop of conclusions like Daniel Fischlin's, for example, that improvisation 'entails negotiation of some sort: whether with self, other, audience, instrument, or the circumstances surrounding a particular performance... negotiations that address difference, dissonance, and in-the-moment problem solving'.<sup>10</sup> Listeners may imagine these negotiations exceeding the interactive confines of the performance. And these negotiations hold the power to run alongside the interpersonal dynamics of democratic life.

### Sorey's democratic instincts

In an interview with the composer Gemma Peacocke, Sorey described *Autoschediasms* as 'a three-dimensional hybrid system of live

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Fred Moten on 'the freedom drive that animates black performances', in Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> 'Tyshawn Sorey by Claire Chase', *BOMB Magazine* 148 (Summer 2019), p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> George E. Lewis and Arnold Davidson, 'On Improvisation', *Televisionism*, <https://vimeo.com/71972632> (accessed 23 May 2021). See also George E. Lewis, 'Listening for Freedom with Arnold Davidson', *Critical Inquiry*, 45, no. 2 (Winter 2019), pp. 438–9.

<sup>9</sup> Gemma Peacocke, '5 Questions to Tyshawn Sorey (composer, multi-instrumentalist)', *I Care If You Listen*, 19 October 2020, <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2020/10/5-questions-tyshawn-sorey-composer-multi-instrumentalist/> (accessed 11 June 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Fischlin, 'Improocracy?', *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 8, no. 1 (2012), p. 15.

composition that is both an evolution of and a departure from the Conduction vocabulary of Butch Morris and the Language Music vocabulary of Anthony Braxton'. *Autoschediasms* interpolates three main components – Gesture, Autonomy and Category – Sorey explained. Around 2009, he began presenting his own conducted improvisation performances with large ensembles as hybrid works. During the decade that followed, he transformed *Autoschediasms* into a system where he drew on some of Morris's gestures and added instances in which these cues are to be performed. This would become the first component, Gesture.

For the second component, Autonomy, Sorey developed a numbering system of ten performance/sound classifications, which the musicians perform on their own accord and in response to or independently of what is happening in the music. By his account, *Autoschediasms* becomes most involved through the third component, Category. Like Autonomy, this method includes indications for musicians to perform activities in their own manner. But in Category, these are all indicated by one or two small whiteboards. Moreover, Sorey points out, 'there are multiple parallel series (strata) that may or may not coexist within this method. For example, players are sometimes asked to perform actions that are *relational* to another musician or a group.' Or players may be asked to 'perform or repeat a series of distinct musical events (these could range from assigned memories that recall earlier performed actions, to instrument specific playing techniques, among many other possibilities) or one or more notated events'.<sup>11</sup> Upon learning about the digital setup for the Video Chat Variations performance of *Autoschediasms*, Sorey had to adjust his approach and, because of concerns about latency, made a plan to lead without using batons and without much use of his hands. Instead, he devised a system that would involve both colour and flashcards, as well as new signals that he introduced for the digital version of the composition.<sup>12</sup>

Responding to Peacocke's question – 'What conditions for a collaborative improvisation make a satisfying musical experience?' – Sorey explained that as a composer who works within both spontaneous and 'formal' composition, what he finds rewarding about spontaneous composition 'is the understanding, by the self and others, that it allows for the coming together of people who have similar and sometimes very different viewpoints, such that creating music together feels like a form of bonding and trusting that one never forgets'. 'We can't take this for granted,' he urged. 'This works best,' he continued, 'when one lets go of their insecurities or ego that often gets in the way of achieving something greater than what they imagined. Trusting and being kind to yourself is what makes for a satisfying experience when you improvise alone and collectively with other bodies in the room (or on screens, in this case).'<sup>13</sup>

One of the principal relational insights of *Autoschediasms* is Sorey's decision to equalise the balance of power between 'leader' and instrumentalist 'followers'.<sup>14</sup> In *Autoschediasms*, he declares, 'everybody is a composer. Everyone in the group, including myself, shares the

<sup>11</sup> Peacocke, '5 Questions to Tyshawn Sorey'.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Morgan Teicher, 'Allowing Things to Happen: An Interview with Tyshawn Sorey', *The Paris Review* blog, 29 September 2021, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2021/09/29/allowing-things-to-happen-an-interview-with-tyshawn-sorey/> (accessed 7 October 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Peacocke, '5 Questions to Tyshawn Sorey'.

<sup>14</sup> On relationships between music and democracy, see Robert Adlington and Esteban Buch, eds, *Finding Democracy in Music* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020).

collective responsibility of whether or not a given performance is successful in its achievement. Some performances are more successful than others, but that's life.<sup>15</sup> This equality, by itself, may just be communal and not necessarily democratic, but Sorey insists on the democratic nature of the collaboration. He stressed this in an interview when asked about leading 'classical players and ensembles'. One group he worked with had never improvised before, and he felt the players 'were just doing what the conductor told them to do because that's their conditioning'. 'They don't understand that it's a democratic process of music-making that's involved,' he pointed out; 'I always say that this is a duet between orchestra and conductor.'<sup>16</sup> In *Autoschediasms*, each musician has the scope for individuality and initiative.

Sorey's connection to Morris's *Conduction* is also helpful for tracing the egalitarian ethic of *Autoschediasms*. While Sorey learned from the lexicon of gestures that cue musicians' actions in *Conduction*, he also took note of the social values revealed through the performance. As he told the flautist Claire Chase of the International Contemporary Ensemble, while discussing *Autoschediasms* in an interview,

I remember a time in Italy, maybe 2003 or so, when Butch gathered a lot of traditional musicians from Africa and Southeast Asia all within the same ensemble as improvisers from New York. The people playing these traditional instruments had never really improvised, but suddenly we found ourselves making some extraordinary music together, all in the moment. It was unlike anything I'd ever done before, where you can create something that's so meaningful with *anybody* at a moment's notice. It taught me that you don't have to have a background in improvisation to successfully make a piece of music with other musicians who are improvisers. All you have to do is *listen*, be open to what's going on, and be prepared to be uncomfortable. If you're okay with taking the chance to step outside of yourself and listen, then you will fit right in.<sup>17</sup>

Sorey's reflection is instructive and shows his alertness to the sociality of group improvisation. He highlights the moral stakes of collaborating in the presence of cultural difference. Yet it is important to consider how the accessibility Morris created for performers of *Conduction* – the accessibility that captured Sorey's attention – filters into the listeners' side of *Autoschediasms*. The absorptive power of timbral variation in *Autoschediasms* turns the *anybody* quality – the music's inclusive nature – into a phenomenon apparent to listeners, too. The open-endedness of the perceptual experience offers listeners a parallel to the instrumentalists' opportunity for belonging in the performance community. And finding form in *Autoschediasms* seems a more retrospective task in comparison to the *prospective* watchfulness that the kaleidoscopic motion of the performance induces. This forward pull towards unanticipated sonorities gathers the listeners in a certain sensory solidarity.

### The performance

In the Video Chat Variations performance of *Autoschediasms*, 16 instruments make up the chamber orchestra: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon,

<sup>15</sup> Peacocke, '5 Questions to Tyshawn Sorey'. This sharing of responsibility fits within what Georgina Born has called the first 'plane of social mediation'. Georgina Born, 'After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic', in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, eds Georgina Born, Eric Lewis and Will Straw (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 43–4.

<sup>16</sup> Teicher, 'Allowing Things to Happen'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Tyshawn Sorey by Claire Chase', p. 77.

bass clarinet, horn, trumpet, trombone, piano, two violins, viola, cello, double bass and two percussionists. Sorey cues instrumentalists with hand signals and handwritten cards, which he also uses to indicate changes throughout the piece. The cue cards can refer to specific instruments, provide instructions (like 'fast' or 'slow') or display symbols.

The composition falls into four sections, each marked by cues from Sorey as well as notable changes in the musical activity. I would characterise these sections as the introduction (0:38–5:25), melodic motion (5:25–11:54), walking bass trio (11:54–13:09) and atmospheric sustain (13:09–25:00). Finding this global form in the performance is itself consonant with Sorey's view of his role as composer; as he has said, 'In real time, the musicians create the content, and I create the form or structure.' From the first sound to the closing silence, the performance lasts 24 minutes and 22 seconds. The overall form could be viewed as binary, where the first three sections stand apart from the larger fourth section. But the expressive interest lives in the performance's episodic details and in the sectional flow of the event.

In the first section, the instrumentalists present themselves individually or in small groups. It is as if the instruments and their players are each introducing and asserting themselves, a kind of subtle, micro-social opening action. These entrances fill the first three minutes, with the sounds of new performers layering on top of existing instruments. The texture is additive and the motion largely linear. Rich, arco string sounds settle into the foreground of a slow, discordant orchestral swirl. The instruments sound as if they are limbering up, stretching across their low and middle registers. The trumpet, clarinet and bass clarinet emerge, stirring and wavering; the bassoon cuts through, too. Then the trumpet bravely floats back in with a feathery riff. Sorey nods and assuredly writes out a cue card, the text of which is obscured from the camera's view. At 5:25, Sorey holds up a set of cards that will significantly affect the direction of the music.

Shortly after this prompt, instruments move towards a more spiky staccato. The sonic surface begins to glint with quick interjections and a ricocheting bow on the violin. The first sound to overtly signal this change is the multiphonic attack in the bass clarinet, gravelly and pointed. Over the next 30 seconds, other instruments gradually adopt similarly punctuated or rhythmic ideas to create a polyphonic, pointillistic texture. The instruments' wood, string and metallic sparks scatter across the virtual space.

The next inflection point occurs at 6:28, when the flute begins playing sustained pitches, sounding light and cool, bending the music's trajectory towards longer tones once again. More instruments gradually move towards melodic gestures, until the ensemble begins to span a spectrum of rhythmic motion. The flute and oboe parts favour smooth melodic motion. Others, such as the piano, trombone and at least one string part, continue the rhythmically punctuated gestures introduced at the beginning of the section. And some fall between these extremes, such as a string part playing tremolos that oscillate under extended bow motion. This segment makes for some striking colouristic overlays and blends, like the bright, fleet piano against the reedy flute. At 10:30, the double bass plays a series of pizzicato attacks, emulating the sound of a walking bass; this sound, it turns out, anticipates section three. The trumpet rushes in for a graceful, clarion run.

At 11:07, Sorey holds up cards with the word 'tutti' and a cursive capital L (see [Figure 1](#)). A piano chord rings out, and the texture



Figure 1:

Tyshawn Sorey showing flashcards to the musicians in the Video Chat Variations performance of *Autoschediasms*.

thins, shifting towards a lower register, as the trumpet still soars. At 11:53, Sorey gives a cut-off (see Figure 2), creating the first moment of silence in the performance; the very next moment, he holds up a card that reads 'fast', setting off section three. The entire ensemble sends forth rapid, aggressive melodic figures, bustling about. This intense activity is short-lived, though, because Sorey gives another cut-off at 12:10. After another moment of silence, Sorey gives a hand cue inviting the bass to return to the walking figures; the oboe and trumpet (using a plunger mute) quickly enter with jaunty, angular lines. They taper off into a unison pitch. Sorey holds up the capital L card again, and the ensemble returns to a texture of low sounds.

The fourth section is the longest. Pitches mostly remain static for a given instrument, although there are occasional pitch bends or inflections. Meditative tones emanate in waves for about five minutes. The clarinet glows; the bassoon casts shadows. Then a few string instruments take up gestures with pitch bends and slides. At 19:11, the sounds become sparser; Sorey's cue cards here contain a 'one bar repeat' sign and an indication of '2 seconds'. The texture grows fuller again and another downward trend emerges within it, as the oboe begins to sigh and the instruments gradually fade into silence. The final three and a half minutes are built around an ostinato of two-pitch patterns in the strings and oboe (with touches of percussion); these figures pulse until the end of the performance.

Arguably, the defining characteristic of *Autoschediasms* is its expansive use of timbre, pointed up by the rhythmic action, the ebb and flow of energy. Not only do the instruments comprise various materialities and sound colours, but they also incorporate extended techniques that multiply their sonic possibilities. The oboe's initial statement (at 0:38) includes not only a sounding pitch but also air sounds that filter through the instrument. A group entrance at 0:57 features the double bass's grainy, overdriven harmonics. Two distinct extended techniques enter at 1:28: the distorted string scrape from the piano's interior, and a scratchy bowing sound from the violin. The trumpet enters at 2:52 with an exaggerated raspy tone, and then at 3:44, the trumpet assumes a purer tone but switches to overly pinched lip slurs. In section two, the strings come into focus, with strum-style plucking, Bartók pizzicati and rapid left-hand slides after a pizzicato in the right hand. The wind instruments and piano play a group of staccato attacks. The bassoon plays a tongue ram/stop sound before the walking bass figures. The trumpet also has some flutter-tongue. In section four, the trumpet player unscrews the valves of the instrument and produces a series of percussive, metallic sounds with the valve caps. Then the whole ensemble sculpts the sound with swells in dynamics and pitch and with wide vibrato. The relatively calm,

Figure 2:  
Tyshawn Sorey before his monitors,  
laptop and flashcards, leading the  
musicians.



pure tones of the instruments here in the final section contrast with the vigour of the first half.

The democratic promise of interpreting timbre inheres in timbre's double life: it awakens the ear with immediacy and magnetism, and its presence is elusive, shapeshifting. This seeming collision of clarity and instability makes timbre – and the musical experience of *Autoschediasms* – radically available: ready and necessary as a sphere of perception and participation. It is in this sphere that listeners open up to the composition's model of social relations. Listeners notice the microsonorities and the micropolitics of Sorey's dual embrace of individual performers and the ensemble as a whole. And listeners become alive to the mystery of *Autoschediasms*: its abstraction, its alternations between atmospheric hush and exuberant instrumental mingling. Timbre can encompass such simultaneities.

The capaciousness of timbre is democratic, I would suggest: its capaciousness an aural reflection of the relational action of *Autoschediasms*, of the way Sorey and the instrumentalists maintain the social equilibrium of the ensemble. It is the multiplicity of timbre that ties the parameter to the values of collectivity and cooperation that Sorey is advocating in his practice.

### Sorey's timbres and their metaphorical potential

The discipline of musicology has seen an efflorescence of timbre studies, involving history of science, psychology, literary theory and more.<sup>18</sup> Looking beyond the often featured technological side of timbre studies and towards a political-philosophical horizon, I propose that the simultaneities within timbre – its complex identity as a parameter both elemental and ephemeral – mirror the breadth of Sorey's experiment in collective responsibility. *Autoschediasms*, then, illuminates the ethical dimension of timbre: what timbre can do for the aspiration towards musical inclusivity.

When the audience listens to and watches *Autoschediasms* – particularly online, when the musicians' bodies and instruments are magnified under the camera lens – they are, in a sense, at one with the musicians in a state of uncertainty. The audience cannot predict the performance's arc or the directions their senses will lead them; likewise, not all is clear for Sorey and the instrumentalists. Indeed, as Sorey commented to Pierson after the performance, at a few points some instrumentalists' cameras went out, but he (Sorey) could still

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Emily I. Dolan and Alexander Rehding, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Timbre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).



hear them playing. Because of the mutual trust among the group, Sorey explained, 'even if mistakes are made, they must all find a way out of them together'.<sup>19</sup> The audience and musicians share the duties of attentiveness and responsiveness. These duties are all the more acute in the context of spontaneous composition, because its performance practice is exploratory, evolving. And in *Autoschediasms*, timbre emerges as the musical parameter closest to this searching, deliberate, provisional approach; in the performance, timbre itself is processual – the exposed medium of sensory flux and risk-taking.

In *Autoschediasms*, musicians have the freedom to coax timbres into reality, with all the ingenuity and physicality that transit requires. And they have the partnership of Sorey as he walks a step ahead, feeling out new sounds and beckoning new instrumental 'combinations',<sup>20</sup> as he calls them. In turn, the listeners are free to identify timbres, to gravitate towards certain timbres and to draw those familiar and strange synaesthetic analogies between sound and colour, light or touch.

Zachary Wallmark has argued that

Timbre is not a quality of sound; it is a process of interpretation. Timbre is what happens in the embodied mind of the listener when sound-generating events are transformed into structures of gestural, crossmodal, affective meaning. . . The experience of timbre is the experience of this translational process. Understood this way, timbre is the name we give to the perceptual bridge between one domain of experience (the sounding world) and another (our own body-mind). The metaphor is the mapping process of one domain onto another. Timbre, therefore, is a verb, but more specifically, it is a *verb as metaphor*. And the metaphor is the living body.<sup>21</sup>

This definition speaks to the cognitive work of listening. Yet I am moved to read Wallmark's definition within a philosophical frame, one in keeping with the communitarian terms Sorey uses when speaking of *Autoschediasms*. Timbre can be participatory. Because of its instability, its alternation between spectral and material presence, timbre helps the listener to *count*, to matter, in body and mind, in the event of the performance. Arnold Schoenberg (whom Sorey has cited as one of his many influences<sup>22</sup>), for one, foresaw a future where the logic of 'tone-colour melody' (*Klangfarbenmelodie*) would heighten the musical experience and draw a poetic 'us' closer to the 'illusory stuff of our dreams' – stuff of 'acute' sensation.<sup>23</sup>

Wallmark takes his metaphorical conception of timbre further, suggesting that 'timbre is a metaphor – perhaps *the* musical metaphor – for difference'.<sup>24</sup> Again, this determination is relevant to the cognitive work of discerning and comparing sounds. And, as Wallmark notes, 'differences in timbre can be perceptually isomorphic to social difference'<sup>25</sup>; Nina Sun Eidsheim, for example, has shown how such perception is rooted in issues of race and vocality.<sup>26</sup> In the chamber orchestra

<sup>19</sup> Alan Pierson and Tyshawn Sorey, 'Behind-the-Scenes: Interview with Tyshawn Sorey', 30 October 2020, <https://youtu.be/tsh9gBZwDAI> (accessed 6 October 2021).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Zachary Wallmark, *Nothing but Noise: Timbre and Musical Meaning at the Edge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 84–5.

<sup>22</sup> Tyshawn Sorey, 'Perle Noire: Meditations for Joséphine: Aesthetics, Discussion, and Reception' (DMA dissertation, Columbia University, 2017), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony*, trans. Roy E. Carter (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 421–2.

<sup>24</sup> Wallmark, *Nothing but Noise*, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

medium, though, where both Sorey and the instrumentalists have creative agency, difference carries especially figurative possibilities.

Each instrumentalist interprets Sorey's cues differently. As Sorey composes, he faces different paths and choices; in the moment, he is concerned, he has said, with 'finding the right decisions to make and sticking to those'.<sup>27</sup> While the form is fluid and emerges over time, there is, then, a kind of periodicity to Sorey's composing – repeated arrivals at proverbial forks in the road, repeated weighing of the ensemble's musical 'best interests'.<sup>28</sup> Pierson remarked to Sorey about how the 'organic development' of the performance resulted from the instrumentalists giving Sorey their ideas, where he would then 'respond to them and take the piece in a different direction'.<sup>29</sup> The cooperation of people with different musical viewpoints anticipates the existence of difference in a pluralist society, difference that extends beyond sound and musicality.

In 2006, in an article about improvisation and the orchestra, George Lewis raised the question: 'What might a new classical music sound like in a post-colonial world?' In response, he proposed that 'perhaps such a music would exist, as theorist Jacques Attali put it, "in a multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies become more burdensome, and rules dissolve" – in short, a "new noise"'.<sup>30</sup> With *Autoschediasms* and his practice more broadly, Sorey is certainly answering Lewis's question. It is noteworthy that Lewis chose to affirm this music of the future (now present) with a word for timbral character, 'noise', a word that in its positive, even ecstatic, sense can stand in defiance of systems of power and oppression.<sup>31</sup>

In contemplating the social implications of perceiving timbre in *Autoschediasms*, I would echo a question Judith Butler has posed: 'How do we come to apprehend the larger social and political world?' Their answer: 'It seems to me that we have to be able to *see* images and *hear* voices, even to smell and to touch a world that we are asked to fathom. And it seems to me that all the senses are at work in such moments.'<sup>32</sup> Such sensory work helps people negotiate the contemporary media environment (of interest to Butler) and notice which issues and experiences are made audible and which are muted. *Autoschediasms* exercises the senses and asks listeners to bear witness to decisions, divergence and expressive flexibility. This exercise – in a way, preparation for sensation in the civic sphere – is especially practical because of timbre's driving role in the musical interplay. In *Autoschediasms*, timbre works the senses on different registers, from the visceral to the technical – registers personal to each listener. It is through timbre that Sorey strengthens the link between sensation and democratic participation in *Autoschediasms*.

There are of course other ways in which composers have reached for the ideal of communal creativity. Many of these efforts, including

<sup>27</sup> Pierson and Sorey, 'Behind-the-Scenes'.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> George E. Lewis, 'Improvisation and the Orchestra: A Composer Reflects', *Contemporary Music Review*, 25, nos 5–6 (October/December 2006), p. 433.

<sup>31</sup> On Attali's conception of a 'new way of making music', see Brian Kane, 'The Voice: A Diagnosis', *Polygraph*, 25 (2016), p. 104.

<sup>32</sup> 'Conversation with Judith Butler I', compiled by Bronwyn Davies, in Davies, ed., *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 3. Butler's words here are allied with their concept of 'sensitive democracy'.

the Happenings of the Fluxus movement in the 1960s, have pushed the bounds of notation and the musical score. In *Autoschediasms*, however, Sorey redefines the work of composition itself, reacting to instrumentalists' live feedback – both sonic and interpersonal. He pursues the ideal of community in real time, rallying the instrumentalists around a process of deliberation, serendipity, evolution. Listening to this process, this act of hope, attunes us to the ways the liberation of timbre enhances musical inclusivity.