

ENCOUNTERS AFLOAT:

Interactions Established in *Afloat* (2014), by Paulo Guicheney

INTRODUCTION

Radio transmissions and recording technologies have been available in Brazil since the early twenties. However, it was not until the 1950s that Brazilian composers began using the methods of composition developed by Pierre Schaeffer and Karlheinz Stockhausen. This interest in music using electronics gradually grew throughout the second half of the twentieth century, albeit with some difficulties such as lack of funding. Works for instruments and electronics can now be found in the music catalogues of many Brazilian composers. One such piece is *Afloat* by Paulo Guicheney.¹

One of Guicheney's most recent pieces, *Afloat* was written in 2014 for the Brazilian pianist and Banff resident Luciane Cardassi. The piece is based on Sylvia Plath's poem *Two Views of a Cadaver Room* (1960), which in turn was inspired by Pieter Bruegel's 1562 painting *The Triumph of Death*. According to the composer, Plath's poem was essential for composing *Afloat*. He has said that it would have become a completely different piece had another poem been used. However, *Afloat* is not programmatic. Guicheney has described it as being not so much about the content of the poem itself, and more about working concepts such as Polyphony of Periodicity (the polyphonic interplay of different lines of periodical beats) and Tempo

¹ Paulo Guicheney, *Afloat*. Copy provided by the composer: 2014

Glissando (the gradual acceleration or deceleration of the tempo within a section of music) into the piece. It is also about integrating literature with music and using electronics to remove (or disguise) the traditional Equal Tuning of the piano. He sums this up by saying that *Afloat* is about Encounters Between Media – migrations between Bruegel (visual arts), Plath (poetry), and Music (piano and electronics).²

This article seeks to show how these themes and objectives are played out in *Afloat*, revealing various ways in which the piece establishes musical and extra-musical encounters. In writing this article I also seek to answer other minor, though in no way lesser, questions, such as: how were the electronic samples conceived? What materials are used for piano and for the electronic parts? How do these materials interact with (encounter) each other, the composer's repertoire, as well as with Plath's poem and Bruegel's painting?

I pursued the answers to these questions via email and Skype conversations with the composer, as well as through analysis of *Afloat* and other pieces considered major influences on Guicheney's musical style. In the opening two sections, I examine the composer and his piece *Afloat*, before turning in the final section to a discussion of how the piece establishes encounters within itself and with musical and extra-musical elements outside of it. I ultimately argue that the similarities between the musical elements, techniques, and musical gestures used in *Afloat* and their use by composers who have had an influence upon Guicheney create firm ties between his piece and western art. These connections can in turn showcase some of many ways in which globalization and technology have made it possible for artists to interact with each other beyond the barriers of time and distance.

² *Depoimentos Provocativos: a Metalinguagem no Ciberespaço*, Centro Integrado de Aprendizagem em Rede, Universidade Federal de Goiás, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxqEEgJxBBc&list=WL&index=46> Accessed 7 November 2017.

1. The composer and *Afloat*

A composition professor at the Federal University of Goiás, Brazil (UFG), Guicheney has composed music which has been performed throughout South America, in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. He has taught master classes in composition at *Conservatorio de las Rosas* in Mexico, and won a prize at the XVII Bienal de Música do Rio de Janeiro festival. He writes regularly for the poetry magazine *Mallarmargens*, as well as *Jornal Opção*. He is also the author of the book *Tempo de Atirar Pedras e Dançar* and is currently a doctoral student at *Universidade Nova* in Lisbon, Portugal.³

Guicheney treats *Afloat* as a duo, with both electronics and piano being equally important as individual instruments. The performance notes attached to the score require that the piano be tuned at the standard A=440 Hz. The reason for this is that the electronics part is tuned ¼-step higher. Although a staff is provided in the score for the electronics, the samples are notated simply as S1, S2, S3, and so on. These consist of pre-composed and pre-recorded samples, containing synthesized sounds produced using synthesizers such as the Korg Ms2000R, Casio CZ-5000, Roland SH-201, and the Moog MF-102 ring modulator. Guicheney also included other sounds used in the samples, such as recordings of Cardassi reading Sylvia Plath's poem, which were edited, processed, and integrated into the samples by the composer.

The structure of the piece is based on the Fibonacci sequence, albeit not strictly so. The piece, which has a total duration of 602 seconds (10'02"), is divided into seven sections. As is shown in Example 1, Guicheney discards numbers zero and one of the original Fibonacci

³ Bibliographical information provided by the composer.

sequence, and assigns a time duration to each of the seven subsequent numbers.⁴ However, rather than follow the precise length relationship as shown in the example, he altered the durations of each section, so as to avoid a mechanical organization of the piece.

Fibonacci Sequence use in the structure of <i>Afloat</i>							
Fibonacci Sequence	1	2	3	5	8	13	21
Precise Duration	10''	20''	30''	50''	80''	130''	210''
Duration Used	10''	28''	30''	61''	87''	160''	224''
Section Number	IV	I	VI	III	VII	II	V
Measure Number	44	1-3	102-103	24-43	104-114	4-23	45-101

Example 1: Use of the Fibonacci Sequence in the structure of *Afloat* (2014).

Besides altering the durations of the sections prior to composing the piece, Guicheney also organized the sections in an order different from that which would be obtained by the strict use of the Fibonacci sequence. As shown in Example 2, the sections of *Afloat* were organized so that the longest section is placed in the second half of the piece, rather than the end.

Structure of <i>Afloat</i>						
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
28''	160''	61''	10''	224''	30''	87''

Example 2: Structure of *Afloat* (2014).

2. Encounters

⁴ Although the structure of the piece was described to me by the composer via video chat, the durations described in the example were found based by my own analysis of the piece. As such, they are approximations, and may not correspond exactly to those of the schema originally used by the composer.

The encounters between *Afloat* and the works that have influenced Guicheney as a composer occur at various levels throughout the piece. The sections of the piece at which some of these encounters occur sometimes overlap. Nevertheless, I believe that discussing the encounters with each of the objects of inspiration will be more straightforward than attempting to discuss all the encounters that occur at any given moment of the piece.

2.1. Encounters within *Afloat*

Throughout *Afloat* there are many moments when encounters occur among the elements of the piece itself. Foremost among these is the interaction between piano and electronics, by way of which the listener's perception of the piano sounds is altered. This occurs as the result of the tuning difference between the two instruments, which in a sense removes the feeling of equal tuning (temperament) of the piano. The alteration of the piano sound can also occur in two other ways described by the composer: either the electronics will mimic the attack sound of the piano or the resonance.⁵ While the tuning alteration is present throughout the piece, the other interactions described may be clearly perceived in measure 1, shown in Example 3. As the pianist plays the harmonic indicated on the score, a simulation of the resulting resonance is heard coming from Sample 1. Rather than the expected decay of the piano sound, the listener hears a prolonged resonance, which increases in intensity and is transformed in a fashion reminiscent to the use of live electronics, so as to reveal the underlying properties of the note played.

⁵ All references to statements by Paulo Guicheney refer either to the interview *Depoimentos Provocativos: a Metalinguagem no Ciberespaço* referenced above or to the video chat with the composer, undertaken on November 11, 2017.

The image shows a musical score for a single measure. At the top, a tempo marking indicates a quarter note equals 54 (♩ = 54). Below this, there are three staves. The top staff is labeled 'Samples' and contains a circled 'SI' on a single note. The middle two staves are labeled 'Piano' and are in 7/4 time. The upper piano staff has a whole rest. The lower piano staff has a whole note with a circled 'o' above it. To the right of the piano staves, there is a text instruction: 'Play harmonic (ad lib) with the tip of your finger on the string.' Below the piano staves, there is a dynamic marking 'ff' and a tempo marking '8^{vb}' with a dashed line underneath. At the bottom, there is a 'Ped.' marking with a line underneath.

Example 3: Measure 1 of *Afloat*.

The encounters between piano and electronics can also be perceived in the rhythmic treatment of the clusters played on the piano and their simulated resonance in the samples. Here Guicheney applies a principle which he describes as Polyphony of Periodicities, by way of which the periodic pulsations in the piano and the electronic parts overlap each other, creating many voices, each beating at its own tempo. This Polyphony of Periodicities can be heard throughout section II and is accomplished in two ways. The first is by using tempo glissandi to desynchronize the pulsations of the piano and the sample, as shown in Example 4.⁶ In this example, both piano and electronics begin the section with constant pulsations at 54 bpm for every quarter note pulsation. The tempo for the piano part is then altered, making it out of synchronization with the electronics. The second is by creating a counterpoint of pulsations within the sample and juxtaposing that to the ever-altering pulsations of the piano part.

⁶ "Tempo glissandi" is a term used by the composer to describe the increasing or decreasing of the tempo of the pulsation in the piano part.

Example 4: measures 8-11 of *Afloat* – Tempo Glissandi.

2.2. Encounters Within Guicheney's *Oeuvre*

An exploration of Guicheney's catalogue of works for piano reveals encounters between *Afloat* and the rest of his work for piano. *Mer* (2012), which the composer considers to be one of his most important works, as well as *Illuminuras I. A Silent Fjord* (date not found) share characteristics in common with *Afloat*.⁷ All three have extra-musical sources of inspiration, and use of clusters to accentuate the percussive nature of the piano. *Mer* is inspired by the book *L'amant* (1984), by Marguerite Duras, from which Paulo Guicheney gets the titles for the movements of the work, and *Illuminuras I* is inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's *Le Bateau Ivre* (1871). Although the use of *sostenuto* pedal to make the overtones more clearly perceived is common to these three pieces, the percussive, pulsing nature of these pieces is claimed by the composer of these pieces as one of the most characteristic features of his music, as shown in Example 5. Notice also that *Illuminuras I*, shown in Example 5c, also makes use of the Tempo Glissandi used in *Afloat*.

⁷ Paulo Guicheney, *Illuminuras I. A Silent Fjord*. Score provided by the composer: date not found.
 _____, *Mer*. Score provided by the composer: 2012.

5a

S.

72

Pno.

72

f

5b

Do not accentuate the dashed bars.

Soft, like a timpani.

pp

(always without fca)

5c

$\text{♩} = 80$ → $\text{♩} = 100$

21 8

21 8

f

(Sost. - fca)

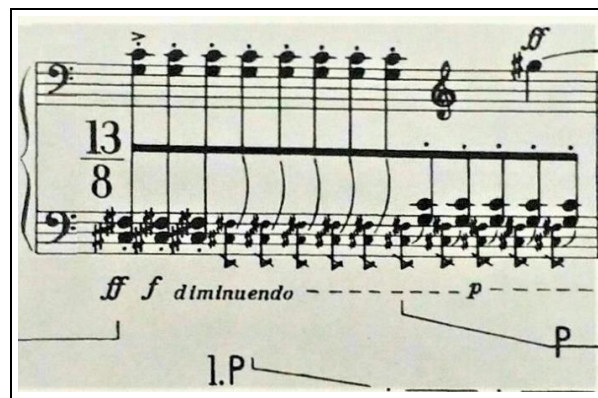
Examples 5a, 5b and 5c: mm 72 of *Afloat*, mm 1 of movement VI of *Mer*, and mm 21 of *Iluminuras I*, respectively.

2.3. Encounters with other composers

Although Guicheney did not quote any pieces by other composers in *Afloat*, it is striking how similar some elements of his piece are to those contained in works that inspire him as a composer. Cardassi has suggested that there is a resemblance between *Afloat* and Stockhausen's *Klavierstück IX*.⁸ According to Cardassi, Guicheney had not intended to pursue any resemblance

⁸ Luciane Cardassi, "Klavierstück IX de Karlheinz Stockhausen: estratégias de aprendizagem e performance," *Per Musi*. Escola de Música da UFMG: 2005.

with Stockhausen's piece, but was flattered by the comparison. One such moment of similarity can be seen in measure 51 of the latter piece, shown in Example 6. This excerpt shows what seems to be Stockhausen's attempt to break the mechanical repetition of the pulse using grace notes to generate a second, off-beat pulse, in a way reminiscent of Guicheney's *Poliphony of Periodicities*.



Example 6: Measure 51 of *Klavierstück IX*, by Karlheinz Stockhausen.⁹

Guicheney mentions yet another composer, Heitor Villa-Lobos, as being inspirational to him, particularly for the percussive quality of the piano in the series *Cirandas* (1925). However, the section of interest for this article, as far as encounters go, is more melodic than percussive in nature. Measures 74 and 75 of *Cirandas XIII*, which consist of an ascending diatonic scale played by the right hand, with a left-hand accompaniment of F3 and G3 (Example 7a) is strikingly similar in gesture to measures 102 to 103 of *Afloat* (Example 7b). The left hand plays C# and D# on varying octaves (the notes themselves remain the same), in accompaniment to the right-hand ascending double-note scale.

⁹ Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Klavierstück IX*. Universal Edition: 1961.

The image shows a musical score for Example 8, measures 50-53 of *Afloat* (2014) by Paulo Guicheney. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (S.) and a piano accompaniment (Pno.). The vocal line is mostly empty, with a few notes at the end. The piano accompaniment is a complex, rhythmic pattern of chords and notes, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic and ending with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score is marked with a 4/8 time signature and a 16-measure bar line.

Example 8: mm 50-53 of *Afloat* (2014), by Paulo Guicheney.

Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955-1956) and Luciano Berio's *Omaggio a Joyce* (1958) are two other pieces that are inspirational for Guicheney. His use of text in the section for electronics is reminiscent of these two pieces, thus establishing encounters with them, in that he edits and processes the recorded readings in a way that the text itself is unintelligible, save for a few significant words or phrases, such as "delicate," "on her blue satin skirts," and "foolish, delicate, in the lower right-hand corner." The pianist also speaks some of these words during the performance, in measures 27, 29, 31, 38, and 40, as if overflowing from the samples and creating encounters between computer and human, as well as between the past and the present. One such instance is shown in Example 9.

The image shows a musical score for Example 9, measure 27 of *Afloat* (2014) by Paulo Guicheney. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (S.) and a piano accompaniment (Pno.). The vocal line is empty. The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern of chords and notes, starting with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score is marked with a 2/16 time signature and a 16-measure bar line. The text "<<< afloat" is written above the piano part, and "(Sost. - æo)" is written below the piano part.

Example 9: mm 27 of *Afloat* (2014), by Paulo Guicheney.

2.4. Extra-musical Encounters

As has been mentioned, *Afloat* piece was not composed as a programmatic work. In fact, the only programmatic section of the piece is the introduction, which is designed to sound as three bell tolls. There are no bells in Plath's poem, because she focuses on the lower right-hand corner of Bruegel's painting. Guicheney looks to the opposite side of the painting, to the upper left-hand corner, to find two skeletal creatures ringing the town bells, as shown in Example 10. These are transcribed to the scores as shown above in Example 3.



Example 10: Edited image of *The Triumph of Death* (1562), by Pieter Bruegel, enlarging the images in the upper left and lower right-hand corners.¹¹

According to the composer, Plath's only influence on *Afloat* was thematic. Love's endurance, flourishing, or even impossibility in the face of death is a theme that is very dear to the composer. This insistent, maybe even harsh, endurance of love can possibly be perceived in

¹¹ Pieter Bruegel, *The Triumph of Death*. 1562.

the stubborn pulses described in previous sections of this article. The characteristics of Bruegel's Flemish lovers are certainly emphasized in Plath's words, spoken by the pianist, describing how one lover is "afloat" in the folds of the other's dress, while both remain "foolish, delicate," utterly unaware of the carnage around them. This encounter with the theme of love is present also in Marguerite Duras's words, which are used to name movement VI of Paulo Guicheney's *Mer*: "*Nous sommes des amants. Nous ne pouvons pas nous arrêter d'aimer*" (We are lovers. We cannot stop loving).¹² Love will flourish, even in the face of death and carnage. Yet as *Afloat* ends, we hear indistinguishable voices in the electronics part, and are reminded of Plath's words, chosen by the composer for the dedication section of the score – "These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long."

3. Conclusion

As we conclude this article, we see that *Afloat* not only achieves the composer's objective of establishing encounters. The piece establishes these connections at musical and extra-musical, conscious and unconscious levels.

Afloat marks encounters of parts within itself at a humanized mathematical level, by making free use of a would be strict mathematical principle (Fibonacci Sequence). But it also establishes encounters with composers and pieces that are important not only for Brazilian but also for American and European music. Although initially the connections of *Afloat* with the music of Villa-Lobos, Stockhausen and Berio seem to be related to inspiration and admiration, a closer analysis reveals that there are thematic materials and concepts that might have been subconsciously transferred to the music of the younger composer. In like manner, the piece

¹² This translation is my own.

connects with literary and visual media not only through thematic inspiration, but also in a singularly programmatic fashion, as in the case of the bell tolls, solemnly announcing the beginning of the piece.

Whether the encounters in *Afloat* happen consciously or unconsciously, they establish the piece's importance in Guicheney's catalogue of works. They incorporate elements that he has been working with for some time, alongside extra-musical topics that are dear to him as a person. However, this is not the sole importance of these encounters. They establish *Afloat* as the focal point of the musical elements used by composers such as Stockhausen, Berio, Reich and Villa-Lobos, who are central to Western twentieth- and twenty-first-century musical culture, as described in section two of this article. In *Afloat* Guicheney has consciously or unconsciously shown that all of Western art is connected and interacts, even if to the smallest extent. In fact, the words from John Donne's sixteenth century *Devotions* could very well have been written regarding this connection between *Afloat*, Guicheney, and Western art: "Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? [...] No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. [...] I am involved in mankind."¹³

¹³ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959.