FELIPE LANUZA RILLING

Absence, silence, and the shades of Takemitsu's *Ma* in Venice

Absence through layering

Absence emerges between the physical world and the perception of the subject who experiences it. What makes absence eventually present is the imagination of the subject, activated by a trace, a fragment, a void, or any other element or situation acting to suggest something absent. Therefore, absence depends on presence, yet one that points at something that is away, physically or temporally.[1] Absence is, therefore, a matter of distance.

I draw on the concept of atmosphere to situate the realm in which a sense of absence can be recognised. Atmospheres have been addressed as an aesthetic category that considers the sense of ambience of a place or situation, as immediately felt by the perceiver. Philosopher Gernot Böhme's theories on atmospheres offer a comprehensive understanding of sites and situations, as perceived both intellectually and emotionally by groups and individuals. Böhme briefly defines atmosphere as tuned space or space with a mood (2016: 2). To perceive something that triggers the awareness of an absence tinges that mood. What is at hand to the senses, present in the here and now of experience, can also carry a sense or a feeling of what is away. According to philosopher Tonino Griffero, sensing the atmosphere is "grasping a feeling in the surrounding space, … being gripped by a *something-more*, … an excess with respect to the place" (2014: 5), suggesting atmospheres as entities that can bear absence as well as being loaded by what is at hand to the senses.[2]

In the experience of cities, absence comes forward through spaces left aside from or overlooked by their active and regular life. These are evocative places, which, by virtue of a lack of current determinacy, can stimulate spontaneous and alternative uses, a free sense of memory as well as prospective and retrospective imagination. In sites of this nature, absence embodies fullness and is a source of richness and potential.

Ignasi de Solá-Morales used the term *terrain vague* to define what he considered to be the "form of absence in contemporary cities" (1996: 21). Mainly referring to large-scale areas, the attributes that de Solá-Morales identified in such unproductive spaces, are: openness, alternativeness, strangeness, uncertainty, ambiguity, as well as an evocative sense of expectation, and critically, an escape

from the overwhelming contemporary city (1995: 119-20). As set aside from the mainstream, formal urban spaces, they offer different possibilities of interpretation and occupancy, by both humans and nature (Kamvasinou, 2006: 255).

Absence can be an immersive experience when experienced in *terrain vagues*, characterised by silence (unless an informal event is taking place). There is a sense of multiplicity and simultaneity in the subtle gamut of noises coming from active urban spaces that remain away. For the perceiver standing in the middle of an abandoned space, the distant noise s/he hears chime with the imagined echoes of what is no longer or what is yet to be. Silence, beyond taking part in the experience of absence in urban leftovers, can also become a metaphor for the fullness it evokes.

In dialogue with the ideas briefly discussed, I have developed a method of visual representation to explore and recreate absence. I call it layering, and it was born as a response to absence as experienced in such places.

While these do not straightforwardly follow or apply Böhme's theory, these interpretations evoke a sense of atmosphere through blurry and dense images that result from the overlay of a series of photographs of a specific place or situation. They express an ambiance loaded with absences in accordance with what can be experienced on site. These images are composed of many translucent layers, corresponding to several photographs of a site or situation, superimposed on each other with reduced degrees of opacity allowing them to become simultaneously present.

Fig. 1 Author (2014/2018). Left over spaces and surfaces in Cannaregio Ovest, Venice, 9-20 November [Layered photographic composition]

De Solá-Morales suggests that urban photography in the 1960s and 1970s first indicated the cultural significance of contemporary *terrains vagues* (1995: 119). Beyond the portrayal of abandoned portions of urban land, absence is inherent in the medium of photography as representation and distancing from reality, as stated by philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1999). By discussing the etymological meaning of photography as the "writing of light," Baudrillard underlines the immaterial presence of reality when portrayed by photography. I further this etymological interpretation by regarding photography as "drawing of light". In

this I follow Svetlana Alpers' analysis of the Greek root *graphos*, which refers to writing, drawing and recording as forms of description (1983: 136). Therefore, I propose the layering of photographs as "palimpsests of light" that reimagine the experience of absence as an approximate impression of things that appear to be away, vanishing, haunting, and have to be recreated by the observer.[3]

The layered images are made of the simultaneous and intensified projection of captured light. As absence relies on the awareness and imagination of the perceiver, they bring forward a retrospective and prospective re-imagination of the site from a spatial and/or temporal distance. The images hold transformative potential bearing absence in their mode of production, revealing (or reinventing) the qualities de Solá-Morales recognises in *terrains vagues*, in spaces that may hold absence even in different ways.

Silence and *ma*

In its basic apprehension as the absence of a predominant sound, silence allows for less perceivable sounds to become available to experience, enhancing the sense of hearing. Silence provides a context for the emergence of a rumour composed by a myriad of overlapping, distant or subtle sounds,[4] constituting a meaningful parallel for absence and layering.

In musical terms, silence can work both as a space or gap between two sounds, or as an active opening for other sounds to become part of the composition. A radical example of the latter is composer John Cage's piece 4'33'' (1952), in which not a single sound is set to be played.[5] A silence lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds allows the perceiver to focus and reflect on sounds otherwise obscured by the presence of music. When played in a room of almost any nature, a variety of sounds coming from inside and outside converge in a dense rumour perceived due to a heightened awareness triggered by silence, which works as an opening.

Among many, Cage influenced Takemitsu, making him discover the values of traditional Japanese music (Burt, 2001: 92), mainly through his sensibility towards Japanese Zen Buddhism, in which a fundamental aspect is the simultaneous presence and absence of all things (Cage and Charles, 1981: 46). According to Mikiko Sakamoto, "it was from this pairing of two contradictory ideas that Cage established his own unique concept of music and shaped the way he thought about sound and silence. His interests in Japanese culture (...) largely contributed to the fundamental philosophy of Takemitsu" (2010: 3).

Takemitsu, in turn, bridged traditional Japanese and contemporary Western music. His silences are embedded in his compositions producing a sonic landscape with no clear distinction between silence and sound.[6] He privileges a sense of atmosphere formed by sonic phenomena instead of a structural narrative.

According to Peter Burt, the absence of recognisable musical forms within his pieces has the effect of "removing the obstacles placed between events and their perception by the act of organising the former into some distracting conceptual 'system'" (2001: 252). In doing this, he privileges a more direct and intuitive apprehension of sound phenomena, an experience less framed by rational categorisations. Takemitsu's compositions become like impressions of sound formed by a series of sometimes alternating and sometimes overlapping notes that hold a certain degree of autonomy.[7] As Takemitsu states:

> [...] each note is refined and emphasised in isolation, the significance of the scale to which it belongs becomes of less importance, and thus the sound approximates to a condition that resembles silence, since it is no longer distinguishable from natural noises, which, though full of concrete tones, as a whole represent 'silence'. (Cited in Miyamoto, 1996: 132)

Takemitsu's musical interpretation of silence is an opening to multi-layered sonorities existing either within or outside the composed sound piece (Burt, 2001: 237-8). In drawing on a myriad of unnoticed or hidden sounds, his use of silence echoes the ability of absence to evoke multiple and distant presences.

Takemitsu's silence is loaded by what the Japanese identify as *ma*: an opening or interval. For Arata Isozaki, *ma* articulates space and time in a unified understanding of a condition in-between or void, yet encompassing a sense of fullness. He writes,

> *Ma* signifies both the distance between two points—the in between space— and the silence between two sounds—internal time. Both imply blankness. The ability and technique to sense *Ma*, the blank or gap, can be the means to aesthetic and artistic expression. (2009: 162)

The notion of *ma* was largely introduced to Western architectural audiences by Isozaki in the exhibition *Ma: Space-Time in Japan* (1978), which influenced broader accounts of the concept, as in the case of music. Interpreted also as interstice or margin (Isozaki, 2011: 95), or as the Japanese sense of place or place making (Nitschke, 1966: 117), Western appropriations of the concept in the field of architecture, enriched but also complicated its definition (Nakagawa, 2010: 44). Kevin Nute asserts that the original meaning of *ma* in Japanese culture does not fundamentally differ from the Western idea of interval, indistinctively used to refer to a spatial or temporal gap as an "uneventful void". He suggests that more elaborate and even metaphysical architectural interpretations of *ma* follow specific agendas to stage Japanese culture and architecture in Western audiences (2019: 54-55, 61).

Being an elusive concept, and posing difficulties for its translation, *ma* has profound connotations but is also very much embedded in Japanese quotidian culture, in which the ambiguity of the term is embraced in everyday life (Aragüez, 2016: 89-90).

Lesley di Mare acknowledges the crucial importance of *ma* in all aspects of Japanese life, and points out that *ma* is a concept that reflects Japanese understanding of time and space as a single entity, in opposition to the Western separate and teleological understanding. "For the Japanese, space, time, and silence are a constellation of elements that form the elusive yet penetrating concept of *ma*" (1990: 319).

Richard Pilgrim emphasises *ma* as an interval that not only refers to measurement but can also carry meanings such as "opening, space between, time between, and so forth. A room is called '*ma*,' for example, as it refers to the space between the walls; a rest in music is also '*ma*' as the pause between the notes or sounds" (1986: 155). However, the meaning of *ma* in Japanese culture entails more complexity than being simply a spatial and/or temporal gap. *Ma* can also interact with sound producing an ambiguity between silence and sound, as in the case of Takemitsu's notes in his piano works, which shade into silence without a

clear point of termination.[8] Timothy Koozin describes such pieces as follows,

> [O]ne is more likely to hear the silence arising toward the end of such figure as a direct outgrowth of the previous sound-event. In this sense, the sound-event draws silence into the piece as an active rather than passive element. It is possible to think of Takemitsu's long, decaying tones as *hashi* (bridges) projecting from the world of sound into that of silence. The moment of waiting for sound to become silence is imbued with the quality of '*Ma*'. (1990: 36)

Rather than an element in the composition, Koozin observes *ma* has a metaphysical connotation, "it is an expressive force which fills the void between objects separated in time and space" (1990: 36). Takemitsu regarded *ma* a philosophical term, and "when questioned as to its deeper significance, Takemitsu's own response seemed to withdraw into a kind of inscrutable silence which was an example of '*Ma*' in itself" (Burt, 2001: 237).

For Takemitsu, in traditional Japanese music, *ma* corresponds to an intense silence that balances sound, for which it holds "a metaphysical continuity that defies analysis" (1995: 51).[9] Takemitsu argues that *ma*, the unsounded part of the experience of music, "is that which gives life to the sound and removes it from its position of primacy" (1995: 51).

The kind of silence Takemitsu expresses in his work is by no means abstract and isolated. It incorporates other, autonomous sources of sound, as the own notes of the composition are thought to interact with silence and a realm no longer external to the played music, but brought forward and contextualised as part of the piece. It becomes evident, as the music itself seems to accompany the acts of a play or a movie that is not being watched, reinforcing its dream-like atmosphere, opposed to self-evident rhythmical structure or syntax between sounds.[10] It is a musical texture formed by a multiplicity of sound phenomena, which "seems to project a space of timeless possibility around itself at every moment" (Hutchinson, 2014: 428). Miyamoto underlines the role of silence in gathering sound phenomena within and beyond Takemitsu's pieces when he writes, it is "in no wise something void, but rather is filled with the numberless tones or noises of space (1996: 32). Following Miyamoto, Burt states, "it is the function of the 'notes played' to contrast with and render perceptible this underlying continuum" (2001: 237). For Miyamoto, this means to "enliven the countless sounds of silence through music" (1996: 32). In Takemitsu's own words: "*ma o ikasu*" ("enliven the *ma*") (1996: 32).

From a different yet complementary perspective, Koozin highlights Takemitsu's sounds as framing such openings and giving meaning to an otherwise incomprehensible continuum. In his music, "sounds give meaning to silence; finite temporal markers suggest an awareness of eternal time" (1990: 41).[11] For Koozin then, it becomes evident that silence, in the musical composition, works as a medium to grasp *ma* when the piece is experienced.

Here, I do not argue absence to be what the Japanese call *ma*. A fundamental difference is *ma* being understood here as an entity in its own right, although existing in-between other entities, while absence being always linked to what is away or not in place, thus it is defined in opposition to or as the negative of presence.

Nevertheless, the distance or gap implied in that being away in a temporal and in a spatial sense, and the way it constitutes an opening, reflects a potential quality

of *ma*: an opening which, as silence in Takemitsu's work, gathers the evocation of a multiplicity of subtle, even distant presences. Absence, in the experience of the built environment, comes through traces, voids or fragments similarly to the way in which the texture of decaying and fading tones in Takemitsu's pieces draw silence into them, and, with it, other sounds that can be or become part of the sound piece.[12] They evoke silence in themselves, as Miyamoto notes, inasmuch as they produce an interaction with it.[13] *Ma* thus becomes an active agent of ambiguity that blurs the limits between sound and silence, and removes the primacy of the author's intention to give way to a more open musical narrative.[14]

Isozaki suggests *ma* to be better understood not only as a gap but also as "the original difference immanent in things" (2011: 95). This extended definition gets closer to Takemitsu's interpretation of *ma* through the way silence dialogues with sound, which in turn reflects on my understanding of absence in drawing in multiple tonalities that, in a seemingly non-structured assemblage, appear as distant, not filling or occupying but reverberating in space. Played in simultaneity, these sounds conform a balanced impression of a sensory and multi-layered immanence, resembling the different temporalities evoked by the inarticulate traces and fragments of a ruin. As Koozin puts it:

> In the temporal imagery of traditional Japanese arts, moment-to-moment events are superimposed against a static background; being and becoming are recognized as contraries, which mutually define each other. Through the decaying reverberation of the piano's tone, Takemitsu creates a metaphor for the fluidity and impermanence of the physical world. (1990: 41)

Takemitsu embraces a sense of multiplicity and simultaneity in his interpretation of silence. The materials of his compositions are in constant flux; sometimes they are single fading tones, or sometimes they are rich layered sonorities that reverberate and assimilate silence. These are analogous to the rumour one can perceive coming from the distant, active city, standing in the middle of a *terrain vague*, which blends with possible pasts and futures, not readily present but suggested as absences.

I have contextualised Takemitsu's work in John Cage's account of silence to further address its resonances with absence and layering, instead of exploring fields of proximity and interaction between music and architecture or visual arts. Takemitsu's musical work constitutes a distant field from which I comparatively reflect on my account of absence.[15] This paper seeks to advance an understanding and representation of absence, making of the gaps and distances between the field of architecture and music (and between Western and Japanese culture) a space of interpretative opportunity.

Venice from the distance

The following images do not represent disused or overlooked spaces in Venice but try to expand the interpretation of absence as layering beyond those kinds of places, to reflect on the city's multi-layered formation and slow ruination.[16] The following compositions reimagine the memories of a city away in space and time—moments captured in light.

Venice exemplifies the idea of the urban palimpsest, giving the impression of accumulating its dense history in its materiality. This becomes evident in the aggregation of its intricate housing fabric, in the layers of stucco partially covering the old façades as they reveal either white stones or dampened walls. The decay of surfaces alternating with recent restorations or some scarce new buildings also contributes to reveal the "layered reality of Venice that condenses at once a plurality of times" (Stoppani, 2011: 161).

Fig. 2 Author (2014/2018). Walks in Venice, 3-20 November 2014 [Layered photographic composition]
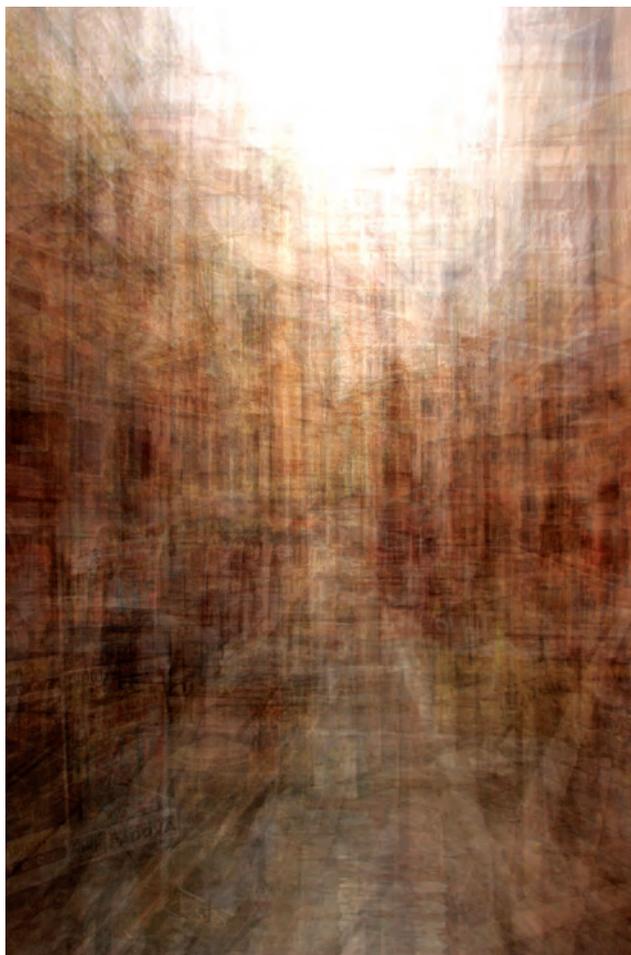
The vertical orientation of this composition depends on the spatial proportion of the photographed environments: narrow streets, alleys, and vertically framed vistas. Despite the city's great spatial diversity, the image reveals some consistent features, such as how the light is distributed and the textures and colours of the deteriorating walls of buildings. The accumulation of images gives a painterly effect to the composition, as if through the dense air the masses of buildings of both sides can be seen gradually dematerialising in light.
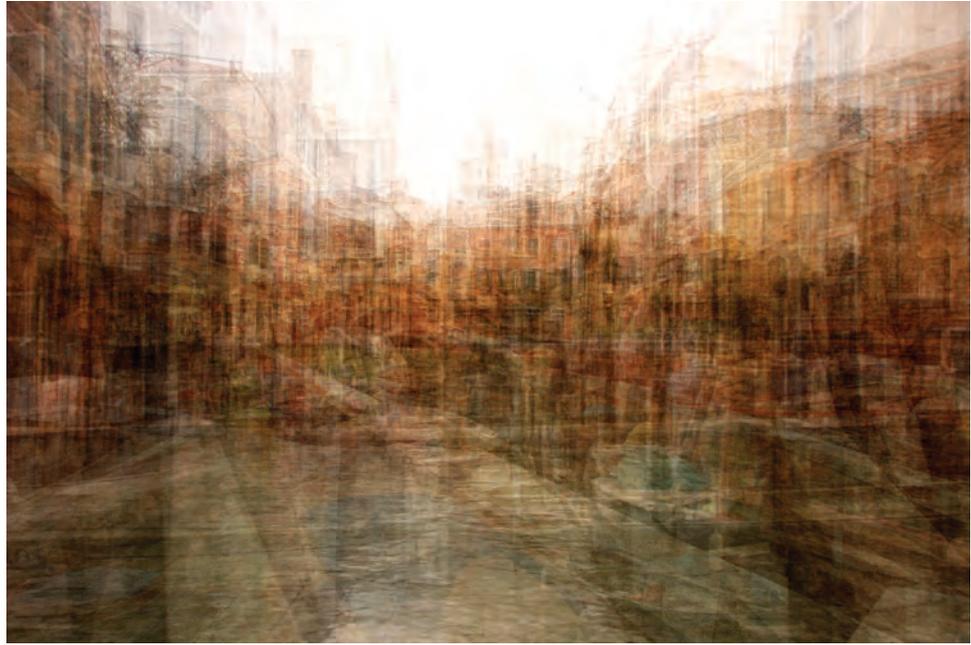
Fig. 3 Author (2014). A walk to Cannaregio Ovest, Venice, 3 November 2014 [Layered photographic composition][17]

Fig. 4 Author (2014). Encounter of buildings and water, Venice, 3-20 November, 2014 [Layered photographic composition]

The next composition deals with more open spaces. The façade's materiality and texture and the alternating presence of water and hard floors seem to reverberate together with the glowing light and the humid air of Venice's hazy and cold autumnal days.
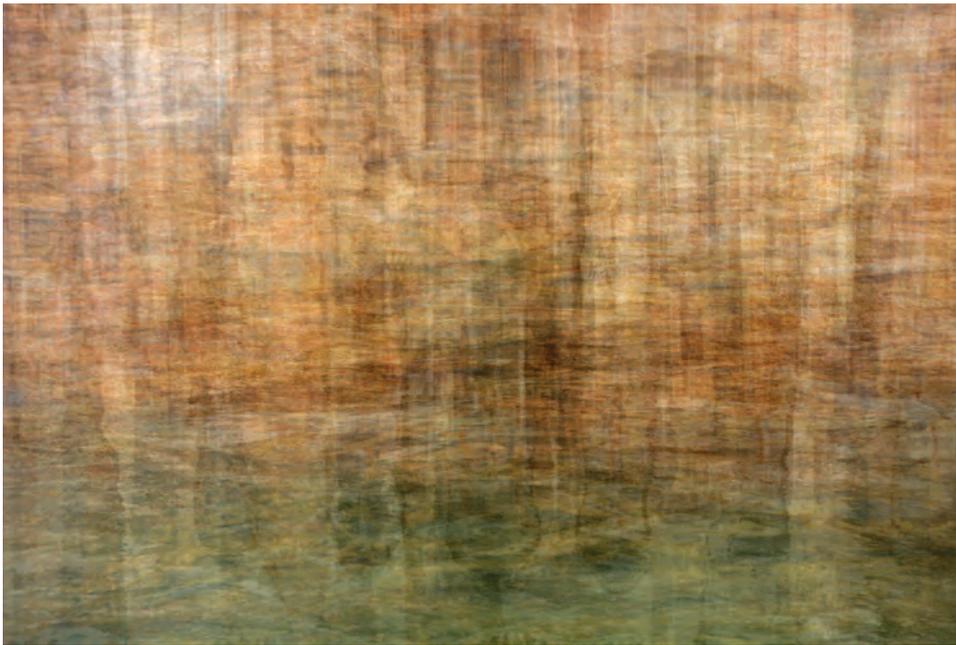
When concentrating on the encounters between façades and water, the overall colouring stays similar. The reflection adds a different depth and complexity, and the greater presence of its green colour and texture reveals the city's atmosphere through the aggregation of more detailed images of the buildings being reflected on or touched by green, flickering waters. The blurring of Venetian buildings into the water triggers thoughts on the fragility of the city and its haunting fate of

slowly sinking into the lagoon.[18] Vanishing into the air or the water, the city appears both constituted by multiple translucent images, anticipating its possible future absence.

In these images of Venice, the photographs vanish into each other losing some of their particular characteristics. In turn, the sites become less legible as the image does not work in a documentary or analytical sense but as a source of re-imagination that appeals to an open-ended, even emotional engagement with something not yet graspable, in the process of becoming.

This form of representation does not respond to an understanding of the geometry of space and form. Sharp edges give way to the predominance of a sensory impression of light and colour, encompassing a temporal and spatial density and depth. In this way, the nature of the images resonates visually with Takemitsu's musical landscapes. The compositions suggest fading images seemingly in motion, balancing between a total opacity and the almost absolute transparency that allows them to reverberate together, interweaving presence and absence. Beyond still images, Takemitsu's relation between sound and silence to express *ma* can be furthered through an exploration of moving images, working more directly with the dimension of time.

Fig. 5a-d Author (2014). Cannaregio Ovest, Venice, 20 November 2014 [Snapshots of layered video]
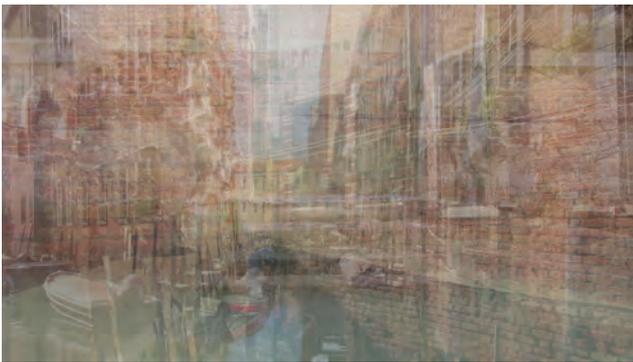
While having observed reflections of my visual work in Takemitsu's music, in the following filmic series I attempt to actively interpret Takemitsu's work by incorporating the variable of time. The resulting moving image composition combines sequence and superimposition to convey an active state of suspension, in which slight movements become visible and seem to hold the captured reality still.[19] There is no particular event occurring in the film, it is a core silence that is in turn invaded by sounds coming from a distance.

The gaps between images become evident as they sequentially appear in the composition, generating a sense of vibrating transition enlivened by the movement of water, light and people. The fading transitions bring forward the ephemeral and transient condition of light appearing and disappearing in the composition, vanishing into blankness. In this way, the resulting piece reflects some of Takemitsu's musical work, following a sense of a "particularly unhurried, autumnal atmosphere" (Hutchinson, 2014: 428), a flow of non-linear time in which the ambience of Venice unfolds.

A slow palimpsest made of the autumnal light of Venice encountering the city's materiality reimagines its different temporalities accumulated throughout time. This last moving composition involves a greater complexity in this series of representations, reflecting the layered formation of the city. As Isozaki writes:

> [The...] fading of things, the dropping of flowers, flickering movements of mind, shadows falling on water or earth [shows a...] fondness for movement of this kind [permeating] the Japanese concept of indefinite architectural space in which a layer of flat boards, so thin as to be practically transparent, determines permeation of light and lines of vision. Appearing in this space is a flickering of shadows, a momentary shift between the worlds of reality and unreality. *Ma* is a void moment of waiting for this kind of change. (Isozaki, 1979: 78)

I have attempted to infuse such quiet intensity in representing the Cannaregio Ovest district in Venice through layering, observing the reverberations and transitions between different images forming an immaterial, moving palimpsest.

Final remarks

While it seems that Western interpretations of *ma* in architecture are more of a creative nature rather than based on historical analysis, as Nute suggests, in music it has had perhaps a similar development, enabling both theoretical understanding and creativity. Its intellectualisation may correspond to an effort for the Western mind to grasp something that is already and deeply internalised in Japanese day-to-day life, art and culture. Takemitsu in music and Isozaki in architecture are paradigmatic examples of this productive cross-cultural hybridisation, on which I have based this dialogue between architecture and music, acknowledging the points of encounter as well as the inevitable distances between both fields.

How could the music of Takemitsu be thought of as a model of interpretation, representation—even of design—of absence, as it comes forward in the experience of the built environment? If not falling into the trap of the mere transparency of materials, the precedent notes and images can contribute to ongoing debates and established interpretations of *ma* and architecture, as well as of

absence and architecture. Here, I have proposed an interpretation of silence and *ma* in Takemitsu's music to reflect on and inform my method of representation of absence in the built environment.

Silence, as understood and used in music by Takemitsu, resonates as a parallel to absence and how it tinges the atmosphere of places. It offers an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the spatial possibilities of architecture and bring forward that which is beyond its physical presence, and beyond the functions and meanings it is supposed to carry. The *terrains vagues* in our cities offer a powerful metaphor of silence. Beyond the challenge of intervention without obliterating the qualities of absence, architectural and urban designers may draw on them to observe and conceive of the built environment in other ways. My attempt to represent Venice as absence through layering constitutes a step in that direction.

As absence itself needs some sort of presence to come forward as such in the imagination of who perceives it, the question would be what kind of architectural presence can bring about or recover absence while keeping it at a distance. In my view, one lesson of Takemitsu's music is the active use of silence and how it draws sound beyond the musical piece—allowing for its emergence. Silence in architecture could then be thought of as being an opening for absence to come forward, rather than being absence itself.

Acknowledgements

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ENDNOTES

1 The use of the word "absence" not only designates "the state of being absent or away", but "also the time of duration of such state" (Murray, et. al.: 1888/1923). This early definition, etymologically traced back to the Middle Ages, is consistent with the contemporary meaning of the word, as can be seen in several English dictionaries. Its Latin root *absentia* implies that it has a similar meaning in French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian.

2 For accounts of absence as haunting and embodiment see Wylie (2007 and 2009).

3 Transparency becomes a necessary condition for layering to convey absence, allowing for the simultaneous appreciation of multiple layers. In these images, transparency is perceived as operating in space and time, thereby evoking a myriad of other moments and situations not readily available in the here and now of experience. This is opposed to absence expressed literally through transparent or translucent materials.

4 Distance here refers to an experiential sense of being away, not to a precise and measurable direction.

5 Cage's 4'33" was first performed by David Tudor on 29, August 1952 at the Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York.

6 In reference to pieces like *Marginalia* (1976/1982).

7 This approach is evident in Takemitsu´s more experimental phase in the late 1970s. See Burt (2001: 175).

8 As examples, consider, *Piano Distance* (1961/1966) and *For Away* (1973/1974).

9 Takemitsu refers here to music played with Japanese traditional instruments such as the *biwa* and the *shakuhachi*.

10 However, Takemitsu's pieces do have a precise notation in which sounds are presented rhythmically. Personal interview with C. Alvear (2018).

11 According to Koozin, in traditional Japanese arts, *ma* is expressed as a portion of void or blankness. For example, in *sumie* paintings, the strokes give boundary to the infinite by rendering the void expressed on the blank page as something tangible and meaningful (1990: 43).

12 Silence in music works as an active aperture or opening within what can be thought of as autonomous musical phenomenon. In Takemitsu's work, this turns the background or context into a *musical* content. Personal interview with C. Alvear (2018).

13 For instance, works like *Autumn* (1973/2018).

14 See Jo Kondon, a contemporary Japanese composer who incorporates ambiguity within his musical compositions.

15 I do not intend a direct comparison between my visual work and Takemitsu's music. His work is a paradigm in a different artistic field.

16 This amounts to a transient condition corresponding, to some degree, to conservation efforts.

17 Previously published in Lanuza (2015: 82).

18 For consideration of the deteriorating influence of water and humidity for built surfaces, in the structure of buildings, as well as the slow, yet consistent sinking of the city into the lagoon, see Powell (2012).