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AESTHETIC PROFILE MAPPING - AN OUTLINE OF A PRACTICAL AESTHETIC ANALYSIS. (1997)

To begin with I must confess that I have had and still have some problems defining the aims and uses of analyzing any aspect of the arts. I am not convinced that fully understanding any work of art could really be enhanced even by extensive analysis. The sublime mysteries and spiritual essence of art can probably never be revealed in this way. At best, all we get is the answers to the questions we asked. Then what?

In trivial areas such as technology and the physics of music, analysis might perhaps be interesting to recording engineers or studio-producers. You may think that you arrive at an understanding of music as an art when you study the mechanics and form schemes or any other property of music, but to me, this reminds of the story of the man who dismantled his clock in order to understand time.

In my view, art - including acousmatic music - does not constitute some sort of coded message, like a cipher or crossword puzzle that has to be interpreted by experts. Some art-forms like literature and film, seem to inspire the academics into tedious and lengthy palavers of hermeneutic nature. By now probably tons of books and papers have been written about James Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" without unveiling the transcendental core that strikes the chords of the reader's emotional and aesthetic experience. At least, I for instance don't like to have my experience of a poem or a piece of music assaulted by professors who want to correct my possible misconceptions.

It seems to me that the more ephemeral the properties of art we choose to study the less substantive the results of our analytical labours. Aesthetics is one of the most esoteric aspects of the arts, and consequently it seems to be overwhelmingly difficult to achieve anything from an aesthetic analysis that could enlighten us or be of any value. But since I have been invited to present a paper here at the GMEB Academy, I feel an urge to give it a try even if it is against my better judgement and that I most likely will fall flat on my face.

It is obvious that we are witnessing a growing interest in the aesthetics of acousmatic arts, although the output of papers in this domain is still rather meagre compared to the number of articles covering such areas as computer synthesis, psycho-acoustics, compositional algorithms, hardware construction, etc. The greater part of what has been written in these areas about aesthetical topics are most often rather abstract and theoretical, with sweeping generalizations, which has made it hard to relate these discourses to the everyday level of the practicing composer. The dominating perspective has been the bird's-eye view and most papers have been as Ben Goertzel puts it "long on philosophy but short on specifics"(1) Hopefully I will be a little more specific towards the end of this paper.

On some occasions in Sweden a more practical approach to musical aesthetics has been called for, an analytical tool which could be used to scrutinize a composer's entire output or even a single work. In my view such an analysis should also enable us to arrive at an artistic evaluation of a work. I have understood that academic aestheticians are very reluctant to make any sort of evaluation of this kind. They apparently fear that it would lead to arbitrary and unscientific judgements which will add to the bad reputation they already have in the natural science camp.

As a composer I don't entertain such doubts. I have nothing to lose and so, I can plunge headlong into this quagmire of difficult assessments. In the real world, evaluations of artistic quality and suchlike things are made all the time but outside academic circles. Also the Acousmatic arts have their "Art World" - locally and internationally - comprising concert organizers, radio and record producers, repertory committees, music critics and journalists, competition-juries, grant committees, etc. These persons frequently make evaluations and pass judgements on grounds which are in most cases totally obscure to those of us outside.

Naturally, in such heterogeneous groups there is no consensus in detail, things you can pinpoint, but quite often you find remarkable unanimity in the aggregate opinion. A certain composer, who happens to be approved by the "Art World", could then surf on a wave of success, while other composers, who seem to be equally competent, don't stand a chance.

The "Art World" seems to establish some odd "ranking-list" of composers - though never officially of course. However, such a thing would immediately be denied by most so called "representatives" of that community. It also means that single compositions will be graded according to arbitrary and diffuse aesthetic and artistic criteria. The various preferences and appreciations of the "Art World" are things that constantly change. Established composers are easily and quickly replaced by newcomers "à la mode", although some remain in focus for a remarkably long time even when completely new aesthetic trends and fashions may take over. The "Art World" is like meteorology. One has to make a new analysis often and regularly to understand what the new trends are at hand at a given time.

It would be interesting to understand more about the nature of these artistic evaluations. What are the aesthetic properties that seem to appeal so greatly to the "Art World"? For example, what are the crucial aesthetic features of Åke Parmerud's works that brought him the first prize seven times in the GMEB concours? What is there that is missing in the works of his rivals? At this point it can only be speculation on my part, but I would like to suggest two things that may be significant here. Parmerud often employs - in an elaborate way - a technique that I would call "polysonic layering" rather than polyphonic. Three or more lines of sonic material are placed at the same time in a given section of the piece. There is seldom any priority established between the layers that can be easily detected by the listener, no foreground or background. The sonic transparency between the layers is carefully presented. The second prominent feature in Parmerud's

works is the principle of the ever-changing continuous transformation of the sonic material he uses in the layers. Sometimes these changes are pretty subtle though they seem to be present most of the time. There are of course other salient characteristics to be extracted from his works such as his choice of sonic material to mention just one of them.

A thorough aesthetic study of Parmerud's work in comparison with the oeuvre of other composers might perhaps give us several clues as to why some composers are more successful than others. After all, the acousmatic "Art World" is not made up of the common listener but of experts in the field and so this world could be regarded as a rather special sub-culture with some very distinctive aesthetic opinions.

Jon Appleton and I presented a small paper at the GMEB colloquium more than ten years ago, later published in *Keyboard Magazine* (June 1986) in which we suggested a kind of artistic personality typology for composers. It is distantly reminiscent of the kind of typology used by Jung and others. We only presented a limited number of categories and our paper had a polemic and satirical twang, but I still believe it would be interesting to include some sort of psychological portrayal of the composers under study in our "mapping", based upon what we observe in their works and from information from other sources. Perhaps this could add something of importance to the understanding of their aesthetic profiles.

Today we could probably come up with a more suitable categorization. We also need to find the criteria that can be advantageous for deeper insight into matters related to style in general and to determine a composer's position in a wider stylistic context. It may take some efforts to extract the appropriate criteria.

Whether we manage to place a composer in a general stylistic context or not, the next step would be to establish the criteria we think could be helpful for a workable aesthetic mapping. We may not achieve a consensus immediately. Agostino Di Scipio suggests a "network of norms" in his essay in *Journal of New Music Research*, Vol. 24 (1995), which he thinks would be relevant for an approach to EAM aesthetics. He launches a number of norms such as "technical excellence, formal depth, expressiveness, social scope, political effectiveness, and many others."

To achieve a better understanding of the aesthetics of the acousmatic arts and to gain deeper knowledge of this area I would like to suggest here an approach to a practical aesthetic analysis to which I give the preliminary designation "Aesthetic Profile Mapping" (APM). This method of analyzing is inspired by the Scottish philosopher Dugald Stewart(3), who was active in the first half of the last century. He suggested that various objects and phenomena in the arts could be described and examined by utilizing a set of carefully selected terms describing aesthetic properties. A certain artefact does not have to correspond to all these aesthetic characteristics, but by consistently using the same set of analytic tools on many works, one could hopefully get interesting results in a comparison between related art objects or classes of objects. In my view, such a method can also be used to characterize a composer aesthetically.

Many years ago I met a visual artist who claimed that most artists never invented more than one main form. For the rest of their artistic career they only made minute variations on that particular form. I have always thought that it was a rather provocative statement, but I have found that it is true in more cases than we think. In the visual arts this phenomenon is fairly obvious. Some artists like Olle Baertling, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, Joseph Albers and many others from the modernistic era evidently found it quite satisfactory that for a long period of time merely make small variations on a limited form theme. Quite naturally, the choice of a single form became the main feature of their style, maybe even a trademark. We can also suspect that they after a while they had to stick to their guns because of strong demands from the commercial Art World. I think we could find similar cases in the acousmatic domain as well even if it may not be that obvious.

The first aesthetic feature we would recognize is if the composer has a pronounced style. If a composer makes recurrent use of a number of specific aesthetic features in his or her works it is of course quite easy to isolate these for stylistic analysis. The majority of composers do not have a particularly distinctive style that makes them stand out from the grey masses, and some composers do to their best to disguise any style by considering every new composition as an independent formal, conceptual and stylistic project having as little to do with their previous works as possible. Our aesthetic analysis could then be somewhat more intricate. Very few composers, however, are not able to pursue such a radical approach to their work over an extended period of time. Analysis of a greater number of their works will most likely unfold aesthetic and formal elements that will occur repeatedly.

We may not find such striking examples in the acousmatic arts as we do in the visual domain, but some works are coming close to the “single formtype artwork” such as compositions by Paul Lansky, Horacio Vaggione and Steve Reich. Thus far I want to underline that my mentioning these composers is not an act of artistic evaluation.

What then, make up the set of aesthetic properties that could serve as the basis of an aesthetical mapping procedure? Several sets of criteria might be possible. Let me name a few that I think would be suitable. A division into three or maybe four subcategories would at this point be practicable. It would also perhaps be wise operating with only a small number of properties and terms, until we have gained some experience with this method.

The first category I have called “Concept and Content”. Under this label we can discuss a number of extra-musical phenomena such as conceptual ideas, political, religious and philosophical ideologies, social context, symbolism, metaphors and other content-related issues. In our “mapping”, we should investigate how these extra-musical ideas have influenced the composer and his and her composing. Some pieces are extremely conceptual - like Luc Ferrari’s “Presque Rien #1” - in fact to such an extent that the concept governs every aspect of the piece. In other works, the concept could be somewhat more obscure unless the composer himself reveals his conceptual ideas, as Morton Subotnik does in some of his compositions. In his “Butterflies” for instance the

insect is used as a metaphor for musical parameters. He uses the graphic contour of the butterfly as a curve for envelopes.

Concept could also be about new and special stylistic ideas or about global form or algorithms inspired from non-musical spheres. I realize that we occasionally come across works which are very hard or maybe impossible to analyze in these terms, but the identification of absent features is also an aspect of our mapping.

The second category could simply be called “Forms and Sounds”. Here the composer’s ability to invent new forms and sonic material is of importance. Any sonic or formal preferences should also be investigated and whether they occur so frequently that they seem to contribute to the composer’s style. The use of established and well-known forms and sonic material need not, however, automatically bring a low esteem to a composer’s aesthetic profile. New and unexpected constellations of well-known material can sometimes bring a feeling of ingenuity to a certain piece.

When describing forms and sonic material we should, of course, use the analytical tools we have already like Dennis Smalley’s “Spectromorphology” for sound objects and Lasse Thoresen’s system for form analysis. Other formal aspects may also be examined. Does the overall formal construction or structure seem to be very strict and rigid, or does it give the listener an impression of being improvised or loosely put together? How will that effect the aesthetic value?

The third category is more evasive, but personally I think it is central in our mapping method. For the moment I have given this the temporary name - “Emotions and other psychological issues”. Quite a few composers don’t believe in the possibility of expressing specific emotions in music, which I guess, also includes acousmatic art. I am not sure that this is the whole truth. At least in a crude way it should be possible to create states of emotion that a majority of listeners will respond to according in the way the composer had intended. If I plan to compose a long passage of calm and tranquility I don’t think the average listener would perceive such a passage as violent or shocking. I am absolutely convinced that acousmatic art also could radiate various emotions. We may disagree about the nature of the emotions we experience but that is an entirely different matter.

We can introduce a whole menu of descriptive terms for our analysis, but I will just give a few examples of what could be used for this purpose. They are listed with no particular order in mind: *bizarre, aggressive, grotesque, hysterical, introvert, sublime, impenetrable, private, happy, funny, naive, expressive, spiritual, powerful, hilarious, innocent, mysterious, tranquil, moving, spiritual, extrovert, superficial, profound, etc., etc.*

Evaluation in this area should aim for assessment of the magnitude of emotional radiation and the complexity of emotions found in a piece. This does not necessarily mean that a great number of emotions have to be involved to gain a higher “score” for the piece, it is the depth and intensity that should be of value. I believe that - except for the sophisticated elite of the “Art World” - emotional radiation is a very important feature when it comes to winning wider public appeal and appreciation.

Moving on, I'd like to refer to a quality that I consider belongs to this category, even though it could be of some prominence in the other divisions also. The overall aesthetic value will be enhanced by the so called "Novelty-effect" or the "Adventure-effect". Baudelaire and others have pointed out that moments of surprise or amazement are of crucial importance in a work of art in order to obtain a good reception. A piece entirely based on "traditional" craftsmanship will most likely not give rise to any reactions of amazement or greater enthusiasm among listeners, at least not among the trained listeners. The ability to create and invent new effects and features in a serious way should definitely be highly evaluated in our mapping procedure.

In my opinion, a fourth division should not have the same weight or priority as the previous suggested categories. However I do not deny that inventions and new ideas in technology could have aesthetic significance or be a source of inspiration for the composer in finding new means of aesthetic expression. Di Scipio puts "technical excellence" as his first "norm" in an aesthetic analysis. For me "technical excellence" is a property of craftsmanship and is less essential in this context. It doesn't hurt if it is present, but artistic inventiveness for instance, is far more valuable. Any sound engineer could achieve "technical excellence", but this would by no means guarantee artistic and aesthetic quality.

Perhaps the most problematic part of our aesthetic mapping procedure is to find a proper and relevant method of evaluation. What are the alternatives? I am not very pleased with the method I come up with so far. As far I can see, the only way is to apply some sort of grading or rating by employing a scale of numbers or points to indicate good or bad. If we were to use this kind of method on our set of aesthetic properties would the piece or group of pieces gaining the highest score also be considered to be the best piece in a listening-test as, for example, in the GMEB contest? We will probably have to accept the result either way. After all, aesthetics is not an exact science and our aesthetic profile mapping could never even remotely be as accurate as a quantitative chemical analysis.