

COMMENTARY FOR COMPOSITION PORTFOLIO

by

VISA TAPANI KUOPPALA

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Department of Music
School of Languages, Cultures, Art History and Music
College of Arts and Law
University of Birmingham
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ABSTRACT

This MMus thesis consists of a portfolio of compositions and a written commentary. The portfolio contains four pieces: Nocturnal Debris, Saturn Feedback Study, Failing to Reproduce Appearances and Still Air. The first three of these are fixed media electroacoustic works, provided on a DVD, while Still Air is a mixed instrumental and electronic composition with both its score and recordings of its performances included in the portfolio. Of the fixed pieces, Failing to Reproduce Appearances uses 5.0 multichannel configuration while the others are stereo. The commentary introduces and examines the pieces and the thinking behind them, with particular emphasis on the creative processes used in their composition and relevant aesthetic issues relating to them. Some of the important aesthetic topics discussed are rhetorical expression, subtlety, silence and stasis, inconclusiveness, emotionality and atmosphere.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When I started my MMus studies at University of Birmingham in September 2011, my outlook regarding the studies was slightly different from what I would imagine most people starting their Masters to have. This was primarily because at that point I already had two years of postgraduate studies in music under my belt, which had resulted in a composition portfolio as an exchange student in De Montfort University, as well as a more extensive thesis on electroacoustic improvisation at Sibelius-Academy, my home university at the time. I was about to receive one Master of Music degree from these studies, so my MMus degree in Birmingham would be my second one. I had also already decided that I would continue my postgraduate studies by doing a PhD after finishing my masters, and I had already started thinking about the research project for my doctorate early in the academic year.

Because of these circumstances I regarded this portfolio produced under the supervision of Professor Jonty Harrison as something of an indulgence, allowing myself to branch out into directions I had not previously explored, without worrying whether or not all of it would follow a single thread consistently. Diversity and eclecticism were on the agenda, then, as I was afraid that a similar level of spread would be less appropriate for PhD research. Indeed, that seems to have been achieved: all of the four pieces in the MMus portfolio are quite different from one another, with *Still Air* and *Saturn Feedback Study* seemingly carved from an entirely different wood from the others. However, when considering the portfolio some time after it was finished, what struck me was that, despite the diverse surfaces, the pieces had a great deal of aesthetic and philosophical unity underlying them. All of the pieces concerned themselves with a number of shared

aesthetic issues relating to rhetorical expression, emotionality, silence and atmosphere, enigmaticism and inconclusiveness, form, material usage and the creative process – among others.

As many of these aesthetic questions are common to most – and in some cases all – of the pieces, I write about them in this commentary topic by topic, rather than piece by piece, referencing the pieces within the topics. However, before plunging into that discussion, I will first briefly introduce and describe each piece in chronological order – this can serve as an extended table of contents for the portfolio as well as a succinct listening guide – and describe the creative processes involved in composing them. The portfolio itself is provided as data-DVD to be accessed with a computer, because one of the pieces included is in multichannel format. After the introduction of the pieces and the discussion of the creative processes and pertinent aesthetic issues relating to them, I will finish off the commentary with a chapter where I evaluate the merits and shortcomings of the pieces, assessing how well the aesthetic aims were met.

II. THE CONTENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO

1. NOCTURNAL DEBRIS

Nocturnal Debris is a stereo fixed media electroacoustic piece of approximately seven minutes' duration. It was the first piece of the portfolio I composed, finishing it at the end of February 2012. It was premiered in the NoiseFloor 2012 festival at the Staffordshire University in May 2012. It is represented in the portfolio as a 48kHz, 24-bit wav file named '1. Nocturnal Debris.wav'.

My main concerns with *Nocturnal Debris* were atmosphere and pacing. I was attempting to create a subtle and sensitive rhythm that, combined with the materials and their development, creates a gentle, impressionistic mood. The piece strives to be inconspicuous and enigmatic, but with a sense of meaningfulness that leaves something lingering in the air after it is gone. Due to the subtlety aimed for, the piece should ideally be played back relatively quietly, as the effect of the piece is sensitive to playback volume. The effect of the first gesture, for instance, should be closer to a gentle breeze rather than an assertive entry. Some of the more static atmospheres (e.g. at 1:25➡ and especially 2:00➡; also 4:35➡) should feel slightly out of reach, some elements being at the threshold of perception. Also, the crescendo that peaks around the four-minute mark should not become extremely loud. The character strived for is more that of seduction than display of force.

2. STILL AIR

Still Air stands out in the portfolio, as it is the only piece included which is not a fixed media electroacoustic work – instead it is a primarily instrumental, score-based piece. Technically it is a mixed work as it contains an electronic part; however, this part is more subdued than those found in the majority of mixed works, having a role of just one instrument among the others. In fact the listener would be unlikely to notice the presence of any electronic elements from the sounding result alone. Without going too far into the age-old philosophical question of “what or where is The Work?”, it is worth mentioning that since *Still Air* is not a fixed-media composition, the recordings provided on the CD cannot be considered “the work” – particularly as the performance used is far from perfect. On the other hand, in my view the score is primarily only a set of performance instructions – hence a comprehensive view of the work requires both reading the score and listening to the included recordings.

Three 44.1kHz 24bit audio files have been included as documentation of the work in the folder ‘2. Still Air’. The reason for the multiple files is that when the ensemble recording was done in the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group workshop in late April 2012, I had not yet included an electronic part in the piece – I decided to add one only *after* the workshop. The first file (‘1. Still Air BCMG unmodified.wav’) is the recording from the BCMG workshop with no alterations other than subtle mixing, and it does not include any electronics. I then constructed the electronic part and created a mock-up in a DAW, where the electronic part is mixed in with the original recording. This is the second file (‘2. Still Air BCMG mock-up w. electronics.wav’). I then also soloed the electronic part from the mock-up and added this as the third file (‘3. Still Air

BCMG electronics only.wav’). It is worth noting, however, that this does not constitute a “tape part” that would be played straight through in the performance – for simpler synchronization the electronics are played with a Max patch with cues in the score. The reader is urged to focus on the second file – the mock-up with electronics – when going through the work, as this gives the best impression of what a performance of the finished piece would sound like; the other two files are provided mainly for the sake of comparison. The biggest difference between the mock-up and what a performance of the finished score should sound like is that, in the recording, the blocks of sound start and stop almost instantaneously, without the slow crescendos to and from silence. In the section on my creative processes I will discuss the small amendments to the score I made after the workshop in order to generate a more graduated start to the sounding sections. The score provided here is an A4 reduction from an A3 original, hence some text is slightly small – however, I have checked that everything is legible.

The piece itself is a slow meditation, of approximately 12-13 minutes’ duration, on what I call in the score “silence made audible” – as if room tones, ventilation hums and distant buzzes of electricity had been subtly amplified. It consists of ten extremely quiet and relatively static sound environments, between which there are areas of silence and brief percussive punctuations. Like most of the pieces in the portfolio, it is intentionally enigmatic, having a feeling of being slightly out of reach. It is also intended to be played back relatively quietly, although the effect of playing the piece loudly is also interesting.

3. SATURN FEEDBACK STUDY

Saturn Feedback Study is another stereo fixed media electroacoustic piece, composed primarily in May 2012, and with a duration of approximately four minutes. It is included in the portfolio as a 48kHz, 24-bit wav file with the name '3. Saturn Feedback Study.wav'. As the name implies, the piece is more of an etude than a fully self-contained composition. It has its basis in my discovery that a recently released commercial VST distortion plug-in, FabFilter Saturn, could be made to self-oscillate without any input. I found the soundworld thus created to be appealing and useful to my aesthetic ends, so I made this study whilst practising controlling the feedback. The feedback is sculpted by automating the plug-in's parameters, both performatively in realtime and in non-realtime – no additional processing is used. Because of the piercing nature of some of the tones produced, listening on headphones is not recommended: the purer tones are both softened and enlivened by being in interaction with the acoustics of a room. Much of the piece occupies extremely high frequency ranges, to the extent that age-related hearing loss can render some of the tones inaudible. For example to older ears the piece might sound considerably more austere around 1:10, if the undulating tones around 16kHz are not audible (see figure 1 on the next page). Unlike most of the other pieces in the portfolio, *Saturn Feedback Study* is not very sensitive to playback volume – in fact, a relatively high volume is recommended for some of the textural detail and visceral impact of the feedback to present themselves.

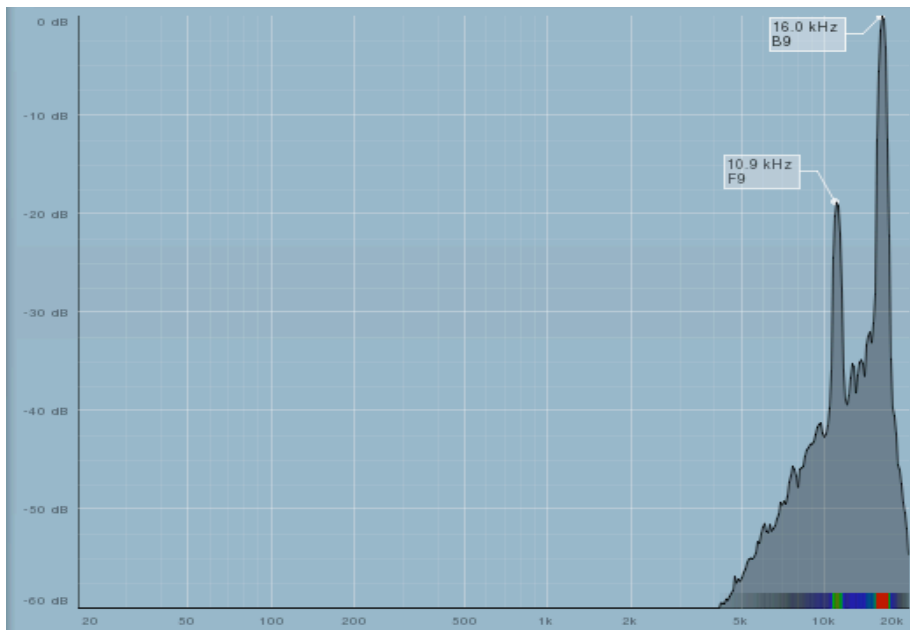


Figure 1. Spectrum analysis of Saturn Feedback Study at ~1min.

4. FAILING TO REPRODUCE APPEARANCES (short version)

The final and most recent piece of the portfolio is a 5.0 fixed media electroacoustic composition with a duration of approximately seven and a half minutes, composed between June and September 2012. Since it utilizes more than two channels, it is provided in its own folder – 4. Failing to Reproduce Appearances – with each channel represented as a separate mono file, named according to its placement in the standard 5.0 listening configuration:

1-L 3-C 2-R

Ö

4-rL

5-rR

In many ways *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* (*FTRA* for short) is an amalgamation of many of the ideas explored in the other pieces, often taken to more extreme levels. It deals with enigmaticism even more explicitly than the other pieces – there is an attempt to control the level of comprehensibility via compositional technique, crafting events and environments that are bordering between sense making and confusion. Partly for this end it employs an eclectic and colourful mix of materials, including feedback created with Saturn and samples from tonal music. Even though sonic beauty is not being shunned, it is persistent in its attempt to avoid a certain acousmatic sheen and employs abrupt cuts and other crude editing as rhetorical devices. Like *Nocturnal Debris*, it has an impressionistic character: there is a continuing air of subtle and lingering melancholy, which, however, never quite goes into melodramatic territory. The name has been appended with “short version” because it feels to me currently that the piece as presented in the portfolio is shorter than the material and its handling suggests it might be. A longer version does not exist yet, but is in the planning stage. This appendix will serve to clarify the different versions in the future once I have completed a longer version of the piece. I recommend playing *FTRA* also on a moderate playback volume, in order to retain the subtlety of the emotional expression. For instance the initial gesture should not feel overpowering or assertive, but gentle.

III. THE CREATIVE PROCESS

When starting to examine my compositional workflows and aesthetic thinking in more depth, it is important to mention early on that for approximately the past four years I have been an active free improviser, in addition to being a composer, primarily active in the field of electroacoustic improvisation. It is evident to me now that this has had a strong influence not only on my working methods, but also on my aesthetic aims and my philosophical thinking – I will return to this later. It is understandable that the working methods are likely to be affected by improvisation practice, particularly as electroacoustic composition gives ample opportunity for incorporating improvisation at different stages of the composition process.

Indeed, in the present climate, many improvisers – in particular, electroacoustic improvisers – feel less inclined to stress the improvisatory side of what they are doing, and many of them move freely and without inhibitions between improvisation and composition via the various shades of grey in between. Many of the prominent labels of electroacoustic improvisation – such as Erstwhile in US and Entr’acte, Another Timbre and Cathnor in UK – release improvised and composed albums next to one another without any need to highlight how much of each is involved.

With this in mind, some years ago I started to develop a compositional method for my own work, which I started calling “slow free improvisation”. One of its aims was an attempt to bridge the gap between my improvisatory and compositional activities; another was to lighten my compositional process. I felt the need for this latter aim as my compositional processes were frequently getting encumbered by excessive

perfectionism and problematizing – in short, the creative process felt psychologically heavy and tiresome. The starting points of the compositional method were to:

1. Compose quickly and lightly
2. Start composing from the beginning of the piece and progress linearly
3. Avoid over-craft¹ or getting stuck on refining a particular section for too long
4. Start without overt compositional ideas and allow the form to be built moment-by-moment

I noticed that when working in this way I could retain in non-realtime composition some of the heightened sensitivity to the moment, pacing and timing that I feel in realtime free-improvisation. Compositional activity retains a similarity to the stimulus-response characteristic of free-improvisation, where the player gets unexpected input from both the instrument or other sound source used (as these are frequently played in a way where the player cannot fully predict the sounding outcome) as well as the other players, and reacts to these in a continuing process of back-and-forth navigation. This aspect of composition as an interactive feedback system between the composer, the materials and the tools is thus heightened when working like this, and the amplified agency of the tools and materials is consciously utilized for minimizing learned mannerisms². The first piece in which I explicitly tried to work in this way was *Torque* (2010), and I wrote briefly about the method in its program notes:

¹ For example, refining material so much that its character is smoothed out (resulting in something blander than the original) or focusing on technical details so much that the big picture is starting to disappear could be seen as instances of over-craft.

² The breath of this commentary is unfortunately insufficient for going into this fascinating issue in more detail. However, it is one of the cornerstones of my forthcoming PhD research, hence, more on this topic will follow.

When composing Torque I wanted to work with the lightness and speed of an abstract expressionist painter – throwing paint on the canvas, generating ideas on the fly, painting over previous ideas, maintaining a primitive intuition and avoiding over-craft. The starting point for the piece was generating a handful of free improvisations in a granular synthesis environment I had built in Max/MSP. I then started to compose with these improvisations in a spontaneous way, encouraging happy accidents by combining unrelated materials in unassuming ways. Frequently I zoomed in on the incidents of one layer of material and allowed them to run their natural course while crafting the other layers to follow their logic. Hence the material develops and a form ensues in an unpredictable but organic way.

This way of working is not very far removed from the “bottom-up”³ material-driven paradigm favoured by much of the Franco-Anglo acousmatic⁴ culture, including many of the composers affiliated with BEAST. However in the way I employ it there is a greater emphasis on progressing quickly and there is a difference in the attitude towards craft: a refined level of technical craft seems to be a priority to most of the acousmatic culture, and this can sometimes result in what I perceive as over-craft; however, I am trying to avoid a certain glossy standardised perfection that can result from this.

All of the three fixed-media pieces in the portfolio could be said to have been composed more or less in this way – at least that was attempted. In all cases I started from the beginning of the piece with a more or less clean slate, open to take the piece in the

³ As used in e.g. Landy (2007) p. 34.

⁴ For me the term *acousmatic music* refers to a sub-genre of fixed electroacoustic music with certain stylistic traits, a set of common practices and a cultural lineage originating largely from GRM in France and spreading prominently in the Franco-Anglo countries. Hence, to me, not all tape music is *acousmatic music* and I would view e.g. Graham Lambkin as an *electroacoustic music* composer but not an *acousmatic music* composer, as the latter term is rarely used in discussion of his music and both his working practices and sounding results differ from the majority of the composers who do use it. This genre-association is possibly one reason why several electroacoustic composers – Michel Chion and Lionel Marchetti, among others – still prefer to use the term *musique concrète* for their work. I avoid using *acousmatic music* in describing my own work as well due to my complicated relationship with its genre traits, as is discussed later.

direction towards which it would naturally lean after starting to juxtapose materials together. Also, I tended to do most of the processing required in the DAW project itself, rather than with external programs. For example, rather than using external granular processing in iXi Quarks, Max, BEASTtools or the like, the granular washes in *Nocturnal Debris* were made by sending audio material to reverbs that were programmed to act more as non-diffuse delays, and automating these sends; this gave me the possibility to sculpt the washes quickly while the piece progressed⁵. *Saturn Feedback Study* is entirely based on automating the aforementioned Saturn distortion plugin, without any processing or other material. Most of this automation was first written in real-time with midi-controllers, and tweaked afterwards. Unfortunately, in the process, I noticed that Reaper's automation handling was not up to the task, as you could only select and edit points on one envelope track at a time – in the future I have to use Cubase for such automation-heavy projects, until Reaper has improved in this regard.

The process for *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* was rather similar to that described in *Torque*'s program notes. I used the same real-time granular synthesis environment as in *Torque*, which I had by now developed further into a flexible instrument named Malegra⁶. I made several long four-channel improvisations (durations between 15 and 40 minutes), imported them into Reaper and started experimenting by juxtaposing

⁵ See appendix 1 for screen captures of the DAW-projects of all of the fixed media pieces included in the portfolio. The pre-fader sends of channel 10 "Crisp Bags" in *Nocturnal Debris* are the best examples of creating the granular washes by sending the material to reverberation plug-ins.

⁶ Markov-Lehmer granulator; so named because in it granular synthesis is controlled by both Markov chains and Lehmer's linear congruence formula. Readers who are fluent in Finnish can read more about it in my master's thesis for the Sibelius-Academy (Kuoppala (2012)).

segments of them with each other and with other material. I deliberately allowed chance to enter the workflow by blindly taking sections from the long improvisation without remembering what they contained and arbitrarily threw them together with some other material. I will briefly touch on some of the deeper philosophical justifications for this practice later on, but suffice to say now that some of the combinations thus arrived at had a freshness and vitality that I could not have crafted with careful deliberation.

However, both in *Nocturnal Debris* and in *FTRA* I ended up with some problems with this workflow further along in the process – this is what I referred to earlier when saying that the workflow was “attempted”. It takes much focus and restraint to maintain this kind of creative process – for example, it is very easy to become obsessed with crafting some details to perfection and hence lose the momentum. In both works, a simple practical problem occurred: a gap in compositional activity. With *Nocturnal Debris* this was approximately the three-week Christmas break; with *FTRA* it was about two months in July-August as I moved further away from the studios and could not work on a 5.0 piece at home. During the gaps, the material that at first seemed malleable and open to endless arbitrary permutations and the sections that were laid down with a light touch seemed to become fixed and inelastic – like hot iron cooling down and becoming rigid. I had learned the material that was already in place by heart and hence it was psychologically challenging to go back and alter it. The playfulness of the workflow was difficult to reinstate.

In both cases, then, the workflow slowed down after the disruption and became more arduous. This is an aspect I will have to be conscious of in the future. It seems to me that when composing in this manner it is important to maintain the momentum without

significant pauses. However, if this is unattainable, I will need to be able to develop workflow-related techniques for reinstating the compositional momentum, such as utilizing different kinds of chance-based operations, switching temporarily to a more top-down approach or otherwise navigating the abstract-abstracted (Emmerson (1986) p. 20) –continuum. In the case of *FTRA*, this slowing down, combined with the practical difficulty that I was only able to manage a very limited amount of studio time after the pause, resulted in the situation where I feel that the version of the piece as presented here does not realize the full potential of the work – hence an alternative version will follow in the future.

The creative process for *Still Air* was understandably very different. As the simplicity of the score suggests, writing the score did not take long. However, what the score does not show is that the pitch material is in fact spectrally derived from recordings of ventilation fans⁷. This process of analysing and translating the spectral information into usable form took quite a bit of work, including writing a custom Max-patch – largely because I had not done it before and I was not using OpenMusic, which would have offered tools to simplify the process. This is not an aspect I wish to stress to listeners or performers, however, and it is not something I would mention in the programme notes, as I prefer the score and the piece to have an air of lightness and clarity.

With music such as this, the playback functions in the Sibelius software were next to useless; so, while writing it, any image of how it would sound had to come from my aural imagination. In the workshop where the piece was performed, then, certain aspects

⁷ These same recordings feature prominently in *FTRA*, although in that case I ended up choosing more of the sections that had footsteps or other human presence and not just plain ventilation hum.

of the piece's realization came as a surprise. I was aware that doing a smooth, long crescendo from silence to *pppp* is impossible as such for winds, particularly in the registers stipulated. However, I was hoping for the players to attempt some kind of approximation of it, rather than entering the stable tone more or less instantaneously, without much of a crescendo, as they did. A version of the piece where the sounding sections would be clearly framed blocks would be a possible alternative, which would throw the work into a different light. However, it is not what I was after this time, which is why I added a section called "crescendos and diminuendos for strings" to the performance instructions in the beginning of the score so that in the next performance there would be a more graduated build-up of the sounding section. As mentioned earlier, after the workshop I also decided to add an electronic part to the score, increasing the number of players from 15 to 16.

Before writing *Still Air*, I had not ventured into instrumental writing for some years. This was partly because the modernist atmosphere in the instrumental composition department at the Sibelius Academy had attached an air of heaviness to the process that had put me off. Now sufficient amount of time had passed for me to forget all of that and approach instrumental composition again with a light touch. Despite some aspects of the process being somewhat cumbersome because of a lack of routine, there was, ironically, something liberating in this reversal to a more abstract, top-down approach. It suggests to me that perhaps one way to counter the writer's blocks encountered with *Nocturnal Debris* and *FTRA* is to write myself text- or image-based or otherwise open-ended scores somewhere along the compositional path.

IV. AESTHETIC ISSUES

In the previous chapter I briefly described how my improvisation practice has affected my compositional processes. It is perhaps less evident how this practice has influenced my aesthetic thinking and sound-preferences – after all, improvisation is normally defined as a process that can be applied to a wide range of aesthetics, not something that can be pinned down by its sounding end result. Nevertheless, even though electroacoustic improvisation can be simply defined as improvisation utilizing electronic devices, another common definition is through aesthetic characteristics and culture, transforming it into more or less a genre of music. This genre – frequently shortened to EAI – has a vibrant culture around it, featuring such prominent figures as Keith Rowe, Toshimaru Nakamura, John Butcher and AMM. Arguably some of its present-day aesthetic characteristics are a preference of slow-moving stratified textures over fast-paced chatty dialogues, an avoidance of soloistic vocabulary, a blur between foreground and background and a predilection towards abstract sounds with unidentifiable sources. Much of it is interested in quiet or otherwise subtle sounds, silence and atmosphere, and poetic inconclusiveness. Many of these characteristics can be heard in my own pieces as well.

It is particularly in relation to a certain forcefulness, masculinity and exaggerated dynamism, which I have started noticing in some recent acousmatic music, that my aesthetic preferences have been veering closer to those more prominent in the EAI culture. It seems to me that much of the acousmatic music composed since the 80s has been frequently preoccupied with crafting powerful, vigorous, dynamic gestures: a music which sometimes sounds to me like it is made primarily to *impress*. A set of

sonic mannerisms has developed around the practice: among the more prominent is the exponential crescendo, leading to a strong attack-decay⁸ sound⁹. This has been matched with a diffusion practice where pieces are frequently played loudly in concert.

In my discussions with colleagues it has become evident that others have noticed the prominence of this trend as well, to the extent of having created personal terms to describe this style. One colleague called it “Hollywood acousmatics”; another used the term “heroic gesture” to describe the kind of strong, “masculine” gestures prominent in this trend. This expression clarified to me one reason why this overtly dynamic gestural language had not felt natural to me: it portrays a sonic rhetoric¹⁰, which to my ears too has certain heroism to it – like, to be slightly facetious, a muscular Hercules triumphantly wielding a big sword from victory to victory. It appears to me that a language focusing excessively on the forceful, masculine, vigorous and triumphant sides of life can be lacking in rhetorical richness – what about failure, weakness, tenderness or fragility? Indeed, many acousmatic composers would be insulted if their sounds were described as weak or frail.

To me, however, these other aspects of human experience have great interest. As I found it initially challenging to find much recent electroacoustic music dealing with

⁸ To use Denis Smalley’s spectromorphological terminology. See Smalley (1997).

⁹ As a side note, this is also a convenient formal device, as the masking character of the momentary strong impact allows the music to shoot into a new sonic world, as if travelling through a wormhole. This enables the creation of music that is fundamentally sectional while maintaining an illusion of organic, graduated development.

¹⁰ I am using the term *rhetoric* in the sense it has been used in the history of classical music – particularly in the baroque period – with doctrines on archetypal musical figures and affects. The emotive-expressive qualities of different kinds of figures and gestures interest me, although I do not share the baroque fascination towards codification and rationalization of them.

them in a way that interested me, I turned to other musical fields for inspiration, particularly to that of contemporary instrumental music. John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff from the New York School, the Wandelweiser-composers – particularly Michael Pisaro – and Anton Webern and Luigi Nono have all been influential for the portfolio. As far as electroacoustic music was concerned, I had more luck in finding a subtler rhetorical language in older *musique concrète*, particularly that of Francois Bayle and Luc Ferrari. As mentioned earlier, it was initially through electroacoustic improvisation that I was able to find greater quantities of recent electroacoustic music with a prominent sense of fragility and a willingness to deal with weakness: here, especially, Keith Rowe was of paramount influence. Finally I was successful in finding more recent electroacoustic music of fixed kind that seemed to share my interests: noteworthy are particularly Graham Lambkin from the US, Robert Dow from Scotland, Helena Gough from England, Patrick Kosk from Finland and especially Lionel Marchetti from France, whose works I studied extensively (e.g. Marchetti (2009)) particularly from the angles of pacing and material juxtapositions.

This interest in subtlety and more delicate aspects of human experience manifests itself in numerous ways in the works included in my portfolio. Among the more obvious are a general tendency towards quieter dynamics and an interest in stillness and silence. These aspects are most explicitly dealt with in *Still Air*; after all, it consists of quiet static textural blocks punctuated by silence (or silence punctuated by the sounding blocks), and the written dynamic range is between *p* and *pppp*. Here the legacy of John Cage and the New York school is strongest, although some of it has reached me through the Wandelweiser composers, most notably Michael Pisaro, Jürg Frey and Radu Malfatti. Of course stasis is highly relative – no two triangle hits are the same and the

sounding sections are full of colour and life as players are struggling at the quietest extreme of their playing abilities.

For me *Still Air* could be several times its current length without being boring, but admittedly boredom is not a key concern for me in general. It fascinates me that people can spend extended durations sitting on their porch in the evening without doing anything except enjoying the gentle breeze of the wind, yet get easily bored when listening to a ten-minute piece of music. With pieces like *Still Air* I am interested in guiding listeners away from the hyperactive timescale of music listening to something closer to the mode of experience of sitting on one's porch. In a very practical way, the repetitive percussion strokes with which the piece starts are a way of slowing down the listeners' sense of time. Keith Rowe's concerns about directing one's focus towards the atmosphere created by the music, rather than the music itself, resonates strongly with me and is relevant to *Still Air*:

I have become increasingly preoccupied with atmosphere, in particular the kind of atmosphere that one finds surrounding a Mark Rothko painting. When I am in the presence of a Rothko work (also after I have departed and later, upon further reflection), I'm struck not by "whew! what great brush strokes! what an incredible technique! what a painter!", but instead by a feeling of the surrounding atmosphere and its sensation. Somehow I wanted to move what I'm doing (intention) towards this notion of atmosphere, an activity where we're not aware of technique, of instrument, of playing, of music even, but instead as feeling/sensation suspended in space, perhaps what Feldman meant by music as time, energising the air, making the silence (unintention) audible.
Rowe (2003)

These concerns are less obvious in the other works, but they are still present. For example, *Nocturnal Debris* has several slightly cryptic static sections (1:25➡, 4:35➡), during which the piece seems to take a backseat and blend to the surroundings. In *Saturn Feedback Study* I was interested in the power of the extremely high piercing

tones to “energise the air”, as if particles were ionized and the air charged with a strange kind of tension. *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* also uses this power of the feedback created with Saturn to charge the air, and it frequently recedes to more introspective, static moments both short and long (one of the longer ones is from 2:43 onwards).

From a different point of view this concern with atmosphere referred to in the Rowe quotation is audible in my pieces in their focus on the emotional resonances of sounds. I am interested in what kind of emotional association a sound triggers *as it is*, when played back bare without much processing; then following from that, what kind of emotional responses are achieved when it is juxtaposed with another sound, and timed and edited in a certain way – these are aspects of the material to which I have been trying to heighten my sensitivity. For example, what does the sample of Henry Purcell’s music in *FTRA* surfacing for the first time at 0:14 suggest in this context and with this timing – and moreover, how does it *feel*?

A processed sound which is edited to have a perfectly balanced gestural shape and polished with diffuse reverb suggests something – the same sound, dry and slightly distorted, and edited with crude abrupt cuts, suggests something else altogether. Some of the *ppp sul ponticello* string sounds employed in the early pieces of Anton Webern which end by seemingly withering away convey a feeling of weakness and fragility; a strong *sfz* string sound crescendoing to a forceful hit has a totally different, more assertive, emotional character. All of these aspects create what I have been calling the rhetorical language of the music – the consideration of which has, in my opinion, so far been under-discussed in the research of electroacoustic music. It is this angle and the connected control of emotional suggestions that is a greater focus in my work than, for

example, spectro- or spatiomorphology. In my attempt to sensitise myself to the emotional resonances of sounds and hence not over-process them, I am reminded by the anecdote about Karlheinz Stockhausen asking Morton Feldman about his compositional technique and Feldman responding that he does not “push the sounds around” (Griffiths (1995) p. 94). Simply placing a sound next to another creates complicated tensions; recognizing these pushes and pulls has been a key concern in visual arts, but much less widely discussed in music:

For most of the last century, the cultivation of a keen awareness of spatial/psychological separation has been a standard lesson in the visual arts. One learns to appreciate two or more distinct objects inhabiting the same physical space yet not only retaining their individual identities but, simply by coexisting, creating a multitude of tensions, disturbances in the air around them as well as psycho-gravitational pushes and pulls, vortices of interacting essences influencing behavior in a manner that swiftly becomes all but indecipherable. The awareness, hyper-awareness even, of this space, indiscernible and inconsequential to most lay or inobservant eyes, and of all the intense activity occurring within it, becomes crucial to the artist, perhaps more so than the objects causing the rippling tension themselves. Olewnick (2006)

In *Failing to Reproduce Appearances*, feedback and other sounds with various levels of abstraction, footsteps, ventilation hums, and samples of tonal music create these psycho-gravitational pushes and pulls, connecting intuitively in a way which would be difficult to plan out rationally. In general I have been recently interested in colourful and eclectic material usage; doing a piece with a focus on a single sound-source (e.g. only using sounds derived from glass objects or constructing a piece from a single sound) fits poorly with my current interests. I have noticed that relying on such a foundation can create a sense of false confidence, where a work or a section is assumed to cohere because of the strictness of its underlying material. For me, the proof must be in the sounding end result alone.

These aspects of rhetoric and material usage relate to the *enigmaticism*¹¹ that I have now referred to several times in passing. From this portfolio, *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* and *Still Air* are most explicitly concerned with enigmaticism, inconclusiveness and intentional confusion – but, again, these concerns cut through all of the works presented here. I am interested in music’s transcendental and spiritual possibilities and I have noticed that for me often there needs to be something that I do not understand, something which does not make rational sense in the music for it to go beyond the mundane. In *FTRA*, the selection of materials and their placement and editing reflects this aim. Here I was inspired and liberated by listening to Annette Krebs’ and Taku Unami’s recent tour de force of confusing juxtapositions, *Motubachii* (Krebs (2010)). The samples of tonal music in particular are unsettling: the persistently repeating sample of Purcell, almost always abruptly cut at the same exact spot and hence without a sense of internal progression; the slowed-down sample from Isaac Hayes (3:14➡) with a faint leak of voice at 3:23; and the drum fill at 4:58 – all of these raise more questions than they answer.

In *Still Air*, the whole general characteristic of the piece could be said to be enigmatic – what it does and what it does not do, its stillness, arbitrariness and inconclusiveness. In particular it is reflected in its non-progressive form. A clear, coherent form that has the expected high points and lulls, and which climaxes around the golden section with some material that has returned from the beginning and then recedes as if now fully exhausted, suggests something. A form where materials return or do not return in

¹¹ I use the non-standard inflection *enigmaticism* as a form of the word enigmatic, referring particularly to its meanings as something mysterious, puzzling or ambiguous.

seemingly arbitrary ways, in which things happen with unclear consequences and which recedes with the feeling that nothing has actually been resolved suggests something different altogether¹². It is almost as if these two cases imply something different about human life and existence. For me, form is of central importance, but not in a fixed, architectural way, but as the unfolding of experience. It could be said that in *Still Air*, the quiet dynamics, the prominence of silence and the non-progressive, inconclusive and almost arbitrary form try to dissolve the borders between the piece and the rest of our experience. Rather than being a self-standing “work”, folding in on itself with a conclusive and coherent construction, the piece is just a grouping of fleeting sensations, which the listener connects or does not connect in a personal way. It is like the story of a bird flying through a banqueting hall, as related to music by Rowe:

You know the story of the Venerable Bede when someone asked him about human existence. He said imagine a banqueting hall; it is winter and it is dark outside; a bird flies in one window, through the banqueting hall and out the other window. This is life. I would like a performance to be like that. So it transcends the question of being Art or not, or technique or brilliance. It is absolutely what it is, a mirror of the whole of our existence. Keith Rowe as quoted in Eyles (2009)

Finally it is worth pointing out that even though I have gone to great lengths to explain how my work and my philosophy deviate from those which I perceive to be more prominent in acousmatic music culture, it still carries strong links to it. For example I have been influenced by Smalley’s writings and concepts relating to spectro- and spatiomorphology and have been inspired by much of the canonical masterpieces of the acousmatic music. However, familiarity with the acousmatic canon and

¹² I do not wish to suggest that one form is better than the other, and, after all there have always been reasons for a convention becoming established. However, I do want to point out that the conventional formal archetypes are not just neutral vehicles of meaning, but *mean* something themselves.

spectromorphology are taken more or less for granted among postgraduates in this field, so I have focused on those aspects which do not fit within its accepted norms and which I perceive subsequently to require more explanation. In an environment where many my aesthetic viewpoints are not commonplace, the other sources of influence, from improvisation to instrumental composition have been vital in giving me confidence in following these directions, almost in the way of approval as discussed by Rowe:

[O]ne way of being influenced, is that people give you permission to do things. I always feel that Cage gave us permission to do something[. ...] And I think that's one of the very important things in one's own life is to pass on permission to other people. [... W]hen I first played with Toshi[maru Nakamura], it was almost as if I'd been hanging around for thirty years [...] waiting for someone to turn up where I could actually play like this! Keith Rowe as quoted in Abbey (2011)

V. EVALUATION

All in all I am satisfied with my Masters portfolio: in it I have explored issues and directions that have been burning at the back of my mind for some time before starting recently to face them properly. Even though I am satisfied with much of my earlier work as well, some of it has felt to me slightly too much like pastiche – as if I had been cautious in tackling headlong some of the issues that were important to me and resorting then to a more classical acousmatic style out of comfort.

Starting to explore these ideas was not entirely effortless. For example, with *Nocturnal Debris* I was already planning to venture further into a more pointillistic style, with a greater prominence of abrupt edits – as hinted at by the gesture at 0:06 – but compositional habits are not so easily overcome, and I reverted back to a smoother soundscape almost accidentally. Nevertheless it was still a step in a new direction for me with regards to enigmaticism and subtleness, and I do consider it one of my most successful fixed works to date.

Still Air, on the other hand, was a bigger leap into the unknown for me, and writing it was a hugely liberating experience. Lack of habitual routine in instrumental writing resulted understandably in some elementary oversights – most notably the crescendos and decrescendos from silence being insufficiently thought through. Even then, it felt as if taking a more abstract, top-down approach to composition gave me permission to take some of my ideas to further extremes without diluting them – a workflow-related observation I have to keep in mind for the future. The performance recorded here is far from perfect and as the percussionists struggled the most, it begged the question

whether their parts should be streamlined. The BCMG players, however, assured me that it is simply a matter of practice.

Saturn Feedback Study is another leap into a sound world which has interested me as a listener for some time but which I have previously kept distance from as a composer. Partly this is because previously I had no means of producing this kind of sound world in a manner that felt natural to me, so I was delighted in the discovery of the unexpected underbelly of the Saturn plugin. Approaching this as a light etude was psychologically liberating – despite my philosophical inclinations, I am yet to liberate myself fully from indoctrination concerning great works, symphonies and opus numbers, and I still feel weighted down by this train of thoughts when starting a work which I perceive to be more “major”. The temptation to start adding different material – particularly recognisable field recordings – was great, as I find that for me the greatest interest in this type of feedback texture is in its contrasting power when juxtaposed with other material, as is done in *Failing to Reproduce Appearances*. However, I wanted to keep this etude pure and focused on sculpting the feedback. The end result is, to my ears, organic and luscious, but perhaps slightly inconsequential – in any case, it was a useful learning experience in manipulating the feedback.

However, it is *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* where I felt I was challenging myself, my materials and my ideas the most. It was the first time I employed such an unrestrained range of seemingly disparate material – including samples of tonal music and sculpted feedback – not to mention working in a multichannel setting, although this was not among my central foci. I feel that here I am really tapping into a nerve of my own interests and have achieved a balance between arbitrariness and construction,

beauty and brutality, and created a sonic world that pushes all the right buttons for myself. Here I am feeling the presence of the kind of poetry I am looking for. However, as mentioned before, I feel that the piece still does not manage to fulfil its potential: somewhere after the three minute mark the piece seems to become too hurried, too anxious, and the more cathartic sections starting at 4:23 and 6:08 come too early – in short, the piece needs more time to spread its wings. Furthermore, the form of the piece ended up much more classical than I intended, particularly with regards to the usage of the Purcell sample, which is now featured too prominently for this length – I was intending it to be closer to a fleeting sensation. Nevertheless, the beginning of the piece is, in my opinion, some of the best music I have written, and the sheer prospect of having these latent ideas finally materialising in a palpable form is exhilarating.

All in all I am happy to notice that my aesthetic ideas have started to focus even when I am working on a diverse range of approaches – I take this as a sign of developing compositional maturity. After the progress made while working on this portfolio, I feel I am in a good position to start my doctoral research.

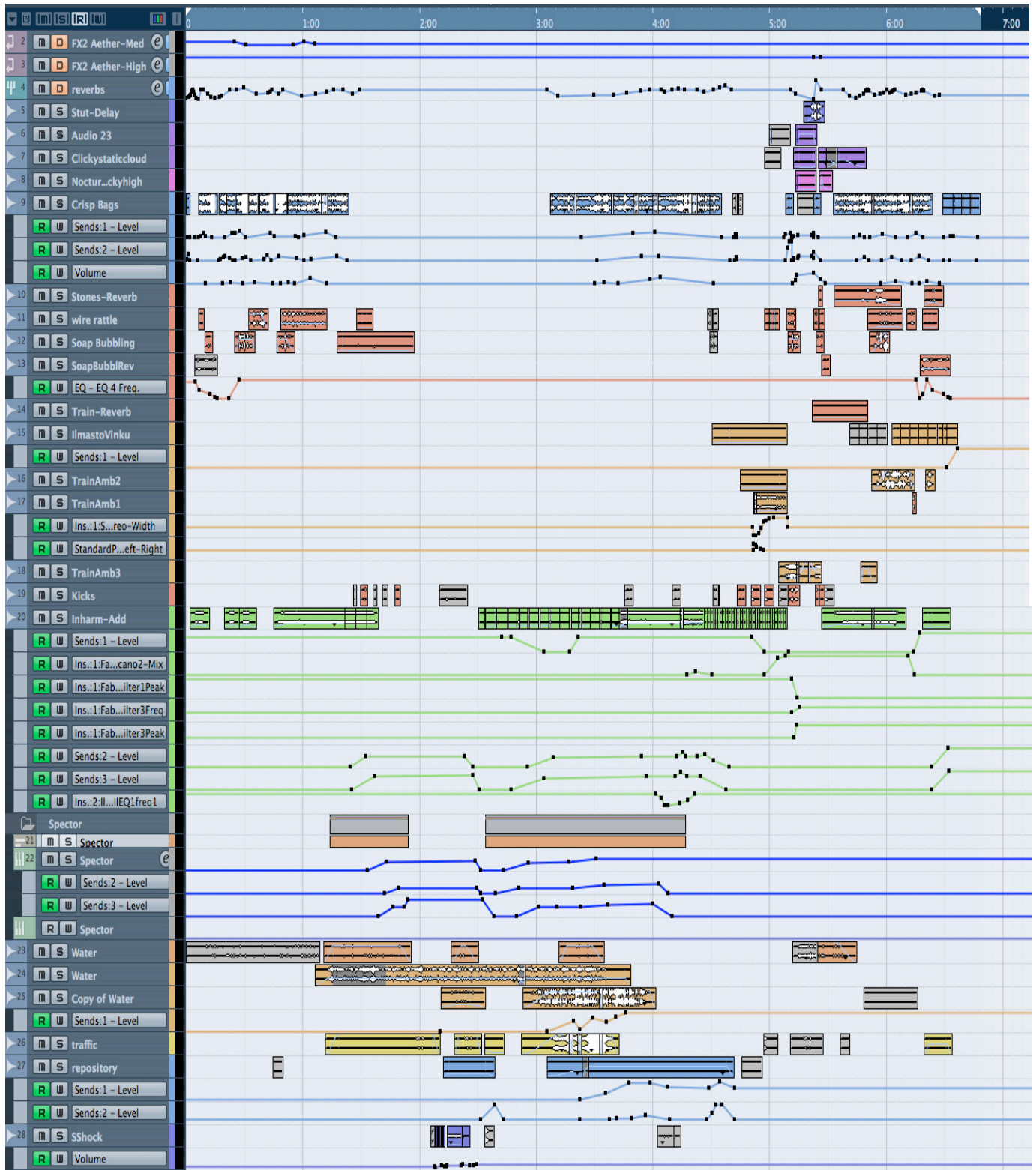
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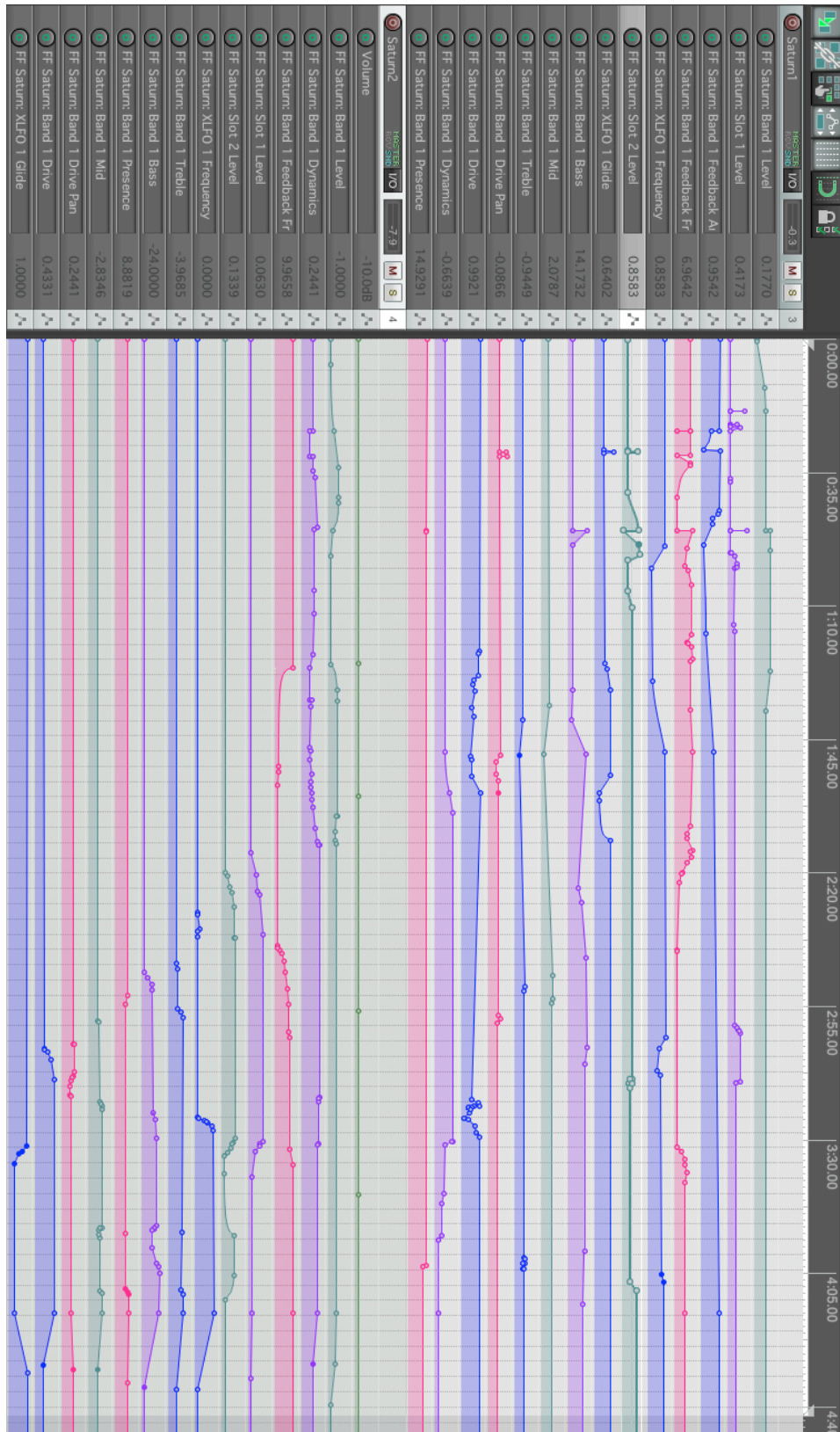
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APPENDIX 1.

A. A screenshot of the entire Cubase project of *Nocturnal Debris*

B. A screencapture of the main automation tracks of the Reaper project of *Saturn**Feedback Study*

C. A screencapture of the entire *Failing to Reproduce Appearances* Reaper project

