

Embracing Multimedia for Value-Added Marketing: Electroacoustic Music Presented Via Enhanced CD

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Abstract:

In the commercial music world, the free distribution of digital material around the Internet has caused providers to search out ways, among other defensive actions, to add value to music, by including photos, lyrics, video clips, Web site links, chat-rooms, previews, extra tracks, etc. In electroacoustic music, the loss of royalties may be less of an issue, but the notion of enhanced presentation is nonetheless attractive, and may help to better establish this domain commercially. This paper introduces an enhanced CD produced by the Group of the Electronic Music Studio of McGill University. Each piece can be listened to as audio, but is also presented in a multimedia context. The composers are introduced by means of photos and bios, and the compositions are presented through program notes, technical notes, photos, and video clips. The result is a manner of presentation that is engaging, educational, and perhaps compelling to curious consumers.

Keywords:

Value-added content, enhanced CD, multimedia presentation

1.1. Context

The phenomenon of Napster, and related technologies, which enable digital audio data to be freely distributed between computers connected to the Internet, caused tremors of panic throughout the music industry. Encoding technology such as MP3 had already raised concerns for the ease by which music could be compressed and distributed. But, in retrospect, the relatively controlled environment of Web sites such as MP3.com seemed rather nonthreatening to publishers and record companies who had hitherto enjoyed almost total control over the industry.

Nonetheless, the relatively open access to the World Wide Web by independent musicians, providing a platform for promotion, sales, and distribution, meant that the industry no longer had iron-fisted control over access by composers and musicians to this means of communication with the general public. Even prior to the free and unmonitored distribution of recorded music through file-sharing, the music industry began to see the need to develop new strategies for promotion that would incorporate the new digital medium the public was becoming increasingly involved with.

At the plethora of new conferences and trade-shows concerned with digital media and music (Plug.In, Interactive Music Expo, Future of Music, etc.), and even on the

commercial fringes of the august Audio Engineering Society, a great deal of attention began to be paid to the enhancement of content. The concern, in other words, was to find ways to develop 'value-added' packaging for the music.

1.2. Value-Added

With the advent of compact discs, the visceral multimedia presentation of record albums, enhanced by cover art, notes, and lyrics, diminished considerably. With digital tools, it has again become possible to enhance the presentation of music through creative graphics and other means. The ability to produce Web sites and CD-ROMs relatively easily and cheaply has meant that music and musicians can be promoted in new ways likely to be appealing to a (primarily young) public increasingly using the Internet as its primary means of communication.

Music, then, can be presented within a context of web graphics, animation, video clips, mailing lists, discussion groups, chat rooms, online interviews, access to lyrics and other texts, links to related sites and information, free music downloads, and so forth. The music, the product being marketed, is packaged with a whole range of value-added elements designed to attract purchasers, keep their attention, make them feel part of something special, and keep them coming back. Ultimately, the aim is to persuade consumers to buy music products rather than to obtain them for free.

While the marketing aspect of the value-added packaging of music may seem crass to composers working outside the commercial realm, the ability to create multimedia presentations has great creative potential, as certain musician/artists have long known. Never before, however, have the tools and the medium been so accessible.

1.3. Multimedia

Up until quite recently, multimedia production was an elaborate affair, requiring resources and skill-sets beyond the capacity of most individuals working independently. With the development of integrated software tools, increasingly affordable peripherals such as cameras, video recorders, scanners, audio interfaces, and CD burners, and exponentially growing processing power, this field has become much more accessible. A CD-ROM can now be created on a home computer with ease.

In addition, HTML and related protocols provide simple means by which various media 'objects' can be linked together and efficiently formatted for presentation on the World Wide Web. The proliferation of the Internet, with cheap availability of memory space for Web sites and uncomplicated routing for uploading data, means that creating and maintaining engaging sites is no longer a possibility reserved for specialists or companies and institutes with substantial resources.

The implications, then, are that all forms of music, no matter how 'noncommercial' or 'alternative,' can be presented to the public in creative ways that utilize available tools

and resources. Such presentations may be aimed at marketing, but there are other applications that may better prove the value of the medium.

1.4. Educational Potential

For work that exists outside the realm of the mainstream music industry, marketing may not be a major concern (although promotion in some form or other is surely almost always a concern). Exegesis, or education, may be the primary goal for developing engaging means of presentation. The use of multimedia or interactive technology can draw people in, informing them of the work, enabling them to explore aspects of it, and, hopefully, developing their interest in it.

The education market for CD-ROMs and computer games abounds in titles, and more and more distance learning is taking place through Web sites of varying degrees of interactivity. In music research, the ability to present written discussion with diagrams, scores, and musical examples, makes the use of multimedia technology highly practical.

2.1. GEMS

The Group of the Electronic Music Studio of McGill University (Montreal, Canada), otherwise known as GEMS, was founded in 1983. It functions as a semi-autonomous ensemble within the Faculty of Music at McGill, presenting concerts of primarily electroacoustic and interactive music. It is peopled by graduate students in composition, music technology, and performance, and has been directed by composer and professor, Alcides Lanza, along with Bruce Pennycook.

In addition to its concertizing in Montreal (and elsewhere), GEMS has released three recordings. The first, *GEMS*, came out on vinyl in 1986 (McGill Records 85027), and contains works by Alcides Lanza, Donald Steven, Richard Lloyd, and Claude Schryer. The second recording, *Before the Freeze*, was released on compact disc in 1991 (McGill Records 750038-2), with music by John Oliver, Morton Feldman, Bruce Pennycook, Laurie Radford, Brian McCue, and Brent Lee.

Plans for a third recording began to develop five or so years later, but, by that time, the notion of producing a CD of electroacoustic music destined to languish in cut-out bins of record stores and on the shelves of the composers involved had lost some allure. This was particularly true for McGill Records, the in-house record label, whose mandate had been tightened over the years to focus on at least breaking even financially. A better solution needed to be found.

2.2. The Production of *Vox Machina*

As it turned out, two members of GEMS during this period, Mark Ballora and David McIntyre, were not studying composition but were graduate students in the Music, Media and Technology program, where they were working with multimedia tools such as

Macromedia's Director software. So, gradually, the idea developed that the music that was destined for the recording could be presented as an Enhanced CD, with additional textual and visual elements to explicate the pieces and the composers.

The music for each of the five pieces on the disc was produced under the supervision of the composer. The compositions are: *Ouvertures II* by Michael Picton; *Semiotic Rifle* by Raymond Luk; *Night-flowering...not even sand - II* by James Harley; *Territorios* by Osvaldo Budón; and *Vox Machina* by Sean Ferguson. Two of these works use performers in conjunction with pre-recorded sounds. *Territorios* is scored for eight percussionists, computer-generated click-tracks, and pre-recorded sounds; *Vox Machina* is scored for soprano, chamber ensemble, and pre-recorded sounds.

In order to keep the multimedia presentation consistent and efficient (in terms of disk-space), all of the materials were placed into a single Director project. That way, the design could be consistent, and any graphic images or other processes that needed to be used in more than one place would not have to be needlessly duplicated. As it turned out, the scripting capability of Director was used more than might normally be required in order that the program run as smoothly as possible and also keep within the limits of the disc allocation available to it.

2.3. Enhanced Presentation

The multimedia presentation of *Vox Machina* is organized in the following way. After a title screen, a 'home' screen (with an identifying background electroacoustic sound) lists the names of the composers, with links to each, along with a connection to 'About GEMS.' This last leads to text outlining the history of the group, with further links to the previous-released recordings and the two faculty directors, Alcides Lanza and Bruce Pennycook. Their 'sites' each include a short bio and photo, with a clip of their own music playing in the background. The activation of each link is accompanied by another identifying electroacoustic sound.

The links to the five composers lead to 'sites' with photos of the composers, program and bio notes, with some of these containing links to diagrams, charts, or texts relating to the piece. Another link launches an excerpt of the composition. In the case of the Budón and Ferguson pieces, this link leads to a video excerpt taken from the recording sessions with the ensembles. In the case of the Budón (a second link) and the Harley, it leads to a visual presentation of photo images in some way connected to the piece. These photos are randomly ordered, fading in and out and superimposed over the duration of the excerpt.

After (or before, perhaps) one has gone through these presentations, one can listen to the works in their entirety. Hopefully, the knowledge gained of the music and the composers will have helped the listener situate the works in a more nuanced context, producing a more engaged and possibly sympathetic hearing.

2.4. Marketing

McGill Records, a traditional music label, was not the best choice for promoting the new technology represented by *Vox Machina*. Instead, the CD was assigned to a new office, McGill Systems, Inc., which had been set up to market various types of digital technology coming out of different research projects at the university. A research grant from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research supported the work of designing and programming the multimedia content of the CD. From there, the project was passed to McGill Systems for marketing and sales (ISBN 7717-0537-9, <http://musicm.mcgill.ca/msi/http/voxmach.html>).

Rather than being presented just as a recording of new music, *Vox Machina* is promoted as a creative application of new technology. Of course, what may have been exciting and new a couple of years ago is no longer cutting-edge. But, the educational value of the Enhanced CD can still be touted, and it is perhaps that element of the technology that will prove of lasting value.