

Other Minds Festival: OM 19: Panel Discussion and Concert 1 (Feb. 28, 2014), 8 of 9



Identifier

OMF.2014.02.28.c2.H

Description

The first concert of the 19th Other Minds Festival of New Music (OM 19) was held on February 28, 2014 in the newly inaugurated SFJazz Center in San Francisco. With a bit of the old, the new, and the old made new again, the concert included three eclectic compositions by composer Mark Applebaum: one featuring synchronized hand gestures combined with electronically processed vocalizations, another aleatoric piece for instrumental ensemble and projected graphic score, and an installation that was part sound sculpture and part unique electronic instrument called the Mouseketier. These amazing electro-acoustic pieces were followed by two works by the oft overlooked composer of new music, Joseph Byrd. Composed in the early 1960s, “Water Music” and “Animals” explore the potential of percussion music, be it with traditional instruments paired with prerecorded tape, or prepared piano in combination with a string quartet. After an intermission the concert then concludes with a selection of purely electronic and computer music works. John Bischoff employs a laptop augmented by, first, physical objects, and then, an analog circuit, in his two recent compositions, “Audio Combine” and “Surface Effect.” Following this, Donald Buchla, whose name is synonymous with early analog synthesizers, presents the U. S. premiere of “Drop By Drop,” which also featured his wife Nannick on piano equipped with a Piano Bar digital interface, all accompanying a video by Silvia Matheus.

The event started as usual with a panel discussion featuring the evening’s composers, moderated by Charles Amirkhonian. We hear Donald Buchla somewhat reluctantly talk about his own contribution to the technology of electronic music while generously praising those of other pioneers. Also revealed is a curious admission of Mark Applebaum’s that he no longer enjoys music as he use to. Joseph Byrd regales the audience with tales of the avant-garde music community in New York City in the early 1960s, while John Bischoff describes some of the thinking behind his works. The concert proper then begins with:

Aphasia

Conceived originally for singer and two-channel tape, “Aphasia” was commissioned by the GRM, Paris and

composed for virtuoso singer Nicholas Isherwood. The tape, an idiosyncratic explosion of warped and mangled sounds, is made up exclusively of vocal samples, all provided by Isherwood and subsequently transformed digitally. Against the backdrop of this audio narrative, the singer performs an elaborate set of hand gestures, an assiduously choreographed sign language of sorts. Each gesture is fastidiously synchronized to the tape in tight rhythmic coordination. The eccentricity of the hand gestures is perhaps upstaged only by the observation that the singer, however extraordinary, produces no sound in concert. (In fact, the role of the “singer” may be taken by any performer of suitably enthusiastic inclination and conviction.) In that regard Aphasia may be the first piece in the vocal canon that can be performed even when the singer has laryngitis.

The Metaphysics of Notation

“The Metaphysics of Notation” is a 12-panel, 72-foot wide pictographic score. The various glyphs were hand-drawn using pens, straight edges, drafting templates, and French curves. Commissioned by the Cantor Art Center at Stanford University, the original work was displayed at the museum for one year during 2009–2010. It was perceived as visual art during most of the week; on Fridays at noon, however, weekly realizations were performed by various local and international musicians, ranging from soloists to large ensembles, acoustic and electronic instruments alike, who interpreted the score according to their own musical acumen. No verbal or written instructions are provided by the composer. An animated version of the score, a scrolling display, will be presented in this concert. As in the museum version, players are charged with the task of inventing a personal assignation of symbols to musical sounds. On this basis a sonic realization, one that problematizes the issue of authorship, is performed in concert. Although seemingly divergent from European common practice notation, Metaphysics shares with it an important commonality: the composer in every era demands fidelity, not exactitude.

Mouseketier Praxis

“Mouseketier Praxis” is an improvisation for the Mouseketier, an original instrument built in the summer of 2001. The Mouseketier is the most recent electroacoustic sound-sculpture in a lineage that begins in 1990 with the Mousetrap, and subsequently includes the Mini-Mouse, the Duplex Mausphon, the Midi-Mouse, six Micro Mice (constructed for the Paul Drescher Ensemble), and the KinderMaus (built for my daughter’s elementary school). The Mouseketier consists of three amplified soundboards’ pink, blue, and yellow triangles with piezo contact pickups, arranged as tiers. In addition to its three principal pickups are five that work as switches to trigger external processes or computer functions. Mounted on the soundboards (the three tiers) are junk, hardware, and found objects (combs, squeaky wheels, threaded rods, doorstops, nails, springs, AstroTurf, ratchets, strings stretched through pulleys, twisted bronze braising rod, and, of course, mousetraps) that are played with chopsticks, plectrums, knitting needles, a violin bow, and wind-up toys. The resulting sounds are modified with a tangle of external digital and analog signal processors. The instrument sounds great, but it is intended equally for its visual allure. Annoyed by the transportation and set-up challenges associated with the behemoth Mousetrap, I built the Mouseketier as a kind of travel model. Not only does it set up in minutes (instead of hours), its flight case, meeting the airline specifications, was designed first. Thanks go to my wife Joan for contributing the Mouseketier’s basic architecture and name.

Water Music

Joseph Byrd wrote “Water Music” (1963) after he began work at Capitol Records, where he had access to multi-track recording equipment. Commissioned by and dedicated to percussionist Max Neuhaus, Water Music consists of a pre-recorded tape of electronic sounds, and percussion instruments to be performed live. After an introduction of rolling gongs, there are three sections of the work that are delineated by different electronic sounds, which the composer describes broadly as “rumbles,” “tinkles,” and “clanks.” Byrd selected the percussion instruments, large gongs, high marimba, and tuned cowbells (Swiss Almglocken), to resemble the electronic sounds on the tape. The percussionist is asked to select from among the notated music of each section, which indicates relative durations, based on the “quality and/or mood” of what is heard on the tape at any given moment. Whether the live music is in accord with or in contrast to the recorded sounds is left to the

discretion of the performer.

—From Eric Smigel’s liner notes for New World Records release Joseph Byrd: NYC 1960–1963

Animals

“Animals” (1961) was written for a solo prepared piano to be accompanied by an animated drone played by a group of six string or percussion players who each sound a single pitch throughout the entire work. The score indicates preparations for a collection of thirteen pitches, subsets of which appear within specific timeframes. Each of the ten staff systems is equal to one minute, with the duration of notated events to be determined by approximate spatial relationships. Although the performers are instructed to play an “even and continuous” pulse, the specific order and rhythm of the musical figures are indeterminate. Dynamics are very soft throughout and there are no accents, so the harmonically static music is devoid of dramatic points of arrival. Instead, there is an undulating texture of constant activity, with articulations by the soloist occasionally surfacing and submerging. Complex polyrhythms emerge from the overlapping of multiple patterns, similar to the cyclic temporal structures of Indonesian gamelan.

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Audio Combine

“Audio Combine” employs four amplified objects as the performed input. As objects are activated one at a time, the resulting impulse sounds and resonances are colorized and recycled in fragmented form based on the timing patterns of their initial occurrence. As more sounds are made, more layers of fragmentation are generated on top of one another. One can think of the piece as the real-time construction of a sonic collage whose precise juxtapositions are always unique to each performance. As the collage gains momentum, synthetic tones and clusters shadow the fragments and eventually overtake them. For this performance the sonic objects consist of a toy chime, a music box, a detuned ukulele, and a hand drum.

Surface Effect

“Surface Effect” features inventive animation and stage lighting combined with analog electronic sounds digitally controlled by computer laptop. It is a masterful combination of the electrified resonance of old-time electronics and the digital precision of modern computers.

Drop by Drop

The score for “Drop by Drop” is, in fact, a video created by Don Buchla in collaboration with Bay Area video maker Silvia Matheus. Some of the footage is reminiscent of a conceptual art film (a dripping faucet) and some of it of a PBS travelogue (powerful nature footage of wildlife and a massive waterfall). In between, lots of water flows under the bridge, providing the performers with suggestions to trigger their improvised responses. Don Buchla performs on a Buchla 200 E analog synthesizer, made in 2003 as an update to the 200, released in 1971. His invention, the Piano Bar, sits on the acoustic piano keyboard slightly higher than the black keys, played by Nannick Buchla. The Piano Bar registers impulses for each of the 88 keys, allowing the player to add to the acoustic output of the acoustic piano various other sounds that are triggered simultaneously with the depression of each key. The work was premiered in Mexico City in 2012, was performed in Vancouver in 2013 and will be receiving its U.S. premiere at Other Minds 19.

[Notes taken from Concert Program Guide]

Musical Selections

Surface Effect, for laptop and analog circuit (2011) (9:28) / John Bischoff

Artists

Other Minds Festival (features)

Bischoff, John (features)