

Spark #1.21 - Making Keraunograph, part Three

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Here's the third installment to the Keraunograph saga. This will take us through each piece on the CD and give you some insight as to "How'd He Do Dat?" and "Why'd he do dat?". I'm sorry this has taken so long to get to you my dear reader, but life has been exceptionally difficult for me in the past month- between the World Trade Center being blown to flinders which depressed the hell out of me (it was a building that was a part of my childhood and adolescence), and coming down with a serious case of the flu (on top of my lung infection in August) and then scampering off to Vancouver to read at the Refrains Electronic Music Symposium, and then helping the family and associates of a dear friend who now lies in a coma- I've been up to my eyeballs in everything that has nothing to do with creativesynth.

This has me less than pleased, as I love creativesynth.com. Thankfully, everything now seems to be on a more even keel. So - lets all get then, shall we?



First off- I made "Keraunograph" with 3 keyboards and one computer. My computer is the first round of "Yosemite" blue and white Apple Macintosh G3s from 1998. It has a Digidesign Audiomedia III card that is the bane of my existence. The software I run ranges from simple destructive editors like SoundEdit 16v2.1 to more complex things like Digital Performer 2.7 and Ioniser. My keyboards are two ancient Korg DSS-1 sampler-synthesizers from 1986 and a Yamaha CS2x synthesizer from 1999. The Korgs are pretty weak as samplers- each of them only has 256k of RAM. But they have very strong filters and built in delays, and a huge pool of samples I've procured or made myself, so they have a number of good uses. The CS2x is a fun synth. It's not very powerful, but it can make some seriously deranged sounds, perfectly amenable to being chewed up and spat out by the computer.

With this array of outdated computers and cheap synthesizers, I put together "Keraunograph". The following is blow by blow of each track. You can now get your own copy through creativesynth.com! No muss no fuss no waiting for Henry to get his ass down to the Post Office. All for you, my dear readers.

Cricket- I wanted to start the CD off with a boisterous fanfare. I developed a number of samples of howling feedback guitar, and then softer more ambient, organ like tones that fed in underneath it all. For the main sound, I modified a "rock guitar" patch on my CS2x, mostly by turning up the feedback and distortion to 11, and then dumping it into a reverb and echo tank. Once recorded, I put everything

backwards and added a touch of reverb. Crickets are small noisy creatures. There are none in San Francisco, and I miss going to sleep with them chirping in the background.

Seventeen Years - is an ode to the cicadas that present themselves every 17 years. When I first came up with the basic sound in my CS2x, (it's an LFO nightmare) I knew I had to do something with this. I sampled a series of passes into my computer, and then manipulated the sound by echoing it, giving it reverb, then reversing it, and then giving it more echo and reverb. Again. San Francisco has no bug population to speak of, so I was inspired by my memories of cicadas. I remember attending a poetry reading once during a cicada infestation. You couldn't even hear the poetry, and the backyard looked like a miniature Jonestown. I was impressed.

The Vagrant Plain - this was done with my two DSS-1 Samplers and the CS2x. The rumbling and silky tones are the DSS-1s and the high pitched organ-like tones are the CS2x. I was inspired to make this piece after spending an afternoon wandering the streets of San Francisco and seeing all the homeless people collect in front of luxury condominiums. It was a Vagrant Plain.

Variation #1 is one of a dozen or so extemporaneous works on the CS2x that were multitracked and run through a series of filters. The basic sound is one of a piano. Variations 1 and 3 are my favourite of the lot. #1 is very light - a good break between the Vagrant Plain and The Tower.

The Tower is based on the tarot card, The Tower, also known as The Tower Struck Down. In light of what happened on September 11, 2001, this piece strikes me as nearly prophetic. I just had this image in my mind of buildings collapsing. I saw them collapsing into themselves- imploding. This piece is an extremely violent piece- there are parts of it where I'm literally pummeling the keyboard in a jagged asymmetric rhythm. This piece was almost entirely performed on my DSS-1 sampler-synths. There are many things I don't like about the recording itself - some of it is badly distorted- but the strength of the performance and the intensity of the playing is such that it forms a major part of this record.

The next piece, Europa, grew out of some patches I developed on the CS2x. The intricacy on this was getting the LFOs, echo, and my own playing to all work together in an interesting way, where my actions on the keyboard would jive with the settings in a way that it brought out interesting effects in the setting, and the settings would play off of my playing. For the sake of continuity, I fed in some light legato tones. To me, this piece is essentially transitory, and gives a feeling of transition. This piece is a hinge between all that came before The Tower, and everything that comes after.



Tibet was performed on my two DSS-1 samplers, using a variety of samples, the most prominent being Tibetan Singing Bells, synthetic choir, organ, and chimes. All of it, multitracked into one dense and appealing sound. I'm rather fond of this piece. It's not the most adventurous thing I've done, but I always find it exciting listening. It's always giving me something. I spent just over a year in a Zen Buddhist Center back in the 1980s. It was a turning point in my life and this piece expresses some of the feelings I had back then, and the strength, beauty, and wisdom my Buddhist studies have provided me over the years.

Variation #3 is another work based in piano samples. Like all the other pieces on this CD, the idea is to create textures rather than melodies or chord patterns. The particular mental/spiritual texture I was working on was a kind of soaring- a sense of flying and freedom. I played the samplers and synthesizer's piano samples into a delay system which I had turned up almost all the way to 11. The idea was the echo of the echo of echoes would create a shimmering sustenance of sound, and through these cascades I would play arpeggios, cluster chords, and similar efforts. Oddly enough, Variation #3 is performable and is very much of a prelude to Sonata.

Sonata is another keystone to the CD. It starts with a Very Very long crescendo. Like Variation #3, it's based in piano samples. But this time, they are heavily processed. This piece starts as a long and brooding effort. I wanted it to build, slowly, and eventually come to a swirling extended crescendo. The settings on the synth are such that the velocity on the keyboard is directly tied to the Resonance Filter and the Low Pass Filter. By gently pressing the keys down, quickly but softly, the sound builds into a gentle background roar. Much of the playing is done with fists and elbows- broad swaths of sounds building on top of itself. Finally, I just start pummeling the keyboard up and down and up and down and up and down, quickly- in beat with the echo, or playing off the beat of the echo- using the side of my palm, closed fists, open hands, closed fists, open hands smearing the keys beneath me, swimming. The music builds up around me in an ecstatic roar, and then I let it slow down and then, more gently, letting the filters clamp down and the entire thing fading into a sweet echo, feeding into itself, and then building it into one final shining crescendo that fades into the distance.

Gerund grew out of a number of disparate sounds and samples. There's a bit more in there than what one notices on first listening. I had a feeling of this piece being something more than it is, and less than it is, hence the title. The emotions behind this piece are disconnected. It was performed on the DSS1 and the CS2x.

I wanted to end the CD with a piece that "brings it all together" but in a way that leaves everything undone. I cooked up "A Mode of Thinking" with the DSS1. It's basically a couple of Organ patches heavily processed and echoed, and then the whole thing was reversed and revered. My only regret was that I didn't get a cleaner recording of it. When I first recorded it, I was very pleased with the results, but it was so noisy, I had to do a lot of filtering in Ioniser and Raygun to get it to sound even halfway listenable. The results are still rather noisy, but in a very inviting way.

In conclusion, making Keraunograph was a major exercise in my inter-disciplinary art. It has a musical component, but it also has a painterly and calligraphic hand made component as well as references to traditions like Printmaking. I'm an integrated artist- I do it all, and I do it as an integrated inter-disciplinary system. The deepest points are of a spiritual nature, that is the gift from me to you. By procuring "Keraunograph" you acquire the manifested object of such immanent forces- form and content embedded in one another in the very facture of the work.

Next, I am working on Keraunograph's successor, codenamed K2. It'll be similar, but Very Different.