

laptop music: unstable musicianship strategy

“The role of the laptop in artistic production has become ubiquitous: it records, transmits, receives, creates, edits, effects, and performs; it is mobile, fast, and light. For the audio-artist, experimental electronic musician, video-producer, or visual artist working in new media, the laptop is increasingly becoming indispensable device.”

(van Veen 2002)

This is a “quick and dirty” summary of non-authorative exploration of the terrain of conditions for creative and technological practices in the light of five activities that a musician conducts with help of general purpose processing device connected to digital networks.

Research

The information age represents an era when, among others, the knowledge that *needs* dissemination *will* be disseminated. As never before, an individual with a personal computer and Internet connection has access to body of knowledge previously unimagined. Despite of Internet explosion being largely a consequence of its privatization, the meme of ‘information wants to be free’ never left the building. Thanks to numerous individuals who continuously publish and communicate their inventions, papers, documentation and explorations on the Internet, and campaign for liberties like free software and free speech, a netizen can now learn almost without limitations, and for her, indeed, information overload is an obligatory experience.

Composition

The freeing sounds by mid-century composers opened a door not only for free compositions, but also for free composers. The re-questioning of art brought new types of artists. By introducing indeterminacy, composers gave performers power to compose, and by using machines musical performer's role became different. Music-making has become possible for anyone with an interest in bouncing samples around in *trackers*, manipulating sounds and sequencing them or perhaps leaving them to random triggering by customised patches. Musicians grew increasing interest in maths, programming and algorithms, to create new varied compositional methods. “Composition is inscribed in the permanent fragility of meaning after the disappearance of usage and exchange. It is neither a wish nor anxiety, but the future contained in the history of the economy and in the predictive reality of music.” (Atalli 1985)

Innovation

The advent of *general purpose processing device* – a personal computer – created a free space for creation of musical tools, compositional software, experimental synthesis and dsp plugins. It created plateaus open to re-appropriation of code, programming routines and experimental patches, with help of ‘intelligent’ software that enables creation of new applications. The composer is free to create her own versions of tools, customised for composition or performance. The instruments morph and switch at fingertips at virtually lightning speed.

Performance

With its mobility, laptop frees the composer, the performer, the band, from bulk of synthesisers, pianos, drums, rack of samplers and effect units, and sends her – the *technomad* – to perform, sometimes motionless to challenge the aura of the spectacle, sometimes immersed into the ocean of her own sound, like it would be a true *gibsonian* cyberspace of avatars, and perhaps indeed the network traffic from the venue’s open wireless network is used as data for control information within the digital patches. The glowing of LCD screens illuminate her concentration, and reveal nothing more than a hint at interface with buttons, sliders and numbers. Or perhaps a black screen with a command line is projected onto the wall demonstrating a custom built music performance tool. Performance as exploration of technology.

Distribution

Using the Net as a network for free distribution of creative works through various protocols and services enabled musician to find her audience and offered possibility to listener to find her music. Music is liberated from its physical media, entering the cyberconsciousness only to re-enter the free flow of appropriation, exchange and redefined referencing. Instant virtual publishing bypasses the middle-man, the manufacturer, distributor and seller, to spread the non-exclusive sound in a non-exclusive way. Even ‘the exclusive music’ – the protected and guarded – is almost militantly liberated by force-and-rip, as in a battle for air, reinstating the right to listen by throwing ripped digital data into the sea of binary bits and bytes disseminated by tcp/ip protocol to be put to seemingly primary use: ensemeling¹ the musical minds: “*Let loose the echoes of difference. They need no guidance, nor control nor mastery or strict prescription, but space and time to plat out their differing echoes*” (Veen 2002)

1 Tobias C. van Veen’s concept of sonic meme.

Laptop music is an un-generalized, un-patterned and non-uniform cultural phenomenon, a product of rhizomatic conditions, a musical practice, an attitude, almost state of mind, consciously or unconsciously redefining the techno-cultural sound scape. It is *a new mode of musicianship: fusing self-research, composition, innovation, performance and distribution in a single technological device connected to digital networks.*

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