

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: Performance Ideas  
Subject: Soundwave/Matt Davignon  
Discipline: Music

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Still image from SPARK story, 2006.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### EPISODE THEME

Performance Ideas

### SUBJECT

Soundwave Series/Matt Davignon

### GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

### OBJECTIVE

Understand the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art.

Develop basic observational drawing and/or painting skills.

Develop visual, written, listening and speaking skills through looking at, creating and talking about visual artworks.

Develop an expressive visual vocabulary with which to address personal and/or social themes and ideas.

Develop observational and representational skills by looking at and reproducing images of people, places and things accurately and thoughtfully.

### STORY SYNOPSIS

Since the early 90s, Matt Davignon has been captivating audiences by with compelling soundscapes fashioned using sound textures, arrhythmic patterns, as well as processed and found sound. Spark checks in on Davignon as he orchestrates Live Play, a musical happening at San Francisco's noted experimental video space, Artist's Television Access.

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing as a group.

Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance.

Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently.

Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another.

Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others.

### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to experimental music
- To provide context for the understanding of the history of experimental music and its pioneers
- To inspire students to think critically about mainstream music and explore new ideas in the creation of sound art

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- TV & VCR with SPARK story "Performance Ideas" about different performance artists around the bay area
- Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer
- Cassette player, CD player, or computer audio program

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
- Pencils, pens, and paper

### INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects

Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems

Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

Oakland-based musician Matt Davignon has become a fixture of the Bay Area's burgeoning experimental music scene. Since the early 90s, Davignon has been captivating audiences by fashioning compelling soundscapes using sound textures, arrhythmic patterns, as well as processed and found sound. Spark checks in on Davignon as he orchestrates Live Play, a musical happening at San Francisco's noted experimental video space, Artist's Television Access.

Experimental music has a reputation for being difficult and inaccessible; some experimental composers have even argued that experimental music's historical inability to gain a wide audience is a mark of its success. Coming from a background in industrial and noise music, Davignon was surprised to find the prevalence of acoustic instrumentation in the Bay Area's experimental music scene, which he began to use in his own compositions. Over the years, Davignon has worked hard to create soundscapes that simultaneously stretch perceived notions of composition while creating music that is both interesting and pleasurable for the listener.

Live Play is the first event of the Soundwave series of experimental musical events organized by promoter Alan So. The event at ATA combines acoustic with electronic performances all improvised to a montage of found footage selected by Sarah Lockhart of Oakland's center for experimental composition, 21 Grand. Invited to guest curate the event, Davignon put together three groups of prominent Bay Area musicians to improvise soundtracks for the experimental film, including the duo Myrmyr, Luz Alibi and Mr. Marauder, and a quintet composed of Moe Staiano, Kanoko Nishi, Lance Grabmiller, David Michalak, and Davignon himself on turntable.

Matt Davignon has developed a unique form of improvisation over the last 10 years. Combining acoustic and electronic elements, he attempts to create dynamic, biological music from seemingly limited source material. Since 2003, he has been

working with the drum machine as a primary instrument, processing the sounds with several devices to create a unique sound palette. Davignon uses turntables, prepared guitars, cassette tape recorders, looping devices or an assortment of household objects and toy instruments in his performances. He has organized events such as the San Francisco Found Objects Festival and Sound/Shift Oakland.

### THE BIG PICTURE

The origin of experimental music and sound art dates back to the advent of innovative visual and musical works that responded directly to the cacophony of the new urban metropolis in the early 1900s. Embracing the new modern landscape and experimenting with its accompanying mechanical noises, artists and musicians began composing and performing pieces using the sounds of industry and the urban world as their instruments.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the German Romantic style of music, with its sweeping orchestral compositions based upon the diatonic scale was very popular. The term diatonic refers to any scale of five tones and two semitones produced by playing the white keys of a keyboard instrument. The diatonic scale is considered important because, of all possible seven note scales, it has the highest number of consonant intervals--the highest number of tones that are pleasing to ear when played together. The most popular composers of the time, Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, followed the rules of harmony and the diatonic scale to create consonant music, which was felt to be expressive of the beauty of nature and the romantic ideals of the period.

However, by the end of the century many artists and composers had rejected Romanticism, seeking instead to embrace the new ideas associated with modernity which were at odds with the pastoral idealism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Musical innovations such as the advent of the 12-tone music and the idea of dissonance and atonality effectively eliminated

the domination of 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions, and opened a wide field of possibilities for composers.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) was a violin-player and composer whose body of work connected post-Wagnerian musical traditions with new musical forms, and laid the groundwork for atonal music and sound art. Schoenberg's innovative compositions were quickly followed by a virtual revolution among composers throughout Europe and the United States, as musicians began to experiment with atonal music, dissonant counterpoint, and an expansion of the classical relationships that bound pitch, color, and form. The effective result of the new musical developments taking place everywhere in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the weakening or elimination of any singular understanding of traditional functional tonality.

New innovations also came through the works of Futurist artists Filippo Marinetti and Luigi Russolo, and Dada artist Hugo Ball, all of whom made large contributions to the creation of sound art. Marinetti was a member of the Italian Futurists, a group of artists who were interested in embracing modernity in their work, exemplified in speed, industry, violence, automation, and pollution. The movement encompassed spoken word as well as visual and performing arts, and their primary focus was on expressing the dynamic and sometimes violent culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his sound poem *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914), Marinetti imitated and glorified the sounds of the urban landscape and its machines. In 1916, Hugo Ball, a German Dada artist, read a "sound" or "simultaneous" poem at Cabaret Voltaire, an energetic performance of cacophony, including whistling, sighing, grunting, coughing, and singing. Convinced the modern language no longer held meaning thanks to irresponsible journalism, Ball sought to create "verse without words," reading the pages of his poem from three music stands standing on the three sides of the stage facing the audience.

The work of Ball and Marinetti was further explored by Luigi Russolo, another Futurist artist, who sought to capture the essence of modern urban life with a range of revolutionary musical approaches and techniques. A defining characteristic of Futurist music is the rejection of traditional instruments and

their replacement with the sounds of industry—factories, railways, autos, airplanes, and other machines. Although Futurism was short-lived, during its time it had far-reaching influence on many composers and helped to foster new and experimental music.

From the end of World War II to today, more and more electronic and recorded sounds have become part of the technical musical palette, including a variety of genres of sound art and musical composition such as noise art, musique concrete, sound poetry, serialism, minimalist composition, and biofeedback, among others. Composers who used existing or found sounds, such as Edgard Varèse, Henry Cowell, John Cage, and Lou Harrison soon had accumulated a vast diversity of new sources, materials, and ideas from which to compose their work. These artists further expanded the exploration of instrumentation, using both traditional and non-traditional instruments, and playing them in new ways, such as strumming, scratching, or scraping the inside of a piano and its strings. New compositional techniques were also used, such as layering multiple recorded and electronically produced sounds together to create new colors.

John Cage was one of the first artists to attach contact microphones to instruments, scratching the microphone heads, and creating electronic distortion and feedback to achieve new sounds. He also worked to take away the "rational" control of the composer, and instead, placed increased importance on the performer. To do this, Cage would present performers with a general graph or road map of the composition, giving them a range of sonic choices to make, but left the actual choices up to them, so that there would always be an element of chance and unpredictability in the outcome.

Most of these traditions continue today as many artists around the world seek to create new pieces using every available technique. Further advancements in technology only increase the possibilities for composers of new and experimental music. The inclusion of natural sounds with industrial sounds in re-mixes of industrial, techno, hip hop, and other genres of music help to create a rich and layered soundscape.

## RESOURCES – TEXTS

Art of Noises, The. Luigi Russolo, Pendragon Press, 1986.

Composing Interactive Music. Todd Winkler, MIT Press, 1988.

Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music. Joel Chadabe, Prentice Hall, 1998.

Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond. Michael Nyman, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts. Douglas Kahn, MIT Press, 1999 .

Silence. John Cage, MIT Press, 1961.

Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and 5 Generations of American Experimental Composers, William Duckworth Da Capo Press, 1994.

## RESOURCES – WEBSITES

All Music - A comprehensive database with information on bands, individual artists, music reviews, descriptions of genres such as avant-garde, movies, plus much more.  
<http://www.allmusic.com>

Matt Davignon's personal website.  
<http://www.ribosomemusic.com/>

Reverberant – Website by artists Iain Mott, Marc Raszewski, Jim Sosnin, and Tim Barrass exploring the physical relationship between sound and the public with sculpture, audio electronics, and video.  
<http://www.reverberant.com>

Sound Culture – The International sound art festival focused on the creative use of sound outside of the field of music by practitioners based in the Pacific region. <http://www.soundculture.org>

Sound Site – Educational website about sound sponsored by IBM as part of The Sound Project, a collaboration between the Minnesota Orchestral Association and the Science Museum of Minnesota.  
<http://www.smm.org/sound>

Sound Travels – A gateway and information site about different events, programs, and opportunities in sound art. <http://www.soundtravels.ca>

SoundPlay – An annual event that puts sound art in context with visual art and words.  
<http://www.soundplay.ca/index.html>

Soundwave -Alan So's soundwave series, featuring some of the Bay Area's most promising experimental musicians.  
<http://www.projectsoundwave.com/series/>

Transbay Creative Music Calendar – Event listing for experimental, improvised, noise, electronic, free-jazz, avant-garde, modern composition, and other forms of contemporary sound in the San Francisco Bay Area. <http://www.transbaycalendar.org>

## VIDEO RESOURCES

Sonic Art: Breaking the Sound Barrier – Film in progress about sound art. For more information visit: [http://home.att.net/~soundart/5\\_sonic.htm](http://home.att.net/~soundart/5_sonic.htm)

## BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Aquarius Records – San Francisco  
Great source for experimental music.  
Address: 1055 Valencia Street, San Francisco 94110.  
Web site: <http://www.aquariusrecords.org>

Bay Improviser – Web site offering links to local artists, concert schedules, music reviews, and other improvisational music resources.  
<http://www.bayimproviser.com>

Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College – One of the country's foremost contemporary music programs.  
<http://www.mills.edu/LIFE/CCM/CCM.homepage.html>

Luggage Store Gallery Music Series – San Francisco  
Experimental and improvisational music programs.  
<http://www.luggagestoregallery.org/luggage/music/php?page=noflash>.

## SECTION III – VOCABULARY

### DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND WORDS AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

#### **Gig**

A slang term for a casual short job, usually a single concert or recording session.

#### **Curate**

To act as curator of; organize and oversee.

#### **Drum machine**

An electronic musical instrument designed to imitate the sound of drums and/or other percussion instruments.

#### **Experimental Music**

Any music that challenges the commonly accepted notions of what music is. There is an overlap with avant-garde music. John Cage was a pioneer in experimental music and defined and gave credibility to the form.

#### **Improvise**

To invent, compose, or perform with little or no preparation.

#### **Koto**

A traditional stringed musical instrument from Japan.

#### **Lap Steel Guitar**

A type of steel guitar, from which other types developed. There are three main types of lap steel guitar:

- Lap slide guitars, the first developed, which use a similar sound box to a Spanish guitar.

- Resonator guitars, particularly those with square necks.

- Electric lap steel guitars, which include the first commercially successful solid body instruments. Lap slide and resonator guitars may also be fitted with amplification pickups (see below), but do not depend on electrical amplification to produce their sound.

#### **Live Play**

A one-time event held at a San Francisco venue called Artists Television Access. Matt Davignon assembled three groups of prominent electronic and acoustic musicians from the Bay Area's experimental music scene to improvise scores for an unusual array of films.

#### **Pickup**

A device that acts as a transducer that captures mechanical vibrations (usually from suitably equipped stringed instruments such as the electric guitar, electric bass guitar or electric violin) and converts them to an electronic signal which can be amplified and recorded.

#### **Quintet**

A formation containing five members. It is commonly associated with musical groups, such as a string quintet, or a group of five singers.

#### **Turntable**

The circular horizontal rotating platform of a phonograph on which the record is placed.

## SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

### STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

#### **Listening to the Environment**

Have your whole class sit quietly with their eyes closed for one minute or so and listen to the ambient sounds of their immediate environment. Have each student take a mental note of how many different sounds they heard, both the faintest and the loudest, then discuss with the whole class and list all the different sounds they heard. Assign this same exercise to students at their own homes or walking to school. Discuss with students how much of their world they understand through hearing.

#### **Sound Environment**

Have students become an environment of their choosing using sound effects alone. Break the class up into teams of four to six players and have each group decide on *where* they are. Using sounds only, no language, have the students become the components of their chosen environment. Suggest places like the metro or train station, a school bus, a jungle, a shipyard, etc. In addition to vocalizations, allow students to use found objects or those in the classroom, such as metal objects like spoons, or paper to being crinkled, a straw in a glass of water or dripping water. Have all the other students close their eyes while one group is presenting, or have the group stand out of sight of the class. Let the class guess what the environment is. If you have the technology, you could also try recording the experience in the classroom, and then play it back for each group to evaluate their performance.

#### **Create Music**

Have students create experimental music to images evoked by written poetry or a visual painting. Use both abstract and more concrete images and have students try to create a musical landscape that matches the image they are seeing or hearing. Keep in mind that every piece has a beginning, middle

and end, and that silence is also an important part of making music.

#### **Experimental Instruments**

In the SPARK episode, “Performance Ideas,” some of the musicians play non-traditional instruments to create music, such as the way the duo Myrmyr blows air through a stretched strip of rubber, or the way musician Moe rubs a spatula on a drum. Try this same sort of experiment with a variety of found objects with your class. What sorts of objects resonate longer and why? Which objects sound pleasant, which sound undesirable, and why?

#### **Researching Edgard Varèse**

Take a look at the following website on Edgard Varèse, a composer who describes himself as “not a musician, but a worker in rhythms, frequencies and intensities”:

<http://www.zakros.com/mica/soundart/f02/varese.html>.

Look at the written score of his piece *Poème Electronique*, and listen to a copy of the piece. In writing scores for new music, composers had to become quite creative in writing for non-traditional instruments and electronic sounds. Have the students take a crack at creating their own scores based on recording samples from sound art. Challenge students to think of ways to express length or duration of notes (maybe just by indicating how many seconds something takes place), their volume, texture, or other qualities, such as watery or metallic sounds or the way rocks sound when struck together. Often a composer will create a “key” or table that explains the kinds of symbols he/she is using, and what they mean. Have students create a key that describes the symbols for the different “instruments” or sounds they hear.

## Recording project

Some people find it difficult to listen to new music, as it does not resemble what they traditionally have heard on the radio or at concerts. Pick music from the suggested play list and play those selections for the class. Assign students the job of collecting "noises" from their homes or around the school with a tape recorder. Provide a list of environmental sounds they should look for, including traffic, construction, people walking, the sound of food cooking, their dog eating its supper, etc. Have them return to the class and present their repertoire. If you have the technology, such as a mini-disc recorder and any editing software, you could take this to the next level and try composing a piece based on the students collected samples. Alternatively, in the classroom, you could record a new piece, using sounds live from the classroom while students play back some of their recordings, creating layers of sound. Play it back for the students and have them evaluate the piece.

## Writing with Sound

Based on their experiences with noticing sounds, have students try to write a short essay or poem describing a walk they might take on their way home from school, or out in the woods, but describing the walk not by sight, but by sound. Make it an audio journey.

## SPARKLERS!

- \* Explore the physics of sound. What makes an overtone? Every sound that we hear consists of a fundamental tone and also a number of overtones or harmonics. Examine this phenomenon together as a class.
- \* Listen to samples of Tuvan throat singers (<http://www.fotuva.org/music>) and hear how they are able to create piercing whistle-like overtones with their mouths while singing. Try this with your students, having them sing a continuous note and gradually changing the placement or shape of their tongue and lips. Examine how overtones are created merely by changing the shape of one's mouth and lips.

## RELATED STANDARDS

### MUSIC

#### Grade 5

#### 4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

Responding to, Analyzing, and Making Judgments about Works of Music

Students critically assess and derive meaning from works of music and the performance of musicians according to the elements of music, aesthetic qualities, and human responses.

*Analyze and Critically Assess*

4.1 Identify and analyze differences in tempo and dynamics in contrasting music selections

#### Grade 8

*Compose, Arrange, and Improvise.*

2.5 Arrange simple pieces for voices or instruments other than those for which the pieces were written, using traditional and nontraditional sound sources, including digital/ electronic media.

2.6 Improvise melodic and rhythmic embellishments and variations in major keys.

2.7 Improvise short melodies to be performed with and without accompaniment.

#### Grade 9-12

#### 2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

*Compose, Arrange, and Improvise*

2.6 Compose music, using musical elements for expressive effect

#### 4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

*Derive Meaning*

4.4 Describe the means used to create images or evoke feelings and emotions in musical works from various cultures

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/standards/vpa>.