



For Anticommunication

(1972)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Seven years ago I saw Cincinnati for the first time. I had come here to listen to the first public performance of my third string quartet by the LaSalle Quartet, an ensemble justly considered to be one of the best of its kind in the world today by most composers alive. For me this was a festival, and it is understandable that I was in high spirits.

Two days before the concert, the members of the quartet invited a large number of friends to a private home, where my piece was played, and I was asked to answer questions about the music I had written, the compositional techniques I had used, and the message I had intended to communicate through this composition. It was at this occasion that I heard my quartet for the first time. I was excited and immoderately pleased. I found all questions of the greatest relevance, answered them as best I could, remained in a splendid mood, and all in all enjoyed everything, including myself.

A few days later the Museum invited me to contribute a ten-minute talk on the musical aspects of the general subject: *Existentialism and the Arts*. This I did not have ready in my drawer. It had to be produced practically overnight. The result of this overnight production, a piece of rather condensed and, under the pressure, spasmodically jumping prose, contains a small passage which rises to the sentence: “A language gained is a language lost!”—a discouraging sentence, and, as a blunt statement, rather controversial. In the context, I knew what I meant by it. At the same time, however, I began wondering what it might mean outside such a context, and whether this question would be worth my while investigating. It

turned out that it was, and all I shall tell you today is related to that first time in Cincinnati.

It did not take long for the sentence to grow old in my mind. Its original informative impact, when it still had raised questions, controversy, and curiosity in my mind, was irresistibly drowned by repetition as I went on thinking about it. It became a kind of slogan, and began to take on the features of a thing one can say. A thing one thinks one understands because one has *heard* it before and not because one has *thought* it before. (The sentence fell under its own sentence and thus a language gained in Cincinnati, Ohio, became a language lost in Urbana, Illinois.) I decided to do something about it and attempted what thousands of artists had attempted: namely to construct a context in which the decay of the sentence, of its words, of all the potential meanings implied by it, would be retarded.

This context, in which it was to live a little longer, could not be again the original Cincinnati piece of prose, nor could it be just a new audience elsewhere where it hadn't been heard yet. The context was to be of a more general appropriateness, if possible to be adequate for any place I can imagine, for any time I can think of. To make such an attempt is equivalent to intending to compose a piece: a piece of poetry to preserve any gained language of words, a piece of music to preserve any gained language of sound.

Briefly: I composed a context of words and sounds in which the sentence "a language gained is a language lost" would have a function that should prevent it from becoming unambiguously communicative, from becoming just words, from getting lost too soon. The finished composition, for electronically generated sound and a human voice, I triumphantly called *Futility 1964* and here it is. [CD Track 7]

Futility 1964

What if the saying, according to which words mean what people take them to mean, were true? And let me suggest only the first few consequences, namely those which concern all of us right here and now:

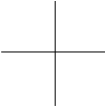
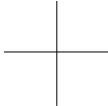
If you, for instance, were an audience which by consensus has agreed on the meaning of words, then I should have studied and learned your conventions before coming here. I ought to have scanned my notes and notions and only selected those for presentation that could be expressed with your words and your meanings. All others I should have rejected as

incomprehensible for you. The result would have been that everything I say would seem to make sense to you, would sound familiar to you, would let you feel confirmed and reinforced in your feelings and probably thus really bore you to death; no matter whether all of you actually perceive the identity of deadly boredom and heroic complacency.

If, on the other hand, you were an audience where everyone reserves the right of taking words to mean whatever anyone pleases, then my task would have consisted in doing research on this audience's structure, until I discovered the average meaning associated here with the average word. In other words: I would learn how to direct my language at a majority of individuals, who, while exercising their individual rights, are more or less unaware of their conforming in reality to a consensus which *rules* this audience instead of *having been chosen and decided* by this audience. I would turn diplomat and salesman and my talk would be accompanied by a viciously apologetic melody singing of the freedom of meaning, the freedom of words for us all, and of the cozy noncommittal generosity with which I present my thoughts, not for your perusal, but for your mood and fancy, to take it or to leave it. This insidious sing-song melody has fatally distorted the dignity and the good faith of many a speaker, an artist, a composer, and many an audience.

Let me mention one more consequence, and remind you that the speaker is only one person, while the audience is a multitude. Thus it is a rare case in which an audience would say: We, either all of us by consensus, or each of us by individual choice, *we* take words to mean thus and thus. But we have invited this individual to speak to us, and our desire is to hear what *this* person takes words to mean. It is, you will admit, a rare case, but if the audience truly has that desire, and if the invited individual trustingly attempts to fulfill it, then a certain harmony of purpose may be expected.

The speaker shows what *the speaker* takes words to mean; *the listeners* compare this with what *the listeners* take words to mean. But just because of the expected harmony, and just because the readiness for liberal comparison is by no means a readiness for change, for learning, for self-reflection, such a situation usually passes without any achievement. The audience approves of the meanings the speaker associates with the speaker's words only as long as the audience approves of the thoughts which result from these associations. Otherwise, the audience will call the speaker's use of language false, faulty, artificial, tendentious, distorting, unacceptable.



Here the mutual agreement and harmony of purpose *prevent* a process by which language might be *taught* to acceptably utter thoughts which seem unacceptable only because of the meanings that words are *taken* to mean.

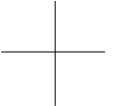
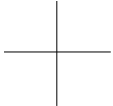
I concede that in order to relate or permute established thoughts and ideas it may be sufficient to know what the listener takes words to mean, and to form one's language accordingly. The success of this language is then measured by the degree of its comprehensibility. The problem of the speaker here is a problem *in* communication. The speaker's aim consists in having a new constellation of old thoughts understood by the currently valid rules and usages.

For the presentation of new thoughts, however, the speaker should be requested to *make* the words mean what they here-to-fore had not meant, thus adding to the available repertory of meanings of a word that new meaning which is necessary for the presentation of the new thought. The success of this language can only be measured by the degree to which it questions the sufficiency of meanings already associated with words, and by the quality of the thoughts that so become audible for the first time; at which time there is, obviously, never enough evidence available that would allow for completely correct evaluations.

As this is the point where the arts, including music, come in, let me formulate a useful term. Where a new thought is presented, the speaker's problem is not any longer only a problem *in* communication, but one *of* communication. My useful term is introduced thus: A speaker with a new thought has to solve a problem of *anticommunication*. The syllables "anti" are used here as in antipodes, antiphony, antithesis; not meaning "hostile" or "against" but rather "juxtaposed" or "from the other side". Anticommunication faces communication somewhat as an offspring faces its progenitor. And just as the offspring eventually will in turn become a progenitor, so will anticommunication, in time, become communication.

This knowledge ought to make it possible for a community of people to have a good time with either. Indeed it should be noted that the good time lasts longer with anticommunication, which leaves a lot open for the next occasion, than with communication, which puts everything neatly away on the spot.

Anticommunication is an attempt at saying something, not a refusal of saying it. Communication is achievable by *learning from* language how to say something. Anticommunication is an attempt at respectfully *teaching*



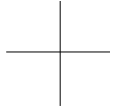
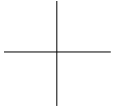
language to say it. It is not to be confused with either non-communication, where no communication is intended, or with lack of communication, where a message is ignored, has gone astray, or simply is not understood. Anticommunication is most easily observed, and often can have an almost entertaining quality, if well-known fragments of a linguistic system are composed into a contextual environment in which they try but fail to mean what they always had meant, and, instead, begin showing traces of integration into another linguistic system, in which, who knows, they might one day mean what they never meant before, and be communicative again.

All this I contend to be analogously the case in all systems in which the elements enter into temporarily significant coalitions, and where some communicable meaning becomes associated with either their moments of appearing or with the particular structure of their appearance. Words in language, gestures of sound in music, definitions of visual units and colors in painting are just a few of the many terms denoting such coalitions. My *Trio for flute, double bass, and percussion* may serve as a fairly adequate illustration for one possible concept in anticommunication. One listener who liked the performance (of which I shall now play the recording) told me about his fun with it: “I always thought I knew where I was, but every time found out soon after that I had been elsewhere”. To me this sounded like a compliment, but it also told me that for him, the piece had already begun to deteriorate toward communication. [CD Track 8]

Trio for flute, double bass, and percussion

Every thought, idea, or concept, as it emerges for the first time in a given society, needs words so that it be expressed, be presented, be heard, understood, and finally communicated. In search of such language one has to either create *new* words or add and attach new *meanings* to *old* words. If a word, in the course of time and usage, has accumulated many kinds, shades, and nuances of meaning, then we have to consider the context in which the word appears in order to know which particular meaning it is to carry. From this it follows that a *new* meaning of a word may be suspected, or assumed, if the context is such that none of the *conventional* meanings would fit.

It is easier to coin and integrate into language a new word, a new sound, a new visual unit, than to make an old one mean something new. This is because the newly coined word announces its newness in every context.



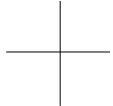
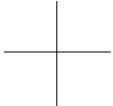
Its function is unambiguous and thus not context bound. A new meaning, on the other hand, cannot be announced by an old word alone, but only by a context to which the old word is a newcomer, in which it had never functioned before. The older a word is, the more meanings it has accumulated; the more ambiguous it becomes, the more context bound it is. Whereas a new *word* adds to the language by enlarging the vocabulary, a new *meaning* adds to the language by increasing the significance of context.

At the moment in which something new is conceived, introduced, and noticed, a temporary gap opens, an *interregnum*, which disappears only when that new something becomes accepted, understood, used, when it begins to grow old. This time of transition is a time in which messages are sent that no one receives, and in which messages are received that no one sent. This is the time in which a language gained is a language lost.

By most people this time is experienced only occasionally, in passing, in some concert, some exhibition, some reading, and then usually not too happily; for it gives them a hard time or no time or too much time, but no answer to their question: “What does it all mean?” It is this time, however, that is the almost continuous time present for those poets, painters, and composers who move with it, who think of themselves as living and working just in that mute and dumb moment where the language they gained got lost, where it won’t do and say what they would have it do and say.

It is therefore a sign of understanding and perceptivity if one expects their productions, their works and words to escape the prevalent level of communicativity; under the condition that all of their activities and objects be at least propositions and at best provisions for the next, now the future, level of communicativity. *Creative Art* resides in poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture, theater, film, television, writing, and even in “happenings” only if each of these subdisciplines function by anticommu-
nication, which is my term for potential and virtual expression in a field devoid of communicative guarantee. One ought to expect, yes, as an ambitious audience, even demand, that this field be cultivated at a time later than the last harvest and earlier than the next.

But, what if it is not only the much maligned audience, the people who come to listen and to see, who have the wrong expectations? What if it is society itself, and therewith also the performers, the dancers, the actors, the musicians, who do not know that their profession consists in handling competently the temporary incompetence of their languages? What if they

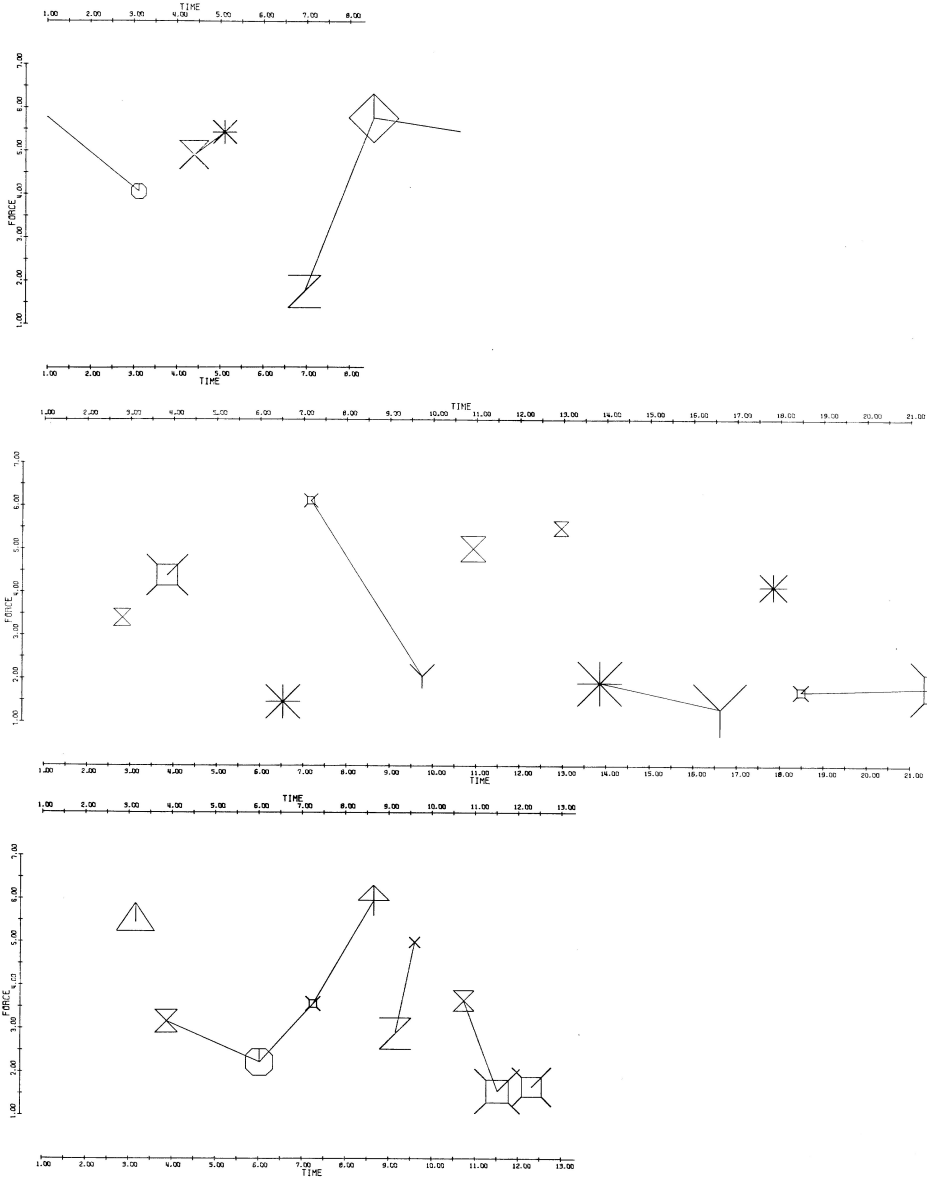
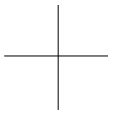


have not matured enough in order to liberate and promote language from its fictitious status of a slave who will do the best it can, to the status-independent existence of students and scholars, who will try to do better than the best they or anyone can?

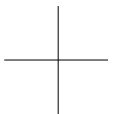
In two different ways I have attempted to get at this problem. In your eyes, performers and musicians are somewhat nearer to composers than society in general. I should tell you that this may be a mistake. Musicians are nearer to the composer only when they intend to introduce the composer's language as theirs, whereas they drop back into the general pool of incompetent society as soon as they merely use it as the composer's. That means that the composer must pay attention to musicians, because the composition (the work of the composer), at least in performance, depends on their paying attention to the implications of the score.

A score is a document in which a composer has specified, as precisely as deemed necessary, the kind and production of acoustical events the composer wanted heard and the context in which these events would carry the musical meaning the composer wanted perceived. Just as in language, there may be new sounds that still have to gain some musical meaning for the first time; and there surely will be many old sounds, which, hopefully, will, in the context, begin to adopt a fresh meaning, to be substituted for or added to the meanings that had rendered the sound a musical sound before. In studying a score, one can see which degree of precision the composer has deemed necessary for the composed specifications. And from that one may conjecture and speculate extensively as to the intentions the composer probably had, in particular as to the kind of attention the composer meant to pay to the performers and the kind of attention the composer desires from them.

This score is to be played by a percussionist. 13 different symbols are to be associated with 13 different percussive instruments. It is up to the player to choose the instruments and to associate with each instrument one particular symbol. These decisions then hold for all 20 pages of the piece. The score indicates time relations, dynamic levels, and, by the size of a symbol, differences in timbre. It is up to the player to choose the sticks and the beaters, and to interpret the differences in timbre through the possibilities of the particular instrument. The entire score as a graphic display indicates contextual features of various kinds, but it is up to the



Three pages from *Plot for percussion*



player to establish a musically meaningful relationship between these features and the chosen sound events. Here is an excerpt from a recording of Michael Ranta playing *Plot*. [CD Track 9]

Plot for Percussion with Michael Ranta

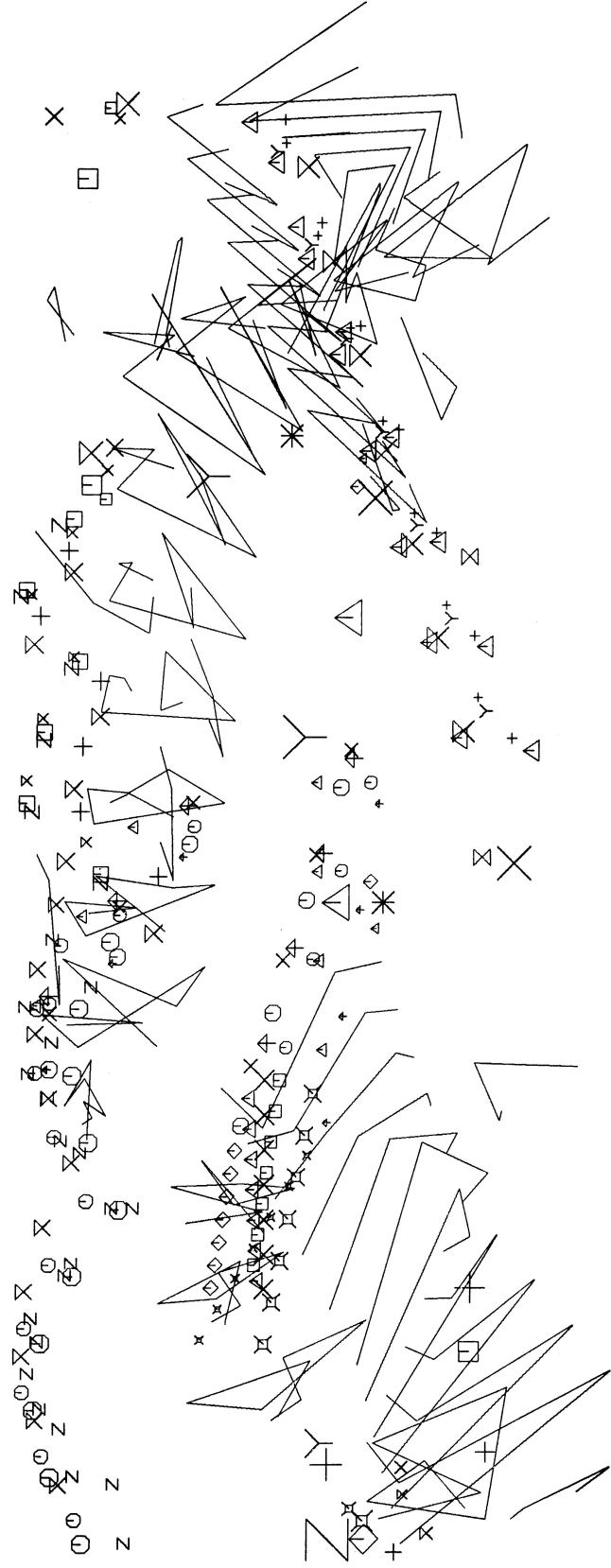
The next slide is easily explained, because it provides the observer with a context only and several structural hints appearing as shapes. The design is one of a set of 20. The whole set is called: *Mutatis Mutandis—Compositions for Interpreters*. That means that the set contains graphic compositions, and that those who wish to interpret the composition of the graphics in their medium, be they dancers, or musicians, or poets, would have to translate the language of the design into the language of that medium. This particular one was used as a score by the British pianist John Tilbury, and here is an excerpt from his performance in a concert in London. [CD Track 10]

mutatis mutandis 13 with John Tilbury

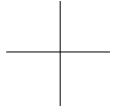
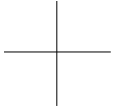
I shall show you more pictures from the set in a minute. It may interest you that they were made and actually pen-drawn by a computer system, which I had programmed. But they are to be interpreted by a live musician. In my next example you'll hear the computer play.

In all cases my program consists of three segments:

1. The first segment is to set up in the machine memory a complex system of rules and regulations, privileges and laws. This corresponds to what I have called earlier “the contextual environment”.
2. The second segment of my program generates and injects into the context lots of different kinds of elements, and helps them either to find their place in the system or quickly to get out again. These elements correspond to what I have called earlier old words and new words in language. Each element is the numerical representation of whatever the programmer stipulates as an element. For my score of *Plot* and for *Mutatis Mutandis* the elements were points, symbols, and x-y coordinates.
3. And this is where the third segment of my program comes in. It reads all the elements that have found a place in the context system and then instructs a plotter, a drawing machine, to draw them.



mutatis mutandis 13



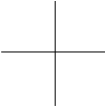
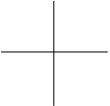
Now, on tape here I have a composition for which the elements represented minute fractions of soundwaves. Here, instead of instructing a plotter, the third program segment instructed an analog computer to convert the surviving elements into electric voltage values and store these on audio tape, 5000 onto each inch of tape. With nearly 40,000 per second, we do not discern each of them passing in single file. We perceive them as sounds, we hear their interactions and fluctuations and relationships and call them pitch, timbre, duration, intensity.

This tape I shall play for you now, asking you to try and apply tentatively some of the ideas I have suggested: Try to discern between old and new sounds, between old and new constellations, configurations, melodies, tunes, between predictable and unpredictable rhythms and pulses, between familiar and unfamiliar timbres and sound colors and intensity changes. And try to remember that I am showing you what might happen if one allows a deliberately stipulated contextual system to do the choosing and selecting of its representatives, instead of having the chosen and selected ones represent the system they deliberately stipulate. Thus everything in this piece that we hear as pitch, timbre, duration, intensity or phrase, is not as usual a tool, a vehicle, an item which serves to construct and to maintain the system, but rather the result of a system that generates, maintains, and renders significant its elements. The piece I called *Infraudibles*, a concoction of infra-audibles in the absence of fraud, and I hope that neither it nor you will be corrupted if I accompany the music with some more slides of the graphic set. [CD Track 11]

Infraudibles with Quintet

The upshot of all this is a proposition, or rather a chain of analogous propositions: To the question whether a statement is true there be added the question: what if it were true?—To the question whether a composition is music there be added the question: what if this were music?—So that language may not become a fossilized fetish, let it be praised for the thoughts it expresses, but ruthlessly criticized for the ideas it fails to articulate. Language is not the standard against which thinking is to be measured; on the contrary: Language is to be measured by a standard it barely reaches, if ever, namely the imagery of human doubt and human desire.

To measure language, with imagery as a standard, is the function of art



in society. The arts are a measuring meta-language about the language that is found wanting. If the imagery succeeds in containing, anticommutatively, for later, the simulation, the structural analogy to that which was found wanting, then, who knows, it may tell us, or *someone*, *someday*, with breathtaking eloquence and in then simple terms, what we, today, almost speechlessly have wanted so much.