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## Introduction to Servovalve

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# Introduction to Servovalve

By Jim Andrews

No. 28 – 2003

One is struck by the minimalist congruence of the visual and sonic in servovalve's audio/visual/interactive Shockwave work. The music is minimal and so are the visuals. The music is, as he says, "electronic, rhythmic, energetic, atmospheric, horologic (clock connected), meta-liturgic... subambient... neurodance" and the visuals, set in the black background, derive their energy not at all from ornament but from their motion with the music and their programming-controlled transformations and movement.

servovalve also does performances with/of his work. So part of the energy of his work relates to the involvement of it in performance. He is one of very few musician-artist-programmers working seriously to the Web and also to live performance. And CD-ROMs. He has six CDs listed on his site. He also has an extensive MP3 download page.

servovalve does not describe himself as a programmer, but looking at his work and listening to the interesting synchronizations of the sound and the visuals, you see that his 'imaging Lingo', ie, programming to change bitmaps on the screen, is actually very good, and so are his skills at synchronizing the necessarily separate audio and visuals. He says

I'm not really a programmer... perhaps I'm becoming one... progressively...I've studied graphic art / visual communication. Mixed with the influence of music....the curiosity of combining both disciplines brings me to programming...It was not easy in the beginning... I'm not scientific minded...I started with Director using it as an animator (horizontal score). and step by step, with help / exchange from people like J.L.Lamarque, O. Koechlin, and A. Schmitt, things became clear...it opened a large/infinite field of exploration to me. My scores are verticalizing progressively.

"My scores are verticalizing progressively"...a very interesting remark. The primary paradigm in Director and Flash is that of the "movie", which consists of a Score that consists of frames, like a movie, but each frame has channels, like an audio composition. People who can't program make Scores that are quite long, like a movie. Lingo programmers tend to make 1-frame movies and the motion and animation is controlled with programming. They subordinate the paradigm of the

movie to the paradigm of the flowchart, which is primarily vertical, rather than horizontal. The Score becomes shorter and deeper.

servovalve, contrary to his own humble assessment, programs very well and, what is more, understands the use and importance of original code in his art and is not afraid of learning about it, finds it interesting to learn about. You can see this in his work, if you are familiar with other Shockwave work in which the code is somewhat similar but the meaning of the motion and the graphics is minimal compared with servovalve's intelligent, significant measures. Others doing related work often make noise and move stuff around and let it be interactive and see what happens. servovalve, on the other hand, pares it down to the bone, to only significant motion and sound.

Consider, for instance, a piece from his CD *n-gone* called "[ligne de ville](#)". This is one of my favorite pieces by him. Turn out the lights, go fullscreen on this one, and turn up the sound. The sound consists of a background loop and, when the graphics change, one of several different pure notes plays. It's rather a cosmic piece, somewhat night-skyish suggestive of the architecture of the heavens...or the bones of our own designs.

The programming here is not obvious. The visual transformations are not so easily done, and they also transform the piece conceptually from a night-skyish piece to, well, something else. Something else rather mysterious and beautiful related to visual art and painting with sound, bits on the screen, and algorithms.

About the CD *n-gone*, [Jean-Jacques Birgé](#) says

"...the multimedia part of his CD *n-gone* is brilliant and definitive. I mean that in the kind of minimal techno images and sounds *I've never seen such a quintessence of it.*"

The variety in *n-gone* is largely graphical, rather than musical, although the pure tones and their timing are sufficiently variable that they are pleasant to listen to, oddly enough. I find "[ligne de ville](#)" very relaxing and intriguing to watch and listen to.

"[x-liner](#)" is a piece in several movements of visual music. It is an extended piece; you should listen to it for at least several minutes. It is formalist but also memorably beautiful in the way that the minimal graphics and audio carve out movements of tone, of mood, of suspense, even.

The motion of the graphics is synchronized with the audio, as in many other of his pieces. In the below interview, servovalve says that one of his main concerns as an artist-programmer is "random crossing reality... synchronicity ???". In "[x-liner](#)", we see some indication of what he means by this in the ways that the visuals cross and the audio cross and they are synchronized. Or that's a part of it.

"electrotomy" is an interactive, generative piece. 'Generative' in the sense that it's different depending on how it starts and also in how you interact with it. The interactivity and the initial configuration determine the percussion; it's mainly a percussive piece. The interactivity is accomplished via mouseover of the area at the bottom right of the piece. This changes the number of elements in the piece. Maybe there are 2kb of graphics in this piece and 2 seconds of sound, in total. Not exactly a multimedia extravaganza. But you get indications of a sense of humour and an austere visual music being worked out with passion.

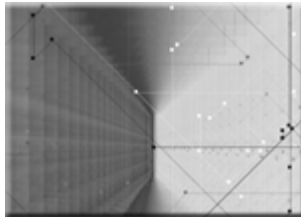
servovalve's aesthetic seems related to Antoine Schmitt's in its passionate, intelligent minimalism. But there is the occasional relation with other of the featured artists, such as the relation between servovalve's "loolab" and Durieu's "Oeil Complex". Mind you, eyeballs are very big in this art. Name any web.artist and they may have an eyeball piece in their work. servovalve's loolab creature is made of blinking eyes like Durieu's is. They are different entities, however. And servovalve's is rather interestingly musical, not surprisingly. Even melodic, we might say, and there seems to be some random element going on with the music and the blinking.



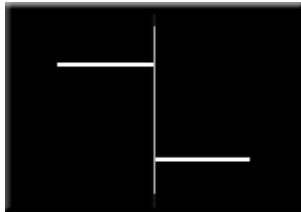
Now if you want to see a musical atom, experience "cone82" or "cone8". These are interactive and resonate with servovalvian charm.

"a chaotic mixture... instinctively, a constant going back and forth between sonic/ graphic movements and programmed control process.... always checking the possible results... I try to use the computer as a chaotic audio player, not as a sound tool to record special tracks... so programming is the ultimate part of the work..."

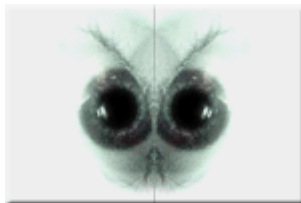
servovalve



ligne de ville



x-liner



loolab