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MUSC109: Introduction to Experimental Music

13 December 2017

A Little Louder?

In grand ceremony, the stage doors of Crowell Concert Hall opened to reveal Professor Neely Bruce seated at a grand piano, his arm hovering over too many keys. As expected, he went on to hit the keys all at once, but his reading of John Cage's *Winter Music* transcended typical replicative performance because it treated the music as a holistic art, encompassing the wavelengths produced and reproduced by piano keys as well as the numerous physicalities involved in performance. This is where and why my *Musicircus* composition initially failed, since the hectic concert necessitated music that filled the room using every physical quality while my composition sat still and quiet in a nook. In this sense, *Musicircus* is a showcase of experimental composition, where prepared or subtle pieces fade away due to overall sonic overload such that artists must utilize other techniques to fight for attention (or not if they so choose!). Thus, *Musicircus* simultaneously serves as an introduction and capstone to experimental music education, since it presents the idea that music can come from a vast array of techniques whilst also providing a tangible confirmation for ongoing students that compositional process is perhaps the most vital and interesting component of experimental music.

Discussion about experimental pieces often resorts to comparison with one or two fundamental canonical compositions, such as John Cage's *4'33"* or Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*. Cage's *4'33"* depends heavily on the live aspect of performance, as the piece forces the listener to become aware of the room and the people in it in terms of physical presence as well as acoustic qualities (particularly that of unachievable silence). Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*

exemplifies that simple compositional techniques can achieve extremely interesting results, and a performer can easily replicate the piece's compositional feedback process in a different distinct acoustic environment. We can see that the pieces elucidate physical and technical aspects of experimental music, which in turn help to define the performances during *Musicircus*.

I composed my *Musicircus* composition, *Turn It Up a Little Louder*, by drawing ideas from Lucier's technique and asking the question, "What does it mean for something to be loud or obvious?" I played with how digital audio is stored by cramming in as much information into a restricted amplitude in the efforts of increasing loudness when the actual decibels remained the same. This was all good in theory, but the piece faced practical issues since it ignored what Cage revealed in *4'33"*, that other bodies were in the space. I had initially thought to record and play back the sound produced in the room, but the room was so sonically and visually disparate that my piece blended in and faded out of sight. Hence, I ironically answered my question for what it means to be loud or obvious by composing a piece that waned from sound and sight of other performances.

After witnessing my piece fail on its first run-through, I watched other pieces and asked, "What does it mean for music to be interesting?" As a student in experimental music, this question essentially became, "What makes 'good' experimental music?" Michael Nyman tries to define experimental music by beginning with Cage primarily because Cage emphasized the performance and interactivity of music as exemplified in *4'33"*. Nyman writes, "...as Cage's statements show it would be foolish to try and separate sound from the aesthetic, conceptual, philosophical, and ethical considerations that the music enshrines" (2). Thus, as I watched a performance of George Brecht's *Drip Music* during *Musicircus*, I found myself intrigued despite barely hearing the resulting noise. I was not intrigued due to the visual component, but rather due to the compositional process the visual component revealed. This was like the pieces in

Ichiyonagi's *Distance*, since the nature of the piece (i.e. instruments performed from a set distance) revealed how the resulting sounds came about. What perhaps then makes "good" experimental compositions is closely related to Nyman's definition of experimental music, where the process is just as important as result.

The process behind my piece was completely opaque, so in my second run-through I aimed to add transparency to my technique. Instead of layering recordings to create louder and louder white noise, I recorded the room in small segments and looped the recordings back to bring attention to the noise in the space. Alvin Lucier comments briefly on Steve Reich's piece *Come Out* saying, "The composer doesn't decide what's happening from moment to moment" (104). By looping the room, I hoped to appeal to the other composers and performers in the room by drawing attention to their performances and increasing a general self-awareness of the sounds we made in the same space. I had translated my digital process into something more audibly apparent, doubly accentuating the loud and obvious performances already existent in the space.

For a newcomer (of which they were several), the entire event probably seemed ridiculous. A man (Michael Pestel) played the "Broominette," which looks like a broom with some sort of woodwind instrument built into it. He swept across the stage with additional wind-powered instruments in his nose and a rattling toy in his hand. This piece is perhaps not as easily replicated as Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*, but it similarly reveals that simple ideas can lead to very interesting results. In this case, the Broominette combined a musical and a janitorial instrument. For a newcomer, Pestel's performance and others eliminated potential interpreted pretention than if the pieces were performed alone and felt the need to be taken seriously. In the *Musicircus* space, *Winter Music*, *Drip Music*, and the Broominette asked little of the audience than to just have fun, watch, and listen, so the audience had fun, watched, and listened.

Works Cited

Lucier, Alvin. *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012. Print.

Nyman, Michael. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.