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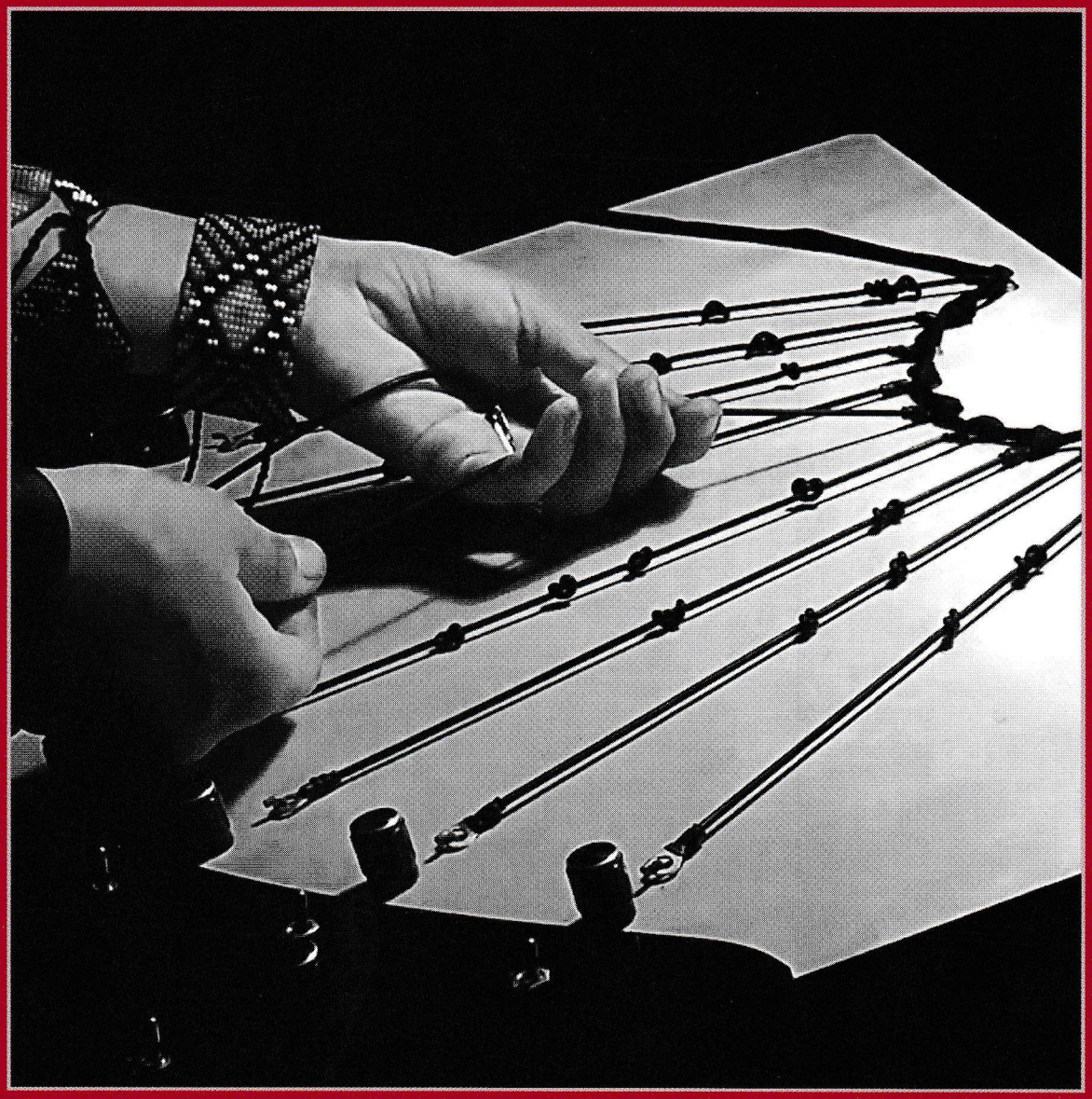
Accessibility of Musical Expression



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The Experience of Sound: An Interview with Thomas DeLio

Abstract: Thomas DeLio is a composer and theorist of international renown in both fields and especially noted for his work in computer music. In this conversation he discusses his musical thinking with over 40 years in the field. His compositions have been performed worldwide and are recorded on numerous labels. Neuma recordings has recently released five volumes of his recorded compositions in an ongoing series of his collected works. The interview itself, conducted over a series of phone conversations in the summer of 2020, begins with a look at his early student years at the New England Conservatory of Music in the late 1960s and early 1970s and navigates through to his current work and thinking today. Numerous aspects of his compositional approach and aesthetics are discussed, including his early influences, his illuminating thoughts on time and silence in his music, his applications of various technologies, and spatial projection, particularly at it relates to his work with sound installations.

> I could say, as Schoenberg did, that at the conclusion of each work I wish more than ever to breathe the air of other planets. When people ask me if I have changed my mind, changed direction, and so on, I say yes. I hope to change every morning when I wake up, to continually seek something different. Concepts such as continuity and consistency are to me incredibly banal; you have continuity in spite of yourself, with it often working against you.
>
> —Luigi Nono, 1987
> (de Benedictis and Rizzardi 2018, p. 75)

Thomas DeLio (see Figure 1), born 1951, is a composer and theorist, internationally renowned in both fields, and is especially noted for his work in computer music, with over twenty recordings devoted to this discipline alone. His compositions have been performed worldwide and are recorded on numerous labels including Wergo, 3D Classics, Neuma, Centaur, Capstone, ERM Media, and Spectrum. Neuma recordings has recently released five volumes of his recorded compositions (CDs and DVDs) in an ongoing series of his collected works. Of note, over his long and distinguished career as a composer, DeLio has been equally prolific and influential as a theorist:

> I have worked extensively as both a composer and theorist throughout my career and see no separation between these two complementary, mutually enriching activities. My work as a theorist has been profoundly influenced by my composition and vice versa (DeLio 2003).

In addition to his compositional work, DeLio has published over 30 essays in journals such as *Journal of Music Theory*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Artforum*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *Revue d'Esthetique*, and *MusikTexte*, as well as the books *Circumscribing the Open Universe*, *The Amores of John Cage*, and *Analytical Studies* of notable 20th century composers, and (DeLio 1983, 2010, 2017a).

This interview itself, conducted over a series of phone conversations in the summer of 2020, begins with a look at his early student years at

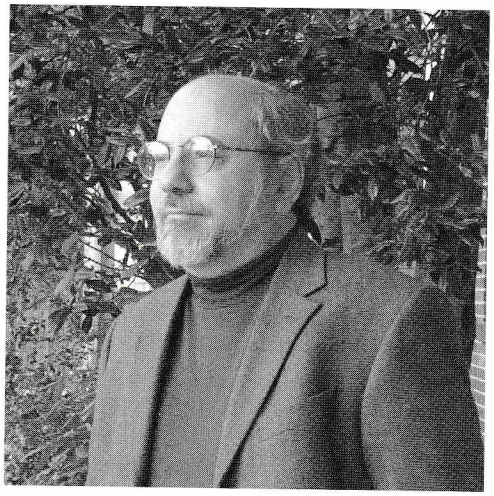

Figure 1. Thomas DeLio. (Photograph by Kathy Malfa.)

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the New England Conservatory of Music in the late 1960s and early 1970s and navigates through to his current work and thinking today. Numerous aspects of his compositional approach and aesthetics are discussed, including his early influences, his illuminating thoughts on time and silence in his music, his applications of various technologies, and spatial projection, particularly as it relates to his exciting work with sound installations. A discography of DeLio's computer music recordings is given at the end of this article. Detailed information about his music and work overall can be found at www.thomasdelio.com.

Background

Licata: What motivates you to both write music and write about music?

DeLio: I want new experiences, which is why I compose, and I want to understand new experiences, which is why I write about music. Each individual's experiences are unique. If a composer is in touch with these experiences, then, naturally, the music created will be original (in other words, true), in what seems to me the only meaningful sense of that word. Now, this seems obvious to me with respect to composition. But it is also true of the study of music (what we mistakenly label the "theory" of music) for any music created from a theory of necessity will be banal). Originality, with regard to both activities, is as essential to understanding something about another's music as it is to understanding something about oneself.

Licata: Your principle composition teacher was Robert Cogan, with whom you studied at the New England Conservatory in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Cogan is not known as an electronic music composer—I believe he's written a couple of pieces involving tape. In what ways was he influential in your development as a composer and in your evolution as a composer of computer music?

DeLio: Well, Cogan is one of the most important scholars of music. His focus on music as sound—in the most comprehensive sense of that term—was unique then, and remains so even today. He taught his students to attend to all aspects of their experience of a composition; not just abstract conventions that pass as music theory (pitch-class sets and the like) but all aspects of sound, as they affect the evolution of a work and therefore the experience of that work. His lectures focusing on tone color in Mahler, register in Debussy, and time and density in Ives are, in my view, some of our most important touchstones as composers and theorists. One need only look at his numerous books to realize his significance. As such, as a composer he led me (and others) to really find the expressive power in all sound material, not just pitches (whether used to create tonal, quasi-tonal, serial, microtonal . . . events). So, it was natural that, as his student, I began to look for ways to embrace and express through all sounds, without prejudice, not just those of traditional orchestral instruments.

Similarly, as a scholar, I have always written essays about music of other composers, focusing on the experience of the sound of their music [Note: cf. DeLio 1983, 2010, 2017a, Forthcoming].

Sound as Object

Licata: You have been composing for over 50 years. How has your attitude toward composition changed over this time? And how, if at all, has the evolution of technologies over the years influenced your work?

DeLio: I am not sure that my attitude toward composition has really changed. I think in my early work I was trying to create a certain experience for myself that is not so different from that in my recent work. Of course, I think I create that experience in a much more effective way in my recent work. I have often quoted a comment the poet William Carlos Williams made about Gertrude Stein, that she went about trying to wipe away all the connotations that words have to get them back new, in a pristine state, ready to be used anew (of course I am paraphrasing). My earliest interest seemed to be on isolating and focusing on sound for its own sake, to remove sound from all its very specific connotations, its baggage. Of course, I was doing this by instinct, not consciously . . . but because it felt like the experience I wanted to have. I don't believe composers consciously try to

computer processing of Inman and others reading his texts.

Licata: Similarly, you have done some remarkable work with sound spatialization, but often return to just stereo in your work.

DeLio: I do still from time to time work with spatialization, and this has led directly to my work with installations, which is how I tend to engage with spatialization of sound now. Spatializing works for concert presentation led me directly to a desire to move out of the concert hall to the creation of installations that run all day long and allow listeners to come into a space, move about and experience the music from different perspectives. The thrust of my work has always been to decentralize. The use of spatialization in the concert hall presentation of multichannel works does not accomplish this to a great enough extent for me.

I also feel that often the excessive use of spatialization in a concert work (whether live or recorded) can take focus away from sound itself, which seems unfortunate to me. I once had the experience of hearing several performances of a composition for violin and live interactive spatialization—a very good piece in my opinion. There was one moment where the same repeated sound moved rapidly around several spots in the hall. Later I heard a stereo reduction of the work on disc and realized that the sound moving so rapidly was subtly changing timbre, something lost—at least to me—as it moved around in live performance. And frankly, the changes in timbre were more engaging than the movement through space. Of course, there are certainly works that manage to maintain sensitive relationships between changes with respect to sound material and movement through space, but my primary interest is to create complex sound events in which there are many subtle change of tone color, and I never want to take away from such sonic focus.

Software

Licata: Can you describe the software you typically use? Where do you find and generate your source material? How do you approach the processing of this material as you work?

DeLio: Well, this may not be so interesting. In a way it's like asking if one is a serial composer, or whatever, but it is the result that counts. I have used Csound a great deal for synthesis, and for *musique concrète* I find the Composer's Desktop Project software very useful, as well as Spectral Delay (the version by Native Instruments seems most powerful). Of course, a number of stand-alone programs for granulation and cross synthesis, as well as many reverb packages—processes we have all used, I suspect. I have started looking at Spectral Layers, which is also very interesting. I use what I need for the result I envision. I never work from a procedure to a result but vice versa. And, of course, there may be more than one way to get the result I want, so I never want to restrict my options. Finally, surprise is important. Sometimes you never know what avenues a new approach to processing a sound will open up, and how those surprising results may alter the shape of a piece!

Nontraditional Concert Spaces

Licata: Can we talk a bit more about your work with installations?

DeLio: Through my installations I have moved away from the concept of "performance." Now, installation is a term used to describe a great many types of work: performances in nontraditional concert spaces (galleries, museums, warehouses, etc.), interactive game-like situations, and so forth. While these may or may not yield interesting experiences, to my mind they are essentially instances of the traditional concept of a performance presented in new terms. To me an installation involves the fixing of sound in a space in a way that it becomes part of that space. My installations play all day for several days, or longer—much like an art exhibit. People enter any time, stay for as long as they want, and leave any time. They move freely around the space and have different experiences of the piece from one another. My purpose, obviously, is to decentralize the experience of sound for the listener. Now, the challenge in creating such a piece, of course, is learning how to create a work that will convey a sense of itself to the listener under these open

circumstances. One cannot predict when someone will enter the space in which the installation is located, nor for how long that person will stay and listen, nor indeed to what extent he will actually walk around the space and experience the piece from different angles, so to speak. These factors are entirely unpredictable. I find this challenging and exhilarating.

This is apparent in my most recent installation Inents (2018). [Note: see Figures 2, 3, and 4, and also the extract recording on https://doi.org/10.1162/comj_a_00564.] The work is an electroacoustic, ten-channel sound installation based upon a text entitled "aengus" by P. Inman (2014). As I said earlier, I have been an admirer of Inman's poetry for many years, precisely for his intense focus on language as substance in and of itself. For me, his poetry vivifies the interconnection of language as it is engaged with meaning as it is shaped. I have presented my thoughts about this remarkable poet's work on many occasions, within the liner notes of numerous recordings, and, more recently, in an essay coauthored with the poet entitled "(ex)Congruities." [Note: see DeLio and Inman 2015.]

The music of Inents is drawn from recordings of the text as read by six different people, three male and three female. These provided all of the source material for the work. The composition consists primarily of moments and surfaces. Prior to Inents, in my electroacoustic work with text, I typically broke up words and phrases to the point where they were generally unintelligible. My impetus for Inents, however, was to create an electroacoustic setting in which the text would often be apprehensible on the surface of the composition. I wanted the text, as spoken by the various readers, to be heard within the context of fragmented and transformed elements drawn from language. The result, I hope, renders those occasional moments where we simply hear people reading the text as music. We become aware of the timbre of each individual voice, the timing of each reading, pauses, breathing . . . I wanted the listener to experience even a "straightforward" reading (if there is such a thing) as itself, first and foremost, a sonic event.

Both my treatment of text and my preference for installation over performance comes from my

Figure 2. Excerpts from the poem "aengus" by P. Inman, used in Thomas DeLio's installation Inent.

a.

noft.

bluff.

---

pith.

n'owl.

- -

ocean.

---

inents.

evasp.

a.

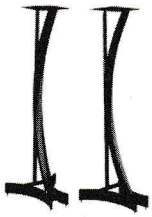
quo.

view of language and literature—and toward this end computer music has provided the perfect medium for me. It has always seemed to me that the substance

Figure 3. Loudspeakers used in the installation Inent, with their arrangement.

Ten matching, black speakers; four sizes.

Ten curved black metal stands (see photo below); three sizes:



Audio Channel / Stand / Speaker Assignments

Channel	*Stand*	*Speaker*
I	small	very small
II	medium	medium
III	large	large
IV	medium	medium
V	small	small
VI	small	small
VII	medium	medium
VII	large	large
IX	medium	medium
X	small	very small

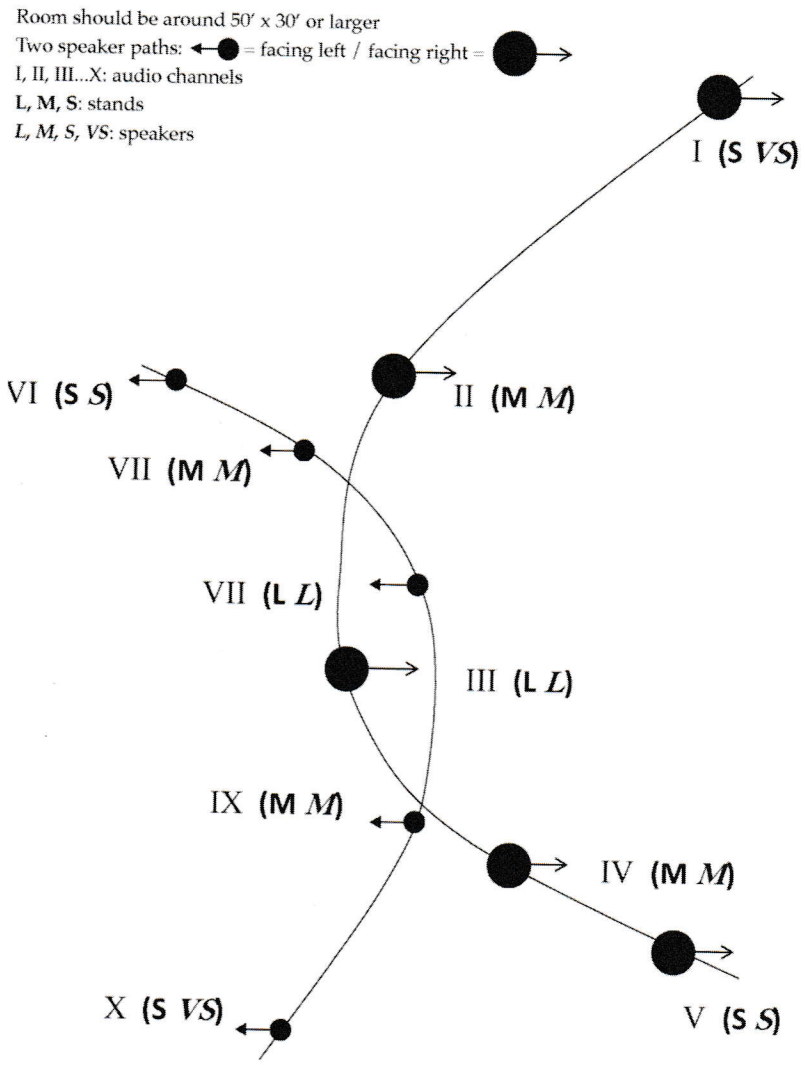
of literature never lies in what is said, but how it is said. From such early modern masterpieces as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Gertrude Stein's *Mexico*, through Samuel Beckett's *Ping*, to such extraordinary recent works as Leslie Scalapino's *Defoe* (to name but a few) we discover the substance of literature, language as thought enacted.

Inents is to be presented in a large room in a museum, art gallery, or similar venue. Given the aforementioned focus on language as subject, it seemed clear to me that any attempt to employ a traditional concert setting or theatrical staging would be inappropriate. The particular focus that both Inman and I place upon our materials situates the listener, reader, and viewer squarely in the center of the experience of the work; not as an outsider looking in (that is, as a member of the audience) but as a participant. It became necessary to find a way for each listener and viewer to feel that he or she was the catalyst for engagement with text and music. In this regard, the sound installation seemed particularly appropriate.

The composition plays continuously, all day, every day, as long as the installation is scheduled for presentation. Listeners enter the room at any time and, as they walk through the space, experience the text and music from multiple, ever-changing perspectives. While standing in one part of the room the listener hears a sound event from one vantage point but is unable to experience (either fully or partially) other, often related events playing simultaneously in other parts of the space. There is no single vantage point from which a listener can experience the complete sonic design with all its dimensions. This is essential, as each experience in life is part of an ongoing process of discovering perspectives, not simply living through one, singular viewpoint. The physical placement of the speakers creates a visual design in the space of the room that reflects the curved design of the speaker stands. [Note: see Figures 3 and 4.] Similarly, a space with curved walls would provide an ideal setting, further integrating the space with the sound production design. Ten speakers are partitioned into a number of zones consisting of groups of two, three, or five channels, which may or may not be contiguous. So, not only will the listeners' perspective change by virtue of where they are standing or walking but also by virtue of which zone they may be standing in at any moment.

I should add, in connection to this discussion of my installations, that almost all my electroacoustic pieces were written for CD and not for concert performance, because the CD medium, I feel, is more fitting for their experience. I really feel that my work, especially with electronics, has been gradually, unconsciously, part of an attempt to circumvent the concert hall experience, with which I have many issues, not the least of which is the notion that we all sit in a hall facing the

Figure 4. Layout of loudspeakers for the installation Inent.



same direction listening and looking at the same performers on stage—the entire experience creating the illusion that we are experiencing the same thing in the same way, which cannot possibly be true.

It seems to me that of all the "revolutions" in Western music that we have experienced over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries (the move away from tonality, the acceptance of noise-based sounds as equivalent to pitched based sounds, algorithmic composition, etc.), one of the most interesting involves the possibility of moving away from the concert hall and, with it, the concept of "performance" with its concomitant constraints (such as its framing of time). In other words, moving away from the idea of fixing the center of experience, so it can more closely resemble real experience. I feel that computers afford the most viable means of achieving this transformation.

Licata: Where do you see your music taking you next?

DeLio: Well, I certainly try to keep sharpening my focus—to continue to find new strategies to "wipe

away all the connotations that sounds have to get them back new."

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Appendix: Recordings Featuring Computer Music by Thomas DeLio

Over the past 40 years, Thomas DeLio has released numerous LPs, CDs, and DVDs on various labels in the United States and Europe consisting of both instrumental and electroacoustic works. The most recent discs are solo albums on the Neuma label, part of an ongoing series of collected works focusing on a particular composer, of which one group features works by DeLio. Earlier discs are compilation albums shared with a variety of distinguished composers.

Albums with Works Only by DeLio

Space/Image/Word/Sound. 2016. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-201, surround sound DVD.

Space/Image/Word/Sound II. 2017. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-202, 2017, surround sound DVD.

Thomas DeLio: Selected Compositions (1991–2013). 2013. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-108, compact disc.

Thomas DeLio: Selected Compositions II (1972–2015). 2017. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-116, compact disc.

Thomas DeLio: Selected Compositions III (1972–2015). 2019. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-120, compact disc.

Compilation Albums with Works by DeLio and Other Composers

Computer Music Currents 9. 1992. Includes *Against the Silence. . .* Mainz, Germany: Wergo, WER 2029-20, compact disc.

ElectroAcoustic Music V. 1998. Includes "Pine, Bamboo, Plum" and "Because, the. . ." Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-92, compact disc.

ElectroAcoustic Music VI. 1998. Includes "M,Nce" and "Plinh, H." Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-99, compact disc.

ElectroAcoustic Music VII. 2006. Includes "Center/s," "Qu,m," and *Belli-Isle I–IV*. Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-105, compact disc.

James Dashow, Thomas DeLio. 1995. Includes "Anti-paysage," "Of," "Though," "So Again," "On Again," and "Of Again." Acton, Massachusetts: Neuma 450-90, compact disc.

James Dashow, Thomas DeLio. 1997. Includes "Though On," "As Though," "So Again," "Not," ". . . A Different Liquid," and "To Make / -as / in-." New York: Capstone, CPS 8645, compact disc.

Music Text. 1999. Includes "Decker." New York: Capstone CPS-8669, compact disc.

Music Text II. 2001. Includes "Think on Parch."New York: Capstone, CPS-8693, compact disc.

20th Century American Music. 1996. Includes "As Again," "Between," "So On," and *Against the Silence. . .* Paris: 3D Classics, 3D8014, compact disc.