"Grain, Sequence, System"

[three levels of reception in the performance of laptop music]

Intro:

The increasing use of laptop computers in the performance of electronic music has resurrected timeworn issues for both musicians and audiences. Liberated by the use of the laptop as a musical instrument, musicians have blurred the boundaries separating studio and stage, as well as the corresponding authorial and performance modes of work. On the other hand, audiences experience the laptop's use as a musical instrument as a violation of the codes of musical performance. This is not a new issue for electronic music: the lack of visual stimuli while performing on technological "instruments" has plagued electronic music for over 40 years with little progress in providing solutions.

This essay discusses issues of performance from the point of view of how electronic music is received rather than how it is presented. Drawing on concepts found in "reception theory," I will examine three levels of reception inherent in the performance of laptop music as used in the performance of contemporary electronic music. These three levels are: the grain of laptop performance, the sequence of historical linkages, and the system of super-culture and its effect of the reception apparatus of the public.

Grain: Laptop Performance

Spectacle is the guarantor of presence and authenticity, whereas laptop performance represents artifice and absence, the alienation and deferment of presence.

After approximately forty years of electronic music, the issues surrounding how audiences *receive* the performance of electronic music have yet to be resolved. Electronic music is best appreciated when an audience is engaged in a contemplative mode of "active reception." The problem arises when an audience receives music in a mode of "distracted reception." "Distracted reception" mode is created by constant immersion in pop media, and sets expectations that the musician will produce meaning through spectacle—and this atrophies the audience's ability to produce meaning for him or herself.

Historically, the unfamiliar codes used in electronic music performance have prevented audiences from attributing "presence" and "authenticity" to the performer. Seen more as a technician than a musician, the performer of electronic music hovers over a nest of cables, knobs and blinking lights; electronic circuits filling the space with sound via an "artificial" process.

Today, most live electronic music is performed on laptop computers in the traditional proscenium setting of concert halls, theaters, and galleries. This context invokes the standard performer-audience polarity, which places the performer in the role of a cultural authority. During laptop performances, the standard visual codes disappear into the micro-movements of the performer's hand and wrist motions, leaving the mainstream audience's expectations unfulfilled.

In traditional musical performances, the score has an obvious origin that is revealed to an audience by the act of a musician interpreting it. The musician recalls the score from his or her memory and performs the piece with emotional expression, giving the illusion of spontaneous composition. In laptop performance, the origin of the score is never revealed; the performer does not serve as a conduit for it, and does nothing to convince the audience that a score exists. Music performed on a laptop is lacking in one element: its unique existence at the place where it happened to be created. Laptop music adopts the quality of having been broadcast from an *absent* space-time rather than a *displaced* one. In other words, a score most likely does not exist and the sounds themselves are unable to reveal a recognizable source. The laptop musician broadcasts sounds from a virtual non-place; the performance feigns the *effect* of presence and authenticity where none really exists. The cultural artifact produced by the laptop musician is then misread as "counterfeit," leaving the audience unable to attach value to the experience.

The laptop performer, perhaps unknowingly, has appropriated the practice of *acousmatic music* and transplanted its issues.

Sequence: Genre Interrupted

Laptop music has a historical precursor to its presentation format: "acousmatic music." In the practice of acousmatic music, there are specific codes used to organize its presentation with which the audience produces meaning. In this style of presentation, the composer usually sits in the audience, operates a mixing board, tape player and/or laptop computer and "performs" the composition by

playing back his or her recorded composition. The audience typically sits facing the loudspeakers on stage and receives the work as a sonic narrative that is *piloted* by the composer. The academic music community has engaged in this presentation of music without a need for "the social rituals prompted by the interaction of stage performer(s) and audience."[i]

Over the past forty years, little has changed with regard to the public's reception of electronic music. As audiences become increasingly enculturated by pop media, the media's "network of aura" (i.e., the combined effect of music video, film, TV, radio, Internet, magazines, etc.) consistently fulfills the public's expectations, thereby conventionalizing the codes of cultural consumption. The process of enculturation, the purpose of which is to maximize profits by creating brand-loyal customers, gradually erodes the ability to construct meaning in art. By privileging certain codes of musical performance and fulfilling a conventionalized set of expectations, audiences consume music as a commodity and less as an artform.

The appropriation of electronic music by dance music culture has reduced the signifiers its borrowed from 20th century music to self-referential *icons*. Without bringing forward their original contexts, the transformed signifiers have difficulty yielding new significance. Additionally, the iconic nature of these signifiers and their newly attached meanings erodes the need to bring the original contexts forward. The result is that electronic music (i.e., Electronica) remains bracketed, leaving the receiver adrift in arbitrary meanings and multiple layers of misreadings.

While Electronica uses many of the spectacularized presentation codes of rock music, their use has accelerated a conventionalized set of codes used to fulfill audience expectations and sustain demand for it products. Consequently, these audiences misread laptop-oriented sub-cultures such as "microsound" and "glitch" because they are unable to work through oppositions to their expectations. In order for electronic music to return to artistic growth, there needs to be a shift towards recuperating historical contexts, building awareness of audience expectations and developing non-distracted modes of reception.

System: Satellites of Super-Culture

Upon examining how cultural codes and mechanisms operate in the system of consumer capitalism, it is clear that sub-cultures orbit parasitically around pop media or super-culture in order to exist. Super-culture supplies all the necessary systems of economics, advertising, presentation, etc. that allow a sub-culture to produce demand for its products in a competitive market. Once a sub-culture

feeds off the systems of super-culture, they encounter similar political-economic problems. As an example: when money is exchanged for electronic music performed on a laptop, the audience has the expectation that they will receive a demonstration of musical skills they do not own. The more skill (hence authority) the performer can demonstrate, the more value is received by the audience. However, it is difficult for an audience to perceive the value of a performance where the artist could simply be playing back a soundfiles on a device more suited to an office cubicle than a stage. Consequently, the standard codes of musical performance are violated: the laptop is doing the work, no skill is required or demonstrated, and the artist could just as easily be any one of the audience faking a performance. This violation is fatal to the audience attempting to overcome opposition to their expectations and reduces the value of the exchange.

The interruption of electronic music from its historical lineage has displaced the precursors to laptop music performance. As a result, electronic music culture has become bracketed, synchronic; its signifiers set adrift and assigned meaning on an arbitrary basis. The system of super-culture has severed, assimilated and recast electronica's artifacts; providing ease of consumption and easily fills expectations, thereby driving a demand for its product. Its use-value remains primarily social, desire-based, and orbits super-culture/pop-media in parasitic orbit.

Conclusion:

"What the absence of visual identification makes anonymous, unifies and prompts a more attentive listening."[ii]

With the vast network of control that super-culture exerts over the various culture industries, it is no fault of the audience that it is unable to recuperate the lost modes of active reception. While the rotational beacon of pop media transmits its message of disposable consumption, other forces are required to recuperate lost modes of reception. When the default mode becomes one of attention deficit, it becomes too much to work past the obstacles to aesthetic appreciation. Laptop music is a result of rhizomatic growth, the advance of technology that liberates the user and changes the way they organize their work. This change has caused audiences to become confused as to what they are consuming; authorial identity is displaced, and the process by which music is performed remains mystified. If computers are simply the repositories of intellectual property, then musical composition and its performance are now also located in this virtual space. The composer transfers his or her mental work into

the computer, and it is brought to life by interacting with it through the interface of a software application. The paradigm may have changed slightly for the transmission of electronic music, but audiences need to reprogram their cultural apparatus for *active reception* in order to recuperate their ability to participate in the production of meaning. It is in this way that audiences can better appreciate the masterful works that will form diachronic linkages for future musicians and audiences. Electronic music can then resume its growth as an artform instead of being relegated to the dustbins of pop media history.

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[i] Darrren Copeland, "Cruising For A Fixing - in this 'Art of Fixed Sounds'", http://www.interlog.com/~darcope/cruising.html, as of February 2002.

[ii] Francis Dhomont, "Acousmatic, what is it?", http://www.electrocd.com/notice.e/9607-0002.html, as of February 2002.