

Soft Revolvers

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Abstract. *Soft Revolvers* is a music performance for 4 spinning tops built with clear acrylic by the artist. Each spinning top, 10' in diameter, is associated with an 'instrument' or part in an electronic music composition. The tops are equipped with gyroscopes that communicate wirelessly with a computer where the motion data collected (speed, unsteadiness at the end of a spin, acceleration spikes in case of collisions) informs musical algorithms designed in Pure Data. A camera placed above the performance table provides video feed that will be projected back on the screen behind the artist. LEDs placed inside the tops illuminate the body of the objects in a precise counterpoint to the music, the positioning of the lights creating visually stunning halos around the tops.

The performance *Soft Revolvers* brings forward the concept of performance specificity: the interfaces become an integral part of a single work of art and are not meant to be played by other performers or used in other contexts. This concept of performance specificity marginalizes this work from the dominant trends in new musical interface design, where characteristics imported directly from the traditional instrument paradigm such as versatility and virtuosity (Overholt 2009, Dobrian and Koppelman 2006) – the capability for an interface to encourage and allow for the development of a skilled interaction through long term practice – are generally privileged. Not designed to replicate the expressivity of traditional instruments, these spinning tops are focused on a narrow set of gestures that are intelligible to the audience due to their physical nature and the energy required of the performer. These visceral gestures engage the audience in the act of controlling ever-changing samples, thus taking advantage of the potential of pre-composed fixed parts in live performance¹.

This is further reinforced by the obvious augmented DJ connotations of the objects and of the performer's attitude. With their large circular spinning bodies and their role as music playing devices, the spinning top interfaces strongly evoke turntables and their related subcultures. Some of the mappings between gestures and sound have been borrowed directly from the bimodal behaviour of turntables: at slow speed, the sounds produced can remind of scratch solos, with the characteristic unstable pitch variations. At full speed, the spinning tops act like normal turntables playing vinyls, in this case, playing pre-composed material.

Embracing performance specificity leads to an inevitable revision of methodology in the creation of new musical interfaces. When versatility cease to be an imperative, it becomes possible to create interfaces that convey strong symbolic connotations, intimately related to the musical discourse. *Soft Revolvers* exemplifies this idea, by integrating non-instrumental, or everyday objects as performance tools. Such objects engage audience members in a particularly intricate manner, awakening subconscious physical memories of their lived experience with those objects, in terms of behavioural expectations, function and symbolic connotations. The public can anticipate the physical rules that will guide the performance and thus actively participate in the tension and release dynamics at play.

Keywords: performance-specific interfaces, live audiovisual performance, everyday objects

¹ This strategy is also used by Nicolas Bernier in *frequencies (a)* (2012) and Martin Messier in *Projectors* (2013).

References

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