

Chasing after the Mixer

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Abstract

The authors examine the No Input Mixing Board (NIMB) as a complex instrument that reconfigures the politics of composition, cognition, control and expression in the context of Electro-Acoustic Improvisation. The notion of performance is relocated within the entanglement of the modulatory body of the artist along with the sound producing devices. Rather than control, the posture of the artist is best described as a form of existential availability to the instrument. This view rejects virtuosity as the pure control of the artist's mind over the instrument, as well as the delegation of performance to automated machines.

Chasing after the Mixer

The Mixing-board is traditionally an instrument of control manipulated by a sound engineer to control the sound levels of input both and output signals. Toshimaru Nakamura, involved with the Japanese free improvisation scene, is one of the pioneers of "No-Input Mixing" which transforms the mixing-board from a mere input device into an expressive instrument in live performance. Because of its inherent unpredictability, the No-Input Mixing-board (NIMB) constitutes a paradigmatic live performance instrument. As we will show, the apparatus of the NIMB turns the rational engineer into a performer who does not control sound levels, but instead modulates the partially unpredictable output of the NIMB to expressive ends.

Technical setup

Toshimaru Nakamura uses a mixer with 8-channels together with a few extra effect devices. The feedback is generated by connecting the outputs of the mixer into its own input which creates a network between the different channels with sufficient gain for the noise in the system to produce a sound. Simple alterations to the volume and EQ can have a variety of effects on the sound: volume changes, frequency changes, rhythmic fluctuations (produced from very low frequencies) and timbral effects. As a rule, Nakamura uses the effects only inside the feedback channel of the NIMB, thus making a distinction between sound generation and manipulation. The effect devices, like hall, delay or distortion, have

particular phase and frequency responses. Inside this feedback circle, phase and frequency responses feedback into itself, thus can leading to complex filtering, resonance and oscillation effects. Due to this, a hall effect in a feedback circle will no longer sound the same. In addition, minute details in a circuit greatly influence the frequency and phase response due to how the effects of the details of the circuit are multiplied onto themselves, meaning even a deactivated effects device may affect the sound produced:

"Some of the effect units are just 'not in use' just like a filter where the signal go through without turn on, but the effect gave me a certain sound character to my noise, feedback sound. I started like this and I don't want to change it. When you connect some effects units, without turning it on, the sound becomes a bit muddy a bit dirty it is not purely clean. I liked it (...)" [1]

NIMB and unpredictability

For Nakamura, the NIMB is primarily a machine of newness, emergence. The instrument brings into the performance a large degree of independence and vitality, which turns the instrument into a tool of difference. Paradoxically, this conception of the instrument as a tool of difference does not point towards the multiplication of possibilities of play inside the instrument. On the contrary, most of the instrument design of NIMB is fixed and limited:

"I don't want to expand my system I don't want to look out side of my boundaries. I don't want do add more effects. I use 5 or 6 effect units. I want to keep this size." [2]

The deliberate limitation of the possibilities inscribed in the circuitry of the NIMB is paired with an alleged refusal to learn from the very experience of play: "I never learned to become better on the mixing board (...) I don't want to study" or "practice". He even tries not to remember what he has learned before. "I do not want to feel confident on stage" [3]

The posture of Nakamura contradicts the classical concept of virtuosity understood as technical excellence. [4] Instead, he highlights the importance of a particular

way to listen and react to the instrument that amounts to a form of existential availability [5] to the instrument: “Sometimes the mixer just leads me. The mixer goes ahead of me, and I was chasing after him. Sometimes it happens. In many cases it happens, which I like. [6] You can’t totally control no-input music because it’s all about feedback. Things like turning the tuning knob, even by one millimeter, make a big difference to the sound.” [7]

The kind of “chasing after” Nakamura is talking about implies that one does not try to predict the sudden qualitative changes happening in the NIMB. Instead we accept that each manipulation on the interface transforms how each fader or knob in turn will change the sound. Thus, while sculpting a sound, one has to accept the constant drift of meaning of each fader. While it would be possible to learn what a movement of a single fader or knob could mean (how it affects the sound), this knowledge is only valid up until another fader or knob is changed. This means that any mapping of functions we might have in our interpretation of the instrument is constantly changing. This ever-evolving map, however, is limited as the general realm of sounds made possible by the instrument is limited thus making it at least partially understandable. The act of playing is still driven by linking the change of sounds to the changing of parameters despite the fact that this link is under constant change. This lack of confidence is directly linked to the *continuously* shifting affordances of the instrument. Above, we described how each parameter affecting the sound is dependent on the settings of the other parameters. This means that the reliance on a certain control of the instrument – i.e. the expectation what a certain fader movement would do – is constantly undermined. In Massumi’s words, the manipulation of NIMB yields a singular confound which is “an absolute variation, comparable only to itself: an “intrinsic” variation or self-variety.” [8]

In NIMB practices, the performer never knows clearly how his gestures will be shaped/transduced by the instable and continuous analog circuitry of the mixing board. Instead, the NIMB player must modulate the electric signal according to the perceived and bodily felt output of the mixer. This makes the performer linked to both the source of the sound and to the modulation of this sound at any given moment.

Bodily felt sound events: the active availability to the instrument

The rejection of the NIMB as an instrument of control should not suggest that Nakamura is passive during the events unfolding in conjunction with the mixing-board. The entanglement of his body and the NIMB is paramount to his practice:

“Once I tried to use a bigger mixer 16 channels, because mine is 12 channels. Actually it is 8. Once I bought the big mixer. I thought this would give me a lot more possibilities. My sound palette will be bigger. I realized this is too big for me. I cannot touch everything. I

anyway only touch a few things I have only two hands, 10 fingers. So I went back to the smaller one (...) This is just a boundary just a limit - and I want to search within this limit.” [9]

To favor mixing-boards with a limited number of channels should not be considered a limitation, but rather as an opening up of the possibilities to explore the intricacies of the modulatory body of the artist and the physical circuitry of the NIMB. Nakamura does not want to see his bodily input being bypassed or blurred in the complexities of technical mediations.

This echoes Ostertag’s position on virtuosity where “an intelligence and creativity is actually written into the artist’s muscle and bones and blood and skin and hair”. [10] This posture of existential availability to the instrument is not passive. Keeping the traditional concept of virtuosity at bay does not amount to delegate the agency of the performance to the preexisting possibilities embedded in technological mediations. The NIMB does not establish a trivial relationship between its control system and the sound output produced by the manipulations of the body of the performer on the mixer. Instead, it connects directly to the intense engagement of the body of the performer with the NIMB. ‘Chasing after the mixer’ yields an active availability to its partially unpredictable sound events.

References

1. Personal interview with Tashimaru Nakamura, 13th of December 2012, Tokyo. Emphasis added.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. For a critic of virtuosity as technical excellence see Jane O’Dea, *Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000)
5. This availability calls upon the concept of “Gelassenheit”, see Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2014)
6. Personal interview with Tashimaru Nakamura, 13th of December 2012, Tokyo.
7. “No-input. Sachiko M and Toshimaru Nakamura”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TI8IMc-8-N8>, 5’05”
8. Brian Massumi. *Parables for the Virtual : Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 164.
9. Personal interview with Tashimaru Nakamura, 13th of December 2012, Tokyo.
10. Bob Ostertag, *Human bodies, computer music*. *Leonardo Music Journal*, 12(1), 2002, 11; Cf. the concept of embodied cognition in music performance studies in Vincent Meelberg, V.. *Embodied Creativity in Performing with Music Software*. (2014, February 25, Retrieved from <http://vincentmeelberg.com/post/77829456147/embodied-creativity-in-performing-with-music>)