

COMPOSING ELECTRONIC MUSIC: A NEW AESTHETIC BY CURTIS ROADS



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About the Author

Curtis Roads is a composer and researcher who teaches electronic music composition at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He co-founded the International Computer Music Association and served as an editor/associate editor of Computer Music Journal for 23 years. The author of numerous books, his electronic music set POINT LINE CLOUD won the Award of Distinction at the 2002 Ars Electronica.

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Electronic music evokes new sensations, feelings, and thoughts in both composers and listeners. Opening the door to an unlimited universe of sound, it engages spatialization as an integral aspect of composition and focuses on sound transformation as a core structural strategy. In this new domain, pitch occurs as a flowing and ephemeral substance that can be bent, modulated, or dissolved into noise. Similarly, time occurs not merely as a fixed duration subdivided by ratios, but as a plastic medium that can be generated, modulated, reversed, warped, scrambled, and granulated. Envelope and waveform undulations on all time scales interweave to generate form. The power of algorithmic methods amplify the capabilities of music technology. Taken together, these constitute game-changing possibilities.

This convergence of technical and aesthetic trends prompts the need for a new text focused on the opportunities of a sound oriented, multiscale approach to composition of electronic music. Sound oriented means a practice that takes place in the presence of sound. Multiscale means an approach that takes into account the perceptual and physical reality of multiple, interacting time scales-each of which can be composed. After more than a century of research and development, now is an appropriate moment to step back and reevaluate all that has changed under the ground of artistic practice.

Composing Electronic Music outlines a new theory of composition based on the toolkit of electronic music techniques. The theory consists of a framework of concepts and a vocabulary of terms describing musical materials, their transformation, and their organization. Central to this discourse is the notion of narrative structure in composition-how sounds are born, interact, transform, and die. It presents a guidebook: a tour of facts, history, commentary, opinions, and pointers to interesting ideas and new possibilities to consider and explore.

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A worthy contribution to the ways in which we hear, perceive, and talk about sound

By Saltillo

Overall, an excellent, clear, concise discussion of the aesthetic elements that drive most (but not all) manifestations of the use of electronic equipment to generate sounds in ways that are intended to be received as "art." Professor Roads tries to cover a lot of ground here: the history of the practices, audio examples (from the companion website) to hear what he is discussing, as well as general areas of intellectual, scientific and artistic concern for people engaged in these practices. For me, personally, the most important aspect of this book is its contribution to the formation of a fundamental vocabulary and set of discursive conventions for talking about electronic music. Let me clarify: I honestly believe that there is no "self-evident" art. We all need to be assimilated into discursive traditions concerning art and it is through that assimilation that we are taught how to perceive, understand and communicate our experience of art. One does not simply go to a Shostakovitch symphony and understand what one is hearing and why it is worth listening to. One does not simply walk into the Prado museum and see some old Hieronymous Bosch painting and know what is significant, relevant, valuable, and pleasing about it. In the case of electronic music practices, the challenge is profound. It is a practice that has emerged before we have developed a common set of discursive practices that allows your average listeners to appreciate it, talk about it, communicate what their hear or perceive and what opinions they may have about it. Most of us are left with some degree of residual "baggage" in our discourse - whether it is inherited from immersion in the traditions of European 12 tone orchestral or chamber composition, or the traditions of pop and rock music - that misguides our ability to make sense of what we hear when we attempt to listen to electronic music. Professor Roads has done a masterful job of helping to frame the discussion in this regard, giving us a set of "canonical" terms, concepts, and ways of

describing what is happening to the sounds we hear that allows us to engage in a true praxis of participation in the aesthetic experience.

Unfortunately the book is not without its short-comings, most of which Professor Roads seems to be aware of, but which nonetheless detract somewhat from the book. The first and most thorough and pervasive is his fetishistic attachment to the concepts of "composition" and "composer." These concepts are useful of course. But I would argue they are far more useful in the realms of pre-electronic and non-electronic music. Within electronic music there are many ways in which the very concepts of "composition" and "composer" are undermined, subverted, and in some instances become irrelevant and meaningless. And yet for Professor Roads, an employee of the university as an institution, locked into a series of institutional norms and conventions that demand his acceptance, the idea that people are still "composers" engaged in "compositional practices" in the domain of electronic music remains natural and sacrosanct. I believe the idea of an aesthetic of electronic music must take into account the myriad ways in which this fetishized concept becomes "de-naturalized" by electronic musical practices.

Another shortcoming is Professor Roads's intentional and complete dismissal of the question of "live performance" as an element of electronic music praxis. He is painfully aware of this short-coming, and offers an apology early on in the book. Unfortunately his apology is along the lines of "I know some people think live performance matters. Historically it did not in the early pioneer days. And my personal practice is so deeply tied to the idea of acting as a 'composer' making 'compositions' in a studio, that I have no experience with, familiarity with or authority to speak on the topic of live performance." I find this apology deeply dissatisfying. Its like someone writing a book about jazz and saying "I do not discuss improvisation in this book because I exclusively work as a composer and songwriter and therefore since I never actually play jazz, I have nothing to say about improvisation as an element of the jazz aesthetic." Well pardon me, but doesn't that miss one of the fundamental points of trying to describe the aesthetic of jazz in the first place? Likewise, much could - and should - be said about the unique ways in which performance is itself an element of the aesthetic. And it is not - as Professor Roads seems to believe - simply a matter of discussing the virtuosity of playing a synthesizer on a stage in real time. There are many layers to the question of performance that never even arise in the context of non-electronic or pre-electronic music, where there is a sharp conceptual and practical distinction between "composition" and "performance" (the latter being understood in the traditional paradigm as simply a "translation" of the pre-planned instructions into the actual creation of sound). If jazz improvisation taught us anything, it was that such a distinction is problematic. In the world of electronic music, things of course become even more interesting. For example, what should one make of - and is there anything to say for - forms of practice like when Swedish electronic music duo Minilogue recorded its 2013 album "Bloom" as a series of recorded "live performance" jam sessions from which they were able to extract enough particularly pleasing, note-worthy moments that could be compiled as "tracks" onto a CD? Some of the actual "live performance" footage as well as videos explaining the equipment set up - in general terms - was put onto youtube and profiled on the website of ableton, the makers of the software used by Minilogue to make the album. And more generally, what can be said about the phenomenon of the rise of the "DJ" or the emergence of "DJ" culture today? It is not uncommon to see artists like Julien Bayle share the stage at music festivals with performers with names like "Dillon Francis" and or Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith perform at Denmark's Roskilde Festival. And whither the DJ? I have been told - not sure if true - that the "Goa" music that eventually became known as "trance" was invented by DJs like Goa Gil at hippie parties in Goa India in the 1980s using techniques of tape splicing and tape looping - the exact same techniques pioneered by Pierre Schaeffer decades earlier in a workshop in France. At what point does that phenomenon become worthy of acknowledgement and discussion? At what point does the craftwork of a Sasha or John Digweed or Bassnectar or Skrillex become something that a true aesthetic of electronic music needs to reckon with, whether for good or for bad?

This last comment brings me to the last and final shortcoming I found in Professor Roads's treatment: his sometimes unreasonably elitist dismissal of much of electronic music today as mere "pop music". This is problematic for several reasons. First it reflects another residual paradigm he has inherited from a pre-electronic/non-electronic musical aesthetic and his position as an academic professor of music: I am referring to the "high brow" / "low brow" mindset that pervades so many aspects of our contemporary cultural practices. Although he tries to defend his perspective early on in an end-note, Professor Roads basically takes the approach of focusing his discussion on performers and pieces of music that he deems worthy of discussion, and broadly dismisses much of what he ignores or passes over as "pop music" without specifying who or what he actually considers to be "pop music". It leaves one wondering: if he didn't mention a certain person or a certain work, is it because he just didn't have time or space to cover everything, or because he genuinely considers it beneath him to discuss such because it is mere "pop music" (which seems to be his preferred pejorative for anything he considers too low-brow for treatment in a work like this). Although this attitude only shows up sporadically, and by no means did it prevent me from being enormously impressed by this book, it happened often enough to become a mild on-going annoyance. And I don't say that just because I like "low brow" electronic music. On the contrary, I think Professor Roads is missing a major aspect of electronic music that is unique and significantly different from non-electronic, pre-electronic musical practices by allowing this elitist high-brow/low-brow mindset to color his perspective on electronic music itself. Namely this: the distance between the "high brow" of electronic music (that Professor Roads purports to speak for) and the "low brow" (of which he chooses not to speak) is much shorter than is the case in non-electronic/pre-electronic music and much shorter than Professor Roads believes. In writing a book on traditional European music theory, an author might be hard-pressed to avoid mentioning the name "Bach" anywhere in the text; but could quite easily get away with avoiding any mention of "Beatles" or "Lennon/McCartney". Such a schism is harder to sustain in speaking of electronic music. Let me be more specific: many, if not most, of the practices and techniques described in Chapter 4 (Creating Sound Materials), Chapter 5 (Sound Transformation), Chapter 6 (Processes of rhythm) chapter 7 (pitch in Electronic music), Chapter 8 (articulating space), chapter 9 (multiscale organization) and chapter 10 (sonic narrative) are routinely employed by creators of what Professor Roads would dismiss as "pop music". One can learn to hear and identify when listening to many of the most accomplished and serious producers of the many forms of dance-oriented electronic music examples of many of the topics emphasized in this book. The Table 5.1 on pages 132-134 of the book is essentially a list of the bread-and-butter tools of the trade for sound transformation in electronic music, whether for the lowest brow "pop music" maker or for those whom Professor Roads views and holds in esteem as his peers. This is not to say I question Professor Roads' choice of sound examples on his companion site. On the contrary - I think he has done a very good job of finding and hand-picking specific examples that very effectively illustrate the points he wants to make. I am simply saying, for someone who is interested in electronic music on its own terms, as a true "new aesthetic", there is far more being done that is interesting and of note and worthy of attention in the non-academic, allegedly "pop" side of things.

Overall, however, regardless of where one's preferences and tastes lean in listening to electronic music, what is truly to be admired by Professor Roads's work, is the way in which it frames basic issues and gives us all a common ground for listening to and talking about this phenomenon in a way that is a meaningful contribution to the advancement of defining such a "new aesthetic".

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Definitive book on a new aesthetic of electronic music

By John_G

Dr. Roads, who teaches computer music research, obviously knows his stuff. The book is a well-written discussion of a new aesthetic of electronic music. It could become THE Text Book on the Subject. Text is written at college-level comprehension.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

This book is a survey of aesthetics and techniques used ...

By William T. Bajzek

This book is a survey of aesthetics and techniques used in electronic music of all sorts. It's very academic and dry, but very thorough and informative.

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