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Chris Fenger

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Looping Life: An Exploration of Looped Music

by

Chris Fenger

Adam Mirza

Adviser

Music Department

Adam Mirza

Adviser

Katherine Young

Committee Member

Michelle Gordon

Committee Member

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Chris Fenger

Adam Mirza

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Abstract:

Looping Life: An Exploration of Looped Music

By Chris Fenger

In this honors portfolio, I explore multiple questions pertaining to the key differences between live and recorded music, as well as the concept of looped music. What are the fundamental differences in music consumption when music is performed live, compared to when it is played back over a stereo system? Also, how does compositional practice change between the two mediums? Looped music in this context describes short phrases of melodic or harmonic content that can be repeated continuously to create a circular phrase structure. Exact repetition of melodic phrases is present in many musical practices. My experience working with looped music grew out of my love for hip-hop and beat making. What I discovered producing beats in my teens is that many of these motives and phrases have a contour that begins and ends in the same place. Hip-hop producer Madlib is probably my greatest early influence; his ear for loops is impeccable and his ability to discover obscure sonic worlds in the realm of sampling is unmatched. Other composers who work with looping that have influenced me are Steve Reich (e.g., *It's gonna rain*), Miles Davis (e.g., "Spanish Key" from *Bitches Brew*), and Igor Stravinsky (e.g., *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*). In this honors recital, I explore the limits of this phenomenon and discover new ways to experience this looping aspect of music.

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Program Notes

Reflections in the Whirlpool

Reflections in the Whirlpool is a short prelude that I wrote in fall 2020 for a select number of players from the Emory University Symphony Orchestra. This piece is based on the concept of phase-shifting in music. A phase-shift is when two nearly identical copies of audio will gradually shift out of sync as they are repeated, according to the slight difference in their length. This gradual process yields complex rhythms that arise from the combination of the offset sounds. This piece is a sonic representation of an individual's descent into the depths of a maelstrom and their resulting view of the light refractions.

Thank you to Emory student performers Ji Won Lee, viola; Jason Goodman, marimba; Richard Jensen, cello; Miyuka Yoshida, flute; Eli Parrish, clarinet; and Rodrigo Salinas, bassoon; for recording the parts for this piece, and also to Paul Bhasin, director of the Emory University Symphony Orchestra, who coordinated this remote collaboration during the pandemic.

Loop Lyfe

Loop Lyfe is the first piece I composed at Emory. It is a piece for a recorded string quartet and drum machine. The idea was to recreate the type of melodic phrases found in hip-hop samples. These melodies are cyclical; they end with a gesture that leads back into the beginning of the melody. Beat making was my introduction to music composition, so I thought it would be appropriate to pay homage to that artform in my first "classical" composition, while also remaining connected to aspects of hip-hop music.

Thank you to my professor Adam Mirza, violin, and Emory alumni Alex Sabol, viola, for recording the parts for this piece.

Purgatory

This is a piece for cello and piano that channels rhythmic energy as an essential part of the human spirit. The starting point was an Arabic rhythm that I discovered by a tabla recording on YouTube, which I transcribed to the piano. The piano essentially acts as a drum loop over which the cello plays melodies. The piece is named Purgatory to represent the conditions in which it was written (beginning of the pandemic, when it felt like time was stuck in a loop), but also because the piece came to be a spiritual cleansing, both in the compositional process and the resulting arc of the music. In addition to the religious meaning, an older adjectival form of the word means "having the quality of cleansing or purifying." The percussive and seemingly perpetual piano part of the first half of the piece eventually gives way to a gentler texture and joyous harmonic ideas.

Streetlights

Streetlights is an ambient electronic piece based on the visuals of night in the urban centers of the world. The sounds in this piece are meant to wash over the listener in the same way a

glowing lamp post would spread light on a foggy night in the city. It is meant to represent the dichotomy of being alone in the most densely populated areas of the world. The base texture of the piece is a recorded sample I made of a chord played on my guitar using only harmonics that is looped along with two synth chords.

Broken Transistor

Broken Transistor—a string quartet that I wrote for the Beo Quartet—was performed at the 2019 Charlotte New Music Festival. This piece is heavily inspired by American minimal music and features ostinatos primarily in the form of looped bass lines. The melodic elements are also based on loops; various aspects of their construction are manipulated as the piece goes on. The piece moves through various thematic areas, sometimes abruptly, almost like a short-circuiting radio switching between channels.

Jammin' with Mac

In Jammin' with Mac I improvise on cello, accompanied by my Macbook laptop, which generates a sequence of additively-synthesized chords through various algorithmic processes. I built this sequencing patch using the audio software Max. While the computer produces relatively simple music, I improvise wild melodies and create as many interesting sounds as I can. The idea is to display how two very different mediums of sound production can combine in unexpected and beautiful ways.

Static Motion

Static Motion is a string quartet I wrote in 2019 for a reading session by the Vega String Quartet. This piece is an exploration of two musical concepts: texture and motion. I was interested in creating different textures through the use and manipulation of grooves, dynamics, and counterpoint. I also explored pairing angular melodic motion with static or semi-static harmonic contexts. I experimented looping multiple voices of the quartet while allowing the other, non-looped voices to meander melodically over the “static” voices, thus inspiring the title of the piece.

Rocks and Trees

Rocks and Trees is a stereo audio composition built from recorded vocals, field recordings, and MIDI. The piece sets a select number of lines of poetry from Mahmoud Darwish's *A Canaanite Rock in the Dead Sea* which are sung by the female vocalist and read by me. Darwish was regarded as the Palestinian national poet during his life, and as a Palestinian, I want to do my part in disseminating Palestinian culture, and also make people aware of the many struggles facing my people. In addition to references within the poem, the title of this piece is meant to convey the binary of Israel-Palestine, its recent history, and the living situations of the two peoples. Palestinians in Gaza are confined to the Western border of the Negev desert, and those in the West Bank, to the Judean desert. Israelis live in the arable regions of the country. Israeli settlers evicted and destroyed entire Palestinian villages, and planted pine forests over them. These events no doubt inspired Darwish's writing:

All the prophets are my family.
Yet heaven is still far from its land
and I am still far from my words.
And the sea descends below sea level so my bones float over water like trees. My absence is
entirely trees

The emotions and imagery of the poetry inform the tone of my piece. There is grief and anger,
but also celebration. Most of all though, there is pain.

The text is used with the generous permission of the Mahmoud Darwish Foundation and
Museum. Thank you to Emory student vocalist Evelyn Sload for recording the vocal parts and
improvisations on this piece, some of which became essential creative input.

Performer Bios:

Alex Lipsky - violin

Alex has been playing violin since the age of six and holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Violin Performance from the Valdosta State University and Masters Certificate in Suzuki Pedagogy from the University of Denver. She has studied with Juan Ramirez, Brent Williams and Mark Rush.

She has a diverse performing background including performances with Michael Buble, the Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Disturbed, Evanescence, and Josh Groban. She has performed with many chamber ensembles and orchestras while in Atlanta and Denver. Regionally, Alex plays with Valdosta Symphony, Albany Symphony, Hilton Head Symphony, Augusta Symphony, Chattanooga Symphony, and Macon Pops Orchestra.

Alex is a member of the SAA (Suzuki Association of the Americas). She teaches privately in Roswell and also for the Waldorf School of Atlanta in Decatur.

Kevin Chaney - violin

An active performer, Kevin Chaney has played with many orchestras including: Macon Symphony, Atlanta Pops, Hilton Head Symphony, North Charleston Pops, Tuscaloosa Symphony, Valdosta Symphony, Cobb Symphony, Albany Symphony, Capitol City Opera, and the Ocmulgee Symphony. He also is the concertmaster for Capitol City Opera. As a contracted violinist with Quality Concerts, LLC, he has toured extensively throughout the United States, Japan, and China on various concert tours. In addition to his extensive touring experience, he also plays frequently with many well known artists such as Sarah McLachlan and Trans-Siberian Orchestra. He also has appeared in movies and TV: Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Madea's Family Reunion*, *Joyful Noise*, and TLC's *Say Yes to the Dress*.

In addition to his active performance schedule, Kevin teaches violin at Clayton State University, the Atlanta International School, and maintains a private studio. Kevin is originally from Atlanta and received his Bachelor of Music and Master of Music Performance degrees from Georgia State University under the tutelage of Tania Maxwell Clements, Christos Galileas, and Michael Palmer.

Andrew Kang - Viola

Andrew Kang, a native of Smyrna, Georgia, grew up in the Cobb County School Systems and began his string education on violin at Nash Middle School. Two years prior to entering college, he was offered his first private lessons from Dr. Lana Teko-Ahatefou. He then continued on to Georgia State University where he started his viola studies, in addition to violin, under the tutelage of Tania Maxwell Clements and received a Bachelor of Music with a concentration in music education. In 2010, he officially switched to viola as his primary instrument and has adopted the late Karen Tuttle's philosophy and approach to viola playing.

Since having graduated, Mr. Kang has extensively toured throughout the United States, China, and Japan with Quality Concerts, LLC, performing with numerous ensembles such as the extraordinary New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players, Hollywood Concert Orchestra, Hollywood Film Orchestra, The New Sigmund Romberg Orchestra, and the Hollywood Festival Orchestra. While performing with these various ensembles, Mr. Kang has had the delightful privilege to share the stage and tour with the famous Shirley Jones, Junko Ohashi, and Billy King. He has also been seen performing on stage with artists including Refuge Dance Company, Babyface, Sarah McLachlan, Josh Groban, the Trans Siberian Orchestra, Trampled by Turtles, Velvet Caravan, Il Volo, Chuck Prophet, and Cirque Musica, and has even appeared performing on an episode of TLC's Say Yes to the Dress.

Mr. Kang actively performs with Capitol City Opera and Macon Pops, and has subbed for a myriad of orchestras throughout the state of Georgia, which include Savannah Philharmonic, Valdosta Symphony Orchestra, Macon Symphony Orchestra, Albany Symphony Orchestra, Ocmulgee Symphony Orchestra, North Georgia Symphony Orchestra, Georgia Philharmonic, and Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestra. He has had the honor to play under the baton of the Grammy-Award Winning Matt Catingub and the talented Michael Palmer, as well as along side the esteemed Melissa White, second violinist of the Harlem String Quartet; Juan-Miguel Hernandez, former violist of the Harlem String Quartet; and the critically acclaimed violinist, Amy Schwartz Moretti.

Mr. Kang is an avid chamber musician and has an unquenchable thirst for chamber music. During his days off from teaching his private studio of violin and viola students, coaching sectionals, adjudicating, working clinics within the Metro Atlanta area, working full-time at Atlanta Violins, the occasional professional studio recording, and gigging with various ensembles in and outside Georgia, he enjoys hosting and attending chamber music potluck gatherings, attending ballet classes, cooking, watching anime, and playing video games. He currently resides in Marietta with his two cats, a Calico named Bea (Beatrice) and a silver-spotted Bengal named Beau.

Harrison Cook - Cello

Harrison Cook received a BA from Georgia State University and his MFA from Carnegie Mellon University for cello performance. He plays in various orchestras, including the Columbus Symphony, Savannah Philharmonic, Greenville Symphony, and the Symphony Orchestra Augusta. As a performer, he has had the opportunity to play around the world, including performances in Italy, China, and Monaco. In addition to his symphonic work, Harrison is an active member of the Atlanta music scene, doing studio work for films, games, and performing artists. He also has a robust private studio, with students who have gone to All State, university, and to summer institutes such as Brevard, Franklin Pond, Suwanee, and Interlochen. Harrison was recently appointed to the position of Assistant Director for the Georgia Youth Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Nathaniel Parker (KSU). Through GYSO he conducts the Honors String Quartet, Symphony, as well as String Symposium.

Harrison is a graduate of Kennesaw Mountain High School, in which time he spent three years with the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra under the direction of Jere Flint. He attended the Brevard Summer Institute twice, the Franklin Pond Chamber Music Program, and spent a summer in Spoleto, Italy through the Cincinatti Conservatory as a part of the Spoleto Music Festival. He

continues to study with Joel Dallow, as well as various other members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, including Christopher Rex and Brad Ritchie. Harrison still gives recitals and is a part of the Arche String Quartet.

Erika Tazawa - Piano

Pianist Erika Tazawa has steadily gained recognition in the contemporary music world. Gramophone UK featured her solo album *Rhythm of Silence* in review: “such intelligent programme-building and committed performances warrant serious attention and exposure,” and she is the pianist of Atlanta-based contemporary chamber ensemble Bent Frequency. A versatile collaborative artist, Tazawa has served as musical staff for AIMS in Graz and the Atlanta Opera, and frequently performs with vocal and instrumental artists internationally. Tazawa is currently on faculty at Emory University.

Evelyn Sload - Voice

Evelyn Sload is a sophomore at Emory University majoring in Music and concentrating in vocal performance, studying with Professor Bradley Howard. She is from Darien, CT and attended Manhattan School of Music Precollege Division. Evelyn is social media co-chair of Emory Concert Choir, member of the Music Advisory Board, Member at Large for Delta Phi Epsilon Sorority, President of Emory’s chapter of Mu Phi Epsilon (professional music fraternity), and a member of The Gathering a cappella.