

MUSIC I AT UCSD  
A BRIEF EXAMINATION

or,

The Flash meets Grodd, the Super Gorilla

Warren Burt  
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This paper is based on 10 weeks of experience as a Teaching Assistant in the Tape Music Project of the UCSD Music 1 Program. Any and all observations made in this paper must therefore be understood in the light of my brief experience in only one portion of the program. This paper is written from a viewpoint of considerable enthusiasm for the course, though I shall, of course, be quite frank in my evaluation of the problems I think the course has. These problems fall into two main areas, those of conflicts between concept and content and those of physical administration. First though, a discussion of the basic nature of the course and the methods used in its implementation.

Physically, the course consists of three meetings a week. One is a one hour lecture attended by all the students and usually devoted to some work or works of 20th century music. The second and third are 2 hour laboratory periods attended by small groups of students. One of these labs is an improvisation lab where the students hopefully obtain some form of improvisatory and sonic sensibility in addition to developing skills in the uses of graphic notation. The other is an environmental music/tape music laboratory in which the students present work done outside of class in collecting (with portable tape recorders) environmental sounds. These sounds are then treated by the class as a springboard for what are termed "environmental dialogues"- a responding, thru imitation or No reenforcement, to pitches contained in the environment. Actual "live" environments are also used for this type of interactive event. The course is structured so that while there is basically one faculty member in charge, he very seldom appears in the role of teacher, the lectures being divided between this faculty member and two others, while the laboratory courses are taught by individual graduate students or faculty members.

The aim of the course, in each of these activities, is to attempt to develop an openness and awareness to sounds, a real sensitivity to the quality of the student's sonic experiences. As one student put it, "I now hear sounds differently than when I used to let them just enter my ears."



To accomplish this ear-opening, the course relies heavily on serious music and musical techniques of the mid-20th century, both of which are largely unfamiliar to the students. By confronting the students with unfamiliar sounds and methods of sound production (improvisation with conventional instruments in an unconventional manner, use of tape recorders), the course seeks to develop in the student perceptive abilities that probably would not have otherwise developed. In the long run, this and other educatōry experiences can (hopefully) only serve to broaden the student, to make him more fundamentally aware of the sensory experience that surrounds him, and essentially to develop a person who is freer, more open, less unaware of his own artificially imposed limitations.

The lecture attempts, through various means, to provide exposure to 20th century musics and musical ideas in a manner that is hopefully broadening. The students usually listen to a recording of a piece of music and then are asked certain very specific questions regarding the composition. These questions usually relate to unconventional methods of sound production, organization, etc. At other times the class has watched films about 20th century composers or has divided up for large group musical excercises ("improvisation"). A further activity of this class is the extension of this writing about unfamiliar musics thru the requireing of written reports on concerts given by the UCSD Music Department.

The improvisation labs are not so much labs in "improvisation" per se, but are rather "creative exercise" periods, where certain exercises are assigned the students. These exercise deal with shaping of sounds, relations of sounds, etc. The students are gradually introduced to graphic notation, a non-note oriented notation of musical sounds, and are eventually assigned to compose a composition using both the graphic notation and their newly developed sensitivities.

The tape labs are a mixture of working with tape recorders as a musical instrument and dealing with environmental sounds. The students record environments they find interesting, write verbal descriptions of their own favorite sounds (sound diaries), and perform environmental dialogs- a creative exercise where the students attempt to match pitches with sounds in the environment.



Each of these exercises is aimed at developing a real awareness to sounds in each student, and each exercise, in a different manner, attempts to put another chink in the armor of unconsciousness that has been built around the student by most of his previous education.

The results of this program have been encouraging, so far. Students are made more aware of sounds, and they are opened up to a greater or lesser extent. Students develop a much keener attitude toward events around them, not only through sound, but through all the senses. Sensory awakening, in one form or another, usually does occur.

However, the effectiveness of this course is hampered by a number of problems, and I would now like to discuss some of these from my own personal viewpoint. As I see it, the two biggest problems with the course currently are a confusion that exists on many levels between course concept and content and a problem of physical organization of course material.

The biggest, most glaring philosophical inconsistency with this course is that it is a requirement. While fully realizing that much of the funding necessary to run a course of this nature results precisely because the course is a requirement, I would nonetheless like to take some well-deserved bites at the hand that feeds us. The making of the course a requirement 1) makes the course overcrowded, and 2) puts in a number of people who, though good students, would just as soon be doing something else. In my opinion, any form of coercion in education is bad- people learn only when and what they want to, and in a course like this, which aims at the exact opposite of coercion, it seems very hypocritical to use such coercion. Steps should be taken to eliminate specific degree requirements altogether, (as in the State U. of New York system) or else to eliminate the validity of any music course in serving in any non-major university requirement whatever. This may give us fewer students to work with, but it would certainly enable us to do a better job with those we had, for these would be students motivated to take the course and not prisoners of a tyrannical degree program. It should also be emphasized that in such a non-required program, students would be told course philosophy in explicit detail in the catalog. The aim



is to get only students in our classes who are eager and willing to learn what we have to offer. Again, I realize that current structuring of the University makes such proposals impossible, but I feel that awareness of the conflict as it currently exists is at least better than ignorance.

Another conflict between concept/content is, I feel, that the course is still too much of a music appreciation class. This is especially true in the lectures. The students are still being told about "GREAT MUSIC"; just the dates and method of telling (indirect inference) have changed. And students may not have recorded environments or improvised in the old days of music appreciation but the assignments as now handled seem to smack a little too much of "new music" appreciation. A more honest realization of the aim of the course, that is, sensory awakening thru sound experience, would help to eliminate much of the confusion here. I feel that in the first quarter the word "music" should be used as little as possible, and very little "real music" should be employed. Our main material should be raw sound used in a very clear, explicit way.

Within this criticism of the music appreciation leanings of the course, the lectures draw especially heavy criticism. They seem unrelated to the rest of the course and are even in their looseness, too rigidly structured. This is through no fault of any lecturer, but just because of the basic nature of the lecture itself. While I firmly believe student should know exactly what is, educationally, going to happen to them, I do not feel it should be done in a setting which, no matter how loosely run, smacks of the second most repressive element of the rest of their on-campus lives. (The first, of course, being requirements.)

One of the most obvious problems is the seeming lack of organization. "One of the worst organized courses it has ever been my displeasure to take," wrote one student. Others, more gently, also related confusion about the apparent disorganization of activities going on around them. The problem here is that although we know exactly what we're doing, we do not give the impression that we do. Perhaps an opening statement whose content, more elegantly expressed, was "This is a course in sensory awakening. Everything you do in this course will be directed towards that end," would help. And reiteration of this from time to time would help, also, in my opinion.



It has been my experience, both as student and teacher, that students do not like to be confused about their course content, do not like to be kept guessing. And telling them that the course is about listening to new music, improvisation or environmental music only serves to place so much shrubbery in front of the student's perception of the true nature of the course. And in talking with the students, I really get the feeling that the lab content is, in their opinion, the course content. Something should be done to correct this.

Aside from the seeming disorganization, this year the course really suffered through an unfortunate timing of events. Almost every one of my students wanted the labs to start earlier in the quarter and especially in the improvisation labs, wanted a more gradual unfolding of material. I attended one improvisation lab and one final tapeing, and all the sensitivity built up in the lab was completely and thoroughly shattered by the bad timing and arbitrary nature of the final assignment. A more fortuitous timing would have been highly desirable, to say the least.

Another problem, already mentioned, is the overcrowding of the labs. I simply had too many people in my labs to do an effective job, and the indiscriminate method of signing up in the office did nothing to help this matter, either.

I will now turn my attention to my tape lab and attempt to make some criticisms from the standpoint of my practical experiences. First of all, NONE of my students understood the environmental dialog. This was because their instructor did not understand the environmental dialog. I felt that inadequate explanation, practice and experience with this was provided for the T.A.s. If we are going to teach something, we are going to have to learn it ourselves, and learn it well-and I feel that adequate opportunity to do this was not provided this quarter. Another criticism of the environmental dialog is a personal one. That is, in a course where students are developing sensitivity to sounds as a whole, the elevation of the pitch parameter to a position of seeming supremacy is archaic. And we do elevate pitch to this position in this exercise. Do we ask them to match timbre, dynamics, envelope? No, we ask them to match pitches. For those of us who have come to regard pitch as one of the least important aspects of musical organization, this emphasis on pitch is very disturbing, indeed.



I would further maintain that the current set-up of the environmental dialog within the context of the tape labs is arbitrary and should be clarified. The nature of tape is such that it can suggest many sounds and activities not otherwise possible. A simplest example is the playing of a tape backwards. In short, the use of tape, by its very nature, suggests active physical activities. There is lots of movement involved in making a tape piece. It is a supremely physical activity. The nature of musical work with the environment is, on the other hand, such that one, while very active mentally, is very passive physically. You can't listen to the grass growing while your playing soccer. The benefits to be derived from these two diverse activities are potentially immense. I feel however, that our current mixture of the two promotes confusion, a type of bodily schizophrenia, as it were. And this confusion in a situation that emphasizes mind-body synch-ups can be very destructive to our good aims. This confusion could be lessened or eliminated by shifting the emphasis either more towards the environment or more towards the tape or by complete separation of the two activities. I feel though, that the current mixture is not quite an ideal situation.

These criticisms should be understood as the criticisms of one who has a positive enthusiasm for the course. The idea of a course of this type excites me greatly. The biggest single fault I find with the course, in fact, is its sloppiness. All my criticisms, whether of philosophical or practical nature, have that one central idea. That is, the course is now sloppy, and it needn't be. In my opinion, all that is necessary to alleviate this condition is clarify our purposes, both to ourselves and our students, and merely plan the physical details of the class well enough in advance as to avoid pedagogical situations inconsistent with our educational aims. Given a slight clarification and organization, I feel that an outstanding concept such as this course can be given the brilliant realization it so richly deserves.