OLEV MUSKA ABOUT HIMSELF

Australian Estonian Olev Muska is one of those 'cast-to-the-four-winds' Estonian musicians whose activities in the homeland are somewhat familiar, yet not remotely as familiar as they should be. In the following article, this multifarious musician introduces his life's- and creative paths and also his special interest, sound design.

ABOUT HIMSELF

I was born in 1953 in Sydney Australia and am, to this day, a citizen of that country. In the euphoria of the 60's British Beat (Rolling Stones, Them, Manfred Mann, Pretty Things, Yardbirds, Animals), at 13 years of age, I taught myself to play the guitar. Influenced by psychedelia, I steered towards recording and, via a 2-track tape recorder, searched for ways to paint with sound. This kind of variation provided a more creative alternative to a band's typically 'personality-based' dynamic. The explorations were quite experimental and the best results were obtained through lo-fi equipment, often via accidents such as bathroom reverberation, magnetic instability caused by poorly stored tapes accidentally left to demagnetise close to loudspeakers, etc. In parallel, I was studying at art school, painting in the then popular idiom of Conceptual Art, in the Photorealism style, regarding such pedantic work to be an expression of minimalism.

Following art school, I visited (Soviet) Estonia for the first time, in 1975. Then followed experiments in the Super-8 film format although, instead of enrolling in film school, I came to work with some of Sydney's top advertising agencies as an art director, in the process learning a great deal about the media, commercial art and marketing.

Tired of attending the incessant client 'wet lunches', I taught myself electronic music, left the advertising world and formed my own design practice, which continues to this very day. Together with colleague Randolph Voglsam, I set up a recording studio in 1979, combining a 4-track tape recorder, mixer and a couple of Korg MS-10 monosynths. Our music was fairly melodic and harmonic and together we learnt a lot about recording techniques until Voglsam's untimely death in 1980 in a motorbike accident.

Independently, I developed along the Micromusic idiom, having being strongly influenced by Kraftwerk. In 1985 I released my debut LP Old Estonian Waltzes, whereby popular Estonian folkdances were given the 'Micro' treatment, having painstakingly and precisely input numerical data note-by-note into the Apple II computer in preparation for playback via interconnected synthesisers. I sent this unusual record to (Estonia's foremost choral composer and folklorist) Veljo Tormis, asking his opinion. From this began our ongoing contact.

KIRI-UU

In 1986 in Sydney - together with Anni Meister who had recently arrived from Sweden - we formed the twelve-piece choir Kiri-uu. Having been brought up and instilled in Estonian culture, for a change we wanted to try a group with which to sing more sophisticated stuff *á la* Tormis. We also felt it imperative to enhance the ensemble's sonic colours with the help of electronics. It just so happened at the time that this sort of mystical exotica was popular on the Australian scene. Some journalists were quite surprised to learn that we were (mostly) Australian-born and not newcomers. For our efforts we received (alongside other publicity) four stars in the local edition of Rolling Stone, although we were never able to capitalise on this fame.

The word 'Kiri-uu' originates from VeljoTormis' arrangement of a wistful and yearning traditional swing song 'The swing yearns for gifts', for which the maestro himself invented a suitable refrain. In far off Australia, such a choice of word seemed entirely accidental, yet it was the word that actually chose us. From amongst the rich collection of notation with which the esteemed composer had endowed us and upon which we commenced creating our own folksong variations, chanced the very word 'Kiri-uu'.

On Kiri-uu's first and striking 1989 visit to Estonia, (upon the tour's 'standing room only' closing performance) we were greeted on the Estonia Concert Hall stage by Tormis himself - sauna pail and rowan branch in hand - declaring openly: "Estonia has adopted you!"

In 1986, with the assistance of an Australia Council for the Arts grant, I composed a five minute piece 'Tere' (Hello), utilising the technology of the day - a Yamaha SPX90 digital delay. I input singer Ingrid Slamer's vocal variations of the word and pushed the gear as far as it would allow. A dense composition materialised, which was performed at the Sydney Estonian Festival's opening night. The piece was fairly *avant-garde* and didn't make much sense to that audience. Only in 1989, after coming to Estonia, was its true meaning revealed.

During the Soviet era, the thought of performing in Estonia was but a dream. Yet, following the international ESTO festival in Melbourne in 1988 (the first major expatriate gathering where participants from Estonia officially took part), we were invited to perform in the homeland. In the process of preparing the programme, we found that entering a darkened concert hall from opposite corners with flashlights in hand to the accompaniment of 'Tere' would make an ideal beginning. The Estonian public's heartfelt response was unexpectedly insightful and deep in recognising the return of its 'lost (wartime) children'. Only then did it become clear for whom and why I had composed the piece in the first place.

Following the 1989 concert tour, the choir broke up, whereupon a duo incorporating Coralie Joyce - with Celtic roots - took form. The Kiri-uu arsenal was augmented by computer (Atari) and sampler (Sequential Circuits Prophet 2002+). We referred to this particular vocal configuration as 'desktop a cappella'. An LP based on Veljo Tormis' folk song cycle 'Ingrian Evenings' was realised (1991-1993), in which I very thoroughly dismantled and re-assembled the words, syllable by syllable. This pedantic - often of PhD calibre - work dealt with the sung language's essence, its musical uniqueness and sonic/emotional nuances, intonation and modulation.

Upon Sydney's Macquarie University's invitation and together with Coralie Joyce, I helped outfit the studios and conduct classes for the Department for Contemporary Music Studies. For Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art sound art festival 'Sound in Space' (1995), we prepared an audiovisual piece 'It Doesn't Sound Like a Real Instrument'. In 1998 I won the prestigious Australian Publishers Association award for Best Designed Young Adult Book ('Dance Till You Drop', Random House). Then followed a synthesis of Celtic and Finno-Ugric music ('Shoti-Ugri', 2000). In 1992, 1996 and 2000 we performed concerts in New York and Estonia. In 2001, an audiovisual collaboration between dancer/choreographers Marika Blossfeldt and Rene Nõmmik culminated with performances in Sweden. Subsequently, I have collaborated with Australia's premier ensemble The Song Company's soprano Jo Burton. In 2005 I designed and published a colourful 84-page book 'Sõrve: 50 Fabulous Years of Sydney Estonian Summer Camps'.

Kiri-uu's current line-up consists primarily of myself , sometimes also of my brother Arno Muska. It can be said that: "Kiri-uu is a microscopic design organism with a big appetite. It absorbs a broad range of client and project input, outputting compelling content for a variety of design, marketing, educational and cultural needs". It reflects my ongoing individual pursuit for and explorations of new possibilities, technologies and projects, whenever and wherever.

In addition to teaching at universities from time to time, during the last couple of years - together with colleague Angela Pasqua - I have helped develop a multimedia facility - housed in a local Sydney council library - whose projects are ambitious and far-reaching, incorporating music composition, sound recording, graphic design, short film making and more. Both young and old partake, including the likes of Paralympian wheelchair silver medallist, Paul Nunnari, whose film of the Alaskan marathon (450km in six days) I post-produced into a 44-minute DVD.

My current work plan is intense and varied, including print design, sound installations, film sound and music, film editing, animation, web design and recording musicians and bands. All of which I also teach.

In addition to The High Llamas record 'Beet, Maize and Corn' (2003), which was dedicated to the memory of Stereolab's Mary Hansen following her untimely death (I saw Stereolab often in Sydney), I'm listening to weirdo Melbourne band Architecture in Helsinki and Scott Walker's old solo albums from the sixties and seventies, together (and sometimes simultaneously) with Wochtzchée's CD 'Diktüoneemakilt'. At home, awaiting on computers, hard drives and tapes, are years worth of my accumulated sound compositions. Perhaps my next release will appear on an Estonian label?

ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SOUND DESIGN

As animals in nature, we learnt to perceive, interpret and - in the interests of survival - respond accordingly to aural stimuli. In the social and cultural context of a man-made environment we are, instead, attuned to organised sound, namely language and music.

A sound designer's job is, indeed, the organising of sound for one purpose or another. Earlier, this kind of 'sonic organiser' was typically a composer, musician or singer who utilised the voice and/or musical instruments, acoustics and milieu. At the start of the 20th century, new technology appeared enabling sound to be recorded, duplicated and more broadly distributed. Throughout the ensuing century, various recording, replication and dissemination methods evolved, employing vinyl, magnetic, optical as well as digital technologies. Acoustics as a science has also substantially grown. Today's sound designer has, at their disposal, a far greater range of creative tools, contexts and technical resources for composition than ever before. Along with the wider means of distribution, new audiences, sound formats and genres have sprung up. Alongside the concert hall, movie screen and radio, all manner of web-based and mobile media have arisen, increasing - amongst other things - the opportunity for international collaboration.

ABOUT COMPOSITION

As with all design, sound design has its elements and principles by which to analyse, build or sculpt a composition. Being both a visual as well as a sound designer, I often utilise the same criteria for both disciplines. This kind of cognition favours a greater harmony between sound and visuals.

Design elements

- line (melody)

- shape (size and length)

- texture (timbre)

- light or dark (tone)

- colour (orchestration)

- form or depth (foreground/background) + width (stereo left/right) + height (azimuth)

- space (amplitude/silence)

Principles by which to employ the elements

- unity

- variety

- balance

- emphasis

- movement and rhythm

- contrast

- pattern

Thanks to today's digital means, visualising sound on the computer screen facilitates a free and intuitive workflow. As with traditional pen-on-paper notation, the digital environment enables writing, painting and collaging, albeit now with the recorded audio itself. The depiction of the computer-based audio composing process can just as easily be visual as it is aural.

Since computer software encompasses essentially all kinds of media, it is imperative that an interdisciplinary debate flourishes. Only then can true synthesis develop. I often search for design in audio and musicality in design.

At the moment I'm finding that, in comparison to visual design programs (eg, Photoshop, Illustrator and Final Cut Pro), music software facilitates greater opportunity to experiment - the ability to readily generate logical inversions, for instance, seems to be more forthcoming. I favour play over pure functionality - for example, I prefer Cubase to ProTools. A favourite (hybrid sound/visualisation program) is Metasynth.

Design elements

Every space is an acoustic space. Planned or not, outdoors or indoors, public or private. Alongside pure sound itself, there are practical questions, for example:

- Is the sound sculpture or artwork permanent or temporary?

- Indoors, outside or virtual?

- How is the work placed / positioned / fitted?

- Is it static or dynamic?
- What is its orientation, for instance, does the sound originate from one or several sources?
- Speakers, headphones or open-air?
- Mechanical, electrical or electronic?
- Details about its length / duration / size;
- Variation from day to day / over a longer period of time;
- The environment's visual demands / needs, eg,
    o Complexity
    o Kinetics / kinesthetics
    o Sculpture
    o Multimedia installation elements
    o Obscurity
    o Relationship to / integration with architecture

Today it's the listener's viewpoint, in particular, that is essential. An interactive composition does not exist until the user commences interaction with the work or technology. As in traditional folk song, the composer's, performer's and audience's roles can be more freely interchangeable. In such a context, the reins are no longer exclusively in the composer's hands.

More questions. Is the listening experience somehow directed or, instead, random? Is the listener's attention being diverted to something else? What is being offered to the listener: stimulation, elevation or distraction? Of what flavour is the listening experience: harmonious or dissonant? Gallery or commercial space? What are the historical determinants? And so on.