

luvsound interview by Erik Schoster

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2005

Maximilian Marcoll is a german sound artist, composer, and software designer. I first discovered his work through his lovely set of externals for max/msp. His duo project dis.playce recently released a record on the german label Naivsuper.

He was kind enough to take some time to answer some questions and give us some insight into his unique approach to laptop improvisation.

++ When did you first get involved with electronic music? Were you already composing for acoustic instruments by then?

i started to write music in the age of about 12. when i started to study percussion at the academy of music in luebeck i met some members of the composition class there and some of them also did electronic music. at some point (few years later) i decided to learn csound and that got me started.

++ How has working with electronics and computers influenced (if at all) the way you approach writing for acoustic instruments? Your violin duo seems to me to be as much involved in what Kim Cascone calls an "aesthetic of failure" as it is in an acoustic tradition that might be traced to figures such as Xenakis, Stockhausen, or Lachenmann.

i think electronics have influenced my instrumental music in a lot of ways. first of all it has totally changed the way i perceive sound.

in almost all of my pieces (instrumental or electronic) there's some meta-level-concept in it. i like to have things happening on different layers at the same time. like in the violin duo, where the time proportions are self-similar in three levels. or in one of my recent electronic pieces where you have pulses in all aspects of the piece (plain pulses with clicks, (almost hidden) pulses in warm drone like noise sounds, pulses as frequent changes of sound colour, frequent occurrences of pulse agglomeration and so on). this kind of thinking was definitely introduced to me by electronic music. so the structural aspect of my music has changed, too. ... and in a lot more ways than i can think of at the moment.

well, i wouldn't say that my violin duo has anything to do with "aesthetics of failure". the question implies that playing noisy sounds on a violin is kind of a misuseage of the instrument. that's what "aesthetics of failure" is about: constructive and creative misuseage of technology. the violin was build for striking strings with a bow. i'm not doing anything else (apart from a few minor exceptions which are hopefully seen as proving the rule).

++ What composers or artists or works have influenced you the most?

to keep it short, (a list of favorites would be much longer...)

composers: bach, webern, stravinsky, bernhard lang, david tudor, reso kiknadze, roman pfeifer, hannes seidl

other arts: linda nordström, francis bacon, yves klein, peter "m." greenaway.

++ What do you listen to?

modern composition, jazz, funk, electronica, birds, improv, baroque, the kids in the flat above, drum n bass

++ How do you approach improvisation? What role does the laptop interface play in the way you perform?

improvisation means deciding what to play in the moment i play it. so i can't think about a minute of music for two weeks. as a result, i play things in an improvisation which i would never write in a composition. but that doesn't mean they are bad. improvising and composing are two completely different approaches to music. (which is why concepts like "real time composing" just don't work.) but they can influence each other in a very productive way.

the interface problem always persists. at one point i decided not to make an effort to communicate to the public what is actually happening in means of cause and effect. if i'll have an idea for working with sensors at some time i'll do it, but "shaking the magic glove" for non-musical reasons is not a solution for me. so i stick to my fader box... (the fader is an interface with a clear technical connotation. one could argue that using faders and knobs is one beer short of a sixpack because they simulate analog behavior and that is not what working with computers should be about. besides that, there (often) is no musical reason for choosing a fader or a knob. but i feel familiar with faders and knobs, so i use them.)

++ In your electronic music, do you ever work with scores?

that depends on what you mean by "score". i almost never write something in "classical" notation for an electronic piece, although it can be very interesting to see rhythms transcribed into classical notation. i recently made rhythms in csound or somewhere which i would probably never had written down in classical notation for an instrumental piece because they are just too simple for the eyes!

with dis.playce we write scores. not in the classical sense, but we always have a paper to fix what should happen when. (are we the only ones doing laptop performances playing from scores?)

++ In your group dis.playce, how do you go about your interpretations of theories or personages? Do you always work this way? Is there a visual element to your performances?

we try to transform ideas and theories we find interesting into music. for instance in the case of anna søhold - who is a researcher in the field of communication of insects (stridulation) - we collected recordings of insects (stridulation of cicadas) and made a piece out of them. the goal could be described as showing the music the cicadas play which is what a.s. has found out - that some insects actually "sing" for fun. sometimes we start with structural dispositions, but the main issue mostly is the sound material. this is more about dedication and inspiration.

the piece "das ende von amerika" (the end of america) is based on kafkas novel, which was another approach. and for our cd "R" we worked differently, too. on "R" every track has a "theme", a phenomenon the pieces is based on. this theme can be music specific, sound material of a particular kind or a technical method. but the first decision we make when creating a new piece mostly is about which sound material we want to use. in the case of "das ende von amerika" the material was varese's amerique and "howl" spoken by

ginsberg in combination with formal aspects of kafkas novel.

in our performances we think about the space we are playing in. we decide where we want to play (not necessarily on the stage if there is one), what the light should be like (mostly very dark, sometimes we use small desk lights) and so on. so we care about visual elements, but mainly in terms of reducing visual aspects to what we think is essential, in terms of focussing the perception on the music. on our record release tour cl_audio made some visuals and we even projected my screen once but these are exceptions of the rule. maybe in the future we will work with visuals but we are very sensitive about the focus. we really want the people to listen. and we are not so much interested in multimedia.

++ Tell me about your work with dancers. Has that required you to change the way you work in any way?

yes, very much. to be honest, i did not feel so good in these projects. there are some points where i'm not willing to compromise. there are some principles of thinking about music and art, which i do not want to change or to give up. if they are in conflict with the project or the choreographer there is not much you can do. but i will keep on trying...

++ Do you identify with an artistic community in Germany? What is the scene like where you live?

artistic community - well not in the sense of "new york school" or something like that. but of course i have people i share basic (and sometimes less basic) thoughts about music and art with. but in general, no.

++ Can you talk a little bit about your projects in software development - about COOPER or other software you've developed and the problems they might have been created to solve?

one important thing about software is that it is hierachical. there are always things which are easier accessible than others. and one is always tempted to use the easier accessible ones. when it comes to software for artistic purposes, the hierarchical structure affects artistic decisions. so one general approach to software development for me is creating hierachical structures that reflect my artistic decisions about what is important and what is not.

in the case of COOPER, the first idea was very simple. i wanted to have a modular environment where i could easily "plug" new patches in. and where i would code a certain thing once and only once (like a mixer section for example). then there was this idea of meta-levels (again). i like the idea of meta-parameters very much, where a number of parameters is bundled together into one single parameter. you could for example create a parameter called "sharpness" or the like, which could affect volume, timbre, depending on the musical situation maybe speed and/or pitch and so on. but with meta-parameters you would always have a fix mapping of the sub-parameters. if one would start to make this mapping dynamic it would get extremely complicated but meta-parameters are for simplification. so i started thinking into another direction and this figure-file-idea came up. the main thing in COOPER is the ability to record user interactions into text-files. you can play something, record it and play it back. but you don't record the sound, you record the data that controls the sound. then you can play the figure back, change it's speed while it's playing or change the content of the figure file. so you control a patch on a meta-level by starting figures, but you don't give responsibility to the machine.

++ How long have you worked with hannes galette seidl? How did you meet?

we are working together since winter 2001. we first met in luebeck coincidentally where i was studying composition until

2001. when i moved to essen to continue my studies, we met again at the icem, made friends and after a few months we started to work together.

++ What is your collaborative process like?

in the beginning of our collaboration we used to improvise together first. we collected things we liked and used these as a basis to grow our work on. (like many choreographers do.) this has changed. after we settle on what material to use and what our new piece should be like, we start to record / search for / create sound material. after that we process the sounds with COOPER. seperately. (in most cases we even spent a lot of time developing new modules for COOPER.) we always listen to the material we have created so far and during this process it becomes (more or less) clear where we're heading. we also often produce some parts in some sequencer program. for example the piece 'karl ortmann' is based on recordings we made on a balcony during a night and a morning in karlsruhe (southern germany). we set mics up at the balcony and recorded three minutes of audio every thirty minutes for about 12 hours. then we sorted things out we didn't like and made two "tapes" out of these unprocessed recordings (preserving the chronological order of them) which are then brought in at certain points in the piece. in the end we compose a piece out of all that material. of course we always jump from one step to another in both directions.

++ What's in store for the future - for you and dis.playce?

well, we are planing our next two cds. actually one of them is almost ready, we just have to work in a studio for a week and do it. (!)

as far as i'm concerned, i'm working on two pieces at once (bad idea) and writing my diploma thesis. so i'm going to leave the academy in februrary. and then?

nobody knows...

++ Anything I've forgotten to touch on?

nope.