

Spark #1.15 -Texture

- Henry Warwick

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In a recent email exchange with the composer Andrew Keeling, he noticed that the music on my CD, Keraunograph, was largely based in textures, and that pitch was of secondary importance.

I replied to him, noting that, in fact, everything except texture is of secondary importance, and I'd like to share my ideas with you all in this edition of SPARK.

In my music, the only rhythms are ones created by the phase patterns of filters and the multiple delay/echo systems. For me, there is ONLY texture. As I briefly pointed at in the CD, I've been working with this "Texturalist" theory for a while.

If one looks at music for what it is (vibrating air molecules) then one has a range of possible sounds. Some are going to be below the range of human hearing, some above. If one records a sound, the recording device doesn't recognise when a song starts or ends- as a recorder it's all sound, and recognition is a property of sentient beings. Furthermore, as far as the speakers are concerned, there is no difference between a song and silence except in terms of the amplitude of voltages.

John Cage freed music from the strictures of meter, melody, and all the other trappings of previous music making. Due to cultural currents that were parallel to Cage's aesthetic, rather than continue the investigation of sound as Sound, an experience of audio texture, minimalism's repetition of simple notable musical structures came to the fore. This pretty much stopped the research, except for a few major exceptions (Roland Kayn, Xenakis, on the more academic end, and Eno, :zoviet*france:, Rapoon, and others on the less academic end.)

My approach is as narrow as Kayn's or Xenakis- I'm very analytical- but I also understand that music is something played by humans, and so my material also has a strong performative component, similar to Rapoon or :zoviet*france:, based in a kind of improvisation. Unlike the aforementioned, my workings are much more structured, where I remember to make certain kinds of sounds at certain points in the performance. Thusly, each performance is unique in detail, but has structural integrity over repeated performances. In this way, my work is neither improvised nor composed. It exists outside of melody and rhythm, yet it often has a driving and/or hypnotising repetition in the z axis.

Permit me a short digression on the dimensional aspects of sound.

If one looks at an FFT (Fast Fourier Transform) of a sound, it has three axes - X for amplitude, Y for Frequency, and Z for Time. A given sample averages the sound values for a short duration of time. The duration is dictated by the Nyquist Law. Repeated samples trace the amplitude of sound through various frequencies over time, the Z-axis.

Therefore, to an objective observer (and a sampler is about as objective as it gets) sound is the same in silence or not- it occupies the three axes. Therefore the various aspects of music can be mapped over the axes by desire and focus:

Pitch focus is in the Y-axis, secondarily in the X-axis. Melody is pitch over time; therefore it is a Y-axis focus with an X-axis emphasis taken over a passive Z-axis.

Rhythm's focus is in an active Z-axis primarily, with secondary focus on the X-axis and tertiary focus in the Y-axis. Rhythm is a variation in amplitude only visible through memory/time. Through repeated applications, expectation is built in the human psyche as we accept it as a Rhythm, and our focus wanders on to other points of interest.

Timbre is very close to the Texture as I conceive of it. Timbre exists in an interesting place, for it is as qualitative and language based, as it is a physical property in the perception of sound. For instance, we can sample a saxophone, and we can all agree that the sampled sax has a sax-like sound. When we hear a live sax, we can say, "that's a sax." When we hear a sampled sax, we can say, "That sounds like a sampled sax". In both cases we are able to recognise the sax itself, it's "sax-ness" lies in our memory and not in the instrument. Hence, if we hear a recording of a sax and a recording of a sample of a sax, they both sound like a sax. The philosophical implications are interesting- it tends to indicate that the platonic universe is a figment of our imagination. But that's a good bit beyond the scope of this article.

I'm also fairly well convinced that this ability to distinguish timbres is a "hard-wired" function of our brains, much as one is able to recognise the face of a loved one whether she had her hair cut or is wearing makeup or both. Therefore, timbre is something that requires the X and Y-axis most equally, with a relatively passive Z-axis acting as a field and permitting variations of the X and Y over a very short range of the Z-axis.

My compositions, being exercises in Composed Texture, work equally in all three audio dimensions. That is roughly how my work presently operates, in a formal sense.

Frankly, as interesting as it is, formalism is only one part of the equation. The other components are less amenable to abstract analysis. There's any number of these component questions, but a few of the first and most obvious are:

1. How does the music aesthetically affect the listener?
2. What are the intentions of the composer in a given work?
3. What are the non-aesthetic effects of the music?

Question #1 is primarily dependent on the listener's response per the listener's preconceived notions and prejudices, and secondarily on the composer's intentions.

Question #2 is difficult to answer, as any of our notions at a given time in culture may not be relevant to the composer. For instance, it is extremely hard to divine the intentions of medieval minstrels'

approach to their music. They're dead, and they didn't write much down or provide many clues. It is easier to determine a more contemporary composer's intentions, as we are all sharing similar cultural experiences, and therefore the cues and references are more easily deciphered. A good composer will recognise this and work with and or against it as the piece may indicate or require.

Question #3 is something only determinable by the listener, but can be guided by the composer. A part of this is to use signifiers of certain types of music that indicate a specific response. For instance, highly repetitive drones will tend to induce a type of hypnagogic state in the listener. Lousy newage "composers" and other similar charlatans use this physiological response to a repetitive field as a hook to be filled in with sentimentalist crap. The actual interesting part, to me, is the repetitive effect and its hypnagogic response, and how it can be frustrated in order to provoke deeper and more "difficult" responses in the listener as the music plumbs deeper depths in the human spirit.

All of this is accomplished through stating the obvious- music is first and foremost audio texture. It is our cultural responses and training that sets up our interpretive structures of sound to make sound into music, and then greater training to split out aspects of music into more discrete components which are then classified as Rhythm, Pitch, Melody, etc. By working outside of all of these categories, and then selecting them as necessary at any given point, I avoid any attachment to them- the only attachment is to the fundamental grid, the zero point field of existence and its sonic environment, and how it affects our most inner, and thusly meaningful, existence.