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UROP Final Report

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Emergent Scenery, Narrative, and Music
from Experimental Soundtrack Production for Film

The experience of being a design student in Rapson Hall is a unique and multi-faceted one, in such a manner that does not lend itself easily to summary or media representation. Crafting a film which is indicative of the student experience is therefore an undertaking which requires experimental processes and careful deliberation. As I have been working alongside College of Design faculty member Christian Korab, we have recognized the importance of the film's score in creating an emergent narrative which is truly representative of the design student experience at the University of Minnesota. In order to consider important aspects of the film's audio, we began by asking ourselves what the acoustic imagery in perception of our built environment might be, how music may be immanent to the ambient sounds of the built environment, and how the spoken word or narrative content may be musically interwoven with the score in order to craft a holistic gestural image; a documentary film more immersive and experiential rather than didactic. By basing the score's composition around these questions, we have produced a piece of audio which is poetically (rather than literally) representative of the student experience in Rapson Hall. The formal expression of the concept proves understandable to our intended audience, but the technical means are not as accessible to novices as the transparent form may appear to the novice.

As with many experimental ventures, precedents are required to maintain aesthetic grounding and to avoid “reinventing the wheel”. Perhaps the most influential of these is Steve Reich’s three-movement piece for string quartet and tape, *Different Trains*. Reich had been riding trains cross country in America during World War II and composed this piece to convey the thought he may have rode on Holocaust trains had he been in Europe instead. The piece centers around spoken phrases lifted from both Americans and Europeans before, during, and after the war. These spoken phrases are looped and utilized as melodies, which the string quartet both mimics and accompanies. The usage of organic interview clips incorporated into music was a concept that highly interested Christian and I. This method of composition seemed to convey the concept of an emergent narrative and musicality that we had discussed, while maintaining distinct aesthetic integrity.

A second precedent for the pilot film’s score is the 1978 record *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* by Brian Eno. Although the genre this album coined has gone on to see worldwide influence, the method of creation is what had interested Christian and I. The process began when Eno was revisiting some recordings of four musicians performing improvisational exercises and noticed that although the musicians could not hear each other, there was a short section when the melodies interlocked. He was so enthralled with this that he cut a loop of the section and used it as the basis for the first track on the album. This idea of musicality coming from serendipitous circumstances is one that has interested me for years, and is an idea that ties in directly with the pilot film score. We knew that we did not want to start with a traditional sheet music score, but rather let the environment and its students dictate to us how the piece should be written.

The first step of the process in bringing this score to fruition was gathering the necessary auditory components. Since the subject of the film is Rapson Hall and the students within, our recordings naturally center around the two. The first set of audio files used for composition included found sound recordings from the Rapson Hall atrium area. These were taken at times of high crowd density and times of near vacancy. The second set of audio files consisted of roughly 36 hours of student interviews. Each individual was interviewed at length (usually for an hour), the goal being to capture more natural responses on various design questions. In addition to the individual interviews, a group of students conversing about design was captured on more than one occasion.

As the audio recordings came together, I began to consider how we might craft a cohesive emergent narrative before I dove into the music (because the narrative was the more uncertain of the two, and would affect the music). The process of this can be heard in the “Soundscapes & Synthetic Narrative Model” audio file. First, I attempted to sift through the recordings to find moments in which the speech seemed significant to me. However, I quickly saw that this took a long time to get to a point where the narrative flowed. Moving forward, we instead began to group spoken word clips into topical narrative categories or “buckets” and pull from a specific bucket for a segment.

In addition to experimenting with the flow of the spoken word in the synthetic assembly of narrative, I wanted to play around with modulating the sound design of the environment over time. Similar to how I was piecing together the vocal clips, it was my goal to reconstruct snippets of the found sound recordings to produce a multi-perspectival or “cubist” view of the environment. In the aforementioned audio file, we are first dropped from a train into a busy

Rapson setting, where we bounce around between a couple student review conversations. In the transition to the next experiment, we are brought into a much calmer environment. This grows back into the busy Rapson environment once again, where we leave by train and are left with the voice in its own distant space.

It was around this time when I was layering audio clips from the Rapson environment that I began to notice the room held certain resonances. Up until this point, the musical experiments I had produced revolved around more traditional instrumentation (piano and synthesizers) which were playing in the “key” of the vocal and environmental audio. However, that did not seem to emerge from the environment and form a holistic view as Christian and I had intended. This taken into consideration, my next experiments involved me attempting to pull the resonance out of the Rapson found sound recordings and to manipulate those to form a piece of music.

The first real piece I produced as a result of this can be heard in the “Rapson Resonance 1” audio file. The recording began with me locating the root note of the building and pulling out resonances digitally in the form of two alternating chords. I then began to layer in more recordings of the space to create the effect of a gathering crowd. Additionally, recordings of paper shifting, pencils moving, and other common architectural activities were utilized to add light percussive and textural elements. The only piece of audio used that was not recorded in Rapson Hall is a subtle sub-bass synthesizer, used to accent the root note. When this experiment was completed, Christian and I noted that the blending of music and environment fit with our ideas for the film in a way that traditional instrumentation did not.

In order to contrast the serenity of the first piece (and in order to try new methods of resonance extraction), I created the “Rapson Resonance 2” audio file. While I did not alter the pitch of any of the recordings used in the first resonance test, I pitched multiple found sound recording layers to create chords in the second test. The effect was less perfect, and lended itself to a more tense atmosphere. I chose to punctuate this growing tension with live instrumentation as well. Near the beginning of the piece, a distant piano note loops, which gives way to a growing synthesizer sequence by the end. Symbolically, this is meant to represent our nature as human beings to progress technologies and utilize them to bring ideas into actuality. The architectural activity noises were also used for their percussive and textural qualities in this test.

Now it was time to utilize what I had learned on the sound design, musical, and narrative fronts to create a proof of concept score. This final product can be heard by listening to the “Soundtrack Proof of Concept” audio file. The film begins outside the Earth and descend to Rapson Hall, at which point it is stated that “we are here”. From there, we experience a brief clip of an architectural review. Slowly, the musical resonance begins to emerge from the environment and the students’ vocal clips weave into the score. The concept for the narrative here is a high level overview of design school. In the file, you can hear students discuss the trials and tribulations of the inherent collaboration, working long hours, and self-exploration. However, the intent is to recognize that the struggle is necessary for growth and reward, and there is a certain serenity in working to improve your life and the lives around you.

The final segment utilizes the second Rapson Resonance test and vocal clips on the subject of “reflective consciousness”. As this subject is far more metaphysical than the previous, the vocal clips, sound effects, and music begin to detach from their environment and float in a

more abstract manner. What keeps everything grounded is the growing synthesizer sequence, ultimately building to one final whispered “we”.

Although the final piece of audio produced is roughly six and a half minutes, there was a myriad of less successful experiments created to get to that point. To present all of these would be unnecessary since the final best represents our concept. Furthermore, the nature of working with such a large collection of recordings has produced more experiments and required more time than was predicted. With that said, the end result is something which could not have been produced without our extensive groundwork, effective collaboration and the experimental rigor of an explicitly engineered production process.

Our intention was to amplify and represent for a general audience the voice of a collective consciousness particularly evident from certain privileged points of view at The School of Architecture. We invented a process to synthesize narrative via multi-perspective audition of the interviews and aggregation of sound bites identified in those auditions to meet logical and aesthetic criteria. The outcome of our intent and process demonstrates a means of exposing and illuminating a multiplicity of thoughtful meaning underlying the objective content in 36 hours of student interviews. The linear record of the content in these interviews has a face value relevant to documentary representation of the subject matter concerning the film. However, this form of reportage is not readily applicable in cinematic and attractive form because of its length and logical complexity. Instead, we have chosen to distill the thoughts of the student body and represent their ethos by a more economical means of focusing on the aggregate.

The potential this method of sound editing and narrative synthesis provides is not lost on Christian nor I, and we intend to continue experimenting with the idea. In fact, the 36 hours of

interview recordings present a wealth of raw material for an intriguing range of narrative possibilities applicable to representation of The School of Architecture, that being the overarching objective of the filmmaking work.

The opportunity to perform this type of research as allowed by the UROP grant is one I am grateful for. Working in the domain of creative professionalism has been a personal goal of mine, and this project has helped me take a step closer to that. It is also gratifying to look back on our initial proposal to find that we have discovered and accomplished considerably more than we had imagined at the outset. Although the work required of us exceeded our original estimation, the successful communication of a narrative emergent from a collective conscious is more than enough motivation to pursue similarly difficult work in the future. As an exercise in professional creative agency, this work has laid the groundwork for an ongoing series of productions to serve representation of The School of Architecture.