

DUMPSTER DIVING AND POST-ELECTRONIC SOUNDMAKING

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ABSTRACT

The author presents an overview of his work, revealing how the socioeconomic position of the electro-acoustic composer may necessitate dumpster diving as a means of survival that also provides a hidden benefit in fueling the creative process.

“This can’t go on! I’m fed up with you lowlifes going through our bins.” This fulmination was directed at me recently during an evening dumpster dive in a Hertfordshire town. Bizarrely, this comment did not issue from a business or residential block, but from a charity shop (or “thrift store”) unexpectedly still occupied. Patrons donate unwanted items to charity shops in the hope of raising money for good causes. However, my tidy bin diversings have revealed that many donations are simply consigned to the trash, and conse-

quently the sheer variety of the binned resources can be inspiring to observe. For shadowy reasons, the inhabitants of these shops are fiercely protective of their discards, often spoiling everything with unpleasantnesses: milk, bleach, paint, dust, excreta, etc. I have found that attempts to address the wastefulness are met with hostility.

My bin-diving endeavors—protracted due to straitened circumstances and the need for materials to build things—have roots in an impish “audio pamphleteering” project. From 1996 to 2006 I habitually left anonymous audio cassettes in public places for people to find. I had called this activity “tapedropping” [1]. The dissemination of (hopefully) strikingly unusual homemade cassettes became quite an obsession. Over this time, cassettes were falling out of vogue, and it was possible to find tapes and tape recorders for free simply by bin diving. This facilitated my widespread tapedropping project. I recorded sonic material with the aim of confronting what I believed to be prevailing cultural blandnesses, small town prejudices, and also highlighting injustices such as the exaltation of bullies and general aversions to thoughtfulness. Later tapes bore email addresses. Tallying which tapes drew the best email responses enabled me

to gradually refine my future tapedropping content.

My intention with tapedropping was to “sonically intrigue” the recipient. After many tapedroppings it became clear that recording unidentifiable sound sources was a potent way of achieving these ends. Ambiguous instrumentation was duly materialized: trade waste bins yielded electronic devices, acoustic sounding bodies and other unpremeditated miscellany—such items were refashioned and recorded for the tapedroppings that were, in turn, dropped in a public place, or sometimes posted back to the premises where the soundmaking materials were originally scrounged from.

By around 2005, technological shifts signaled the cassette’s obsolescence; its usage in prodding the sensibilities of random townspeople was no longer viable. At this point, the concept of *post-electronic* music seemed appealing. This was somewhat tangential to tapedropping, but still concerned both “sonic intrigue” and bin diving. I experimented with acoustic methods of recreating classic electronic music effects. Post-electronic music is very economical, as it requires only the bare minimum of electronic devices—the main components are scrounged.

One of the earliest explicit instances of post-electronic music technique is found in Terence Dwyer’s 1975 workbooks *Making Electronic Music: A Course for Schools*. Recognizing that many U.K. schools could not afford synthesizers, Dwyer suggested acoustically simulating electronic sounds: making recordings of a kazoo for a sawtooth wave, using vocal hissing for white noise, placing a microphone inside a tube to simulate a resonant filter, etc. My own post-electronic methods involve mechanically moderated assemblies of adjustable objects subjected to electromagnetic feedback, susceptible also to unexpected effects [2]. By carefully controlling the feedback levels and the countless physical mechanical adjustments, various operations can be effected: acoustic waveshaping, “granular” operations, creation of subharmonics, echo/resonance and modulations (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Daniel Wilson, Improv quartet Oscillatorial Binnage in La Borde Basse studio with basic resonated scrounged wok mechanical assemblies (left to right: Daniel Wilson, Toby Clarkson, Chris Weaver and Fari Bradley). (Photo © Toby Clarkson)



Opening dumpster lids presents bounded musical possibilities: Every object is a sonic module with hidden resonant frequencies waiting to be liberated. It also suggests various engineering concepts. Any clusters of bagged items in a bin present ready-made musical chords, filters and assemblies. It is even possible to turn a shop worker's malicious act of drizzling junk in gunk to one's advantage. The spoilt items can represent unusable objects—desecrated objects sadly out of bounds. Or, inversely, spoilt items could indicate those objects that must be used (a messy task). Spiteful despoliations can set parameters and can be viewed as a compositional aid.

The most ardent sonic experimenters are compelled to academicize their practices in the hope of securing academic posts to earn their livelihood (often the only feasible employment option). Academicization may also serve to placate one's parents if they maneuver to withdraw their tolerance for unprofitable pursuits beyond adolescence. Incidentally, the lack of employment opportunities for such specialists was a concern for electronic composer Daphne Oram, who made insightful analogies in her 1972 metaphysical work, *An Individual Note of Music*. Oram drew attention to what she called “unmatched impedance,” where an artist or graduate might be represented as being too “hot” a signal and “input” into restrictive unskilled work, where the signal is clipped and distorted, causing frustration. But what of a signal connected into unemployment?

In the absence of any income, dumpsters beckon. The value of scrounging in experimental music is being realized in the 21st century, most visibly with the growth of circuit-bending culture, where old circuits are sought. Scrounging's adaptation to composition itself is also fruitful, but I have grasped this only through the circumstantial turmoil of postgraduate oblivion. The environmentally conscious aspects of scrounging are attractive, but for many, scrounging is straightforward survival.

As time passes, gaps in the CV widen, more doors close, hunger irks, frustration grows, and one may find oneself despairingly echoing that vindictive heckler: “This can't go on!” Yet in light of scant opportunities, the need for resourcefulness and want of interestingness, it can *only* go on.

References and Notes

1. The tapedroppings were given their first wider airing on Resonance 104.4 FM. See C. Atton, *Alternative Internet* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2004) p. 131.

2. D. Wilson, “Miraculous Agitations,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 22 (2012) pp. 35–40.

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FUN WITH INFORMATION OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE OBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses audio/video interaction in his recent performance practice.

Creating sound and video is always a subjective task. One medium is often deliberately subservient to the other or the two media are created separately and put together once complete. Overt synchronization between the media can appear cheesy, lazy, square, isolated or controlling, but it is completely feasible for one person to design and control both media simultaneously. Real-time media programming has collapsed all digitizable media into byte streams, subject to the same essential structures and operations. Only at the very last stage—when the data is to be represented as the color of a pixel or the momentary position of a sound wave—does the composer's intention reclaim the form (and the perceptual and conceptual connotations) of a specific medium.

Although they can be utilized to create ambiguity, computers do not handle ambiguous instructions; the logical objectivity of the system requires the intentions of the composer to be spelled out in advance. In my art practice I strive for a combination of audio and video in which both media, working in tandem, reinforce and reflect the underlying structure and thought process. (I like to think of that thought process as “medium-free,” although of course the programming language/

environment has now become the medium of expression.) This intertwining of media began out of simple necessity: I wanted to perform both audio and video at the same time. Rather than hurriedly swap between controlling one and the other, I wanted to control both simultaneously. I wanted to be able to change a parameter and have both audio and video respond in a (hopefully) tangibly related way. At around the same time, I began developing video systems for real-time anaglyph 3D video (for 3D glasses). Though my interest in 3D began purely as technical novelty, additional benefits quickly became apparent. At the simplest level, audience members simply paid more attention, dropping a facade of critical detachment and eagerly hiding behind silly glasses. People considered the performance results less as an artistic display and more as both a scientific demonstration and an inducer of nostalgia: scientific in that it was more akin to watching a toy or product that has been engineered and has its own functional aesthetic beyond human authorship; nostalgic in that it allows an escape from “adult” artistic interpretation to allow for a more childlike consideration. (I am sure the frequent Tron-esque wireframe graphics encourage both these responses as well.) Are either of these potential responses preferable (or even appropriate) lenses for engaging a musical work? As someone with training in traditional musical aesthetics who is also influenced by scientific and computational aesthetics, I find this question looms. (As Brian Eno said: “If you don't call it art, you're likely to get a better result.”)

Brief Overview of Salient Works

Many of my works use the most literal audio-video connection possible: employing the audio waveforms as the visual content. The process begins with a 3-axis oscilloscope that shows three channels of synthesized sound: One signal plots on the *x* axis, one on the *y*, and one on the *z*. This representation of sound gets away from music as a human-built hierarchy of rules (music theory, tonality, scales, chords, etc.) and instead exposes music as raw math whose qualities are as visible as they are audible. Consonances are stable; dissonances are unstable. Brightness is jagged; dullness is smooth. Close intervals are knotted; primary intervals are open.