

# **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**

to Christian Wolff

Site-specific: outside, by the water, any body of water, like: a pond, the ocean, a lake, a stream, a river ...

Materials: stones. As many or as few as desired. Maybe they are already there.

## **Performance:**

Arrive, set a start time, start.

Use the stones as elements or implements to make percussive sounds on the water.

Play the water with the stones.

Play singly, together, rhythmically, with solos, triplets, common rhythms, irregular rhythms, cycles, patterns, with no rhythms.

There can be pauses.

No speaking.

When you feel the piece has ended, end the performance.

For any number of performers.

Dean Rosenthal

May 12, 2012  
Edgartown Great Pond  
Martha's Vineyard

# Maybe They Are Already There

Dean Rosenthal

I.

What did it mean to compose **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**? I had been searching internally for a meaning to this for a long time, at first as a coming to terms with what appeared again over the last decade or so, to be a resurgence of the text score movement that seems to have originated in (and dominated) the works of Fluxus and, most prominently, George Brecht's Water Yam and La Monte Young's Compositions. Later, Portsmouth Sinfonia, the Scratch Orchestra and many others, like Christian Wolff (Prose Collection), Steve Reich (Slow Motion Sound), and Tom Johnson (Private Pieces) would take up this mode of utterance. Much of the new work appeared to have come from students of CalArts, my ghostly alma mater, which I'd attended before conspicuously dropping out. I had noticed text scores also came from other U.S. institutions, including Wesleyan University, College of Charleston, Hampshire College, Northwestern University, and Oberlin Conservatory. Surely a good number of other educational institutions in North America and around the world have participated in this direction and continue to do so today. But this essay is really about my piece within a personal context and not merely a history of the rich and fascinating tradition of alternative notations that include verbal/text notations.

Conversations with others since this rediscovery of this popular way of composing led to dead ends initially. Why was this tradition being revived? Coming back to composing in 2009, after a decade-long hiatus from compositional activity, had alerted me to a number of developments I had no idea about - these new textual notations were one of these developments. Was this revival of interest? Text scores could definitely be seen as an easy way of writing music. An out. But there are some intentions that couldn't quite be conveyed with conventional notation. I quickly decided that the good pieces required a model of sophistication, imagination, a reckoning with history, inspiration and execution, and then went looking for them. There were a lot of scores to pore over! The multiplicity of works maintained an uneven quality, and I felt the critical ought to be considered alongside the creative. In this sense, my piece arrived as something of a curious surprise. Let's have a look.

II.

In April and May of 2012, I went overseas to Europe to give concerts, attend a conference, and meet musical friends and peers for five weeks. During my last week of travels, in Paris, I attended and participated in an outdoor concert at the Bois de Vincennes with composers Antoine Beuger, Jürg Frey, Tom Johnson, members of the Dedalus Ensemble, and others that included an all-afternoon performance of Stones. Stones (this score comes from "Prose Collection", 1969, Frog Peak Publications, free download) is a text score by American composer Christian Wolff. In Wolff's piece, we were instructed to:

*make sounds with stones, draw sounds out of stones, using a number of sizes and kinds (and colors); for the most part discretely; sometimes in rapid sequences. For the most part striking stones with stones, but also stones on other surfaces...*

It was a great experience to be there and to participate and much good music was made that day.

A month later, after I had returned, I found myself once again encountering, in stones, this singular quality of possibility. I was at a pond one night, alone — a large pond in Edgartown, on Martha's Vineyard — and I began to skip the stones I found at the water's edge. I listened to them bounce and sound the water. I listened to the sounds the stones introduced to the water, the rhythms of the stones, controlled and then liberated.

*Why not play triplets, I thought? Now, let's pause. What comes next? Here's another stone in front of me, in the dirt. This one is much larger. How should I approach the water with this stone? Will I make a high throw and let the sound and the circles resonate? Or a soft, small toss, dropping the stone into the water merely a few inches from the water's surface? Should I use one stone or many or several at a time? What comes next? What comes after that?*

I quickly realized I was playing music and immediately after that realization came the realization that I was composing. This experience would have to be formalized. How could I convey this music, this performance? How could I make it inclusive of others and address my immediate surroundings? My love of nature became evident to me immediately. Like many of my recent pieces, I go about finding the music to compose outside of myself: in existing mathematical structures, the prerecorded music of others, and direct recordings of existing natural and man-made phenomena; this music was also about things found, a meditation and mediation on a found place and found implements.

III.

**Stones/Water/Time/Breath** was also about memories. I remembered learning how to skip stones with my father by the water. I remembered the easy lesson, the practice, the encouragement, at the ocean (as I later wrote in my piece, "at a body of water"). The memory of skipping stones after family events by the water. With friends. Lovers. Why not now with other musicians? This seems to me like a natural extension of the logic that often controls or influences my decisions. I could make new memories in my role as composer. I see myself in this role as a facilitator of experience, creating an event that leads to a performance. This is a new role. How does this work?

Site-specific: outside, by the water, any body of water, like: a pond, the ocean, a lake, a stream, a river ...

The piece is located physically in an indeterminate space. It could conceivably take place indoors. It could conceivably take place by a lake. At a swimming pool. On the ocean. This instruction allows the flexibility of self-governance while determining a point of termination. You are participating in the composition process. This brings you to a creative space that allows for solitary or group gesture.

Materials: stones. As many or as few as desired. Maybe they are already there.

What, besides a body of water, agency, and the ability to follow written instructions is required to perform **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**? Stones. This fact, along with the suggestion that "maybe there are already there", is the vital statement of this work. What is meant by "maybe they are already there"? This is probably the only poetic line in the text. You have chosen to locate yourself by stones, at a distance to them, or somewhere in the middle. If you know where you are headed, you will know what is ahead of you. If it is an unknown, this likely (but not always) remains unknown. The suggestion can be considered as an open question for the performer and the ensemble to answer.

Arrive, set a start time, start.

This means the piece really starts when you pick a destination; this requires you to arrive after all. Set a start time. Of course, the set time to begin the performance may be set in advance, but the score indicates that it should be chosen after the performers have completed their journey to the performance destination. This means the performers have still more compositional choices to make as they prepare for the performance, which now already seems to be under way. Still, you start.

Use the stones as elements or implements to make percussive sounds on the water.

Play the water with the stones.

Play singly, together, rhythmically, with solos, triplets, common rhythms, irregular rhythms, cycles, patterns, with no rhythms.

The performance requires the performer to perform the music by sounding the body of water with stones. The water is played in a variety of ways (or maybe several or maybe only one) following the suggestions of the text. The emphasis is at once focussed on group action and the individual. Is there a social compact within this structure? Maybe. You become part of a community, but not necessarily in ways that are meaningful. You can still go off and do your own thing. If you perform with others, you combine experiences, but the results may not always be interesting or helpful. Or maybe they will be.

There can be pauses.

The idea of pausing is a lot different than a measured silence. In an email conversation with a friend, I realized that the idea of pausing in this sense really comes from the idea or existence of silence and the idea of rest or inactivity. In silence, there is an inaudible lack of activity and so, too, in pausing there is that paucity of movement. Both physically and mentally, in every exterior and interior sense, the body rests and movement subsides. Thus, the outlook can be conducive to nature, ebbing and flowing, in growth and death.

No speaking.

The idea that the performance takes place without any performer voicing his or her thoughts is tentatively given voice by the presumption of uninterrupted sounding music. No one wants their piece interrupted (unless that interruption is a welcome one) and this seems to be a good enough reason for me to make this request. In **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**, the idea that the music of the stones on the water alone with the attendant sounds of the location is in fact the completeness of the realization of the score is intentional: we are given a point of departure as both performers and audience.

When you feel the piece has ended, end the performance.

For any number of performers.

These are very common instructions to many text works. They seem appropriate here. Still, it is surely helpful to describe how these simple imperatives are related to **Stones/Water/Time/Breath** in particular. In performance, this piece lasts from ten seconds in length to ten years, or possibly longer. Obviously there is a practical component. Naturally the piece will begin to take form during the performance and, later, dissolve-resolve to conclusion. In conversation with a friend, who observed for himself that, "your piece is a function of time," I realized that it was also actually a function of

community (or lack thereof) and a facilitation of experience, both discursive and living. When you feel the piece has ended, you punctuate the experience, as time has passed, by completing the score. The music ends and the event continues, as the performer (or performers) begin to and ultimately withdraw from the performance.

Any number of performers may participate — what does this come to signify? It is important in the role of composer as facilitator to invite a community of one or more to come together in order to fulfill what has become, in fact, both a ritual and a work of art. What happens is entirely composed of the choice made by the interpreter at the composer's directive. Often this choice is obvious: a group of friends, a class of students, a solo performer, a previously formed or pickup ensemble that wishes to promote and explore the function of experience in full agency.

IV.

I will look at two performances in this explication of my work and present my thoughts as they pertain to the actualization of **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**.

***First performance: Edgartown Great Pond, Martha's Vineyard, May 12, 2012.***

***Approx: 10 minutes. 8:20 - 8:30 p.m.***

When this piece was composed, it was clear that I would try it out almost immediately. The following day seemed auspicious and together with my wife, Karin, I went back to the spot where the work was born. We attempted to document the preparatory motions (finding stones, setting times, locational representations) and set out with our start time, our destination and began. The performance began with a single stone breaking the plane of the water and continued for ten minutes, two individuals coming together and separating. I was often aware of and comfortable with the space and time set out for us. I wondered what was happening with the other side of this performing dyad. Was I working too preciously? Trying to make my sounds with my personality or my musicality? We seemed to discover the realization of this score successfully. There was a feeling of experimentation with nature and a conveyance of both solidarity and solitude. There hadn't been a prepared intention here. There was never a called-for result, and the music we made — the crunching of the sand beneath our feet, the sounds of fingers and stones and wind, plunks and skitters of stones and the water, the descending, silent sun — this had been both a structured and free example of life and sound, and it was exhilarating.

Later, Karin reflected on this performance:

*We were married there, that was on my mind. At the end of our wedding we skipped stones. So I was thinking about that. I was remembering, I was watching you, listening to your stones hit the water. I was also listening to the sounds of the stones I played as they hit the water, watching the water as the stones broke the surface and made ripples. I was thinking about place and memory, from having been in that place before, I was listening. How would this develop? How would this end? How would we know when the performance was over? It seemed very peaceful and nice, there did feel like there was a resolution at the end. We had decided that when we would stop we would go back a few feet, to show we had ended. When I felt I was done, I did that. I stepped back. You played a few stones, individually, for a few more minutes. Then you stepped back. I felt a sense of resolution. I hadn't known what the piece would be, and then it was.*

*It was a good feeling.*

**Performance: Nine Mile Pond, Wilbraham, MA, July 22, 2012.**  
**Approx: 18 minutes. 7:30 - 7:48 p.m.**

*I was raised in Wilbraham, a suburb of Springfield, Massachusetts, that is approximately 120 miles north of New York City and 80 miles west of Boston. It seemed like a good idea to go back and try this piece out there. I made the decision in advance to make this a solo performance; I wanted to understand something about this piece on my own in the environs that I had known as a youth. Wilbraham is an upper middle class suburb, with no particular culture to speak of than that of American 1980s suburbia: nice houses, friendly, self-conscious, almost exclusively white, relatively uninteresting, but pleasant. There is a private school in the center of the town, and Wilbraham is now known for several things: having (in considered company) the oldest recorded American folk song in the history of the country ("On Springfield Mountain," circa 1760s), being the home of Friendly's, the family restaurant chain, and having a several mile stretch of historic homes on Main St., which added to the rest made the town center, complete with a soldier's memorial, brick building post office, village store, and gas station — the picture of a lovely New England postcard. Nine Mile Pond is a pond named for the nine-mile distance from this pond to Springfield center.*

*As a younger person, I was artistic, but this history of mine has been a strange one, and I am still intrigued by the thought of returning to a place I once spent time in, in the context of performing as an adult. I'm not sure if it's a full circle, or any circle. Growing up, I had planned to be a musician since turning 10 — but definitely not the musician who would come home to play stones on a pond and work in this ordinary context. The pond I chose to return to, Nine Mile Pond, played a special role in my life while growing up. There were trails behind my parent's home, and I walked them alone and with friends and family often; they led to different places: open valleys, streams, lively open spaces, and other destinations. Those trails and the places they led to are now gone, erased by developments and the encroachment of more and more suburbia. The woods then were beautiful and I spent a lot of time there. I had made a strong identification with nature then, would this once again be possible? One of the trails let out onto a dirt road that led to a pond. Nine Mile Pond. There were houses on different sides, and I often wondered how I would access those roads to see those different neighborhoods. I passed Nine Mile Pond often. There was a convenience store just past this large pond that was often the destination of my walks, either alone or with a friend. I went to the store and bought treats and returned to our neighborhood past the pond and through the trails — like a movie scene, walking, stopping to look everywhere, then over to the store to pick up a little something and walk back. I really loved those walks. I loved exploring. I often rode my bicycle, I rode on the same paths and streets.*

*Maybe this performance was about returning to a part of my childhood, reaffirming my earliest creativity. The part of me that is curious about almost everything is part of this piece. The connection is the water. Was the water at this body of water more special to me? It was stable. Consistent. I took pictures when I came back as a university student. In the winter the pond looked beautiful, in the summer it looked warm and murky. The water might have been a dark blue-brown, completely opaque. Sometimes people boated there. Nine Mile Pond was modest. This water was a sort of steadiness. Nothing at that time seemed profound about Nine Mile Pond. It was simply there, just as I was, maintaining a consistent presence.*

*July 22, 2012: I've just completed the performance at Nine Mile Pond. Today was so quiet, still with sounds of cars and watching the concentric circles created by the stones penetrating the water, seeing the mosquitos that skittered over the water. Before I arrived to the spot I chose, I drove around the pond several times, rediscovering my childhood walks, picking up stones on — of course — Lake Drive. We parked at what is now a Chinese restaurant and what had once been the convenience store*

that I'd walk to as someone younger. I arrived with Karin at a spot on a hook in the road close to a small commercial plaza. There is a small beach there. "No public swimming." It was semi-littered with trash. But there were stones. We moved aside the detritus, and set up, Karin with her camera, tripod, and Flip cam, and myself, simply preparing. A solo performance.

At 7:30 p.m., I started. First, a stone Karin had chosen. A small stone, dropped lightly into the water from a height of no more than four inches, a foot or so from the edge of the beach. Plunk. I thought, "maybe they are already there" — this direction-notation, seemed to come from beyond my intended notation suddenly, this somehow took on an integral element of performance. They were already there, the stones. We had collected many ahead of time from nearby, but these stones, spread over the small beach, these were already there. This was not a beautiful part of the shore, yet there were lily pads to the right of us. I listened, in and out, to the sounds of the cars driving past in both directions on the adjacent road. There was a bird, there was the sky. The weather had been cloudy when we arrived, but now the sky had broken open, revealing streams of sunlight. A more active role seemed called for, less mental, less structural, conscious. In this performance, I let the openness of the score take over and combine with the directives I had set down. And I felt I took part, I participated. Where was this participation located? There were moments when I played a stone, and waiting, conscious pauses came after some time, and later natural pauses. There was a one note solo. I watched concentric rings of where the water rang from the stones. Many stones. Perhaps over a hundred. The participation seemed to be characterized by a consistent integration of my sensing both musically and as a performer. This was a separation of composer and participant. This performance had at once brought me home and taken me into the present by nature of the separation.

V.

What does all of this mean? I look back and reflect on this experience and see that there's a logic and an intuition at work. After all, successful music has to have both, if you approach composing the way I do. But what can I prove in **Stones/Water/Time/Breath**? I think what I see is simply an experience that reflects concerns with environment, locality, collaborative authorship, and ultimately, community. The last concern reflected, community, can be considered to have both social and ecological values and I am pleased that I've discovered an original approach to these values within my artistic practice. And like the stones that I found in Wilbraham and Edgartown, and the directive in my text, maybe "they" are already there.

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