

Thoughts on the Oral Culture of Electroacoustic Music

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In this Academy we have more than once spoken about the lack of documentation about specific compositions. Since electroacoustic music has no scores in a traditional sense, it is impossible without documentation to know how a particular piece was made. This fact makes teaching electroacoustic music particularly difficult, and I believe it has other far-reaching consequences as well. This paper will discuss some of these consequences.

Since the early 17th century, when the first musical scores (as opposed to part books) were published (the madrigals of Carlo Gesualdo, whose violent chromaticism so interested his contemporaries that scores were made from the individual parts), music has been a literary culture, conscious at least of its immediate past, ensuring its future not through performance, but rather through the intermediary of a written representation of what should sound.

Electroacoustic music on the other hand is an almost exclusively oral culture. There is very little written documentation of compositional practice (as opposed to technical practice). Both as a composer and as a teacher, one relies on one's personal memory of heard music, and on the reactions and thoughts that music provoked, when imagining what a new piece might be like. Those of us whose ties to instrumental music are strong certainly sense the newness of this oral culture more clearly than those who work only in the electroacoustic domain. Let me therefore suggest some of the ways in which I think this quality of working in an oral culture affects us composers most strongly.

1. There are neither analytical tools nor is there an analytical vocabulary for electroacoustic music. Musical analysis as we think of it is a product of the 19th century (before that, analytical discussions were in the context of composition books), but the prerequisite for analysis, an abstract representation of music (scores, musical notation in general) is of course much older. Electroacoustic music has no such abstract representation.

What's so important about an abstract representation? Two things, I think. First, a score or other representation allows us to stop time, to go back and study something as long as we want, to compare passages, to form an idea of a piece outside the inexorable flow of time. Second, a score (or other representation) is not the music itself but an intermediary. The modalities of the intermediary suggest ways to think about the music so represented. (In this way, a phrase I write down when sketching for an instrumental piece may suggest a continuation simply by the way it looks, and many ideas suggest themselves as notes and rhythms rather than primarily sound. And think of how much Beethoven's music owes to his having been able to write down his first, often quite banal, ideas so he could continue to work on them, presumably not because his memory was bad, but because the dialogue with the written representation was important for the honing of the idea.) Where this intermediary is missing, one can only think of the music in its own terms: as sound.

2. The difficulty of thinking in abstract terms about electroacoustic music and the lack of analytical vocabulary mean that it is very difficult to conceive of compositional models which have validity beyond one's own personal experience. In the past, concepts like "dissonance-consonance", "harmonize", "modulate" or "motivic development" were understood by all and could be used to help imagine compositional procedures ("I'll harmonize the melody differently now," "I'll modulate to another key"). Of course, articles and talks about electroacoustic music, and presumably composers themselves, use compositional models, too, in describing what is going on ("the music's texture gets denser" or "the tessitura becomes very narrow"), but the models are usually very simple ones, hardly related to the actual musical material itself in the way the idea of "modulation" is related to pitches. The use of such models does not insure that one will write good music, nor, obviously are conceptual models necessary to make

good music. I suggest however that such conceptual models have always enriched composing, allowing composers to think about their work in more complex ways than would have been possible otherwise.

3. I believe that the lack of an abstract representation as intermediary between oneself and the music has another consequence. Much of electroacoustic music focuses on the sound itself, its structure, its synthesis and treatment, etc. Many pieces signal to a sensitive listener that the expressiveness of the music is to be found within the sound itself, rather than the shapes it makes or the relationships into which it enters, and I believe that the attraction of electroacoustic music for most composers and listeners too has to do with the sensuous pleasure got from listening. All of us know the experience of getting drunk, so to speak, on one's own sounds while working in the studio.

But I must confess a vague intellectual and spiritual discontent when listening to most electroacoustic music. The (many: I am not complaining about the general quality of electroacoustic music, only trying to characterize an important aspect I find common to most of the good work in the field) good pieces are often like glorious desserts in a wonderful restaurant: colorful, rich, unique, but one-sided and subtly frivolous.

I believe that the focus on sound tends to make us listen to electroacoustic music in a largely associative way. So, for instance, I regard the *Traité d'objets musicaux* by Pierre Schaeffer as an immense effort to render conscious and to define the associations the ear has vis à vis a large number of sonorous, if not exactly musical, situations. But throughout history much great music has resided at the meeting of sensuous seduction on the one hand, and abstract ordering which is independent of, and even at times detrimental to, the sound itself on the other. Often this conflict between sensuous directness and structural speculation is extraordinarily expressive. (There are many examples of this: medieval organum with its struggle to subjugate the rich melodic lines to simple ruses of consonance and temporal pattern, the great isorhythmic motets of Machaut and later Dufay, Bach's *Kunst der Fuge*, where the euphony often has to yield to higher contrapuntal exigencies, late Beethoven, Schoenberg, Stockhausen, Xenakis, to name but a very few.)

The language of electroacoustic music has little with which to counteract the seductive power of sound. Older music moderated sonorous directness by imposing some kind of external, non-sonorous pattern on the music: regular temporal structures in isorhythmic music, immensely difficult contrapuntal tasks with Bach, etc. The struggle between the musical material and the abstract structure which tried to impose itself often was an important part of the music's expression and surely was recognized metaphorically by the perception. In a musical universe where none of the old concepts: harmony, counterpoint, formal constraints—all of these taken in their broadest sense—have any authority more, it is difficult to imagine what could check the force of music's sensuous quality. I believe (you will reproach me for my romantic-heroic mind-set) that all great music reflects this basic opposition. I further believe that this opposition is very difficult to achieve without being able to interpose a layer of abstraction between oneself and the sounding music.

4. Because electroacoustic music exists only as sound (and not in some more abstract way like a score), it exists only in the present; it has no past. Individual pieces of the repertory of electroacoustic music seem to be equidistant from us when we listen to them: we like some pieces more than others, we may be able to identify certain stylistic fashions, but the pieces often seem to be written without knowledge of each other and without reference to an internal history. (This is of course an exaggeration. In speaking with others, one discovers that there is a lively oral history of the repertory: many people have heard and reacted to the same pieces, but always privately, shyly, without reference to a larger collective memory or judgement.)

The absence of a past is probably not a very serious problem for composers of electroacoustic music in their everyday lives (as opposed to when they attend conferences like this one): very little creative activity goes on while looking back over one's shoulder. But this absence of a past (or rather, as I have been insisting, the absence of tools with which to construct a past) does have an important consequence. I believe it is at least partially responsible for a diminished sense of the importance of our field, both in the world in general, but also among ourselves as well. How often has one heard (and how often said oneself?): "Of course, I compose instrumental music, too"? In the hierarchy of the music world, we are clearly quite far

down the ladder, upstarts whose activities have nothing to do with the noble work of the (needless to say) past. (There are other reasons for this discrimination, the most important of which is our alliance with Anathema itself, Technology.) The diminished sense of the importance of the field has important political consequences. Electroacoustic music is not an attractive area of work for musicologists, those colleagues whose thinking and writing is so important in establishing lasting written traces of what one has done, because there is virtually no material, other than the sounding music itself, with which to work. At the very least, to be the object of intense musicological interest renders one's work respectable in the public eye, regardless of what the composer concerned may think about the attention she or he receives. Without this respectability, electroacoustic music will never play a politically sufficiently important role to obtain the conditions of creation, performance and diffusion it deserves.

5. The final crucial area in which the lack of analytical tools and of a vocabulary of abstractions is particularly important, and to my mind particularly disastrous, is the area of pedagogy. I think of myself as a composer, but I spend more of my life teaching than composing. I teach both traditional music theory and courses in computer music, and although the human relationships are usually closer and richer with computer music students, I believe that my teaching of traditional theory is far more efficient.

I teach traditional theory by studying the score of a piece with students, examining it carefully to learn as much as possible about its composition and then thinking about the meaning and significance of what we have discovered. In these analyses the reasonably objective score allows one to learn a great deal about how the piece was composed. At the same time, the distance of the score from the sounding reality of the music encourages abstraction when thinking about the music's structure and about the relationships between individual compositional aspects.

I teach computer music by lecturing about theory, by playing and discussing music with the students and by spending a great deal of time with the students at the computer, listening to and commenting on their work. However, I can do much less analysis that I would like, because the equivalent of a score is missing. Neither can I show the students in detail

how a piece was composed (unless the composer has made materials publicly available, as is the case for a few important pieces, among them *Inharmonique* by Jean-Claude Risset and *Mortuos plango, vivos voco* by Jonathan Harvey), nor can I train them to work at a level of abstraction which seems to me appropriate to composition. For this reason, teaching computer music seems to me much more arbitrary and subjective than teaching instrumental analysis and composition.

Not only is it next to impossible to speak seriously about the craft of composition without a literature which can be analyzed, it is equally difficult to do any kind of serious aesthetic education. Without models one can examine soberly, away from the klieg lights of performance (to which I count listening to a piece straight through and in its true tempo), it is difficult to isolate, let alone to formulate arguments for and against, particular aesthetic decisions. My students are typically so overwhelmed by the sensuous reality of the music they make that it is difficult to speak with them about structural and aesthetic matters. I consider this a great disadvantage.

The best guarantee for the survival of our field is an active young generation. The active young people are there, but they lose enormous amounts of time in having to learn so much about electroacoustic music by retracing so many of the steps our generation took. The situation one would hope for would allow the interested, gifted young composer to assimilate the achievements of the preceding generation quickly and then to move on to more relevant interests. Until analytical tools for electroacoustic music are developed, and until adequate documentation allows us better insight into compositional practices of the past, such organic evolution won't be possible.

Until recently, I thought this condition of belonging to an largely oral culture was (in our Western musical tradition) specific to electroacoustic music. After all, instrumentalists always have to work from a score. But I see similar situations more and more often in other areas of music pedagogy as well. Closest to home, in teaching instrumental composition, I myself find students considerably less interested in *métier* than they were a generation ago. If I comment on a passage in a composition from a technical point of view, I am likely to get as an answer, "But I like how it

sounds”. Implicit here is the primacy of “how it sounds” over technical considerations. When speaking with instrumental teachers, especially of young people, I learn that while young instrumental pupils are by no means less gifted than pupils were 20 or 30 years ago, they certainly practice less and read less well than young people a generation ago did. On the other hand, they definitely improvise better and learn far more easily by heart than young people did 30 years ago. These are all signs of a far more general shift from a literary culture to an oral (and aural) culture.

In this little essay, I cry out for better analytical tools for our art and for better documentation of its most important works in order that it may attain greater maturity. But who knows? Maybe electroacoustic music will be one of the dominant art forms in a future culture without books and scores and without a linear sense of historical causality. Maybe, like the old Greek slave trying to teach the young Roman centurion the subtleties of Greek verbs, it makes no difference whatsoever what I think and teach: an illiterate army will change the world far more than my poor verbs could do. Maybe—most probably—the maturity of electroacoustic music lies in a direction I cannot even begin to imagine. Maybe, contrary to what my training and experience tell me, I should cast off both my dependence on outlived musical models and my desire to grasp everything analytically and give myself up to the simple sensuality of this glorious music of ours.

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A brief postscript.

On rereading this essay, and remembering the interesting discussions after presenting it at the Academy meeting in Bourges, I think the text insists too little on one point. I often contrast instrumental music and its scores to electroacoustic music without a score, but I certainly do not mean to suggest that a new system of musical notation should be devised to represent electroacoustic compositions. Nor do I think that yet another graphical representation of sounding reality would address any of the points I make above. Instead, I hope for new analytical tools, and with them new abstract representations of electroacoustic music. These new tools must arise from the technology used to compose and realize our music. Advanced forms of spectral analysis may prove to be one such tool,

analysis taking account of psychoacoustic factors another. But my prophetic gifts have always been weak—I really have no idea of the future.

I do not wish nostalgically for a new notation—the purely visual modality of the traditional score is clearly not adequate for our needs. I mean rather to call for the discovery and development of new modalities of representation and abstraction of sound, timbre, temporal structures and all the other elements of our art. Not back to what was, but on to what we cannot yet imagine.

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