Introduction

This project involves an investigation of 20th century experimental compositions documenting common features and motifs found in prominent works of music. The objective of this documentation is to create a comprehensive database of compositions, including these features to demonstrate the evolution of music in different contexts and environments.

The goal of this research is to develop on the pedagogy of experimental music into the 21st century. Defining and expanding on established principles is paramount for the future of production and study of these works, hence this project explores the history and methods of existing works and expands upon them with the use of modern technology.

The purpose of this research is to explore how our way of experiencing sound is shaped by culture, physiology, and experience, and how this is translated into improvisation and compositional methods. Furthermore, this research holds to challenge the traditional definitions of audience, performer, environment, and composer. The introduction includes an extended discussion of the three main movements of this project: 1) The Life of a Songbird 2) The Life of a Songbird and 3) The Life of a Songbird II. Each movement explores a different aspect of the project, drawing on a variety of sources. The first movement introduces the project, and the second movement introduces the concept of sound as a form of experience. The third movement experiments with spoken word and explores the effects of the ocean on the listener.

Materials and Methods

The following is a list of materials and environments used in the composition process:

- Zoom H4 Pro Handy Recorder
- 24-bit/96kHz Field Recorder and 2x USB Audio Interface with Onboard XY Mics, Stereo, M-S, and 4-channel Modes
- Spokane Public Library Recording Studio
- Birch Bay State Park
- University of Victoria
- BC Ferries
- Garage Band
- Audacity
- Steinway upright piano
- Pigini Sirius Kyna Chromatic Accordion

Methods used in this body of work draw inspiration from various composers from the 20th century starting with the works of Pauline Oliveros. The basis of this composition is from Oliveros’s work Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice particularly the piece Old Sound. New Sound, Borrowed Sound Blue, for voices (1994) and methods of Field Recording in which the composer is required to take stretches of recordings and layer them upon one another to create a singular body of work. Daily journaling of soundscapes as part of this Deep Listening practice were also used to cultivate a greater ability to listen to a variety of environments. Though parts of this composition draws inspiration from traditional music, repeated figures, and motifs found in Minimalism (such as the works of Philip Glass), dynamic qualities and durations found throughout these works are inspired by the works of Olivier Messiaen and John Cage using unconventional pitch and duration to create unpredictability. This composition leans into the Dadaist rejection of logic and cohesion, encouraging absurdity with extended recordings of natural environments with incoherent voices that are stretched, reversed, or otherwise manipulated throughout the composition.

The Life of a Songbird

This project culminates into a final 38-minute composition entitled The Life of a Songbird which serves as a representation of the various methods practiced and used throughout this project.

00:00-8:00 The Life of a Songbird begins with an introduction of improvisations performed at the Spokane Public Library with Clara Patten on piano and Naomi Harris on accordion, this includes audio collected from Birch Bay State Park of birds in the area and sounds of the ocean.

This introduction includes an extended technique on accordion, using bellows to emulate and mimic sounds of the ocean.

8:00-14:30 In this composition the soundscape of a trip on BC Ferries, this dissolves the barrier between audience, environment, and composer to represent a unity in performing understanding, this is also blended in the introduction of this piece notably at 5:00.

14:30-19:12 Of this piece is are multiple recordings of repeated chords and arpeggiation performed on piano at the University of Victoria. This section marks the beginning of the fall into unpredictability and draws from a combination of Minimalism and serialism drawing inspiration from both. This is inspired by a combination of Minimalism and Serialism, inspired by the works of Phillip Glass’s Metamorphosis and Olivier Messiaen’s atonal and unconventional layering of piano in Sept Hasitets for piano and orchestra, as articulation, duration, and pitch are manipulated and distorted.

19:12-28:37 This section is drawn heavily from traditional methods of accordion composition that draw inspiration from 20th century Russian and French variety music. The beginning of this section experiments with long melodic lines that blend into one another using manipulation causing dissonance and forcing the listener to focus on multiple themes.

The second movement in this section is heavily inspired by modern French musette variety and uses extended bellow technique for accordion inspired by Vladimir Zabinsky’s Omaggio ad Astor Piazzolla.

The third movement experiments with spoken word and explores personal experiences and sound manipulation.

28:37-38:25 The whole piece is played backwards and sped up through the end concluding in Pauline Olivero’s Deep Listening Practices. This also includes pressured and stretched voices.

Conclusion

For music to progress, it is necessary to deconstruct the definitions traditionally ascribed to performer, composer, and audience. Through practices of Deep Listening throughout unconventional environments, this research has proven that psychological, physiological, and emotional responses and experiences all play into methods of composition, experience, and performance. As this body of work explores many different styles and methods of composition ranging from Traditional to Avant-Garde, ultimately the audience’s personal experience and ability to listen is what determines the meaning and breadth of a composition on a personal basis. Ultimately, it was found that the composition process was idenpendent with environment and the sounds produced from them. As audience and composer work from an anthropocentric value system of listening (human voice, song, danger, food water), composers of all kinds of music must evaluate the extremes of what is defined as harmony versus noise. As the 21st century continues to develop technology, accessibility of recording equipment to people all over the world will increase. The spread of culture and experience will force the world of Western Music to deconstruct purpose and meaning in composition, thus the boundary between artist and audience must be dissolved. Furthermore, the methods of composition and performance will be altered using this technology to serve as instrumentation that manipulates time, which in traditional instrumentation is incapable of.

References


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