

# Compete

and

# The Sound of Progress

*by Jed Skinner*

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**Compete**

## Background

This piece was created using location recordings of Leeds during the morning rush hour period of 20th April, 2009. Recordings were made at Leeds city train station and Bond Street in the city centre. The recordings were made using a Tascam HD-P2 portable digital recorder and a Sennheiser MKE-44 stereo microphone. A stereo microphone was used to capture a sense of space in the stereo image. The piece was produced on an Apple iBook G4, using Propellerheads Reason 3 and Apple Logic Pro 8.

The recordings were captured on a Monday morning, and I have used the train station recording to demonstrate the uniformity and mundanity of this particular moment of the day. The first recording to be heard in the piece is from the train station. The recording fades in with an anonymous, automated announcer proclaiming the arrival of the '0600 service from London King's Cross' followed by a cascade of footsteps and voices. In the station, this automated voice is louder than everything else. It is the most important of all sounds in this environment: people's journeys, and by extension aspects of their lives, depend on it in some way. However, after a while in the station, the frequent nature of the automated announcements means that it can be filtered out of one's consciousness. I wanted to try and bring this feeling into the piece.

To emphasise the echoing nature, which I found to be similar to a 'voice from above', I applied a tape delay effect to the channel. I adjusted the feedback of the delay to create a feeling of distance, emphasising a feeling of disorientation and disconnect. This coincides with an announcement of the train 'terminating here' and warning against parking in 'unauthorized points'. The formal, scientific tone is devoid of emotion, which to me seemed to contribute to an atmosphere of functionality. The sound of people moving in the station depicts an entirely functional scene. They do not seem to be really 'there' at all, but rather passing through, rushing to be somewhere else. Necessity is the only reason why they are in this location. Myriad unknown lifestyle factors mean that this commute is an aspect of the nature of these people's work, and pressure is upon them to arrive at the workplace on time. No-one really stops, or slows down, and most people do not have the time to do so. Time is the governor of this moment.

I have contrasted these rushing, urgent sounds with slow, sweeping chords, which open the piece. The usage of suspended seconds, ninths, suspended fourths and minor sevenths, in addition to their circular nature, mean that a 'resolution' is never reached. The cycle of these chords could continue indefinitely. Each time a cycle is completed, a booming kick drum emphasises the start of the next cycle. This is a parallel of the days of the working week: with the cycle of days complete, the next week begins. As the cycle of chords could continue infinitely, this reflects the nature of the commute to and from work. The commute continues indefinitely: five days a week, twice a day, for ever. The synthetic nature of these chords, created in Reason using a subtractive synthesiser, reflects the unnaturalness of this cycle, a purely human construct that has no equivalent elsewhere in the natural world.

I felt that there was almost a sense of fear in the atmosphere of the train station whilst recording these sounds. Apart from a few instances of inter-person conversation and a brief capture of laughter, most people were either silent or involved in conversations on mobile phones, or listening to music through headphones. I have brought this feeling through in the piece by generating a 'whining' sound in Reason, using the Maelstrom granular synthesiser. The sound moves quickly between two frequencies very close to one another. This creates a feeling of unease, of unsettledness: a representation of the inner, primal emotions that people need distracting from in their suit-clad shells.

Repeated throughout the piece is a voice saying the words 'compete, compete, I want to see you struggle'. I found it to be strange that, in a country in which 71.6% of the population consider themselves supposedly adherent to Christian morality and ethics<sup>1</sup>, a situation has developed that has seen the richest, most exploiting banks and money corporations propped up by the financial contributions of those that suffer from these companies' reckless actions. Everyone is expected to continue as normal, to 'keep calm and carry on' doing their job, which may now be unsafe as unemployment rises<sup>2</sup>. The only logical reason for this situation developing seems to be a sadistic one: a fetish towards watching people struggle. I wanted to summarize an argument that Kingdom describes in *No Such Thing As Society?*, one that valorises selfishness and exonerates greediness:

if each person acts according to naked self-interest, the end result will be the best for society. Life is a great game of cricket, where if each player scores as many runs as possible, the team will triumph<sup>3</sup>.

The voice is treated with a bitcrusher, distortion and delay, to give it a synthetic quality. Because the words seemed to be inhuman, I wanted the voice to be removed from human vocal qualities, yet still be intelligible.

At around 2'20" the recording from Bond Street is introduced to the mix, which was made a couple of hours later than the train station recording. This recording captures sounds of the street: the beeping of a pedestrian crossing, buses, cars, footsteps and talking, can be made out. Schafer argues that 'noises are the sounds we have learned to ignore'<sup>4</sup>. However, I wanted to capture the sounds of the city to depict an environment in which

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<sup>1</sup> See < <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=293>> [accessed 20th April, 2009].

<sup>2</sup> 1.46 million people are unemployed and claiming benefits at the time of writing. From < <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=12&Pos=1&ColRank=1&Rank=326>> [accessed 11th May, 2009].

<sup>3</sup> John Kingdom, *No Such Thing As Society?: Individualism and Community* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p.6.

<sup>4</sup> R. Murray Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2007), pp.29-39, p.30.

most of the people in the world now live<sup>5</sup>. Synthesised beeping noises are layered over these sounds to represent the unseen and silent technological components of the city's infrastructure, which cannot be recorded.

The piece ends with the sound of the urban environment prominent in the mix, before being processed through a bitcrusher, gradually downsampling the resolution of the audio. During this process, a passerby is heard to say 'it's the end of the world'. The combination of these two events makes the piece end on an unsettling note, before fading into silence.

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2008).

# Performance notes and score

The score for this piece is applicable only to the chords. The booming kick drum is played at the start of each cycle. The other elements of the piece can be created through the effects I have described in the commentary. I have incorporated screenshots of these elements to make the various parameters easier to replicate by others.

Fig. 1. Malestrom graintable synthesiser in Reason.



Fig. 2. Subtractor subtractive synthesiser in Reason.



Fig. 3.

Score of chords.

The image displays a musical score for two staves, likely representing the left and right hands of a piano. The score is written in common time (C) and consists of seven measures. The upper staff uses a treble clef, and the lower staff uses a bass clef. The notes are organized into chords, with stems pointing downwards. The sequence of chords across the measures is as follows:

- Measure 1: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note C3.
- Measure 2: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note E2.
- Measure 3: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note G2.
- Measure 4: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note B2.
- Measure 5: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note D3.
- Measure 6: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note F3.
- Measure 7: Treble staff has a chord of C4, E4, G4; Bass staff has a single note A2.

## Bibliography

Kingdom, John, *No Such Thing As Society?: Individualism and Community* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992).

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Unknown Author, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2008).

Religious statistics:

< <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=293> > [accessed 20th April, 2009].

Unemployment statistics:

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# **The Sound of Progress**

## Background

This piece was, like 'Compete', created using a Tascam HD-P2 portable digital recorder and a Sennheiser MKE-44 stereo microphone. The motivation behind this piece was an interest in exploring what impact human-created sounds have on the environment. I recorded the sound of vehicles passing over the Humber Bridge, some woodland, traffic in Leeds city centre, the conversations of passersby in Hyde Park, Leeds, and a chemical works.

To help construct the piece, I used Brian Eno and David Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* pack of cards. They contain, according to their accompanying notes, 'over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas [...] they can be used as a pack or by drawing a single card from the shuffled pack when a dilemma occurs in a working situation'. I wanted to contrast the various sounds by juxtaposing both human-made and natural sounds next to one another. The cards that I drew from the pack assisted me in making decisions that allowed this to happen. Using Apple Logic Pro 8, I interpreted the various cards as shown in this table.

Card	Interpretation
1. Simple subtraction	Dynamic FFT filtering on sound of vehicles passing over the Humber Bridge.
2. Be dirty	Overdriven birdsong.
3. Distorting time	Timestretching conversations recorded in Hyde Park.
4. Towards the insignificant	Focus on the vibrating frequency of the bridge rather than the sound of traffic passing over the bridge.
5. Tidy up	Noise reduction and spectral gating applied to recording of chemical works.
6. Do something boring	Sample of a disco beat added. Notions of 'boringness' emphasised through bitcrushing. Indeterminate rhythmic pulses remain.

In order to implement the 'simple subtraction' card, I decided to make use of a particular sound that I had picked up when recording. As the vibrations of traffic passed over the bridge, I realised that the placement of the microphone (fig. 1) had resulted in a harmonic from within the structure of the bridge being made audible. I used a form of frequency filtering known as Fast Fourier Transform (FFT), which allows the spectrum of the recording to be analysed and modified. Using Adobe Audition 3, I initially removed all frequencies but the particular harmonic in question from the sound, and then gradually brought back in other frequencies at differing volumes (figs. 2 and 3). This meant that the recording sounded completely different at the end of the process, with an entirely new texture and timbre. However, it still retained enough information for a listener to be able to make out some details of the original recording.

I recorded the sound of a chemical works in Hull, at a distance of about ten metres from the perimeter fence. However, due to this distance, sounds from other areas in the environment such as wind and traffic had become prominent in the recording. Using Audition, and interpreting the card 'tidy up', I generated a noise capturing profile from a quiet portion of the recording, and applied it to the rest. In Logic, I used a spectral gate to further remove frequencies, narrowing the spectral bandwidth until only the 'target' sound was left in the recording.

The recording of woodland took place in two different locations, Etton and Bishop Burton, both in the East Riding of Yorkshire. The woods at Etton were home to a bird with a particularly loud, repetitive chirp, whilst the woods at Bishop Burton featured many different types of birds. To emphasise the loud chirping of the bird at Etton, I interpreted the 'be dirty' card by feeding the signal through an amp simulator in Logic (Guitar Amp Pro). I configured the simulator to a setting that accentuated crunchy and distorted characteristics. This contrasted with the birdsong from the woods at Bishop Burton, which I left as recorded. The combination of overdriven and 'clean' birdsong also serves as a comparison between the human and natural sounds. Human made sounds often still sound jarring due to the nature of their production, such as in an internal combustion engine, or vibrations through metal. When an attempt is made to 'uglify' natural sound such as birdsong and compare it with 'normal' birdsong, it still sounds like birdsong. Yet, when the vibrations of the bridge are isolated and enhanced, the sound becomes more 'pure', and rather like wind. This paradox is fascinating to me, and I have tried to make it a central point in the piece.

The 'distorting time' card was used to timestretch the recordings of people engaged in conversations in Hyde Park, Leeds. The voices, when elongated in this method, began to sound more sinister. In the case of a group of women laughing, it sounds devoid of the humanity behind the original laughter. To emphasise this, I added a tape delay effect which adds a sense of disconnect to the recording. The feedback from the delay was controlled, resulting in waves of rising and falling noise. The voices were also panned from left to right to underpin this sense of disconnect and alienation. It also struck me whilst recording these conversations that the people probably had no idea they were being recorded, yet I was engaging in what felt like intrusion on aspects of their personal and shared lives that I had no way of comprehending. This creates a third dimension of disconnect as the voices are removed from their natural context, further contributing to a sense of unease.

Another sonic object that has been removed from its context in the piece is the disco beat. This was an interpretation of 'do something boring', and in my opinion, bland disco drum beats are very boring. The sample comes from Linda Jones's 'Body Fever (Let's Go Party)'<sup>6</sup>. The tempo of this beat seemed to be slightly too slow to dance to excitedly, yet too fast to particularly ignore. Its awkwardness, combined with its mundanity, was appealing to me. The drums were then bitcrushed in Logic, which resulted in rhythmical bursts that no longer sounded like drums, but a steady pulse. The drums were filtered so

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Jones. 'Body Fever (Let's Go Party)'. Spirit Records, SP-A-777-12 (1981).

only the low frequencies remained, and then had reverb applied to them. This made the drums sound as if they were underwater, or coming from behind a wall. The sense of distance implied between the drums and the subject is similar to that from car stereo systems as they drive past, which is a common part of urban life. In this situation it is run of the mill, but in the piece, it stands out. Therefore the card 'do something boring' has inadvertently resulted in the 'boring' aspect of the song being the most prominent and out of place.

The recording of traffic from Leeds city centre runs at a low volume throughout the piece. This is because, when I was recording the sounds in the piece, I noticed how at every occasion, at some point in the background, could be heard the sound of a road. This is the ultimate human sonic impact on the environment around us: it seems that cars can be heard almost everywhere at some point<sup>7</sup>. By adding a slow rumble of engine noise underneath the piece, I have tried to represent the inescapable predicament of being unable to fully appreciate the quiet nature of the countryside, as people travel out of urban areas to experience it for themselves.

Schafer argues that 'just as we refuse to leave a space of our environment uncultivated, unmastered, so too we have refused to leave an acoustic space quiet and unpunctured by sound'<sup>8</sup>. The sounds of human lives leave an impact on the environment around us that is more than just the sound of progress. In many ways, these sounds exist because they are not particularly thought about in the context of being 'sound'. They are part of something else. By removing them from their original context, altering them, and placing them in a conjunct montage, I have hopefully drawn attention to them.

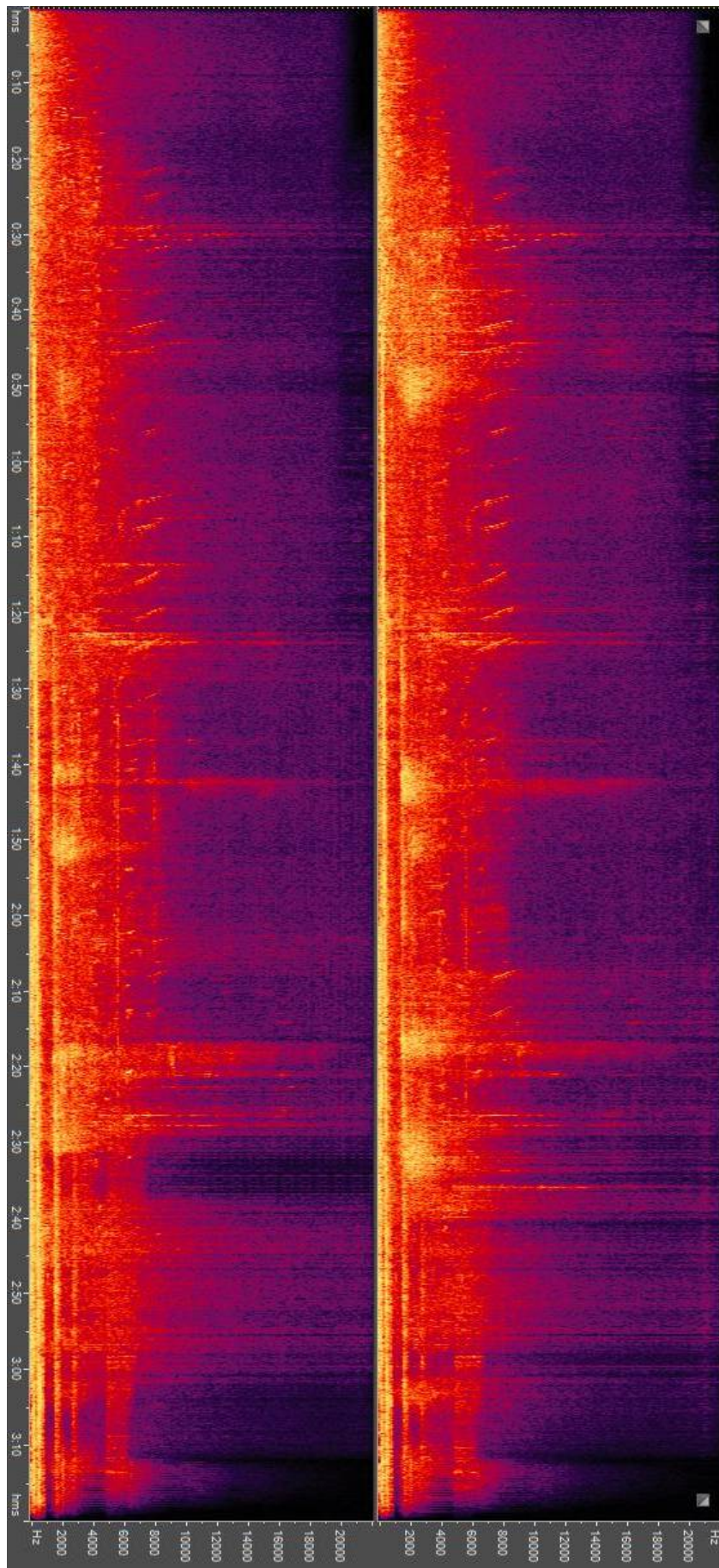
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<sup>7</sup> DEFRA noise mapping has demonstrated that the sound from large, arterial roads can be heard from a considerable distance away. See <http://noisemapping.defra.gov.uk/cara/wps/portal/noise> [accessed 11th May 2009] for examples.

<sup>8</sup> R. Murray Schafer, 'The Music of the Environment', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp.29-39, p.36.

## **Performance notes and score**

As this piece cannot be performed verbatim due to the nature of its composition, I have instead attached a spectrogram, which is the most accurate representation of the sound produced. The brighter the colour, the stronger the frequency is at that particular point in the graph.



## Bibliography

DEFRA, <<http://noisemapping.defra.gov.uk/cara/wps/portal/noise>> [accessed 11th May 2009].

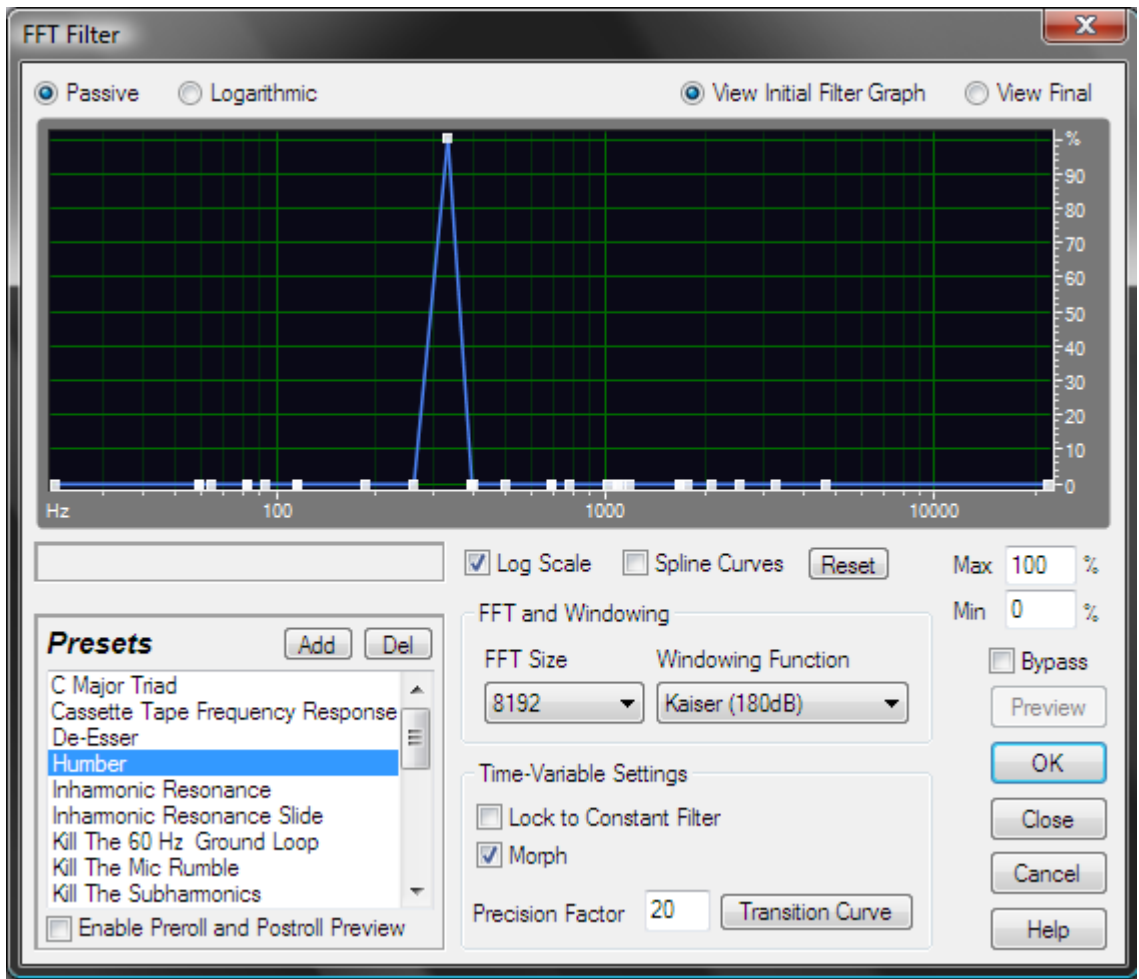
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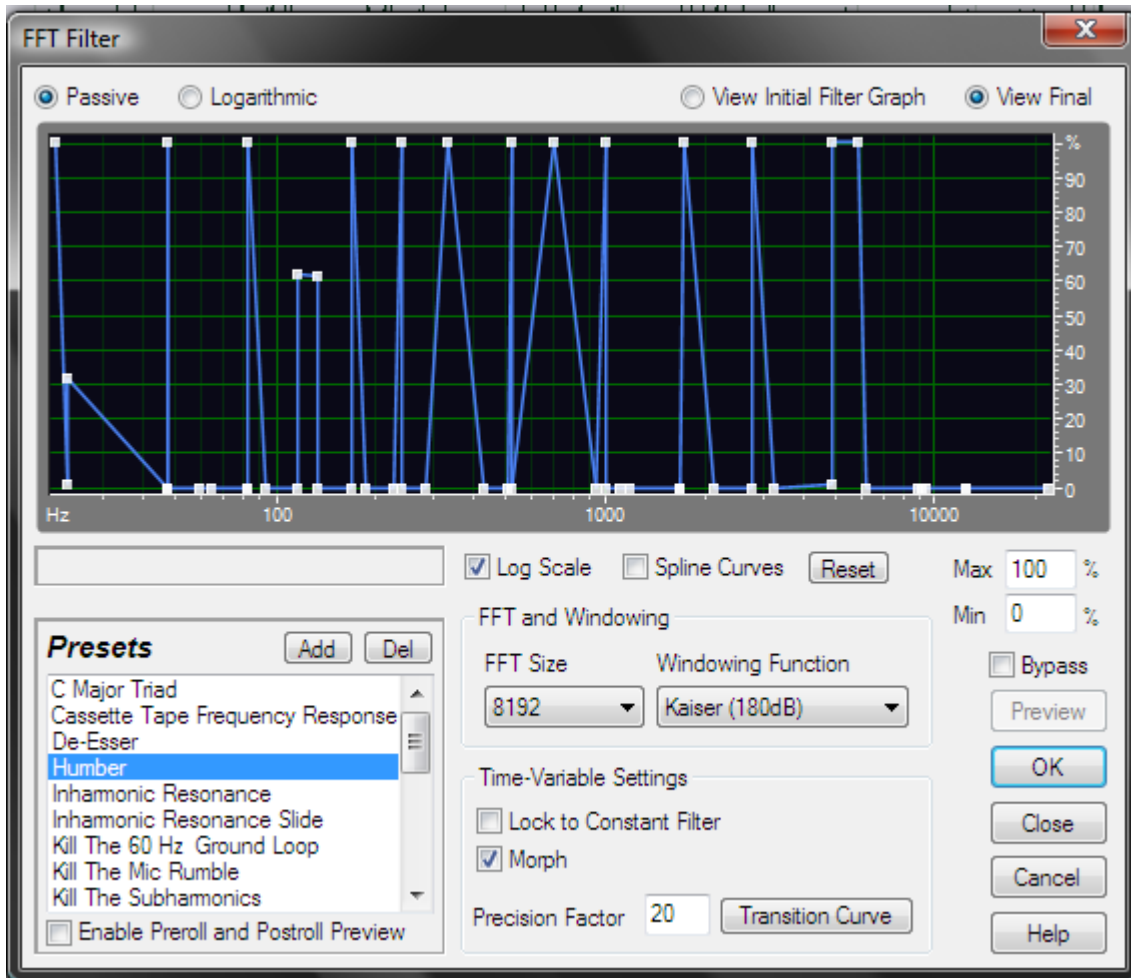
## Appendix



**Fig. 1.** Positioning of the portable recorder on the Humber Bridge, which resulted in the detection of a fundamental vibrating frequency running through the structure.



**Fig. 2.** FFT Filter in Adobe Audition, showing the fundamental harmonic frequency of the vibrations through the Humber Bridge.



**Fig. 3.** FFT filter of final frequency spectrum audible after processing of Humber Bridge recording.