Building Tools #8

Max Röhrbein/Bass Simulation
The New "Sound" of Music

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- Initial comments?
- How much has changed in 10 years?
- Is there really anything fundamentally new in what Theberge is describing?

"Autotune"

Well I was in the studio
But I couldn't hit the notes
I could have got a vocal coach
But I ain't want no vocal coach
But then someone showed me this plugin
So you can't hear the notes I miss
So I don't need no vocalist
And now I got an instant hit

What I find fascinating about the "auto-tune is the end of musicians" argument is how it ignores virtually all other forms of vocal manipulation. The channel strip for the vocals in a pop song will nearly always have EQ, Compression, some type of delay, reverb, "exciters", probably some stereo panning stuff, maybe Chorus, not to mention multitracking, harmonies, etc etc etc. And Auto-tune.

And as soon as the auto-tune comes in you start hearing the argument of "this person obviously can't sing because they can't sing on key". Do you ever hear anyone saying "this person can't sing because they can't control their volumes, so they have to be compressed"? I think it says a lot about the parameters that we set, culturally, as qualifying someone as a musician.

-- Yann on CreateDigitalMusic.com

Wrong!

On the other hand ...

- Who is the musician? The audio engineer?
- Is the vocalist just a sample?
- Sonic creativity has always been about taking "distortion" and turning into a "desirable effect"
- Hendrix
- What about Melodyne?

On the other hand ...

- What about Melodyne?
- Is this an editing tool?
- A composition tool?
- What does it say about "sound" in music?
- Music as performance vs. data processing

Just How Radical Is This?

- As recently as 1967, Edgar Varese was still fantasizing about "an entirely new medium of expression: a sound producing machine"
- This machine is now just a download away!
- Mid-20th century: "how to make it sound like ...?"
- 21st century: "what to make it sound like?"

What has become interesting is the idea that artists are people who specialize in judgement rather than skill. And this of course reopens the question of who can use that job description.

Brian Eno (Mix 16 [6], 1992:30)

... despite its conventional appearance, the keyboard of a synthesizer or sampler is an "interface", little more than an elaborate switching device; thus the relationship between gesture and resulting sound (i.e. the manner and the degree to which a sound responds to the body through touch, breath etc.) becomes entirely arbitrary, something to be rationally planned for as part of the overall characteristics of the sound program. The technical separation of the physical interface from the sound producing mechanism in electronic instruments may account, in part, for the apparent autonomy and uncommon power that "sounds" have in determining how you play them.

Théberge, p 199

Question: how does this apply when looking at FX that transform sound (e.g. foot pedals for guitarists) ? How does it apply to non-keyboard-driven synthesis? How does it apply to non-realtime audio transformation?

Can it be done
Is there one, melody
that's never been played
How does it sound, can it be found
that new song
That's never been in the air...

Heard a lot of music in my lifetime
Somehow it all sounds the same
Is there a sound to choose
One thats never been used
By anyone, anywhere?

I've searched so long
it seems it just isn't there
that melody that's never been in the air
so fresh, so rare

-- "*Can it done done*", Weather Report 1983

Strange Encounters with Other Musics

"Glass had never heard Indian music before. What Glass thought that he had learned from Ravi Shankar and tabla player Alla Rakha was that their music was not cyclic as was ours, but was a continuous flow of beats that was constructed in an additive process. This understanding, although not correct, gave him the ideas he would use for his own music. He had completely misunderstood the music, but it inspired him nonetheless. His misunderstanding, he recognized and acknowledged later."

Notice the distinction between the **sound** and the **music.** Glass wasn't interested in the sound, just the musical form.
What happens when we give people the sounds without the music?

Berlioz

While in London, Berlioz heard some Chinese and Indian music in authentic performance, and this most progressive and modernistic composer of the time could make no sense at all of what he heard.

His description of Chinese music: 'I shall not attempt to describe these wildcat howls, these death-rattles, these turkey cluckings, in the midst of which, despite my closest attention, I was able to make out only four distinct notes.'

His description of Indian music is even less flattering!"

-- George Crumb, "Music: does it have a future?"

Tensions

- Embracing vs. rejecting history
- Music as an abstract, theoretical form vs. music as a part of a wider culture
- Technique vs. technology
- Act local vs. think global (belonging to a place vs. belonging to the whole world)
- Musical performance vs. Music "production"
- Judgement vs. skill

Mongrel
(Mischling/Promendenmischung) Culture

mon·grel

/ˈmʌŋgrəl, ˈmɒŋ-/ [muhng-gruhl, mong-]

–noun

1. a dog of mixed or indeterminate breed.
2. any animal or plant resulting from the crossing of different breeds or varieties.
3. any cross between different things, esp. if inharmonious or indiscriminate.

–adjective

4. of mixed breed, nature, or origin; of or like a mongrel.