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Emulating Babbitt

**The Computer as Specialist**  
(Who cares if you compose?)

Computer

The musical score is presented in a five-staff format. The top staff is for Flute, followed by Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The time signature is 4/16. The score begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 62. Dynamic markings include *mf*, *mp*, *f*, and *p*. There are also some performance instructions in parentheses, such as *mf* (5♭: 6♭) and *mp* (5♭: 4♭). The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 3. The bottom staff of the second system has a dynamic marking of *p* (5♭: 7♭).

## **Gunnar Geisse: The Wannsee Recordings**

Two compact discs, 2017, available from NEOS Music GmbH, München, Germany; [www.info@neos-music.com/](mailto:www.info@neos-music.com/).

*Reviewed by Seth Rozanoff Glasgow, Scotland, UK*

Gunnar Geisse's *The Wannsee Recordings* offers listeners several formal approaches to managing instrumental source sounds and their processed counterparts, suggesting a studio-based approach. Geisse has developed a soloistic approach, balancing issues of orchestration and sound design, resulting in a fluid sense of improvisation. He performs his compositions with his custom-built laptop guitar, without ever overdubbing. In his accompanying booklet to *The Wannsee Recordings*, Geisse describes his instrument as a "hardware/software set-up . . . consisting of an electric guitar, a laptop, a midi controller, and software which converts audio signals to MIDI messages in realtime for the purpose of operating and controlling any virtual instrument, and in fact a lot of them at the same time, with a non-virtual electric guitar." Geisse's ability to manage many instrumental layers in real time stems from his previous approach to controlling his sound layers, in which he used Ableton and a combined use of a joystick, faders, and buttons, along with his electric guitar.

All the track titles on this double CD set refer to the recording session data and track number. The binary, hexadecimal, and \*decimal numbers are in brackets. For example, track 1 of CD 1 is labeled II.2 [100000 20 \*32]; track 2 of CD 1 is labeled VI.5 [1111100 7C \*124]. After the track title, Geisse then lists the virtual instrument line-up. For some of the tracks he also lists his own non-virtual electric guitar playing. For this discussion, I will simplify the track titles, and refer to their order on each CD.

In the very first track, I hear a timbral organizational strategy involving a distorted guitar, vibraphone, piano, brass, woodwinds, electronic bass, and electronic drums split into three prevalent sound streams. This opening track serves as a prelude, as it maps a way into Geisse's approach to timbre and form. In track 2, Geisse adjusts his orchestration in order to demonstrate an antiphonal relationship between his own electric guitar playing and the virtual electric guitar.

The use of a virtual drum set on track 3 is quite distinct from its use in the first two tracks. The drum set is used similarly in Geisse's previous work with electric guitarist Marc Ducret, wherein he provided musical support, resulting in the formation of a hierarchical sense of interplay.

In track 4, Geisse introduces the listener to a hybrid sonority stemming from the combination of the electric guitar and piano. During this timbral collision, the music moves at a frenetic pace. There is an "unplayable" aspect to the resulting music, similar to what one might hear in some of György Ligeti's piano études that were later made for the player piano. Track 5 uses the same instrumentation as track 4, highlighting melodic and harmonic moments in a very short span of time.

In track 6, Geisse distinctively colors his melodic lines and phrases, drawing from a virtual instrumentation of distorted guitar, choir, orchestra, percussion, timpani, vibraphone, celesta, and piano. These robust orchestration techniques are further expanded in a formal manner in track 7. In this track, an introductory piano motive is followed by its musical variation in a

string ensemble, which the composer triggers with his laptop guitar. The result resembles a miniature piano concerto.

At this point, I noticed the music's ability to play with my sense of causality. I attribute this to Geisse's approach to working with the sampled instruments, whereby he blurs their instrumental identities. Ultimately, I became aware of an increasingly wider sonic range, involving varying mixtures of conventional instrumental timbres and processed, or noise-infused, material.

Track 8 reveals this range as well. Here, the form is improvised, demonstrating a contrast between the more noticeably electronic sounds and the virtual instruments. In this track, Geisse also starts exploring texture, building large sound masses and creating varying densities with the use of noise.

Geisse's interest in noise apparently stems from his current need to "get free" while performing with others. In a conversation I had with him, he said, "I give up everything, somehow, I'm in the instrument . . . somehow, it's *less* control." This statement suggests that he is not burdened by the need to create formal complexity. With this in mind, the role of noise in *The Wannsee Recordings* is not to simply fill space, but to subtly transform timbre as needed.

In track 9, Geisse continues to expand his sonic palette, not only orchestrating noise, but also using spoken voice utterances in a virtual choir contribution.

Geisse expands his use of noise in track 10, processing it, and also incorporating a recorded natural soundscape into the track. In this track, Geisse also performs on his electric guitar, thus fusing noise elements, electric guitar, and recorded environmental sounds.

Geisse continues to perform on the electric guitar in track 11, matching his instrument with other virtual guitars, bass, and drums. Here, the process of blending these guitar sonorities with one another also reveals consistent rhythmic patterns or grooves.

In tracks 12 and 13, we hear more experimentation with varieties of electric guitar sonorities. Sometimes he utilizes a standard digital processing lexicon; at other times he layers electric guitar, prepared acoustic guitar, or distorted guitar.

Given the timbres and instrument choices that preceded it, track 14 comes as a complete surprise. We hear a full-spectrum church organ. Geisse has specifically made a point of mentioning his own views on the substance of this track, stating, "it's somehow my favorite—I don't understand it, but it touches me, something to do with chaos and beauty." It is the only track that demonstrates the use and transformation of a single virtual instrument.

Geisse takes another unexpected turn in track 15, using an Andean lute instrument called the *charango*. Juxtaposing that instrument with virtual string timbres, Geisse builds the piece by creating a type of concertino for *charango*.

Demonstrating a return to using a fuller ensemble, track 16 balances an orchestration drawn from steel-string guitar, piano, strings, drum set, vibraphone, and woodwind sounds. Geisse demonstrates his mastery of his laptop guitar instrument, dynamically arranging his sonic palette into compelling combinations.

In track 17 we hear hybrid music, resulting in the mixture of jazz–fusion motifs provided by the electric piano and drums, and the coupling of the choir’s *sprechgesang* and strings. In the final track of this CD, we hear yet another distinctive arrangement — processed brass, processed wood-winds, and processed vibraphone.

The virtual instrumentation used in the second CD continues to offer the listener inventive timbral combinations. This aspect of Geisse’s work is revealed thanks to an expanding instrumentarium. Examples include: the *dombra*, a Turkish lute used in the fourth track, a steel-string guitar and prepared piano used in track 5, a tabla used in track 7, a saxophone in track 8, and, in track 9, an *oud* (a pear-shaped bowl lute), a *ney* (a Persian end-blown flute), and a *shakuhachi*.

This type of instrument eclecticism is a core element in *The Wannsee Recordings*, especially in the second CD, which clearly demonstrates Geisse’s ability to draw from many musical traditions. For example, in track 2, there is a jazz–fusion quality, similar to what can be heard in Miles Davis’s early electric bands. This track also mixes in a supporting quasi drum-and-bass layer. Track 4 experiments with the collision between *dombra* and analog-synth sounds. And track 7 can be heard as a tabla concertino.

Sometimes Geisse seems to challenge himself, experimenting further, combining opposing instrument classes. For example, in the second CD’s tenth track he begins the piece with a *shamisen* and steel-string guitar, later adding the cembalo, e-bowed acoustic guitar, and *glockenspiel*. This track contains the most imaginative grouping of virtual instruments out of the entire collection.

Another distinctive element in *The Wannsee Recordings* is Geisse’s compositional strategies for each of the tracks. For example, in track 11, the ensemble, composed of classical guitar, flute, oboe, clarinet, alto saxophone, woodwinds, vibraphone, strings, and double bass, articulates contrasting rhythmic patterns, similar to Conlon Nancarrow’s experiments, which often utilized juxtaposing tempos between voices. In track 12, Geisse combines the electric guitar, prepared acoustic guitar, woodwinds, brass, percussion, timpani, celesta, vibraphone, strings, choir, and piano, but uses them very sparingly, similar to the vertical figurations found in Morton Feldman’s compositions.

Throughout *The Wannsee Recordings*, Geisse also demonstrates how he works on a solo/accompaniment continuum whereby he mixes solo and accompanimental roles for individual voices in each of the tracks. Sometimes, there emerges a timbral ambiguity through his application of noise as masker and enhancer. A good example of this occurs in track 1; all the instruments have been degraded via an intentional signal quality reduction. At other times he takes an opposite, “clean” approach. Structurally, this is manifested in textures where his virtual instruments initially perform in unison and then seem to fall apart. An example of this can be heard in track 6. This track’s musical deconstruction is the result of contrasting combinations of virtual instruments, interrupting stasis.

Another approach to developing solo/accompaniment compositional strategies can be heard in track 15. Here, Geisse’s idiosyncratic approach to rhythmic shaping, which can be heard throughout *The Wannsee Recordings*, further demonstrates his pitting of a solo against an underlying rhythm section.

While speaking with Geisse, I began to understand his desire to control his performance system, and his ability to form his unique musical voice throughout these tracks. His overall attitude regarding control can be summed up in this statement: “I’m reacting to what I am hearing . . . [beforehand]. I really try to improvise with my controller, with my guitar, so I know everything in my hand . . . but because it’s so complex, I can’t control everything . . . and I like it.” Although technical complexity is present (as it relates to the design structure of his laptop guitar), it is not possible to control all aspects of the system. So Geisse seems to rely on his responsive listening during performance. For Geisse, because of the nature of his instrument, each performance is an exploration, moving him forward, continually revealing subtleties of form, texture, density, and an overall sense of orchestration.

Returning to Geisse’s sonic palette, one notices that his virtual instruments have only been loosely modeled on their real counterparts. For example, with regard to all the plucked strings (guitars, *oud*, etc.): He prepared all of these source sounds himself. Therefore, the term “virtual” in this context suggests the absence of a sound’s direct causal connection to a given instrument. As such, Geisse has successfully managed issues of formal and motivic development, as well as digital transformation of his virtual instruments, further exploring the boundaries of the composer–performer within a technological-based medium.

Seth Rozanoff, 'Gunnar Geisse: The Wannsee Recordings', *Computer Music Journal*, 42:1 (Spring, 2018), pp. 84-86. © 2018 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, reprinted by permission of the MIT Press. [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/comj\\_r\\_00453](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/comj_r_00453)