Living Room Pieces is a sound installation that explores listening in the home - its special modes and attributes - reinventing the living space as a place of engagement and discovery.

Challenging some of the paradigms of contemporary music consumption, its huge inventory of sounds and the unpredictability of their occurrence create a listening environment that transforms one’s relationship to physical, architectural, social and aural space. Sounds from the installation interact with a room’s ambience; their timing and placement reinforce a listener’s sense of being “in the moment” - aware, attentive, resilient.

Living Room Pieces is a computer-generated, multichannel, long-form composition. Its structure is built on rules - for timing, for various types of signal processing, for spatialization - executed in “real time”, that create continuous change while maintaining the sense of a single, unifying, purposeful idea. On the one hand, every sounding moment is unique, never to occur again, on the other, the algorithms have a consistency that suggests, reassuringly, an underlying organizational intent. The composition’s form, in the broadest sense, is a seven day repeating cycle, instantiated each time the software is launched. In theory, this need only happen once, as the piece will run without interruption for as long as there’s power to the system.

This new version of Living Room Pieces (the piece’s first manifestation was in 2005, in an apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, where it ran uninterruptedly for one year) was originally commissioned by Kamer Negen Gallery in Belgium in 2019 for an 8 channel sound system. Subsequently, I had a minor revelation about the sound system that has allowed me to reduce it to two channels - two speakers but configured differently than the normal “stereo” setup. This version can be installed on an inexpensive Raspberry Pi computer - still generative and still integrated into the home environment, this system is nevertheless cheaper and easier to install than a full-blown 8 channel system with a more powerful computer.

The full equipment list for the installation is:

1. Raspberry Pi or Mac Mini computer, with power supply or cable

2. Two speakers, for example the Peachtree M24 or Kanto Yu on the high-end, or the cheaper Micca PB42. These sell as pairs with a stereo amp in one speaker, which makes connection to the computer easy. For Living Room Pieces, the speakers are placed as far apart as possible in the room, as opposed to the typical stereo “stage” setup.

3. Cables to power the speaker amplifier and to connect the second speaker and the computer to it.

When the computer is turned on, it automatically launches the program that plays the piece. A brief test sound is heard, confirming that both speakers are working. Then the piece plays, continuously, for as long as the system is left on. A recommended volume setting is achieved by turning the speakers all the way up; this setting is considered optimal and should not be changed. The installation can be muted by turning off the speakers.

When I say the piece plays, it doesn’t mean that sound will necessarily occur immediately. The timing algorithms result in a great deal of silence in the piece, hours can pass with nothing emitting from the system’s speakers. In the context of a piece that runs continuously for long durations - years potentially - this is of course to be expected.

There are 301 modules that constitute the installation, organized into 11 categories according to the characteristics - such as “intermittent”, “sustained”, “pitched” and so forth - that best describe the sounds the module plays. A module plays a specific sound or group of sounds in ways defined by a set of parameters that control duration, playback speed, location points in the sound file, various filter settings, panning and delay between the two speakers and reverb type - all of which may change during playback. The content ranges from field recordings to computer-generated tones, recorded improvisations by musician friends, “found” sounds, recordings of objects or activities (cooking, cleaning, walking, etc.), quotations from musical pieces and speech. Even if the same module is played back multiple times over a particular time period, it will always be noticeably different.

A module is “called up” by the program and played according to scheduling algorithms that form the structure of the piece. There are seven of these, one for each day of the week, and the order of the seven is determined when the program loads and will repeat as long as that “edition” runs. These scheduling algorithms call up modules according to criteria that determine how many, the category from which they come, their timing and duration. Some call multiple modules to play simultaneously, while others only call one at a time. One scheduling algorithm creates an ordered “row” of 12 modules that repeats throughout that day (and changes the next time the algorithm loads), an obvious homage to Schönberg’s serial technique. Another chooses a single module to play throughout the day. And so on. Since each of these scheduling algorithms has its own character, a listener may begin to associate a particular form of the piece to a particular day of the week. This juxtaposition of the predictable and the seemingly random is characteristic of Living Room Pieces.

The listening act is usually assumed to be, by definition, intentional and limited. One listens to music, to speech, to nature sounds that are relaxing, pleasing or informative. One also “listens out” for signs of danger; in fact, when the unfortunate situation arises that such a sound is made manifest, the listener experiences an intensity of emotion rarely felt during listening in general. But one doesn’t listen to trucks passing by, the construction site outside one’s window, or a neighbor’s dog barking. One hears these things without acknowledging them as sounds of interest in and of themselves. Pierre Schaeffer, John Cage and others posited these kinds of (un)sounds as having intrinsic value, yet 70 years on, the vast majority of listening is still focussed on a narrow range of sounds (or use of sounds - for example, The Beatles borrowed the sound of a low-flying plane in a song, transforming it from an annoying noise to an index of sexiness) - rejecting non-functional, i.e. “non-musical”, noise as nuisance.

Living Room Pieces revisits this modernist project, utilizing the potential of computer algorithms and moving the setting of the listener’s experience from the concert hall (or record player) to the living space itself, as the site where the fundamental contemporary paradox of control and the lack thereof plays itself out. The home is where we consider ourselves safe - from intrusions of all kinds - and progress is defined, in part, by how considerable this sense of control is. Yet into this area of comfort and predictability - achieved not least by an embrace of technologies such as the computer - comes a constant, implicit threat communicated via these same technologies - of social decay and alienation, of invasions both real and virtual, of financial instability, of political dysfunction, of breakdowns in physical and mental health. The transfer of the experience of sound into this space, as opposed to specialized or intentional spaces such as the concert hall or rock club, is fundamental to Living Room Pieces.

I mention Schaeffer and Cage as opposites that I seek, in Living Room Pieces, to reconcile, as two artists whose responses to technology and to radically changing social conditions frame the theoretical range of discussions about the sonic arts that continue today. Schaeffer sought a “reduced” listening, disassociating a sound from its source in order to make it abstract, amenable to usage in a compositional narrative. Cage, on the other hand, wanted sounds to be heard in and of themselves, without narrative, without relation within a functional, hierarchical structure. Neither of these projects were ultimately successful (though they’ve generated a library of commentary), as is evidenced by the ascendancy and ubiquity of popular music and the return of classical music to tonality, virtuosic (dramatic) display, and the constancy of its core repertoire.

Living Room Pieces is not an outsized project, its intentions are modest, limited to a personal, private experience for a, by definition, relatively tiny number of people. Yet it does seek to draw attention to some of the continuing contradictions and difficulties of listening, as a metaphor and extension of other aspects of life, in our day to day routine. It represents a challenge to the idea of music as a consumed and sometimes fetishized product, and points to a way of listening that’s an act, not of control, but of acceptance, openness and active involvement. It counters the notion of music as mood enhancer. By presenting the listener with a world of openness and potential, rather than a closed system of localized needs and desires, LIVING ROOM PIECES frees the mind and senses. The false sense of “entitlement” that underlies much of consumer culture is replaced by toleration for the unexpected, openness to ideas and influence.

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