

# pendulum: Electronic Improvisation and Visuals with Steph Horak

*[There is] no point of stability or centre [with regards to our cognitive relationship to the perception of music, and to the larger world]. As in a vibrating string, the axis of the oscillations performed is the string at rest. Such a middle ground would be tantamount to silence. Resonance, by contrast, requires oscillation of both the mind and the ear. It summons us to always keep on percussing, discussing, percussing.*

*Veit Erlmann – Reason and Resonance (2014)*

Having initially started as a conversation with the UK-based sound and voice artist Steph Horak, *pendulum* found its final shape as a live improvised electronic music and visual performance. It was presented at Sonorities festival 2018 in Sonic Laboratory of the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queen's University Belfast. It emerged as such, as a result of the texts that Steph and I had exchanged during a three-month correspondence prior to the performance. The live setting involved electronic modules, recited poetry (playback), voice, and visuals.

The performance was formally divided in several shorter sections, such that each started with improvisation and ended with recited poetry. In the space between textual (or poetic) dialogue, improvised sounds represented our different approaches to musicking. The aim was to respond to such differences through improvisation informed by listening; to each other's playing and to the poetry. In *pendulum*, the arrangement of texts can be interpreted by the 'listener' as a dialogue between two people. In practice, however, they are juxtaposed accidentally. As such, they sometimes clash, sometimes pass by each other indifferently, and sometimes work together towards synthesis of a 'hybrid' perspective. The entanglement of text and improvised sounds within the piece is intended to serve as an intuitive context for manifestations of difference—different point of views, approaches, decision-making processes, and attitudes.

The main idea for the piece was, on the one hand, to explore, based on our own texts and sound-based practice, the apparently 'instinctive' human tendency towards constructing dichotomies in dealing with complex issues. We had conjectured that the existence of such a seemingly 'natural' inclination is a basis for the emergence of many forms of technology including the digital. To that aim, we surveyed various uses of binary oppositions within our own poetic and reflexive writings and picked a number of texts, which reflected those in relation to the notion of 'difference' with regards to issues of identity, gender, race, culture, and politics. On the other hand, we were keen to reflect on digital music media's capacity to 're-open creative agency' (Born 2005, 26) through 'decomposing' the 'aural and visual objects into basic binary

representations' (*ibid*, 28); an underlying driving force responsible for the emergence and burgeoning of a digital arts and experimental electronic music scene in Iran that has been subject to scrutiny in this text. In this context, *Pendulum's* aim from my perspective was also to respond to a relatively recent, and still very niche, interest within EEMSI in relation to live improvised electronic music performances; a form which has been almost completely absent from the scene's live repertoire.

The poetry element was stored in a digital sampler module as a series of pre-recorded samples, which were supposed to be triggered by the visuals during the performance according to a set timing. The visual component was produced using a basic Max/MSP code extracted from a patch that was uploaded on Cycling 74 forum<sup>1</sup> by a user under the alias VINCE. The latter consisted of three black graphic pendulums that oscillated at different frequencies. In our version, the pendulums' bobs were rendered transparent in three colours: red, green, and blue. We tweaked the patch such that the pre-recorded poetry was triggered (via OSC messages) in certain instances of the meeting of two or three pendulums at an *extreme*—the only point in the trajectory of pendulum in which, as a result of a 'non-zero acceleration' that involves a change of direction, an ephemeral balance occurs. Through the correlation between poetry and the meeting of pendulums, the piece intended to metaphorically emphasise the significance of such a fleeting moment; one in which actors reach a fragile equilibrium before starting to diverge once again towards opposite poles. As the RGB bobs overlapped, their transparent shape allowed for the synthesis of new colours, which also served to further highlight such an ephemeral balance.

Due to a technical problem during the performance, however, the Max patch did not trigger the pre-recorded poetry samples at the 'right' moments. Instead, it acted as if completely independently from the pre-programmed setting. This resulted in 'misplaced' audio-visual relations that undermined the performance dramaturgy. Although it would be interesting to pursue a line of inquiry concerning an evaluation of *pendulum* in terms of success/failure, the main question for me in the context of this research is the following: how can the experience of enacting *pendulum* help me provide more insight into EEMSI's processes? What are the points of contact/departure between EEMSI's repertoire and *pendulum* from the perspective of this research? To answer these, I would like to begin with reflecting on the following thought: in one of my two main attempts to perform improvised electronic music during the course of this research—the other one being a collaboration with Pouya Ehsaei<sup>2</sup> at IKLECTIC London (March

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<sup>1</sup> [cycling74.com/forums/page/1](http://cycling74.com/forums/page/1)

<sup>2</sup> Reflections on the performance with Pouya Ehsaei is offered in the next section.

2018) which will be discussed later—something ended up going ‘wrong’: a piece of code that was configured to ‘meaningfully’ mediate between the visual component and the sonic did not do its job ‘properly’.

I would argue that EEMSI’s aesthetic specificity (or otherwise shortcomings) in live performance situations—by which I specifically refer to the noticeable scarcity of improvised sets—can be understood in terms of an embodied resistance against ‘uncertainty’: contexts in which there is relatively higher chance for things to go ‘wrong’. Through a perspective on a clash between the affects of an invasive mechanism of social-political, juridical, ethical-moral control—a ‘machinic’ process that I identified, explained, and termed ‘amorphous regulatorium’<sup>3</sup> in Chapter 5 (5.2, page 125)—and digital media’s capacity to ‘re-open creative agency’ (Born 2005:26), the above understanding can provide us with significant insight. In *On Musical Mediation* (2005) Georgina Born claims that such a ‘re-opening’ is made possible as ‘digital media supersede the capacity of material artefacts to stop the flow of re-creation [...] Music shows this remarkably well: digitized music, distributed via MP3s, CDs and the internet, is continually, immanently open to re-creation.’ (26) I would argue, however, that any similar arguments in relation to digital arts/music in Iran should begin by theoretically dealing with the state’s aggressive policies in, on the one hand, filtering the flow of material artefacts and, on the other, to monitor and restrict people’s access, as much as possible, to any possibility (even in thought) outside the boundaries of its control. It is only after this theoretical manoeuvre, it seems to me, that the agency of digital and new media technologies in offering creative possibilities can be meaningfully explored in the context of this research. In other words, to rigorously investigate such a capacity to act and make difference in relation to formations of aesthetics, processes, activities, and preferences or ‘tastes’, we first need to situate it within a particular social-material-semiotic<sup>4</sup> context.

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<sup>3</sup> As defined in Chapter Five, the almost-(im)permissibles involves a large category of coordinated ‘actants’—behaviours, thoughts, practices, ethics, laws—that in the current situation operate at the conjunction of radically different worlds—the world of internet ‘imaginaries’ and the world of social ‘realities’; the converging worlds of ‘mad’ technological acceleration and neoliberal capitalism, and the isolated worlds of ideological-political resistances against the latter and its ‘cultural’ hegemony. The almost-(im)permissibles are, however, and more broadly, a historically grounded by-product of ambiguous ethics resulting from particular transcultural-social-economic-ecological-(theologico-)political processes and power relations in the Iranian plateau. They are an amorphous, semi-autonomous, agentive force that guarantee a creative reproduction of the mechanisms, or ‘fuzzy’ channels, through which moral-ideological-political control sustains itself without being sufficiently detected and countered.

<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on the ‘social’ is not meant to be exclusive of the biological-ecological influences. Social-material is, therefore, meant as a holistic and entangled concept, involving all forms of a ‘mattering’ (Barad 2007) and sociality that is consist of materials, actors, relations, mediations, agencies, biologies, ecologies, histories, subjects, objects, perceptions, semiotics, and metaphysics, as described in 1.6 (page 20).

My findings show, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, that what digital and new media technologies have enabled in the context of EEMSI involve new forms of thinking, practice, and sociality. This has taken place through disruption of ideologically-grounded processes of political control exerted upon production-consumption, ethical-moral and legal regulation, economic and curricular activity, and through redistribution of knowledge, social relations, means of production and dissemination. Through this viewpoint, EEMSI's emergent 'live' aesthetics can be conceptualised in terms of a metamorphosis: a *bodily* transition from a previously tedious and rather passive (or otherwise repressed) mode of existence to a much more active one that involves a playful engagement with making and performing electronic music. Although this transition has been unfolding in the public domain (online and offline) for almost a decade now, it is still too young in social-historical-biological terms. From the perspective of this research, the aesthetics of electronic music performance in Iran still externalises the tensions arising from a creative engagement with the affordances/limitations of digital technologies, in a cosmopolitan setting mediated by the internet, and embodied effects of the 'almost-(im)permissibles'.

The latter description resonates with Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's understanding of Foucault's writings about the mass movements that led to the 1979 revolution in Iran, as the consequence of body's desire to liberate from the prison of the soul (2016). I do not use this analogy to draw a parallel with the conditions of the 1979 revolution—a historical event in relation to which EEMSI generation has no direct, unmediated, access—but to specifically draw attention to this play between 'body' and 'soul' as repeatedly articulated in Foucault's writings. As described in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), the kind of soul that Foucault refers to is 'the effect and instrument of a political anatomy' (25); 'the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body.' (29). As such, it finds a parallel in my concept of 'amorphous regulatorium' and its social affects. EEMSI's live performance aesthetics has emerged through an intensive, situated, and embodied play that has been unfolding, although rather marginally, against the manifestations of the mainstream culture in Iran between the 'externalising', 'de-regulatory', 'freedom-seeking' body and the 'internalising', 'regulatory', 'claustrophobic', ideologically-politically moulded and 'morality-seeking' 'soul'.

EEMSI's aesthetic specificity—the question of why only a specific array of electronic music practices has surfaced within Iranian society in public domain—can be broadly understood in relation to four themes that have emerged through the process of this research and in contact

with the works and words of my interlocutors. These can provide a context for understanding why electronic improvisation has been a rarity within EEMSI:

- 1- The lack of an experimental electronic music tradition in Iran;
- 2- Restrictive and regulatory processes that can only be surpassed *creatively*, through synthesis of new *reliable* forms; forms that are able to enter into constructive exchange with the state's filtering machine and society's needs and anxieties, without causing an abrupt disturbance;
- 3- Digital interfaces and the internet's capacity to facilitate such syntheses through enabling new forms of 'mattering' (Barad 2007) distributed through (sufficiently) de-centralised networks, beyond the confines of the nation-state;
- 4- Disentanglement of the embodied control: (re)discovering and reconfiguring the affective limits of almost-(im)permissibles through performance (in its broadest sense of the term).

In the context of live improvised electronic music, the performance ecosystem, as a contingent ecology, is fragile. As Waters (2007b, 4) notes: "The relationship between performer, instrument and environment becomes notably mutable in situations in which component elements are assembled in the real time of performance." Lurking beneath the visible surface, technical and bodily 'glitches' are often agents of transgressive change that impose new demands upon the ecosystemic behaviour by disrupting, at times radically, the performatively and/or empathetically negotiated 'design'. Radical disturbances as such leave the musicking humans with only one good response: to creatively adapt. For the young digital arts and experimental electronic music movement in Iran this can be difficult, in the sense that their response needs to be carefully measured in advance, as part of an ongoing negotiation with other forces enacted within society, including those of the state. EEMSI involves performances of individuals who, in order to explore new uncertain territories, need to simultaneously develop a reliable 'map' that enables them to confidently navigate the (social-cultural and ideological-political) 'red zones'. Such a traverse requires the approval of the 'authorities': forces of the state as well as the 'internalised' agents of 'self-policing'. In this context, live electronic improvisation seems to be a particularly risky method of musicking in Iran, at least for now, due to the challenging and unexpected outcomes it may produce; contexts in which things may go 'wrong'.

A discussion of *pendulum* in this section hoped to explore how reflecting on the correlation between situated embodied musicking human agents' decisions and the ecosystemic behaviour in the context of live electronic music, through a perspective over the social and

performative aspects of ‘noise’ and ‘control’, can generate new understandings regarding EEMSI’s aesthetics specificity. In the following part I will specifically focus on three collaborative projects, which have offered this research significant new insights into EEMSI’s conceptual and practical workings. More substantial attention, however, will be given to one of the projects titled *intra.view* to investigate how, as a locus for the meeting of different modes of doing and thinking sound, collaborative composition can synthesise perspectives that are otherwise hardly accessible through (particularly online) participant-observation techniques.

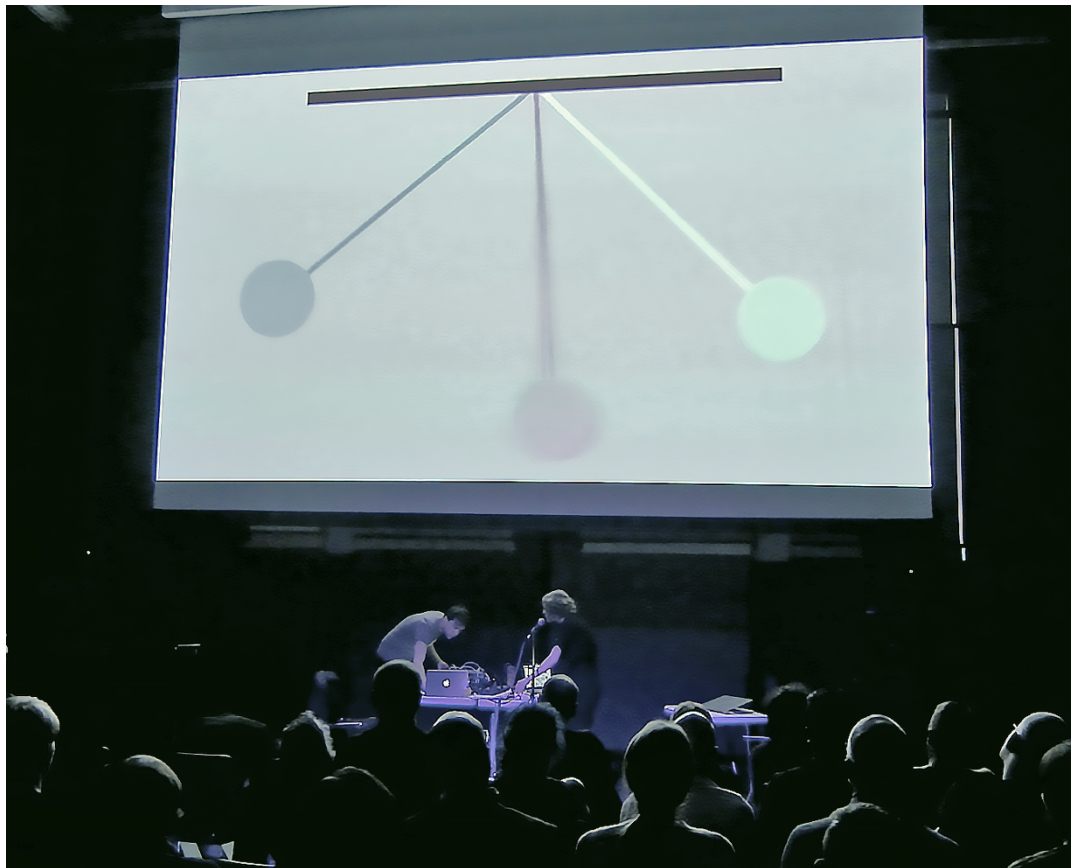


Figure 6-7. Screenshot from the video documentation of *pendulum* at Sonorities 2017