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Composing Electronic Music: A New Aesthetic



Synopsis

Electronic music evokes new sensations, feelings, and thoughts in both composers and listeners. Opening the door to an unlimited universe of sound, it engages spatialization as an integral aspect of composition and focuses on sound transformation as a core structural strategy. In this new domain, pitch occurs as a flowing and ephemeral substance that can be bent, modulated, or dissolved into noise. Similarly, time occurs not merely as a fixed duration subdivided by ratios, but as a plastic medium that can be generated, modulated, reversed, warped, scrambled, and granulated. Envelope and waveform undulations on all time scales interweave to generate form. The power of algorithmic methods amplify the capabilities of music technology. Taken together, these constitute game-changing possibilities. This convergence of technical and aesthetic trends prompts the need for a new text focused on the opportunities of a sound oriented, multiscale approach to composition of electronic music. Sound oriented means a practice that takes place in the presence of sound. Multiscale means an approach that takes into account the perceptual and physical reality of multiple, interacting time scales—each of which can be composed. After more than a century of research and development, now is an appropriate moment to step back and reevaluate all that has changed under the ground of artistic practice. *Composing Electronic Music* outlines a new theory of composition based on the toolkit of electronic music techniques. The theory consists of a framework of concepts and a vocabulary of terms describing musical materials, their transformation, and their organization. Central to this discourse is the notion of narrative structure in composition—how sounds are born, interact, transform, and die. It presents a guidebook: a tour of facts, history, commentary, opinions, and pointers to interesting ideas and new possibilities to consider and explore.

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Customer Reviews

Overall, an excellent, clear, concise discussion of the aesthetic elements that drive most (but not all) manifestations of the use of electronic equipment to generate sounds in ways that are intended to be received as "art." Professor Roads tries to cover a lot of ground here: the history of the practices, audio examples (from the companion website) to hear what he is discussing, as well as general areas of intellectual, scientific and artistic concern for people engaged in these practices. For me, personally, the most important aspect of this book is its contribution to the formation of a fundamental vocabulary and set of discursive conventions for talking about electronic music. Let me clarify: I honestly believe that there is no "self-evident" art. We all need to be assimilated into discursive traditions concerning art and it is through that assimilation that we are taught how to perceive, understand and communicate our experience of art. One does not simply go to a Shostakovitch symphony and understand what one is hearing and why it is worth listening to. One does not simply walk into the Prado museum and see some old Hieronymous Bosch painting and know what is significant, relevant, valuable, and pleasing about it. In the case of electronic music practices, the challenge is profound. It is a practice that has emerged before we have developed a common set of discursive practices that allows your average listeners to appreciate it, talk about it, communicate what they hear or perceive and what opinions they may have about it.

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