Book Reviews

Emmerson, Simon. *Living Electronic Music.*

Ashgate Publishing, 2007 (195 p., ISBN 0754655482)

Reviewed by Valérie Vivancos

Simon Emmerson's book *Living Electronic Music* seems to be drawing a rhizomatic topology of the elements that play a significant part in defining the live performance of electronic music today. The tone of the essay is alternately academic, scientific and journalistic, and the plural topics tackled in its six main chapters and numerous subsections overlap so as to achieve a quasi-exhaustive exploration of the subject. It is, however, important to note that Emmerson's perspective is deeply rooted in the acousmatic genre, a trait presumably induced by his teaching "Music, Technology and Innovation" at De Montfort University and his practice as an electroacoustic composer. Thus, references to acousmatic music, its technical analysis (studio composition, live diffusion, spatialisation and loudspeaker interface) and its pioneers and current practitioners (Schaeffer, Smalley) play a central part in his stance.

Drawing from the fields of research, observation and experience, Emmerson attempts to identify the acoustic, psychological and organic elements as well as the paradoxes and intricacies of live performances in the "electronic age." The notions of body, compositional intention, presence, immersion and degrees of spatial proximity are all carefully examined through the prism of non-chronological historical revolutions (rather than evolutions) and aesthetic theories often borrowed from visual arts paradigms.

Emmerson's analysis of the compositional process (prior to a "live" diffusion or improvisation) is toying with the "disappearance of the author" central to 20th-century avant-gardes. This is conducted through various automated electronic devices, but also through conceptual, systematic, and generative processes, scientific models and random productions including Cage's experiments, serialism and *elektronische Musik*. Subsequently, it also acknowledges the return of the personal print of the composer through the likes of anecdote and narration (Ferrari).

An important part of the book is then granted to the body as a sounding element. Live events imply the presence of "a human" coupled with an operation

of "spontaneous creativity" in a non-mechanical way that also involves the audience as a receptive component within the performative area. Emmerson shifts from the quasi-static experience of an acousmatic diffusion (of a piece that has been composed in the studio-instrument) to the micro-gestures of a laptop performer that still catch the audience's attentive gaze. A third category includes the moving body immersed in the Dionysian (almost taboo) rhythms of electronic dance music and its fleeting IDM trend. In this instance, references are made to Aphex Twin and a few like-minded contemporaries as accepted illustrations of the popular "electronica" genre of the 90s. There, Emmerson interestingly forecasts that "[i]n times to come there may be increasing exchange between electronica and 'academic' electronic music strains but aims and ideas can remain different without mutual distrust" (87).

The final chapters of *Living Electronic Music* are devoted to more literal acoustic preoccupations of the various scales of the performing space, approaches to multi-channel sound projection, new interfaces, and recording and amplifying devices—issues that can be of more specific interest to technically curious learners and practising performers.

Nick Collins and Julio d'Escriván, eds. The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music.

Hardcover, December 2007, ISBN 978-0-521-86861-7, 312 pages, illustrated, notes, index; Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK; telephone in USA (800) 872-7423; electronic mail orders@cambridge.org; World Wide Web www.cambridge.org

Reviewed by Michael Barnhart

(Editor's Note: This review also appears in the Fall 2009 issue (Vol. 33, No. 3) of Computer Music Journal.)

This book is a recent addition to the popular and extensive Cambridge Companion series. In the introduction, the editors propose to "deliver access to a powerful territory of inspiration and excitement" (p. 2), and deliver it they do. This survey deftly escapes the common pitfall of some similarly aimed works which, though bursting with fascinating facts about historical electronic music, ultimately fail to illustrate the aims that inspired such efforts in a way that meaningfully connects them to areas of current creative effort. Rather than simply serving up the history, this book invites and assumes participation and offers a diverse range of perspectives for

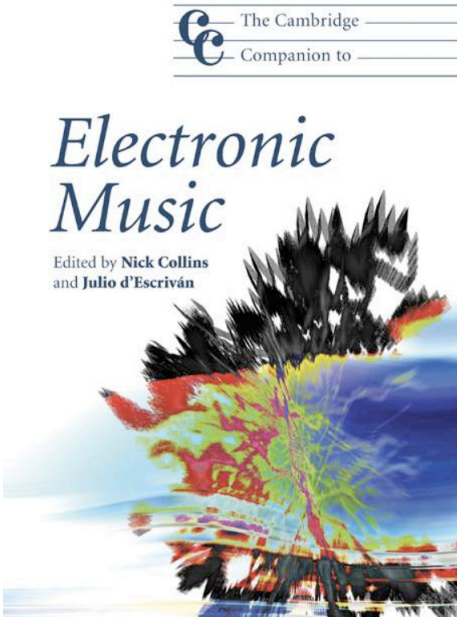
consideration. Restating content found in other familiar works is largely avoided in favor of presenting new ways of thinking about both past and present endeavor and "less widely represented themes from the research front" (p. 2).

The structure of *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music* consists of an Introduction followed by thirteen chapters grouped around three major thematic areas.

Part One, *Electronic Music in Context*, contains four chapters. In the first, entitled "The origins of electronic music," Andrew Hugill finds the nascent stirrings of desire for sound technology in passages of visionary fiction from the 17th through 19th centuries. It is a refreshing vantage point from which to begin. Taken together with his discussion of early inventions and their transformation into new expressive media, he illustrates the emergence of real sonic art from the collective imagination.

In Chapter Two, "Electronic music and the studio," Margaret Schedel looks at the importance of the early studio to aesthetic development and the changing definition of the studio concept. "The studio is no longer defined by its contents; rather it has become a context created by the user" (p. 37).

Nicolas Collins examines the development



of "Live electronic music" in the third chapter, acknowledging the important experiments of 20th century composer-performers and smartly including often-neglected subjects such as turntablism and circuit bending.

Ge Wang's "A history of programming and music" concludes Part One. He addresses pre-computer mechanical automation, the development of early computer music languages, contemporary real-time systems and future directions, looking at how "the programming language acts as a mediator between human intention and the corresponding bits and instructions that make sense to a computer" (p. 55).

Interleaved with the three major subject areas are two engaging collections of artists' statements following Chapters Four and Ten. Together, they offer a sampling of the creative perspectives of thirty electronic musicians from across a wide array of experiences.

This excerpt by Alejandro Viñao offers a glimpse:

> Our serious music world has disowned one of its greatest traditions: that of being at the forefront of technological transformation in music. Far from inspiring change and invention like composers of the past, most composers of the last sixty or seventy years have attempted to create the music of today with the technology of another time (p. 187).

So does this one by Seong-Ah Shin:

> Most students called the studio the 'ghost room' because of the strange sounds that emanated from that dark corner of the building. However, for me it was the most interesting room in the department, with new sounds and fascinating equipment (p. 82).

Part Two, *Electronic Music in Practice*, is comprised of six chapters (Chapters 5-10), each dipping into a different conceptual stream of contemporary work. "Interactivity and live computer music" by Sergi Jordà covers the computer as instrument and the composer as instrument builder, and catalogs various means of performance interface and their inherent possibilities/limitations.

Karlheinz Essl's "Algorithmic composition" presents a useful overview of the field, linking pre-computer process musics that involved style rules, serialism and chance operations to ongoing real-time experimentation. Chapter 7, "Live audiovisuals," co-authored by Amy Alexander and Nick Collins, examines the complex history of multimedia performance.
Julian Rohruber's chapter on "Network music" "covers a broad range from collaborative composition environments to sound installations and improvised music ensembles," giving special attention to the history and significance of communications technology in art (p. 140).

Julio d'Escriván's chapter, "Sound and the moving image," addresses electronic music for film, television and video games. Among other points of interest, it contains a favorable reappraisal of the importance of Raymond Scott's innovative commercial music and studio techniques during the 1950s and 60s and

closes with a provocative section entitled "Future media?" The final chapter of Part Two is Nick Collins' "Musical robots and listening machines." A subsection entitled "Four interactive improvisation systems" gives detailed profiles of selected composers' strategies. Other subsections include material on machine listening and accompaniment.

Part Three, *Analysis and Synthesis*, contains three chapters. In the first, "Computer generation and manipulation of sounds," Stefania Serafin provides a well-organized overview of the categories of synthesis techniques and their origins, ending with an exploration of future possibilities. In the second, Petri Toiviainen reviews "The psychology of electronic music," explaining "some of the important aspects of perception and cognition that can be regarded as useful for gaining better understanding of the perception of electronic music" (p. 231).

Natasha Barrett's substantial finale entitled "Trends in electroacoustic music" "identifies these trends and their compositional and aesthetic circumstances, forming a springboard for a new composer to the genre" (p. 232). The main text is preceded by a detailed timeline (beginning with Pythagoras and ending with contemporary video games) that highlights many foundational contributions to and developments in electronic music. Curious readers will welcome the selected discographies and suggestions for further reading that follow many of the chapters, as well as additional notes and a lengthy reference list.

The diversity of topics, accessible format, careful referencing, and the high quality of the contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to Electronic Music* guarantee that it will be of some interest to nearly every reader of *Array*.

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