

# Something & Nothing

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## Introduction

This essay is about the concept of "something." By "something" can be understood any musical idea you have: a few composed bars that you have seemingly thoughtlessly entrusted to paper, a few chords or a piece of melody or a few symbols that you know how they should sound. Or even a suggested movement, line, rhythm or larger shape. I see the "something" as an initial phase of composing.

## Something or idea?

When I compose a piece, I start with a "something." This "something" can consist of a few bars of music, a spontaneous drawing, or a thought that may translate into sounds. How exactly this "something" arises is an interesting question. Why do you compose these bars? Why does this particular thought pop up, and not another? "Something" is not the same as "idea." Ideas belong to the realm of thought, while "something" includes all forms of existence or perception. In Aaron Copland's book "What to listen for in Music" he states: "every composer starts with a musical idea. That is not a mental, literary or extra-musical idea but a theme. The theme is a gift from Heaven. He doesn't know where it comes from." Copland sees "theme" and "musical idea" as synonyms. "A theme can be a melody, a whole piece of music, accompaniment figure or a rhythm," he says. It is interesting that, reading his book, the subject of "something" (or in the words of Copland "theme/musical idea") is apparently alive in several composers. In "The Meaning of Music", musicologist Leo Samama, referring to the study of Matthew Guerrieri, writes about the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth: "Those first four tones, as sketchbooks show, are anything but the result of one moment of sublime inspiration. Only after a few fruitless attempts and failed attempts did that motif emerge in its final form. Beethoven has wrought, forced, forged it step by step. He had to work hard for it."

## Free association

Outside of music, a "something" could be created by, for example, mentioning the first word that comes to mind. I put it to the test and came up with the word "boat." At first glance, that seems strange, because I don't really have anything to do with boats or the sea. Yet that word came up first. Why is that? Perhaps, at the moment when you have to choose, a stream of thoughts takes place in the brain in a split second? Perhaps it was because of my love of travel, my interest in uninhabited islands, or the challenge of composing, which feels like an uncertain boat trip without a compass. Perhaps a recent piece by George Gershwin that a carillon student brought with her also played a role: *There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York*.

Sigmund Freud introduced free association as a method in psychoanalysis. A client is asked to name everything that comes to mind without a filter. The purpose of this is to discover how deeper thoughts, wishes or traumas are stored in the unconscious. While this doesn't always happen in the form of one spontaneous word, it does involve the spontaneous reaction and association that arises without conscious control.

In linguistics and in creative therapies, word association exercises are often used, in which respondents name a word that immediately comes to mind when they hear a stimulus word.

This method is often used to gain insight into the automatic, often unconscious connections in the brain. For example, it helps identify basic emotions, cultural influences, or personal experiences associated with specific words and concepts.

In the art world, spontaneous expression, such as with Surrealists or Dadaists, is seen as a way to release the subconscious and irrational aspects of the mind. André Breton, founder of Surrealism, considered spontaneous thoughts and associations to be a form of "automatic writing," in which rational thought is temporarily set aside in order to release deeper ideas and images.

### **Spontaneity**

The game where you spontaneously mention a word can be a comparison for the spontaneous way in which a composer can form an idea. That musical idea doesn't just come out of nowhere; it is already present somewhere, albeit often hidden, in the twists and turns of the brain. Of course, it can also happen that you immediately reject this first idea. This can happen during the awareness process (idea) or after you have made it physical by writing something down (something). Maybe the material does not meet what you ultimately have in mind? For example, you can first think of a boat, improvise a piece of music inspired by a boat, but still decide that this material is not inspiring enough to continue with. However, you can also enter into a "marriage of convenience" with the theme. Maybe it forces you to experiment with new ideas and eventually takes you to unexpected musical destinations.

When I think of spontaneity, I think of a statement by the painter Karel Appel: "I just mess around a bit." There is some truth in this: many works of art start with something that does not have to be a masterpiece. It can be messy, as long as there is potential to grow into a full-fledged piece.

Composer Igor Stravinsky is said to have sometimes created sounds by throwing his hands on the piano keys seemingly thoughtlessly. Some sounds he rejected, others looked promising. It could be that Stravinsky already heard in his head which sounds he wanted and his hands searched for the physical form of those sounds on the keys. But sometimes he looked for sounds that had not already been codified somewhere, and then literally improvised at the piano, sometimes he reported that he had done this and later it turned out that he had 'stolen' a few things, such as the bassoon introduction of the *Sacre*.

This method raises questions about the existence of coincidence. According to philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, everything that exists must have a reason; There is no such thing as real arbitrariness. Leibniz also bases this on the thesis of the windowless monad.... The brain must always be fed first in order to be able to produce from there (except godliness, was his opinion...) In this view, Stravinsky's hand movement would not be a pure coincidence, but would be directed by an invisible, unconscious force.

### **Angle**

When I thought about this topic, I almost immediately decided to ask ChatGPT if there are any philosophers who have dealt with the concept of "something". Another person might have first thought about what "something" means in everyday life, or about its language variants: *etwas* in German, *quelque chose* in French, *iets* in Dutch. The route you choose when writing about a topic says a lot about yourself. Philosopher Carl Gustav Jung described

this phenomenon as the "personal unconscious"—the part of us that consists of forgotten memories, repressed experiences, and thoughts that usually remain outside of our conscious memory.

### **Something vs Nothing**

It is also interesting to ask whether "nothing" is the opposite of "something". Can you only understand "something" when you also have an image of what "nothing" means? In Jewish mysticism, also called kabbalah, a lot of thought is given to the difference between "something" (in Hebrew *yesh*) and "nothing" (*ayin*). Kabbalists such as Rabbi Isaac Luria believed that everything in the world comes from *ayin*, a "nothing" that is not an emptiness but a hidden force, a source that transcends our understanding. The Kabbalah teaches that the world was created from this particular "nothingness." According to this idea, God withdrew a little (*tzimtzum*) to make room for creation, and in this way "something" (the material world) came forth from "nothing" (the divine source). Although this kabbalistic thought sounds somewhat cryptic, I can imagine something about it. Things need to be given time to mature. You could call that time space of creation. I also think of wandering nomads who leave to give soil time to recover. I think of the rest that the body needs to heal on its own after an illness. It is not an empty space. Something happens that is hidden from the naked eye.

I wonder if John Cage's composition *4'33"* is also an exploration of the concept of "nothing". This piece, which consists of exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, invites us to listen to the sounds that normally go unheard. Cage wanted to show that silence is never really empty: while the musician is not playing anything, we hear rustling papers, breaths, sounds from outside. Cage, inspired by Zen Buddhism, shows that silence and emptiness can be full of potential. Silence becomes a space in which unforeseen sounds can take on meaning.

In music, we see that rests are often counted out from the inside (or out loud during exercise) by the performer, without meaningful charge. Sometimes even the foot is counted. But when rests are experienced as breaths or as a silent longing for the next note, they become meaningful. This charged silence, the moment for the "something," is not a real emptiness, but a period full of inner movement. Maybe you can compare it to radio waves: we don't hear anything when the radio is off, but those waves are all around us. The trick is to pick up the signal. Samama: Silence is much more than meaningful space or breaths.... Silence is the canvas on which the composer models his sounds.

### **Doubt**

Questioning the created something, in order to convince yourself of its value, is an indispensable aspect of the composition process. Self-criticism is probably one of the hardest things there is. Is it something strong or is it weak material? Does it offer opportunities for development or not? Is it written in your own language in terms of idiom or are they sounds that actually belong to someone else? Questions that you, as a composer, can only answer yourself. In the book of Samama there is ample attention for the listener. In the end, the person has the last word in 'choosing' which emotions he/she experiences with music. A composer is by definition the first listener of his own work.

When piano students say that they find a piece difficult, I sometimes answer that they just have to keep practicing, accept that learning the piece is difficult but that in six weeks they will hardly be able to believe that they once found it difficult. It works more or less the same way in composing. You can stare into an empty space with your "something". Is it good material? But once the play progresses, you can hardly imagine that you found it difficult. In fact, the piece is already there, but you just have to find and write it. These remarks are reminiscent of what I wrote about radio waves that are already around you but still have to be picked up by your antenna and about Stravinsky who probably searched with his hands on the keys for the sounds that were more or less already in his head. If you were to reason like that, it would be that even before you have ever composed a note in your life, everything in space is already there. It would be an empty space filled with potential.

It is probably not a problem to write a disappointing composition every now and then. It can be due to the way you have worked out an idea or something, but it can also be due to the basic material itself. But to know what you want (to write) you also need to know what you don't want (to write). That's why you can also compose bad pieces. However, as a composer you can be disappointed yourself, while a listener or a performing musician is very enthusiastic, or the other way around: you are extremely satisfied yourself and the listener doesn't like it. I don't think pieces that are in someone else's idiom or that are unclear in what they communicate, are successful. Who am I and who is the other? What do I want to communicate with the documents? These are very complicated questions that, in my opinion, cannot be answered with thinking alone. They can only be answered and tested through artistic performance, evaluation and reflection.

### **Conclusion**

It is not always possible to know for sure whether it is viable immediately after making "something". Does it lead to a composition or does it fail? In every "something" there will certainly be weaknesses to be identified. "The first chord is strong, but the next chord doesn't add anything." It may even be necessary that there must be a weakness in the "something"? Then the composition functions as if it were the solution to a problem. The moment you have reconciled yourself as a composer with that basic material, you have accepted and adopted it, you have decided that it is valuable, then you can decide to work with it and develop it into a composition.

A few bars alone do not make a complete piece. The raw material requires further development: what are the consequences, which direction do you take? After the "something" always comes the question: what is next?