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

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Spring 2008 OCW

Listening Notes 4.1: Synthesis, Algorithm, Process
Everything on this week's listening could have been done using Max/MSP, though the analog-y stuff wouldn't sound so good.

Pan Sonic—Aines (from Kulma) (1997)

Drawing by Peter Whincop.

Boys with their toys. Finnish. Mika Vainio and Ilpo Väisänen. Super-duper.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan_Sonic
http://www.discogs.com/artist/Pan+Sonic for links.

An Amazon reviewer, "a music fan" said in May 6, 2002, under the title "what's wrong with clanking tins & clashing cymbals"—with his wit, I take those last two words to be a complex semiotic analysis—his rating the album with three stars was "becuse it's not THAT annoying. I like my albums annoying.' Evidently it is cool to have friends nervously laugh and associate panasonic [they were called that prior to a "disagreement" with the Japanese electronics company] with Cabaret Voltaire or Can. And pretentious—ask those friends "what's wrong with good, ole pretentiousness?" He gave one star each for (1) it's ability to test speakers; (2) how it can annoy others by "play[ing] it while they're trying to sleep"; and (3) this comes as a surprise, given all s/he's already said, "it's actually listenable." Cats beware!—we are warned. S/he sums it up: "Annoy people (& animals) with your music (hopefully, pretentious music)!" [All errors and idiosyncrasies, sic.] Well, yeah. I know various pieces in the semester's listening have had entire dorm floors ready to kill my students. Yet, this piece? It's pretty wonderful, to my ears. I currently don't have a cat, alas, to comment.

Can you imagine from your brief introduction to Max/MSP how you might make this? This does sound a bit analog-y, especially compared with everything else on this week's listening. After listening to everything else, can you hear that? (I know we don't have analog synths, but we have listened to analog synth/other analog device music, like the Atlatl last week, also the Seht/Stelzer.) Formally: what do you think of the sudden changes vs. the gradual changes? Is something so minimal and artificial—little or no harmony, melody, rhythm—appealing to you? Does it end well for you? As you might have gathered or learned from all the listening so far, there are other things in music, other ways of listening. We listen to more Pan Sonic in 21M.540.

Microstoria—Slap Top (from Init Ding) (1995)

For this incredible and perfect track, I will take the approach of appropriation, that of a review. Someone else's ears, or mind (or something), or means of income. The CD was released on Thrill Jockey, the blurb reproduced by forcedexposure.com, and my summary of it: quite hard to paraphrase simply because I can't say it better than the original. Or worse: it definitely has a high β_σ content, one that escapes my literary style. Here goes nothing:

Microstoria is comprised of Markus Popp from Oval and Jan St. Werner from Mouse On Mars. We are now entering the realm of really bad science fiction writing: "'The instruments' used are what could be seen as their successors—machines and digital technology." And, philosophically, apparently Oval excludes authorship of music and Microstoria explores authorship, especially in relation to improvisation. Very apparently. I see Terminator II, Brazil, Twelve Monkeys, Tron even. But, Microstoria, like they are like two guys making sounds.

We are supposed to be struck by the paradox, that the "tones" (I am note sure what the reviewer means by that) used in composition "are mechanized, yet paradoxically rich." I am not sure wherein lies the paradox. Listen to an air vent. "The resulting pieces are organic in feel, a striking result when viewed in context with their origins." Listen to an air vent. (I am assuming "organic" really means "as if living"; in aesthetics the term is usually associated with the idea that something is growing, from some initial see of an idea, less than that it is now grown, breathing, reproducing. Très nineteenth century.)

I cannot say the next part of the review without exercising someone's first amendment right, and turning it into a poem:

On c e,
instruments were physical
        entities,

connecting the creative individual
through tuition and technical skill
to the al-
most metaphysic-
al world of music.

The distinction between

computingdeviceand'musicalinstrument'
was increasingly blurred
since the 1950s; however, it
left the composer in
charge of his/her
machin-
ery. More recently in the 1990s thing shav e m e r g e d i n too n e.

Okay, that was exciting and informative. We now hear about "authoring environments," etc.,   that were "still fully capable of hosting the residual 'old' music media as well as its terminology." Hosting terminology—what parasites those words be.

S/he gets it right by saying that composers could be designers via new software. ... [blah blah] ... "Atavistic concepts like an instrument end up as a tutorial vocabulary, or in other words a helpful software metaphor. Microstoria has goals and tasks for the near future: music as organized acoustics and music as software."

Does a description like that do anything for you? How improvised does this sound? Can you hear the references to more standard band configurations (like bass, keyboards, drums)? A lot of music we listen to in this course lacks words. Is the lack of words a problem in this piece? (It's a non-question in many pieces we deal with, such as the Ryoji Ikeda, below.) Does it end well? What does "music as software" really mean?

This is one of the best CDs in the universe. This was probably made using looping software, not Max/MSP, though I know groups like Oval and Mouse On Mars have group members called 'programmers,' whatever that entails.

One minor detail, but exuding real intelligence: a former student noted what the title of the piece is when spelt backwards....

Bernhard Günter—untitled I/92 (from un peu de neige salie) (1983/1993)

Very minimalist. German. The liner notes (initially not by the composer) regale us of her—for the sake of argument the reviewer is female, arbitrarily—response to the CD, as a buyer for a distributor. On first hearing of "a little dirty snow" "it made me upset, even angry. 'This is just too much, I can't take this. What is this supposed to mean?'"

The reviewer thought the sounds were "poor, and their discreet [I'm not sure if she meant "discrete"] silence didn't seem to build up to an organic whole." And the low volume disturbed her, thinking of the piece as "vanishing," depending on the environmental. She kept asking: "What am I supposed to get out of this nonsense? I don't hear anything... I certainly didn't question its originality, but to me it sounded very conceptual, i.e., a work based upon some (unknown) set of ideas whose actual realization was acoustically unsuccessful."

After a tiny saga of her choosing to distribute a Morton Feldman CD, and her colleagues the Günter, and the realization that Günter liked Feldman, she "had found something to listen to, in exactly what I had previously considered as nothingness, and I was following these sounds while the work emerged."

I must quote her verbatim, hoping I'm not treading on anyone's toes. I do this because it is pretty informative how impressions change, and how one might approach a piece with seemingly little material in it:

"I can't really explain how this happened—somehow I focused my concentration on simply, and only, listening to those sounds, and my previous impressions disappeared. I unearthed a richness coming from a variety of subtleties, both in the nature of the sounds, and in their composition; a very peculiar musical flow connecting what I had at first considered fragments into an organic unity: a delicate work that required a lot of attention and an empty mind to be perceived in its entirety."

According to the composer, all the pieces on this CD are digitally edited and sampled sounds, except for this piece, which is entirely synthesized, more of that WYSIWYG flexible strategy, not a preconceived system.

And here's the rub: "Both structural and phenomenal listening approaches seem perfectly adequate, while I generally discourage associational listening." Though that sounds β_σ-y, it makes sense if you think about it a bit. I also think he's saying that it's largely improvised. From listening, is that your guess? I have a lot of Günter's work, and it is basically clicks and noise, some throbs. I mean that in a very positive way;

I really really like Günter's works. In a way, this does not differ from Ryoji Ikeda's work, though Ikeda uses sine tones (and other simple waveforms) a whole lot. After listening to the latter, compare what they do with their sounds, and how their sounds are different. And how different all the clicks are on the Günter.

More of him in 21M.540.

Ryoji Ikeda—Headphonics 0/1 (from + / -) (1996)

http://www.ryojiikeda.com/. I interpreted him as pretentious—I met him a couple of years ago [Fall 2005] at MIT, wears all black, etc.—but that's probably unfair; perhaps I didn't understand what it means to be an artist. There's currently [Fall 2006] an installation of his at the List (cavea(r)t: you have to pass through a lot of sweat to get to it...). But he's about as good as it gets, and his CDs are among the best in the world. We will be looking at/listening to more of his stuff in 21M.540. All very clean, clinical, very computer-synthesized. The ending of the piece isn't abrupt as it seems; the CD is a gapless CD and this track, the first, runs onto the next.

After the small amount of Max/MSP you have learnt, can you imagine making the piece?

Christian Fennesz[, Zeitblom, Lillevän]—»17:44« (UA) (2001)

Warning: this is quite long; it's a 20 minute excerpt of a very long performance. We've heard some Fennesz before; this is quite different. It was that summer of 2001 in Berlin again, and I went to something at

[oh heck my old listening notes go very wrong from here. It has taken literally days to track down this performance. Here is, finally, on a list-serv archive about it:]

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format5 - signaturen elektronischer klangkunst
parochialkirche berlin-mitte, klosterstraße 67

13.07. 21.00
monolake + Alexej Paryla - Gobi V (UA)
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Christina Kubisch - monochrom / vier Flächen für Trautonium und vier
Instrumentalisten (UA)
Max Brand - Die Astronauten (1962)
Patrick Pulsinger + Erdem Tunakan - in memorian Max Brand (1999)
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Golden Tone (Chistian fennesz/Zeitblom/Lillevän)- »17:14« (UA)


14.07. 21.00
Wolfgang Mitterer - radio fractal beat music chill out II
mit John Schröder/e-guitar, Rudi Mahal/bass-clarinet, Herbert
Reisinger/drums, Christian Fennesz/electronics, Patrick
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Pulsinger/electronics, Erdem Tunakan/electronisc+turn tables, Wolfgang
Mitterer/electronics+composition
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monolake + lillevän...
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I am not sure which show I went to, though I suspect the former, because that was a Friday night, and I recall it being a Friday night.

This was in a converted church on a beautiful, quiet, almost quaint street in Mitte, the hipster center of old East Berlin. There was a >10-speaker set-up, the space was pretty large and round, IIRC, not too many people were there, say, a hundred, and I had my binaural mics with my MD recorder. So I recorded Fennesz and others jamming—it was 'laptop improv,' responding to each other's possibly-Max/MSP patches. Can you tell that it is three people (for some reason, I recall only two), or does it sound as if it is from one source? There's an element of DJ-ing in this: the artists respond to the crowd, shock them into attention if they get restless, keep it quiet when they seem tranced out. Can you tell? This certainly informs the loose structure of the excerpt. Is it a case of you-had-to-be-there to appreciate the structure, or does it survive into the recording? The title of the work is »17:44« but if that refers to how long it was supposed to be, they were seriously wrong. We left because my friends (including the famous ex-girlfriend Helen Lee) were bored. I wasn't, not even slightly.

For some shows I have been to, I have a sneaky feeling that the performers were simply hitting a play button, occasionally altering levels, but generally pretending to be doing a whole lot more. A few weeks ago [Spring 2008] I was at the Middle East experiencing Space Faces (bless them, tearing up the sheet for the very last time, with most members of the band having passed through 21M.361); they were followed by Brendan Murray, a local computer and turntable musician whose work I especially like—we listen to him in 21M.540. He was alone, facing the audience, laptop, board, and contorted his face occasionally, and seemed to be doing things to make the sound whatever. A couple of us snuck slightly backstage and observed that it was basically an act.

Does that really matter?

Random Inc.—Losing Touch (from Clicks and Cuts Vol. 2) (2001)

a.k.a. Sebastian Meissner. Very six-years-ago [update Spring 2008: very seven-years-ago], the sort of music played at clubs with no dancing, or in hip cafés with lounge seats (if any), unusual and low lighting (if any), and minimal décor (if any). After listening to the Fennesz, do you hear this as composed rather than improvised? Why or why not?

Andreas Tilliander—Vibetan (from Clicks and Cuts Vol. 2) (2001)

Swedish. Also very seven-years-ago and northern European (although he did play at the Middle East (as in, Central Square) just over a year ago [in Summer 2005], the same sort of stuff).

Image courtesy of Rae Zucker. Used with permission.

http://www.myspace.com/andreastilliander. Everyone seems to have a myspace site, even Christian Fennesz, who is pretty famous in the genre, and probably rich. Notice Tilliander has several monikers: his real name, Mokira, Lowfour, Rechord, Komp, and the bands Bulgur Brothers and Skitus. He has a video on his myspace page entitled "Watch me being drunk and play false tuned Acidub. Andreas Tilliander - Bonnadub." Quite interesting to see close up.

Thomas Meinecke's Framus Waikiki—Jukebox (from Maschinelle Stratageme) (2000)

A more industrial type of minimalism, but again, no recorded sounds, just computer synthesized. What do you make of the rhythm/meter of this? (It's not as simple as it seems.) And the simple stereo effects?

All in German:
http://kuugel.redefreiheit.net/meinecke_interview_13.html

Google translated it as:
http://translate.google.com/translate?u=http%3A%2F%2Fkuugel.redefreiheit.net%2Fmeinecke_interview_13.html&langpair=de%7Cen&hl=en&ie=UTF-8

[that should be a single line]: read footnote 8 to have the title of his group or persona explained.

http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Meinecke

Paul Lansky—mild und leise (1973)

Listen closely to this, at 40–50s. Then listen to Radiohead's Idioteque. Then go to
http://www.music.princeton.edu/paul/radiohead.ml.html. (Incidentally, note the very un-stereo mix for
much of the Radiohead.)

Radiohead—Idioteque (from Kid A) (2000)

Nothing to say.