The articles in this on-line supplement are drawn from a symposium [1] presented in November 2011 at Wesleyan University as part of a celebration of Alvin Lucier’s work as a composer and teacher. The symposium was structured as three panels focused on his instrumental works since 1984 (Notations), his electronic works since 1965 (Processes) and his early work as a conductor, performer, and composer (Performance). A particular goal was to explore the connections between his electronic and instrumental music.

Both Nicolas Collins and Richard Lerman were careful to point to the central role of listening in Lucier’s approach to live electronic music. Typically, those pieces arose from “extra-musical” ideas (brain waves, echolocation, room resonance), a process Andrew Dewar termed “recontextualization” or “cross-domain mapping.” A crucial property of this approach is that the mappings into sound seek an immediate aural encounter with the generative idea, eschewing conventional musical structures as distractions. For example, the brain waves of Music for Solo Performer are not treated as an objet sonore for manipulation but as an immediate physical reality at the moment of performance. Consequently, each of these pieces begin from scratch as a trial-and-error process of listening, searching for a simple, clear mapping that was musical, but only on its own terms. Any recourse to conventional musical structures would be a distraction. Needless to say, the identification of such mappings was a difficult and anxiety-filled process.

Beating patterns, a central focus of many of Lucier’s instrumental works, provide an example of some of the difficulties. Acoustical beating involves the fusion of two sounds into a single sound that possesses its own rhythm (the beat frequency). Justin Yang argues that Lucier’s singular focus on beating patterns serves to detach the listening experience from historical association. He describes this effect as “prehistoric” in contrast to an ahistoric quality he attributes to the deconstructed instrumental sounds of Helmut Lachenman’s music.

In his presentation, the cellist Charles Curtis recounted his initial inability to even recognize beats, commenting that “we train ourselves [as musicians] under the other model of music as a rhetorical or pseudo-semantic system to filter out beats.” Beating patterns between spatially separated sources have a spatial character that Nicolas Collins described as lying “beyond the loudspeaker.” Anthony Burr explained how his interpretation of In Memoriam Jon Higgins required him to learn to hear beating patterns spatially while not being able to clearly distinguish the sound of his own instrument. He commented that this has allowed him to interpretively shape the total sound of the piece to a much greater extent than in most of the other contemporary music he plays. Thus, these pieces require a reconception of sound on the part of the composer, the performer and the listener. The sound of this music is not a signal being broadcast but a field being activated where frequency manifests itself as wavelength as much as pitch.

Hauke Harder introduced the term “scanning” to describe how Lucier’s electronic pieces unfold in time. Scanning may take the form of a systematic “gradual process” as in the repeated re-recordings of a text in I am Sitting in a Room, a relatively undirected physical exploration as first enacted in Vespers and found in Still and Moving Lines of Silence and Bird and
Person Dyning. Nicolas Collins emphasized the role of trust in performances of pieces such as *Music for Solo Performer* where a secondary performer enacts this scanning based on verbal instructions. At the same time, Lucier has always been interested in finding alternatives independent of individual decision making. In the case of *Music for Solo Performer* Lucier conceived a version recorded by Pauline Oliveros that combines three separate takes performed with different instrumentation. The varying levels of activity of the three realizations allow the recorded version to “scan itself” without the intervention of another performer.

In my symposium presentation, I considered how Lucier’s music is composed through the interaction of governing images, aural, theatrical, conceptual and visual, with physical and psychological phenomena. In his talk, not reproduced here, Daniel Wolf discussed *Still Lives*, a set of short piano pieces. The form of each piece is based on a simple line drawing of an everyday object or image that also provided the piece’s title (Lamp, Barbecue Grill, Chopsticks, etc.). Wolf described the drawings as providing a “smooth, coherent and attractive trajectory and form for the elucidation and presentation of an elementary acoustical phenomenon.” His mischievous conclusion was that this piece could be understood as a form of “absolute music” about nothing but itself. Anthony Burr commented that the whimsical literal-mindedness of the compositional process mirrored the literality of acoustical beats and this was part of the piece’s attraction. In addition, *Chopsticks* does explicitly allude to that tune everyone learns to play at the piano. Thus, while the focus of the piece is indeed about hearing sounds that are not “about” anything, a subtle semiotic play found in both the framing of the piece and aural substance of one of its movements. The sly wit with a slight whiff of Dada and Duchamp that this provides can be found throughout Lucier’s work. At the same time, the attention to sound as something listened to rather than shaped as “absolute music” (in Daniel Wolf’s words) leads us to the question with which Charles Curtis ended his talk: “Why is this music so expressive?”

RONALD KUIVILA
Supplement Guest Editor
E-mail: <rkuivila@wesleyan.edu>

References
1. *Alvin Lucier—A Celebration*, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, 4–6 November 2011. The festival included an exhibition, films, concerts and the Lucier Celebration symposium, which brought together composers, musicians and writers to discuss Lucier’s work and influence.
The following are abstracts of papers focused on the work and influence of Alvin Lucier. A number of the papers were presented at the Lucier Celebration Symposium, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, 4–6 November 2011. The symposium was part of a series of events commemorating Lucier’s 80th birthday that also included an exhibition, films and a series of concerts. An additional paper, by Justin Yang, has been added to the on-line collection of papers. The full papers can be viewed at <mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/-/22>.

**Between Composition and Phenomena: Interpreting “In Memoriam John Higgins”**

Anthony Burr, E-mail: <aburr@ucsd.edu>.

**Abstract**

In an interview discussing his shift to what might be termed conventionally composed concert works in the early 1980s, Alvin Lucier makes a distinction between “composition” and “phenomena.” In his usage, the former refers to the conscious aesthetic decisions involved in making a piece of music, while the latter refers to the kinds of acoustical or psychoacoustical concerns that shaped much of his work from the 1960s and 1970s. The author comments on Lucier’s work from this period, as he experienced while a student at Wesleyan University in the 1970s.

**Resonance Comes between Notes and Noise**

Nic Collins, E-mail: <ncollins@saic.edu>.

**Abstract**

Alvin Lucier was at the epicenter of a paradigm shift in music that took place between 1965 and 1975, in the backwash of John Cage, and his work from this period served as a roadmap for new music. Reaching back to a pre-hominid time before the divarication of music from other sound, Lucier composed works that re-connected music to physics, architecture, animal behavior and social interaction. These pieces implied that one could make music “about” anything, not just some finite set of concepts handed down the European classical lineage—that composition was not an activity bound by five lines, but a more amorphous “glue” for unifying the larger world. The author comments on Lucier’s work from this period, as he experienced while a student at Wesleyan University in the 1970s.

**Reframing Sounds**

Andrew Raffo Dewar, E-mail: <adewar@ua.edu>.

**Abstract**

This essay examines processes of recontextualization, reframing and cross-domain mapping as compositional techniques employed in a number of works by composer Alvin Lucier, with a particular focus on the early compositions *Music for Solo Performer* (1965) and *Vespers* (1967). In these works, Lucier takes existing technologies and recontextualizes their functions by placing the frame of music performance around their sounds. Lucier’s use of reframing extends to other domains, such as in the 1970 composition *Qui-simodo the Great Lover*, which employs a performance practice inspired by the long-distance communication systems of whales, his transformation of Ernst Chladni’s experiments with modes of sonic vibration into *Queen of the South* (1972), and the exploration of natural radio frequency emissions in the ionosphere that resulted in the 1981 composition *Sferics.*

**Music on a Long Thin Wire**

Hauke Harder, web site: <www.haukeharder.net>.

**Abstract**

This article relates works of Alvin Lucier to a commonsense definition of process and discusses how processes determine the musical perception in these works. Special emphasis is given to his sound installation *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, which is unique in the sense that the musical development of the installation can hardly be traced to a single phenomenon or principle. Based on examples from nonlinear physics and experiences from various setups, suggestions are presented if and how processes are at work in *Music on a Long Thin Wire.*

**Alvin Lucier: A Performer’s Notes**

Charles Curtis, E-mail: <crcurtis@ucsd.edu>.

**Abstract**

The author, a noted performer of Alvin Lucier’s music, approaches the special case of making and controlling acoustical beats as a hallmark of Lucier’s later music. Specific performance issues, including technical and instrumental details, frame a discussion of the process of listening that is particular to this music. Controlling the rate of acoustical beats involves a kind of listening that de-emphasizes pitch identity in favor of pitch as a transparent activator of defined acoustical events. A listening away from the sound source, a focusing on the spatial feedback that acoustical beating provides, projects the performer’s act of listening out into the space shared by performer and listener. The state approaching unison and the slowing down of beats to apparent zero is considered as a kind of silence, a vacancy both spatial and personal, in which outwardly directed listening potentially yields to a heightened experience of the listener’s own location and presence. The work of La Monte Young stands as an alternative reference point; the author cites examples of works in which the separation between listener and performer seems to be suspended.

**On-Line Supplement: Lucier Celebration**

On-Line Supplement: Lucier Celebration 87
The difficulty of unraveling multiple layers of acoustical beating in a work like Charles Curtis (for solo cello and two sweeping sine waves) is analyzed; a nearly performative mode of attention on the part of audience members is posited as the condition for apprehending such a work’s acoustical detail. The personal shadings of the listening act may hold a key to the unmistakable, and mysterious, expressivity of Lucier’s music.

**IMAGES AND ACTIONS IN THE MUSIC OF ALVIN LUCIER**

Ronald Kuivila, E-mail: <rkuivila@wesleyan.edu>.

**ABSTRACT**

Alvin Lucier’s music is most often understood in terms of the physical phenomena (brain waves, resonance, standing waves, beating patterns, etc.) it engages. However, from the very start images have served to govern his compositional choices and are equally central to his compositional process. Early pieces such as *Action Music for Pianist* or *Music for Pianist and Mother* focus attention on familiar aspects of musical performance of a theatrical nature (the gestures of a pianist or the eponymous mother sitting in the house). Lucier even describes *Music for Solo Performer* as being about “one person, alone, sitting very, very quietly releasing a flood of energy that permeates the concert space.” While immediately subsequent pieces can be described as either physical and psychological situations, imagery of various forms is deployed to shape the performance that unfolds within the situation. In some cases this takes notational form as lists of possibilities, in others the concept of the piece inherently dictates the actions to be taken. With his return to instrumental writing, images often enter into the shaping to the notations as a kind of whimsical *augenmusik*. As many others point out, these structures only serve to shape the articulation of the acoustical phenomena that are the central focus of the piece. The disappearance of instrumental identity into these phenomena is part of the particular poetry of these pieces where form exists more as a means of exploration than an expressive act.

**THOUGHTS ON ALVIN LUCIER AND PERFORMANCE**

Richard Lerman, E-mail: <www.SonicJourneys.com>.

**ABSTRACT**

In the early 1960s, composer Alvin Lucier was hired at Brandeis University to teach “service” courses in the music department. He was able to make the most of the situation by offering his own work and that of visiting artists in many non-traditional spaces on campus. The paper, based on the author’s anecdotal recall while a Brandeis student then, goes on to suggest that offering work in these spaces may have contributed to some of Lucier’s later works that explored the spatial qualities of music and sound. As part of his hire, he was also director of the Brandeis Chorus and Chamber Chorus, and especially the Chamber Chorus offered many performances of Feldman, Brown, Cage, Ashley and others in the early to mid 1960s. These and other performances lead to the formation of the Sonic Arts Union.

**SEMIOTICS, PRESENCE AND THE SUBLIME IN THE WORK OF ALVIN LUCIER**

Justin Yang, E-mail: <justin.yang@qub.ac.uk>.

**ABSTRACT**

Alvin Lucier, in his uncompromising exploration into the artistic potential of acoustic phenomena, has developed a body of work that remains highly original and hugely influential across many disciplines. His seminal works such as *I am sitting in a room* and *Music for Solo Performer* have foreshadowed ways of approaching sound that are in common use among electro-acoustic composers and installation artists, as well as in commercial products. Lucier, despite his far reaching influence, is and has always been a composer, and his explorations of acoustics have been singularly focused on the development of a rich body of music. This article investigates Lucier’s unique approach and attitude towards acoustics and aspires to enumerate important aesthetic developments he has made in creating music through the exploration of acoustic phenomena. In particular, this article seeks to investigate the role of semiotics in Lucier’s work, commenting on the pre-linguistic nature of Lucier’s approach to acoustic phenomenon. Here as well, an exploration of Lucier’s musical materials takes place, focusing on his instrumental compositions, specifically *Diamonds for One, Two or Three Orchestras*, where instruments are used as catalysts to generate in real-time acoustic phenomenon which interact to produce a rich yet intimate world of sound. Finally, Lucier’s approach to semiotics and real-time generation of music is viewed through a sublime aesthetic provoking questions regarding issues of presence and the now.