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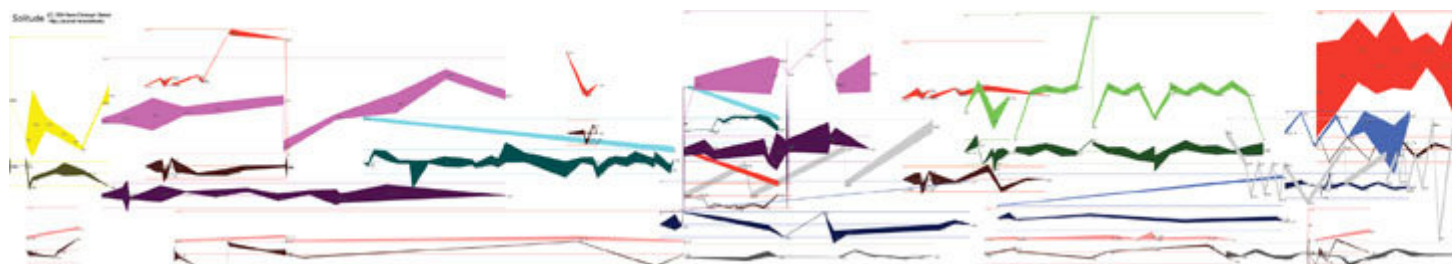
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Graphic Scores & Musical Post-Literacy

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What decides whether a notational form or system survives is its vitality

-Cornelius Cardew



Solitude by Hans Christoph Steiner

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In his comprehensive survey of the history of Western art music, Richard Taruskin raises the possibility that advances in electronic musical technologies have brought us to the cusp of a post-literate age—an age in which the creation, interpretation and preservation of musical compositions depend less and less on standard musical notation. Whether or not musical literacy has gone into eclipse, alternate forms of notation have become increasingly common over the past half-century or so. And while they may not have been designed with the end of standard notation in mind, they do seem to be compatible with, and conducive to, a post-literate musical practice.

Notating a score serves three basic functions: Expression of the composer's intention; instruction to allow the performer to realize the composer's intentions; preservation of the work for future realization. In essence, a score is a means of fixing and conveying information about selected properties of sound, to a certain approximation. These properties typically include pitch, duration, dynamics, articulation and so forth. From the point of view of the tradition of Western art music, representing these properties effectively entails a certain fluency in employing the standard musical notation that has developed since Guido D'Arezzo invented staff notation in the 11th century; interpreting the resulting scores in turn assumes a corresponding fluency in reading standard notation—a musical literacy, in other words. But increasingly, work is being created that doesn't require these skills, hence the suggestion that the current era is a post-literate one.

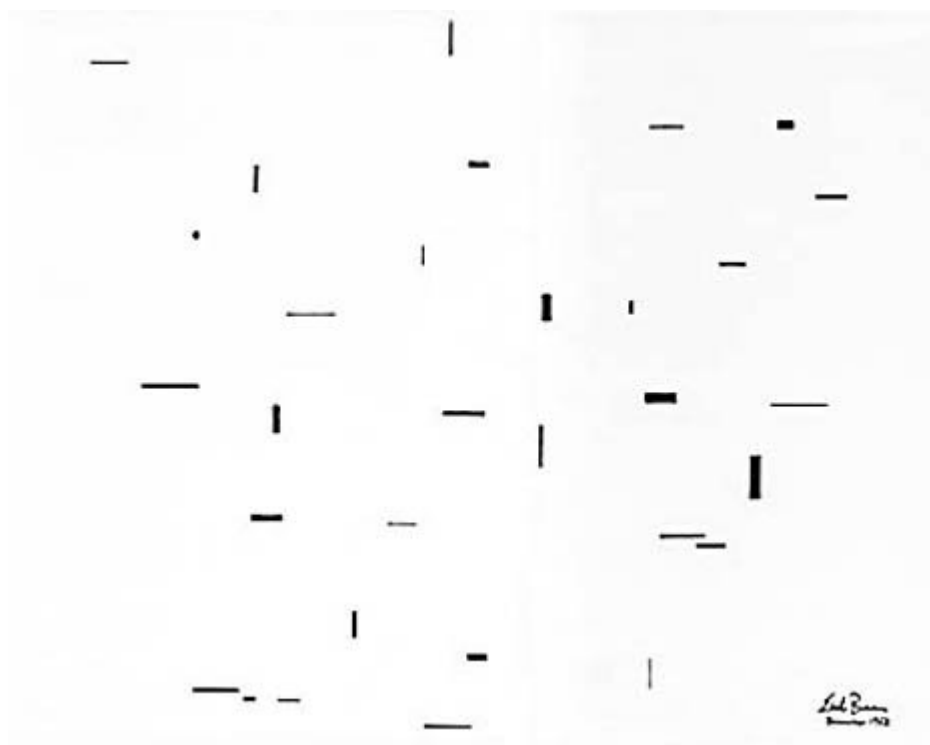
Renouncing standard notation doesn't necessarily mean renouncing notation; post-literacy doesn't mean illiteracy. At least since the early postwar period there has been a significant counter-tradition of exploring non-standard forms of notation that can fairly be characterized as post-literate in effect if not in original intent. Prominent within this counter-tradition is the graphic score.

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Graphic scores in the modern sense go back to the experiments of the New York School composers of the late 1940s-early 1950s. Earle Brown's *Folio and Four Systems* of 1952-1954 are landmarks in this regard: Unconventional scores that bear more of a resemblance to abstract paintings or lithographs—a very sparse Mondrian comes to mind at times—than they do to musical scores.

Brown's scores showed one way to represent sounds, gestures and various parameters of sound—whether defined or undefined—without using conventional symbols for notes, rests, bars and so forth on a five-line staff. To be sure, graphic scores could and did take many forms using many kinds of marks, some of which may take standard notation as a starting point—for example George Crumb's scores written out in circular staves, or Krzysztof Penderecki's use within the staff of symbols representing specific instances of extended string technique. More radical graphic scores, like Brown's, used undefined marks or symbols whose potential open-endedness or outright ambiguity allowed the performer to choose which aspect of the sound or performance they would signify. Perhaps the most striking example of this is Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*, an elegant 193-page work that looks rather more like a Robert Motherwell painting than a musical composition.

Paradoxically, Brown's *Folio and Four Systems* as well as other graphic scores from this same period—Morton Feldman's *Projection* series, made on graph paper, or John Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, based on star charts, to choose examples from Brown's fellow New York School composers—were created at a time when avant-garde composers in both Europe and the US were using serial techniques to extend ever more comprehensive control over a composition's various aspects. Graphic scores provided a kind of mirror image of this so-called integral serialism—a methodical inversion, as it were—in their leaving it up to the performer to supply the specific values for a range of musical variables. Brown, a composer with a background as a jazz trumpeter, described his own graphic scores as purporting to furnish a “creatively ambiguous stimulus” that a performer could interpret in any of a number of ways. In a sense the performer would complete the composition by filling in details of pitch, duration, dynamics and so on as hinted at by the score's visual features. But in order to do so effectively, the performer would have to come up with the appropriate interpretive strategy.

*December 1952* by Earle Brown

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Cardew described the interpretation of graphic scores as consisting in reading them “intuitively.” Intuition may entail many things, but as a strategy for interpreting graphic notation, intuitive interpretation might well rely on the performer’s ability or willingness to read marks and signs analogically—to see, e.g., rhythms suggested where marks on the score form regular patterns, or to see the lengths and shapes of lines or forms as indicating durations or the shapes of phrases. (Even to describe phrases as having shapes is to engage in an analogical manner of speaking about musical phenomena; analogical thinking may in fact be inevitable in the conveyance of musical information, graphically scored or not.)

Reading intuitively or analogically is, I would suggest, a post-literate skill or strategy for obtaining (or creating) meaning from a suitably composed text, particularly one embodying a significant degree of indeterminacy. Such a skill is post-literate because it does not presuppose anything more than a very basic knowledge of the interpretation of conventional scores. A rough but suggestive parallel: Imagine a written text that conveys information through the shapes and visual patterns of the letters on the page rather than through the ideas communicated by those letters when assembled into words and larger semantic units. Conventional reading skills wouldn’t come into play here; rather, other interpretive skills would be called for.

By the same token, the skills necessary for reading standard notation are not necessarily relevant to the interpretation of a graphic score. Much information ordinarily carried by a conventional score may be absent from a graphic score and in need of being supplied by the performer; the rapid reading, comprehension and precise realization of the composition in all of its details wouldn’t come into play, although a more general sense of the composer’s intentions may—or may not. Instead, the performer must inhabit something like a quasi-synaesthetic state and through a radical imaginative leap be able to “hear” what these shapes, lines and other marks might sound like, in the absence of the interpretive constraints imposed by standard conventions.

Given the interpretive strategies graphic scores elicit, it isn’t hard to understand the particular appeal these scores hold for experimental musicians. There is something intrinsically “experimental” about the interpretive leap many of them demand—a leap into a notational unknown, where the outcome is potentially unpredictable. But there is an extrinsic reason for the attraction as well. Many experimental musicians were formed outside of

traditional musical pedagogy and have come up in musical milieux with strong oral traditions, or those in which, functionally speaking, recordings have taken the place of scores. Nor would fluency in traditional musical notation seem to be especially relevant to experimentalists working with electronics. And yet a lack of fluency in traditional notation wouldn't be an obstacle to the interpretation of many varieties of graphic notation.



Friedman

from O.P.T.I.O.N.S. by Bruce

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By no means are all contemporary graphic scores suited to fully intuitive, post-literate interpretive strategies. Some seem as difficult to realize as the most complex conventional scores and thus as dependent on a foundation in specialized reading skills. *Scores** by Tina Davidson, Michael Maierhof, Takayuki Rai, Keren Rosenbaum, Jack W. Stamps, Kyon Mee Choi and others, for example, take fragmentary elements of standard notation and rearrange them into unexpected configurations or supplement them with verbal instructions and/or unconventional markings to produce visually arresting, provocative scores which still require rigor in reading and in realizing specific authorial intent. If these draw on post-literate interpretation it is by virtue of a post-literacy that presupposes advanced conventional literacy as its starting point.

But others, while still alluding to staves, clefs, articulation and dynamic markings, beams (with and without noteheads) and other symbols drawn from conventional notation, seem to function as did Brown's early graphic scores, that is, as stimuli for the performer's ingenuity or as enabling constraints on improvisation. Raven Chacon's "pictographic guides" were specifically created in order to help elicit improvised performances from chamber musicians unused to improvisation; Bruce Friedman's O.P.T.I.O.N.S. scores, modular assemblages consisting of symbols often alluding to elements of standard notation, are also meant for structuring improvisations (the acronym stands for Optional Parameters To Improvise Organized Nascent Sounds). Scores by Chris Chalfant, Ivan Vincz and Eoin O'Keeffe take a similar approach. For these scores, as

for the elegant graphic designs of John Kannenberg, Joe Pignato, Michael J. Schumacher, Vagn E. Olsson, Hans-Christoph Steiner and Henrik Colding-Jorgensen, one can see in the shapes they contain hints regarding phrase shape, duration and relative pitch, and play accordingly.

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Finally, to take up the idea stated in the epigram (and ironically so, given Cardew's later rejection of he called "graphic music"). Far from being a passing fad of the 1950s and 1960s, experiments with "creatively ambiguous" notation have given rise to a thriving counter-tradition. Graphic scores are again flourishing, or continuing to flourish, because they possess real value for performers and composers alike. While early forms of graphic notation weren't necessarily meant as a way to write for performers not fluent in standard notation, their value as an alternative kind of notation useful for just such performers seems something of a happy, if unintended, consequence. These early graphic scores and their successors could and do quite creatively convey musical information to performers—and composers—who have come up in a world in which traditional musical literacy is no longer a *sine qua non*. We can only expect these scores to become increasingly significant in a post-literate musical world.

*Examples of recent graphic scores come from *Notations 21*, a collection of graphic scores by contemporary composers edited by Theresa Sauer and published in 2009—forty years after the 1969 appearance of *Notations*, the classic volume of graphic scores collected by John Cage and Alison Knowles to benefit the Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts.

Cornelius Cardew: *Treatise* (1963-1967)
Performed by Syntax Ensemble

See the video : <https://youtu.be/JMzIXxlwuCs>

Photo on Current page by Barry Long/Eye in Hand

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