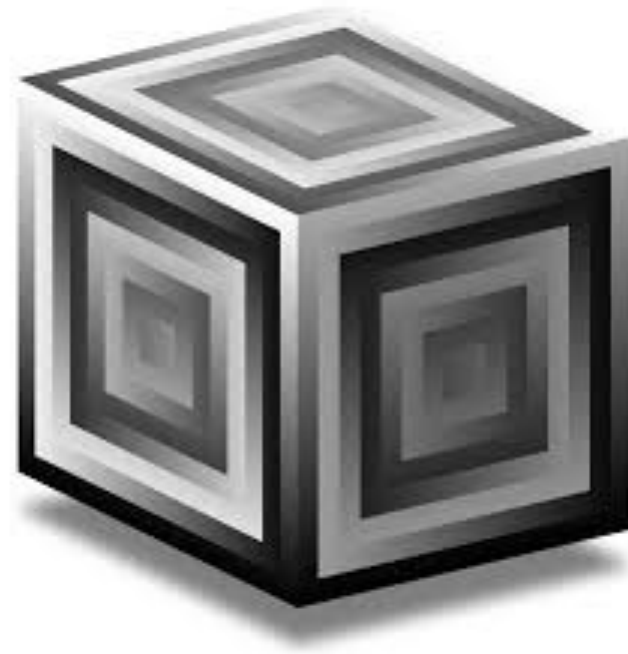# Composing Music

Topics Addressed

- Parameters of Music
- Thinking about Music
- Analyzing Music
- Compositional Approaches

Parameters of Music

- Pitch
- Rhythm
- Timbre/Instrumentation
- Dynamics
- Articulation
- Duration
- Tempo
- Meter(?)
- Form(?)
- Harmony(?)/Melody(?)/Key(?)

What are those elements of music that are intrinsic to the sound itself?

"Extra"-musical Parameters

- Meaning/Intent
- Emotion/Mood
- Genre(?)
- Originality
- Consonant/Dissonant
- Energy/Intensity
- Simple/Complex

What are those elements of music that we as humans map onto music?

Questions to Think About When Listening?

- What kind of emotional reaction does this piece elicit?
- What is the form of this piece? How is that form articulated through its lyrics, pitch content (i.e., harmony, melody, key, atonality, etc...), rhythm, dynamics?
- What is the "purpose" of this work?
  - John Cage: "What is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposeless or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life--not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord. "
- Why do you like or dislike this piece?

Aretha Franklin – I Say A Little Prayer (1968)

Click here to listen:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtBbyglq37E
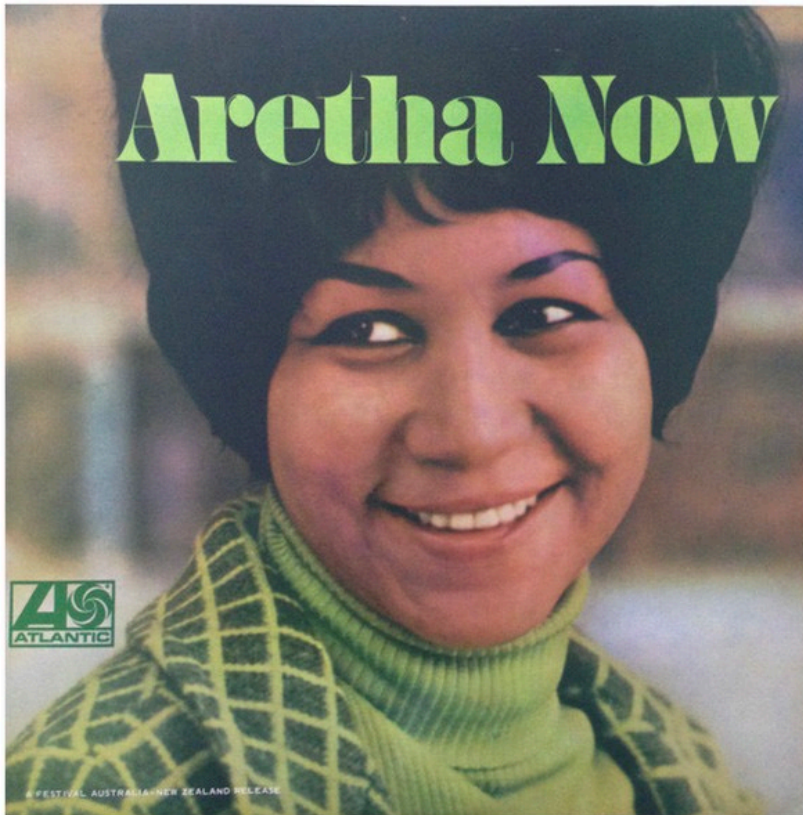
Fun fact: this song was originally sung and recorded by Dionne Warwick a year earlier. Burt Bacharach wrote the song.

Aretha Franklin – I Say A Little Prayer (1968)

- What kind of emotional reaction does this piece elicit?
  - Lyrics are helpful in being direct – song of devotion – Vietnam war as a backdrop
  - How does the music help with this?
    - Rising motion on "Forever"
    - Change back to minor on "To live without you would only be heartbreak for me"
- What is the form of this piece? How do the parameters of music help articulate that form?
  - Classic verse/chorus pop song
    - Verses are in F# minor and choruses are in A major though the later verses use different harmony (i.e., chord patterns)
    - Choruses are louder and use more background vocals – thicker texture

How could we make this in SuperCollider?

Brian Eno – Music for Airports 1/1 (1978)

Click here to listen:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWu4ieBqGFg

Brian Eno was one of the foremost experts on the Yamaha DX7 – the famous FM synthesizer from the 1980s. Listen to Drift for an example of his use of the synthesizer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml6PpB9hII

Brian Eno – Music for Airports 1/1 (1978)

The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term Muzak. The connotations that this term carries are those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces - familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music as an idea worthy of attention.

Over the past three years, I have become interested in the use of music as ambience, and have come to believe that it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without being in any way compromised. To create a distinction between my own experiments in this area and the products of the various purveyors of canned music, I have begun using the term Ambient Music.

An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. My intention is to produce original pieces ostensibly (but not exclusively) for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres.

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to `brighten' the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and levelling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms) Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.

From the liner notes of *Music for Airports*

Brian Eno – Music for Airports 1/1 (1978)

- What kind of emotional reaction does this piece elicit?
  - Reflection, calm – not all ambient music is necessarily like this
  - Space is very important in this piece as well as interesting sounds
  - How does length affect our emotional reaction?
- What is the form of this piece? How do the parameters of music help articulate that form?
  - Is there form?
  - Repetition without direction
  - Stays in the world of D major (some C naturals)
  - What is the focus of the piece?

How could we make this in SuperCollider?

Imogen Heap – Hide and Seek (2005)

Click here to listen:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYIAfiVGluk

The harmonization of the voice is done with something called a vocoder which breaks a sound down into its frequency components so that it can be shifted to different pitches.

Imogen Heap – Hide and Seek (2005)

- What kind of emotional reaction does this piece elicit?
  - Lyrics help provide some clarity – though the meaning of the song is not distinctly clear – it certainly involves a painful separation between two people
  - The importance of human-ness in all aspects of the song
  - Synthetic element?
- What is the form of this piece? How do the parameters of music help articulate that form?
  - Through-composed
    - Roughly in three parts: the beginning, "Mmm whatcha say", last minute with eighth note pattern, and the fadeout on "you don't care a bit".
    - The repetition helps delineate the "Mmm whatcha say" part and rhythm helps delineate the last minute with a clearer pulse

How could we make this in SuperCollider?

Gilles Gobeil - Le Vertige Inconnu (1994)

Click here to listen:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1D1H3JwuigY

This piece is part of a genre/movement of electronic music called *musique concrète.*

Gilles Gobeil - Le Vertige Inconnu (1994)

- What kind of emotional reaction does this piece elicit?
  - Drama!
  - Real vs. Synthetic
- What is the form of this piece? How do the parameters of music help articulate that form?
  - A series of escalating crescendos
  - Pitch? – not really – pedal point at 4:45-ish
  - What drives the drama?
    - Texture/Density
    - Dynamics
    - Wet/Dry
    - Rhythm at 6:11! – helps create the biggest crescendo

How could we make this in SuperCollider?

How to begin?

- There are many strategies for approaching and writing music
- Many many hours of practice, experimentation and failure
- Listening to music
- Some say that music composition cannot be taught
- Model composition – imitating pieces of music that you like
- Improvisation – preferably on your own instrument/voice

Approach One: Start with a musical idea

- Create several sounds/melodies/chords/rhythms you like – preferably in SuperCollider since that is the medium we will be working in
  - Though it's perfectly acceptable to start at your own instrument/voice
  - Find something that speaks to you. Is it a sound that moves you?
- Reflect upon those sounds
  - How do these musical fragments engage different parameters of music?
  - How can you organize those sounds? What kind of form would work well with the sounds you came up with?
  - Can you sketch out a plan for the piece?
- This is a good strategy if you've never written a piece of music before – can also attempt to model another work you admire

Approach Two: Make a plan

- Devise a plan for your piece of music
  - What is its form?
  - What is its purpose?
  - What kind of emotional response should your work have?
- Devise sounds to fit your plan
  - More challenging because you have to know you can create the sounds that will work and/or have an understanding of music to know how to execute your plan
  - What sounds/melodies/rhythms/harmonies will work with your plan?

BE ADAPTABLE!

What if I don't know any theory?

- Many famous musicians can't read music.
- Most music doesn't involve complicated harmony/theory
- There is music that doesn't engage melody or harmony but instead focuses on other parameters of music
  - Le Vertige Unconnu
  - Drumming/Percussion music
- Try playing just the white keys on the piano – what can you come up with?
- Experimentation is everything

Resources

- Finding outside sound sources:
  - https://freesound.org/ - Need to make a free account to download
  - Free sample libraries – great to find drums this way
  - Free piano notes: https://theremin.music.uiowa.edu/MISpiano.html
- Download Audacity!
  - Easy, free software to cut, copy and paste audio files