

I had a conversation with someone recently about the nature of creativity and how it applied to the Arts in general and synthesis specifically. I happen to be one of those people that cling steadfastly to cause and effect - even when we know one without necessarily knowing the other or fully understanding their relationship. Schroedinger's Cat is not welcome in my home. I'm not particularly given to beliefs about Muses or inspiration that suddenly appears from "nowhere". This is not to say that musical creativity doesn't come from \*somewhere\* of course, simply that sometimes we don't know \*where\* it comes from exactly. Sometimes however, when creativity is required the issue can be forced or corralled. In my books, it is the phenomenon of limitation that is the mother of creativity. So it is, that when you are trying to come up with that 'perfect' sound on your synth you are not always better off adding yet another layer of sound. In an age where 'extreme' culture seems to rule and even foods regularly have prefixes like 'mega' or 'supersized', and synths come with 64 or 128 voice oscillators, it really isn't surprising that the notion of the triumphant superlative spills over into creative thinking and the Arts. "If the sound isn't quite right, then let's \*add\* something it is lacking." I'm often guilty of this approach myself. When resources are available, I feel oddly compelled to use them all the time and in every single synth patch. This is the classic example of the machine controlling the (wo)man. When technology as it applies to Art is perceived as limitless, it becomes the proverbial blank page that terrorizes us and cripples creative output.

What I'm proposing - and this is by no means an original idea - is that when in a creative rut we are better off \*limiting\* our resources rather than \*adding\* to them. Contrary to linear thinking, this usually increases our options because it forces us to think in ways we may not have thought of previously. It forces an artificial 'necessity' thus resulting in the proud motherhood of some nifty invention. This sort of thinking was central to the music of minimalists like Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Brian Eno. Eno actually created and released commercially a deck of cards called the Oblique Strategies, which consisted of cards with single simple suggestions used to break out of creative ruts. There is also an online version you can try at <http://www.dimensional.com/~jthomas/oblique/> By forcing limitation, we expand the need to be creative.

Let us try an experiment. Let's start with what is sometimes referred to as a default or 'plain vanilla' patch on your synth. If you have more than one synth, use the one you have used the longest and feel you've gotten everything you can out of. Strip the sound down to its bare essentials. Turn off almost everything. Got 4 Oscillators per voice? Turn off 3 of them and make the remaining one a simple waveform like sawtooth or square. Multiple filters running in parallel? Route the sound through only one. Does your synth have a bunch of awesome effects? I'm unilaterally declaring them ineffective, so turn 'em off. Yes \*all\* of them sunshine.. I see you hiding behind that gated compressor/spectral enhancer you like so much. Strip the sound down to the basic synth paradigm. i.e. a single oscillator routed to filter routed to output/amplifier stage. Set any appropriate Envelopes to full sustain only with no attack or release. Ok tough guy/girl with your fancy-pants 128 voice workstation behemoth.. whatchagonnado now? eh?? I'll tell you what you're going to do. Be creative! By paring down and removing 'clutter', you allow for building back up in thoughtful considered ways. New thought processes are born almost effortlessly once you remove the 'clutter'. Stripped to its naked essence, sound creation becomes like a simple arrangement of arrows and geometric shapes - a collection of small ideas intersecting and reinforcing each other in some artistic, organic kind of way. For example, try thinking of control elements like LFOs and Envelopes as organic objects or 'beings' that move and vibrate at their own rate. Taking 2 LFOs and applying them in similar amounts to a common destination (OSC, Filter, whatever) but having either slightly different or mathematically related speeds can result in interesting intersections, fascinating 'shapes' and wobbly difference-beat frequencies that seem to take on a life of their own. Try cross-modulating anything that can be cross-modulated. You will be amazed. Trust me. By experimenting on the level of the very small you allow for the possibility of sound design to take on entirely new directions.

Last year I was working on a project on my particular choice of synth workstation and I simply could not come up with musically what I was trying to achieve. 64-voice polyphony it seems turned out to be the culprit behind my creative stonewall. I moved over to an older 4-voice analog synth and within minutes couldn't believe how music was flowing forth. I realized then, that it is only when we are aware of the \*walls\* that we realize the potential for what we can do with the space in a room. An infinitely large room is not a room at all but some kind of Existential Hell worthy of a Twilight Zone episode. My answer to this Hell is to put up some temporary false walls like a cheap office cubicle that you can hang your hat

on. The 'Muse' it would seem is present when we want it to be. We just have to know how to ask nicely.

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