

having to carry out the repetitive,
mind-numbingly boring but still
very necessary tasks required to
manage increasingly complicated
processes of production

/ James Saunders

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having to carry out the repetitive, mind-numbingly boring but still very necessary tasks required to manage increasingly complicated processes of production (2025) is part of a series of pieces that explores purposeless work. In the piece, the large ensemble players individually work through a looping set of sustained sounds, following commands given by their choice of player in the small ensemble which tell them when to move to the next sound. This cycle is sporadically interrupted by longer organ drones which reset the process.

Although the small ensemble players are given some control, they do not know the effect of their cues on the actions of the large ensemble players. Equally, the large ensemble players must keep cycling through their sounds, following increasingly complicated routes through the material. The organist is autonomous and can halt this process, but is in turn halted by the small ensemble.

There is an illusion of purpose and organisation, but essentially this is arbitrary. There are coercive rules to follow that shape the behaviours and culture of the players, but no indication of any goals or results to achieve. I am interested in playing with aspects of institutional behaviour, where an organisational structure tasks its workers with clearly defined jobs which are obligatory but may have little obvious purpose. The title comes from David Graeber's book *Bullshit Jobs*. It is well worth reading.

small ensemble [c.4 players]
large ensemble [c.25 players]
organ (or drones)

duration: variable (ideally at least 30 minutes)



SETUP

INSTRUMENTS

Each player in the small and large ensemble has their own setup which should comprise any viable combination of:

- pitched instrument(s)
- objects/devices
- electronics
- voice/body
- recording/playback device with no amplification (i.e. playback from internal speaker) – e.g. phone, tablet, laptop, dictaphone, tape player etc.

The drones player may use any setup capable of creating an immersive wall of sound. This could be:

- organ
- synthesiser
- sine tones, or tones with a very simple waveform
- amplified textures
- feedback
- etc.

AMPLIFICATION

The small ensemble players each need a microphone connected to a PA with a speaker setup that locates each player’s voice to approximately match their stage position. Alternatively, each player could have a separate microphone and local speaker setup.

The large ensemble is not amplified.

If the drones are produced electronically then they should be played through the PA.

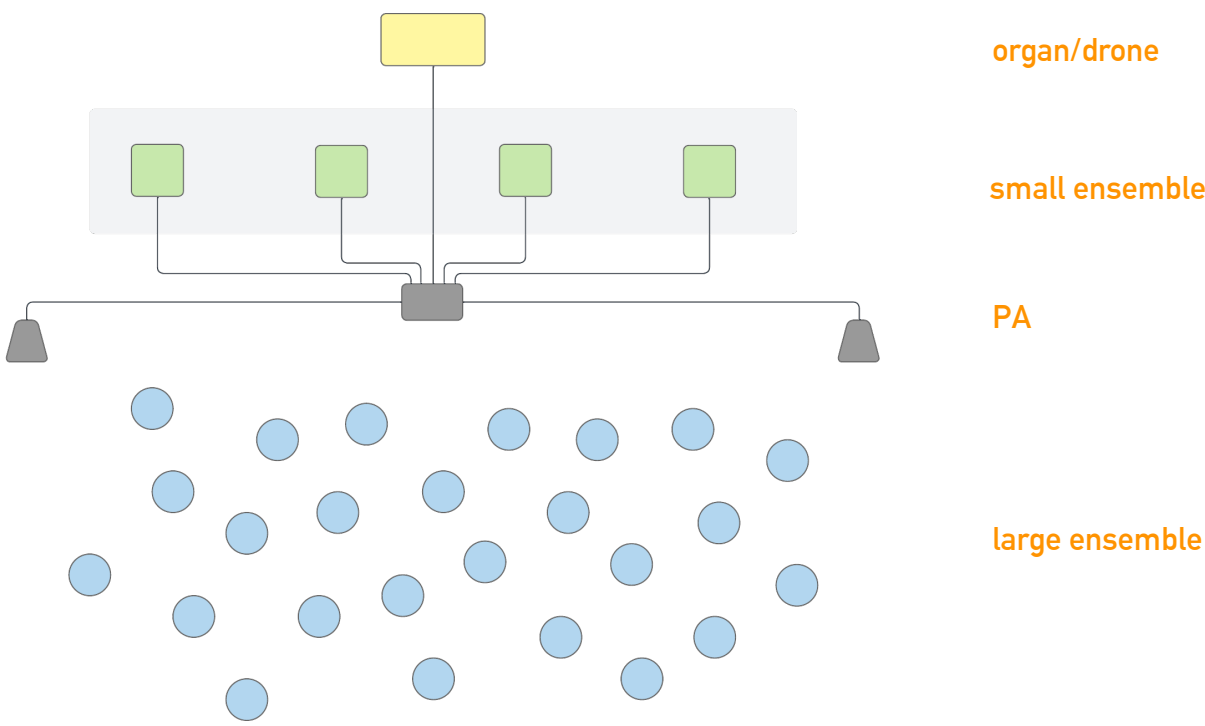
LAYOUT

The small ensemble should be separated from the large ensemble, for example seated behind them on risers. The small ensemble players should be separated from each other spatially so that they appear to be autonomous.

The large ensemble players should be scattered across the performance area with no particularly obvious organisation (e.g. not situated by instrument type or conventional ensemble positions).

The organ/drone player should also be separate from both groups, for example in a different location on the stage or in the auditorium or, if organ, at the organ console.

The PA with necessary inputs should be set up with speakers positioned so that the large ensemble and audience can hear the cues (the mixing desk can be wherever practicable but is just shown below for routing).



PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS

SOUNDS

ENSEMBLES

Each player in the small and large ensemble needs to find a collection of specific and repeatable sustaining sounds to use in the piece.

The number of sounds needed varies according to the version of the performance score used, but generally c.10-20 are necessary.

Additional or adapted sounds should be prepared for the (?) cue (see below).

Each sound should be assigned a number counting up from 1 in advance. The sound-number pair is fixed for a performance, but may be reassigned in a subsequent attempt. Players number their sounds individually, so there may not be a correspondence with sounds of the same number across the group.

The sustaining sounds all need to have the following features:

- a general uniform identity, a sound object, a drone
- where rearticulation is needed (e.g. breathing, bowing) this can be done subtly

Sounds may have the following features:

- any mix of pitch and noise, and perhaps some variation across the chosen sounds
- instability through means of sound production (e.g. very slow hand movement or minimal breath pressure) producing inconsistencies in the sound
- if non-sustaining sound sources are used (e.g. a drum, or plucked string), rapid rearticulation of a sound is possible but should aim to sound continuous
- where electronic sounds are used, control should be through an expressive interface so that inconsistencies might be revealed
- sounds should generally be very quiet, bordering on silence, but occasional louder (or very loud) sounds are possible.

Sounds should not:

- have their own internal pitch or rhythmic patterning (e.g. not a melody, loop, chord sequence, riff etc.)
- comprise a series of distinct events (e.g. not a sequence cycling through a series of samples)

ORGAN/DRONE

Prepare a set of c.10-20 drones which should be relatively static and very low pitched (felt as much as heard). Drones should be relatively clean harmonically (predominantly combinations of octaves, fourths, fifths, major seconds, minor sevenths) and have varying degrees of density.

The sounds should be relatively quiet, diffuse and understated, but distinct enough to be heard through the ensemble.

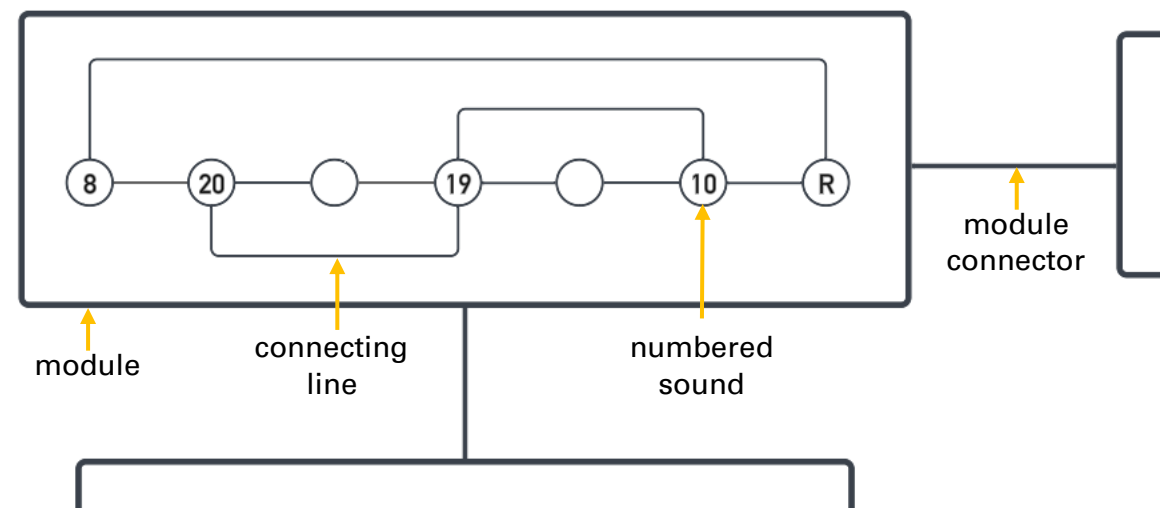
NOTATION

ENSEMBLES

All players have the same score, but navigate through it independently.

The score is a network of modules, each containing a further network that links the different sounds selected by each player.

At any given time one of these sounds is active for each player. When following a CHANGE cue (see below), a player moves to one of the connected nodes by following a line that connects to it. For example, in the version below if a player is playing sound 20 and receives a CHANGE cue, they may move to sound 8, 19 or the blank (silent) node.



- ② play numbered sound
- silence (do not play a sound), and stop all current sounds including recording playback
- ? play any numbered sound, or a new sound, different each time
- R start recording using your device
- P play back one of the recordings you have made using your device

Sounds should be sustained as far as possible while active, subject to the need to breathe and maintain stamina. If a break is needed, use the silent nodes to stop briefly.

ORGAN/DRONE

See the performance instructions below. There is no additional score.

CUES

The piece is controlled by a series of cues given only by players in the small ensemble.

Players in the large ensemble only respond to these cues.

Large and small ensemble players only respond to the small ensemble player they have currently selected to give cues, ignoring cues given by the other small ensemble players.

The organ/drone player operates independently of the cues, with the exception of START.

CHANGE	All cued large and small ensemble players move to a new sound connected to the current sound by a line on the score.
RETURN	All cued players return to the previous sound they made.
WAIT	All cued players stop making sounds, including recording playback.
CONTINUE	All cued players who have been stopped by a WAIT cue continue playing the sound they were playing when stopped, including playback of recordings.
SWITCH	All cued players switch to a new small ensemble player to take cues from.
START	At the beginning of the piece or after an intervention by the organ/drone player, cued players choose a node on their active score and begin playing. The organ/drone player stops making sound on hearing this cue given by any of the small ensemble players.
END	All cued players stop playing. This is the end of the piece for them.

INSTRUCTIONS

LARGE ENSEMBLE

Choose one of the small ensemble players, and a starting module. All players should choose the same starting module.

Only follow cues your currently selected player gives.

Begin when your chosen player gives a START cue.

Choose one of the numbered sounds on the current module and play until the next cue given by your selected player.

If your selected player gives a SWITCH cue, choose a different small ensemble player to take cues from.

Only take cues from your current player.

When the organ/drone player makes an intervention, stop immediately.

While they are playing, switch your module to one of the possibilities linked to it and use this for the next period of playing.

Start this when your currently selected player gives a START cue.

The piece ends for you when your currently selected player gives an END cue.

SMALL ENSEMBLE

You may give any of the spoken cues at any time.

At the beginning of the piece, you will need to give a START cue so that players following you begin

You will also need to do this again after an organ sound to restart players following your cues.

You also respond to cues from one of the other small ensemble players.

Choose one of the other small ensemble players, and a starting module. All players should choose the same starting module.

Only follow cues your currently selected player gives.

Begin playing when your chosen player gives a START cue.

Choose one of the numbered sounds on the current module and play until the next cue given by your selected player.

If your selected player gives a SWITCH cue, choose a different small ensemble player to take cues from. Only take cues from your current player.

When the organ/drone player makes an intervention, stop immediately.

While they are playing, switch your module to one of the possibilities linked to it and use this for the next period of playing.

Start this when your currently selected player gives a START cue.

The piece ends for you as a sound-maker when your currently selected player gives an END cue. You may still give cues for players following you after this, and will need to give an END cue to end the piece for them.

NB: you give cues that affect other players and respond to cues given by other small ensemble players. These modes are not linked: for example, if you have to follow the WAIT cue, it does not prevent you from giving cues yourself, only from making sound at that point.

ORGAN

At any point you may make a sustained sound as an intervention.

You are autonomous and may play a sustained sound when you wish to. This stops all the other players from making sounds.

Hold this until one of the small ensemble players gives a START cue, then stop immediately.

With the exception of this cue, you do not follow cues from the small ensemble.

The piece ends when all of the small ensemble players have given the END cue and nobody is making sound.

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