LOSPERUS : AN APPROACH TO IMPROVISED SOUND PERFORMANCE

Scott Smallwood
University of Alberta
Department of Music

Stephan Moore
Brown University
Department of Music

ABSTRACT

Losperus is a performance piece by Evidence (Stephan Moore + Scott Smallwood) that uses small microphones, resonant objects and commonplace motorized devices to create a dense, evolving texture of amplified sound. Built by human caretakers into spontaneous kinetic sculptures that swiftly form, interact, and disintegrate, the true performers are the objects themselves, speaking and moving with a volition that eerily emulates animal awareness. In this paper we discuss the process of developing and performing Losperus, with examples from previous performances. We trace how this work grew out of our heavily field recording-based laptop performance practice, translating a software-based improvisational language steeped in acoustic ecology into a parallel method of musical expression realized with physical objects. We will also discuss the role that the drama of enforced entropy and the threat of disaster plays in creating the suspense and resolution of the sonic results.

1. INTRODUCTION

Losperus is a "composition" of sorts, consisting of a pre-performance practice of acquiring materials, followed by performances designed to last between 15-45 minutes, involving a sonic improvisation with oscillating fans and resonant objects. The piece begins with the collection of materials, which are found in thrift or second-hand stores, in flea markets, or on curbsides and in dumpsters. Oscillating fans are preferred, but we have also performed with electric foot massagers, partly-disassembled humidifiers, and automated tie racks. Resonant objects, usually metal or glass, are chosen for their sonic potential (tested in-store), shape and size to allow for interesting relationships to emerge. The performance begins with an empty table, equipped only with a mixer, power strips, and several small microphones. Behind us, or off to the side, is a collection of fans, objects, and tools. As we take in the sounds already existing in the space, we subtly add layers using a whirring fan or two, initially employed in the "normal" way. Gradually, we "prepare" the fans in various ways, by affixing small weights onto the blades, causing the fans to vibrate. We continue to populate the table with more fans, and objects such as metal bowls, glassware, and other materials that have sonic possibilities. The fans become actuators, and the masses of objects transform into unstable kinetic sound sculptures that dance around the table precariously, sometimes falling to the floor in a crashing heap.

Our primary role as performers is to set up these situations and let them play out, while also taking time to strategically place microphones in the evolving sculpture/instrument/organism, in order to capture and amplify the sounds, mixing them into the space. All of this is improvised, with the objects themselves guiding our process. The instruments are also the musical materials, making it possible to view this as a kind of "live coding," but enacted with acoustic objects rather than software-based sound algorithms. Over the course of the piece, the audience is able to experience the formal structure of the sound and the physical drama involved in our efforts to create these sonic structures, which often ends in failure or frustration. Each performance is unique, with the day's selected objects ensuring that each performance has many new variables.

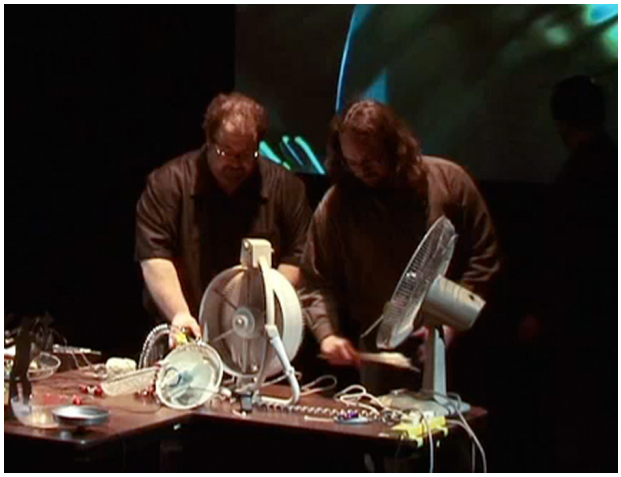

Figure 1. *Losperus* performance, with video, at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 2012.

2. HISTORY

The piece that came to be called *Losperus* was initially developed as a thought experiment between us (the authors) and a few artist colleagues, including Sarah Warren and Seth Cluett. This was at a time, roughly 2003, when there was a synergistic collective of artists living and working in Troy, NY, USA. Many of us were experimenting with new modes of creating music and sound, through the use of computers and custom software, hardware, and alternative performance paradigms. Our artistic subculture was heavily influenced by a steady influx of touring artists and

musicians as part of the improvised music scene on the East Coast. Some of the artists directly influencing the scene included the New York-based video art performance group The Poool, the "self-idiomatic" improvised music of Boston and elsewhere [1], and sound performers such as Howard Steltzer, Jason Talbot, Pauline Oliveros, Maria Chavez, Dan Deacon, and many others. As well, the advent of early live-coding, the practice of creating software "on the fly" for generating musical ideas, as promoted by musicians like Nick Collins [2], as well as Perry Cook and Ge Wang [3], was also very much in the air at the time.

In addition to general explorations in new conceptions of instruments and sound making, much of our process has been, and continues to be a practice of field recording-based laptop performance. Up until that time, most of our work as a duo had been concerned with bringing field recordings into an improvised performance context through software mixing and processing environments, and was deeply influenced by such groups as the New York Phonographers Society. The methodology we developed of sound capture, discovery, editing, and improvised performance informed our process for *Losperus*, encouraging us to realize a similar process through a relationship to physical objects. It was a way to bring our laptop process of coding and performance out into the open, giving the audience a chance to see both what was making the sound, and how we were creating and mediating it through the construction of physical "algorithms."

Losperus was named years before it became a reality. We had jokingly given our idea working titles such as "Phan," and "Oscillations," until one day our idea for the piece was described to 5-year old Devon Richard Smallwood. When asked what we should call it, he immediately came up with the name *Losperus*, a mysterious and wonderful word which immediately became the official name of the piece.

The first time we performed *Losperus* in public was August 17, 2008, in two consecutive concerts at The Stone in New York City. Since then, it has continued to be a successful performance paradigm for us. We have performed it over a dozen times across North America and in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China, in both solo and duo configurations.

3. PRINCIPAL CONCEPTS

In this section we will discuss some of the basic themes and concepts of the piece, citing examples from specific performances.

3.1. Silence and Space

A paramount issue for us in most of our work has been to develop an intimate understanding of our canvas, that is, the soundscape of the performance spaces in which we find ourselves. For *Losperus*, we explicitly place this awareness in the foreground, not only for ourselves, but also for the audience. We begin with an empty table a metaphor for the silent room, as it gives the audience a chance to hear and identify the noise floor, to see that we are listening carefully to what sound is already present, and to witness our regard for the empty workspace on which we intend to build a piece. Our presence in a state of listening meditation is built into each performance, as we typically begin by standing and listening with concentration for a few minutes.

After this preparation, we usually begin with one fan, taking the time to deliberately select it from our mysterious pile off to the side, bring it to the lit table, set it down, plug it in, and turn it on. This lone fan's thin sound fills the space, adding its layer to the still relatively silent environment.

As we continue to build the sonic texture, the solo fan is joined by another. Gradually we envelop the space with the microscopic sounds of the fans using microphones, bringing the audience into the close-up subtleties of the devices. In the case of some performances, we also provide close-up views of the process using small video cameras, projections, and video processing. Our video collaborators, which have included Benton-C Bainbridge and Jonathan Lee Marcus, work with us using small cameras to amplify the visual element into a media-rich experience. Before long, the room is humming and buzzing with activity, sometimes in multichannel configurations.

3.2. Acoustic "Live Coding"

The website toplap.org, dedicated to the practice of live coding, explains that "Live coders expose and rewire the innards of software while it generates improvised music and/or visuals. All code manipulation is projected for your pleasure."[4]. The challenge is to create a meaningful, coherent work through improvisatory coding. While this may seem to be a gimmick, it has become a real subcultural space for creating work, with listservs, blogs, performance spaces and even conferences dedicated to the practice.

Our concept of *Losperus* shares some of the values and goals of live coding, in that our performances reveal a layer of manipulation that is typically hidden from the audience. To spell out the analogy, our "coding algorithms" are "analog" and "acoustic," and readily understandable to all, since the language of what we are doing is not based on a specialized syntax that some audience members can't translate: it is all happening in front of them using everyday objects and direct physical actions, however dubious.

3.3. Acoustic Ecology

In our shared hybrid experience as phonographers and composer-improvisors, utilizing collected sounds within our performances and compositions, our connection to soundscape, listening, and sonic experience is an important part of our practice. We strive to listen to the totality of our environment at all times, in the way Pauline Oliveros describes when defining the practice of Deep Listening: "listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what one is doing." [5] Our practice of making recordings of spaces and objects in our lives and travels, of discovering and capturing the extant soundscapes of modern society, as

well as the promise of preserved natural spaces, has informed the content of our work in profound ways. In *Losperus*, this experience manifests in the values that guide each decision that we make, from the daily selection of resonant and actuating materials, to the setup and formal unfolding of the performance, to the mixing and microphone placement decisions we enact en route.

Further, in keeping with the ideas of composer, writer, and proponent of acoustic ecology Katharine Norman, we strive to use listening itself, e.g. the form that listening attention takes, as a basic material for musical composition and improvisation. [6] Through this performance medium, we are able to translate, interpret, and re-imagine the experience of our own attention, as it functions in the often noisy and fan-saturated urban environments we traverse in our daily lives.

Losperus gives us direct physical control over the circumstances of sonic experience and discovery through the creation of dramatic sonic events, but this control is very different from that exercised by a guitarist or saxophonist. The action of the motorized objects in our performances mirrors the unfolding of a field recording in real time. It has created a new way for us to improvise with sound through the creation of real-time kinetic instruments of instability, allowing the sonic and visual results of these to be sculpted into an artistic statement.

3.4. Auditory and Visual Amplification

Our interest in this project emerged not only from our love of the discovery process it engenders, which is directly related to our interest in field recording, but also from the intense experience of interacting with these objects and their sonic and visual appeal.

After our first few practice sessions, we realized that many of the sonic subtleties that so excited us would be lost to the audience without amplification. Crucial details of the sounds that were audible at close range during practice sessions became very difficult to hear at even slightly longer distances. We found ourselves wanting to apply a sonic microscope to these sounds and bring them to an audience throughout a larger hall. A natural next step was to employ durable lavaliere microphones, stereo or multichannel speaker systems, and mixing boards with easily accessible equalization functions (for controlling feedback and shaping the sound) as a way of expanding the sonic view.

A desire to accomplish the same ends visually suggested adding small cameras and projectors along with our microphones and speakers. We eventually began collaborating with video artist Benton-C Bainbridge, formerly of the Poool, who performed *Losperus* with us for a New York performance of the piece as part of Roulette's Mixology Festival in May of 2009. This experience was so successful that we implemented our own automated video projection system for a performance at the University of Alberta in 2011, when no outside video artist was available. Later, when we were invited to perform the piece in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China, in 2012, we invited another video artist, Jonathan Lee Marcus, to join us. The amplification of both small sounds and close-up views constitutes a compelling invitation for audiences into our performances.

Figure 2. Example of objects used in a *Losperus* performance.

3.5. Drama, Suspense, and Failure

After our first performance of *Losperus,* we realized that the audience had related to what we were doing in ways that went beyond the sonic experience of the piece. Even before we integrated video, we noted that audiences were being moved by the drama and suspense created by the performance. During the winter of 2009, we toured the piece in the US Midwest, performing it in Cincinnati and Oxford, Ohio; Muncie, Indiana; and in Chicago. In each location we utilized objects obtained at second-hand stores within the local community, thus solidifying an ethic that we continue today: that each performance should feature a unique set of fans and resonant objects acquired locally. This practice ensures not only a fresh performance perspective, but also a local "flavour," having acquired the objects within the locality of the performance itself.

But beyond this, the tour gave us new information about how the audience related to our performance. They saw and understood what we were trying to do, and in many cases they would see how what we were doing with the objects could potentially falter; that they might eventually collapse and break apart, often in dramatic ways. This introduced the idea of failure, and even danger, which turned out to enhance, rather than diminish our performance experiences. It highlighted a new element we had not considered: the idea that we were creating drama, albeit without a specific narrative, in a manner that paralleled the spectacle of virtuosity. Instead of creating additional performance pressure for ourselves, in feeling the need to succeed in our efforts, this approach gave us permission to fail, and fail spectacularly. The audience was allowed to see and hear the failure, and, ultimately, to accept the chaotic sounds and images produced by the failure as part of what we were trying to convey.

We quickly realized that failure could also give way to danger and fear in the audience. After all, these sound-making contraptions, in their potential failure, would be allowed to fall off the table and break, potentially shattering and exploding in front of the

audience. Breaking glass, blown speakers, electrical shorts and flung objects are all real possibilities in *Losperus*, creating a need to establish some basic safety protocols. Some of those have included a ban on fans with metal blades, a practice of using only tested, trusted plastic zip ties for securing weights to fan blades, and other precautions. Most of these protocols were worked out well before any public performances, but understanding the perceptions of our audience on this tour really helped to solidify these standards.

During a dress rehearsal in Hong Kong, we mistakenly allowed ourselves to attach a delicate cup made of thin glass to a fan with particularly rigid plastic blades in a way that caused it to shatter and spray glass shards out into the (thankfully empty) front row. This event frightened our producer, and we had to assure her that we would prevent anything like that from happening during the performance. Luckily, the performance went very smoothly, with no disasters of that sort occurring in front of a full house of enthusiastic observers and listeners.

4. THE AUDIENCE AND *LOSPERUS*

Our experience with *Losperus* has brought up interesting questions regarding the connections it makes with our mostly industrial society, and how music has changed with respect to our everyday sonic references and content. Challenges remain in terms of the work's agency, and the phenomenological stance that it posits on its audience. Since the audience sees exactly what is happening, they may lose any sense of us as "trained" performing musicians, and instead rely on what they know about the objects in question, and the possibilities we are putting in front of them. We expose our process of sound-making to the audience, with the possible consequence that they may well imagine alternative scenarios to the ones that are unfolding based on our actions, ones that *they* might have chosen and enacted. After all, we are using objects that most everyone knows well and understands, and they can see and hear the results clearly, without the mystery and mediation of electronic processing or re-composition. Here, *Losperus* opens the door to a potentially collaborative relationship with the lay-audience member – one that has not been a part of our experience in other modes of performance and composition, suggesting an interesting array of possibilities. We are interested in what happens when an audience member wonders "if this is what music is, couldn't I do it as well as you?" The classic response is the Cagean one: "Of course they could, but they don't." [7] Another answer might be to open the piece up to audience participation – an experiment we have yet to try, though we have invited audiences to try it at home! The accessibility of the work afforded by our object/instruments brings the audience into sympathy with our performance in a way that is strangely more intimate than the relationship an audience establishes with traditional instrumentalists, who are, like us, "showing it all" and yet are possessed of a virtuosity that is remote and inaccessible to most of their audience.

In addition, that same accessibility provides experiential access to the musical realm we are exploring. The sounds produced in *Losperus* are not "natural" or melodic: you can't hum the music we are making. Yet, audiences have been willing to follow our sounds and seriously consider them to be musical in large part because we are not hiding behind computer technologies to produce them. To do so would paint those sounds into processed layers of esoterica, and deny a concrete realm of imaginative agency to our audiences. To be fair, we also create music that is guilty of that crime, and we are not apologetic about it. But it has been an exhilarating experience for us to connect with audiences in this way, and to re-examine our overall practice through the lens of these encounters.

5. CONCLUSIONS

We feel that *Losperus* has resonated with our audiences in terms of encouraging sensitivity and engagement with modern society and its sonic character. At the same time, it has given our audiences behind-the-scenes access to the process of sonic exploration we undertake, while also exposing, in a visceral and immediate way, the sort of risk and potential for failure that exists in any kind of true improvisation. The potentials of this work to engage, edify, and entertain encourage us to find ways of taking these ideas further.

6. REFERENCES

[1] Bullock, Michael T. "Self Idiomatic Music: An Introduction" in *Leonardo Journal* 43(2): pp 141-144, 2010.

[2] Collins, N., McLean, A., Rohrhuber, J. & Ward, A. "Live Coding Techniques for Laptop Performance", *Organised Sound* 8(3): pp 321-30, 2003

[3] Wang G. & Cook P. "On-the-fly Programming: Using Code as an Expressive Musical Instrument", In *Proceedings of the 2004 International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME)* New York: NIME, 2004.

[4] http://www.toplap.org/about, accessed October 13, 2013

[5] http://deeplistening.org/site/content/about, accessed October 13, 2013

[6] Norman, K. "Real-world Music as Composed Listening", *A Poetry of Reality: Composing with Recorded Sound Contemporary Music Review*, vol 15 Parts 1-2, 1996

[7] Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Wesleyan University Press, 1961.