

*Virtual* (1997)

by John Young

notes on performance

This piece is realised in stereo, but should ideally be heard in a multi-loudspeaker diffusion. A minimum set-up for this would include central (front) reference loudspeakers, wide frontal loudspeakers, and side and rear loudspeakers, all full frequency range and controlled from a mixing console. Additional distant frontal and overhead (high frequency) loudspeakers are also desirable. The diffusion should be devised prior to performance and rehearsed thoroughly.

The aim of the diffusion of *Virtual* should be to use the extra stereo width and surround potential of the system to draw the accumulations of sound energy out from an initial frontal focus, and also accentuating the moments of 'environment-like' spatial distance. Moments when sudden change in sound identity occur can also be articulated by change in focus of stereo perspective. These shifts should not be so sudden or gratuitous as to draw attention to the 'performance' but follow and enlarge the existing dynamic flux of the music.

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artistic concept

This piece attempts to convey the idea of an illusory soundscape set in vibrant motion by the wind—an invisible and capricious source of energy for the 'virtual' objects in the space, the exact nature of which we are left to imagine. This idea extended partly out of my fascination in the process of making field recordings in the natural environment, where the wind is typically regarded as a pervasive and problematic intruder. But, in fact, the wind is often a part of the sonic signature of a place (especially in the notoriously windy city in which I live), so I set out to record wind 'noise' trying to take advantage of the very active but entirely natural stereo play it produces over a pair of microphones (just as it does across our ear canals). Other sound identities were designed around this idea, including controlled and turbulent air streams, tube-like resonances, and 'objects' which form and flutter close to the ear, or far in the distance. Linked to this is a characteristic and consistent spatial morphology within which these sounds evolve and transform in their own ways. I was also aiming to develop a scale of sonic reality and abstraction, from the super-real sensations of direct physicality to more materially ambiguous sounds.

Underlying these ideas is the belief that recognition of sound sources and motivating energies is a powerful aspect of our processing and understanding the world around us—whether environmental or cultural. To me the most appealing aspect of computer music is the potential to design sound-objects which play on our instinctive desire to 'understand' the connections between energy and source—since by way of this we seek to comprehend sounds as signifiers of the physical presence of objects, as well as appreciating their qualitative aspects of contour, texture and colour. This dual aspect of acousmatic music (where sources are invisible), may simultaneously present us with heightened realism and extremes of abstraction. This relates to a view of the computer not as an instrument producing super-human but note-based musical structures, but as a powerful shaping tool, capable of giving us new insight into the sonic experiences of our environments.

*Virtual* was realised in the Electroacoustic Music Studios of Victoria University of Wellington, and in the composer's home studio.