

Title: *What it means to be post-human*

ANDREW A. WATTS, University of California-Santa Barbara

1. PROGRAM NOTES

What it means to be post-human (2017-18) takes the physical concept outlined in *A Dialogue, In Absentia* and re-imagines it in a futuristic, hive-mind scenario. *A Dialogue* uses implanted Bluetooth speakers to play back sounds through each trombone, having the performer actively modify the sound through mouth shapes and slide movements. For *post-human*, rather than a dialogue between two forces, a hocket is the primary compositional structure, whereby the audio (this time played back into each singer's mouth through a headset) is a singularity among the group. The text-to-speech procedure used before now is virtuosically allocated to the different singers. Together, the two works seek to explore how technology can utilize the human body as an acoustical space, with live performers modifying the playback environment while philosophizing on the most profound tenets of humanism.

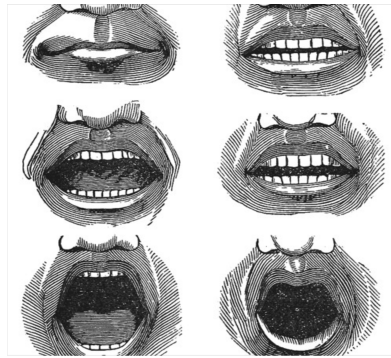


Fig. 1. Cover Page image for *What it means to be post-human* [1].

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

What it means to be post-human is an exploratory musical composition that delves into the evolving dynamics between technology and human performers, spotlighting the role of the human body as an instrument in a digitally dominated environment. Examines how technology utilizes human faculties for expression, thereby reversing the conventional roles in musical creation.

Central to the piece is an innovative application of technology where Bluetooth speakers and headset devices become more than mere conduits of sound. They are integral to the performance, channeling pre-recorded, processed sounds directly into the performers' mouths. This method allows for a nuanced interaction where the acoustics of the human body, with its unique physical characteristics, become the primary tool for sound modulation. The performers, therefore, are not just musicians but become live filters and resonators, lending organic warmth and variability to the otherwise sterile digital soundscape.

The compositional structure of the work, employing a hocket technique, emphasizes collective expression and the seamless integration of individual inputs into a singular auditory experience. This structure underlines the theme of the

piece: technology as a driving force using human capabilities to achieve a higher level of musical expression.

This piece is particularly relevant to the NIME 2024 theme, "Tactility in a hybrid world." It epitomizes the concept of tactility not just in the physical sense but also in the intimate interaction between the digital and the organic. The work addresses the current focus within the NIME community on creating sustainable, inclusive musical experiences that are adaptable to a changing global context, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Furthermore, *What it means to be post-human* challenges traditional notions of musical performance. It asks pertinent questions about the nature of musical expression and the role of the human body within it. In an era where digital technologies increasingly dominate the arts, this piece offers a fresh perspective on how these technologies can be harnessed to enhance and redefine the human element in music.

The composition is not just a musical work; it is a statement on the interplay between humanity and technology in artistic expression. It invites the audience and the NIME community to reconsider the boundaries of musical performance, highlighting the potential for technology to not only complement but also to amplify and diversify the natural capabilities of the human body. This makes *What it means to be post-human* a novel contribution to the field of new musical interfaces and a thought-provoking piece in the discourse of music, technology, and human interaction [2].

3. PERFORMANCE NOTES

If included for fixed-media playback I believe the "club" locations or 'the Nijverheid' in Utrecht would be appropriate.

Technical Rider:

- Digital projector with HDMI connection
- Laptop or desktop computer for playback
- PA system, either stereo or 6-channel
- Audio interface for connection between computer and PA system
- Audio cables to connect between audio interface and PA system

If included for live performance I believe the main venue, Tivoli Vredenburg, would be most appropriate, however, I am open to other spaces.

Technical rider:

- Laptop or desktop computer for playback
- 6 Original headsets with speaker mounts (designed by and provided by composer)
- 6 channel audio interface for connection between computer and headsets
- 6 Audio cables to connect between audio interface and headsets

The entire work consists of shaping your mouths to different vowels (unvoiced) while headset speakers positioned very close to the mouths direct pre-recorded processed speech into the mouths (respectively). There is no singing or vocal activity in the traditional sense (each performer changes their formant shapes to actively filter the playback sound—sort of like an electric guitar “talkbox”).

The mouth shapes are not an exact lip sync of the speech material, but rather gestures precisely mapped onto the onsets (and offsets) of the speech. Meaning, each performer will not be pantomiming the recorded speech when it is their part, but coming in exactly when the recording is allocated to their headset and performing the notated mouth shape transitions, then stopping abruptly when the recording moves on to another performer. The effect should be a progressive human filter of the recording being virtuosically hocketed by the ensemble.

Regarding the recordings, “All voices mix.wav” is what the composite playback sounds like and what is sent out as six channels during rehearsals and in concert. For the convenience of the performers, the individual channels are available too as separate files (these might be helpful when practicing). The “All voices dry.wav” is for hearing the speech as it was originally, if interested. “All voices dry.wav” will not be used for any performance.

There are no individual parts. Each performer should practice and rehearse from their own copy of the full score. Performances should be memorized (without the score).

4. MEDIA LINK(S)

- Video: <https://youtu.be/oyPKBUPE3BY?si=BIMVyZpfKTylwki7>
- Audio: <https://soundcloud.com/wattsmusic1/what-it-means-to-be-post-human>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank his wife and son, Kristen and Sebastian.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

N/A

REFERENCES

- [1] A. A. Watts, *What it means to be post-human*, San Francisco, CA, Counterpoint Printworks, 2018.
- [2] A. Watts, "Composition, Technology, and the Posthuman," in *CeReNeM Journal*, Ed. C. Frank, Issue 7, University of Huddersfield, 2020, pp. 172-192.