

*under\_current*

for electric guitar solo and orchestra (2020–2021)

Dedicated to Yaron Deutsch

Compared to the instruments that make up the symphonic orchestra, the electric guitar is a very young instrument. Since the 50s it is omnipresent in pop and rock music, but only fairly recently have composers started to integrate it in the framework of contemporary music, as solo instrument, in ensembles and sometimes even within an orchestra.

Even though my interest in jazz, pop and rock music came much later than my interest in contemporary “classical” music, I have been fascinated by the electric guitar early on. It might seem entirely underwhelming as an observation, but this is an instrument that needs electricity, current, in order to sound, and its sound isn’t emitted by the body of the instrument, like its acoustic cousin, but rather by a black box to which it is connected via an electric navel cord: the amplifier. That positions it on the crossroads of acoustic and electronic sound, and that was exactly what hooked me to the instrument.

One of the first compositions in which I structurally integrated live-electronics, *Not I*, was for this very reason, composed for the electric guitar. In it, I placed another “black box”, in between the electric guitar and the amplifier: a computer that manipulates the electrical signal and changes the relationship between the gestures of the performer and the resulting sound. Since *Not I*, the electric guitar has featured in many of my compositions for ensemble and live-electronics, in which it often functions as a hinge between the acoustic and electronic soundlayers.

A few years after *Not I*, in 2009, fate (or rather: Thomas Schäfer) brought me in touch with the electric guitarist, Yaron Deutsch. I was to compose a piece for the fantastic ensemble he spearheads, Nickel Ensemble (*Fremdkörper #2*). We have been collaborating ever since, and became close friends. Yaron has premiered several pieces of mine, and we founded the improvisation band *Ministry of Bad Decisions*. I can truly say that I would not be where I am as a composer, a musician and a human if our paths would not have crossed (And I would not be making the killer humus of which he gave me his secret recipe). Composing a work for him as a soloist with orchestra, then, was a logical step in our ever evolving collaboration, a next challenge we accepted as a team, and it is a token of our friendship.

Whereas in *Not I*, the sound of the electric guitar was electronically manipulated by a computer before it would reach the amplifier, in *under\_current* the sound coming from the multiple amplifiers in Yaron's idiosyncratic setup is extended by the orchestra, which functions (generally) as a huge, human, analog meta-amplifier. The battery of pedals that are used to live-process the sound of the electric guitar, find an equivalent in the use of objects that transform the sounds of the orchestral instruments. Throughout *under\_current*, the relationship between all the "amplifiers", the electrical and analog ones, will shift & shake, branch & break, split & merge, and with it the relationship between the human and the technological.

*under\_current* is my "corona-baby". I started working on it with the onset of the "first wave" in February 2020, and about 18 months later, upon receiving my second vaccination, and a "fourth" wave seeming to take off, I drew the double bar. Through almost 20 online workshop sessions with Yaron, it has grown organically, Yaron's invaluable input constantly offering exciting new ideas and directions. In this period of worldly chaos and uncertainty, *under\_current* has been my refuge, a house from which I could react on what's happening beyond its walls, in which I could live and breathe freely, without masks or distancing.

Stefan Prins

August 2021