Selfish Gene: Structured improvisation for ensemble

For 3 - 10 core players; more players possible. Duration roughly 22 min.

by Sarah Peebles, March 10, 2006; revised November, 2007

Foreword (ensembles please read)

Selfish Gene balances elements of freedom with limitations and direction so that a wide range of musical outcomes are possible with each reading or performance. The work's structure is fairly repetitive yet includes incremental changes, and requires one to shift one's focus between the self and the group while playing in a way that requires intense listening to other members of the ensemble. There is no intended or preferred direction or outcome for the piece; rather, Selfish Gene is concerned with process.

Generally speaking, two rehearsals of two hours each should be sufficient for a group to feel comfortable with SG. It is strongly recommended that all performers and conductor/facilitator spend some time absorbing the directions before diving into a rehearsal or performance. Selfish Gene should not be sight-read. The directions should be followed as closely as possible, though I have intentionally left some vagueness here and there, and thus each ensemble should feel free to interpret the instructions as they see fit.

The title refers to The Selfish Gene, a book on evolutionary theory by Richard Dawkins, written in 1976. Dawkins proposed that natural selection is governed on the genetic level, rather than on the individual level, as had previously been proposed by Darwin. The "selfish gene" concept holds that "evolution is best viewed as acting on genes, and that selection at the level of organisms or populations almost never overrides selection on genes"; that natural selection is linked to how effectively an organism's genes are dispersed globally, and how effectively genes mutate and adapt to their environment. Although I was initially interested in coming up with an effective strategy for creating intriguing improvisational experiences on a musical level, both for the performers and the audience, it struck me that the workings of this piece have some things in common with current evolutionary theory. I hope You play SG often and enjoy the experience!

Note: PDF files of the SG score and cue cards are posted at sarahpeebles.net, under "projects".
{As I do not yet have a PayPal account, please feel free to mail chocolate (70% cocoa) and/or coffee (dark roast) in lieu of money.}

Programme Notes (for audiences)

Selfish Gene balances elements of freedom with limitations and direction so that a wide range of musical outcomes are possible with each reading or performance. The work's structure is fairly repetitive yet includes incremental changes, and requires players to shift their focus between the self and the group while playing in a way that requires intense listening to other members of the ensemble. There is no intended or preferred direction or outcome for the piece; rather, Selfish Gene is concerned with process. The title refers to "The Selfish Gene", a book on evolutionary theory by Richard Dawkins, written in 1976. Dawkins proposed that natural selection is governed on the genetic level, rather than on the individual level, as had previously been proposed by Darwin. The "selfish gene" concept holds that "evolution is best viewed as acting on genes, and that selection at the level of organisms or populations almost never overrides selection on genes"; that natural selection is linked to how effectively an organism's genes are dispersed globally, and how effectively genes mutate and adapt to their environment. Although I was initially interested in coming up with an effective strategy for creating intriguing improvisational experiences on a musical level, both for the performers and the audience, it struck me that the workings of this piece have some things in common with current evolutionary theory.

Sarah Peebles is a Toronto-based American composer, improviser and installation artist. Her studies have included violin, composition and Japanese traditional musics at the University of Michigan School of Music, Toho Gakuen School of Music (Tokyo), Tokyo Association of Shinto Priests and The Okada guild (Saitama Pref.), among others. Much of her practice focuses on digitally manipulated found sound projected via loudspeakers and/or physical objects, as well as developing distinct approaches to acoustic and amplified improvisation on the shoh, the Japanese mouth-organ used in gagaku. Her activities have included music for dance, multi-channel audio, radio, video/film, performance art, new media and improvised performance. She has collaborated with a wide range of musicians and artists internationally, and her music is available on a number of recordings. Details at Studio Excelo "time-based art with a creamy filling" (www.sarahpeebles.net).

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Time
@

A.1 - A.2

0"   Roughly half of the core players create small-to-medium length phrases which they repeat. Dynamics and all other parameters open choice. (Begin with 3 players if 5 performers in total.)

1"   When cued, the other half of the core players choose one or more note(s) from one of the phrases they hear and play the note(s) (simultaneously) as a long, unbroken pitch or chord at any dynamic. You may bend the pitch(es) slightly as desired. (Begin with 2 players if 5 performers in total.)

B

2"   **Listen only:** each person chooses (without playing) any phrase or long note(s)/chord which somebody else is playing to gravitate to. You may also choose to incorporate several distinct long notes (e.g. long notes played by various people) into a new chord. However, don't do anything with that for one minute; continue with your original material (A); use this time to listen while you play your original thing.

C

3-6" Shift to your chosen phrase or long note(s)/chord when you're ready. Feel free to change over abruptly or switch over little by little (e.g. incorporate it into what you're already playing and mutate what you're doing 'til you've switched over completely). do this over the next 3-ish minutes.

D

6"   Shift to another players' material in this manner (as in C) three more times, but with each shift also alter some aspect of the new phrase or long note(s)/chd—such as timbre, volume, rhythm, speed, etc.—while retaining its pitch material (or pitch relationships/ interval material).. Each shift lasts two minutes (signaled by conductor and/or clocks).

E

12"   Continue shifting in this manner (as in D) three more times, each a 2-minute shift, but insert spaces (pauses, rests) into your phrases/long note(s)/chd, or extend existing spaces. Make these spaces gradually longer with each repetition of your material. People playing chords may add or subtract one or more notes in your chord after a space, drawing from the source material (i.e., the source phrase) of your chord

(A—E) Wild Card

??"   At ANY point in the piece (between sections A and E) one person may choose to stand up - noted here as "Wild player" (hats or similar in lieu of standing may be preferable to indicate wild card). At this point everybody either holds the note they are presently on or holds one of the notes they arrive at within 30 seconds, until Wild player sits back down. Wild player may choose to play a free solo during this time, may choose to be silent, may play freely within her pitch set/pitch material, or may choose to hold the note she was on when she stood up. Wild player must wait at least until the group has settled completely into held notes before sitting back down/removing hat. Wild card can happen only once. It should not be discussed ahead of time. It would be most appreciated if Wild player does eventually sit back down. Resume where you all left off previous to the Wild Card (the conductor will have paused the clock during Wild Card).

F

18"   Over 2-ish minutes, gradually switch over to play exactly what the Wild player is now playing, until the group is playing in unison. (If nobody stood up, the conductor chooses a player to follow). Play the phrase/note(s)/chd together two times through; if the material is more than a minute long, play one minute of it twice through.

That's it. Go out and have a beer or eat a meal together - invite the audience, if there is one.
See notes and abbreviated score, below.

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Notes:

1. Conductor / Facilitator

   a) A conductor/facilitator keeps track of time and signals, via the cue cards provided, the beginning (both at 0" and at 1"), the changes of sections and the repetitions within sections, and, the final 2 repetitions, but not the very end of the piece. Clocks may be incorporated as desired for players' reference.

   b) The initial sets of core players (at 0") should be determined ahead of time or designated at the onset by the conductor.

   c) Designate repetitions within sections via cue cards plus a finger (1, 2, etc.).

   d) Pause the clock during Wild Card. If visibility issues arise during Wild Card, assist in facilitating the group's awareness of the Wild player and their actions when appropriate.

   e) If "unwanted" cacophony reigns, the conductor/facilitator may signal specific players, or the whole group, to play more quietly. If all is "too" quiet, chill out and have a chamomile tea or nap awhile.

2. Where more than 7 players in total, choose from the following options, or mix them:

   a) Choose 7 core players (or some appropriate number according to the size of the ensemble). Additional players each choose one of the core players to shadow (e.g. double) - you may choose a single player or change whom you shadow throughout - playing with them in unison as much possible. Core players might want to wear a hat or something to distinguish themselves as the core, because this could get pretty confusing.

   b) Groups of people take shifts as directed by the conductor. The transition(s) should be seamless, with each new person picking up on the of thread of the player whom they're replacing as their jump-in point.

3. It is strongly recommended that all performers and conductor/facilitator spend some time absorbing these directions before diving into a rehearsal or performance. Selfish Gene should not be sight-read. You'll find that elements of freedom are balanced with limitations/direction so that a wide range of musical outcomes are possible with each reading and/or performance. There is no intended or preferred direction or outcome for the piece; rather, Selfish Gene is concerned with process. Feel free to work out unclear aspects of the piece within your group as you see fit.

4. Abbreviated Score (below) and cue cards held by the conductor should be used in performance for quick and uncluttered reference by performers. Cue card PDF files available at sarahpeebles.net, under "projects".

5. Unamplified instruments are preferred except where necessary (i.e. electric guitars), or where balance issues become a problem, or where amplification brings out exceptional qualities of an instrument which otherwise would be inaudible.

6. "dynamic" = volume level; "@" = at the time signified below; 0" = minutes etc.

   See abbreviated score and cue cards.

Selfish Gene

Abbreviated Score (cue cards available upon request)

(A) 4 players at 0"
phrases   [for 2 min]

3 players at 1"
note(s)/chord [for 1 min]

(B) at 2"
choose ⟶ **phrase**
wait ⟶ **note(s) / chord** |1 min|

(C) **shift** ⟶ **phrase**
⟶ **note(s) / chord**   **X 1**   [3 min]

(D) **shift** + alter **X 3** [2 min each]

(E) **shift** + alter + space **X 3** [2 min each]

wild card   **stand**
⌣̇
/ **hold**

(F) **unison with stander** [2-ish min plus?]   **END**