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**Examining the future of born-digital musical works.
A survey on Portuguese composers' preservation practices.**

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*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new
landscapes, but in having new eyes*

Marcel Proust

To examine the future of born-digital musical works one needs new eyes, not to discover new landscapes but to truly see what is there, waiting to be acknowledged. The problem of the rapid obsolescence of our contemporary musical heritage is not new, but it is still not being seen enough. Works are constantly being lost without any concerted or widespread attempt to rescue them from oblivion. It is quite staggering that, at this point, with so many projects on the subject, there is no professional specifically trained to archive, document or preserve our contemporary musical heritage. This area of expertise is still not specific to a particular expert, whereby composers are often assigned with the task of archiving and preserving their creations.

Unfortunately, according to an international survey, titled *InterPARES 2 Project - General Study 04 Final Report: Survey of Recordkeeping Practices of Composers*, conducted by Michael Longton (2004), within the framework of the research project InterPARES 2, composers are not particularly concerned about preservation or archival procedures. Longton concluded that:

“2. Almost half (47 percent) of the respondents have lost files they considered valuable through hardware or software obsolescence (13). [...]

4. Question (4) seems to indicate that the participants in this survey are not particularly concerned with archival issues. While 97 percent say they attempt to keep the digital records they produce (3) 100 percent keep them for practical reasons (4). This probably reflects the fact that composers have not, historically, had to concern themselves with preservation [...]

9. If one thing emerges from this survey, it is that composers work alone. Even when they are officially attached to institutions, the archival and preservation policies and practices of those institutions will seldom touch them.” (Longton, 2004: 1-2).

From the aforementioned, it can be inferred that most composers do not have the financial and human resources or the technical expertise to properly archive and maintain the digital files they produce, and consequently the necessary documentation to preserve their works. Several artists face many similar problems as the testimony of the MoMA's conservator Ben Finoradin attests:

“Many artists I work with have piles of hard drives sitting around with their work on it, and are a bit at a loss as to where to begin to get their digital archive in order. This is a very frustrating position to be in as an artist, especially in the face of limited amounts of time, money, and technical expertise. Practicing digital preservation is challenging even for large and well funded institutions, so it comes as no surprise then that it is quite the task for artists young and old, emerging and blue chip.”¹

In her article "Ephemeral Music: Electroacoustic Music Collections in the United States", published in 2008, Adriana Cuervo pointed out that there are very few North American institutions holding collections of born-digital electroacoustic music. According to the author, in the United States of America, born-digital electroacoustic music “is slowly disappearing as both custodians and creators are not taking the necessary steps to establish a sustainable long-term access model to preserve these vital cultural expressions.” (Cuervo, 2008: 1). And what about Portugal? Are Portuguese institutions and composers working towards the preservation of the contemporary Portuguese musical heritage, especially in the case of born-digital works?

In Portugal, there is no existing national phonographic archive or any other sort of institutions keen to devote their human and financial resources to preservation issues, being Portuguese composers the primary responsible for their works' future. In this context, and considering the future of the 21st century Portuguese musical legacy, it turns to be crucial to understand if Portuguese composers are taking the necessary measures to safeguard their personal archives. Moreover, it is also of the utmost importance to know what kind of documents they produce and archive and if they are properly documenting their creations, especially those born-digital.

To access this information a questionnaire was submitted to 113 Portuguese composers, during 2016, via an electronic formulary by Google Drive. In the following sections the main results obtained with this survey will be presented and discussed, bringing to light the Portuguese realm, usually absent from international academic debates on the subject.

A survey on Portuguese composers' preservation practices

Titled *Thinking about the future of the contemporary Portuguese musical heritage* the survey was organized in two sections. In the first one composers were inquired about their names, ages, gender, academic qualifications, and the place where they live and work. The second section, with a total of 17 questions, was subdivided in four main groups of questions. Those groups were established according to the following themes: characterization of the respondents' compositional practices; recordkeeping practices of composers; composers' perspective on the future of their creations; and identification of the composers' documentation practices. The data collected was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 23), by means of descriptive statistics.

¹ Accessible at: <https://medium.com/@benfinoradin/digital-preservation-in-the-artist-s-studio-8951e564bb3e>. October 5th 2018.

Respondents' general information

With a total of 53 replies, 45 men (84,9%) and 8 women (15,1%), with an average age of 48, responded to the questionnaire, namely João Pedro Oliveira, António Pinho Vargas, Adriana Sá, Isabel Pires, Cândido Lima, Pedro Rebelo, Tomás Henriques, Miguel Azguime, António de Sousa Dias, among many others. 10 out of the 53 respondents did not identify themselves. In addition, over 50% of the respondents hold doctoral degrees and live in Lisbon or nearby. Some of the respondents, however, live and work abroad especially in the United Nations of America, Northern Ireland and Brazil.

Characterization of the respondents' compositional practices

The majority of the respondents (21; 39,6%) started composing during the 80s. Of the remaining composers 15 (28,3%) started composing during the 90s, 8 (15,1%) from 2000 onwards, 5 (9,4%) during the 70s and 4 (7,5%) during the 60s. At this point it is worth mentioning that only 11,3% of the respondents have music composition as their main source of financial support. The remaining composers also teach, play music, and/or carry out research, among other income generating activities, such as, for instance, the rental of apartments in Lisbon for tourists.

Moreover, Portuguese composers are specially dedicating themselves to the creation of works of chamber music; music for orchestra and/or solo instrument and/or choir; music dependent on electronic media (especially electroacoustic and live electronic music); and multimedia works. It is important to note that nearly 60% of the 53 composers who replied to the survey, reported recourse to music composition software, mainly Max/MSP, but also Pure Data, CSound, SuperCollider, among other programming languages. It is not surprising, then, that 56,6% of the composers surveyed do not represent all of their works with traditional musical notation.

Recordkeeping practices of composers

The documents most produced and archived by Portuguese composers are scores (in digital formats or printed), audio files (recorded on magnetic tape, CD, pen-drive, etc.) and patches. Getting access to the content of those documents is of the utmost importance for 92,5% of the responding composers. Further, 94,3% of the respondents usually archive all produced documentation after finishing a work, mainly for archival purposes, but also for future performances or for new creations.

Nevertheless, 54,7% of the responding composers have already lost or no longer have access to the content of several documents, mainly due to technological obsolescence. For the remaining 45,3% of the composers, this does not apply as they regularly update/ migrate their files and/or create multiple copies of those documents stored in several locations.

Curiously, only 30,2% of respondents reported cases of musical works no longer presented due to technological problems. Despite this, 50,9% of the 53 composers who replied to the survey claimed to have already participated in some sort of initiative aimed at recovering or re-establishing the 'performability' of a given work. This means that it is not only the technological obsolescence that jeopardizes the future of our recent musical legacy. The results exposed in the following paragraphs may also attest this outcome.

Composers' perspective on the future of their creations

Regarding the question: Have you ever thought about the future of the contemporary Portuguese musical heritage? 88,7% of the responding composers claimed they did. Actually, over 80% of the respondents are interested in the subject and find the preservation of their works crucial for future generations to engage with the music of the past. Nevertheless, only 28,3% of the composers that replied to the survey consider that all of their works may be performed in the future without their presence. This demonstrates that the ephemerality of the composers' body and memory is also a major problem for the future performance of their creations, since there is no materialized collective memory on the works or a proper documentation capable of materializing the immaterial.

Identification of the composers' documentation practices

Seventy-seven percent of the responding composers believe that, with proper documentation, any work can be preserved for the future, and yet they are not particularly concerned about documentation as only 24,5% of the respondents always attempt to document their works, producing a documentation that encompasses not only scores, patches or audio files, but also details about the software and hardware devices, recordings of previous performances and interviews with composers and other information on the composers' intentions.

Conclusion: Examining the future of born-digital musical works

Departing from the preceding remarks one may conclude that the contemporary Portuguese musical heritage is in real danger of being lost and forgotten because composers do not have the necessary human and/or financial resources to properly preserve/document their creations, although it is in the interest of composers to ensure that it is done. But, is after all the composers' duty to take care of their works? What about the role of museums and related institutions in the future of our musical legacy? Can those institutions be the solution to the problem?

The answer to these questions is not straightforward, but could lead to a promising future. In fact, new repositories for documentation and networks of preservation are needed, otherwise most of today's works will be lost in the near future due to the absence of a materialized collective memory.

References

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