

**ICMC 2015 Concert Reviews**  
**University of North Texas, Denton**

**Sunday 27 September**  
**Concert 8**  
**Merrill Ellis Intermedia Theatre**  
**13:30**

by Jason Fick

The afternoon concerts in Merrill Ellis Intermedia Theatre (MEIT) at ICMC 2015 were the most appealing to me. This was largely because the events were all sixty minutes in length, and the sound immersion in this space was ideal for electroacoustic music. I have always loved fixed media pieces and was most fascinated by the Monday and Sunday afternoon concerts. Having recently attended Jonty Harrison's Illustrated Demonstration on Diffusion and Adrian Moore's paper on Cross-Modality in Multi-Channel Acousmatic Music, I believe that concerts 8 and 13 (reviewed later) best exemplified current practices in fixed media, including well-defined gestures, highly directional movement, and vivid orchestration paired with rich aural sensations.

Concert 8, presented on Sunday at 1:30,

including one for image and sound. I found these compositions very stimulating because each embodied a highly defined character. The first piece, **Modernist** by Ryan Maguire, was written for video and 2-channel electroacoustic music. According to the composer, 'the audio is comprised of lost .mp3 compression material from the song Tom's Diner'. I found Mr. Maguire to be very creative in his abstraction of the source, and as a result, he constructed several beautifully dense, noisy textures. As the piece opened, the audience was introduced to active material presented in both sonic and visual media. The individual elements were constantly evolving, containing great variety in rhythmic spacing, density, and gesture. This piece had a wonderful essence, and while his materials seemed primed for development, its brevity left me wanting more.

**Within and Without** was composed for 8-channel electroacoustic music and diffused live from the center of the room by the composer, Andrew Walters. I thoroughly enjoyed this piece: his materials were highly inventive, vivid in nature, and shaped in a stimulating manner. He stated in the program that the source material came from the unwanted sounds that were made while playing the piano. 'I took these sounds we normally do not notice or try to eliminate and created this piece'. The

composition opens with dense textural material, which was diffused around the space. As the piece progressed, each idea transitioned from various dense and sparse abstractions in a logical and exciting manner. The composer's use of diffusion contained a wide range of spatial perspectives, which characterized the experience quite nicely.

Judy Klein's **Railcar** for 8-channel electroacoustic music made an extremely impactful statement. The composer framed the experience with her program note, which read: 'at one end of the railcar was a glass bin, filled with paper clips. I added the few I had brought with me, in memory of the lives of so many'. This acousmatic work was highly effective in conveying an engaging sense of movement and breadth. The piece was calm and played at a low intensity throughout. After a series of meaningful progressions, a woman's voice enters from the left side of the room. The woman described the experience of arriving in Poland on a train and losing sight of her family amidst the chaos. The orchestration of this moment was very powerful, and it presented the audience with a poignant aural commentary on the effects of such a devastating loss.

The noisy, abrasive, and highly exciting presentation of Dan Tramte's **Euthanasia** for 8-channel

electroacoustic music provided a welcome contrast from the emotional intensity of the previous piece. 'You're on your death bed. The only two sounds you hear—your nervous system and the machine keeping you alive—are now your entire world', writes the composer. The sound material contained several distortions—noises, pops, clicks, and extreme frequencies—and Tramte's shaping of these materials was very inviting. The piece began with beeps and clicks, an obvious reference to hospital machines. As it progressed, these various distortions were beautifully shaped and orchestrated in both active and calming textures. The narrative was very engaging, and Tramte's live diffusion further strengthened the identities of his sound characters. This presentation was one of the most artful forms of noise music featured at the conference this year.

The strong sense of motion and direction created a highly stimulating effect in **Cercles et Surfaces** for 8-channel electroacoustic music by Elsa Justel. As the composer states, this piece 'answers to the principle of musical gestures in space, creating a flow of seemingly chaotic sound patterns that approach each other and meet in arborescence creating a new order. The multitrack discourse contributes to create a polyphonic texture that accompany the gestural movements in the space. While Justel was not present to diffuse the work live, the fixed media

version contained great variety in spatial perspective. The colorful and active interaction among the various materials in the opening struck me immediately. Although this composition was a bit long for my particular taste, I was fascinated by the meaningful construction of gesture, detailed spatialization tactics, wide range of timbre, and brilliant orchestration.

In my opinion, the most electrifying piece on the program was **Nothing that Breathes** by John Nichols III for 8-channel electroacoustic music. I was captivated from the opening attack to the final release. In the program note the composer describes the sound material and aesthetics of the piece as related to wind and breathing. This composition featured many thrilling swooping and crashing gestures that ramp into the foreground and terminate in a goal-directed manner. Nichols provided great variety among these hits through varying the duration, amplitude, and textural activity within each instance. The composer diffused the piece live and presented a highly directional and invigorating performance to close the concert. I enjoyed this event immensely because of the strongly defined character of each work and the masterful programming on behalf of the organization committee.

**Sunday 27 September**  
**Concert 12**  
**22:00**  
**Lyric Theatre**

*by Jorge Variego*

Remarkably enough given the selection process at ICMC, the program of Concert 12 offered a clear consistency both in the age of the featured composers and in the year their works were composed. For as well as being of the same generation, all of the pieces that were performed were written within the last year. This statistical anomaly did not influence the aesthetic of the concert, however, which was sonically very diverse.

**froTH** (2014) by Elizabeth Hoffman started off with an invitation to meditate through a series of subtle improvisatory textures built by the flutist and the computer. The success of the piece resided in the space Hoffman created between the flautist's phrasing and the water-like granular textures. They achieved the effect of drawing the listener closer and closer to the naïve sound of the low register piccolo part.

**Two Wings** (2014) by Michael Rothkopf opened with a bassoon solo enhanced by electronics (it could have been the other way around!) while the soprano sung both in English and Spanish, suggesting

a three-part counterpoint. For moments, the computer seemed to provide an improvisational canvas for the voice and the bassoon. In other instances, the electronics enriched the timbre of the live performers. Well balanced and performed, this work could be the starting point of a multimedia opera.

Third in the program came my piece, **La Jungla** (2014), which presented a wild soundscape created through computer automation. The speaker configuration in the Lyric Theater allowed me to play with sound diffusion, creating a trajectory that slowly moved from the wide back to the narrow front field.

Tim Kreger's **Firehose** (2014) followed, its sound palette presenting a stark contrast with my own piece. Firehose is a real-time improvisation using the Twitter live stream API, which provides access to the live stream head, also known as the firehose. This work uses a filtered form of the latter to generate a musical stream for the live performer to react to. Featuring a live electric guitar and visuals, Kreger projected short tweets generated live from Twitter relating to visceral emotional topics: love, happiness, loneliness and so on. These apparently disjointed tweets invited the audience to complete them, whilst the striking minimalism of the colors helped one to build one's own version of the story.

**unfold** (2015) by Rolf Wöhrmann focused on rapid movements of clean sounds in space.

This algorithmic composition is based on the idea of densities that evolve and change radically, always challenging the listener's ability to identify the sonic objects. The trajectories served to invited the listener to follow each imaginary path through space. It invited me to get lost and find my own way out.

**v->t->d** (2014) by Christopher Jette was a work of engaging simplicity realised with the utmost complexity. A projected video showed the live saxophonist from different angles, filtered and distorted through various image processes. The instrumentalist appeared to control all the data streams: both the video processing of his performance, and the electronic sound processing applied to his instrument. For example, the amplitude of his playing controlled the quantity of 'image grains' that we could see on the screen. After a few iterations, I started to appreciate the way the distinct coupling of image and sound changed my orientation to the piece as a listener.

With **past every exit ...** (2014), Jason Palamara brought a monolithic block of sound that served to punctuate the concert thus far. Containing almost no formal variation, the piece offered a highly intense free improvisatory texture (think

free jazz of the 60's) from beginning to end.

In **Imaginary Universe** (2014), Takuro Shibayama exploited the distinctive array of loudspeakers in the Lyric Theatre to create an environment that was equal parts concert performance and sound installation. Utilising an automated diffusion patch created in Max, the work drowned the audience in massive moving sound structures. The most novel part of the piece for me was in Shibayama's application of subtle modulation to the arrival times of the sounds at each loudspeaker. It achieved the effect of making each audience member's spatial experience unique.

**Telepresent Storm: Rita** (2013) by Thomas Rex Beverly was an audiovisual piece that used sonified and manipulated data harvested from storm 'Rita'. Far from being a metaphorical representation of the sonic experience of a storm, the piece was an experiment in translating one set of data to another. Hearing and appreciating the composer's mapping choices – from atmospheric data to sound – was the chief interest of the piece for me.

The final piece, **Shared Buffer** (2014), was a collaborative live-coding performance that made me rethink the entire concept of musical expectation.

Seeing lines of code written in real time invited the listener to imagine what sounds might come, or how they might affect or transform the sounds that we were listening to, before the code was executed. From remote locations on the globe, Eldad, David, Ian, Alex and Alexandra managed to keep the audience enraptured, in continual anticipation of sounds not yet heard.

**Monday 28 September  
Concert 13  
Merrill Ellis Intermedia Theatre  
13:00**

*by Jason Fick*

Concert 13 was presented in the MEIT on Monday at 1 pm. There were six pieces on the program—five for fixed media (one with video) and one for laptop. I found this concert appealing for the ways in which the pieces maintained a strong relationship to their original source materials. James Caldwell's **Deep Pocket Music** (Nos. 11-16) was composed for 2-channel electroacoustic music and featured gestures created from sound sources that came from his pocket. These included 'finger cymbals, a pencil run over the rungs on the back of a chair, dresser handles, the bag from a bunch of apples from the grocery store, and marbles poured into the bottom of a hand drum'. Each miniature was very alluring due to

creatively shaped sound entities, which I thought transitioned very well with each other. Each movement was played attacca, and they were all strong musical statements. With that said, I wish the composer had presented a more engaging spatial mix.

**Trittico Mediterraneo** was composed for 2-channel electroacoustic music and diffused live by the composer, Konstantinos Karathanasis. He states in the program note that this work is 'a three-movement piece inspired by summer themes'. The first movement was a brilliantly orchestrated section crafted from bell samples. The second segment featured the sounds of children playing paired with abstracted derivative manipulations. The material of the third section, made from the sound of cicadas, was quite captivating, first introduced as a transitional gesture, then becoming the foundation of the final movement. I was quite impressed with the detail and clarity in terms of spatialization, especially considering that this was a two-channel piece. This composition was very pleasing due to its intricate textures, vivid sound characters, and invigorating transitions.

The third piece on the program was **Accretion Flows**, composed by John Thompson for video and 8-channel sound. According to the composer, the piece presents a tightly coupled

'relationship between the audio and the visual. This coupling is accomplished by allowing an underlying system to act as the substrate from which is medium will grow. In **Accretion Flows**, audio and visual particles are created and directed within a gravitational system. The composition is the organized sequencing and layering of these patterns and orbits'. The sound and visual elements of this piece regularly mimicked each other. Both media were particle-like in nature and contained a great amount of diversity among their textures. The music was comprised of active patterns with popping and snapping sounds that were blended with sustained tones. The video element was equally busy, its material including segments of dots, lines, moving sketch-like doodling, and firework-like shapes. I enjoyed the great diversity that existed among the dense and elaborate textures presented throughout the piece.

Kyle Vanderburg's **Reverie of Solitude** for 2-channel electroacoustic music was a reflective piece that was diffused live by the composer. He states, this piece 'serves as both an exploration of and an invitation to reverie; providing a space wherein the listener is asked to reconsider their idea of what it means to daydream'. The composition opened with the sound of a crowd and transitioned to a train passing, before leading to river water, and then returning again to the crowd

idea to close the work. The progression of the piece was slow with each instance of ambient recording juxtaposed with constructed shapes that bubbled up and eventually overtook the previous idea. Overall, I found the transitions interesting, but this work lacked the engagement of the other pieces on the program.

**Wind Chimes Clatter through the Mist and Fog** by Jon Fielder written for 8-channel electroacoustic music had a great sense of purpose and an alluring progression. As the composer states, 'the piece plays with the concept of distance and perception of space'. I was captivated from the opening moment when vivid, chime-like sounds with a spring delay appeared from different positions throughout the hall. After this idea, we are presented with a calmer and more ethereal section, also containing a great deal of chimes. Throughout this segment, a few goal-directed ideas appeared, and the ending contained some low and juicy granulated materials. The sound characters were extremely rich and the gestures were very inventive. I was captivated by the wonderful sense of breadth, shaping, and vibrant orchestration in this piece.

The concert concluded with Kerry Hagan's **s/d** for 8-channel computer music with procedural algorithms rendered in real-time. This composition

was noisy, active, and grabbed my attention immediately. I was fascinated by the intricate textures Ms. Hagan created, as one was able to perceive many layers of colorful noise characters with a great amount of diversity in rhythm, articulation, and dynamics. Hagan used stochastic theories and algorithms to devise the material in real-time to an excellent effect. The layering was very detailed and quite pleasing, with great care spent on orchestration.

In closing, each of the pieces on concerts 8 and 13 paid great attention to spatial perspective, orchestration, gesture, and sonic identity. These events were very appealing, and the works therein epitomized the techniques addressed in the two presentations on aesthetic approaches to fixed media by Jonty Harrison and Adrian Moore. I believe that the programming of each work was well thought out, and the duration of afternoon concerts allowed one the adequate time to effectively process and fully appreciate each composition.