

Amnemonic Site - Thoughts and Sources

"By the grace of this forgetting, we temporarily shelve our inherited ways of looking and see things as if for the first time..."¹

For over a year, the working title of Amnemonic Site was "Amusia" ("...a sharp decrement in an individual's ability to grasp musical relationships in the perception of sounds, or in the ability to perform, read, or write music." 2) I related to this idea when I discovered it because I had been experiencing an extended sensation of dissolution regarding composition. It was a feeling no doubt spurred on by the recurrent dissection and analysis I was undertaking in the Music/Sound MFA program at Bard College in upstate New York. The more I looked at reasons for making new work, the more they dissolved. The more I tried to create a logical and coherent approach to composing, the more I ended up with half-finished projects. The more saturated I became with hearing other people's work, the more I forgot what my own work was about.

But perhaps this state of mind could be interesting... What would it be like to lack comprehension of musical form? What would it be like to forget that such a thing as "music" even exists? Couldn't this be liberating? Such a state might allow one to really listen - to hear more clearly the subtle textures, tones, and pseudo-melodies in everyday objects and materials. I began imagining a culture in which the idea of music had been forgotten or never learned, but in which people insisted on the value and practice of collective sound-making activity. What would their "music" sound like?

I have been involved for some time in organizing and directing group sound-making activities as a means of collecting raw material for studio compositions. On a frigid February day in 2004, I listened to and recorded a Chinese New Year's celebration in Chinatown, Manhattan. The complexity and proliferation of sound was astounding, and united every action of every witness/participant into a mass of sonic confusion. The thousands of excited voices all around me, confetti rockets, firecrackers, shouting, footsteps on crumpled paper, Chinese dragon drums, Scottish marching snares and bagpipes, Chinese pop music blaring through speakers, and the distorted voices of announcers using cheap microphones. All of this was happening simultaneously and immersively. This was the kind of sonic environment I wanted to create! It sparked the idea of making acoustic spatialized "noise" compositions.

Each sound making up the totality of this environment could be analyzed in terms of density (rate of occurrence) and frequency (occupation of the frequency spectrum), and then translated into a suitable analogue, creating not a reproduction but a reflection of the original environment. This thought process resulted in two performances in 2004, one at the Intransitive Music Festival in Boston, MA, and one at Bard College. Wood, firecrackers, rattles, voices, harmonicas and other objects were "played" following a simple score which determined the sequence of sound events and to some degree, the interaction between players. In the second piece, participants additionally played the volume knobs of 12 small cd players containing pre-recorded elements, including sine-tone sweeps, organ chords and field recordings of crowds. Perhaps the idea of "amusia" could be a new way of looking at pieces I was already making...

Recordings of the Chinese New Year's celebration and those two live performances served as the instigation for and backbone of Amnemonic Site. It's the first piece

I've made where boundaries between live and studio modes of composing begin to blur - recorded becomes live becomes recorded, with the studio as a final place for manipulating and composing the material. (Currently, I am working on pieces where the situation is reversed, and the live performance will be the compositional platform.)

So why did the title change from "Amusia" to Amnemonic Site? After having finished work on the cd, I realized that it would be inaccurate (or at least arrogant) to think of this idea as a permanent state. It doesn't seem possible or desirable to completely forget all music without the very undesired root cause - brain injury. So instead, one could speak of going into or inhabiting a "place of forgetting", an amnemonic site. This could refer to both the process of creating the work and the act of listening to it. It's a place I try (and sometimes succeed) to reach while composing. I forget any other music than my own, forget that there are rules or requirements for a music to exist, forget all of the ideas and forms that I have absorbed. It's the ultimate reward of engaging the work.

1. Pollan, Michael, *The Botany of Desire*, p. 168, Random House, New York, 2001
2. Cook, Perry R. (ed.), *Music, Cognition and Computerized Sound*, p. 217, MIT Press, 2001