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Pousseur's *Scambi* (1957), and the new problematics of the open work

I

I begin with an irony. Pousseur's *Scambi* (1957), cited as an exemplum in Umberto Eco's famous essay on the 'open' work (Eco 1989) has, as a result, been reified as a historical mo(nu)ment. Yet the open work will always be a challenge to any history, since its intention is to live beyond any citation. No matter how many Ecos the open work may sustain, *Scambi* and works like it will be sound-sources and compendia of possibilities, whether realised or not.

However, now that the era of high modernism, in which concept of the open work was a radical resistance to this dominant aesthetic, has been relegated to history, the special status of the open work is reduced. Owing to the development of contemporary western culture, which, as we know, assumes that all musical works are open to perpetually renewed interpretation by listeners, musicologists, analysts, and performers, no musical work is permitted to resist endless interpretation (whether interactive, incommensurate, or contradictory) which exist in a general field of openness sanctioned by liberal European culture. This contemporary situation is partly the effect of the invention of the concept of the open musical work, in which Pousseur was complicit: a second irony. One effect of this symposium might be to free *Scambi* from its iconic status as history, to revive and redefine its specific openness within general openness, and to return a continuous presence to it by opening it up to interpretive renewal.

To respond to this recommendation is neither simple nor easy, since — third irony — the contemporary dogma of openness considers the (structurally) closed works of the past to be those that must be opened (Figure 1), and that the open works of the present (where ever we set its dimensions) are either left open — and, critically, left untouched — or are subject to explanatory closure (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Opening of the closed work in contemporary musicology

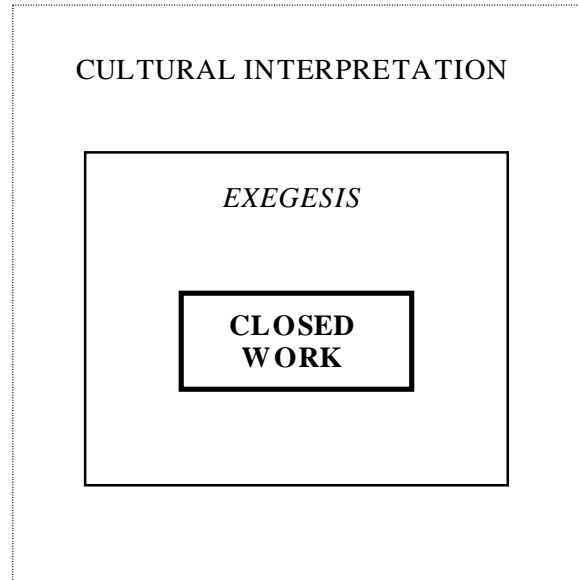
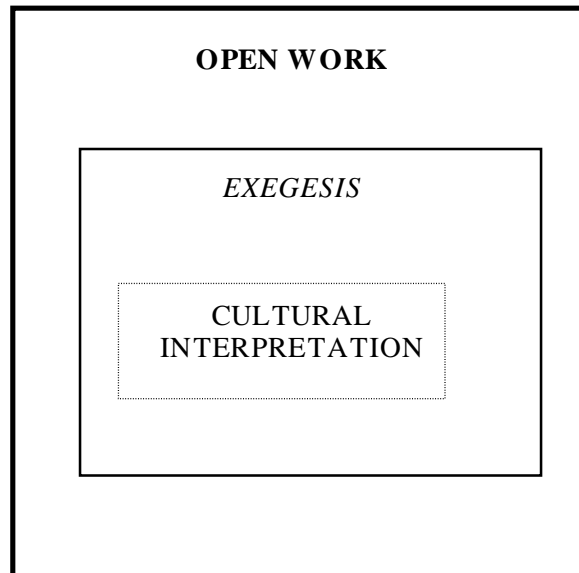


Figure 2: Closure of the open work in contemporary musicology



Here we encounter two incommensurate critical demands symptomatic of our culture: the familiar, our cultural inheritance, must be *opened* in order to maintain its place in

contemporary culture; but *new* (by which I mean more that just recent) open works must be explained and therefore provisionally *closed* in order to be placed in this culture. Two forces of conservatism or academicism are evident here: to open the past, the closed beloved; and to close the present's entrancing mobility. To put it bluntly, this is the difference between anglo-american 'new musicology', which can hardly bear to confront the 20th-century avant-garde (which it tends to despise and marginalise), and the discourse on postmodern artefacts which either incorporate their own critique (and therefore foreclose any discussion other than the explanatory), or, owing to their 'difficulty' and technological sophistication, seem to demand explanation of their processes and aesthetic intentions in advance of any critical response. Both critical positions — freedom (opening) and exegesis (closing) — are forms of cultural domination (which, according to their critical mode, may be either benign or violent), in that they tell us how to think now, in the present, about the musical object. And although they have a liberal intention (to provide new information and perspectives), they always end with a signature ('I was here'), or the expectation of approval (which is the confirmation of signature: 'you were here'). These, respectively, declare or affirm some form of authority.

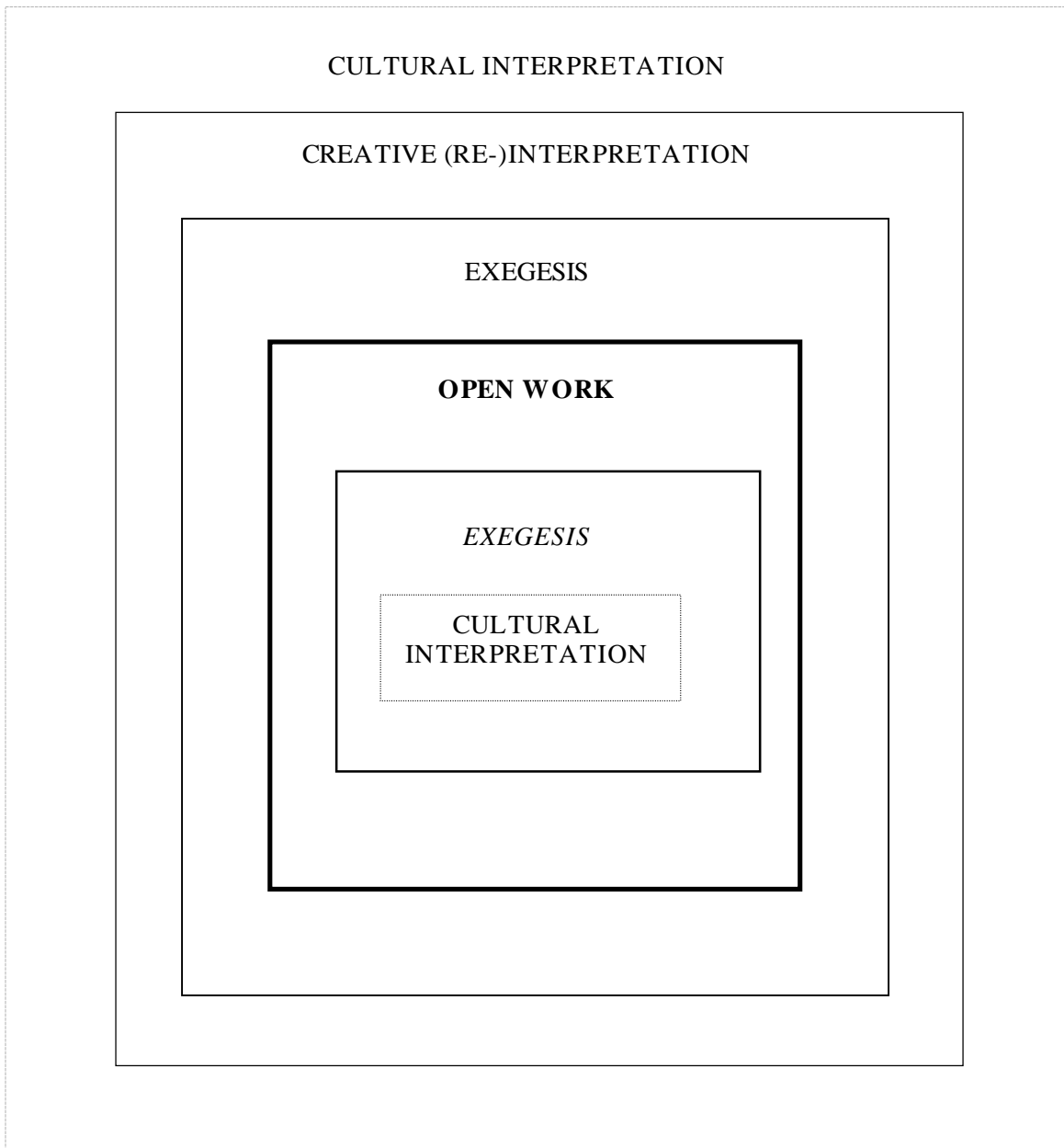
If my contextualisation is accurate, it is clear that the concept of the open work has been compromised by its own success. Its radicalism is now enveloped by a pervasive liberality that neutralises its radical intention. Time and history have assimilated the open work into contemporary consciousness, which, in its present form, does not easily tolerate the musical work as anything other than open. This, historical, process of assimilation is also the sign of an opposite imperative — toward *closure*, which is desired in the social, interpersonal, and academic domains, as simulacra of certainty, yet — fourth irony — is intolerable to us now as an *aesthetic* position unless ameliorated as relativism (my truth/your truth).

II

As conceived in the late 1950s, and as the avatar of our present attitudes, the open work can escape neither these ironies of history and thought nor the limits and closure of time and spatial determination. But it does intend to challenge these limits and to reconfigure the categories of structure, interpretation, composition, and performance. The unprecedented scope for internal mobility in the electronic open work enlarges and facilitates the possibility that this challenge and intention may, for any such work, actually result in a material history beyond these limits. The special aspect of the electronic open work — open in structure, or in realisation as structure — is that time, whether durational or musical, can be extended, potentially, into infinity; structure is perpetually reconfigured and therefore infinitely delayed as a concept; performance, as always, is perpetually renewable. In Pousseur's conception of it, what is really *new* in the electronic open work is that it (to use the terms of Nattiez's semiotics) conceives interpretation to be poietic as well as esthetic. Its renewal is *primarily* a matter, and *the* matter, of composition.

Writing about *Scambi* in 1959, Pousseur ended by envisaging the day when technology would allow listeners to make their own realisations of the work (either following his 'connecting rules' or not) and to 'give the, now *active*, listener the experience of a temporal event open to his intervention and which could therefore be elevated in type, as vital, creative freedom' (Pousseur 2004 [1959]: 159). The active listener becomes, in effect, a composer; reception and interpretation are expressed as (musical) production, and esthetics is, at least partially, collapsed into the poietic. In recent years, Pousseur's invitation to interpret his work creatively as recomposition has been extended to remix and other types of appropriation that are not only permitted but welcomed (a position that associates him with popular-music culture in which such freedom is assumed: Figure 3).

Figure 3: Consequence of Pousseur's conception of the open electronic work



This generosity, I surmise, is a function of his socialist world-view and his suspicion of the contemporary obsession with intellectual property. No-one 'owns' Pousseur's open works, not even the composer, perhaps. His signature, whether literal or evident as style and choice, is provisional: it is a mark, an X, to be re-marked by others (who cannot fairly claim to own their versions either). A primary significance of Pousseur's work is that it extends posterity to *composers*, not only to performers and listeners. Some type

of *new*, not merely reproductive, future, it seems to say, cannot be escaped or pre-determined.

The ‘work’ we call *Scambi* is therefore not ‘the’ work, but a work always in progress, a ‘working’ that denies working-through to structural closure or finality and insists on its provisional, mobile status. Consequently, it is little wonder that the contingency and instability of the open work has a sclerotic effect on cultural and analytical interpretation that depends on ontologically-definite objects. Esthetic interpretation, if it is to have anything other than ephemeral value, relies on the work-concept — on some constancy of a work that could support the provisional epistemologies of interpretation, until the work and its conceptualisation are released anew by updraughts of cultural interest and preference. Faced with the open work, especially one like *Scambi*, the (esthetic) interpreter cannot forget that interpretation is not only contingent, but is now contingent on an unstable or impermanent object, and for this reason may be only an ephemera based on the ephemeral, and, perhaps, not worth the effort. A fifth irony: by opening posterity to composition (poietics), a work like *Scambi* tends to *close down* another type of posterity — its renewal in cultural and aesthetic interpretation — because its interpretations are enfolded into creative products, the esthetic interpretation of which might as well be confined to immediate reception (as personal perception and music criticism).

III

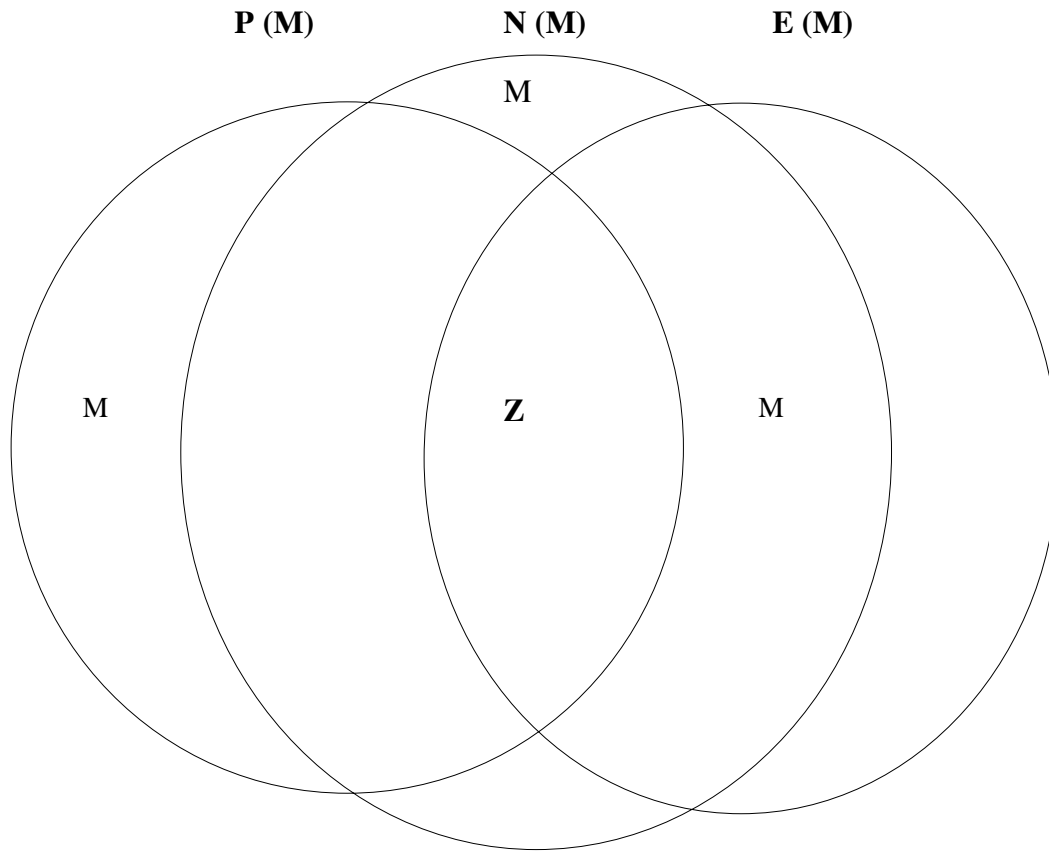
Confronted with the provisionality, contingency, and mobility of the open electronic ‘work’, what can analysis or cultural interpretation offer to *Scambi*? So far (using the familiar categories of Nattiez’s semiotics) I have indicated the ways in which esthetics and poietics overlap in such works, and their consequent expansion of the poietic beyond the unique composer. But there is another dimension, in which analysis is at home: the neutral level. However it is defined — whether as the material, immanent level (Nattiez 1975: passim), or as the ‘trace’ of the composer’s activity (Nattiez 1992: 12) — neutral, objective analysis needs a score, whether produced poietically, or as a transcription. For

Scambi, neither is available, unless we wish to become musical accountants after the fact. There is a world of difference between the transcription of oral-tradition music as a means of recording and understanding an unfamiliar tradition, and the academic myopia of attempting to define, on paper, works that explicitly and radically bypass notation and fixed definition. Since there is no score for *Scambi*, there can be no ‘trace’ of the composer’s activity distinguishable from Pousseur’s definition of materials and rules of combination (i.e. the poietic) or the events it makes possible (i.e. the poietic and esthetic). Consequently, the material reality of *Scambi* is not a single reality: it can have many existences, each of which is a different reality, a different work.

Scambi, even more than in determinate electronic compositions, challenges the concept of neutrality. Pousseur’s definition of 32 sequences and set of connecting rules are all we have, and as Pousseur has said many times, need not be followed. Structure, therefore, would be only a matter of connection (or, if not, succession), and although the profile of each sequence is determined in pitch, duration, and other parameters, there can be no definition of the structure of the whole, except that extracted from any realisation. Neutral-level analysis would therefore have to be reconceived in the plural (neutral levels), but, in the absence of any concept of structure other than the rule (which can be disregarded) of ‘continuity in one parameter’, description of this level would devolve into the expanded poietic, as a description of the criteria of the composer’s or ‘active listener’s’ choices of succession and/or combination. Although any version of the work is necessarily fixed materially (on tape or CD), any attempt to define a neutral level for it will be an illusion: the neutral will almost immediately devolve analysis to a description of poietics, or, if some larger design is to be extracted, to esthetics.

Although Nattiez’s tripartition has a certain strategic and epistemological usefulness for the electronic open work — he has argued for its applicability to the open work in general (see Nattiez 1992: 82-7) — the model almost collapses when confronted by the work’s insistence on converging the poietic, neutral and esthetic domains (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Partial collapse of the tripartition implied by Pousseur’s conception of the open electronic work



P: poietic level
 N: neutral level
 E: esthetic level

M: materials (of *Scambi*)

Z: zone of intersection (P, N, E)

Another template of thought is required, one that will allow us to fulfil the first task of analysis as recommended by Spinoza — to come to a clear and distinct idea of its object. It seems to me that Deleuze’s theory of the virtual and actual might be the most appropriate model for the analysis of *Scambi*. As Pousseur describes it, the work — constituted as an archive of elements (the 32 sequences) and a strategy of relations (the rules of connection and combination) — has no single presence. Already, however, these elements and operations are the product of a construction that proceeds from an idea — *scambi*, or, in English, ‘exchanges’. (In Italian *scambi* is cognate with *cambio*, ‘money

exchange', the exchange of one value for another, or equivalence in value with an exchange of number and identity.) The title of the work therefore inscribes the essential imperative of its virtual dimension which must become actual, in this case as the exchange of composer/interpreter, the exchange of technological possibilities (diffusion), and the almost infinite exchange of perceptions and interpretations. This defines a type of unity, or, at least, consistency from one dimension to the other.

The virtual, though, must also be analysed: it is *constructed*, and incorporates the signs of its historical moment. *Scambi*'s processes of construction are clearly defined in Pousseur (2004). (1) Four defined parameters (pitch, speed, homogeneity, and continuity) are each subject to 12 orders of presentation described in binary notation (e.g. 0001), and determined by exchange and combination of the primary values (0,1). The result of this process is that there are, potentially, 48 parametrical orders (4x12). When these parameters are stacked vertically, potentially there are 144 vertical combinations (12x4, including redundancies). Virtually, then, *Scambi* is a combinatorial system delimited by the square of 12. In this respect it resembles other works of its period, such as Boulez's *Le marteau sans maître* (1957), parts of which are based on a combinatorial matrix of 144 elements (pitch, duration, attack, dynamics). Yet Pousseur, like Boulez, seemed to realise that the progress from virtual to actual should not be a simple matter of either distributing elements mechanically or imposing some spontaneous articulation on them prematurely. The composer's subjectivity can intervene too soon. Both works conform to the serial norm of 48 forms. Boulez, in *Le marteau*, constructs the virtual by distributing the elements in 24 derived series (and, potentially, their retrogrades); but Pousseur constructs the virtuality of *Scambi* by selection and deletion of potential combinations so that the 32 'sequences' of material are distributed in 16 families or 'sections'. Since $32 + 16 = 48$, parts (sequences) are enfolded into wholes (sections).

In the progression to the actual, Boulez acts as the composer of connection and combination of series according to fortuitous pitch repetitions and subjective design. Pousseur, however, specifies only general rules of succession and combination of sequences, based on their characteristics. As composer, Pousseur *retreats*, strategically, so

that the sequences will not congeal into a single unity and will remain relatively mobile, open to other subjectivities.

IV

I will close with a few remarks on the actuality of Pousseur's preferred version of *Scambi* (1957), and since this is an ongoing project, on its potential actualisation (there can be no closure except an open end).

(1) It seems to me that *Scambi* is quite classically formed, as a large phrase in the form of an arc, the apex of which is defined by the intensity of dynamics, depth of pitch field, and durational intensification (c.5-6 minutes), after which it declines in intensity to cadence in pitch ascent and decrescendo. Other conceptions of form are not proscribed by Pousseur's rules of connection.

(2) There are two types of material: chirruping and *pointilliste*, and sustained, long-breathed sounds, which are variously overlaid. Since these remain distinct, the spectre of the classical sonata is present as the opposition of two well-defined types of material. Although they overlap, I hear no 'exchange' between them, no *scambi*. Future realisations might invoke other narratives of material interaction and structure.

(3) The two types of material, though acousmatic, suggest the basic articulations of speech — palatal or dental sounds, and breath. *Scambi* might therefore be related to the post-WW2 ideal of the *tabula rasa*, and/or investigated as a classic example of Adorno's contention that no musical material can escape contingent matter.

(4) Finally, there is the issue of continuity and discontinuity. Pousseur remarks that, by connecting sequences with similar beginning-end qualities in *Scambi*, 'complete continuity was [...] possible, with no sign of juncture; pronounced breaks in continuity were more likely to occur within sequences because pauses had been built in to them' (Pousseur 2004: 157). This suggests that continuity in *Scambi* is primarily virtual, as defined by the rules of connection that can be heard to guarantee types of continuity in the actual. Similarly, discontinuity, the sign of the postmodern, is virtual since it is a constituent of the sequences. Yet it is, in addition, the most disturbing effect of the

actuality of (Pousseur's) *Scambi*. The apparently unmotivated hiatuses and silences of the work appear to me to be uncanny. Like the zips in Barnett Newman's paintings, they are openings onto the void of the real, the unknowable, or the Buddhist *bardo*. Even though it may be merely the historical residue of the relatively crude technology available to Pousseur in 1950s Milan, this discontinuity-effect should not be underestimated. It is the sign of a history and a window to meaning. Other versions, including Pousseur's 3-minute version, and those by Berio, which aim for different types of continuity, might be evaluated — not only technologically but also culturally and interpretatively — in relation to *Scambi*'s first actuality.

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