composition, process, ideas

Posted by kirlian - 2008/12/14 11:51

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This is a response of sorts to "what's your favorite forum?" thread. so...

here are some of my thoughts/processes to start with:

while any standard or non-standard approach to composition may yield results, on any given day nothing may work and you may just have to accept that improvising or crapping out whatever you can and recording it for later review is the best option. on that note, working every single day and keeping that continuity going for long periods of time is absolutely the most important thing. Working everyday for one year, even if it's only for thirty minutes each day will completely change you as an artist. it's impossible not to improve (or realize that you should quit) if you work every single day.

One very obvious thing: engage in self-study on the subject of composition/form/process. This can be anything from studying Arnold Schoenberg's Style and Idea to analyzing an extremely basic form and writing a new melody to it... or literally counting the number of measures in your favorite techno track and mapping it out on paper section by section with extensive notes and then modeling a track of your own on that exact form. or writing down marley, bob dylan, bjork, rumi, e.e. cummings, the roots... and looking for ideas, concepts, and phrases that move you and set them to your own music.

Most Important:steal ideas from the masters! :) any genre or style, time period, melodic, rhythmic or harmonic structure is fair game. in fact it's necessary and inevitable unless you are going to invent a new language of music in your bedroom studio.

My process:

>>if I'm already inspired i get straight to work usually improvising a bit and recording the output then listening back for anything in the chaos that resembles a 1) melody 2) harmonic structure 3) rhythmic form 4) something worth developing. then i pickem out and start the same process over repeatedly until i have some well developed improvisation which can be used to organize a form.

>>if i want to "write something" i play at the keyboard or my saxophone or my MD UW and have a few inspiring albums ready to go on the ipod. usually albums that are totally unrelated to whatever type of music i'm working on. if it's machinedrum that day then i'll cue up some west african, samba, salsa or some other very rhythmic and melodic stuff. i listen then emulate. sometimes i don't listen to anything but the inner ear and try to stretch it to hear something original. sometimes.

>>i write down musical phrases that i like in a notebook. my own music, or not my own. if manuscript is not your thing then keep a musical phrase sample/midi file folder. these are always there when inspiration isn't.

>>i write without acknowledging inner commentary. First ideas always make it onto paper in their entirety. in fact i use a writing pencil without an eraser. i never erase. the inner critic does not have your success in mind. the inner editor does. later though.

'write' is interchangeable with sequence or program a track.

>>once i've got something , anything, i get a form together before i degenerate and begin making squeaky shit on some preset.

>>i take a few simple ideas and develop them rather than trying to sift through a lot of complex/dense ideas.

>>i strive to balance preparation, organization and theory with improvisation.

all this stuff is just general without referencing any gear (almost) or hardware vs. software issues because form (structure) and content and delivery are for my purposes completely unrelated. concepts in musical form and composition apply equally to sonata, rag, techno, jazz standard, george crumb, improvised music, gamelan, electronic, symphonic... whatever.

long first post on this. hopefully someone made it the end and finds it useful/stimulating.

Anyone else want to share some processes?

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Re:composition, process, ideas

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incredible post Kirlian. very thorough. it's nice to see someone learning to work around the almost near, first nature short-comings that come to 'bedroom' producers. great insights. i need to be more awake before i can contribute anything personally. :)

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Re:composition, process, ideas

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That's what I'm talking about!

I like your ideas. I'll share some ideas I've used in composing songs. I used to just tweak and mess around with equipment but now I feel the desire to create something someone can relate to.

My song "Jin Tian Waltz"

Well since living in Taiwan, I've been studying some Mandarin Chinese. So studying Chinese culture in general has been influencing me as of late. I hate to sound like a new age religious person because I am far from it but the ideas of Daoism have influenced my music.

The opposites pulling each other. How you beg for structure but at the same time music can breed some chaos. It's the balance of these things that inspires me right now.

I took the Waltz beat 1,2,3 and had a guitar part that I wrote 5 years ago. I finally used this in the waltz structure. I then found all the waltzes that I had in my music collection and listened to them constantly. I found some really nice trumpet sounds that I tried to recreate with guitar in my own way. You have to borrow from the past, it's the basis of all art. Like was earlier stated, you can try to create a new genre or whatever but no matter how original you think you are, you are taking from what's already been done.

I felt inspired by a conversation I had overlooking Taipei one night. We looked at the lights, the cars, the pollution, the incessant city noises and thought about what people do with their time. I just couldn't get over this and I had to go home the next day to make my song. So these are just some ways that I go about my day.

This is just one song though. It changes everytime I make a song. I usually just know when my personal inspirations will be able to be applied to music. If I don't have any personal inspirations I have trouble making music that I enjoy and therefore no one else will give the time to listen to. And why would you?

Has anyone read "This is Your Brain on Music"? I love that book. I suggest you read it if you like music.

John

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Re:composition, process, ideas

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jin tian waltz has a very inspiring vibe. liked it lots!

i can totally relate to your inspiration sources. i've found that traveling and living in a foreign country provides a constant flow of ideas.

however unresolved and incomplete the expression will often ultimately be, i think it's important to pay attention to how your beliefs, experiences and environment influence your music and try to work with that conceptually. it'll be there even if you don't pay attention to it, but i've found for myself that projects or tracks driven by a concept i hold in my mind seem to materialize faster and ultimately have more meaning for me.

on that note, i think i'm inspired!

time for a little kaffee and some studio:) :cheer: :woohoo:

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by kirlian - 2008/12/14 19:54

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actuel wrote:
incredible post Kirlian. very thorough. it's nice to see someone learning to work around the almost near, first nature short-comings that come to 'bedroom' producers. great insights. i need to be more awake before i can contribute anything personally. :)

i look forward to hearing from you on this actuel! after listening to your music, i believe you probably have lots of insight into process and composition.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by dajaphonics - 2008/12/15 00:08

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Kirlian, I just checked out your website and after reading some of your posts I have to say I like what you have to say. I think we're on the same page as far as music goes.

You are absolutely right, your surroundings will affect your music even if you're not consciously thinking about it. So why not try to be aware as much of it as you can? It totally helps. My machinedrum is a conduit of my creativity and it will only be as much as I want to make of it. It's way too easy to make absolute madness on the thing, I find it's more challenging to make it sound coherent, taming the elektron. Well thanks for the input. Your initial post is very inspiring, much more than any gear thread ever will be even though that's not the point behind these particular threads. Good work on articulating your creative process. I give you props.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by papertiger - 2008/12/15 03:40

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kirlian wrote:
...working every single day and keeping that continuity going for long periods of time is absolutely the most important thing. Working everyday for one year, even if it's only for thirty minutes each day will completely change you as an artist. it's impossible not to improve (or realize that you should quit) if you work every single day.

i absolutely agree with this, and for me it's one of the most frustrating parts about writing music (although i use the time writing with respect to myself *very* loosely). Not even counting work, there's family, friends, and other hobbies that steal time.

... or literally counting the number of measures in your favorite techno track and mapping it out on paper section by section with extensive notes and then modeling a track of your own on that exact form. or writing down marley, bob dylan, bjork, rumi, e.e. cummings, the roots... and looking for ideas, concepts, and phrases that move you and set them to your own music.

you should have a chat with wesen about these ideas. he's the only person i've ever "met" to approach music with such a rigorous take it apart and see how it works approach -- which he has with some of Hawtin's closer to the edit works.

>>i write down musical phrases that i like in a notebook. my own music, or not my own. if manuscript is not your thing then keep a musical phrase sample/midi file folder. these are always there when inspiration isn't.

I find that this is a great idea, and I do it, but in practice i rarely go back to my "noodles" or jams. It's nice to have the source material though. I've recently cribbed from something I've had lying around since 2000.

>>i strive to balance preparation, organization and theory with improvisation.

starting to learn guitar has shown me how useful the theory is. I played something in dmnor. had to look up in a keyboard chord book (thank god I have one) to make the key/nonguitar part.

somewhere I heard someone, i think an e-music artist, suggest that a little knowledge was dangerous -- that it was enough to trap you inside of a box, but without the benefit of knowing the box so well that you could step outside of it. I think that's true for some things, but with respect to notes and pitches a bit of knowledge is very convenient.

I can't say that I have a formalized process. I usually start with an idea for a beat, 9 times out of 10, and then add parts from there. I've never considered what I do "song"-writing -- not out of some arrogant or pseudo-intellectual attitude, but simply because song implies creating a structure that changes over time, which is something I'm not good at, really, or try to be good at.

And welcome, Kirlian. =)

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by swiv - 2008/12/15 04:28
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dajaphonics wrote:

Has anyone read "This is Your Brain on Music"? I love that book. I suggest you read it if you like music.

John

check out this thread for other things to read:

http://elektron-users.com/index.php?option=com_fireboard&Itemid=28&func=view&id=46802&catid=13

For "finished" songs, I tend to draw "inspiration" from my basic state whether intentional or not. Music is really just a simple outlet for me. I need to get a track recorded within a couple of days of starting it, or I fizzle off and lose inspiration, I guess that track stops being relevant. That's also why my mixes and recordings can be quite on the shite side... when it plays back like a song, has some sense of resolution or whatever, I just want it out of the machines so I can start again. I definitely do not try from the outset to have a profound message or change the way people thing about the world or anything like that. Maybe I should though :laugh: But I hope people can take something worthwhile from listening and interpreting anyway.

It's when I sit down and take a purely technical approach that I end up making patterns and kits that are nuked the next day. I think that without some recognition that a pattern is relevant, and maybe without any attachment, it's not worth turning into a track, regardless of the coolness of the sounds or the time invested in creating them.

Composition for me is something that isn't pre-planned or mapped out in any way. If I play back something in song mode, and I feel like it needs a change of tone, a lull, more energy, whatever, I just make a new pattern then and link it up. I just react to what's been covered so far in a track, where it could be taken next, not worrying about an overarching structure or plan.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by daswesen - 2008/12/15 05:40
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wow kirlian, amazing post. I don't really have the time and energy right now to write a thought up response, but I'll be sure to check back in a few months when the workload here is cleared :)

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Rew - 2008/12/15 08:42
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makes me realize i need to stop being so goddam lazy with my music!! get off my ass and just do it. I want to make music.... have sounds in my head.. so why the hell arent i doing it??

For me there are always a million things to do when I come home at night... a million reasons not to turn on the machines and tell myself i7ll make some stuff on the weekend.

The thing about writing / working everyday is huge for me! i really need to buckle down and do this. really start taking a proactive approach to making music.

Really insipiring post. Thanks. This is the type of thing i really look to this community for. Thanks everybody:)

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by TrondC - 2008/12/15 14:12

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hm, I very rarely play around more than twice, maybe three times a week, I just don't have the time to do this every day! Unplugged the rig 4 weeks ago as a part of removing distractions before university exams, and I'm going away for two weeks soon, so that makes it almost two full months with no noodling at all. gotta find the time next year!!

great post! inspiring read

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Human Koala - 2008/12/15 16:25

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1h every morning, sometimes i'm late at work due to that when i found something, one hour in the evening, and a lot of time during the we.
it's an habits now

HK

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Opuswerk - 2008/12/15 16:44

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great post.
All I can really add is +1, as this is what i've been doing too.
One thing maybe is don't push the inspiration if it doesn't strike. I'm usually far better off doing sound design, and trying to learn features of my instruments when uninspired.
Also copying a track's structure (noting down when the kick goes out, when the drop comes, the bass switches and the pads kick in...) can help yield some great results and help have a guideline in order to get out of the loopitus.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by kirlian - 2008/12/15 19:02

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Opuswerk wrote:

One thing maybe is don't push the inspiration if it doesn't strike.

agreed. i never to try to force anything. there is always something to do in the studio and more often than not for me when i start making some sounds inspiration is not far behind.

i read a quote by a famous author (whose name escapes me at the moment)... something like (in response to a question of inspiration):

something, something, something... "fortunately, inspiration strikes at nine o'clock sharp every morning". build that shit and they will come.

HUman Koala wrote:

1h every morning, sometimes i'm late at work due to that when i found something

i'm late for work every day dude. coffee and elektron (maybe some live and reaktor) and sure enough it's 8.30 next time i look up.

i'm happy some people are getting something from this. the responses have been insightful for me as i tend to take a lot of my methods for granted and i have not spent any time hanging or communicating with other electronic musicians. i'm admittedly a newb on the MD UW but just hanging around here has lit a serious fire to improve my chops on that thing.

looking forward to more!

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by eminor9 - 2008/12/15 20:11
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Music is something that continues to inspire and amaze me and as a real music lover I try to listen to a very wide variety of styles.

Things I do
-play my acoustic piano a lot, I force myself to teach me a piece every trimester (classical, something jazzy or a nice pop song from the past - currently working on Chopin's Nocturne in Eb and a piano version of Depeche Mode's 'See You').
-on top of the practicing I'll work out some melodies/phrases/harmonies related to those pieces but in totally different concepts and record them to my portable recorder
-when switching on the electronic devices, and while working on sound design, I'll try to fit any recorded/written part into a couple of patterns
-if it works, I'll explore and expand the project during one or two weeks, if the result is ok by then I'll finish it i.e. in my own way and obviously within my capacities and available time (reason why my tracks have never sounded finished/polished), if it hasn't worked within this time frame it'll be nuked
-sometimes I'll fire up the electronic kit, start sounds from scratch and build up a groove around a specific sound or short sequence and if it works expand from there, I especially like the Mono for this: copy pattern, do a few minor/subtile changes like varying a melody by simply adding or removing (a) note(s) and then build into a track in song mode, often this brings inspiration to modify or add more patterns
-with the MD I speciifically like the CTRL-AL machine to modify and save alternate kits/patterns and expand from there.
-the tone/vibe of my tracks will mostly be dictated by the real life experiences I'm going through, I think, although melancholy is quite a dominant factor in my style, but I guess this is just a reflection of my personality/character

As others have stated, don"t be afraid to be inspired by things from the past, it"s what every miumusician has done upto now, there's no need to reinvent the wheel and don't try to fit into specific genre or style, try as much to sound like yourself.

Will add further to the post if someting else crosses my mind.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by lcvl - 2008/12/15 20:14
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Really great thread.

For me one of the great advantages of using hardware in the music making process is that it kind of forces you to focus on really listening to what you're doing.
Listening.. your ears... your hearing.
It's not just about one of five senses.
Many think that listening is way more than that.
Being able to listen deeply to all the sounds around you (including music, of course) is a transcendental experience in itself.
For me that's where "inspiration" is hidden.
Being able to get to that spot, that place where I'm really able to listen. It's where I'm able to experience the beauty of

sound in itself.

On the other hand, involving my eyes/vision completely changes that experience for me. It seems that vision someway has a more direct connection to the left side of the brain, invoking your rational side.
No need to say that working at a computer is an almost completely vision-centric experience.

Just a stupid test: http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/story/0,22049,22535838-5012895,00.html

Am I going OT? :blush:

P.S. Suggested reading: http://www.amazon.com/World-Sound-Brahma-Landscape-Consciousness/dp/0892813180

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by dajaphonics - 2008/12/15 20:50

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I need to check out that Schoenberg book. I'm listening to some of his piano pieces now, they're really interesting.

Does anyone recall from "This is your Brain On Music" the author suggested that if you are involved in anything for 3 hours a day over 5 years, it amounts to putting enough time to be considered an expert in your field.

When I say that I don't have enough time, that's just an excuse. If you really enjoy something you'll make time for it. You'll squeeze 30 minutes of whatever you love whenever you can. I've said "I don't have the time" so many times before but what it comes down to it is what am I doing now? I'm on the Internet. I'm sure most of you reading this can attest that we all spend far too much time on the Internet.

Also, thanks everyone for your input. This is exactly what I wanted when I suggested there's not enough dialogue about making music.

John

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by howdragonsdisappear - 2008/12/15 21:04

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kirlian wrote:

something, something, something... "fortunately, inspiration strikes at nine o'clock sharp every morning". build that shit and they will come.

I heard that the best creative moment for the brain is at 23 o'clock, the worst at 16 o'clock.
I think it's right for me, generally i'm also late at work but it's because i've done too much music the last night ...

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by kirlian - 2008/12/15 21:10

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lcvl: that book has been on my shelf for a year! i guess now it's time to read it. thanks for the reminder.

up late, up early. i always feel my best stuff coming after 23 uhr and before 0200.

night is for my right brain and day my left. how i spend my studio time is usually reflected thusly.

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Re:composition, process, ideas

Hi, (warning: long post!)

When it comes to composition and ideas, I find it hard to see a pattern or regularity in my way of working but there definitely is one:

I can wander for many hours through my equipment doing "research" on how specific sounds are generated. I can try to build strange bassdrums on the md, create patches on the Virus ti and reverse engineer existing patches to see how they were made. I learn a lot of it and one thing that has been very helpful is simply sampling one bar of an existing piece of music and loop it inside the md with the aim of coming as close as you can get. It's funny to see how much variations it generates by just trying to replicate what others have made. Also this forum, the md tips from tarekith and the mnm tips of tib are great sources...although I have made some contributions to them myself, all I can say is: Thanks! It really helps understanding your equipment better and it boosts creativity and experimentation.

What others create is every now and then also a severe source of frustration as it all looks (and sometimes is) so simple. Especially techouse...just listen to some tune on beatport, proton radio or di.fm and many times you hear simple loops, made up of simple components. It frustrates me that with all the technical knowledge I have, it doesn't pop out of my machine on a day by day basis. Record labels like pokerflat for example are bad for my ego as they have some sense of melodic minimalism and simplicity which proves to be very hard to replicate.

The other extreme off course exists as well: For example the German label Perlon records comes up with very minimalistic and abstract productions which are so far above what I can imagine....doing so much with so little....

Creating the movement, the development in a tune, keeping the listener interested and triggering emotions...that's the hard part for me.

However, for me creating music is not about replication or being a look-a-like but simply having fun, learning, being in control and create something that I like, finnished or not, recognised or not. In the end I am not a full blown artist and my life (fortunately) doesn't depend on this. I' m simply an engineer...a computer/maths expert...not someone with a creative aura who has sparkles of creativity around his head but at least someone who understands what he is doing, if needed all the way up to the level of Fourier analysis.

But every now and then, creativity strikes and then, things suddenly move at lightning speed. Once a melody pops into my head, complete with rhythm, bass, chords, etc. I experience just 30 minutes in which every knob I touch turns into gold. A good bassline is programmed in just one minute on the mnm while I previously had been wandering through all kinds of arps and bass patches without any result. Rhythm programming on the md goes fast and sounds really good with every machine I introduce...It fits the bass, the cowbell fits, the hihats...eq-ing to fit it in...filtering to correct...rate reducing to destroy....it all comes together...

So the bottom line is that if I have something to work to...something that lives in my not too creative mind, things go fast and then the experience and the knowledge boost the speed. All the other acitivities are there for learning, fun and research.

There is however one thing which has improved my understanding of producing with the Elektrons. It is a purely technical issue, but I think it is worth to point out here as it helped me in overcoming some producing and arranging problems. The approach is technical and systematic:

In some way, music can be considered a rhythmic repetition of sounds. The repetition aspect can, however not be exaggerated. Just imagine creating a one bar loop and let it run for 4 minutes...that becomes boring after one minute already. Conclusion: music needs a development, a change....while at the same time some elements like rhythm and/or bass must stay the same to keep the song cohesive. So creating music is balancing on the tiny line between change and constants.

This brings up the question how many "change" the Elektrons allow for. The first answer is off course: plenty, just use the parameter locks! But let's look a little closer to that and perform some simple calculations:

The mk1 units have 8 banks of 16 patterns each so that is 128 patterns. There is also memory for 64 kits. So on average, one kit drives two patterns. Simply sticking to this rule means you never run out of kits, although theoretically you could run all 128 patterns on just one kit.

A kit stores the chosen machines and their "default" settings. The pattern, however, stores the triggering of notes

(including swing and accent) and off course the parameter locks and glide settings.

So the pattern (triggering of notes and the lock system) is what allows you to create change and variety while the kit forms the basis.

Now let's assume that we want to create a song in which no bar sounds exactly the same, that is: every bar of the song is unique in terms of triggers and locks. Then, how long can a song be?

Let's see:

A pattern has at most two bars on the mk1 units, so one pattern is 8 beats.

As we have 128 patterns inside the Elektrons this means we have:

128 x 8 = 1024 beats.

Assumed that you create music at roughly 128 bpm, this means that you can create at most:

1024/128 = 8 minutes!

So if you use the mk1 units to their full potential, you can create at maximum only 8 minutes of continuously changing (every bar unique) music. On the mkII units, Elektron has doubled the pattern length which brings it to 16 minutes, but it is still not much.

Now, my reason for pointing this out is that if you are creating a full song, everything that poses a unique part of your song costs relatively a lot of pattern memory. So if you want to create a full song on the Elektrons, you will probably end up with at least half or more of the pattern memory used.

It is therefore not strange if the intro or roughly the first two minutes of a song already eat two full pattern banks alone.

Off course I know that not everything in a song is unique. Things are repeated every now and then and existing patterns are reusable.

But if you run into troubles because you are reusing a pattern in songmode (with a different mute configuration for example) and your song is sounding dull, boring and too linear then just ask yourself the question whether that pattern should have a unique element which makes it different from the others. If it does, then you are not struggling with your creativity but you bumped against the constraints of information theory. You are trying to compress (information wise) what cannot be compressed as it is unique. Therefore: copy the pattern and create another one with the needed changes to break out of the boringness...be greedy in using patterns, given the calculations made above.

There are also a few other "tactics" that can be used to break out of the 8 minutes unique issue:

-live tweaking: many people do it and (audio)record straight into a daw or sampler.

-use random lfo's as every time the pattern plays, the affected parameter will sound a little different. (It is not a coincidence that the more randomness or entropy you find in a signal, the harder it gets to compress. True random sequences therefore cannot be compressed.) The lfo's would gain a lot more power if they could affect the trigger timing as well. For example: putting a square wave lfo with depth 4 on a trigger would trigger the note 4 steps before or after the step it was programmed on. (this is probably impossible to implement as it would allow triggering outside the current pattern.)

-copy a track living on track x to track x+1 and program the needed variation by editing the triggers and/or locks. In song mode you selectively (un)mute the appropriate tracks thus creating a variation while it does not cost you an extra pattern. Off course this cannot be used if all 16 or 6 tracks are used.

-(ab?)use songmode by playing only a part of a pattern and mangling it internally. Very powerful and creates unexpected results.

-Put 2 variants of 1 bar drumrolls in one pattern. (you can stash 4 in one pattern in the mkII units) and use songmode to play the appropriate part.

If you made it this far: thanks for reading. This is just an attempt at putting a couple of things in a perspective. Perhaps it helps you in understanding and possibly overcoming loopalitus. Anyway, I still have a long way to go... but it will be fun for sure ;)

M.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Allerian - 2008/12/15 21:57
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So if you use the mk1 units to their full potential, you can create at maximum only 8 minutes of continuously changing (every bar unique) music. On the mkII units, Elektron has doubled the pattern length which brings it to 16 minutes, but it is still not much.

Interesting. I tend to look at it the other way around. The MD offers 16 tracks, which I often view as two or four complete patterns, depending on the complexity of the beat. I'll literally make up a kit with two or four sets of the same instruments and only keep one group unmuted. Depending on how much I'm asking from the MD, this allows me flexibility without changing patterns all the time.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Ookpikk - 2008/12/16 01:03
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merlin wrote:

-(ab?)use songmode by playing only a part of a pattern and mangling it internally. Very powerful and creates unexpected results.

This is so key - why else would Elektron allow 256 steps per song?
I think though, that the sequencer on the Elektrons does lend itself to loop-based composition, even with cutting them up in song mode. I find it's much easier to write songs which evolve linearly in something like Cubase.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by Tarekith - 2008/12/16 10:50
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Compostion and writing music for me has always been sort of a weird confluence of ideas and techniques, and in the heat of the moment I never really can tell which is which. I'd say I spend a lot of my time really learning my gear and what it can do, so that if I do get a burst of creative energy, I don't have to think about "HOW" to do something, I'm only focused on "WHAT" I'm doing. I've never been one who finds composing easy, it's usually hours and hours of trying different ideas that are doomed to failure, only to have one mistake take me on a 3 hour oddessy that hopefully ends up as the basis for a musica idea worth expanding on later.

One of my major issues is that I'm extremely picky when it comes to the music I write, so I'm not the sort of person that has ever been good at cranking out a tune in a day or two. Most of the time they take a month or more when all is said and done. I really enjoy listening to my tracks when I'm done with them, so I find that taking a lot of breaks to give myself some perspective, and a chance to recharge the creative juices really helps me. It's not uncommon for me these days to have 5 or 6 songs in the works at once, so I can distance myself from any one of them at any time. Sounds odd, but I find I like my songs a lot more when I take these short breaks, and then come back to them to see just how it sounds after awhile. Otherwise I find I spend a lot of creative time and energy on something that might fit my mood in the short term, but long term I'm just not happy with (or I wish I would have followed a different path I could have taken halfway through). It might not be as fun day to day, but at the end of the year I think I'm happier when I listen to all the music I wrote, and find it still makes me proud no matter what my mood.

When I say I take a lot of breaks, I don't mean from music related activities either. As was mentioned before, there's

always something that needs to be done in the studio. So I'll use these down times to sort new samples, check out some new software demos, watch tutorial videos, read product manuals, update the MD Tips and Tricks B) , or even just work on learning the gear I do have just a little bit more. All of this is "practice" in my mind and really goes a long way to removing the technical limitations from interfering with my artistic intents when I am actually chasing down an idea. It also helps me learn my studio's "sound" better, removing acoustic limitations too.

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by johnathon doe - 2008/12/16 15:18

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Tarekith,

I am a traditionally live instrument composer.

I have to agree whole-heartedly to your thoughts.

I work the same way. But, not in the same way.

Our fulfilled ideas don't come about by fulfilling them, but finding them.

peace

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Re:composition, process, ideas
Posted by actuel - 2008/12/20 08:53

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Wonderful contributions from all. Inspiring and definitely good to hear about other ways of approaching writing.

I have different ways of working depending on whether it's an original or remix. For original material it goes something like this:

Most songs start with rhythm. Mood often dictates tempo. Usually I work somewhere between 100 - 140bpm. The last year I have started many of my beats on the MDUW.

The above rhythm is typically very minimal. I learned long ago that filling up the wholes with rhythmic hits early on makes for a mess later, at least for me. So by minimal i mean, i kick + snare pattern. I rely on the MD synthesis for this.

While I like to start with a minimal rhythm base, I'll spend a ton of time shaping those sound. Resampling, processing through the T-Res, layering, etc. I never go for a strong effect. But i think its incredibly important that each sound is authentic in character.

At this point, I'll start playing around with UW sounds. Also, rhythmic. It would take me forever to try to explain what I look for but I just know it when I hear it. Often I'm looking for dirty sounds. Poor recording quality, mixed poorly, etc. Often I'm reaching for rare late 70's to 80's records. There's a lofi quality there that can't be fabricated today.

Anyway this is just a nasty kick, snare, hihat but often it could be anything that I shape in Ableton's Sampler. You can do just about anything with that app. Great sound design tool.

So now I have a nice rhythm track that has the body I want. Bass and melody next.

It's hard to say what comes next. I work a lot on inspiration. Depending on the rhythmic base I usually start thinking about either the bass or melody. Let's say it's a synthy melody I'm excited about on this example.

Fire up the Monomachine and start crafting. I love sound designing in the MM, but it takes time. At this point I really feel I can shape pretty quickly in it. Lately, I load up the new DigiWave machine almost always. Though I hold a special place in my heart for the SID machine.

Anyway, it's all inspiration at this point. I mean, I can think of sounds and write them but I prefer to just listen. With the beat rolling I just shaping and shaping. There are typically two things that happen, either it's a pad or over arching melody or very rhythmical. Which is pretty easy to do on the MM.

After the first thematic melody is achieved I then go for bass sounds. Sometimes I'll do bass sounds on the MM, if not I will work with Ableton's Sampler. Sampler is a great sound shaper. As for source material, it really can be anything. I very rarely yank a bassline then repurpose it for my own uses. I want something more sonically authentic.

Again, I'm working of inspiration. At this point I have a rhythm base and main melody. So the bass just falls in the pocket.

I know it's odd that I didn't do the a-typical drums > bass > melody writing but i don't know how to explain that i find locking down all the bottom end with drums and bass tends to quickly suffocate the track. I like textures but in order to fill-in the track there has to be simple components.

From this point the base of the track is there. Most likely there are multiple patterns in the MD and MM. Most of all the core song changes already worked out: intro, main pattern, melody, and usually at least two changes based on the main theme.

Now I start dumping everything into Live. Why? because it's fcking quick as hell. From this point the track is pretty much there. I just need to mix, maybe add some efx, and often I'll chop little bits to see what kind of weird new ideas come about.

As for mixing, I like to think I mix each sound along the way. So by the time they're all in Live there's not a ton left to do. I typically add several instances of Saturator and possibly other efx, but I kinda hate the overuse of efx in music.

That's about it. The one sidenote to this whole post is that while I tend to start rhythmically, I'm often working off inspiration, so anything goes. It's pretty simple really. The longest part is sound designing and shaping things to get the character I want. Downside to this style of writing is that it's not very quick. It's easy to put a kick and snare on x0x pattern, but it's another thing to make it sound good.

One caveat is that I am a strong believer in keeping things minimal. I don't want distractions, no more then the many that life delivers, and also I think the only way to truly grasp my gear is to make it do what I want for me, ie learn it. I've lived through the 'looking-for-gear-that-sounds-like' phase. It's a bottomless pit, the a roller-coaster of 'buy and be excited' then slowing be disappointed and shift the next victim. Anyway, I like to keep it slim and make my gear sing. Not that that always happens but it's nice way to stay focused and remember it's not the gear. Anyone who plays and instrument should know that. Anyone can have a keyboard and softsynth, but that doesn't make you a Herbie Hancock. :)

Another new variable is that the MM is quickly becoming one of my favorite rhythm boxes. I can great really unique drum sounds that are hard to achieve so quickly on the MD or other synthesis. It could just be that I love writing on the MM but it's really becoming a big staple in my rhythm writing.

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