
Sonotexts

New Machines for the Locomotion of Time

What's New about W. Mark Sutherland's Sonotexts? Not much, which is to say, everything.

In his book *Organs without Bodies*, Slavoj Žižek argues that the New only ever emerges because of a specific sort of repetition. The New is not a faithful repetition of the past, but a realization of possibilities that never fully emerged because they were betrayed by the actual course of history.[1] In many cases, as Siegfried Zielinski has noted, past possibilities often remained in embryonic form because of the tendency of media toward *untimeliness*: many are realized in technical and media practice either long before or long after their invention.[2]

If you want to build the future, you have to ransack the past for what didn't happen, but could have. If you want to build the future, you have to steal from the doubts, fantasies, wishes and failures of the past.

Take the work of George Antheil. Go on: take it.

Antheil foresaw a future with only two kinds of music: the Banal, which drew its energy from "the pulse of the new people," exemplified by ragtime, and the Mechanistic, which derived its energy from the environment of these people: "the towers, new architectures, bridges, steel machinery, automobiles and other things which have a direct function in modern life." Banal music would express sentiment through the voice of individuals; Mechanistic music would express a new sense of "time spaces" through the invention of "new machines for the locomotion of time, or the musical canvas."[3]

Though Antheil' s prose style bears a surface resemblance to Futurism, he scorned the Italian Futurists and their instruments for their reliance on onomatopoeia. In "Manifesto of the Musico-Mechanics," Antheil boasted that his new musical "machines will, of course, have nothing in common with the foolish Futurist machines of the Italian Futurist which had no musical dimensions or pretensions to space, but were only and sheerly improvisations of noise intended to imitate automobiles, airplanes etc. which is ridiculous, and has nothing to do with music."[4]

Antheil's friend and frequent apologist Ezra Pound concurred. "I am perfectly aware that you can imitate the sound of machinery verbally, you can make new words, you can write '*pan-pam vlum vlum vlan-ban etc.*,' [...] but these are insufficient equipment for the complete man of letters, or even for national minstrelsy. The mechanical man of futurist fiction is false pastoral, he can no more fulfill literature than could the bucolic man."[5]

For Pound, "music is the art most fit to express the fine quality of machines," and "there would be something weak about art if it couldn't deal with this new content."[6]

Antheil's music has more in common with the logic of computer programming than typewriting, because it makes heavy use of the technology of the piano roll, a direct ancestor of the punch-cards computers required for data entry as late as the early 1980s. But it was untimely precisely because of this very fact. His most famous piece, the Ballet Mécanique, which he began working on around 1923, featured, in addition to some conventional instruments – three xylophones, four bass drums, a gong and two pianos – a number of actual, non-metaphorical machines – a siren, three airplane propellers and seven electric bells – and an astonishing 16 synchronized player pianos (the mechanical precursors of the computer). The Ballet Mécanique was never performed with its complete instrumentation until 1999, because coordinating that many player pianos to Antheil's specifications turned out to require the use of computers, micro switches and MIDI technology, not simply to anticipate it. Predictably, the New York premiere of the Ballet in 1927 was an unmitigated disaster that haunted Antheil for the remainder of his public life.[7]

Though Pound describes Antheil's "musical world [as] a world of steel bars, not of old stone and ivy"[8], he is interested in Antheil's music because it complements the human with the mechanical without "humanising" the mechanical by translating it back into words.[9] Few performers in the history of music, sound poetry, soundsinging and related fields have managed to accomplish this trick. But Sutherland is one of them, and he has accomplished it repeatedly. Even (as in the case of "Time Signatures for György Ligeti") metronomically.

Though their titles frequently mark the works on these CDs as *homage* through dedications to their predecessors, Sutherland's Sontexts are not imitations. They are the best kind of betrayals, the kind that only emerge when a pupil follows the spirit rather than the letter of the canon.

The act that makes this sort of productive betrayal possible is that Sutherland elevates the technological objects that populate his Sonotexts – synthesizers, metronomes, punctuation marks, digital video tape, typewriters, suitcase record-players, thimbles, nails, blank acetate LPs, Crackle Boxes and other delights – to the level of active contributors. Sutherland's Sonotexts are possible because of digital media technologies, yes, but what makes them *work* is that rather than using digital media to suborn the world of objects to his desires, *he uses it to render himself into an object*: one component among the many that comprise a vast Rube Goldberg machine of sound.

This is not Banal music. It is Mechanistic. It will not help you get laid. It does not want to lull you to sleep. You cannot work out to it. You cannot tap your toes to it (okay, you can tap your toes to the metronome piece, but you'll be tapping for a long, long time). Sutherland himself remarks that you may find it difficult to listen to more than two or three of these pieces at one setting.

But just as the Sonotexts refuse to humanize the mechanical, they also refuse to be limited to the notion that humans are necessarily their target audience. The ideal listeners for these discs may not have been invented or constructed yet. But if you're willing to conceive of yourself on their terms – that is, as yet another object in the assemblage, and not the most important, either – the Sonotexts may take you places you didn't expect to go. Which is to say, not necessarily the future you wanted, but the future you deserve.

Darren Wershler
spring 2011

Works Cited

[1] Žižek, Slavoj. *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004. 12.

[2] Zielinski, Siegfreid. "Modelling Media for Ignatius Loyola: A Case Study on Athanasius Kircher's World Apparatus between the Imaginary and the Real." Trans. Grindell, Nicholas. *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium. Ed.* Kluitenberg, Eric. Rotterdam/London: NAi/Art Data, 2006. 28-55. 30.

[3] Antheil, George. "Letter to Mrs. Bok." In Whitesitt, Linda. *The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-59*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983.68-69.

[4] Antheil, George. "Manifesto of the Musico-Mechanics". Qtd. in Whitesitt, 69.

[5] Pound, Ezra. *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*. [1927]. New York: Da Capo Press, 1968. 52-53.

[6] Ibid., 53.

[7] Whitesitt, 31.

[8] Ibid., 62.

[9] Ibid., 52.

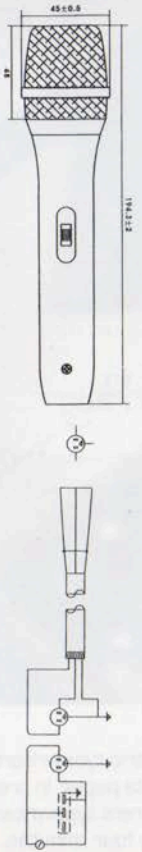
DISC ONE

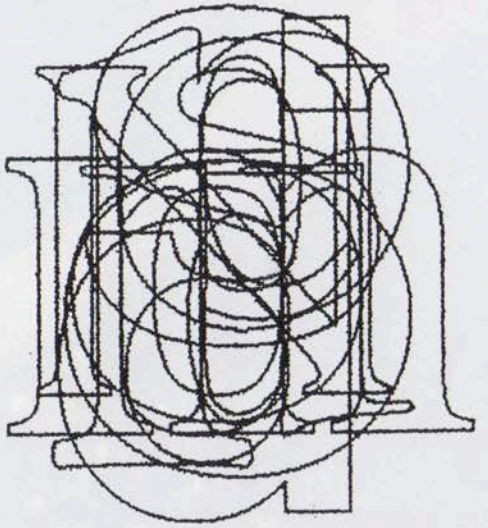
Concrete Sonotexts
Recorded in performance at Grant Avenue, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

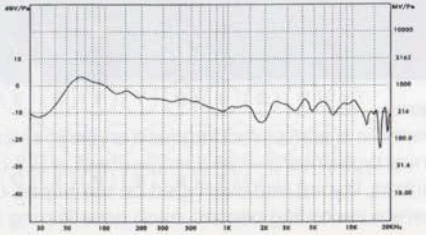
Sound Poem For Emile Berliner (Sutherland, 3:19)
AntiQwerty (Sutherland, 4:44)
Portrait of Nicola Tesla: A Sonnet (Sutherland, 3:42)
Time Signatures for György Ligeti (Sutherland, 26:10)
Poème Digitales (Sutherland, 2:28)
Metalogue (Sutherland, 4:05)
Scratch (Sutherland, 9:40)

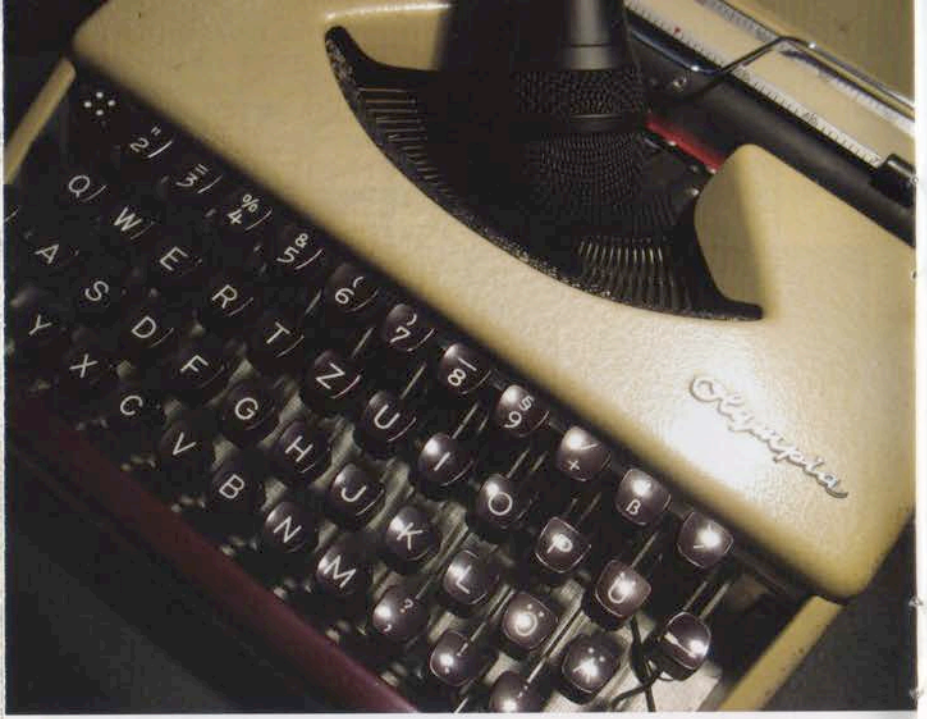
Sound Poem For Emile Berliner

In the foreground is the sound of my tracing with a lavalier the letters *s-o-u-n-d-p-o-e-m* on a piece of sandpaper, heard first in the left-hand audio channel and again in the right-hand audio channel. The background sound is feedback from a microphone channelled through a Califone suitcase record player. Emile Berliner (1851–1929) was the founder (1895) of the Berliner Gramophone Company. He invented the disc gramophone (1887), an acoustic tile, and a prototype helicopter (1922). He also made microphones.



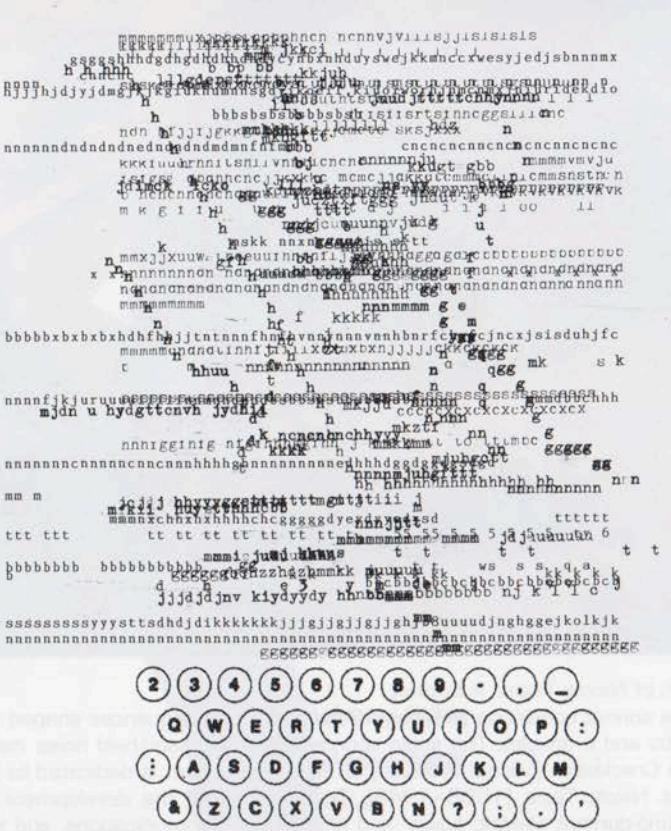


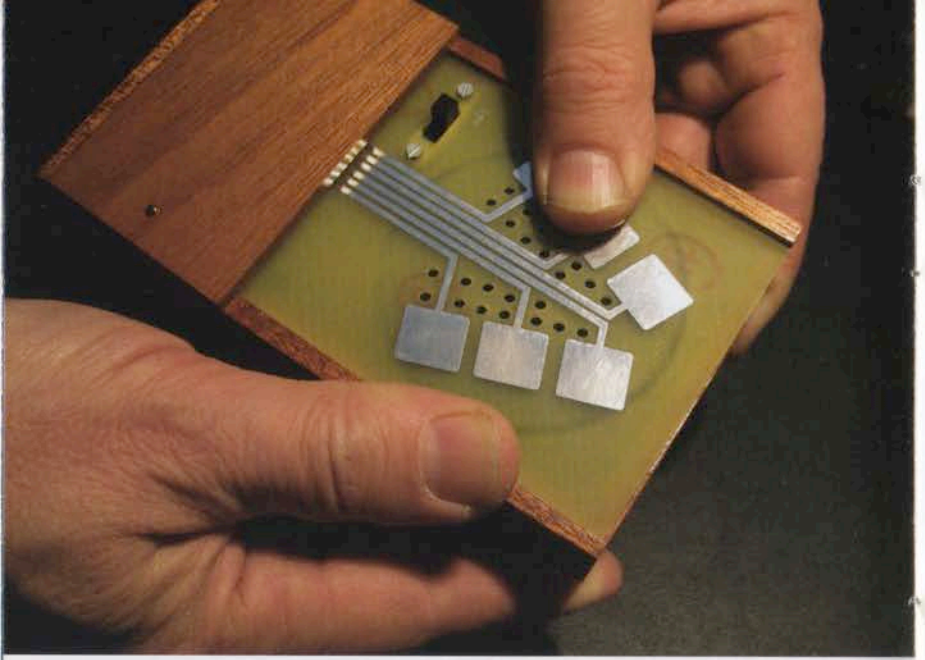




Antiqwerty

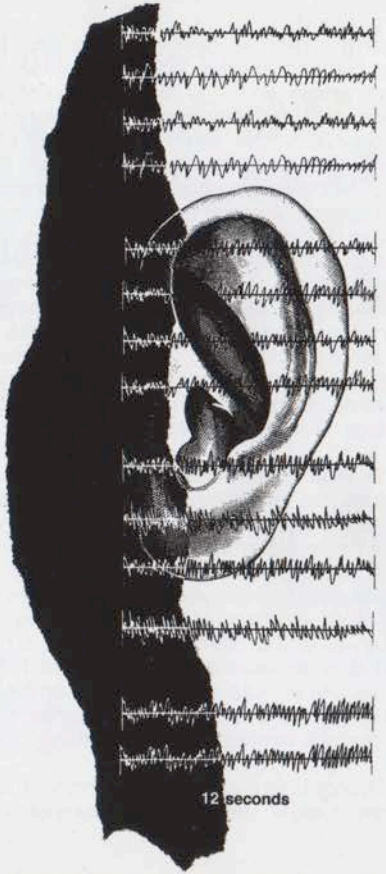
"Antiqwerty" is a sonotext composed on sonic relics—three electric typewriters and two manual typewriters—with a single sheet of 8.5-by-11-inch white paper. In creating this sonotext, I typed and overtyped on the paper, using five different typewriters for five separate recording passes, each pass lasting approximately four minutes.





Portrait of Nicola Tesla: A Sonnet

This is a sonnet consisting of seven 12-second sound sequences shaped as three quatrains and a couplet. The audio source is a small, hand-held noise instrument called a Cracklebox (Michel Waisvisz/STEIM). The sonnet is dedicated to the mad scientist Nikola Tesla (1856–1943). Tesla pioneered the development both of alternating-current electric power and of wireless communications, and was also credited by the United States Supreme Court with the invention of radio (1943).



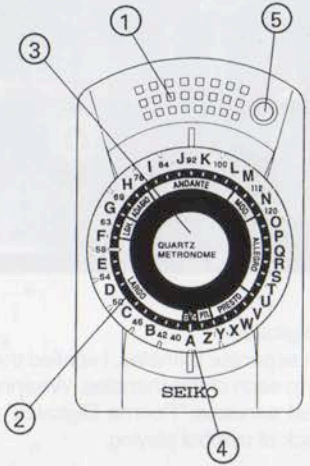
Time Signatures for György Ligeti

"Time Signatures for György Ligeti" is based on the late composer's 1962 performance score *Poème Symphonique* for 100 metronomes, originally proposed for one conductor, ten participants, and 100 manually operated metronomes. My piece is an audiovisual installation performance for art gallery, using 100 battery-powered metronomes configured on the gallery floor. A poem of 21 words, exactly 100 letters in length, and including all 26 letters of the alphabet, forms the visual and rhythmic basis of the piece. The configuration of the 100 metronomes on the gallery floor mimics the physical shape of the poem. Each letter in the poem is represented by its own metronome. Those that stand in for the letter A are the only ones to use the pitch capacity possessed by modern electronic metronomes—the concert pitch *A* (440 Hz). The *A* metronomes are, therefore, the only metronomes in the piece that are not assigned a pulse rate. The rates assigned to the metronomes for all the letters beyond *A* differ in each case, with *B* assigned pulse 44, *C* pulse 48, *D* pulse 50, and on to the letter *Z* at pulse 208. The duration of the gallery installation performance is determined by the lives of the batteries used: when all the batteries in the 100 metronomes are depleted of their charges the installation falls silent and the performance is complete. The average battery lifespan in the metronomes is approximately 80 hours.

To accommodate the time constraints of the *Concrete Sonotexts* CD, the performance of "Time Signatures for György Ligeti" has been adapted as follows. Each of the 100 metronomes is activated at seven-second intervals, beginning with the first metronome of the poem (letter *S*) and continuing letter by letter through the poem to the final 100th metronome of the poem (letter *E*). All 100 metronomes are in operation for approximately two minutes of this track (from 12:00 to 14:00 minutes of its running time). At approximately 14:00 minutes, and beginning with the first metronome (letter *S*) of the poem, the process is reversed, and each metronome is switched off at seven-second intervals until all 100 metronomes are silenced. Note that this is an unmediated recording, with ambient sound—including my footsteps and cracking knee, the creaking floorboards, etc.—were captured for posterity by the microphones strategically placed above the metronomes and directly on the studio floor.

"Time Signatures for György Ligeti" was first performed and exhibited in 2006 at the Kasseler Kunstverein, Kassel, Germany as a component of the *Poetische Positionen II* exposition.

sound off
start rhythm machines
no quiet conductor
no xylophone or zither
kick drum wild violin
or bass guitar
just time



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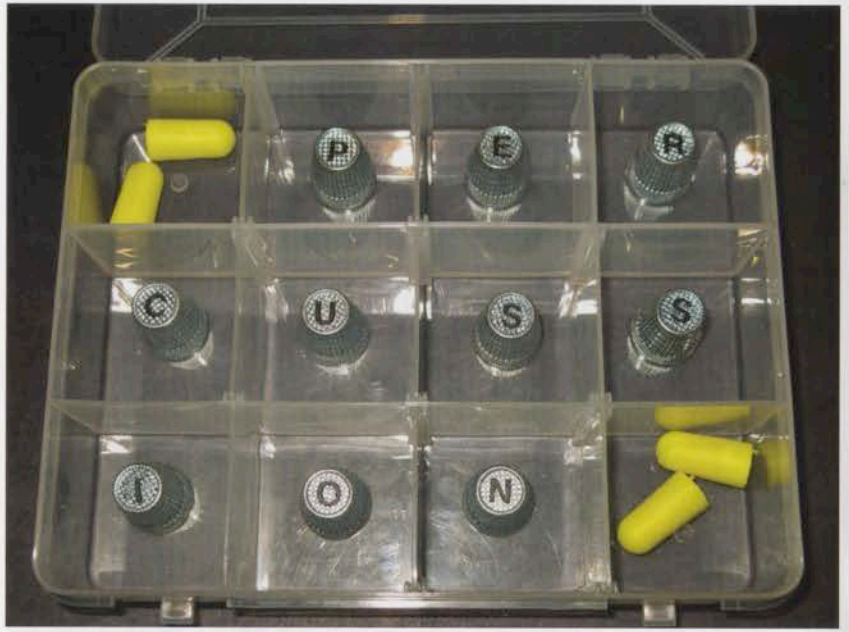
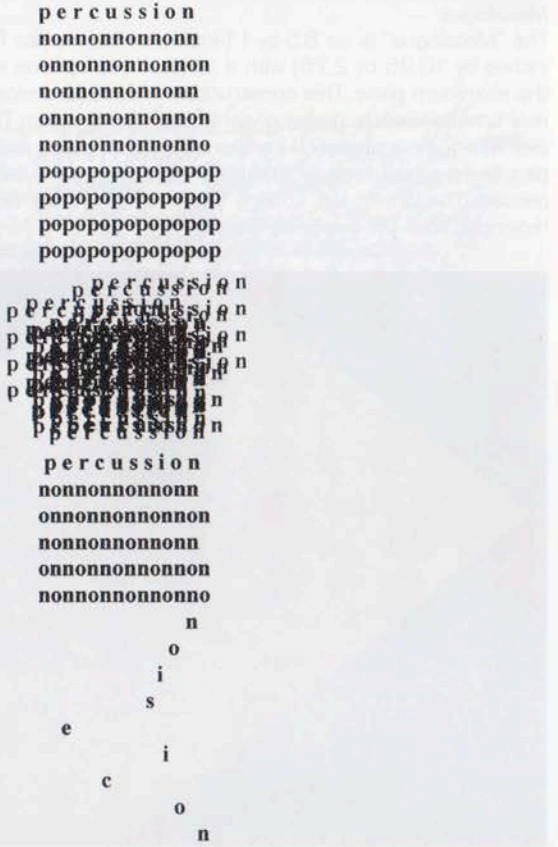
2. Tempo Chart
3. Tempo Setting Dial
4. Reference note A (440hz)
5. Tempo LED display



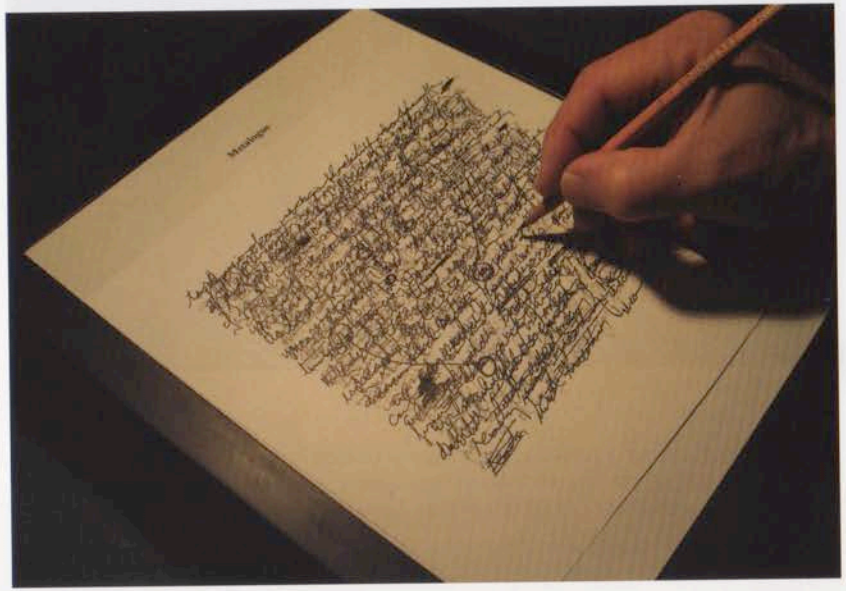
Poème Digitales

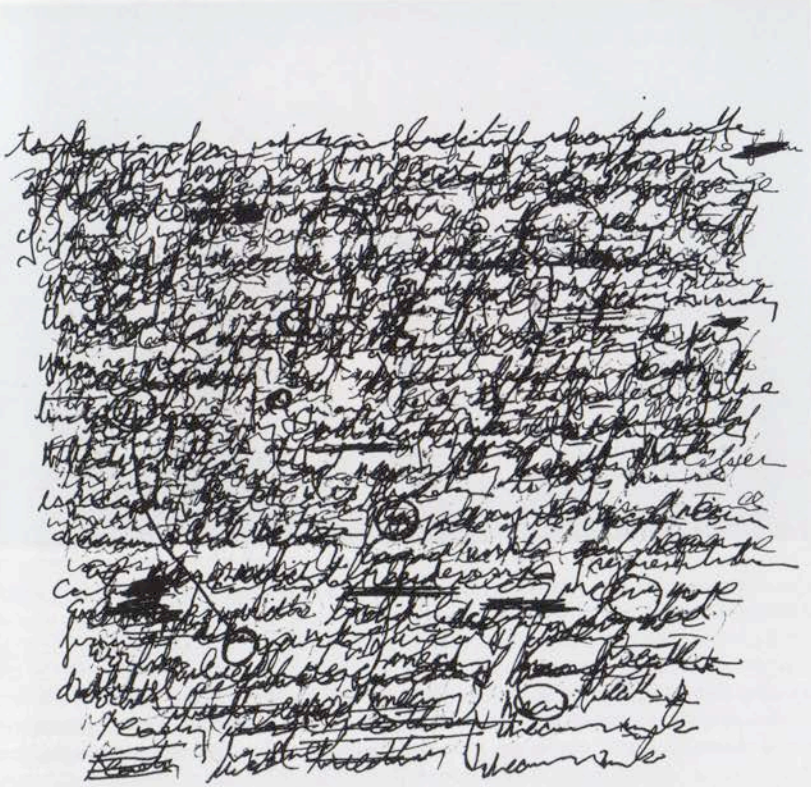
Using ten separate thimbles, I spelled the word percussion by assigning one letter of the word to each of the thimbles. Wearing all ten thimbles on my fingers, I performed the scored sonotext "Poème Digitales" on a drum kit in the studio, overdubbing a single track of cymbal playing.



Metalogue

The "Metalogue" is an 8.5-by-11-inch aluminum plate fixed in a wooden frame (13 inches by 10.25 by 2.75) with a contact microphone attached to the underside of the aluminum plate. This construction is a crude device for hearing and listening in real time to writing, drawing, scribbling, and erasing. This sonotext was created by overwriting on a single 8.5-by-11-inch sheet of paper with a ballpoint pen, a felt tipped pen, and a pencil, for approximately four minutes for each of five separate recording passes. The breath-like sounds audile on this track are caused by my shirtsleeve moving across the paper as I write.





Scratch

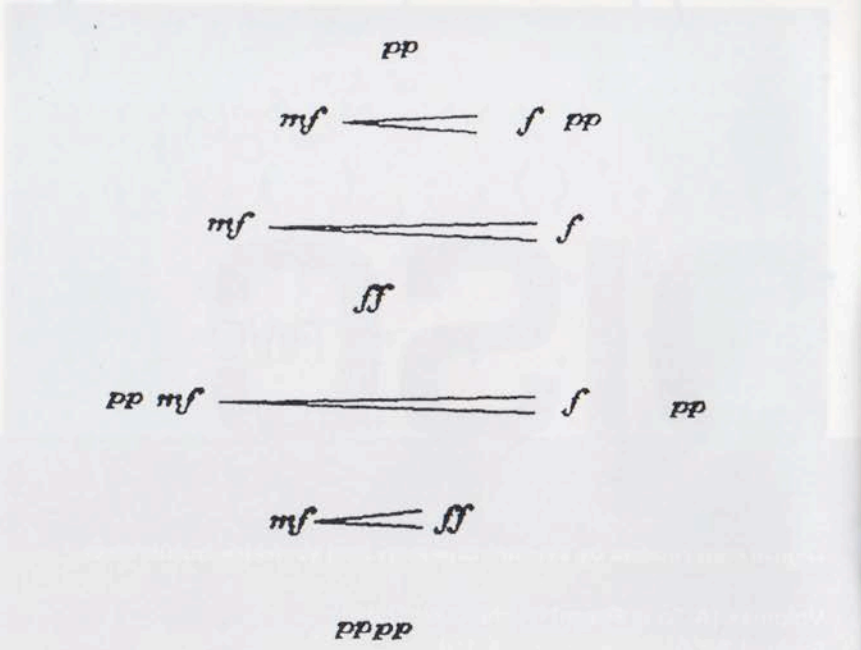
The word *scratch* was inscribed on a blank piece of acetate with a nail, after which a metal-master copy of the scratched acetate was produced. 300 vinyl records were pressed from this master. There is no recorded sound on these vinyl records. The only sounds you hear on this CD track are from the scratch marks made by the physical text carved into the original piece of acetate, the surface static on the vinyl record, and the motor of the Califone suitcase record player. As a concrete sound-poem-object "Scratch" combines a physical gesture and aural event in a single form and process. John Cage's *4'33"*, Eugen Gomringer's "Silencio," and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's gramophone etchings are antecedents of "Scratch".

"Scratch" was first exhibited in 1998 at the ACC Gallery, Weimar, Germany, as part of the Broadview 5.1 exposition.

DISC TWO

Synthetic Sonotexts
Digital realizations by William Blakeney and W. Mark Sutherland

Volumes (A Tone Poem) [Sutherland, 2:49]
Radical Artifice [Sutherland, 9:19]
Time Signatures .01 [Sutherland, 15:03]
Time Signatures .02 [Sutherland, 15:07]
Quintet: A Sound Poem for Stéphane Mallarmé [Sutherland, 5:44]
Static Poem [Sutherland, 7:17]



Volumes (A Tone Poem)

"Volumes (A Tone Poem)" can be performed using any sonic source material, including text, noise, musical instruments, the human voice, etc. For this recording of it, William Blakeney created a series of waveforms, using granular synthesizer, modulated static, and digital chatter, similar to the repeated motifs found in the work of Yasunao Tone—hence the parenthetical element in the title.

Radical Artifice

This sonotext is based on the sequential reading of punctuation marks in pages one to three of *Radical Artifice* by Marjorie Perloff (The Chicago University Press, 1991). Each of the 14 different punctuation elements (period, comma, opening parenthesis, closing parenthesis, apostrophe, etc.) that Perloff uses in those pages is assigned its own unique signature sonic value.

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“ , ” “ . ” -, , , “ , ” : , , , , , . - .
, , , , , , ’ ( ) , - ’ (-) , , , , , , , “
, ” “ ” . : , ; - , ; , , , , ; , - ; ; . “ ”
: , “ , ” “ , ” , “ ” , “ ” “ . ” , “ ”
, - ( ) , , , , “ . ” “ ” ( ) , , , , , - ,
“ ” “ ” . “ , ” “ . ” , , , — — , , .
, , - - { } , “ , , , ” - , , , “ . , ” ,
- , , , , . - , , , , , , , - , - . , , , - . . , ,
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, , “ , , , ” “ , ” “ ” “ - ” (“ ”) ,
“ , ” “ ” (—) . . . , , — - , ( ) “ .
” , , - “ ” , “ , ” . , “ ” . , : ( ) - ,
?

Time Signatures .01

This is a translation of my sonotext "Time Signatures for György Ligeti," and is based on the metrics of the 100 digital metronomes used in that sonotext. This translation uses 26 separate sounds corresponding to the 26 letters of the alphabet, but in this new sonotext each letter/metronome of a single word enters the listening field and is then added to the mix for the complete word(s) the letter occurs in (i.e., *sound, off, start, rhythm, machines,* etc.). Each of the 21 words of the text/poem is assigned its own track, with the 21 tracks introduced into the composition word by word at 20-second intervals. Twenty-one tracks times 20 seconds equals 420 seconds or seven minutes; so at the seven-minute mark, all 21 words/tracks are running simultaneously, which they continue doing for one full minute. At the eight-minute mark the entire compositional process is reversed, with the first word/track, *sound,* beginning a slow fade until that single track becomes silent at approximately the 8:20 point of the piece. At that point, the second word/track, *off,* begins a slow fade until that word/track falls silent at approximately 8:40 of the sonotext. The process continues, one word being subtracted after another, track by track, every 20 seconds, until all 21 tracks are silenced at approximately 15 minutes total for the complete sonotext. The digital sonic material used in this .01 translation of "Time Signatures for György Ligeti" includes Bell Labs phonetics, digital noise, etc.

152/126/168/116/52 126/60/60

152/160/A/144/160 144/72/200/160/72/108 108/A/48/72/80/116/56/152

116/126 138/168/80/56/160 48/126/116/52/168/48/160/126/144

116/126 192/200/104/126/132/72/126/116/56 126/144 208/80/160/72/56/144

96/80/48/96 52/144/168/108 184/80/104/52 176/80/126/104/80/116

126/144 44/A/152/152 66/168/80/160/A/144

88/168/152/160 160/80/108/56

sound off

start rhythm machines

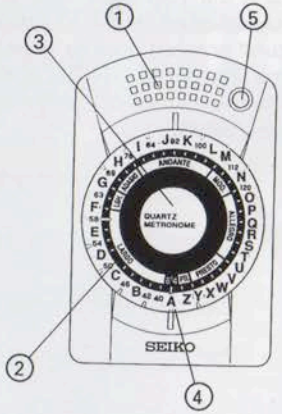
no quiet conductor

no xylophone or zither

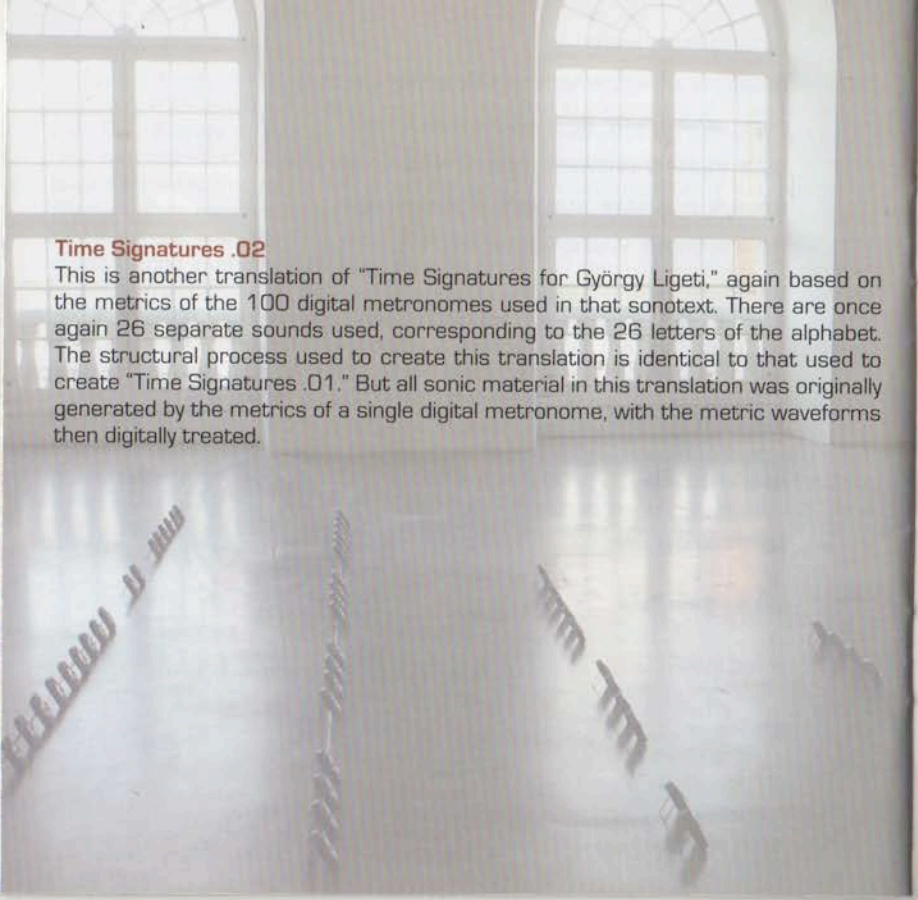
kick drum wild violin

or bass guitar

just time

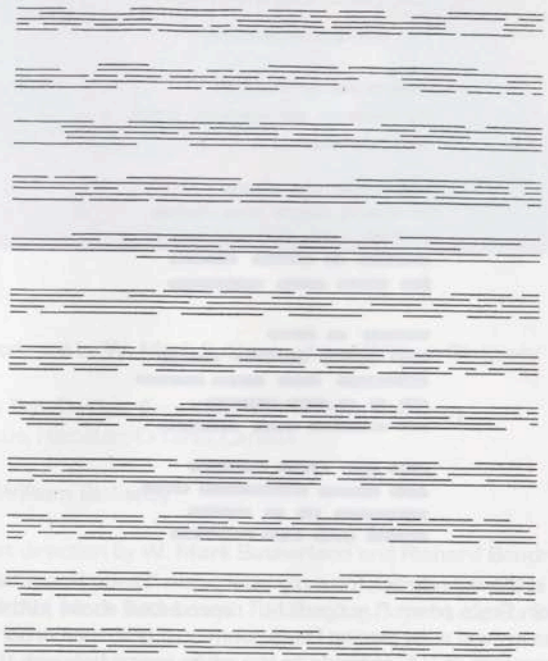


1. Speaker
2. Tempo Chart
3. Tempo Setting Dial
4. Reference note A (440hz)
5. Tempo LED display



Time Signatures .02

This is another translation of "Time Signatures for György Ligeti," again based on the metrics of the 100 digital metronomes used in that sonotext. There are once again 26 separate sounds used, corresponding to the 26 letters of the alphabet. The structural process used to create this translation is identical to that used to create "Time Signatures .01." But all sonic material in this translation was originally generated by the metrics of a single digital metronome, with the metric waveforms then digitally treated.



Quintet for Stéphane Mallarmé

Inspired by Mallarmé's "Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," this sonotext was composed on a single piece of manuscript paper. A grid was placed over the resultant score to designate sonic activities and rests (silence, space). The treble clef is the source of the harmonic pitches used in this sonotext. Thank you Dean Batute for creating the EML 400/401 synthesizer programming and samples.

Lautgedicht by Man Ray

Static Poem

This sonotext is the soundtrack from my videopoem "Static Poem," which is based on Dadaist Man Ray's poem "Lautgedicht," reproduced above in this booklet. The videopoem was arrived at by placing Ray's poem on a grid, then arbitrarily assigning a time measurement of 2.5 seconds to the white space between the blanked-out words of the poem. That white space was replaced in my videopoem with visual static and white noise. The length of the white space between the poem's blanked-out words was used for exact measurements of the physical length of the blanked-out words, to each of which a sonic length, based on the white space's 2.5-second duration, was assigned. The blanked-out words of Ray's poem were replaced by silent black leader-tape.

Sonotexts produced by **W. Mark Sutherland** and **William Blakeney**

Engineered by **Bob Doidge**, **Amy King**, and **William Blakeney**
at Grant Avenue, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Mastered by **William Blakeney**

Images and art direction by **W. Mark Sutherland** and **Richard Boudreau**

All Sonotexts by **W. Mark Sutherland**, The BarKing Boys Music Co. SOCAN 2011

Thank you Dean Batute, Carolyn Bell Farrell, Christian Bök, Paul Dutton, Karl Jirgens, Nobuo Kubota, Jurgen O. Olbrich, Linda Jasma, Jon and Barry Stainton, Greg and Robert Sutherland, Francesca Vivenza, Darren Wershler, and Gayle Young

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