


Spring 2022

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Recommended Citation

Samp, Aidan J., "Do Androids Dream of Improvisation?" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 303.
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Do Androids Dream of Improvisation?

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts of Bard College

by
Aidan J Samp

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

This project is my exploration into where we as humans have been, come from and where we are going or trying to go. The concept of *Do Androids Dream of Improvisation?* is an exploration of dreams and all their levels: subconsciously generated dreams while sleeping, the worlds they create and the suspended sense of reality/temporality that shifts the relationship between space and time. The exploration of dreams that humanity has for itself, looking into the future, especially in regards to technology and how humans continue to alter the Earth and its climate through the overuse of resources. Finally, dreams of travel that lead us off of Earth; the billionaires and their space race to nowhere (with air, trees, or mangoes). “There are no mangoes on Mars!” -Arisleida Herrera.

Androids being able to dream, calls into question their humanity and the ability to long for improvisation, which is the most alive thing one can dream of. The title is a reference to Philip K. Dick’s novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, (published, 1968), which the Blade Runner films are inspired by (*Blade Runner*, 1982 by Ridley Scott) (*Blade Runner 2049*, 2017 by Dennis Villeneuve). The book, and both films, deal with our relationship to technology and artificial intelligence. Technology, electronics and especially the internet, has shifted the way humans interact with one another and the environment we inhabit. We have become dependent on technology to complete pretty much everything we do in daily life. We are especially dependent on our phones, which have become extensions of our consciousness and memory. Humanity has essentially become hybridized with technology and unfortunately, as time goes on, we get further from what is most important; the health of our planet, especially our forests, and oceans.

Music has been centered around the technology that was available to musicians to express themselves since the beginning of time. Since the first beings on earth discovered the

wonder of imitating nature's rhythms, or by extension, mimetically depicting one's inner self through voice and percussion, musicians have been searching for new sounds, new timbres, new ways to make sound more abstract and able to depict worlds within ourselves and ones outside ourselves that we dream up.

When I play music, it can feel like I'm in a dream; time doesn't flow in the same way, especially when improvising. The sounds interact with each other in the space and reverberate interacting with everyone in it as well; the sound of the room depends on who is in it. When playing freely, the groove, melody, tone and color or shape can turn on a dime at any point, just as the time, place and feeling of a dream, even visual makeup of the dream's reality, can shift and morph from one thing to something drastically different.

The first song I'm doing in the project is "Journey Satchidananda", by Alice Coltrane. A song that, to me, encapsulates the feeling of a dream. I am opening the show with it and it was my closing piece last semester. I wanted to create a direct bridge of sonic information, but also this is just a continuation of the last rendition and is the next step in the development of the piece that started to be performed last semester. This semester, there will be a harpist featured, Julia Haines, and Elias Ephron will be the featured poet. Elias is performing an original poem that he wrote for this project. To introduce the tune there will be a droning synth with harp over it, spiraling around Elias' words.

The second piece is called, "The Procession", written by Tigerdog Zebrafish, a group composed of myself, Jonah Roth (Mandolin), Vigilance Brandon (Trumpet, flugelhorn, and Moog Sub Phatty synthesizer) and Alex Parke (clarinet), all who will be playing on this. The tune is, rhythmically at least, based on reggae and dub. Melodically it is inspired by the Ethiopian jazz fusion of Mulatu Astatke. The title, in my conception of it, is creating an image of

a procession of elaborately adorned beings from a different planet, following a strict set of customs that go back to ancient times in their society. It reminds me of Sam Rivers' song, "Dance of the Tripedals" from his 1967 album, *Contours*, at least in what the sounds and title bring to my mind.

The third piece I wrote is, "Dogon Dogstar". It is a sonic base of synths from Logic, with layered recordings I made of birds in my backyard with tape delay, along with other sounds I recorded in my room in Los Angeles. The recordings include me making whooshing sounds on my bed with my hands, or some snaps. From the internet, I found and used audio of the vibrational frequencies of the earth's sun, sped up to human auditory range, as a warm bed for the synth, birds, and other sounds to float in. The band then plays a primarily improvised arc of music and texture over it, continuing once the track is done and taking it to new places.

The name, "Dogon Dogstar", is inspired by the star Sirius, also called the dogstar because it is in the constellation Canis Major, and is named after Sirius, Orion's dog in ancient Greek mythology. The Dogon are an ethnic group indigenous to Mali, who tell stories that go back thousands of years through oral tradition and are deeply ingrained in their philosophical and spiritual basis. The stories are of amphibious beings that came to them and gave them immense knowledge of the cosmos, both of earth's solar system and of Sirius'. The beings are called the Nommos, and according to the Dogon, arrived in a saucer shaped craft, poured water in a crater they made and landed. They had individuals in the pool pass on knowledge of Saturn's rings, Venus' moons and that Sirius was a part of a binary star system with an elliptical orbit and orbital period of 50 years, among much more. The Dogon have a festival called Sigui, celebrating every time the stars are visible between two specific mountain peaks in the night sky, every 60 or so

years. The music was inspired by this phenomenon, and the feeling of going past one's own disbelief of a strange account and giving into the possibility of infinite, infinities.

The fourth piece, “The Seas of Neptune” is also using a track I made in Logic, made up of two different shaped kombucha bottles that I blew various rhythms into making rung notes. I used tibetan tingshas, ringing with deley. I used a recording of the space outside of Neptune, as a shifting ambiance to go under more improvised ambient music played by the band, while sonically exploring with tone and its outer reaches.

The next tune is another Tigerdog piece entitled, “Anthropocene”. The title is referring to the time we are living in now, that began with the evolution of humans, and is defined by our impact on the planet and its various ecosystems. In Language & Thinking, the August that started off my first year at Bard, my final paper for the program was about the Anthropocene. I wrote of how humans frequently have the notion of invincibility, and how humanity has the power to overcome the natural forces of the earth. On the contrary, I argued that it is more likely that our collective actions as a species will lead to sets of cataclysms based on the systems being off balanced, and the earth will have another extinction of a group that lasted less time than the dinosaurs. In general, the song, in my conception of it, is about our relationship with items we have forged with formerly natural materials.

The penultimate tune is one I wrote and expanded on, from a melody I have been playing since I was 7 or so, initially on an old plastic keyboard. It is something that I never wrote down until this semester, but have always remembered. I named the piece, “Atlantis Pyramid”. The melody gives me a feeling of being a child, a certain nostalgia of innocence and openness to the things that can happen in the world; a free imagination that can create and see places that may have once been, or will be. Last year I realized that my melody was inspired by the feeling and

shape of a melody in the 1984 film, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, by master illustrator and filmmaker, Hayao Miyazaki, the song “Nausicaä Requiem” in the score by Joe Hisaishi, has a melody that is sung in a childhood memory of the film’s heroine, Nausicaä. It was done in such a powerful way that it impacted me as a child and I believe emotionally imbued the melody I wrote. Around the time I had first started to play the “Atlantis Pyramid” melody, was soon after I had visited a resort in the Bahamas called Atlantis, with my family. We were able to stay at the resort for free because my father was working on a film in the area. During the entirety of our stay, I was mesmerized by the aquatic/ancient civilisation theme of the place, even though it was cheesy in many ways. The location “Atlantis Pyramid” has in my mind, is between the bio-dystopian future of Nausicaä, and memories of childhood exploration in the resort linked to themes of an ancient past. The title is also literally referring to a hypothetical pyramid at the center of life and society in Atlantis, an ancient advanced city that crumbled under the waves of rising sea levels.

The final piece in the concert is a combination of “N.Y. State of Mind” by the rapper Nas, off of his 1994 debut album, *Illmatic* and “Blue Rondo á la Turk” by the Dave Brubeck Quartet off of their 1959 album, *Time Out*. I came up with the concept of the piece and worked it out with my friend Eddie Rosato-Johnson, who is a guest pianist at this concert as well. We put it together my senior year of high school and have performed it in varied arrangements. The piece is based on the idea of hip hop music and jazz living in one space harmoniously as complementary forms, something which is both a prominent idea and practice in modern jazz of the 21st century. Something that I as a drummer, and fan of both genres, am a large proponent of. The two songs, brought into the same sonic space, is to show harmony in difference and that the two are just two points of the same musical timeline; both forward thinking tunes that have

become well known in their respective genres. In the piece, I have spliced sections of both songs and superimposed them atop one another, i.e. the drum groove from the Nas tune with an altered version of the originally 9/8 time signature Blue Rondo. In order for the rhythms to line up, I made every other measure 7/8, it becoming a pattern that matches up with the 4/4 hip hop drums. The same thing is also done in reverse; I play the altered Blue Rondo groove with a musician playing the Joe Chambers sample that DJ Premier used in the beat. I have done performances of the tune with a rapper, and have done it with two different DJs scratching with turntables and taking solos with samples, usually chopping up verbal phrases. For this concert, I will be making the piece be more of a creative outlet to add ornamentation to the source material. During the first head, it will be a trio, in the solo section, other players are introduced and the head out will be deconstructed, with pieces of the Blue Rondo melodies fragmented and played in and out of time over various grooves and chaos.

In my moderation concert, *Phantastic Planet*, I dealt with the Big Bang theory in the intro to our version of "Space is the Place" by the Sun Ra Arkestra. It was free improvisation trying to sonically depict the Big Bang's audiofile slowed down and stretched out. It was the early stages of life, the first primordial giant stars, and skipping to creation of Earth. In my first senior concert, *The Devonian Space Age*, I dealt with the evolution of the first boned beings in the water, their movement onto land, creation of trees, and its connection to outward exploration of space. In this second concert, to finish off my undergraduate experience at bard, *Do Androids Dream of Improvisation?*, I am dealing with the implications of humans on the earth, what we are trying to accomplish, and how we have strayed from a sustainable lifestyle going into the future on this planet.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank my parents and family for always encouraging me to explore my imagination in whatever form or medium I am passionate about, and for supporting my artistic endeavors however they are able, my whole life, no questions asked.

I want to thank my board for being the core of my experience here at Bard. For their many musical specialties, enriching my experience through practice, dedication, performance, deep understanding of history and extra musical aspects of music. Most importantly, to always search for one's identity on their instrument, in order for full expression.

I want to thank my band and all the multimedia collaborators in this project that have done the real work, and I can not express enough how much I appreciate them for bringing this absurd idea into fruition. Much of the process has been serendipitous in the ways that certain things I would usually be nervous to try, come out smooth casually, and it is because of the dozen+ group of artists who have given a lot of energy into this experiment.

I want to thank my friends who give me the break from constant thought of this project, and the non-thought every person needs at times. For talking about the concepts, listening to me formulate ideas through rambling. I am especially thankful to my fellow seniors who are in a similar shifting period of life.

Finally, I want to thank my girlfriend, who has supported me the most in daily life while I have been working on this project. She is very encouraging and always has my back, even when she is stressed herself. I am especially thankful to her for checking me when I falter in productivity or organization. And above all, for being the best lover and companion a drummer obsessed with ancient civilisations could ask for.

Program:

Journey In Satchidananda- By Alice Coltrane, featuring: Julia Haines on celtic harp, and Elias Ephron with an introductory poem.

The Procession- By Tigerdog Zebrafish (Aidan Samp, Vigilance Brandon Jonah Roth and Alex Parke). Featuring Alex Parke on clarinet.

Dogon Dogstar- By Aidan Samp

Seas of Neptune- By Aidan Samp

Anthropocene- By Tigerdog Zebrafish (Aidan Samp, Vigilance Brandon, Jonah Roth and Alex Parke). Featuring Alex Parke on clarinet.

Atlantis Pyramid- By Aidan Samp

N.Y. State Mind / Blue Rondo á la Turk- By Nas and DJ Premier / The Dave Brubeck Quartet.

Arranged by Aidan Samp and Eddie Rosato-Johnson. Featuring Eddie Rosato-Johnson on acoustic piano.

Players / Shakers / Movers

Vigilance Brandon- trumpet, flugelhorn, Moog Sub Phatty.

Micheal Bariteau- Tenor saxophone.

Mikalah Jenifer- Vibraphone.

Rodney Clark- Congas, auxiliary percussion.

Eli Lotz- Acoustic piano.

Eddie Rosato-Johnson. Acoustic piano.

Julia Haines- Celtic harp.

Alex Parke- Clarinet.

Matthew An- Electric bass.

Elias Ephron- Spoken Word / Poetry.

Perry Zhang- Computer / tech deconstructionist, headpiece constructionist.

Miles Bitton- Photography, poster photo / graphic design.

Ginger Port- Cinematographer.

¿Do Androids Dream Of Improvisation?

Visilance_Brandon
Michael_Barriteau
Mikalah_Jenifer
Rodney_Clark
Eli_Lotz

Eddie_Rosato
Julia_Haines
Alex_Parke
Matthew_An
Elias_Ephron
Perry_Zhang
Miles_Bitton

Aidan Samp's Senior Concert II
Friday, May 6th 8:30 PM in Blum Hall