

W. KEITH DUFFY

Sound Arguments: Composing Words and Music

Considering the commercial success of textbooks like *Writing in a Visual World* (Ogden, Katz), *Beyond Words* (Ruszkiewicz, Anderson, Friend), and *Picturing Text* (Faigl

composing essays already—but how would you feel about doing a different kind of composing as well?

This semester we've constructed a digital recording studio space in the room next door. It contains a microphone, a digital drum machine (that can produce about 300 different drum sounds and can be programmed or played freehand), a keyboard synthesizer (that produces about 300 distinct sounds), a sampler (that allows you to capture pre-recorded sound from CDs or tapes, or sound through a microphone, and use that sound in many different ways), there is also a computer-based, multitrack recorder (that allows individual tracks of sound to be recorded separately and then mixed together) and a bank of "sound processors" (that can create special effects like echoes)

Here's what I'm hoping we can do: After we work on researching, writing, and revising our essays in our regular classes, we will meet in the studio next door to experiment with sound and hopefully we will be able to record some music. Don't worry: no music-making or music-playing experience is required; all that is asked is that the sounds you create must in some way be connected to the essays you are writing. For example, if you write a persuasive essay arguing that forced volunteerism as a high school graduation requirement is hypocritical and moronic, in the studio you will be trying to represent those same arguments in sound. While the studio is primarily set up to create experimental electronic music, if you have an instrument you want to bring in to record, you may do that as well.

Lastly, if you think the idea of writing essays and recording music seems like a strange concoction, I believe you'll be surprised how much the two can be closely connected. As a writer and musician, I personally have discovered how much the two mirror one another (and how much one activity has taught me about the other). By asking you to engage in both of these processes, I hope you will learn how to harness the emotional and intellectual power of music (or sound) to better understand the rhetorical (or persuasive) power of a well-written, well-researched argument—and vice versa. Melding these two modes of expression is a challenge, but with my help in the studio, I think you will come to understand how artists might construct effective persuasive arguments on controversial issues in multiple mediums. Trust me, it's fun; this is a no-stress situation, but it will require your dedication and openness to the process.

Faced with this course requirement, some students immediately start looking for the exit. I'd be lying if I didn't say that even hours later, some students initially have difficulty comprehending this cross-pollination. The rhetoric of words and the rhetoric of...sound? What could the two possibly have in common? Fortunately, once I assure everyone the only requirement is a healthy sense of exploration, most students settle in. To orient ourselves to the connections between written rhetoric and sound, in the studio, students and I begin our experimental first-year writing class by discussing—in general terms—how

rhetoric manifests itself in a multitude of forms. Using excerpts from the aforementioned textbooks, and other sources like Bronwyn Williams' *Tuned In*,³ we explore the visual, oral, textual, gestural, and aural aspects of rhetoric. Since our focus is primarily on the aural (and since students eventually create electronic musical scores that correspond to their written texts), we focus our exploration by listening to and making notes on a variety of compositions (most of them experimental) recorded by electronic artists who explicitly approach their art rhetorical ways.

One of these artists is Terre Thaemlitz, whose recent CD release is titled "Couture Cosmetique: Fragmente Electroacoustique Symptomatic of the Need for a Cultural Makeover." Thaemlitz is a good example of a contemporary electronic artist whose music is infused with an agenda. As a self-described "transgendered, non-spiritual, socio-materialist," Thaemlitz's electronic and electroacoustic compositions tackle a variety of controversial issues, including the commodification of sex and gender, the erosive forces of capitalism, and the questionable purposes of art and social standards.⁴ At the beginning of our class, students and I also analyzed experimental recordings of John Duncan, an artist who has a long history of transgressive research in the name of art.⁵ His release titled *The Crackling*—a meditation on the relationship between science and religion—is composed from digitally edited and treated segments of recordings made on location at the Stanford Linear Accelerator in California (SLAC). According to Duncan, the clattering blips and the subharmonic sinewaves (all captured with carefully placed contact microphones and manipulated digitally in post-production) represent his inquiry "into the nature of humanity in light of its place in the cosmos, in light of new discoveries about the behavior of particles. Science has become trusted as

a religion,” says Duncan. “But putting faith in science to provide all the answers to all questions is a howling, tragic mistake.”

Although this basic orientation to the rhetorical elements of contemporary electronic music is crucial in making the class work

English-speaking counterparts. To support her claims, Emily utilized and documented a variety of print sources, particularly a series of New York Times articles. In her research, she discovered that a paltry 11 percent of teenagers who enter the ninth grade actually leave bilingual programmes successfully, while the rest do not.

Because of her personal experience, Emily felt very strongly about this issue. So, I was not surprised when she entered the recording studio with a sense of determination and an eagerness to see how rhetoric might also be represented using sound. Like most of the students in the experimental course, Emily opted to create an abstract electronic piece, one that did not rely on traditional notation or rhythmic structures. My experience had taught me that the “open canvas” rhythmic, atonal, aleatoric approach used by some contemporary electronic abstractionists allows room for students to experiment. Additionally, the lack of formal training in music becomes less of an issue for students when they feel free to work in an unconstrained environment where they can focus on the idea that sound can represent rather than on technique, chord arrangements, or time signatures. Those few who do possess some musical training are more than welcome to use that knowledge in creating their compositions; but those who lack such an education can have an equal chance at creating some stunning pieces.

Sitting down with me in the digital recording studio to begin her session, Emily unfurled the paper bag she had brought with her. Inside was a handful of English-Spanish language cassette tapes she had found in the school library; for her, these tapes represented the complexity of her feelings about having attended a bilingual educational programme. She explained that she wanted to sample the English and Spanish voices on the tapes at alternating speeds, while morphing the sounds through the sampler.

After a basic orientation to the studio equipment and a few sessions of grubbing around (which, I've noticed with most students, often mimics the prewriting stage in written composition), Emily decided to begin her short, three-minute composition with a tiny wisp of white noise which steadily increases in volume over the duration of the composition and eventually becomes an overwhelming roar. To me, it sounded like an alien wind blowing through space or across an inhospitable landscape. She said this menacing sound represented how she and her peers felt when first introduced to the U.S. educational system—she was lost in a vast, faceless, institutional system. As the hissing sound grows incrementally louder, chopped fragments and slivers of people talking are slowly introduced onto the canvas. Nanoseconds in length, the fragments are purposefully not sustained enough for the listener to understand complete words or phrases; the voices are meaningless. In fact, it is difficult, at first, to distinguish whether the voices are speaking in any identifiable language; in such a shortened clip, simply identifying them as human voices is a challenge. She achieved this effect by using granular synthesis software on the computer which allows the composer to sample any piece of prerecorded material and reduce it to microscopic pieces and rearrange it with the click of a mouse.

Stuttering along at a steady clip, the fragmented voices grow incrementally louder, and they also grow more sustained so that a few isolated words can be understood at random. Although they are almost imperceptible, English and Spanish voices shrouded in a delayed echo effect suddenly rise from the chatter, creating a nonsense of words and sentences. She claimed this jumbled mixture of vocal sounds represented the confusion she felt having to navigate an educational system that kept her mired in one

language, while claiming to give her access to the language of power. Next, she added factory-like grinding noise (representing the idea of a monolithic educational institution) and more sustained voices, and she slowly increased the volume of all the elements to the point of digital distortion. The composition, which took five one-hour sessions to complete, comes to a halting close just as it threatens to push the listener to the brink of physical pain. This chaotic, shrieking musical composition shares the same title as her written essay: "A Superfluous System." (Example 1).

In one sense, Emily made

English-Spanish language tapes). Referencing sources in either insipid or a certain

many “sound effects” options (verb, echo, phasing, reversing, pitchshifting, and harmonizing). In both kinds of compositions, students discover how such effects might be used for rhetorical purposes.

As you can see, similarities between both mediums are so numerous that a comprehensive discussion is nearly impossible. Generally speaking, I prefer not to hold prescribed discussions with students about these theoretical and practical connections when we are in the recording studio together. This way, I hope the student experiences the studio as not simply an extension of the academic writing class (which is often steeped in a student-teacher hierarchy), but as an almost sacred place of relatively pure experimentation. Accordingly, there is one facet of this pedagogy I've tended to downplay in the articles I've written on this topic and I'd like to correct it. To be honest, the most powerful effect of this pedagogy has been the factor. After teaching writing at the secondary and postsecondary levels for over a dozen years, I have honestly to admit that my classroom got a little stale from time to time—this is a perennial challenge for us all. Being able to reinvent my writing classroom by immersing students in the rhetorical aspects of sound and by spending hours with them as they discover this new “compositional space” in the recording studio—has been a great boon to me professionally. Certainly, learning is a serious endeavour, but having fun is equally serious. Upon reflection, I realize that my classroom had been lacking a lighthearted spirit of exploration that it once possessed and this pedagogy has changed that.

Students are not shy about admitting their sense of fulfillment and enjoyment, and their musical compositions often reflect those feelings. As my syllabus above states, writing students are supposed to connect their musical compositions rhetorically to their

and Lisa, Jessica, and John managed to have fun, express themselves, and learn something about rhetoric at the same time.

While almost every one of my students responded positively to this pedagogical experiment, the same can be said for all of my colleagues. While I have heartily enjoyed implementing this pedagogy, I compelled, as a professional, to offer two caveats to any writing teachers—especially untenured ones—who might try to reproduce it. On several occasions over the last three years a number of my peers have been critical, rightly or wrongly, of my pedagogical explorations. First, I've been reminded that any claims I make regarding student success are strictly anecdotal. This is true; I've not conducted a quantitative or qualitative study regarding the work students complete in the writing classroom and the recording studio. Although this pedagogy is still in its tentative formative stages, I suspect such a study—especially focusing on the attitudes and perceptions of first-year writers engaged in this enterprise—would prove useful and interesting. I think future research into this area would be beneficial. A second caveat involves the hoary tenet of “publish or perish,” a writing professional who is interested in the rhetoricity of electronic music and its production, I've listed my own original music (published by a variety of

