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Music: An Artform Without Borders?

Abstract

Before the World War II sound art was almost identical with western modern art music. In postwar times several new sonic forms have emerged that can hardly be incorporated in art music. A serious discussion is therefore needed to examine the distinctive factors, which constitute a clear delineation of art music and for instance electro-acoustic music (EAM) in its recorded, fixed forms. The author has compiled ten factors that are rarely found or totally missing in "art music", but are truly characteristic for EAM. Two of these factors are examined in greater detail - *mimetic content* and *causal relations*. The author is of the opinion that we deal with two kinds of EAM artforms. One is intended for the concert stage and often referred to as "live" or "mixte". The other is fixed in a recording medium. Like the cinematic arts (films and video), the latter belongs to the fine arts, while the first one should be placed among the performing arts. Consequently, the author suggests that the recorded form of EAM should be called "Acousmatic Art".

If music solely consists of sounds could all sounds be regarded as music? This question may seem silly to the layman, but today the answers could vary depending who you are asking. The traditional art music lover will say, perhaps, that music certainly is built by sounds, but that these belong to a very special and confined group of sounds. In addition these sounds are put together according to strict rules and compositional criteria.

In the event that one is a believer in the "institutional theory" as espoused by George Dickie, one will argue that all kind of sounds that are deliberately presented in a concert hall should be considered to be music and that it is the program committee, the concert-organizers, the performers and the music critics who are deciding what is music and what is not.

If you ask another group, for instance those who profess themselves to be adherents to the philosophy of John Cage, they will certainly take at least one step further and emphasize that both the intended and the unexpected sounds could constitute the musical work. However, one is not restricted to the concert hall and from a sonic point of view a piece of music can be constituted in just any way and be performed anywhere and finally

it should change its shape entirely for every new performance. It is even possible that the music does not even need any human intervention. “Mother Nature” will take care of it on her own. Cage has hinted that at some occasion.

Such an idea may not be as outrageous as it may seem. Some computer-generated music is coming rather close to such an ideal condition. It is quite feasible to write a computer-program that will, without any further intervention from the originator, “compose” a “music” that is so unpredictable and convoluted that not even the originator can predict the outcome. When the originator has pressed the “return”, the computer will provide the listeners with an endless number of “compositions” and in that way imitate “Mother Nature” or God or whatever creator suits ones fancy.

I have often pondered if there is anything possible in terms of music or if there is anything further in terms of artistic development beyond John Cage’s aesthetic philosophy? How far can we get and still claim that we are dealing with an art form we call music.

Perhaps there is a way out of this aesthetic *cul de sac*. During the early 1960s, the term “borderline crossing” was something of a “buzzword” for the avant-garde art. Behind this development one can discern, among other things, the concept of *das Gesamtkunstwerk* that originated at turn of the last century. Many artists undertaking experimental art were quite influenced by such ideas and John Cage’s philosophy, which was often thought to be the origin to these thoughts. Since then we have seen many variations in the integration between art forms and some promising new directions have emerged.

The result of such combinations may sometimes give birth to still other new art forms or that older, related art forms appear more clearly and distinctive seen from an aesthetic perspective. It may be helpful for the understanding of the aesthetics of an art form if we can keep the borderlines distinct, especially between more adjacent art forms, e.g. music and the other sound arts.

In the end of the 1960s such a new art form were established in Sweden, namely *text/sound compositions*, which has subsequently received international recognition. It still holds an important position in the sonic arts community. In an investigation of developments within the sonic art since the end of World War II, one will find a certain flora of somewhat demarcated art areas that can hardly be incorporated in music. The following compilation may give us some ideas about the prevalence of sound art though it is by no means complete or listed in a hierarchical way.

The Art of Sound

1) Music in the traditional sense: instrumental or vocal

- 2) **Electroacoustic music**
 - 3) **Acousmatic art**
 - 4) **Sonic art**
 - 5) **Audio art**
 - 6) **Organized sound**
 - 7) **Spectro-morphology**
 - 8) **Musique concrète**
 - 9) **Bio-feed back music (bio-music)**
 - 10) **Hörspiel**
 - 11) **Cinema sonore**
 - 12) **Sound poetry**
 - 13) **Text/sound compositions**
 - 14) **Computer music**
 - 15) **Noise(art)**
 - 16) **Plunderphonics**
 - 17) **Radio art**
 - 18) **Electronica**
 - 19) **IDM**
- etc.

Some signs indicate that we are in a period today, like we were in the early 1960s, characterized by the integration of art forms and border crossings between the arts. Recent attention has been focused on a more purist sonic art, a direction that is difficult to include under the definition of music. It may be premature to draw any far-reaching conclusions as to what is behind such a development. Perhaps the younger sound artists think that modern western “art music” is exhausted as an aesthetic idiom; that it cannot be further developed and that one has come to the end of the road.

Perhaps it is time to reconsider the borders of music, above all the borderlines *vis a vis* the other remaining art forms within “sound arts” realm. If we consider the viewpoint of these other sound art forms, some clarification seems necessary as these alternative art forms are often handled in an unfair way by benighted musicologists and critics who apply a criticism derived entirely from outside the field of music.

It is essential to start a discussion to discover what constitutes the borders between music as an art form and other sonic art forms. As a start, I have listed ten criteria or properties that I think are relevant for this purpose. These are fairly obvious and easy to apprehend. My method of analysis may be seen as somewhat awkward since, above all, it is argued that the criteria for said analysis are poorly developed or are missing entirely in music.

The selection of criteria is entirely mine, but there may be several other properties that could be even more relevant for such a survey. I use Electro Acoustic Music(EAM) as an object of comparison. Partly because it is the second largest area among the sonic art

forms next to music (which still remains the most extensive area), and partly because it is fairly divergent in this comparison. These ten criteria may to a certain degree also be found in the remaining art forms in the sonic arts field. I want to underline that all the ten criteria may not be present in one and the same EAM work.

In this context I want discuss the term Electro Acoustic Music since I find it obsolete and not very useful in the present situation. The first part of the term leads the thoughts in a wrong direction, to the technical façade and not to the artistic substance and expression. The second part - music - is often confusing to a wider audience, which can not relate what they hear to their previous experience of music and thus it makes it harder for them to reach an acceptance of this art form as music. When I refer to EAM in this case I exclusively think of EAM fixed in a recorded format. Since I believe EAM fixed in a recording medium differs greatly from music as we usually know it and I tend to consider that EAM should be regarded as a separate and independent art form. It seems also that we are operating with two separate types of EAM. One of them is directly aimed for the concert-stage and is often referred to as “live” or “mixte”, as opposed to the “fixed” type I already mentioned. The first type - the live/mixed EAM - has all the characteristics you find in any concert performance of music. From an aesthetic point of view I think it would be far more satisfying if we keep them as two separate entities.

In order to draw a distinction between these two types of EAM, the designation “Acousmatic art” should be applied to EAM which is fixed in a recording medium. The term *acousmatic* has been around for a while in Canada, England, France and seems to be growing also in the United States. The term *acousmatic* was formally launched by François Bayle in 1974, but could probably be found in Pierre Schaffer’s early thinking as an alternative to the term *musique concrete*.

Another factor which might be used to discriminate between music and the *acousmatic* arts is the issue of the score. So far it has not been possible to notate the *acousmatic* compositions adequately in an accepted score form that might allow some type of “functional analysis” of its sonic material and structural organization. In the best cases some more or less personal notes by the composer describing the sonic processes have been displayed and which may be used as support for the director of “sound projection”. Not even a sonogram give sufficient information to carry out the type of functional analysis that are frequently found in traditional art music.

On the other hand one may sometimes question how much a Schenkerian oriented analysis really tells us when it comes to the understanding of a particular piece of music in terms of artistic and aesthetic value. From time to time one has the feeling that some analytical work has become an academic end in itself. For instance, could the average music listener get an increased aesthetic experience or pleasure by knowing how the chords in a harmonic succession refer to one another?

It has been pointed out that music is a closed, self-referential system where the sonic components solely refer to each other and there could not be any extra referential meaning added. With few exceptions such a self-referential system is missing in the *acousmatic* arts or if it exists, it is only meaningful to the composer and cannot be apprehended by the listeners. A possible structural analysis has to start on the perceptual level, what will be perceived from an auditory point of view. Such an analysis may be difficult to implement, but not impossible. In any case it will be a demanding task. In a great deal of *acousmatic* art it is hard to find any structural references between form, sonic gestures, duration and sonic material. However, by applying, for example, Dennis Smalley's spectromorphological analysis we are able to get a good idea of the forms of a single sound object, sound event or a sound process, but by and large it is only with difficulty that we will find and understand any structural references in the acousmatic art by just listening
(See Luke Windsor, "Towards a perceptual...")

A more useful analytical approach would aim for appropriate aesthetic parameters, for example, the aesthetic preferences of the composer when it comes to his or her choice of forms, sonic material, duration patterns, mimetic relations, stylistic matters, or even which clichés have been used. In short we should try to lay down the aesthetic profile of the artwork.

The following list of criteria form the basis for my discussion about the border issues between music and the *acousmatic* arts. Some of the following criteria are not entirely of an aesthetic nature. They are more like a set of description parameters. In various degrees they will be found in the *acousmatic* art forms, but they are rarely found or are totally missing in music.

- 1) The pitch-parameter has a reduced role or is nearly absent. Object-oriented instead of pitch-oriented (see notes 1 and 2 below).
- 2) The time-parameter appears often in a vague and subjective. It is seldom based on metrical durations in the traditional sense. Repeated sonic elements rather than rhythmic processes.
- 3) The entire sound world can in principle, be used for a composition.
- 4) Discontinuous processes in sound sequences. Causal logic is usually missing (see note 3 below).
- 5) Mimetic elements are often found, often on different levels.
- 6) Parallel motion instead of counterpoint, "polysonic layers".

7) Composers almost always realize their works by themselves. Generally no interpreters are required.

8) Spectral and timbral composition are central. Continuous transitions occur from one sound to another, e.g. morphing, “melange” etc.

9) Variable and virtual room acoustics and ambience are essential. Virtual sound movements is often employed.

10) EAM belongs to the category **fine arts** while instrumental/vocal music belongs to **performing arts**.

(1) It has been implied that one of Pierre Schaeffer’s great theoretical contributions was to replace the musical note with sound object as the smallest common denominator. (Ambrose Field: ”Simulation and Reality - Simon Emmerson: Music, Electronic Media and Culture, 2000)

(2) For many years the term sound object (*objet sonore*) has been firmly rooted in the terminology of Electro-Acoustic music and has its roots in Pierre Schaeffer’s theoretical system. Perhaps one could use the term “sound event” as a more neutral designation of the smallest common denominator of the *acousmatic* art.

(3) Causal Logic could be described in the following way; the listener experiences that a causal relation emerges when a number of sonic events are presented in a work of acousmatic art.

Consequently the listener must be able to grasp and understand the choice of sonic events and the reasons for their internal order and relationship.

Some of these ten criteria above are rather obvious, while a few could be the subject of a more extensive discussion. Most important here are number four and five. A characteristic and typical criteria of the acousmatic art is in my opinion the mimetic element.

Quite a few composers and theoreticians today seem to agree.

Simon Emmerson has in his, very important, but at times controversial essay “ The Relation of Language of Materials” pointed out the importance of the mimetic character of a great part of the sonic material found in *acousmatic* art. Emmerson even utilizes the mimetic content as a parameter of classification for *acousmatic* art. Emmerson is also aware of that “Mimisis” not only portrays the nature but also comprises other aspects of human culture, not directly associated with the sonic material.

In his essay “Through and Around the Acousmatic” Luke Windsor argues in a fairly convincing way the importance of the acousmatic dimension and its dominance in the *acousmatic music* (his term). Windsor evidently means that the mimetic element is the

most essential characteristic of the *acousmatic music*. In his reasoning, partly based on James Gibson's perceptual theories of "ecological acoustics" and Windsor's own research he looks at the sounds of our everyday life and how these function in an *acousmatic* situation. These sound phenomenon, which frequently appear in the acousmatic arts, constitute, in a decisive way, the border between what he calls *acousmatic music* and the instrumental/vocal music. However, this cannot be the whole truth. There are quite a number of acousmatic works that scarcely are based on mimetic material at all.

An intrinsic, logical, referential system will not necessarily be found in sound sequences or single sonic events demarcated as such, even if their mimetic signification is "decoded" and understood by the listener. Windsor gives the impression that if a person is able to identify the sound source behind the sonic events they will also understand why they appear in a specific order determined by the composer. However it will not be more "logical" to listener if he or she can identify a sequence of FM-sounds followed by the sounds of a jet plane or a bulldozer.

The mimetic concept as it emerged in the ancient Greek philosophy and has been thought to be the first theory of art even if it describes many other aspects of human life that are truly elaborate and many-faceted. The term "mimetic" is here used more loosely when compared to the sophisticated concept in ancient Greek philosophy.

From an analytical point of view, it is appropriate to employ three levels of mimetic imitation, that to some degree could be seen as analogous to the three conditions Plato specifies as valid for an imitation. Another source of inspiration for such a "scale" is Dennis Smalley's essay "Spectromorphology" found in Simon Emmerson's book *The language of Electroacoustic Music*. The term "mimesis" is not used in reference to the imitation of spiritual and psychological states of mind, which might also be expressed in *acousmatic* art. Naturally, there is nothing to prevent a composer from trying to express mental, psychological or emotional states in *acousmatic* art. That is precisely as possible or impossible as it is in traditional art music.

Level No.1. A single sound event or sound process may be recognized immediately as a sonic imitation of something that we easily apprehend as baby talk, barking dogs, footsteps in gravel, door-slamming, ambulance sirens, etc. These imitations are most often presented in the form of a recording using a microphone, but could nowadays be synthesized in such a convincing way that we think they are authentic. The classic *musique concrete* essentially occurs at this mimetic level. Pierre Schaeffer even launched an aesthetic/technical doctrine for concrete music; all sound employed in a concrete piece must be recorded using a microphone, no synthetic sounds could be accepted. Schaeffer's doctrine was however abandoned when synthesizers and samplers started to appear in great numbers during the 1970s.

(A special case of some interest is how we should consider a recording of a musical performance in a concert hall? On which mimetic level does it belong? Even the best recording of a performance can not be confused with live audition. It could perhaps be said that the recording actually is nothing but an imitation of what was experienced in the concert hall. Maybe this can be used as an argument against recording of art music that is composed and aimed for the concert stage. A recording can never, in any case replace the live performance.)

Level No. 2. In this group a sonic event or a sonic sequence is originally recorded directly, but has gone through a more or less extensive electro-acoustic transformation, however not to the extent that original sound cannot be identified.

Level No.3. The original sounds have reached a level of transformation that makes it quite difficult to apprehend what is being imitated. The listener has, however a residual feeling that something has been imitated. This category also includes sonic sequences that have no origin in the real sound world but nevertheless gives the listener the impression that the sonic material sounds give rise to an remote association to authentic sounds . “That sounds like a jet plane taking off or like a flock of birds crying”.

It is very rare in traditional art music that we find examples of instrumental imitations, but a few might be noted:

Beethoven’s *Battle Symphony*, Arthur Honegger *Pacific 231*

and the opening of Glenn Miller’s “*Chattanooga Choo Choo*”. There are also a very limited number of contemporary examples.

A classical work of *musique concrete* like Pierre Henry’s “*Variations pour une porte et un soupir*” from 1963 is virtually the perfect example of a mimetic orientated work. As the title indicates this work is entirely based on recordings of a squeaking door and a human sigh, which in many variations has been treated moderately with the electro-acoustic technology available at that time. In principle Henry does not surpass Level No. 2, i.e. one is always able to hear how the sonic outcome is related to the source material. A work of later date that also illustrates a mimetic technique is Elio Martuscielli’s “*Proiezioni*” from 1998. In this composition Martuscielli works solely on Level No.1.

There exists, however, a problem that I believe also exists in the visual arts. In general it is vital that you have some first hand experience of the sound world that is recorded (in Martuscielli’s case sounds from film projectors, his prime source of sonic material). One can not expect that all listeners are familiar with all “sound worlds”. An equivalent barrier among the “image worlds” would be the presentation of imageries that are perfectly realistic imitations of real objects but that are unknown to the viewers.

As an example of Level No.2 is Paul Lansky’s “*Night Traffic*” could serve. The work begins with recorded traffic sounds but Lansky starts directly on Level No.2, where the

sounds are already transformed but the general dynamic contours are easily perceived and the sonic material leads the listeners in the right direction.

Passages that illustrate Level No.3 are frequently found in almost any *acousmatic* composition. It therefore seems useless to mention any specific example.

Item No.4 on the list is about the way the sonic material is organized (particularly considering what is claimed in the preceding paragraph concerning the absence of restriction as to what kind of sonic material may be used for an *acousmatic* composition). From an analytical point of view, causal relations are the most problematic issues to handle. And a difficult task, also for the experienced listener, is to comprehend what rules and principles have guided the compositional work. Perhaps it could even be an impossible undertaking. The reason why a particular sound event should be followed by another is obscure. Usually the causal relations between sounds are weak to nearly non-existent. There is a risk that a threshold is created when it comes to appreciation and assimilation *acousmatic* art. The sonic events can only with difficulty be related backwards or forwards in time. Probably one experiences a continuous succession of unrelated sonic moments while listening - at least for the first time. The time window is narrow.

In the previously mentioned essay by Simon Emmerson his point of departure is that music may be regarded as some sort of language and that electro-acoustic music is no exception. Such a view is far from being accepted in all circles, it is rather the subject of an ongoing dispute among musicologists and aestheticians. However, as an intellectual experiment, one assumes that Emmerson is right and that Electro-Acoustic music actually resembles a language it is reasonable to accept that such a "language" also has a kind of syntax. Aside from the more or less mimetic aspects of the sonic material Emmerson introduces a dichotic connection where the extremes are what Emmerson refers to as abstract syntax and abstracted syntax. An **Abstract syntax** means a syntax that totally guides the composer's work from an extra-musical point of view and is consequently based on principles taken from outside the musical material like serial technique, the golden mean, various mystical number grids, and other nonmusical manipulations. An **Abstracted syntax** implies, according to Emmerson, that the syntax is "abstracted" from the sonic material. Between these extremes we find mixtures or combinations of these two kinds of syntaxes.

Several problems arise here. Even if the listener happens to know which kind of syntax forms the basis for a certain composition, it is problematic to discover how these syntactic principles have directed the composer in his or her work simply just by listening. Nor will it be any easier if one knows in detail how the abstract or abstracted syntax are formulated and constructed. Emmerson uses Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's "Studio 1" as an example in which an abstract syntax has been implemented. Stockhausen's work is based on a number series that is manipulated according to serial

methods, but it is extremely difficult to “hear” how these numbers are related. It does not help that Stockhausen has “revealed” how he constructed his number series.

A work that Emmerson doesn't mention but is likewise founded on an abstract, extra-musical principle is John Chowning's “*Stria*”. In Chowning's work all parameters (durations, spectra as well as the larger structure of the work) are based on the ‘golden’ mean. “*Stria*” is entirely synthesized by using the computer. It ought to be a rather reasonable endeavor to experimentally examine how a test panel apprehends these circumstances and whether it is perceptually possible to “understand” how this type of works are constructed simply by listening to them

Unfortunately, Emmerson does not tell us how an abstracted syntax is derived from the sonic material. He does not give us any practical examples of his method, or what a set of abstracted syntactic rules might look like. Furthermore he doesn't refer to any sources where this kind of knowledge could be found.

If you happen to be of the opinion that neither music in general, nor the Electro-Acoustic music in particular may be regarded as a language, other alternatives should be examined. There are acousmatic compositions, where mimetic and synthetic sound material are incorporated, and put together in a way that it sometimes remind us of the “combines” by Robert Rauschenberg. The sonic material used in such works could be quite disparate and very distant in terms of spectral relations. Great art has been created in this way both in the visual and sonic arts. Searching for connections and relations in form and sonic material, and then turn them into normative prescriptions, might be standard operating procedures for music theorists. However, it is hard to imagine any visual art theorist, who would ever consider stating that every time an artist used a stuffed goat, it has to have a tire mounted around its belly.

In order to reach a better understanding and a more profound insight in the acousmatic arts, I think an aesthetic approach could be useful. When we study and scrutinize the artistic output of an individual *acousmatic* composer or a group of composers who seem to share the same stylistic idiom, we often observe that certain types of formal elements are more frequently used than other. The composer may favor specific types of sound objects, spectral components, duration and gesture patterns, etc. These preferences may be analyzed, mapped and evaluated from an aesthetic point of view. Eventually they make up the aesthetic profile of the composer in question. Quite good analytical tools have already been developed by Dennis Smalley and Lasse Thoresen which could very well describe what we actually perceive and grasp from an audition of an *acousmatic* composition. Such an aesthetic profile mapping of a composer could very likely give us more pertinent information and enhance our understanding of the distinctive character of a work by an *acousmatic* composer. It would also help us to place him or her in a broader aesthetic/stylistic perspective and hopefully help us to introduce *acousmatic* art as a important entity in the cultural and intellectual discussion instead of constantly reverting to compositional and perceptual technicalities.

The fact that western art music is based on a restricted number of building blocks (often the case in music from other parts of the world as well) implies that the chance that a certain pitch will directly follow the preceding one is reasonably high. In atonal music it will never fall below 8.3%. In “classical” art music -not to speak of popular music - the probability is far higher due to stylistic phenomena and various normative systems, usually quite well known to the listeners. Considering these circumstances, we could claim with confidence that there is a strong causal relation between the components in a “classical” art music work.

Consequently, the major cause of the predictability of the art music, and a massive part of the popular music is their limited sound worlds. Additionally, stylistic features and normative rules of composing due to their long historical development have become possible for the listeners to identify and to accept. The factor of recognition is of paramount importance when it comes to the experience of listening to music. Even some works based on serial or twelve-tone principals do not cause any resistance to experienced listeners nowadays. However, the probability of the sudden sonic appearance of barking dogs, chain saws, bubbling fluids or sea-gulls during a string quartet performance is likely to be low.