

Ornithological Blogpoem

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ABSTRACT

Ornithological Blogpoem is a setting of a poem by Elisa Gabbert for one or more voices and audience mobile devices, composed by Ben Houge. It receives its US premiere at the second Web Audio Conference on April 5, 2016, performed by the composer and a group of singers from Georgia Tech's student community, rehearsed by Jerry Ulrich and Timothy Hsu.

PROGRAM NOTES

The text of the piece consists of an unordered list of rather surrealist bird attributes, well suited to a non-linear setting. Its form evokes a tree full of chirping birds, which is an effective metaphor for internet communication (not only social media like Twitter, but also the blog format in which this poem first appeared) and seems particularly appropriate for a musical setting that relies on network technology.

As the piece unfolds, short phrases that are being sung by the vocalist(s) begin to play back on audience members' mobile devices with increasing volume and density. The phrases become more fragmented and the density increases until the sound begins to resemble a room full of birds chirping, while the human singers gradually reduce their volume and stop singing.

To participate, audience members visit a designated web page and press a "listen" button on the web app that appears. *Ornithological Blogpoem* is not designed as a highly participatory, interactive piece; rather it considers the audience as a crowd-sourced speaker array, allowing them to operate in the relatively unexplored middle ground between passive listener and active participant. I feel this creates an interesting complicity among audience members; each is dependent upon the presence of the others to effectuate a successful performance. In my observation, audiences are more attentive to the music when their own mobile devices are involved in its deployment.

Part of the beauty of the piece is that it can be performed with no pre-installed infrastructure: no speakers, no microphones, no amplification, and no custom network or server. If the audience has access to the internet, the piece can be performed spontaneously anywhere. This opens up some unique performance opportunities in unconventional spaces.

In addition to the audio processing and deployment on the audience's phones, the singers' performance is also mediated by the web. Singers rehearse the individual phrases of the piece, but the exact timings of the performance and repetitions of phrases are controlled by another web app. Singers press a button to begin the performance, and from that point on, they sing phrases as instructed by the app. In this way, the piece is also an investigation into real-time score generation and coordination across multiple performers using the web.

WEB LINKS

Similar ideas are explored in "The Tomb of the Grammarian Lysias: Real-Time Performance and Crowd-Distributed Music Diffusion with Networked Mobile Devices," by Ben Houge and Javier Sánchez. Presented at the 21st International Symposium on Electronic Art, August 14-19, 2015, Vancouver, Canada. http://isea2015.org/proceeding/submissions/ISEA2015_submission_146.pdf

The text of "Ornithological Blogpoem" by Elisa Gabbert is available at http://thesteinachoperation.blogspot.com/es/2006/04/ahhhmy-i-dont-have-to-run-day-and_23.html

For more of Elisa Gabbert's fine writing, visit <http://thefrenchexit.blogspot.com>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Elisa Gabbert for her permission to set her poetry to music. Thanks to Jerry Ulrich and Timothy Hsu for their enthusiasm in preparing the piece for performance and to all of the fine singers who participated. And thanks to all of the organizers of the second WAC conference, especially Anna Xambó Sedó for her help in coordinating the US premiere of my composition.



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Web Audio Conference WAC-2016, April 4–6, 2016, Atlanta, USA.

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