

Stuart Russell ~ Composer



Whilst working in the defence industry Stuart Russell developed an interest in electronic music. He is now a UK based composer who works with both electronic and conventional instrumentation. His approach takes the form of the sounds he makes, collects or processes and are a means to a compositional end which enables him to arrive at textures, rhythms and effects outside the of usual instrumentation. He played in various rock bands for about fifteen years before composing “seriously” again in 2000.

Stuart is described on the Cool Fusion web site as “a pioneering stalwart of electronic and electroacoustic composition whose music is rooted in landscape of the Thames and Thames Estuary”. A few years ago Stuart built a home studio and later went on to study composition with Alan Parsons. He often performs live with laptop and devices. His collaborations are often cross-arts projects with people from differing musical backgrounds and traditions. He also curates electronic/new music events at Slackspace, Colchester.

What is Slackspace?

Slackspace is a voluntary arts project set up in Colchester to make artistic use of empty shops and premises in Colchester, its been going since 2009 and has given critical support to emerging artists in the area. I've done several concerts there bringing electroacoustic and new experimental music to an audience that would otherwise not encounter such things outside of academia. It has sprung some surprises and been successful, though organising it, and essentially asking people to play for free is difficult.

Where do your get your ideas from?

Some come from hearing things; often to do with locations, some from hearing a piece by someone else, which in turn, fires my imagination. However ideas can come really out of nowhere

How long have you been composing?

I first started composing electronic music in my early twenties, but didn't take it that seriously, at the time I was more interested in learning Music Technology, mixing, mastering etc. I was into electronic music then but lacked the budget or knowhow to do anything constructive. I worked with someone who has since become a well known media composer. Pre Atari MIDI computer days (1985), I used to play synths for him, and in return, he introduced me to music technology.

Do you tend to start a piece and finish it in one session?

This really depends on how involved the piece is, there are some short pieces, that are either improvisations, or, possibly more accurately, spontaneous compositions, but more complex pieces, especially if I'm mixing electronics with conventional instrumentation, can take far longer. Having said that I personally dislike projects that drag, and so I'm always looking to finalise any project I have on the go.

Do you edit your pieces much? Go back to them after a few weeks or months?

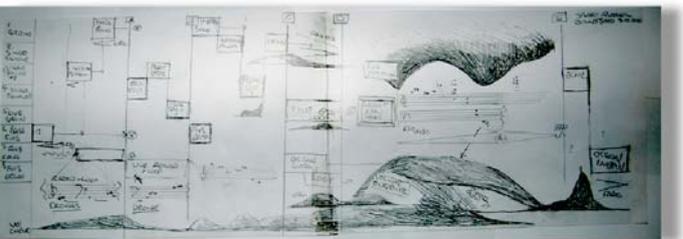
Yes, especially if the piece involves a written score. I want to make sure it makes complete sense and that all information is correct, also as I always assume the musicians time is limited, I want to make sure that the score is completely legible, that there are no misleading spellings or beamings, or badly drawn slurs etc.

Did you study 'new music'? If so, where?

I didn't do music at school, it wasn't available for starters at secondary school, but post rock music I went to the City Lit and did a three year course on composition, which actually inhibited me, largely because it taught techniques as rules in an historical context. It didn't help me write what was in my head, so in the end I took private tuition from

several composers working in Colchester.

The score for 'Trainsounds' - how would you read that?



It's an idiomatic score for using Ableton live in conjunction with a launchpad, a MIDI keyboard and a control surface (one that controls volumes on the channels). It reads left-to right in conventional manner and the instruments (in this case samples or synths) down the left hand side. The squares are buttons on the Launchpad to press which launch samples and MIDI clips, or record loops. The notes on the staves are guides for improvisation- i.e. those are the notes to use but are not time-defined (no lengths given). The piece is not time defined but process defined meaning a previous stage has to be done before moving onto the next. The player can make the sections as long or as short as they like. Although this is an idiomatic piece it can be interpreted in a different situation if the launchpad boxes are substituted for commands or music frames.

Presumably the 'large shaded spaces' indicate sound waves or volume?

The large shaded space on the top is an indication of where the file position pointer in the granular synth should be, if this were a desktop DAW piece and one was writing a control line, it would look something like this- the top is the end of the sample, the lowest peaks are the beginning. Other shaded spaces are indeed sound waves and intended volume curves.

How did the commission for the London Cultural Olympiad drop onto your desk?

Cool Fusion were looking for a programme that was diverse; they had drama as well as music, and my music on Soundcloud had impressed the initial committee. I submitted a proposal of what I wanted to, which involved me researching and speaking to keen athletes. This was an area completely outside my comfort zone and I made a point in the proposal that I would be starting ground-up and that it may result in me making music outside of my normal area, which I think it did.

Who, if anyone, from the classical world has been an influence?

In terms of composers I felt very drawn to the American Minimalists 10 years ago, and part of that has retained slightly in my music, though these days it might be very hard to spot, but more consistently I feel very close to the 60s period of Gyorgy Ligeti, in particular Atmospheres, Lontano, Lux Aeterna, the Requiem, Volumina, which I first heard at about 14 in the Kubrick film "2001 a space odyssey". Individual pieces that have influenced me over the years include the C minor Passacaglia and Fugue by Bach, Mixtur by Stockhausen, Mortus Plango, Vivos Voco by Jonathan Harvey and recently Gerard Grisey - Partials.

Does where you live influence the tone and ideas in your music?

The Thames Estuary is a unique place. The landscape is not pretty; it has this roughness to it, brambles, hedgerows, lots of industrial scars from quarrying, the petrochemical industry (now largely gone), both world wars, landfill sites, coal burning power stations, munitions factories. What is interesting is nature has very quickly grabbed it back; walk along the sea wall and suddenly an old lamp post juts out of a bramble bush because under all the greenery is a forgotten road from a long demolished factory site.

The greenery has a harshness to it, some parts are like a rough scrubland, it can be extremely bleak and as a result, have this huge grandeur. There are plenty of things that make sounds; the numerous birds, several buoys still have bells on them that ring when the tide changes or the wind pushes them, there are many remnants of past industry that whistle and sing in the wind, That feeds into what I do, often literally in the form of samples or field recordings. I'm not interested in doing pretty little pieces, so I find a language that best expresses the beauty in this part of the world. There are several pieces which directly refer to various locations, and often there is this dark sound, but also there's a lighter side as well.

Do you think where you live affects opportunities to perform or get commissions?

I don't think so these days with the internet; I've not been held back by living outside a major city. The world has shrunk considerably in the last 13 years as far as reaching across borders. I can remember in the 1980s to be taken seriously in rock music one had to live in London, nowadays with Soundcloud, Bandcamp, Twitter etc the days of having to live in the right place have largely gone.

You wrote a piece on your blog which was about how “music can be extremely difficult to play but easy to read” and how some composers are “making scores look more difficult to read than they need be” <-> Do you want to elaborate on this?

This came out of an open score project I was helping to run. Somebody had attempted to write a complexity-style piece but basically didn't understand the genre and the fact that complexity required both collaboration with the performers and time to really get to grips with it; both were severely limited in this project, and the score itself was asking too much in too short a time frame, so unfortunately the composer couldn't be programmed. I had seen the score and it was misleading, giving the impression of something deliberately looking more complex than it actually was, which I find pretentious, hence my blog.

Does tension require complexity?

No. Tension can be created with sound clusters, rhythm and conventional means. However there is a different tension created by deliberate complexity which is to do with the challenge of interpretation. I'm often tempted to feel that this has parallels with sport at times, and is less end-objective than a conventional piece, it still has an objectivity but more to do with playing than the final end result. But having said that there are complexity composers that I admire, where their complexity is justified in that it creates effects, and I point out that those composers can bring back what they've written, so it's obvious the composer has clear intentions.

What is on the horizon for you in 2013?

There are a number of live performances coming up, an intriguing commission which is still vague at the moment. On Saturday 13th July I premiere my piece “Between brass and bells” for Solo trumpet and electronics, 4 channel diffusion, in which the sounds of a full brass quintet have been sampled, harmonically separated then combined with extracted harmonies of church bells. I will also be doing another album in the Month of February as part of Rpmchallenge, which will be released in March and also hoping to bring Sonic Arts Forum to Colchester this year, funding allowing.

How has social media changed music?

Yes, it's now easy to propagate one's music very quickly and without the constraints of a traditional record company or publisher. However one still needs to put in a substantial amount of time in order to build up network and it works two ways; one needs to offer something in return of communication. It really doesn't work if one just tries to use it as advertising space - it demands quality interaction, and often on different levels. As such it's a very good means of discussing and developing ideas. There was once a period when one could have an act of pretending to be a reclusive genius that hid away in an ivory tower and just produced the work. This has now gone because there is not the infrastructure to do the propagation on behalf of the artist. One now has to be straightforward and explain the work, which I personally like.

Almost anyone can now have a recording studio in their home. How you feel this has impacted on music.

We now have very affordable (often free) equipment, hugely sophisticated, completely democratised yet whilst there's a fair few of us experimenting and having success, there is hell of a lot in classical and rock being ultra conservative and trying to essentially make music that fits into an imagined box.

Previous generations of musicians/composers like Hawkwind, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Ligeti, Stockhausen, Cage, Philip Glass set out to stand apart from what had gone before. Electronic music is still at the coal face yet look at the huge numbers trying to sound like X in the past - by all means be influenced, but make it your own!