

“Dreams in the Desert” Analysis

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“Dreams in the Desert”, by Elaine Lillios is a fantastical auditory journey between the conscious and the unconscious. The piece is an experience, an exploration of what occurs in your mind at night when you close your eyes and dive into the unknown, in other words, a dream. There is a lot to unpack in this piece, both technically and speculatively, however this portion of the paper will be a basic analysis of the concrete aspects of the piece.

Part 1: The Concrete

“Dreams in the Desert” does not utilize standard instrumentation, it instead features an array of carefully recorded sounds which are then precisely manipulated electronically to wide range of effects. All together, there is a combination of first and third order surrogacy in the sounds used. The sounds that can be identified with a physical source that are contained in this piece consist of:

- The movement of water (or something moving in water)
- A source of flame
- The crackling of leaves as something moves through it
- Raindrops on hollow objects
- The scraping or brushing of an object
- Human speech

There is also a whizzing sound that can be heard in the B section of the piece. This sound appears to be a recontextualized and manipulated version of the flame sound.

The piece doesn't contain any melodic content, meter, key, pitch, tempo. It is an exploration of sound one wouldn't normally explore. It's the auditory equivalent of looking at something familiar with a magnifying glass in order to see what you wouldn't normally see. This piece lets you hear what you wouldn't normally hear. In this way, the piece is very textural. The piece does contain dynamics however and it uses these, along with convergence and divergence of certain layers of sound, and manipulating the rate of the appearance of sound events in order to also make this a gestural piece that carries itself forward. It goes between phases of introverted texture shaping and driving ahead intermittently throughout the piece.

I have divided the piece into four sections each divided by a transition. Each section can be heard as a different exploration of texture and timbre, but, once again, there are a few moments of forward movement that is suggested by the velocity of the sounds. For example, the previously mentioned whizzing sounds in the B section, or the sudden use of panning in many of the transitions. The doppler transition between B and A' especially has a feeling of velocity to it, making me feel as if I have physically been pushed forward.

Intro ---- A section (00:13) ---- B section (3:20) ---- A' section (5:48) ---- C section (8:28)
---- End

The first 13 seconds are the sounds of movement in water, the listener is surrounded by the sound. The movement intensifies and crescendos till the 13th second where sound of the water is then put through some kind of electrical effect, creating an ethereal split-second after which the physical sound of the water immediately drops out, leaving the listener with an electrical echo of the first impact point of the piece. This is the start of the A section. Thin wisps of electric sound permeate as the sound of the water slowly returns, this time combined with the previously mentioned “electrical echo” creating a sound texture that is somewhere between the sound of actual water and emulated water. Section A pushes forward with the addition of the sounds of something jumping out of the water. This sound becomes rapid and intensifies to a peak and then starts to fade away. The transition to section B is marked by the loss of the electrical component of the sound and the addition of the sound of the gas flame which, naturally, boils the water.

The B section starts at 3:20 when the gas flame is abruptly extinguished. The B section is a brand new exploration of sounds consisting of the movement of something, presumably feet, through dry leaves. It is an exploration of sharp sounds as opposed to the softness of the water. It is also accompanied by the whizzing of objects and pitter-patter of raindrops. In many ways, the form of this section is similar to the first.

They both explore sound events at the same rate and move from simple to complex by adding more sounds to the texture. The end of this section brings us the first sound that isn't based off of a pre-recorded object: A group of synth tones come out of nowhere and pan with a doppler effect starting at 5:45 which leads into A'.

A' is just like the A section, except the sound is all third-order surrogacy. It is the only the emulation of water. The transition here is now the opposite of the first transition, since it builds up into the incorporation of real water as opposed to electric water.

The final C section consists of an accumulation of previous sounds and themes with the addition of some sort of scraping/brushing sound and recordings of human conversation. The piece fades out as one last wave of water washes the listening space from left to right and is then answered by the sound of the flames moving from right to left.

Part 2: Biographical Survey

Possibly the biggest strength of electroacoustic music is that the composer potentially has absolute control over every sonic detail of the piece they are trying to make. In this way, the electroacoustic composer is truly an auteur. Logically, it then makes an analysis of the composer paramount when trying to understand one of their pieces.

That being said, there is not much written material on Elaine Lillios, at least not in the conventional sense. She is still a relatively new artist. Her first known work “Oceanus IV” was created in 1986. However, her first work that was actually published and sold was the piece “CELLAR”, created in 1994 and distributed on the compilation album *Music from SEAMUS - Volume 6* in 1997 (electrocd.com). Regardless, her body of work is still prolific and well respected. She has received numerous awards and honors including the 2013-14 Fulbright Award, First Prize in the Concours Internationale de Bourges, Areon Flutes International Composition Competition, the Electroacoustic Piano International Competition, and many more (Elillios.com/about).

Lillios is quite the academic, boasting a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees from Northern Illinois University and a D.M.A. in composition with an emphasis in computer music media from the University of North Texas. She also has a Masters of Philosophy from the University of Birmingham in England (*Bowling Green University*). She is currently Interim Associate Dean, Professor of Composition, and Coordinator of

Music Technology at Bowling Green State University (Elillios.com/about) She also serves as Director of Composition Activities for the SPLICE institute, a weeklong summer camp that focuses on developing the electroacoustic elements possible in both composition and performance (*SPLICE*).

Her compositions have been receiving praise since she was still a student. In 1999, while studying at the University of North Texas she was honored by SEAMUS (The Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States) with their annual commission award for students. She completed her commission in 2000 with “Earth Ascending” for female voice, tape, and video. The work was based on the several female poets including Jeni Couzyn, Jehanne Mehta, and Cynthia Fuller (Hinkle-Turner). This piece serves as a great way to understand how Lillios creates her art, utilizing multiple types of media and inspirations from extramusical sources, especially poetry. These two concepts will be a recurring theme in her pieces to come.

Over the years, Lillios has greatly developed both her approach to composition and instruments/mediums used in her pieces. After graduating from North Texas in 2000, she created exclusively electroacoustic works, mostly based on the recordings of non-instrument objects, similar to music concrete. In 2007, she returned to composing for instruments but still viewed her composition through that electroacoustic lens, “Now I find I treat my instruments as if they were that piece of crinkly paper. I have to figure out what that sonic potential is. Where’s the intersection between the crinkly paper and a

saxophone? How do I bring these two worlds together?” (Dupont). Lillios said this in an interview about the construction of her most recent work, “Hazy Moonlight” completed in September of 2016. That piece is also based on poetry, in this case, the writings of Wally Swist. Her compositional process also includes the construction of diagrams she calls “mind maps”, essentially very complex bubble diagrams that she uses in order to organize appropriate imagery. She also sketches in order to visualize the music and even engages in direct correspondence with the performers who send her improvisations based on the aforementioned sketches. This is all before anything is actually notated (Dupont).

Obviously the majority of Lillios’s work does not feature live performances or traditional instrumentation. Neither does “Dreams in the Desert”, but having an understanding of her compositional approach can give the listener a better understanding of all of her pieces. In a statement published on her own website, Elaine Lillios established her goals and philosophy in creating music, “The majority of my research and composing focuses on music for fixed media, both stereophonic and multi-channel. Removing live performers from the musical paradigm focuses all attention on sound, making it the most important aspect of electroacoustic composition. In my opinion, every sound that exists can be musical and serve as an element in a composition. I collect these “sound objects” via recording, process them using various software tools, and then combine them to create musical structures.” (“Electroacoustics”). This statement is easily upheld in “Dreams in the Desert”,

considering the piece is comprised of recordings of “concrete” sounds which are then made to sound more musical through digital manipulation. The latter half of the statement is also very similar to Varese’s famous “organized sound” concept. It’s clear that even though she is a relatively newer composer, her work is deeply rooted in the electroacoustic tradition.

Other concepts that Elainie Lillios pursues in her music include Sound Diffusion, Ambisonics, and Deep Listening. Sound Diffusion refers to the performative elements of electroacoustic music. It is essentially how the composer distributes the sound throughout the speaker system during playback for a concert, “By moving sounds through the listening space I’m able to exaggerate specific moments, outline the formal structure of a piece, and create virtual spaces within the physical confines of a performance hall” (“Sound Diffusion”). Lillios learned sound diffusion under the tutelage of Jonty Harrison while studying philosophy at the University of Birmingham. She specifically learned the BEAST system or the Birmingham ElectroAcoustic Sound Theatre system developed by Jonty himself. Established in 1982, the BEAST system currently features more than 100 discrete channels for electroacoustic presentations. “Dreams in the Desert” is only recorded in stereo however, but the use of movement in the sound is both prominent and effective, often being used to denote transitions to different section through a panning movement, or perhaps to create the illusion of objects whizzing by the listener's head. Sound Diffusion is clearly an important technique that Lillios employs. Ambisonics is similar in that it is attempting to manipulate

where the listener hears certain sounds. The key difference is that Ambisonics represent sound in 3 dimensions, meaning that the sound can be manipulated between left, right, up, and down. Lillios started experimenting with this in 2007 with works like “Encounter(s)” and “Listening Beyond”. This is after “Dreams in the Desert” was created but it still shows Lillios’s obsession with manipulating the apparent location of sound in her music.

Deep Listening is something different all together. It’s more of a philosophy than a technique. Lillios studied Deep Listening with its founder, Pauline Oliveros who coined the term in 1988 after making a recording 14 feet deep underground in a cistern. In an interview with American Public Media in 2003, Pauline Oliveros defined Deep Listening as, “... listening to everything all the time and reminding yourself when you’re not listening...” (Baker). In its most basic form, Deep Listening seems to be about forming a distinction between simply hearing something, or actually *listening* to something. “Dreams in the Desert” definitely exhibit these ideas. Even before I researched this topic the music seemed to suggest that in order to truly appreciate it, I had to really focus on the exploration of sounds that was taking place. It’s like a guided meditation, but instead of listening to an instructor, we are listening to the music and using it as a way to channel our free-flowing thoughts. “Dreams in the Desert” suits these concepts considering it’s about someone who is dreaming, another way we engage with our mind. Not to mention its calming use of water in the beginning, it’s like the piece is inviting the listener to dream alongside the desert-dweller .

Listening to Lillios's other work has been enlightening; exposing common ideas that can be heard in most of her pieces. For example, almost all of her pieces are exclusively based off of the manipulation of natural sound rather than synthesis. It is very indicative of musique electronique. Like in "Dreams in the Desert", many of pieces tend to avoid long tones and instead consist of many rapid short bursts of sound events. This is heard in "Arturo", "Threads", and "Listening Beyond". All of her pieces exhibit movement. If there is one theme I can detect in her discography, it is velocity. The sounds consistently make you feel as if you are being pushed forward with the powerful uses of panning and her exploration of busy, organic textures. There are also many recurring sounds she utilizes. The water motif from "Dreams in the Desert" return in "Backroads: Shoe Factory". Besides utilising natural sounds, Lillios also likes to use a lot of recordings of human speech. "Dreams in the Desert" does this, but the speech is not as clearly understandable as it is in "Listening Beyond" and "Arturo".

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*note: some of these citations may look different because I had to use an internet archive to view certain webpages that had been taken down. The MLA hasn't officially codified a standard for citing internet archives, but they have suggested a format which can be observed here

<https://archive.org/about/faqs.php#265>

If you have any questions ask me about it ask me in class or email me.

Part 3: Speculation

Or

“Dreams in the Desert”: Swimming in the Subconscious

The concept of Deep Listening has consistently influence how Elainie Lillios creates her art. After all, Elainie has studied with Pauline Oliveros, the founder of Deep Listening, and even sought her advice while she was composing “Dreams in the Desert”. Therefore, when one listens to “Dreams in the Desert”, one should apply the techniques of Deep Listening in order to fully appreciate the piece. According to CMind (the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society), “Deep Listening is a way of hearing in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it. We let go of our inner clamoring and our usual assumptions and listen with respect for precisely what is being said”. In other words, it’s like a guided meditation, but the music is being used to guide where our thoughts are exploring.

Over the course of a few days, I have attempted to “Deep Listen” to the piece and it has both improved my listening experience and has helped me draw a lot more information from the piece. The rest of this paper will consist of me describing what meaning I found in “Dreams in the Desert” while using “Deep Listening”. I think it is important to stress however that due to the meditative nature of “Deep Listening”, the

meaning in the piece will be different for each individual listener. There is a more physical narrative to the piece. It's an audio representation of the dreams of a person traveling through the desert. But I'm going to treat that scenario as a jumping-off point. I think that the image of someone in the desert diving into their subconscious through their dreams an invitation for the listener to do the same.

The introduction of the piece immediately reinforces the idea of meditation/reflection/contemplation through its use of water as the primary sound source. Water is often used a symbol of reflection in both visual and audio mediums. It also gives the listener a sense of open space, the listener is on the cusp of a body of water, observing its depth, getting ready to dive in. Likewise, the dreamer is about to dive into his subconscious, which is presented as having depth like a body of water. At 0:14, we cross the threshold and "dive" into the water, submerging ourselves in our own subconscious. The water sounds then settle down and seem to stabilize. A new synthetic sound layer perpetuates the water that almost seems like an audio representation of witnessing a sunbeam penetrating a through water while submerged, further suggesting the "diving" action we take. The movement of the water slowly intensifies as we dive deeper, alongside the sound of something jumping out of the water briefly at both 0:50s and 0:59s. This is like fish jumping out of the water, which could be symbolic of thoughts and ideas passing between the conscious and the subconscious. Sound events appear more frequently and at 1:59 we start to hear many fish jumping. The sound continues to intensify until 2:36, the height of the fish. The fish

slowly die away and are replaced with a bubbling, boiling sound that grows in their stead. It's the churning of thoughts deep at the bottom of our minds. We eventually reach the source of the bubbling as an open flame appears at 3:11 in order to transition us to the 2nd section. It's important to note that the flame goes out at the end of the transition, I think it's representative of the conscious mind fully turning off and the unconscious mind assuming full control, analogous to the person in the desert fully losing his consciousness and starting to dream.

The second section can be seen to represent the "dream state". The lack of water (in fact the sounds suggest dryness) signifies the dreamer's lack of awareness that they are dreaming. They are no longer in the semi-conscious portion of falling asleep, their dream is now reality. Instead of water, we explore sharper sounds, the snapping of twigs and movement of dry leaves. These sound similar to the water section however in that they are explored in the same fashion with brief, rapid movements in sound. The piece is asking us to discover the similarities in the sounds of both the water and the earth. Similar to the reflection motif in the first section, this section is asking us to challenge our perceptions and understand that even two opposite substances, life-bringing water as opposed to dry, dead leave, can have connections between each other. At 4:45, we start to hear many whizzing sounds in the air, directly mirroring the fish jumping in the first section (It is also a recontextualization of the sound of the flame in the transition; it's pitched upwards so that we don't associate it with fire and instead sounds like fast air). In accordance with the theme of

reflection, this section is a mirror image of the first, it's comprised of an opposite texture, but it has the same form. The sounds continue to intensify like the first section, but the whizzing is replaced with the sound of raindrops on a dry, resonant surface, bringing us back to the water motif and also continuing with the unification of opposite elements. Altogether, the second section presents the dream as a fake reality but reminds the listener that we are still submerged in the subconscious by still emulating the events in the previous section even if under a different timbre of sounds. The height of the raindrops is reached as we transition once more at 5:48 but this time with the synth sound that previously accompanied the water in the first section.

The third section brings back the themes of reflection by using the water sounds from the first movement. This time however, it specifically focuses on the synthetic portion. This is the first part of the piece where the primary movement is dictated by a sound that doesn't obviously come from a natural/physical source. It is however, from a rhythmic perspective, almost identical to first section. Once again, the third section challenges the listener to reflect on both the differences between natural water and this "synthetic" water. It takes the ultimate organic substance, the building block of life, water, and modulates it to become electronic, which is commonly characterized as "lifeless". There is another interpretation available however. Since water is also being associated with the dreamer's subconscious in this piece, this synthetic water is also representative of the dreamer starting to become aware that he is dreaming and we begin the ascent back to reality.

At 8:30, we return back to restatement of section, or, the layer directly between dreams and reality. This is a period to reflect on all the thoughts you may have come across while listening through this piece. The music shows this too by incorporating sounds from previous sections (the whizzing, scraping, and the synth). The human speech samples falls in line with the return to reality. Within the narrative of the piece, it may be indicative of the dreamers fellow traveler's actually trying to wake them up. This could be corroborated by the lines chose, "We're almost there" "You there, there we go" are heard around 10:02. It also invites the listener to dwell on the people in their life and associates those people with the water of the subconscious. This part of the piece may be asking us questions such as: "Who are the people who influence my life the most" or "How do the people you surround yourself with shape your character or effect your decision making?".

The piece begins to fade out at 10:32. The flame from the transition between section 1 and section 2 returns. This time, however, when the flame pans from right to left, it doesn't get extinguished. Continuing with the idea that the flame represents the conscious mind, this is evocative of the dreamer waking up. The cycle of sleep is completed and the dreamer continues doing whatever they were doing in the desert. For the listener however, the flame not being extinguished is emblematic of having changed after listening to this song. If the last section serves as a compilation, a review

of all the previous themes explored, the rekindling of the flame is akin to keeping the introspective knowledge gained after using this piece to explore “Deep Listening”.