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Practicing Scales

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Abstract

Practicing Scales is a creative practice research project that explores the theoretical frameworks of subscendence through music performance and spatial audio composition, utilising the disassembly and reassembly of musical ‘objects’ as a method for investigation. By examining the interplay between music-related 'wholes' and 'parts,' the project aims to demonstrate the fluidity of boundaries and the entanglement of elements in the process of music creation.

Link to Audio: https://soundcloud.com/jackofthesuburbs/practicing-scales

Introduction

This is the research narrative produced in conjunction with a music project which consisted of a series of creative experiments and resulted in a single audio output mixed for binaural playback. Combined, these form the creative practice research project, Practicing Scales.

The project was inspired by Timothy Morton’s notion of subscendence, which was explored through the process of music-making in three stages: a recorded performance with an acoustic guitar, the recorded disassembly of the guitar, and the compositional reassembly of the audio files to produce a recorded audio output mixed for binaural playback. The aim of the project was to make sense of subscendence through music practice, and generate musical reference points for the concept that would be accessible to others.

The project utilises music performance, composition and production, combined with critical and philosophical inquiry to form an inter-disciplinary method of generating insights and understanding; an approach described as a “knowing-in-action: a knowing-with and knowing-through” by anthropologist Steven Field (2015, p12). This research method, which I refer to as a Spatial Audio Disposition, integrates technical practices of

sound capture and reproduction with a critical examination of the cultural and perpetual implications of these sounds, as informed by Morton's ecological philosophy and the concept of 'aural architecture' discussed in Spaces Speak, Are You Listening? (Blesser & Salter, 2009). By acknowledging the complexity of spatial audio beyond mere technological application, a Spatial Audio Disposition offers a holistic framework that underscores the interconnectedness of sound, technology, and everyday human experiences.

Embraced as part of the Spatial Audio Disposition is Voegelin's position that "an explanation is never the phenomenon itself, but only a refracted image of it", and that "when we have access to multiple views, each with its own biases and limitations, we acquire greater understanding of the phenomenon" (2013, pp.ix-x). This aligns with Harman's concept of 'withdrawal' within his Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) (2018), which Morton adopts in their own work and explains by saying that "no one access mode can exhaust all the qualities and characteristics of a thing. Therefore things are open, they withdraw from total access" (2018, p xxix). This position helps outline the affordances of the method, with a multi-dimensional approach, but also its inevitable limitations, especially when carried out by a single individual.

Account of Process

The following is a brief account of the creative processes of the project. Photographic documentation illustrating the practice process can be found in the Appendix.

For the improvised performance with the guitar a condenser microphone was directed towards the sound hole, and a condenser microphone was directed towards the neck of the guitar. During the disassembly of the guitar a single condenser mic was was continually adjusted to be directed towards the area of direct guitar/musician activity, and a piezo mic was continually re-positioned on the various parts of the guitar. During the composition process each recording was cut to smaller parts and selected for their diversity of sonic qualities. These parts were repositioned temporally across the timeline within the Digital Audio Workstation, Ableton Live 10, then repositioned spatially in a binaural mix utilising a range of Envelop for Live devices (a collection of free, open-source immersive audio

production tools that work with Ableton Live Suite), altogether forming a new whole with its own unique spatiality. The whole process took place in one afternoon in the upstairs study room in my home.

The Whole is Less Than the Sum of its Parts

The project takes its conceptual inspiration from Timothy Morton's notion of subscendence, which Morton introduces in Humankind, after addressing a misconception surrounding the phrase 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Morton explains that this truism is a misunderstanding of the argument in Gestalt psychology that the whole is different than its parts, not greater than (2017). Morton proposes a 'rewrite' of the phrase "so that the whole is always less than the sum of its parts", and calling this 'subscendence' (2017).

Put simply, with subscendence, a whole is less than the sum of its parts ontologically, numerically, rather than in degrees of importance. The trees in a forest outnumber the forest, so the "forest is ontologically one" and the "trees are more than one" (Morton, 2017). Furthermore, subscendence suggests that complex systems, like climate and neoliberalism, are not just less than the sum of their parts, but that the parts themselves are just as real and hold their own value and significance: "There is so much more that humans do other than be parts of humankind" (Morton, 2017). This position highlights that parts can be parts of numerous wholes, as well as be wholes themselves, so that "in an ecological age", "there is no one true and proper scale", and that in fact the tree and the forest exist in the same way (Morton, 2017).

These ideas are also discussed in Being Ecological, another work of Morton's in which the distinction between environments and the lifeforms that occupy them is challenged. Morton suggests that when we consider the relationship between spiders and webs, and beavers and dams, we notice that "what is called environment is just lifeforms and their extended genomic expressions", and when we think this way we are "already thinking about wholes and parts in a different way" (2018, p64).

Agency

Morton's concept of subscendence contributes to movements that challenge the hegemony of the previously dominant anthropocentric outlook that privileged human thought and human-scaled activity, spatially and temporally. In contemporary philosophy movements like New Materialism and OOO, objects and non-human life aren't just viewed primarily through the mind of the subject, which opens up an awareness to non-human agency at various scales and their relational interconnectedness. Morton actually posits that "if one de-privatizes correlationism, one arrives quickly at some idea that everything has agency" (2017).

Variations of perspectives on beyond-human agency appear in philosophical approaches like OOO developed by Graham Harman (2018), New Materialism, as exemplified by Jane Bennett's 'vital materialism' (2010), and Karen Barad's own flavour detailed in their theory of Agential Realism (2007). According to OOO, all objects have equal ontological status, regardless of their scale or complexity, and agency is inherent to each of them. In New Materialism, agency is also extended to non-human entities, but is viewed as distributed and relational, rather than inherent. And while New Materialism tends to focus more on the material aspect of agency, within Barad's Agential Realism, agency is enacted through intra-action, the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" where properties and boundaries emerge through their ongoing entanglements (2007, p33).

The reference to agency in this project does not necessary align to any specific perspective, as it is the areas in which these viewpoints overlap that conceptually support the methods explored in the project.

Musical Wholes and Parts

In the musical experimentation process, three examples of 'wholes' were initially selected for exploration: an acoustic guitar, a song, and a chord. The premise was to identify a simple set of 'objects' that would be familiar to a musician that could be disassembled into some of its constituent parts. The following outlines how subscendence can be illustrated by examining the guitar, and is discussed in relation to Blesser and Salter's concept of 'aural

architecture', described as "the properties of a space [that] can be experienced by listening" (2006, p5).

In an anthropocentrically scaled perspective of the guitar performance and its deconstruction, the environment in which the event took place was a small room in a house, in which "the composite of numerous surfaces, objects, and geometries" created the aural architecture (Blesser & Salter, 2006, p2). My own presence in the room is included in this description, just as "recording in a concert hall without an audience changes its acoustics" and due to the "enveloping reverberation, the listener is inside the sound generation process" (Blesser & Salter, 2006, p143,145). At this scale, despite some positioning of furniture in the room by myself, the aural architecture of the room exists regardless of this, or any other incidental or intentional factors, so that the aural architect[s] of the space is not an actual person, reinforcing the idea of non-human agency (Blesser & Salter, 2006, p2).

The acoustic guitar I used consisted of parts such as the body, neck, frets, strings, and tuning pegs. Numerically, there are more parts than the guitar they make up, and these parts have unique properties that are not necessarily manifest in the whole. The wood used for the body of the guitar may have specific tonal qualities that are not fully expressed when it is combined with other materials and components in the construction of the guitar. Similarly, the strings, when plucked in isolation, produce a range of frequencies and overtones that might be altered or suppressed when interacting with the body and soundboard. The combination of these parts creates a functional guitar, but the potentialities of each part are restricted when considered only within the context of the whole.

Blesser and Salter discuss this concept at a different scale

As we hear how sounds from multiple sources interact with the various spatial elements, we assign an identifiable personality to the aural architecture, in much the same way we interpret an echo as the aural personality of a wall. To illustrate that we are aware of aural architecture, consider displacing familiar sounds to unfamiliar environments. Transported

to an open desert, urban traffic would not have the aural personality of a dense city environment. Moved to a forest, a symphony concert would not have the aural impact, intimacy, and immediacy of a concert hall. Nor could the aural personality of singing in the bathroom, which takes advantage of the resonances of small spaces, be duplicated in a large living room. In each contrasting space, even if the sound sources were to remain unchanged, the aural architecture would change (2006, p2).

The guitar as a whole, with its own aural architecture, represents a limitation of the potentialities inherent in its components. In this way, the concept of subscendence allows us to better understand and appreciate the intricate relationships and dependencies that exist between the parts of a system and the emergent properties that arise from these interactions. When subjected to careful examination guided by the concept of subscendence, the distinction between an enclosed acoustic space and acoustic objects blurs and then disappears. As, at different scales, a wall surface and the body of a guitar can function both as part of a spatial boundary and an acoustic object (Blesser & Salter, 2006, p149).

Reflecting on the interconnectedness of these parts and wholes brought an unexpected focus on the agency inherent in each component. During the performative aspects of the project, I was particularly conscious of the influence I ‘felt' between myself and the guitar. In hindsight, it is clear that influence extended beyond a two-way interaction, and that it was the agency of or between all of the surrounding objects, their constituent parts, and the various wholes they constructed, that resulted in the moment I experienced as a music performance. As Blesser and Salter state:

> as with all sensory aspects of architecture, cultural values and social functions determine the experiential consequences of spatial attributes. In different social settings, the same acoustic features have different meanings, which then influence the mood and behaviour of the people in those settings (2006, p3).

Indeed, this suggests that my ‘environment’, the study room in my house, informed my interactions with the guitar in each process, and thus the musical outcomes as the result, and that they may have been different if the processes were carried out in a community centre, and different again if carried out in a museum.

Concluding Thoughts

Through reflections on the aural architecture at each stage of the creative process I have been able to better understand how the spatial qualities of any moment are the result of the interplay of the interconnected objects that make up a 'whole' or 'environment'. It occurred to me that observing the unique sonic qualities of a moment, like listening to the reverb of a specific space, is an audible demonstration of the agency enacted by the surrounding objects, how the 'parts' effect on each other through intra-action, creating the 'whole' that is the sonic experience.

By adopting a Spatial Audio Disposition to carry out the disassembly and reassembly of a guitar, this project has developed a tangible illustration of the interconnectedness and fluidity of boundaries between 'wholes' and 'parts', where music and space can be seen to actually combine into a single concept by broadening the concept of sonic events to include their interaction with their 'environment' (Blesser & Salter, 2006, p155).

While there was an understanding of the ecological context to the term subscendence prior to the creative engagement, it was not directly engaged with during the process. This was something that was reconsidered afterwards and has informed the following concluding thought.

In an interview about music and sustainability, Kyle Devine, the author of Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music, discusses ideas that informed his upcoming book, Recomposed: Music Climate Crisis Challenge. Here he calls for a radical re-thinking of musical systems, a "transformation of the transformation", as current efforts to address the climate crisis attempted in the name of sustainability don't seem fully viable: "the underlying assumption here is that solving music's environmental problems involves finding ways of making our current listening formation both more lasting and less resource intensive" (Devine, 2022).

Morton's subscendence is used as part of a larger framework of thinking towards the goal of 'solidarity with nonhuman people' (the subtitle of Humankind), particularly in the context of the climate crisis. Given that current and historic expressions of musical activity (e.g. record labels, music streaming, vinyl production) are inextricably linked to this

current state, it could be argued that it might be time to question the importance placed on the dominant 'objects' within current modes of music consumption and production, particularly within systems that appear the least human-friendly. I think considering subscendence offers some way as to attempt this constructively, by disassembling existing models and practices, and exploring new pathways offered by the unrestricted potential of their various 'parts', and co-enacting new forms of agency that demonstrate solidarity with non-human people.

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Appendix: Project Documentation

Figure 1: Performance with guitar, taken by Gary-Martin

Figure 2: Before disassembly, taken by Gary-Martin

Figure 3: Performative disassembly, taken by Gary-Martin

Figure 4: After disassembly, taken by Gary-Martin

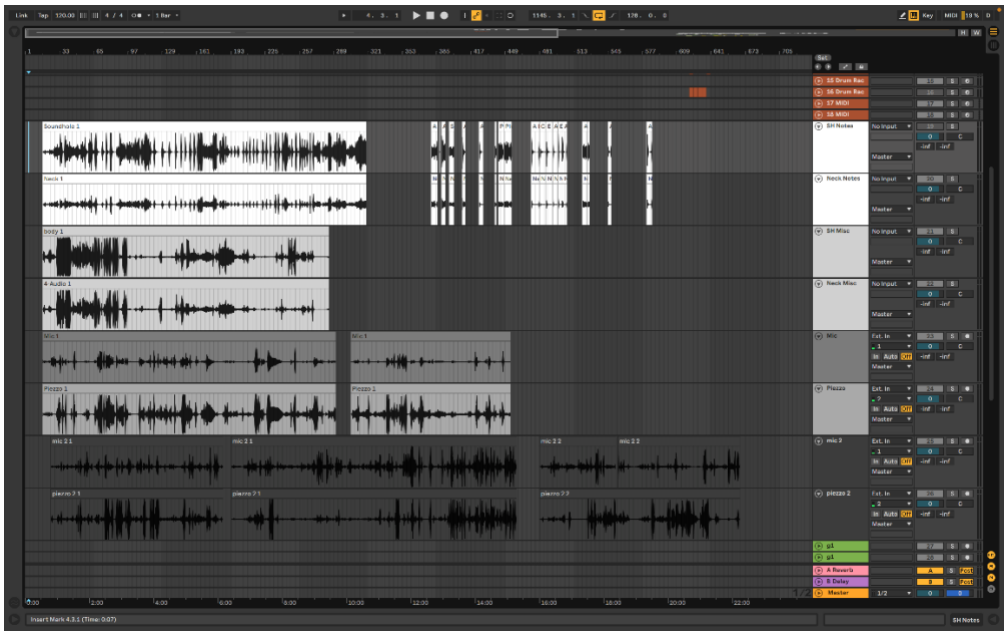

Figure 5: Recorded audio in Ableton, taken by Gary-Martin

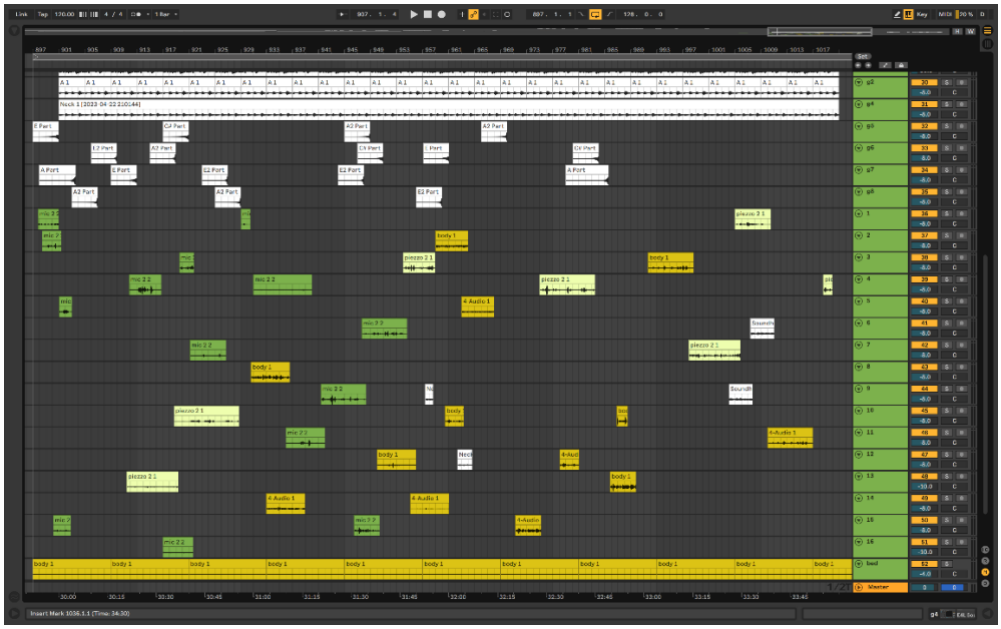

Figure 6: Reassembly of audio, taken by Gary-Martin

Figure 7: Completed song as new ‘whole’, taken by Gary-Martin