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# Do You Suppose He Didn't Know What He Was Doing? On “Not Knowing” and Computer Music

## Abstract

*Is there a place in computer music for not knowing? Is there a place in computer music for suspension, or transcendence of the ego? Is there a place in computer music for ecstatic expression? Is there a place in computer music for non-mediated creation? Is there a way in which creating computer music can be a spiritual practice? This short essay asks these questions in a non-linear manner, not so much as a means of proposing answers, but as a means of suggesting problems to be dealt with.*

## First Sound Excerpt: duration 1:30

I recall, a number of years ago, a composer colleague saying, “I can account for every note in this piece!” His pride was that not only was his piece constructed totally rationally, but that each decision along the way had a justification as well. Contrast this with the familiar story of Morton Feldman bringing his early student work to John Cage – after looking at the piece, Cage asked Feldman how he had made it. Feldman replied weakly, “I don't know how I made it.” Cage exploded with enthusiasm: “Isn't that marvelous! It's so beautiful and he doesn't know how he made it!”

The quote which opened this paper, and from which it takes its title, is from a series of conversations between Morton Feldman and John Cage, recorded by WBAI, New York in 1966 and 1967. These are now available from <http://www.archive.org/details/CageFeldman5>.

The quote comes from the very beginning of the fifth dialog. At the end of the fourth dialogue, they had been talking about, among other things, music education, and Edgar Varese. Then the tape ran out. The 5th dialog simply opens in mid sentence. Whatever transpired while the tapes were being changed has been lost. Here is the complete moment:

Cage: Do you suppose he didn't know what he was doing.....or, knew what he was doing and didn't want anyone to know.

(long pause)

Feldman: I think that he knew what he was doing, but he didn't want to know what he was doing.

(long pause)

Cage: Well, in a very real sense, that's what we're all doing, because even though we might think

we knew, the thing will only come to life for someone else when he knows something that we don't know. (Cage/Feldman 1966-67)

This quest for not knowing, for the inspired unconscious act, for the making of music in other than a state of determined rationality, has been around for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It can be traced back even farther, of course, back to the 14th century Christian mystical text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the writings of Islamic mystics such as Rumi and Hafiz, and innumerable Buddhist and Zen texts. And it turns up in other places. Arnold Schoenberg, mis-represented by many as the height of compositional rationality, in a 1914 letter to Wassily Kandinsky states that since 1909 he has been searching for 'complete freedom from all forms', and later says 'We search on and on (as you yourself say) with our feelings. Let us endeavour *never* to lose these feelings to a theory.' (Craft 2006:29-30.)

Given that in computer music, so much of what we do is done in programming languages and environments, which often involve a lot of rational, step-by-step analytical thinking, it's important to ask about the irrational, the unknown, the ecstatic state (three very different things) as a basis for musical creativity. This essay is posed as a series of questions. I ask these questions as a secular composer in a technological medium, not pushing or endorsing any kind of religious or spiritual belief. However, since our art is concerned with the study of attention (how *do* we listen?), and since the meditative and spiritual disciplines have been concerned with this for centuries, we should feel free to listen to them.

## Second Sound Excerpt: duration 1:34

### Encounters with Remarkable People

In 2003, through a mutual friend, I was invited to meet Sheikh Abdul Aziz, the British-born leader of the Mevlana Sufis of Melbourne. I found him to be an absolutely inspiring teacher, one who used irrationality and paradox in his talks in a most delightful way. I was also impressed with how the Melbourne Sufis made their spiritual practice the centre of their lives, organizing work, play, and trips away around their Sufi practice. While observing this, the thought occurred to me: “This is all very beautiful, but I already have a spiritual practice – it's called music

composition!" I realized that what I was doing was a secular equivalent to a spiritual discipline – a path of self-alteration and self-growth involving the exploration of sound and the processes behind it. My readings in neo-Pythagoreanism, especially Iamblichus, Porphyry and Plotinus, had shown me that mathematical contemplation was indeed a meditative, if not overtly spiritual, practice and that my explorations into various mathematical-musical structures and tuning systems were a part of that meditative, spiritual path.

Thoughts such as this, and Cage's early 1950s ideas of using chance as a means of avoiding what I would now call "first level" (note-to-note) ego-driven choices in composition, lead to considering the ego. One of the best writings about the ego I've read recently is a 2006 interview with Robert Frager, head of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, who is also Sheikh Rangip, leader of the Redwood City, California Helveti-Jerrahi Sufis. In this interview, he talks at length about the ego and its seemingly contradictory place in modern psychology and traditional spiritual practice. I will now quote from it at length, interspersing quotes from it with questions of my own as to how the issues he raises might relate to computer music.

One way of putting the problem is that in using the term "psychology" in an academic setting, in an institution that offers a Ph.D. Degree, we're taking on the whole Western academic tradition with its emphasis on the head alone – certainly not heart, much less soul. If you break apart the very term "psychology," "psyche" means spirit or soul in Greek; and therefore, psychology or psychoanalysis is literally the scientific analysis, the logical cutting up, or parsing, of the soul, which in itself is pretty crazy. How in hell do you parse the soul? How can you be analytic when it comes to the soul?

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to relate this to our field, computer music, which has mostly lived in the realm of the academy, and on the edges of the sciences. And yet, our field is music, which totally lacks that ability to be proven which is the essence of scientific method. I mean, how do you prove music? There's nothing to prove. Sound simply is. (And we here note that economic success or failure proves nothing. Or at least nothing that is relevant to the present arguments.)

When you even use the term "psychology," you're buying into something that says logic will do it. But logic is a very limited tool. Certainly, logic has caused me to make a lot of wrong decisions in my life. And in

Sufism, as soon as you get to the higher stages, forget logic. It doesn't figure anymore because you have a paradox; what is that soul in you that's transcendent? What is before the before? And after the after? These are not questions logic is ever going to handle.

How does paradox enter into our composing computer music? What is the place for the transcendent in computer music? Can we use the logical construct of the "patch" as a substrate for ecstatically based artistic activity?

I think certain practices frankly don't have any power unless you've been given them by a teacher. They won't work. So I think this business about being your own teacher ignores the importance of transmission, of lineage, of initiation. The spiritual path is not merely logical or mechanical. It's not psychological or spiritual bodybuilding. It's something much more subtle. I think there's an energetic connection with the teacher. We talk in Sufism about the *rabita al kalb*, the connection of the heart.

We might ask – In Australian computer music, do we have this idea of transmission, lineage, initiation? Should we? If we don't have it, why not? If we need it, is there some way to establish it?

One very important component of the struggle to develop oneself spiritually is service – service to humanity but also service to the world, to all of creation. One of the great tools to do that is the personality structure, including the ego, the sense of self. Now even as you're working to divest yourself of that separate sense of self, which is the last stage, in order to get there, paradoxically, you need to use that self well. It is the beast on which the Buddha rides.

Is the ego - the desires - the beast on which our ecstatic sounding can ride? Is technology the beast upon which our Buddha can ride? Is programming logic the substrate on which we can build our sonic and spiritual explorations? In Sufism, the aspects of the personality which hold us back are called the *nafs*. Is there a way to make computer music free of the *nafs*?

I had a wonderful teacher, Moshe Feldenkrais, who is an incredible teacher of movement and bodily functioning. He could work directly with anyone – from those with the most severe physical handicap limitations from accidents and birth defects, all the way up to great athletes

and musicians – to improve their functioning. And he said, “When I’m working with someone, I don’t even think in sentences. Because the structure of grammar would get between my nervous system experiencing the nervous system of the person I’m touching.” (Frager/Hamilton 2006)

Is there a way to incorporate that kind of non-grammatical immediate nervous system to nervous system communication in computer music? Is there some way that a structure built on grammar (a program) can be used for that kind of non-verbal expression? Even farther, and perhaps most mystical of all: Is there a way our energy and the energy of our machines – nascent intelligences they very well may be – can cooperate in some kind of higher spiritual or energetic song? Are we already transformed by our machines, even as we are transforming them?

### Third Sound Excerpt: duration 1:13

#### Questions and Music

Kenneth Gaburo’s “scatter” method of composition, that he developed in the 1980s, was put forward as one way of transcending logic, rationality, “the lick.” It used the physicality of his body, often after extended sensory deprivation experiences, to make an output – a diagram, a tracing of some kind. These tracings, the product of unmediated physical energy, were then analyzed and transcribed into various other media. In dealing with machines, Gaburo often worked with them directly after a sensory deprivation experience. In one case, “*Rerun*” he worked with the loudspeakers off, using his sense of physicality to direct his working with the machine. These processes are described in his essays “ISIT” and “LA.” (Gaburo, 1986, 1987)

So can I not know what I’m doing? How can I work with deterministic technology in not just a non-deterministic way, but also a way where I literally don’t know what I’m doing, or what my results will be? And how can this be reconciled with the desire for both very carefully controlled sonic results, and for exact attention to the details of unexpected sonic results. In other words, how much “not knowing,” and in which contexts, are we talking about? How can I get to such a state of familiarity with my equipment that I can compose with it ecstatically, intuitively, spontaneously? Can I use my medium in an unmediated manner?

The three musical excerpts heard here were attempts at that not knowing, and of becoming, as is said by Tibetan Buddhist writer Lobsang Phuntsok Lhalungpa, “listening itself.” In the first, the quote from John Cage is treated with the Composers’ Desktop Project “Distort-Cycles-Repeat” and “Extend-Scramble” functions to produce an extended and fragmented result. These functions are such that predicting their

results is extremely difficult. John Dunn’s Art-Wonk was used to generate lists of random parameters for the CDP program to produce time-varying results. The second excerpt takes 10 quotes from Chris Mann’s interactive website “The Use” <http://theuse.info/> (last accessed April 6, 2008) and convolves each of them against all the others. No sounds were listened to during the gathering of the samples, or the editing, or the convolution process. All work was done visually, and kinesthetically. Only once the samples were placed into the VSampler sampler, and a random selection process in ArtWonk had been devised, were the results listened to, and the ArtWonk program modified slightly. The final excerpt is made with some electro-acoustic percussion boards I built. I improvised on the instruments, recorded the result, then used the CDP function “Edit-Random Chunks” to cut each of four improvisations into 61 random fragments each. This produced fragments I would not have otherwise chosen. These fragments were assigned to individual keys in the Wusikstation sampler, and this assignment was then further unpredictably altered by placing the Wusik into a 64 note microtonal tuning. This was then controlled by another random selection program made with ArtWonk.

### Fourth Sound Excerpt: duration 0:03

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