

# **Chapter 1**

## **Live Looping**

In this research paper I wish to study the musical practice of Live-Looping. Live-Looping is in a sense a mythical genre of music that does not appear to have a formalised history written about it. Through my research I aim to put forward the idea that it does exist as a genre of music with a clear and traceable history. Whilst following this history from its initial development to its contemporary uses I hope to uncover stylistic parallels between disparate artists who have made extensive use of Live-Looping technology. This will also go some way to ascertaining if there is any existence of a group aesthetic. Further to this I hope to unearth links between the compositional language of the music and the advancement of Live-Looping technology. I intend to reference this research to artist's work with particular regard to their role and influence within this field of musical expression. Due to the shortage of pre-existing material illustrating the development of Live-Looping, I will gather much of my research directly from those artists involved in the movement. Through this first hand study I hope to glean a more accurate portrayal of what I consider to be an incredibly vibrant musical movement.

For the purpose of this paper I have chosen to use the term Live-Looping to define a particular use of technology in performance. Live-Looping can be defined as being where “the sounds of a performer are extended and multiplied by the use of delay processing and real time sampling.”<sup>1</sup> It does not refer to music where “pre-recorded

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.audiomidi.com/classroom/software/loops\\_part1.cfm?cpid=92](http://www.audiomidi.com/classroom/software/loops_part1.cfm?cpid=92) Zonvar, Dr Richard. *A child's garden of looping*, 2003

sounds are played back in a repetitive way as part of a performance or recorded composition”<sup>2</sup> Therefore my working definition of Live-Looping excludes DJ turntablism, sequencing and simply playing repetitive music.

Briefly, the technology of Live-Looping was originally conceived of as using tape-delay systems. However, it developed through the use of digital hardware and more recently, software where it has proved to be especially popular amongst programmers of the Macintosh language Max/Msp. Thanks to mass-market exposure and digital technology’s flexible nature it is now common to find basic Live-Looping algorithms in many popular digital guitar effects processors and other equipment of this kind. Here it is used as a practice aid as well as a performance device. In fact it can be argued that it has achieved the status of being a standard effect on most guitar oriented multi-effects processors. It is also common to find a Live-Looping algorithm as one part of a much more complex system in the software domain of programming languages like Max/Msp. In this case the looping component is there to organise and give form to the more complex processing and algorithmic-based composition work. It can therefore be seen that looping, like most recording hardware, has been absorbed into the software of digital music technology and because of this its use has become commonplace. In this paper I intend to look at all of the above incarnations of Live-Looping technology referring to them as Live-Looping devices.

Typically, Live Looping performances are characterised by a performers desire to create an ensemble effect that is not possible using conventional technique. What is of interest is how performers have challenged this notion, by examining the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Zonvar, Dr Richard. *A child's garden of looping* , 2003

between themselves and Live-Looping technology to find new forms of expression. The most common use of Live-Looping is where a player records a phrase that is then fed back to them, this process is then repeated to create a layering effect. The feedback loop gives the player the opportunity to learn and capitalise upon the subtle nuances of their expression. This effect differs from that of an ensemble's in that one person's personality is being layered as opposed to many personalities being combined. The relationship between the looping device and the musician also allows for a large amount of improvisation. The player is unrestricted from having to communicate their intentions to other ensemble members, thus allowing them to accompany themselves in whatever way they see fit.

In terms of aesthetics Live-Looping provides the user with the opportunity to take chaos and achieve order from it. When a series of random events are selected and then repeated they cease to be random events because they then can be learnt and order can be perceived. Therefore, it can be said that looping random sounds results in the organisation of events where meaning is created from repetition. In this way Looping can also be said to display detail or magnify a situation. This was used to great effect in Alvin Lucier's installation *Sitting In A Room*, where his use of looping has the effect of displaying the resonant frequencies of the room.

This is a genre characterised by paradoxes, a performer plays their instrument live but their relationship to the dissemination of their instrument is different to that of the conventional player. By recording themselves, they are in a sense involving both themselves and the audience in the processes of both the studio and the live environment. An instrumentalist is effectively recording their performance and disseminating this

recorded performance, as it happens. A live performance is typically characterised by the fact that musical events are created and then lost. This is paradoxically the opposite of the situation in Live-Looping, where the moment is captured and replayed as part of the performance.