AscoGraph: A User Interface for Sequencing and Score Following for Interactive Music

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ABSTRACT

Composing interactive music using score following requires tight coordination and several round trips between many tools to write the score to follow, and to author the electronic actions, and assess their synchronisation. In addition, at performance time, the score-following must be monitored to ensure proper execution. Unifying composition and performance phases provides composers and electronic music designers a global approach with the best of both worlds. The AscoGraph interface is an incarnation of the need for unifying authorship and performance for Antescofo’s score following and reactive engines. AscoGraph provides high precision tools for textual and graphical authorship of complex dynamic interactive music pieces with intuitive and sustainable design. This article presents the design, challenges and integration of AscoGraph for edition and representation of mixed music scores using Antescofo by affording complex hierarchical constructions such as nested blocks and polyphony in electronic actions while maintaining readability and ease of authorship.

1. INTRODUCTION

Automatic Score Following has been an active line of research and development among composers and performers of Interactive Music since decades. In such setups, an automatic score following system comprises realtime listening machine that in reaction to recognition of events in a score from a human performer launch necessary computer music actions. The process of composing and performing such pieces require dedicated interfaces for both the authorship and performance of mixed music pieces considering expressivity for two important primary elements that are Time and Interaction. The study of such interfaces is as vital as the design of the real-time system itself since it underlies expressivity and reliability of the final result.

Dedicated interfaces for editing and visualising augmented scores for Score Following systems has been long studied in the computer music literature. Though not directly related to score following, the SCRIVA system [1] implemented a score editing tool for electronic sounds destined for real-time performance and generation of pre-notated events. On similar lines, the Animal system in [2] is another example where the notion of authoring of time through complex hierarchical graphical objects is explicitly addressed. Despite addressing authorship of time in both systems, they lacked explicit considerations for interaction control which was shifted entirely towards the performer rather than the designer/composer. The problem of sequencing mixed with score following was first approached by Puckette in XPLODE [3] where actions are primarily triggered by events and much of temporal expressivity is lost to attain real-time performance. NoteAbilityPro [4] is another recent example of integrated score environment capable of communicating with the Antescofo score-following engine [5] amongst others. Despite all these efforts, our community still lacks integrated environments that address needs for a smooth workflow between composition and performance phases of interactive music pieces.

This paper introduces AscoGraph (Figure 1), a new interface for editing, visualising and simulating augmented scores specifically designed for Antescofo [6] musical scores. AscoGraph provides visual interfaces for authoring of multiple time semantics for electronic actions, polyphonic authorship for concurrent electronic voices, and facility tools for users composing and performing with complex scores. Electronic and instrumental scores in AscoGraph are tightly coupled. AscoGraph emphasises editing for electronic actions but provides necessary tools for importing and visualisation of instrumental scores from common platforms. Unifying heterogeneous timed events in AscoGraph is possible by constant translation of event/action time-stamps to a relative musical timeline. This assumption makes visualisation possible for performance situations where tempo is dynamically detected and constantly changing. Furthermore, Simulation Tools are available to visualise an ideal and flattened performance especially for dynamically programmed electronic actions and complex scores.

We begin this paper by describing the integration of AscoGraph within common existing workflows for composition and performance of interactive music. Section 3 describes AscoGraph environment in terms of its software ecosystem for interactive computer music. Section 4 details specific concepts for score representation and edition in AscoGraph as well as facility tools for composers such as simulation capabilities, followed by future perspectives and concluding remarks.
2. COMPOSITION WORKFLOW

2.1 Composition phase

Composers often prepare instrumental sections of their pieces using Finale, Sibelius, or other score engraving system. An important feature for AscoGraph is the score import capabilities from MusicXML or MIDI formats, which make the first steps of composing an interactive piece much smoother. MusicXML is a score format which can be exported from main classical musical notation editors. Writing electronic parts is made less difficult with AscoGraph and Antescofo new reactive engine since version 0.5, which provides new ways of writing interaction, based on clear musical hierarchies such as groups, loops, curves and more.

Visualisation capabilities of AscoGraph enters the composition workflow as a huge gain since Antescofo’s score syntax is text based, where a list of events, such as notes, chords, trills or multi (glissandi), with associated pitch and duration describe the score as it should be followed by the score follower next to their electronic actions. AscoGraph distinguishes itself strongly from other softwares such as NoteAbility in its sole focus on Electronic Action authorship rather than music engraving. The integrated import facility of AscoGraph is solely there to support visual feedback on the instrumental score, for which we believe there are numerous stable software. Importing existing instrumental score is done by drag’n’drop where it is directly converted to Antescofo notes notation. For automatic MIDI accompaniment, it is also possible to convert MIDI file to electronic actions (MIDI notes on/off) by pressing CMD during import.

AscoGraph engine shares the same score parsing routines with Antescofo core, so the validity of the score is checked on saving while editing in AscoGraph, with detailed parsing errors handling.

2.2 Performance phase

AscoGraph is strongly connected with Antescofo core object (using OSC over UDP) : when a score is edited and modified it is automatically reloaded in Antescofo, and on the other hand, when Antescofo follows a score (during a concert or rehearsal) both graphical and textual view of the score will scroll and show the current position of Antescofo.

3. ENVIRONMENT

AscoGraph emphasises editing the reactive score. One key design choice while creating AscoGraph editor was to allow both textual and graphical editors, representing different views of the same score. “Time of composition” and “time of performance” need proper dedicated environments [7]: AscoGraph and Antescofo combines both representations.

The general mechanisms which articulates each component are discussed in this section.

3.1 Link to Antescofo

The Antescofo engine is embedded in a Max/MSP or Pure-Data external (dynamically linked) object. The AscoGraph editor can be opened by double-clicking on the Antescofo...
object. It is then launched as a standalone application, and it loads the score if one was loaded in *Antescofo*. Communication with *Antescofo* uses OpenSoundControl protocol (OSC) [8] in both ways as shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Antescofo and AscoGraph general diagram.](image)

- From *Antescofo*: detected tempo, detected pitch, score position in beats relative to tempo, score loading commands are displayed in *AscoGraph*.
- To *Antescofo*: User interface buttons in *AscoGraph* generally send OSC command to *antescofo* object, in order to control transport: play sequence, start score following, stop, next event, previous event, load a score, etc.

Thus, *AscoGraph* can display accurately, at low CPU cost, visual feedback to help composers during rehearsals or performances.

4. SCORE REPRESENTATION AND EDITION

4.1 Dual representation

*Antescofo* score is a text file containing events (chord, notes, trills, glissandi, ...) to follow, synchronisation strategies on how to trigger actions, and electronic actions (the reactive language). Visually, the application is divided in two parts, on the left a graphical representation of the score, using a timeline with tracks view. On the right, a text editor (with syntax coloring and auto-completion) of the score is displayed. Both views are editable and synchronised on saving. Special objects such as "curves", are graphically editable: they are used to provide high-level variable automation facilities like breakpoints functions (BPF) with more than 30 interpolations possible types between points, graphically editable.

Due to its programmatical nature, score-following requires a dual representation of interactive scores as text and graphics. Allowing edition in both modes and providing ways to pass from one to the other was one of the challenges around *AscoGraph* realization. When an object is modified (such as a curve) graphically, it displays an "Apply" button, when pressed it replaces the corresponding text in the score with new values. On the opposite, when the text score is modified manually, it is graphically redisplayed when the file is saved.

4.1.1 Graphical score representation

Currently, two visualisation modes are available for instrumental section:

- **Pianoroll**: A MIDI-style graphical notation display has been developed to represent easily musical events to be followed by *Antescofo*. Events in *Antescofo* are distinguished in this view by their color. Four types of events are separately recognized by *Antescofo*: individual notes, chords (polyphonic notes), trills (for tremolo, vibrato, etc) and multis (continuous variation of pitch, such as glissandi). Last special kind of musical event is rest note (silence), which are displayed as an empty black frame separating other events.

- **Guido**: A more traditional way of displaying western classical music is the staff view based on solfège. For displaying complex scores, the GUIDO Music Notation format [9] has been integrated in *AscoGraph*. When an *Antescofo* score is parsed (when loading or saving), a GUIDO string is dynamically translated from *Antescofo* events notation (cf Figure 3).

For fast navigation in the interactive score, a 2D zoom bar has been introduced intuitive to most users.

4.1.2 Textual score representation

Embedded in each *AscoGraph* window, is a textual editor, based on the Open-Source multi-platform project Scintilla [1] with the following features:

- **Auto-completion**: when dealing with large number of electronic action receivers names, simplifying text input has quickly become a useful feature. An advanced mechanism was imagined with IRCAM’s Computer Music Designers’ precious help: easing the input of Max receivers names. Many pieces are based on really big Max patches, which can count several thousands receivers, each controlling a distinct parameter of a sound effect, synthesis, etc. To answer this demand, a "namespace getter" has been implemented in the *Antescofo* object, loaded by Max.

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1 Scintilla - Open-Source editor: [http://scintilla.org/](http://scintilla.org/)
asked, this object lists recursively every receiver's name in the loaded patch, then sends it by OSC to Ascograph. This way, these names are added to a list containing by default every keywords of Antescofo language.

By pressing Ctrl-Tab in AscoGraph (after a receiver name or a language keyword prefix is typed), a small window listing completion possibilities is displayed. An other demand was to allow user variables to be added to this completion list: this can be done by sending add_completion_string to Antescofo object. Syntax coloring is supported to help reading the textual score.

Embedded Antescofo parser: The Antescofo language parser is embedded in AscoGraph, and provides detailed parsing errors when saving or loading a score.

Actions to Event Bi-directional Sync enables a strong link between both graphical and textual editor. This feature allows smooth transition in-between graphical and textual representations in the score. This feature is of utmost importance since certain hierarchical electronic patterns demand constant go-between the two representations.

Furthermore, it is possible to evaluate a partial score by simply selecting appropriate text in the score and a special playstring mechanism which sends the selected score excerpt to Antescofo, allowing fast execution of small chunk of code as well as auditioning of parts during composition.

4.2 Writing electronic actions using Antescofo’s reactive language

4.2.1 Action templates

The "Create" menu in AscoGraph (Figure 4) provides a generic electronic action template insertion mechanism to ease adding electronic actions in an Antescofo score. Another very useful menu is “Label”: to access directly a specific event marker (Figure 5).

4.2.2 Hierarchical group display

Musical objects in the Antescofo electronic score can be defined in nested block hierarchies, and run concurrently (polyphony), with various behaviour (loop, group, curve) and attributes (delays, group delays, variables) etc. AscoGraph arranges such complex schemes into ordered blocks with correct vertical alignment with regards to themselves (polyphony among electronic phrases) and with regards to the instrumental score as shown in Figure 3 and 8.

4.2.3 Curves graphical editing

Continuous breakpoint functions can be controled by the Curve construct: curves can be seen as control automation (Figure 6). AscoGraph provide efficient ways to add, delete, move breakpoints and regenerate dynamically corresponding groups in the text score. By pressing the “Apply” buttons after modifying graphically a curve, AscoGraph dumps in the score the new breakpoints values.

One important feature of AscoGraph is its graphical breakpoint editing. Antescofo provide more than 30 standard interpolation types, from linear to exponential, polynomial (with several orders), etc.

4.3 Simulating a performance

Like any interactive system, Antescofo scores can become rapidly complex and the need of simulating a performance has been expressed by several composers and electronic music designers in order to test their compositions and directly see the output.

A standalone version of Antescofo has been embedded in AscoGraph to provide a virtual execution of a score, simulating clocks as fast as possible. This mechanism can be a great help when dealing with processes or whenever constructs.

5. FUTURE WORKS AND CONCLUSION

The work on AscoGraph, since late 2012, has been highly incremental and based on important user feedback deploying the software in various compositional and performative setups. The joint ambition of AscoGraph in becoming both a compositional and performance interface for Interactive
Figure 8. First bars of Tensio for String Quartet and live electronics by Philippe Manoury (2010). Left: Hand-written manuscript by composer showing Violin part (below) and electronic actions (top) staves. Right: Antescofo equivalent visualised in AscoGraph

pieces, has allowed composers and computer musicians to rapidly integrate the software in their process and to start composing at the very onset using the interface. Figure 8 shows an example of such integration.

AscoGraph is released under Open-Source MIT license and has been released publically along with new Antescofo architecture since IRCAM Forum in 2013. Due to its modular architecture, AscoGraph can be deployed on multiple platforms such as commonly available mobile and tablet architectures.

Future work will focus on the following points amongst others:

- Tracks display for easy message filtering,
- Visualising dynamic processes: control structures which trigger actions not in response to a recognised musical event but to the occurrence of an arbitrary logical condition,
- Specialised editing mode: e.g. dragging audio files with analysis.
- Alternative representations and views for editing.

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AscoGraph is based on ofxTimeline by James George https://github.com/YCAMInterlab/ofxTimeline

6. REFERENCES


