

# “We Don’t Write Songs. We Write Records”: a compositional methodology based on late 20<sup>th</sup> century popular music.

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## Abstract

*Leiber and Stoller are often quoted as having famously stated “We don’t write songs. We write records”. This paper discusses an evolving methodology that is crystallizing out of my composition practice and my ongoing research into the art of record production and popular music performance practice. The methodology takes aspects of performance and technological mediation from selected styles of popular music and combines them with non-standard (for the style) melodic, harmonic and metric practice. The technological mediation can take the form of a generative Max/MSP patch, an electronics performance using gesturally generated MIDI control of a Max/MSP patch or a combination of electronic processing and more conventional recording studio techniques. The resulting pieces are suggestive of the gestural shapes and record production sounds that are characteristic of the styles. The paper will also discuss some of the forms that technological mediation and performance practice can take in popular music styles and the cultural context that produced them and endows them with meaning.*

## 1 Introduction

The title of this paper refers to Leiber and Stoller’s assertion that “We don’t write songs. We write records.” They were a rhythm and blues songwriting team who doubled as record producers and produced a string of hits for Atlantic Records and their own label Red Bird in the 1950s and 60s. The relevance of the quote obviously stems from its acknowledgement that the composition process in popular music had moved beyond the traditional definition of the musical text as melody, harmony and lyrics to include all aspects of the recorded sound.

The art of record production in late 20<sup>th</sup> century popular music has involved the development of creative techniques that have altered the fundamental structure of both instrumental performance practice and composition. I will proceed shortly to describe some of the changes that are relevant to the compositional methodology that I have been developing and then attempt to place them in the broader

context of western musical creativity in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

My work attempts to isolate certain characteristic features of popular music styles and to combine them with other forms of practice that are generally considered to be outside the norms of popular music. Thus a piece such as *King Phil Meets Zaggers Uptown* (Zagorski-Thomas 2005) for piano and electronics involves gestures in the piano part that are suggestive of reggae performance practice combined with a live electronics performance using techniques taken from dub reggae mixing. The metre, the tonality and the instrumentation are, on the other hand, non-standard to dub reggae. The title of the piece is a reference to Augustus Pablo’s 1976 album *King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown*: a dub reggae classic. (**Audio Example 1: excerpt from *King Phil Meets Zaggers Uptown***).

This approach has become a cornerstone of my composition and I have utilized the research I am undertaking into the nature and history of record production to inform and extend the syntax, performance practice and conceptual frameworks in my pieces. As will be explained in more detail later, I have used certain aspects of the record production process and performance practice in particular styles of popular music to develop syntaxes for a series of compositions. The syntax and the performance style required from the players for each piece combine to expose certain characteristics while eschewing others. The features that I’m seeking to highlight might be broadly categorized as ‘Growls, Grooves and Graphic EQ’:

1. Growls – expressive timbral shaping techniques used in performance.
2. Grooves – the use of expressive microtiming and repetition.
3. Graphic EQ – the use of technological mediation to deliberately alter a performance.

I will end with a discussion of what I consider to be the forms of cultural meaning that compositions utilizing this methodology might elicit from listeners familiar with the relevant popular music forms and a short description of some planned future works.

## 2 The Production Process

There are four aspects of the production process as it has developed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that I wish to discuss: eliciting a performance, selecting the material, editing the material and mixing the track. The composition of what might traditionally be described as the musical text (harmony, melody, lyrics) is at best an equal partner to and often less important than these creative processes of production. This process will generally be shared between musicians, sound engineer and producer in different proportions.

### 2.1 Eliciting a performance

The role of the arranger as a separate entity in popular music has disappeared to a large extent and has become elided with the process of composition and the practice of performance. Performers will often be given relatively vague instructions and asked to 'come up with something'. There may then be some form of negotiation between composer, performer and producer until something is agreed on. This will often take the form of recording one or more takes of experimentation by the performer with requests to 'try something different' or 'work on that idea' guiding them towards a final result.

Part writing as such may also be substantially predetermined by stylistic conventions to the extent that the major variable becomes the 'feel' of the player: the groove. In these situations, the creative role in getting the right part recorded relies as much on selecting the right player and creating the atmosphere as on determining the nature of the part itself. Thus, selecting a drummer who plays with a rhythmic feel that is appropriate to the style is usually a much tougher job than deciding what the part should actually be.

### 2.2 Selecting the material

The task of selecting which material will be used for a final recording has grown in a variety of ways during the past half century. At earlier stages in the development of the technology it involved the choice between entire performances and with the development of tape editing this extended to include sections of entire performances that could be spliced together. As multitrack recording developed the choice was extended to allow the selection of separate instrumental performances within a piece and of 'dropping in' to repair unsatisfactory sections of those performances. As the number of available tracks expanded, it also became possible to retain multiple takes in their entirety and to select between them (or between segments of them) at a later date.

The introduction of sampling added a further level by allowing short sections, often a single bar, to be selected and repeated as a 'performance'. It also allowed for the use of 'found sounds' and saw the role of the DJ as selector of

prerecorded musical components redefined as auteur. Non-linear, hard disk recording further allowed for the selection process to expand to allow copied sections of a performance to be arranged throughout the linear structure of a piece.

As far as criteria for choice are concerned, the first and most obvious is the notion of correctness. How much does the performance conform to the pre-existing notional syntax that the participants had? There will be a continuum along which aspects of this may be, at one end, culturally defined (such as how well the pitches of the notes conform to the traditions of the appropriate tonality) and, at the other end, personally defined (such as choosing between performances that may have appropriate pitching and phrasing and where the choice comes down to differences between culturally informed individuals). The idea of correctness therefore blends seamlessly and gradually into the realm of aesthetics where one person's idea of 'out of tune and out of time' is another's idea of 'expressive'.

Another aspect of the selection process is the choice of when to make the decisions. Changes in technology have made it easier and easier to defer the decision making process. Multiple takes can be kept and substituted for others right up to the point of mixdown. There are many producers who insist on closing down their options gradually throughout the production process so that every new musical component that is recorded is judged against the performances in exactly the form they will be in the final mix. Others amass large quantities of alternate versions in order to be able to mix and match them at a later stage.

This leads us onto one of the ontological questions that will recur throughout this paper. Can we include a selection process such as this as part of the act of composition? How much technical direction does a composer or producer have to give to a performer to be considered the author of the product? Choosing the notes? Choosing the rhythm? Choosing the tonality and the dynamic shape? Choosing the performer? I shall return to this shortly.

### 2.3 Editing the material

The development of technology in the past 50 years has radically altered the extent that a performance can be altered after the fact. Whilst discussing the selection process I have already mentioned tape splicing, multitracking, dropping in and out, and the type of cutting and pasting that non-linear recording allows. The introduction of MIDI also allowed rhythmic quantizing, the changing of the sounds that were triggered and micro, note level editing of velocity, pitch, note length and position.

This has also now been extended to include the surgical editing of audio performances. Audio quantize engines and pitch changing technology are combined with cutting and pasting on the note to note level to substantially alter existing performances and to create entirely new ones. The editing of material has changed so dramatically in recent years that it is not uncommon for producers to elicit the

response ‘Did I play that?’ from a performer when they are played a final mix.

Technology that was developed to repair technically unsatisfactory performances has become a powerful armoury of creative compositional tools through what Keep (2005) has described as creative abuse. This started with the treatment of recorded performances as sample material but has extended to chunking musical performance into what Tagg (1982) has described as musemes (short phrases that can be reassembled syntactically) or even down to individual beats (such as the way Propellorhead’s Recycle software slices up and reassembles rhythmic loops).

## 2.4 Processing and mixing

After the tasks of eliciting the performance and selecting and editing the material have been achieved there is still the question of processing and mixing. This process is too complex to discuss in detail here but I shall start with a list of the potential forms of control that can be exercised over and above the gathering of the material into the required form:

1. Staging and clarity
2. Dynamics
3. EQ and spectrum
4. Time domain effects
5. Pitch domain effects
6. Spatial processing
7. Balance

One of the key concepts here is that of staging as it has been developed by Moylan (1992) and Lacasse (2002). This extends the meaning from that which puts the recording in a psychoacoustic space such as room ambience and stereo positioning to also include the manipulation of audio signals to reinforce (or even create) a musical meaning. An example might be to add some compressed ambience to a drum track to increase the average amplitude and thus seem louder in order to support some aggressive musical meaning in the track as a whole. The meaningful aspects of musical gestures can be made to stand out in a track through electronic mediation and the choice of which features to emphasize and which to ignore or blend together is the key creative process in record production.

## 3 The Big Picture

I return now to ontology and specifically how the question of what it means to be a composer was dealt with in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor (2001) has chronicled the way that Pierre Boulez and others debunked *Musique Concrete* and Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s and embraced the *Elektronische Musik* of the Cologne studios. These criticisms are based principally around the question of determinacy. How much does the composer determine the sound? The use of ‘found sound’ in *Musique Concrete* was dismissed as collage and, as such, was deemed to be a

lesser creative activity than the synthesis based methods of *Elektronische Musik* where the sonic building blocks were entirely under the control of the composer.

These arguments applied equally well to the fields of jazz and other forms of popular music where the character of the performance was as central to a piece as the composition (and by the 1950s and 60s perhaps more central). If this were true then the music was, when judged by the criteria of determinacy, a lesser form of creative art.

Jazz and even some forms of popular music have come to be seen as more serious art forms through adopting levels of complexity in areas that are conceived as having cultural value such as extending their harmonic language and using complex formal structures. The collaboration of composers with performers to the extent that an instance of a work is generally characterized by the interpretational and improvisational skills of the performer is still, however, an obstacle to the recognition of these forms of composition as having the cultural gravitas of through-composition.

In certain forms of popular music, particularly where sampling is involved, auteurship has been redefined to include the selection of the work of others as creativity and, by implication, as composition. It’s interesting though that there seems to have been much more debate over the question of sampling as composition than over the idea of a producer selecting the performance of a session musician for inclusion on a track.

Whilst, and perhaps because, the question of determinacy was being used in the battle for supremacy in European art music, composers such as Cage were defining themselves as radically ‘other’ by, amongst other things, their usage of indeterminacy in the composition process. In these instances though it is the concept that it considered to be the work and the concept is fully determined by the composer. The sonic manifestation of the composer’s instructions in these types of work is generally considered in the literature to be subordinate to the conceptual framework behind the instructions.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen two parallel yet earlier developments that have generated similar debates about the ontology of art. As a parallel to *Musique Concrete* and, later, sampling, we can point to photography as creative activity where the selection, framing and capture of a pre-existing phenomenon is the central activity. It’s unsurprising that in our cultural framework society is quicker to label as art the work of photographers and sampling musicians who use processing to distort the captured image or sound in innovative ways. The other development is that of the theatrical or cinematic director as a parallel to the creative record producer. In these instances the central activity is to provide a vision for interpreting an existing work by eliciting appropriate performances from the participants.

Albin Zak (2001) has discussed the changes in composition technique in popular music brought about by multitrack recording and sampling. The ideas that he mentions concerning the construction of a piece through

sonic experimentation in the studio relates very closely to Schaeffer's conception of the composition process and Taylor's (2001) evocation of Levi-Strauss and 'bricolage' rather than 'science'. The artists who are considered as being most 'serious' are chosen through criteria that give them credit for traditional auteurship albeit in the distorted popular music form of auteurship – the production of records.

Eisenberg (1987) and Gracyk (1996) have both discussed the ontology of music and the development of recorded music in particular, phonography as Eisenberg has termed it, with reference to the allographic or autographic nature of artwork. Has the shift from the composition of a score, an allographic work like a novel where the meaning of the work is not embodied in a single, unique object, to the creation of recordings as art shifted the nature of some forms of music to being autographic work like a painting; a creative act that results in a unique object? How has this idea that there may be an original version of a piece of music in the form of a recording affected our conception of it? An obvious aspect that springs to mind is that we associate a single performance (or more commonly a conglomeration of performances) and a single performer or group of performers with a particular piece of music if it has this autographic nature. Perhaps less obviously, we also associate the particular technological mediation that was employed in the realization of that recording with its artistic identity. In the same way that Da Vinci's canvas preparation and paint mixing techniques influence the nature of the Mona Lisa as well as his brushwork and artistic conception, the types of reverberation and the distortion introduced by tape compression and amplifier overdrive affect the sound of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band as well as The Beatles' songwriting and playing.

Christopher Small (1992) has used the question of whether music is a thing or a process to discuss the commodification of music and the issue of ownership. Was the way that the principle of ownership became central to the organization of society related to the process by which the work and the auteur became central to artistic activity in western culture? The desire for clear delineation of creative authorship has led to western arts music's lionization of the composer above the performer and the pre-composed musical 'object' over communal creative practice. Is this, perhaps, a particular, culturally determined manifestation of the human mind's genetically programmed search for causality?

## 4 Creating A Syntax Out Of Process

I now turn to a discussion of how I am using these concepts in my compositional methodology. I mentioned in my introduction that I was using selected characteristics of popular music styles in an attempt to create pieces that are reminiscent of the style without being 'of' it. My motivation for developing this methodology stems from a desire to

understand how such seemingly simple music can elicit complex responses. Textual, rather than contextual, studies of popular music have developed a series of nascent theories about groove (Keil 1987, Iyer 2002), record production (Lacasse 2002, Zagorski-Thomas 2006) and timbre (Frith 1996, Barthes 1972, Zagorski-Thomas 2005) that tend to be centred around theories of embodied cognition. My aim has therefore been to create sonic spectromorphologies that are mimetic of the human and technological gestural shapes that are culturally specific to these musical styles.

These gestural shapes arise out of the generative processes that are used in the production of these types of music. Each piece that I have created has therefore employed a syntactic structure based on the processes involved in the production of authentic instances of the musical style in question. The authenticity of these instances is a personal construct that will be open to criticism and no doubt, outright derision, from communities who have more detailed knowledge of the styles in question. My aim, however, is an exploration of my personal perceptions of the characteristic features of these styles and these will be rooted in my aesthetic preferences and levels of stylistic differentiation. In order to explore the extent to which these processual aspects of style carry meaning I have adopted a methodology that focuses attention on the familiarity of features such as gestural shape, timbre, groove and processing by making metre, tonality and harmony unfamiliar or less intuitive to those embedded in western popular culture.

I am differentiating between the syntax of the composition and that of the performance in order to keep the explanation clear but I consider them to be thoroughly enmeshed. I shall return to the question of performance in the next section.

The two main components of the compositional syntax are the Max/MSP patches and the notation for the pieces designed for performance and the recording / mixing process and the notation for the pieces that are pre-constructed recordings for playback. The recording / mixing process also includes appropriate electronic (and in some instances, acoustic) processing. Through these elements I am seeking to embody certain characteristics of the production process so that they will produce sonic gestures with appropriate morphologies. Using both the computer / studio and live performance (on instruments and electronics) I have created a variety of models that utilize certain features of the edit/select and signal processing features of these methodologies.

Thus, for example, *The Bell End Theory* (Zagorski-Thomas 2005) is a piece for trumpet and electronics that models certain aspects of hip hop styles. The title refers to A Tribe Called Quest's 1991 album *The Low End Theory*. The Max/MSP patch utilizes reverse and forward, multi-speed playback of samples taken from the trumpet performance. These are controlled by the electronics performer from the modulation wheel of a MIDI synthesizer in a way that is

mimetic of DJ scratching of vinyl records. The start and end points of the sampling are triggered by the electronics performer with a MIDI key but the looping point is edited by the Max/MSP patch to synchronize all the samples to the tempo set by the first sample created by the two performers. (**Audio Example 2: excerpt from *The Bell End Theory***).

The record / edit / select process that is inherent in sample based music is used but is undermined by the forcing of decisions without deliberation. There is no choice in the form of options and to a great extent the score tells the electronics performer when to sample. This obviously removes the principle creative element from the sampling process (the choice of what to sample) and makes it part of the composition process by determining what the trumpet will play and when it will be sampled in the score. In this instance the trumpet part is semi-improvised from a set of given rhythmic patterns and possible notes.

In *Brown Paper Bonk* (Zagorski-Thomas 2006) for double bass and electronics submitted for inclusion as a piece for ICMC 2006, the electronics are controlled entirely from within a timeline in a Max/MSP patch. The title refers to the 1997 Roni Size track *Brown Paper Bag* and models aspects of this sample based ‘drum and bass’ style. In this piece the performance involves the player being off stage so that they can be sampled without being heard by the audience. There is, however, a screen on stage showing their performance. The performer hears a click track and instructions telling them which part of the score to play through headphones. The audience thus sees the performance gestures on screen and then hears them used in the piece as the Max/MSP patch creates it through speakers in the auditorium. The sample / playback process is, to some extent, predetermined in the score / Max/MSP patch but there is also an aleatoric element as some of the computer decisions are made by randomly generated numbers. (**Audio Example 3: excerpt from *Brown Paper Bonk***).

The third piece that I’m going to discuss in relation to process and syntax is *Who Are Phil, Natasha And Chris?* (Zagorski-Thomas 2006) for piano, voice, percussion and recording studio. It is based on the rock music style of The Who from the early 1970s. An important element of this was the amount of pre-preparation in the form of score writing that was done and the extent to which revisions were made in the studio after hearing exactly how the performances had turned out. This, in conjunction with the techniques of overdubbing and dropping in and out, meant that much of the piece was constructed using a methodology appropriate to the style. This was combined with the treatment of piano and vocal parts through amplification of the period and the recording of the track onto 2” analogue tape at levels that created a characteristic tape compression effect. It also involved recording in a large space that was characteristic of British rock recordings of the period. This is intended as one part of a suite of pieces based on early 1970s rock and I plan to press them all onto vinyl to further

enhance the authenticity of the sound. (**Audio Example 4: excerpt from *Who Are Phil, Natasha and Chris?***).

The syntax of these pieces is thus created to model and emulate facets of the production processes that are stylistically relevant. This can take the form of the composition process itself, the selection of recording techniques or the design of the computer based electronic processing. This may facilitate the use of studio based gesture (mix engineer performance), aleatoric generation of preset, studio-style action scripts or subroutines, electronic or acoustic processing that leaves a stylistically appropriate sonic imprint on the recorded sound or construction techniques like sample looping or multitrack layering. The ultimate aim is to create pieces that have a structure mimetic of sequencer based and/or multitrack recorder based compositional practice in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Popular Music.

## 5 Composition And Performance

The performer is a participant in the creative process and in popular music styles this often takes the form of stamping their ‘voice’ on the recorded output. Various aspects of the way that instrumental and vocal styles that are typical of a particular type of music have been incorporated into my compositional methodology will be mentioned in this section. This factor is equally as important as the way that technology is used in the construction of my work.

Changes in the recording process and the methodology of recording and composition in popular music have fundamentally changed the nature of performance in those situations. A player rarely performs a piece from start to finish in a single take without finding that it has been edited in some way at a later point in the production process. Many performers both find and expect that they will only have to record one version of a repeated section and that it will be cut and pasted through the piece. Performers also find that they are providing raw material for the producer to use in their creative activity. This creative activity often takes the form of performance being treated as sample material or being cut up and reassembled to create ‘new’ performances. Peter Sheppard Skaerved of the Kreutzer String Quartet commented to me at a run through of pieces by composers at Goldsmith College, London recently that he disliked playing many electroacoustic pieces as they used the performers as a sound source and there was no opportunity for interaction.

This question of how much input the performer can have and how much interactivity there is in the process of producing a piece is another very important aspect of my compositional methodology. In some pieces I have put the control of the electronics in the hands of a performer and this allows for interactivity and mutual action and reaction in the course of the performance. Examples of this are *King Phil Meets Ziggers Uptown* and *The Bell End Theory*. In other instances the performer’s input is in the recording stage of a piece for acousmatic playback. In *Who Are Phil,*

*Natasha And Chris?* the musicians' input consisted of developing the performance techniques to achieve the appropriate rhythmic feel and timbral shaping.

The control of the producer over performance aspects of the production process has been modeled in my compositional methodology in a variety of ways. The most obvious and direct way is that I have produced the pieces for acousmatic playback. This has involved negotiating the desired performances with the players, selecting and editing them, and processing and mixing the final recording. Another way that this has happened is when the Max/MSP patch or the electronics performer controls which parts of the performance are to be sampled and looped and thus becomes a cipher for the producer.

Perhaps an extreme example of a way in which performances have been transformed in the production of one of my compositions is *JB* (Zagorski-Thomas 2006), a 60 second acousmatic piece that was submitted for the 2006 60x60 project ([www.VoxNovus.com/60x60/Call.htm](http://www.VoxNovus.com/60x60/Call.htm)). The piece aims to recreate certain aspects of James Brown's late 1960s work using as few conventionally pitched sounds as possible. Each component of the piece is constructed from two or more performances where the morphology of one has been superimposed onto the other with a vocoder. (**Audio Example 5: excerpt from *JB***).

Keil (1987) has used the term participatory discrepancies (PDs) to describe the ways that performances are given character through variations in parameters such as rhythmic feel, timbral shaping, dynamic control and tempo variation. Popular music forms rely on PDs in performance (instrumental and technological) as a key determinant of their stylistic identity. Performance meaning stemming from the importance of the rhythmic feel to the piece is related to the style of playing but can also be mediated by technological processes such as looping and sample triggering. All of these forms of PD can also be mediated through the mix process by using equalization, dynamic shaping (compression and noise gates), spatial staging (panning, volume and time domain effects) and balance control.

The crucial nature of using appropriate PDs in both the instrumental and electronics performances makes the selection of and negotiation with the performer central to my compositional process. Thus far, in pieces where there is a performative aspect to the electronics, I have taken that role myself. This has also meant that several of the pieces have been prepared with and performed by a specific player. An example of this is *The Re-Education of Natasha Lohan* (Zagorski-Thomas 2006) for voice and electronics which models aspects of RnB ballads from the 1990s. The title refers to Lauren Hill's 1994 album *The Miseducation of Lauren Hill*. The singer, Natasha Lohan, worked with me to develop certain vocal gestures that involved stylistically appropriate spectromorphology and intonation and pitch ornamentation techniques and yet avoided the metric structure and tonality of the genre. We started with a score

mapping out certain pitch shapes and an overall form and listened to recordings of Lauren Hill, Mary J. Blige, Brandy and Mariah Carey and developed the score and the interpretation in parallel.

This piece also involves live electronics and I modeled the performance on a notional combination of the sound engineer's and producer's jobs. The Max/MSP patch creates a randomly generated accompaniment using granular synthesis with sampled fragments of the vocal performance which possess some of the characteristics of a drum, bass and electric piano rhythm section. The electronics performer controls the dynamics and, through high and low pass filtering, the frequency content of this accompaniment to create an 'arrangement' with higher and lower levels of emotional intensity that follow the structure of the vocal performance. The electronics performer also samples phrases from the vocal performance in conjunction with a pitch shifter to create 'backing vocals' at appropriate points in the structure. (**Audio Example 6: *The Re-Education of Natasha Lohan***).

In a compositional methodology that is seeking to create a substantial amount of its musical meaning through the manipulation of timbre and micro-timing and also requires instrumental performance, the shortcomings of conventional and even extended notation become evident. Working closely with a particular performer to develop some aspects of the performance practice is one approach. Alternatively, with a knowledge of the style that's being modeled, the attributes that are considered important can be determined by implication in the score. Some performance attributes are left partially undetermined in the score to emphasize the fact that they are less important than others. The corollary of this might be that in many scored pieces where the melody, harmony and rhythm are highly predetermined, the intonation and timbral shaping are left to the performer to 'improvise' within certain culturally constructed boundaries. By leaving the selection of notes and rhythmic patterns to the performer, I am affording them a similar freedom with parameters that I consider subsidiary to the musical meaning of the piece. What might be considered as improvisation and thus as the deliberate introduction of indeterminacy into the compositional process, should rather be viewed as leaving a certain amount of expressive freedom to the performer in the determination of parameters that are not central to the piece's meaning.

*Ms. Cellobastic* (Zagorski-Thomas 2005) for cello and electronics is based on stylistic elements from ragga and the title is taken from Shaggy's 1995 Track *Boombastic*. In this piece the cello is given a choice of notes and rhythmic cells from which to build a performance. The key responsibilities for the performer are to initially provide a performance with a rhythmic impetus appropriate to the modeling of accompaniment for the style and to subsequently emulate the intonation, rhythm and timbral shaping gestures of ragga vocal techniques. Likewise the electronic performance should emulate the mixing techniques used by both

producer / engineers in the studio and DJs in the dance halls. (Audio Example 7: *Ms. Cellobastic*).

## 6 What Does It Mean?

My primary motivation for developing these compositional techniques was an aesthetic attraction to the textual complexity of popular music textures and rhythms combined with an inability to communicate musically in an effective way through actual popular music forms. Developing this methodology has also, through happy accident, collided fruitfully with my research in record production and popular music performance practice.

I shall now attempt to establish what kind of cultural meaning pieces that have been constructed in this way might elicit from listeners. I'm not assuming that listeners would necessarily be familiar with the niceties of performance practice or record production techniques in, for example, ragamuffin the 1990s. I am, however, assuming that the ubiquity of popular music in contemporary society has led to the sound of these types of technological mediation and performance gesture to some extent permeating the consciousness of all those who participate in contemporary western culture.

I would argue that the pervasive nature of western musicological tradition has made us blind to parameters that it considers unimportant and 'unmusical'. Whilst we all use implicit knowledge gained through experience to categorize music according to the types of gestures and technological mediation that have been used in its construction, scant regard has been afforded to incorporating this into theoretical musicology.

I would hope that one result of these types of composition is to point to features that are normally taken for granted or ignored, as being somehow definitive to certain musical styles and highlighting the way that technological mediation and performance variations are even sidelined within the musical cultures that rely on them. The implicit importance of the 'sound' of recordings is highlighted by the way that they are generically recognizable even when melodic, metric and harmonic features are inappropriate and non-standard.

In some ways this is equivalent to Tagg's (1982) hypothetical substitution in semiotic analysis. In his painstaking deconstruction of the Kojak TV theme tune Tagg illuminated the semiotic meaning or importance of certain aspects of the piece by varying other aspects such as the temporal ordering of the melodic phrases. Perhaps this compositional method achieves a similar goal by creating actual substitutions that make the meaning of certain participatory discrepancies and technological mediation more obvious.

Let's return to the quote from Leiber and Stoller in the title of this paper again: 'We don't write songs, we write records'. The development of phonography throughout the

20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has led to the evolution of a complex vocabulary of sonic gestures and textures with powerful cultural resonance. Popular music studies is characterized by its overwhelming focus on the context at the expense of the text. In the absence of established musicological tools that allow for the analysis of features such as timbral shaping, groove and technological mediation, and the burgeoning array of approaches to studying the cultural constructions involved in the industrial production and social reception of popular music, this is, perhaps, unsurprising. As musicology grapples with the problems of studying these important aspects of musical activity, perhaps compositions that address these issues can help to shed a little light on the types of meaning that they create.

This compositional method might also be seen to represent a form of rebellion against the establishment in that it seeks to valorize musical features associated with conventionally low status forms of music in opposition to the status quo. However, it does little to challenge the predominance of determinacy and auteurship in contemporary western musical culture which may be seen as one of the reasons for the continued low status of these musical forms. Creative communal performance continues to be valued less in western culture than deterministic forms of composition with a clearly identifiable author – but that's the start of a different paper.

## 7 What Next?

I'll conclude with a brief outline of how I see this methodology developing. There are some other pieces like this in the pipeline. I mentioned earlier that *Who Are Phil, Natasha And Chris?* is intended as part of a suite of pieces utilizing the production and performance techniques of 70s rock in conjunction with instruments, harmony, melody and metre that are recognizably not of the style. There is a work in progress that will also be part of this suite that is based on the style of Led Zeppelin. At the moment this piece is planned for voice, clarinet, cello, piano and percussion.

I have also been planning some installation pieces based on the gestures of particular styles of music that seek to combine sound and image to highlight the ways that movement is involved in the creation of the sound. One piece involves making a multitrack recording of a jazz quartet and filming them at the same time. Each instrument's audio recording would be convolved with white noise to remove pitch information and the video performances of each player would be projected onto the four walls of a room whilst the 'noise gestures' associated with each of their performances would be played through a speaker next to their video image.

Another piece involves filming a close up of the hands and torso of a rock guitar soloist and using jitter to translate the gestural information so that a Max/MSP patch could manipulate an aggressive granular synthesis sound with



random pitch content. The video and audio tracks would then be played back together.

The final installation piece would involve filming the hands of a pianist performing a piece of Bach on a MIDI keyboard. The MIDI data would then be used to modulate and envelope shape a recording of running water. The video would be shown alongside a vertical array of speakers in such a way that the highest pitched notes of the keyboard would be spatially highest and the lowest pitched notes spatially lowest. The MIDI pitch data would also be used to assign the relevant 'note' of the running water audio to a speaker that was spatially closest to the equivalent note on the video image of the keyboard.

These pieces obviously concentrate on the gestural aspects of the musical styles in question and would attempt to create a sonic 'imprint' of those movements in isolation from their normal musical context.

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