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What Is Happening To Music?

David Toop

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HAUNTED WEATHER
Music, Silence and Memory

Digital technology has changed the ways in which music is perceived, stored, distributed, mediated and created. The world of music is now a vast and complex jungle, teeming with CDs, MP3s, concerts, clubs, festivals, conferences, exhibitions, installations, websites, software programmes, scenes, ideas and competing theories. In the eye of the storm stands David Toop, shedding light on the most interesting music now being made - on laptops, in downtown bars in Tokyo, wherever he finds it.

Haunted Weather is part personal memoir and part travel journal, as well as an intensive survey of recent developments in digital technology, sonic theory and musical practice. Along the way Toop probes into the meaning of sound (and silence), offering fascinating insights into how computers can be used for improvisation. His wealth of musical knowledge provides inspiration for anyone interested in music.

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For information on David Toop: www.davidtoop.com

What is Happening to Music?

body processes

Not strictly awake, though far enough from dreamless sleep, I am lying on this bed up here in the clouds. Outside the 12th floor window of the Shinjuku New City Hotel crows chant their death songs and in my near-hypnopaedic state I float on their air streams, gliding through dust shapes of sound. Ear pressed closely to the pillow, a body infiltrated by mournful, fog-bound melody. There are two pitches, rumbling, fugitive, maybe a distant Bowhead whale lament heard from far northern seas. Lift this head from its hollow within the pillow; pass outside the room: these notes vanish as if hidden by the real.

I think of John Cage's story about his experience in a totally soundproof anechoic chamber, a place of no echoes. Drawn to silence he expected to discover exactly that. Instead, he heard two persistent noises. The engineer in charge of the anechoic chamber at Harvard University explained: the high sound was the working of Cage's nervous system, the low sound was blood pulsing through his circulation. In other words, he was hearing his own lifeforce. Perhaps a hotel technician would diagnose the melancholy notes filtering through this pillow as the chant of my own nostalgia.

Muffled by the wall next to this bed there is water running. My neighbour taking an early morning bath, or have I drifted in jet-lag reverie to the edge of a stream in the local park? Other sounds take up fleeting residence alongside these ambiguous intruders: body processes, faint murmurs of 5.00 am traffic from the street far below; sirens; trucks reversing in a cacophony of alarms and recorded vocal hysteria; air conditioning; the drone of that conveniently placed beer dispensing...
machine that squats across the corridor between the lift and my door. Some of these sounds are so peripheral they shy into nothingness, like smoke sucked into crevices of thin air, the residual traces of sound artists dreaming.

speaking glass

This was January 2000, the beginning of an arc. I was in Tokyo with my friend and colleague, Max Eastley. As it happens, Max plays an invented instrument he calls The Arc, as well as building sound sculptures that are as engagingly beautiful as they are technologically simple. We had been invited to perform a live concert and create an installation together for Sound Art – Sound As Media, an exhibition curated for the InterCommunication Center, or ICC, by Minoru Hatanaka. 'The collapse of tonal music this century has opened the way for a musical revolution,' wrote Hatanaka in the explanation of his exhibition, 'with the expansion of sound-producing materials and technological progress leading all manner of sounds to be treated as music. Forms of expression are now emerging which simply do not fit within the conventional framework of “music,” and not only in terms of experimental and computer music, but even in the area of popular music. What is happening to music?'

A showcase project run by the Japanese telephone company, NTT, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of telephone service, the ICC is a hi-tech palace of marvels located on the fourth floor of Tokyo Opera City Tower. It has been described by the art critic Toshiharu Itoh as 'a cultural facility of a sort that had never existed before, a place that would explore not only the value of future artistic culture but that also examined the issues of communication and the mind in a technological society.' In the permanent exhibition it's possible to create and evolve your own virtual organisms, be immersed in virtual reality controlled by a wooden puppet and 'converse' with virtual characters. 'Currently we could point to a whole cross-section of works intersecting with the field of media art,' Hatanaka wrote in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue. 'Indeed it would be difficult to find examples of media art which do not incorporate acoustic elements. This is certainly not unrelated to the fact that not only music, but media art in general progresses and matures in step with advances in technology. Just as our daily lives are saturated with electronic sounds, the element of sound is omnipresent in media art.'

No need to look very far to find the truth of that, though in Japan, an unusually close relationship between infrastructure media and weird sonic experiment was showing signs of strain. As recession bit deeper and deeper into Japan's institutions and their vision of what might be possible in the future, corporations began to shed their commitment to unconstrained innovation. TOA's Xebec Hall in Kobe, which I wrote about in Ocean Of Sound, had suspended its programme and NTT was about to restructure its InterCommunication Center. The belief that technological development, commerce and artistic experiment can march hand in hand, whistling a cheerful improvised tune, is fragile.

During a second trip to Tokyo that year, I visited ICC again for the opening of an exhibition called Tangible Bits: Towards Seamless Interfaces between People, Bits and Atoms. Demonstrating the on-going work of Professor Hiroshi Ishii and his Tangible Media Group at the Media Lab at MIT, the exhibition explored interface design. PingPongPlus was table tennis with a difference: a ping-pong table covered with digital water. Bounce the ball across the table and digital fish scatter in all directions. I risked a quick game. With or without digital fish, my returning still lets down my serve. The Curlybot is like a cross between a computer mouse and a contestant in Robot Wars, a cute little plastic dome that looks as if it might catapult toxic substances into your eye if you get too close. Curlybots exist to be pushed around. They remember the path they were pushed along, no matter how convoluted, and then play it back on their own initiative. Elsewhere in the room, more trade show than art exhibition, one of the inventors demonstrated his Music Bottles. Lifting the lid from one bottle I heard a jazz piano player, taking off the second lid added a double bass, removing the third completed the classic jazz trio with a drummer.

Encountered at the development stage, such gizmos can be just one twitch away from laughable. By the time I started listening to jazz in the 1960s, a revolution was in progress. Free jazz would consign anything but the very best post-bop piano trios to drinking lounges and supper clubs. Why in the year 2000 would I want to be listening to a vastly inferior version of the Ahmad Jamal Trio escaping out of three empty scent bottles? But the explanation of how this idea originated was rather poetic. Hiroshi Ishii imagined a weather report bottle for his mother, a bottle of soy sauce that would uncork a
chorus of songbirds if the weather promised to be fine, the sound of rain if showers were imminent. Snow on the way, they didn't say. "What fun it would be for his mother, who had never touched a mouse or seen a homepage on the Internet,' wrote Itsuo Sakane, Director of the International Academy of Media Arts and Science, 'to have the articles in her kitchen function as interfaces. This way of thinking is perhaps rooted in a very Asian and Japanese view of life, an ancient animistic view of nature that prizes communion with our natural surroundings.' Further possibilities for this invention were proposed: 'perfume bottles filled with poetry or wine bottles that decant stories. More practical applications might include a medicine chest full of bottles that tell the user how and when to take them and let the hospital know when they do.'

Smart glassware may or may not have a place in the future but for me, the immediate implication of this technology was musical. I don't imagine glass bottle concerts becoming any more popular than Benjamin Franklin's glass harmonica, used for one-off works by Mozart and Björg but otherwise a minor curiosity from the museum of antique audio technology. The many forms through which digital technology can distance music making from the human body broach more significant issues. I thought about Toshiharu Itoh's statement -- 'a place that would explore not only the value of future artistic culture but that also examined the issues of communication and the mind in a technological society' -- and wondered what was happening to the rest of the body. In the overheated climate of the fin de siècle cyber years, a lot of wild claims were made about the inevitability of downloaded consciousness in the post-human era, most of them written by people who spent too long gazing at their computer screens. Is human flesh already atrophied? The obsession with body image, sex, health and diet in those societies prosperous enough to fret about such things suggests not. Musical recordings triggered by disturbing a magnetic field; is that a true manifestation of animistic communion with nature or just its pale shadow? Design and lifestyle magazines are full of Zen and nature, all of which seems a superficial reaction to the loss of something profound.

How to describe it, this loss? To feel in the moment, clear, without distraction, able to allow spontaneous, unmediated experience, to shed media connectivity, emotional distance and the fragmentations of this life of multiple, complex levels, tempi, shades, duties and obsessions, if only for a fleeting moment.

**headphonics**

**anechoics**

There is a tiny anechoic chamber, soundproof and acoustically dead, built within ICC. For a time, an installation entitled World, Membrane and the Dismembered Body was one of the permanent exhibits. Created by Seiko Mikami, an artist who uses computer technology to explore information environments occupied by the human body, the piece amplified the sounds of a person's internal organs as he or she sat in the chamber, then transformed these sounds into a continuously transforming polygonal mesh. 'The ear/acoustic sense, a fragment of the exhibition visitor's body,' writes Seiko Mikami in the **ICC Concept Book**, 'serves as a circuit for unfixed data -- such as the heart tone, a psychological affect -- that is employed according to the second-to-second changes in the visitor's psychological condition. Thus, a fundamental gap is born between the body's response, when the heart is made to palpitate and undergo change in the anechoic room, and its result as expressed in the movement of sounds emitted from the body. When the body's heartbeat is thrown off course by an intervention from the outside, the desire arises to try to control the sounds that the body emits. A gap occurs between this event and the resulting desire; thus, the visitor is overcome by the feeling that a part of his/her corporeality is under erasure.' The final experience, Mikami concludes, is a feeling of being turned into a fragmented body.

A few days after the Shinjuku New City Hotel reverie I am sitting in this anechoic chamber. A panic button is close to hand, an unusual, mildly threatening precaution for a sound art installation. Exhibition curator Minoru Hatanaka closes the thick door, leaving me alone in darkness so complete that I can barely be sure I still exist. Feeling not unlike the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Premature Burial*, dreaming of 'the blackness of the absolute Night', I wait for the start of Ryoji Ikeda's *Matrix (for an anechoic room).*

I first met Ikeda in London, probably in 1994. At the time, he was pointing a Camcorder at people like me, asking us to hold forth for a few moments on silence. His preoccupation with silence had been established in 1993 by a compilation album called *Silence*, released during his tenure as audio visual producer at Spiral, the Wacoal Art Center, in Tokyo. The
contributions to this eclectic album were wide ranging: jazz pianist Paul Bley; Can member Holger Czukay; Ko Ishikawa and Tamami Tono, both performing on the Japanese bamboo mouth organ, the sho; Simon Fisher Turner and Derek Jarman; sound artist David Cunningham; Masumi Nagasawa playing John Cage's In A Landscape. With additional music by Ikeda and Yoshio Ojima, there is also a typically faltering reading by the late John Lilly from his book, The Centre of the Cyclone – An Autobiography of Inner Space, a document of the effects of taking hallucinogens in an isolation tank.

Precise, reserved and utterly focussed, Ryoji Ikeda seems an unlikely follower of Lilly's radical experiments in consciousness, what the researcher into dolphin language, neurology and interspecies communication described as metaprogramming of the biocomputer. For Lilly, persistent behavioural patterns were tape-loops or faulty recordings, habits that could be altered through rigorous explorations of the self. Perhaps there are connections between Ikeda's music and the techniques Lilly had discovered during his explorations. 'Of course, I respect John C. Lilly and what he has done,' Ryoji writes in an e-mail, 'but also I'm a bit ambivalent towards his late thoughts . . . it is sort of the same case as Stockhausen. His followers also make his excellent researches blind.'

Born in Tokyo in 1966, Ikeda is fascinated by the phenomenology of sound and time, the way in which minimal sound sources such as sine waves can precipitate dramatic physiological effects and mysterious perceptions for the listener. 'Yes, perhaps physiological aspects of human may be a part of them,' he writes, 'for me, the most important thing is their “relationship” to each other. I cannot focus and pick up only one element of them.' Matrix is the purest illustration of these interests. Listener is too meagre a word to describe the perceptual invasion of his work. My own response to being temporarily trapped in this foetal state is intense. Thick snakes crawl up my spine, circle around the inside, then outside of my cranium, constrict my abdomen. Slightly nauseated, I think of Masatoshi Naitoh's shocking photographs of Komasa Ichiza, a group of old-fashioned travelling players once based in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. Oppai san, a member of Komasa Ichiza, could thread live snakes into her mouth and then out through her nostrils. To feel the fluid physicality of sound in this way is an ambivalent pleasure, erotic in part, but also close to the sensation of submitting to a virus, hovering on the brink of fear at times, simply through being uncertain about how far the experiment will go. Surrender to it and time slows to a crawl, the air turns sticky and thick, thoughts refuse to cohere. Like an optical art for the ears, the patterns mutate with movements of the body. The matrix is rebuilt with every new audition.

Ikeda's single-minded investigation into acoustic phenomena began tentatively in 1990. “Preamble”, the introductory track on the Silence compilation was his first release. In 1994 he began working with Dumb Type, a performance group founded in 1984 from graduates of Kyoto City University of Arts. Since then his refinement of materials and method has only been interrupted by the media overload – news broadcasts, astronauts and cinema samples - of 1000 Fragments, released in 1995. The stripping away of these referential elements raises the question of why they were there in the first place. Like the work of the Finnish duo, Pan Sonic, and the young German artist, Carsten Nicolai, Ikeda's recordings have an oblique but marked relationship to techno. They may be constructed from minimalist sine tones, white noise, pure pulsation and the tiniest shavings of pure sonic materials but they still belong in some distant way to the history of disco.

This relationship has an irony to it. Disco's celebration of the body is hedonistic, flagrantly sexual, aerobic: "free your ass and the mind will follow", as funk lord George Clinton theorised it. The work of Ikeda and his contemporaries also attacks the mind body problem by asserting the materiality of sound while questioning the nature of perception. If we experience sound as a physical sensation via internal organs, skin responses and muscle tremors then the common perception of sound as an immaterial substance, absorbed through the ears but perceived mainly through mental processing, becomes uncertain. Heard at its intended volume, Ikeda's music is a total experience, a white-out of pure data. As a preface to his ICC release of a retrospective DVD, formula, he quotes architect Mies van der Rohe – 'Less is more' – and pianist David Tudor – 'More is more'. From minimalism comes excess. His work could be heard as a branch of architecture, the school of invisibility.

Matrix (for an anechoic room) is an installation that relies almost entirely on electronic technology, yet that technology is
invisible within the piece. A year after experiencing Ikeda's installation in Tokyo I saw him perform in a London concert hall. The stage was completely empty, dressed to look as neutral as possible, and Ikeda sat in dark anonymity at the mixing desk, half way up the auditorium, equipped with a laptop computer and Zip drive. The only visual element of the show (is show the best word?) was a film created by Ikeda with Shiro Takatani and Hiromasa Tomari of Dumb Type, closely synchronised to sound. Despite the absence of any performers to look at, a sell-out audience sat spellbound by the visceral effect of sound.

As the apparatus of music becomes less apparent, particularly in the digital domain, so sound becomes more completely itself, the purest manifestation of a disembodied, time based art. Freed from the distraction of ranked violinists dressed in black and white sawing at their instruments, guitarists leaping around on a stage, entire typing pools of keyboard players, choreographed dancers, drum risers, video walls and pyrotechnics, the intangible core of music, the part that makes some people close their eyes when they listen, is allowed its full power. Aside from the enticing reasons for combining music with other media - the dream of creating an overwhelming synaesthesia from mixed art forms or simply the need for some eye candy to distract from the tedium of most live music – this gain comes with some profound losses. Whether based on false assumptions or deep seated needs, the sight of musicians playing in real time, engaged in actions that have a discernible link to the sounds they are producing, makes an audience feel a warm glow of communication. The fact that this warm glow might freeze before the end of a concert doesn't detract from the persistence of that basic need.

**noise as silence**

Days after *Matrix* and my hotel reverie, still flagging from the effects of jet lag, I was persuaded to visit Gendai Heights Gallery for an event called Noise As Silence. A small art gallery, record shop, performance space and bar in the dark back street suburbs of Tokyo's Shimokitazawa district, Heights Gallery was packed by the time we arrived on a Saturday night. The performance had already started (performance is no better than show, but most of these words just don't work properly anymore). Just inside the door was Sumihisa Arima, manipulating sound through MAX software on a laptop computer. Almost hidden by the bar, at the far corner, was Akira Kosuga, controlling a loop sampler and electronic effects. Seated by the wall, to the far left of the room, was Christophe Charles on laptop, also using MAX software, and in the centre, in the spot we would normally associate with the stage area, were Shunichiro Okada, Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Carsten Nicolai. These three were crammed together in a line behind a small table, like the three monkeys who see, hear and speak no evil. In the middle, Michael von Hausswolff tweaked a mixing desk, panning an 11,000 Hertz tone around the room. On either side of him, Okada and Nicolai stroked the trackpads on their laptops.

One of the few outward indicators of difference with this technology is the presence or absence of an Apple logo on the raised lid. Musician Steve Beresford describes a performance given by three improvisers in a London club: the group sat at a table on stage, though instead of flipping up the displays of expensive laptops, they opened pizza boxes, each with half an apple glued to its lid. Acutely conscious of displaying ostentatious branding in No Logo zones, some Mac users cover the glowing Apple on their G3s and G4s with black tape or cute stickers. Otherwise, the only way to tell what kind of music programs are in use is to learn to aurally recognise the clichés of the software. But in a group improvisation involving six participants, all using electronic equipment, the importance of difference, the individual voice, is a moot point.

A traditional rock band – the Rolling Stones, say – represents a fairly simple hierarchical model: vocalist Mick Jagger sharing the top of the heap with the Tommy Hilfiger logos, the rest of the band strung out below, followed by the hired hands, bass and keyboards, then an army of production functionaries and anonymous crew members packed down into the base of a vast pyramid. Even the way the band sets up on stage follows this model: singer at the front, drummer at the back, road crew adopting that ridiculous half-crouching run that signifies invisibility when something goes wrong with a microphone or cable. There are plausible reasons for this model. Nobody wants to see the hot dog stands, merchandising franchises, accountants, riggers, ticket sellers, car park attendants and security muscle up on stage with the band, but the symbolism remains telling.

At Gendai Heights Gallery, the physical organisation, along with the musical structure, was more like a web of distributed
consciousness than a pyramid. For the audience, squashed up together with the players in amongst them and unable to identify sounds by easy visual references to saxophones or piano, the source of any given sound was ambiguous. For most people, I would guess it was unimportant. The way to enjoy this event, to build structure and meaning, was to find a location somewhere within the web, then feel the threads grow and mutate in all dimensions. This was true for the players, too. I hesitate to call them musicians because not all of them think of themselves as belonging within that category. At points of high complexity, when musicians are utterly absorbed in what they are doing, even improvisations using instruments such as double bass, trumpet and guitar can become confusing to the participants themselves. Who's doing what? Where's that coming from? As in cooking, combinations of flavour transcend simple addition. When the sound sources are electronic, using racks of analogue effects, or exclusively digital, generated from software, then the sounds will tend to bury themselves and their origins in the mix.

moving through haunted weather

Having joined the audience at Heights Gallery, initially reluctant to be there at all, I surrendered to the mix, accepting its seductive siren song, immersing myself in the oceanic. For more than forty minutes my senses felt bathed in transmissions from a distant planet. Like the slow spin of a short wave radio dial, the music slid softly through voice fog, tongues unknown, electrical radiance, hollow pulses, freak atmospheres, a tapping ghost, occult broadcasting, flickers at the edge of human audio, the munch and spittle of software scoffing on chaff. When I listen now to the CD-R document of that night a phrase from James Hamilton-Paterson's novel, *Ghosts of Manila*, creeps into my head: '... moving through haunted weather.'

Something in the sensitivity and textural variety of this exchange reminded me of improvisations by the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, a group of varying membership with the late John Stevens a constant inspirational presence at its centre. But that was thirty years ago, mostly acoustic, created on technologies of wood, metal, skin, plastic, wire, flesh and little pads of cloth. John believed that a musical instrument should be a direct extension of the human body, reaching out into physical space: breath and muscle, the dance of elbows and ankles, fingers, ears and instinct all working together in fluid motion, filling the air of a room. In 1971, when I took part in his improvisation workshops with percussionist Paul Burwell, John made us think hard about what it meant to play guitar through an amplifier or shake a wooden rattle. Both ways of playing involved devices or consequences that were one step (or a guitar lead) removed from human physicality. The seeds in a rattle collide with unpredictable volition once shaken; like all music, the physics business as much as the music business, but proportionally high in randomness. Strictly to myself, I thought so what? Giving up electric guitar in 1971 felt like fleeing the city to live in a teepee in Wales: totally unacceptable. Over time I came to realise that this apparent purism was one of John's methods for teaching us novices how to grasp and intensify the experience of being in the moment. Now I wonder, had he not succumbed to heart failure in 1994, how he would have reacted to this kind of improvisation, a new generation of players working according to his blueprint yet conjuring sounds out of virtual space with only the slightest tremor of a fingertip.

Just as I assumed the music was drawing to a close at Heights Gallery, the whole picture shifted into a different frame. So far, all of the players could be mistaken for members of the audience, their concentration on technology no different from the screen gazing you see on a train or in a café: somebody texting a secret lover; adding cereal, rice and milk to the PalmPilot shopping list; furtively perusing porno JPEGs on a laptop. They could even be me, writing this book. The melodrama of being a musician, that Slim Shady, royalty on drugs, full makeup and chain saw in broad daylight thing, was entirely absent.

The appearance of Tetsuo Furudate, plugging in his electric violin in front of the three monkeys, transformed this art-as-life scenario into something truly odd. A past collaborator with such notorious luminaries of the Japanese underground noise scene as Keiji Haino and Masami Akita, otherwise known as Merzbow, Furudate lives up to the image of a Tokyo boho with his floppy hair, long black coat and decadent demeanour. I imagine him drinking sake in the company of demi-monde Edwardians such as Arthur Machen and Austin Osman Spare. Furudate's first notes emerged from the swamp dripping with reverb, a reminder of another world, a different era. As H.P. Lovecraft might have written, "I heard afar on the moor the
faint baying of some gigantic hound.'

Feedback trembled at the edges of control, as Yurihito Watanabe tested a microphone through the mixing desk. Watanabe is a small man with long straight hair who might have been a member of Monsieur Debussy's salon, had he lived a century earlier. His voice turned out to be a plummy, operatic counter tenor, albeit untrained, a bird of vivid plumage that rose out of this forest floor of electronic abstraction, then hovered high above it, conscious that such a conspicuous display might quickly become a solo flight but determined to make a show. If those were his misgivings, they proved to be close to the truth. Most of the participants in the first phase shut down rather quickly. This withdrawal meant that those who stayed with the new direction were disengaged from an intricate web. Their location in physical and musical space grew clearer. The alarming contrast between distributed consciousness and the distinctive musical signatures of Furudate and Watanabe was more marked for being less dense, less interpenetrated than it might have been with all participants fully involved. By the end, the only survivors were violin, sporadic voice and what sounded like the snuffling of a giant cyber-dog. Sometimes sounds appear to be hemmed in by a vast, ambivalent silence, an eraser that threatens to rub out anything in its grip. This was one of those moments.

The performance ended after seventy minutes, perhaps with the faint scent of a mismatch left hanging in the air. Without any dramatic transition, Heights Gallery became a social space, the players standing up from their electronic devices to mingle cheerfully with people who had been audience members just a few minutes before. Later, some of us went to a restaurant. I talked with Furudate, though don't remember asking him his feelings about the music. That came later, as I began to appreciate the strength of my own reactions.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I had experienced a public enactment of a confrontation that had troubled me for years. Six months later I was lecturing in Saalfelden, a pretty village close to the Austrian Alps. To reach Saalfelden, first you fly to Salzburg, which means that the ghost of Mozart blips loud and strong on the tourist radar. Every summer, Saalfelden hosts a jazz and improvisation festival. I lectured on the subject I'm circumnavigating right now: the impact of digital technology on our humanistic conceptions of music and performance. After I'd finished, a Viennese DJ named Patrick Pulsinger approached me. He was enthusiastic about what I'd said in the lecture and as we chatted he handed me a white label 12” ep called “Easy To Assemble - Hard To Take Apart”.

Later that night I listened to a couple of the live concerts before going to bed. Singer Shelley Hirsch was playing in a duo with DJ Olive. Over dinner, Shelley didn't look in the best condition to play. She was wracked with period pains and clearly should have been somewhere comfortable with a hot water bottle and a handful of painkillers. As it turned out, both of these New Yorkers were magnificent. Olive cued up a succession of quietly complementary records on two decks; Shelley did her free associative thing: babbling, singing in a bewildering confusion of styles, whispering asides, acting out little dramas, using two microphones to shift spatial illusions and personae, generally bouncing off any available stimulus that struck her. She even threw a little of our dinner conversation into the pot. It was a demonstration of how to be utterly, demonstrably human yet interact beautifully with a technology that exemplifies art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Back in London I listened to “Easy To Assemble – Hard To Take Apart”. The first thing that struck me was the list of musicians, a jazz septet that included trombonist Radu Malfatti. Radu lived in London in the early 1970s, heavily involved in the free jazz and improvisation scenes of that time. Lately he has developed a different reputation, notoriety even, as a proponent of extreme minimalism. Some of his recent albums are so sparse that you assume the laser in your CD player is kaput. For a lot of people, this is going to sound like another instalment in the Carl Andre 'Tate bricks' saga, but Malfatti is reacting against verbosity in contemporary composition. As for improvisation, he argues that success on the live circuit requires an active, energetic style of playing that leads to cliché. More interested in challenging cultural expectations and developing forms that heighten awareness rather than spread uniformity, he has subtracted activity from his music to the point where almost nothing is left.

At the same time, he's a capable post-bop jazz player and that's how Pulsinger used him, along with pianist Josef Novotny and the others. The idea was to rework their acoustic music electronically, feeding their acoustic sound through Pulsinger's
computer, where it could be shaped and transformed with audio software. The output mixes both acoustic and electronic signals, giving the listener a sense of encounter between two different worlds, one of physical room spaces, real time and human interactions, the other of virtual space and digital processes. I e-mailed Patrick and he told me about his real ambition, which was to present this concept in concert. Ideally, the jazz ensemble would be on stage in a soundproof glass box. They would play but their sound wouldn't travel beyond the confines of the enclosure. Pulsinger would be outside the box with his laptop, transforming the sounds in real time. He wanted to do it, he said, but there were technical problems.

Cruel to ask so I didn't but I assume some of those problems were not unrelated to the issue of soundproofing. To make the glasshouse completely soundproof I imagine you'd have to start by making it airtight. A small airtight glass enclosure full of musicians all moving and blowing would soon get pretty stuffy. Condensation would mist the walls and ceiling until the structure took on the outward appearance of the Palm House at Kew Gardens. After a time the players would get sleepy, maybe collapse one by one over their instruments. If the concert was long enough they might even suffocate, their souls wafting away into the digital domain like those paintings of The Rapture enjoyed by born again Christians during the Ronald Reagan era. In normal circumstances this would signal the end of the evening but Patrick would still be there, plenty of sounds stored in his hard drive, more than enough to shape and transform until the police arrived.

ants hub code

September 2000: a month after Saalfelden; the city was Berlin. I had been booked to perform in an event called Quasi Amazonia, the slightly subversive adjunct to a more official German celebration of traditional music from the Amazon region. Appearing on the same bill as Silvia Ocougne and Chico Mello, who played John Cage compositions in bossa nova style, I gave the debut performance of A Journey Sideways, a project that addressed my experiences of recording Yanomami shamans in Amazonas. Our show was held in the smaller theatre at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the hall that Berliners call The Pregnant Oyster. The night I arrived in Berlin the main festival programme featured Afro-Brazilian trance music from Amapá in Brazil. The large auditorium at the house of world culture certainly represents an aspect of global culture: the architectural culture that purports to democratis concert going by redesigning the hall in which it takes place. Seats are raked on a barely perceptible incline that sweeps in a gentle wave around the stage. The platform is very low, deep and wide, the beach at the centre of the bay, and within touching distance of those audience members sitting in the front row. In this kind of hall you're supposed to feel equal to your neighbours, relaxed, informal and just a second away from becoming close personal friends with the musicians on stage.

There is a long and tortuous history of European concert promoters presenting music from regions that do not share the values embodied in concert venues designed for classical orchestras. Modern bands using electric instruments, virtuoso soloists and formalised music traditions such as Indonesian Gamelan, Hindustani Ragas and Japanese Gagaku can work tolerably well. Even if the structure and meaning of the music is only superficially understood, the power of the performance and skill of the performers is easily appreciated. The effect of transposed ceremonies that belong in secret night gatherings, seated on desert sand, or in a longhouse hidden deep in a Pacific rainforest, ranges from surreal to excruciating. Once upon a time I took my seat at this type of event full of great expectations. Now I slump down in a resigned air of cynicism and dread. Given the choice of going back alone to my hotel by the only remaining stretch of the Berlin Wall, or hearing some Brazilian trance music, I made a mistake. Anybody involved in the music industry for more than thirty years suffers excess awareness. This affliction is a type of repetitive strain injury that goes with the occupation. So as the musicians filed out on stage, drumming and dancing, my eye was drawn to the identical ironed creases in their identical shiny smocks. I thought of suitcases loading onto jumbo jets, travel irons and clothes hangers, the hopeful showbiz acumen that led one member of a distant community, or perhaps a tour agent, to suggest matching band uniforms, just like James Brown and the Famous Flames or The Beatles.

The drumming and singing began, their clarity unimpeded by the dynamic ambience of a communal living space: no babies crying, dogs barking, no night insects or generators throbbing. As with comparable situations in the past – hearing the
Ketjak monkey dance in a performance for bored package tourists in Bali or Australian Aboriginal ceremonies at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts - I can't stop thinking that this shouldn't be music solely for spectators. Exoticism and voyeurism are compounded by alienation. In all its manifestations, this problem is an adversary attacked repeatedly by every conceivable strategy during the 20th century: a few performers address ranks of passive observers in the atmosphere of a mausoleum. 'The modern concert hall is built on the assumption that a musical performance is a system of one-way communication,' wrote musicologist and educator Christopher Small in *Musicking*, 'from composer to listener through the medium of the performers. That being so, it is natural that the auditorium should be designed in such a way as to project to the listeners as strongly and as clearly as possible the sounds that the performers are making.7

As for the rhythmic patterns and repetitious vocals, they are supposed to facilitate trance states, not fashion critiques. Neither should this music be a purely performative spectacle, a 'thing' to observe. Just sitting in this everytown hall, listening in a disengaged way, dispassionately watching events unfold, my mind began to run amok. I thought about endings, how problematic they are for musicians unaccustomed to the formality of defined beginnings, appropriate duration and co-ordinated conclusions. A senior member of the group dealt with the endings problem by tapping one of the drummers on his shoulder. The second the signal came, everybody stopped abruptly. After a short pause, they began the next piece. Towards the end of the concert, one of the younger musicians invited audience members from the front rows to join them on stage. Certain incidents in this category of horror stick in my mind like pieces of unwanted chewing gum: the woman called up on stage to be a Juliet to Barry Manilow's Romeo, then presented with a video tape of her impossible dream come true; the woman inveigled into sexy dancing by the SOS Band, her ample backside crotch-bumped in front of a packed concert hall; the woman (you see a pattern here) seduced into the spotlight by Eighties soul hunk Alexander O'Neal, then serenaded and virtually dry humped on his big brass bed.

In Berlin, a woman took one brave step towards Amapá, delighted to enact the role of the sexy northern European. She was followed by a mother, cautiously swaying, her baby cradled in one arm. Finally a few men bold enough to confront their own inhibitions jumped up on the platform to dance. I slapped myself on the wrist for my malicious train of thought. The scene was rather sweet. The source of these so-called problems was traceable to my own jaundiced and contradictory views. Participation of some sort, no matter how awkward, is better than none at all; that's so long as it's not me up there. Better for people to express a physical response to the music than just sit like a bunch of Euro-stiffs at a Brahms conference. Actually, what I really thought after flirting with these positive messages was more a tumble of remorse than a limp apologia. How pallid this experience had been from the outset, how brutal the wrench that pulled the music out of its social and spiritual context and away from its climactic purpose. To see somebody fall into trance can be disturbing, shocking, like watching a time slip. Where was that disturbance, or the vigour latent in the music? Held in check, of course, by the bureaucracy, the design, the managerial tedium of contemporary concert going, by the uneasy confluence of anthropology and entertainment, by the dissonance inherent in the event, by the bogus neutrality of the environment. Should we blame the Brazilian musicians for wanting to expand their horizons and make a bit of money to take home, the festival organisers for focussing attention on a rich cultural region, the audience for indulging their pleasure in hearing the remains of an unusual musical tradition or the uniformity entrenched within such performance environments?

Like Patrick Pulsinger's unrealised ambition to encase acoustic musicians in a soundproof glass box, or the confrontation of digital and corporeal at Heights Gallery in Tokyo, this Berlin concert presented me with a symbolic encapsulation of some of the challenges now affecting live music. What remained unresolved was the reason for those challenges and the way in which live music might adapt to accommodate them. Based on my experiences as a fan, as a concert reviewer and as a performing musician, I had begun to feel that live music was anachronistic. Concerts continue to flourish, of course, but too many of them are content to be signposts to the past: musicians twenty or more years past their best, bands reformed to feed the illusory nostalgia of an audience too young to be aware of them first time around, the stubborn endurance of the pre-20th century classical repertoire, copy bands selling fakes of U2, Abba or The Doors in the absence of the originals, 'classic' jazz and rock groups recreating past eras with young substitutes depping for the dead or otherwise indisposed stars, new bands copying old bands or playing music so perfected and dominated by control systems that the audience might as well be watching DVD. As the adverts used to ask (somewhat optimistically, since this was analogue cassette tape under discussion), is it live or is it Memorex?
David Toop is a musician, composer, writer, musicologist and sound curator. He has published three books: "Rap Attack", "Ocean of Sound", and "Exotica".

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