

Chasing Chords

Introduction

In essence, the idea is a musical game that asks a drummer and a piano player to guess and to play in sync with randomly events generated by the software: a bass drum hit and a piano chord respectively. The purpose was to create a musical texture consisting of virtual and live bass drums and piano chords that is made up of four random processes; where two was generated by the software, and the other two by a piano player and a percussionist struggling to play in sync with the computer generated events. For the drummer the instruction is simple: try to hit the next computer-generated bass drum simultaneously as it appears. For the pianist the task is to guess and to play the next randomly generated chord, out of three possible, in sync when it occurs.

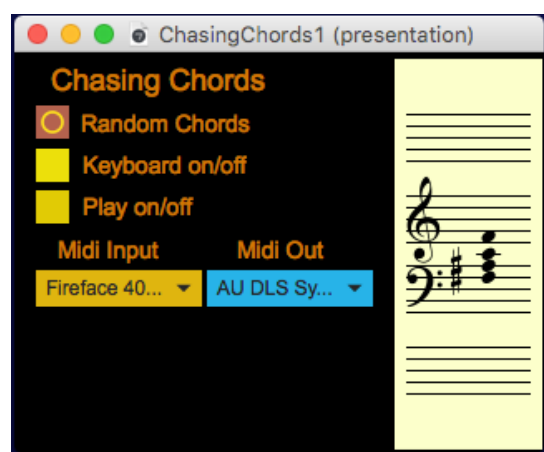


Figure 1: Chasing Chords

Figure 1 shows a screen dump of the Max patch Chasing Chords.

Musical Inspiration

Among sources of inspiration however, one may mention American experimentalists such as John Cage and Morton Feldman, rather than free jazz artists. A point of departure is a cornerstone in John Cage's music, namely that one important structural parameter in music is the relation between sound and silence. In *No Thing Such as Silence* Kyle Gann writes, a propos structure in Cage's music: "a rhythmic structure was an empty stretch of time to be filled with sounds, or with sounds and silences" [1]. The empty structure in Chasing Chords is the double random-based re-play mechanism; a structure eventually filled with sounds and silences. Moreover, Cage's so-called *Number Pieces*, and e.g. Feldman's *Intersection 3* are also regarded important sources of inspiration. Cage's number pieces [2] consist of predefined time windows where the performers have to play one or several predefined notes, without specifying exactly when to play, except within given time window. Feldman's *Intersection 3* divides three participating instruments in three registers, low, mid and high, and asks the performer to play, e.g. a low note during a predefined time window. The resulting audible outcome, in both refereed pieces, displays recognizable musical identity in different performances and with different performers, despite relatively big interpretative freedom for the participating musicians.

Conclusion

Chasing Chords is created and used within a free jazz context, but borrows ideas and concepts from the experimental music tradition as e.g. Michael Nyman discusses in his book *Experimental Music* [3]. The perceived free jazz flavor in the musical result, I will argue, has rather to do with the participating players idioms and pre-suppositions, than the software, since the structure of the random generation of sound events is genre neutral. According to my point of view, the interest Chasing Chords may create is the perceived uncertainty when the next event will occur, and whether any of the players will succeed to hit them. Another crucial and significant concept in this tradition is task; to perform is to solve a series of tasks rather than self-expression and/or expressing concepts. Michael Nyman argues with respect to experimental music: "for each experimental composition presents the performer with a task or series of tasks which extend and re-define the traditional (and the avant-garde) performance sequence of reading-comprehension-production" [4]. In this context, solving the task is meaningless in itself; it rather functions as a method to move and

change the player's attention, from expressing something to solve the given task. To play, or rather to interact with the Chasing Chords reminds of playing a simple FPS video game, which is intentional, however the audible outcome shows a musical identity, which, I will argue, would not be possible to achieve without the software. A recent update of Chasing Chords features implementation of a listener that counts hits, and first to achieve a fixed number of hits, e.g. five, is declared winner, and play is terminated. This feature risks to drain the musical quality of the software, which rather is to act as a starting point for improvisation, than becoming a game by its own means.

[1] Gann, K. No Such Thing as Silence 2010. p. 54.

[2] The number in each number piece mirrors the number of participant players.

[3] Nyman, M. Experimental Music 1999. p.2

[4] (Ibid p. 15)