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Influences of sustained tone minimalism in my recent music

Keith actually mentioned in the first session after Kyle's talk, that composers so rarely talk about the listener, and how their role may impact upon the compositional role. This talk hopes to go some way to remedy that!

I do not consider myself a minimalist, or a post-minimalist composer, but I certainly operate within the current experimental community. I'm talking about what has fed into my compositional approach, and how my thinking about creative practice influences my musical output.

I want to begin by discussing my interest with time, and the temporal experience.

[SLIDE]

So, let's picture me, at the train station, let's say it's Birmingham New Street, platform 8a... and when sitting on that platform, I often found myself watching time pass on the clock. What that does is bring my attention to the manner in which *experience* time...and gets me thinking. What about when you have a similar experience in music?

I'm not talking about the 'music slowing down' or 'speeding up', I'm talking about when our temporal experience is made apparent and is perceived to transform (unlike in, for example, traditional classical music where some kind of thematic narrative retains the focus of the listener).

[SLIDE]

Jonathan Bernard writes that minimalist music is 'music which is *about* time', and [SLIDE] that 'there is something about this sense of the passage of time that is *enforced*'. This is an area brimming with possibilities for creative practices, and one which has by no means been exhausted.

As well as this interest in the transformational nature of time, I've always had an interest in a 'non-hierarchical' approach to the creation of music. [SLIDE] (blank) By this I mean the organisation of the performers, and the performance situation; there is no singling out of one player or groups separate to others, and there is no friction or dialogue between two or more sets of players.

This non-hierarchical approach is the reason why I am passionate about groove music; it is the the repeating chords which I used to play on the piano when I was younger, and why I am drawn far more to a total harmonic approach rather than one relating to line.

In James Tenney's use of the word 'isomorphic',
[ISOMORPHIC SLIDE]

I've found a theoretical approach which aligns with my own. Tenney used isomorphic to describe little- to no-parametric change in a sonic environment (I should add that this relates only to *composed* parameters, which instruct the performers, rather than the resultant sound). Isomorphism in music is consistency, similarity, predictability, and is undeviating.

Sustained tones allow for an environment where predictability can be at its highest level (or, if you like, where entropy is at its lowest level). In contrast to sustained tones, repetitive music, (where some kind of musical cell is repeated), continues to create in the listener a sense of awareness *about* the fact it is repeating, and thereby continually encouraging the possibility that the repetition may differ. The fact that the experience is often one of *separate* cells means that the nature of difference is brought to one's awareness *more so* than in sustained tone music, where the listener may well come to expect little-to-no parametric change, or isomorphism. So, there is less of an *expectancy* of change in sustained tone music, but due to their constancy in the composed parameters, it is then easier to experience smaller durations upon performance.

[SLIDE]

In terms of composed parametric change, isomorphism in sustained tones results in a close representation of a non-hierarchical environment, one where there is no intentional layering of value to a particular constituent part over any others. This is where isomorphism allows a deeper insight and understanding of the experience, and encourages a more *exploratory* role for the listener - but more on that in a minute.

Whilst I have been discussing isomorphism in the composed parameters, I want now to address this magical word [SLIDE] *stasis*. Or, [SLIDE] '*stasis*'. For me, when used about the musical experience, this is one of the most poorly-used words in musical criticism, and, when setting about writing up my PhD last year, the first rule I gave myself was that that word has no place in my thesis. It is usually used as a reductive end to a discussion, which to me usually marks the *beginning*.

When someone experiencing this music examines the apparent 'static' nature of this music, they will soon discover not a fixed, 'changeless' soundworld but rather [SLIDE] an active surface layer, where we discover a myriad fluctuations are occurring and providing interest and detail for observation. [SLIDE - activate] Even someone whose music often attracts the *s* word, La Monte Young, has this to say:

"Change, or flux is inevitable. Stasis, or remaining the same, is impossible." and that "the state of flux, variation, or contrast, is unavoidable"

Because the composed parameters of my music are near-isomorphic, our perceptual processes focus in on the smaller details of the sound environment. These relatively small deviations are then acted upon by our auditory grouping mechanisms, [SLIDE] and so rather than there being an experience of stasis, the continually changing surface layer articulations lead to a constant state of *flux*, the exact opposite of stasis.

This state of flux inevitably impacts on our sense of temporality when listening to the music; this transformational temporal experience, in combination with the non-hierarchical approach to organisation [SLIDE] has led to me aiming for a situation where the *listener* becomes the *participant* [SLIDE] [SLIDE]; due to the non-hierarchical nature of the composition, there is no single path for which one has to follow to 'understand the music'; it remains an open environment where many opposing experiences can exist simultaneously. I align with Merleau-Ponty's notion that [SLIDE] "the perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect [...] it is, rather, a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views". In my music, I simply try to prompt people to explore a further number of perspectival views.

A phrase which Larry Polansky used to describe James Tenney's music resonates very much with the way in which I create music: [SLIDE] "It's not so much that Tenney wants to tell you something, as it is that, like Cage, he is interested in providing a tool to help you evolve"

So, having contextualised my own in interest sustained tones, the isomorphic approach to organisation and the non-hierarchical listening environment which results, I want to talk about transformations which I apply to this environment.

Within this state of parametric near-isomorphism, I often apply a gradual pitch process where transformation occurs on an almost imperceptible scale, still encouraging listeners to engage with the active surface layer. This gradual pitch process applies a *framework* to the listening experience, and I use the word *framework* advisedly as I see this as very different to a musical discourse; the emphasis still remains upon the surface layer, but this *framework* (the pitch process) actually promotes further activity on the surface layer, and allows further sonorities to be revealed to the listener.

In my use of global pitch processes, there are clear links to other composers' work:

Pitch divergence:

[SLIDE] James Tenney - *Critical Band*

[SLIDE] Richard Glover - *Corradiation*

Pitch convergence:

[SLIDE] Phill Niblock - *Five More String Quartets*

[SLIDE] Peter Adriaansz - *Music for Sines*

[SLIDE] Richard Glover - *Gradual Music*

A recent piece of mine for piano [SLIDE] (*Logical Harmonies*) applies a simple cyclic framework to triadic harmonies and retains the focus upon deviations rather than just the composed parameters.

Importantly, for these pieces where a sense of *closure* may be experienced, it is the *pitch process* itself which creates this, not the attitude or expression of the performers. By creating these pitch processes, I intend for the performers not to change anything about their performance to enhance the sense of finality (there are similarities with the Cageian removal of the ego). What I am calling for here from the performers is

the notion of non-interventionism as defined by pianist Philip Thomas¹. [SLIDE] This approach exists “without reference to any external stylistic code” so as to “focus upon the production of sound within the parameters of the score”²

In my music, I intend to communicate through scores a state of non-interventionism and concentration by the performer where they focus solely on the production of *pitch* (itself implying a balanced, consistent tone - moderate dynamic, pure tone). It is not directed towards virtuosity or technically demanding performance in the traditional meanings of these words, but rather promotes an enhanced concentration upon the aural nature of the music.

The approaches to notation in particular aim to convey this idea. Returning to the score of *Logical Harmonies*, [SLIDE] it is clear how the extreme austerity of the score directs the performer towards this approach of non-interventionism - simply playing what is notated, in the clearest possible manner.

Outside of this non-interventionist performance approach, what I have found myself concentrating on more and more in recent music is interaction between performers; I now no longer use stopwatches, instead preferring to allow players to move through a piece at a pace that is comfortable - that feels natural - for them. An example is *Inversions in Retrograde...*

[SLIDES]

Viola player

Players move pitch only they are comfortable, and only in direct relation to other players (not to an external reference such as counting beats or a stopwatch). It is the *players* who take control over movement through the score. My recent piece for the Bozzini string quartet, [SLIDE] *Seventh Inversions*, instructs players to perform a unison double-stop glissando very gradually between Just Intonated chords, which they arrive at *only* once all players are ready - continuous signals between players during the glissando help them to stay together when moving at a pace comfortable to them.

So, to summarise what I've been talking about:

[SLIDES]

My two interests in the experience of time and the 'non-hierarchy' in music led to me working with isomorphic sustained tone environments, which brought about the notion of listeners creating their own, subjective experiences - listeners becoming participants. Pitch processes are applied to create a further sense of transformation, and through a greater interest in open compositional approaches, I worked more with structures that would allow performers to have a real sense of control in these pieces; a different angle from the perceived master/slave relationship. This ultimately results in a sense of participatory music, an inclusiveness where subjectivity is embraced and encouraged.

1 Thomas, Philip 'A Prescription for Action', Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music, ed. James Saunders (Farnham, 2009) p.91

2 Ibid.