

Chapter 2

The Pre-History Of Live-Looping and The Figures That Would Inspire Its Creation.

Musique Concrete – The Beginnings of Tape based music.

Live-looping was created from the birth of the tape recorder, however it was by no means the first tape music. The tape recorder was developed by 1935 and became readily available by 1950. The tape recorder's potential to allow new forms of musical composition was first recognised by the composers of contemporary classical music. The first of these was Pierre Schaeffer whose early studies written for manipulated gramophone records of sound effects were the beginnings of what he called Musique Concrete. Musique Concrete was “a term Schaeffer coined to denote the use of sound objects from nature, “concrete” sounds of the real world. These were opposed to the ‘musical objects’ of tonal music, whose source was the abstract value system of the mind.”¹

Schaeffer can be said to be the founder of the institution of the electronic music studio way back in 1948. Using the medium of vinyl he designed a whole series of techniques for musical composition. He would create endless loops from specially cut records, reverse sounds, layer sounds, and process sounds with reverb and audio filters. It is amazing to think that so many of the compositional techniques that we take for granted today were pioneered by Schaeffer back in 1948. The 1950s saw Schaeffer transfer his

¹ P91 Holmes, Thom *Electronic and Experimental Music* (London: Routledge 2002)

skills from working with vinyl to the more flexible format of tape and alongside his associate Pierre Henry he produced the first extended Musique Concrete composition, *Symphonie Pour Un Homme Seul* which was premiered in 1950.

Musique Concrete represented a new compositional language, where the outcome was essentially fixed in concrete form that gave no scope for interpretation by a performer. It is within Musique Concrete that we saw the beginnings of the fascination with recorded sound as a unit for musical creation and manipulation that has continued right through to the present day with digital sampling. Composers became fascinated in the variety of sounds that could be produced by familiar objects and instruments when warped by the studio environment. Composers could change the timbre of an instrument via the variable playback speed of a tape recorder, recorded sounds could be fragmented via razor blade editing, allowing small chunks of different material to be reassembled into collages of unplayable passages. For example a clip of laughter could be reversed then spliced into the decay of a piano chord and blended with a re-pitched flute melody. These types of manipulation would form the blueprint for functions implemented later on in Live-Looping.

The Breaking of the European Model

Musique Concrete can be said to represent the beginnings of a break away from the European Classical model that had dominated music throughout the 19th and early 20th century. Music in the early 20th century had been characterised by the modernists Schoenberg and Stravinsky who represented the cutting edge of the continual evolution of the system of musical harmony. This in turn had been cemented in history by the

creation of the European schools of music such as the Academy of Music, and the Trinity College of Music.

Music Concrete clearly differed from the music of the Serialist's. The music was no longer about increasing the complexity of the harmonic and rhythmic components. The focus had changed all together, where the quality of found sounds and the newness of manipulated sound became the focal point for music composition. A new aesthetic had been found.

Music Concrete displayed a language of musical examination that would later on be repeated in the early live-looping pieces. Compositions like Henry's 'Vocalise' using only the sound 'Ah' demonstrate how entire pieces could be made from very small musical fragments. Indeed Schaffer would often classify his pieces by the type of sounds used to make them. There are clear parallels between these early tape pieces and the early tape pieces of the Minimalists like Steve Reich and Terry Riley. Pieces like Riley's *She Moves Me* or Reich's *Its Gonna Rain* both rely on this idea of the examination of a single musical fragment.

Cage

Other composers also began to try to distance themselves from the European classical tradition. The American composers Henry Cowell , Charles Ives, and John Cage tried to create a music that wasn't based upon the European tradition. Of these Cage was probably the most successful and would prove to be one of the great pioneers of American music, whose ideas would be of huge influence to the first Live-Looping composers.

Although Cage had grown up studying the European classical model of music under teachers like Schoenberg his musical ideas began to display a departure from European forms and traditions. Cage's harmonic and rhythmic language was still derived from the European tradition, yet his obsession with experimentation redefined the boundaries of what music could be perceived as and represented a significant departure. I believe Cage is best look upon as an inventor of musical ideas, who although failed to produce many outstanding compositions, certainly produced an outstanding output of ideas and methods for the creation of music. Cage in a sense represented an extreme of modernism where he even managed to call silence music.

It was Cage's philosophy on music, his incorporation of the influence of eastern cultures, and what he represented that inspired the Minimalists rather more than the actual music he made. Cage removed the need for music to have a developmental structure, he replaced this with the idea that music can exist as a sensation that can be heard. Cage's music presented the listener with a surface to read into as opposed to directing the listener through a piece of music through the use of harmony and structure which can be heard even in the atonal music of Schoenberg and Webern. This idea of music as an open surface can be seen to have been taken up by the first Live-Loopers, the Minimalists.