

Visualise:

**MAKING
ART**

**IN
CONTEXT**

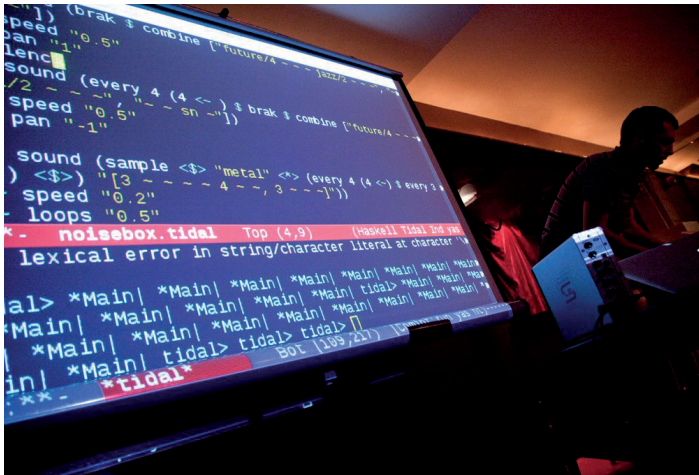
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SHARING ELECTRONIC MUSIC PERFORMANCE

A constant within the arts that involve performance is the notion of sharing with an audience. In what follows, I will discuss this idea in connection with two electronic music performances that opened the *Visualise* 'Poetry, Language, Code' Summer Exhibition at the Ruskin Gallery (2012–06–21). Both took different though related approaches to this notion of sharing, involving visualisation and 'live coding' of electronic music. What motivates electronic musicians to share and show an audience aspects of the music's structure that may otherwise remain unseen and unheard, as it being performed?

In answering this question, we might consider composer Mauricio Kagel's argument from 1979, *On the Artists Self-Understanding and Tasks*. Kagel asserts that, 'communicating—sharing with—can certainly be regarded as an essential goal of every artist's work. Whether one uses notes or noises, colours or objects for this purpose is of no concern, so long as thoughts are communicated which can be worked through and shared' (Kagel, M., 1982. Translated by John McCaughey. NMA 1, pp.28–29). There's a directness here which can be compared with earlier less optimistic statements about the possibilities of communication and expression in art, for instance, by modernists such as Samuel Beckett and Igor Stravinsky. Regardless of how artists may align themselves with such positions, most would welcome a public reception to their work which contained a strong family resemblance to the intentions that lay behind it. In my experience as an electronic music composer-performer, however, it is not always straightforward getting such intentions across to varied audiences with different understandings of music as an art form.

Audiences of a certain type of electronic music—especially that which is not performed live—have often endured concerts where there is little to see, save speakers surrounding an empty stage. Contrast this with the historical practice of music as a more participatory one. Whilst the culture of popular music concerts has long bridged part of this gap (through dancing, singing along, etc.), a recent movement in electronic music concerts has also acknowledged the importance of a form of visual participation in the music’s presentation. So-called ‘live coding’ involves the composer–performer coding electronic music live onstage: computer programming as, and for, music performance. The organisation TOPLAP was founded in 2004 to represent live coding, their website explaining that ‘live coders expose and rewire the innards of software while it generates improvised music and/or visuals’ (<http://toplap.org/about/>).



The TOPLAP manifesto argues that, ‘it is not necessary for a lay audience to understand the [computer] code to appreciate it, much as it is not necessary to know how to play guitar in order to appreciate watching a guitar performance.’ (<http://toplap.org/wiki/ManifestoDraft>). Whether we agree or not with this analogy, we can recognise an attempt to highlight the presence of the electronic music practitioner as a live performer. This can also be observed in TOPLAP’s call for the artist to ‘show us your [computer] screens!’ in order to demonstrate through such sharing that the performance is a live one.

As a sometime member of TOPLAP, I am sympathetic to these issues, yet sensitive also to fundamental differences between performance involving ‘real’ instruments and those using computers. As if to compensate for the absence of conventional instrumental skills, there has been a tendency in live coders to approach its practice with virtuosic programming machismo, at times more akin to showing off than showing–sharing. In response to this perception, I wrote a short text in 2007,

Towards a Slow Code Manifesto (www.ludions.com/slowcode/). In it I express the hope that 'slow coding' might bring to the live coding of electronic music the same ideals which the slow food movement aims to bring to cooking. Organisations interested in slowness have the common thread that to experience things well, takes time. In addition, I would argue that then it comes to electronic music performance, augmenting the aural with visual can jumpstart insight that may otherwise take more time yet.

Motivations for different forms of live coding are varied. As an audience member at numerous live coding events, I have gained enjoyable insight into other performers' music through seeing its patterns and algorithms visualised. To return to where we began, one such example was the live coding performance given by Alex McLean at the opening of the *Visualise* Summer Exhibition. McLean's identification as a live coder can be seen in the motto on his website: 'Making music with text' (<http://yaxu.org>). During his live coding performance the audience could observe from the projected computer code the 'surround sound' electronic music seemingly being created in front of them in the gallery space.

My own contribution to this exhibition opening was the four channel composition *all the chords and others* (2012). The work is for computer electronics, projected visuals and improvising instrument, and I performed it with composer and saxophonist Kevin Flanagan. Though *all the chords* is not a live coding work in the terms framed above, it is concerned with liveness in electronic music: it is performed live, the electronic part is to some extent randomly different each time it is played, and the overall pacing and tempo of the piece is determined during performance in response to musical interaction with the instrumental performer.

all the chords also shares with live coding the aesthetic of seeking a direct kind of sharing with the audience, an intention of communicating something of the musical thinking behind the work through extra-musical means. In this case the form of sharing is also a visual one, using software I have authored, 'PitchCircle' (image pictured right) and www.ludions.com/notation. Made using the SuperCollider programming language, this software can function both as *visualisation* of music employing notes, and also—as here with the saxophone—to structure musical improvisation.

Part of the motivation for making the PitchCircle software is my belief that an audience member need not be a reader of standard musical notation to appreciate a visual language formed by an alternative, less technical representation of aspects of a composer's musical thinking. The assertion here is that most music can be understood in terms of visual metaphors: shapes, contours and patterns. In performance, using PitchCircle enables the music's notes and chords to be experienced as both seen and heard. To close, whatever art form a practitioner works in, it is in their interest to try to express and share their thinking clearly. This may result in employing all means available, whether in space and in view or in time and in sound.

