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Literature and Performance of Music for Double Bass and Tape

By Jeremy C. Baguyos

Electroacoustic music for double bass can be classified into the following two types of repertoire: real-time/interactive computer music or tape music. Real-time/interactive computer music is the newer of the two types and involves the algorithmic generation of electronic sounds in live performance. Pre-recorded electronic sounds are usually avoided, and instead, the sound of live input is used as the source material for electronic sounds. A computer is used for capture, processing and synthesis, and the software is usually written in the MAX/MSP environment. The second category, tape music, is the older of the two types of electroacoustic music for the double bass. Tape music for double bass involves the pairing of the live double bass with pre-recorded electronic sounds. In modern electroacoustic concerts, the modern media formats, CD Audio and MPEG1-Layer 3 (mp3), are used to play back the pre-recorded sounds, but the electroacoustic community continues to call this category "tape" music. The term "fixed media" is often used to refer to the tape music category, as well.

The following list of works for double bass and tape was compiled using various sources and includes recent works and older works that have remained in the active repertoire. This list includes both published and unpublished works, but it is not comprehensive. A more extensive list that includes real-time/interactive works, multimedia works (video, dance, narration, theater), and chamber music combinations that include double bass and electronics is maintained and updated at <http://musicologist.org>. This online list also includes a list of electroacoustic works whose scores have become very difficult to obtain. Comments, questions, additions, deletions, and corrections to the web page are most welcome at jbaguyos@mail.unomaha.edu or Jeremy Baguyos, SPAC 217, University of Nebraska-Omaha, 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, Nebraska 68182, USA.

The most important sources include the *Comprehensive Catalogue of Music, Books, Recordings, and Videos for the Double Bass*, 4th edition by Murray Grodner; "Catalogue of Electronic Double Bass Works" from the *Journal of the International Society of Bassists*, (1980, vol. 7, page 67) by David Neubert; performances and concert programs from recent confer-

ences of the International Computer Music Association and the Society for Electroacoustic Music in the United States; and from individual composers who wanted their works included on the list after an open call facilitated through the Internet from 2002-2006. An important resource that aided in cross-verification is C. Braxton Ballew's "Annotated Guide To Electroacoustic Solo Double Bass Repertoire: Published Scores to 2005" (DMA dissertation, University of Georgia, 2007). This resource is available through the University of Georgia dissertation databases.

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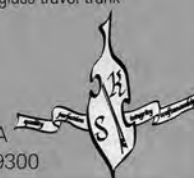
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For musicians working with tape, performance practice is an issue that has not been widely addressed. In the pursuit of an emerging performance practice for live musicians with tape, the following tools and themes help shape the live performer's interpretation of tape music: 1) balance, 2) musical relationship between the machine and performer, and 3) the rejection of the "curator" for the celebration of the unique.

In a technology-savvy culture, addressing the parameter of balance between tape and live musician seems almost mundane. However, in a sound world that is not limited by the physical limitations of an acoustic instrument or human performer, new types of old challenges can confound the acoustic performer due to the expanded possibilities of the traditional parameters. Otto Luening states: "when electronically produced sounds are combined with traditional instruments - whether a symphony orchestra, chamber music ensemble, or a solo instrument - problems of mixing and masking arise." (Luening 1989).

The traditional double bass soloist had only to worry about being drowned out by the orchestra, which could reach a maximum of 120 dB. A sound system's volume is limited only by the sound system, power supply, and the audience's pain threshold. The expanded amplitude range demands the use of a microphone for the acoustic performer, and that creates new issues. Morrill states: "we will continue to find loudspeakers a challenge to use in performance, even if the available equipment is not elaborate. We will also discover a thousand compositional ways to compensate for loudspeaker-performer imbalance." (Morrill 1989). These issues are more pragmatic than aesthetic and may seem like bothersome details to the double bass solo artist, but they are details that warrant even more attention since the possibilities of dynamic range in the electroacoustic genre are almost limitless. This issue, however, becomes a consideration in an emerging performance practice. Considerations of balance are very important in the Christos Hatzis composition *Birth of Venus* for double bass and tape. The dynamic range of the tape is very wide, so the volume of the double bass must be electronically adjusted in live performance. In the same way that balance is a fundamental issue in the rehearsal and music criticism of an orchestra's performance of a symphonic war-horse, balance can become a starting point for both performer and audience in the appreciation of music for double bass and tape.

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Discourse on man's relationship with the machine is almost as trite as discourse on man's relationship with nature. In the pursuit of an emerging performance practice, however, this broad issue is a useful thematic tool in a performer's or audience member's encounter with music for double bass and tape. Under the broader theme of man vs. machine there exists the sub-themes of rhythmic integration, juxtaposition, and sonic blend.

The theme of rhythmic integration for purposes of defining the relationship of man with the machine is best illustrated in Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms*. These works are described by Davidovsky as "a series of short pieces wherein conventional instruments are used in conjunction with electronic sounds" and "to achieve integration of both into a coherent musical texture" (Composers Recordings 1966). In the *Synchronisms*, especially Nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, Davidovsky demonstrates a wide variety of formats for rhythmic integration between the machine and the human performer. The *Synchronisms*, when viewed as a cogent summary of rhythmic integration techniques, establish the norms for performance with tape on any instrument. The rhythmic integration can consist of occasional clock timings that require coordination between tape and performer only at certain junctions in the music, which leaves the performer plenty of freedom to exercise rubato in the bass part.

This is the practice for the performer in Davidovsky's *Synchronism* No. 1. This is the same practice for the double bassist in a performance of *Death of Desdemona* by Frank Proto, *Mist* by Robert Gibson, or *Absolution* by Adrienne Alexander. The other

end of the spectrum is *Synchronism* No. 6, which requires total, controlled interaction between the tape and performer. The score is notated with precise indications resulting in a highly integrated work with almost no performer control (Soule 1978).

In the double bass with tape repertoire, high levels of mandatory integration predominate in works such as *Radio Sonata* by James Sellars and *Uncoiled Oscillations* by Samuel Burt. In any piece of double bass music with tape, the performer must identify the level of rhythmic integration, and respond accordingly with rubato or tight coordination, or something in between. Davidovsky helped define a new type of ensemble playing that focuses on the performer's ability to sync with the tape. Syncing with tape becomes an artistic pursuit. In the same way that ensemble is a fundamental issue in the rehearsal and music criticism of an orchestra's performance, rhythmic integration with tape becomes a starting point for both performer and audience in the interpretation and appreciation of tape music.

The theme of juxtaposition is illustrated in the works of another electronic pioneer, Jacob Druckman. Druckman outlined a useful tool with compositions like *Animus III* and *Synapse Valentine* when they were recorded on the same disk under the organizing principle of the juxtaposition of electronics and human performer. *Animus III* and *Synapse Valentine* represent two "polar possibilities of combinations of live and prerecorded sound" (Nonesuch 1971). In *Animus III*, the clarinet sounds from the human performer and the tape sound are "inextricably combined." In *Synapse Valentine* "the electronic and the live are juxtaposed, but



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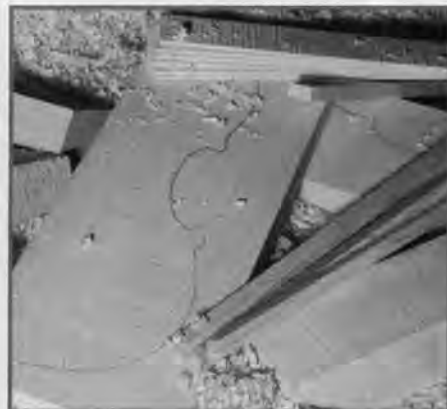
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completely separate" (Nonesuch 1971). Chamber musicians often use the technique of thinking of a dialogue between parts or that the different instruments are having a conversation. This is similar to the idea of juxtaposition between tape and performer. In this case, however, the chamber music partner of the tape never argues, but it also never changes its mind. This can result in a screaming match as opposed to a conversation as in Frank Proto's *Death of Desdemona*. It could even result in the "gradual dissolution of the personality of the player" as in *Animus III* (Druckman 1978).

On the other hand, it can be elegantly juxtaposed in *Synapse Valentine*. In the same way that dialogue between parts is a fundamental issue in the rehearsal and music criticism of an orchestra performance, interaction and dialogue between parts becomes a starting point in the interpretation and appreciation of tape music. It is the obligation of the performer to find this starting point in the continuum outlined by Druckman. Juxtaposition can be conceived in a more traditional sense. For example, "If electronic sounds are used with a symphonic ensemble as direct contrasts to the conventional instrumental sounds, the work can be much like the baroque concerto grosso. Either one of the sound groups can act as concertino or concerto" (Luening 1989). In an emerging performance practice, it is the performer's role to recognize when the composer is attempting a juxtaposition of machine and human and to delineate that contrast as if a baroque orchestra was delineating the concertino in one of the *Brandenburg* Concertos. This can be applied to a variety of other works for double bass and tape such as Orlando Jacinto Garcia's *Paisaje del sonido* for Double Bass and Tape.

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Sonic blend in the same soundspace has been discussed and utilized by composers. Dexter Morrill pointed out the possibilities in that "compositions that feature timbres similar to those of live performers have a potential for balance that might not otherwise exist" (Morrill 1989). He promoted the idea of "confusion between real and synthetic sound sources." In his composition *Studies* for trumpet and tape, Morrill "found it important to have the loudspeakers elevated to the height of the trumpet bell and to have both the loudspeakers and the player a good distance from the audience" (Morrill 1989). One interpretive tool that performers can use, then, is to recognize and delineate in performance, the sonic blend created by the effective orchestration of the computer and the human performer. This can be done through proper mixing of levels, correct loudspeaker placement, and performer control.

A tape piece in the general repertoire that demonstrates the notion of a live performer effectively becoming part of the texture of the tape part is the classic *Philomel* by Milton Babbitt. In this work the punctuating, disjunct entrances of the soprano sound like the punctuating, disjunct entrances of the RCA Mark II.

In this and other tape pieces the live musician is to blend with the tape and seamlessly become part of the texture of the tape. Two works in the double bass repertoire that utilize similar approaches are *Piece No. 2* for Double Bass and Tape by Orlando Jacinto Garcia and *Synchronism No. 11* for Double Bass and Tape by Mario Davidovsky. In orchestration, a composer can combine two instruments to create one texture. It is the job of the conductor or performer to recognize that intent and to assure that the two timbres are communicated as one timbre in the texture of the music. In the same way that orchestration is a fundamental issue in the rehearsal and performance of a work, electronic orchestration and its realization by the performer becomes a starting point in the interpretation of tape music. In the pursuit of an emerging performance practice for tape music, rhythmic integration, juxtaposition, and sonic blend are tools under the rubric of man vs. machine. The tools are useful for the performer and listener in the interpretation of tape music.

The third theme has less to do with the logistical aspects of tape music and more to do with hermeneutics and history. Western Art Music traditionally looks to composer intent and the recreation of that intent as the ultimate authority in the interpretation of Western Art Music. Performer pursuit of composer intent and circumstance is the driving force in the interpretation of Western Art Music (Taruskin 1995). In a genre that is as young and recent as Electroacoustic music, composer intent is an e-mail message away or the composer's wishes are so well documented due to their life in the information age, that the driving force for mainstream classical musicians becomes an easily attainable goal for Electroacoustic performers. In a sense, because composer intent is so clearly laid out, there is no room for interpretation! Furthermore, the pursuit of composer intent and composer circumstance is shaped by the tradition of the interpretation of composer intent and circumstance over time. In a genre so young and divergent, there is an absence of tradition and hegemony. Without a traditional style to which to conform to (or to reject or to extend), the performer is left without the usual tool for interpretation. In the absence of composer intent and correct style, where does a performer turn to as the ultimate authority in the interpretation of a piece?

The answer to this question lies in the rejection of the anachronistic "curator" approach to the interpretation of Electroacoustic music. There are two parts to this answer: a rejection of the "curator" approach and the celebration of the unique. The mainstream approach of faithful reproduction of composer intent and/or composer circumstance cannot apply to a genre whose philosophical antecedents were

the forward-looking Futurists. Implementation of their philosophy was not a school of thought, but a divergent stream of ideas, whose tools make any sound possible up to the limits of human perception. The genesis of Futurism coincided with relativist post-modernism where anything goes and there is no prevailing standard of creativity.

These philosophical ramblings can lead to another tool for interpretation. The performer must accentuate what is new and individual in a work in addition to realizing what he thinks is composer intent and composer circumstance. It is the job of the live performer to communicate to an audience the unique aspects of the work in convincing exaggeration, but without melodrama. An example would be Alvin Brehm's recording of Druckman's *Synapse Valentine* on Nonesuch. His vocalisms and the barbaric attacks on the instrument define its individual characteristics. So the performer identifies the unique, defining gestures then delivers them with the same abandon that propels the composer. Sometimes the gesture is subtle. It may just be a concept such as "total serialism," "restrained objectivity," or "passionate, neo-romanticism." Whether the gesture is literal or conceptual, the performer must identify it and delineate it.

As the Electroacoustic genre continues to mature, the methodologies of interpretation, performance, and appreciation of the genre will emerge and mature as well. Part of the genesis of this methodology includes the pursuit of an emerging performance practice for live musicians with tape. The following tools and themes help shape the live performer's interpretation of tape music: 1) balance (amplitude), 2) musical relationship between the machine and performer, and 3) the rejection of the "curator" for the celebration of the unique. These tools and ideas serve as a starting point for interpretation, performance, and appreciation.

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