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Peter Zinovieff and Cultures of Electronic Music

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Electronic music has long been, and continues to be, a potent intersection or bridge, between music popular and less popular—what in simpler times has been described as "low" and "high" art.² The instrumentation of popular music from the middle of the 20th century can be distinguished from that of "classical music" (or more tellingly, as the Germans have it: *ernste Musik*) in very general terms: guitars drums and keyboards, as against various combinations of orchestral instruments. But when it comes to electronic music, also in very general terms, the instrumental *tools* are the same across these musical territories which in some ways, have become interpenetrated in the 21st century. So for the synthesiser music enthusiast and musicologist alike, with electronic music, there would appear to be a kind of "level playing field", in terms of tools and equipment, between musics whose apparent intended function, expressive intention and meaning could not be seemingly wider apart.

This technological commonality between such musics makes kissing cousins between compositions and composers (or "artists") that do not ordinarily "belong" in the same kind of psychological musical space, for want of a better expression. (As a point of reference: cue arguments between people that sort their albums/CDs/MP3s by category or exclusively alphabetically: does the music of Harrison Birtwistle *really* belong next to The Beatles, or on a different shelf/playlist altogether?) The use of identical or similar equipment for apparently different musical ends makes for fascinating comparisons between these musics which generally speaking, are ordinarily kept apart in both popular and academic culture.

When explaining to non-specialists who Peter Zinovieff is, as a shorthand, it's easiest to describe the place of the EMS VCS3 synthesiser in electronic music history, usually in the context of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. This is the approach that some of the standard music technology textbooks take, for instance, with the British doing a better job than the Americans.³ Harshly described by Zinovieff as one of EMS' "rather pathetic little synthesisers" when interviewed for the *What the Future Sounded Like* documentary (audiences gasp at this description during screenings), the iconic VCS3 is emblematic of the popular perception of Zinovieff's place in electronic music history. At the same time, however, it is also a minor irritant, tending to shadow as it does the other musical work that Zinovieff was involved with for over a decade from the mid-sixties, and which he continues today at the age of 80.

Directed by Matthew Bate, *What the Future Sounded Like* (2006) gives a very good overview of some of the people involved in Electronic Music Studios (EMS), London, while omitting others entirely (such as Alan Sutcliffe,

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² Thanks to Alan Sutcliffe, Robin Wood and especially Peter Zinovieff for conversations that informed this piece of writing. Any errors are my own.

³ See example, Holmes, T., 2012. *Electronic and Experimental Music: Technology, Music, and Culture*. New York, NY: Routledge. Here the EMS company, but none of its founders, are named.

who was a part-time director of EMS and with Zinovieff co-wrote the prize-winning *ZASP*). The short film does well in outlining the place of EMS equipment in popular music, and demonstrates how the company marketed its synthesisers in accordance with the post-hippy Zeitgeist ("Every Nun Needs A SYNTHI" being one of Zinovieff's more memorable slogans, accompanied by a photograph of a woman in habit, donning headphones and playing a Synth AKS). The film also suggests, as Zinovieff has long stated, that as far as he was concerned, the function of the EMS company was to fund his own *personal* music studio, containing as it did digital musical and computer equipment initially never intended to be available for sale by EMS the company (an index of the somewhat confusing overlap is of course that this private studio was itself also called EMS).

Most readers of this text will also know that what distinguished Zinovieff's music studio from all others in the UK—and possibly the world—at this time, is that it was the first *computer* electronic music studio in a private house.¹ This studio preceded the synthesiser-producing EMS company by a few years in the mid 1960s, and significantly was never intended for the production of the kind popular music with which the EMS commercial equipment is most often associated. (Congruent with this, a playfully staged photograph from the 1970s of the EMS studio shows Zinovieff's children in flowing white clothes at the controls of the EMS machines, captioned "A performance of the Magic Flute / GLYNDEBOURNE 1983".²) So herein lies the rub, and perhaps explains why Zinovieff's place in music culture and history is richly complex and more nuanced than usually acknowledged. For Zinovieff himself would express little interest in the kind of popular electronic music that most of the people who are interested in *him* would have. (Again, we're talking in broad brushstrokes here: you, considered reader, are a likely exception...)

And these musical/cultural tensions go in multiple directions: some reporting from the popular music side describe Zinovieff as a boffin or "mad professor type" (being educated to the level of doctorate plays to this image). On the other hand, although Zinovieff is steeped in classical music culture, as the photograph of a mock futuristic performance of Mozart's opera suggests, it is also the case that he has no formal training as a composer. In fact, that description was one which for many years Zinovieff was overly-hesitant to use for himself, something that has rightly changed since his recent blossoming of compositional activity.

If Zinovieff's popular music associations are by now almost clichéd (the VCS3 is used by Pink Floyd on *The Dark Side of the Moon* record, then later by John Michel Jarre on *Oxygène*, and so on), they are still yet under-explored. It may well be that Delta Unit Plus, the trio formed with Delia D. and Brian Hodgson in the mid 1960s, was mainly intended to be another attempt at a money-spinner. However, it is still notable that, despite the apparent failure of this particular enterprise, the band is still entwined in one of the UK's "holy grails" of 60s popular music, The Beatles' *Carnival of Light*. It is one of the very last of the bands recordings to remain unreleased, its reputation easily attested by searching YouTube and seeing the many fakes of the track available. That this work has also been described by Zinovieff as a *collaboration* with Paul McCartney makes this moment all the more fascinating. (The billing on the poster advertising this 1967 "sound rave" at the Roundhouse describes "Music by Paul McCartney and Delta Unit Plus".) A postscript to this episode: in a recent interview for Q Magazine, picked up by *The Guardian*, McCartney, cultivating yet again his avant-garde electronic music credentials, describes meeting and visiting Delia Derbyshire, and going down to "a hut at the bottom of her garden ... full of tape machines and funny instruments".³ The irony: it's a visit to *Zinovieff's* garden studio in Putney that McCartney is describing, full of EMS equipment that Zinovieff himself co-designed, and which formed the backbone of Delta Unit Plus' instrumentation and tools.

But the blurring of rightful attribution, of cultural and musical categories and memory don't always stem from such misrememberings of personal or cultural memory. For it is under the monicker of Delta Unit Plus that Zinovieff and Co. also perform (plays back) Zinovieff's first acknowledged electronic music compositions, including *Agnus Dei*, in a concert in Bagnor, 1966. Intended to be the part of an electronic music mass, *Agnus Dei* flies Zinovieff's musical modernist allegiances most clearly. Here is a composer who is interested in *serious*, complex and "difficult" music, that may well entertain, but which is often *about* more serious matters than the largely "consumable" pop of the period. (And yet, now another counter case to muddy the water, the mischievous *Lollipop for Papa* - Papa being Papa Hayden—from 1970. The piece begins in the at the time popular yet throwaway style of Wendy Carlos' *Switched-on Bach*, but then follows on with a set of experimental variations that embrace modernist atonal musical territory.)

⁴ The following textbook gives a good general overview: Manning, P., 2013. *Electronic and Computer Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See Chapter 11.

⁵ http://www.softzine.com/?page_id=20

⁶ www.guardian.co.uk/music/2013/mar/22/paul-mccartney-dr-who-yesterday

By the late 60s, this seriousness of technological musical intention and ambition brings Zinovieff to the attention of a young modernist British composer, just returned from North America on an academic Harkness Fellowship. Harrison Birtwistle is a Northerner, from a small Lancastrian village on the outskirts of Accrington, where musical sophistication consisted of the local military band. Zinovieff's background, of course, couldn't be more different: cultured Russian émigrés parents, boarding school, an Oxford doctorate, and so on. And yet, they become very close friends, and their musical lives become entwined for the next decade. Over this time they collaborate on numerous modernist compositions, Birtwistle primarily writing the instrumental parts, Zinovieff the electronic. (These works in fact are the subject of my own musicological research). Then comes the all-consuming and ambitious opera *The Mask of Orpheus*, the now well-documented collaboration between Zinovieff and Birtwistle as librettist and composer.¹ The project includes an electronic music component, conceived as part of the opera from the start, but which is later unable to be realised by Zinovieff due to the collapse in the late 1970s of the EMS business and Zinovieff's EMS studio.

There are other collaborations and meetings with key modernist figures in the classical music world of the late 20th century, from the UK and beyond: collaborations with Hans Werner Henze, experiments with Karlheinz Stockhausen, performances involving Hugh Davies, and so on. These associations are important then, not only in themselves, but because they remind us that this, in fact, more than the output of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop and its current well-meaning evangelists, is the orientation of Zinovieff's musical world. That, and as the title of *Lollipop for Papa* suggests, the music of what is sometimes still called the Western classical music canon, especially Hayden and Beethoven—more on the latter below. (Zinovieff's daughter Sofka Zinovieff, a celebrated author, writes that when on holiday as a child, "There was always music playing, but it tended to be Mozart, Beethoven or Schubert rather than the kind of thing that was composed and recorded at the [EMS] studio in London").²

Peter Zinovieff's current *public* return to composition, beginning around 2010, has resulted so far in four compositions, all of which make perfect sense within the musical contexts outlined above. With *Bridges from Somewhere and Another to Somewhere Else* (2010) he explores the territory of transformation of audio of early recordings of Turkish folk music, in fact those made by Béla Bartók in 1936, recordings which helped shape Bartók's own approach to composition. Assisted by Tony Myatt and others from the University of York, *Bridges* was developed for a Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary-commissioned sculptural installation, using a multichannel system employing the highly specialised "Ambisonic" technique of sound diffusion. This method of creating multichannel works was employed again in 2012 for a second TBA21-commissioned work, *Good Morning Ludwig*, in which the audience is immersed in electronic sound coming from all around, including above (it is one of the compositions being performed as part of the career-spanning *Peter Zinovieff 80th Birthday Concert* in Cambridge, May 11, 2013). As suggested by its title, this composition also returns to notions of variation form springing from the models of existing music of the classical era, this time, the *Coriolan Overture* of Beethoven. The immersive nature of the result has echoes with Zinovieff's earlier "tape music" collaboration with Harrison Birtwistle, *Chronometer* (1971/72), which was among the earliest UK electronic *multichannel* works. *Chronometer* comprises two asynchronous pairs of two channel tape, allowing the introduction of subtle differences in timings between the pairs of channels each time the composition is "performed" in this format. (Its welcome rerelease on audio DVD in 2008 by Sound and Music,³ whilst making the a multichannel version of the piece publicly available for the first time, effectively destroys this subtle relationship between the parts of the composition.) This temporal approach rightly can be compared with notational/performance practices in Birtwistle's music of the time. However more importantly, from the standpoint of computer electronic music, it should be considered in relation to notions and the practice of controlled *randomness* that the use of the computer facilitated in Zinovieff's music from the mid 60s (an approach commonly now described as *algorithmic music*).

Since Zinovieff's public return to composition, there have been other works and collaborations, too, with the violinist Aisha Orazbayeva (*OUR*, 2010, a concerto for violin and electronics), and with the poet Katrina Porteous (*Horse*, 2011, broadcast on BBC Radio 3). Peter Zinovieff is also currently working on further compositions with Orazbayeva and Porteous respectively. Using current computer music technologies, Zinovieff embraces the new whilst employing notions of musical form and continuities that take us back to his earliest innovative musical work in electronics and computers. We look forward to hearing the results.

⁷ See for instance Cross, J., 2009. *Harrison Birtwistle: The Mask of Orpheus*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate

⁸ http://www.softkazinovieff.com/?page_id=20

⁹ Various: *Recovery/Discovery—40 Years of Surround Electronic Music in the UK*. SAM 0801