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"A violin, by any other name . . ."

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I have looked - in vain - for many years now for a text in which it someone acknowledges that the invention of music and the invention of the straight line were simultaneous and coterminous. This is of course, in several senses, hyperbole, but culturally, at least for the European mind-set, the myth of the invention of the first musical instrument also marks the invention of the straight line, and though I wait to be corrected, I have yet to hear of this being articulated quite as directly as I am articulating it now. As an idea, it stands as a jumping off point for my interpretation of Jon Rose’s work with violins and their derivatives over the past forty years, or so, as well as informing my own very different work with violins in the landscape.

When the infant Hermes (who is, rather tellingly, the messenger and mediator between the Olympian gods, the gods of the underworld, and the world of humans) cuts the skin of the cow he has sacrificed, and which he stole from his brother Apollo, into thin strips and stretches them over a tortoise shell (Graves, 1992, pp. 63-64), he is the founder of a whole sonic and mathematical civilization. The sound of the lyre (the instrument he has made), the straight line, and the mathematics of the harmonic series co-exist from the very start of instrumental music, and lie in wait until the age of human, historical time, when Pythagoras will articulate them as a naturally-occurring system, fusing the abstraction of the line with the sensual perception of the musical tone, but bringing the sensuous under the domain of the rational. Hermes gives his two-fold invention, as a token of appeasement for the theft of his cattle, to Apollo, who will come to be the overseer of all things balanced and rational. The straight line, then, and harmonic structure, gather to themselves associations of being divinely-inspired qualities that distinguish humans from the rest of animate creation.

From this, the phrase "there are no straight lines in Nature" has become something of a commonplace, and as Tim Ingold points out, the straight line has become associated with a whole range of Cultural attributes, from rational thought (straight thinking), to honesty (as opposed to crooked or devious), normative "straight" sexuality (as opposed to perversion or to being bent), and - citing J. F. Billeter - the apparent certainties of quantitative rather than qualitative knowledge. On the basis of these ideas, the straight line comes to stand as one of the defining phenomena of human Culture, over against the absence of the straight line in Nature. There is also a deep cultural ideology in the West (noted by many feminist critics over the past fifty years, or thereabouts) that identifies the masculine principle with mind and the mathematical, and the feminine principle with materiality and the body in which Nature is feminine (productive and nurturing) and Culture is masculine
(intellectual, technological, and ordering) serves to further underline such distinctions - however spurious such distinctions are in actuality.

This is too easy a set of ideologies to take at face value, though, and as Ingold shows, there are in fact plenty of straight lines in Nature (the edges of crystals spring immediately to mind), and the majority of lines produced or used on a daily basis by human cultures are not, in fact, straight at all. The distinctions, whatever their apparent cultural force, are yet spurious. His extraordinary book *Lines: A Brief History* repays more detailed reading than is possible here, but in it he assembles a significant amount of evidence that rather than the straight line delineating a distinction between Nature and Culture, per se, “[t]he hegemony of the straight line is a phenomenon of *modernity*, not of culture in general” (Ingold, 2007, p. 155, emphasis added). This would be a modernity, then, which consolidates and empowers a patriarchal rationalism to exercise dominance, in the name of Culture, over Nature, with a whole series of misogynistic and ecologically catastrophic consequences (see Plumwood, 2002, pp. 13-37).

If, as Ingold suggests, modernity has tended to appropriate the straight line as the dominant paradigm of the line *tout court*, he is careful to distinguish between two categories of line; the mark left by a gesture, which will tend towards the irregular, and the lines that join together discrete points, which tend towards the straight. For Ingold these distinctions between two types of line are congruent with two similarly distinct human experiences of space and place; “wayfaring”, on the one hand, and navigation on the other (Ingold, 2000, 219-242). With wayfaring the knowledge of the terrain, and an individual human subject’s orientation within it, emerge out of movement, sensory experience, and memory that are brought into play as the subject traverses space. Navigation, in contrast, is the purposeful movement across a place that is already "known", either through the recollection of prior experience, or with the technological affordance of a map. The trace of the wayfarer only arises *through* the wayfaring, whereas the navigator moves by connecting discrete points that, in a sense, already *exist*. In music, parallels exist between these binary splits with improvisation as a form of wayfaring, and playing from music - be that from memory or notation - as a form of navigation.

The straight line, then, that was "invented" at the same moment as the harmonic series - as a cultural determinant of Music-with-a-Capital-M - associates itself with a whole host of "human" categories, "human" in that imperious sense that European and Euro-Colonial cultures have of trying to clasp on to anything that they can use to distance themselves from the rest of Creation. The violin plays across not one but two constructions of such straight lines, the strings running the length of the instrument, and the horsehairs suspended under tension between the tip and the heel of the bow. These two straight lines cross, and a mathematically predictable, but "natural", harmonic sound results.

But the mathematical purity of the motion of bow against string, of straight lines of tension perpendicular to one another, is undermined by the body of the player who is not a machine and who, in Jon’s case in particular, actively kicks against any suggestion that mathematical perfection is a desirable outcome of playing
the fiddle. Using an incredibly imaginative range of sound producing techniques, Jon’s playing (along with the playing of other improvising violinists, such as Angharad Davies) unravels the mutually consolidating constructions of the straight line and the harmonic series. The strings don’t always produce harmonic structures, and the movement of the bow becomes circular, stuttering, flickering, or jagged. The fixed-point, the straight lines of bow and strings, combine not into some abstract, "pure" sound, but set off evanescent gestures as one straight line crosses the other. The bow leaves behind not a visual line, as such, but plays out a gesture that fills the present with the trace of its movement, as it happens, in sound. And yet, even as Jon’s improvisations seem to be musical wayfaring, that notion of the straight line, and all its baggage keeps slipping back in. This principle - a stretched string excited by friction - remains constant across Jon’s work, but gives rise to a whole range of practices and inventions that extend the violin - or perhaps we should call it violinism - into a tremendous diversity of forms and contexts.

I’ve drawn on Ingold’s ideas about different categories of lines, and different categories of movement across the surface of the Earth because so many of Jon’s violin-based or violin-informed inventions - the relative violins, as he calls them - have a strong spatial dimension as they cross over from invention into practice. The "aeolian violin" and the punitingly named "tromba-mariner" depend on wind and water respectively within a decidedly non-concert environment (environments I have explored in my own work, in very different ways but also with violins, in the wind and in rivers, see Hogg, 2013) and the "double piston triple neck wheeling violin" and the "bicycle powered double violin" must move through an environment in order to be played (http://www.jonroseweb.com/d_picts_relviolins_describe.html). The largest scale manifestation of these relative violins that must move through space in order to sound have been the three Pursuit projects, in which bicycle-powered instruments and sound makers, including several violin-type devices, are choreographed through a space creating massive textures and drones. These devices and their players/riders, made, in Jon’s words, "to test musical notions of time, distance and speed", multiply over and again the meeting of straight lines (stretched strings), gestures (traced in space and sound by the motion of the bicycles), and musical sound and action.

Jon is, by his own admission, obsessed with the violin, but also obsessed with testing the limits of the violin, particularly the limit of what it can be as a cultural object that says, perhaps more than any other instrument, "Classical Music". Taking this idea into "the heart of the beast", as it were, Jon’s collaboration with John Oswald and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra put Jon’s "conventional" violin, and recognisably "classical" technique, into the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, but with only the orchestra playing the music that Tchaikovsky himself actually wrote. We might consider that the solo violin and the music Tchaikovsky wrote for it as the raison d’être of the concerto, but Jon improvised the solo part throughout, occupying the central position of Tchaikovsky’s work in such a way that displaces that work into another place. Listening to the recording of the first movement on https://vimeo.com/16096837 the concerto is at once recognisable (assuming you've heard it before) and completely defamiliarised, and yet this is
ultimately not iconoclasm but a genuine - and to my ears musically fulfilling - re-imagining of the piece. It's like Lyra Belaqua's "Oxford" in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, it is recognisably "Oxford", just not quite our Oxford. I don't hear Jon's interventions as destructive, just in the same way that squatting is not necessarily destructive, but rather a form of "trespassing" that actually does no harm, and in fact might change things for the better, given the generally moribund and repetitive culture that has built up around the majority of "the classics" since Classical Music stopped taking itself as seriously as it perhaps ought to. As should be clear, the images and metaphors that come to mind are spatial - geographical, even - and perhaps part of the reason for this is that how music has been configured as "property" over the past 200 years, or so, but also because Jon moves into the space normally reserved for whoever plays Tchaikosky's notes, but he continues to just be Jon, with his own notes to offer.

Perhaps the real test case of what we might call this "political" aspect of Jon's work is the YouTube video where he's told by a security guard that he's "not allowed to play music in front of the Opera House". Does the interior of the Sydney Opera House have some kind of a monopoly on music that extends outwards into its immediate environs? Would Jon's performance have been welcomed inside? If nothing else, the video is an inspiring example of creativity and exuberance in the face of pointless, miserablist "authority".

The policing of the environment can often put in place restrictive social practices that seem to exist only because someone has deemed that they can. The ineffectiveness of the colossal fences intended to restrict where rabbits and dingos are "allowed to play" that are strung out across vast distances in Australia seems to be in inverse proportion to the colossal costs, physical resources, and human labour expended in building and maintaining them. Interestingly, there is even quite a lot of evidence that certain animals use them as navigational aids rather than as deterrents to movement across the continent! Given the twin themes in Jon's work of bowed strings and the denaturing of violins, and the equally prominent position that geographical space has played in his work through the bicycle-violins, the "double piston triple neck wheeling violin" - which resembles nothing so much as one of those wheeled devices that groundsmen at cricket pitches use to draw straight white lines, or the measuring wheels that civil engineers use to plot out distances on road building projects - it seems almost inevitable, in retrospect, that he ended up turning fences into "violins".

Jon had been building instruments to bow for many years, particularly a series of instruments with very long strings for gallery performances in which the rich and complex layers of different pitches reach into regions of the harmonic series that though still, actually, mathematically precise are perceptually so complex that the listener is transported into an other-worldly soundspace where wonder and the purely sensual leave behind any glib notions of harmony grounded on octaves, fifths, and triads. And then, as he tells the story of the first time he played a fence in the outback, after several years of playing these instruments Jon was driving past one of the endless Outback fences and recognised it as just a very, very long string. That marker of space, that delineation of who was and was
not allowed to be there, that most "human" of constructions, that straight line (at least between fence posts) was transformed, simply by the application of a bow to it, into a violin... with a different name, admittedly, but hardly less of a violin for all that, given the greatly extended range of what a violin can be, and do, through the forty years or so of work Jon has been doing with them.

It's from thinking about Jon's many fence projects, and extrapolating back from them into his other work, that Ingold's ideas about lines came - for me, at least - to resonate so strongly with what I see as a protracted, and not always explicitly foregrounded, struggle with a sort of centralised abstract power that characterises just about everything Jon has done as an artist. Tampering not only with the how of violin playing, but with the what of what a violin is or can be, Jon has taken pleasure in defying convention and offering up beautiful, imaginative alternatives to sterile conformity. But this goes further than tinkering with or bending conventions. The instruments, and their playing, move out into the world, be that the conventional violin in front of the Sydney Opera House, or the bicycle violins in a sports park. So when such freedom of movement meets a fence what else it there to do but to play it? It's not going to move, so why not turn it into a violin.

In the seeming desolation of the Outback, with little in the way of forest or topography to conceal them, the great fences tear scars across the emptiness, trying to determine who and what is in or out, with lines plotted between fixed points hammered into the soil. This is the line as a paradigm of modernity, of the human domination of Nature, of abstraction victorious over sensation. Here, with hardly any other physical distractions in the landscape, we see an apotheosis of the power of the straight line to legislate, to rule (no coincidence that the word "ruler" can be the ultimate authority in a society as well as an object for drawing straight lines). The relation of the fences to the land is one of "knowing" and "determining", organising the space, navigating from known points to known points, that do not shift or waver. There does not seem to be any way that such an object could discover or make anything. Ironic, then, that the lines of the fence wire reveal their harmonic qualities through the wayfaring that is musical improvisation, rather than the point-to-point quality of a written score, or a remembered melody. The fence was never built to be an instrument, but for the time Jon (often with his partner, Hollis, also a violinist) bows it, it is as though its function to separate and legislate is suspended, and the whole of its being is thrown over into sounding and amazing the listener who hears it.

But there is another dimension to this work, one that has not been so far articulated. Editing an academic journal on landscape and music last year, I asked Hollis to write a short article about her work with Jon on the Australian fences (Taylor, 2015, pp. 350-363). I was somewhat surprised to receive a first draft in which rather than audio sound files by way of illustrations, a transcript of some of the fence sounds into modern Western music notation were given as examples. Both I and my co-editor, Matthew Sansom, wrote to Hollis suggesting that it might be more useful in terms of getting the experience of the bowed fences across to the readers if we were to publish actual audio samples of the sounds rather than music notation that not only doesn't really represent the full
experience of the sounds themselves, but which is also only legible to readers trained in Western music notation (see Taylor, 2015, pp. 355-358). But Hollis’s response was that this was not meant so much to be the representation of an extract from a soundfile transcribed into (partial) notation, but rather a documentation of the fact that the fences, when bowed, were *music*. The notation, in and of itself, is a material testifying to the musical rather than simply sonorous significance of their work. And there’s a wonderful twist here in associations, because the fences strung out across Australia themselves resemble some kind of sparse, Feldman-esque music notation; straight lines on which isolated events are strung out, punctuating the background murmur, and resonating into an ever receding sonic past.

So, the fences divide up the land, and yet they can also be violins, they resemble musical notation, but their sounds as music can be represented on yet more straight lines that, in turn, resemble fences, or the strings of a violin. There is always the danger that academic - especially hermeneutic - writing gets carried way with itself, twirling a fantastic arabesque of ideas into such a tortured structure that it detaches itself from the material being commented upon. And yet I have found Jon and Hollis’s work on the Australian fences to be both a continuation and meeting of Jon’s earlier concerns with violins, strings, human space, and the artistic power of displacement of one sort or another. I’m not suggesting that any of this is what Jon or Hollis set out to do, I’m not even sure they will agree with my "reading" of their work, but since trespassing (via YouTube) into Jon’s world ten or more years ago, these reflections of mine hopefully communicate some of the things that I’ve found there.

bibliography:


