

Jurij Dobriakov

## Experimental electronic music and sound art in Lithuania

Lithuania has a large and varied electronic music scene. But Lithuanian electronic music influences are global rather than local, says Jurij Dobriakov, a feature boosted by events such as Gaida, an annual festival of international contemporary music held in Vilnius. Here, an overview of Lithuanian electronic musicians working in genres from academic through sound art to dance.

When discussing the scene for a specific kind of music in a given country, one is naturally tempted to delineate its "territory" in a way that would make it appear homogeneous and easily distinguishable from that in any other country. Yet the problem of indeterminacy arises when one deals with a phenomenon as polymorphous, deliberately cosmopolitan and increasingly independent from geographical location and sociocultural context as experimental electronic and electroacoustic music. Once the contours are drawn, they tell more about the scene's unique "political," economic, and infrastructural situation than they point to some "national" aesthetic shared by all members of that scene. Obviously, there is a circle of individuals in Lithuania who use similar electronic composition and performance tools, perform at the same festivals and events, face common challenges, and often collaborate with each other. On the other hand, do they have anything else in common that would point to the existence of a specifically "Lithuanian" electronic and electroacoustic music scene, apart from shared "infrastructure" and geographical location? It appears that a variety of fairly different attitudes to the scene exists, as well as differing aesthetic reference points among the Lithuanian composers and sound artists themselves.

Opinions regarding the necessity for the scene's exceptionality are also varied. A frequently expressed opinion holds that the Lithuanian scene should strive to integrate into the global scene as much as possible. To some extent, this tendency may be explained by the fact that integration effectively increases the publishing and performing opportunities (Lithuanians' works are increasingly being released by international record labels, while they get more opportunities to perform at international festivals, alongside globally celebrated electronic artists); consequently, localism is rarely viewed positively. Besides, it is worth mentioning that for a considerable proportion of Lithuanian producers and audiences of electronic music (especially, of its popular, club-oriented varieties) the resemblance of local productions to Western "benchmarks" was, at least for some time, a kind certificate of quality. Such "mimicry" seems natural in the early stages of development of a young scene.

A couple of important reasons for the absence of "local" trends in Lithuanian electronic and electroacoustic music may be suggested. Firstly, because serious electronic music (not the type of naive "cosmic" soundtracks used in hyper-optimistic sci-fi movies) was generally deemed unpopular in the former Soviet Union, no tradition of electronic music emerged in postwar Lithuania. The potential of electronic sound was realised properly only at the end of the 1980s; the aesthetic reference points are therefore greatly varied and mostly "external". Secondly, there are no record labels in Lithuania committed exclusively to electronic music with which a certain type of music and "typical" sound is usually associated (eg Raster-Noton, Mille Plateaux, Sub Rosa, Ritornell, and those gravitating towards club music, such as Warp, Rephlex,

etc.). In effect, it is only meaningful to discuss each composer's characteristic sound, which is global as much as it is Lithuanian.

Before turning to that, however, it is necessary to specify the type (or types) of music presented in this overview. Several coexisting (and often overlapping) scenes that use the same yet differently understood notion of "electronic music" can be distinguished. There are professional or "academic" composers who pay considerable attention to rational composition and psychoacoustics; their experimentation often involves a combination of electronic and acoustic sound, as well as electronically controlled or enhanced acoustic sound. There is also an "underground" (this term should be understood, primarily, as indicating the non-institutional character of this group) – quite a wide circle of artists in whose understanding "electronic music" is equated, first of all, with experimental sound art, in other words with various psychophysical, technical, and aesthetic experiments that use electronic sound manipulations as the primary means of expression. Some of these artists have an academic background in music.

The term "experimental electronic music" is sometimes also used to describe the heavier genres of quasi-esoteric industrial music (eg industrial, post-industrial, dark ambient, power electronics, harsh noise), but since their "experimentalism" often appears to be of a far more schematic and limited nature, this scene is not included in the present overview. Lastly, there is the scene for lighter electronic genres (idm, indietronica, dub, trip-hop, etc.), which enjoy wider popularity among the young audiences and, at least in prospect, are more successful commercially. Despite that, this scene seems less interesting in terms of original ideas and experiments, with a few notable exceptions (discussed later).

This overview focuses mainly on "academic" electroacoustic music and "non-institutional" sound art, and discusses some individual artists whose work has been most intense, purposive, and conceptually interesting in the past few years, thus influencing and shaping the general context of today's experimental electronic scene. Sure enough, there are many experimental composers and sound artists in Lithuania, both interesting and professional, who remain beyond the scope of this overview.

### **Academic electroacoustic and electronic music**

Quite a few professional Lithuanian composers have several electroacoustic compositions in their lists of works. In most cases, however, one gets the impression that electronic sound is just another medium they have "tried out" because they perceive it as "different" and "intriguing", without fully recognising and utilising its unique potential. Composed in this manner, electronic pieces often sound as if they were initially devised for acoustic instruments, and usually suffer from an overly linear narrative structure. Nevertheless, there are composers who employ contemporary "formats" of experimental electronic music, new sound programming platforms, and live electronics in a more systematic way, and understand the electronic medium as being different from traditional acoustic media in principle and even paradigmatically. Antanas Jasenka's involvement with electronics may be considered the most consistent among them, though his work seems to belong within the context of the sound art scene, where his efforts have been the most intense. Discussed in this section are composers who work in academic contexts, though not exactly (or not always) with "academic" means (in the traditional and slightly derogatory sense). Their electroacoustic works are usually performed at the annual contemporary music festivals "Gaida" and "Jauna Muzika". Some of these composers occasionally take part in the experimental sound art events as well. Vytautas V. Jurgutis is one of the composers best acquainted with the global context of electronic music. In his work, he daringly "naturalizes" both the plasticity of abstract electronics and

electronic dance music rhythms. His sound is insistently digital and abstract, based on elongated, as if time-stretched, plastic resonant layers, high frequency currents, and (as in the album *Neogard-Club-Electronic*) warped technoid grooves. He employs algorithmic sound programming platforms (such as SuperCollider), which is still a rare enough case in Lithuania. Jurgutis' most interesting and technically complex electroacoustic work is certainly *Terra tecta for electronics and cello*. Jurgutis is also the curator of the "Jauna Muzika" festival in Vilnius dedicated to the international and local electronic and electroacoustic music scene.

Rytis Mazulis, often referred to as "superminimalist," uses electronic means as a way to transcend the human auditory, compositional, and performance limits. Almost all of his recent compositions are based on studies of microintervals and require superhuman precision in composition and performance. Electronics are used here either as a para-optical kaleidoscopic structure that envelops the acoustic sound of instruments and voices (as in *Form Is Emptiness* for electronics, cello and choir), or as an independent instrument controlling the reproduction of infinitely complex parts (as in the album *Twittering Machine*).

Recent electronic works by Ramunas Motiekaitis display a variety of non-standard rhythmic structures: sometimes humoristic to a degree of being kitschy, slightly resembling the "trademark" sounds of Japanese 8-bit computer games (eg *Surrounded for accordion and electronics*); sometimes sharp and intense, made of distorted percussive sounds and aggressive middle frequencies on the verge of listenability (e.g. the purely electronic *Jouissance*). Exceptionally organic are the almost ritually hypnotizing, transient acoustic spaces of shifting dynamics conjured by Marius Baranauskas, in which voices and whispers dissolved in multiplied echoes take the central position, forming a single transparent substance with electronic soundscapes and subtle wafts of noises (eg *Let*, based on a text by Rabindranath Tagore). Baranauskas's highly nuanced compositions are imbued with a sacral, ethereal, almost somnambular tone, requiring maximum involvement on the part of the listener. In lengthy electroacoustic compositions by Vytautas Germanavicius, one can recognise features of intuitive composition, subtly dissonant tone, and collage-like sonorities found in free jazz and instrumental theatre. The dynamics of sound ranges from barely audible noises and minute granules of electronic sound to bursts of more energetic tone clusters (eg *Luminous*).

## Sound art

The adherents of the experimental sound art scene take electronic sound as a paradigm that encapsulates exceptional possibilities of digital sound generation, manipulation and composition. In their work, sound becomes not just a musical, but ever more an architectural, physical and conceptual unit, an object of open-ended intuitive improvisation, conceptual design, or quasi-scientific research. In sound art, "musicality" and traditionally understood composition give way to free experimentation with technology, psychophysical effects, concrete sound poetry, and metaphysics of the very phenomenon of sound (or its absence). Obviously, not all of the scene's participants arrive at this shift purposively and effectively; sometimes their fascination with technology and instantaneity of various ad hoc creative methods overshadows the resulting sound itself. Practically all genres of contemporary experimental electronic music are represented on Lithuanian sound art scene, including drone, soundscape, microsound, glitch, clicks'n'cuts, conceptual sound design, noise, post-techno, electroacoustic music, field recording manipulations, and electronic minimalism. Many of its active members work in other contemporary art disciplines (video art, installation, performance, interactive art) and integrate these experiences in their musical activity. Even though this scene is quite uneven in terms of

aesthetics, collaborations between various sound artists are quite frequent and often extend beyond geographical borders as part of joint international projects. Given an apparent deficiency of infrastructure, sound artists usually present their new works at the local interdisciplinary art exhibitions and small events, as well as at the annual new media and sound art festivals, such as "Garso Zona", "Centras", "Elektrodienos", and "Enter". An increasing number of them are included in the programme of the annual "Jauna Muzika" festival.

Arturas Bumsteinas is among the most active and multidirectional artists on the Lithuanian interdisciplinary and sound art scene. He often acts not only as a sound and visual artist, but also as an entrepreneur, initiating various experimental collective sound projects (eg the laptop quartet "20,21") and launching publishing platforms. Bumsteinas's sound territory extends from minimal drone tracks and frequency manipulations based on concept play (eg Renaissance in Music, performed by the laptop quartet "20,21") to detailed, subtle electroacoustic compositions where snippets of acoustic instruments blend seamlessly into electronic textures, atmospheres, noises and rhythms (one of his most interesting works in this area is the album Placido, released by Zeromoon netlabel), thus witnessing the influence of his composition studies at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. Having many releases on international netlabels and traditional record labels to his credit, Bumsteinas frequently performs and participates in various art exhibitions abroad.

The music of Antanas Jasenka is intense, dynamic and multilayered, populated with diverse electronic sound objects - from glitch to soundscape (as in his latest multimedia release *Boarding Pass*). He is often found involved in collective sound creation platforms and interdisciplinary collaborations with various sound, visual artists and writers. Like Arturas Bumsteinas, he has several successful releases on international record labels and is invited to important new music festivals (eg "Turning Sounds 3" in Warsaw). He has presented radio shows dedicated to electronic music, and designed sound environments for theatre plays.

Gintas K (Krapavicius) began his musical career as a core member of the industrial electronic band Modus in the 1990s and later shifted his interests to hyper-synthetic minimalism, presenting solo projects in the areas of pure waves and acoustic vibrations, microsound, noise and post-techno rhythms. Gintas K's conceptually complex and demanding works are often released by international record labels (his most recent double CD *Lengvai / 60 x one minute audio colours of 2kHz sound* was released by the Portuguese Cronica label) and included in international compilations of experimental music and sound art. Performance art is yet another area of his interest, though currently he seems to concentrate almost exclusively on sound.

Darius Ciuta, a professional architect and former-leader of the noise band NAJ, may be described as the most introvert and acousmatically oriented Lithuanian sound artist. Rejecting any notion of music's visual aspect, he reduces his sound material, consistently and deliberately, almost to the point of extinction, where tonality and even rhythm become eliminated. Ciuta's "typical" mode is radically rarefied, architectural, and meditative, akin to the ideology of microsound, and focuses more on silences between the muted sounds than on the sounds themselves.

Many elements of sound poetry and influences come from Eastern philosophy (especially Zen) and various poetic traditions have found their way in the music of audio Z (Tautvydas Bajarkevicius). In his works, rhythmic layers unfold in time and space, echoing with the multitude of their own metamorphosed reflections, which make intense dynamic sound almost ethereal. His other compositions resemble musical haikus because of their fragmentary and cyclic nature. Bajarkevicius is also the organiser of the

annual "Garso Zona" event, a sound (and, increasingly, visual) art project important in terms of developing the scene's integrity. He is also one of the scene's most active theorists, furthering the discourse on sound art in the context of new media culture.

Raimundas Eimontas is perhaps the most improvisational participant of the experimental electronic music scene. He often presents live sets of electronically modulated and distorted guitar or violin sounds whose free and intuitive flow is not unlike that heard in psychedelic improvised music. Frequently performing with other sound artists, he is founder of the avant-garde improvisation band "N!N!N!" and has also composed non-improvised electronic works. Juozas Milasius, a professional guitarist active in rock, jazz, and electronic music scenes, works in a similar key, frequently collaborating with Darius Ciuta and other sound artists (Milasius and Ciuta gave several performances with the renowned Japanese post-noise artist, Kouhei Matsunaga, during his visit to Lithuania).

PB8, member of the interdisciplinary art collective "Group of Independent Observers", creates geometric sound structures inspired by the aesthetic of minimal techno and urban digital sound design, which coalesce seamlessly into his visual artworks, interactive installations, and multimedia releases. In his recent work he also experiments with combinations of electronic and acoustic sound (like in his performance at "Garso Zona 06", which merged live violin playing with PB8's electronics and visuals). The artist is active in the new media art scene.

### **Electronics in popular music territories**

With the development of Lithuanian music scene, the listeners' tastes and artists' stylistic choices become more diversified. This also entails the advancement of technical skills and aesthetic discernment needed for more interesting and complex styles. Naturally, popular youth culture keeps expanding to include not only club and dance music, but also some more refined and less formulaic electronic music styles intended for active listening, rather than dancing. Compared to the kind of music discussed in the previous section, it would be an overstatement to describe the work of the artists mentioned in this section as experimental. Yet, in the context of popular and club music, they obviously stand out as original, inventive, and innovative. One must also note the high quality of their music and performance, agility, and rapid growth in popularity. These artists and groups are worth mentioning at least for presenting interesting electronic music to wider audiences, thus stimulating greater stylistic diversity in Lithuanian popular music and establishing new standards of musical quality. Besides, they often perform at the same events as more experimental artists (at festivals like "Centras" and "Enter", where they usually present more intriguing and complex versions of their pieces). Even though in the beginning of their booming career the Vilnius-based FusedMARC - arguably the most popular, frequently performing and noteworthy band in this musical category - was labelled a Lithuanian version of international stars (such as Björk, Broadcast, and Portishead), now it seems to be arriving at its own distinctive sound. The latter is based on imaginative mixture of idm, trip-hop, and post-rock rhythms with indie-rock-like distorted guitar, various synthesizer tones, and female voice (at times, indeed, resembling that of Björk) fed through various electronic effects. When playing at small-scale events, the group uses the elements of ambient and minimal techno as well.

Having launched his solo career in the intersection of dark ambient, drum'n'bass, and drill'n'bass styles, Klaipeda-based IJO now gravitates towards the more accessible easy listening, ambient, and idm territories (though without renouncing his personal attachment to heavier drum'n'bass styles). Yet even in making lighter music, he is able to retain that easily

recognizable and interesting sound, which borrows certain elements from his previously employed styles. The artist's persistent effort to improve the sound quality and expand his creative toolkit is especially noteworthy. Even though IJO's works have been released mostly by online labels (like the Lithuanian idm/minimal label Sutemos), several of his compositions appeared in the commercial CD compilation *Pizza Jazz Music*. Both members of Dublicate, practically the only Lithuanian adherents of electronic dub music (Genys, member of one of the oldest DJ teams One Ear Stereo, and Pablik, ex-bassist of the easy listening/jazzy house band Empty), have a solid musical experience and a shared taste for music weaved from deep pulsating basslines, reverb-soaked guitar sounds, and syncopating rhythms, inspired both by classic Jamaican dub and contemporary minimal and dub techno. Dublicate's music is interesting because of its seamless combination of "obligatory" dub elements and influences of other electronic music styles.

### **What is lacking?**

It is quite obvious that the Lithuanian scene lacks, above all, the infrastructure that would otherwise ensure its vitality and continuity. Firstly, there are no electronic music oriented record labels that could stabilize and structure the scene. Lithuanian composers and sound artists usually release their works on international record labels, online publishing platforms (the first Lithuanian netlabel, "Surfaces", which existed for several years, and Arturas Bumsteinas' publishing platform for collaborative works at [www.mixthemixthemix.com](http://www.mixthemixthemix.com) can be mentioned), or use the DIY tactics by releasing and distributing their records themselves (in limited editions, meaning these records are not widely available). One can also mention the inadequate representation of the experimental electronic scene in the media, manifested in a complete absence of specialized publications, radio shows, and so on. Yet the most important "gap" is probably the fact that electronic composition tools and new electronic sound platforms are not widely considered to be "legitimate" parts of the academic curricula. In turn, this has several negative consequences: there are no conditions for the development of a more open and complex local discourse on experimental electronic music and sound art; the scene acquires certain aspects of ostensible marginality; no larger experimental sound labs and studios are opened; and, finally, no influential institutions promoting and popularizing electronic music and sound art are established.

Speaking of the music itself, a few things shortcomings on the Lithuanian scene can be named. First of all, especially among the "non-institutional" sound artists, there is a strong tendency towards a certain technological asceticism, which denies the value of the performative aspect and unique individual performance technique. The resulting sound becomes more important than live performance, which must be reduced or eliminated because of its association with the heritage of classical music. For many artists, a customary laptop with largely pre-recorded sound material becomes the sole performance instrument. Yet from the earliest stages of electronic music development it was often emphasized that an electronic composer is, in a sense, an engineer as well, creating his unique sound tools. It would be interesting to see Lithuanian electronic sound artists demonstrate their original performance techniques (like the legendary Japanese artist Aube), develop their own sound processing tools (like Akira Rabelais' poetic sound deconstruction algorithms), and experiment with live electronics and real-time processing of acoustic instruments' sounds (as Raimundas Eimontas often does). Such diversification of creative means would make the scene less predictable.

### **Perspectives**

It is likely that the Lithuanian scene will be further synchronized with the global processes, and more composers and sound artists will articulate themselves more actively and fully in the global electronic music and sound art discourse.

This, in turn, would make the scene seem weightier and more "legitimate" in Lithuania. An important effect of such synchronization would be the wider use of algorithmic musical platforms (such as MAX/MSP, PureData and similar) and introduction of technical and aesthetic innovations acknowledged on the global level. The emergence of strong theorists developing the critical discourse of electronic music as an integral part of new media culture is equally important. As mentioned before, such an evolutionary scenario depends heavily on the emergence of institutions promoting electronic music and sound art as professional activities. It is also likely that the scene will become less fragmented in the accelerating context of post-institutionalism and convergence of disciplines and activity spheres. This would entail an increasingly interdisciplinary approach, transcending the limits of the customary "audio + video" format and blurring the obsolete borders between the "academic" and the "non-institutional" contexts. One would expect more frequent collaborations between the two, which would most certainly help in developing a common understanding of the electronic music and sound art context. The beginnings of this process (such as the participation of several academic composers in Arturas Bumsteinas's collective projects) and its positive effects can already be noticed. The "ethic" of collaboration, manifested in the global sound art scene in the form of various platforms and algorithms for collective composition, is already widely present in Lithuanian sound art. This can be anticipated to be one of the main tendencies in the Lithuanian scene's further development, especially if the results of the new collaborative models are as fascinating as the process itself.

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