

Thoughts on Field Recording as a Catalyst for Improvised Concert Music

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January, 2004

Abstract: This paper describes a process for generating improvisational structures in concert music pieces for acoustic instrumental ensembles through the practice and analysis of field recording. In this paper I define and introduce the concept, illustrate the process by discussing two examples from my work, and provide thoughts for critique and further exploration of the concept. It is my hope that this will serve as an initial examination, and provide a roadmap for continuing investigation and refinement of the concept in my future work.

Introduction

“Today walking across Revelle campus, a motorcycle forms a chord with the Central Utilities building. How to represent, express the spacial quality of that chord? At what point did it become a chord rather than two separate sources? There was a fusion. What happened to the chord?” (Oliveros 1984)

In recent years, my work as a composer and sound artist has moved away from both note-writing for instrumentalists, and rigorous control and form of musical materials, to music that is more about the process of textural sculpture and structured improvisation. In particular, my interest in the domain of free improvisation and the practice of field recording has resulted in not only the gravitation towards electronic music, but also towards operating as both composer and performer. In that context, I have taken great interest in field recording not only as an end in itself—that is, presenting work that is about finding and presenting interesting spaces with little or no re-contextualization—but as a process involving the “hunting and gathering” of materials with which to compose, manipulate, sculpt, slice, and mimic both in controlled studio environments, and in the context of live improvisation.

To that end, I have found myself attracted to sound artists and performers who have, in their work, created soundscapes which in many ways reflect some of the same

kinds of “sound states” that I find interesting in everyday “natural” soundscapes, whether those sounds are created with electronics or acoustic instruments or objects. Artists such as Christina Kubisch, whose installation “Uber die Stille” from 1997 includes sounds piped into the space through drainpipes in the floor, derived from the sounds of various pieces of office technology, such as dot-matrix printers, hard drives, and computer fan noises (Kubisch 2000); David Dunn’s piece “Madrigal” (1980), a performance piece for seven vocalists/reciters and two-channel audio tape, which combines an outdoor field recording with improvised vocal lines of quietly articulated phonemes, notated in the International Phonetic Alphabet (Dunn 2001); and Ralf L. Wehowsky’s (RLW) “REFRIG*#1:4” (1992), an installation of several refrigerators and guitar amps installed in the center of the space on a “stage”, all turned on and humming in the space (Wehowsky 1999). These pieces all deal with bringing sounds from the everyday world into spaces where they can be observed, rearticulated, and exposed; which of course is part of the long-standing tradition of *musique concrète*. These are ideas that have resonated with me for a long time, and have found their way into my work in a variety of forms, whether I’m working in the studio or performing in an improvised context.

I began wondering what it would be like to purposefully articulate a field recording with acoustic instruments, within a concert music setting. That is, what if I could write a string quartet in which the group played a field recording of a construction site in the woods recorded from a distance of 100 yards? Or an orchestra piece in which the orchestra plays a field recording of a traffic jam on the San Mateo Bridge (outside of San Francisco) recorded from a boat in the bay? Would this be interesting to hear? Would it even be possible?

There is nothing new about wanting to mimic the sounds of a real-world environment in concert music settings, whether in the form of the flowing piano accompaniment in Schubert’s art-song “Die Forelle”, depicting the bubbling waters of a mountain stream; or the bombast of bass drum, timpani, and thundersheets in Hovhaness’ “Mount St. Helens Symphony” (No. 50). But what I was interested in doing was explicitly articulating a field recording with instruments, giving each instrumentalist one or more roles which are derived from a sonic component of an actual field recording.

Methodology

In developing a reasonable methodology for creating these pieces, I have considered two very different approaches: a controlled approach, and a free approach. A controlled approach is the more rigorous and less interesting approach in my view, since it requires an exacting compositional process and a precise prescription for performance. With this approach, I would analyze the field recording, determine exactly which pitches, sonorities, rhythms, and timbres exist, and attempt to notate them in a precise way. This would require not only a tremendous exercise in notating and anticipating very specific sounds through an extreme amount of control of extended technique, but it would also require extremely advanced players, and would probably not be much fun to perform. It seems antithetical to the nature of the sound being mimicked, which in my mind is closer to a sonic meditation in chaos than it is a world controlled by tight mathematical parameters. Finally, a controlled approach is also less attractive to me because of my own personal aversion to extreme composer control of musical materials. I am more interested in finding ways for the performer to contribute creatively to the process of music-making that go beyond the athletics of musical technique.

Therefore, I have chosen a free approach, which is to simply use my ears to find the interesting components of the field recording, and describe them to the performers in a way that allows them the freedom to imagine and execute them musically and efficiently. For example, in the score for “IFR0203-undering” (described below), the sharp, beeping quality of the Australian “bellbird”, which is prominent in a field recording I made in a wildlife refuge northeast of Melbourne, is described to the performers (piccolo and violin) as a series of sharp, staccato articulations of a high E, sometimes a 1/4-tone sharp or flat, played randomly and frequently throughout the composition.

Revealing the Source

Despite the fact that I have chosen a free approach in describing the sound and giving parameters for interpretation and improvisation, I am not interested in describing the sound by revealing the nature of the field recording. I could, for example, include a copy of the field recording in the score and indicate something like the following: “This piece is based on a field recording made in a roller-skating rink in Las Vegas. A copy of this recording is included. Please listen to this recording, and be aware of it as you perform this piece. Each part in the score is designed to articulate a component from this recording.” Etcetera. And in fact, this information could also be revealed to the audience.

However, I think that this would be a devastating mistake. In fact, contrary to other practices in field recording I have been and continue to be involved in, and to those practices which composers like Hildegard Westerkamp (Westerkamp 1999) and Barry Truax (Truax 2002) discuss, I am not interested in evoking a “sense of place” with this work. I am simply interested in evoking a unique improvised soundscape; a composition which is derived from and inspired by a field recording, and which allows for a kind of open indulgence in floating space, rather than strictly measured time. I am, in a sense, interested in a hyper-schizophonic (Schafer 1977) experience that results in a unique, and idiomatic, piece of music.

This is not to say that I wish to hide the source, but I do not wish to give it any kind of significance, particularly to the audience. My hope is that these pieces will not be heard as field recordings, but as instrumental, improvised soundscapes. In some cases the pieces may sound very similar to the field recordings from which they are derived, and in other cases, perhaps, they will sound very different.

Examples

Though this paper may seem to articulate a process that is well formed and applied, it is a young idea that has only manifested itself in two pieces so far, only one of which I have actually heard performed. I would like briefly discuss the first two pieces in this series of compositions I am envisioning, and discuss what I have learned from the process so far.

IFR0103-shelter. The first piece, entitled “IFR0103-shelter”, is by far the simplest manifestation of the idea. The source field recording for this piece is a recording of rainfall from inside of a “shelter”, which happened to be the front porch of my house in Troy, NY. In this recording there were two “components” which I abstracted for performance. The first was the composite sound of rain outside of the shelter, made up of many statistical droplets of rain hitting various surfaces near and far. The second was a more localized, rhythmic, and regularized sound of various channels of dripping water from the roof of the shelter onto hard surfaces directly in front of the shelter, which generated interesting polyrhythms.

I assigned these two components to two groups of sound-makers, one of the groups being the audience, and the other a group of four percussionist playing matching sets of egg-shakers, surrounding the space performance space in four corners. The score is graphical, and simply indicates that each percussionist is to play a rhythmic pattern at any tempo at a designated time. All timings in the score are approximate and improvised. The audience part is simply performed throughout, and involves each audience member lightly patting their thighs with their hands at any tempo, resulting in a sound that roughly resembles falling rain.

This piece is very simple on the surface, but it yields a sonic environment in the concert hall in which the audience becomes integral, and in which each person’s individual position results in a unique experience.

IFR0203-undering. The second piece in the series, entitled “IFR0203-undering”, is based on the aforementioned field recording of the Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary outside of Melbourne, Australia. Specifically, this field recording features the pervasive singing of bellbirds, several other bird and animal sounds, children’s voices, distant traffic noises, and the sound of an airplane passing overhead.

The piece is scored for piccolo, clarinet, violin, viola, piano, and percussion. I broke the field recording down into five basic components, from which I created basic vocabularies and distributed them among the instrumentalists, as follows:

- Bellbirds [piccolo, piano, violin]
- Other Bird Sounds – intermittent [clarinet]
- Ambient Rustlings [percussion, piano, cello]
- Children/Voices [clarinet, percussion (voice), piano (voice)]
- Airplane [cello]

Again, the score is graphical, and the timings between sections are variable and improvised. In addition to a graphical score, each instrumentalist also has a page with sound descriptions, introducing the sonic vocabulary they are responsible for, using both text descriptions and traditional notational keys.

Further Exploration and Conclusion

As with any concert music endeavor that involves improvisation, imprecision, and reliance on performer contribution, these experiments will be risky and perhaps may be met with some hesitation by those involved in traditional note-music performance. Therefore, I believe I will be more successful with these pieces by not treating them solely as concert music scores that retain an element of portability, although they will certainly exist in a form in which that is possible. I believe it may be more interesting and fruitful to use these as improvisational structures in a setting with players who already retain an improvisational practice, and are also willing to work with a structure. At the same time, although I am currently envisioning these pieces for small groups, I would like to eventually create a series of pieces for larger groups of players, including orchestra or symphonic band.

While at Princeton, I hope to use as many opportunities as possible to try things out within the performance contexts already established. Ultimately, I hope that this process will be revealing and fulfilling for me not only within the context of concert music production and composition, but in my own practices of improvisation and field recording.

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