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DXARTS 462

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Concert Critique

*Choose one piece from the concert and compare this to one piece from our repertoire. How does the overall composition evolve? What are spectral qualities that are similar, and how do the techniques compare?*

In Chowing’s program, *Stria* (1977) was certainly my favorite piece, followed by *Phoné* (1981). For me, what set the former apart from the other pieces was not only its very interesting compositional form, but also its use of spectral techniques that gave rise to all sorts of intriguing musical materials. At the time of the performance, the piece reminded me heavily of Johnathan Harvey’s *Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco* (1980), a piece which (I think) was featured as part of the repertoire of DXARTS 461. I studied Harvey’s piece extendedly at some point and I. learned about his use of the sounds of the bell, as well as the voice of his son, and the analysis and reconstruction of both sound sources. Similarly, Chowning reconstructed the human voice through additive synthesis and recreated its spectral qualities. What was very fascinating to me was that in both works, a very similar timbre and set of spectral qualities were achieved. What is more, this reconstruction of the voices was not entirely perfect. But this imperfection resulted in a certain overarching sense of ambiguity within the entire piece, where one could not pinpoint the exact source of the sounds. Were these recordings of human voices or synthesized versions of them? Where was the line at which these voices could be differentiated from the other sounds present? I realized I was not able to answer many of these questions while listening to the piece in the theater, but this is exactly what made it so fascinating. I believe Harvey achieves a similar effect in *Mortuos Plango* wherein, over the duration of the piece, the sounds of the bell and the boy’s voice intertwine, their spectral characteristics morph and transform (I remember Harvey spoke of “turning the bell inside out”), and, at the end, one is left with a sea of sounds that are somewhat similar to both the bell and the boy’s voice.

Now, although the two pieces are quite similar in the ways mentioned above, they also differ in many respects. Considering the topics of form and sound sources already explored above, there is one stark difference between the two works, namely in the inclusion of an exposition of initial material in Harvey’s piece. That is, in the beginning of the work, we hear clear and distinct sounds that identify the bell and the boy’s vocals. At this point, the differentiation of the two sounds is quite easy: the bell *really* sound like a bell and the vocals *really* sound like a child singing. And by the time we reach the end of the piece, this distinction no longer comes easily. In contrast, Chowing’s piece—as far as I can remember it—does not exhibit the same clear trajectory of the sound transformation where one sees the transformation of recorded sounds into synthesized ones. Instead, what we have is a through–composed form of sounds unfolding through compositional spaces. I am not advocating for one over the other, but rather just addressing a difference I notice across the two works.

All in all, *Stria* is heavily reminiscent of *Mortuos Plango* by virtue of its use of timbre, form, and its methodology of computer synthesis. I think the use of ambiguity adds a great deal of substance to both pieces, but especially Chowing’s. If we imagine a rendition of this piece wherein the sound of the voice was extremely clear and perfect (say, with the help of AI), I do not think it would have the same caliber of artistic value, simply because all the magic and mystery would be eliminated and all that would be left is a highlighting of technological mastery. And, as it seemed to me, this notion of all technical proficiency and no aesthetic deliberation is something that *Stria* (but not *Turenas* (1972), for instance) avoids—which is a reason for why it was ultimately my favorite piece in the program.