

Realising Seth Kim-Cohen's *Forever Got Shorter*

John Lely and Ross Parfitt

excerpted from

Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation

by John Lely and James Saunders, Continuum, 2011

Note: Ross Parfitt realised Forever Got Shorter, May 2010 at Bank Street Arts, Sheffield, UK.

John Lely: I know you've worked with Seth before, but how did you come across this piece?

Ross Parfitt: I overheard him talking about it sometime in 2008 and was immediately interested, chiefly, I think, because of the idea of this physical parallel of car jack and bass-drum pedal. The actions required to activate either of them are so closely related that the piece struck me as an interesting act of remapping, whereby a common action could have an uncommon outcome through a (conceptually) simple reconfiguring of physical materials. It reminded me of a section in Anne Michaels' book *Fugitive Pieces*, in which a typist shifts her fingers one key to the right but continues to type as if they were in the original position. At the time that I eventually performed the piece, in a series of concerts in Sheffield with Steve Chase, it tied in with an idea of performing recursive pieces, in which the input to the piece depends upon its output. In *Forever Got Shorter*, the performer's ability to continue playing the piece is affected by the angle of tilt, the degree of collapse of parts of the kit, which is itself determined by what has already been played. This is fascinating – that the piece is essentially self-destructive.

JL: So when you finally saw the score, what was your approach to reading it?

RP: My initial approach is always to assume complete isolation of a score from all reference and influence, essentially to consider it as self-contained. From this position I look for clues within the score about what to do, starting

with directly practical issues such as resources required (space, equipment, people, etc.), obligations and logical inferences regarding obligations ('if I do x then what effect does that have on y?'), inconsistencies ('is it possible to do y if I do x?'), etc. Over many close readings of the score I want to increase the scope of examination to make sure I've understood it as fully as I can by, for example, considering more typical interactions with the given materials, unstated implications regarding the manner of realisation, cultural references, my guess at intended meanings, metaphor and so on.

As a principle, I feel it is initially crucial not to bring any musical or other assumptions to a score or to make any assumptions of the score. The reading of a score has to be detailed and focused, closely examining the meaning and connotations of the words, with the intention of gathering information from clues, and to ensure I'm taking it seriously and not doing it flippantly. For example, in the second section of James Tenney's *MAXIMUSIC*¹ the performer is required to play until he or she is 'nearly exhausted' from the physical effort of playing loud and fast across a range of percussion instruments. As a performer you need to consider what is meant by 'nearly exhausted', and it could be tempting to aim for a lower threshold of exhaustion (it's pretty inconvenient and unpleasant to be exhausted), but reading the clues (the piece's title, 'sudden loud, fast', ending the section doing something 'as loud as possible', the contrast between the 'soft roll' which is later 'now inaudible', the precedent of Tenney's *Having never written a note for percussion*² crescendoing to *fff*, ...), it is clear that this is not about being a bit tired, or giving the impression to the audience (acting!) of being very tired, but it requires serious commitment to putting yourself into a state of near exhaustion. A score which requires considerable physical activity is, to my mind, 'about' physical activity, and it is therefore against the spirit of the piece to scrimp on this, by being any less than fully committed to realising the physicality of it, whether that be exhausting, dangerous, embarrassing, etc.

¹ James Tenney, *MAXIMUSIC*, 1965 (page xx)

² James Tenney, *Having never written a note for percussion*, 1971

Lucier's *Music for Solo Performer* (page xx) is really important here because it cannot work unless you really are in this particular state – you cannot shortcut it or act as if you are in that state. And if that means that there is no sonic output during a performance because the performer does not achieve that state then so be it. At least they really tried.

I also think it's important to consider omissions to be as important as inclusions and understand that they may be intended by the scorer. I always assume that the score is complete, that all aspects are as they should be and that no aspect could be better expressed in any other way – even logical inconsistencies may be intended. I don't like to assume that an omission is necessarily licence to do what is omitted.

Some of the clues I felt important in the score of *Forever Got Shorter* were:

- 'solo': one performer.
- 'trap kit'; drum kit, but with what components?
- 'small platform'; what dictates its size?
- 'small heavy trap kit beat'; non-specific, some fairly typical rock beat. No guidance on components of the drum kit but surely it should look like a drum kit, so should include bass drum, snare and at least two tom-toms, hi-hat and at least one cymbal. Read the whole score for more info re: musical content then come back to this.
- Some details about the principles of operation of the tipping platform and connection between bass drum pedal and car jack are given. These details are crucial and need examining very closely for design requirements and flexibilities, plus further consideration of implications of any choices made here. Do they compromise any of the other requirements of the piece?

- ‘The piece is finished when the drummer can no longer reach any drums or cymbals.’ The eventual collapse of the kit might not be total but has to be sufficient to put all elements out of the drummer’s reach, which basically means being fully collapsed on the floor. More importantly this implies that the drummer continues with whatever parts of the kit are within his or her reach, and I take this to mean that the feeling of the music should be maintained as closely as possible, as if a rock drummer had dropped a stick or the guitarist had just kicked half of their drum kit over (they have to keep going). So the musical content must be flexible and responsive to the circumstances and there is a need for resolution to continue until total collapse.

- ‘The specific arrangement of the car jack will depend on the model of jack employed.’ So the platform and tipping mechanism need to be built by the performer to suit the model of jack they get. Crucially, though, Seth writes that this is ‘part of the performance of the piece. (Good luck.)’ So he obviously anticipates that it will be hard work and feels that the ‘specific arrangement’ (this is nicely understated; he really means designing and building) aspect is important enough to require additional emphasis in the score, rather than simply inclusion. Reading between the lines, I concluded that this is not just part of the piece but pretty much the most important aspect of it, apart from the collapse. It is a challenge to engage at a deep level with the process and practical details of construction and, again, short cuts are not appropriate.

- ‘It goes without saying that the duration of *Forever Got Shorter* is a product of the frequency (or infrequency) of kick drum beats. (This parallels the correlation of heart rate to life expectancy in animals.) This equation should be considered in advance.’

There is a spectacle involved in this piece and I feel it is important for it to occur gradually. Too short a duration and the drummer’s position would go from normal to precipitous too quickly for the audience to really enjoy. There is an upper-limit of duration built in by relating each occurrence of the bass-drum

in a drum kit beat to a press of the pedal of a car jack. These things are built to lift a car relatively quickly so the issue of going on for too long isn't really present. So imagine a typical rock-type beat – the bass drum occurs approximately two to four times per bar with a pulse c.80-130 bpm. That gives a value of 40 bpm (ie. 40 presses on the car jack per minute) if you take the slowest end of this rough rock-spectrum. Of course the relevance of this value differs according to the individual structure used, because the number of car-jack presses required to get the angle of the platform far enough to finish the piece will differ, possibly quite significantly. But if we say, for the sake of the argument, that it might take around 100 presses to do this, then at 40 bpm the duration is 2 1/2 minutes. Is that duration OK? My feeling was that this was too short and that something slower and sparser, in which the bass drum was a less-important musical element than in very typical rock, would enable this piece to unfold at an appropriate, gradual pace. Something between Led Zep's 'Kashmir' and PiL's 'Pop Tones' immediately came to mind, and I felt that a more thorough plan of the musical content just wasn't necessary. Rock drums are semi-improvised anyway but, more importantly, as you continue to read the score it becomes clear, because of the scant detail given to the exact nature of the musical content, that this is not what the piece is about.

JL: Seth says in the score that he considers solving the puzzle of how to build the device as part of the performance. Given the technical complexity, and the planning needed for the eventual presentation of the drumming element, do you think that your realisation perhaps began at the moment you heard about the piece from Seth?

RP: Well, my consideration of designing and building began at the point that I heard about it. The piece is so physical that at a very early stage it requires a mental image of possible structures and consideration of the complexities around this. So, yes, I think that the realisation started in 2008 when I heard about it, though, of course, there were fluctuations in the amount of consideration I gave it – sometimes none, sometimes just pondering,

sometimes drawing diagrams of possible constructions and wandering around DIY shops examining different car jacks. In 2010 I decided on a performance date, though I still didn't know how to do it.

JL: So how did you go about planning it?

RP: I know nothing about building / construction. I knew I needed strong materials and tools to work with them in order to build the structure. Basically I needed help from someone who knows what they're doing with these things and, as it happened, I knew a generous professional joiner and mechanic, Dave Cecil, and he was happy to collaborate. We drew up several different designs, trying to think as broadly as possible about problematic issues of each one, and of course they all had problems. The least problematic became the basis for the final structure.

As Seth suggests in the score, there were many issues to do with the dimensions of the jack itself which affected the design and build process – far more than I'd anticipated. A key consideration was my ability to activate the jack in a way which worked efficiently and did not require significant changes in the physical act of drumming. I felt that if such changes were required then I would be less able to concentrate on drumming and would be distracted by these unfamiliar playing requirements or by attending to the mechanism of the jack and platform. So the plans had to be very thorough and the structure had to be robust to enable this.

JL: And in the building stage – did the plans work?

RP: We managed to cover most of the key design issues before starting building, such as, crucially, measuring the angle at which the drum kit would tumble. But there were some other aspects that we had missed out so the design had to change quite radically as we were building when we realised how important these things were. I feel it's essential that performers of this

piece should go through this process and consider these things for themselves, so I'm not going to go into real detail here, but there are a couple of very important things to think about. Firstly, where is the pivot of the jack and how does that relate spatially to the platform and bass-drum pedal? Secondly, what surface does the jack rest on?

Through trial and error, and a fair amount of rebuilding, the structure that we ended up with was fantastic and it worked absolutely as well as I'd hoped it would when I first heard about the piece. I was so pleased. But I also took a planned risk by not fully testing it before the performance. We checked that the platform would tip sufficiently, that the drums could tumble (but not looking at how they would fall, or trying to plan for this – this is part of the beauty of the performance event), and also that I could drum easily and activate the jack efficiently. This was enough to reassure me that the mechanism would work and I really didn't want to know more than that, mainly so that I could enjoy the performance itself as naively as the audience, and as naively as I believe the piece requires.

JL: You've played other pieces by Seth, as well as various other experimental works for percussion. What was your approach to playing this one?

RP: It needed to be as similar as possible to playing a normal drum kit in a normal way; nothing extraordinary, so that the process of tipping would be as if incidental. I was concerned about the risk of the collapsing kit being a cartoonish or pantomime spectacle. Whilst there is certainly humour in what happens I did not want this to be overtly performative, and it took a while of thinking this through and discussing it with you and others to resolve this. The eventual resolution was to do with Buster Keaton, who, you told me, is a hero of Seth's. Keaton became, for me, a fantastic model of performance attitude. He seemed to respond so directly to his circumstances, with minimal emotion or attempts to obtain sympathy. Run. Jump. Drive. That's what I wanted – simply focus on my task, responding as necessary to the changing

circumstances as if they were mere interruption (don't be concerned about the tipping surface but about how to continue playing). Essentially my approach changed from performing a piece to doing a thing.

There appears, in this piece, something of a conflict between the attentive, detailed preparation and the naive position required during performance. Again, this is the same as Keaton – he can only remain impassive to the wall of the house falling around him in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* because of the huge and careful effort which he put into preparing it. *Forever Got Shorter* does, therefore, require an amount of 'acting' during the performance (the performer has to pretend that he or she doesn't know that the platform will tip up) however this does not feel disingenuous because there is actually no engagement with the tipping (such as mock-surprise, panic or expressions of victimhood) other than to adjust my drumming as the drum kit collapses.

Most pieces of music can be realised more than once and this is usually a relatively simple act of repeated performance. A realisation of *Forever Got Shorter* is clearly not just a public performance but has as a major concern the issue of solving the puzzle of the specific arrangement of the car jack. Using a pre-built structure seems somewhat false and so the structure I used has been taken apart and the wood reused (I think it's now part of a garage wall), because this process of considering, designing and building is so crucial to each realisation.