

# Monads

- A. Electronics (18.32)
- B. Voice (17.59)
- C. Percussion (17.59)
- D. Environment (18.00)

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Editions 005  
<http://jasonkahn.net/editions>

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In the field of philosophy *monads* are often referred to as the elementary particles which combine to create a substance. In the context of this double LP, the title refers to the constituent facets of my musical activity: namely, percussion, electronics, environmental recording and voice. What ties these different pursuits together is my particular approach to composition. No matter what sound material I work with, the outcome – at least to my ears – reflects a certain compositional methodology and approach to working with sound in general. I thought it would be interesting to place these four sound groups together as distinct compositions, not only as a means of focusing on the compositional similarities but as a challenge to myself.

Often during the composition of these pieces, I found myself in the position where mixing one of these four sound groups with another would've provided an easier solution than just, for example, sticking with only one sound source. Of course, at times any acoustic sound source could be construed as electronically produced and vice versa. But perhaps it was just the idea of taking something explicitly electronic and adding it to an acoustic

source that became attractive – and from which I wanted to distance myself.

By now, though, after composing for years with different sound sources it's become clear to me that no matter what sounds I work with, the end result will always reflect my ideas about composition, will always sounds like *me*. *Monads* is therefore a kind of discourse in this realization and confirms what I've known all along. These four pieces are less about their sound sources than the compositional strategies tying them together. Any sounds could be at play here. The real material being used is how these sounds are worked with, combined and formed into an overarching sonic structure and dialog.

*Electronics* takes as its sound source anything I could electronically produce sound with in my studio. This included a Doepfer analog synthesizer I've been working with since 2001, a mixer, different feedback systems, contact microphones, electromagnetic field inductors, radios and computer. In general, these different set-ups reflect my performance practice, using, for example, synthesizer patches I've regularly given concerts with over the years. Working with these patches, as well as others developed specifically for this composition, I gathered together the material for *Electronics*, in most cases recording from one loudspeaker with one microphone.

Other than minor equalization, I didn't re-work any of the recorded source material during the compositional process. As will all the pieces on *Monads*, the actual composing took place on computer, a process of assemblage where I usually knew how I wanted a piece to start, but beyond this the next step was often unknown to me. Generally speaking, each section of a composition determined what the next decision would entail.

Composing for the medium of a vinyl twelve-inch record restricts the length of the composition, which I suppose could be seen as a limiting parameter.

I've also composed for CD many times, allowing a duration of seventy-two minutes, but I can't say this was any easier than working within the approximately eighteen-minute range of a 33-1/3 RPM LP. In any case, this is what I had to work with and I adjusted the compositions to these parameters accordingly.

Other issues to keep in mind when composing for LP is the overall frequency response of the vinyl medium and the placement of bass frequencies in the mix. In many cases, what is possible for a digital medium like CD is not going to work for vinyl, perhaps even sending the needle skidding across the LP or popping hopelessly from groove to groove in the vinyl. I prefer the warmer sound of vinyl to digital media and therefore am happy to work within these added constraints.

A great inspiration for me has always been the the production aesthetics of Folkways records. These were known for – and often roundly criticized for – their flat frequency range. A characteristic which at the time these records were being made referred to the overall sound of the recordings as being unenhanced, with, for example, no frequencies being boosted in order to make the recordings sound *fuller* or more *powerful*.

In today's world of ultra-truncated sound waves, compressed and limited to produce a sense of constant spectacular loudness and presence, trying to go for a more natural sound with a wide dynamic range is akin to working in mono, which would be the next logical choice for me. But we'll leave that for another set of liner notes and accompanying LP.

*Voice* collects many studio, live and installation recordings where my voice was used. The live recordings go as far back as my solo performance at the 2014 *CoCArt Festival* in Torun, Poland. The installations *Other Ghosts* (2015), *We'll Walk in the Rays of a Beautiful Sun* (2016) and *An Attempt*

*at Exhausting a Place in Hong Kong (After Perec)* (2016) used my voice reading text I'd written especially for each installation. These texts were played back in the exhibition space over multiple loudspeakers. *Other Ghosts* went one step further, as the recordings I made with voice accrued over the one-week length of the exhibition, where I performed, wrote and recorded continuously. This yielded a very dense mesh of voice and text.

What the live and installation recordings provided in energy they sometimes lacked in detail, as many nuances were lost in the performance or exhibition space where I recorded. Therefore, having the opportunity to record my voice with close microphone techniques in the studio opened up a whole other world of sounds which I normally wouldn't be able to hear in a live situation. Using very sensitive, low-noise microphones I was able to work on subtle, near-silent sounds, which I could then magnify to the same level of sounds which were originally recorded at a loud level (screaming!), thus inverting their implicit energy levels.

I also count as studio recordings going to different locations and working with the particular acoustics I find there. I improvise with these different spaces, playing with their resonance, their harmonic properties and just the overall feeling I get from being there. This was the *modus operandi* on my double LP *Songline* from 2015 (Editions 004). *Voice* ends in this fashion, with a recording I made in the network of storage rooms beneath the apartment building where I live in Zürich.

Near where the elevator opens into the basement there, one enters a very resonant room of bare concrete walls, floor and ceiling. Being close to my apartment, I could spend a lot of time here making different recordings. One evening I ended up riffing on the intervals from The Beach Boys

*God Only Knows*, and then later chopping this up to produce a staggered, stumbling sensation fading *Voice* off into the resonance of this space.

*Percussion* reflects the oldest aspect of my work. I started playing drums in 1981, at first in punk bands, then slowly moving into the field of more experimental rock and improvised music. Early influences on me were Z'ev, Ed Blackwell, Maureen Tucker, as well as traditional music from Ghana and Nigeria, which I came into contact with while studying at the University of California Los Angeles with the great Ghanaian ethnomusicologist and composer J. H. Kwabeha Nketia.

Moving later to Berlin, I was fortunate enough to hear and watch up close many excellent and innovative drummers like Peter Hollinger, Paul Lovens and Jacki Liebezeit, as well as having the opportunity of studying *daf* with Farhan Sabbagh from Syria and *tombak* with Madjid Khaladj from Iran. I'm not sure if any of these influences shine through on *Percussion*, I just mention them here by way of context and inspiration.

The procedure for composting *Percussion* followed that of the other pieces on *Monads*, with the exception that the source material didn't include any live recordings. In my studio I worked with drum set and various metal objects I've found and managed to hold onto over the years. I recorded the drum set as a whole instrument and also its individual elements. Because I can't play very loudly in my studio, many of the recordings were initially played at a low volume but recorded with close-position sensitive microphones, thus creating the possibility of producing big sounds from small, even microscopic, sounds.

I also re-visited a percussion set-up which I'd schlepped around the world on tour for many years. My original inspiration for this was Max Neuhaus' seminal interpretation of John Cage's

*Fontana Mix*, where Neuhaus used contact microphones and various percussion instruments to create feedback. My version uses a kind of bass-snare drum I designed and built, with a contact microphone taped to the bottom snare skin and a condenser microphone mounted on the drum hoop above the top skin. Between these two microphones and the amplification of their signals in the performance space over a speaker I'm able to create feedback with the skins of the drum, using one hand to modulate the rate of feedback by moving it closer and further away from the top vibrating drum skin.

Using this feedback I'm able to explore the resonant frequencies of the space I'm playing in. I sometimes play cymbals on the top skin of the drum, adding their resonances to the mix or using their movement to modulate the rate of feedback. With this set-up, working with sound becomes akin to sculpting in a plastic medium, with the performance space becoming the actual instrument I'm really working with. I hadn't used this set-up for several years, so it was refreshing – and perhaps a bit nostalgic for me, I'll have to admit – to re-visit and integrate recordings made with this very particular and personal way of extending the notion of percussion into this composition.

*Percussion* starts with a layering of all the source recordings I made for this piece, sounding to my ears like an orchestra tuning up before the beginning of a concert. At some points in the composition an entire drum set comes to the fore, but for the most part I'm dissecting the drum set and focusing on individual elements like cymbals, singular drums (floor tom, bass drum, etc) or specific techniques (press roll on the snare drum, soft mallet roll on the floor tom, feedback from the bass-snare, for example). As in *Voice*, the inversion of soft for loud sounds plays an important role in the contours of the piece.

*Percussion* ends with bowed cymbals

– something I almost never work with, but for which I wanted in this particular composition as a further nod to electronic music, albeit in acoustic form.

*Environment* is the last piece on *Monads*, and perhaps the composition on this record closest to my heart. I find composing for environmental recordings the most challenging, as I often get completely side tracked by the memories each recording wakes – especially when the recordings are of my family. I generally carry along a small digital sound recorder with me wherever I go, sometimes also using a pair of earbud microphones which I can clip to the collar of my shirt. In short, I'm basically just recording all the time – not everything, mind you, but I try to be ready should something interesting catch my ears.

The recordings on *Environment* go as far back as 2014. I had a lot of material to sift through for this piece! My family consists of five kids and my partner, all of whom make appearances at some point in *Environment*.

Since reading Henri Lefebvre's books, I've not been able to keep him from my thoughts when making these environmental recordings. Lefebvre's ideas about the construction of social space find a direct correlation for me as I explore the world through sound. *Environment* is a kind of attempt at constructing a social space in the form of a sound composition. What one hears are the elements of a social space I live through everyday: going to my kids' school, on vacation with them in France, moving day to day through Zürich, my home since 2000.

Along with Lefebvre I feel greatly indebted to the ideas of Luc Ferrari, who took the notion of *acousmatique* music beyond Pierre Schaeffer's sound objects. For me, Ferrari used his compositions in what amounted to a social methodology, exploring the spaces of people's lives through sonic occurrences. Sounds are not necessarily always just sounds, they

can mean something, carry a weight, often tell a story. I wanted to bring this out in *Environment*. Perhaps this is the story of my life, a snapshot of the space I live through every day.

Listening back to *Environment*, what surprised me was the amount of actual music that found its way into the composition: my kids singing in school and at home; a group of girls in a train; an Alphorn quartet; a Swiss folk music combo; recordings of Swiss traditional music played over a PA system at a festival; some kind of saucy Latin music played near a beach on the Côte d'Azur; pre-recorded church music droning on endlessly into the void; jazz from a car stereo struggling its way to be heard over the wind and motor. And so on...

I didn't set out to record all this music and indeed one of my guiding premises has always been that any sound out there in the world can be construed as music. But in the end, I actually recorded so much music per se! Of course, these musical recordings find themselves placed in the composition next to or within many sounds more conventionally understood as non-musical or as *objet sonore*. But I think the fact that these recordings are so omnipresent in *Environment* reveals something about what my ears are attuned to as I move through the world.

*Environment* ends with a brass orchestra's final notes dissolving into what I remember from this recording as being a very warm summer afternoon, with the sun just starting to set behind some hills and the pungent smell of geraniums wafting in the air. The small audience applauded and, like the last strains of music, gradually dispersed. I was there with my kids too. With the music over, we turned around and slowly made our way back home.