Roc Jiménez de Cisneros:

the state of radical computer music

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In my first book *Micro Bionic,* I briefly attempted to make an outline of the 21st century "computer musician" as social type. In the process, I noticed some defining characteristics common to the most recent generation taking up this "computer musician" mantle (or merely having it conferred upon them by the critical community.) For one, these new musicians and/or sound artists were adept at mixing aspects of 'high' institutional knowledge and 'low' consumer culture, albeit not as stereotypically as presented in any number of "intro-to-postmodernism" course books. They shuttled between clubs and conservatories, or between festivals and lecture halls, with a remarkable agility and with equal respect accorded to both polarities of physical rapture and intellectual advancement suggested by these environments. In this socially amorphous milieu, goals such as securing tenure and maintaining peer group approval seemingly took a back seat to another imperative: cranking up a noise as intense, wild, and highly articulated as possible. With this being the imperative after which all other concerns had to be secondary, practicioners of this new computer music disregarded the differences in age, nationality and sometimes even artistic background among themselves. Rather, expressive skill and persistence of attitude were far more important means of gaining admission to this strange and seductive nano-scene.

Despite the instant decrease in shelf life that came with labeling this phenomenon as "extreme" or "radical," calling it "radical / extreme computer music" was appropriate enough when considering the wired excitement of the new sound itself: it was music with a speed of transformation that either implied or initiated radical change, sometimes going from pointillist pin-pricks of sound to full-on furnace blasting within the space of seconds. And it was "extreme" in that it approached various saturation points - of volume, compositional complexity, etc. - that made it difficult to imagine any louder or more complex successor. It is not a coincidence that this music truly began to bloom in a late 1990s music culture where self-referentiality ruled the roost, and where enforced lassitude could still be passed off as a political pose rather than as a mere dearth of ideas. When seen against this post-everything slacker background, the appeal of "radical" or "extreme" computer music becomes more clearly defined. The attraction to it stemmed not from its status as a Futurist rapture of technological exhibitionism, but from something which had little to do with computers at all: it was rehabilitating recordings and concerts as vehicles for

sound first and self-reference second, not the inversion of this order that was prevalent in pop culture of the time.

It seems only logical that the new strains of computer music would be embraced by an audience as heterogeneous as the cultural omnivores creating it. Certainly, the uppermost percentile of computer-literate, mathematically competent individuals could enjoy the music as a sonic illustration of dynamic systems. Meanwhile, a hip, street-smart coterie of designers saw the music's rollercoaster ride of variable tone color, shifting texture, and violent fragmentation as providing - perhaps even more so than electronic dance music - a perfect complement to an inchoate, yet seductive visual world also under construction. Evidence of this can be seen in the 1999 volume *DiscStyle,* edited by Martin Pesch and Markus Weisbeck, which includes a number of Tina Frank's album designs for the exemplary Mego label in among the album artworks that accompanied both standard and leftfield varieties of dance music.

One of the more intriguing groups to stalk this arena of sound, the Spanish duo of Roc Jiménez de Cisneros and Stephen Sharp (aka EVOL), embodies many of the tendencies already under discussion here. They have also, throughout their career, manifested a wicked streak of humor that has not been dulled by their immersion in the arcane realm of computer coding. The website of the record label ALKU (coordinated by Roc with partner Anna Ramos) is laden with references to concepts like "jiggery-pokery" that, before they are even comprehended, evince a certain amped-up ludic sensibility (and one that isn't incommensurate with "taking things seriously," either.) In the past, the ALKU site also offered downloadable scripts to its visitors that re-envisioned the 'glitch' aesthetic as a gateway to devious fun: the 'Foo Foo Foo' script, for example, would search a target drive on a computer for all available soundfiles, from which it would then select the opening second or so, recombining these hundreds of snippets into hilarious, sometimes revelatory auto-compositions.

EVOL / ALKU spokesman Roc, as evidenced by the discussion below, knows his way around the language of machines, yet exhibits another curious, ironic feature common to the "radical computer musician": they don't necessarily need to work with computers at all, and are content to fall back on other methods of communication. In an inversion of "expanded technique" -which once meant, among other things, supplementing acoustic instrumentation with electronic novelty - Roc and his cohorts find themselves relying on

quotidian odds-and-ends to enhance the high-tech sheen of their computer compositions. Much talk has been made about how electronic music of the 21st century would be a radically hybridized form, and this talk with Roc Jiménez de Cisneros makes clear exactly what kind of hybrids we can expect to see more of. Stochastic processes fused with "rave" sounds are just the tip of this particular iceberg….

Maybe I'll start with the title of your new release [Rave Slime]- what's your connection to "rave" culture? Is it an active interest (going to raves or participating musically), or have you observed the culture from a distance? I'm also curious how the "rave" scene in Spain developed relative to the scenes in the UK, US and so on- was it pretty much a parallel development or did it develop more slowly / quickly than in these countries?

Both Stephen (co-author of "Rave Slime") and I have been interested in rave culture and house music for a long time. In fact, when I got into electronic music in the early 90s, it was through a weird combination of old computer music on one hand, and dance music on the other. I used to go to a library in Barcelona that had the most amazing collection of 50s avant-garde, and at the same time I went to DJ shops and bought lots of techno white label 12"s. Of course back then I could not have made the connection between both, but it felt natural to me. We are part of a generation of artists who have bridged that gap, approaching abstract electronic music from a perspective that has a lot in common with techno, rave culture and so on. That's why I usually refer to EVOL as "computer music for hooligans".

The rave scene has been huge in Spain since the late 80s, but it's significantly different, both musically and culturally, from other places in Europe. It developed as a very underground subculture heavily influenced by Belgium and the UK, but quickly became a very peculiar thing with its own character. Until the early 90s, the Valencian scene was a very bizarre mixture of acid house, EBM, noise and techno, and it spawned a whole culture that was later dubbed "makina" or "bakalao". It's still huge today, but it was never as mainstream and accepted as in the UK, where you had programs like Dance Energy, a cheesy, all-ages celebration of rave culture on national TV (the first time Stephen showed me footage of that I just couldn't believe it).

As regards getting into rave and house music in the early '90s, as well as the more academic or avant-garde electronic music, do you feel like you were an 'exception' among electronic music fans of the time? Or was this acceptance of different music styles 'something that was in the air'? Certainly this was around the time I also noticed that "classical electronic" LPs were fetching higher prices in record stores, and were no longer something you could buy 2 for a dollar.

I'm sure it was in the air for a lot of people. Whatever type of art or music you like, it just makes sense to know where things came from. For me it felt quite natural because I had a different background: I was into grindcore, hardcore and all that stuff for years, so noise and bizarre structures were already an integral part of the records I listened to, and when I got into electronic music I quickly became fascinated by the rougher side of avant-garde and academic computer music. In a way it felt like the same thing times a million, only much older, which made it even more exciting.

What kind of changes occurred between that time and the late 90s (societal changes, technological changes, etc.) that led to the formation of EVOL?

I guess techno happened. Just like punk before that, lots of kids with no formal musical education saw it was relatively easy to buy old gear and muck around with it. In 1996 we met Pita [a.k.a. Peter Rehberg], who was at our first ever performance, and through him things unfolded pretty quick. That obviously also has to do with the Internet and how it quickly facilitated the creation of bigger (human) networks/scenes.

Of course, Pita is another one of the figures now associated with bringing computer music to a kind of 'street' level. However, I think this refers more to making these sounds easier to appreciate and easier to relate to – not making the composition techniques themselves something that just anyone could handle. I think the attitude of 'extreme computer music' certainly differs from that of the academy, but the most radical psycho-acoustic recordings seem to be the ones coming from people who

have advanced, specialized knowledge of coding, scripting etc. Any thoughts on this?

Right, this relative popularisation has little to do with ease of use. It's more an attitude towards composition/performance, and one of the byproducts of that attitude is that more people, not just academics, can appreciate this stuff. But that does not mean the learning curve for some of these tools is any less steep. Of course it all depends on the tool – this in turn goes back to the misconception that making electronic music is easy. It *can* be, because there is no standard way of doing anything. But that doesn't only apply to music…

I've noticed, with "Rave Slime", you create sounds with "custom-written generative software" in order to attain the same type of sounds created by the Roland Juno synth series during the heyday of techno. In this case, what's your motivation for committing to all the "steep learning curve" programming when various "soft synths" and emulators are already available? And maybe this question relates to the entire "hand-coding vs. straight-out-of-the-box recording" argument- why is designing new software to do the job of currently available products important for you? And do you feel that your approach to this issue is pretty much the same one agreed to by the rest of the 'radical computer music' community, or - again - are you guys an exception in this regard?

I started introducing old school hardcore style stabs and sounds in EVOL performances in late 2008, and these gradually took over. I suggested Stephen should join in because we're good friends and we're both kind of obsessed with that sound. "Rave Slime" and similar ravey pieces we're doing combine old synths and hand-coded variations of them, but the goal with this code is not perfect emulation of the classic machines. If we wanted that, we would have stuck to the actual synths. Writing software for this means you can approach and tweak the sound in ways that the Roland Juno series and other old modules probably can't. It doesn't mean it's better this way, it's just a different approach. That's what made computers exciting in the first place. A lot of the composers who started using computers for sound synthesis in the 1960s created tons of music that was simply not possible without a computer. It's what the Goodiepal refers to as the utopia element of electronic music.

When I think of emulations done in this style, another thing that comes to mind is the P.C. emulators that allow you to play perfect reproductions (or ROMs) of every available coin-operated arcade game from the 80s and early 90s. I notice that fans of both coin-op emulators and music equipment emulators can be divided into purely nostalgic people (people for whom the interface with the emulator is just a gateway to a larger set of pleasant, personal memories), and people who feel that these 'originals' can still be manipulated to make radically new creative statements.

So, I'm guessing EVOL fits the profile of the '2nd' type of person mentioned here- but is that correct? Is there also an element of nostalgia in "Rave Slime", or a conjuring of a 'better' point in recent history?

Call it nostalgia or respect... In any case, the history of electronic music is full of attempts to reproduce the behaviour of previously existing instruments. Still today, many synths have a keyboard as their main interface, which is totally bizarre for me because that's definitely not how I think about music making, but that is a consequence of this imitative paradigm. For decades, one of the main goals of synthesizer designers and manufacturers has been the emulation of traditional instruments. Most of the times they hit the **uncanny valley** and failed miserably, but that's usually where it gets interesting. I don't care for hyper-realism but good things can come from that process of imitation, the TB-303 being the obvious example of this. Another intriguing chapter is the legitimation process of the synth in the late 60s, where Moogs, ARPs and other machines suddenly became massively popular after Wendy Carlos started playing classical tunes on them. Was she conjuring of a 'better' point in recent history or making radically new creative statements?

Well this last example is particularly interesting, because it shows how the public in general becomes more sympathetic to new technologies after these devices are shown as capable of interpreting the 'old' repertoire.

And, in this case, that old repertoire is distinguished as being something 'difficult' to play, or something that requires real virtuosity to tackle. This is what intrigues me

about the revival of the previous generation's electronic music tools: things like the TB-303 were seen as incredibly user-friendly and capable of being handled by anybody (not only the trained virtuoso); and much of the music made famous by these tools was the antithesis of the baroque or hyper-complex approach to performing and recording music. One TB-303 emulator in particular (the popular Rebirth software introduced in the late 90s) paid its respects to this newer 'tradition' of accessible / populist electronic music rather than the tradition of virtuosity and 'transcendence through complexity'....where does your own music, made with emulation tools, fit in here? After all, it sounds quite complex and non-linear despite its also referring to this era of electro-simplicity.

If it sounds complex and non-linear it has more to do with aesthetic choices, than technical ones. A lot of the tools in EVOL are not that crazy – the beauty of chaotic systems is that they can yield very complex structures from pretty simple rules. Just like the TB-303 is indeed a simple system that can produce great results. I'm much more interested in the outcome than the methods, even if these play a huge role in what I do. The thing with old machines like the 303 and similar synths is that although you call them user-friendly, often they were not designed to be used that way, at least not for the very first house producers. It was a bunch of kids trying to do crazy things with machines they barely understood. And it was great. Now, user-friendly has a totally different meaning. In the past few years there has been too much focus on the musician's side of things. We should be more worried about the listener's experience, about challenging musical ideas, and less about touch-sensitive devices, controllers, ease of use and all that. In the end it all boils down to a combination of two factors: first, the industry's obsession with turning listeners into producers. And second, a huge imbalance of interface design over content. Just look at video games: since the Wii came along, all major console manufacturers have spent tons of money in the development of motion-capturing devices and crap like that. It's a race to see who comes up with the most inventive controller, but for the most part games are totally stuck. The vast majority are still very narrow-minded and fit very easily into perfectly defined categories. And the situation in the music scene is not that different. A lot of the students in my programming class are desperate to learn about sensors, motion-capturing systems, touch screens and so on, but many of them don't really know what to do with these tools afterwards. They have been

exposed to way too many shows where the main selling point is the how, not so much the result. Then on the other side, the academy seems to be as lost as ever. I recently read a paper on the spring issue of *Computer Music Journal* called **"Artificial Evolution of Expressive Performance of Music: An Imitative Multi-Agent Systems Approach"**, by Eduardo Reck Miranda, Alexis Kirke, and Qijun Zhang. It's amazing how academia is still trying really hard to make computers play music like human beings. I thought the whole point of using computers to make music was to do things you cannot do without them, not pass musical Turing tests.

Funny you mention CMJ, I have an issue of the journal from 2002 where Sergi Jorda echoes your concerns above, saying "the design of new controllers is often approached from an essentially technical point of view, in which the novel of the sensing novelty deployed overshadows the attainable musical results." So, it seems, fortunately, that academia is not totally obsessed with demonstrating how 'human' music technology can be. Although, yes, there are definite camps within academia who do maintain that obsession.

As I've been hinting at earlier in our discussion, a common concern of the current world of video games and electronic music interfaces is that of universality. The Wii's manufacturer, Nintendo, has advertised itself as a great uniter of people since the days of the 'Famicom' game system or 'family computer', and it seems like the newer Ableton software is also pitching itself as providing an accessible "universal interface" that will unite diverse types of people. Am I just a skeptic, or are these ambitions too grandiose?

There cannot be such a thing as a universal interface, it would make things very boring. Which brings us to Sergi's quote because, funnily enough, ***Reactable*** (of which he is pretty much the father) is the epitome of what I was talking about earlier. Jorda and his team replaced what he referred to as the "technical point of view" with that fixation with interactivity, but the "musical results" are missing. What they play at their official demos is this middle of the road dance stuff no one would pay attention to it if it wasn't for the fancy colours. Which once again comes to show that tools are not everything, because their table

involves a bunch of powerful general-purpose software tools that can be used to make great stuff. It's a very flashy toy, and they just proved it when they started selling an iPhone version of it. I hope they sell a ton of them, but I don't see it as the paradigm shift they proclaim. And it's a shame, because if you look back fifty years ago, there are many prime examples of composers and computer musicians who devoted their lives to the creation of inventive interfaces, and they did that with extremely limited resources. Maybe that's why I prefer totally stripped-down interfaces to make music and play live. They look dull and you can't jam much with them, but that's the point.

At this point, it might be good to turn our conversation towards the novelty of interfaces, since we've already dealt with interfaces that are meant to resurrect a past model of design or aesthetics. I think it was Miller Puckette who said (probably in the same issue of this journal we've mentioned!) something to the effect that novelty was fairly pointless unless it "revealed something." I guess he would have seen that as "good" novelty, while there was such a thing as a "bad" novelty that carried with it a sense of surprise but no corresponding information. Would you agree with that, or no?

Yes, that's an interesting point, but it's hard to draw the line between good and bad. The theremin, computer-vision and brain-computer interfacing systems are three good candidates in this debate. There is an extensive literature about affordances and constraints in musical instruments (and more generally in human-made tools) which I won't try to recreate here. What's important is to be aware that any system, however complex, implies many of these properties that shape its capabilities. There is no right or wrong interface: it's up to the user and their understanding of these limitations and perceived action possibilities. I tend to favor general-purpose systems, but in reality they can be as good or bad as we make them. When we started using compressed gas horns in our performances in the late nineties it was merely a conceptual joke, but with time I realised that even in such a simple instrument (which by default produces only one note) there are also many affordances which progressively lead to a totally different approach to the horns and their constraints in the performance context.

This anecdote about the horns brings me to the topic of circuit bending; particularly the warping of electronic toys' pre-programmed sounds into ones that are more varied and unpredictable (at least in the short term.) Despite its current trendiness, I'm interested in how this practice simultaneously employs nostalgia and futurism... using the electronic relics of one's childhood to make recordings or performances of sounds that people (presumably) haven't heard before. Do you feel any kind of kinship with people who build or work with circuit-bent devices?

Not really. Probably because they are usually very lo-fi and I don't find that appealing.

Yet I find people working with these lo-fi devices (a colleague in Chicago calls them "slow electronics," maybe as a nod to the "slow food" movement) often have concerns that overlap with those of certain computer musicians, especially as regards recycling, sustainability and so on. Both the kid 'bending' a Speak & Spell, and someone like Mattin using a beaten-up laptop Linux laptop instead of upgrading to the latest MacBook, seem to be rejecting the planned obsolescence of consumer electronic equipment on different levels. Even though you may not like the sonic output of the people I mentioned earlier, is this a concern you share with them?

A lot of that planned obsolescence you mention has to do with pushing new lines of product in the name of speed and miniaturization, but Moore's law will hit a brick wall at some point because you just can't keep shrinking down indefinitely. Sometime in the next 20 years we may reach that limit and that will seriously mess up the current standard of consumer electronics life cycle. I am looking forward to that. But in any case, even though we have been talking a lot about tools and their role in the creative process, I have always been more concerned with the ideas that precede them. Or at the very least with the possibility of dissociating ideas from systems, if at all possible. Let me go back to the Goodiepal, since he is a great illustration of Sol Lewitt's 'The idea becomes the machine that makes the art', which still holds today. When Kristian started playing live again after his exile in the Faroe Islands a few years ago, his shows involved a completely different set of tools which he had developed or fine-tuned during that period, while he had no access to computers or

electronics. But the musical essence of the shows was incredibly close to his early electronic stuff, only he was whistling, playing lute or just telling stories. And then the shows/talks he's been giving for the past couple of years are in turn a development from that, where he doesn't even have to *play* much music, he just *talks* about it, so he pretty much fulfills Lewitt's quote.

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