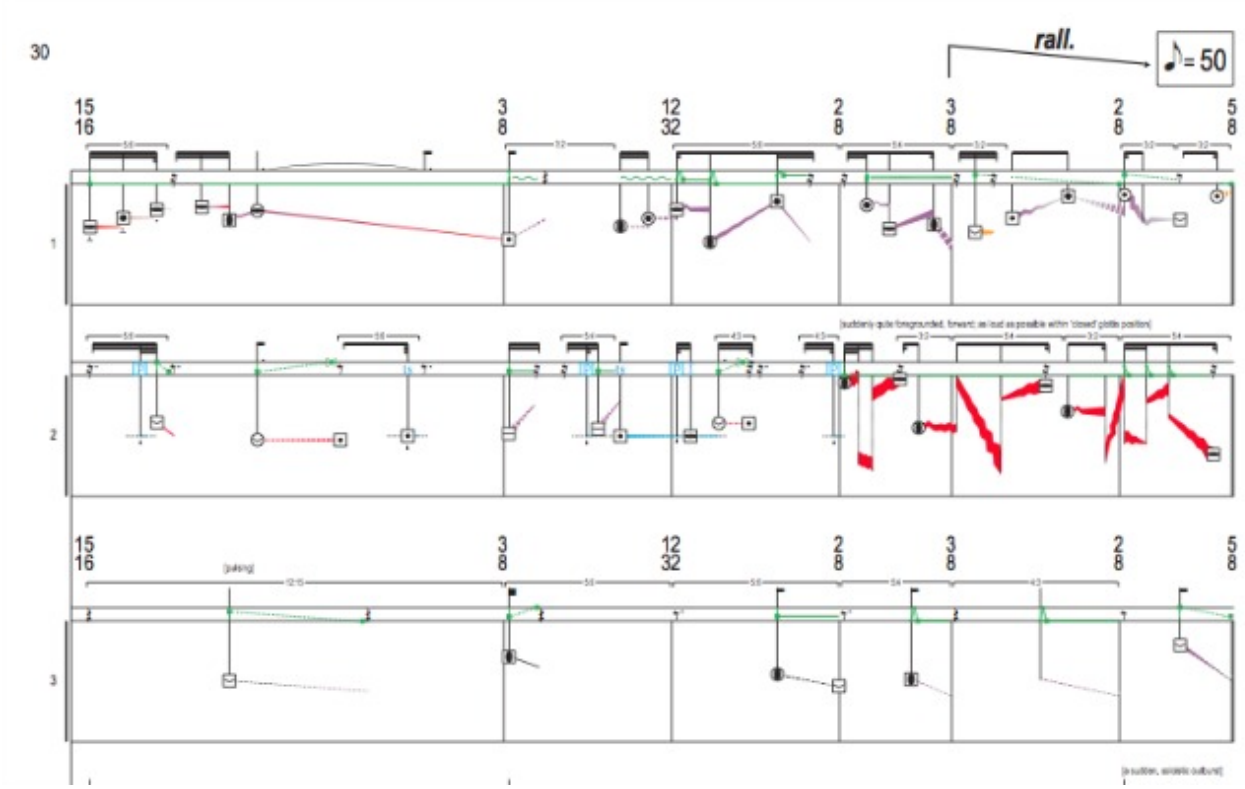
Squiggles Are the New Quarter Notes: Why Music Looks Different Now

By Karen Loew



Aaron Cassidy

Most professional classical singers are able to perform music written in the five major languages of opera: French, German, Italian, English and Russian. But Aram Tchobanian, a singer who lives in Brooklyn, has performed in 25 languages, including Chinese, Hindi and Yoruba.

And recently, he's been learning more musical languages—ones with no names, that are written in mysterious symbols instead of words, with unfamiliar shapes, colors, and squiggles instead of quarter notes and treble clefs.

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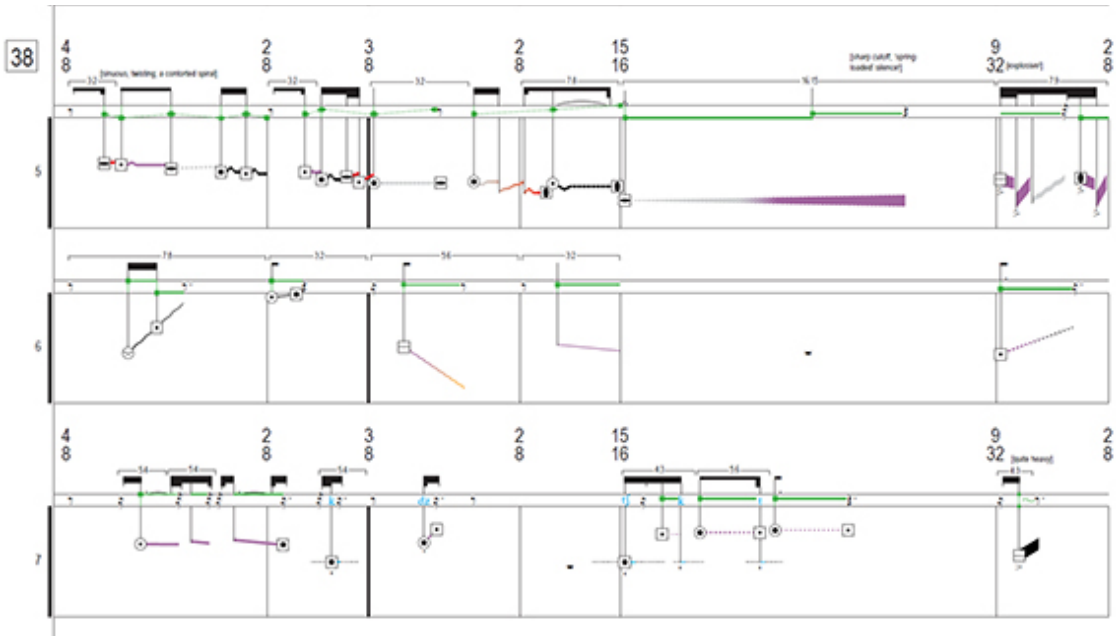
These languages are created by contemporary classical composers like George Crumb, Beat Furrer, and Aaron Cassidy, the last of whom is the composer of a new work that Tchobanian will perform with the experimental Ekmeles ensemble this fall. When Tchobanian first sees the music, he says, he is unable to read it as a musician normally reads a score.

“It’s not written in music notation. Not at all,” says Tchobanian, a tenor with experience ranging from opera classics to contemporary works. During rehearsals for the American premiere of the Furrer piece “Fama” earlier this year, the composer himself taught the ensemble how to interpret his score.

“Graphic notation,” as it's sometimes called, is becoming the new normal in the world of contemporary classical music—a genre also sometimes called new music, art music, or experimental music. Musicians and composers working in this space often eschew labels, yet many feel their work is very much in the lineage of classical music, following in a coherent trajectory from Mozart to Stravinsky to John Cage to present-day composers; Cage’s 1969 book *Notations* first brought ingenuity in musical scoring to a wider audience, and the movement has continued to develop ever since.

“Today it’s pretty much standard,” says Amir Shpilman, an Israeli composer based in Berlin and New York, whose works involve both instrumentalists and singers in forging compelling soundscapes. “It’s used in all art music today.”

Many composers use software programs to create these idiosyncratic scores, which are often prefaced with reams of explanatory notes and may even soon include YouTube links for demonstrations of technique. Cassidy’s new piece, for example, called “A Painter of Figures in Rooms,” uses eight voices, each with two lines to follow. One line indicates the shape of the mouth and tongue. The other “covers things that the composer calls tension, which kind of amounts to pitch,” Tchobanian says. “It’s all done in color coding and little squares, little symbols, circles that are closed and open.”



Aaron Cassidy

At the London premiere of "A Painter of Figures in Rooms" last year, Cassidy discussed the toil of creating the sheet music using a graphic design program. His goal was to "describe the physiology of sound production in the voice" in a visual format. That's a pretty big departure from penning a string of eighth notes to indicate an arpeggio in C.

So why are some composers abandoning traditional staffs and time signatures in favor of creating their own notation? "If you want something [to sound] different, it has to look different on paper," Shpilman says. Many composers, he says, strive to create highly individualized scores simply for the sake of uniqueness or personal style. (After all, when composers create by putting pen to paper, the written results are as distinctive as handwriting.) But for him, form follows function: "I'm obsessed with the sound. I find any way I can to make that clear on the page."

Graphic notation, it's worth pointing out, is not actually new. Jeffrey Gavett, a singer and composer as well as director of the Ekmeles ensemble, points to the playful aestheticism of the 14th-century European *ars subtilior* style, in which music was written in the shape of a heart or a harp, and a perpetual canon was written in a circle. "It was the first flowering of a real complexity in notation and a recognition that notation is an integral part of the art," says Gavett. Today's standard notation is itself the product of change over centuries, and non-Western cultures employ many other systems.

What's especially noteworthy about the present moment is some composers' special focus on technique: "Rather than notation that tells you what it sounds like, it's notation that tells you what to do. It's performative."

For example: In Shpilman's piece for a large ensemble including cello, percussion and bassoon called "Hedef," the score's symbols include one for strings meaning "body percussion, strike the indicated

body part of the instrument" and another for woodwinds meaning "tongue ram."

For performers, "it's like breaking a code," he says. And yet, experienced ones know there's "a certain tradition to it": Just as players of Baroque music know to vary the volume despite a lack of dynamic markings in the original written music, Shpilman avers that those fluent in new music get a feel for understanding scores calling for, say, air noise using fricative and plosive consonants in a frantic and irregular speed and rhythm, as "Hedef" does.

Yet there's another, more abstract stream in new notation—running alongside the movement toward prescriptive scores by composers like Cassidy and Shpilman—that's also lower-tech. Works in this kind of notation look a lot like paintings, drawings, or blueprints. They are created with paint and ink on paper, not the software program Sibelius. Theresa Sauer collects and exhibits these pieces, and published them in the book *Notations 21*—a contemporary response to Cage's *Notations*. Sauer's collection boasts astounding variety, imagination, and beauty, and she keeps on receiving submissions from people around the globe.

"This is the age of the self-invented score," says Sauer, who lives on Long Island and is celebrating graphic scores at the Sounduk Festival in England this fall. A fan of all kinds of music—and of conventional notation, too—she is particularly enthusiastic about the graphic notation meant to be interpreted by instinct. (Like the red cut-outs on a white field, reminiscent of Matisse, seen halfway down this page.) She praises the "democratic" nature of this approach, saying it's a great way to involve children and the elderly in music-making.

The movement toward innovative notation is driven by the desire for new sounds, structures and interactions, Gavett says, for which traditional notation is not sufficient. But in assessing the product, he adds, the music itself is still what matters—composers don't get points for cleverness alone. Gavett should know: He gave an interview from the Carlsbad Music Festival between performances of Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*, which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for musical composition and is written in traditional notation.

"I think if a composer can achieve her intended goals with totally traditional notation, then doing so will make it easier for performers to interpret," he wrote in an email. "It's totally worthwhile and important to find new notational solutions if it serves the communication between composer and performer, and does something that traditional notation cannot do."

But, he said, "traditional notation's not going anywhere."

As Sauer puts it, with traditional notation, "the composer has laid out the rules, telling you how fast, how slow, and there are very few, if any, options." Yet with graphic notation, if your intention as a player is true, "then you are correct, because you've acted responsibly in your interpretation," she says. "There are options for decisions, and that's all." Those decisions can include such basics as which instruments to use and how long to play.

Sauer, a musician and composer, puts some of her own compositions in this category. “I start a dialogue, like a conversation. However anyone wants to respond, that’s their choice. I collect the responses, which are all very different performances, and I call that the tapestry of response. And I enjoy that.”

“I believe it will continue to grow as a global phenomenon,” Sauer said.

Shpilman agrees: He compares the capability of conventional notation versus new notation to that of a regular cell phone versus an iPhone. And he carries an iPhone 4.

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