


MUSIC, MERCURIALITY, AND



avid Dunn is a composer and sound designer who has worked in a wide variety of audio media inclusive of traditional and experimental music, installations for public exhibitions, radio broadcasts, and film soundtracks. He co-founded the Independent Media Lab in Santa Fe and is the author of Music, Language, and Environment. Lizbeth Rymland is a poet, writer, philosopher, and world explorer.

LIZBETH RYMLAND: I see your work as the use of sound for conceptual invocation, as the working of tools to bring non-human presence, or the intelligence of an eco-system, into awareness. I'm interested in the artists and scientists who are exploring the landscape and its inhabitants as a highly mercurial, mutable, protean domain. I believe that that is where evolution always wants to go, into a more facile mutability of forms. Plants change direction to open towards the sun, and respond to moonlight as if silently cheering. Birds practice directional navigation and aerodynamics in what appears to human eyes as a very pleasurable pastime. For human beings to continue here on Earth may depend on learning to play the way animals play. I believe that this protean behavior requires the evolution of tools and techniques, and calls for the ephemeralization of technology: materials used for transport, communication, or vision becoming smaller and more lightweight, perhaps incorporated into the body. Maybe sound is much a part of that mutability, the harmonic call for communicating with the algorithms of DNA. Your work strives to achieve a part of that evolutionary process. I want to ask you about your pieces that communicate sonically with the mindedness or intelligence of environments. Can you make a bridge from your working objectives and methods to a future science?

DAVID DUNN: I have mixed feelings about the use of technology in relationship to the issues you're raising. On one level my interest has been in using technology as a kind of recapitulation to natural magic, using the technology as the ground of power through which "magic" could take place. I've also been interested in understanding the artistic use of technology as a desire to humanize and create some sort of critique for the cultural milieu that we exist in. Technology is, in large part, the culture that we live in. On a practical level, I'm not sure whether the kinds of things you are describing can take place through the use of technology. While my interest is to explore some of these possibilities, I'm very torn with regard to achieving them through a technical means.

LR: What means do you use to explore this?

DD: My path of exploration has been to use various technologies as a means for interacting with the physical environment and non-human lifeforms. My way of conceptualizing that is to look at the linkages between music, language, and the environment. By music, I don't mean what we are familiar with when we usually use the word "music," at least in terms of western art/music traditions. But rather, I mean to look at it from a larger historical perspective, and as a parallel system to spoken language, as a model for ways in which we can use sound as a means for interaction with the non-human world.

LR: In working with an ethic of mutability or mercuriality, I begin with a departure from the making of artifacts, which seem somehow hermetically sealed from systemic communication with the non-human world of elements, plants, animals, and spirit. Artifacts, such objects that sit in an art gallery, or musical tunes that play on the radio, seem to be somehow sequestered, or sealed off, from a greater systemic interplay with phenomena. Poetry used to be invocation-

al and influential, not merely on other human minds, but from the Logos, the original rhythmical utterings, which was one with phenomena and phenomenal forms. I see your work as opening the musical domain from one that is artifact-based. You are not making songs; instead you are making some sort of process for invoking or playing with mystery. What do you mean when you talk about communication with the non-human world? What is the non-human world, and how is that done in a non-artifact based process?

DD: My desire has been to redefine the science of bio-acoustics, which has been the study of the sound and communication behavior of non-human creatures: birdsongs, the sound of frogs and insects, mammals, invertebrates, and the emergent properties that occur from the interaction of lifeforms within an eco-system. My interest has been to expand the science of bio-acoustics to be inclusive of the various properties that could link together music, human language, and non-human communication behavior. My so-called musical compositions have really been research experiments which try to demonstrate certain environmental behaviors in response to a sonic stimulus that I place into the environment. The important part is not the resulting sounds as a musical structure, but rather that the resulting sounds are evidence of these emergent properties of interaction. They demonstrate characteristics of co-emergent behavior between myself and the environment.

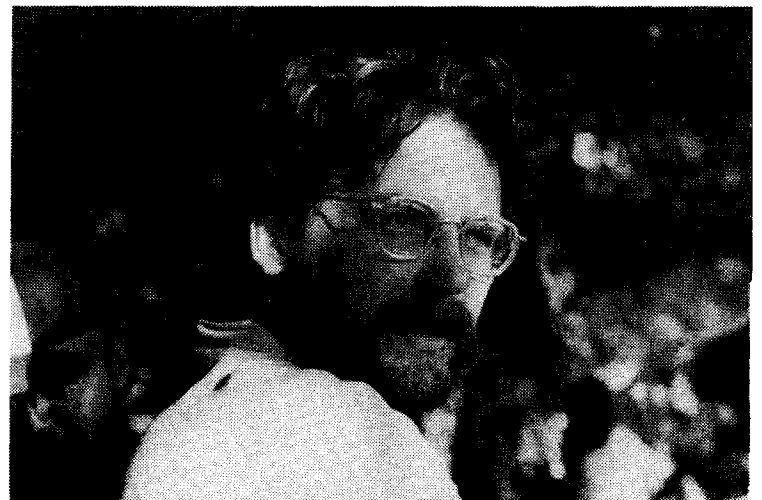
LR: When you've dipped your hydrophones into ponds and amplified the sounds of microorganisms, the resulting acoustic tracings sound like some kind of extraterrestrial, insectival jazz which is exquisite, and even danceable. But your work does not elicit the typical emotional response of nostalgia so often associated with other music.

DD: Are you talking about popular music?

LR: I'm talking about familiar music, western or non-western, that manipulates emotion with a small "e." Even though I delight in these human states of consciousness, I wonder about their gravitational pull. I often feel somehow narcotized by them. The insectival soundscapes you've made trigger some other set of responses in the mind-body that I experience only with psychoactive substances. I see that the patterning within your music might also provide some clues as to how we might communicate with our DNA to change forms if we want to, or to nanotechnically spring structures into visibility and back again into invisibility. Do you actually make a methodology of examining the patterns within an environment and watching for the synchronistic or psycho-physical

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—DAVID DUNN



A CALL FOR MAGIC IN TECHNOLOGY



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and psychedelics occurred. Music has provided a kind of hold-over, or parallel communicative strategy for maintaining the integrity of certain kinds of archaic states of mind. My interest is in trying to get back to the source and to show these archaic links between music as a human activity and the possibility of communication with the non-human living environment.

LR: Could you give me an example?

DD: Take the case of the ponds. It is an attempt to provide evidence, in a research sense, of what those links might be by concentrating on some of the most primitive of creatures. These insects reside in bio-habitats (freshwater ponds) as small as ten feet in diameter. By simply recording these things, focusing on them with a kind of sonic microscope, unimagined levels of complexity are revealed—associative properties to dance and musical rhythms. I think it is incredibly important that we understand the existence of such phenomena even at the level of something as supposedly primitive as a small water beetle.

LR: Part of what we have been talking about involves a change in the cultural landscape—the ephemeralization of technology, the tools and materials becoming smaller and more lightweight, and then incorporating them into the body. I see the future role of artists and scientists as creators of a vast landscape and playground of delight and pleasure, one in which we can enjoy ourselves as animals do. Our bodies could be covered by a filmy substance, intermittently sparked with phosphorescent lights through which we could warm, cool, and feed ourselves, even communicate with other creatures at a distance. I think of vast tracts of holographic ranges for roving teenagers, with apparitions that tease, coax, haunt, provoke, and seduce the kids into new feats of velocity, agility, and sensory prowess. Artists should take over Los Alamos and play with evolutionary potential. Artists should take over Hughes Aircraft and Rockwell Laboratories in order to transform the landscape of technology and its oppressive cultural forms into a more mercurial and botanically sensitive one. The aim: to strip away material density and weight.

effects they may have when replayed for listeners or replayed for the wilderness environment itself?

DD: The power of music is that it has effects upon the mind-body which in many ways are analogous to the effects of hallucinogens of psychoactive substances. We change when listening to a piece of music. Music is one of the most physically affecting of artforms. It penetrates the body in an omnidirectional manner. It surrounds and penetrates the body. The emotional associations attributed to music since the Romantic Age are inductive states of consciousness that result from this physical experience. So in that sense, music is analogous to drugs. It is no accident that the linkages between rock 'n' roll

DD: The issue of ephemeralization of technology is an immense one because we are embedded in the self-perpetuating ambitions of culture. As I said earlier, technology and culture are synonymous. To me, the jury is out as to whether we can turn that around. I have often thought that what we are attempting to do through these technologies, which continue to be complexified, miniaturized and ephemeralized in the way that you are describing, is to arrive at a point where the aborigines already were thousands of years ago. We've taken this long to come back to a very basic truth, which is to understand what we are as living systems, and how we are embedded in a web of other living systems. To change Los Alamos and the cathedrals of scientific research, which are so linked to the military and industry, requires political action through understanding the self-interests which perpetuate the culture as it stands. It has to do with cultural values. What you are describing is an incredible challenge; it would constitute a complete perversion of the status quo.

LR: I see in historical polarization two kinds of people, artists and scientists included. The first group consists of the people full of conscience and historical memory, but often lacking in imagination. I'll call these the 'sineaters.' The other group are the technicians, which in the art and science worlds are represented by the rogue technologists who perform mere technical feats without conscience and without memory. Like immoral magicians, only interested in the clever connections they are making, or the technically sweet solution. What is needed is to make a Grand Opus in the public operating theatre, like an Alchemical Circus, an exchange of attributes in which the 'sineater' and the Electronic Rogue consume each other. I read in a prominent art magazine that they are resurrecting the fashion of 'bad boy' or 'class clown' art in L.A. and New York. The question I ask myself is, who cares? I think we need vision and not stupid jokes. No acts of conscience without magic, no acts of magic without conscience.

DD: I have a deep frustration about the current state of both art and science. To respond to what you refer to, I don't find either of those roles to be very interesting: the heavy-handed social critics vs. the class clown, or the terminal hipster who sees that art is supposed to somehow flip off the mainstream culture. The art world is too often consumed by fashion and the trivialization of intelligence. It is as much a part of the perpetuation of destructive behavior as a lot of scientific research. They both lack vision. What defines a real artist may not be the terms that we are familiar with, such as predictable behavior invested in self-glorification. Instead, the artist should be defined by a refusal to participate in the narrowness of familiar cultural assumptions by putting forth a model for experiential and perceptual advance.

LR: You've talked before about the artist as 'systems integrator.' What does that mean exactly?

DD: What I refer to as 'systems integrator' is that the artist would enter into unfamiliar domains, domains generally arid of certain kinds of creative thought, and apply a unique understanding of structure, materials, and conceptual creativity. The question should be: Where is art needed?

LR: And the answer could be: On the level of deep structural understanding and not merely as decoration.