

Structure in the Dimension of Liveness and Mediation

Jeffrey M. Morris

Why live? Because some things are meaningful only when experienced live and because there are new structural relationships to explore in the area in between the live and the mediated. A performance loses its aura or authenticity [1] when recorded, and enters the realm of the hyperreal [2]. A recorded performance can be captured in great detail but only from a fixed perspective and risks being subjected to manipulation as well. What is lost lends value to liveness, but new opportunities for expression are also made possible. A focus on mediatization (the process of recording live events to be replayed at different points in time or space) can illuminate and exploit the disparity between live and mediated events. My compositional work explores ways to use mediation as a device of imitative counterpoint and formal structure, expandable to include not only sound but also visuals and liveness itself. Events are performed live, recorded, and juxtaposed with mediatized versions of themselves within a single performance, allowing for composition in terms of the tension and release between mediated and unmediated events in live performance.

TECHNOLOGY IN LIVE PERFORMANCE

The increased use of technology in live performance has provoked varied responses. Many are troubled by an apparent disparity between performative acts and the sounds resulting from them. Others give it no thought, having become accustomed to valuing only the sound, because that is all most recorded music delivers. Perhaps a new performance practice is developing with different values, or perhaps the troubling qualities of this disparity can help us reflect on our understanding of the value of live performance. In my experience performing with computers, watching others do so, and speaking with audience members about it, I have observed that it is generally disconcerting to watch straight-faced pointing-and-clicking, and it is perhaps even more troubling to watch repetitive jerking with a control interface when there is no visual clue regarding the musical results of those actions. I have experimented with pianistically ornamented gestures while performing with gamepad and Nintendo Wii Remote controllers with good (unsolicited) comments from audience members. I am not fond of adding superficial elements to a project, although informal experiments have demonstrated that they do serve some kind of function. While some like Julio d'Escrivan [3] believe that younger audiences are increasingly less troubled by such disparities and that this will soon cease to be an issue, two things are still made clear: audiences can be sensitive to the relationships between performative causes and effects, and

because of that, it is possible to exploit liveness as a distinct element of a work of art.

Philip Auslander considers mediated performance equivalent to live performance, observing that modern audiences have become desensitized to its effects [4]. This may be interpreted as one sign of a loss of humanity in transition to a posthuman era. Conversely, Steve Dixon decries the cynicism of postmodern criticism and cites an optimistic view among artists and scientists [5]. I share this optimism, but mine is not based on how many billions of Hertz, bits or flops are represented in a piece of technology. Rather, I am optimistic about the new structures and relationships that art can illuminate through new technology. I do regret the apparent widespread sacrifice of quality for the sake of (not always legal) convenience, but as an artist, I see the playing field for expression as having shifted into new territory: as technology allows humans to communicate in new ways, structure and meaning can be manifest in new dimensions of a work. Auslander describes where audiences have placed value; however, he does not offer a prescription that inhibits practicing artists from seeking new places where value might be found or created.

MEDIATED AND LIVE SOUND

When an artist expressively uses properties of a work that are increasingly overlooked by audiences, the results may further alienate listeners. Compositions by the Darmstadt school and Milton Babbitt that shifted structural importance away from pitch and toward other dimensions of music are good examples of this phenomenon and are comparable to the works I discuss below. Like those composers, I see no reason to let the natural evolution of the status quo limit the possibilities of human experience and expression. I have seen this alienation in effect even among contemporary art specialists and musicians; for example, after a performance at the International Society for Improvised Music conference, in which Eric km Clark performed on electric violin and I performed with him using a computer to mediate his signal. The sound heard through the single instrument amplifier did not always include the live violin signal. Sometimes the live violin playing only caused past violin passages to be heard. At other times there was no obvious relationship at all between Clark's actions and the sounds and silences coming from the amplifier. One observer, who was also performing at the conference, expressed discomfort with this performance: "If there's a violin there, I want to hear it."

ABSTRACT

While technological developments can replace some aspects of live performance, they have also opened a new dimension of musical structure: that of liveness and mediation, which requires live performance in order to be meaningful. Liveness itself can be used and manipulated as a distinct musical element. The author describes these concepts at work in his compositions that explore mediatization as a device of intermedial imitative counterpoint and formal structure.

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Other performers separately made similar remarks.

These comments remind me of an experiment on the PBS television show, “Newton’s Apple” [6], during which the host was offered a taste of delicious mashed potatoes served as a scoop atop an ice cream cone. The expectation of vanilla ice cream ruined any chance of appreciating the mashed potatoes. Similarly, members of my audience that came looking for meaningful relationships in only the usual places tended to see the overt mediation by the computer as a mistake or malfunction that only obstructed their experience of the performance. A more Cagean mindset, ready to appreciate anything for what it is, would more readily notice and appreciate the tension-and-release in the counterpoint between the live events and the resulting sounds (whether or not they were intentional). However, unlike the alienating properties of serial music, which challenge the limits of human pattern recognition, the effects of mediation at play here are indeed salient; they are only overlooked as a result of recent social conditioning.

The once-live can become live again when it is replayed, but it becomes a new and distinct event happening in its own moment, *Now*, but connecting with (and escalating by that reference) the *Then* in which the referent was first performed. Live sampling within an improvised performance intensifies the connections made in this way. Even in composed works, I work primarily with structuring improvised passages in order to magnify the sense of liveness and intensify the significance when those *Nows* are mediatized and manipulated. Replayed material can participate in and influence new *Nows* and be recontextualized within the new web of connections. Through such a performance, cause and effect can become twisted or reversed: the authenticity of the “real” musical idea can be passed among different reiterations of it (for example, a theme followed by variations or a climax preceded by foreshadowing copies), it can be cast outside the musical work to point to a series of events that never actually happens within the performance, or authenticity can be completely demolished. My goal is not simply to deconstruct the concept of authenticity and celebrate its demise but instead to use the establishment, distortion and reinforcement of authenticity as a new way to create and manipulate tension.

ARTISTIC INVESTIGATIONS

Early works in my investigation of mediation, titled *Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Musiker* (2005) and *Motet* (2006), are software environments for improvisation that build up imitative contrapuntal textures from live samples taken during the performance. Gamepad- and Wii Remote-based sampler instruments developed in 2006–2007 allow the computer performer to directly co-opt materials as they are played and apply them in supportive or thematic roles, lending structure and coherent development to the improvised performance.

This Is Not a Guitar (2007), six studies in mediation, embraces the electric guitar as an instrument that is necessarily mediated. In this work, the guitar’s sound is disembodied and isolated from the physical acts that cause the sound. Transformed by a series of “black boxes,” the sound is injected into one or many loudspeakers that may be any distance from the guitar and performer. Despite this disparity, the audience tended to watch the performer while listening to the speaker(s), considering them to be one seamless whole. Overall, this work explores various notions of presence and causality embedded in the work’s construction, including the hum of the amplifier as the audible-but-ignored sensation of presence. *This Is Not a Guitar* also plays with the distance between physical cause and sonic effect and stretches the bonds between what is seen and what is heard by letting the two fall out of synchrony. It presents physical events without their expected sonic results, and it presents recognizable sounds such as pitch bends and familiar riffs in the absence of the physical actions one might expect to create them. This piece uses counterpoint in the dimension of liveness and mediation to create tension and release and to aid the forward development of the music.

An extended composition for electric violin, digital piano and electronics called *Time is the substance of which I am made* (2007) [7] extends this exploration of mediation to include visual sampling. Just as in the works described above, all sonic materials come from things played during the performance, even though they are not always presented in a recognizable way. Video clips are taken of the performers during the performance and are at times presented only as abstract textures moving in relation to the music. For example, a performer’s arm or hair will often move in a way related to what is played, but not in a way that is parallel

to the music—that is, the music cannot be “read” just by watching the close-up video. While the performer’s body is not completely independent of the sound played, the relationship between sight and sound shifts among parallel, similar, contrary and oblique states in ways that result in effective intermedial counterpoints. When possible, the processed video is projected onto the performers, allowing their live motions to recombine with the mediatized visual materials. This video material is most effective when presented live, because it highlights some visual aspect of the visual counterpoint that is already embedded in the performers’ actions. It may be presented again later in a performance as a way to refer to an earlier moment, but as with the sounds, mediatized materials are only used during the performance in which they originated.

The audiovisual recording during the performance allows for the inclusion of events that are performed live but not heard until later in the performance. This is another method of slicing the sound and vision away from the performance. (It is also why a digital piano is used instead of an acoustic instrument.) The audience can see that unheard music is being played, which creates tension during the original live event. When the sound is presented later, the relationships within the work are illuminated and that tension can be resolved. The recorded sound can be played along with a video recording of that moment, presenting both the sound and the vision without the liveness of its original performance. The liveness of the original moment is highlighted through its disappearance in the mediatized version. This disparity makes the *Now* more precious.

Another technique I use in the work involves directing one performer to watch and play audibly, copying another performer who is inaudible at the time. This allows the pure distilled liveness to function as a distinct influence in the work: for example, the music heard from a violin is a sonic translation of the pianist’s performative acts. The audio recording of the silenced digital piano can be presented later in the work with some of the specialness of ordinary live performance, because it finally reveals the pianist’s “authentic” performance. Until that time, the audience has only heard the “translation” made by the violinist, which is at best a flawed version of the pianist’s performance because of the impossibility of the violinist playing exactly what the pianist played by watching without hearing.

The concert hall, as these works use it, is not obsolete. It is, however, no longer the only source of some things that we value in music (such as the skilled or expressive presentation of a melody by a uniquely talented performer), but that is not all the live venue offers. James Romig [8] makes the point that much common-practice music survives even harsh mediatization. Most such works are still recognizable even when heard as low-quality telephone ring tones, but much of Babbitt's music, in his example, gives significant structural roles to musical parameters other than pitch and rhythm that would not survive such a transformation. Too much information would be lost in the conversion to a ring tone for such a work to retain its identity. Similarly, the identities of some works—including many yet to be created—depend on the tension between liveness and mediation. The concert hall remains the only forum in which we can experience both liveness and mediation

together and through their differences explore our own human experience in new ways.

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References and Notes

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3. J. d'Esquivan, "To Sing the Body Electric: Instruments and Effort in the Performance of Electronic Music," *Contemporary Music Review* 25, No. 1–2, 181–191 (2006). Further discussion in J. Morris, "Live Sampling in Improvised Musical Performance: Three Approaches and a Discussion of Aesthetics," DMA dissertation, Univ. of North Texas, 2007, pp. 65–68.
4. P. Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 1999).
5. S. Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*

(MIT Press, 2007) pp. 154–156. In chapter 6, Dixon contrasts Auslander's view with that of P. Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), which emphasizes the ontological value of live performance.

6. I. Flatow, host, "Newton's Apple" (Twin Cities Public Television, 1983–1998).

7. The title of this work comes from J. Borges, "New Refutation of Time" (1946) in *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952*, R. Simms, trans. (Univ. of Texas, 1964) p. 187.

8. J. Romig, "Parametric Counterpoint: Babbittian Ideals in Composition and Performance," lecture at conference Milton Babbitt: A Celebration of his Life and Music (Millsaps College, 2003).

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