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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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Spring 2008 OCW

Listening Notes 1.1: Musique concrète

(Quite a lot of this is based on Evan Ziporyn's notes, and used with permission.)

With the listening assignments, you might like to listen to the works, then read the notes while taking in a second, more critical listening. I always provide some background, sometimes pictures, and some questions, which should guide at least part of your response. Please respond both technically and aesthetically. Also, please check the overall syllabus for the course to see what the listening journal requirements are, and the modulus syllabus to see which pieces are compulsory and which are recommended.

Bob Ostertag—Sooner or Later (part one) (1991)

This long piece—a whole CD—is based on a recording of a Salvadorean boy burying his father. You can read all about the composer(?) on his own website, mentioned below, so I won't write anything more. The website is fantastic.

Similar questions to the ones that follow: Is this a piece? Is it composed? Clearly the source is not obscured, but at times the message is. Is the underlying emotion altered in quality or quantity? Does making this a 'piece' of 'music' debase the original situation, or is there some other outcome, in your mind? What techniques were used? Is it too long (and you're only hearing half of it) or just right? What about the fragmentation and silences?

More information:

<http://bobostertag.com/>

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

Note from the Wikipedia article that Sooner or Later is a result of Ostertag's having lived in El Salvador for the previous seven years—he is a bit of a lefty, to understate it. He used old samplers until 1999, and now he uses Max/MSP.

Iannis Xenakis—Concret PH (1958)

One of the earliest examples of pure musique concrète, it remains among the most extreme.

Side-steppingly modified from the notes to the compilation *Early Modulations*:

In the latter years of the 1950s, the composer Edgard Varèse had composed an entirely synthesized piece, *Poème électronique*, now fairly famous. It was designed for the “visceral stimulation” of the throngs going to the famous architect Le Corbusier’s parabolic Dome pavilion at the Brussels World Fair. Rather like Satie’s little pieces to be played in the intermissions of his larger works, but quite different, really, while the Varèse tape was being rewound, Le Corbusier and Varèse’s student, Iannis Xenakis, played over the 400-speaker system Concret PH—“the amplified crackling and spitting of burning charcoal.” Xenakis was training to be an architect as well as a composer, hence those two teachers.

The name is derived from ‘Concret,’ the material of the dome’s construction, and ‘PH,’ *Paraboloïdes Hyperbolique*, the architects description of the building’s core structures. The liner notes have the obligatory fancy-speak: “as the architect dealt with civic planning by taking the long view of the rhythm of city life, so Xenakis proposed an abstracted music with a ‘narrative’ of pressure attenuations, energy exchanges, ripples, tremors and explosions.”

Is the source material irrelevant to the composer’s purposes? Xenakis was an iconoclast, a Greek in post-war Paris, studying with Messiaen and Arthur Honegger but rejecting serialism and the mainstream avant-garde (oxymoron?) for a noise-based music organized around probability theory and other branches of mathematics. Is this irrelevant to the result? Is it detectable? Does the result seem ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’? Do you regard it as ‘music’ or ‘noise,’ or should there be no distinction between the two? Do you find it ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’?

More information:

<http://www.iannis-xenakis.org/english/>

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

Alan Lamb—Beauty (from *Primal Image*) (1986)

Listen before reading!

Lamb is an Australian biologist; this project began in 1981 and was released in 1995. This entire album was recorded by attaching contact mics to telephone wires in the Australian outback. Crikey! The wires respond to natural phenomena such as wind, birds and insects, temperature changes, etc. Lamb does not process these normally near-inaudible vibrations but simply presents them as they have been gathered and culled. (There is minor editing and EQing.)

If you had not read this, or if you heard this before reading this, what would be your guess as to the origin of the sound? Is it important to know where a sound came from? Is this music? Is this art? What is Alan Lamb (apart from a biologist)—a composer, sound recorder, what? Can you think of a visual arts analogy?

More information:

<http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au/web/biogs/P000277b.htm>

<http://www.rainerlinz.net/NMA/22CAC/lamb.html>

Jack Body—Prelude: Azan (Call to Prayer) (from Suara - Environmental Music From Java) (1993)

Jack Body—Epilogue: Sawangan (Pigeon Whistles) (from Suara - Environmental Music From Java) (1993)

Jack Body is a Kiwi! He is one of the most important New Zealand composers, not only for his erudition but for the scope of his interests—from the classical canon to the street music of some of the poorest regions of Southeast Asia. He has spend much time in Indonesia, and brought to New Zealand its first Gamelan. These pieces of musique concrète are made exclusively of environmental sounds of Java, one of them human, the other natural. Azan uses the morning call to prayer in this very Islamic country. If you've been to an Islamic country, you'll know the sound is all around you. Sawangan is made from the sounds of whistles attached to homing pigeons. From the composer's own liner notes: "In this series of pieces I play a dual function, as a composer and as an ethnologist—the pieces are artifice, but within them I have framed intact samples of the environment, as one might hear the real world through an open window."

Do you think it is religiously insulting to make a recording such as Azan? Does this sound like a single recording, or the juxtaposition/concatenation of several recordings? In Sawangan how do you think the subtle sound modulations arise? Who are the composers here—Body, the flock of birds, the people who attached the whistles, the people who designed the whistles? How does this compare with a western classical piece and its performance? Is it important to be able to identify a composer? Are these ethnographic recordings, or pieces of music or sound art?

A little more information:

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

Pierre Schaeffer—Étude aux chemins du fer (1948)

Musique concrète was invented in the late 1940s by French radio engineer Pierre Schaeffer, who thought

of it as a sonic analog to photography. In the ensuing decades, composers and sound artists brought a variety of methods and aesthetic principles to 'found sound' art. These reveal themselves both through the chosen source material (field recordings vs. pre-recorded LPs, 'real world' sounds vs. 'music,' a single source vs. a variety of sources, etc.), and the way it's used (kept intact and recognizable, sliced and diced, juxtaposed, transformed by processing, etc., or not). *Railway Study* is an early example, which, as the title implies, is made entirely from various location recordings of French railroads.

To what extent is the sound of trains revealed and obscured, presented and transformed? Do you think it is important in *musique concrète* to have a connection to the source maintained; or, in your view, are there different sorts of *musique concrète*? If you didn't know the sounds were from trains, what would be your guess? How are the sounds altered? Clue: very minimally. Is there some relevance to a piece composed of train sounds being produced in 1948? Is this piece indeed composed? (Compare it with, say, the Lamb piece.)

More information:

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

http://remixmag.com/mag/remix_pierre_schaeffer/

On *musique concrète*:

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

Sarah Peebles—First Kitchen (South Shinjuku Area) (from 108—Walking Through Tokyo...) (2002)

According to the composer, she wanted to create a "sound walk" through Tokyo—a "sonic portrait which reflected everyday experiences in this city, yet which also included some special events." She had planned to record something particular, and did so, but the bulk of the CD is more general and spontaneous. "My walks through various districts unfold here as they actually occurred, though some sections are edited and changed to various degrees...."

When I first read the next part, I thought, that's all that nonsense art-school-graduate-speak. Upon reflection, I've found a strange connection between sounds I have recorded, and the 'I' that went along with the scene or thing recorded, or the act of recording, or more likely, of remembering. Peebles: "I couldn't separate the sounds from my physical and emotional experience of having recorded them. But, what I found (unconsciously) was a periodicity inherent in much of the material, and I could feel this periodicity in my body, via my memory—and my intuition guided me towards the space between things." I suppose one finds natural rhythms—I doubt natural or rhythmic any more than anything separated in time is rhythmic—in anything. But we cling to patterns we discern, and can accentuate them, be mesmerized.

On these spaces, she says the Tokyo ones “can be (physically) spacial [sic.], ... cyclical, or all of these”; especially when compared with Toronto, where she is based. Peter: I think this is a nice point: it isn't the mere sounds, it is the 'when' of the sounds: and the silences become sounds themselves, because you listen for or to them, during them—you engender their being rather than their non-being.

The effect of a city on the sounds it produces has an impact on her; speaking of one voice—a recorded evangelist—“The timbre of his voice changes as one walks through the area; it is ‘filtered’ essentially by the air—which includes the temperature, humidity, and pollution of that moment—and the reflective or absorbent surfaces of bodies in motion, cars, bicycles, and buildings.” This, I suspect, would change from city to city. And if you are in two minds as to whether this is a composed piece or not, consider the choices that have to be made when recording, in general. And specifically to this piece.

Effectively likening city sounds to a number of things—music, theater, perhaps even a demo derby (I'm mostly joking about that one)—she is “engaged by their rhythms, tonal qualities, pace, dramatic delivery (or lack there-of [sic.]), cyclic nature, and interactions/collisions with one another and with the sounds in the vicinity.”

Again, is this a composition? Can you tell if it is a straight recording or if it has been modified significantly? Would recording in a different city lead to different compositional decisions? How do you understand the phrase “a sonic portrait” as a visual analogy?—bear in mind the temporality of recording (in many senses).

More information:

<http://www.sarahpeebles.net/>

John Cage—Williams Mix (1952)

This is generally the most unloved piece on the entire listening list—I just thought it would be wise to warn you. Having said that, last semester's students were the first to read this warning, and, perhaps swayed by it in that negative way, many of them liked it.

We (probably) started the semester with Cage's 4'33", which without a doubt, even to his most vehement critics, changed the course of music composition and thought (and theater?). Cage's music and writing are well worth dwelling on, even at their most enigmatic or infuriating. This is a short tape piece from 1952, premiered at the University of Illinois in March 1953. The 500 page 'score' (which has never been reproduced) is a set of directions, solely for the cutting and splicing of taped sounds. The source sounds

themselves are in six Borgesian categories (<http://www.lcd.upenn.edu/myl/wilkins.html>, intqhc.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/18/4/264.pdf, very interesting and tangentially related to my dissertation): city, country, electronic, manually produced, wind produced, and 'small' (i.e., inaudible without amplification). Pitch, timbre and loudness are notated as well. Approximately 600 recordings are necessary to make a four-minute version of the piece. The compositional means were I Ching (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching) chance operations. Cage made this version with the assistance of Earle Brown, Louis and Bebe Barron (well known for the soundtrack to the 1956 movie, Forbidden Planet), David Tudor, Ben Johnston and others, but it is also possible to create other versions, using the score. It took approximately a year for the piece to be assembled. As Bebe Barron put it, "I was astonished when I heard the piece. Some of the sounds would appear and disappear so quickly that you couldn't recognize the source; it made me wish we hadn't spent so long on some of them." Cage seems to have shared this ambivalence: "It was a highly questionable process in view of the electronic utilities we now have."

Do you like this piece? If so, why; if not, why not? Does it seem like it was worth all the effort? Is Cage the composer, if the I Ching provided many compositional choices? Would you choose to listen to this piece if I hadn't asked you to do so?

More information:

<http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/cage.html>

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

And for some Cagean fun:

<http://www.lcdf.org/indeterminacy/>