

# Credit Crunch

*by Jed Skinner*

Commentary on the piece

## Background

In creating this piece, I acquired an upright piano at the end of its useful traditional life and recorded the sound produced when I subjected it to various implements. I then used a sledgehammer to dismantle the piano, recording the sound this produced. Following this, I produced the piece using Apple Logic Pro 8, facilitated by the *Oblique Strategies* pack of cards produced by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. I wanted to make the use of chance a key part of the piece. I took a random card, and interpreted the instruction it gave (i.e., 'Work at a different speed', for example, I interpreted as using slowed-down samples to create a different sound). This then formed my methodology to approaching the piece's production, forming an aesthetic basis on which to work. I intend to explain in this commentary about the aesthetic choices I made in the piece, and in the performance notes I have outlined in more detail the production and other methods used to create the sounds in the piece.

In making this composition I have been influenced by the concept of music as noise (and vice-versa). It seems to me that noise is often portrayed as '*just*' noise, whereas music (when opposed to noise) requires either tonality or some other barrier separating it from seemingly chaotic, randomly arranged series of sounds. But when both are combined, what is the effect? In this piece I have tried to include both of these elements: a 'prepared piano' part, consisting of a repeating series of notes, the timbre modified by the hammers of the instrument encountering resistance in the form of nails and screws in the strings, combined with the sound created by afflicting claw hammers, mallets and a sledgehammer onto the piano's stings, woodwork, keys and internal workings, resulting in sounds that are unable to be predicted to any great extent.

I arranged the fragments of recordings in what could be approximated as a 'montage' style in Logic's Arrange view, having interpreted cards (see performance notes) in a particular way. In the process of doing so, any sense of chronology, in terms of the order in which each fragment was recorded, was removed. In chronological order, the recording process went as follows: prepared piano part, manipulation of the piano strings with claw hammers and mallets, the final violent disassembly of the instrument with the sledgehammer. Brian Eno argues that "the effect of recording is that it takes music out of the time dimension and puts it into the space dimension"<sup>1</sup>. The sonic manipulation of space through various digital processes generates a new synthetic addition to the piece. As a result, and even if a piano was not destroyed in the process, this piece could never be re-performed verbatim. There will always be subtle differences between this particular outcome and another. I feel that this essential instability in the piece, manifested through the lack of a core tangible structure that can be easily replicated, is something that is not particularly prevalent in most music around me, which I find to be an interesting yet frustrating aspect of my daily audio soundscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Eno, 'The Studio As Compositional Tool', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds.), *Audio Culture: Readings in modern music* (New York, London: Continuum, 2004), pp.127-130, p.127.

This leads me to another area. I have been considering the fact that noise is part of our everyday life. Mark Slouka describes how “everywhere drifts the aural refuse of our age”<sup>2</sup>, that “silence spits us out and engulfs us again [...] quiet, like a pair of great parentheses around a dependent clause, closes off our days”<sup>3</sup>. R. Murray Schafer writes of a “lo-fi soundscape”, where “everything is close-miked. There is cross-talk on all the channels, and in order for the most ordinary sounds to be heard they have to be monstrously amplified. In the ultimate lo-fi soundscape the signal to noise ratio is 1 to 1 and it is no longer possible to know what, if anything, is to be listened to”<sup>4</sup>.

I compare these descriptions with the over-produced sounds of the latest production-line major label singer/rapper/indie band/Andrew Lloyd Webber spin-off, seemingly omnipresent whenever I turn on the radio, TV, computer or step into a garage or supermarket. These songs are only the latest offerings in a seemingly never-ending quest for shallow, corporate-sponsored perfection. It has reached the extent that the voices of those who are unable to sing, yet have the superficial physical attributes to enable the producers to make a fast buck, must be digitally brought back into tune. At this point I consider what really constitutes noise. In this situation, I find myself siding with the Japanese sound artist Masami Akita (also known as Merzbow): “if noise means uncomfortable sound, then pop music is noise to me”<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, the recession we have begun to experience in this country has made me concerned about not only my future prospects but those generally within the ‘creative industries’, especially music. The eerie sound of sanitised, carefully sculpted sound-products of the latest X-Factor winner’s cover version, multiplied by governmental obsessiveness with economic efficiency and productivity conjures up a potential image of a future where all music that is uneconomic is prohibited. In effect, the destruction of the piano works in two ways: firstly to create a sound that is almost unmarketable and therefore inefficient, and secondly as an image of the final triumph of Coin over Art – destroying anything that is unnecessary to a profit.

Ultimately, however, it is for the person listening to make what they will of the piece.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Slouka, ‘Listening For Silence: Notes On The Aural Life’, in *Ibid.*, pp.40-46, p.42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> R. Murray Schafer, ‘The Music Of The Environment’, in *Ibid.*, pp.29-39, p.33.

<sup>5</sup> David Keenan, ‘Consumed By Noise’, *The Wire* 198 (August 2000), p.29.

## Performance notes

Firstly, I would like to stress that this piece *cannot* be performed verbatim, due to the nature of the instrumentation used and the unique sounds generated. Instead, I am using this space to detail what processes I have used in the piece and describe in some depth, from a more technical point of view than the commentary, what is happening in the piece.

I acquired a piano and removed all exterior panelling and doors from it in order to gain access to the strings of the instrument (photo 1). I 'prepared' some of the strings using nails and screws in order to create different timbres when the hammer struck them (photo 2). Following this, I recorded the sound of claw hammers and mallets striking, pulling and scraping along the strings towards the base of the instrument (underneath the keyboard). Then, I demolished the piano using a sledgehammer. (See photo 3 for tools used).

To record these sounds, I used two SE Electronics SE2200A condenser microphones connected to an M-Box Firewire 410 interface, recorded in Apple Logic Pro 8 on an Apple iBook G4 laptop. Two microphones were required to create a stereo recording. To capture the prepared piano part, I placed the microphones in a near-coincident pair configuration approximately a foot above the top of the piano (photo 4). This was to try and avoid any unwanted phase cancellation. The same configuration was repeated with regards to the strings at the base of the piano (photo 5). To record the piano being smashed required the microphones to be moved away from the instrument by approximately three feet either side, which resulted in a spaced pair configuration (photo 6). This was necessary to avoid the microphones being damaged by the loud sounds generated and any flying debris from the piano's demolition. The piece was recorded in a garage but I tempered the harsh reflections that came with this confined space by draping curtains and cloth around the walls of the structure. The end result was drier sound and much less unwanted reverberation.

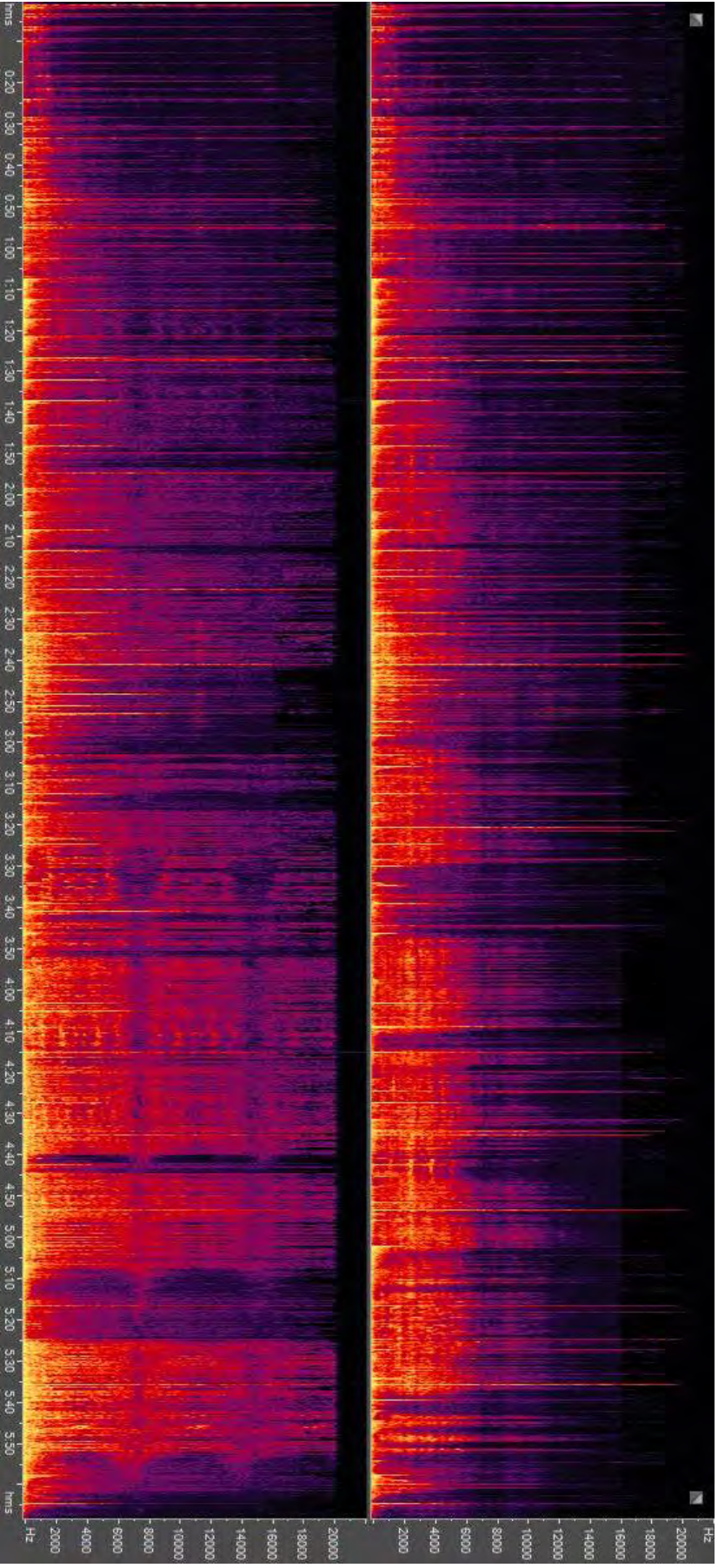
After the recording process, I used a pack of cards to approach the production of the piece. Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* card set contains, according to the details accompanying it, "over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas [...] they can be used as a pack or by drawing a single card from the shuffled pack when a dilemma occurs in a working situation". I decided I would use these cards as a random generator to approach the piece. By using chance there would be no way I could fully predetermine the outcome of the piece other than the recordings I had already made. Each time I took a card, I interpreted the writing on it in a way relating to the production of the piece. The cards I used and my interpretation of each are listed on the following page.

Card used	Interpretation
1. Use an unacceptable colour	On string scratch tracks, adding an amp emulator (Guitar Amp Pro) to the left channel, and a Bitcrusher, limiter and Pitch Corrector to the right channel.
2. Retrace your steps	Left string scratch channel reversed.
3. Not building a wall but making a brick	Holistically, looking at the piece in terms of individual details rather than a mass of items.
4. Water	The tracks should flow in and out of each other, rather than be a rigid structure.
5. What to maintain?	Due to time constraints, the progressive development of soundscapes are limited. Maintain a sense of variation in the piece within the time constraints.
6. Don't be afraid of things because they're easy to do	Repetitiveness is easy, and variation can be achieved through the modulation of effects parameters. Repetition of string scratch tracks, progressively becoming louder through the piece. Also repetition of prepared piano part.
7. Don't stress one thing more than another	Overall, similar to 5, in the sense that each part of the piece should take turns to be the most prominent at various points in the piece.
8. Ask your body	I retain overall creative control.
9. Be extravagant	The use of various effects can be used to emphasise and <i>over-emphasise</i> parts of the piece.
10. Emphasize differences	Enhance the contrast between quiet sections and loud sections.
11. Go outside. Shut the door	Use filters to allow sound to be heard in different ways. Filters used: Spectral delay on prepared piano parts, dynamic EQ on piano smashing channel (at various points).
12. Work at a different speed	Various speeds to be used to create different sounds. Piano smashing track duplicated and slowed down by 300%.

This piece is a combination of both predetermined factors (the piano recordings) combined with random factors (through the use of the cards). As the piece cannot be re-performed accurately or indeed anywhere near approaching the end recording, these notes should serve as a guide to recreating something *similar* but not the same as this piece. However, many key areas of the recording rely on the performer's own interpretation of random cards, tools available and instruments that can be 'reconfigured' in such ways as in this piece.

## Score

The most accurate method in which this piece can be fully represented is through a spectrograph. I have included a spectral representation of sonic power at different frequencies throughout the duration of the piece. The brighter the colour, the more intense the sound at that frequency. I have also included a representation, in standard notation, of the prepared piano part. These two methods combined are the best method in which to display the piece graphically without relying on too much idiosyncratic representation on my part, or confusion when being interpreted by the performer.





**Photo 1**





**Photo 3**





**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**

