

‘OHRENLI(E)DER’ COMPOSITIONS FOR LISTENER

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1 INTRODUCTION

The ‘Ohrenli(e)der’ are a series of listening instruction pieces; no sounds are being created during their performance. Rather, the existing sounds of the acoustic environment are taken as musical base material, which is then altered by covering and uncovering ones ear canals, according to the temporal structure notated in the score. Fourteen different songs have been written so far (four of which are presented in the appendix of this article), with the project being open to the addition of further pieces. Since the primary focus of the Ohrenli(e)der is an appreciation of the everyday soundscape, they are targeted at performers who are not necessarily musically trained and at performances in the context of everyday life. The challenges which this creates with regards to their notation and distribution are discussed in this article.

2 NOTATION

The notation of the Ohrenli(e)der aims at exercising enough graphical appeal to get people interested, but at the same time not overwhelm them. A potential performer coming across one of the scores – maybe by chance – should stick with it long enough to find out what it is about and try a performance of the piece. Therefore, the pieces should appear ‘doable’, since the main focus of the Ohrenli(e)der is on an active appreciation of sound, not of virtuosity. People not trained in reading music should be able to read the scores and feel that they are actually able to perform them. This is supported by the fact that no sounds are being created in the course of the performance, which takes away a lot of the embarrassment typically associated with public music performance. A performance of the Ohrenli(e)der is primarily a private experience, oriented in-rather than outwards. Also, the pieces allow for associations with familiar experiences; as a child, we all have performed the Ohrenli(e)der for ourselves. I invite you, for example, to recall your last performance of song No. 10 (see figure 4 in the appendix).

The L/R symbols on the front page of each score define top and bottom of the page and suggest some sort of ‘stereo listening’ experience. The black triangles define the directions of increasing volume, using a widely understood symbolism familiar from most music players. Early drafts of the pieces also included textual information on the front pages of selected scores, for example to limit their performance to certain environments (e.g. ‘In a noisy environment’). While some of the pieces do work better in certain environments than in others, we have decided to remove these instructions and stick to generic instructions on the backpage of the scores. Some songs aim at a ‘literal’ interpretation of the temporal evolution which they notate (e.g. songs nos. 4, 7; see figures 1 and 3), while others primarily suggest certain gestural qualities (songs nos. 5 and 10; figures 2 and 4). The speed at which the listener steps through the piece is determined by herself.

The postcard format has been chosen for the score design of the Ohrenli(e)der. This format supports the idea of performing the pieces ‘anytime anywhere’ very well; not only because the scores are small enough to carry them on ones own body. Postcards travel; they are a means of

transporting information through places. It is hoped that this will encourage the listener to 'perform' the pieces in different acoustic environments. Also, postcards are used to transfer information from one person to another, which makes it possible to *share* the pieces, in spite of the almost 'autistic' listening experience, which they help to create. Postcards can also be handed out or placed in public places for people to pick up. The visual appeal of the scores is expected to be strong enough to support such a 'flyer' interpretation of the postcard format.

3 REACTIONS

Informal experiments have been carried out with a number of individuals, both musically trained and untrained, in order to evaluate the comprehensibility of the scores. Most people were confronted with the scores – usually starting with their front page – without any prior knowledge of what they were about to see. While immediate associations often range from 'psychological experiment' to 'optical illusions', the symbols used on the front pages (the 'L' and 'R' and the volume-indicating triangles) generally succeed in suggesting some sort of listening experience at second sight. However, most people suspect that this listening experience is in some way going to be technologically mediated. The symbolism seems to be too strong for different associations to be made; but this is also the moment where listeners will often turn the score to the back page in order to acquire more information.

Another interesting observation was that most listeners instinctively choose their hands as a means of covering their ears during the performance; usually through gestures that are far too extensive to make any acoustic difference. Maybe the instructions should limit performers to using a finger on the tragus of each ear to (un)cover their ear canals.

Two listeners have noted that the Ohrenli(e)der cannot be recorded. It is appreciated that this means that they cannot be 'consumed' either, in the way that an mp3 file can be. Annette Basch has noted that "Musik ist nicht konservierbar. Es gibt Aufnahmen, aber Musik entsteht immer neu." ('Music is not conservable. There are recordings, but music re-emerges newly every time.')

Another manifestation of the same phenomenon is that it is impossible *not* to listen to the Ohrenli(e)der, in the sense that it is impossible not to think of green elephants once somebody tells you not to do so. After having made the decision to start the concert, there is no way one is not going to be part of it; if one is not part of it, there simply is no concert. The pieces require a certain engagement with the acoustic environment.

4 CRITIQUE AND PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES

While it might be impossible to perform the Ohrenli(e)der without listening to them, the main compositional challenge remains how to encourage people to actually perform them. The idea behind the pieces seems to appeal to many people who are confronted with them for the first time. However, their confrontation with the pieces often ends at this point; very few try a performance in the course of this first confrontation, and it can be suspected that many never will.

While most compositions can rely on the widely understood social conventions of the concert hall or other performance environments, this is not the case with the Ohrenli(e)der. Their intimate relation to everyday life means that they cannot benefit from the specific 'mode' which a concert audience puts itself in as part of the performance ritual. The design of social environments for the distribution and performance of the Ohrenli(e)der could address this challenge. It has been suggested by various listeners that the pieces would suit an art gallery context. A careful spatial arrangement of the scores, informed by the gallery's architecture and the everyday soundscape resulting from it, could create a broad range of stimulating listening experiences for exhibition visitors. Another strategy would be to link the performance of the pieces directly to a social experience; for example by performing them on one another in pairs, as Pedro Rebelo has suggested.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have given valuable comments on the Ohrenli(e)der in the course of their creation. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all of them, especially those by Dave Drury, Matt Green, and Pedro Rebelo. This research project is being funded through a SPUR studentship.

6 REFERENCES

1. R. Geisenhanslüke, Interview with Annette Dasch, Die Zeit, ZEITmagazin Leben, Issue 31/07. (26th July 2007).

7 APPENDIX – OHRENLI(E)DER SCORE EXAMPLES

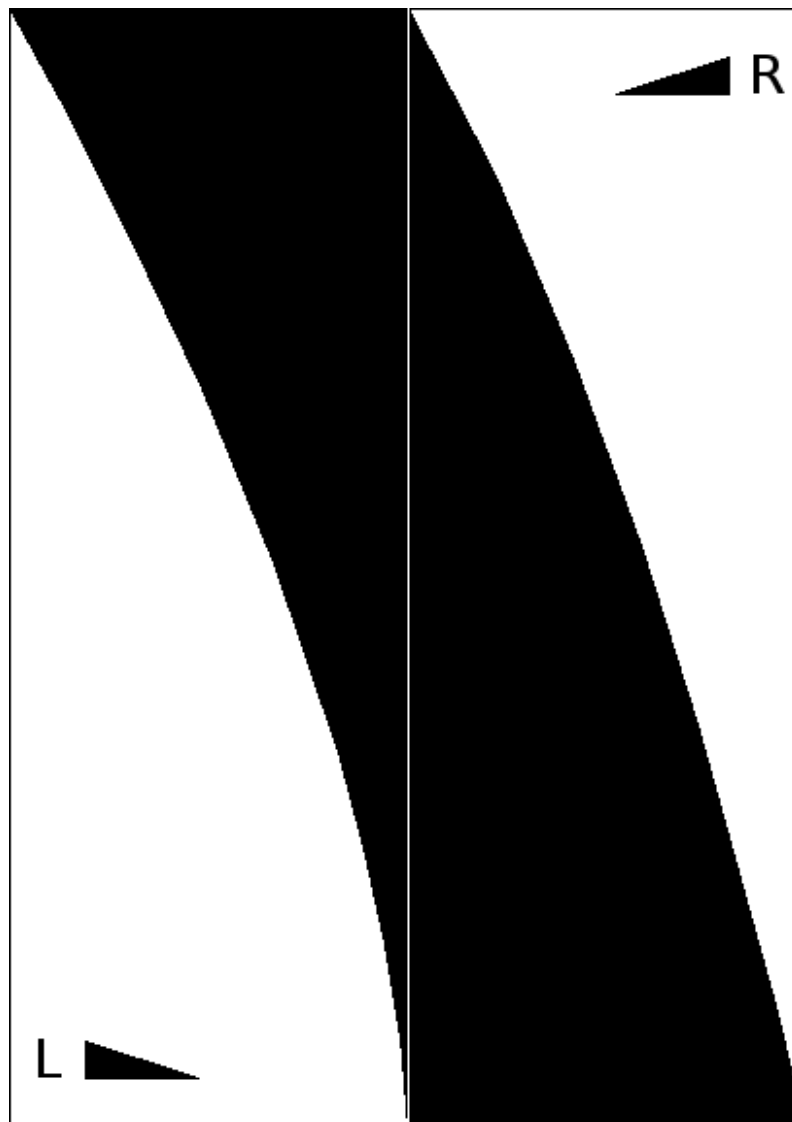


Figure 1: Ohrenli(e)d No. 4

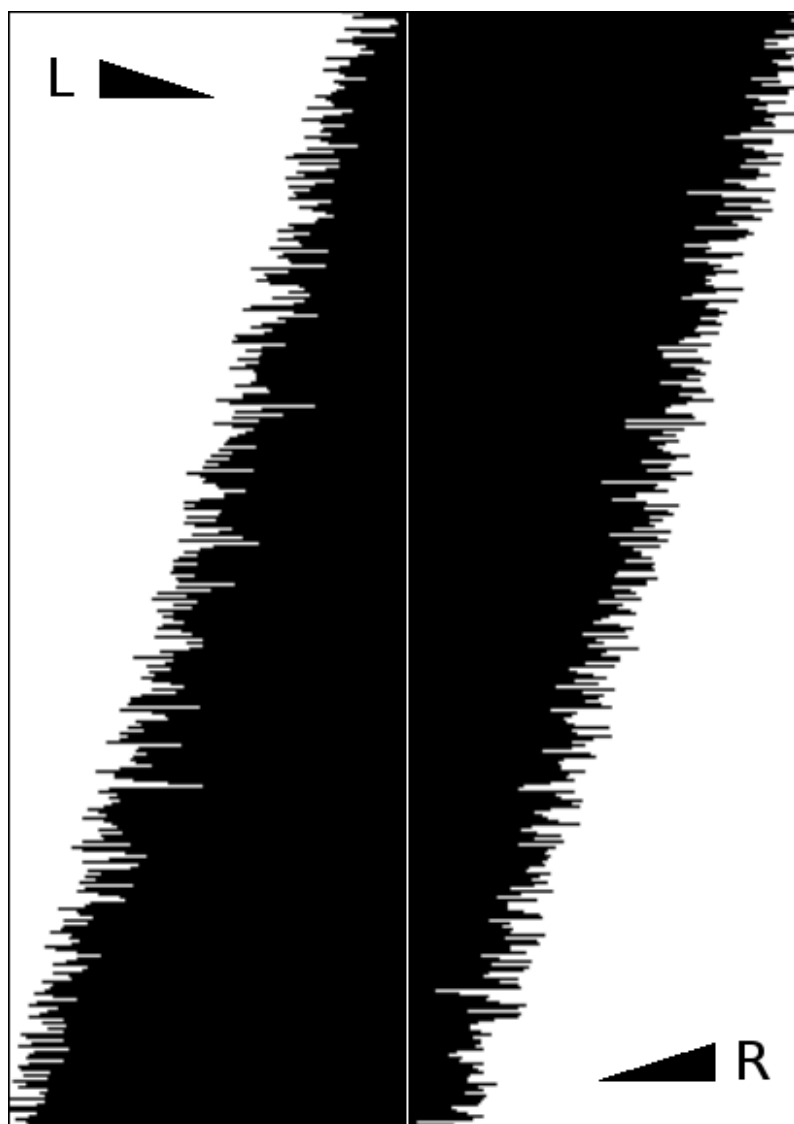


Figure 2: Ohrenli(e)d No. 5

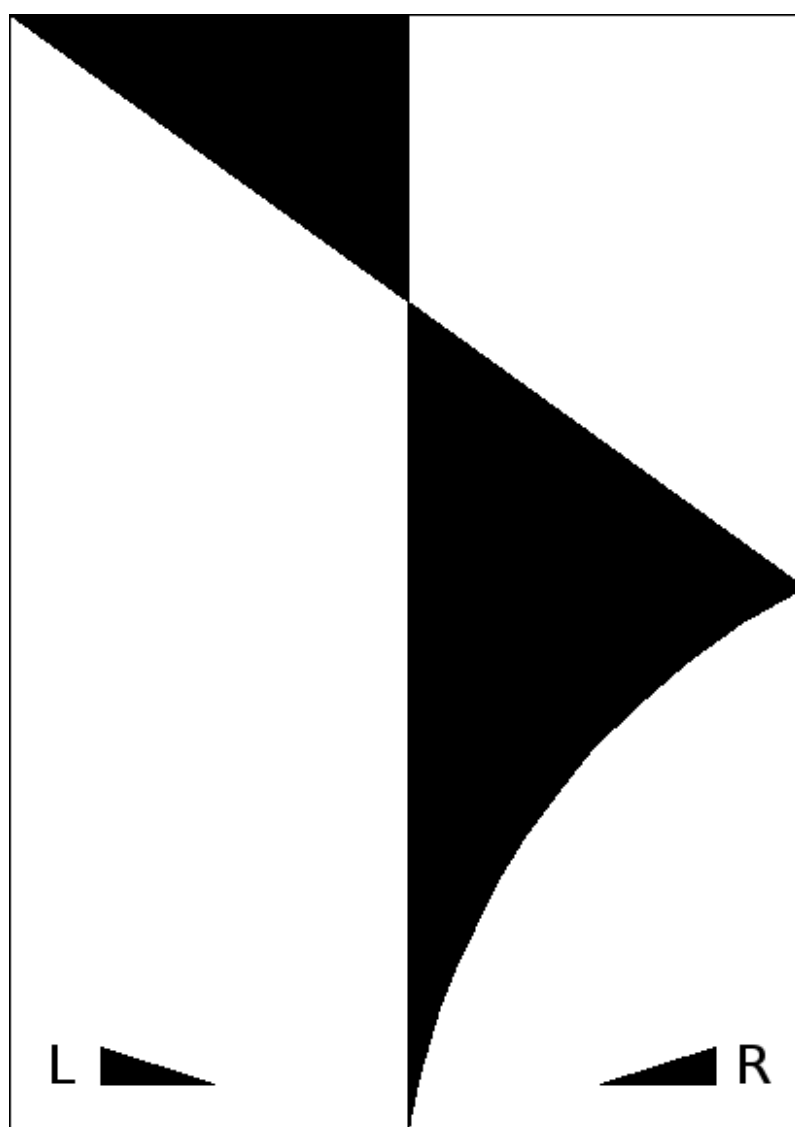


Figure 3: Ohrenli(e)d No. 7

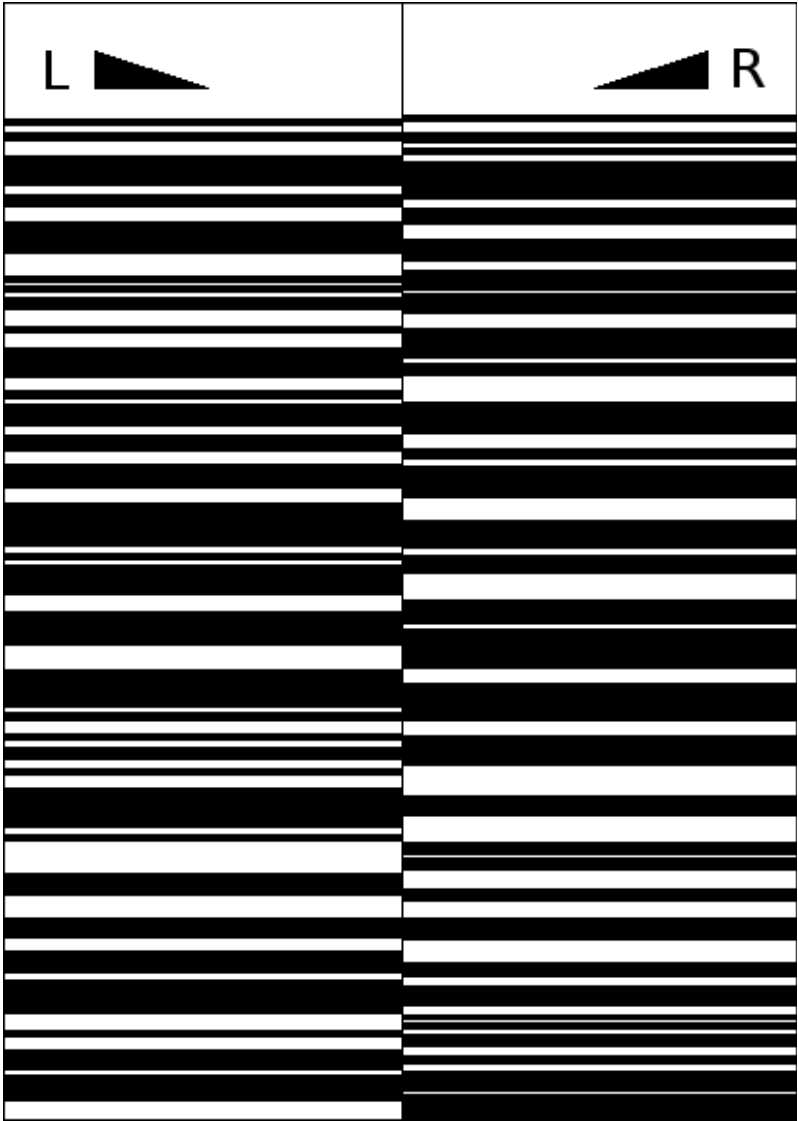
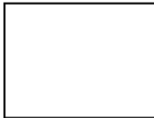


Figure 4: Ohrenli(e)d No. 10

Ohrenli(e)der - # 1
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- Overleaf is the score of a piece of music. You are its performer and audience. The only instruments you need are your ears and something to close them – e.g. your fingertips, hands, a seashell, etc. The sounds in this piece are those of your acoustic environment. No additional sounds are created during the performance – listening itself is the performing act.
- The score is read from top to bottom. You can start the piece whenever you wish. You may freely determine the speed at which you pass through the piece.
- The left half of the score corresponds to your left, the right half to your right ear. The further black color extends from the page center towards the edge, the more you need to uncover the respective ear. For example, a blank left half means that you should close your left ear as firmly as possible, whereas a fully black right half signifies an undisturbed listening experience on your right ear.

<http://florimur.at/ohrenli-e-der>

Figure 5: Ohrenli(e)der - score backpage