

COMBINING PERFORMERS WITH SOUNDTRACKS: SOME PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

by Barry Truax

School of Communication

Simon Fraser University

Burnaby, BC Canada

truax@sfu.ca

Abstract

The author describes his creative experiences over the past 45 years in combining live performers with fixed electroacoustic soundtracks, and discusses the problems inherent in such mixed works, as well as the compositional approaches that create new relationships between the performer and the pre-recorded material. The article concludes with advice on practical considerations that are typically involved in such works, for both the composer and performer, within an evolving technological and artistic context.

1. Introduction

I have been intrigued by the possibilities afforded by combining a live performer with an electroacoustic soundtrack ever since I became a composer as a graduate student in 1969. In fact, my first electroacoustic work, *Children* (1969), was a setting of poems by e. e. cummings for soprano and electronic tape. Since then, much has happened in the field of electroacoustic and computer music, particularly with regard to live performance practice (Emmerson, 2009), but the "mixed" combination of live performer(s) with some form of "fixed media" has often been met with strong prejudices. One bias comes from acousmatic music practitioners who tend to avoid mixed works, presumably because their basic concept of acousmatic sounds coming from unseen sources would seem to preclude the aesthetic viability of including a visible performer (even though the tension that could result might be theatrically suggestive). The more serious critique is that the fixed quality of a pre-recorded soundtrack (or "tape" in earlier years) precludes interactivity which seems to be valued above all else. This objection takes different forms, depending on whether it comes from the perspective of the performer (for instance, feeling "trapped" by the fixed timing imposed by the soundtrack), the composer (whose aesthetic goals may require more fluidity or "freedom," up to the point where the performed result may be completely different every time), or the audience listener. I once had a reviewer say she was "depressed" to

experience the setting of a love poem for a live performer and soundtrack; I wondered what her reaction would have been if I had stated that the performer (who clearly was intimately interacting with the soundtrack) was actually triggering those sounds, not just reacting to them? If the listener perceives an interaction between a performer and the musical accompaniment, does it really matter whether the latter is fixed or live?

2. Why Combine Live and Pre-Recorded?

Here I will only speak about my own preferences and from my own experiences, while acknowledging that other composers and performers will adopt different positions and practices. My strongest impetus for creating mixed works is that skilled live performers provide a level of musicality and impressive virtuosity that is entirely different from what is possible with electroacoustic means, and therefore their contribution can be regarded as complementary. By definition, electroacoustic music is created with sounds coming from loudspeakers (and therefore only re-embodied in those speakers), whereas the live performer's sounds are always correlated with observable and highly embodied physical gestures (the only exception being perhaps the organist hidden away in an organ loft). In fact, one of the biggest challenges in creating electroacoustic sounds is to establish a language in which gesture can be perceived. According to Trevor Wishart (1996), gesture is an imposed morphology that arises from a continuous input of energy, such as breath, voice, bowing, rubbing, etc., as distinct from an intrinsic morphology created by impact energy that releases the resonant properties of an object, as with percussion or plucked instruments. Listeners are familiar with that range of energy-gesture relationships in the acoustic world, and may feel confused at how to interpret an abstract world of sound created, for instance, by a synthesis and/or compositional algorithm.

Whatever the sonic repertoire, it is clear that the live performer provides not merely a visual focus for the audience, but can also act as a "persona" in their interaction with the soundtrack, with varying relationships I will discuss in the next section. This can lead to a sense of theatricality and drama, even though some performers, trained to perform only with musical skills, may be less comfortable taking on an acting role, whereas others may embrace it. However, since the performer inevitably draws visual focus, I tend to keep the accompanying soundtrack very strong and present, not ambient. My personal criterion is to create a soundtrack that is interesting to listen to on its own, yet leaves enough "space" for the live performer.

