

Leonardo Mezzalana

Countersinging for baritone sax and double bass (2025)

composer's note

Countersinging is the vocal interaction between two or more animals of a same territorial species. It is a quite well-studied, but still rather mysterious phenomenon that has been observed especially in song birds. Research shows that it often appears to be a territorial negotiation, but it could also be a kind of courtship display or a way to exchange other types of information. Many analyses addressing temporal patterns, alternation patterns, song type choices and relative pitches have been carried on, concluding that during countersinging the individuals behave according to precise rules conveying messages whose meaning, however, we mainly fail to understand.

This piece takes some of the evidence at our disposal about countersinging – and the possible role that, in countersinging, behaviours like overlapping the other individual's song and matching their song type could play – as a starting point to build an interaction between two instruments. At the beginning of the piece, the double bass is alone in the sonic space, like an animal who sings its own song (what, in animal communication research, is called "broadcast signalling"). After some time another animal – the baritone saxophone – starts signalling, but at the beginning it's too far to interfere with the first one. When it approaches, however, the two animals (instruments) start an interaction that is shaped by some of our understanding of how countersinging works. When it looks like the negotiation has ended in favour of the intruder, however, the first animal begins vocalizing again, suggesting that the interaction could start anew.

Countersinging is part of a research directed to develop new compositional techniques by consciously transferring ecological, bioacoustic and ecoacoustic principles and patterns to instrumental composition. The overall purpose of this research is to interrogate the connection between music and natural sound environments, thus seeking to interrogate our relationship with the non-human and to develop forms of ecological thought.