

attack

for digitally-edited sounds, 2011

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Introduction.

This piece is an exploration of your personal digital music library (iTunes, Napster, mp3s, oggs, etc). It has become fairly common for citizens of this digital age to carry around with them vast quantities of sounds for *consumption*. Yet this library also holds great potential as source material for new compositions. This piece is an exercise in shifting the relationship between you and your music library from one of consumption to *production*. I hope this score will encourage others to tap into this resource either via the composition I have described here or by those of their own design.

Material.

Isolate the beginning, i.e. the “attack”, of the initial sound object of each track in your digital music library. Attack can be interpreted different ways given the musical attributes of each sound object. For some sound objects, it might make sense to use the first few milliseconds (the traditional attack) of the first note or sound event. Others might work best when the start of the larger gesture is used, thereby yielding an excerpt with a longer duration. Some sound objects are so brief that they are in essence only attack and can therefore be included as a whole. Overall, the tendency should be toward sounds that are started but never completed. Only these attacks may be used in the final product.

Method and Form.

Isolating the attack may require a multistep process. For my initial realization of this piece, I first stripped five seconds from the beginning of each track from my music library using an automated batch process. This was necessary because the attack may not occur at the start of the sound file, instead follow a brief period of silence. These five second sound files were then imported into a digital audio workstation (DAW), where each sound file’s start and stop points were further trimmed to isolate the attack as they were added to the timeline. Alternate methods may exist with greater reliance on automation or batch processes. These may be used, but for me it was important to have a more direct hand in the decisions used to form each attack.

Using your DAW, join the attacks together end-to-end to form a continuous stream of sound objects. To determine the exact progression from one attack to the next, I suggest the simple sorting algorithm used by your DAW to organize its list of available sound objects. Simply sort the attacks alphabetically by name, start by inserting whatever attack is at the top and continue down the list. The resulting form yields surprising variations in morphology as shorter attacks clump together to form dense chains of sound objects and are interrupted by longer attacks that provide moments of respite as they slowly fade in.

No attack should be used more than once in the end product, so as to achieve maximum variety in the presentation of your materials.

Structure.

The structure for this piece is indeterminate. My initial version was created by choosing a starting and ending point from among the list of sound objects in my digital audio workstation. Some may wish to select a subset of the attacks based on some perceived significance (e.g., a single artist or tracks that have a specific word in the title) and create their version by using all the attacks in this subset. Others may wish to end the piece only once you have completely exhausted all the attacks available from their library. Still others may wish to divide the work into a series of movements based on common track numbers, where all track ones would appear in movement one, all track twos in movement two, etc. Whatever structural constraints you place upon yourself, it is important to adhere to guidelines given for material, method and form.

Credits.

I am indebted to John Cage for his descriptors (material, method, form and structure) which I have used above to organize my instructions and thoughts on this composition. I also want to acknowledge that this composition draws obvious inspiration from John Oswald and his idea of “plunderphonics”.

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