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Tombeau(x): sinfonietta for living and dead technologies (2015)

   Tombeau(x) is inspired by concepts presented in Carolyn Abbate's article "Outside Ravel's Tomb."[1] At first read, I was taken by the quasi-symphonic structure of the article: I found inherent musicality in the way Abbate developed themes through the various sections of her article, climaxing in musical analysis of Ravel. To me, the beauty was not in this analysis itself, but in the way the necessary contextual information was woven together to support it. Furthermore, the subject matter was immediately appealing to me: states of dualism between life and death, human and machine; the relationship between marionette and puppet-master; the grotesque at the boundary between the known and the unknown.

   Rather than programmatically representing the progression of the entire article with music, I have chosen to illustrate several of its ideas with sound—as I hear and understand them. The concepts I selected are such that music will serve to reveal, and perhaps make clearer, some of the semantic intricacies buried deep within.

   In its most basic translation, *tombeau* is French for "tomb." *Tombeau* is also a typical French Baroque genre: a literary or instrumental lament written in memory of someone who has died. Abbate describes the semantic double exposure of this word: "The *tombeau* destroys or consumes memory; conversely, it remembers someone who has died, reflecting on his [or her] artistic utterances by reproducing them in altered form."[2] As the *tombeau* is a form of reproduction, parallels can be drawn with an industrial invention: the phonograph. The below paragraph from Abbate's article concisely summarizes the crux of my piece:

> Besides the phonograph, however, there are other box-shaped images that *tombeau* suggests: not only the literal tomb, but also a kind of miniature theater, a box containing something that has been brought to life. Thus the *tombeau* invokes two ideas that are inversions of one another. It plays back a lifeless work. But it is also inspired by that work, like a puppet in a theater of reanimation, a lifeless object set in motion by some hand that moves from within. The living composer plays his imperfect recording of a dead master's sounds, and a past master brings a present composer back from stasis or death.[3]

   I chose the title *Tombeau(x)* to demonstrate the simultaneous existence of single and multiple *tombeaux*. The players in my piece span three centuries: player-piano technology dates to the late 19th century; the Commodore 64 was invented in 1982; and ChucK, the programming language used to control everything and generate sound of its own, is a product of the 21st century. The player piano and Commodore 64 are both outdated, obsolete technologies that are being reanimated for their sound. Box-like enclosures house long-silenced voices brought back from the dead: these are physical *tombeaux*. I make use of samples of music by other composers in Mvt. III. In isolation from their complete context, these too become sound objects from which new meaning is constructed through juxtaposition and association. I selected these samples from recordings of pieces that I performed in my time at St. Olaf. Now, the work serves as a *tombeau* in the commemorative sense: an expression of the summation of my musical education. My recital is also a *tombeau*—it is the headstone on my composition degree. Finally, this recital hall is a *tombeau*,

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[1] Carolyn Abbate, "Outside Ravel's Tomb," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol 52, No. 3 (Autumn 1999): 465–530.
[2] Abbate, 470.
[3] Ibid., 470.

enclosing within its walls a musical experience that is extremely unlikely to ever be heard again in the same sequence and entirety.

I.   Arcadia

". . . much is eternal in the cemetery garden. Mortal remains do not decay, but stay, as they are, in sustained sleep, or as cinders safe from mutation. And like Arcadia, these immutable dead recede from us as we age and change and experience passing time; their immutability, like that of the pastoral Edens we visit in imagination, is comforting."[4]

Arcadia is the mythological pastoral utopia. The contemporary cemetery strives for the Arcadian ideal: a well-cultivated garden characterized by lack of decay and eternal rest. This movement is composed entirely of sine tones. The sine wave, the ur-component of all sounds, possesses an ideal purity. However, it is rarely, if ever, found in its pure form in nature. "Arcadia" makes use of functions that generate natural harmonics based on a fundamental pitch, here C_1. The length and spacing of each tone are also derived from the harmonic series. As the movement progresses, the spectra shift from harmonic to inharmonic, illustrating the illusory nature of Arcadian utopia. Circular panning around the 4 channels also increases, introducing physically-perceptible turbulence to the Edenic status quo. "Arcadia" culminates in a maelstrom of additive timbres no longer identifiable as sine tones, cut off abruptly by the initial note of the next movement.

II.   Musette

"A musette is commonly defined either as an instrument resembling a small bagpipe or as a piece, a pastoral dance with a drone bass that imitates both the instrument and its characteristic repertory. François Couperin wrote a number of keyboard musettes, stylizations of peasant bucolism into faux-naïve harpsichord dances that suggest Watteau's canvases, with their aristocrats playing at being shepherdesses. Couperin's musettes harbor the ultimate lost sound-object: music made in Arcadia. . . . What remained constant was a musical feature, the bourdon, a single note sustained in almost every measure. Otherwise, keyboard musettes became mechanical, representing not pastoral music per se, but music boxes. One could say they became representations of Arcadia at several removes: music boxes were built playing little shepherd dances, and musettes came to imitate not that dance but its automated medium. And once that had happened, a resonant semiotic particle from the original dance, Arcadia, could easily leach away. Perhaps the metamorphosis into mechanism was implicit from the outset, since even musettes representing pastoral sounds already imitated something constructed, not real."[5]

This movement is the first appearance of the player piano and the Commodore 64. Here, an instrumental transition is made from the utopian sine waves of Arcadia to real-world mechanical instruments. These instruments are the music box, striving for the blissfully bucolic Arcadian ideal but unable to replicate it. As such, the C_1 *bourdon* drone continues, this time as a muted note in the piano. Where this note was sustained without articulation breaks in the first movement, it is now broken up due to the inevitable decay of the piano. This tolling assumes a sinister position: reminiscent of cathedral bells, it brings to mind connotations of fatalism and a deeply unsettling knocking from within the tomb. Like the Enlightenment image of the torch-bearing hand emerging from the frontispiece of Rousseau's tomb, this mechanical *bourdon* makes us wonder at the animation of the internal. Later in this movement, unison lines between the Commodore 64, player piano, and ChucK subtly morph in relative amplitudes: past sounds exist in tandem while hiding behind the barriers of present sounds; interiors are revealed through exteriors. As this musette meanders ever onward, the omnipresent threat of mechanical failure becomes increasingly palpable; the horror of mortality in our machined evocation of eternity reduces this perpetual dance to parodic grotesquerie.

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[4] Abbate, 468.

[5] Ibid., 501–2.

III.   Extimacy

"Anyone who tries to look into the space behind the walls or to hear what is really there is making a grave mistake. . . . But if we were to transgress a border to the hidden places where such sounds can be heard, we would discover vulgarity, melancholy, and stupor. . . . Never wish to break open the toy and see inside."[6]

In Lacanian philosophy, extimacy (from French neologism *extimité*) describes the simultaneous existence of the Real both inside and outside a given system. Samples of other past composers combined with samples of my own previous work are manipulated to illustrate the "paradox of extimacy" in which the "external, contingent, found element… simultaneously stands for the subject's innermost being."[7] Each external piece brings with it a set of unique meanings and historical contexts, which blossom in manipulation and juxtaposition. In the 19th century, mechanical failure became a terrifying notion with the appearance of humanoid musical automata; now, manipulated recordings of the human voice illustrate this uncanny horror. Finally, the *tombeau*'s "symbiotic, even phagic, relationship to dead thoughts and lost objects" comes to be realized.[8] The mechanical sounds generated by the player piano and the Commodore 64 are consumed and processed by the laptop running ChucK. As the line between animated and animator becomes blurred, so does that between composition and composer. To what extent is the human performer merely a machine reading a set of instructions, attempting to convey the intangible? In participating in the realization of one's own work, might the composer be controlled by his/her very creation? In the context of this piece, could Abbate's article function both as a set of instructions and as a found element in dialogue with itself? As these questions are explored in mesmerizing transmedial sonic dialogue, elements from the previous two movements return, bringing this *tombeau* to rest—a rest characterized not by its finality but by the eternal echoes of its extimacy in auto-necrophagous feedback.

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[6] Abbate, 519–20.
[7] Ibid., 521.
[8] Ibid., 471.