



370 Flies, presented during Benjamin Patterson's Retrospective Concert at Roulette, in Brooklyn, as part of Performa 13.
Photography by Paula Court.

Benjamin Patterson – A Retrospective Concert

BY CRISTIANE BOUGER

By the time Benjamin Patterson met John Cage in Cologne in 1960, he was already a classically trained, professional double-bassist and assistant conductor. The encounter radically changed Mr. Patterson's perspective on making art, and its impact was reflected in *Paper Piece*, created in the same year. In the press material for the album *Early Works*, released by the label Alga Marghen, he states: "This work cut the umbilical cord to all of my previous classical and contemporary musical training and experience". Two years later, in 1962, Mr. Patterson assisted George Maciunas in the first Fluxus International Festival of the Newest Music in Wiesbaden, Germany. Among the artists presented in the Fluxconcert were Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, John Cage, Alison Knowles, Wolf Vostell, and Nam June Paik. Benjamin Patterson was then at the core of Fluxus foundation in Western Europe, and was one of the artists who had critically contributed for the Fluxus legacy. Mostly recognized by his concept of "action as composition", Mr. Patterson appropriates the sound produced by ordinary actions—sometimes leading to extraordinary situations—to compose the score of his symphonies, operas and other musical pieces.

Five decades elapsed since Fluxus originated, and after an art production hiatus of twenty years, Mr. Patterson has been more active than ever. In the last decade he showed his work extensively in all continents. In 2010 his first major museum retrospective, Benjamin Patterson: Born in the State of FLUX/us took place at the Contemporary Art Museum, in Houston, Texas. In New York, his work was recently featured in the exhibition Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art, presented by Grey Art Gallery NYU and The Studio Museum in Harlem.

Benjamin Patterson: Action as Composition: A Retrospective Concert premiered on November 12 at Roulette, in Brooklyn, and was part of the series *Three Duets, Seven Variations*. Co-presented by Performa 13 and the Goethe-Institut New York, the event marked the first retrospective of the artist's action scores.

The two-hour concert had a set-list of eight compositions that spanned over Benjamin Patterson's career, giving a comprehensive overview both of his early works and his more recent production.

As the audience waited at Roulette's lobby to get into the theater, Mr. Patterson talked to every spectator at the door before allowing the passage to the theater seats. Looking behind his sunglasses, he emphatically asked me: "Do you trust me?" My answer directed me to the center of the audience, although it was not clear if there was any real co-relation between the spectator's response and the place one was supposed to occupy.

The evening initiated with *First Symphony* (1964). In this score, the absence of light following Mr. Patterson's clapping command, is summoned to the smell of grounded coffee poured over the floor on the theater aisles, stimulating the audience's olfactory sense.

Re-imagining the opera *Carmen*, by Georges Bizet, *A Dozen for Carmen* (1990) employed twelve performers in Victorian paper masks, each of them holding a red rose in their mouth. The performers positioned themselves in a semicircle facing the audience. Their enigmatic presence, still to the opera's intense prelude was to some extent, evocative of certain danger, certain irony. Mr. Patterson, seated in front of a small table on the center of the stage, handled a food chopper half-filled with water and an empty wine glass. In response to his conduction, one by one of the performers approached his table and offered him a rose; then crossed the stage and repositioned oneself at the end of the semicircle. Mr. Patterson put the rose inside the food chopper, closed its lid and turned it on, repeating the action at each performer's movement. The water turned reddish. At the end of the prelude, he poured himself a glass with chopped roses, raised a toast to Carmen, and drank the whole glass at once.

370 Flies (2003) shows Benjamin Patterson wearing a fisherman hat while entering onstage with a fishing rod and reel. He angled in the direction of the audience. Getting at his table, he started narrating the history of the art of fly-fishing. The action was then centered in the reading over the name of hundreds of artificial flies, also known as artful imitation baits. A video behind him shows two recreational fishermen practicing angling by a river. The video soundtrack is made of fragment loops extracted from Franz Schubert's *String Quintet, Op. 114, D. 667 – the Trout Quintet*. At the same time that we witness a fisherman caressing an agonizing fish before freeing it from the hook back to the river, Mr. Patterson's continuous reading accompanies the melody of each fragment loop of Schubert's music.

Duo for Voice and String Instrument (1961) followed a score composed of instructions, graphic notations and symbols through which singer Chilo Eribenne performed an array of sounds full of facial expressions. Ms. Eribenne vocal performance was accompanied by the dissonances of Mr. Patterson's double-bass.

Defined by the artist as a piece for people with “a tolerance for high silliness”, *A Simple Opera* (1995)—first performed as a homage to visual artist and poet Emmet Williams—was played by an ensemble of party whistle blowers conducted by Mr. Patterson. In the overture the “instrumentists” introduced the opera with a prolonged blowing. Thereafter, the sound score was interpolated with an explanatory text enunciated by the conductor himself. At each text interposition, the conduction led to a crescent number of blowing movements.

My Tone, Your Tone, His Tone, Her Tone (2005) was influenced by some musical tradition principles from West and Central Africa, such as alternation of pitches and tones, community participation, and juxtaposition. For this composition, Mr. Patterson had the International Civil Aviation Organization alphabet projected onto the screen behind him. Internationally used in aviation and military fields for a clearer spelling enunciation in radio and telephone communication, the ICAO alphabet is composed by words instead of letters (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, and so on).

The composition was based on a narrative that accounted for the experience of a musician from the Juilliard String Quartet—Robert Mann, I believe—while on tour in West and Central Africa. The story tells that, in spite of the enthusiasm for what the musicians believed to be the best concert performed by the Quartet, it was quite disconcerting to see the audience standing silently at the end of the performance: No applause, nor smiles. Inquired by the meaning of such a reaction, the chief of the community told the musician his people felt very sorry for him and the other musicians being so old and not have yet found their “personal tone”.



My Tone, Your Tone, His Tone, Her Tone, presented during Benjamin Patterson's Retrospective Concert at Roulette, in Brooklyn, as part of Performa 13. Photography by Paula Court.

In those regions of Africa, Mr. Patterson explained, each member of the community owns and is responsible for a specific musical tone, passed from one generation to another; each person masters his/her family tone to respond to their specific place in the melody of the music. Thus, the community mesh of personal tones is fundamental to create music.

Following his narration, with a microphone placed right in front of the stage, the artist invited the audience members to come and say their name initials according to the spelling alphabet, in which B.P., which stands for Benjamin Patterson, becomes “Bravo Papa”.

The interaction of the participants was recorded by an audio mixer operated by the artist, who played it back, reverberating the newly recorded voices while other initials were enunciated on the microphone. A great extent of the audience formed a long line in the aisles of the theater in order to lend their “personal tones” to the impromptu collaborative performance.

Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* was the inspiration for the homonymous composition performed by Patterson. His action score, originally entitled *Lick Piece*, dates back from 1961 and counted on a female performer. In the version presented at Roulette, the performer is replaced by an inflatable prop.

Seating on his chair, Mr. Patterson pumped up air into a non-recognizable inflatable figure. As the air was pumped, the form over the table started revealing itself as the main subject on Edvard Munch’s *The Scream of Nature* (1893–1910). Lying over the table, *The Scream* faced the audience, juxtaposed by Wagner and the sound of the artist pumping action. Once the figure was filled, he sprayed several cans of whipped cream over its body. *The Scream*, repainted by the white streams of slick cream, was then topped with cocktail cherries.

Positioning himself at the edge of the stage, the artist held a bowl of wooden chopsticks, and offered them to the viewers, who started coming onstage to taste the communal dessert.

Paper Piece (1960) was among the works presented at the first Fluxus Festival in Wiesbaden. The original score describes the participation of five performers who manipulate sheets of paper as instruments to be performed in actions such as tearing, twisting, crumpling and rubbing, among others. For *Action as Composition*, Mr. Patterson presented what he called a “nano version” of the piece. The option, he explained, was made because it would not be possible to present the integral piece after *Tristan und Isolde*’s leftovers. Then, a timid rain of paper pieces was thrown from the balcony, marking the end of the *Retrospective Concert*.

The evening was an unparalleled opportunity to engage in the work of Mr. Patterson, whose historical importance allows us both to directly access the mode of thinking of Fluxus, as well as to put the development of his recent production into perspective.

Being it by re-imagining the work of Classical and Romantic composers, being it by extracting what is audible in a vast range of objects, Mr. Patterson stretches and reconfigures possibilities of meaning in his synthetic structures. This is the case, for instance, of *A Dozen for Carmen*: The chopped roses Mr. Patterson drank can be as much a translation as an ironical review on the depiction of seduction and death in the opera's story.

In a different way, the same occurs in *My Tone, Your Tone, His Tone, Her Tone*. While the narrative works as the spinal cord of the score to illustrate two highly complex modes of cultural sophistication, the composition created on spot expands the meaning of encounter by overlapping and amalgamating the participants' voices into an unrepeatably polyphonic piece.

Working with Fluxus peculiar humor toward the convergence of art and everyday life, Mr. Patterson expands the audience's perception on the ordinary. At a hurried impression, one might think that after understanding the structure of his scores—what happens quite quickly—there is no further novelty on the actions performed. Yet, what seems frugality or simple repetition, may indeed reveal a fabric of entwined influences and unconventional commentary.

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