

Introduction

In my composition thesis I explored writing experimental music for physical, acoustical, social, and political spaces. My basic goal has been to “activate” these spaces by implementing interactive performance structures, and through introducing provocative documentary material. These interests were informed by a commitment to political activism and a set of ideas about the role experimental music has played in social movements and on what approaches to composition might be most effective.

Early on in my project, I attempted to “activate” all of these spaces at once. As the year progressed, however, I found that I needed to work on issues in isolation in order to make more effective pieces. In the fall I designed pieces in which players interacted with sound-modifying programs. These pieces allowed me to examine and modify the generally rigid and hierarchical social topographies of concert situations but did not permit the inclusion of specific political references. Later in the development of my thesis I designed sound installations utilizing politically explicit material. Here, my concern with interactivity emerged through a more subtle emphasis on the personal nature of people’s experiences of these works. In more open installation environments I explored a set of issues I refer to as social topography. I use this term to mean the distribution of power and the social relationships in a physical or conceptual space. In different projects I sought to render social topographies audible and flexible through interactivity and the use of political material. I also composed tape pieces for radio and an “earwalk,” a tape piece that guides the listener on a walk so that the recorded sound relates to a specific physical

environment. When composing in these mediums, I paid particular attention to the unique features of these ‘spaces’ as contexts for sound.

By the late spring, I had come to think of all of these approaches as important tools for exploring experimental music as a means of achieving social change. I had expanded the focus of my compositional inquiry; creating radio art pieces for broadcast over WESU, performance pieces and sound installations involving performers in headphones interacting with signal processing of their voices, and “earwalks,” installations, and radio works dealing with the war in Iraq, chalking and other topics.

In making an explicit connection with political ideas artworks gain the potential to be agents of mobilization but also have a greater potential to affront people unsympathetic to the political ideals expressed. In eschewing obvious and explicit ties to social movements, subtly political experimental sound pieces gain in social mobility. My recognition of the need to treat this trade-off seriously led me to compose pieces that treated this balance between social mobilization and social mobility differently. Rather than following a single approach, I undertook projects exploring different answers to these questions about approachability, cultural capital,¹

¹ Sociologist Pierre Bordieu provides a framework for understanding the elitism of the experimental music audience through his concept of cultural capital. In an explication of the themes in Bordieu’s work, Randal Johnson explains cultural capital as “a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for, or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artifacts.” The acquisition of cultural capital, according to Bordieu, is accomplished through a long process of education by peers and family members, and through social institutions.

Randal Johnson quoted from: Bordieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. by Randal Johnson (London: Polity Press/Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 7.

political engagement, and subtlety, with the understanding that political effectiveness is a complex matter without a single best solution.

With the hope of undermining the cultural capital associated with experimental music through its association with universities and concert halls, I hoped to give my projects creative contexts, placing them in outdoor, public, or non-traditional spaces. I wanted my pieces to directly engage people who encountered them, and hoped to explore different ways of creating music where people could interact directly with the sound of a piece by speaking or moving. In an attempt to transmit left-minded meaning effectively to my audience, and in order to hold out against status quo affirming interpretations of my pieces, I wanted to infuse my pieces with topical specificity in alliance with social movements with which I was involved. Drawing on the subtle politics of many experimental pieces, I hoped to consider ways to get my work to facilitate an introspective critical look at the social topography among different participants in the piece and in different musical contexts.

In my first completed project, *Activated Sound*, a pre-concert anti-war sound installation for a show in celebration of student activism, called ‘Action, Struggle, Resistance, a Celebration,’ I included topically specific material, allowed audience members to control the attributes of the sonic texture through speaking into microphones, and attempted to undermine the formality of the piece’s World Music Hall location.

Writing, setting up, and supervising the performance of *Activated Sound* led me to narrow my focus for future pieces. I worked through different types of sound-modifying programs with which players could interact through a series of pieces in

the fall and winter. In these pieces, I used the programming language SuperCollider to sample amplitude and frequency content from microphones, and re-emit sounds related to that information in a variety of ways, designed to be controllable in a live situation with the hope of drawing participants in to increasingly sophisticated interaction with sound-modifying programs.

As my involvement with anti-war and pro-chalking activism deepened over the course of the year, I found ways to work through topical specificity and to explore ways to deploy political material in installations, radio art, and “earwalks.” Beginning with my 15 February thesis concert in the World Music Hall, and progressing with some regularity through March, I worked on a series of anti-war pieces, trying out different sound material and different contexts for performance. Through my involvement with R.A.T. (Radio Art Transmitter on 88.1 WESU Middletown) I was able to experiment with radio art, and composed a series of pieces addressing unique features of radio for broadcast during the show. I also helped create a pre-show sound environment for a production of the *Vagina Monologues*, and worked on a large-scale installation and “earwalk” called *ChalkTalk* examining the history of chalking by students at Wesleyan in the context of the administration’s recent imposition of a ‘moratorium’ on chalking. The chalking pieces will coincide with WesFest, a weekend of activities for accepted prospective students, and Peoples’ Awareness Month and are being created with the assistance of members of Wesleyan’s queer community and a production team from the music majors’ seminar on recording.

This last project, an interactive “earwalk” and sound installation following a path around the campus, targets a system of power while approaching a topical issue.

While my work on different issues in isolation has led me back to working on a project that engages with social topography and topical specificity, I also came to see the other approaches I had taken as valid ground for exploration in their own right. I will continue to explore interactivity through sampling and processing the sounds of performers and audience members and will look to expand these pieces into installation and new performance contexts. I will also continue my work in community sound-gathering projects and sound installations and work further on pieces for radio and other media.

The following chapter examines the compositions I have written this year in rough chronological order, considering the approaches I have taken to interactivity in my compositions, expressions of and engagement with social topography in musical spaces, topical specificity and community sound recording projects, and my interest in non-traditional spaces for sound and subverting expectations in common performance spaces. Following this account, I conclude with some thoughts about ways I envision continuing the work I have begun and opening new lines of work in relation to the issues I explored this year and will discuss in this chapter. Each account is preceded by a brief description and some documentation of the piece being examined.

The first appendix contains copies of the scores for pieces I composed this year. A second appendix contains transcripts of the SuperCollider code I wrote in producing several other projects. A third appendix, on audio CD, contains recordings of concert pieces as well as the shorter radio works I wrote and excerpts from an installation and a longer radio piece.