

Hearing *Mulholland*, which is a 21st century exercise in hearing anything at all.  
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*Mulholland* is a piece for a solo MIDI keyboardist operating a bank of samples. The piece takes its name from David Lynch's movie "Mulholland Drive". At an operative scene in the movie, the two main characters go to see an act at the mysterious "Club Silencio" at the mysterious hour of 2 AM. They watch as a woman sings unaccompanied the Argentinian lament "Llorando". At the climax of the song, she collapses, apparently dead. And uncannily, her voice continues to resonate through the hall, even as her body is being dragged offstage. The element of this sequence I've fixated on is the element of *dislocation*. The singer's voice is disturbingly dislocated from her body. Narratively, the sequence is disconnected in pacing from the rest of the film, and is never explained or referred to afterwards. In my *Mulholland*, the sonic content of any given sample is dislocated from its source, both geographically and in time.

In one of the samples, we hear a male voice utter the nonsensical phrase "it was just like, d'you know what I mean like, just like, y'know". This strange equivocation is the result of some splicing on my part of a conversation with my friend Ian. The sample is set to loop indefinitely as long as the key it's linked to is depressed. Let's take a look at all of the *dislocation* happening here. Ian's voice is dislocated from its body. Even before editing on my part, his words are dislocated from their conversational context. The words' literal meaning is gradually overtaken by their rhythmic, pitch and timbral content. And as we become aware of the noisy results of my editing (clicks and pops and discontinuities), the sample as a record of an event becomes separate from the sample as a produced sonic object. Though the sample itself is familiar and definable, almost banal, through a series of dislocations it becomes a very very interesting to listen to.

A second sample I particularly like is 30 seconds of a piano improvisation that I had recorded for another project. The sample is entitled "lakeway2.wav". To see a performer sitting still, holding down a single note while many notes sound is analogous to watching a body being dragged offstage as her voice continues to sing, minus Naomi Watts. To further complicate things, I've got a two more samples derived from lakeway2.wav loaded in the sample bank. One plays the same sound cue down an octave, and the other plays it down an octave and twice as slow. Their presence points to the inherent untrustworthiness of my medium. Which of the three is the original?

As I continue my discussion, I'd like to bring in the names of some authors we discussed in the course, in order to both mark ideas that influenced the piece, as well as discuss how the piece can be heard in context of their ideas.

In a move that I think Sterne would appreciate, I've incorporated the sounds of the technological processes used to make the piece into the piece itself, though they are still dislocated in time from the event of their recording. These are recordings of the internal electrical workings of my laptop, made with a telephone coil (capable of transcribing electrical signals into audio information, and then relaying that information to a recording device). These sounds are completely foreign to the average listener, although they are certainly electronic in origin. I primarily use these loops as ambience to surround other, more meaning-ful samples. The

combination or collaging of samples is another dislocating move that disturbs the process of accurately identifying sample origins. I am reminded of Sterne's discussion of doctors' attempts to accurately diagnose heart conditions through listening. The listener is tempted to define each sample as a separate sound source, but because of the collaged nature of the work, invariably fails. A listener might be able to identify an electric guitar sound accurately on its own, but when juxtaposed with other stranger electronic sounds, it becomes stranger. I was surprised that someone in the class made the comment that they had no idea what most of the samples were: I thought that, with a few exceptions, it was fairly obvious.

The difference between what the performer and audience hears or listens for becomes a pervasive theme of the piece. I, the performer, am familiar with the entire range of possibilities, and I know the full content of each sample, whereas the audience is unknowing, excited by each novel turn, eventually becoming lost in the collage. To use Sterne's distinction: I listen analytically, the audience synthetically.

One sample in the collection is entitled *thump.wav*. It's the short, percussive sound of a piano lid falling. Several keys on the keyboard are set to play this sample back at varying rates: twice as fast,  $3/2$  times as fast,  $4/3$  times as fast, and 1.414 times as fast. These rates are obtained from the Western tuning system, corresponding to the octave, fifth, fourth, and tritone respectively<sup>1</sup>. Because the original sample has a quick attack and decay, we hear some interesting rhythms when multiple keys are depressed at the same time. The process is similar to setting multiple metronomes to run simultaneously at different tempi. These rhythms can be simple or complex; transcribable or incomprehensible, depending on how simple the ratios are, and how many are in play at a time. But even when the resulting rhythm is simple, the listening ear hears it not as the sum of independent voices, but as an emergent composite of sound (thanks Cooke) — in other words, synthetically.

Another example: I've got a sample called *misc\_lowfreqrumble.wav*<sup>2</sup>. It is a whole minute long, and is very quiet for the first 40 seconds, after which it gets quite loud. When I use that sample, I am listening carefully for the audio spike from the moment I depress the key, but for the unsuspecting audience there is no discrete thing to perceive until the sound has already reached their ears — especially since there is no matching visual cue to accompany the onset of sound. There is no way the audience can prepare to listen for the sound: it is heard unexpectedly.

Now, what would Schwartz think about this? Is the ear unwillingly assaulted by unwanted modern sounds? Or does this music allow the ear to act as its own agent, seeking out different layers to the collage? I like to think that in the context of performance, no sound is unwanted, and that this piece might function socially as a 'training ground' for the so-called indefensible ear.

This unexpected hearing also calls to mind Nancy's search for the ephemeral hearing before listening. Whenever the noise of *misc\_lowfreqrumble.wav* first catches our ear, in the instant right before, we have certainly experienced the sensation Nancy describes, of "captur[ing]

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the simple ratios  $3/2$  and  $4/3$  for the fifth and the fourth is from the Pythagorean system of tuning, as opposed to the common-practice well-tempered system.

<sup>2</sup> "miscellaneous low frequency rumble," obviously. I'm not sure about the source of this one, I found it buried in a nest of folders on my hard drive.

or surpris[ing] the sonority rather than the message” (5). And because of the strangeness of the sound itself — the indescribability of its timbre — his moment of linguistic identification can be delayed for a bit longer, and we are suspended in sonic ecstasy.

Or maybe not.

If I wanted to, I could even make an argument that this music defines my place, as in Feld’s discussion of Kaluli song. All of the samples I gathered were dependent on my current location and interests. Some, like my conversation with Ian who lives in Brooklyn, depict specific journeys that I undertook this semester. Others, like the lakeway2.wav or misc\_lowfreqrumble.wav, are remnants of other projects I’ve undertaken this semester. There are even a few sounds that are specific to the culture and soundscape of Amherst College: the sound of a keycard reader, or the sound of the Amherst College Concert Choir. Schuyler suggested that I record the Mt Holyoke crosswalk voice: “THE YELLOW LIGHTS ARE FLASHING. PLEASE CROSS NOW. THE YELLOW LIGHTS ARE FLASHING.”, which I think is a fantastic idea. I’m incorporating the naturally occurring sounds of my environment and lifestyle just as, on Feld’s recording, Ulahi incorporates the sounds of her environment and the currents of her thought into her music.

To draw a comparison to percussionist Evelyn Glennie, the way in which I touch the MIDI keyboard is part of the performance as well. The volume of the sample is determined by the speed of my attack, firstly. More interestingly, I’ve found myself being somewhat theatrical with my movements, especially in the second performance of the piece in the Friedman Room, in front of an audience of strangers. There’s something silly and whimsical about making a big deal, gesturally, out of striking the keys when all I am really doing is activating a sample. It’s a parody of Glennie’s attitude. For her, movement and dance is an essential music-making technique with which she interfaces with her instrument. I mimic these gestures, though the truth is that my “instrument” is incredibly unsubtle. The information required to produce an exquisite 10 minute performance could be encoded in a MIDI file not larger than 100 kb.

In performance, the elucidation of many of these ideas was not as clear as it could have been. Because the piece was improvised (I knew where it would start, where it would end, some possibilities for things to happen in the middle, and not much else), compositional decisions were made according to my aesthetic sensibility, rather than a desire to be didactic. In the end, Mulholland is a concert work, capable of being enjoyed in- and outside the classroom. Its idea-based origin is perceivable, but not obvious. I think that starting with theoretical concepts and building aesthetically upon them is a fine way to write a piece. Thank you for listening.