

Pamela Z: TIMEPIECE TRIPTYCH

(a suite of temporally disturbed sound works)

- i Declaratives in the First Person (5:02)
- ii Syrinx (6:11)
- iii De-Star Spangled Banner (10:19)

Timepiece Triptych is a suite of multi-channel sound works exploring time-related processing on vocally-produced sounds. Various time-altering digital processes including extreme time-compression and time-expansion, delay, granular syntheses, reversal, and reverb are applied to spatialized layers of text fragments and brief melodic material. The only sound sources used in the three segments are my voice and (in *Syrinx*) the voices of birds.

Declaratives in the First Person is made entirely of text fragments from the sentence “I would like to think that the art itself is enough of a statement.” I first recorded this sentence (in my own voice) in response to a request to participate in an exhibition called “The Art of Artist Statement”, in which the curators of a gallery in Chicago (The Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center) were exploring artists’ attitudes and thoughts about the constant need to write artist statements. I separated the components of the sentence into short samples ranging from long phrases to single phonemes, and then severely altered the time of these fragments—expanding, compressing, and shifting them in time. These regions are then layered in ever-changing relationships with one another.

Syrinx takes its name from the vocal organ of a bird. (The human vocal organ is the larynx, while the avian “voice box” is called the syrinx.) Starting with what sounded like fairly simple and short birdsongs, I slowed down the recordings until their individual pitches and surprisingly complex melodic material were revealed. I then learned to sing each of these melodies, and digitally sped up my performances of them until they matched the length & pitch of the original birdsongs. In *Syrinx* I use multiple layers of various permutations of the birdsongs (mainly finches & wrens) and human performances of them along with other bird-influenced vocal sounds processed with pitch-shifting, time compression & expansion, granular syntheses, delay, and reverb. *Syrinx* is the only segment in which pitch-correction was not applied to time-expanded samples, so it has a broader frequency range and makes some use of the sub-woofer channel.

De-Star Spangled Banner brings the work full circle with regards to the original source of the exploration. It is made entirely of samples of my voice singing a bel canto rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*. In this segment, pitch correction was consistently used whenever the time was expanded or compressed, resulting in a palate of sounds that remains completely within the pitch range of the original melody. Embedded in the texture are passages of the anthem stretched to as much as 35 times its original length so that, if played in its entirety, the normally under-two minute song would become fifty minutes in length. The opening phrase “O say, can you see”, which normally takes approximately 4 seconds to sing, lasts for a full two minutes in some of its iterations here. Likewise, there are samples where the time is compressed to the extent that the entire anthem takes only five and half seconds from beginning to end. My vibrato (which is already so wide you can drive a truck through it) forms incredible hills and valleys when stretched, and creates a kind of warbly underwater opera sound when compressed. I found that, when layering the longer stretched passages, I not only achieved a good deal of the customary “beating” one generally gets from phase-shifting, but the clashing of my hideously wide vibrato morphs quite convincingly into air-raid sirens, vacuum cleaner motors, and bad refrigerator compressors. When heard un-layered, these same stretched passages sound more like crying or plaintive moaning.

History:

In 2003, conceptual artist Kelly Heaton made a rather bizarre request of me. She was creating, as part of a solo exhibition at Ronald Feldman Gallery in NY, a piece called “Btsy Rss alters the American flag to the tune of *De-Star Spangled Banner*”. The piece involved an American flag from which Kelly had carefully removed all the white parts using a seam-ripper. The naked, red and blue flag would be hung on a wall with the removed white stars, stripes, and bits of thread piled against the corner beneath. The wall adjacent to the altered flag would display a video of a soprano in somber attire performing a painfully slow rendition of the national anthem. She wanted me to perform this anthem, which was to be a full fifty minutes in length. The actual anthem is under two minutes long when sung normally, so I had to expand it to approximately 35 times its normal length, rendering the melody completely unrecognizable to the human ear. Kelly wanted to videotape me performing it in real time, rather than to use a digitally altered video. She felt that the strenuousness of standing with my hand on my heart singing this agonizingly long anthem would perfectly embody the kind of surreal, infuriating and heart-wrenching “patriotism” needed for the piece. In order to learn what this expanded version would even sound like, I first had to sing it normally and then stretch it out in Pro Tools (using pitch correction to keep it in the same key) to create a reference track. Performing the *De-Star Spangled Banner*— with its seemingly endless sustained notes and the cavernous hills and valleys of my stretched vibrato— turned out to be an extremely athletic and challenging feat. I needed to have the digitally stretched version in my ear (earbuds hidden beneath my hair) in order to get it right, and the result was haunting and strange. Of course, for the finished video, only my actual slow singing was used, not the sound from the digitally stretched recording— which was only used by me as a guide track for singing the piece.

But I found the sound of that stretched version to be really compelling. All the digital artifacts resulting from pitch correction on such extremely time-expanded sound file were very pleasing to my ear, and I was inspired to do some actual work using similar sounds. After more experimentation with time compression and expansion, I came up with a little study of bird-song in which I slowed down a bird’s voice, learned the melody, and then sped my own voice up to the speed of the bird’s original song. In 2004 I created a short multi-channel piece (the first version of “Syrinx”) using these bird sounds. My appetite for time-altered sounds was still un-sated and, in 2005, I created another short multi-channel piece called “Declaratives in the First Person” in which I expanded and compressed fragments of text. This piece kept evolving over the next several years including 2-6 channel audio versions and some live performances including a 2007 version in which I trigger the sampled fragments with a gesture-controller.

Finally, at the beginning of this year (2008), I realized that what I really wanted was to revisit the 50-minute sound file from my original stretched *Star Spangled Banner* recording, and to create new work using the actual sound that put me on this particular path in the first place. I began creating a piece using the original bel canto recording and the stretched guide track to build new expanded and compressed samples of different lengths. To my delight, the sounds from the stretched anthem became even richer when I began editing and layering them to build this ten-minute, multi-channel piece. Working on this new segment drew my attention to the strong connection between it and the other two works that were inspired by the original anthem material, and I felt compelled to do some re-editing on all of them and combine them into this sonic triptych.

Presentation Information:

Timepiece Triptych is designed to be presented through four matched, equally separated speakers (with sub-woofer if possible— though it is only active during Syrinx) in a space of any size. The power of the speakers should be appropriate to the size of the space and the volume should be up such that the sound is full and present in the room. The DVD is authored to send sound to Left, Right, Surround Left and Surround Right (and sw). In reality, there is really no “front” per se. Listeners can face any direction, and the speakers should be adjusted to put out equal levels.

There are two possible installation scenarios:

- 1) The three segments play consecutively and loop so that a listener who enters the space and remains for 22 minutes will hear the entire suite.
- 2) Alternatively, the segments can heard in three proximate (but acoustically separate) spaces, each looping continuously so that a listener can physically move from one section to the other.

It is also possible to present the work in more of a “tape-music concert” setting in which an audience is seated and listens to the entire suite in one go. In either scenario, it is preferable that the space be visually stark (if possible) so that the listener can fully immerse themselves in the sound. If the presenter prefers the 3-space scenario, individual separate DVDs can be provided.