Inherent in all music—and perhaps in all sound—sonic phantoms lurk and stalk with the promise of mystery and elevation. We just need to conjure them.
Inherent in all music— and perhaps in all sound— sonic phantoms lurk and stalk with the promise of mystery and elevation. We just need to conjure them.

Barbara Ellison is an Irish composer / sound artist whose work explores ghostly presence and substance in a plethora of sonic realms. Delving into the sonic intricacies of objects, developing manipulation strategies in musical instruments, creating voice avatars with transhuman vocal capabilities or carrying out field expeditions from the Arctic to the Amazonian rainforest, the hidden and the phantasmatic reveal themselves as a reward for the engaged and attentive listener willing to take this sonic voyage along with Ellison.
My work explores the nature of perceptual ambiguity and our innate propensity and desire as humans to find meaningful patterns in our environment even where none exist.

In relation to sonic or auditory experience, I have coined the term ‘sonic phantom’ to describe the audio-psychological phenomenon of an illusion of hearing that conveys what I call a ‘phantasmatic’ presence; something apparently heard that specifically gives rise to the generation of patterns that have the character of presences with apparent semantic or meaningful features. In both composition and performance I strive to manifest heightened states of focus or trance, ‘in-between’ or liminal states- and through the use of ritual and repetition, intriguing sonic structures which emerge from the hypnotic repetitious exploration of simple sound-producing actions. I play with sonic materials that are either naturally ambiguous or have been ‘composed’ to attain this quality, in order to exploit the delicious potential for auditory apophenia to manifest resulting in phantasmatic emergent phenomena.

Mine is a kaleidoscopic and explorative approach of sonic phantoms in composition – a form of creative apophenia- spanning a wide and diverse spectrum from the realms of Phantasma Instrumentalis (musical instruments), Phantasma Materialis (non-instrumental objects), Phantasma Humana (voice) and Phantasma Mundana (nature) [these terms being my adaptation of the centuries-old universalising musical categories created by Boethius in the 5th century]. These realms cover an interwoven constellation of research and compositions, which play in diverse ways with auditory ambiguity, exploiting the potential for the creation of unusual and compositionally interesting emergent features.

For ‘Super-Sensor ’ I have made a selection of 1 piece from each realm, which highlight a particular use, method, process, or implementation of phantom induction in my music.

www.barbaraellison.com
Phantasma Mundana - ‘Natural phantoms#10.wav’ 14’42”

Phantasma Humana - ‘Vocal phantoms tts #11.wav’ 5’37”

Phantasma Materialis - ‘Drawing phantoms#06.wav’ 14’30”

Phantasma Instrumentalis - ‘Harp phantoms#09.wav’ 39’09”
PHANTASMA
MATERIALIS
DRAWING PHANTOMS
The ‘Drawing Phantoms (OVP)’ pieces use drawing as a medium to trace and transform repetitive shapes on amplified surfaces so to manipulate the perceptual auditory image and to lure out vocal sounding sonic phantoms. In the spirit of the phenomenon popularly known as EVP (‘Electronic Voice Phenomenon’), I call my own drawing process ‘OVP’ (‘Object Voice Phenomenon’).
The ‘Vocal Phantoms’ pieces were composed primarily using a computer’s ‘text-to-speech (TTS)’ utility.
PHANTASMA
MUNDANA

NATURAL PHANTOMS
The ‘Natural Phantoms’ pieces have been created using original field recordings as the source material:

‘Natural Phantoms#10’ is composed with recordings from rainforests in Borneo, Cambodia & Australia;
PHANTASMA
INSTRUMENTALIS
HARP PHANTOMS
The ‘Harp Phantoms’ pieces are composed from studio-processed materials, originally performed by Angélica Vázquez on ‘manipulated’ Harp.
I have coined the term ‘sonic phantom’ to describe the audio-psychological phenomenon of an illusion of hearing that conveys what I call a ‘phantasmatic’ presence; something apparently heard that specifically gives rise to the generation of patterns that have the character of presences with apparent semantic or meaningful features. Mine is a kaleidoscopic and explorative approach of sonic phantoms in composition—a form of creative apophenia spanning a wide and diverse spectrum from the realms of Phantasmata Instrumentalia (musical instruments), Phantasmata Materialia (non-instrumental objects), Phantasmata Humana (voice) and Phantasmata Mundana (nature) [these terms being my adaptation of the centuries-old universalising musical categories created by Boethius in the 5th century]. These realms cover an interwoven constellation of research and compositions, which play in diverse ways with auditory ambiguity, exploiting the potential for the creation of unusual and compositionally interesting emergent features. On these CD’s are a selection of pieces from each realm, which highlight a particular use, method, process, or implementation of phantom induction in my music. I play with sonic materials that are either naturally ambiguous or have been ‘composed’ to attain this quality, in order to exploit the delicious potential for auditory apophenia to manifest resulting in phantasmatic emergent phenomena.

The ‘Natural Phantoms’ pieces have been created using original field recordings as the source material: ‘Natural Phantoms#10’ is composed with recordings from rainforests in Borneo, Cambodia & Australia; ‘Natural Phantoms#09’ is composed with recordings from the South African savannah (‘Sonic Mnabola’ workshop & residency 2013).

The ‘Vocal Phantoms’ pieces were composed primarily using a computer’s text-to-speech (TTS) utility. The ‘Drawing Phantoms (OVP)’ pieces use drawing as a medium to trace and transform repetitive shapes on amplified surfaces so to manipulate the perceptual auditory image and to lure out vocal sounding sonic phantoms. In the spirit of the phenomenon popularly known as EVP (“Electronic Voice Phenomenon”), I call my own drawing process ‘OVP’ (“Object Voice Phenomenon”).

The ‘Harp Phantoms’ pieces on CD 2 are composed from studio-processed materials, originally performed by Angélica Vázquez on ‘manipulated’ Harp.

All works composed, recorded and produced by Barbara Ellison between 2010-2014
CD Mastered by: Francisco López
CD artwork by Barbara Ellison

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