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Towards a Junk Aesthetic**Towards a Junk Aesthetic: On the Advantages of Junk Instruments for the Performance of Indeterminate Compositions**[Click here to download pdf version.](#) (156kb)

by Simon Katan, BA Mmus,
4 Wilton Estate,
Greenwood Rd.,
London E8 1BD,
U.K.

Email: simon [at] simonkatan [dot] co [dot] uk <http://www.simonkatan.co.uk/>

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Instruments, Composition, sound, musician, improvisation

Abstract

The article explores the author's motivations for restricting his group, Halal Kebab Hut, exclusively to junk instruments for the performance of indeterminate compositions. Such motivations include the separation of the trained musician from their historical imperatives, the creation of a new referential framework for the interface of score and improviser, and the sonic and semantic potential of junk instruments, especially in relation to humor. Finally, the author ponders the dialectical relationship between Halal Kebab Hut and its junk.

Halal Kebab Hut — *algorithmic junkestra* is a band of seven improvisers who perform indeterminate compositions using a large and growing collection of junk --- objects deemed unworthy of serious musical activities. Amongst other things this includes tin cans, water balloons, electric toothbrush, bubble wrap, whoopee cushion, food mixer, vacuum cleaner, hack saw, kazoos, pan pipes, klaxon horns, bicycle pumps, tape recorders, mbira, swanee whistles, bird calls, electronic children's toys, Casio MT-41, computer speakers in feedback loops and so on. Whilst the practice of using everyday objects as musical instruments is widespread amongst composers and improvisers and dates back at least as far as Luigi Russolo's 1913 treatise, *L'arte dei rumori*, the use of junk in *Halal Kebab Hut* has a particular set of functions that relate to the performance of its indeterminate compositions [1].

One such function is to separate the musician from their past, from the fetishisation of their own instrumental technique. In earlier experiments with writing compositions for improvisers, I found that musicians would very quickly become frustrated by the restrictions that the score placed on their instrumental technique and would inevitably end up bending, breaking, and ignoring the prescribed rules thus leading to an uncomfortable dynamic where neither composer nor performer was satisfied. Such situations always compared unfavorably with what could be achieved by free improvisation. The problem was the superimposition of a foreign body, the score, onto a pre-existing performance tradition with its own historical imperatives. Through the use of junk, a new set of prejudices and fetishes emerges around the instruments and the compositions thus creating a unique and integral performance tradition in which the balance between performance and composition have been successfully renegotiated.

Player B - Instructions

start with **silence** or **rattle**

If A = **silence** then play **silence**

If A = **rub** then play **rub** or **clap**

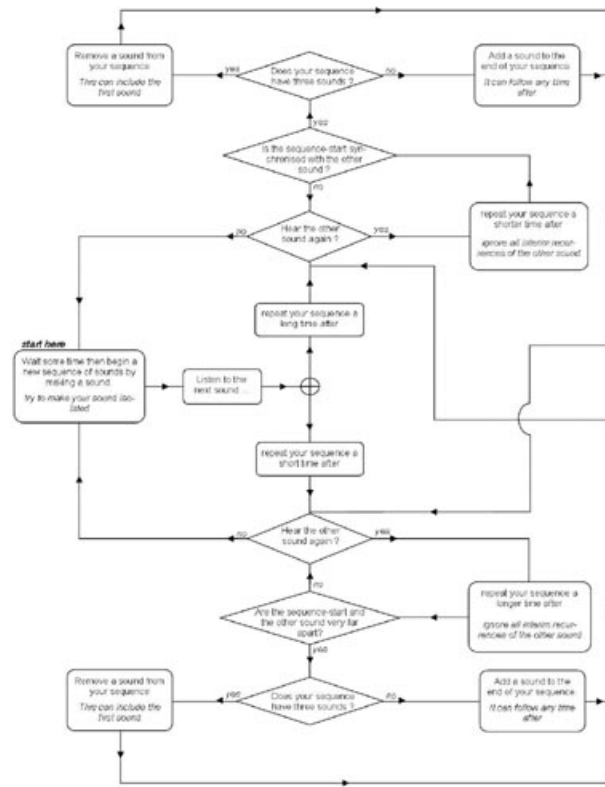
If A = **clap** then play **rub**

If A = **rattle** then play **rattle**

Table 1. Player B's instruction card from Carpet Bowls for Tins.

Halal Kebab Hut's indeterminate compositions take the form of algorithms, which consist of series of interrelated rules that generate structure through a process of iteration and bind the performer's actions together into complex networks. In such situations, the use of junk instruments allows for a set of commonly held points of reference, i.e. types of junk, specific techniques, or gestures, with which the rules of the algorithms can interface. Just as the standard harmonic, rhythmic notation system allows for the synchronization and organization of performers so does *Halal Kebab Hut's* junk but in a context where rhythm and pitch are secondary parameters to timbre, texture and gesture. The way in which the various compositions interface with the performers changes from piece to piece. *Carpet Bowls for Tins* limits players to the use of tin cans with various types of sticks and categorizes gestures under four headings, *rub*, *clap*, *rattle*, and *silence*, that can easily be recognized by other players whilst affording as much freedom as possible in terms of performance. The players are linked together in a fixed network in which each player responds to the gesture of their right hand player; Table 1 shows part of the score for one performer. Although the same gestures are used throughout, each player's score has a different permutation of rules and it is via the interaction of these rules that structure is created. Rather than guarantee any particular linear outcome, the structure contains within it various weightings which make some events more likely whilst excluding others altogether. The piece was designed to have the minimum number of instructions per player whilst retaining the maximum structural identity and was developed via the use of statistical computer modeling.

VARAZIONI CON SHISH - NO. 4



Simon Katan 2006

Figure 1. The score for *Variazioni Con Shish*.
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In contrast to *Carpet Bowls for Tins*' use of homogenous possibilities, *Variazioni con Shish* utilizes the specificity of sounds within the ensemble of junk instruments. All the performers follow an identical process in which they become interconnected in a variable network by latching on to iterations of individual sounds from other players (Figure 1). Each player ends up managing a series of several sounds, where the temporal proximity to the other player's iteration, as well as the number of sounds in the series, is altered according to the rules of the algorithm. Despite the resultant aural complexity and density, the individuality of each sound allows the players to keep track of the one onto which they are latched. Thus junk's potential for specificity and homogeneity in terms of technique, sound, and gesture helps solve a conflict between content and form that has existed in semi-improvised music since the dissolution of tonality in free jazz.



Figure 2. Some junk instruments before a recording session.



Figure 3. An excerpt from a performance of *The Freemasons*.

Of course, junk also provides a rich pallet of sounds that are distinct from those of digital and analogue electronics, or extended instrumental techniques. Furthermore, the various instruments imbue the resultant sounds with semantic content. For example, in addition to hearing the sound of a vacuum cleaner, the listener also recalls the original context of the instrument, which is producing the sound and juxtaposes it with the ongoing performance; the effect is amplified by the visual aspect in live performances. One could speculate that that much of the humor of *Halal Kebab Hut* is derived via the unlikely combination of instruments and their semantic properties. Over a period of time performers have developed a sensitivity towards this aspect of the music with emergence of individual preferences for particular situations - a squealing pink toy dinosaur in combination with a cow shaker for one piece, sawing into a piece of wood together with a drone from a toy recorder in another (Figure 2). A further source of humor is the use of unsuitable instruments for given tasks; for example,

attempting to produce a lyrical solo with a power drill. This seems to have broadened into a more general aesthetic for the band influencing aspects such as composition titles, album covers, promotional material, the presentation of performances, and even the compositions themselves. One such composition is *The Freemasons*, the performance of which at times involves having significantly more conductors than performers (Figure 3). This 'junk aesthetic' even stretches to the band's name - a suitably unsuitable title for a band. Thus, having initially been employed as a means of facilitating a neutral situation for the performance of indeterminate compositions, the junk becomes involved in dialectic with the performers and composer. One comes to wonder who's the dominant partner in such a relationship, *Halal Kebab Hut* or its junk?

Resources

Audio files of all the mentioned compositions can be downloaded from www.halalkebab.co.uk as well as more detailed articles on the composition of algorithmic music.

References

1. Russolo Luigi, Filliou Robert trans., *The Art of Noise (futurist manifesto 1913)*, (New York: Something Else Press, 1967)

Author Biography

Simon Katan is a London-based composer, performer and music educator. He is the founder of *Halal Kebab Hut* — algorithmic junkestra who have been together since 2004 and have performed extensively in and around the British Isles, including at the Sonorities Festival, Belfast earlier this year.



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