

Concert Response: The Noisebau (ft. Schwitters' Ursonate)

PROGRAM *summary*

October 16th 7:30 PM – Philip T. Young Recital Hall - *The Noisebau*

In between two auditory sculpture performances (Taxi Pandemonium by Mowry Baden and The Noisebau by Puppets Forsaken), Ursonate by Kurt Schwitters is performed by Christopher Butterfield.

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A frantic weekend was winding down to a close on Sunday, October 16th. It was quarter after 5PM and I had no plans on getting any more work done, when I received an Instagram DM from a school friend.

>> *yo you busy tn?*

technically not? I'm really tired Idk, why?

>> *wanna watch chris butterfield recite nonsense poetry with me and some friends*

>> *7:30 in the PTY*

haha sounds fun

And thus, my evening plans were complete. With eager ears, I listened to a small excerpt of a recording my friend sent to build anticipation. Raised by a rock 'n roll family in a small town, I was new to the world of attending concerts that are not punk shows or dance parties in the woods. In fact, I attended my first two concerts only within that past week; Palm Court Light Orchestra with Erik Abbink saxophone, and the UVic Wind Symphony and Symphony Orchestra. I had even less experience with experimental music and art. This is a story of love at first listen.

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My new friends and I eagerly sat in the second row of the Philip T. Young Recital Hall. Because no one sat in the front row, we were the easy victims for eye contact by the performers. I had grabbed the last printed program; I watched achingly as it was passed around (thankfully, it ended up back in my hands at the end of the night, permitting this response). To briefly describe the first sculpture visible on stage, it functioned as a standing desk, complex mechanically beneath the table, and bizarre in appearance, with extravagant, tall “privacy” wings on the left and right sides.

The show began with the sculpture standing alone on stage, now electrified. It was still; however, buzzing audibly. Volunteers were directed onto the stage one at a time, nervously and bashfully grinning. Now, there was a sculpture, and a lone ignorant participant; one audience member tasked with translating the performance to the rest of us. As an audience, we turned our full attention to one of us. I recognised the task to experience the sculpture through their reaction. We could all see and hear it, but only the

one on stage could feel it. Unlike how we usually approach musical performances, we sought to feel what the performer felt from the instrument. I observed the sculpture and imagined what it would feel like; most of all, I studied the performer's face, body language, movements and sounds. Each volunteer was in a vulnerable, exposing position. As I watched, I may have learned less about the sculpture, and more about the character of volunteering individuals and the audience. Perhaps the participants in art are not only the performer, but also the perceiver; perhaps *we* are the heart of the art itself.

In terms of appreciating the music, the sculpture audibly vibrated. It mechanically whirred on its own and reacted loudly when a participant roughly gained contact with it, like a vibrating phone on a table. Some participants interacted rhythmically with the sculpture, touching and letting go like someone riding the wave of air outside the window of a moving car. There was a pulse unique to each participant. The sound of the sculpture was not static; it breathed and changed pitch, volume, and tone. Squeaking, trilling, racketing, cricketing, electrified metal in contact with wood and flesh. At times, a high-pitched squeal could be heard. At others, a deep guttural sound that rubbed my hearing. The composition was constantly unstable. It gave an edge of nervousness and anticipation. I was enthralled. Atmospherically, as we were all participants in the music happening in that room, I heard giggles, hushed breathing, held breaths released, soft hums and awes; gasps from the performer occurring simultaneously with changes in the instrument's sound. The third volunteer giggled and was the first to speak, "This is really weird." The audience laughed in shared relief. She continued, "Sorry, I feel like it's gonna break or something." While the piece had the entire audience suspended by irresolution, the performer experienced the most uncertainty as they battled with sensation of the unknown, even feeling threatened by proximity to the enigmatic contraption—blinded by lights, surrounded by attentive witnesses, unexpectedly on stage, for possibly the first time, performing a score they are actively composing; the performer an audience unto themselves.

Once the artistic directors determined we had appreciated the sculpture long enough, we waited for it to be moved off stage before the next piece could begin. A piece that may not have been the headliner, but the reason many of us were there, including myself and the friends to my left.

The performer, Christopher Butterfield, appeared on stage at long last. Wearing a casual grey-coloured business suit—as opposed to concert black—a white-bearded man strolled in dutifully from the left side wing. The stage was empty besides a black music stand, a red mug, and a tan manila envelope, loudly and intentionally dropped. Before beginning, Butterfield placed the score on the stand; as the concert progressed, he discarded finished pages by throwing them onto the floor. With curiosity, I watched closely, and found the score was contained on cut-out rectangles of paper pasted on oversized slates of cardboard. As I strained to see, it appeared to be entirely expressed in words, written in the form of repetitive poetry. That was satisfyingly reflective of the piece I witnessed.

Before starting, the performer maintained serious facial expression. Through eyeglasses, he stared at the audience, eyes tracing the room. The atmosphere was silent,

waiting. Turning his gaze to the score, Butterfield began. The piece performed consisted of nonsense syllables spoken in rhythm, repeating and expanding, staying true to classical sonata form. Affronted by the satisfaction of receiving what we had been waiting for, the audience was immediately giddy, and muffled laughter could be heard after only the first phrase. The performance would continue for almost an hour.

Butterfield rocked and swayed back and forth on stage, lightly rubbing his fingernails. He watched the score intensely, albeit never missing an opportunity to glance up and show us each new emotion in his eyes. He asseverated the piece with transcendental focus. Spoken dynamics ranging from whispers to shouts; spoken tone ranging from fierce to tender; spoken articulations ranging from spits to drawls. The performer's facial expression reflected these changes; relaxed and soft, tight and charged, glaring and furious. Slight pitch modulations further translated the ebb and flow of emotion and tension in the piece. Though he was only speaking, the performer's mouth formation and voice quality had a distinct clarity and balance that informed me he was expertly trained in voice. In the scored syllables themselves, there were articulations by consonant, and tone by vowel. Observable was rhythmic juxtaposition within phrases, established by repeated simple syllables followed by unique complex ones. Each line and idea would be repeated a calculated number of times based on the sonata form and classical thematic development the piece adhered to. The performer's fidgety body language was expressive of the music. At points of peak intensity, he leaned his upper body forward towards the score, accusingly glaring at the slates he would throw emphatically to the floor. As the score calmed, his body language relaxed and simplified; slowing; retracting; waning; tired, weak, and defeated. His movements danced with the score.

It was a sincere, impassioned musical performance. The audience, including myself, was both immersed and inexorably humoured all at once. The atmosphere in the hall was the most trancelike of all my recent concert experiences. My eyes seldom left the performer, as my thumbs worked furiously to take notes in my phone. Whenever I moved in my seat, I heard the plastic rustle of my pleather jacket and barely audible wind chime of its many metallic affixions. I tried to stay as still as possible to avoid such perceived auditory interruptions, but all sounds remain important to my memory of the experience. The slap of discarded score hitting the stage. My friend clearing her throat. An isolated breath of laughter from the upper left balcony behind me. A gasp followed by a sigh as the piece reaches energetic climax and softens again. Several times, the audience rumbled in laughter at growling, carlike sounds, and sudden exclamations.

Towards the end of the final movement, Butterfield stepped away from the score and began to pace the stage. The syllables changed; now, he recited what sounded like the alphabet. He stopped in the left corner of the stage, rocking back and forth. Unbound from reading the score, his full attention was on the audience. Slowly, he moved back towards center stage. I watched, intently, as he stopped before he got there. Stopped—directly in front of me and staring directly into my eyes. His stare maintained all the accusing intensity he gave the score in the hour preceding. I accepted the challenge and held his unwavering gaze willingly. This moment of prolonged eye contact with the performer was the highlight of my evening; I had the unique opportunity to see the performance from the perspective of the score on the page. I knew how I looked, and

sensed I was giving a performance to the performer. Like most audience members, in contrast to his somber expression, I was smiling. I was dressed dramatically in an all-black outfit, complete with a black fedora atop asymmetrical pink hair, and large, bright-green-framed eyeglasses. I had the appearance of a young person—and still typing notes in my phone—I had the appearance of a young person using their phone during a concert. I might have been terrified to have a 30-year-professor in my second month of university staring me down for bad behaviour, but I was simply thrilled by the artistic gravity of the moment. Eventually, Butterfield returned to his route, and stopped back at centre stage.

Soon thereafter, Christopher Butterfield's performance drew to a delicate close. The tension suspended for the past hour erupted into roaring applause. Butterfield smiled, shook his head, and put his hand over his heart at the mass standing ovation and screams that filled the auditorium.

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Listening to a previous studio recording of the piece by the same performer is reminiscent of but not comparable to the live performance. I could never replicate this experience by listening to the recording. Not only atmospherically, but musically, the live version I witnessed had captivating auditory substance. I had been hesitant to agree that recorded sound cannot fully capture and replicate the original. This concert convinced me. Just as a photo is not the same as the real thing, a recording is only a copy, an imprint of a memory. Today, we frequently use technology that effectively records and projects imagery and sound. The digital world neither compares to nor replaces the surrounding reality perceived by our unfiltered senses. The quality of the sound I heard at this concert was not duplicatable. The sound I hear through my earbuds is real and impactful; nonetheless, intrinsically disparate to the live sounds I hear around me.

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