Jennifer R. Ellis

Weav-weav-weaving (2014)

I. "And the Thread Never Broke"
II. "Her Voice Never Faltered"
III. "And the Harp-Strings Spoke"

This piece is inspired by the poem "The Ballad of the Harp Weaver" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. In the poem, a mother and her son struggle to survive a harsh winter. Turning desperate, the mother uses her harp to create tangible objects to provide for her son, using the harp strings as a loom to spin out garments. The poem is long and devastating and, within its lines, there are a few particular images that caught my imagination. I'm interested in the way Millay converts the harp into a utilitarian object that produces the unexpected. This piece is all about producing the unexpected.

The first movement centers on a laughing/weeping sound world created by using a screwdriver against the harp strings. Since screwdrivers techniques are often two-handed and normally produce only one or two notes, the electronics mime the screwdriver sounds in real time to create chords. The electronics also help to increase the sound of effects that might not acoustically reach the back of a concert hall; it lets the audience hear what I hear when I'm sitting at the harp. Part of the way through, a playback begins. The M.O., the IRCAM's motion sensor technology, controls the speed of the playback. I play along with the speed-adjusted playback. Since, the sensor is attached to my left arm, however, everything I play changes the speed of the playback. That means I have to adjust my performed line to speed changes in the recorded line in real time.

The second movement uses a variety of string manipulations to create a buzzing, vibrating sonic world. The M.O. controls a MaxMSP Flange patch that manipulates different aspects of the sound. However, those aspects are tied to seven settings correlating to the speed of my left hand. This tie creates a real-time dialogue between the sounds I play on the instrument and how the computer interprets those sounds.

The final movement is titled "And the Harp-Strings Spoke" in part because very little of the sound in this movement is created by plucking the harp strings. Instead, the strings resonate via the pedal motions.

I am so deeply grateful for this opportunity to work with the IRCAM's motion sensor technology and intensively study MaxMSP here at AMF; the Future Music lab is truly an incredible program. Thank you to the IRCAM for lending us this remarkable technology, to Tom Zicarelli for being a very patient teacher with the most wonderfully off-the-wall ideas, to Jean-Baptiste Barrière for his insightful feedback, and most especially to Mari Kimura for all of her guidance, teaching, enthusiasm, inspiration, and calm optimism in the face of computer crashes. Mari, this wouldn't have been possible without you!