

I'm not a robot

Nina Whiteman

2020

for six instruments (or multiples of six instruments) and video

Duration

21 minutes

Instrumentation

Flexible.

Six instruments (or multiples of six) that are able to sustain and make gradual dynamic and timbre changes.

(For example, woodwind, brass, strings, synthesizers.)

The instruments should be chosen so that they are capable of blending as an ensemble.

Programme note

I'm not a robot is a composition for six or more performers (flexible instrumentation) and video. The video forms the score for the piece, which prompts responses from musicians much like the familiar CAPTCHA (Completely Automated Turing Test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) screens that appear in online interactions. Musicians each have a zone or square of a gridded screen, and must form sonic responses to initially mundane images, following instructions on-screen (e.g. 'play a B when a pylon is in your square'). Increasingly, performers are asked to form emotive responses, think for themselves, and make political judgements in an increasingly complex memory game.

The work asks what it is to be human in a technology-driven world. It also takes the unusual step of asking musicians to make choices based on their opinions outside of the sonic realm.

I'm not a robot was initially commissioned by Mic Spencer and the LSTwo ensemble at Leeds University, though the planned live premiere did not take place in April 2020 owing to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The premiere recording was made during 2020 with the following performers recording their individual parts at home: Gavin Osborn (flute), Nina Whiteman (synthesiser), Emma Lloyd (viola), Rocío Bolaños (bass clarinet), Alice Purton (cello), and Otto Willberg (double bass). My thanks go to them and also to the RNCM Research Fund, and Royal Holloway Music Department for part-funding this recording.

Credits:

The video mixes my own footage and photographs with found images and video licensed copyright-free from Pexels.com.

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Performance instructions

GENERAL:

The video is a score for performers, and should also be projected so it is visible to the audience.

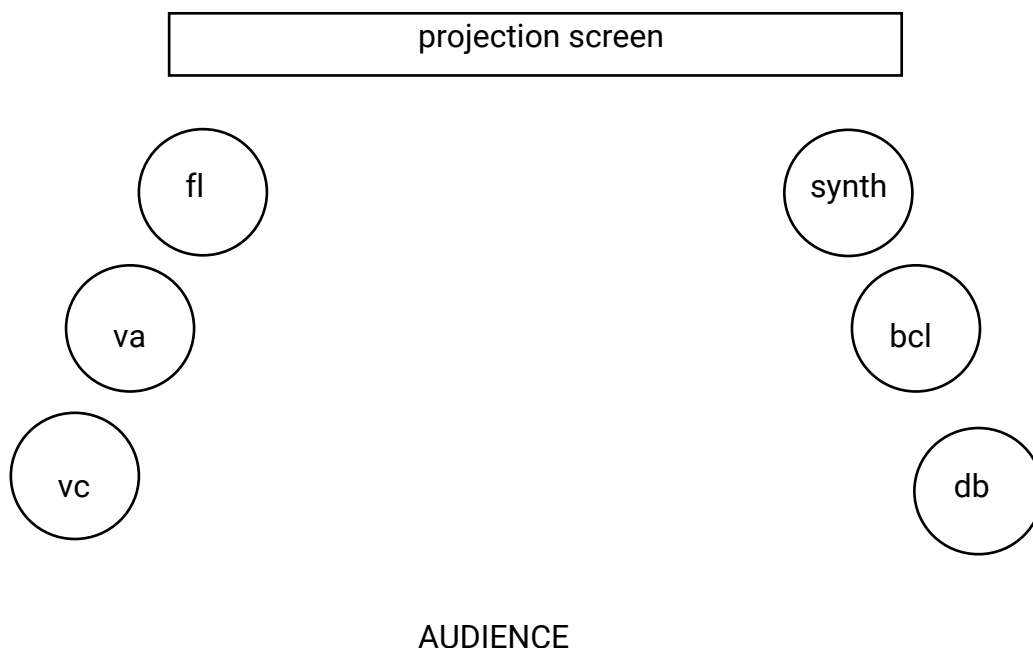
Each performer has a square, or territory. They must respond to the on-screen instructions, following those that correspond to their square, or position in the grid.

The allocation of squares is free, but generally higher-pitched instruments should be positioned at the top of the screen, and lower-pitched instruments at the bottom. For example:

1 Flute	2 Synthesiser
3 Viola	4 Bass clarinet
5 Cello	6 Double bass

LAYOUT:

Performers may have their backs to the audience to facilitate coordination with the video where sending the video to multiple devices is not possible. Performers should be positioned on stage in a way that clarifies to the audience their respective box positions in the video. For example:



SOUNDS:

Musicians should approach 'human-made' and 'natural' images differently. Generally 'human-made' objects call for a more robotic response:

- blunt onset and termination to notes
- static volume and timbre
- very *linear* volume changes where indicated

'Natural' images should be rendered expressively, emotionally, even:

- gradual/shaped onset and termination
- variable timbre and volume, as though 'alive'
- volume changes might be exponential, or quite subtle, but rarely linear

Pitches may be played in any octave, and starting dynamics are chosen freely with the above in mind.

Players may breathe/change bow discretely as necessary.

TEXT INSTRUCTIONS:

The written instructions in CAPTCHA text are open to individual interpretation, but some suggestions are provided below. Some of the text instructions invite creative responses. Once the direction has disappeared from the screen, players may continue to realise it, or return to a more neutral position until a new instruction is given.

quarter tone – a quarter tone alteration, up or down a quarter step/50 cents

timbre flux – continually adjust timbre (irregular) by varying bow position/embouchure/pressure///

airy tone – breathy quality to sound (e.g. produced by bowing on/near bridge for strings) with variable amount of definite pitch

complex tone – created through overpressure or a multiphonic that contains the pitch class required

wide vibrato – generally slow and wide, with irregularity/speed changes

timbral trill – alternation between two fingerings that produce the same pitch (strings could alternate between an open string and a stopped string, or between a stopped note and a harmonic); fast with irregular speed changes; octave alternations permitted where necessary

erratic tremolo – tremolo or flutter tongue that appears and disappears erratically

dynamic flux – unpredictable/irregular changes in dynamic

KEY TO PITCHES:

Once image types have been introduced, players are not reminded of their pitches, and should therefore memorise them. Transposing instruments should play pitches at *sounding pitch* (so a B flat instrument will play an E in order to sound a D):

Road sign = D natural

Traffic light = C natural

Pylon = B natural

Flower = A natural

Tree = F sharp

Animal/living creature = C sharp

If more than one image type appears in your square (e.g. flower + animal), then an alternation between pitches ad lib. is one acceptable response.

IMAGES OF PUBLIC FIGURES:

Only respond to these once the instructions have been given. This means you should ignore human faces and other unexplained images until the latter stages of the piece, where the option responses are indicated. Once the public figures have been introduced, you should continue responding to them, and it is permitted to change your response/opinion, or to play a neutral response.

Please contact the composer if you have any questions or plan to perform this piece:
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