

Autechre: The Sound of Music

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Dear Liesel,

It is one of those curious coincidences which create the impression that perhaps there is a master plan. On the night you came to Chicago in the sing-along version of *The Sound of Music*, Mssrs. Sean Booth and Rob Brown (whom perhaps you know collectively by the name *Autechre*) came from England with their decidedly unsingable version of the sound of music.

The word communication, derived from the word commune, which in turn is derived from the word common, seems naked these days without the prefix tele-, from the Greek, meaning far. Our communing now takes place at a distance – this electronic epistle being clear evidence of that. It is 2001 now. This is, according to accepted wisdom, to be the year the machines take over, or so said Sir Arthur C. Clarke, a knight of the British crown. And this is where the machines come in. But more disconcerting – and unnervingly close to Sir Arthur's prediction – is that the machines don't just enable us to commune. They commune with one another: computers with fax machines, cell phones with Palm Pilots, MP3 players with distant servers.

Increasingly, the field of cognitive science is settling on the notion that, like machines, we obey a predetermined set of imperatives hard-coded into us by

genetics. But we're suggestible creatures. Do you recall the day two or three summers ago when we picnicked on the banks of the Danube? We were enjoying some marvelous cured ham on black bread when, from the river emerged a man dressed in a gabardine suit and silk tie, with a blueberry pie in one hand and a bowling trophy in the other. Do you recall what he said to us as we sat there, aghast? "Please," he said in a cold, clear voice, "kill me."

If I were a machine, I'd have ignored him. Undoubtedly I would have lacked code for "Euthanasia request from: gabardine suit and silk tie wearing man emerging from river with: pastry and award." When machines can manufacture reactions to unforeseen stimuli, we can consider them truly intelligent. But humans already possess this wonderful capacity. You must remember that we asked the man to sit down and offered him a sandwich. A few moments later, calmed by the warm air and the marvelous ham, he apologized for interrupting our picnic and for making such an untoward demand.

Though the machines are threatening, we are still in control and still driven by such human necessities as affection, attention, longing, lust and a good sandwich on a summer day. Telecommunications and computers serve the human species. It's in our collective political and financial interest to allow people to maintain intermittent, long-distance, data-based relationships between, say, Salzburg and Vienna, or Berlin and London. But personally, psychologically, and culturally, our well-being is more dependent on continuous, short-distance, emotionally centered relationships. Why must the home pages of Yahoo, MSN, and AOL focus on the perversely inane daily events in the lives of motion picture and pop music celebrities? Is there no more nourishing information of which we might avail ourselves?

Yet the gentlemen of whom I spoke earlier aspire to a method and manner of

communication which might be best described as mechanistic. Their field is electronic music, or more precisely, “Intelligent Dance Music”, also known as “IDM” or simply “Intelligent”. The world of music produced with electronic devices is unusually fractious, even within the ever-narrowing categorizations of popular music as a whole. We have reached a rather absurd point where there are almost as many subgenres as there are artists. One might think that such specificity is desirable, since, surely, no two artists are really so alike. Sweet Liesel, if only it were so. Much electronic music sounds like nothing more than demonstrations of the machines used to produce it, and one artist is, as often as not, indistinguishable from the one to his left or the one to his right.

Mr. Brown and Mr. Booth, however, are a different breed. Their music sounds like a telegraph operator gone mad, a random flow of Morse code dots and dashes. Their recordings do not bear the fingerprints of the engineers who designed their sequencers, drum machines, and software. They subvert the intentions of the manufacturers and make compositions from the sounds that were never intended to be part of the music, the glitches and fizzes. Indeed, their music quite often bears a close resemblance to a tablet of bicarbonate of soda immersed in a glass of water. That the ear can come to recognize these amorphous compositions as music should not strike you as so remarkable; after all, I can hum the tune my modem makes when connecting.

But when Autechre took the stage at the Metro theater on Friday – actually, it was at approximately one o'clock on Saturday morning – there was little to connect the event to the tradition of musical performance. Mr. Brown and Mr. Booth stood behind a chest-high console. A pair of dim lights were trained on them. This required no skill on the part of the lighting technician, as the performers did not move so much as a foot. Those in attendance did not dance; they were implicitly instructed not to. Autechre do not consider their

music dance music. They prefer to associate themselves with other pre-Intelligent intelligent artists like the German Karlheinz Stockhausen and the American John Cage. They appeared to be manipulating laptop computers and outboard effects gear. But I could not swear to it because the equipment remained largely hidden to the audience. There was nothing to watch, yet the entire audience obediently faced the stage.

I can only imagine how different your performance of *The Sound of Music* must have been. I have heard that members of the audience came dressed as characters from the musical – as nuns or mountain-folk clad in lederhosen. I have received reports that performances in other cities included exuberant vocal participation by all involved, be they teenagers or octogenarians. And I am persuaded that the sing-along version's origins – as a way to lift the spirits of elderly pensioners in a Scottish nursing home – is evidence of not just the power of *The Sound of Music* but of the power of the sound of music as well. I cannot help but wonder whether, 50 years from now, we shall gather in an auditorium to lift our spirits with the music of Autechre.

Many heady art movements of the past have been reflections of humans' relationship to progress at a particular historical moment and their attendant alienation and disorientation. Why, it seems like only yesterday that Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara were staging their outrageous Dada events at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. And, if that was yesterday, then happenings, Fluxus events, and Warhol's Factory must have been only this morning. Autechre's machine-driven minimalism simply reflects our mute technological present: we are living in virtual isolation, connected only by our devices. But should it not be the artists who climb out on a limb for us, making every effort to speak the unspeakable, fending off the encroaching digital babble with veracity? Or must we learn to process code as language, data streams as intercourse, sound as music? Is the truth that there is no

truth, only progress? Should popular music be concerned with these issues?
Can it help but be?

As ever, dear Liesel, I await your reply.

Yours,
Seth