Composition: Electronic Media I
Oct. 17, 2007
Preparing for the Mid-term Critique

1. Composition critiques will take place M Oct. 29, W Oct. 31, and M Nov. 5. The schedule of presentations will be determined during the beginning of class on M Oct. 22.   The compositions will be graded based on duration: 00:45+ = A; 00:30+ = B; 00:15+ = C; 00.00.001+ = D; 00:00 or less = F.

2. Bring in a bounced version of your composition that can be played in Peak. This is for a backup.

3. We will try to play Pro Tools sessions during the critiques. Make sure that your session runs correctly in Studio 1 the day of the presentation. We can use Studio 2 as a backup, so make sure your session runs in there as well.

4. To prepare for the critiques, consider organizing your work environment as follows:
   a. Go through all of your work for assignments and extract single notes, motives, and gestures.
   b. In Peak, normalize, remove silences at beginning and end, reshape the envelope (sometimes a faster fadeout will make a sound have more presence in the attack, while leaving room for other sounds to be heard) and rename with efficient notation (such as YI.AA.c).
   c. Set up your Pro Tools session with 16 stereo tracks, with the edit window showing the minimal amount of info (no need to have i/o view selected, for example).
   d. Import your sounds into Pro Tools. Since your sounds will mostly be stereo, Pro Tools will convert them to pairs of mono files and store them in the session's Audio Files folder. If you have mono sounds, Pro Tools will not convert them—instead Pro Tools will link to them wherever they are residing. A good practice is to place these mono sounds into your Audio Files folder. That way Pro Tools will always know where your sounds are.
   e. Import your sounds in Pro Tools using the drag and drop method.

5. Consider organizing your Pro Tools session as follows:
   a. Name your Pro Tools session with a suffix such as LF.1a. Several times during each work period, save your session as LF.1b, LF.1c, etc. When you make a major change in your composition, use a suffix like LF.2a, LF. 2b, etc.
   b. Do not use two different sessions for your composition. It is very difficult to import/export data between sessions.
   c. You can create a workspace for trying out ideas at the end of your Pro Tools edit window, at around the 10 minute point.
   d. When composing, try to leave a little elbow room in the tracks so that you can easily move things around in time, as discussed in class.
   e. At the conclusion of every work session, bounce your session to a stereo file labeled YI.Safety.1, YI.Safety.2, etc. This provides you with a backup.

6. Make sure that the mixing board is set the way you like it. Write down your settings for trim, pan, and faders. You should probably not use the EQ, so make sure that it is disengaged and the knobs set to 12:00.

7. Compositional structure.
   a. Consider writing out plans for organizing pitch transpositions, rhythmic schemes, density patterns, etc. Music that bases such structures on a limited set of principles will be more unified and coherent. The more unified your music is, the more dramatic it will be when you deviate from your organizing principles.
   b. Some composers like to pre-plan their form by sketching out register, density, tempo, and presentation of ideas and sounds. If you do this, you can always deviate from your plan. The boxer Sonny Liston: "Everyone has a plan until they get hit."
   c. Consider re-arranging your material if you get stuck. Many composers create their music out of sequence.

8. Processing in Pro Tools.
   a. Apply EQ to sounds to keep the sonic space clear of unwanted frequencies. Consider filtering out frequencies that are below the perceived fundamental frequency of the sound.
   b. Apply an echo tail, reverb tail, or reverb wash as needed. Do this judiciously. You cannot apply an individual reverb to every sound, nor should you. Determine the sounds that would most benefit from reverb. Adding touches of reverb will give the illusion that all the sounds are situated in a space, not just the sounds that actually have reverb. Having one reverberant sound every 5-8 seconds is usually sufficient to create a sense of space for all of the sounds.
   c. Use the high-quality pitch shift plug-in (as shown in class) to create stepwise voice-leading between significant events.
   d. Occasionally highlight a passage containing several regions, copy and paste these to another location, then perform a pitch shift of 1 or 2 semitones. You may delete some sounds or re-arrange them for variety. This is a good technique for giving your music a sense of direction.
   e. Before processing, consider normalizing first, so that you operate on a greater amount of data. After processing, consider EQing to remove unwanted artifacts.

9. Apply what you learned in the assignments.
   a. To give sounds more presence, consider adding attacks and tails as you did in Assignment 1.
   b. To create complex material like sound masses, consider bouncing and importing your sounds as a way of increasing the number of sounds that you can fit into a section of a session. This is what you did with the pre-masses in Assignment 2.
   c. When copying and pasting material, remember to apply the principles on non-repeatability established in Assignment 3.
   d. Focus the listener's attention on selected groups of sounds by organizing them into coherent gestures, as you did in Assignment 3.
   e. When structuring parameters, create a set of operations, organize these into a matrix, and create a score, as you did in Assignment 3.

10. In addition to composing interesting music, pay attention to the big picture.
    a. Do sounds all have the same volume?
    b. Do sounds follow one another in a predictable flow?
    c. Are there phrases?
    d. Are the phrases all the same length?
    e. Do you always have a sustained sound in the background?
    f. Are your sustained sounds too static?
    g. Does your music jump around too much, without having points of repose or stability?
    h. Are you always presenting new sounds, without returning to previously heard material?

11. In composing, try to spend part of your time going back over older material. As you become more familiar with your piece, you should begin to hear ways that you can improve it. With a notated composition, changing the pitch of a note is a very common way of improving the work. In the electronic medium, changing the temporal position of a sound is a very useful way of improving the work. Sometimes moving a sound a half second earlier or later can make a huge difference in phrasing. Remember to take responsibility for the performance of the work, as well as its composition.

12. Begin developing ideas for the title and program notes.

13. There are two useful methods for getting unstuck:
    a. Throw sounds together without listening to the result until everything is in place.
    b. Copy and paste a selection of sounds. Then re-arrange these sounds, delete some, and pitch-shift some.

14. Dialectics
    a. Adopt the opposite aesthetic viewpoint of the work.
    b. Build contrast into the composition.
    b. Work on two different tasks, one meaningful, the other house-keeping.