



The Composer Essay Project

Mind the Glitch: Nicole Lizée's Etudes

By Susanna Eastburn, MBE

I first met Nicole Lizée, and encountered her music, at the 2014 ISCM World Music Days in Wrocław, Poland. We had a slightly silly conversation outside a bar about her home province of Saskatchewan, which I had studied extensively as part of a "Prairie Provinces" project aged 13 at secondary school, resulting directly in my permanent farewell to the academic study of Geography one year later.

A couple of days later I saw and heard her piece *Hitchcock Etudes*. As I watched and listened I was left gasping with admiration at her invention and audacity. My mind was filled with questions... What kind of composer was this whose approach to her material was so untrammelled by musical conventions? What instinct had led her to imagine this piece, which splices together extracts of Hitchcock films, electronics (including electronic treatment of Bernard Herrmann's score), and piano? What did it signify that she had inserted herself as an occasional, watchful but silent, presence, sitting next to Doris Day at the piano in a clip from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*?

(This will all make more sense if you watch the *Hitchcock Etudes* yourself, which you can on YouTube.)

These *Hitchcock Etudes*, and three of her subsequent works, *Tarantino Etudes*, *Kubrick Etudes*, and *David Lynch Etudes* form a body of work which Lizée has referred to as the *Criterion Collection*. They are inspired by auteur theory (the idea of a film director as the ultimate creative "author" of a film), and self-evidently born out of her admiration for these directors; specifically by her repeated watching and rewatching of taped recordings of these films.

The *Criterion Collection* comprises "études" or studies, in line with a long tradition that includes the celebrated études of Chopin, Debussy, Liszt and, in the 20th century, Ligeti and Cage – to name just a few. Etudes were originally conceived as teaching material to develop virtuoso technique, with each étude honing in on a particular technical challenge. Lizée's four sets of Etudes understand and are playing with this tradition – not only in the superficial aspect of their demands on the instrumentalist(s), but in their obsessive revisiting and re-exploring of fragments of the film and film score source material. And what happens when a cassette recording of a film, or part of a film, is watched over and over again? It degrades, it bleeds, it slurs and slides. All of this, and more, is in each of these works.

Lizée's father was an electronics retailer and repairer, and she has talked about growing up in a household full of early electronic equipment, much of it written off as broken or malfunctioning. From an early age, she was fascinated both by the iconic sounds of some of these machines (such as the Stylophone, the omnichord, even the early electronics game Simon™) and also the results of when analogue electronics degrade or glitch: when a needle on a turntable jumps; when a video tape stretches and warps; when technologies collide and produce a scream of feedback.

These sounds and techniques infuse her music, both in the form of the machines themselves (such as in the work *Death to Kosmische* for string quartet, where the Kronos Quartet not only plays their usual instruments but also Stylophones and omnichords) and in how she selects and combines her material, deliberately bringing the apparently unpredictable and highly individual results of malfunctioning electronics equipment into a collision with real life musicians. So much individuality could result in chaos, but Lizée brings fierce control and a formidable technique to this. She is the only composer I know who has devised a precise notation for a turntable part, and in these *Etudes* she notates an extraordinary variety of events: Norman Bates' stutter; Naomi Watts' gasp; Laura Dern's drumming feet. As an audience member, it is nothing short of a delight to experience the morphing of fragments from these iconic films into a live musical and visual exploration.

Turning a recorded speaking voice into notated music and then elaborating on it is nothing new, of course (Steve Reich's *Different Trains* is just one example), but what makes Lizée's *Etudes* different is having video integrated within it. We watch these fragments of famous films and (whether we know them or not is not the point, although there's interesting A/B testing to be done about the different experiences of the *Etudes* by those audience members who are Lynch/Hitchcock/Kubrick/Tarantino aficionados, and those who are not) see the composer's fascination in the tiniest detail: a window frame in the corner of the shot; an accordion-like arm gesture; a maniacal laugh. Diane Ladd, playing a TV interviewer, asks "Surely these fresh new revelations must send a shiver down your spine?"; Lizée takes the arch speech inflections of these last four words and spins out a section of fake-innocent music in best easy listening style, accompanying the spoken words of the character. But the music is distorted by glitches, and she forces us as viewers to examine the character's perfect teeth and final expressive downward tug of the mouth, over and over and over again.

Lizée's music feels full of spectres from the past: the directors whose films she is cutting into; the obsolete equipment (much of it now consigned to landfill) which she drags into the present day; the squeaks and glitches of sound that are an anachronism in the digital age. But this 'musical hauntology' (as she has termed it) works the other way also. For me, one of the most mysterious aspects of the *Etudes* is the way that Lizée herself occasionally drifts through them, like nothing so much as a present-day phantom in the past. In the *David Lynch Etudes*, she is often an invisible presence. A paintbrush over the screen adds tears to a character's face. Her own notation unfolds in real time. A handheld camera films an apartment that contains an unknown bearded man who at various points

eats small photos of the David Lynch characters featured in Lizée's work. Towards the end of the work, he eats first a photo of David Lynch, and finally... one of Lizée herself.

There's so much going on in these works, and so many different elements: films, directors, glitches, instrumentalists, a celebration of analogue distortion, and much else. Yet each of the *Etudes* is satisfyingly coherent, and can proudly join the very small number of works that I've come across which are genuinely successful in bringing music and film together into one completely integrated and highly original artwork.

In researching this article I read one press reviewer's comment that they weren't sure the *David Lynch Etudes* would work as audio alone. I'm not sure I agree (since the aural material is so very interesting), but actually I think he's missing the point. There's a highly individual artistic instinct at work here in drawing together a seemingly disparate set of ideas and materials to create something new, and while it may not be clear to us as audience members how Lizée has arrived at her decisions about what things are 'allowed' to belong together, the fact is that they definitively do. Writing from my desk in London, I see much in Lizée's approach that is reminiscent of the great UK electronic music pioneers Daphne Oram and Delia Derbyshire (and in fact Lizée has cited the latter as an influence). Like these illustrious predecessors, Nicole Lizée demonstrates above all else an inventive spirit, not bound by conventional notions of how new music is created, what it consists of, and what it needs to look and sound like.

Susanna Eastburn, MBE. October 2018. London, UK.

Susanna Eastburn MBE is the Chief Executive of Sound and Music, the United Kingdom's national charity for new music. You can learn more about her work at soundandmusic.org.

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