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21M.361 Composing with Computers I (Electronic Music Composition)
Spring 2008

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21M.361: Composing with Computers I (Electronic Music Composition)

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Listening Notes 1.3: Even More Musique Concrète

(A small portion of this is from Evan Ziporyn's notes, and used with permission,)

Gavin Bryars—Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet (1975 Eno Obscure label version)

The story of this piece is told perfectly well by the composer, so I won't reproduce it here.

http://www.gavinbryars.com/Pages/jesus_blood_never_failed_m.html

Please listen to the whole piece; it isn't short. Before the accompaniment enters, aside from the singing, what other sounds can you hear? Hint: there are two broad categories. If you had made this piece, would have you cleaned the recording of either of the two categories of noise?

Explain. Do you think the instrumental accompaniment adds to, subtracts from, or otherwise alters the effect of the singing? Does the accompaniment enter at the right time? Is the piece the right length? Explain.

Christian Fennesz—013 +- 6.18 (from Plus Forty Seven Degrees 56' 37" Minus Sixteen Degrees 51' 08") (1999)

Largely paraphrased from forcedexposure.com, who got it from somewhere else. (Courtesy of Touch Music. Used with permission.)

After his first solo album, *Hotel Paral.lel*, Fennesz recorded this in July and August 2001, "transforming his back garden into an open air studio," apparently using only guitar and his Apple laptop. I simply have to quote the editorial review, just for its, er, particular way of putting things: "The tension between source and process has produced a powerful and hypnotic work, with echoes of My Bloody Valentine's classic *Loveless* album of 1991[which listen to]... Maybe a digital update of textures and fractured rhythms explored by Brian Eno on *Another Green World*... ." Well, yeah, but what of that "tension between source and process"? I think when composing it is at least useful to bear in mind what sounds you have, where they came from, what you are doing with them, where they are going, what they are doing, why you are interested in them, how much they dictate what happens, etc. This is probably obvious, but when you get stuck, perhaps think of these things, or get some sun, or something.

I'm not sure what in this piece, or the others on this fantastic album, are concrète; I was just taken by the phrase "manipulated 'natural' environment"—which I don't even quote above. (It was in reference to pictures, not music.) Just write something about this piece. We'll be revisiting Fennesz's music when we study algorithm and process in Module Four.

Erdem Helvacioğlu—Wandering Around the City (2003)

Everything I know about this person is from <http://www.erdemhelvacioğlu.com>. Just go there, listen and read.

Things to think about: Do you think the non-concrète sounds are in fact not concrète, just computer generated? Where is the line drawn between concrète and non-concrète? Sometimes that is relevant, sometimes it is not. Explain, with reference to this piece and others. How well does this piece stand on its own: does it sound like the soundtrack to an episode of CSI or some science-fiction film with a lot of scene changes and action? Sometimes I call this sort of music ADD music, well, at least aspects of it: lots of quick changes, not much focus is required. (I have ADHD so I'm allowed to make these sorts of comments.) Is this a fair assessment? Later in the semester we will compare scenes from two different movies, in an attempt to explain focus and modern ADD-film and TV making. (CSI is a good example of an ADD TV show; The Passenger by Michelangelo Antonioni is my example of non-ADD film-making. We'll see.)

Paul Lansky—Pattern's Patterns (from Alphabet Book) (2002)

I wrote to the composer about this piece because I couldn't find out anything about it. He wrote back in 45 minutes. Here is what he said (courtesy of Paul Lansky, used with permission). Read this after listening to the piece and thinking about it.

"Pattern's Patterns has a rather blatant 'scheme' which, surprisingly most people (except percussionists) don't hear.

"It's in 5/4 time and is organized into groups of four measures. A bell rings at the beginning of each measure, and two bells every four measures. Each measure within the 4 measure group has the same selection of words (actually fragments of words) but they are arranged in space a little differently.

"The pattern changes every four measures, when the two bells

ring.

"It starts out with a woman's voice just saying letters, and slowly merges with a man's voice saying numbers. After a while the numbers take over. Then suddenly the letters join in. (This is a great moment in the video, it's where the police beacons come in). Have you watched the video?

"The piece was written with SuperCollider. It's actually just one patch to generate the whole piece (I love SuperCollider).

"It's the only piece I've done with such a blatant scheme. I also consider it one of my chatter series. [Lansky has written a series of pieces with the word "chatter" in the title, all computer-generated.] I'm actually quite proud of it and did an 8 channel version which I'm releasing in a year or so on a DVD-audio disk.

"People find the patterns in the 8 channel version even more confusing.

"It doesn't bother me that people don't hear the patterns. I think it's probably better this way."

Why do you think "it's probably better this way"? I've included this among the concrete pieces because of the use of voice. We'll be looking at voice more closely when we study Max/MSP. This is also a good example of concrete elements in a fairly tonal/modal setting, one with a regular metric scheme. Can you hear the words, or fragments of them? Are different voices used, or are they the same voice modified? (You should be well-equipped to answer this with your new-found knowledge of time compression/expansion and pitch shifting.) Is the piece a good length?

Kaffe Matthews—in search of a bun, 8 (from cd dd) (2001)

Kaffe Matthews—the last of the violins, 14 (from cd dd) (2001)

There were no notes with the CD, other than: "All pieces made by live sampling and processing things in and around the performance." Hence, musique concrète. Each of these two pieces is part of a series of pieces, I guess to be heard consecutively. "in search of a bun" is 24' 07" long,

and is from the Kaai theatre studio, Brussels, Belgium (Audio Incident No. 4, January 2000 [whatever that means]), and “the last of the violins” is 23’ 00” long, and is from The Link, Bologna, Italy (angelica, May 1999).

Go to <http://www.annetetworks.com/> and click on the Artist tab to find out about her. (Don’t be lazy, do it, it’s interesting.) Notice how she is a ‘live converter,’ not a composer or artist.

Here is a review by the artist Scanner, a.k.a. Robin Rimbaud, from that website (courtesy of Robin Rimbaud, used with permission).

“Immaculately presented as always with images suggestive of places and spaces without clarification. Memories from place with sounds from the space.

“The CD opens with an edgy surface noise that ruffles from calming hovering rushes of melody that dissolve into harsh industrial harmonics that seem to devour the speaker and cough out a transparent spittle of silver music.

“And questions arise—is ‘the last of the violins?’ a requiem for the final occasion of applying her unique approach to the violin live? From the undulating and indeterminate scratchings it is hard to tell, the language so buried within a live processing that it’s as if the face lift has brought about a whole new soundscape a full step away from imagined sounds of the violin.

“The beat of a telematic clock, the glitchy heavy metal drones, the broken frame of percolating fizzles, bubbling up from beneath, hypnotic frequency rushes in the ‘Pool in the Basement’ that push and pull at the sealed skin of the speaker, all of these moments add up to the fourth in a series that is as mesmerizing as it is unpredictable.

“What makes this music so beautiful is the ability to listen repeatedly and constantly find fresh nuances and effects with the densely filled soundscape. I will now listen to it once more and continue my exploration.”

Now, you write your review of one or two or both of these two pieces. Include: whether or not you can hear environmental sounds (people, machines included), if you think it has form, if you would like to attend a live performance (which is also the composition) of these pieces. Do you like these pieces? As usual, explain. Does it withstand repeat hearings, as suggested by Scanner?—that’s a hard question to answer unless you listen to it several times...

Tod Dockstader—Traveling Music (from Apocalypse) (1961)

Pared down and paraphrased from the liner notes; some sentences are verbatim, just without the quote marks (courtesy of Starkland, used with permission, © 1992 Starkland, <http://www.starkland.com/st202/index.htm>)

Tod Dockstader was born in 1932, majoring in psychology and art at college. As a graduate student he went on to study painting and film, paying his way by doing cartoons for local newspapers and magazines. In 1955 he found himself in Hollywood, first as an apprentice film editor, then sound and picture cutter for animated cartoons (including Mr Magoo). Following that, he then pursued cartoon work in New York, and “as needs must” became an autodidact sound engineer and sound effects specialist. In 1958 he apprenticed as a recording engineer at Gotham Recording. At this major commercial studio, he surreptitiously used off-work hours to collect interesting sounds and to experiment with musique concrète.

He composed at Gotham until 1965, then worked as an audio-visual designer on the Air Canada Pavilion at Montreal’s Expo ’67, making dozens of soundtracks and shooting thousands of slides and a film. Around this time he became recognized as an important composer of electronic music. Unfortunately by now, Dockstader, by not working as a recording engineer, had lost the kind of studio facilities he needed to create his organized sound compositions. The idea of home studio in those days was not an option. Lacking academic credentials, being an “outsider,” he was denied grants and access to the major electronic studios—they were few and far between. So he began to concentrate on educational a/v work, and today he has written and produced hundreds of filmstrips and videos for schools.

From the composer: “Traveling Music was originally composed as a monoaural piece (Electronic Piece No. 8). It was, in effect, my Poème électronique, after Varèse, and my first piece to be strictly organized with a few sound-materials (instead of throwing everything in and stirring briskly, as I’d done prior to this). When I got the use of a two-track recorder, I used this piece, instead of doing a new work, so I could concentrate on teaching myself the techniques of placing sound in space (between speakers) and moving it through space—hence the title. (Jackie Gleason, in his black-and-white TV days, used always to ask the pit-band conductor for ‘a little traveling music’ to help him move across the stage.)”

Sound sources, according to the composer: gong, switch arc (multiplied into antiphonal rhythms with tape-echo), one test generator, jet plane, metal plate, metal bowl, voice, hollow tube, and

adhesive tape. (I suspect at least one of these things was not his own.)

This piece is more like what you will come up with in your Assignment 1.3 than any of the other pieces, perhaps. Do you recognize the various original sounds? Do you like the sounds and the way they are put together regardless of their provenance? Does this sound like a conventional composition, in some sense? Is it obvious he worked in sound effects and editing? Can you imagine (and please describe) how the piece was made (thinking in terms of two Pro Tools tracks instead of a two-track tape recorder). Has the piece withstood the test of time?

Pink Floyd—Bike (from The Piper at the Gates of Dawn) (1967)

No course in electronic music could possibly be complete without a little early Pink Floyd. This song is a Syd Barrett classic. (Later Pink Floyd is dominated by Roger Waters.) He went pretty mad shortly after this album; psychedelics may have contributed. He went on to make a couple of solo records, then lived at home with his mother from the early 70s until 2006, when he died. If you don't know early Pink Floyd, you should.

The latter part of this piece is pretty musique concrète, fairly radical for the day. The Beatles' producer George Martin also introduced similar things.

Don't write about this piece. Just enjoy it and try to understand it.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syd_barrett

Francisco López—La Selva (excerpt) (from La Selva) (1998)

Since I am not allowed to quote full paragraphs, Here is his webpage <http://www.franciscolopez.net/>. And I will quote, for the purpose of public review, and in no way to steal his thoughts or publish them unduly, rather, to understand their magic. They are *perfect* as they are, and we can deduce a lot from those alphabetic entanglements. (The blurb is written in the third person, but, knowing how these things work, first person, etc....)

“Over the last twenty five years he has developed an astonishing sonic universe, absolutely personal and iconoclastic, based on a profound listening of the world. Destroying boundaries between industrial sounds and wilderness sound environments, shifting with passion from the limits of perception to the most dreadful abyss of sonic power, proposing a blind, profound and transcendental listening, freed from the imperatives of knowledge and open to sensory and

spiritual expansion.” [Emphasis added—oops, that’s almost the whole half paragraph I emphasized, for its humility and poetry.]

Really, what is “he” trying to say? I was trying to think of the name of the game, which is like the Jeopardy of its more common version: someone gives a dictionary definition, and you have to guess the word. I found <http://www.askoxford.com/wordgames/partygames/>. The above paragraph could be the result of just about any of the party games listed. (I’m sure the party mentioned on the website involves more than just cracking open the party sausages among family and friends.)

Now, on his music:

The composer “has been developing a powerful and consistent world of sound creations, “trying to reach an ideal of absolute concrète music.”” The rest of the paragraph says how famous he is, where he’s been. Why, he’s even been to New Zealand!

I do like this expression, though: “Through what he once called as ‘the exploration of the universe of broad-band noise from the real world,’ his music arises from the processing of environmental recordings.” What is he saying about the things we hear around us?

His work is contrasted to the “classical soundscape movement (and even despite his paradoxical past involvement with related organizations as the Environmental Tape Exchange, the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology and the Nature Sounds Society).” And his work has never been representational or a documentary, rather “a dramatically opposite object sonore perspective.”
β_σ alert: <http://cec.concordia.ca/econtact/Ecology/Lopez.html>. This makes more sensible sense: “[T]he evolution of his aesthetics and conceptual background is a profound process of refinement towards an extreme musical purism.” In other words, original meaning we may infer from the originating sound is stripped away, “with a voluntary and forceful refusal of any visual, procedural, relational, semantic, functional or virtuosistic [sic.] elements.” Is this possible, in your mind?

He aims for his music to be heard deeply and carefully and with great perspicuity—an essence “capable of reaching both the deepest and most dreadful abysms of crude strengthness [sic.]” He is not interested in clarity as a result—an idea I quite like—rather “a world where things are uneasy, unclear, unsolved and where one is forced to immerse and search.” Again, I like that. I don’t exactly get it from his music, but intentions count for something, I’m told (e.g. when giving a present).

The result is what he calls “belle confusion.” Sounds like a tintinnabulist’s nightmare.

For a full description of this particular piece, see <http://www.franciscolopez.net/env.html>. It’s long, but interesting. At least skim over it. Tagline: “sound environments from a neotropical rainforest.” So much ink, so many pixels, so much optic nerve activity wasted. Leave it to the ear! I am assured by a good friend (Howard Stelzer of tape noise fame, later in the semester, and on the first day of class) that López is fantastic, so I ordered more CDs; they were pretty decent, thus eroding my unnecessarily necessary comments above.

The concrète aspect is obvious. What do you think of this as a composition? Is López a composer? Was the piece evocative? Should that be the aim of musique concrète, or is that an irrelevant question? Do his words, and those of others, do anything for you? Is β_σ the correct aesthetic-mathematical constant to apply here?