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Materialisation of fixed media music

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Summary

This dissertation examines the public presentation of fixed media electroacoustic music and investigates the performative capacities which are involved in materialising such music in order to shed light on the question of why the public presentation of fixed media compositions is actually the only way to fully experience this music. While electroacoustic music *production* has been the main focus of academic work in this area in recent decades, less attention has been given to its public presentation. This dissertation therefore reflects on what performing means in the context of fixed media music, where prefabricated music is presented through loudspeakers in a concert venue.

The dissertation consists of a written part in three chapters, alongside an audiovisual part for video and multichannel sound track. It is not intended that one of these should be an illustration of or a commentary on the other, but that both carry equal weight and importance as outputs of this research. Chapter 1 of the written part discusses the idiosyncratic features of fixed media music, and explores the interconnections between composing process and performance practice. It considers various manifestations of performative agency in the process of making and presenting such music, suggesting that the composing and performing processes may be considered as components of a single continuum. In this chapter I also underscore the importance of public presentations of fixed media music, exploring how the absence of music production activities on stage (such as playing an instrument or singing) elevates the awareness of the corporeality of the listening bodies of the audience in the here and now of the concert situation, which accounts for a quality of liveness. Such a perspective shifts the focus from the (alleged) fixity of the medium towards the diversity and wealth of the listening experiences that it can engender.

Chapter 2 discusses the concert situation of fixed media music in relation to the concept of *atmosphere*. I mainly draw on the work of the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who formulates atmosphere as a new approach to aesthetics. For Böhme, atmosphere has an *in-between* status, being neither a subjective and psychological phenomenon, nor a completely objective quality of things and the environment. In this light, the experience of music is shaped holistically through a synergy between the various elements (or 'atmosphere generators') which participate in the concert situation. For instance, the role of lighting and peripheral vision is discussed in the context of the *acousmatic situation*, where the cause of sounds is concealed or occluded by the electroacoustic medium. This new perspective suggests that the ontological status of a composition is an actualisation which takes place in an atmosphere, rather than having been definitively completed once its sound files have reached their final form in the studio.

Through my own practice as a composer and performer of fixed media music, in chapter 3 I discuss various practical issues around composing fixed media music and presenting it in public. The role of space as a musical parameter, and its importance in composing and performing music in general and in fixed media music in particular, is discussed by proposing the concept of *spatial polyphony*, where spatiality can introduce a new dimension in fabricating and experiencing polyphonic texture through the organisation of simultaneous musical events in space, which are (analogously to the traditional definition of polyphony) both perceptually discrete and structurally connected. This in turn motivates the deployment of a multichannel sound system in a more musical manner while developing the musical materials, rather than the

spatial aspect being something added at the end of the composing process. Subsequently, I propose a concept of *post-mix* as a practical and performative approach towards composing and performing fixed media music, where composing in higher number of channels than that to be used in the performance allows for more flexibility in adapting a piece of fixed media music to various circumstances. Through a case study, I demonstrate how post-mixing can lend itself to the generation of various different sonic results, while still preserving the identity of the composition. In this third chapter, I also examine alternative 'non-loudspeaker' sound sources for projecting electroacoustic sounds, and how they can shape the musical material. In my *Broken Ensemble* project, I utilise broken instruments in combination with transducers as loudspeakers to materialise sounds in space. Finally I discuss the activities of Azimuth, an initiative founded by myself and two colleagues, as a platform for presenting and promoting multichannel electroacoustic music. The experiences with Azimuth have enabled me to engage with many of the questions that emerged in the course of this research project, and to put into practice its concepts and findings.

The audiovisual component of my dissertation explores the subject matter of my research through the affordances of the audiovisual medium. It includes elements such as interviews with some prominent practitioners in the field and documentation of their approach in presenting fixed media music, as well as more abstract and 'atmospheric' visual elements accompanied by a multichannel soundtrack. Through mixing the actual concert presentation of fixed media music and documentary elements, I set out to give an experience of listening to fixed media music while demonstrating various concert situations and atmospheres. I illuminate diverse approaches of presenting such music publicly, and demonstrate the process of preparation and engaging in dialogues with other practitioners. The audiovisual format thus offers more creative possibilities for self-reflection, so that the result is both a multichannel composition in itself and a poetic interrogation of that medium.

More generally, the research has yielded valuable insights into the nature and potential of thinking about fixed media music in terms of performativity and of the audience's involvement in active perception, especially through the concept of atmosphere. These insights have in turn informed the evolving concepts that form an important focus of my compositional work, such as spatial polyphony and post-mix. They also have a more general relevance to the theoretical and practical investigation of multichannel fixed media music and its possibilities, which, it is hoped, will form a meaningful contribution to the discussion of this still young area of compositional and technical thinking and practice. Moreover, the audiovisual component of this dissertation will hopefully open up a new path in artistic research by showcasing its affordances, specifically in the field of music.