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FOREIGN OBJECTS AND THE ART OF INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects upon the practice-based research of its author and collaborators by examining aspects of musical performance and representation in two recording projects. The first of these identifies a research problem in the recorded communication of an 'acousmatic' performance piece. The second project examines the recording of classical piano repertoire in alternate interpretations: one as 'authentic', the other as a highly manipulated work which progresses the investigation of the representation problem through multiple recording techniques and 'DSP orchestration' in post-production. The paper concludes that this then offers a promising route for audiences to experience and reinterpret the music by interrupting their spontaneous assumptions about the recordings.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses two recording projects recently produced under the auspices of the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (QCRC). These activities represent ongoing collaborations between musicians located in the Centre, aiming to develop the idea that artistic practice might be better understood through unpacking its research processes:

The contemporary academic climate creates room to redefine the process leading to performance in terms of creative research. In this process, the musician is a researcher . . . He [sic] consults a vast database of information, partly external in scores, books, colleagues, and other sources, but largely internalised in the form of an 'aural library' created by many years of practice and experience. This research determines the choices the musician finally makes. In other words: the performance . . . represents the outcome of the research. The aim of these projects is to make an important step in making the choices . . . and the processes underlying them explicit, and in that way increasing our understanding of the creative process as a whole. (QCRC, 2005)

In this case the performances are those recorded, manipulated and represented by the author in collaboration with the performers in two album productions: *Foreign Objects* (performed and composed by Vanessa Tomlinson and Erik Griswald, aka 'Clocked Out Duo') and *Interpreting a Century Later: Ground-breaking piano music of 1908-1909* (performed by Stephen Emmerson). This paper briefly examines some key issues relating to such representation in the first work, then moves on to more closely examine a number of ways in which the second work is subsequently approached, developed and positioned. Along the way, audio excerpts are provided where relevant. The final section of the paper discusses the implications for ongoing research and presents an overview of the findings thus far.

2. FOREIGN OBJECTS

In 2008, percussionist Dr Vanessa Tomlinson came to me with some ideas for the development of compositions and performances by herself and pianist partner Erik Griswald. The new music would be rehearsed and recorded in the QCRC's IMERSD studios, to be immediately followed by (also recording) a concert premier of the works in the Conservatorium's Ian Hangar Recital Hall. Both sets of recordings were then to be edited and compiled into a final album production. While the project did not begin life as a reflective research piece, it did provide some pivotal insights which led to the development of the second Emmerson project.

The *Foreign Objects* (2008) album includes a core set of six tracks which pay homage to two giants of contemporary music: Terry Riley (the master of expanded space) and Morton Feldman (the master of intricate patterns). The final results present arrangements, edits and integrated sound productions that combine live and studio performance environments where the musicians extend the sound landscape of the keyboard through prepared piano to the world of 'found object' percussion. From the program notes: "Mixing bowls meld into cardboard preparations, roofing tiles into buzzing screws, toy piano into miniature bells" – at least, this is the artistic aim.

Yet in most of the final recorded pieces (*Foreign Objects* 1-6), any distinction between the performance and the representation is tacit. Recordings tend to present familiar instrumentation, timbres and rhythms, and similarly to many popular music and jazz productions, are likely invisible as interpretative, virtual artworks to the non-specialist listener. For example, popular music may have an expected structural form (eg: A-B-A-B-C), style of vocal interpretation, lyric content, harmony and sound production genre. Also with jazz: the head, the solos, the role of the instruments and so on. Familiarity with assumed forms makes it easy to believe that recordings 'are' music, or more accurately, displace 'musicking' (Small, 1998) in the widest sense of the word where the record listener tends to 'fill in the gaps' (Dahl, 2007).

However, in one of the album tracks 'Lavender Mist', this analogy breaks down. Here Tomlinson uses ropes tied to a piano leg to move over and play various scattered glass, china, metal and wooden objects on the floor. Griswald accompanies on prepared piano and improvises by watching Tomlinson's body movements and listens to sounds. And in turn she responds to his sounds in an iterative musical process. In live performance the piece was possibly the highlight of all the music, with audible gasps coming from the audience at times, and being heard and responded to by the performers. This seemed to present a 'complete' work – with the bodies, the performance and stage craft, the interaction by performers

with and through the audience. By contrast, once the recording is made and the performers leave the room (concert hall or studio), one is left with only sound, its meaning completely transformed. It simply sounds like 10 minutes of slapping and odd noises: with little form, hooks, structure, melody, arrangement or reference points. With the performer's bodies removed, the piece lacks conventional meaning and is left as a somewhat incomplete audio remnant.



Figure 1: *Lavender Mist* – Clocked Out Duo (play [lavender_mist_excerpt.mp4](#)).

In an interview Tomlinson commented that “this project just didn’t lend itself quite as well to that [traditional recording approaches] . . . in this particular instance I think we are looking at a more creative mix” (2008). She sees this like “scoring the sea bed”, examining fragments of bric-a-brac on the floor, uncovering (by striking) different objects – perhaps aiming to present an ‘acousmatic’ experience of sound, ie: where “a curtain has been lowered between . . . constituent sounds and their previous existence in the world . . . eliminat[ing their] literal qualities; the listener spontaneously detaches the sound from its source or cause (Hamilton, 2003, p. 358).

Here though, performance and improvisation (cause) do take priority over source. Therefore the problem arises: how do we reconceptualise the piece for a fixed audio recording? Perhaps ‘zooming in’, alternately recording dry, ambient, working different treatments on each of the various scattered objects on the floor. However, despite our best efforts and re-working the technical set-up, we could achieve little audio separation and/or treatment with limited microphone positioning because otherwise, Tomlinson would not be able to physically access and play this ‘instrument’.

It was these issues of representation that led to discussion with colleague and classical pianist Stephen Emmerson who had also been engaged with similar matters in an earlier project, *Around A Rondo* (2007) where he extensively details interpretations of Mozart’s intentions for the score through audio visual and written analyses of other musician’s approaches as well as those of his own. We decided that perhaps a new project should begin where the Clocked Out project ends: in this case, to take forward issues of representation in the recording and production of classical piano repertoire.

3. PIANO MUSIC, A CENTURY ON

A series of important works came up in a concert performed by Emmerson in October 2008. The compositions dated from 1908, regarded as a landmark in the history of European Modernism with a number of the 20th century’s most remarkable composers finding their distinctive voice around that time via seminal works for solo piano. These include Alban Berg’s *Sonata Op. 1*, Arnold Schönberg’s 3 *Piano Pieces Op. 11* and Béla Bartók’s *Bagatelles Op. 6*. This challenging repertoire requires extensive mechanical rehearsal and intellectual preparation by the pianist in order to bring both virtuosic performance and a depth of meaning to the works.

The concert was recorded in order to review the performances and to inform the research design of how the underlying emotional contexts might be exaggerated through further sound recording and production processes. Given the complexity and overall length of the repertoire at around 80 minutes, the project would be staged in a series of undertakings in order to refine the methodology and common language necessary for a cohesive outcome. A series of studio recording techniques were then trialled and the early results of these technical and aesthetic schema were applied to some of the Bartók works and presented to a conference audience (live in studio) along with a following research paper (Draper & Emmerson, 2009) as part of the developmental process.

4. THE ART OF INTERPRETATION

To recap for a moment: ever since the invention of sound recording and the phonograph there has been much debate about the notion of ‘authenticity’ in these relatively new, time-fixed representations of music (for example, Benjamin 1968 [1936], Gould, 1966; Adorno 1975; Hamilton, 2003). Quality classical music recordings became highly sought-after by audiophiles for a few decades or so, as well as a reference point for dynamics, timbre, spatiality etc. – supposedly to represent the *Real Thing*. Yet, if one attends any orchestral concert or walks around amongst the orchestra decks in rehearsal, it is clear that however high quality a recording (audio or video), it is nothing at all like the ‘real thing’. The hair on the back of one’s arms and neck literally stands up in response to a 50 foot wide collaborative, 80-person musical instrument that can play with vastly more dynamic range and timbral subtlety than any recording can ever hope to capture.

In this project the authors wanted to pick up on these ideas based on the premise that a recording is not ‘music’ in itself, rather, may be a complex virtual artefact in which the creators’ art of interpretation may enhance, exaggerate and manipulate the work through deliberate interference: drawing upon analysis and reflection as well as historical and interdisciplinary perspectives, while still leaving open the possibility for reflexive improvisation in post-production. Rather than continue directly on from the heavily weighted documentation of the earlier *Around a Rondo* project, here it was agreed that two albums would be produced: a ‘before and after’ effect, one album as the ‘authentic’ traditional approach to piano recordings, the other a highly stylised and interpretive work. The double CD set would be accompanied by a small booklet outlining some of the key themes and considerations.

On authenticity

In December 2008 the Conservatorium's Steinway grand piano and Concert Theatre were used to record all of the works over a period of five days. Primarily, this served to support Emmerson's capacity to artistically respond to the venue (rather than be recorded in a controlled but less performer-friendly studio space). The piano was tracked using some 16 microphones spaced at varying positions throughout the hall or attached above and below the piano – all of which enabled varying sounds or 'perspectives' to be recorded for later evaluation. Many variants of performances were recorded, some as complete takes, some according to specific bar numbers, and others as multi-track recordings where the left and right hand parts were recorded separately in overdubs. Following these recording sessions, in January 2009 a lengthy process of editing was undertaken, choosing just which tracks, parts and performances would be compiled together as a final working session, as shown in the Figure below:



Figure 2: All recordings, compiled.

The horizontal axis of Figure 2 in fact shows a traditional process that occurs in many professional classical music recordings, that is: many takes are edited together in an attempt to create the illusion of a 'perfect' performance. Here shown as the Berg (first block), the Schönberg pieces (second block), and finally the Bartók Bagatelles (third block). 'Authenticity' is far from it, rather, what is essential is the way in which the artists assemble and offer such hopeful projections to their record listener audiences.

The 'horizontal' album

What we termed 'the horizontal album' was produced as the first of a two CD set. Despite all of the microphones and acoustical representations, the final outcome was based on i) the fidelity of one close microphone pair using a Digital Signal Processing (DSP) reverb plug-in; and ii) the artistic decisions made in the horizontal editing domain. Figure 3 approach applies throughout the album:



Figure 3: From Schönberg's *3 Piano Pieces Op. 11*, Piano Piece 1 (play [piano piece 1 horizontal.mp3](#)).

The 'vertical' album

Moving on from the horizontal assembly of best edits, we turned to the vertical layers. While we started with 16 microphones, many recordings were rejected for aesthetic and/or technical reasons, leaving four sets of stereo pairs (eight microphones) as shown in Figure 4:



Figure 4: Schönberg's Piano Piece 1, all tracks.

These can be briefly described down the vertical axis as: i) primary 'classic' large diaphragm pair; ii) intimate close microphones over the piano hammers; iii) Pressure Zone microphones (PZMs) attached under the soundboard for bright, rich harmonic content; and iv) a wide, highly ambient MS pair placed some 15 meters out into the hall.

We started the project with a somewhat 'Gouldian' conception (Gould, 1966) that the interpretations might be modelled simply by editing various microphone placements to highlight the insights we wanted to represent. However, this primary sonic palette proved to be surprisingly limited and so we increasingly drew upon modern popular music production techniques including the automation of DSP plug-ins for equalisation, pitch, reverberation, stereo field, distortion and compression. This led to us to an approach which we now describe as 'DSP orchestration', as shown in Figure 5 below:



Figure 5: Piano Piece 1 – all edits and DSP automation.

The Figure shows firstly how the various audio recordings have been edited in blocks that broadly correspond to different sections of the score: some bars are presented as 'natural' recordings, while others may abruptly change to

alternately distant ambient or close and intimate sounds. Overall though, the automation lines indicate how this particular Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) (ProTools) is used to 'score' the changing sounds of a solo piano recording. The movements up and down automate various effects to closely follow various attributes of the performance, sometimes at a note-to-note level. For example, the reverberation may be raised dramatically on specific chords to highlight a certain drama in the harmony and/or dynamics at that point. In other places, gentle transitions from one sound stage to another may be applied in order to draw in the listener's close attention, sometimes to set up for another key point in the piece. One overall example is provided here in the working draft of Schönberg's Piano Piece 1:



Figure 6: The 'vertical' mix of Piano Piece 1 (play [piano piece 1 vertical.mp4](#)).

5. SO WHAT?

At the time of writing the albums are still a work in progress, often delayed by academic responsibilities in the teaching semester. However, such imposed delays appear to be working in the best interests of the project. To date, the first drafts of the Schönberg and the Bartók pieces have been completed and are in the process of circulating for peer review. This then will feed back into our thinking as we move to final mastering of the albums for an end-2009 release.

Thus far the 'horizontal' recordings attract a largely positive but predictable response, given the familiar sound stage for Emmerson's virtuosity and the difficult beauty of the music. In stark contrast however, initial reactions to the 'vertical' album have been uniformly strong: sometimes outraged that we should interfere in such ways against the 'Viennese tradition', or alternately, that listeners are so enthralled that they rewind, discuss, and listen again to uncover more meaning. Andy Hamilton offers that "... sounds that have particular associations or importance for us as human beings cannot be experienced acousmatically, because the associative or significant content is too great" (2003, p. 358). Yet here we find that some are willing to make the conceptual leap and that our early approaches to DSP orchestration are beginning to offer a promising route for audiences to experience and reinterpret classical music recordings as virtual artworks in their own right – where we interrupt production conventions and otherwise spontaneous assumptions.

Returning to the 'Lavender Mist' piece from the *Foreign Objects* album which led us to this point: Tomlinson spoke

of "scoring the sea bed", uncovering strange objects and making sense of them, playing with them, making music from them. While perhaps this particular piece could never really be fully realised other than by Clocked Out Duo in live performance, here then in the piano works we believe we have evolved some of these ideas to fruition. By bringing such seminal works into the 21st century and reflecting on the past using contemporary technologies and techniques in explicit ways, we have aimed to uncover fragments and insights into the music as 'foreign objects' which have not been explored before. Moreover, in documenting these creative processes in an ongoing way, we hope to continue to contribute to the understanding of artistic practice as research within the contemporary academic landscape.

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