Gestural Composition

by Scott A. Wyatt
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Many American electro-acoustic works are often concerned with the use of pitch as one of the primary compositional focal points. While I consider this a valid approach, I have been interested in the design and use of sonic gestures that are not immediately based upon pitch as the obvious focal point. These gestures can be concrete and/or electronically generated (as I have no prejudices for either), that are much further processed and shaped electronically to create new identities that transform and develop throughout the designed course of the composition. This approach, with its roots in both traditional concrete and synthesis techniques, takes on a time-based sculptural performance that affords the listener a desired opportunity to discover the interplay and development of molded sonic events without the interference of pitch as the primary factor. Attention turns to gestural evolution and gestural development within a host space or spaces. Some have labeled this approach "gestural composition" or "sound mass composition," and while other approaches are often pursued within the University of Illinois Experimental Music Studios, "gestural composition" has maintained a major presence during the Studios' 40-year history. To perhaps better understand my selection of works presented at the ÉuCuE Series XVI concert on November 4, 1997, a brief discussion about the Illinois activities and facilities would be helpful.

The University of Illinois Experimental Music Studios were founded in 1958 and were one of the first of their kind in the Western Hemisphere. Some of the early activities include the first developments in computer music by Lejaren Hiller (1958-68), expanded gestural computer synthesis by Herbert Brun, the creation of the Sal-Mar Construction (a 24-channel real-time performance hybrid synthesizer - 1969-72) by Salvatore Martirano and the Harmonic Tone Generator (one of the first analog modular synthesizers -1964) by James Beauchamp. Composers John Cage, Kenneth Gaburo and Ben Johnston, along with Hiller, Brun and Martirano helped to forge not only technical awareness and activity, but also active discussion on aesthetics and experimental performance. Today, the facility continues as an active and productive center for electroacoustic and computer music composition, education and research, centered around a composition department of 10 faculty composers. The present facilities include 10 specially designed studios for sound generation, processing, and recording. The initial courses in electro-acoustic music techniques spend a great deal of time with musique concrete and classical synthesis techniques to create an awareness of the medium beyond that which the elemental use of MIDI instruments suggests. Sound design, gestural definition and development are among the main focal points stressed.

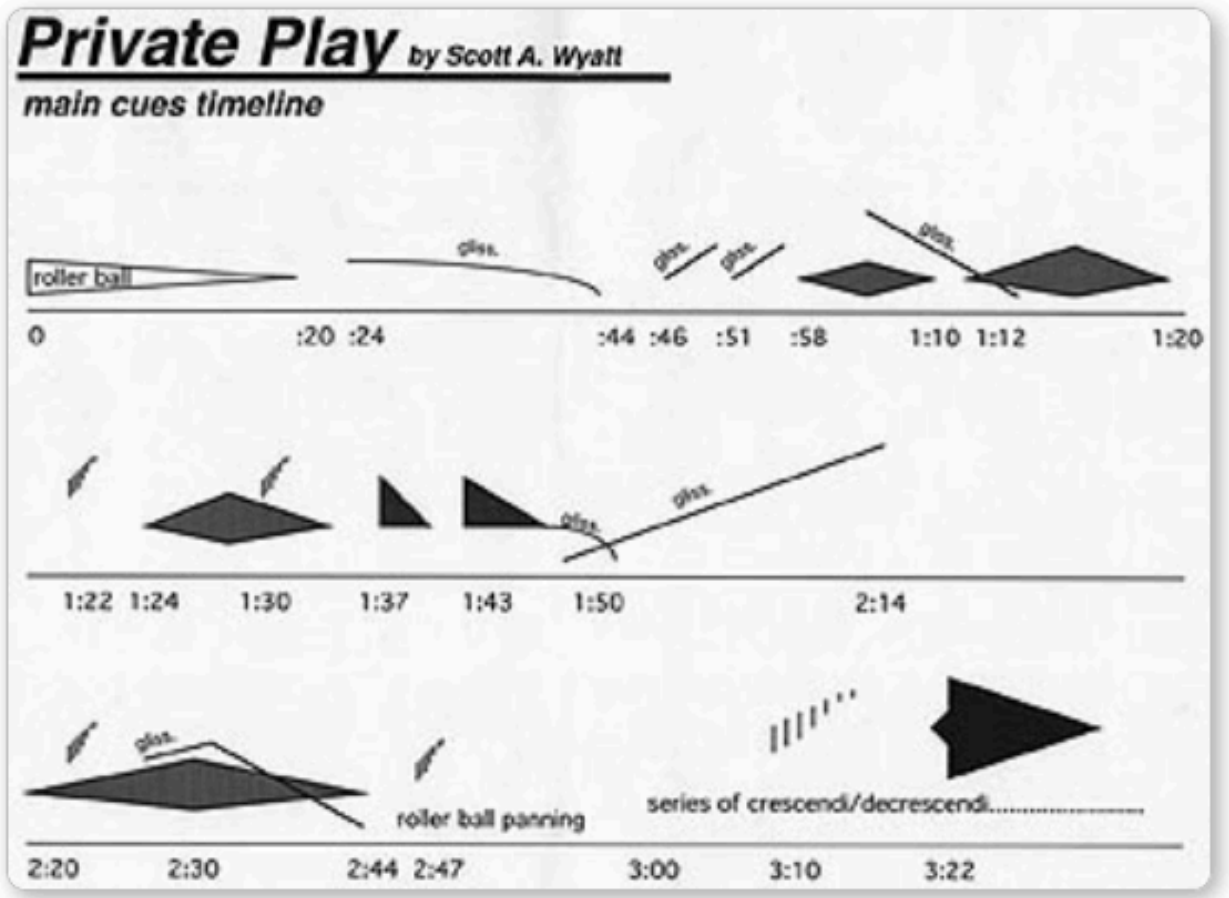
Points of No Return Risonare C
The first two works presented during the concert are significantly influenced by classical musique concrete techniques. *Points of No Return*, by current doctoral student Chin-Chin Chen, is in 5 sections, shifts between two different environments and employs concrete techniques within the digital domain. Only at a very late stage is electronically generated sound incorporated to color some dramatic moments. *Risonare C*, by past Illinois doctoral student Colin Franey, was entirely created from train sounds recorded live by the composer. This concrete work was accomplished by purely analog means (and without the use of a sampler). The composer was always fascinated by the repeating but always changing rhythm of the train, the cacophony of sounds both near one's vantage point and further down the line of cars. More than just the sounds, the work concerns itself with the evolving energy, motion and direction of the original sound objects.

The next two works, while incorporating stronger pitch elements, continue the prime focus on gesture and expressions of energy. *Creati*, by Middlebury, Vermont composer George Todd (and not having any affiliation with the University of Illinois), was inspired by a fascinating mobile sculpture by George Rhodes. The sculpture is in the New York Transit Authority building near Times Square. It consists of steel balls which are hoisted by tiny elevators and released down various slides that take them through heliotropes, chutes, ski jumps, etc., all the time banging against various objects made of wood and metal. The balls are released into random paths at random times so that something is always going on: the sounds and the sights are mesmerizing.

Whitewash was created by Paul Koonce (Assistant Professor at Princeton and past Illinois graduate) using the CMUSIC sound-synthesis language running on a NeXT computer. The source sounds for the work consist of two piano tones-one low, another high-contrasted against a third, granularly synthesized, chordal sound. These three sounds, all heard early in the work, form the basis for development, which uses successive granularizations to transform and fuse earlier sounds and gestures into incarnations of character, depth and speed. The various whitewash identities are used to build a drama of cinematic scope and character where the reach of gestures is increasingly expanded toward the brink of noise.

Private Play
The last work, *Private Play*, was originally designed and realized as a gestural soundscape for an eight-channel sound system using three front channels (left, center, right), two side channels and three back channels (left, center, right). Subwoofer information was recorded within the front channels of the tape in addition to the full audio frequency material and was tapped via aux sends to subwoofers during performance. This was my first effort with our new eight-channel system specifically set-up for diffusion work at the University of Illinois Experimental Music Studios. We have been pursuing development of a performance practice and methodology, notation, and pedagogy for a more uniformed approach to eight-channel sound diffusion or projection. After having researched theatre surround systems (AC-3, Dolby Digital, DTS, THX, etc.), we found the use of eight discrete channels more

convincing and appropriate for our continued work. The fashionable quest for nomenclature brevity forced us to refer to our Discrete Eight system as the D-8 system. I wish to thank our CEC friend, Kevin Austin, of Concordia University, for sharing his experience and insight with eight channel and much larger systems set-up for diffusion presentations. I also would like to express my appreciation to Kevin Austin for the opportunity to share these works with audience members at the ÉuCuE Series XVI concerts and with the members of the CEC.



Scott A. Wyatt's score

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