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

occasional snippets of vaguely futuristic synthesized speech ("Will you join us? Imagine a playground of endless terrain.") and pop culture samples (Toy Story's squeeze toy aliens; the Nintendo Wii background menu music). Overall, the superficially "happy," inoffensive, and generic nature of the compositions is reminiscent of the corporate-approved intersection of New Age and commercial music—training videos, MIDI keyboard demos, and early personal web pages.

Condo Pets' first track, "Text Bubbles," serves as an exemplary model of the compositional techniques used by Ferraro throughout these albums. It consists of 29 two-bar phrases in common time with a short unmetered coda. There are 11 instrumental elements layered throughout the song—four melodic and six percussive, with a metallic bell sound existing somewhere between—that repeat with very little variation. Figure 2 shows the structure of these layers (grey bars indicate some variation in the otherwise consistently repeating patterns).

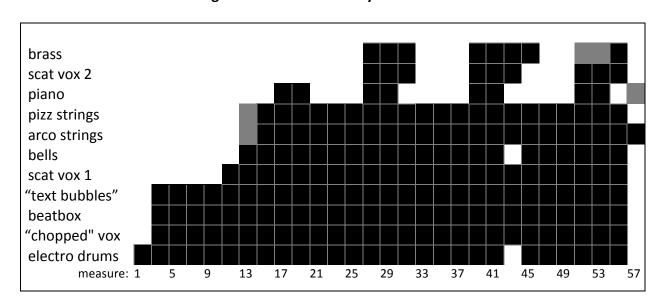
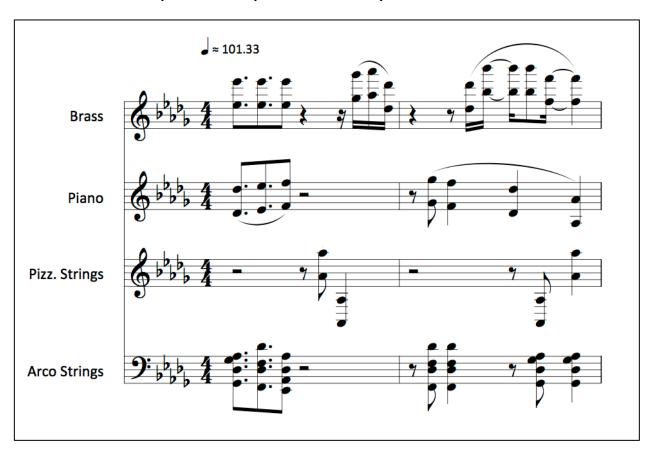


Figure 2. Instrumental layers in "Text Bubbles"

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 (7 m grad)—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."

"Text Bubbles" is harmonically static, with each melodic layer (Example 1) outlining D_D major (omitting the seventh scale degree). The voices' harmonic gestures seems unrelated—the piano outlines the tonic triad; the pizzicato strings' A_D seem to reinforce motion to the dominant; the repetition of E_D and B_D 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.

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 Poeme Symphonique as a composition that "transform[s]... the invisible to the visible" by exposing an otherwise private tool (Jackson, 218).

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