Introduction to Opusmodus

A Contemporary Language for Making Music

Composing, like most art-making, is a messy business, It is rarely radio in the head. You don't turn it on and there it is. A composer goes searching for music. It's out there somewhere, but it has to be detected, discovered, and then deciphered into music's own language. To do this requires experiment and imagination.

In the 1980s MIDI provided a contemporary language for musical events that let us use computers for recording and editing already conceived ideas. But MIDI is not a natural language, and programming with it is a highly specialist task. Composers want and need a straightforward contemporary language for music that whilst relating to traditional staff notation, and MIDI too, enables the origination of novel ideas and new forms of making. Such a language is parametric: found in and used by Opusmodus.

The Parametric World of Music

Musical events belong in a network of parameters: pitch, note duration and rhythm, dynamics, articulation, and at a higher-level tonality, harmony and musical structure itself. They are all connected. In Opusmodus, we are 'Parametrical'.

Increasingly composers create novel musical events by interacting with musical parameters written or 'found' through separating them out, processing them, and then putting them back together again. Rhythms are constructed through additive and subtractive processes, pitch aggregates are formulated with magic squares and statistical algorithms, integers, intervals and random numbers are often starting points, ways to 'make a mark', to fill the blank page (or screen).

Many starting points in music composition are not based on sound at all, but on geometric structure, proportion, chaotic incidence, visual relationships, movement, poetry and prose. Whatever these may be they will need to be pulled somehow onto the musical stave. This remains the format our culture continues to invest in as a notation-led end result, the common currency of most music education, professional performers, ensembles and orchestras. Much new art and media music continues to reach us through such notated scores composed by bringing together those commonplace parametric elements.

The Parametric Instrument

With a Parametric Instrument for Composing Music it becomes possible to network musical parameters into inherently variable, adaptive forms that combine into unique and often surprising continuously differentiated fields or systems. This is what Opusmodus does.

Musical practice in composition is no longer style-oriented or system-based. It can be everything and anything. Composers can be insatiably curious about the possibilities of phenomena that lie outside music, because so much around us is now understood and able to be captured as data. And so composers need the wherewithal to make conversions of such data to live in the parametric world of music. Opusmodus has the parametric tools to make this happen.

Don't necessarily expect a previous experience with technology to open the door straightaway to what Opusmodus has to offer. This is not about point and click, play and record, copy and paste. It is about thinking and scripting; it is about building expressions made of functions that are able to process or generate one or many musical parameters and provide an output that can be seen and heard, instantly. Opusmodus provides a fast and robust feedback loop for musical ideas.

Learning Opusmodus : A Strategy

If you've learnt a language there's a similarity. You might go to a class or know a native speaker, then you can listen, copy and eventually talk. Otherwise you'll use a CD and a book, or interact with a web-based tutor. At some point you'll have to work on vocabulary, and maybe learn to write. The language of Opusmodus requires something similar.

- Take a look and listen to the example scores.
- Read the Preliminaries.
- Take a Tutorial.
- Browse the Documentation, the vocabulary of Opusmodus.
- Study the score-scripts.
- Modify these scores and start to write your own.

The tutorial resources can be accessed from within Opusmodus itself. You'll find Quick Start, a guide providing the necessary basics. Then there is Stages: a 30-part collection of score-scripts and text commentaries designed to be opened simultaneously.

Important Questions: Necessary Answers

Be sure, you'll find in all these learning resources something to fire up the imagination. Browse as much as you can, and begin to ask yourself what is it that makes up my musical language? What are the elements and common processes I already use when making a piece of music?

Do I know how a piece of my own music is composed? Is it really trial and error, continuous experimentation until it 'sounds right' or are there methods, techniques, pathways you've already established or invented? Such questioning is a highly recommended exercise. And if you don't have the answers, learning Opusmodus will prove a unique way into musical literacy!

Whatever the answers to these questions, bite the bullet with one of the early tutorial guides. Approach these little score-scripts in a spirit of play. The more time you can devote to playful experimentation before starting on that next commission or project the better. Again, think of learning a foreign language. You may learn enough Italian in a Day with a CD to 'get by' but to understand and use the language you have to go further. It's the same with Opusmodus. Learning takes time, but it will prove such an enriching process, and one that brings together understanding with knowledge: about the music you compose and how you compose it.

If you are new too scripting, don't shy away from the basics. Once you have them you won't look back and all kinds of possibilities will open up.