

Scholars on a Picnic: Risk Ecology and the Songs of Ants

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In this paper, the composer will outline the origins and telos of the musical score conceived for *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts*. Hints of a pastoral turn and a post-industrial utopia abound in Fuller's conception of The World Game and the composer will present what post-modern influences were brought to bear on the creation of the sounds and how generosity and empathy were used as a generative tool for composition and play.

It is 1970 and there is a broken piano in the basement of the house. The upright is old and smells as though it has been through many floods, count the rings of lime and mildew that have etched up along the base. I am seven years old and I develop an affinity for the instrument, its singularly odd tuning, missing ivories and heavy weight. I place my head onto the black enamelled surface in order to hear the resonances of the instrument more acutely and as I play, I hear the wooden strides of the action amid the soft counter rhythms of the felts, the interior of the system. In among the sustained notes are other ecologies of resonance, moments of distinct interaction that blend and sing briefly before they fade.

I am staring at crushed lava stone, a coffee collared pumice that is ochre toned, rusted. The rocks are splayed out very evenly on the back lawn, there is something almost lunar about them... maybe it's the hard light in the Phoenix Valley, as if the sun belt is just that, a band of concentrated photons focused on drying up all the military retirees in the area. This is the visual tableau for my listening, all done from

behind a mid-century window wearing oversized headphones. The reel to reel unwinds time on two wheels that rotate in a synchronous spell, a radar ping, a creaking fracture, communications static and a long droning sound that I imagine is a whale. I'm in my grandfather's office in 1977, listening to the recorded sounds of the Nautilus, the first nuclear powered submarine navigating under the polar ice in 1958.

The score for *Scholars on a Picnic: A Generative Ballet in Three Parts* is a personal parable that describes my own cultural shift in music from that of performing music to creating and experiencing sound [1]. As the narrative accounts describe above, my own acts of western music making on a damaged piano connect to my listening of the sounds of the Cold War as introduced to me by my Grandfather. A similar sonic progression from the framework of the classically melodic to the territory of modernist abstraction is also at play in the games of Risk,

The Game of Global Domination (by writer/filmmaker Albert Lamorisse in 1957) and the World Game (or World Peace Game) developed by Buckminster Fuller in 1961. While Lamorisse's game of Risk regenerates border conflicts set in the time of the Napoleonic wars, Fuller's World Game is designed to generate an exchange of the world's resources for the common goal of achieving world peace.

Music and sound for *Scholars* will be performed as a sound montage across 3 acts and will include musical phrases, figures, samples and processed sound from specific eras in musical history with each act having its own specific grouping of sonic referents. Act 1, Setting out the Picnic - The Battleground, will feature music that is derived from such composers Anton Reicha, François-Joseph Gossec and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. The music for Act 2, Entre'acte The Free-for-All will be comprised of sounds that represent dense, chaotic and dissonant sounds that refer to the creation of false memories, fake news and the sleepless condition of today's contemporary lifestyle. Inspired by the traditions of Dada, Russolo's noise and the serialism of Luigi Nono and Pierre Boulez. Finally, sound for Act 3, Food Coma - Peaceful Slumber is derived from the sonic optimism present in the electronic music of the 1950's and 1960's including composers such as Pauline Oliveros, Otto Luening and Raymond Scott.

From an artist's perspective, Fuller's World Game can be looked at as an eco-compositional tool. The whole earth of it might just sound like jazz. The proposition of sharing the world's resources is about taking great risks together and that leads to the creation of an ecology of risk.

"I next saw that if that could be done then, the theory of John von Neuman's war gaming, which holds that ultimately one side or the other must die, either by war or starvation, is invalid. Therefore, I saw that we had a heretofore unconsidered alternative way to play the world game in which as with mountain climbing, the object would be to find all the moves by which the whole field of climbers would win as each helped the other so that everybody successfully reached the mountaintop and all returned safely to its base. This is a mathematically permitted alternative of game

playing but it has never been played in any of the war games of the great nations of the earth.” [2]

Also in play within the risk ecology are all the actors who join with you to share the resources of the picnic, the ants. The artist opens a briefcase full of referential items. This briefcase is also used in the performance of *Scholars on a Picnic* and that seems ironic at first, but you are accustomed to the notion that objects from the everyday will appear to you as symbols. A special microphone is placed near the ants, whose numbers are now increasing. Just under the sound of the slight breeze, you hear it, a gritty whine that is slightly out of the range of your hearing. On pause in a space between music and sound, you listen for clues. Hearing the ants sing will make you sleepy. This is peace.

References

1 From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts” in *Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 80–87.

2 Fuller, R. Buckminster. “World Game Series: Document One, The World Game: Integrative Resource Utilization Planning Tool” (Carbondale, IL: World Resources Inventory, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 1971).