



A private space is a web-based sound-art project designed to allow visitors to ‘journey’ to various imagined locations on a map and experience surreal sonic environments. Each location’s soundscape is specifically designed to be listened to through headphones and juxtaposes binaural recordings of existing environments with composed ambient material. It is concerned with creating a subjective virtual ‘journey’ via an interactive graphic environment.

This project came about as a result of my preoccupation with the notion of privacy. In a world where the privacy of the individual is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain (or even attain), a constructed aural (and visual) virtual environment may be able to offer one type of alternative.

Influences from ambient recording artists range from Brian Eno and Harold Budd to Susumu Yokota, Stars of the Lid, and artists from the Kranky and Feedback Loop labels. The latter, in particular, has been home to several artists who have explored the juxtaposition of field recordings and ambient music.

This particular method of approach – an almost programmatic one - arguably breaks from some of the defining aspects of ambient composition:

An ambient experience is subtle rather than obvious, ‘felt’ rather than ‘thought’. Like perfume it is invisible but nevertheless strongly asserts its presence. Ambient experiences are concerned with how we draw our attention. They are holistic: equally concerned with being inside and outside an experience¹.

What level of attention is required from the listener, then, when one integrates soundscape composition (a musical form which often tends to require an active degree of attention) with ambient music (which is usually designed to be listened to

1 Mulholland, N. *Dans l’air du Soir - Notes on Ambient Art*, <http://www.publicartscotland.com/features/9-Dans-l-air-du-Soir-Notes-on-Ambient-Art>, (2009), accessed 22 April 2010.

in an almost passive manner)? A private space intends to explore ambiguities of the listening experience through juxtaposing the aforementioned sound-forms and setting them in a headphone-specific context.

The ambient element of the private space compositions, as is frequently the case with ambient music, can be seen to correspond with American minimalist composition (e.g. Steve Reich and Philip Glass). Ultimately, the structure evinces an “extreme reduction of the musical means”², the material either loops in an additive process or extends (often by means of time-stretching) what has been initially presented. In both cases, once the material and its process has been presented, it evolves independently without further interference by the composer.

With regard to the soundscape element of the compositions I have, in some cases, referred to three models identified by the composer Barry Truax (Truax states that his models roughly correspond to each of the three *Presque rien* works by Luc Ferrari):

1. Fixed spatial perspective emphasising the flow of time, or a discrete series of fixed perspectives;
2. Moving spatial perspective or journey emphasising a smoothly connected space/time flow;

2 Mertens, W., *American minimal music*, trans. Hautekiet, J. (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007), p. 11.

3. Variable spatial perspective emphasising a discontinuous space/time flow.³

The decision of which model to consider is dictated directly by the intended experience for each location. Most obviously, for example, if the intention is for the listener to have the auditory experience of walking through a certain environment then the recording process will have involved the recording of a moving image in order to later evoke a subjective response when listened to through headphones. Conversely, if the intended experience is one of observing or witnessing an event from a fixed location, then a fixed image will have been recorded.

Both soundscape and ambient elements exist side-by-side in these compositions. Efforts have been made in order to avoid imposing a musical hierarchy or explicit gestures. Rather, the elements communicate by sharing several parallels: a collage-like structure, specific timbres and rhythms, and texture. A minimum of processing and editing has been applied. The integration of elements occurs in the balance resulting from the mixing and mastering of the materials.

An example of this is “All-points station”. This piece uses binaural field recordings in a train station. As a result of the natural reverberation of the environment, the tannoy calls are characteristically muddy, the details of arrivals and departures unclear. Equally indistinct is the chatter of nearby waiting passengers and movement of distant traffic. Towards the end we hear the warning ‘beep’ of a luggage carrier as it passes from right to left, gradually becoming more reverberant as it moves off into the distance. This keynote sound serves as a cadence of sorts to the piece.

The composed ambient material consists of a layering of e-bowed piano samples. A simple ping-pong delay effect is used throughout causing the layered sounds to slowly blend spatially with the environmental recording. The metallic timbre of the vibrating piano strings also complements the somewhat industrial soundscape of the train station.

³ Truax, B., “Genres and techniques of soundscape composition as developed at Simon Fraser University”, *Organised Sound*, 7(1), (Leicester: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 8.

As far as the visual element of the work is concerned, I have been working closely with a visual artist (Shenpen Chokyi) who has been responsible for creating both the island map and images representing each location – (some of which are literal while others are more abstract in their design). “All-Points Station”, for example, is represented as a computer chip (see **Figure 1**).

This collaborative part of the process has involved a regular exchange of thoughts, ideas and personal experiences in relation to the proposed locations. The private space island is an imagined one. Its visual appearance has been constructed via the artists’ memories of existing locations and imaginings of fictional landscapes.

With all these elements combined I hope to create a unique virtual environment which will encourage new and interesting perceptual experiences for all who visit it.

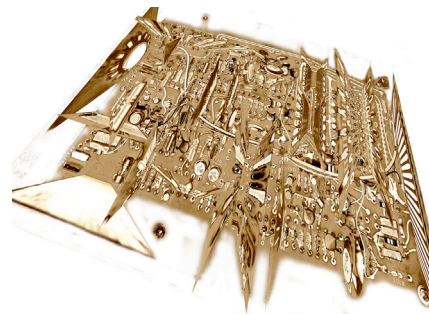


Figure 1: “All-points station”

Ross Whyte is enrolled in PhD studies at the University of Aberdeen where his research topic is *Sensorial Messages: Multi-Sensory Perception in Musical Composition*, supervised by Professor Pete Stollery and Dr Miriama Young. Recent compositions include *Reproductions*, a 30 minute work for live electronics and solo male dancer (2010) performed at Citymoves, Aberdeen as part of the DanceLive and Sound Festivals, *Fog* (2009), an audio-visual installation and *Lisbon diaries*, a collaborative project with choreographer Claire Pençak performed at DanceLive in Aberdeen and at the Traverse Theatre Autumn Festival, Edinburgh in 2009. More recently, he has been involved with the ‘Transform Aberdeen’ project at the National Theatre of Scotland working with students from Dyce Academy on producing recordings and composing a half-hour soundscape based on these.