Surveying the Compositional and Performance Practices of Audiovisual Practitioners

Anna Weisling
Georgia Institute of
Technology
Atlanta, GA, USA
aweisling3@gatech.edu

Anna Xambó
Centre for Digital Music
Queen Mary University of
London, UK
a.xambo@qmul.ac.uk

Ireti Olowe
Centre for Digital Music
Queen Mary University of
London, UK
i.o.olowe@qmul.ac.uk

Mathieu Barthet
Centre for Digital Music
Queen Mary University of
London, UK
m.barthet@quml.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of an online survey conducted with the objective of gaining insight into compositional and performance practices of contemporary audiovisual practitioners. The survey gathered information regarding how practitioners relate aural and visual media in their work, and how compositional and performance practices involving multiple modalities might differ from other practices. Discussed here are three themes: *compositional approaches*, *transparency and audience knowledge*, and *error and risk*, which emerged from participants' responses. We believe these themes contribute to a discussion within the NIME community regarding unique challenges and objectives presented when working with multiple media.

Author Keywords

Survey, audiovisuals, mapping, collaboration, performance

CCS Concepts

•Applied computing → Sound and music computing; Performing arts;

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies relevant to the audiovisual community include Faulkner's early dissertation of audiovisual practice, international culture, and technology [6]; and Baker's 2008 text [1], which convened online discussions with practitioners about how audiovisual work is articulated through practice and observation. In more recent studies, Carvalho and Lund [4] classified audiovisual practice by discipline, Hook et al. [8] explored an HCI-driven approach to audiovisual practice through the lens of performance and interaction, and Correia et al. [5] investigated assessed metrics by which audiovisual prototypes are produced and evaluated. Our approach seeks to contribute a discipline-agnostic look at how artists approach and resolve the conditions of composition and performance within work that is designed to

be multimodal, and perhaps identify areas in which unique trends emerge among varied practitioners. We conducted an online survey so that we could reach the international and specialized community of AV practitioners, a research method typically used in the NIME community [9, 10].

2. SURVEY AND METHODOLOGY

The study follows the patterns reported in [2] about the nature of evaluation in the NIME community, particularly taking the performer's stance and using mixed methods (here, thematic analysis combined with descriptive statistics). For analysis, we took a qualitative approach driven by thematic analysis techniques [3]. Our intention was to utilize more generalized aspects of composition and performance (e.g. collaborative techniques, mapping strategies, system design, risk and error, audience consideration, and documentation habits) to structure the survey while allowing possible themes to present themselves. Individual respondents are referred to by the letter R followed by their identifying number (R#), while specific questions are referred to by the letter Q and its order in the survey (Q#).

Recruitment of participants was conducted by sending a call to a list of 204 audiovisual practitioners and to the NIME mailing list. We targeted both performers who work with audio and video in tandem as well as performers who collaborate in audiovisual works. Although only 28 individuals responded, the age ranges, experience levels, and instruments and software used were highly diverse, and opinions about the process of audiovisual composition and performance were varied and rich.

3. COMPOSITIONAL APPROACHES

Two major compositional approaches emerged through the data, which we are terming *synchronous* and *dialogic*. A synchronous approach sees the compositional process as an activity done together, with audio and video developed at the same time. Dialogic composition frames the process as being largely led by one element (audio/video).

Half of respondents stated that they composed both audio and video synchronously. For example, "I [like] to have a common experience together in order to enter the same mood (...) I also feel important to set a series of key words that can drive our research together and start growing a common field and language" (R14, Q23). Alternately, half of individuals reported that they begin with one element first. Many composers who engaged in a dialogic process had a clear preference for one element leading the development of

the piece: "I write all the music and figure out how I want to perform it and then I program the visuals, and then sometimes go back and make changes in the music so that the interaction between music and visuals is more clear or interesting" (R6, Q24).

When prompted to rate the importance and role of audio and video elements within their work, most respondents rated both elements as highly important, even as 22 participants indicated that they design the audio component to control aspects of the video, while only 15 do the same with the video element controlling audio. This may imply that, although the practitioners represented in this questionnaire overwhelmingly agree that the aural and visual components are equally important, this does not necessarily mean that content is made to be equally influential within the performative system.

4. TRANSPARENCY AND AUDIENCE KNOWLEDGE

Respondents displayed significant differences in their view of the audience's understanding, ranging from high prioritization and transparency to complete mystery and opacity. Of particular interest was whether the performer's focus was on showing the audience the audiovisual system's workings as they contributed to the performance experience, or denying or obscuring these elements from the audience in the interest of creating a more immersive environment. We have taken inspiration from the Platonic terms of *mimesis* and *diegesis* [11] to differentiate between these approaches: mimesis represents an approach which intends to fully immerse the audience in the "world" that is being created, while diegesis indicates a performance which places the performer not only in a "showing" role but also a "telling" role, engaging the audience with the "world" that is being created, but also the methods and modes of that creative process.

Respondents' statements show polarized opinions, with proponents of a diegetic approach stating sentiments such as: "audience understanding is important for me" (R16, Q32), and "I want the audience to see what I'm doing (. . .) and be able to make a connection between my actions and what they are hearing" (R19, Q31). In contrast, mimetic practitioners expressed positioning such as: "I really do not care whether the audience understands what we do when performing" (R22, Q32), and, "I don't care about audience. Just for me. Too much describe [sic] always ruins everything" (R2, Q32).

It is important to note that the categories of mimesis and diegesis reflect a very rough distinction between "showing" and "telling." The space between these two approaches makes up a spectrum, and approaches can change not only from piece to piece, but over the course of a performance.

5. ERROR AND RISK

A third theme that emerged across the data set concerned issues of error and risk, and how practitioners viewed the many uncontrollable elements of performance. When asked to describe how they approached or engaged error and failure in new work, 11 respondents directly framed them as positive and even desirable elements of their practice, often making the argument that the errors contributed to a sense of liveness, complexity, or engagement for an audience during a piece. Only 5 respondents expressed a desire to actively avoid or safeguard against such situations. At the most extreme, one participant spoke of forfeiting creative agency in the interest of avoiding failure: "Always go with the safe option, even if that would mean sacrificing the expressivity of the output to a degree" (R23,

Q44). It is unsurprising that performers find moments that are unplanned or unexpected to be opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking and skill (defined as a combination of control and effort) [7]. To that end, we were not surprised to find that 16 respondents reported deliberately building randomness or non-linearity into their performance systems, while only 4 explicitly chose not to. Some of the key qualities that respondents attributed to these elements within the system included: liveliness, excitement, complexity, surprise, variation, improvisation, co-creation, and autonomy.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper represents a small portion of the information provided by survey participants. Going forward, a deeper analysis of the data could be useful in identifying more nuanced motives, including different compositional approaches in solo versus collaborative work, views on constraints and limitations in hardware and software design, and the desires of practitioners concerning the future of audiovisual technology. Going forward, we hope to recruit more participants within and outside of the NIME community.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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