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**To cite this article:** Zubin Kanga & Alexander Schubert (2016): Flaws in the Body and How We Work with Them: An Interview with Composer Alexander Schubert, Contemporary Music Review, DOI: [10.1080/07494467.2016.1258105](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2016.1258105)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2016.1258105>



Published online: 05 Dec 2016.



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# Flaws in the Body and How We Work with Them: An Interview with Composer Alexander Schubert

Zubin Kanga and Alexander Schubert

*This interview with Alexander Schubert, one of the most significant of the younger generation of German composers, examines his work as an innovator of new types of gesture-technology relationships. We begin by discussing his background, education and influences, and in particular his relationship to the peers discussed above. We then examine some specific questions about his use of video (both live and prerecorded) and the use of choreographed gestures. Finally, we discuss four key works which show three very different approaches to his use of gesture. Your Fox's a Dirty Gold for solo performer with voice, motion sensors, electric guitar, and live-electronics (2011) features a solo performer, singing and seeming to play electric guitar, although all the sounds are produced by the movement of sensors, rather than the instrument. Laplace Tiger for drum-kit, arm-sensor, live electronics, and live video (2009) shows the use of live video triggered by the drummer's gestures, amplifying while also transforming the audience's perceptions of these movements and the resultant sounds. Sensate Focus for electric guitar, bass clarinet, violin, percussion, live-electronics and animated light (2014) uses lighting to create the illusion that the ensemble on stage is a digital projection. And HELLO for any number of instruments, live-electronics and video (2014) uses a video of himself performing everyday tasks in his home, as both the graphic score and the 'conductor' for the ensemble.*

*Keywords:* Alexander Schubert; Zubin Kanga; Gesture; Technology; Video; Sensors; German; Composer

Alexander Schubert is one of the leading German composers to have emerged in recent years. He is also one of the most significant figures in an international generation of composers who draw on a variety of other artistic disciplines, technological trends, and popular culture to create a much wider definition of what live music can be. And importantly for this journal issue, the use of gesture and visual elements is a

fundamental aspect of his work as well as one of the most innovative aspects of his output. Schubert was born in 1979 in Bremen and studied bioinformatics in Leipzig and Multimedia Composition with Georg Hajdu and Manfred Stahnke in Hamburg. Since 2011, he has been a PhD student in Hamburg, and teaches live-electronics at the conservatory in Lübeck. Apart from working as a composer and solo musician, Schubert is also a founding member of several ensembles including Decoder. He has contributed to a variety of different projects as a musician, composer and programmer (for example Wiener Festwochen, Staatsoper Berlin, SWR), curated a festival for contemporary electronic music for several years, and runs the contemporary music label Ahornfelder. He is an organising member of the VAMH—a collective maintaining a broad network for contemporary music, and organising an annual two-week long festival.

He has received prizes and scholarships from ZKM, Giga-Hertz-Prize, Bourges, ICMC, NIME, JTTP, Darmstädter Ferienkurse and commissions from NDR, International Musikinstitut Darmstadt, Ensemble Resonanz, IRCAM, ZKM, HCMF, Kulturstiftung Hamburg, Piano Possible, and Ensemble Intégrales amongst others. His works have been performed by Ictus Ensemble, Nadar Ensemble, Ensemble Intégrales, Ensemble Mosaik, Piano Possible, and Decoder Ensemble in over 20 countries, including: IRCAM Paris, NIME Sydney, ICMC, ZKM, Darmstädter Ferienkurse, Steinhardt School New York, Essl Museum Wien, Deutschlandfunk Köln, SMC Porto, MDR, Wiener Festwochen, Komponistenforum Mittersill, TU Berlin, Kunsthalle Hamburg, Akousma Montreal, Klangwerkstage Hamburg, EMM Kansas, ARD Hörspieltage, Ljubljana, USA, England, Spain, Tunisia (Schubert, 2016).

In a recent blog post for Borealis Festival, later published by MusikTexte, Jennifer Walshe defined an approach common to many European composers which she calls the ‘New Discipline’. Composers of the New Discipline draw on ‘dance, theatre, film, video, visual art, installation, literature, stand-up comedy’ and which ‘invoke the extra-musical, which stimulate the non-cochlear’ (Walshe, 2016, p. 1). She lists the composers, James Saunders, Matthew Shlomowitz, Neele Hülcker, François Sarhan, Jessie Marino, Steven Takasugi, Natacha Diels, and herself, alongside Alexander Schubert as key figures of this movement. Although previous generations have had similar interdisciplinary movements such as Fluxus, Dada and the ‘music-theatre’ developed by Kagel, Walshe claims that the new generation exists in a different cultural landscape, post-MTV and post-YouTube, in which digital documentations can have a supremacy over live performances, and in which all music is now music-theatre (Walshe, 2016, p. 1).

As we will see below, Schubert considers himself related to, but not a core part of the movement defined by Walshe, but is sceptical of the usefulness of such a category that encompasses a wide variety of practices, as well as being suspicious of the ease with which such ‘schools’ or ‘collectives’ can be used for marketing and promotional purposes. In addition, he traces a different lineage, not through Kagel and the tradition of music-theatre but through his experience as a stage performer in rock, electronic, and improvising groups, and in his experiences in editing video. Nevertheless, he is one of the most successful young composers to combine music, theatre, technology, and film,

creating work that is comedic, horrific, immersive, and thrilling, putting him at the forefront of the trend Walshe has identified. Matthew Shlomowitz's assessment of Schubert's place in this scene is very apt, both within it and distinct from it.

The remit of New Music has moved on and broadened out in the twenty-first century. Composers such as Joanna Bailie, Michael Beil, Johannes Kreidler and Jennifer Walshe have created work that: engages popular and everyday culture; develops historical ideas from the visual arts (e.g. conceptualism); utilises technology to create new musical instruments; combines field recordings with music to form new relationships between music and the world; and, establishes a music-led interdisciplinary practice with multimedia and theatricalised works. Whilst evidently connected to each of these trends, Alexander Schubert's work is a distinctive voice within this milieu. (Shlomowitz, 2015)

This interview begins with a discussion of Schubert's educational background and influences, followed by a general discussion of his use of various technologies, such as motion sensors and video, as well as the importance of gestural choreography, before focussing on four key works, each utilising a different gesture–technology relationship.

## **On Education**

**Zubin Kanga:** Tell me about your background in composition and bioinformatics.

**Alexander Schubert:** I first studied bioinformatics with a focus on artificial intelligence. After that I worked for a year at a cultural institute at the ZKM at Karlsruhe and there I got in contact a bit more with academic electronic music. And after that I studied composition.

**ZK:** Were you ever involved in the popular music scene?

**AS:** In general, my whole background is from the 'popular music', but it's never been 'pop' music or singer-songwriting or things you could dance to. But it's also definitely never been in the academic or contemporary art scene. I've been performing and releasing albums but the concerts were always in clubs or in off-locations. So before I started studying composition, I was active in different performing and improvising groups. I was roughly 20 and from that time on it moved away from being a hobby to creating music with the aim to perform somewhere.

**ZK:** And when you started studying composition, did it allow you to bring all those elements in? Or did they want you to do a more rigorous, traditional compositional training?

**AS:** The studies I did in Hamburg were actually ideal. They didn't really try to force anything on me so much. During the first two semesters, I was trying to absorb the styles and the compositional techniques that were taught there. I was more influenced by that than bringing in my own things. But I studied composition with the aim of finding a new approach to the things I'd been doing before in a different way with the possibility to shape things, to notate things in a more clear way.

Over the last five or more years, I've constantly been taking different things from my past as materials for my work. I'm still trying to use elements I'm coming across in different music worlds that aren't contemporary music, like electronic music and techno music and all those genres which are part of my life but not typically the focus of contemporary music.

## On Influences

**ZK:** Let's move on to the people in contemporary music, and outside it, who influenced you. You previously mentioned people like Bernhard Lang and Fausto Romitelli and Luc Ferrari and all those composers who are, like you, looking outside of contemporary music for their inspiration and materials.<sup>1</sup>

**AS:** Indeed, even within the contemporary music world, I've been most drawn to people who also look for those links to other musical styles. But then again it's also broader than links to other musical styles.

If we look at, for example, Bernhard Lang's music, the formal aspect of how he on the one hand, reflects the use of media and compositional technique but also of the music performance scenario. Those are things that I find very interesting. Before I started composition, I had a much more intuitive approach, which I still try to use, but something has been added to that by examining the work of these composers.

**ZK:** A lot of those composers use cellular forms—it's all about forming mosaics rather than traditional development structures. But that's different from the other influences you mentioned: Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman and Radiohead. Those musicians are quite eclectic in how they deal with structure and also the importance of gesture and visual elements. Was the use of gesture by these other influences important?

**AS:** It's a good question. The whole gestural part in my music originally came from my experience of performance. So the first inspiration was improvised free-jazz, with a real energy on stage, as opposed to sitting behind your sheet music. This was really in-the-moment performing and you were articulating with your body and communicating with the audience, with the other musicians. And this energy, this will-to-perform and to bring across this intent was to me, the original starting point to work with those gestures and try to come up with technology or patches or with a concept for a piece that would allow that same energy. The beginning was not so much about theatre or performance-art, but more about the raw energy and expression of these musicians.

**ZK:** There are a lot of younger composers around Europe who have a similar obsession with gesture—do you feel an affinity with them and their music?

**AS:** Yes. Simon Steen-Andersen and Michael Beil are two people I feel close to and they're both touching a lot of similar topics. Working with the body, with body representation. Both play with stage scenarios. And there are also other people working in this field, but the reason I would choose those two, and maybe Matthew Shlomowitz and Jennifer Walshe: it's not purely about the conceptual approach, it's also to do with

the sensation behind it. Establishing a scene that allows a certain sensation or experience where it's not just broken down into an artificial conceptual approach.

**ZK:** It's a contrast with a lot of other contemporary music performance. A lot of the music is very energetic and visceral but that doesn't necessarily come across on stage.

**AS:** I think it's often the case. But then again, sometimes it doesn't make sense to force somebody to do it if he's not really wanting to do it or able to it. For those pieces it doesn't make sense for anybody to play them. You have to really feel comfortable, you should have a personal relationship to this sort of stage presence or willingness to perform. And I don't want to make a general statement that people should do it more, or that I'm often missing that. The traditional setup of the performer coming on stage, sitting down, opening the sheet music, playing, going off stage: I find this, at least for my own work, unsatisfying. Increasingly unsatisfying. I'm also aware that you can criticise that approach, saying 'do we always have to rely on something extra-musical? Does everything have to be visual?' And I can also understand that perspective but for me it's the area with the most potential to do something new.

**ZK:** Jennifer Walshe recently wrote an article calling this integration of theatre, dance, and film into music the New Discipline. Would you agree that it is a kind of school? Or do you think it's just a convenient grouping of composers who are doing quite different things?

**AS:** I've read that article. I don't mind if somebody wants to group us together like that. I don't really see this myself. There are groups of composers who actively work in a school or a composers' group—I don't really do this so much. I think it can be helpful or convenient to label in this way but it's also problematic when these labels are used to advertise or justify a composer's work.

## On Using Video

**ZK:** Let's discuss some of the different elements in your music. You use video in many ways. What does it add to your work?

**AS:** In general, the way I use video has changed over the time I've been composing. So beginning with *Weapon of Choice* and *Laplace Tiger*: those two pieces really fall into what I described before about working with gestures on stage, where the video was really about the ability for the musician to shape all the electronic elements and create an instrument which he can control. It empowers the performer to be able to control all the different elements and thus enlarge or augment the performance space or the action-radius of what a solo performer can do. It's picking up the movements of the performer and amplifying them.

After these works, I stopped working with video for a while because I found it very difficult to deal with the gap between the stage and the projection. I find this very problematic: having musicians on stage, and having a projection there and making a link between them. So for that reason I stopped working with it for a while, until *HELLO*, where I began a new approach. In *HELLO*, the initial idea was that, after having all the musicians on stage do something and it's translated into music, from gesture to music,

I wanted to have something that was the other way around. That was the fundamental idea of *HELLO*, using my gestures on the video as a conductor and as also the source of the material which is played by the musicians.

**ZK:** Are there particular people you drew upon from film or video art for your visual aesthetic?

**AS:** For filmmakers, maybe David Lynch. But for the last few pieces, I started leaving behind those sorts of artificial performance situations combining live musicians and film and shifting it to a form of piece where some sort of narration is happening or evolving out of something that appears to be a musical setup. That approach is becoming more and more interesting for me. For the last few pieces, when I started working, I imagined myself as consequent to Michael Beil, for both *HELLO* and *Star Me Kitten*, but after a while I get bored or judgmental about what I've setup and other things happen.

**ZK:** You want to break that relationship that you've setup?

**AS:** Yes. And those things I don't really plan. Like I said before, there is a balance between some formal aspects and how I can break them. But it also runs quite freely and I'm often surprised where it eventually goes from the starting point.

### On the Choreography of Gestures

**ZK:** Can we talk generally about gesture and its role in your scores? You often notate gestures very specifically. How do you formulate this notation, and do you work with performers to hone the notation or resulting gesture? What's the relationship between these visual gestures and the sonic structure of the piece?

**AS:** I think it's always a bit different from piece to piece what the relationship is. In *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold*, I treat them as equal components. But within a piece, there are certain passages where the focus shifts. Sometimes the actions determine the musical outcome and sometimes it's also the other way around, and sometimes the gestures are really a choreography that goes alongside the music. So it's often shifting between those approaches.

**ZK:** Could one look at one of your pieces and say there's a choreographic structure independent of the sound? Can you take away the sound from *Your Fox* or *Laplace Tiger* or *Weapon of Choice*, and there still be a coherent structure to the visual gestures?

**AS:** To a certain degree. For example, I would look at *Your Fox*. There is certainly a development there. Starting from a gestural code of rock music, then there's this longer, more quiet section in the middle where she slows down and turns into a puppet or really gets much more mechanical, where you question what you saw before, the super-expressive codes of rock music.

**ZK:** The hand in the air ... The guitar feedback ...

**AS:** And then again the whole thing with the guitar feedback which is super-stylised or super-artificial because the whole thing is not actually producing feedback. It's all sensor based and fake. In this piece you can see this evolution or interplay between

really working with these different kinds of expressive gestures that are also believable and related to memories of other performances.

**ZK:** How much do you use this visual vocabulary, particularly the rock star stances. How much do you use that in other pieces? Like the drumming clichés in *Laplace Tiger*, with drummers throwing their hands in the air?

**AS:** Of course in *Laplace Tiger* we have a rock drummer thing. But it was also about the freedom to hit the drum to do an acoustic sound and then do something in the air to control the electronics. So between those there's a lot of performative freedom. While with *Fox* and *Point Ones*, I was focusing more on the gestural codes: for the conductor in *Point Ones* and the guitarist in *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold*.

**ZK:** Because you have all these other elements, how important is the sonic structure? Sometimes it seems like you have very carefully crafted rhythms or timings in a time-space score, but you don't have any notated harmony, and often you don't even have any pitch material.

**AS:** That's a special approach in *Weapon of Choice*, *Laplace Tiger* and to some extent in *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold*. In all the other pieces there is pitch notation. The most extreme one is *Weapon of Choice* where the whole harmonic side is neglected, where it's really about the noises rather than about harmonic evolution. *Laplace Tiger* is for drum kit so there's not much pitch information there and in *Your Fox*, it's an inter-play between notated pitched sounds and less specific notation. With all the semi-improvised scores, it's of course also dangerous—how much freedom do you leave to the performer? I've done a lot of different grades of how much improvisation I use. I especially used it for the first sensor-based pieces and there the reason was to try and come up with a frame that wouldn't limit the performer too much, to give too many restraints by notating it too precisely. That's the reason I left the scores to those pieces very open.

**ZK:** Would it produce too much of a 'classical' performance style if it was precisely notated. Too controlled? Whereas you wanted a performance style closer to a rock concert ...

**AS:** Exactly. Where it's really about the performer on stage that they make it their thing in that moment. And to make the whole situation believable, particularly the play with the sensors, so that it's not, 'I'm playing the piece and then sometimes I'm playing the electronics'.

### On Working with Performers

**ZK:** How closely do you work with performers? Do you adjust what they're doing? Or do you leave it to them?

**AS:** I used to try and always be there with the performers but with an increasing number of performances it's getting more and more difficult to do that. One advantage of the gestural base and the use of gestural controllers is the possibility to let the musician interpret these in an individual way. With fixed media this is much less possible. So with that in mind I am extremely happy if someone else brings their own ideas or



approach and if that is different from what I have conceived, but also convincing, then that's the best thing that can happen. So I only correct it if there's any fundamental concepts or ideas or things that might be counter-productive to the evolution of the piece.

**ZK:** Are the corrections in the form of getting them to loosen up and not be too constricted by the technology?

**AS:** That's very often the case. It's actually never that somebody's doing too much or using the system too much. I think that never really happens. You need to develop the playing techniques and use of sensors together so that the performer can rely on the system to work and that it becomes some part of you, or at least you feel related to it, so that they don't feel so shy and intimidated by it, and can push it as far as possible.

But there might also be particular aspects of the the performers' approach to gesture that I want to focus on. Some of the newer pieces about gesture are about an artificial, digital representation of a body. That is something that always needs some work, where the movements are not supposed to play anything but really become fixed start and end points, which feel very artificial for a musician. And there's sometimes a process of transformation that requires work. For example, in *Point Ones*, the conductor's gestures go from traditional conducting movements to almost robotic movements, where he's falsely giving cues to the musicians and where the whole system isn't working anymore, and the process of making this understandable is a big part of the rehearsal process.

**ZK:** How closely are your collaborators involved in your creative process? Do you conceive the whole piece yourself before taking it to them? Or do they influence your process and you calibrate your works to the performers?

**AS:** If it's a new piece, in many cases I work with them throughout the process, but I'm also trying out those things myself. When I wrote *Laplace Tiger*, I had a drum kit for a month, and when I wrote *Weapon of Choice*, I had a violin so my typical working process for those things is often a back and forth between working on the technology and writing the patches and coming up with small, musical interaction modules and then recording these on videos, coming up with a library of different interaction concepts or scenes, and then starting to piece those things together. For a lot of those pieces, even for *Your Fox* where you have a singer, I include them in the process but I was finished with the piece and had a whole recording of myself with the voice and video already prepared.

Still, working with the musicians is extremely important, certainly in preparations for performance. Even though I notate everything in detail there are a lot of open questions. In *Sensate Focus*, for example, there were a lot of questions during the rehearsal, from the ensemble but also from [co-Artistic Directors] Joanna [Baillie] and Matthew [Shlomowitz] who really brought themselves into the process. Which was really useful.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes you also realise, there's more left to interpret than you might first think. There are many more ways to approach the material.

**ZK:** Are there any particular performers who you like to work with, perhaps because they understand your process and the visual elements and your aesthetic?

**AS:** There's Decoder Ensemble that I'm part of. Obviously they are extremely well prepared for performances and have performed almost all of my pieces now. For the solo pieces: Frauke Aulbert for *Your Fox* and Jonathan Shapiro for *Laplace Tiger* are in the ensemble. This is the closest group I work with.

**Featured Work: *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold* (2011)**

*Your Fox's a Dirty Gold* is written for a solo performer, who sings and appears to play the guitar, although all the sounds are produced by a Max patch responding to sensors on the performer's hands. The abstraction of instrumental playing techniques—creating sounds from the performance movements, but not the actual instrument—makes this a particularly interesting case study in Schubert's approach to gesture. Our discussion below examines the technical and compositional process, as well as his interest in the gestural codes of rock guitarists. A photo of a performance in action is shown in [Figure 1](#).

**ZK:** What does the title, 'Your Fox's a Dirty Gold', refer to?

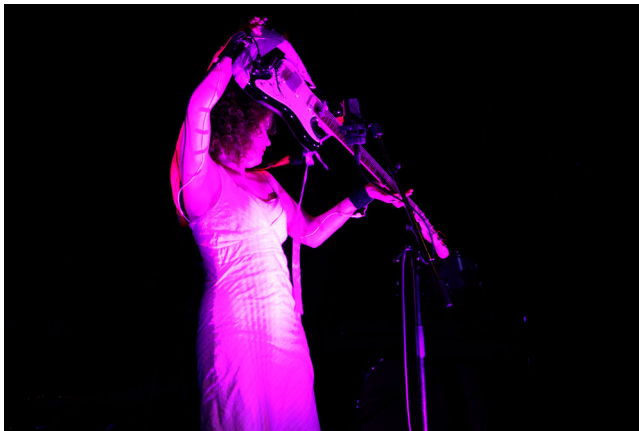
**AS:** I find it difficult to put it into words. It's a strange love song, maybe in an abusive relationship with fox really meaning 'fuck'. Desire with a downside to it.

**ZK:** You use the guitar as a controller, rather than using a guitar sound. So as mentioned earlier it goes into MIDI and outputs an artificial sound?

**AS:** Absolutely, so those sounds of the guitar are never heard in the piece.

**ZK:** So why were you keen to have this abstraction between what she's doing on stage, and the resulting sound?

**AS:** The choice of the guitar controller was about pushing the gestural performance of the hands a step further to reflect on how artificial the whole concept is. Taking those



**Figure 1** Performance of *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold*. Photo by Gerhard Kühne and reproduced with his permission.

codes from rock music seriously, but at a certain point making it very obvious how arbitrary they are, allowing them to crumble and lose their meaning. Especially at the beginning of the piece, those gestures are believable and have a certain energy or power and it happens step by step that it becomes more obvious how constructed this performance scenario is.

There's the whole feedback section which is taking these wild rock-guitar performance codes to the maximum. Where you have that in real life you have a real aggression to the performance, but there's something very abstract about it here. And you also have the guitar solo where she appears to play the solo but the range of the notes being played have no relation to how it would sound on a guitar and go below and above the guitar's normal range.

On why I used the guitar: first of all the guitar was not part of the original idea of the piece. I wanted to do a piece with sensors and singer after having done two pieces with instruments and sensors and I wanted to create something where the hands are free, where there is no musical need to work the hands. And I thought this is actually a great task because now I can really control everything I want to control very precisely without having to move them to play the violin or something. But that led to a point where I asked myself, 'why is she doing this onstage?'. It was lacking a motivation to fumble around in the air with her arms. It was unsatisfying to do it for technology's sake. This is where the rock performance trope that involved the guitar came into play in order to create a basic setup from which I could work. I think this is something that applies for every piece that I write. If you take *Star Me Kitten*, you have a person standing there because it's a powerpoint presentation. I'm always looking for a scenario I can establish and then work with and see what I can take apart.

**ZK:** So are you creating a character on stage? Because they have a text as well which is an angry punk rock text. But it's not necessarily a theatre piece, even though she is a type of character, or is she?

**AS:** She is definitely a sort of character. I don't know if I planned that ahead—it was something that happened as the piece developed.

**ZK:** Is it the result of the performer's input?

**AS:** To a certain degree it is, but also the piece has quite a wide range of freedom to it. But you couldn't change the atmosphere of the piece—it imposes a character on you. You have to jump into it otherwise it's not believable and it's not going to work.

**ZK:** Is there a model of someone else who writes lyrics in this way: perhaps the Riot Grrrl early 90s bands or punk rock or even earlier?<sup>3</sup> Is there anyone in particular you were trying to evoke?

**AS:** Not so much, I didn't have anyone particular in mind. It has this punk/new wave feel to it, which is obvious, but I didn't have anyone particular in mind. One of the key aspects is switching between more aggressive and more vulnerable parts, with this cycle playing out as you come back to the chorus.

**ZK:** And that's a very prominent trope in those genres. Going between those two extremes—with the distortion pedal on and then not.

**AS:** That's right, turning on the distortion on the guitars for the chorus.

**Featured Work: *Laplace Tiger* (2009)**

In *Laplace Tiger*, the gestures of a drummer are picked up by hand sensors, which then control the electronics and live video. A particularly interesting feature is the use of parallel graphic and text scores—both detailed, and yet both allowing great freedom for the performer to improvise freely within constraints. The opening of both scores is shown below (Figures 2 and 3).

In our interview, we discussed the performer's range of input, the calibration of sensors to encourage a wilder performance and the balance between direct mapping and the abstract interactions between gesture and video.

**ZK:** How does the live video work?

**AS:** It is a similar approach to *Weapon of Choice* but the processing is much more abstract. There's a camera integrated into the drum kit, recording the movements of the player. Based on each cue and also based on the movements of the player, the video image transforms the process. There are several moments in the piece where you can observe a direct influence, but it's generally much more abstract.

**ZK:** So you talked a bit before about video being about enlarging the performer's gestures. It's doing that, but it's also playing against the performer's gestures by transforming them to produce a very different kind of visual output.

**AS:** That's right, it used to be much more direct, as in *Weapon of Choice*, with this enlarging of the gestures. I still see it in *Laplace Tiger*, but for certain sections those movements turn into really abstract geometric planes. So in this case it's not so much about the direct amplification of the gesture but it's still under the control of the player and his ability to shape the video using his gestures.

**ZK:** In the score, you say the sensors need strong movements to trigger the live video. So to what extent did you choose the calibration to encourage the performer to make bigger movements? How closely did you work with the performer to work out exactly how strong those movements needed to be?

**AS:** It is actually always the first step when working on those things and always a crucial step. It's exactly as you're saying: it's not sufficient to just do a tiny movement to get the sounds. You also want to set the threshold so that the performer can play the drum kit as violently as they want without accidentally triggering it. So determining those thresholds has a direct influence on what the performance looks like. I found it interesting to come up with a control interface that would encourage the performer to give full energy to make it work. It's interesting how you can programme the performance qualities you're looking for into the patches.

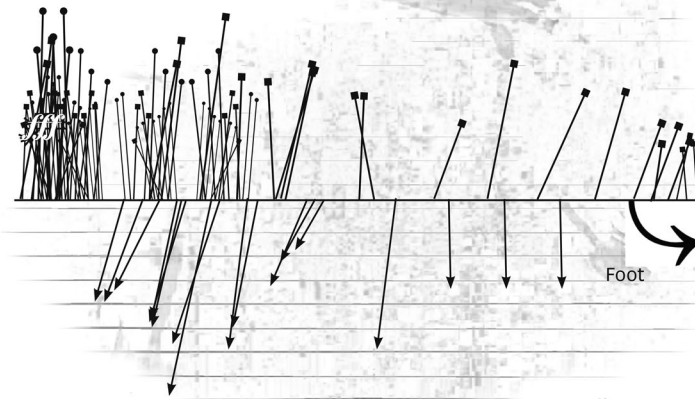
**ZK:** Does that need to be calibrated for each new performer?

**AS:** Yes, but I try to make it one main sensitivity threshold which then calculates down to the others. So it's not super complicated—at the beginning you need to just set it and start playing. One other thing is getting the movements right, because it relies on a lot of artificial movements which are very different from normal playing techniques, which has some advantages. For example, if you play with a loose wrist you

## 7. Shreds IIa

**48** (30")  
shreds

same as first shred part (cue 11), but not so long.  
Start really dense and rapid - but then get sparse pretty quickly, deconstruct a rhythm.  
At the end only single hits.  
Then samll crescendo leading to next cue.



## Jazz-Subsequences II

**49** (5")  
slow, steady  
jazzy

**50** (5")  
slow, steady  
jazzy

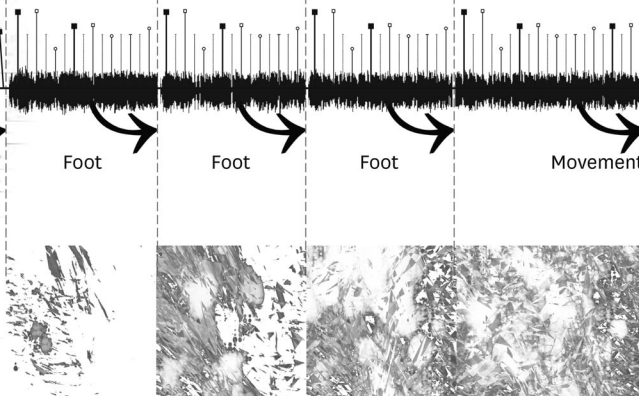
**51** (5")  
slow, steady  
jazzy

**52** (5")  
slow, steady  
jazzy

Contrast to previous material: steady jazz rhythm, constant ride-cymbal, clichéed  
change rhythm a little for each cue. Always hit cymbal simultaneously when pressing foot switch

*mp*

After starting the 4th tape/  
loop the setup is prepared to  
jump to the next part with a  
strong hit/movement



**Figure 2** Excerpt of graphic score of *Laplace Tiger*. Reproduced with the permission of Alexander Schubert.

7. SHREDS II				
Hardcore Jazz – movements to electronic sounds	48		1'20"	Left arm movement trigger piano chords, right arm movement triggers electronic sounds. Bass drum is amplified a lot; each instrument hit is assigned to a random „click and cut“ sound
		FOOT		Start with a really fast complex beat (starting with double bass). Repeat once or twice, then fragment it to pieces with more and more pauses. Use the elements individually too – separated. Go back to a much slower beat with the repetition of the beat always being delayed and the notes come later than expected. Build this up from the individual notes – but let it remain far from a steady beat, rather try to create the expectation of a beat.
8. LOOP INTERLUDE				
4' Hold Buffer	49	FOOT	*	Trigger 4 looping and tapes with footswitch.
	50	FOOT		Do this simultaneously with hitting „bell part“ of hi-hat and cymbals, racks and sticks only (mp)
	51	FOOT		
	52	MOV		Trigger the tapes and loops gently then immediately start playing a fast but rather silent rhythm, repeat in variations 4 times
				After starting the 4th tape/loop the setup is prepared to jump to the next part with a strong hit/movement

**Figure 3** Excerpt of table version of *Laplace Tiger*. Reproduced with the permission of Alexander Schubert.

can play as hard as you want without triggering. Once you make the wrist a bit stiff, then the force transferred to the sensors is much stronger.

**ZK:** We've spoken a bit about notation, but this one is really interesting because you have two scores. You have this table score as well as a graphic score. And I think you say that the table score is more useful for the performer, but the graphic score's also very interesting.

**AS:** Yeah, it's interesting for this one. The table score is really useful in a performance situation because it's really condensed information and very neutral. While the graphic notation also includes the video parts and I tried to come up with a score that was more expressive and pleasing to look at rather than a table. So it's more to inspire the performer while the other one is super-practical.

**ZK:** So did you then need to workshop these scores with the performer to get the effect you wanted within each of those cells or did you leave it to them to interpret?

**AS:** There's quite a lot of freedom and with the original percussionist, we also workshoped this for some time too. I'm interested in what their approach is, what their ideas are and trying to take as much as possible from them into the piece. But there's quite a lot of room for a personal approach and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

### Featured Work: *Sensate Focus* (2014)

*Sensate Focus* is composed for four performers: electric guitar, bass clarinet, percussion, violin alongside live-electronics and animated light. It was commissioned by Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and premiered by Ensemble Plus-Minus in 2014. **Figure 4** is a screenshot of the ensemble onstage.

The work is particularly fascinating for the way it uses the synchronisation of lighting, gesture and sound to make the performers look like digital projections. Our discussion focused around the influence of video editing on the stage scenario.

**ZK:** In *Sensate Focus*, the lighting is the key. Can you explain how this works?

**AS:** In *Sensate Focus*, the light controls are fixed. The piece is performed with a click so the processing and the lights are synchronised with the musicians. Very straightforward.



**Figure 4** Photo of Ensemble Plus-Minus performing *Sensate Focus*. Photo by Gerhard Kühne and reproduced with his permission.

**ZK:** What was the purpose of lighting the performers individually? Was it influenced by the way lighting is done in theatre? Or is it about highlighting and subverting the conventions of how ensembles are setup and perform on stage?

**AS:** The main influence was performance art that uses visual projection and lights on stage, as well as contemporary dance. The reason why we used that light setup was to highlight the performers' gestures. But there's also a lot artificial movements in the piece—the musicians are presented like short video clips. It has a very digital feel to it. You see a short clip of somebody doing this, a short clip of somebody doing something else, so you look at it as if you're looking at it in a video editing programme—it doesn't feel like a real person on stage, but more like a digital, video representation of something that's happening on stage. The way the lighting is used in the piece is a bit like sampling. It's about spotlighting a particular gesture and taking samples at different points and then using them in different combinations. Sampling in real time, taking a certain snapshot of a continuous presence. It depicts the way we can take the body and use it for a purpose, send it out, copy and paste our image online. I wanted to make this possible in a performance on stage.

The previous pieces were much more about the expressiveness of the performers. Coming up with tools that let them interact with the electronics. Here it's about the human at the service of the machine. The digital representation of them, and taking that one step further—the way they move has a robotic, mechanical feel to it. It's working with snippets of movements to arrange and edit.

There's a tension between the machine-like aspect and having a live performer on stage. It's not just about how it's presented but also about the inability of the performers to keep up with this mechanical approach, in particular, the section which starts with 110 bpm and going up to 199 bpm. So it's also about trying to show how



impossible it is for them to keep up with the scenario. This is another aspect that interested me when working on this piece—it shows the flaws in the body and how we work with them and how it is impossible to fulfil all the demands we put on it. I think it's quite beautiful in revealing these flaws.

**ZK:** Has it been performed by anyone else besides Plus-Minus?

**AS:** Yes, it has recently been performed by Decoder Ensemble. This is interesting because we don't have a guitarist—we have an electronic zither. And we have a cellist, rather than a violinist, which he plays standing up, which was interesting. They suggested the instruments and I was amazed at how adaptable the setup actually is. Very pleasantly surprised. Ensemble Vortex also did a version, and there are other interpretations on the way.

**ZK:** Is the work more concerned with the visual aspect of the four musicians rather than the sounds of the instruments? Did you re-notate the work for these different instrumentations?

**AS:** The zither can play everything the guitar can play so that wasn't complicated. And for the cello, she transposed just a few high notes. For other pieces it would be much more problematic, but for this combination it works.

**Featured Work: *HELLO* (2014)**

*HELLO*, commissioned by the Quasar Saxophone Quartet in 2014, is composed for a flexible group of instruments, live-electronics and video. A video of Schubert performing various activities at home—playing instruments, eating, making hand gestures to



**Figure 5** Photograph of Decoder Ensemble's performance of *HELLO*. Photo by Gerhard Kühne, reproduced with his permission.



the camera—is synced with the score. Figure 5 shows a screen shot of the video; Figure 6 shows the opening of the score.

The performers choose sounds to match each of the gestures on the film, creating a precise mapping between visual gestures and sound. The premise is complicated by later scenes where Schubert leaves his house to prank call his neighbours, is seen editing and uploading the video for *HELLO* and gives a short interview, creating a commentary within the work on its own process of creation.

**ZK:** The video is a graphic score, and even though you've notated a written score, you state that the video takes precedence in terms of the types of gestures the performers choose to play. Do you need to talk to the musicians about the type of material they choose, which will work with each moment in the video?

**AS:** In the notation there's a lot of freedom but there needs to be a strong aesthetic coherence to the gestures. It's not about the type of sound but about the quality of the gesture. Certain instruments need a particular type of energy or density, which needs to be workshopped in rehearsals, and the quality of the sound needs to be adjusted too. But in my experience, the musicians were very creatively engaged and brought many good ideas to the rehearsals.

**ZK:** And it seems like the direct relationship between sound and an accompanying gesture is quite similar to the *Letter Pieces* of Matt Shlomowitz.

**AS:** I was aware of those pieces, but while working on this piece I wasn't worrying about the approaches of Matt Shlomowitz or Michael Beil, although they both influenced me to go in this direction. It was a cumulation of ideas—it was already there in *Point Ones*, which is focussed around the conductor's gestures, developing how conducting and artificial conducting movements can be interpreted by electronic sound and visuals, so *HELLO* was an obvious next step for me.

The figure displays two staves of musical notation for a piece titled *HELLO*. The first staff begins at measure 35 and contains a 'DELAY' box above the notation. The second staff begins at measure 43 and contains a 'REV' box above the notation. Both staves feature a series of hand-drawn gestures below the notes, including wavy lines, hand icons, and abstract shapes. The notation includes various time signatures such as 3/8, 2/4, 3/4, 5/8, and 4/4. The first staff also includes a 'mf' dynamic marking and a 'gliss up' instruction. The gestures are drawn in a simple, sketchy style, often resembling hand-drawn letters or abstract shapes.

**Figure 6** Extract from score of *HELLO*. Reproduced with the permission of Alexander Schubert.

**ZK:** Why did you decide to have yourself in the video, as a kind of conductor? You could have filmed someone else so it's interesting that you chose to have yourself on screen.

**AS:** I think at first I did it for pragmatic reasons while working on the piece and trying out things at home. When working on these sorts of pieces, I need the video at the same time as I'm notating it. So I can record different gestures I want to hear and record the video and edit them together as a way of starting. So it was just easier to do it myself and then I found it worked really well to keep it that way.

**ZK:** It's interesting that you perform the video at home. You're not on stage. It gives it a certain intimacy, and you say in the programme note that you're inviting the audience into your home and into your life.

**AS:** Again, it was for pragmatic reasons at first. I then recorded some footage in a clean studio space but felt it was losing something. At home with the furniture and props and the less polished recording quality, it had a certain character and energy and it was much less interesting when this was lost. So I stayed with my original approach and it developed a life of its own.

**ZK:** It certainly does. As the piece goes on, you have some narrative sequences, where you go out of your flat and go to your neighbour's house to prank call their doorbells and write graffiti before coming back. Is this used to break the relationship between you, the audience and the performers? To make it more into a narrative film for some time, before returning to your role as conductor?

**AS:** There's a balance between the conceptual side to the piece and the subjective, personal side to it. At first, I thought of making the piece very straightforward, where I would just make the conducting video and then I got bored by it and I tried to surprise myself and I needed a reason to continue the piece. This is the reason I continue to compose—I need to be able to surprise myself with every piece. I'm well aware of the theoretical context, about laying open the structure of the piece and the artificiality of creating these sorts of videos that go on youtube, and the way you present yourself and your work. I'm aware of those aspects, but it's more about a way to break through my own expectations and make it worthwhile for me to create.

**ZK:** There's something quite anarchic about it, and particularly provocative to put this in a contemporary classical piece.

**AS:** That is about bringing the personal into the work. For this moment, it's on the soft side, as the neighbours actually allowed us to do what we wanted. But yes there is also a political aspect to this passage too.

**ZK:** And then you have an interview at the end where you discuss how the piece is going to end. A lot of that has been coming up in cinema as well, where you don't just break the fourth wall but comment on the process of making the thing you're watching. Were you referencing anyone in particular in cinema or literature, or was it something you came up with independently?

**AS:** There's a Frank Zappa video where they're editing the music video they're working on. But that might not be the earliest or the most prominent example. But I had thought of this one when I was creating *HELLO*.

**ZK:** You have a warning in the score about how difficult it was to perform, even though it seems very simple. What were the specific difficulties?

**AS:** There are two fundamental steps. The first one is finding the right sounds. The instrumentalists need to each find their own sounds, and then they have to work as an ensemble, which needs to have the right energy and density as a whole. So it is a group effort from me and the performers, which is quite time consuming. And the second thing is that the progression of those gestures becomes very fast. It doesn't look that complicated but the speed that you have to change from one sound to the next is challenging and possibly difficult to read all the symbols and remember the precise sound for each. So it requires more rehearsal than a conventionally notated work. That line in the score is actually a result of feedback that the musicians gave me, to warn other performers, as they needed more time than was actually scheduled.

**ZK:** Is there any overarching idea that draws all these pieces together, or are they all of their own type?

**AS:** There are definitely concepts that link them all together. The approach to editing is definitely a recurring theme. And a lot of them are about scenarios that I am trying to create where it's about a total experience rather than just a musical experience. Extreme contrasts and unexpected twists are also recurring themes. And even for the works that don't have a visual aspect, the way I work with music has a gestural basis. Even small gestures take on an important role.

## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## **Funding**

This article is part of Zubin Kanga's post-doctoral research at the CTCL research centre at the University of the Côte d'Azur, within the GEMME project on Music and Gesture, supported by funds granted by the ANR (National Agency for Research, France).

## **Notes**

- [1] Schubert sent a list of influences to me during preliminary correspondence for the interview (Personal Communication with the author, 1 March 2016).
- [2] Joanna Baillie and Matthew Shlomowitz are the Artistic Directors of Ensemble Plus-Minus, which commissioned and premiered *Sensate Focus*.
- [3] Riot grrrl is an underground feminist hardcore punk movement that originally started in the early 1990s, in Washington, and the greater Pacific Northwest, noticeably in Olympia, Washington.

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