

# Strobes, Mirrors, Fog and Site-Specific Experiences

## INTERVIEW WITH GERMAN COMPOSER ALEXANDER SCHUBERT

by Nicolas Bernier

In the past decade, Alexander Schubert has produced an impressive body of work that blends sensor-based music, interactive video and theatrical choreography into immersive works or even dreamlike parallel world psychedelia *mise-en-scènes*. Focussing on a holistic, multi-sensory view of sound creation, Schubert details how light became an important part of his language over the years and how he uses its artificiality to engage unusual relationships with the public.

**[Nicolas Bernier]** The scope of your work being quite vast, from mixed music to electroacoustic, to installation and “performative conference”, how could we first describe its essence? Are there some elements that, behind the apparent eclecticism, bind your creations together?

**[Alexander Schubert]** I usually prefer to leave this question to others as I feel it’s often an attempt to justify or over-evaluate one’s ideas and concepts... but I’ll try to articulate a few aspects. There are a few more or less obvious characteristics like the combination of contemporary classical music and music from other popular genres, such as experimental electronics, techno and hardcore; free jazz is an obvious feature in every piece. This approach is quite personal: I don’t arbitrarily comment on or quote different styles but rather use only those I have a personal connection to, as I’ve been a part of these scenes in a way or another. Using these different styles is not the message for me, it’s merely a language, a tool I use. I don’t want to make a musical comment through the use of other styles; I simply use them as I feel they are part of my vocabulary, while the aims of the pieces lie elsewhere.

My composition technique combines several approaches to writing. First, at the starting point is always a set-up that includes musical, visual and staging parameters. It’s from this scenario or scene I then start working. This often follows an automatic writing technique — or at least, I try to *go with the flow* for longer periods, allowing the material to develop on its own too. It’s then a back-and-forth process between technique and self-analysis. I think that these different poles can be experienced in the pieces and are also pretty much analogous to the way I navigate through life.

Another prominent feature is my work with the body and gestural content. The bodily experience of a piece has played a dominant role, whether in a context where a sensor-equipped performer manipulates the music through movement or in an immersive setting in which the presence, perception and position of the listener or viewer is of vital importance.

This is directly linked to the underlying aim to create pieces of music and art that offer a complete experience rather than simply an auditive work to be listened to. The overall sensation is for me of high importance and that strongly includes (but is not limited to) all visual aspects, like light design, video and performance. My wish has always been to write something that creates a pull, that draws the listener in and opens an artificial world. That was already true for earlier, purely musical works, but became increasingly important through the use of visual aspects, leading to more and more immersive settings.

That brings me to the last point: The use of technical and media resources and concepts as theoretical and conceptual indications while also still using them as tools. But the main objective of my pieces remains to create a personal, subjective and, if you will, *romantic* artwork in a sense. This may contrast with the fact that a lot of my pieces use extremely loud, harsh sounds and intense visual stimuli. I see these forms of expression — in my case — not as a form of aggression, rebellion or critique, but rather as a crowbar or jackhammer to force open a door leading to something fragile and personal. For me, it is about the sometimes hidden harmonic, peaceful, beautiful elements in this noise — or its contrasting counterpart.

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Another path I sometimes (additionally) incorporate is the use of humour and irony. It's a way to approach topics from a different angle and can be found in a lot of my pieces. Sometimes it is obvious and direct, sometimes a formal element — I'm not trying to make pieces or sections funny, but rather try to play with expectations, anticipation and the rules of a given setup.

Both the use of extremely contrasting material and the use of humour reflect my personal approach to life in general, so that these pieces — even if they sometimes seem highly artificial — are very personal and tell a lot about me. Friends who know me well see a lot of my personality in these pieces.

In the last couple of years, light seems to have taken an important place within your work. How did light first enter into your creation process?



Video 1. Alexander Schubert — Star Me Kitten (<http://www.alexanderschubert.net/works/Star.php>) (2015), for singer, flexible ensemble, video and electronics. Performed by Fabienne Séveillac and soundinitiative during the Klang Festival in Copenhagen on 4 June 2015. YouTube video “Alexander Schubert — Star Me Kitten [soundinitiative]” (13:37) posted by “Alexander Schubert” on 22 June 2015. (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=CcorGw1h688>)

I first started to work with video — in an abstract way — to emphasize motion in performance pieces. This usage of video was already heading towards what light can do. One of my main problems with video was the fact it was limited to a canvas on stage (unless you use the whole space or use a special mapping, which can only partly solve this problem). I found this separation between the video plane and the rest on stage complicated, at least for the pieces I was interested at that time. There are obviously works in which a clear video canvas makes sense. I find this especially true if the content of the video specifically demands for a represen-

tation of this kind. For example, in *Star Me Kitten* (2015) I came back to video because its use was conceptually coherent with the format of the piece, which was shaped like a PowerPoint presentation (Video 1). This stands in contrast to setups where video is only used as an additional element — and we accept it, as it is a multimedia concert — but I find that a weak justification for the use of video. The other point is that video is, most of the time, based on a two-dimensional projection in a three-dimensional space. So it disregards a major part of the space, stage and venue, creating an awkward separation between performer and projection.

So, on the one hand, I can say that working with light entered my works when I was beginning to see some shortcoming of the use of video in performance contexts. Also the kind of pieces I was writing shifted from more or less classical performances with a musician on a stage in the direction of theatrical pieces and immersive concert installations. The nature of these new pieces demanded a different approach, and light was the right way to achieve this.

Since light has been integrated in your vocabulary, do you consider it as an integral part of the composition, closer to a “total art” approach, or simply as an element of scenography that you work in (in a more technical or utilitarian approach) at the end of a project?



Video 2. Light is used in a theatrical way to emphasize gestures and bodies in Alexander Schubert's *Sensate Focus* (<http://www.alexanderschubert.net/works/Sensate.php>) (2014), for electric zither, bass clarinet, percussion, cello, live electronics and animated light. YouTube video “Alexander Schubert — Sensate Focus [Decoder Ensemble]” (14:01) posted by “Alexander Schubert” on 31 March 2016. (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=wMH54JeYNF4>)

In the pieces that include light, I consider the visual aspect (and all other possible sensations, in fact) to be as important as the music itself. None of these pieces could be performed without this component. And all these pieces have been composed with this specific relation in mind. The use of light is settled at the beginning of the writing process, as are the instrumentation, stage setup and so on. My goal would always be that the light not only supports the music, but that the piece will be perceived as a whole, with lights having equal weight and rights as the other components in the work. For some pieces, like *Sensate Focus* (Video 2), the light is the main idea, or starting point of the composition, and I then develop the piece based on this idea.

So how do you achieve the inclusion of light as part of the whole process? Do you work with physical or virtual prototypes of the space in which the piece will be presented? I am asking because this is a problem I personally have, that I find it much more appropriate to work directly in a theatre, for instance, as it is not always easy to work with a small-scale prototype.

This is an extremely relevant question and I find it very challenging to approach this topic. I am a pragmatic person who tries out everything all the time during the writing process. That means I perform all my pieces myself to a certain degree in order to see if it works — I will even film myself doing it, in order to assess the result. I do the same as best I can with the visual parameters, but light is the most difficult one to test.



Video 3. Trailer for Alexander Schubert's *Supramodal Parser* ([http://www.alexanderschubert.net/works/Supramodal\\_Parser/index.php](http://www.alexanderschubert.net/works/Supramodal_Parser/index.php))(2015), an hour-long programme of four pieces for singer, electric guitar, saxophone, percussion, piano and electronics (and haze and light). The work blurs the border between performance lighting for musicians and theatrical lighting that is partly aimed at the audience. (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=p-HSCbF-rvs>)

If it is purely theatrical light, I can imagine it and simply animate or automate it with envelopes in parallel to the composing process. For the more complex pieces, I have programmed simulation patches in Max/MSP that let me visualize the light programming in real time. For that I model each light source I am using in a sub-patch and then assemble them in the correct position on the screen, giving clear visual feedback. This is especially helpful when a high number of light fixtures is at play; for example, more than 50 were used in *Supramodal Parser* (Video 3). I can then adapt the visualization to my personal needs and can also programme certain features in the light programming. For example, I sometimes add sub-patches that generate random behaviour or that follow semi-automated patterns. A key question for me is always: Which detail do I programme by hand and what will I leave to be generated automatically during the performance? When working with 10 independent moving heads you quickly have more than 300 parameters to control... which is a lot of work. But it gives the greatest freedom of detailed work with the lights if you do it manually. Sometimes you get better result if you, for instance, automate five parameters in detail and let the rest behave within a set of rules you define.

So the software testing is an important part of the creative process, allowing me to maintain a feeling for the final result. The next step is that I often rent the specific lights (if they're a special model) to be used in the performance in order to try them out directly, verifying if they behave the way I anticipate.

The more specialized the light programming, the more important this stage becomes. When working on *Supramodal Parser*, I fell in love with the possibility of detailed programming of the Atomic 3000 strobe. So I decided to buy two of those and create the installation *Solid State* (Video 5). Here both the programming and the resulting perception is so fine-tuned that I had to try everything in real time most of the time. I ended up buying the lamps to start working with them, trying to create a small version of the installation in my flat.

I even flushed the whole place with my fog machine, resulting in the neighbours calling the fire brigade! But this gave me a good feeling for the perception of the result; I was able to experience what one really sees when your eyes start to flicker, rather than an abstraction on the screen.

As I already mentioned above, one of the biggest advantages of light is, in my opinion, the ability to work in any space, adapt to it and reshape it. Light is clearly a tool to work in a three-dimensional space. While that is a tremendous gift, it's also a challenge to judge how it will look, depending on the venue, as each individual space has unique potential and reacts differently compared to others.



Figure 1. Image from Alexander Schubert's participative installation *Black Mirror* (2016), which took place in the woods and in an abandoned hotel. Image © Lea Giordano. [Click image to enlarge] ([http://econtact.ca/19\\_2/images/schubert\\_blackmirror-LG.jpg](http://econtact.ca/19_2/images/schubert_blackmirror-LG.jpg))

For the very time-consuming piece *Black Mirror* (Fig. 1), which took place in the woods and in an abandoned hotel on the outskirts of Luxembourg, Daniel Dominguez (who worked amongst other things on the light with me) and I spent a week on the site a few months ahead of the performance in order to test different light situations. Some things we had planned simply didn't work in the space, and some ideas could only be developed and explored on the spot, with the space providing feedback and unforeseen concepts. That unfortunately is a luxury we seldom have, so it is always a compromise how to best test the setup beforehand.

Working extensively with light, how do you approach the relationship between sound and light? What is your main intention when using light? Does it help to trace some kind of narrative path, or is it used as a metaphor for the "big spectacle", creating links between so-called serious and popular music?

I would classify the way I work with light in two main categories (which may overlap). Firstly, to illuminate the performers and secondly to use light in the complete venue or installation space, in order to create a more ambient or immersive setting.

In *Sensate Focus* (Video 2, above) the lights are used to highlight the bodies and movements of the performer. Each of the four musicians stands under a spotlight that is turned on and off synchronized to the music and movements. It serves a theatrical purpose by accentuating the gestures of the performers, only showing the sections the audience is supposed to see, while the musicians stay in the dark in some other passages. So here the light works to focus the audience's attention on the specific actions of the musicians. More broadly speaking, it also shifts the focus of sensation from the auditive domain towards the visual domain, hence the title of the piece (aside from the pun on sexual therapy). The lighting is a very functional aspect of the piece, as we see all the involuntary movements and pauses of the musicians who are not moving at a given point. Additionally, it introduces a theatrical mood into the piece that could not be achieved by other means.

The way that the light is turned on and off leads to an effect close to video sampling (sampling being the process of extracting and exposing only certain excerpts of a continuous stream). Here, only certain passages are chosen, sampled and made visual for the audience. It then bears a resemblance to a collage of video clips of four performers that are juxtaposed and played back next to each other. The way the performers are positioned on stage already reflects the aesthetic of video clips or digital representations. In this sense, the light makes it possible to achieve a sensation that would otherwise only be possible with other media. I see this as a means to comment on the representation of body in today's world, where we constantly perceive humans through stylized and digital representation of video clips, GIFs, avatars and such. The use of light — together with the choreography, which is a vital part of the piece — allows me to turn the live performing musicians into a quasi-digital representation and through that process to perhaps shed some light on how we see and perceive humans nowadays.



Video 4. Alexander Schubert — Scanners (2013, rev. 2016), for string quintet, light and choreography. YouTube video “Alexander Schubert — SCANNERS [Ensemble Resonanz]” (12:10) posted by “Alexander Schubert” on 11 November 2016. (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=7S9sSF4WnKs>)

A similar technique is used in *Scanners* (2013), for string quintet, light and choreography. The difference in this case is that it treats the human performers as almost machine-like entities (Video 4). It reflects on body representation and the man-machine dualism, and also looks at the string quintet as a highly specialized performance machine. In this case the above is also true, whereas here the light serves to accent the robotic movements as well.

The second “category” of the use of light in my work involves the creation of immersive settings in which the audience is part of the action, themselves soaked in the light. Most prominently, this is the case in audiovisual installations but is also found to some extent in pieces that incorporate the space where the audience is positioned in the staging. The main shift here is that the audience is the main focus and in the centre of the visual impulses. The audience becomes the main subject of the piece, together with the perception of the performance space. With the heavy intensity of the visual stimuli, the resulting piece can only be perceived partially by the sensory apparatus of the viewer.

The audiovisual installation *Solid State* arose from the idea to create a piece that is solely based on the strobe light (Video 5). This walk-in audiovisual installation deals with the sensory experience of rave culture by simulating its substance-based transcendence of conventional sense perception. The installation is realized in two adjacent rooms connected by an open door, which, as the only distinguishable item within the installation, is quasi-overemphasized. On the one hand, the image of the door relates to the trip-like transition into another world and refers in a symbolic way to the experience of crossing a frontier. On the other hand, the

threshold reminds us of the eternal unknown transition to the afterworld, which, from the perspective of our present life, is just as unascertainable as the boundaries of the space within the installation. In each of the two rooms, two speakers, a stroboscope and two red spotlights are positioned aiming at the door. The rooms are completely filled with fog and it's basically impossible to see anything besides the door.

Through the use of pulsating and stroboscopic light, dense fog and bassy surround sound — the main components of rave, linking to it and connected and synchronized by a special programme — the room is transformed into a hallucinatory environment provoking an ecstatic state for the spectator. Thereby, the multi-sensory effect functions as a neuronal multiplier, as the brain reacts many times more intensely to multiple impulses seen, heard and felt simultaneously as it does to singular ones. Utilizing synchronous as well as shifting visual and auditive patterns, the geometry of the room escapes perception. Due to the limited visibility caused by the fog, and because one's eyes cannot adjust fast enough to the constantly changing lights, the visitor cannot perceive the dimensions of the space, resulting in disorientation and the need to let go of conscious control. Thus a state is created that cannot be captured, and the feeling arises that one is falling in an endless room. Furthermore, the afterimage effect causes an optical illusion: the intense strobe light evokes hallucinations, structures and ornamental patterns imprinted on the retina, which convincingly resemble some forms of intoxication.



Video 5. Documentation of Alexander Schubert's audiovisual installation *Solid State* (2016), which works exclusively with light and sound, with the space and the audience at the centre of the focus.

(<https://youtube.com/watch?v=EBTM6lao604>)

A piece that falls between these two poles is *Supramodal Parser*. It combines the immersive setting with performance emphasized by light on stage. As in the installation *Solid State*, this piece also deals with concepts around rave culture and club context with related topics of disorientation and altered perception. The light here helps to create a feeling of immersion in the audience space. On stage the performers also only appear in short flashes or within the mist, giving them the quality of hallucination-like appearances. The overall intensity and density of the audiovisual stimuli lead to a state of mental overload, which is part of the concept of the piece.

The title of the piece refers to a section of the brain in which sensory inputs of different stimuli are parsed and processed regardless of the stimuli type. So the idea of treating audio and visual components in a similar fashion and thereby creating an interwoven perception is a key idea of the piece.

Now that we know more about the different ways and reasons you work with light, could you talk about the other side: what sound and light relationship would you try to avoid?

The pieces I am writing very often rely on heavy stimuli, strong intensities and also refer to popular culture such as techno, for example. Of course, the inherent danger to this approach is the use of these elements for the sake of the spectacle only, but I am interested in exploring and conveying something quite different from that. Although I do make use of some of these elements, I try to avoid doing something that is purely a show, an event that uses the lights only to make it big or spectacular.

I think it's justified to use these elements to achieve a certain aesthetic goal, i.e. creating a perceptual or sensory state that evokes stimulus saturation, perception errors, narrative and emotional situations, or an emphasis on the body. I see these explorations as tools to achieve a specific state of perception rather than a state of pure amazement.

Your latest pieces are audiovisual installations where light (often combined with fog) plays an important role. After a decade of extensive work involving more "traditional" instrumentation and concert performance, what brought you to installation? Would it precisely be the work on light that opened the field of installation-oriented practice for you?

Light definitely played a vital role in this new orientation in my work. I think since the point when I began working with gesture (for *Weapon of Choice* in 2009), the body experience became more and more important. After several pieces that dealt exclusively with the body image of the performer, the focus slowly shifted in the direction of the listener-viewer. Aside from surround sound, the light and fog offered the possibility to take the audience *into* the piece. You could say that the light that I started to use on stage slowly sloshed into the complete venue. I see these pieces as a progression, with each subsequent work going one step further in that direction. It's always been the case that I found I could use the visual component in an even stronger or more condensed way than in the previous one, which then led me to continue in this direction.

It also had a lot to do with the fact that musically and theoretically I was focussing on techno music and associated topics, and that laid the foundation to dig deeper in this domain.

From my understanding, those installation pieces could even be described as "experiences", the participative aspect being indeed quite important, and maybe tracing a link, in that sense, to your concert roots. Both approaches actually bring performers and viewers together in the space. How would you compare, make links between or distance your concert work and your installation work?

That is true, I actually see that as a shift in all my works, even those pieces that have performers or a "regular" stage situation. The idea of integrating the audience in some way or another became more important to me, especially the goal to create something that can be perceived as a whole, and as an experience. I have tried to turn away (for the time being) from the classic concert situation, where the musicians are on stage performing a piece and then that's it. This can be great in a lot of cases, but it's just not what I am interested in right now, or it is not where I feel I can try to add something to the existing corpus. So even in pieces like *Star Me Kitten* (Video 1, above), which have a more or less normal stage setup, I try to bridge the gap between stage and audience. In that piece the setup is a PowerPoint presentation where the singer speaks directly to the audience, and this then slowly spirals down to something completely different. Here I see the audience member rather as an *active* part of the presentation context than a typical concert guest. So my hope is to create pieces of music or art that establish a pull, and draw the audience into the respective setup and atmosphere and, ideally, into a certain strange world.



So I would not so harshly discriminate between the more installation-oriented and the more stage-oriented works; the idea of a whole sensation and complete experience remains the general aim. But in pieces like *Solid State*, *Lucky Dip* and *Supramodal Parser* there is a whole new set of opportunities to do that, or at least to do it on a different level. It allows me to create situations that I could not realize in a standard concert venue.

Could you tell us a bit about what your current interests are and what kind of projects you have in mind for the near future? Is light still in the plans?

*Black Mirror* was completed and premiered at the Rainy Days festival in December 2016, performed by Lucilin Ensemble in a one-hour concert installation. It takes place in and around an abandoned hotel located at the city border of Luxembourg. The audience arrives with a bus and is equipped with wireless headphones, a cape and a cat mask. From this point on, audience and performers all look alike. The audience is guided through the space via headphone instructions, allowing them to interact with each other and the performers. The hotel is put into different audiovisual situations — it's a dream-like scene supported by surround sound, automated moving light, performance and video projections. The aim is to create an immersive setting in which the audience is both thrown back to themselves and also confronted with an anonymous group identity. Both the group situation and the specific site of the abandoned hotel lay the scene for the emotional, subjective plot of the piece. It's designed as a return to a forgotten place that stands for avoided, hurtful and dark memories — as if returning to a grave stone, confronting one's past and one's vulnerability. The setting allows all kinds of horrific imagery and scary scenery — but is merely used as a metaphor for what is supposed to be an honest emotional confrontation with the past, evanescence and grief. The resulting piece is even more immersive and the audience becomes an even more crucial part of the piece, as they explore the surroundings themselves, interact and decide how to fit into the setting.

At this point I am starting to move away from the topic of rave culture, as I have the feeling I have already said enough things in this domain and I try not to repeat myself if possible. So the direction I am interested in right now is more the darker, psychological topics — and especially the topic of interaction, in the broadest sense. Not so much in the interactive way I worked before (where musicians interacted with technology through sensors or video) but interactive in the way that the audience becomes part of the piece, or that the musician is put into a non-musical situation and has to interact with surroundings as well. Aside from that, the narrative aspect gains more weight in my recent pieces and I think it will continue to become more important, although I think classical music theatre pieces or similar are not the direction I am heading. For all these approaches light remains a vital part of the concept.

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## Biography



Alexander Schubert studied bioinformatics and composition. Schubert's interest explores cross-genre interfaces between acoustic and electronic music, and combining different musical styles (like hardcore, free jazz, popular electronic music, techno) with contemporary classical concepts. Schubert has participated in his youth and early career in these various genres both in groups and as a solo artist. Furthermore, performance pieces are a major focus in his work. The use of the body in electronic music and the transportation of additional content through gestures are key features in his pieces, which aim to empower the performer and achieve a maximum of energy. This is done both through the use of sensors and visual media. Apart from working as a composer and solo musician, Schubert is also a founding member of ensembles such as Decoder. Since 2011, he teaches live electronics at the Musikhochschule Lübeck. His works have been performed more than 400 times in the last few years by numerous ensembles in over 25 countries.

<http://www.alexanderschubert.net> ([http://econtact.ca/19\\_2/..../photos/SchubertAI\\_mugshot-PM.jpg](http://econtact.ca/19_2/..../photos/SchubertAI_mugshot-PM.jpg))