

## Richard Chartier



With its precisely crafted digital whispers and soft low-frequency hums, the music of sound artist Richard Chartier explores the outer reaches of auditory perception, often traversing the space between silence and near silence. Yet his spare constructions contain a surprising wealth of sonic activity—they require close, focused listening to perceive the quiet tempest of carefully crafted clicks, chirps, and sub-bass pulses brewing beneath his apparently calm surfaces.

"I was the kid that liked the white crayon," Chartier says half-jokingly. A professional graphic designer as well as a sound artist, Chartier's distinctive, elegant packaging shares a similarly clean, modernist aesthetic. His interest in making electronic music developed out of an early love of Kraftwerk and the romantic synth pop of Depeche Mode, but his tastes soon gravitated toward the more experimental tape-collage work of groups like *zoviet\*france.*, Nurse with Wound, and the Hafler Trio. Similarly, his own music became increasingly abstract, and by 1989, he had abandoned the last vestiges of pop-music convention and structure and began creating dense ambient soundscapes.

In the past few years, he has returned to these early, pre-digital works, sometimes to remaster them with few compositional changes (as on the 2002 reissue of *Direct.Incidental.Consequential*), but more often to mine them for raw materials, reconfiguring them into new pieces. For instance, on *Archival1991*, released on Crouton Music in 2003, Chartier reworked two of his pieces from the early 1990s, stitching them together into a single, finely layered drone that retained both the aesthetic and structure of his early work. A second series of Chartier-meets-Chartier revisitations, titled *Retrieval 1, 2, and 3*, will be released on three separate records over the course of 2005. For these, the alterations were more profound. "These are taking the older materials and recombining them and reworking them much more than *Archival1991*," he says. "Much of their original feel is there, but they are very different in approach and technique and composition."

The changes in approach, technique, and composition, which separate his early ambient dronescapes and his ultra-minimal constructions of the past seven years or so, was made possible by Chartier's shift to pure computer-based composition and digital recording in 1995. "A work like *Series*, which is my most minimal work, was born from going completely digital in the recording process," he says, referring to the fantastically spare, inaugural release on his own digital sound-art imprint Line. "I finally eliminated that pesky analog hiss, which hampered me from using silence in a more compositional way." The precision of digital composition and

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Photo: Evelina Domnitch



recording allowed Chartier to achieve not only that precious absolute "0" signal, but also to focus with microscopic precision on the particularities of each discrete component within a piece, sculpting them down to the finest detail.

On subsequent recordings, from the subtly crackling *Of Surfaces* (Line) to the gradual unfolding of *Decisive Forms* (Trente Oiseaux), Chartier continued to explore what he has called "an implied silence that is not silent," fashioning pointillistic compositions that seem poised on the brink of inaudibility. Indeed, without the aid of headphones, the delicate low-frequency pulses of *Decisive Forms* all but disappear under the weight of the ambient noise of even the quietest apartment. However, his most recent release, *Set or Performance*, marks a shift towards greater audibility in Chartier's work. It's an unusually active piece and, although it is still whisper quiet, it has a far greater dynamic range than much of his work, with Chartier focusing less on silence than on evolving a spider-like web of audible sound.

As its name implies, the disc documents a concert from late 2003, and the live context explains its relative noisiness—for obvious reasons, Chartier's live sets have always been louder than his recorded work. It also reflects a conscious move towards what he describes as a "less silent" aesthetic. Perhaps the best example of the increasing sonic density of Chartier's work is an ongoing collaborative project called Chessmachine with Russian-born sound artist Ivan Pavlov, a.k.a. COH.

Modeled on the long-distance chess matches of the Cold War era in which players from either side of the Iron Curtain exchanged moves via courier, Chessmachine ostensibly pitted the quiet, ultra-minimalism of Chartier against the bristling high-voltage electronics of Pavlov. The two exchanged sound-file "moves," which were compiled on a release on the Mutek label, and eventually a "match" was arranged for the 2004 Mutek festival in Montreal. The concept was head-to-head competition between opposites—East vs. West, red vs. blue, PC vs. Mac—rather than collaboration. However, over the course of the various matches, the two competitors ended up adopting the musical strategies of the other, Chartier says, with Chartier making uncharacteristically loud, Pavlovian moves and Pavlov countering with almost Chartier-esque subtlety.

"I always learn more about my work during a collaboration," he says, and he has had a number of especially fruitful partnerships with artists like William Basinski, Nosei Sakata (\*0), and Taylor Deupree. "What I like about collaboration is that things occur that you think, 'I would not have thought of doing it that way.' If I go back and listen to my projects, especially as O/r [with \*0] for example, I think, 'What is this? Did I make this? I don't remember creating this.' It's fascinating."

"I think the best collaborations and the ones that are successful are the ones where the two (or more) artists fuse into an indistinguishable whole. When I read reviews of collaborations I have done, most reviewers mistakenly associate me with elements that I did not play, such as the live performance with Taylor Deupree and Kim Cascone, *After*—I was the one who was doing more harmonic drones and the rhythms."

"I don't want to be 'that quiet guy,'" he says when asked about his recent forays into more audible sound works. "I don't want to do the same thing over and over again. I have been getting back into more ambient music these days and actually listening to much more old punk and post-punk stuff. Electronic music has lost its edge to me, or at least I don't hear much that I like anymore. Much of it doesn't stand the test of time for even a few years."

*Set or Performance* is out now on Line. ■■