

Digital Economy Action: Composition by Participatory Piracy

Stephen Cornford

In April 2010 the British Parliament signed the Digital Economy Bill into law, making provision for the enforced restriction of persistent copyright infringers' Internet connections. As the arguments for and against such legislation appeared in the press, I only felt more disconnected from the "creative industries" that this Act of Parliament was supposedly protecting. Not only would the innumerable niches of contemporary experimental music be unable to create and maintain a fanbase without some of the music being freely available in digital formats, but the tools of piracy: RapidShare, MediaFire, Dropbox et al. are now part and parcel of music production and publication. The simplistic stigmatism of these processes in much of the press provoked me to explore how to make work that demonstrated the educative, communicative and, above all, creative potential of file sharing as a process. The as-yet-unrealized composition *Digital Economy Action* is my response [1].

The premise is simple: A sequence of sounds and silences are passed digitally around the world in the manner of a chain letter, each user performing a single conversion of the file from one audio format to another, before passing it on to the next user and myself. The details of the conversion itself, the software and format used and the means of transferring the file to the next participant are all entirely indeterminate. This repetitive digital action is the most mundane method of audio processing, one that has become an inaudible facet of music production and consumption. Whether it is through downloading songs from iTunes or submitting masters to a record label, these processes are performed without much consideration by artists and audiences alike. All digital audio we encounter may have undergone several similar transformations, each of which invisibly performs some subtle but irreversible compression, before reaching our domestic digital-to-analogue converters.

This method makes the performance of the work available to the everyday consumer of digital music files, rather than only to experienced audio producers. The composition, although planned and administered by myself, places responsibility for its realization in the hands of the same com-

munity who will eventually be its consumers. In this sense the work, like so many before it, strives towards that commonly sought and still elusive goal: the dismantling of the distinction between artist and audience. To participate in the realization of the piece requires no particular training, knowledge or skill.

In an era when cultural production is wholly embedded within the capitalist economy, and creativity has for the most part become simply another asset of industry, it seems romantically modernist to even use the words "artist" and "audience." The simple factory relation between producer and consumer is perhaps more appropriate, and it is this distinction that the composition seeks to scrutinize. If we are to take the complexity of roles involved in the creation of a piece of music—from writing the score through realization to publication and distribution—and reduce them to just the role of production, then is not the buyer who rips open the CD and posts it to their blog intrinsically contributing to the production of the music?

If Cagean compositional theory implicitly posits that the condition of music is produced perceptually by individual listeners, then, at its logical conclusion, this is a situation in which there are no consumers left at all. The ticket-, disc- and file-purchasing public can produce entirely subjective realizations of a score from their individual concert hall seats and living room sofas. But market-driven notions of ownership and authorship are unlikely to catch up to the notion that music is not actually a commodity.

Digital Economy Action takes the contemporary conditions under which music is distributed and turns them into the score itself. The performers of the piece are its distributors are its consumers. The instructions for its performance mimic the peer-to-peer file-sharing process and are the only means by which sound is processed, allowing the music to be produced by the act of its distribution.

My interest in this process is not solely as a polemic on current relations between composer, performer and consumer, but also as an exploration of the resonance of the digital audio architecture in which contemporary music inhabits. We are familiar with the wow and flutter of weary tape transports, the surface noise of oft-handled vinyl and the rapid stutter of the scratched CD. These media artifacts have all been in-

ABSTRACT

The author discusses the inspiration and design of an as-yet-unrealized composition in which participants serve in the roles of composer, performer and consumer all at the same time. Provoked by the passage of a law restricting sharing and distribution of music files, he explores the potential for file sharing as a compositional process.

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corporated into musical vocabulary for decades. Less familiar are the timbral distortions of repeated compression, the sonic signature of our contemporary hardware. It is this that I hope to find.

Note

1. If you would like to participate in this composition, send an email to <steve@scrwn.co.uk> with the subject *Digital Economy Action*. I will forward detailed instructions to each participant and set the process in motion. Each participant will receive a free CD copy of the complete composition.

Stephen Cornford is a sculptor who uses sound and noise to explore the physicality of the world around him. Cornford studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and Dartington College of Arts and is currently a Research Fellow in Sound Art at Oxford Brookes University.

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