

# VISIONS OF SOUND: AN EXPERIENTIAL REVIEW ON ALGORAVE

Alice Tomlinson

In Birmingham's art and industrial playground there is a revolution happening:

highlighted orange, titled 'hotpink', cut and paste then told to 'hush' with the rhythm of a cursor. Vivid Projects in Digbeth is moving to a steady, building, hopeful, frantically engineered electronic sound, a webbing of line after line of code that swells and breaks in waves of noise, of music..

Algoraves – an offshoot of a type of improvised algorithmic composition known as live coding – are a growing movement among both programmers and musicians, the joining of visuals and composition being an inseparable part of their live experience. Minimal techno starts piling up, reversing in on itself. Complex patterns emerge, fall away, then return stronger. Throughout, two agitated cursors move from line to line, scouring, re-writing whilst their audience, eyes to the screen, start in their tentative dance.

In style of all good revolutions, this one follows a manifesto [1]

#4. Open process, open minds- we have nothing to hide.

Sound“wood\*8?” Sound “glass/2 glass 4”

Animationstyle motionBlur

Maybe I’m mistaken. This is a de-volution, reiterating that music – which we have learnt to understand as an audible pleasure – is no more than a language. Music is described as much as music is produced, with the instrument of translation being a computer turning layer upon layer of mathematics into lip smacking, scratching electronica.

Yet like an unfamiliar language, I can’t help but feel that this is an art with an air of exclusivity. As a process of improvisation it is certainly complex and deliberate. These events are often initiated by a live-coder - in this instance Vivid Project’s curator Antonio Roberts (aka hellocatfood) - and mostly taking place within an environment built for live coding whilst also using custom software each performer has created themselves.

#### **#5. Software dictates output, we dictate software**

Producers of live-coding understand their instruments at the core, and with this in mind there seems to be something incredibly freeing about these performances being processes of improvisation. They are messy, unapologetically so, and are created in the knowledge that every script will be erased, reworked and resurrected in their next performance. It is a process of pure experimentation.

In theory however, this a movement committed to audience accessibility. It is the visual importance of an algorithme – the transparency of live coding – that aims to dispel intangibility in electronic music as an experimental, artistic process.

Open process, open minds- we have nothing to hide.

In seeing a line of code with 'harp' or 'crash' and hearing those very words come to life puts the material in reach, the audience more trusting in this unconventional clubbing experience. This sensory process is not magnified by what can be heard but the visuals on screen, which are not only lines of code but, at present, a swelling, multiplying pink cube folding in on itself and its reproductions.

No doubt, I feel ridiculous. Dancing to what feel like the familiar chimes of steel drums which are instead running lines of mathematics, lines which repeatedly heavy then smooth the tinny beats as they are typed behind a laptop. These sounds are coarse and erratic, oscillating between fast breakbeats and pauses to create a musical exploration which is fundamentally technological, yet the output – no more than an equation – having an entirely emotive, reactive outcome in dance.

But there is a self-consciousness in my instinctive movements, distracted – or so I think – by my subconscious commitment to the work as an installation. The live coding has made the musical experience something which I am desperate to understand, forgetting that this is not an engineering of software but an engineering of sound, a search for new dimensions of timbre and musical movement. Exposing the process is a step toward a solution, but perhaps a step away from the audible pleasure of experiencing the hasty, unpredictable, uncontrollable curves of live music, instead being transfixed with finding reason within the chaos.

I'm listening, I'm moving – but I'm mostly looking, waiting for it all to make sense.

Admittedly I have turned this into an experience of over-thinking, trying to find reason in something that doesn't need reason at all. To go beyond the digital, the technological and rational mathematics, you will undoubtedly find something



unapologetically human, and personal in each performance. To attend an algorave is not necessarily to appreciate a precise craft, but to enjoy a process of human curiosity and experimentation. The screen may go blank, the speaker make an unexpectedly deep sound in its throat, but the webbed lines go on as emissions of repetitions, ready for a different approach, a different formula and a continuation of musical output through whatever means those behind the laptop have.

1) Ade Ward and Alex McLean, *The Generative Manifesto* (August 2000) <https://slab.org/the-generative-manifesto-august-2000/>

Image credits: Martin Sz

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