you are required to split your attention between multiple sources of information
James Saunders (2018)
INSTRUMENTS

2 violins
viola
cello

flute
obo
clarinet
horn (straight mute)
trombone (plunger mute)
piano (with melodica)

percussion:
crotale; small tom tom (or hand drum); bass drum (or other large resonant drum); 5 chime bars (G3, C#4, G#4, B4, A#5);
suspended cymbal; 2 plastic cups (rigid, with thin, sharp edge); 2 wood boards; 2 thin metal sheets; polystyrene block
supaball mallet; 2 elastic bands; takeaway cardboard coffee cup; bow; table tennis ball; notched wood rod

2 violins
viola
cello
double bass

auxiliary instruments
16 desk bells (different pitches)
16 harmonicas (any tunings)
16 aerosols (with fairly neutral contents!)
16 horns (any combination of bicycle horns, air horns etc)
16 whistles (any combination of referee, samba, etc.)
paper (enough for c.5 sheets per person)

audio playback
PA for playing the audio file.
(the audio track can be started by an ensemble member or another person as necessary)

The audio file and rehearsal tracks are available from the composer.

duration: 20’
you are required to split your attention between multiple sources of information (2018) presents the players with a stream of auditory cues to which they must respond with specified sounds. The cues regularly switch between different types and are directed at different sub-groups within the two ensembles, requiring the players to think and act very quickly. The piece explores cognitive load and the way we remember associations between cues and responses. Cognitive load is the amount of mental effort needed to remember things in different situations. An example of it in practice is the children’s party game where a tray of objects is displayed before being hidden, and then participants are asked to remember as many of the items as possible. The difficulty of this task is affected by the type and arrangement of the objects. In the piece, moments of ordered information are disrupted by less predictable cue sequences and regular changes of cue type. The cues include samples of real world sounds which induce a range of different responses, as well as text-to-speech computer voices reading extracts from the Harvard Sentences (a set of phonetically balanced texts developed in the 1960s to test artificial voice modelling) and giving other verbal cues. The title is adapted from Mousavi, Low and Sweller’s ‘Reducing Cognitive Load by Mixing Auditory and Visual Presentation Modes’ (1998) in which they investigate the split-attention effect and its impact on cognitive load. They argue that if subjects ‘are required to split their attention among multiple sources of information that must be mentally integrated before they can be understood, learning may be inhibited’, while suggesting that ‘if effective working memory can be increased by having two sources of information presented via different modalities, the negative effects of split attention may be ameliorated.’ In the piece, all the cues and responses are aural, requiring players to negotiate the stream of information in one mode. The increased cognitive load affects the speed of response by players and the variations in time required to complete sound-producing actions on the different instruments, producing an unpredictable trail of sounds after each cue.

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The text-to-speech recordings were made using the voices provided in Google Cloud Text-to-Speech. For full information, please see https://cloud.google.com/text-to-speech.

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Other samples and field recordings were made by the composer.

alarm[325367_moonlightshadow_fire-house-alarm].wav
bell[219047_jarredgibb_church-clock-strikes-1].wav
buzzer[164089_hypocore_buzzer2].wav
cannon[187767__qubodup_cannon-shot].wav
car[436589_julien-matthey_transport-ext-horn-01a-car-short-mini-countryman].wav
dog[100032__nfrae_rose-bark].wav
doghorn[99630__tec-studios_foghorn].wav
gate[177194__barkenov_hard-grating-metal-gate].wav
pirate[401931_qalba4_piratematt-1].wav
siren[121532__thaighaudio_01052010-tornado-siren-test].wav
steam[234782__wubitog_steam-hiss].wav
telephone[79440___xyzr_telephone-ring].wav
till[253946__jmayoff_grocery-store-cash-register].wav
train[209970__jrosin_trainwhistle-with-natural-delay].wav
whistle[218318__splicesound_referee-whistle-blow-gymnasium].wav

SETUP

The string quartet and ensemble should be positioned as two distinct groups, but in close enough proximity for a single group to be apparent when required.

Each player needs a small table/surface to store the auxiliary instruments for easy access.

The audio should be played back through a PA, ideally with speakers close to the ensemble. The players need to be able to hear the audio throughout, so monitor speakers might be necessary in some spaces. There should be a good balance between the audio playback and the acoustic instruments so that the audience can hear both equally well.

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS

The piece comprises an audio track containing a sequence of audio cues that both the players and audience can hear, and a set of responses that the players make.

Players respond as quickly as they can to each cue and work independently of each other: the speed of response will vary based on factors including memory, difficulty of sound production, context, and cue density. It is not intended that all players should play perfectly in unison, rather that the variable speed of response will generate a series of delayed sounds.
The audio track for the performance can be used in rehearsals, but it is important that players do not learn it too well, such that they anticipate the cues.

The cues found in the audio track are as follows:

**Noun phrases/sentences**

There are 12 sentences (selected from the Harvard Sentences), each containing two noun-phrases; there are 24 noun-phrase cues in total.

Each noun phrase is a cue for a response by the players.

As soon as a player hears one of the noun phrase cues, they make the corresponding sound as soon as possible afterwards. Sounds are either short (solid noteheads) or sustained briefly for up to c.2 seconds (empty noteheads), although the stream of cues may prevent this.

The noun phrases are read by six artificial voices and are as follows (cue words in **bold**), although they are normally presented as fragments or different permutations:

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Steam hissed from the broken valve.
It was a bad error on the part of the new judge.

The child almost hurt the new dog.
A thin book fits in the side pocket.

The pirates seized the crew of the lost ship.
Tear a thin sheet from the yellow pad.

A man in a blue sweater sat at the desk.
Torn scraps littered the stone floor.

The doctor cured him with these pills.
Either mud or dust are found at all times.

Fine soap saves tender skin.
The horse balked and threw the tall rider.
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**Number cues (string quartet only)**

The quartet have a set of 12 number cues spoken by an artificial voice, signalled by the numbers 1-12.

These cues indicate the looping material with the same number should be played.

Each number cue is preceded by a name (or names) and followed by a beep.

For example: 'Lucas 5 [beep]' would result in Lucas playing material 5 as soon as the beep is heard. Players should continue to play the cued material until they are either given a cue that overrides it (e.g. ‘Lucas 1 [beep]’) or they are given an ‘off’ cue (e.g. ‘Lucas off [beep]’ or ‘Everybody off [beep]’).

While playing this material, players ignore other cues directed at the ensemble, until they are integrated back into the larger group with an ‘off’ command.

Each system contains two material types. The character and approximate tempo is indicated at the start of the system. Dynamics and other playing techniques hold for the whole system, unless otherwise indicated.

Players can start a system at any point and stop playing immediately when given a new cue. There is a repeat at the end of the system that enables return to beginning of the system as necessary. Sections between repeat marks may be optionally repeated any number of times. Where repeats overlap, any of the possible units may be repeated (in the example below A-C, B-D or B-C).
Spelling alphabet cues

There are eight spelling alphabet cues spoken by an artificial voice: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel.

Each spelling alphabet cue indicates a sustained drone response, either with an audio sample of an electrical drone, or alone. The drone responses are approximate transcriptions of the electrical drones, but any tuning differences and irregularities should not be adjusted to match the recordings.

These cues may be directed at individual players (e.g. ‘Jagdish Foxtrot’ or ‘Irvine and Ashot Hotel’), or at everybody (e.g. ‘Everybody Bravo’).

The response sounds should be sustained until a new cue instructs players to do something different (e.g. ‘Ashot Delta’ or ‘Jagdish Off’).

Sound sample cues

There are 12 sound sample cues spoken by an artificial voice: alarm, bell, buzzer, cannon, car, foghorn, gate, siren, telephone, till, train, whistle.

Each sample cue is a recording of the named sound source, and players respond with a sustained sound (except for ‘till’, which is short).

The sounds are broadly imitative but should not be rhythmised (i.e. for ‘alarm’ and ‘till’, do not imitate the rhythm in the sample).

Sounds should sustain briefly so that they blend with the sample.

Pulse cues

Pulse cues comprise a number spoken by an artificial voice, four-beat metronome count in, and then a drum beat at the same pulse lasting the named number of beats (e.g. ‘Seventeen – [beep, beep, beep, beep] [drums for 17 beats]’).

All players respond to this whatever they were doing. It cancels all other actions.

Players should select two sounds each and alternate between them for the duration of the pulse on the strong and weak beats.

Sounds should be consistent during each pulse cue but may change for subsequent cues.

Object cues

There are six object cues: aerosol, bell, harmonica, horn, paper, whistle.

These cues are spoken by an artificial voice.

Players make a short sound using the indicated object as soon as they hear the cue.

Each sound should be a simple gesture (e.g. a single bell strike, a single blown harmonica chord etc.)

Note cues (ensemble only)

The note cues comprise the spoken word ‘notes’ followed by a sequence of names, all spoken by an artificial voice.

The named player plays their single pitch as soon as they can after hearing their name, producing a hocket.

Sing cue

The sing cue comprises the word ‘sing’ followed by a piano triad.

All players choose a pitch from the chord and sing it with enthusiasm for c.1-2”.

The pitches can be sung in any comfortable register.

Hold

If ‘hold’ is included in a spoken cue, the resulting response should be held. For example: ‘Notes Hold Aglaya’ would mean that Aglaya plays her note and sustains it; ‘Hold / tender skin’ would mean that the response to ‘tender skin’ is sustained rather than played as a shorter response.

or

At certain points ‘or’ is used in a cue to specify options for cues and responses. For example ‘Ashot and Ralf Bravo or Golf’ would meant that Ashot and Ralf each choose whether to respond to the ‘Bravo’ or ‘Golf’ drone cues.

Other sounds

There are a few other inserted sounds that do not have a cueing function. They are just there for decoration and to confuse matters. The lengthy on-hold music at the end offers an opportunity to sit and relax for a short time.
GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

all

o-pppp(----)  The sound should be on the edge of silence, and stop and start irregularly, or have an inconsistent quality due to any associated playing techniques.

ppp(< >)  The sound should centre on the indicated dynamic, but allow any micro-variations to emerge naturally (do not try to play them though)

[vib]  An exaggerated, fast, vibrato.
[distort]  Extreme energy channelled into the sound (heavy bow pressure, overblowing etc) to distort the sound.

wind and brass

[throat]  A very rapid series of single articulations of the air stream in the throat (not a growl or flutter-tongue). The pace should be as fast as possible, to the point where it is hard to control the regularity of the attack.

[air/noise]  Breath sound with little pitch component. Noise tones should be emphasised.
[growl]  Vocal input to the played note (hum, sing etc) to produce a distortion of the sound.
+[ ]  Closed plunger mute
[ ]  Open plunger mute

[throat]  Blocked – as closed, but with extra pressure to seal the tube as much as possible.

percussion

[U]  Circle the cup on the surface using the base of cup on surface

[ ]  Circle the cup on the surface using rim of cup on surface (upside down)

[elastic band]  Tension the band between thumb and index finger, pull back band and release onto drumhead to produce a short, sharp attack. Attaching the elastic bands in advance may ease speed of articulation.

[notched rod]  Bow object with notched rod to produce a rasping sound.

piano

Tremolo with all pitches sounding together as a fast, repeated chord (each hand independent). If the bracket extends to both hands, the whole chord should be played in this manner (hands synchronised).
   For tremolos without the bracket, the chord may be broken (bisbiglindo).

[damp: LH]  Damp the strings with the indicated hand. The pitches should still be clearly audible, but muffled.
[heavy damp: RH]  For ‘heavy damp’, the sound should be more muffled, with less audible pitch.
[f.t.rub]  Rub the across the strings lightly with the fingers to produce a slightly damped tremolo.

bowed strings

[minimal movement]  Minimal bow movement necessary to produce sound, which should be unstable as a result.
[damp]  Damp all strings lightly with the fingers of the left hand. A coloured pitch/noise sound will result.
[f.n.pizz]  Pizzicato with fingernail
FLUTE

OBOE

CLARINET

HORN

TROMBONE

PIANO

PERCUSSION

VIOLIN 1

VIOLIN 2

VIOLA

CELLO

DOUBLE BASS

VIOLIN 1 [SOLO]

VIOLIN 2 [SOLO]

VIOLA [SOLO]

CELLO [SOLO]

NOTES

PULSE

OBJECTS

SING

[play a note from the piano chord]
violin 2

* = 200-240
[heavy pressure] [distort] [heavy pressure] [distort] sim.

* = 60-80
[col legno battuto]

* = 80-100
[pizz]  [arco]

* = 1-2"

* = 2-4"
[vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]  [vib]