

The Digital Musician (3rd Edition)

Accompanying website

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Eleonora Oreggia



(Photo: Alessia Milo)

Eleonora Oreggia (also known as xname) is an artist and producer of electronic music born in Milan and based in London. She received a Laurea (BA+MA) Summa Cum Laude in Visual Arts from the University of Bologna (DAMS, Drama Art and Music Studies), with a thesis in Semiotics of Audiovisuals. In 2003 she moved to Amsterdam (Leonardo scholarship) to work as editor and researcher at Netherlands Institute for Media Art (NIMK). In 2008/2009 she became Researcher in Design at Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht where she developed the metaphysical software Virtual Entity. In London she has been awarded a practice based MPhil in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths University and she is currently pursuing a fully funded PhD in Media & Arts Technology at Queen Mary University of London.

Her research investigates the perception of the invisible developing systems for audiovisual performance composition using electromagnetic waves. Her live compositions transform light and other electromagnetic frequencies in sound waves through self built synthesizers and complex semi chaotic machines. She has performed, exhibited and lectured in music venues, art institutes, galleries and festivals in Europe, Asia and America - and over the Net. In 2016 she founded Nebularosa, a record label releasing music that challenges the established modes of music productions.

xname.cc
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Case Studies

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Why do you make music?

I make music because I hear music in my head, and making it accessible to others breaks the isolation that individuation engenders, the fact of being yourself and not another. I have always listened to the sounds of the environment, trying to amplify and select them in my head, searching for a rhythm, a pattern, and the emergence of sense from outer spaces.

When experience goes beyond words, and feelings overflow logic and reasoning, music prevails, becoming an explosion, a release of bliss. Something emerges, that which was already there, yet caged between brain and chest.

What music do you make?

I make some strange form of electronic music oscillating between experimental, noise, techno and industrial. It is bass driven and very tactile. I explore vertical harmonic sounds and polyrhythm. The melodic parts are based on non canonical scales given by the frequency range of the lights I use to generate sounds.

How do you make music?

In 2010 I started learning electronics to make small oscillators and synthesisers for fun. Since then I have abandoned the laptop in my music making (for years I was using Pure Data, a visual programming language). I started designing musical instruments which could transform light in sound, as I am also a visual artist and I have always been interested in synaesthesia. I use solar panels and light dependent resistors to make music. Since a few years I am also designing microwave antennas to detect and sonify electromagnetic signals. My instruments are opened to zones of catastrophe and chaos, and the idea that improvising with an instrument is a sort of amorous dialogue with an interface, where controllability should give space to the gracefulness of error, surprise, affection and loss of control. In this sense, technology that goes out of control can become a sort of companion. This imaginative approach to technology – that accepts non linearity and swerves – is an aesthetic form I reconnect to a “feminine” mode of the technical (gender is intended here as identification not biological determinacy), where electronics become subtle, soft and slightly affective and unpredictable, therefore more similar to the organic world.

Is any of your sound-based work not ‘music’ as such and, if not, what is it?

I don’t think any of my sound-based works are music as such so I am not too sure how should I answer this question. A particular example could be The Quantum Clock, an amplified and hacked quartz clock whose hands change speed and behaviour in relation to the environment and the spectator’s presence. The sound of the clock, its rhythm and sudden hesitations, as well as the change in bpm (beat per minute) is a slightly different way to explore the effect of sound on our perception, and the conventions which we are used to.

How do you describe yourself (e.g. are you a performer, a composer, a technologist, an engineer, some combination of these or, indeed, something else) and why?

I am an interdisciplinary artist and, as such, I represent a combination of all of the above, but also a bit more. My background is in classical studies, critical theory, semiotics and visual arts. In the 90s I started to DJ at home when I would get bored of listening to the same records, and I wanted to change them a little bit. I am a self taught musician, engineer and software programmer, but recently, not from the start, I have received a formal education in science. My art work and experiments with technology brought me to Queen Mary, University of London, where I have been awarded a scholarship in Computer Science and Electronic Engineering, and I am currently writing up a PhD thesis on “Audiovisual composition using electromagnetic waves”. In 2016 I have also received the Queen Mary Music Scholarship and since then I have a personal music tutor who has introduced me to Western music notation. Classical music, though, remains a sort of second language for me, whereas electronic music, and the approach that looks at sound as signal, wave, frequency, is my natural language.

What is the cultural context for your work - how are you influenced by music from other cultures or the other arts?

When I was a teenager I lived in Milan and was attending a few concerts a week, mainly free jazz and progressive rock. In the 90s I moved to Bologna and I was very influenced by techno rave music. I have also been listening to a lot of early noise music, breakcore, minimal techno, electro and avantgarde. If we look at the external world, definitely Afro-Brazilian culture is the one that influenced me the most. In fact, I started to build acoustic musical instruments in the 90s as part of the game/dance/fight Capoeira, which I have practiced regularly (mainly Angola style) for many years. There I experimented with polyrhythm, very low harmonics, and a very different approach to music than the tradition of Western music. Capoeira connects rhythm and dance to trance states and the collective experience of expanded (outer) spaces. This is definitely very present in my music. Capoeira also teaches about a certain extra power that is given to the musician and performer when they play the musical instruments that they have built. However, I was finding myself a bit constrained in building a Berimbau, with biribá wood and a cabassa (gourd) imported from Brazil, because in reality the core idea is to make musical instruments from materials that are available, so I was reflecting on this. If such materials were widespread in Angola or Salvador do Bahia, they weren't accessible resources in my urban habitat. So, what would be the equivalent, if I had to reinvent my own tribal ritualism? Inexpensive electronic components, that you can also recycle from obsolete technology, are the materials of my own natural environment, post industrial as it is.

What skills and attributes do you consider to be essential for you as a musician?

The capability of listening and a certain precision in the hands. Another attribute is the ability to count.

How do you select and shape sounds in your work?

I like to generate sounds with the machines I build and modulate them in realtime, mainly using lights and electromagnetic emissions, but also creating a chain through which the signals travel. I control the sound frequencies using the mixer, making subtractions or additions on different channels.

What are the processes you typically use and why?

Sometimes I use microphones and electronic stethoscopes (medical instruments to detect the heartbeat) to play with feedback loops and the Larsen effect. Occasionally, I stream this to different remote servers on the Internet and replay it locally in real time. The result, with time delay and compression artefacts, on top of the feedback loop, is astonishing.

Do you have any other useful or relevant things to say about being a musician in the digital age?

There are no more limits in music making nowadays, it's exciting.

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