

HEARING PHANTOMS IN THE DESERT

By 1888, some claim that Australia, with a population of only 3,000,000, had become home to 700,000 pianos. These hefty instruments were not used solely for entertainment, however. With keys clacking across the oceans and over vast swaths of country, they became symbols of cultural supremacy throughout a continent that most colonists considered cultureless, despite indigenous Australians' presence there for tens of thousands of years.

Erkki Veltheim's *Telegraph: Two New Proposals for an Overland Telegraph Line from Port Darwin to Port Augusta, from the Perspective of Alice Springs* is inspired by what could be called the "camel piano." It refers to the legend that the upright piano at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, located roughly at Australia's geographic center, travelled nearly 500 kilometers across the desert on a camel's back. The story may be apocryphal; it may be true. The nearly hour-long piece, written for a detuned colonial or grand piano and electronics, creates space for both possibilities. Throughout its duration, the sounds of the camel as well as the piano which is still in Alice Springs both do and do not exist, just as the piano played by pianist Gabriella Smart resounds in concert with unpredictable, even unknowable, sounds arising from each venue's acoustics. Akin to the hallucinogenic experiences which non-indigenous Australians can have when traversing long distances across what they perceive as an unchanging interior, *Telegraph* creates a Rorschach test onto which listeners project their fantasies and dissolves any sense of truth or clarity for its audience.

In the piece, the pianist repeats a two-note phrase 70 times. Both notes were chosen by turning the 85-key Alice Springs piano into a geographic metaphor that represents the Overland Telegraph Line between Port Augusta and Port Darwin, the distance of which in kilometers is roughly equal to the range in Hertz playable on this shortened piano. By using two mathematical formulations, Alice Springs exists at both Eb4 and A6 on this imaginary map, which further complicates notions of fact and certainty.

The rhythm of these repeated notes represents another line, too: a Twitter post. Translated into Morse code by Veltheim, the post—"If only Bradley's arm was longer. Best photo ever. #oscars"—was the most retweeted tweet as reported on 13 January, 2015. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres first posted it on 3 March, 2014, accompanied by an image of 12 smiling celebrities who came together for a mass selfie during the Academy Awards ceremony. Taking narcissism to the extreme, they collectively ask the world to look again and again at this meaningless message as they continue looking at their own faces until the image fills as many screens as possible.

Unlike tweets, Morse code messages were repeated by necessity at telegraph stations located between senders and receivers. Just as the piano brought a sense of "home" to the British in Australia, the telegraph lines fulfilled the desire held by many colonists to be brought metaphysically closer to England. In addition, these messages put at a distance the perceived silence and emptiness that surrounded them, an iteration of which Veltheim creates with his score. But in the 21st century, social media has propelled the sense of existential dread that manifests itself as a need to speak and be heard to a point of absurdity.

The ease with which people post on social media, and do so without limit, fulfills Jean Baudrillard's observation in *The Ecstasy of Communication* that the drive to communicate has become pornographic. This dilemma finds people asking themselves, unconsciously, "If I'm not tweeting, sending a Facebook message, or uploading an image to Instagram, do I exist at all?"

The urge to fill any void has consequences beyond one's control, as Veltheim illustrates by leading audiences towards a total cacophony that takes sound beyond perception. At first the piece seems relatable, with the rhythm of the piano discernible amidst flashes of noise. But after about 35 minutes, the structure begins to disappear. The electronics raise the suggestion that what we hear exists on an ever-expanding plain which seems as if it cannot continue stretching and yet somehow does, morphing at a slow enough pace that the changes cannot be understood or even perceived.

The confusion and sense of feeling overwhelmed that this journey engenders can only arise through overstimulation sustained for a lengthy period of time. As with much ritualistic music from around the world as well as long-duration pieces by Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and others, *Telegraph* not just demands but compels a renunciation of the self and a submission to the ecstatic. The "I" of the listener disappears as the counterpoint of incessant repetition on the piano and unpredictable electronics rejects any foundation onto which a spectator might latch. The piece cannot be controlled by anyone—even Smart falls into a trance-like state regardless of how many times she performs it. Any attempts to do so would be acts of folly akin to those made by those Europeans who died on mapping expeditions of the Australian interior or the titular character of Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, who tried pulling a steamship through the Amazon in order to build an opera house in the jungle.

Near the end of the piece, the piano, though still playing, becomes enveloped by a barrage of sound with indiscernible boundaries and origins. A dense, arresting chord fills the air and persists long enough that it seems as if it will never end. Here, Veltheim appears to ask: If a camel can carry a piano through the Outback, why not a church organ, too, piece by piece? Or, even more extreme: What would it mean to bring together every instrument from one's home and play them simultaneously? In a way, isn't that what the colonists wanted, to fill the air with their noises and their noises alone, to commit as much violence as possible against both silence and the sounds of those already living in Australia to whom they refused their ears? *Telegraph* takes us to this logical conclusion of the colonists' project and challenges us to experience the chaos it engenders.

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