

THE ARMCHAIR RESEARCHER

*a project conceived by Rosemary Mountain
December 1998
pilot version launched in April 1999*

As this is an extremely new project, I am particularly interested in all reactions: any comments on the format or the contents, whether general or specific, detailed or succinct, will be duly digested if you send an e-mail to mountain@vax2.concordia.ca or "snail mail" to Dr. Rosemary Mountain, Concordia University - Music, 7141 Sherbrooke St. W., RF 322, Montreal, QC H4B 1R6. Feel free to print out and photocopy any parts of these pages -- but please make sure that my name and contact remain visible! Thanks for your interest.

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The Armchair Researcher – What? Why?

The Armchair Researcher aims to encourage reflection and dialogue on issues of music perception and cognition. Its format is intended to complement existing laboratory experiments and procedures by investigating general concepts and underlying strategies through concentrated thinking and exchange of ideas, enabling more involvement by musicians (and others) in the conceptualization and design of appropriate new experiments and in the increased awareness of existing data and their incorporation into music research.

The idea was conceived partly to challenge the perception that serious research in the psychology of music must involve laboratory experiments on the part of all participants. Naturally, without such investigations, we would be merely speculating. However, in many of the experiments conducted, it appears that the content of the experiments and / or the pool of subjects whose opinions and behaviour are being evaluated do not coincide with the typical content and audiences of any but the most mainstream of Western music.

Trained musicians who take the time to read some of the articles by music psychologists often find, after wading through unfamiliar terminology, procedures, graphs, article structure, and bibliography, that the “musical” examples used seem trite, contrived, or simply too basic to provide really useful reference. Although psychologists have perfectly reasonable and solid defenses for all of these complaints, musicians may be left wondering how long we must wait before we can apply the collected data to our own research.

The typical approach of a music analyst might appear to be at the other extreme: pronouncements by a single individual are made about a single musical passage or work, usually without referring to a specific performance and without varying the elements one by one in order to identify the relative weight of the various factors. The vocabulary used, and the means of structuring the results, is often very personal. However, the validity of these explorations is found in the assumption that the analyst uses his/her own musical intelligence (which is usually the result of many years of training, listening, reflecting, etc.) to propose a given interpretation of a passage. Then colleagues (and students) are relied on to corroborate, argue with, modify or reject the proposal. An analyst gains a reputation by consistently presenting interesting and helpful perspectives and insights into musical structures and recommended ways in which to hear / perform it.

As a composer, I am naturally interested in investigating the way in which the potential performers and audiences of my work are likely to respond to specific configurations of aural information. As an analyst, I am interested in investigating “hunches” I have about the way in which certain musical structures can be favourably perceived. As a person fascinated by issues of perception and cognition, I am interested in facilitating dialogue between musicians and psychologists. Therefore, I would like to see more of a mix of the approaches of the two fields. Thus, in this project I propose what I believe are likely interpretations or behaviors, and ask for corroboration or arguments from others. Meanwhile, I will try to act as “translator” between the two fields: directing musicians to some of the fascinating results of music perception and cognition, and conveying musicians’ concerns to the psychologists with suggestions of possible procedures and content for investigation.

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An Investigation Of Musical Imagery

Project I of THE ARMCHAIR RESEARCHER

Specific notes about this project:

The project **An Investigation of Musical Imagery** was stimulated by my attendance at conferences of the European Society of Cognitives Sciences of Music, and subsequent acquaintance with the writings of authors such as Godøy and Richardson. I plan to present a paper at the Conference on Musical Imagery (VI International Conference on Systematic and Comparative Musicology) in Oslo in June 1999, whose contents will be based to some extent on the responses I receive from the enclosed project (especially questions 9-11). (Web site for the conference is: <http://www.hf.uio.no/imt/CMI-99/>)

Format:

Although I have been experimenting with a more formal questionnaire design, I have decided for the present to use the more casual layout presented here. This is for three reasons: 1) The official questionnaire format implies a rigor which demands a more careful wording and organization of the questions, and would create expectations of a statistical tallying which I don't intend to perform at the moment. 2) It would involve several more pages for you and me to print out, photocopy, post, etc. 3) The project is designed to encourage you to sit in your armchair, comfortably, and reflect on these issues. I would prefer that you read the entire set of questions first before writing down any response. I will then sit in my armchair and reflect on the possible ramifications of the responses I receive.

N.B.

Some of the questions may seem rather naive. However, I include them here either because I am not aware of a consensus on "the" answer, or because I am doubtful about assumptions on the matter, or because I find the reflection on the issue intriguing. In contrast with many laboratory experiments in psychology, I am not interested in the "norm" nearly as much as I am in learning about interesting approaches that have been utilized by composers. I also am curious to know how many composers share my strategies, and to what extent.

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WARMUP - (for anyone) - *How do you image music?*

W-1. a) Imagine -- try to actually "hear inside your head" - the sound of a violin being tuned. Then think about the following:

If asked, would you be able to identify:

- the order in which you "heard" the strings being played?
 - whether they were plucked or bowed?
 - whether the duration of the notes were long, short, or varied?
 - whether you "heard" the string being adjusted by the peg?
- b) Imagine the sound of a trumpet playing a high note, with a plunger mute. Imagine the same trumpeter, playing the same note without the mute. Imagine the same trumpeter, playing the same note again without the mute, but much more softly.
- c) Imagine the sound of a hurdy-gurdy being played.
- d) Imagine the sound of 3 piccolos playing a cluster in the high end of their range.

Are the sounds of some instruments easier for you to imagine than others? If so, do you think that this comes from familiarity with the real thing? Did you imagine (a) specific player(s), with a specific quality/style of playing?

Did you wince with the imagined sound of the three piccolos?

W-2) Do you think it makes a difference to the quality (accuracy) of your imagined sounds depending on whether you heard them live or through a recording? Do you think of certain sounds as being, for example, "the recorded sound of a string quartet" or just "the sound of a string quartet"?

W-3) When you imagine these sounds, do you imagine the players as well (visually?)

If so, is this a generic image, or can you identify details about their visual appearance (e.g. whether male or female; long or short hair; what type of clothes; etc.) ?

If you can imagine the details, do you think this comes from the memory of one specific player on one specific occasion? the amalgam of one specific player on many occasions? the amalgam of many specific players on many occasions? an idealized picture drawing from everything you know about people and that instrument? an imagined picture based on a character you just invented?

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for composers -- including arrangers and improvisors:

QUESTIONS about COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES

1. Do you ever make graphic sketches at any stage of composition?
2. Do you ever think about new ideas by imagining visual forms in your head? If so, to what extent do you think these visual forms correspond to music notation? to sonograms or other visual renderings of sound signals? to movements of performers? to movements of imaginary activity which generated the sonic designs?
3. Do you work in electroacoustic or computer music fields? If so, are you accustomed to seeing graphic images on the screen when you work? Can / do you "hear" the sound in your head when you see its image on the screen? Do you ever imagine that type of image and then derive the sound from the imagined form?
4. Do you ever compose music for theatre, opera, dance, film, TV, video, etc? If so, to what extent do you make links between the movement of people or images on the stage or screen and the music that you compose? Do you imagine possible movements which then help you "shape" the musical gesture or design? Do you think this work has an influence on subsequent music you compose which is **not** accompanied by any physical / visual movement?
5. Have you ever worked directly in another form of artistic expression -- for example, do you dance? have you taken painting lessons? Are you in (intimate) contact with persons who work in other art forms? Do you often watch other forms of expression -- attend dance performances, visit galleries, etc? If so, do you consciously make associations between music and the other form(s)?
6. Imagine that you have a textural or bridge passage which you have decided needs some slight changes / improvement. Do you ever do such work away from the score paper and instrument(s) -- i.e. mentally? If so, how do you mentally represent the material to yourself? Is it like a tape recording which you can "play" and listen to? If so, can you "start" at any point in the "tape"? Do you ever represent it as a visual image? If so, how is the temporal aspect represented -- does your mental visual image have an accompanying "time marker"? Or does your image exist to some extent "outside time", which you can see in a glance and know that it is(as yet) flexible in its duration?
7. Do you have a typical order of choosing elements for a composition? If so, what is it? (for example: orchestration, length of piece, then formal design, then pitch collection, then specific gestures/textures, etc.). If not, what determines the order?

8. Imagine that you decide to add an ascending scalar gesture into a melodic passage.

- a) Do you represent this mentally by "seeing" a corresponding image in your mind? If so, is the image that of a visual gesture or movement as produced by a human, other animate, or inanimate thing? the image of a score paper with the musical elements written out? or is it an abstract line drawing? (if the latter, do you always see it mapped out on a grid, with a horizontal time axis and vertical frequency axis?)
- b) Do you "hear" the gesture being played? "see" it being played?
- c) If you imagine it on score paper, or if you "hear" it being played, is it always complete in all its details: instruments, articulation, duration, pitches, tempo, dynamics? Do you ever have the sense that you **have** heard it in its completeness, but would have to work (reflect, probe the image more carefully, etc) to discover / remember exactly what combination of elements were involved to produce that gesture?
- d) If some of the details are more complete than others at first conception, can you say which ones, or does it depend completely on the context?

9. Imagine that you are in a quiet relaxed environment, conducive to composing, and you suddenly "get" an idea for a piece, or part of a piece. Has this ever happened?

- a) If so, does the whole piece in all its details come to your mind, needing only to be transcribed to be given to the performers? If so, have you ever had trouble retaining the image until the transcription was complete?
- b) If the whole piece does not come to your mind complete in all its details, do any of the following describe what happens?
 - i) the idea consists of a short passage (e.g. a theme) quite complete in details (notes, rhythm, articulation, etc) which will then need to be "contextualized" by composing an introduction, a bridge to another section, a development, etc.
 - ii) the idea consists of some short gestures/motives which have a certain identity (which you won't forget) but have not yet been filled in with all the details (e.g. you might still have to determine the proper instruments, some of the notes, etc.)
 - iii) the idea consists of some visual images which correspond to a structural form, which then have to be filled in with musical details in order to reveal the original form in the best way possible.
 - iv) the idea consists of specific characteristics for a theme and/or gestures which will enable you to make decisions about the details in keeping with the original concept. (see questions 10, 11, 12 for more detail.)

10. Have you ever thought of passages, melodies, gestures, etc in an anthropomorphic way, or with characteristics of physical bodies, in order to retain a reference to remember how you want to develop their behaviour throughout the work? (E.g., this melody has a haunting quality, which will always give the whole passage a sinister feeling when it appears, even though there may be other ideas present -- this gesture will always have that shimmering quality, even though I might change the orchestration in some places -- that texture is rather lacy, so it will be a good contrast coming after this really strident chord -- the cello will start off this movement as the aggressive one, interrupting the others, but by the end of the movement will be playing alongside the viola, etc.)

11. Have you ever consciously tried to imitate the sound of natural phenomena or animate non-humans (flowing river, birdsong, insects)? Have you ever tried to imitate their behaviour? (the short bursts of some bird songs, the tendency for birds to sing more at certain parts of the day, etc) Have you ever "mapped" data from a non-musical field onto music, by working out a correspondence for certain values, and expanding/shrinking the temporal scale (earthquake patterns, the polyrhythm of the sun and moon, etc)?

12. Have you ever tried to evoke human characteristics in music? Has this been with or without words? with or without a narrative link (as in opera or film)? Do you try to portray actions (e.g. walking, dancing, climbing), words (e.g. speech-like phrasing and intonation) ? moods (melancholy, carefree, etc)? character (bully, wimpy, chatterbox, etc)?

13. Do you use descriptive words in your scores to convey specific mood / actions to the performer (e.g. solemn, hesitantly, *espressivo*, "like a madman") ?

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Further Food for Thought

FFT1) How do you choose an appropriate CD from your collection to match a specific mood / occasion? Do you walk over to your collection, visually scan the covers/names/sections (if you have them organized by style or era) and narrow down the choices? When you have found a potential one, do you stand there and "reconstruct" a few seconds of the work aurally in your head? Or do you "hear" a beat / an instrument / a specific piece in your head, and then walk over to the collection and retrieve a matching CD? How do you think music is "classified" in your head -- by style? by composer? by instrumentation?

FFT2) Imagine that you turn on the radio, and within three seconds of hearing some music, decide that you don't want to listen to it. What are likely to be the major contributing factors? (e.g. instrumentation -- "I hate vibes!"; style - "I hate opera!" ; specific knowledge of the piece - "I hate Mozart's 40th!" ; mood - "I don't want a lively jig right now!"; interpretation - "Boy, they're playing rigidly!"; complexity - "I don't have the energy to concentrate on Stockhausen right now!" ; etc.)

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CONTACT INFO

Thank you very much for taking the time to reflect on these questions. Any comments would be very gratefully appreciated. If you care to answer to specific questions, you may simply refer to the question number. Send them in one of the following formats:

by e-mail: **mountain@vax2.concordia.ca**

by snail mail: Dr. Rosemary Mountain,
Concordia University - Music,
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by fax to: +514-848-2808 attn: Dr. Rosemary Mountain

Regarding your identity and anonymity:

You may send your comments anonymously. However, I would prefer to have your contact (preferably e-mail) for my own purposes, so that I can ask you for clarification on points of your response, if necessary. I have no intention of divulging your contact information to other parties.

As I suspect that there may be significant correspondences between imaging strategies and the type of medium used (e.g. mainly acoustic, mainly electronic / computer, mainly multimedia, mainly music for dance, etc.), I would particularly appreciate your contributing this information.

If you give me exceptionally helpful / lucid answers, I will want to be able to acknowledge your assistance. However, I will confirm this with you before mentioning your name.

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