

James Ferraro's "Text Bubbles"

James Ferraro, an American musician who has lived in San Diego, San Francisco, Portland, New York, Los Angeles, Ohio, London, Berlin, and Belgium, first gained attention during the wave of sleepy lo-fi cassette releases labeled *hypnagogic pop* by *Wire's* David Keenan in 2009; later, he was similarly lumped in with the *chillwave* and *hauntology* subgenres, and has most recently been named as a forefather of the *vaporwave* and *distroid* movements (outside of the blogosphere, his music lands on the ambient-noise spectrum). While Ferraro's earlier recordings fall in line with the hazy faux-nostalgia of his Pitchfork-approved chillwave counterparts, his 2011 releases—the *Far Side Virtual* LP (originally intended to be released as a package of cell phone ringtones) and its prelude EP *Condo Pets*—instead focus on the present, near future, and distant future. In particular, recent critics have begun to discuss this music as expressing accelerationism: “the notion that the dissolution of civilisation wrought by capitalism should not and cannot be resisted, but rather must be pushed faster and farther towards the insanity and anarchically fluid violence that is its ultimate conclusion, either because this is liberating, because it causes a revolution, or because destruction is the only logical answer” (Harper, “Vaporwave”).


Ferraro himself seems willing to entertain many points of reference for these recordings; in an interview with *Altered Zones*, he proposes frozen yogurt, Apple stores, domesticated pets, Starbucks gift cards (used to buy a history of Starbucks), and Claude Debussy as possible sources (Friedlander). I find the albums particularly relevant to the

Figure 1. Promotional poster for James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual*.



aesthetics of corporate image, disposable entertainment, and consumer electronics (see Figure 1). However, the musical content is worth examining on its own, particularly in its bland, oppressive homogeneity.

The 16 tracks on *Far Side Virtual* and seven on *Condo Pets* are effectively interchangeable—each is completely synthesized with General-MIDI-inspired piano, pads, brass, and percussion; at a moderate tempo, often with an impression of non-quantization; and (perhaps with the exception of *FSV*'s “Condo Pets”) in a major-ish key. Each musical voice is relentlessly melodic, blurring any sense of distinct tune/accompaniment relationship; often, these overlapping voices obscure any sense of harmony beyond confirming the key. There are

In analyzing “Text Bubbles”, I sought first to understand its gawky rhythms. Superimposing the first few phrases made it clear that the main “electro drums” and “text bubbles” layers were not simply looping. Initially, I believed that the master tempo was fluctuating; however, the presence of one consistent pattern—the processed vocals that repeat in each measure from mm. 3–56 (♯ )—showed that the master tempo was recurring uniformly at 101.33 bpm. Since the underlying tempo was steady, this meant the patterns on top were “off-beat.” In the scope of digital music, this implies “humanization” or non-quantization (notes that have not been corrected onto an underlying rhythmic grid); it is somewhat out of the ordinary, as a major advantage of MIDI sequencing is its ability to correct timing errors.

In some ways, non-quantized music has always existed—human instrumentalists are hopelessly unable to play at a high level of precision, and even transhuman musicians (player pianos, MIDI keyboards) are doomed to some level of error. Richard Beaudoin has examined human “microtiming” inconsistency in his compositions, including 2009’s *Etude d’un prelude VII—Latticed Window*, which uses spectrographic analysis to measure millisecond-accurate timing of Martha Argerich’s recording of Chopin’s Prelude in E Minor (op. 28, no. 4) and transform those rhythms to a larger timescale (Beaudoin and Kania). Somewhat misleadingly, however, a “humanized” electronic rhythm implies error beyond this millisecond-scale irregularity in “human” performance. Conversely, many musical genres exploit rhythmic unevenness in a stylistic manner—Baroque *notes inégales*, jazz swing, or funk bassists “playing in the pocket.” However, electronic music is often unable to achieve these “grooves,” as its fundamentally digital nature seems to deny such “human” looseness.

Detroit hip-hop producer and performer James Dewitt Yancey (also known as Jay Dee and J Dilla) became defined by this rhythmic space between human imprecision and human groove. Yancey's characteristic production for groups like A Tribe Called Quest, Common, and Slum Village consists of non-quantized beats triggered from the Akai MPC drum sampler that are clearly uneven beyond simple imprecision but too rigid for swing (Dodson). The "sloppy" result has been imitated by many producers following Yancey's death in 2006, but used successfully by very few, including Daniel Dumile (MF DOOM) and Otis Jackson, Jr. (Madlib). Reading *Far Side Virtual* as a hip-hop record seems surprising, but it has many fundamental similarities: non-quantized beats, a loop-based structure with layers dropping in and out, the use of samples, and even the presence of beatboxing on "Text Bubbles."

Example 1. Transcription of melodic layers in "Text Bubbles."

The image displays a musical score transcription for the track "Text Bubbles." The score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is marked as approximately 101.33 BPM. The score consists of four staves:

- Brass:** Features a melodic line with dotted rhythms and rests, including a prominent eighth-note triplet in the second measure.
- Piano:** Provides harmonic support with chords and single notes, including a half-note chord in the first measure and a melodic line in the second measure.
- Pizz. Strings:** Features a sparse, rhythmic accompaniment with single notes and rests.
- Arco Strings:** Provides a harmonic foundation with sustained chords and single notes.

“Text Bubbles” is harmonically static, with each melodic layer (Example 1) outlining D \flat major (omitting the seventh scale degree). The voices’ harmonic gestures seems unrelated—the piano outlines the tonic triad; the pizzicato strings’ A \flat seem to reinforce motion to the dominant; the repetition of E \flat and B \flat in the brass suggest minor harmonies; and dense chords in arco strings suggest inversions of major triads. However, the overall effect is one of cohesion, largely because the brass, piano, and arco strings share a rhythm at the beginning of each phrase. Additionally, the melodic contour of the piano and arco strings are related by inversion, particularly at their shared rhythm.

I am intrigued by Ferraro’s work on *Condo Pets* and *Far Side Virtual* for many reasons— aesthetically, its futuristic references to the 1990s’ awkward transition from analog to digital are deceptively nostalgic—a sort of “modempunk” to the Victorian era’s “steampunk.” In examining its compositional techniques, however, I found myself frustrated by its artistic accomplishments. These recordings give an impression of complete inauthenticity and ultimate insignificance, both of which are absolutely subverted by instrumental composition: if I have taken the time to write it, it becomes significant; if musicians perform it on stage, it becomes authentic.

My Metronome Study for String Quartet, written as a response to Ferraro, incorporates several of the technical elements I have identified in these recordings. It uses a similar pitch collection (omitted seventh scale degree) and quasi-pandiatonic accompaniment over a repetitive bass line (the unfulfilling I-IV-V-vi-I progression). The study seeks to achieve an impression of rhythmic non-quantization somewhat contradictorily—a straightforward

rhythmic framework at 100 bpm is overlaid onto tempi of 72, 88, 112, and 126 bpm and quantized into eighth and sixteenth notes. In order to synchronize their parts, the four musicians must adhere strictly to personal metronomes through headphones; at the end of the piece, the audience is allowed to hear the previously obscured overlapping pulses.

The *Metronome Study* is not only intended to realize a rhythmic goal, but also an aesthetic one; by asking a standard ensemble of musicians to play in a fundamentally non-standard and non-ensemble manner, I hope to remove the sense of legitimacy that seems to be stuck to instrumental performance. However, the players are not explicitly being made uncomfortable—rehearsing with a metronome is a familiar task.

By using headphones to give each performer only a fragment of the complete composition, I am reminded of Gavin Bryars' *1, 2, 1-2-3-4*, which explores incompleteness by having each musician accompany individual listenings of popular music (including The Beatles, on one recording). Bryars wrote that he was interested in the “difference between what the performer *believes* he plays and what he is *heard* to play (quoted in Nyman). A more recent investigation of a similar concept is in Richard D. James' *Remote Orchestra*, where James (also known as Aphex Twin) communicates with the orchestra through a mixing board rigged to project visual cues and independent tempi broadcast through musicians' headphones. The end of the study, which brings the overlapping metronomes into a performative setting, joins György Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique* as a composition that “transform[s]... the invisible to the visible” by exposing an otherwise private tool (Jackson, 218).

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