An Overview and Analysis of Methods and Aesthetics Employed in the "Chimera Cadence" Album

Lars Bröndum
Abstract

The album “Chimera Cadence” is a collection of pieces composed by Lars Bröndum on Gothic horror concepts. The CD was released 2018 by the label Antennae Media and online streaming sites, such as Spotify and Bandcamp. Bröndum states that the Gothic idea originates from comments he often get when playing live, “you should write music for horror movies!” Intrigued by the idea Bröndum composed this suite of music that is inspired by the moods of Gothic horror fiction, art and architecture. The music is intended to immerse the listener into imagery of crumbling medieval castles ornamented with bizarre chimeras, and around themes of the supernatural, horror, decadence and madness. This paper is a short overview of the pieces as well as a brief presentation of the background and compositional methods and aesthetics employed on the album. A more detailed descriptive analysis of working the methods and the music in the piece “Suspended in the Pit” (Bröndum 2016) is also presented.
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1. Introduction

The Chimera Cadence album is a collection of eight electroacoustic pieces based on Gothic horror concepts. The music was composed, performed and produced between 2013-2019 by Lars Bröndum. The album was released as CD by the label Antennae Media¹ and online (on for example, iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, YouTube).² The music on the album is mainly composed using modular analog synthesizers, Theremin, voice, prepared instruments and alternative control surfaces, such as ribbon controllers and infrared light sensors. The compositions are often structured around cyclical processes, irregular ostinato, fragmented gestures and microtonal clusters. In this paper a general overview of the pieces is presented, as well as a more detailed descriptive analysis of the piece “Suspended in the Pit” (Bröndum 2016). There is also a brief discussion about working methods, performances and reviews.

2. Background

The music on the Chimera Cadence album is based on Gothic horror concepts. Bröndum states that the idea originates from comments he often get when playing live, “you should write music for horror movies!” Intrigued by the idea Bröndum composed the Chimera Cadence suite of music that is inspired by the moods of Gothic horror fiction, art and architecture. The music is intended to immerse you into imagery of crumbling medieval castles ornamented with bizarre chimeras and around themes of the supernatural, horror, decadence and madness. The pieces were composed and arranged to be shorter in duration and simpler in structure than Bröndum’s earlier releases, such as the album “Fallout” (Bröndum, 2016).

The music on the album was composed and produced by Lars Bröndum. On the liner notes the following instruments are listed: Modular Synthesizers, Buchla Music Easel, Theremin, Violin, Percussion, Prepared Piano, Flute and Computer Treatments. Barbara Bröndum contributed with voice and spoken word on tracks 1, 4 & 5. The photos, sleeve design and cover art was created by Lars Bröndum. The photos on the cover were taken in Glasgow and in the Blackness Castle in Scotland.

The CD release was the 20th October 2018 at Fylkingen³, Stockholm, Sweden. At the CD release, Lars Bröndum, Anders Sjölin and Per Gärdin performed live music and

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¹ More information about Antennae Media can be found here: http://www.antennaemedia.se/Home/Antennae_media.html

² The CD is available on http://www.antennaemedia.se/Home/Albums.html and available on streaming platforms, such as: Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/album/1HzQf2cGm5PNiRtTLe9WqO?si=rC_zV0Z5T1Gb9KrLxvCFw and Bandcamp: https://larsbrondum.bandcamp.com/album/chimera-cadence

³ “Fylkingen - New Music and Intermedia Art is an artist-run, non-profit association for experimental music and art. The association was founded in 1933 and currently consists of approximately 300 Swedish and international artists who develop and present new work in Fylkingen's own venue located in Stockholm, Sweden” (https://www.fylkingen.se/about).
selected tracks were played from the new disc. The fixed media pieces were accompanied by visuals created by Bröndum.

3. Methods and Aesthetics

The principal working method when composing the pieces on this album was to use live performances as the source and edit them by remixing. The remixing involved abbreviating the improvisations in duration and in some of the pieces new material has been added. The improvisations are mainly from live recording from concerts. For example, Suspended in the Pit (2016), Sharp are the Black Angels’ Wings (2017), The Pendulum (2016) and When the Sky is Low and Heavy (2013/2018) are live recordings ranging from 2013-2018. The other tracks were composed live in the studio with similar methods as the live recordings. The primary source for the sounds in these recordings were generated by using analogue and digital modular synthesizers, Theremin and with the addition off processed voices and prepared instruments (piano, flute and violin).

Bröndum’s performance and recording aesthetics resonates with the ‘West Coast’ philosophy and the European avant-garde of the 1960 and 70s. By avoiding traditional controller surfaces, such as keyboards and tempered scales, Bröndum explores alternative ways to compose and perform music. For example, by triggering sounds and adjusting, pitch, dynamics and timbre in real-time by using pitch ribbons, joysticks, touch plates and antennas (such as in a Theremin) and infrared controllers. Bröndum designed his performance surface accordingly so he quickly can move between the different control surfaces. The equipment has to respond fast and the timbre should be adjustable in very high resolution.

The compositions are often structured around cyclical processes, irregular ostinato, fragmented gestures and microtonal clusters. The musical material is mainly concept-based improvisations and then restructured into compositions. "Improvisation is making music instantaneously without planning. Composition is constructing music. In improvisation you can't change your mind; in composition you can" (Olivieros 2013). Bröndum uses a middle ground between those two extremes that Olivieros proposes. Bröndum composes the improvised material by rearranging, editing and remixing⁴. Bröndum states that, “when I improvise pieces I usually work in three looped stratus (layers), but some times extending up to five layers. The layers are not synchronized so Bröndum achieves what Boulez would term “surface indeterminacy” (Whitney 83). An example of this can be found in the piece 5x5 (Bröndum 2015), which was the basic concept in “When the Sky is Low and Heavy⁵. See Figure 1.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion about Bröndum’s working techniques, please read the paper, Graphic Notation, Indeterminacy and Improvisation: Implementing Choice Within a Compositional Framework Bröndum Lars, Open Cultural Studies, 2018, 2(1), 639-653.

⁵ This is also further elaborated on in Graphic Notation, Indeterminacy and Improvisation: Implementing Choice Within a Compositional Framework Bröndum Lars, Open Cultural Studies, 2018, 2(1), 639-653.
The main compositional techniques employed by Bröndum on the Chimera Cadence album are listed below.

3.1 Tape loops
A primary technique used on this album is tape loops. That is, by adding layers on top of layers complex aural textures can be achieved. Tape loop techniques were developed by experimental composers, such as Pauline Oliver’s, Fripp and Eno and Terry Reily in the 1960s and 1970s by using reel-to-reel tape recorders. However, Bröndum mostly uses digital loopers on this album (such as Boss RC-505).

3.2 Clustered microtonal webs
The clustered microtonal web techniques that Bröndum employs are reminiscent of the micro-polyphony developed by composers such as Györgi Ligeti and Krystef Penedercki. The technique is executed by writing melodies in massed canon in close proximity. This obliterates the individuality of the melody creating a sound mass. Bröndum use loopers to achieve this, by adding layers with approximately the same melodic contour in a tight microtonal “pitch space”

3.3 Multilayered cyclical canon
Techniques such as talea and isorhythm (employed in medieval music and non European music and as well by contemporary composer such as Messiaen, Crumb, Ligeti, and Reich). This is often achieved by using analog sequencers running at different speeds.

3.4 Surface indeterminacy
Surface indeterminacy (a term coined by Boulez). Boulez describes the technique as, ‘the opportunity to oscillate around a given tempo or allow them the freedom to play a particularly complicated passage at their own speed’ (Whitney 2000: 83). This is often applied by Bröndum by starting several random generated triggering processes simultaneously, thus creating complex rhythmical patterns (see figure 2).
3.5 Fragmented ostinatos
Fragmented Ostinatos – jittering and isorhythmic ostinatos. Often an asymmetrical odd time signatures, with syncopated accents. These are recorded into loops at long time intervals, returning after for example 15-20 seconds.

3.6 Timbre and space change
Gradual or instant change of timbres, textures, proximity, dynamics, density (see figure 3 an example).

Figure 2, Surface indeterminacy from “Serpentine Line” (Bröndum, 2015)

Figure 3, example of timbre and texture change.
4. Overview of the Pieces

This is a short overview of the eight pieces on Chimera Cadence album and the performances of the pieces. Performances that have been peer reviewed are marked with [PR]. Peer review in this context means that a committee or music organization has selected the piece for performance on a festival, concert or conference.

4.1 Chimera Cadence

The album opens with the piece “Chimera Cadence” (2018). The duration of the piece is 5’13” and the piece is structured around several prolonged cadences. Silent and ominous Chimeras and Gargoyles inspired the music. The equipment used were analogue and digital modular synthesizers similar to that discussed in chapter 5, but also vocal sounds by Barbara Bröndum and violin has been added. Bröndum performed the violin using extended violin techniques, such as quartertones glissandos, scratching and plucking.

The piece has also been mixed to 4 channels and in 5x1 surround. It has also changed name from Chimere and Chimerea Cadence to Chimera Cadence.

Performances:
• Feb 10, 2019 in surround sound at LJUDBIO V festival at Slottsbiografen, Uppsala, Sweden. [PR]
• August 18, 2018, in surround sound at VEMS outdoors concert, Sätravik, Sweden. [PR]
• July 26, 2018, Chimera (premiere) in 5.1 surround at Schhh concert series at Vardagsrummet, Borrby, Sweden.

4.2 Suspended in the Pit

“Suspended in the Pit” conjures up de Sade’s torturous horror in a dungeon. See chapter 5 for detailed analysis.

Performances:
• March 8, 2019, Masonic Festival (Missouri Experimental Sonic Arts) at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, MO, USA [PR]
• March 18, 2017 at Media Artes, Växjö Konsthall, Växjö, Sweden
• Dec 17, 2016, Suspended in the Pit performed live at VEMS concert at Fylkingen. Stockholm, Sweden. [PR]
• Nov 20, 2016, Suspended in The Pit performed at Sines and Squares Festival,
Manchester University, United Kingdom. [PR]
• July 3, 2016, Elektronsöndag by Moneeo, Gävle, Sweden. [PR]

4.3 The Pantheons of Darkened Stars

“The Pantheons of Darkened Stars” was composed around a strain from Clark Ashton Smith’s “Song of the Necromancer”. It is mainly recorded with analog synthesizers, in similar fashion to Suspended in the Pit discussed in chapter 5. Bröndum also performed the flute part using alternative techniques such as microtonal pitches, tongue slaps and key clicks.

4.4 Sharp are Black Angels’ Wings

The piece “Sharp are Black Angels’ Wings” is based on a poem by Anna Akhmatova describing a different kind of horror. The piece is structured around a live improvisation entitled “Cat O Nine Tails” performed by Lars Bröndum, February 5, 2017 at Fylkingen in Stockholm. Bröndum abbreviated the live recording and added prepared piano, and computer processed sounds as well as voice sounds by Barbara Bröndum.

Performances:
• February 5, 2017 at Fylkingen in Stockholm.

4.5 The Bell Chimes in Broken Intervals

“The Bell Chimes in Broken Intervals” is based on a fragment from Hart Crane’s poem “The Broken Tower”. The chant in the end is based on scrambled fragments from William Blake’s poem “The Angel” spoken by Barbara Bröndum.

4.6 Ominous Procession

“Ominous Procession” takes inspiration from Goya’s’ painting “Procession of Monks” and Mathew Lewis “The Monk”. The repetitive and fragmented percussion ostinato is similar to the ostinato idea of Suspended in the Pit (see chapter 5). It is a piece that has been reworked several times and performed under different names, such as Descending Procession and Procession in 4-channel surround.

Performances:
• March 22, 2018, SwedArtMusic Festival “The Descending Procession”, #FST100 [pr]
• Jan 18, 2018 “ Procession in 4-channel surround”, Fylkingen, Sweden.
4.7 The Pendulum

“The Pendulum” alludes to Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” where a prisoner slips in and out of consciousness as a giant razor sharp pendulum slowly moves down closer and closer. Bröndum tried to create an organic sound of a pendulum swinging back and forth between the left and right speaker. This was achieved by panning a drone from an oscillator between the left and right speakers with a LFO (low frequency oscillator) sine wave. The speed of the LFO and the amplitude varies as the piece progresses. Sometimes the pendulum is faded out to create a form to the piece but it also to mimics the poor victim slipping in and out of consciousness. The pendulum sound is altered by applying reverb manually, creating a more metallic sound. The reverb is almost at the edge of self-oscillation in feedback. The pitch was also modulated so it rises as the intensity increases. Several performance surfaces were employed, such as a pitch ribbon, random generated pulses, infrared lights and a Theremin.

Performances:

- June 8, 2016, Pendulum performed in the Halo 9 concert. Fylkingen, Stockholm, Sverige.
- May 28, 2016 Rökridån, Slakthusområdet, Stockholm, Sverige.

4.8 When The Sky is Low and Heavy

“When The Sky is Low and Heavy”, is based on five strains from Baudelaire’s “Flowers of Evil”. The piece is a remix of Bröndum’s piece “Spleen”. “Spleen” is an improvisation that was premiered on the 80th anniversary of Fylkingen and the performance took place 23 November 2013 at Musikmuseet in Stockholm. The piece has been shortened and overdubs have been made. The form of the piece is based on five strands of Baudelaire’s Flowers of Evil (1857).

I. from the whole horizon’s murky grid  
II. the dome of stone  
III. voiceless hordes of spiders  
IV. bells leap with rage  
V. long processions without fifes or drums

An analysis of the original, non edited version of “When The Sky is Low and Heavy” (entitled “Spleen”) can be studied in the article; Work in Improvised Music: Playbour, Improvisation and Neo-liberalism, Bröndum Lars, Kristensen Lars, PARSE Journal, 2019(9).

Performances:

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6 Musikmuseet is now called scenkonstmuseet. For more information see https://scenkonstmuseet.se/?i=en&mmcss=&oid=2&niv=2&ommu_open=1 (downloaded 2019-03-26.)
7 An expanded discussion and analysis of the piece can be found in the article, Work in Improvised Music: Playbour, Improvisation and Neo-liberalism, Bröndum Lars, Kristensen Lars, PARSE Journal, 2019(9).
• June 21, 2019 When The Sky is Low and Heavy is performed in surround sound at NYCEMF 4:30 PM at Grand Hall, NYU, New York. USA [PR]
• December 15, 2018 VEMS concert, Fylkingen, Stockholm, Sweden.
• November 4, 2018 performed in 8-channel surround by VEMS at the Kontakt Festival in Norrköping, Sweden. [PR]
• October 20, 2018, Antennae Media CD release of Chimera Cadence Fylkingen, Stockholm, Sweden.

5. Descriptive Analysis of Suspended in the Pit

The descriptive analysis of Suspended in the Pit are excerpts from the unpublished paper “The Pendulum and Suspended in the Pit: a study of control surfaces of modular synthesizers in live performance” by Lars Bröndum. The paper was presented on the “Present and Future of Electronic Music” conference at University of Central Lancashire in UK. November 14, 2018.

5.1 Duration.

The duration of the piece is 8’24”. The piece has differed in different performances ranging from 10 minutes to 15 minutes. A final version was recorded for the CD Chimera Cadence and it was edited down to 8 minutes and 24 seconds in duration.

5.2 Form

**Part A**: short intro with noise fades in and a sinister irregular ostinato appears. Slow improvised microtonal webs are spun with pitches from the ribbon controller that is looped. The melodies are slightly varied in semitone pitch bends. A perfect fourth followed by a major second (C-F-G) can be discerned. At 2.23 a low frequency pitch enters, as the first loop fades out.

**Part B**: The pulse remains but almost disappears at 3.27. A randomly generated surface indeterminacy texture is generated by triggering a sample and hold with an infrared light controller (Koma “Commander”). As the hand triggers the infrared light a pulse is sent to a source of random generator (Make Noise’s “Wogglebug”). Several layers of irregular bursts are added to create the surface indeterminacy textures. The sounds are produced with an oscillator that is controlled by random CV (Wogglebug). The surface indeterminacy intensifies in density. At 4.21 the random texture is taken over by a plucked string resonator (Mutable instruments “Braids”). At 4.44 a feedback solo emerges. The feedback is generated on a Buchla “Music Easel” by feeding back the output into the aux in and controlling the volume slider to vary the pitch. The pulse evolves into the texture until around 6 minutes and then recedes.

**Part C**: at 6.11 a digital FM oscillator (Mutable Instruments “Braids”) and a looped pitch ribbon (Doepfer A-198) solo is performed using oscillator “DPO” (Make Noise) and Intellijel’s oscillator “Rubicon2 through Intellijel “Korgasmatron” filter and through the vactrols in “Optomix” (Make Noise).

**Part A1** at 7.07 a bass enters and the sound fades out and the ostinato returns first
triumphant and then fading out into noise.

5.1 Dynamics

The dynamics outlines the form of this piece ranges from pianissimo to forte fortissimo. See figure 4 for a graphic representation of dynamics.

5.4 Control Surface

The ostinato is the ground of the piece as it hammers out a sinister irregular pulse. Bröndum used the “Pulser” outlet on a Buchla Music Easel for this. It was generated with the random outlet (see figure 5) with settings in the “Pulser” to create an irregular pulse controlling dynamics and low pass. Bröndum used the touch plate to trigger a slight flat C in octaves. It dropped in tuning slightly as these old analog synthesizers do. Using the pulser to generate random voltages altering the amplitude in steps generates the pulse. The envelope was used to slightly change the modulation of the complex oscillator. At times the two oscillators were faded in as drones by using the Easel’s faders. The modulations and timbre faders were also manually changed. The complex oscillator is modulated with frequency modulation from the simple oscillator creating a fat FM modulated menacing tone. The pulser was modulated by the random output to create the jilting irregularity. The three constants in the piece (which was a ground which Bröndum improvised over) were:

A: The Pulse, the fourth/fifth harmony, the spun webs of microtones falling and ascending in microtones.
B: the generated surface indeterminacy texture and feedback solos (over the pulse)
C: looped pitch ribbon solo (over the pulse) and relaxation of density to end piece.
Figure 5, Buchla Music Easel patch.

6. Review

Martin Nyström reviewed the Chimera Cadence CD January 6th, 2019 in Dagens Nyheter.

After finishing his PhD dissertation on the music which for example was heard in "The shining", Lars Bröndum has now become his own horror master. He knows exactly how important restraint is to bring out the tension. The composer Lars Bröndum has long been one of our leading electro acoustics. He defended his dissertation on clusters in the music of Ligeti and Penderecki. That is, the sound cloud effects that reached the broad audience through Kubrick's film "The Shining". Now Bröndum has become his own horror master on eight tracks influenced by writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Hart Crane, Anna Akhmatova, Clark Ashton Smith, Marquis de Sade, Charles Baudelaire and the painter Goya. And the music is as scary as it is voluptuous as reality is transformed into a vertiginous path through tall towers or into bottomless pits. Bröndum refrains from bombarding the listener and knows how important restraint is to bring out the tension - in order to reach the roar that is the trapped inside normality - and to eject it out with a crushing force. 4/5 (Nyström, 2019)
7. About the composer

Lars Bröndum, PhD, is a composer and musician. His music has been performed in Sweden, Japan, Scotland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, England, USA, Spain, Germany and Mexico. His music often is structured around cyclical processes, irregular ostinatos, fragmented gestures and microtonal clusters. Bröndum writes electroacoustic music as well as music for ensemble and orchestra. He also performs live using an analog modular system, a Theremin, effect pedals and sometimes a laptop with Max/MSP. His music often explores the interaction between acoustic and electronic instruments and lives on the border between written music and improvisation. He performs in different ensemble configurations, such as ReSurge, AGAIG, S.P.A.C.E., Rhizomatrix and The Remin’ Trio and with Lars Bröndum/Lisa Ullén duo and Bröndum/Gärdin duo. He is also a Professor in Music at the University of Skövde at the Department of Media, Aesthetics and Narration (School of Informatics). Bröndum’s CD “Fallout” was awarded best album in the category "Experimental" in the Manifest Award 2016 by SOM (Svenska Oberoende Musikproducenter). He has released the CDs “Chain of Events” on Elektron Records, and “Fallout”, “The Text and Sound Project” and now “Chimera Cadence” on Antennae Media label.
References


