

Essay

REFLECTIONS ON THE MASTERS PROGRAM IN DIGITAL MUSICS AT DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

A personal experience of a student in the Masters program in Digital Musics at Dartmouth College is presented. First, I introduce my background and student experience abroad. Then the academic environment, coursework, musical opportunities, and the location of the program is discussed. Although the presentation is personal, this discussion focuses on elements of the above topics that are important to students in general.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this essay is about my experience at Dartmouth College as a masters student in Digital Musics. However, for students thinking about doing a masters program abroad, I would like to introduce myself as well as my study abroad experience in Japan.

I graduated in 2005 from the University of Washington studying composition and computer science. After graduation, I left for Tokyo to study at the Sound Media Representation Lab at Tokyo Denki University. I studied mainly computer music composition at the University of Washington, but I also became interested in some Japanese noise and electronic music, which was gaining popularity in the Seattle underground music scene. This, along with the chance to study Japanese language and culture made me want to go to Japan.

The experience abroad introduced me not only to many Japanese, but also to many amazing people from various countries. Life in a foreign country also lets one view one's own country from a new perspective. I mainly focused on developing a genetic algorithm analysis synthesis framework, and used it to create pieces. The conferences and concerts I presented the research and music at were good not only for presentation, but also for meeting new people with similar interests. It was also through the conferences that I got to see many beautiful areas of

Japan. My study abroad opened up several options for me upon leaving.

I chose to study at Dartmouth because it was a small, intimate program that appeared to have very self-directed students. The music department also provides a tuition waiver and a stipend so that the students can fully focus on their compositional or research interests. For the sake of organization, I am dividing the work/life environment into the elements that were most interesting to myself.

2. ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

The masters program is small, with only 6 students. It is within the music department, but it is in a different location on campus. The program's students and faculty offices are located in a small building that is completely for use by the Digital Musics program. Besides offices, it contains two studios for recording and editing, as well as a seminar space where classes are held, and attic space for practicing or soldering.

The faculty in the program consists of composers and researchers with interests ranging from evolutionary musicology to efficient audio databases. In addition to the main faculty in the program, there are also associate faculty with other departments that participate in events and collaborate with the masters students. Notable composers and researchers are also brought in several times per quarter to give concerts and lectures.

3. COURSEWORK AND PROJECTS

Although the classes are demanding, there is only one Digital Musics seminar per quarter, and it generally only meets twice a week. I had time to explore my own projects independent of the assignments. I was able to continue work on my genetic algorithm framework, and present this at Columbia for a meeting there (NEMISIG). I partici-



Figure 1. Digital Musics students perform at weekly concerts in the Hopkins Center for the Arts. The author, left, and Patrick Barter, right.

pated in Google Summer of Code to develop new features for the open-source program Audacity. The department funded me to participate in external concerts at five locations, from an informal concert exchange at Princeton to a conference (SEAMUS) in Indiana. The department also funds some student-initiated projects. I organized the release of a departmental CD. Furthermore, I was able to take three undergraduate classes from sculpture to German.

The written thesis is treated as a major component of final the two quarters of the program. I changed my topic from ultrasonic wavefields to the relationship between software and music. The task of formal writing and the constant review by advisors was demanding for me. I found the thesis process to be most useful for becoming aware of the relationships between my interests and history.

4. LOCATION

Dartmouth is located in Hanover, New Hampshire. The New England scenery is beautiful in every season. I was initially afraid of the cold winter, but I was happy to see the snow in my second year, as I had learned how to warm up by cross-country skiing.

Within the college there are interesting concerts, but in the surrounding areas there are not many electronic or experimental music events. I went to Hanover desiring and knowing that there would be a certain amount of isolation, so this did not bother me. However, when I did travel, I found nearby interesting places for art, culture, and music

in Montreal, Boston, Burlington, and Kittery, which are all a short drive away.



Figure 2. The Digital Musics 2008 CD. The cover photo was taken on a typical winter day in Vermont on the drive to school.

5. AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Michael Chinen

Michael Chinen is a programmer and composer born in Hawaii in 1982. He studied at the University of Washington, Tokyo Denki University, and Dartmouth College. He is currently in Germany at the Technische Universität in Berlin on a Fulbright grant to design ultrasonic-based sound installations.