

Going in Circles: In Conversation with Simon Scott 14.02.11

‘If someone makes a great record and they don’t know who the fuck Varèse is, then that’s fine – it doesn’t really matter, you know? – but I think to a degree context *is* still important.’

A bold opening, without doubt. Just back from performances at the *Zivilisation der Liebe* Ambientfestival in Köln and the *Transmediale* festival in Berlin, a smartly dressed Simon Scott sits across the table at a coffee shop in Cambridge. Picking out highlights from his record collection, it’s clear he knows his stuff. From Yasunao Tone and Oval we slide past the Room 40 roster to Machinefabriek and Peter Broderick. When we get to Wolfgang Voigt’s sampling of Wagner on his most recent release *Nah und Fern*, we pause. I ask if Simon has ever worked in this kind of way.

‘It’s funny, I was thinking about this earlier. About 6 or 7 years ago I stopped playing with my band, and I started to use samples. I’d sample myself: I’d find a moment in an old song, then take that and make a kind of montage, build sequences, and then start to process them... It was about stripping things right back, going back to a moment that you love – finding just ten or twenty-five seconds in a piece of ten minutes – looping it, and building from there.’

Needless to say, this process of composing isn’t a fast one, but for Simon there seems to be a certain comfort in taking enough time over things. ‘It’s taken me two years to write the new album for Miasmah [released this summer], and that’s all refinement, chopping away the slack, getting rid of things that aren’t quite good enough’. You can hear this focus, too, not least on 2009’s *Navigare*. An idea ducks up from under a heavy, wet blanket of crackle, struggling to stay afloat before inevitably slipping back out of earshot. When I suggest it sounds ‘oppressive’, Simon nods. He cites a remarkable parallel: ‘My uncle was an alcoholic, and he was also a submarine officer. So he spent most of his life submerged under water, and when he docked he’d be in the pub getting completely caned. In other words, he was always, and literally, under the influence of one form of water or another’.

Suddenly, it occurs that there’s a poignant link between the inspiration Simon cites and his working methods. Loop-based music, after all, is an elaborate process of entrapment; sound energy is forced into relentless cycling, repeating audio assumes a position as inescapable as the submariner’s. Wary of heavy topics, I decide not to pursue the point. Instead, I ask him about Max/MSP.

A few clicks later, we're ogling an impressive matrix of loopers, pitch-shifters, delay units, tone generators and EQ functions. (See the screenshot below). Generalizing, the patch works in three main ways, Simon explains. First and foremost, it allows him to record and mix together multiple layers of his guitar playing into the computer in real-time. Clearly represented as waveforms, loops can be easily shortened, lengthened or rerecorded on the fly. Secondly, the patch provides ample means by which to manipulate the recorded sounds: filtergraph functions allow for the improvisatory modulation of timbral properties, whilst delay and chorus effects help flesh out the sonic texture. A secondary group of loopers stutter and distort sound from the first, generating local glitches from the global stream of audio. (Looping loops, anyone?). Thirdly, and more subtly, the musical process the patch provokes – steady, build-and-release motivicism – and the quick, simple adjustment its various parameters allow, encourage the user to listen carefully to the evolving sound and respond critically to it. 'It's all about listening,' Simon offers. '[The festival *Zivilisation der Liebe* was in this thousand-year old church, in the middle of Cologne, with beautiful acoustics. Not long after the start I was cranking my delays and reverb right down because the room was so *live*... likewise, if you've got something really shrill, if you've got loads of little grains freaking people out, then you can just roll them off with the master EQ'.

Just gone noon, the lunchtime rush begins. With a gust of cold air, the door swings open, springing back with a happy clatter. It's the sunniest day of the year so far, and the crisp light is reminiscent of *Silenne*, Simon's recent release on the Dutch microlabel Slaapwel. I suggest that it's his brightest record to date. 'Silenne was a celebration of a lot of different things... The years before had been pretty hard. I came out of Slowdive (Simon's first band, whose second album was produced by Brian Eno) basically with nothing. There was a lot of loss, too; a couple of my mates died on motorbikes, and there was illness as well, and the only way I could cope was by withdrawing, teaching myself a new way of making music, getting a computer, learning about Max, learning Supercollider language. *Silenne*, after ten years, is basically about feeling like I'm finally where I want to be again'.

We meander on for a while, draining our cups and chatting about music in universities, and the modern classical tendency towards modality. Simon is quick to ground his own conception of tonality with references to Debussy and his consonance-happy contemporaries. Before we know it, mulling over notions of influence and context, we're back exactly where we started. Loops, it seems, are everywhere.