The Musicians of Memory – compositional silence and the audio-visuality of sound

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As a multi-sensory composer I am concerned with the inter-relationship between the human voice and abstract sound and the use of rhythm, intonation, accent and tone as an original source for compositional exploration. In practice, this represents the use and application of voiced sound recorded in public spaces, including political demonstrations and rhetoric, as the stimuli for computer-aided composition. Using the inherent rhythmic patterns that occur in this context, I am concerned with the creation of a melodic abstract response while engaged in contemporary composition. Representing an opportunist and creative response to rendering sound using digital technologies without imposing pre-determined images, the need to “picture” a response is unnecessary – the imagery is in the sound and individual social, cultural and personal experiences.

The Musicians of Memory intends to illustrate how irregular and regular audio phrases pass between generations, creating opportunities to reflect on the potential of digital sound to enhance our sense of space, time and compositional processing. This new work creates opportunities to consider the implications of using digital technologies as a means to a creative end. What is gained from processing sound in this way? What is lost when marginalising the analogue techniques of the past? How are new technologies influencing the ways we interact with and experience sound?


1. INTRODUCTION

What is my area of critical interest? I am concerned with the inter-relationship between the human voice and abstract sound and the use of rhythm, intonation, accent and tone as an original source for compositional exploration. In practice, this represents the use and application of voiced sound recorded in public spaces, including political demonstrations and rhetoric, as the stimuli for computer-aided composition.

Using the inherent rhythmic patterns that occur in this context, I am concerned with the creation of a melodic abstract response while engaged in contemporary composition. These works represent an opportunist and creative response to rendering sound using digital technologies without imposing pre-determined images, just as there are no preconditions as to how these sounds should be heard. There is a distinct link between how voices are transmitted and how they are received. Ornette Coleman suggested that it was only through the human voice that emotion could be transmitted and although fingerprints and voiceprints are unique, it is only the voice that changes according to emotional or physical state (Coleman 2006).

2. SEEING VOICES

The fact that a human voice changes over time leads to a unique appreciation of its range, variety and quality of sound. Ageing, use, misuse and repetitive strain injuries are not confined to professional singers, orators or broadcasters. Our voices alter over time but are often still recognisable by listeners who have not heard your voice for an extended period of time. These elements provide the sounding board for my current area of critical interest. What happens to the voice equates with how these emotional signals, if this is what the voices really are, can be transformed into non-linguistic compositions. As a freely available rhythmic source as irregular as the
heartbeat, as firm as a pulse, voices and their transmitters – the human frame – provide numerous opportunities to procure tone, tonality, pause, pace, timbre and volume to use as the basis for further creativity. How these elements are transformed by computer assisted software and hardware to create a digitally enhanced composition, complete with melodic anchor and appropriate periods of stillness, contribute to how I continue to explore the relationship between abstract sound and its association with involuntary visual imagery. If sound can create an ‘earworm’ is there a visual equivalent? Can a specific sound be linked to a specific image?

This poses a compelling question – can a sound composition prompt a recurring visual response? In other words, if a sound composition creates a particular image or series of images will this occur again next time the listener hears that composition?

2.1 VOICING AND RECORDING

The capacity of the human voice to reflect emotion and the potential to use “field recordings” as a source for sound composition is extraordinary. The ways in which we communicate are complex, the emotions involved in political rhetoric seemingly emphasise the tonal and rhythmic range of the voice. Rendered from the original to abstraction, these sounds present a wide range of improvisational material. Why use words when it is possible to explore the harmonic potential of the voice through digital technologies? The need to capture “real” sound is only the starting point. Sound composition may begin once the originals have been rendered. This is similar to the ways in which individual musical notes, provide the raw material for interpretation.

The voice may function on a different rhythmic and tonal range but can still provide the compositional materials for abstraction in sound. Acknowledging that some political orators provide a more fruitful source of voices than others is of interest here. The orator who is impassioned, improvisational and able to use their accent, intonation and personality to move a crowd is often remembered. The orator’s art is all about technique. Pause, pace and timing, short sentences, accent, emphasis and intonation all contribute to political oration but how that can be rendered into a electronically based, digitally mastered composition is a different process altogether.

3 COMPUTER AIDED COMPOSITION

The works that I produce are not entirely dependent on computer technology as a means of production. Their creation is primarily improvisational, blending a variety of techniques and processes that may also include the application of digital technologies and computational programming. They are enhanced by their interaction with specific computer hardware and software. In this, my work is computer-aided but not computational. Although my work may exist independently of the computer the interaction between form and content is substantially strengthened by the creative application of scanners, digital cameras, sound and image editing software.

3.1 STILLNESS, SILENCE AND EMOTION

Concerning silence it is necessary to consider several seemingly conflicting elements. Firstly, what is the difference between silence and stillness? Silence rarely exists. What we consider to be silence is so often stillness. This may appear pedantic but the silence associated with most compositions is, in reality, stillness. Other sounds are present. Heartbeat, breath, movement and sounds of the inner ear are, for example, four elements that prevent “true silence” occurring.

Secondly, how do these periods of silence or stillness contribute to the overall emotional structure of the composition? Arguably, the need for stillness and/or silence in contemporary composition is imperative. Without space, sounds become over-wrought. There is no apparent need to fill every second with noise. Composer Brian Eno suggests that the composer/listener relationship should not overawe the compositional process as he acknowledges that he ‘can trust listeners -- they don’t need to be constantly woken up.’ (ENO 2005)

Thirdly, if stillness or silence can be as powerful as an emotive outburst, how are these implemented to enhance the aural impact of a composition in sound?

3.2 A MELODIC ANCHOR

Within the compositional process some consideration should be given to the practicalities of composition and the psychological impact on the composer. The desire to create music that challenges established ideas of what is acceptable in terms of melody and pitch is complicated by the desire to underpin a composition with a degree of familiarity – leading to compromises that may limit the radical nature of the work.

Decisions concerning pitch, harmony, tone, atonality, volume and rhythm remain within the composer’s control although the tendency to conform to accepted practice is driven by other factors. For instance, degrees of dissonance are
often resolved by the use of a melodic anchor. Following a period of dissonance, the composer or improviser employs a stabilising note to provide a cognitive reference point to re-establish the melody (Bharucha 1984).

Giving further consideration to Bharucha’s concept, Albert S Bregman, Professor, Department of Psychology, McGill University, considers the use of the melodic anchor by musicians following a mistake in live performance that is covered up ‘by following it with a stable note that is near to it in pitch so that the former is heard simply as ornamentation.’ Bregman adds that ‘jazz improvisation has often been described as an ongoing accommodation of errors in this way’ (Bregman 1994).

The potential to exploit the use of the melodic anchor should be considered in association with the development of improvisational techniques although as John Cage suggests improvisation ‘depends more on your taste and memory, and your likes and dislikes. It doesn’t lead you into a new experience, but into something with which you’re already familiar.’ (Cage 1987)

The same may apply to compositional use of the melodic anchor, a safe haven that feels and sounds familiar, even in the most discordant composition, a point that Cage takes issue with when considering how compositions become heard reminding us ‘that we don’t hear anything until it is audible.’ (Cage 1987)

4. THE DIGITAL ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

It is possible that the relationship between analogue and digital processing is becoming increasingly blurred. The speed of digital composition and ease of accessibility is at the expense of traditional analogue processing. There is no reason to ignore the past. The ideas and concepts produced during analogue composition are no less valid that the newly minted ideals of digital reproduction. The relation between the composer, in this case best represented by capturing “field recordings”, and the end product has become increasingly complicated. During the recording of these sounds I questioned the ethical nature of the pre-production process. Is the 21st century creating a remote version of what is being experienced? For me, this became what I have identified as “the digital elephant in the room.” Is the experience of the ease of capturing any sound, whether in performance or on location, diluting the relationship between listener and original source? Are these opportunities to record using digital technologies, whether it is a sophisticated H4 Zoom recorder or a smartphone in a club, serving as a third party mediator that interrupts the experience?

5. RECORDING THE MUSICIANS OF MEMORY

Two political demonstrations provided the “field recordings” for The Musicians of Memory. These recordings are purely subjective. Choosing to join a demonstration with the intention to capture sound is hardly a reason for being there. It is apparent that taking part in a demonstration against government policy is an act of faith in the belief that policies can be changed. This may not be how things are but the resulting recordings provide a valuable source of digital material.


CND Stop Trident demonstration: Trafalgar Square, 27th February 2016: the search for a melodic anchor proved difficult although sounds captured included repetitive phrases used by orators for effect. The use of repetition in this way emphasised the role of the voice as a source of rhythm but, more specifically, as a form of call and response, a technique employed by blues and jazz musicians for over 150 years.

6. RECORDING, EDITING AND OPPORTUNITY

Vocalisation through chance had a major impact on the nature of this composition. The relationship between listener and orator, vocalist and crowd control created an opportunity to use
improvisational sound in a different way. Even in improvisation between musicians, there is normally an accepted structure or procedure. The ways in which musicians interact in a studio or performance environment is different from those engaged in a public demonstration. The pureness of sound is not replicated or even possible if street sounds are being employed. The unaccompanied female vocalist who sang at The Don't Bomb Syria demonstration aided an unexpected but very welcome additional dimension to this work.

A further dimension was added by the use of crowd chanting as a rhythmic source. Use of repetition and the quality of these sounds to resonate within a confined space in Parliament Square enhanced the depth of the recording, taken while taking part in a sit-down demonstration. This could not be pre-planned.

What does all this mean? By resting my ear against these sounds I can glimpse fragments of conversations between takes - fingers between notes - notes beneath addresses - sounds of lost moments of love and the next to last generation sleeping in unison. It all begins with... begins with what? You decide – listen to this transmission from The Musicians of Memory.

7. CONCLUSION

Fortunate to have experienced the development and use of both analogue and digital recording technologies over the last 45 years, I continue to be challenged by the strengths and weaknesses of recording.

Reel-2-reel equipment created a greater purity of sound but at the expense of confining musicians in a studio environment. Street recordings were difficult without professional outside broadcasting technologies and associated power sources.

Conversely, digital recorders are highly portable and create opportunities for improvisational freedom and chance encounters to capture raw and unedited street sounds. The Musicians of Memory could not have been created in the past and any loss of purity of sound can often be used to creative effect or managed within subsequent editing. The potential to exploit and explore the nature of sound and the ways in which we can manipulate and compose new concepts of audio-visual complementarity seem boundless. Digital technologies provide a unique opportunity to eavesdrop, sample and edit recordings to contribute to achieving a greater awareness of how we “see” sound. In the end, all that’s left is to listen. The composition is complete. Listen out for the voices that seem to drift in and out with the tide wave after wave of unleavened chords caught up in the lost chaos of the years before these years. Why wait in silence when there is so much to be heard?

Subsequent editing took place at the composer’s studio in Hampshire (UK). The final composition was produced in association with Cubase and WavePad to create an MP3 soundtrack.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Musicians of Memory uses a variety of digital technologies to create the final composition including a H4 Zoom digital recorder with built in microphones to capture street recordings. The thousands of largely anonymous demonstrators, singers and orators provided the creative voice that drove and inspired me to complete this composition. It would not have been possible without their voice and the freedom to express opinions through non-violent demonstration.


