

The Blipvert Method: Consonance at the Intersection of Composition and Performance

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The confluence of composition and performance is a compelling phenomenon which confronts many 21st century electronic music artists, brought about primarily through an independent “DiY” ethos to creativity and the ubiquity of advanced musical, and non-musical, technology. Techniques of software programming, improvisation, reconstitution of electric and acoustic instruments, sampling, and manipulation of audio in a live setting (to name a few) may all find a place in an artist’s methodology regardless of style. It may be even be said that the techniques employed by an artist delineate the style itself, e.g. “controllerism,” “turntablism,” “live PA,” etc. The following paper offers an in-depth structural analysis of the composition and performance fundamentals of BlipVert, a pseudonym under which I have been presenting electronic music to the general public for almost two decades. The BlipVert composition “New Choomish,” from BlipVert’s 2010 release “Quantumbuster Now” (Eat Concrete Records, NL), is examined as a construct which manifests an expressive faculty in both live and studio environments, consequently demonstrating a profoundly synthesized framework of sonic and gestural principles.

Keywords: composition, performance, improvisation, movement, building-blocks, Northlich, BlipVert, New Choomish

“BlipVert,” a pseudonym under which I have been producing and performing electronic music since 2001, represents a personalized musical aesthetic which synthesizes composition and performance by means of spontaneity, i.e. improvisation. Spontaneity in fact exemplifies the purpose of my “instrumental” choices in live performance and their subsequent relation to my compositional procedures. Bruno Nettle determines degrees of musical decision-making in improvisation as dependent on the “size of the building blocks” available to the musician, and “the larger the blocks, the greater the internal variability” (1974, 15).

¹ This article is a revised excerpt from chapter 4 of William Northlich's Master's thesis from Wesleyan University, "The DiY Dynamic: Experimental Electronic Music and the Underground in the San Francisco Bay Area."

According to Nettl, “building blocks” refer to the component units of an established musical system, and can consist of

...the tones selected from a tone system; they are melodic motifs; they are harmonic intervals and interval sequences in improvised polyphony; they are types of sections (e.g., the exposition of sonata) (ibid., 13).

Nettl’s mention of “greater internal variability” due to larger building blocks—as well as the idea that improvisation and composition share similar aesthetic traditions—insinuates that an artist’s repertoire consists of elements from both spontaneous inspiration and pre-planned creative ideas. Moreover, the *efficacy* of an artist’s repertoire relies on the varied combinations of building blocks which are developed and implemented throughout the creative process.

BLIPVERT COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS

At its core, BlipVert relies on a solid foundation of meticulously composed digital audio tracks which contain a great deal of tangible input, i.e. interaction with hardware components as opposed to software. To this end, my home studio environment is primarily oriented towards devices that allow maximum “hands-on” involvement. I prefer to use studio components that I can treat like instruments, i.e. “playing” the studio devices with my hands as opposed to manipulating a virtual environment. I work with hardware components such as drum machines, samplers, and mixing devices that are independent from the internal software of my computer.² The more I physically interact with my studio components, the more visceral my compositions become. The electronic music studio itself effectively becomes an instrument (Dudas 2010, 29). Hence, the idea of a “studio improviser” (ibid., 30) is an ever-present element in my work; I am able to intimately create, edit, and reconfigure ideas at a moment’s notice. The incorporation of randomness as a controlling factor in my compositions is a direct result of the “hands on” nature of my studio environment.

One of the sole software programs I use is ProTools, a reliable recording and digital editing workstation that acts as the “central nervous system” for recording and editing music. For my purposes, ProTools presents a user-friendly and versatile environment for digital manipulation and editing of sound files “in a variety of ways down to the smallest details” (Katz 2010, 148). The ability to manipulate sound in

² Some of the more notable “hands-on” components in my studio include a MacBook Pro, an Elektron Digitakt Drum Machine/Sampler, a Korg Electribe EMX-1, and a Boss SP-404.

this manner provides the bedrock of the controlled chaos that marks any BlipVert performance.

Taking the lead from Nettle's above pronouncements, the BlipVert compositional repertory may therefore be described as a system of distinctly individual hyper-developed musical units, or "building blocks of many different orders" (Nettl 1974, 15). Musical units, i.e. building blocks, in BlipVert compositions consist of one of two concepts:

- A fully realized musical passage, occupying any length of time, which is used as the focal point for further development. Some examples of these musical ideas can include multi-layered polyphonic vocal melodies, complex percussion patterns, extended melodic motifs, and genre specific musical sections utilizing specific instrumentation.
- A mood or overall sonic temperament that is desired to be expressed through a process of "collage" composition. That is, the combination of multiple sonic textures to create moods of intensity, manic happiness, disorientation, anger, and terror.

Each musical unit is essentially treated separately as its own composition, which results in a "condensed blur of electronics that borrows from everything: jazz, glitch, metal, IDM, funk, and probably at least a few genres that haven't even been named yet" (Breakcore 2009). Consequently, musical units in BlipVert compositions are often multitudinous in their conception, and furthermore contain intimate and interrelated connections with each other, such as a continuation of a motif, revisiting distinct structural fragments, or elaboration of a previously stated theme (see Fig. 1). However, the most salient characteristic of any BlipVert composition, and subsequent performance, is its "unpredictable and frenetic" (ibid) nature, i.e. the presence of rapid, randomly shifting musical ideas that seem to provide a "real-time window" (ibid) into my compositional thought process. Nicolas Slonimsky provides an apt description of compositional development that is perfectly representative of BlipVert compositions and, despite their unpredictability, their underlying coherency:

When a musical seed grows, each cell divides into several cells, forming new musical organisms. A good composer manages to maintain unity among all these microscopic—or shall we say musicoscopic—particles [...]. (1966, 63)

The resulting unity of such musicoscopic particles results in a highly flexible compositional process where: "Songs become liquid. They become vehicles for improvisation, or source materials, field recordings almost, that could be reconfigured or remixed to suit the future" (Toop 1995, 44).

The BlipVert composition “New Choomish”—released 2010, Eat Concrete Records, Den Bosch, Netherlands—provides a good example of separately distinguishable musical units that maintain both underlying connections and random shifts of mood and texture.³ New Choomish consists of five separate musical ideas, or sections, each of which displays different building blocks as well as different dimensions of my musical abilities (see Fig. 1). The composition opens with a multi-layered vocal sequence (Musical Unit #1) that establishes the initial tempo, later joined by a compliment of percussion, electric piano, and synthesizer that further outlines the tempo. The vocal sequence and instrumentation combine with each other and dramatically interact until 1:23, where a sudden shift to aggressive, edited percussion occurs. The second musical unit comes into play here, which consists of a frantic sonic temperament characterized by a collage of synthesizer textures, percussion fragments, incomprehensible vocals, samples, white noise, and effected elements from the previous section to create an almost disorienting effect. The second musical unit culminates with an explosive climax at 2:46, featuring an accelerated sequence of percussion and synthesizer that gradually slows to stop at a descending glissando vocal line at 2:58. From here, the third musical unit takes shape, with a whispered vocal chorus accompanied by a subdued frenetic drum pattern. Occasional, brief interruptions of sung, choral, and yelled vocal textures add depth and playfulness to the whispering chorus and drums. After another dramatic climax ending at 3:26, the fourth musical unit occurs with faster aggressive edited percussion, similar to the second idea. The fourth unit continues to 4:37, where a sustained synthesizer line seems to put the composition in a holding pattern before moving forward. The fifth and final musical unit enters with a surprising ensemble of South Indian percussion, handclaps, synthesizer, two independent choral melodies, and a whispered spoken vocal line, ushering the listener into a completely new sonic realm as compared with the previous sections.

At first listen, the musical units in New Choomish seem haphazardly thrown together. Yet, by observing the composition closely, some sensible connections can be made between each musical unit. The first unit prominently introduces complex, creative vocal layering as one of the main components of the entire composition. This kind of vocal layering is prominently heard in the third and fifth musical unit, as are “whispered” vocal textures. The first unit also introduces a primary “pulse” to the composition through the vocal layering and added complement of electric piano and percussion, a concept to be reiterated later on.

³ Please refer to the accompanying audio file of “New Choomish” in its entirety for reference to the compositional analysis.

The use of complex, disjointed, aggressive percussion formulates another primary component of the composition; instead of “keeping a beat,” percussion is used to make “more interesting broken beats and rhythms” (Mori in Rodgers 2010, 75). Units two and four take on the concept of aggressive percussion as the focal point, with occasional bursts of synthesizer samples and ancillary textures. The aggressive percussion textures in unit two also give way to an explosive climax at the end of the unit, which eventually subsides to accentuate the subdued feel in unit three (also emphasized in units one and five). Unit three retains an element of aggressive percussion and multi-layered vocals, maintaining connections with the previous two musical units introduced thus far. Another explosive climax occurs at the end of unit three, which not only repeats a significant element of unit two, but also leads the listener to a revisiting of unit three within a completely new preparatory context. This is to say that both moments of climax are given different treatments as to their resolve, one leading to a subdued feel and the other leading to an aggressive feel.

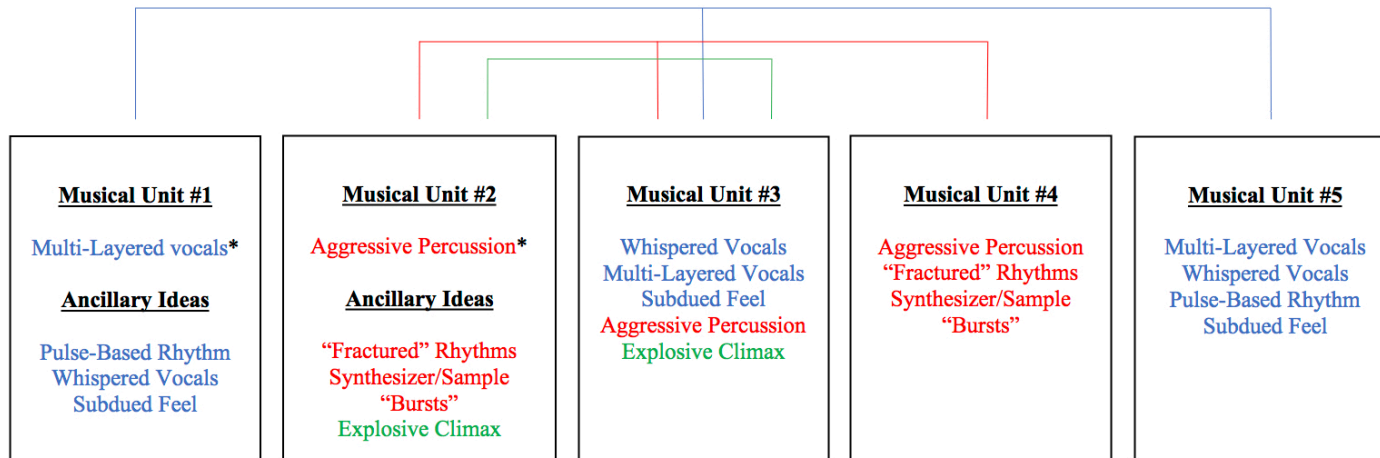
While unit five may seem random, the relationship to units one and three—whispered vocals, multi-layered vocals, subdued feel—emphasizes the desire to use vocals as the transmuting foundation of the musical unit. Furthermore, unit five’s return to a steady pulse-based percussive texture is reminiscent of unit one. Based on this rationale, units one and five provide coherent structures of rhythm centered musical units that effectively bookend the frenetic nature of the additional units.

From a more abstract perspective, the most sensible way to interpret any BlipVert composition is that of a “rich collage” of sounds, afforded by the “manipulability of recording technology” (Katz 2010, 163). As indicated earlier, the flexible and versatile nature of ProTools helps to achieve the kind of hyper-development within units that ultimately contributes to the chaotic nature of BlipVert compositions. The milieu of editing, idea-shifting, aesthetic combinations, and collage-oriented sound construction in BlipVert compositions indicates, “it is not the quality of the final product that is most important, but the quality of the manipulation” (Wordsayer in Schloss 2004, 165). Viewed in this way, BlipVert compositions maintain an intimate connection with their application to live performance. BlipVert performances are as unpredictable as the music itself; compositions are further manipulated with a variety of live performance hardware that focuses on sound manipulation rather than the successful execution of a composition from beginning to end. Thus, the “hands-on” nature of sound manipulation in my home studio translates directly to the performance venue; compositions that have already had a significant amount of tangible input are essentially given a newer, yet familiar, field in which to roam.

FIG. 1

BLIPVERT COMPOSITIONAL SCHEMATIC

“NEW CHOOMISH” – RELEASED 2010 EAT CONCRETE RECORDS, QUANTUMBUSTER NOW EP

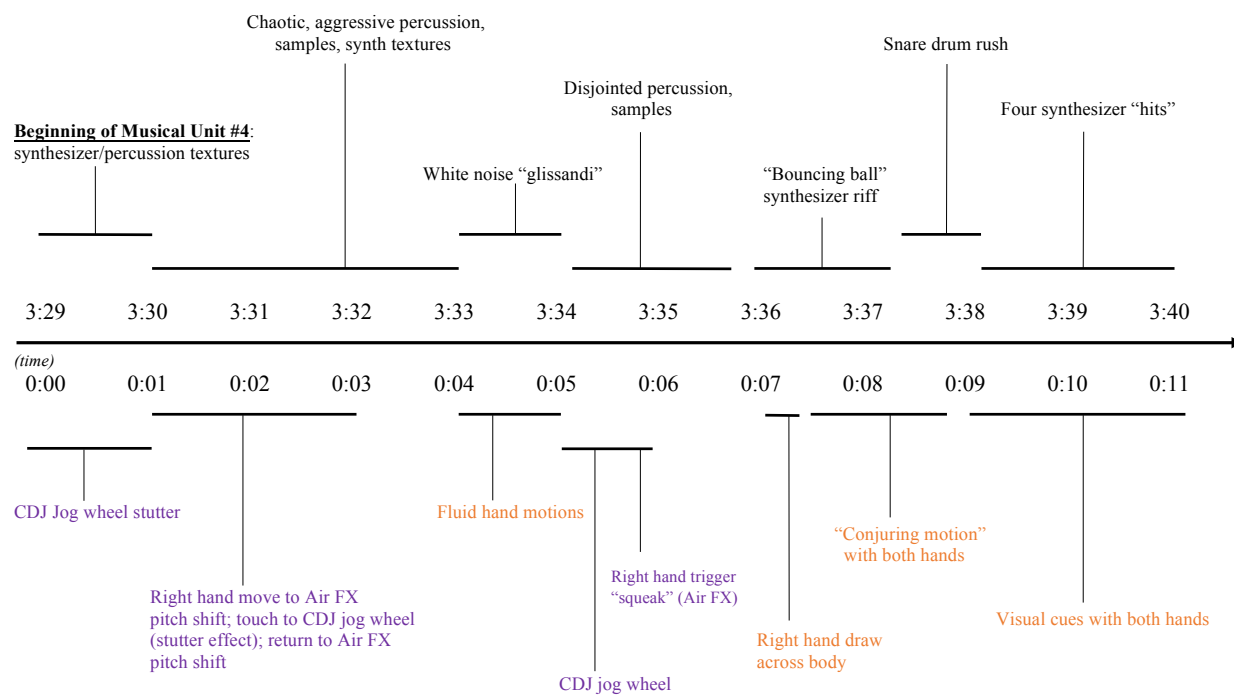


- * = Fundamental design of entire idea. Subsequent (ancillary) development occurs as a result of fundamental design.
- Colors indicate connecting elements from idea to idea.
- If there is no fundamental design (*) indicated, idea components are a result of previous fundamental and ancillary developments.

FIG. 2

BLIPVERT PERFORMANCE STRUCTURE

ORIGINAL COMPOSITION (OC)



LIVE PERFORMANCE DECISIONS/ACTIONS (LP)

Key: "Instrumental Usage," Body Movements

BLIPVERT LIVE PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

In live performance, I employ the use of a small and mobile apparatus of electronic components which is capable of a maximum amount of freedom and power. The activity of sound manipulation, as evidenced in the compositional framework, takes on a more central role due to the dynamic nature of my live performance components.⁴ In addition to sound manipulation, ancillary body movements are incorporated to heighten the visual aspect of the performance. Ultimately, I use my composed material as vehicles for improvisation. The resulting sonic experience is full of energy and erratic. When this experience is combined with ancillary improvised vocal accompaniment, microphone feedback delay loops, and an occasional woodwind solo, the live show becomes a mixture of intensity, drama, kineticism, and placidness.

The visual result of my live performances is that of rapid arm, hand, and body movements. Often times, determination as to *how* sound is manipulated and produced can become clouded, as some of my movements involve small gestures that do not indicate a specific effect or alteration. However, due to the relatively streamlined nature of my live performance setup, gestural movements are concentrated enough as to be sensible without being indecipherable. An audience member, with some inspection, can *eventually* determine the purposes of my gestures and the subsequent connection to the types of sounds that are produced.

Many of my body movements can sometimes represent a bizarre, frenetic kind of “Brownian motion,” which has been defined by some audience members as loosely choreographed dancing (see “The 2010 Annual Transbay Skronkathon”). I equate this kind of motion to “body tricks” used in DJ battles (Katz 2010, 135). These kinds

⁴ The hardware and software configurations in my live performances have undergone many changes over the last sixteen years. For a significant period of time (and when this paper was first written), one of the most expressive pieces of equipment I employed in my live performances was a Pioneer CDJ deck, a CD playback unit which featured effect and sound-file manipulation via the use of a centralized “jog wheel” on the unit itself, thus providing a significant amount of “tangible” interaction with the sonic material (similar to my above-mentioned studio methodology). Hence, the Pioneer CDJ deck will be referenced as the primary “instrumental” component with which I interact in the live performance analysis. Currently, I use a MacBook Air computer which runs a highly dynamic sound-file playback program, i.e. a “DJ” software program, called Traktor, produced by the Native Instruments company. Traktor offers a wide range of options for sample manipulation and sound effect alteration. Along with Traktor, I use an MPC MPK Mini MIDI controller and a TC Electronic “Vocalive” vocal effects processor, both of which, I have found, equal the Pioneer CDJ in terms of tangible interaction and expressivity.

of moves, such as spinning in place, jumping up and down, random twitching, and aimless meandering about “do not affect...the sound of the routine,” but rather add to the visual appeal of the performance (*ibid*). Thus, gesture is not only a vital aspect of performing BlipVert in a live setting, it acts as visual accompaniment to the overall chaotic sonic experience, allowing me to step away from pure “instrumental” focus and incorporate drama, humour, anger, and silliness. It could be reasoned that my ancillary body movements at their core maintain strong improvisatory character as well, i.e. “interpretive” movement. By observing that “spontaneity of execution is the essence of music vitally connected to the human body” (Partch 1974, 44), the improvisatory inclination of my BlipVert project can be witnessed visually from both instrumental gestures and interpretive movement.

A performance of New Choomish in Eindhoven, Netherlands during a 2009 European tour is an ideal opportunity to witness the concomitant elements of sound manipulation and body movement working together (“BlipVert Live @ Gaslab: Eat Concrete ‘Bassfudge Powerscones’ Tour 2009”).⁵ Due to the multitude of activities occurring within this one excerpt, the first eleven seconds of the live performance (LP) will be compared and contrasted along with the original composition (OC) (see Fig. 2). The beginning of the live performance starts at the beginning of musical idea four (OC 3:29). From 0:00 to 0:01 (LP) the original material is “stuttered” by use of the Pioneer CDJ jog wheel, creating a brief, dramatic foreshadowing (or sustaining) of what is to come. Over the next two and a half seconds a multitude of actions occur (LP 0:01–0:03.5). A right-hand move to the Alesis Air FX pitch shift is followed by a brief touch of the CDJ jog wheel (still on a stutter effect), with a return back to the Air FX pitch shift culminating in a “pausing-hands-to-chest” motion at 0:03. The altering of the original composition’s percussion and samples (OC 3:30–3:33)—in addition to the rapid arm movements required to alter the sounds—add an elevated dramatic effect to the already chaotic material. The original composition next introduces rapidly falling and ascending “white noise glissandi” (OC 3:33–3:34). The live performance choice made in this case is to visually interpret the glissandi by use of fluid hand motions (LP 0:04–0:05), which seem to logically extend from the pausing motion at LP 0:03. The original composition then introduces a disjointed two-second collection of percussion and samples (OC 3:34–3:35). The sonic recreation ability of the CDJ comes into play during this part of the performance, as multiple right and left-hand touches on the jog wheel turn this of the original composition into a pitch-shifted drum break (LP 0:05–0:06). The drum break

⁵ Please refer to the web link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4j-bWLN2XU&t=94s> in its entirety for reference to the live performance analysis.

culminates with a quick right hand wave over the Air FX (LP 0:06), providing a small “squeak” before moving forward.

At this point, body movements take over the rest of the performance. The original composition's “bouncing ball” synthesizer riff (OC 3:36–3:37) is visually interpreted with an extended right hand draw across the body (LP 0:07). A sped-up snare drum “rush” (OC 3:38) is interpreted with a kind of “conjuring” motion with both hands (LP 0:07 to 0:09). Finally, four prominent synthesizer hits, each at different pitches (OC 3:38–3:39[40]) are emphatically stated with four defined visual cues with both hands (LP 0:10–0:12). The visual cues are also delivered in different directions to highlight the changes in pitch.

The strength and purpose of any BlipVert performance relies on an overriding sense of experimentation and spontaneous interaction with sonic material. The overall aim of the above analysis is to provide an example of the *types* of improvisatory choices that are made, as well as the *frequency* of improvisatory decision-making. A BlipVert performance contains a multitude of actions occurring within an extremely short period of time, resulting in an entirely new composition from both aural and visual standpoints. A colourful analogy that could characterize my performances would be that I become an “action painter” (Veal 2001, 100) of sound and visual motion. Each BlipVert performance is an “episodic coloration in which ‘explosive sonic events’ take place” (ibid) coupled with equally explosive visual events.

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