

Meditative Live Coding and Musicological Hindrances

Matthew Tift
Lullabot
me@matthewtift.com

Overview

In certain situations, music live coding obtains a meditative quality. Meditative live coding can offer benefits beyond the sounds produced, but not in all performances. This study explores live coding as a method to cultivate mindfulness. It argues that three conventional ideas about musical practice exert a strong regulative force in live coding performance: the notion of the “musical work,” the idea of music as a “thing,” and the conviction that music requires interpretation. Drawing on the work of music scholars such as Lydia Goehr, Carolyn Abbate, and Christopher Small, and deploying a pragmatic approach influenced by William James, this study offers an historically-informed theory of live coding that highlights its usefulness in cultivating an awareness of the present moment.

Musical Works

Few ideas have wielded more regulative force in the history of musicological discourse than that of “the musical work.” In some instances, we equate a musical work with a score, while in others it is found in a performance or a recording. Our Western culture regularly conflates the idea of the musical work with music and views the work as fundamental to most musical activities. The philosopher Lydia Goehr examined the expectations and behavioral patterns associated with the concept of the musical work in her book, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. Using Goehr’s ideas we can shift the discussion from determining whether or not live coding produces works to examining how the work-concept governs live coding performances. For example, if we intend to generate musical works while live coding then any thoughts about how to package, sell, or distribute the work distance us from the live coding moment. Meditative live coding cannot be rooted in notions of the musical work-concept or comparable concepts that impose rules. Any thought that some essential component is absent from a performance detracts us from the live coding happening at that time, in that place.

Musicking

In addition to letting go of ideas about musical works during live coding events, we also would do well to let go of our ideas about *music*. If the goal during meditative live coding is to let go of judgment, then a music defined as “ordered,” “agreeable,” “expressive,” or “beautiful” sound offers nothing. There is no reason to claim that discussions of live coding as music are incorrect, but instead we can recontextualize live coding in a way where art objects do not take center stage. The ethnomusicologist Christopher Small argued that we should understand the term “music” as a *verb* rather than as a noun, as an *activity* not a thing. He coined a new term to describe this activity: “musicking.” During meditative live coding we have little use for music as a thing to possess or treasure. Observing the activities that contribute to live coding performance highlights the importance of human relationships and encourages empathy. A focus on musicking rather than music also serves to highlight the importance of the *event* of live coding, shifting our attention from existing to doing, and reducing feelings that we must accomplish or gain some thing during a live coding event.

Musical Analysis

Of course, even if we abandon ideas about musical works and music, we can still find ourselves at a live coding event shackled by a belief that we must analyze the performance. Following Vladimir Jankélévitch, the American musicologist Carolyn Abbate has championed a shift in attention away from works to performance by promoting Jankélévitch’s bold claim that music is *ineffable* and that “music was not invented to be talked about.” Abbate believes that analysis deprives our experience of performance – and we can extend this idea to meditative live coding. Abbate’s formulation gives us the courage to explore our meditative live coding practices without fear that what we do could be “interpreted incorrectly,” whether our involvement at a live coding event is through performing, listening, or dancing. When we analyse, we tend to move away from the practical and material to the merely theoretical. With this mindset we establish conditions for meditative live coding and abandon ideas of “music as mysterium” in order to allow performances to become an opportunity to observe what William James called the “rich thicket of reality.”



Discussion

To distance ourselves from such fundamental musical concepts could be seen as a significant departure from an academia that prides itself on uncovering hidden meaning, as revealers of truth. This pragmatic approach discards a reified conception of live coding and replaces it with a meditative live coding that does not require works, music, or analysis. These ideas could influence any style of live coding, from the concert hall, to the night club, to the classroom, online, and the home. We must never judge a live coding experience to be a failure, a success, or even neutral. But the reality is that to “just pay attention” is as difficult as it is simple. It goes against our cultural conditioning to suggest that musical output does not carry any information and that it does not mean anything. But if live coding is to create conditions for non-resistance to whatever arises and become a meditative experience that cultivates mindfulness then we can start by recognizing how our conditioned ideas about musical works, music, and interpretation limit our experiences.

Read the full paper at <http://iclc.livecodenetwork.org/2019>

References

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