

Input/ Output

- Theory



Bob Ostertag: Why Computer Music Sucks. 2001

Bob Ostertag: Why Computer Music Sucks

This paper was published in LMC, Texts on improvised and experimental Music from Resonance Magazine. Volume 5 Number 1



Fig.: Bob Ostertag

"Computer Music" per se is, at least for the moment, at something of a dead end. This is the result of a bizarre sort of inverse development over last few decades.

Back in the "old days," the electronic technology used in music was quite primitive, yet the range of music that was attempted was staggering, and a freewheeling spirit of adventure was prevalent.

Today, we have computers with technical capabilities inconceivable at the time of Varèse and the early works of Cage and Stockhausen. Yet as the technical capabilities have expanded, the range of musical possibilities which are being explored has become increasingly restricted.

Similarly, in the "old days" access to the electronic music-making technology was limited to a handful of individuals working in a few research institutions. Today, computers are ubiquitous in music. There is almost no recorded music that does not involve the use of a computer somehow or other, and the ever decreasing cost of the technology means that a bona fide home computer music studio is within the means of any erstwhile member of the middle class of the western world.

Yet just as computers' presence in music has mushroomed from nearly invisible to downright unavoidable, the range of music considered to be Computer Music has become increasingly fixed and rigid.

Why this contradictory evolution, which seems to impose social restrictions as fast as technology seems to offer new freedom?

Why this emergence of Computer Music, instead of an openness to all the musics which computers make possible?

Two reasons: one having to do with artistic stasis, and the other to do with social self-interest.

1. Artistic Stasis. For all the self-professed interest in using digital technology to create new musical forms, in fact the agenda of "computer music" quickly ossified around the concerns of the Western avant garde prevalent at the time of the introduction of computers into music (in fact, concerts which pre-dated the appearance of the computer in music): algorithmic composition (which is really a digital extension of serial music), and extended timbral exploration.

When considering the 287 works submitted for the Ars Electronica prize this year, it is remarkable how little the focus of Computer Music has strayed from these early concerns over the intervening decades. This is even more apparent when one considers that, formally speaking, the large majority of pieces involving computer response to live instrumentalist are simply variations in algorithmic composition. (Though also the influence of the increased interest in improvisation which has recently spread through the Western avant garde is also a factor, at least in some cases).

2. Social Self-Interest. The emergence of Computer Music as a thing we isolate off to consider on its own, to confer advanced academic degrees in, publish journals and organize conferences about, and award prizes to, is of course intimately linked to the careers, salaries, and prestige of the individuals and institutions which benefit. Here the logic of the inverse development of the broadening use of computers in music against the narrowing of the concerns of Computer Music at least has a clear and rational basis in the self-interest of those involved. In fact, it is a phenomenon seen time and time again in academia: the more an area of knowledge becomes diffused in the public, the louder become the claims of those within the tower to exclusive expertise in the field, and the narrower become the criteria become for determining who the "experts" actually are.

The cul-de-sac these trends have led "Computer Music" into is a considerably less enjoyable place to tarry due to a technological barrier that is becoming increasingly obvious: despite the vastly increased power of the technology involved, the timbral sophistication of the most cutting edge technology is not significantly greater than that of the most mundane and commonplace systems. In fact, after listening to the 287 pieces submitted to Ars Electronica, I would venture to say that the pieces created with today's cutting edge technology (spectral resynthesis, sophisticated phase vocoding schemes, and so on) have an even greater uniformity of sound among them than the pieces done on MIDI modules available in any music store serving the popular music market. This fact was highlighted during the jury session when it was discovered that a piece whose timbral novelty was noted by the jury as being exceptional was

discovered to have been created largely with old Buchla analogue gear.

The problem of greater technological power failing to produce more interesting timbral results would not be so central were it not for the fact discussed above that Computer Music has made timbral exploration its central concern. To put the matter in its bluntest form, it appears that the more technology is thrown at the problem, the more boring the results. People set out for new timbral horizons, get lost along the way in the writing of the code, the trouble-shooting of the systems, and the funding to make the whole thing possible, then fail to notice that the results do not justify the effort.

It is interesting to note that the jury for computer animation found an opposite result: in animation at least, the difference in quality between work done with cutting edge versus commonplace technology is immediately apparent to even the untrained observer. Even, in fact, to an 8-year old. Thus the success of Toy Story. In Computer Music, on the other hand, the merits of the works done with cutting edge versus commonplace technology are certainly opaque to the uninitiated, and often discernible only to those who have invested time and effort in acquiring expertise in the very same technology.

(It must be said, however, that due to the enormous financial returns which hinge on visual innovation, the resources thrown at computer animation dwarf those involved in even the most high end music systems. Who knows what might result if the resources put into developing the two hours of Toy Story animation were put into two hours of music?)

If, however, we leave the confines of the Computer Music tower and look at what is happening outside in the rest of world, what do we see? Computers are revolutionizing the way music is made.

Take dance club music, for example. Techno, hip-hop, trip-hop, trance, etc. Here we have genre upon sub-genre upon micro-genre of music which is based almost entirely upon, and impossible to conceive of without, the absolute regularity of tempo computers are capable of producing.

But this development is not limited to music with the regularity of beat of those I just mentioned. The funkiness of almost every groove on every Prince record would not have been possible without the timing resolution offered by computers. Or to go to a different extreme, the drum machine extravaganza's of Ikue Mori, with their almost absurdly complex tempo and meter juxtapositions, usually determined on the fly, are unthinkable without computers.

Or to take yet another development: automated mixing consoles and effects processors have brought a sea change in the subtlety and nuance possible in the mixing of popular music, as immediately becomes apparent upon comparing recordings made before and after their emergence. This has opened up a whole new range of studio artistry.

All these developments and more are cases in which the introduction of computers has revolutionized the way music is conceived, played, recorded, and appreciated, creating new genres, new fields of expertise, new forms of experiencing a performance, and so on. All of it is unimaginable without computers. And none of it is Computer Music.

And up to now we have not even added sampling into the discussion. Of all the ways that computers have been applied to music, sampling has had the most radical impact. Sampling has taken musique concrete, blown it open, and showered the debris down on the entire musical world. New genres have been spawned and existing ones changed forever. New terrains of collaboration and appropriation have been opened. Even more profoundly, fundamental notions of authorship and artistic ownership have been shattered, leaving for the moment no clear heir in their place.

It may not even be an exaggeration to say that the entire "post-modern" aesthetic has been shaped in important ways by this technology.

Yet sampling is not Computer Music. Why? Precisely because it sampling is everywhere. If sampling is the legitimate domain of any teenager working on the family Macintosh, no one can claim a monopoly on its knowledge. Thus it falls from the rarefied heights of Computer Music, its vast impact and consequences notwithstanding.

I wish to be very clear here: I am not arguing that the market in which popular music is bought and sold is a valid arbiter of artistic excellence. As a composer who has worked for years with no institutional connection or support, surviving on the fringes of the music market, I am acutely aware of how the market imposes its own constraints, and discourages the kinds of creativity that interest me the most. It is the weight of these very market constraints that make it so important that those musical arenas which operate according to non-market criteria be as open and flexible as possible.

The very existence of all those kids goofing around with sampling on the family Macintosh has helped to stir an interest in novel musical approaches in general and music made with computers in particular that is broader than ever.

Isn't it ironic? On the one hand we find market constraints squeezing popular music with an unprecedented vigour, and on the other hand we have a public with an equally unprecedented fascination with computers and their possibilities. And yet Computer Music can find no audience beyond those who make it.