

X-TOPIA
ELLIOTT SHARP
Soldier String Quartet



Extopia is The Thing Itself, downloaded and transformed. 'Outside of its place' — it exists as extopia. This is not an end product or a static process or a one-shot event, but a feedback loop.

Transformation was a key element in CRYPTID FRAGMENTS (found on my eponymous CID on the Extreme label, XCD 020.) In that piece, core materials were played by violin and cello, dumped into the computer and radically sculpted through time-expansion compression, pitch shifting, filtering, reversing, editing, and recombining. Some of the resultant 'instruments' retained much of their identity, some were rendered unrecognizable as string sounds (here 'instrument' will be redefined to mean the final sound or phrase created by processing). All of the instruments were finally organized in time through layering and playlists to yield a virtual string quartet. This quartet could not, however, be performed in real-time. All of its transformations are processor-intensive and require rendering and editing time.

I had long sought to perform such a transformative electro-acoustic piece in real-time — in fact, much of my performance on guitar (beginning in 1969) used electronic and mechanical processing to place the sounds 'outside' their normal form and role as guitar. With the advent of the PC, my work in this zone (under the name VIRTUAL STANCE 1986 — 1990) entered the digital realm and made use of the software M running on an Atari 1040 to drive various samplers and digital delays. With M, an improvisational environment could be prepared and then realized in performance. M was a clocked sequencer with a tendency to rhythmic structures involving cyclic repetitions. I tried to make these tendencies less obvious through the use of samples of my invented string instruments (slab, pantar, violinoid) that had been processed to mask their origins.

X-TOPIA further refines this real-time approach. The string quartet is given core materials ordered in time as well as an instruction set of musical actions. Using the Buchla Thunder (offering unprecedented real-time MIDI control) as a controller and various digital signal processors, the sounds of the quartet may be sampled and transfigured sonically and spatially in performance by the composer. The sonic processes instigated by my processing are integrated by the quartet to effect their own decisions about further musical actions to be taken within the piece and which are again processed and sent into the sonic field.

Irrational music is a useful pun to describe what I try to manifest in my compositions: ir (an irresistible pun) — the acoustics of sound in space and in the eye and its connection to the

perceptual engine, the overtone series, different tones, feedback, volume effects 'define melody', 'define groove'

the rational: structure and order, algorithms of use and process. formal systems of organization, social and genre context cross-reference.

overall -the irrational — chaos, intuition, the tangential.

Non-linear improvisation is an essential part of irrational music -improvisation brings the music to life, it transforms the static into the dynamic, the individual effector in the sonic flux.