

# **SCORES THAT TELL**

**HOW CAN CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS USE NARRATIVE  
IN CROSSING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES?**

**RASMUS ZWICKI**

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## HOW CAN CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS USE NARRATIVE IN CROSSING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES?

When working across multiple disciplines, composers are sometimes faced with a peculiar issue: the question of “where does the work originate?”. Does the music follow the text? Does the dance follow the music? Should the video be dictated by structures in the music or vice versa? Questions similar to these can become the basis of heated disputes among artists, as part of aesthetic wars or as personal disagreements between collaborators, but what I want to focus on in this essay is the creative challenge facing transdisciplinary composers – composers like Simon Steen-Andersen, Jeniffer Walshe, Michel van der Aa or Matthew Shlomowitz who expand their compositional material to include non-musical elements. These artists are moving into new hybrid genres, where musical concepts of form may prove inadequate when constructing experiences across disciplinary boundaries.

What I want to explore is whether incorporating narrative considerations in the compositional process can provide some helpful tools in working out the structure and relationships between multidisciplinary materials. I will do this by looking at some basic narrative theories in relation to actual transdisciplinary compositions, and try to illuminate whether a narrative approach might offer composers anything that is not already found within the structural concepts of music theory.

### MAKING SENSE – NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVIZATION

The modern study of narrative and narrative structure started out in the late 1920's, with Russian formalist Vladimir Propp identifying 7 key character types and 31 narrative elements typically occurring in Russian Fairytales<sup>1</sup>. Ideas about recurring functions and patterns in narratives were further developed by structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, (1928)

Barthes, and the academic discipline of narratology has since diversified into a variety of strands, described by literary theorist Jonathan Culler as being

implicitly united in the recognition that narrative theory requires a distinction between "story", a sequence of actions or events conceived as independent of their manifestation in discourse, and "discourse," the discursive presentation or narration of events. <sup>2</sup>

Narratology gained wider currency as filmmakers began to apply the theories in their creative process from around the late 1960's and onwards, with prominent artists like Stanley Kubrick and George Lucas consulting Joseph Campbell's popular book *The Hero's Journey*. <sup>3</sup>

In the initial, 'classical' phase of narratology, from mid 1960's to early 1980's, narratologists were particularly concerned with identifying and defining narrative universals<sup>4</sup>, but because the theories often originated in literary studies, most of the narrative strategies defined deal with the relationship between the story and the discourse, – a distinction that does not easily translate to music. Some later developments in the understanding of narrative that I find especially relevant in the context of this essay, include the cognitive approach by American psychologist Jerome Bruner as well as the Austrian narratologist Monika Fludernik's concept of *narrativization*. Their theories share the notion that creating narratives is an essential part of how the mind is organising the sensory input of any type of experience, as Bruner writes:

[...] we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing <sup>5</sup>

In her book *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996) Monika Fludernik seeks to redefine narrativity more broadly as "representation of experientiality"<sup>6</sup>, detaching the term from its dependance on plot:

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, (Routledge, 2001), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*, 3rd edition (New World Library, 2003), 186-187.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Christoph Meister, *Narratology* (retrieved from <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narratology>)

<sup>5</sup> Jerome Bruner, *The Narrative Construction of Reality*, (*Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1991), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (2009), 108.

Actions, intentions and feelings are all part of the human experience which is reported and, at the same time, evaluated in narratives [...] Experientiality is filtered through consciousness, thus implying that narrative is a subjective representation through the medium of consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Narrativity is, according to Fludernik, not a quality adhering to the text. Rather It is the reader who “interprets the text *as narrative*, thus *narrativising* the text”<sup>8</sup>. Based on this theory of narrativization as a fundamental part of consciousness itself, it could prove very useful for composers to study the narrative paths created by consciousness, and how they can be challenged, teased and satisfied, to engage, surprise and please audiences.

## **NARRATIVE IN MUSIC**

If any experience according to Fludernik can be *narrativised*, then the musical experience will be no exception, but does music actually contain narratives? Obviously music is unable to transmit anything near the level of detailed account traditionally defined as a narrative, Theodore Adorno has suggested that “music recites itself, is its own context, narrates without narrative”<sup>9</sup>. The concept of narrative music has been the subject of intense debate and speculation in recent decades, but as Jason Kahn points out:

In confronting each opposing theoretical position on narrative music, one perceives that the problem may lie [...] on the definition of narrative itself.<sup>10</sup>

Opinions include everything from Carolyn Abbate’s almost total rejection of the idea (arguing that when speaking of music as narrative we realise the word is metaphorical, and therefore it cannot serve as a satisfying descriptive characterisation<sup>11</sup>), to Vincent Meelberg who, in the preface to his book on *Narrativity in Contemporary Music* defines narrative merely as the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Meelberg, *New Sounds, New Stories: Narrativity in Contemporary Music*, (2006), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Gloag and David Beard, *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2009), 115.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Kahn, *Opera and Non-Narrative Music*, (2014), 54.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (1991), preface.

"representation of a temporal development"<sup>12</sup>, or Michael Klein, who suggests that in music both narrative and non-narrative tendencies coexist as "separate features that contaminate each other in different degrees"<sup>13</sup>. Seeking to define non-narrative music, Jason Kahn makes the following distinction:

In music, one cannot speak of different types of discourse, rather of music that is discursive or music that is non-discursive.<sup>14</sup>

As examples of the latter, he points to *processural* music (Steve Reich), *serial* music (Karlheinz Stockhausen), *indeterminate* music (Pierre Boulez) and *aleatoric* music (John Cage) as well as field recordings and noise music. Interestingly in even some of the most extreme examples of these compositional techniques, the composers have often interfered in the mechanical non-discursive process, to introduce some kind of disruption, resulting, I would argue, in a sort of conflict or reenergising of the structure, that perhaps an intuitive narrative sense told the composers their pieces were missing.

In the highly processural composition *Piano Phase*, Steve Reich disrupts the predictable phase shifting process when introducing new material on page two. The process continues, but in this minimal context the change is striking, and potentially inspires a perception of narrative.

In serialism Stockhausen introduced the *einshub* – a disruptive and usually intuitively conceived 'insertion' in conflict with the calculated serial structure of the work. These *einschübe* enabled Stockhausen to insert 'found objects' discovered in the process of composition, even if they were "unaccounted for in the composers original masterplan"<sup>15</sup>. They arguably provide some of the most memorable and narratively engaging moments (like the brass chord moving around the concert hall in *Gruppen*), often in contrast to the non-repetitive and non-linear tendencies that characterise serialism, and to some audiences has made it 'hard to follow'.

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<sup>12</sup> Vincent Meelberg, *New Sounds, New Stories: Narrativity in Contemporary Music*, (2006), preface.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Kahn, *Opera and Non-Narrative Music* (2014), 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Maconie, *Other Planets: The Music of Karlheinz Stockhausen*, (2005), 195.

For the American musicologist Anthony Newcomb “modes of continuation lie at the very heart of narrativity, whether verbal or musical”<sup>16</sup>. He views the basic formal possibilities of continuation, change and rupture as universals linking all sorts of narratives, and references the ‘paradigmatic plot’ deduced by the structural studies of Vladimir Propp and later Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his own study of Classical and Romantic music<sup>17</sup>.

Another American musicologist, Fred Maus also accepts the experience of musical narrative, but as something created in the mind of the perceiver as a reaction to the mimesis of motion present in the music:

Whenever there is an interesting action, there are stories that can be told about it: the concepts of narrative and action are made for each other<sup>18</sup>

But these theories were all developed with the purpose of *analysing* the perception of music – not *creating* it. Despite their interesting inquiries into the narrative potential of music, they will still leave the composer relatively clueless as to how a narrative perspective might actually inform the compositional process. A more practically applicable approach is perhaps to be found in an entirely different art form.

## **NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN COMMERCIAL SCREENWRITING**

Screenwriting is probably the creative field that has most widely adopted a structuralist concept of narrative, seeking to work out practical tools that can help screenwriters structure their stories, so as to best capture the mind and emotions of their audience. Central to this pursuit has been the search for the ultimate ‘paradigmatic plot’ to function as a sort of recipe for the strong, captivating narrative. Apart from Joseph Campbell’s concept of a universal, seventeen stage monomyth<sup>19</sup>, which seems to be a reference for many American ‘script gurus’

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Newcomb, *Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies*, (1987), 167.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Fred Maus, *Music as Narrative*, (1991), 7.

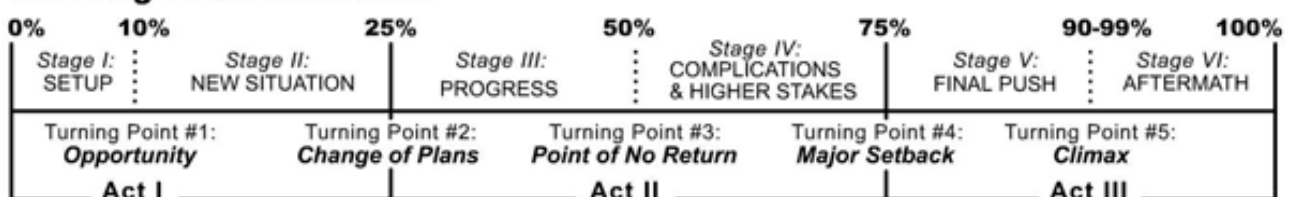
<sup>19</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*, (New World Library, 2003)

(including the notorious Robert McKee<sup>20</sup>), the various influences have also included the Bulgarian literary theorist and disseminator of Propp's Russian formalism, Tzvetan Todorov, whose idea that "the minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another"<sup>21</sup> is often outlined in the following five stages<sup>22</sup>:

- 1: The narrative starts with an equilibrium
- 2: An action or character disrupts the equilibrium
- 3: A quest to restore the equilibrium begins
- 4: The narrative continues to a climax
- 5: Resolution occurs and equilibrium is restored

American script consultant Michael Hauge is a typical product of the American movie industry's quest for blockbusters. Imagine the reaction among contemporary composers if someone wrote a book titled something like "Writing Scores That Sell". Well Michael Hauge did just that with his 1991 book *Writing Screenplays That Sell*. He argues that "commerciality and artistry are not mutually exclusive"<sup>23</sup>, and has worked with all the major film studios in Hollywood to maximise the audience impact of their movies. As a framework for identifying problems in plot structure, Hauge works with the following Six-Stage Plot Structure<sup>24</sup>, based on his analysis of the most succesful hollywood movies:

**Michael Hauge's  
Six Stage Plot Structure**



<sup>20</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (Methuen, 1999), 421.

<sup>21</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Structural Analysis of Narrative*, (NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 1969 autumn), 75.

<sup>22</sup> BBC.Com: What is narrative?, (retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/education/guides/zqdhrrdm/revision/3>)

<sup>23</sup> Michael Hauge, *Writing Screenplays That Sell*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), Kindle Locations 243-244.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Hauge, *Six-Stage Plot Structure*, (retrieved from <https://www.storymastery.com/six-stage-structure-chart/>)

According to Hauge, his relatively self explanatory model outlines how “in a properly structured movie, the story consists of six basic stages, which are defined by five key turning points in the plot”, and he even asserts that “not only are these turning points always the same; they always occupy the same positions in the story”<sup>25</sup>.

I generally find it interesting to see what happens when thoughts and ideas that appear to have arisen in separate corners of the universe are combined. Even if it might seem a bit far fetched to try to apply a structure like this to a composition, the structure does represent a very practical device, developed on the basis of narratives that have engaged hundreds of millions of people, and therefore it might just prove useful. Additionally, for narrative principles to be transferable to virtually any discipline in combination with music, I think they have to deal with some very simple and straightforward terms, and approaches like Michael Hauge’s do appear to promise just that. If the application of narrative concepts to composition shows any promise, preferably some more specific terms should be designed, on the basis of deeper studies of narrativisation in relation to multidisciplinary works.

## **NARRATIVITY IN MATTHEW SHLOMOWITZ’S *LETTER PIECE* #1**

The series of *Letter Pieces* by transdisciplinary composer Matthew Shlomowitz, combining physical action, spoken text and sound, provide some excellent material for exploring narrative elements when structuring material across multiple fields, in part because the actual material of the pieces must be chosen by the performers; the composer provides a simple guideline for choosing the material, but the score itself is only concerned with the structure – or *narrative* of the piece. As the composer states it in his performance directions:

They are called *Letter Pieces* because the scores use letters to represent these sounds and actions. [...] I’ve created the structure and the players create the content within a prescribed framework.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Hauge, *Story Structure: The 5 Key Turning Points of All Successful Screenplays*, (retrieved from <https://www.storymastery.com/story/screenplay-structure-five-key-turning-points-successful-scripts/>)

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Shlomowitz, *Letter Piece 1: Arsenal, Bahrain, Chihuahua, Darjeeling and Eisenhower* (2008), 2.



Looking at the score is like looking at a detailed structural chart of the piece, and for the purpose of this short analysis, the otherwise challenging question of whether narrativity lies in the material or in the structure of the piece, can therefore be bypassed, because the composition is solely the structure.

In *Letter Piece #1* for two performers (score attached, numerous video recordings available online), performer 1 is instructed to create five physical actions that “should relate to five ‘stages’ of a narrative sequence”<sup>27</sup>, while performer 2 must choose five sound-events. These two sets of material are then interrelated in various ways as the piece progresses through five differently structured sections, with section four deviating noticeably from the others by having the performers in turn speaking the actual letters instead of performing their associated actions.

From a narrative point of view, I find that a number of important factors have contributed to turning this simple game into an effective and engaging score. In the following I will point out a few of the ‘narrative’ tools used, while loosely relating the overall structure of the piece to the narrative steps found in Todorov’s Equilibrium Theory and Michael Hauge’s Six Stage Plot Structure. The overall concept of the piece deals with the synchronisation and desynchronisation of the physical actions and sound-events. This is fundamentally different than the construct of any purely musical work, and this to me is the main reason for viewing the experience in narrative terms.

During the first section we are introduced to the first three actions and sounds in a combination (A+A, B+B, C+C) that – because it is the only one we know – now becomes the ‘correct’ one. With its repetitive nature, the piece manages to establish an identification between the synchronous elements, described in the following way by the composer:

When an action and a sound are performed together, we perceptually couple them even if they share no material relationship. A central idea of all the pieces is shifting these relationships.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Shlomowitz, *Letter Piece 1: Arsenal, Bahrain, Chihuahua, Darjeeling and Eisenhower* (2008), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Shlomowitz, *The Postman Always Rings ABC: Matthew Shlomowitz’s Letter Pieces* (2010)

After a short while this 'setup' (Hauge) or 'equilibrium' (Todorov) is disrupted by conflict, as the relationship between action and sound A+A is shifted to A+B. In compositional terms this is merely a different contrapuntal combination of materials, but the narrative experience at this point is one of 'disruption' (Todorov) – something goes wrong or an 'opportunity' arises, creating a 'new situation' (Hauge).

The following return to the initial, 'correct' combinations, starting with eight demonstratively repeated instances of C+C in double tempo, seems like a logical first response to the disruption, and corresponds very well to Todorov's stage of 'a quest to restore the equilibrium', usually constituting the most elaborate part of a narrative, before the final 'return to (new) equilibrium'. During sections three and four, this conflict escalates in a number of ways, the composer cleverly economising with the possibilities, introducing new elements (D+D) and gradually integrating it with the existing elements while exploring different pairings as well as *solos* (where an action or sound is stated alone).

This way of economising with the material is an important tool in most narratives, where the introduction of a new character or discovery adds new energy to the narrative by opening up new opportunities. Though these concerns are obviously not specific to narrative, there is a striking similarity between composition and narrative in dealing with the challenge of avoiding a heavy middle section before the climax. The peculiar *molto ritardando* on repeated D+D at the end of the second section followed by an *a tempo* return to the initial correct pairings interestingly corresponds to Michael Hauge's concept of a 'major setback' followed a 'retreat to identity' before the 'final push' towards the climax<sup>29</sup>. What clearly marks section four (following eight insistently repeated B+B) as the climax of the experience is a sort of ultimate release of 'withheld information': For the first time the final elements (E) are introduced in both parts, followed by revelation of the letters (the performers are instructed to speak the letter names) explaining the construct of the whole piece as well as the mysterious title.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Hauge, Six-Stage Plot Structure, (retrieved from <https://www.storymastery.com/six-stage-structure-chart/>)

As an 'aftermath' (Hauge) or 'return to (new) equilibrium' (Todorov), section five discards of all but the initial elements (A) in a sort of tragic *morendo*, where the two A's follow each other closely in pairs, interrupted by increasing durations of rests, before the physical action A is left alone to finish the piece in silence.

On a surface level the composition seems sparse and repetitious, in part due to the limited material, and this is in keeping with contemporary trends within certain parts of the new music scene, but contrary to many other examples of compositions that *do one thing*, I find that the experience itself is rich, varied and engaging, and I believe that understanding the structure from a narrative point of view actually helps to reveal why. Like any analysis of a musical or transdisciplinary work, some of the conclusions may seem a bit forced or perhaps even a bit disconnected from the actual experience, but it nonetheless appears convincing to me that understanding the experience from a narrative angle really opens some useful perspectives on how the piece achieves its effect.

Other pieces will prove less receptive to this kind of crude and schematic narrative interpretation, but perhaps the experience of these works will show a lesser degree of narrativity as well. One important point to make when attempting to reveal narrative effect of *Letter Piece #1*, is that the composer probably did not have it in mind when conceiving the structure, and did just fine without narrative concepts. So it would be of interest to explore works with more distinct narratives, where narrative concerns have actually played an integral part in their creation.

## **COMPOSING WITH NARRATIVE: LAST SYMPHONY**

Unfortunately I have not been able to obtain any accounts of contemporary transdisciplinary composers working from a narrative point of view, so I would like to include my own experience here, in order to put my thoughts on the subject into a practical context, and demonstrate how a narrative approach to transdisciplinary composition can work in practice.

In 2013 I was asked by the Danish National Chamber Orchestra to compose something special for their celebration of the centenary of the Danish Composers' Society, and I took this as an opportunity to explore the combination of music and narrative in a large scale work.

The piece, for orchestra, actress, dancers, extras and electronics, was titled *Last Symphony* (score attached, video recording on YouTube), and the core idea was to move inside the Classical symphonic structure and have it play out in a sort of abstract emotional narrative involving all elements of the concert situation (with the repeated exposition of the first movement resulting in déjà-vu-like repetitions of everything including the conductors verbal introduction etc). My aim was to create the sense that the whole experience of the concert situation was somehow taking place inside the head of the actress, and one means of achieving this experience was to hear her voice as a voiceover in the electronics, telling somebody else where she was and what she encountered, while the actress was physically moving around the concert hall.

At the time I had only a limited knowledge of plot structure and dramaturgy, but moving back and forth between the prescribed symphonic structure and the narrative layer of the composition really increased my awareness of the fact that this composition did not start in music or drama or dance or any other element. Everything in the composition – the sounds, the words, the movement, the lighting etc. all referred back to a sense of abstract narrative, relating to a core idea of the experience that somehow was beyond any discipline. For any crucial choice made regarding the various disciplines in play, I would consult this narrative structure, and that would limit the possible choices significantly. The composition was the narrative structure, a sequence of events that had to be maximised in terms of impact.

Because the four movement symphonic structure was my chosen 'narrative', I did not feel the need to use any kind of established plot structure, but comparing my *Last Symphony* to Hauge's Six-Stage model, I do spot a number of similarities. This tells me that however simplified these kinds of models appear, using narrative structure as a framework and a possible tool to resolve problems of timing and sequence does not seem like a bad idea at all. The exact model chosen as a reference is not crucial, I believe, – what matters is that it

provides a clear context for reflection in terms of narrative perception, and does not leave decisions affecting this part of the experience to be made 'in the dark'. The choices I made regarding the integration of non-musical elements in *Last Symphony* all seemed clear to me, and purposefully thought out in the process, and that really eased the challenge of communicating them to the large and diverse cast of extramusical participants. A quick narrative Hauge-analysis of *Last Symphony* could go as follows:

Bar 1: "Setup"  
Bar 50: "Opportunity"  
Bar 90: "Change of Plans"  
Bar 154: "Point of No Return"  
Bar 229: "Major Setback"  
Bar 255: "Climax"  
Bar 260: "Aftermath"

From the recounts of audience reactions I have heard after performances, often describing narrative interpretations that I had never myself imagined, I must conclude that a large part of what people have experienced in the piece has to do with the narrative character and its direct link to the music. And even though the narrative is obscure in nature, and quite open to interpretations, it still seems to me that the narrative *is* the composition, reflected in the 'discourse of music, words and various actions.

## **CONCLUSION**

So how can contemporary composers use narrative in crossing disciplinary boundaries? There are obviously infinite ways in which composers can use various levels of narrative in transdisciplinary composition (from abstract narrative structures and all the way to telling and actual story), but what it provides is a very useful framework for considering the interplay between multiple fields, as well as shaping the formal sequence of events to keep the audience engaged in the experience.

Much of the terminology surrounding the practical applications of narrative seems to center around the actual perceptive experience that the writer is aiming to imbue. In comparison, the

terms provided by music theory and analysis are often more focused on describing the musical construction itself, sometimes almost separated from the experience it provokes in the listener. As seen in the analysis of *Letter Piece #1*, a narrative approach immediately focuses on how the structural progression can affect the listener, and from a creative point of view, this could prove very useful.

Because narrative is so central to how we perceive, I propose thinking in narrative terms when working out formal structures incorporating multidisciplinary materials, in order to steer the narrative faculties of the audience in the interest of the composition. This does not mean (necessarily) to create an actual narrative, but to let the creative process be informed by thoughts like “where should I add conflict by introducing some sort of disruption to the equilibrium of my compositional concept?” and “can I enhance the effectiveness of the climax by introducing some sort of major setback to the development, or by revealing some withheld information?”. These kinds of questions offer some different perspectives on what the composer aims to achieve with her/his compositional choices. They do not dictate anything in terms of the core material of the work, but can potentially help to enhance the way it is experienced. By focusing on narrative elements and structures within the composition, the composer can offer both satisfaction and challenge to the intuitive narrativisation of the audience.

Awareness around the different degrees (Klein) of narrativity found in various types of works, could lead to the composer adding narrativity as a parameter to the compositional process, thereby even enabling the integration of narrative and non-narrative tendencies within the same work. At least in my own experience, narrative is seldom taught as part of the academic training of composers, where formal considerations in general seem to have a rather low priority. Perhaps it should be included, – perhaps composers as well as audiences would benefit.

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

Matthew Shlomowitz, *Letter Piece 1: Arsenal, Bahrain, Chihuahua, Darjeeling and Eisenhower* (2008)

Rasmus Zwicky, *Last Symphony*, (2013)