
Coursework commentary

2017–2018

CO3346 Sound and music

Coursework assignment 1

General remarks

This unit is structured on a topic basis through the subject guide. The coursework assignments this year were designed to allow students to explore concepts of randomness and chance in more depth, and to produce a sonic artefact as the outcome of their investigation.

The first coursework assignment involved exploring background material in the area of randomness, within the context of sound and music, as well as making use of the material about swarms and developing a practical implementation. The second coursework assignment required finding out about the work of John Cage, a significant figure in music and chance.

At level 6, examiners expect a higher quality response to questions, as this is the final level of the degree programme. Students are also expected to perform more independent work in order to achieve the requirements of the assignments, and to be able to submit reports and essays of high quality. This year, there were a handful of excellent submissions for both coursework assignments, but there were also a disappointing number of mediocre ones, especially in the first, where it seemed that students did not make the effort to read broadly. This resulted in essays that were very narrowly focused, and correspondingly, for the second, in artefacts that were not especially creative. It is extremely important that students investigate the subject matter in depth, especially at level 6, and do not simply follow what seems to be the easiest path to submitting work.

A large number of students submitted essays that had a list of references, but no citation in the essay at all. It is not sufficient to simply note your sources at the end. Proper academic writing has to ensure that claims made and arguments posed, as well as information given, are clearly linked to the sources from which they are derived, and this needs to be done in the body of the essay.

This year, examiners were pleased to note that the required submission format was well adhered to.

Comments on specific questions

Randomness in generative music

For this coursework assignment, students were expected to develop an understanding of randomness and chance in the creative process, and in particular, in making music. They were also expected to delve more deeply into the material about swarm music that is in the subject guide, in a practical exercise that linked to creativity. In general, the better submissions included reference to a wider range of appropriate sources, correctly cited.

Part A involved learning more about the area, by reading various sources and answering questions about particular topics. The first question of Part A was

generally attempted well, with many students obtaining all available marks for their description of randomness. However for the second question, which required an essay, only a small handful provided a good essay. In particular, only a few students linked their essay to their description given in answer to the first question.

There were three excellent essays, however, which discussed the concepts as well as including some viewpoints which were clearly justified. One student, for example, noted that most musicians see randomness and chance as the same thing, while acknowledging that Cage himself did not, and that the distinction was central to his work on aleatoric music.

Another student posed the question of why aleatoric music should even be of interest; they then went on to give some answers that were linked to the literature. For example, they noted that Cage felt that his compositions should be experienced by the listener (rather than containing particular communications that he wanted the listener to understand). Cage believed this would be achieved by leaving what the listener actually hears to chance, to some degree. Because this is done in visual arts, poetry and dance, the student felt that doing it in music is reasonable too.

A particularly good essay discussed the fact that aleatoric music can often produce dissonance, and it can be useful in the question of aesthetics, and what we might consider noise versus actual music.

Another good essay linked the work of Jacobs in indeterminate music to Cage's music of chance. Most essays did mention Cage's interest in and use of the I-Ching, and most students also mentioned Mozart's Game of Dice in their discussions.

Good essays mentioned the work of Xenakis as well as that of Cage, and other composers as well as creative work in other artforms that relate to chance. These are essays that do not simply produce summaries of found material, but draw together links; and essays that pose and answer questions.

Part B required an explicit discussion of randomness in algorithmic composition. Again, many essays were mediocre, but there were also a couple of excellent submissions which examined the topic in a critical and focused way. One student discussed some of the challenges in the area, but balanced their discussion with the benefits of including randomness in such compositions. Again, this was all justified with appropriate citation.

Discussions of uniqueness, innovation, and improvisation were included in some essays, as well as the ideas of aesthetic appeal. One student also included some technological aspects, which was an interesting idea.

The final part, Part C, required the implementation of the work on Swarm Music that is given in the subject guide, and then an exploration of some of the concepts that came up in the previous parts of the coursework assignment.

Most students managed to complete the implementation, and produced a decent working swarm system. A handful of students did not provide a separate basic implementation, and only submitted their exploration work. A larger number submitted working systems that had no comments, thereby losing marks and demonstrating a lack of understanding of the importance of comments in the coding process.

A few students provided excellent and imaginative explorations, and supported these with insightful discussions of what they had done, and what they had discovered. It is important to present conclusions that are clearly justified by the work that has been done. One very good example devised two explorations that were linked in the concept of reducing variability. The

two different explorations reduced the variability in two different ways – the first by reducing variability between two notes, and the second by changing how the swarm is sampled – and then evaluating the interest in the music generated. An excellent overall evaluation of the Swarm approach was also provided, with strong substantiated conclusions.

Finally, not all students included sound examples with their submissions. It is always a good idea to include some examples of output from your system if possible, and discuss them in the context of what has been asked for.