



MACANDMUSIC

with Kevin Brislin

Broken tree flowing

"I like everything...except the last song."

We had spent the last 55 minutes listening to the latest mix of a soon-to-be CD and everything was going well-until now. The sentiment behind the comment was that the last song ended anticlimactically, on way too much of a down note (uh...did you hear the first thirteen songs there, Bub?), and the ending song did not match the opening song in intensity. Now, this is a person whose opinion I take seriously, so it became a quest to find something that was going to work as a finale.

The first song of the CD was a montage of sound effects that had a somewhat related theme (the buildup of the Atomic Age) with a nice, quiet orchestral piece in the background. While I didn't want to repeat the beginning, or even extend the same theme, I felt that maybe I did end the CD on too quiet a note. The last song comprised two acoustic guitars and a very quiet organ. The theme was about the reflections of someone on death row. As producer, I thought the CD ended on a "Whoa, deep subject" note. Apparently, I could have been mistaken.

Off the edge of the world

So, what to do? I decided to go off into uncharted territory (my favorite place) and try a Macintosh program that I had only read about...that is, Thonk. Now, Thonk is one of those rare programs that people either love or hate. I love it; it fits in with my John Cage-ian mentality that random elements (or, as I call them, happy accidents) are what make most of life interesting. Whether it's art or music or database programming, the happy accident is what clearly makes the difference between a bland product and one that stands out amidst the crowd. Thonk is a breeder of happy accidents.

Created by Arjen van der Schoot, Thonk uses granular synthesis as the basis of its sound generation. Without going into the academic basis of granular synthesis, let's just say it is a way of breaking sound down into tiny pieces (grains) and playing with those grains. Thonk takes a 16-bit, mono AIFF file and granula-rizes the input file in a random fashion. The interface is extremely easy to understand; you can make the output file either "Hectic" or "Flowing." That's it, folks. No mind-numbing pages of parameters to try to understand. No user's manual to wade through. Just "Hectic" or "Flowing." No control. Ah,

bliss.

Multi-metamorphosis

As part of this process, I imported a short, 15-second piece of music, called "Broken Tree," from a royalty-free multimedia CD-ROM. All of the sound files were SND resources. The problem is that Thonk is very specific about what it wants; ONLY a 16-bit, mono AIFF will do. How do you change that? Enter SoundHack, a sound file processing program that performs many utility and esoteric sound processing functions. So, it was a simple matter to import the SND file into SoundHack and then convert it to AIFF-and a slim couple-hundred-K file. Thonk takes over from there. Even on a Power Macintosh 5500, the granularization process is fairly slow. It took about an hour to create a two-minute sound file. Also, the sound file ends up being large; digital audio takes up approximately ten megabytes per stereo minute. This particular Thonk file ended up being 21 meg. You've been warned.

The end result

Now, after all of this nonsense, what did the resulting file sound like? I had Thonk do a Flowing granularization of "Broken Tree" (which was a solo piano piece.) It ended up being very strange. It has characteristics of sounds like an ocean wave, a male choir, and weird little bits that sound like an old '60s computer in some sci-fi film. It also sounds like something Gyorgy Ligeti composed for the film 2001, A Space Odyssey. All in all, I found the resulting piece highly usable in an avant-garde kind of way. I believe that if I couple this music with some spoken word performance about practically anything, it really will be a good way to end the CD.

Did I mention that Thonk is freeware? You'll need a Mac that has an FPU, but other than that it will run fine on anything. You can find Thonk at www.audioease.com. So, if you're looking to experiment with something really out-there, Thonk is it.

Kevin Brislin is a Macintosh/FileMaker Pro consultant, freelance writer, and songwriter/producer/musician (now that they're here). Email him at dkimchee@earthlink.net

