Reviews

[Editor’s note: Selected reviews are posted on the Web at http://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 In some cases, they are either unpublished in the Journal itself or published in an abbreviated form in the Journal.]

Recordings

Lefteris Papadimitriou: Objects


Reviewed by Seth Rozanoff
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

In Objects (2020), Lefteris Papadimitriou has constructed a suite of works, each one demonstrating its own distinctive organizational strategy and range of digital abstractions. Each “object” in this series (there are seven) sustains a particular range of sonic layers. A studio process—forming connections between sounds that share similar gestural identities—determines the mixture of these layers. Papadimitriou’s studio process involves forming connections between sounds that share similar gestural identities—determines the mixture of these layers. Papadimitriou’s layers stem either from one type of morphology, or are the result of a more-complex arrangement of samples. Sometimes his materials are generated using modular sampling techniques from the Reaktor program. Papadimitriou also uses studio synthesis techniques, such as granulation, filtering, and time stretching. Where pitch qualities arise, he transforms these source materials.

The issue of the sound layer is a core compositional element, and Papadimitriou has carefully prepared these layers before constructing his tracks. Software such as Max and Soundgrain have been used in this process as well. Papadimitriou describes one aspect of his preparation: “I could have a clock generate a pulse, modulate this pulse through tempo envelopes, divide it and send it to different devices (in Reaktor).” He creates different states in Reaktor, which he moves through his system using a sequencer.

Papadimitriou also experimented with similar approaches when controlling samplers and other effects chains, to generate sequences of new sounds. Ultimately, the resulting layers serve as the building blocks of Papadimitriou’s sound world. These mult timbral arrangements could be viewed as the sonic origins, or objects, of each track. Although fixed, his process of stratifying layers, with its idiosyncratic organizational strategy in the studio, offers the listener a highly dynamic sonic result. According to Papadimitriou, that result, as it relates to form, could also be characterized as a mini-sonata for electronic sounds.

Formal concepts in Objects are rooted in a previous work called “Sonatas for Electronic Sounds”. According to the composer: “The idea was to compose three different large pieces that can be played together in a loop.” Eventually, Papadimitriou created a large-scale installation from that work called Fluid Forms. The formal sections in this work contain what can be described as musical DNA, which were used in the current iteration of Objects. Overall, Papadimitriou’s careful organization of gesture, as well as construction of a range of abstractions and timbral relationships, led to each track’s distinctive sonic narrative.

Papadimitriou describes his work as “a series of defined musical objects that may continually baffle the listener about their source and musical purpose.” It is this type of abstraction, or attempt at disguising causality, that is at the core of his compositional approach. For example, in “Object 1,” which opens deceptively, there is a long pause or silence at the beginning that plays with the listener’s expectations. The opening utterances are significant, containing enough sonic material to produce substantive music that is developed further. This type of action seems deliberate. However, as I listen to Objects, I am drawn to the distinctive pacing and the timing of its sound events.

This version of Objects initially stems from a four-channel configuration that Papadimitriou views as “a counterpoint of sounds from different speakers.” The stereo version seems to highlight form more clearly: Specifically, an additional overarch ing layer formed from the perceived physicality of designed sounds and the development of their digital transformations. Here are some of the sound sources used to construct Objects: acoustic guitar played with drum brushes, mandolin with broken strings, a portable radio, bass drum, wind chimes, piano, a radiator, and...
other devices commonly found in the home played with percussion mallets.

Papadimitriou’s work and planning in the studio, with this source material, has not only led to the design of formal compositional strategies, but also suggests a total aesthetic. Although Papadimitriou seems to have formal outlines for his Objects, he also included subjective decisions in the studio, effectively enriching his wide range of materials.

Revisiting “Object 1,” within the first 30 seconds of the track, one hears a small range of abstractions alluding to objects that could have been struck or strummed. These performative elements are highlighted. Within these seemingly compact sonic clusters, sometimes within mixtures, pitch references can be clearly heard. Overall, there is a dense stratification of processed layers, concealing the causality of sources.

In “Object 2,” the listener may notice a set of miniature machines. Glass-like sounds are introduced here as well. The narrative formed alludes to a relationship between these imaginary machines and materials that they could potentially have produced. “Object 2” also highlights the use of the wind chimes, to create a dream-like environment. Other aspects highlighted in this track are percussive attacks, stemming from the use of mallets. In “Object 3,” the sonic textures reference a materiality that is granular in density. There is an elastic quality that results in an expansive, sonic space. Overall, the abstracted sound objects in this track demonstrate an expanded, larger scale.

In “Object 4,” Papadimitriou has successfully drawn out more of the metallic qualities in his source material. There is also a sense that the objects heard demonstrate their own patterns of movement in space. With all of the processing used, the objects inside this space simulate play between one another. This emerges from a new relationship formed between Papadimitriou’s enhanced objects and their sonic trajectories. This track also mirrors a visual choreography of new patterns within the sonic frame provided.

In “Object 5,” Papadimitriou seems to have distilled plucking and scraping actions, referencing his stringed sources. As the piece progresses, the notion of physicality related to those sounds is blurred. This ambiguity embodies Papadimitriou’s initial concept of affecting the listener’s perception of sources. In this track, he also exploits silence in a manner that extends his composite gestures. For me, a game narrative emerges in this track, and although mixed for stereo listening, the listener hears spatial depth within an ensemble of sources. As such, even with a range of electronic techniques utilized, this track produces an illusion of a multidimensional listening space.

“Object 6” contains more of a musical narrative, among a rich juxtaposition of source material. We do not just hear a merger of these sounds, but a countertop among the layers formed from these materials. There is a dialogue present that features musical relationships without directly referencing pitch material. With its distinctive orchestration, this track particularly demonstrates a sonata-like form as well.

“Object 7” begins with a prominent silence, beginning similarly to the first movement. This movement could be viewed as a finale, with a heightened sense of performativity, connecting phrases and further solidifying larger gestures. Here, Papadimitriou doesn’t juxtapose source materials in an extreme way, but does still include an imaginative variety of them. The use of brushes is prevalent in this track as well.

These works contain a highly complex set of variations, demonstrating many subtle musical events and timbral changes. Papadimitriou has clearly taken great care in shaping his layers, offering the listener the widest possible range of color and density, derived from his source materials. Not only does each Object have its own narrative or poetic composition, it contains multiple objects that emerge while listening. This set of works encourages a well-rewarded and highly engaged listening experience.

Annette Vande Gorne: Illusion

Reviewed by Arian Bagheri
Pour Fallon
Lisbon, Portugal

Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On, better known as The Slave Ship (1840), is among Joseph M. W. Turner’s finest paintings, and one of the most recognizable visual artworks of the romantic movement. Fused with the painting L’etoile noire (1957), by the founder of les automatistes Paul-Emile Borduas, it greets listeners of Annette Vande Gorne’s latest acousmatic venture, Illusion, in the form of Luc Beauchemin’s cover.

doi:10.1162/COMJ_r.00572
© 2021 Massachusetts Institute of Technology