

September 4, 2007

# Seeing a Symphony on a Grid

By **KATE TAYLOR**  
*Staff Reporter of the Sun*

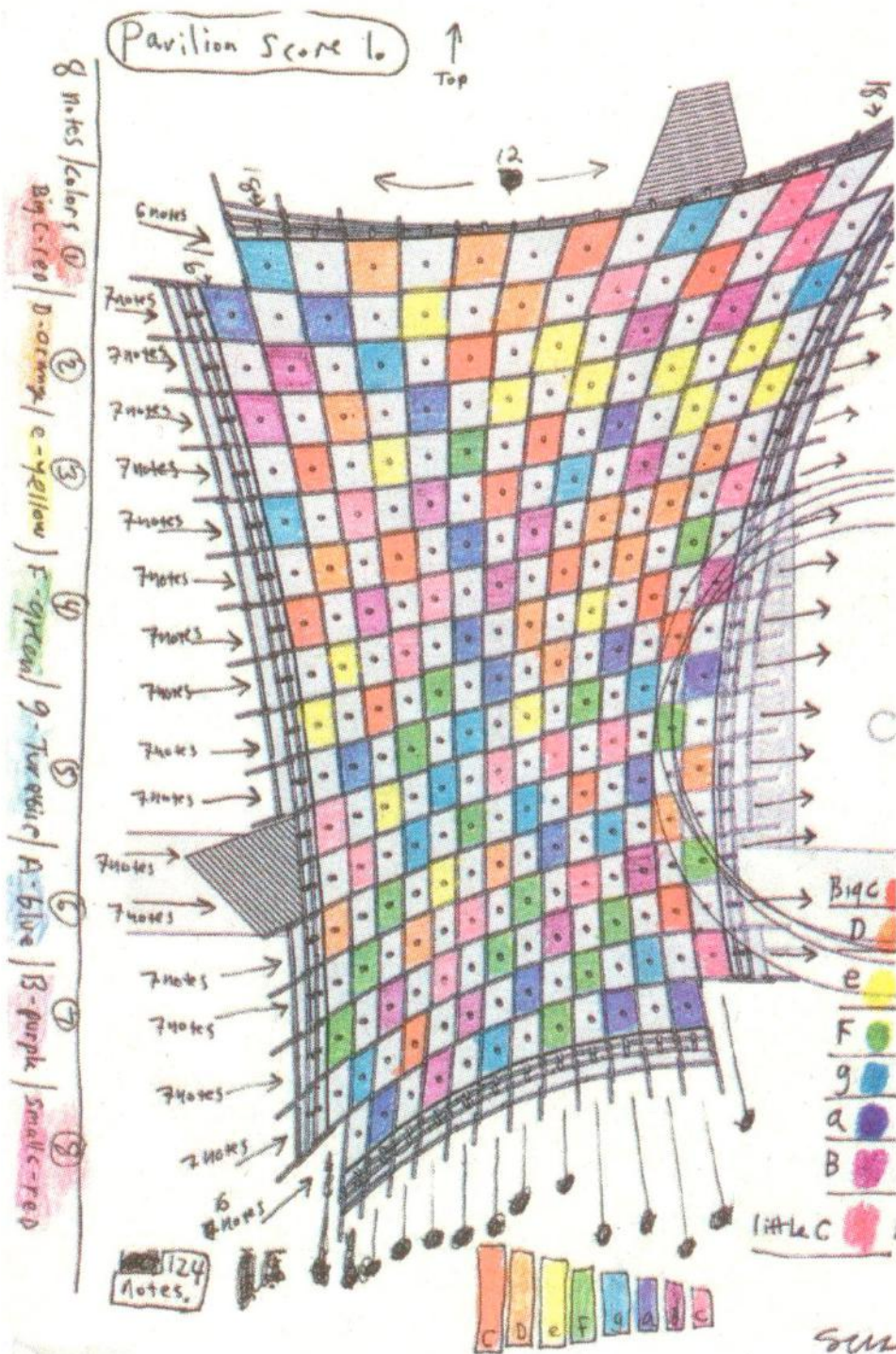
Many people find experimental, or new, music intimidating — hard to understand, let alone enjoy. An exhibition opening Friday at the Kitchen offers neophytes a point of access through graphic scores, which are essentially drawings that blur the line between music and visual art.

“Between Thought and Sound: Graphic Notation in Contemporary Music” is a multigenerational show of 31 artists; most are composers, but a few, such as Stephen Vitiello and Steve Roden, more appropriately fall under the category of sound artists. The “huge looming figure” in the background of, but not included in, the show is the late John Cage, who influenced many of these artists.

“We had a discussion and a little debate about it, and we decided it was best not to have him” in the show, the executive director and chief curator of the Kitchen, Debra Singer, said. Unlike Cage’s graphic scores, which are widely known, “Most of this work hasn’t been exhibited,” Ms. Singer said.

A graphic score is any musical score that isn’t (or isn’t entirely) written in conventional Western, five-line-staff notation. No two composers use the same system — if system is even the right word for what is often a very open-ended way of representing music — and a composer may invent a new language of notation for each piece he or she writes.

Please see **SOUND**, page 15



COURTESY OF STEVE RODEN AND SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS  
 A detail of Steve Roden’s ‘Pavilion Score 1’ (2005).



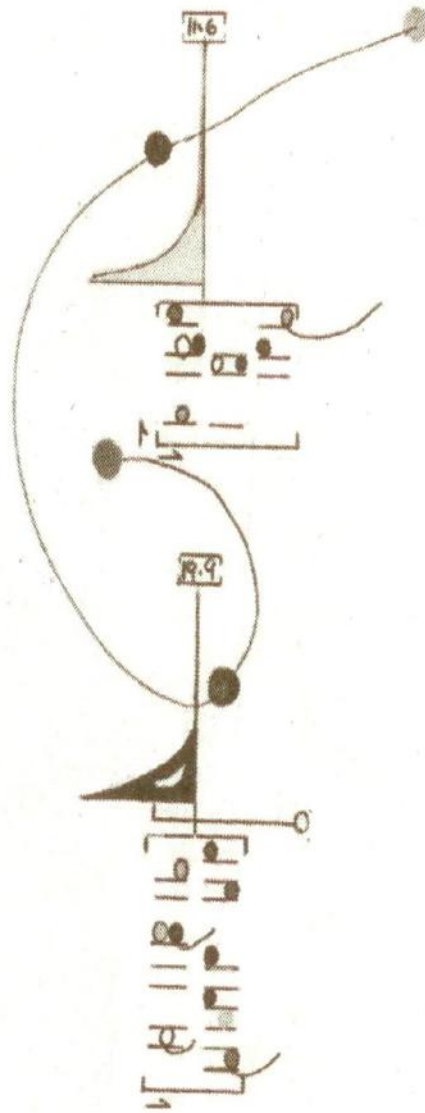
September 4, 2007

## *Imagining Graphic Sound*

**SOUND** from page 1

The drive behind Cage's and his contemporaries' experimentation with graphic scores was a desire to initiate a new, and more open, relationship between a composer and a performer, Ms. Singer said. "If you take a traditional musical score, every little thing [is laid out for you]: Play it loud, play it soft, here are all your notes, here's the timing. You follow my orders." But Cage and others wanted the performer to be part of the creation of the work.

Thus, Cage's graphic pieces require a lot of the performer, who has to, first, digest Cage's instructions, then come up with his or her own formula for interpreting the piece. In Cage's "Variations" series, for instance, each score consists of several square sheets of transparent plastic. Some sheets have a pattern of dots, representing different sounds, and some a pattern of lines, each of which is meant to represent one of five parameters: frequency (pitch), amplitude (volume), duration, overtone structure, and when the sound occurs within the whole time-frame of



Wadada Leo Smith, 'Multiamerica' (1999).

WADADA LEO SMITH



NEW YORK  
**The Sun**



September 4, 2007

the piece. The musician decides what kind of sound each dot will correspond to, and which parameter each line will represent, as well as how to overlay the transparencies containing dots and lines to create the score.

If this sounds about as simple as a linear algebra problem, consider a somewhat more playful graphic score by Cage, called "A Dip in the Lake." The score exists in two forms. The reproducible one is a list of 427 addresses — intersections or locations, like a park or cemetery — in or around Chicago. There is also a unique (and more visually exciting) score created by Cage himself: a map of Chicago on which he pinpointed all the locations and drew lines between them; this score is in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

In the first realization of "A Dip in the Lake," Peter Gena recorded sound at each of the locations, cut the tapes into lengths suggested by the I Ching, and then spliced the fragments together in a random order. At the New Music America festival in 1982, the tapes were played on 12 portable tape machines simultaneously, in different locations on a boat docked at Chicago's Navy Pier; the audience wandered among them.

Many composers of graphic scores take inspiration from visual art. Cage was very interested in Duchamp and the idea of the readymade. "He would take [the pattern of] grains in wood and use that as a graphic score," Mr. Vitiello said.

The work of another experimental composer, the late Cornelius Cardew, was influenced by his day job as a graphic designer, Ms. Singer said. Cardew's "Treatise," a 193-page work consisting of different patterns of lines and dots and arcs, looks like a graphic designer's notebook.

Some of the artists in the show are actually visual artists first or equally. Mr. Roden is a painter as well as a sound artist. Mr. Vitiello's

two pieces in the exhibition, which are his first graphic scores, came about through his frequent practice of simultaneously doing field recording and photography. He took some photographs of a pond in Maine, where he had gone to record the calls of a group of loons. In the photographs, he was struck that the reeds coming out of the water looked like a musical score. So he took two of the photographs and overlaid them on staff paper.

"I took the movement of these reeds as actions that different musicians would perform," Mr. Vitiello said in an interview. "The ripples in the water are the piano. The long chutes going one way are the flute, the ones going another way are the trumpet."

The resulting images function as both works of art and musical compositions. The scores will be exhibited at the Kitchen and at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin, Texas, and they will probably be sold to either a collector or an institution. Meanwhile, the musical pieces will be performed in April 2008 by an Oregon ensemble called Beta Collide. Mr. Vitiello will spend some time with the musicians discussing how they will translate the image into music.

"I have to figure out how to articulate [my vision]," he said, "and they have to figure out how to interpret it." He said he would probably overlay another piece of vellum with a time line on it, so that they will know that the water ripples at, say, minute three.

Although composers of graphic scores intend for the performer to have freedom of interpretation, in general these scores are not meant to be merely improvised. Joan La Barbara, a composer and singer who is represented in the show by two works, and who collaborated with Cage for many years, called the work of the performer of a Cage piece "controlled freedom": "You do not make decisions in the performance." Ms. La Barbara said. "Your decisions are es-

tablished ahead of time, although how you realize those decisions may differ from one performance to another."

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Kitchen will also present performances of many of the graphic scores. On September 14, one of the other curators of the exhibition, Alex Waterman, who is a cellist, will perform, along with the percussionist Dave Shively, Earle Brown's "December 1952" — a single-page score composed of vertical and horizontal lines, which Ms. La Barbara compared to a Mondrian painting. There will be two performances, on September 22 and 23, of David Tudor's iconic, five-hour "Rainforest IV," which was performed at the Kitchen in 1975. (Audience members may enter and leave the theater at any time.)

On October 10, Ms. La Barbara's ensemble, Ne(x)tworks, will perform scores by Cardew, Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith, Michael Schumacher, and Ms. La Barbara. She will sing her 1975 solo piece "Circular Song," in which the performer must sing a pattern of ascending and descending glissandos, singing on both the exhalation and the inhalation. Ms. La Barbara described "Circular Song," which is very physically challenging to perform, as a "process piece" and said she was influenced in creating it by conceptual artists like Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bruce Nauman.

Ms. La Barbara said that one reason she uses graphic notation — in some pieces, something as simple as drawing a shape above a conventionally notated bar of music — is to indicate to the performer the kind of energy that should be behind a sound. "I tend to see sound in my mind," she said. "It's like seeing a visual gesture and then shaping the sound, almost like painting with my voice. If you could think of the voice as being the paint, and my breath is the brush, and it's sculpting the paint and putting it onto a time canvas."