Studio Report: Composition Studios, School of Music, University of Auckland, New Zealand.

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ABSTRACT

Report with examples of recent work from the University of Auckland Studios which are composition rather than research oriented and intended to serve the needs of student composers who wish to make use of expanding technology. A brief account of how the Auckland studio fits the New Zealand context.

1. Introduction

Auckland University's composition studios are low budget studios largely designed for introductory teaching but capable of producing high quality compositions. The studios are directed by two composers whose own work is as much involved with vocal and instrumental music as with electronic work. John Rimmer's electroacoustic music experience includes work in the Experimental Music Studio at MIT and the Electronic and Recording Studio at the University of East Anglia. Earlier this year his Fleeting Images and Crow for oboe and tape were presented at Synthèse 92 in Bourges. John Elmsly began electroacoustic work at Victoria University of Wellington and subsequently composed at IPEM in Gent, Belgium. His Génauque for brass quintet and tape was presented by Radio New Zealand at the 1990 Paris Rossum. Both composers have spent time working in the Computer Music Facility at Simon Fraser University with Barry Truax's real time granular synthesis system.

2. History

Since a studio is defined by its historical context and the composing personalities as much as by hardware and software, it is perhaps worth considering the growth of electroacoustic music in New Zealand. The first studio was established in the mid 1960's by Douglas Lilburn at Victoria University of Wellington. During the next fifteen years several composers, some with overseas experience in the medium, worked in this studio and by 1980, on Lilburn's retirement as director, five LP recordings of their work had been published by Kiwi Pacific Records Ltd. The most prominent composers in this group were Jack Body, John Cousins, Ross Harris, Ian McDonald and John Rimmer.

In the 1970's new studios were established at other universities in Christchurch, Dunedin and Auckland. The University of Auckland studio was founded by John Rimmer in 1976 with basic equipment such as the small Synthi AKS voltage-controlled synthesizer, a specially built mixer-amplifier unit, three stereo tape recorders and microphones. From this meagre beginning and with an emphasis on composing using natural sounds mixed with synthetic ones a lively electroacoustic music scene evolved. A Roland modular synth with an early version of the Micro composer was purchased in 1979. Interestingly this synthesizer is still much in demand although the cumbersome
MC-8 rapidly displayed the limitations of pre-MIDI sequencing and soon took early retirement. In 1986 three studios were incorporated into a new School of Music building. Two of these contain micro-computer workstations and the third doubles as a recording control room and mix-down studio.

It is perhaps important to point out that in New Zealand there are no true conservatories, so all music teaching is combined in the University Schools of Music, leading to many composer-performer-musicologist interactions. Perhaps this has a negative aspect in that with frequent practical performing situations available there is less temptation for studio composers to become dedicated to research.

3. Teaching

The primary function of the studio complex is to provide an introduction to electronic composition for music students who take a three year Bachelor of Music or four year Bachelor of Music (Honours) degree. There are full-year undergraduate courses at two levels. The first of these is concerned with studio familiarity and elementary composition and caters for twenty students. Student creative projects are built in ‘musique-concrete’ style around classical studio techniques of tape editing and the use of microphones, reel to reel tape recorders and mixing consoles. A digital version of this project using Macintosh computers and Sound Designer software provides a useful follow-on to the 1960’s tape music approach. Both analogue and digital synthesis techniques are introduced, fed and supported by an historical repertory of pieces. The second course covers FM synthesis, sequencing, and sampling; with each of these the approach is to encourage free and unconventional uses of the methods rather than developing proficiency in standard commercial routines. What is perhaps unusual in our approach is that it is not designed primarily for the production of electroacoustic specialists; many of our students are composers and performers with other specializations. This is true even at graduate level, though there are possibilities for Computer Science students to carry out specialised work which can be more oriented towards programming. However our musician students are being attracted by the possibility of reaching down into programming through Max or MIDI Pascal, both of which are currently being explored.

4. Composition and Computers

Our philosophy has always been to exploit existing equipment in fresh and imaginative compositions. Some of this is traceable back to Douglas Lilburn’s sensitive approach to sound, an approach combining an interest in rugged environmental aspects with the most fastidious criticism of the acoustic and musical aspects of the end product, regardless of production method.

We regard computers as studio tools for the composer, tools whose usefulness has been dependent on having convenient replay of high quality sound. The Apple II-Mountain Hardware system was included in the studio in 1982, but suffered a little from being a closed system. MIDI sequencing began in 1985 with our DX7, and rapidly progressed through C64-Sequential and Dr-T-KCS systems to the ATARI-Dr-T-KCS which has been the main sequencing combination used for our MIDI equipment. For sampling work on the other hand Apple Macs have been used from the outset, progressing from one 512 to two IIs with Sound Tools, and a II used in conjunction with the Emix II.

With our strong tradition of interest in environmental sound, affordable digital recording has been vital, and we have been using DAT since May 1988. The desire for cheap and easy editing of this medium has meant that the Digidesign Sound Accelerator has been of special interest though we had to wait until 1991 before we could afford a system. Particularly useful to composers have been the processing and editing functions made available by associated software such as
TurboSynth, and we look forward to further applications becoming available to users like us who lack the time to devote to large scale programming. Of special interest will be improvements to the versatility and ease of use of software for the MacII-DAT combination. Perhaps a granular synthesis implementation ...

5. Other Activities

Users of the studio include visiting teachers like Susan Fykberg (currently at Simon Fraser University) who as well as carrying out some of her own work and teaching within the University gave a course in electronic music techniques to dance students from Auckland's Performing Arts School, and past graduates such as Neville Hall and Matthew Sutor whose composition projects range from concert pieces to music for theatre. Continuing Education courses have made studio facilities available to users not enrolled in full-time university music courses. In 1990 we held an 'Electroacoustic Music Week', with concerts of various types and seminars by visiting composer Manfred Stahnke. 1991 saw many of us participating in a similar weekend of electroacoustic music at Victoria University of Wellington. Visitors have spent short periods in Auckland and worked on projects, but we hope that there will be more opportunities for composers and researchers to visit the studio and compose or carry out research; although we can only offer basic equipment and facilities the environment is nuclear-free.

As in the rest of the world the main development in computer music in New Zealand has been the proliferation of commercial and home MIDI studios. The universities have all added to their sound resources with similar MIDI equipment. In addition Victoria University purchased the Fairlight Series 3 when its School of Music moved to a new building in 1989. Many new pieces have been composed during the past five years and we hope another series of New Zealand electroacoustic music will shortly be published on CD.