

Reviews

[Editor's note: Selected reviews are posted on the Web at www.computermusicjournal.org (click on the Reviews tab). In some cases, they are either unpublished in the *Journal* itself or published in an abbreviated form in the *Journal*.]

Events

Missouri Experimental Sonic Arts Festival (MOXsonic)

This festival took place 5–7 March, 2020 at Hart Recital Hall, the Center for Music Technology, and the University of Central Missouri Gallery of Art and Design, Warrensburg, Missouri. For more information visit: <https://moxsonic.org/2020-schedule-of-events>.

*Reviewed by Ralph Lewis
Champaign, Illinois, USA*

During the first weekend of March 2020, the University of Central Missouri (UCM) hosted the third annual Missouri Experimental Sonic Arts Festival, otherwise known as MOXsonic. Although some participants were unable to attend due to coronavirus exposures in United States airports that resulted in canceled flights, the festival successfully presented most of its planned concerts, installations, talks, and demonstrations. Even so, the contributions of the people whose travel plans were affected, such as New Renaissance Artist Elizabeth A. Baker's performance



of Gabrielle Cerberville's "Phases," were deeply missed.

On 5 March, MOXsonic kicked off with the first of its Nightlife concerts in UCM's Gallery of Art and Design, with performances by Benjamin Penwell and Izi Austin, Brian Riordan and Jake Sentgeorge, and Daniel McKemie. Where Penwell and Austin's "Look Love, See How Each of Us Is a Wilderness" reveled in expansive, luscious stasis, "Elk Splat" by Riordan and Sentgeorge explored breaking points and collaborative moments between extended vocal techniques and live processing. I was particularly taken by how Penwell and Austin pushed each other even within the sheer musical surfaces they traversed.

McKemie's "Live Code Synthesizer Control Etude #1" used laptop and a modular synthesizer, improvising with feedback loops inspired by Pauline Oliveros's tape delay feedback setup. He presented a paper about this during the following day. Although each set was distinct, the different ways they combined elements of composition, improvisation, and experimental technology epitomized what made this year's festival exciting and suggests what the future of MOXsonic could look like.

By design, MOXsonic is not necessarily only an electronic music festival per se. Instead, it has interests that run across disciplinary boundaries. According to the festival's website (using their uppercase bolded letters): "MOXsonic focuses

on programming concert events with experimental music involving **LIVE** performance with **LIVE** interactive technologies, fixed media events, live coding, and more. Improvisers, composer/performers, and teams of composers and performers are especially welcome, as are performers who would like to present new or recent works. MOXsonic is interested in a variety of musics, installations, and research presentations. In addition to our daytime activities, there is a nightlife component where musicians can stretch out and explore longer forms while other participants socialize."

After the first night's "stretched out" explorations, MOXsonic resumed on Friday with paper presentations, a workshop by Seah, Dave Seidel's installation "Involution," and a full day of concerts. Jason Palamara and Elaine Cooney's presentation "Destructive and Inventive Instrument Development with IUPUI's DISensemble" was a particularly intriguing survey of how this unique ensemble, comprising musicians and engineers, spends each semester making new instruments from scratch and performing new works for them.

Palamara, who was present to give the talk, is a professor of music and art technology, and Cooney is a professor of electrical and computer engineering technology. Through their combined efforts, the last few years have seen their students at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) return to the ensemble more comfortable and curious about building, breaking, and modifying different software and hardware packages. Although there is much to be said for these kinds of explorations, the opportunity to dive deep into the often finicky, but fun, world of these practices in a stable, collaborative space sounded wonderful.

doi:10.1162/COMJ.r.00556
© 2021 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Seah, meanwhile, presented a workshop entitled “Body Resonance” that drew on their research in Butoh, Body Weather Laboratory, Noguchi Taiso, and Somatic Movement. As they explained to me, the goal of the workshop was “to introduce musicians to somatic movement practices, potentially opening paths to experience sound somatically (through the tissues) as opposed to intellectually or specifically through the ear.” These same ideas about sound transmission similarly arise in their work “Like Water,” which uses video of waves, enveloping low drones, and meditative live processing on stage. It may be presumptuous to insist on more of something, but I would be interested in MOXsonic or a similarly minded festival pursuing these ideas further and asking Seah to lead a recurring workshop each day of a festival as a central part of its planning.

Some of Friday’s concert highlights included works by Kennedy Dixon, Jesse Allison and Anthony Marasco, Neil Rolnick, and Eric Mandat. Dixon’s “Pretty on Paper,” a spacious, subtle work for viola and improvised electronics, showcased her skills as composer and violist, as well as a thoughtful collaborative dynamic with Kristopher Bendrick on live electronics. The audience participation work “Gravity | Density” by Allison and Marasco demonstrated a particularly successful use of mobile devices in an active manner. In addition to using an easy-to-access website that was responsive to in-the-moment handling, the realization of this intricate network of overlapping glitching CD player samples was elusive and rewarding.

Rolnick’s “Messages” for solo laptop was a tasteful celebration of his deceased wife, Wendy. Using samples of her phone messages, he delivered a beautiful, spontaneous

version of the work. I was initially unaware of the piece’s origin but was struck with Rolnick’s sense of timing throughout the performance. Later, after reading more about the meaning behind it, I have returned to this playful, loving memorial throughout this year.

Clarinetist-composer Eric Mandat’s performance of his “Before the Breath of Spring” was another quintessential MOXsonic moment. Although Mandat’s compositions are well regarded and his skills as soloist and member of the Tone Road Ramblers are well known, MOXsonic’s intersections of composition, improvisation, and live electronics perhaps allow another way to put Mandat’s longtime practices and ebullient curiosity into context. Throughout the set, he cued physical sensors to trigger manipulations of his dynamic, personal compositional expression, infused with decades of thoughtful improvisational practice, resulting in another unforgettable performance by Mandat.

Similarly, a recurring highlight of each MOXsonic festival has been a performance by the Choir Boys, a duo consisting of UCM assistant professor Jeff Kaiser on trumpet and electronics and saxophonist Andrew Pask. This year as part of the Friday Nightlife concert they performed with Len Lye’s bizarre, hand-drawn 1929 film *Tusalava*. The results were mesmerizing and disturbing. Although Kaiser and other UCM faculty maintain respectful, low profiles as they support the guest artists during MOXsonic, I was glad space was made for this because live performances by Kaiser are not to be missed.

Before proceeding, a brief disclosure: I should mention I also had a premiere during that Friday of a work entitled “MoxTube” for interactive YouTube instrument, audience

participation, and UCM’s clarinet ensemble. It features UCM assistant professor clarinetist Elisabeth Stimbert, her students, and video work by Robin Meiksins. Reviewing my own work would be preposterous, but I wanted to note how supportive the organizers of the festival and UCM’s students were as I developed this peculiar work that uses YouTube as score and instrument, and is built to encourage initial forays into sound mass and clarinet improvisation.

Saturday began with one of the most unusual events from the festival: a preview of a nearby “cave” intended for performances during future iterations of MOXsonic. In actuality, it is a human-made space from the late 1800s or early 1900s cut into rock to store commercially sold blocks of ice in the Warrensburg, Missouri, area. We were given a sort of “Cave 101” class by Kaiser as we sized up the single space’s 50-foot deep, 10-foot wide, 7-foot high area.

Kaiser instigated group improvisations with the 40 or so visitors responding en masse to Kaiser’s phonic prompting. More-adventurous vocalists found increasing comfort in the space and ran through whatever technique came to mind. The cave was not as resonant as I had assumed before the visit, but it was clear that people’s imaginations were churning heavily about musical possibilities for this newly understood place. When MOXsonic resumes in the future, artists will be able to propose projects to be performed in that space.

This last day of the festival continued with demonstrations, 5-minute videos, concerts, a workshop, and a final Nightlife concert. The morning’s *espressoAcoustic 2020* event by Kansas City Electronic Music and Arts Alliance (KcEMA) was a particularly refreshing and relaxing morning doppelganger of the Nightlife events. KcEMA’s members including Marble

(Meagan Conley and Alberto Racanti), John J. Pearce, Seth Davis, and Spencer Perkins took turns performing, making coffee, and engaging attendees. After a day of concerts and presentations, it was a helpful change to be at a lower-impact event where people had the time to talk and share about their work in a looser way.

Some highlights from Saturday's concerts included Christina F. Butera's "Oda a La Vanguardia," Jay Afrisando's "The Night Is Dark and Full of Roarers," and Wombat's "Generation 3.1." Butera's work, sung exquisitely by soprano Jessica Salley, combined strong, bravura singing of a playful text with a rich, interactive electronic setting. Although "Oda" is enjoyable on its own, I am curious to explore more of Butera's *Suite for the Passerby*, the collection of soloist and interactive electronic works from which *Oda* comes. Intriguingly, the larger work was originally designed for a performance at the Donald J. Hall Sculpture Park in Kansas City.

Afrisando's "The Night Is Dark and Full of Roarers" is an improvised work that live-processes his performances of *saluang*, *sarunai*, and *bansi* in an 8-channel setup. Alternating between playing the different instruments and manipulating them in *SuperCollider*, Afrisando found careful, expressive opportunities that brought the sometimes disparate, percolating moments together.

Wombat, comprising saxophonist Justin K. Comer, electric guitarist Carlos Cotallo Solares, and double bassist Will Yager, delivered a patient, noisy performance with "Generations 3.1." Against an extended audio playback of grainy, distorted long tones, each performer expertly navigated contorted, grinding sounds.

With MOXsonic centering on live, experimental music (and what these words can mean in the 21st century), I particularly hope it continues to

build relationships with improvisers, artists whose practices are less easily quantified, and the scholars who study their work. MOXsonic is the rare festival that is free to apply to and free to attend, with no selling of tickets at the door. It has a distinct chance to connect in long-term ways with musicians who routinely attend conferences, as well as with more skeptical or uncomfortable artists, who may not realize how welcoming the space is to their work. Kaiser, Stimpert, Eric Honour, and Travis Garrison bring an exceptional warmth and interest in community to the festival. This is a space to try things—to share experimental musical or artistic practices that do not necessarily fit in with the electroacoustic festival or music conference mold. I cannot wait to hear what is programmed at the next MOXsonic festival.

Recordings

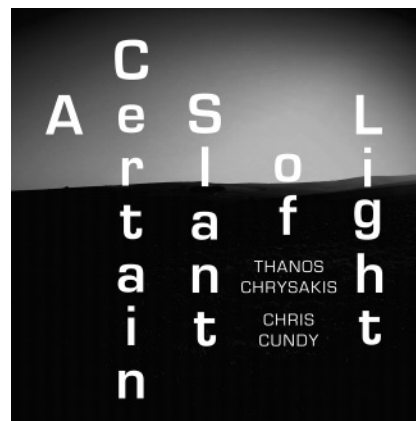
Thanos Chrysakis and Chris Cundy: *A Certain Slant Of Light*

Compact disc, 2020, UK TRRN 1443, available from Aural Terrains, www.auralterrains.com/.

*Reviewed by Seth Rozanoff
Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

In *A Certain Slant of Light* (2020), Thanos Chrysakis and Chris Cundy successfully explore a distinctive sonic territory that stems from the duo's strategy of mixing digital

doi:10.1162/COMJ.r.00555
© 2021 Massachusetts Institute of Technology



and analog electronic instrumental sources. This electroacoustic duo performs on a variety of instruments and sources. Chrysakis performs on laptop, synthesizers, a vintage reel-to-reel tape deck, and a Watkins Copicat. Cundy performs on bass clarinet, megaphone, voice changer, zither, and amplified objects. This distinctive instrumentation has great potential for experimenting with various timbral combinations, and can exploit a full sonic range in one fell swoop. This sonic palette provides performance possibilities that have the potential for continually developing the musical landscape.

Chrysakis and Cundy do not seem to follow any rigid format when setting up their performances beforehand. Instead, they meet each other in the moment, intuitively matching one another, and encouraging musical development. Both players are ready to work together in search of a composite sonic identity. They carefully listen to one another when introducing their materials during performance. This also allows for musical adjustments that are made on the spot.

A Certain Slant of Light, a compact disc released on the Aural Terrains label, was recorded in a studio in Cheltenham, England. Throughout

the work's five-part form the listener hears how Chrysakis and Cundy build an electroacoustic picture, communicating a musical narrative within this composite structure. The introductory dialogue between the players might be heard as a succession of noisy utterances, but Chrysakis and Cundy work toward producing a distinctive counterpoint between the delicate, more carefully placed layers, and more weighty sonic events.

It is interesting to note the role of the bass clarinet as it relates to the group's aesthetic as well. First, neither player uses live sampling in his setup. In Cundy's performance, he makes his own adjustments, demonstrating either leading or passive musical behaviors. In Part I, he seems to primarily match other electronic timbres, forging his performance based on dense, or metallic soundstreams. Part I also seems to rotate through a series of timbral combinations, exploring subtle inflections of noise-infused elements. The duo presents an intuitive approach to improvising, demonstrating spontaneous, individual exploration. Chrysakis performs on a laptop using the Max programming environment, two custom built synthesizers, including a Korg MS-20, and the Watkins Copicat tape machine mentioned earlier. Cundy uses a voice changer, a megaphone, and other effects with his bass clarinet, as well as a collection of stones and glassware used to play a zither.

The duo's performance method suggests an environmental approach, wherein their setup spontaneously interacts to a given environment. Cundy mentions this regarding the voice changer: "The voice changer is a toy originally marketed as 'Mr. Alien,' but adapted for a studio setting with an output and an extended microphone for choosing close or wide placements. Its basic function is as a pitch shifter and distortion pick-

up and in this situation it was used on the whole room. It's good at picking up unintended and incidental noises that happen as we move around and operate."

It is this approach to timbre that expands the players' musical potential and sonic range—picking up the unintended. Regarding the application of electronic synthesis, it sounds as if the players had coordinated their performance with each other, never intending to overpower the other, or create any imbalance. An important aspect of their way of working is a willingness to learn how to produce music together. In situations such as these, the players embrace uncertainty.

Upon listening to Part II one notices an ambient drone in the background. It can be viewed as a starting point for developing smaller, fluid fragments, whose sequences emerge at varying distances relative to a lightly pulsing convolution layer. The approach heard here can also be described as a type of electronic ornamentation, pitted against a focused, noise layer. Initially, I asked Chrysakis whether noise played a central role here. His response was: "we are not noise artists. We see sound in a continuum from noise to pure clear pitch and what exists in between."

Another related aspect of texture occurring throughout *A Certain Slant of Light* is what I would call the metallic, a characteristic timbre. Chrysakis views this quality as assisting in "filling out" a particular range. The noises that Chrysakis and Cundy are interested in relate to their concern with the natural environmental, or even something hidden. Chrysakis adds another comment regarding noise: "You can see it also as a metaphor (of noise) trying to obscure the signal (the music). To create more entropy while we try to work around

it, transform it, and bring into the foreground some musical sense."

The solo bass clarinet stream heard at the end of Part II sets up the listener for a much more intense opening in Part III, wherein the duo is noticeably quite active, performing a wide range of sonic shapes. Here, they create not only large performative gestures, but more-refined and, perhaps, less-complex sound activity, in which each person plays off of. At around four minutes into Part III the form changes noticeably. Each new section, afterward, begins with materials that sound like microthemes. Overall, Part III offers the listener a more complex musical narrative, demonstrating a succession of varied musical behaviors.

Part IV begins with less momentum compared with Part III. Here, the duo creates microtextures, further extending the lighter-weight layers. This movement builds density, while still maintaining a deliberate pace forward. Within some of these broader textures, one hears an improvisation with metals as well. As heard throughout the other movements, Part IV also demonstrates a fluid relationship between the players with respect to timing and its relationship to the electronics. Their performance is clearly guided by active listening. This activity seems to have also assisted in managing the contrast between the more treated, and untreated sounds, which creates a unified character. At times the duo superimposes contrasting textures of live instrumental and electronic sources.

In Part V, the bass clarinet line initially expands to layering a performance around a nature-based sonic theme. The role of these core environmental sounds provides a background accompaniment. As such, this movement can be characterized as continually developing due to the robust

sonic dialogue between the players; they play with congruent levels of energy with one another. Although this movement may demonstrate a limited form of interaction, the players seem capable of producing almost any musical figuration that is woven into the sonic landscape.

Ultimately, the musical gestures heard throughout this work constitute a performance that can be heard as free-form experimentation. However, *A Certain Slant of Light* develops a focused level of control to manage a range of musical transitions. Overall, I sense that this work has developed a

type of attitude toward crafting sound, mixing clean sounds with other, degraded audio fragments, alongside integrating the use of the surrounding environment. The duo demonstrates a distinctive compositional approach within this electronic performance medium.