

On Composing " This Gospel Train is Pulled by Steam "

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1 Introduction

I came to computer music composition after 20 years as a club DJ, during which time I played a wide variety of music including music not normally associated with a rock venue. I had always been interested in breaking down the *artificial* barriers found in music and had been listening to computer music since the sixties as well as rock, pop, blues and gospel. However, I did not begin to compose until the eighties, after having had some success with a couple of dance hits using the *nom de plume* Beatsystem ***Walk on the Wildside*** (Island Records) and ***To a Brighter Day*** (London Records). Both these recordings are examples of my desire to break down barriers. The first single, ***Walk on the Wildside***, a cover of a Lou Reed song took a rock song and gave it a dance beat. Songs being given this treatment at the time were generally from soul or rhythm and blues artists. The second single used a sample from "***Oh Happy Day***" Edwin Hawkins Singers, a gospel song, this too was given a dance beat and new lyrics.

At the point, where I started to compose computer music I was well aware of *labels*, both artificial and real together with the *marketing* of popular music. I had decided that I wanted to combine various genres and compose pieces that would break down barriers. It seemed to me that in order to enable my music to be heard by those persons who did not normally buy computer music I needed to avoid having my music released on an *academic* music label such as Wergo, Nonsuch or any of the others usually sold in the contemporary section of classical music stores. The recent re-packaging of early electronic music has enabled it to reach a far wider audience than previously thought possible e.g. **OHM: the early gurus of electronic music. (Ellipsis Arts CD 3673).** or **EARLY MODULATIONS: VINTAGE VOLTS the roots of electronic music (Caipirinha CD)** Bearing this in mind I signed a record contract with a dance/ ambient / electronic music label from Nottingham (Time Recording's EM:T label). EM:T were able to market my recordings in the popular/ dance music sections of large outlets, I was therefore, in theory at least, able to

reach my preferred audience. It is important to devise a marketing strategy for ones musical output in order to reach the widest possible audience. This marketing enables radio plays and reviews in magazines not previously thought of as able to further the cause of electro-acoustic/ computer music. See Gonzo Circus below.

My first release proper for EM:T was ***Beatsystem 2297 (EM:T 2297)*** released in 1997, previous to this I had several tracks on compilations that they had released. As a result of the positive feedback on these compilation tracks I was given the opportunity to record a full-length album of my music.

2 Early Works

Although I wanted to compose computer music, I did not want to make the sort of acousmatic music that I had been listening to nor did I wish to be tied tyranny of the 4/4 beat of dance music. I longed for the freedom to compose using sound, relieved of the conventions of popular music but still accessible to those that heard it.

I had heard the soundscape compositions of composers such as Barry Truax ***The Vancouver Soundscape (CSR-2CD 9701)*** this was more the sort of sound I had in mind, I needed bring something of myself to it. With this in mind I began composing ***No More***. The idea of creating an imaginary soundscape appealed to me very much. Reviews such as that which appeared in THE WIRE

"No More" the standout track on Derek Pierce's otherwise one man Beatsystem project, incorporates "live" Paris, Texas style blues guitar and vocal samples into a stark minimalist drone punctuated by funereal percussion and cicada chirps."

did much to convince me that I was indeed heading in the right direction. No references here to obscure academic composers but to popular guitarist Ry Cooder and the soundtrack of ***Paris, Texas***. Other reviews such as that found in the Dutch Underground magazine GONZO'S CIRCUS

"No More " is the sort of abstract fragmented blues that you pick up on a transistor radio in the middle of the Nevada desert. Beatsystem make sound

collages for those who don't care about musical conventions. Beat the system with Beatsystem.

were also encouraging, I was using classical computer music techniques such as fm synthesis, granulation, time-stretching and filtering, and my music was being heard to by people who would not have normally listened to computer music. The success of this first CD led to my starting work on a follow up CD, although EM:T themselves had gone bust, poor management I believe rather than anything to do with the quality of their recorded output. The releases on EM:T had shown me that my ideas regarding marketing and labelling seem to be borne out. I will therefore be looking at similar strategy for the release of my next CD.

3 Composing "Gospel Train"

During 1999 I started work on various new pieces, one of these was entitled **This Gospel Train is pulled by Steam**. Its source material was extracted from **Railroad Songs (Legacy CD 408)**; a recording of the last steam train to run on the Santa Fe Railway, together with a portion of **The Gospel Train (Rounder CD 1701)** sung by Belleville A Cappella Choir. I wanted the piece to be both a lament for and a celebration of the Golden Age of Steam as well as a metaphorical journey toward heaven.

Most of the sounds were processed using Tom Erbe's Soundhack program. I was particularly impressed by its ability to time-stretch sounds to such an enormous degree, I liked the way the phase vocoder revealed the inner workings of the sounds I had chosen. Train horns and other mechanical sounds revealed the distant and heavenly qualities that I wanted.

In order to provide a rhythmic backdrop to the piece I looped and filtered the steam engine noise in Csound. Resonant filtering this sound reminded me of the sound of the "jaws harp" often played by the hobos travelling the railroads of America.

The voices were edited to fit the rhythm track but otherwise untreated at the beginning of the track; treatment starts with the "amen" which is stretched using Soundhack 3' 42" into the piece.

A guitar part is added to the first half, this is somewhat reminiscent of the guitar in my earlier piece **No More**. At 5' 30" the journey towards heaven begins whilst the guitar part fades, never to return. Train horns, shunting noises and sounds derived from the railroad recording are superimposed over the relentless rhythm. Stretched vocal sounds begin to appear at 9' 36" they become recognisable as the "amen" from earlier at 10' 00" and again at

10' 19". During the last minute or so the vocal sounds are left on their own to provide a fitting cadence to the piece.

Movement of sounds is achieved using binaural filtering in Soundhack, providing a rewarding experience for the headphone listener as well as metaphor for travel. As well as stretching and filtering I have granulated some sounds in Csound, although I use this process less than in previous pieces. Overall I am pleased with the piece although I wish I still had the multi-track recording of it, this would enable me to mix it to surround sound as well as increase the possibilities when diffusing it in concert settings.

4 Conclusions

My experience thus far in computer music composition have led me to believe that it is possible to produce music that is technologically advanced and rewarding to listen to, whilst still being accessible. A recent visit showed me that even institutions such IRCAM are aware of the need to appeal to young composers from a non-academic background as well as the more established ones. To this end they are considering making Forum Ircam software more accessible. Hopefully, computer music will open its doors to up and coming talent regardless of their background and thus advance computer music's status in the future. I believe it is time to bring computer music to a wider and much more varied audience using all the means available to us.