

Chapter 9

Contemporary Live-Looping

In this chapter I will describe the changing trends and new forms of composition that are emerging from within Live-Looping today. It is obviously difficult for me to assess the impact that an artist may have on Live-Looping without the value of hindsight. So I aim to look at the aspects of the genre that stand out the most and relate them back to the historical context I have set out in the previous chapters.

Contemporary Looping

The 1980s was the digital age, whose children were the first group to grow up emerged by a mass media culture overloading their senses with digital information. It is perhaps fitting that Live-Looping should mirror this paradox, that now people are hearing the live performances of instrumental and vocal artists like Amy X or Andre Lafosse relayed to them in a sampled and digitised form. Through modern technology live performance has become digitised, edited, processed, and sampled. New technology and attitudes to technology have encouraged new narratives to be formed between Live-Loopers and their equipment. Hardware has spawned new control and editing options while software has allowed Live-Loopers the freedom to design new and more complex Live-Looping devices that are configurable to different compositions.

Andre Lafosse and the Turntablist aesthetic.

The culture of DJing or Turntablism has made the manipulation of recorded music in performance a widely accepted form of musical dissemination. Dance music and Hip-Hop have made the aesthetic of cutting and splicing fragments of music in composition

normality. It is perhaps interesting that Live-Looping should see a visionary artist emerge with a similar aesthetic. Describing himself as the ‘Turntablist Guitarist’, Andre Lafosse mirrors the aesthetic of the cut-up, cutting and splicing his guitar performance replaying this digitised music back at the audience. He jumps between his recorded loops like a DJ switches records, seamlessly blending one loop into another and jumping back in time to replay previously recorded phrases.

Turntablism, to me, is about taking an apparatus that is ostensibly designed for playing back a recording, and using (and imposing) the architecture of the playback apparatus to actually sculpt the sound itself.¹

Lafosse has applied this approach to his guitar and Looper set-up from the following standpoint,

if a DJ can make new sounds by scratching a record and playing the mixing board controls, then the same kind of concepts and principles could be applied to looping. The guitar (in my case) would take the place of the record, and the EDP and foot-controller could act as the turntable/mixer end of the equation.²

By focusing some of the skilled aspects of his performance on manipulating the output of his guitar, Andre has in a sense chosen to use his Live-Looping device in a soloistic way. The sounds he produces are therefore governed by the techniques of manipulation he has devised for the EDP in conjunction with his guitar. This is in much the same way as the vocabulary of sounds a turntablist produces are defined by the techniques they have developed for their mixer in combination with their record decks.

¹ Lafosse via private email, 12/5/2003

² Lafosse via private email, 12/5/2003

Fragmented music

The form of fragmented composition can be traced back to Musique Concrete where composers would create complex fragmented phrases by inserting many pieces of tape together. The processes pioneered by Schaffer in 1948 of insertion, repetition, and the reversing of material are still highly visible in contemporary Live-Looping, the difference being that now this vocabulary of techniques are being carried out in real time. However although these techniques can be traced back to Musique Concrete their appearance within contemporary Live-Looping is more likely to be derived from the influence of modern dance music.

Lafosse's compositions have an aesthetic basis in common with dance music and the jagged highly edited sequenced sounds that have characterised the form. However, through his vision he achieves this aesthetic live combining it with improvisation, which adds a feeling of experimental electric jazz to the music. Lafosse has in a sense redefined the medium of the Live-Looping device freeing it from merely providing a surface for the layering of sound. Andre uses the Live-Looping device to create angular loops of sequenced sound that evolve as he replaces elements within it. This goes beyond the aesthetic of cutting and splicing, it's the aesthetic of ordered replacement in live-performance calling many to class Lafosse's music as Glitch music.

Lafosse has pioneered Glitch music within Live-Looping. Glitch music is a new genre of musical composition that has been so named after its fragmented sound. This can be heard in Lafosse's early Glitch compositions such as *Spastic Meditation* (2001) or *Instant* (2001) where he creates unplayable collections of fragmented phrases. Lafosse's style of musical composition/improvisation is still very young and I believe we are

hearing an artist just beginning to realise the potential of his talent. The development of Lafosse's style can be heard on his more recent compositions like the mesmerising track *Asana* (2002) where he manages to create beautifully layered textures which are then transformed via his insert work (insert is a function on the EDP). This piece contains a specific type of interplay where the listener's sense of a lead line or melody is continually shifting between the guitar and the Live-Looper. Lafosse's most recent track entitled *Siesmic* (2003) is perhaps his most rhythmically aggressive use of the insert process and is in some ways reminiscent of experimental electric jazz music.

What Lafosse has pioneered in a sense is the technique for the live sequencing of non-midi instruments. Sequencing has traditionally been the territory of synthesisers and samplers, but Lafosse's technique of Glitch music allows this to be applied to any audio signal in real time. Andre's influence has also lead to a greater focus on the innovative functional capabilities of the Echoplex, his looping device of choice, causing other people to integrate new Live-Looping techniques into their performances.

Other Live-Loopers

Other Live-Loopers are taking the aesthetic sound worlds of modern dance music and finding ways to generate this live. Artists like Armatronic's seek to invoke the soundworld of modern electronic music but via an improvisatory methodology. With his racks of drum machines, synthesisers and live-looping devices Armatronic's starts with all the banks empty, no loops programmed and seeks to improvise electronic music live. His music revolves around the idea of an improvisatory performance where every creation is different and has an inbuilt unpredictability. This opening up of electronic

music to chance in live-composition demonstrates a break from the traditional idea that electronic music has to be non real-time form of music creation.

With the popularity of DJ culture having peaked we may see a resurgence in the importance of live generated material as opposed to pre recorded live manipulated material. We are seeing an increasing convergence between electronic music and that which is made by conventional instruments. Live-Looping is very much a part of this allowing an instrumental performer to access the vocabulary of electronic music through technology. This could be especially significant in the field of modern dance music as it has struggled to be created or performed other than in a largely pre-recorded format. The live sequencing of live instruments could open this genre up to more radical performance opportunities.

Aesthetic Trends

Contemporary looping has seen a trend towards an abandonment of the traditional live-looping aesthetic of a surface of continuous sound so popularised by Terry Riley and Robert Fripp. This has been replaced by more jagged and conventional song-based structures by artists like Amy X. In a sense looping is shedding its traditional sound of slowly evolving musical textures for the contemporary aesthetics of the music of mass or popular culture. This shift in stylistic aesthetic can also be put down to the change in attitude of the current generation of Live-Loopers. Thanks to the mass media revolution people expect to have their attention grabbed instantly and held. This change in attitude is illustrated by Andre Lafosse

First and foremost, I knew I didn't want to play ambient music. I wanted something that could grab and hold the listener's attention... If I'm going to make

music, and especially if I'm going to go in front of an audience to do it, I don't want to be ignored - I want to capture people's attention, and hold it.³

Live-Looping has also become characterised by the sheer versatility and the range of aesthetics that people are producing with it. This can be directly attributed to the growing complexity of the equipment used to make it. Digital looping devices as opposed to analogue tape have allowed Live-Loopers to access the sound worlds of dance music and popular song structure with an ease that simply wasn't possible with tape. It is perhaps most significant when these new capabilities are used to take the essence of a music genre (e.g. Lafosse's innovative take on turntablism) rather than the simple emulation of the sound world of other genres via different means.

Emerging Trends

Live-Looping is also creating a new emerging form of interaction between musicians. Live-Loopers are beginning to synchronise their devices together so that they can improvise together into a looped form that maintains a consistent timing relationship. This creates a new kind of interaction between musicians as they are reacting to a delayed form of recorded improvisation leading to all sorts of interesting frictions between performers and a new set of rules of engagement.

Control

The physical relationship between a Live-Looper and the control of their technology has undergone significant changes. Performers are now able to interact with the recorded material using all sorts of digital control methods not possible with analogue technology. Through the use of programming languages like Max/Msp and configurable

³ Andre via private email, 12/5/2003

physical controllers it has become the artist/programmers role to decide the limitations of the interaction between the performer and their looped material. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the female singer Pamela Z through her use of the programming language Max/Msp in conjunction with the midi controller the bodysynth. Through the physical gestures of her body she controls (via the bodysynth) pre-recorded phrases and the Live-Looping and manipulation of her voice. In this sense she has tailored the physical gestures of her body to the manipulation of sound creating a particularly theatrical relationship between her gestures and the audiences perception of her use of technology. Amy X chooses a similar approach to Pamela Z of valuing the theatrical approach to audience communication, choosing to use drum pads to trigger looping functions,

it fits in well with my animated and very theatrical performance; I can make a big motion that results in a musical event, and the audience sees that happen quite clearly. It's important to me that it's clear to them what I am doing and that all the sounds are being triggered in real time. This way they really get to observe the process, and that, along with the personal nature of the songs, creates a connection and intimacy with the audience that I find missing from most looping performances.⁴

Live-Loopers are enlisting the help of Max/Msp programmers to transcend the limitations of their hardware devices creating more personalised systems for particular performances. An example of this would be the French Live-Looping clarinettist Michel Aumont who is working with Max/Msp programmer Phillippe Olivier to produce a patch

⁴ Amy X via private email, 30/4/2003

that transcends the limitations of hardware loopers allowing him to deconstruct and remix the different components of a previously layered loop. This is a field of software-related musical composition that is rapidly expanding and there are now very capable Live-Looping patches freely available for all the major musical programming languages Pure Data, Max/Msp, and Csound.

Traditionalists

Although contemporary looping has been characterised by new forms of composition there are still those who are continuing a detailed investigation into the possibilities of Live-Looping in its traditional tape-delay format. One such artist would be the American composer Jim Fulkerson who could be described as an elder statesman of the looping community. "Fulkerson started working with tape-delay in 1968 at the university of Illinois and states that his interest in tape-delay based composition has remained the same throughout his life. Fulkerson describes himself as a Minimalist who has continued to be fascinated with the idea of the surface structure created by tape delay and how the instrumentalist can guide the listener through this structure"⁵.

However, although Fulkerson's technical use of tape-delay has remained the same he has contributed many interesting ideas to the compositional use of this form. Fulkerson has developed a range of new techniques for the trombone and through the use of tape-delay has found a way to use these techniques in musically interesting way. The layering process of tape delay allows Fulkerson to paint textures and instrument effects creating a seamlessly flowing soundworld normally unfamiliar to the trombone. This can be heard on the piece Co-Ordinate Systems No. 10 where Fulkerson plays his trombone

⁵ Paraphrase, information gathered from an interview with Jim Fulkerson, 1/5/2003

with woodwind mouthpieces creating a landscape of sound that has a distinct electronic quality. I would argue that Fulkerson's use of tape-delay has allowed him to show the extended voice of the trombone that he has developed. The form of layering allows Fulkerson to make sense of these seemingly unusual and bizarre instrument sounds creating an orchestral effect. Fulkerson has also been responsible for taking Live-Looping into many contemporary art disciplines "especially experimental film and new dance".⁶

⁶ <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/BartonWorkshop/bartonframe.htm> The Barton Workshop members short biography of James Fulkerson