



Behind the 8-Ball

for improvisers and prompter
by Adam Scott Neal



About the Piece

This work is written for any number of improvisers on any number of instruments (including voice and other body sounds). The piece will also require a prompter who will obtain prophecies from the Magic 8-ball and relay these prophecies to the performers and the audience.

The work is based not only on the Magic 8-Ball toy from Tyco Toys, Inc., but also on notions of semiotics in music explored by William Coker in his book *Music and Meaning: A Theoretical Introduction to Musical Aesthetics*. (NY: The Free Press, 1972.) Among his ideas is the notion of musical “truth,” in which an expression is presented, disputed, then reaffirmed in a piece of music. The simplest example would be ABA form, but this notion could be applied to any music in which opening material is presented again (even in a transformation) to conclude, or “prove” a piece.

Behind the 8-Ball also owes an enormous debt to John Zorn and his game pieces. I was already a fan of Zorn's work with Naked City when I first performed *Cobra*, but *Cobra* has since come to be one of my favorite works by anyone.

In this work, the improvisers will present an expression, which the 8-Ball toy will deem satisfactory, unsatisfactory, or somewhere in between. Based on the toy's responses, the improvisers will play either similar or different material. The piece concludes with an affirmation of their original improvisations.

Adam Neal, September 2005
Atlanta, GA

Special Equipment

1 Magic 8-Ball by Tyco Toys, Inc.

20 signs, labeled YES, NO, or MAYBE on the side facing the performers, and with an 8-Ball phrase on the side facing the audience. (Color-coding may be helpful for the prompter).

YES signs:

As I see it, yes.
It is certain.
It is decidedly so.
Most likely.
Outlook good.
Signs point to yes.
Without a doubt.
Yes.
Yes – definitely.
You may rely on it.

NO signs:

Don't count on it.
My reply is no.
My sources say no.
Outlook not so good.
Very doubtful.

MAYBE signs:

Ask again later.
Better not tell you now.
Cannot predict now.
Concentrate and ask again.
Reply hazy, try again.

Directions

The prompter will give a signal of their own devising to the performers to commence the piece. The performers will improvise while the prompter reads the Magic 8-Ball (approximately 15-30 seconds).

The prompter will hold a sign corresponding to the reading of the Magic 8-Ball. Depending on the sign, the performers will either continue improvising on their present material, or change:

- If the sign says “Yes,” the performers will continue just as they have been.
- If the sign says “No,” the performers will change their improvisations drastically.
- If the sign says “Maybe,” the performers will slightly alter their improvisations (in such ways as dynamic change, timbre change, or register change – melodic and rhythmic material should remain similar).

The performers will follow the instruction while the prompter makes another reading. When the prompter holds up the next sign, the performers will follow accordingly.

The piece ends when the prompter has held up 3 “Yes” signs. The prompter should hold up the sign, wait for an appropriate moment, and cut off the ensemble.