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The position of Electro Acoustic Music in the arts.

Electro-Acoustic Music (EAM) is a strange art form. At best it is tolerated, and maybe in some instances even respected, but no one seems to really love it, including the composers and the arts administrators involved. Often it meets with a kind of passive resistance or indifference; sometimes condescending or deprecatory views are expressed even by people who are very active in contemporary music. I have to admit - in spite of my devotion and active involvement in this art form for almost thirty years - that I seldom listen to EAM for my own private satisfaction. When I do listen it is mostly for professional reasons. Maybe because it is more rewarding and stimulating to create EAM than to listen to it.

A couple of years ago a mini-debate occurred in Computer Music Journal initiated by the chief editor of the magazine, Stephen Pope. He stated: " I have identified two worrisome trends that I describe as 1) the marginalization of "art music" within contemporary art, and 2) the marginalization of non-real-time music within electro-acoustic music" Several other writers responded and seemed to agree that a marginalization had taken place. Various opinions were expressed in which even the idea that electro-acoustic music could cease to exist was suggested. However, as far as I can see the discussion was not supported by any real hard substantial evidence like concert statistics, records sales, declining copyright revenues for the EAM-composers, less program-time for EAM on radio stations, etc.

I believe that this debate was triggered by a sudden and vague feeling that EAM is not growing as an art form, is not developing, is not generating a new and wider audience. In addition, the debaters probably also noticed that EAM has a very low status in the art music community.

My personal opinion is that EAM has been marginal from the very beginning even if there have been some fluctuations in interest and appreciation on the part of the public during the 45 years EAM has existed.

There may, in fact, be a more widespread feeling among practitioners that the development of EAM may not be on the right track at all, and that it has been moving in the wrong directions for some considerable time.

If my view is correct, what are the underlying causes of this predicament and can anything be done to change direction and improve the situation?

When EAM first marched out to a somewhat wider audience during the fifties, it was received with some aversion but also with some curiosity and maybe also a little respect. A few people may even have thought that EAM was a genuine musical invention of the 20th century, "the music of the future". However, EAM was by decidedly a marginal phenomenon for at least the first 15 years of its existence for obvious reasons: 1) very few production centers existed . 2) Practically no concert halls were properly equipped for regular EAMperformances ;3) The process of producing the compositions was slow and cumbersome . All these disadvantages contributed to the state of marginality.

In the early sixties a number of prominent composers of contemporary music, people like John Cage, Luciano Berio, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez.etc - who had also been active in EAM-composition, quit working in this field. Some of them took a rather condescending view of EAM produced in the studio - "non-real-time" music as Pope calls it, and on some occasions even openly attacked this art form. It certainly hurt the reputation and the further development of EAM both in Europe and the US.

The cultural and intellectual life of some west-European countries moved in a radical left-wing direction during the late sixties and the early the seventies had a politically radical left-wing movement which highly influenced cultural and intellectual life. This was especially true of Sweden. EAM could naturally have become something to attract young intellectual people a great deal at that time, but new art music in general was seen as repulsive "rubbish" for a bourgeois élite and EAM was regarded as something even worse, like being associated with the military/industrial complex. In Sweden, at least this aversion to EAM has still not really been overcome, even though other political winds have been blowing for quite a long time now. New art music continues to have low status in intellectual circles in Sweden.

It is in a way ironic that during the same period popular music producers began to utilize the means of electro-acoustic production on a very broad scale - a process which eventually led to a massive dominance of popular music in the development of music technology and in the manufacture of its machinery.

When a new art form or a new aesthetic movement is brought into being good arguments for its justification seem to be necessary in order to give it a wider acceptance and to launch it successfully. Often the creators attack the previous art movements for being outdated, inferior, etc, using various invective to denigrate the old and glorify the new.

Since EAM from the very beginning was not just another aesthetic movement or style in contemporary art music, it had to be justified in a different way. Blank cheques were drawn on the future and terribly unrealistic promises were made. It was asserted, for instance that every sound or sound structure you could imagine could also be synthesized in EAM. Yet it was easy for everyone in these early days to hear that there was a gigantic discrepancy between what had been promised and the actual sound result. Even 35 years later we are still not quite able to fulfil those promises. It goes without saying that EAM production has always been heavily dependent on technical equipment of high quality, administrators were therefore forced to come up with strong arguments to get the proper economic fundings for the studios.

The argument "music of the future" was frequently used - especially in Sweden and rather successfully for a while - often in combination with the term "experimental". Several public radio stations in Europe and universities in North America, for instance thought that they needed an experimental music studio in order to develop the genuine media music of the future. The word "experimental" is associated immediately with scientific research and the general idea indeed was to give EAM a certain aura of being some new branch of science rather than an art form. This became even more obvious later when computer-music appeared on the stage.

In my opinion this was very unfortunate because it encapsulated and confined EAM in a pseudo-scientific realm and gave it a negative reputation of being something exclusively for a small professional élite of engineers and research-oriented composers

whose output was supposed to be way beyond the common listeners' comprehension. Today this notion still dominates; EAM is a peculiar branch of science and should be justified on those grounds rather than for its artistic merits. It is one of the main reasons why EAM remains marginal.

It could be interesting to compare the electro-acoustic art music with the popular music field. From a technical standpoint large areas of popular music can be defined as a kind of EAM and the composers and producers who are working in this realm are using at least as advanced technical production means as their colleagues in the so called serious EAM, but I think that in popular music the idea of EAM being a sort of science never occurred.

EAM history teaches us that the big public radio stations in Europe lost interest in maintaining their production facilities for EAM since its promises could not be fulfilled and the meager output could not justify the heavy expenditures. Eventually the experimental studios were closed down or they were kept on a low and insignificant level. We have seen this happened in Cologne, Milan, Stockholm, Tokyo, Warsaw, Ghent, and elsewhere. EAM has become - with a few exceptions - an activity entirely for universities and other institutions for higher education, both in Europe and North America. This has merely emphasized the concept of EAM as more of a science than an art form.

It is perhaps trivial to point out that when high tech is applied to an art form it does not necessarily lead to the absurd idea that it has in some way to be associated with the natural sciences. Even if massive research and technical innovation has been invested in an art form, the content and artistic ideas seem to be unaffected, as for example, in videoart and computerart. Why is it that EAM seems to be the only artform which has taken this direction? I noted earlier that scientific arguments have been used to gain economic support and respect for EAM. Perhaps some of the answer is to be sought there.

Since the early fifties there has been a general trend in contemporary music to give new music the image of being scientific to an extent that has no parallel in other art forms. Numerous examples might be mentioned. The whole concept of serialism, for example, is an attempt to apply the same rationalism and precision that are predominant in the natural sciences. Trying to be as

objective as possible in the process of creation leads to a take over by computers and various composition techniques in which the creative role of the artist as a human being is gradually reduced to nothing. Strangely enough, both John Cage and the most aggressive computer music composers are aiming for total "depersonalization" in music. No other art form that I know of, is to such a degree focused on its own production technology. It becomes the sole content of its manifestation. Who cares if a piece of music is based on neural networks or chaos-theory or is produced on the newest and hottest gear as long as the composition has no emotional radiation, no sensual qualities, and no appeal to ordinary listeners? I think it is a big mistake and a "cul de sac" when we reject the human aspect and try to "depersonalize" the art, reduce it to a kind of natural phenomenon and objective fact without meaning and try to rub out the human creator behind it.

I may be hopelessly romantic, but I believe that this depersonalization attitude among EAM artists plays a major role in its isolation and marginal existence. To break away from this stalemate. EAM needs to be more extrovert and emotional, sensual with content and meaning - though of course on a high artistic level. We have to feel that one human being is trying to communicate with other human beings. It is not enough any more for a composer to provide a bundle of sounds in order to "imitate nature in her manner of operation" as John Cage put it.

Can anything be done on a practical level to improve the overall situation for EAM? Maybe it is possible but it will take some considerable effort and cooperation among the EAM practitioners. Lobbying and public relations are essential ingredients in our civilization and include the arts. EAM does not have any distinguished and respected spokesmen outside the composers' camp which is a considerable handicap. There are no influential critics to write informative articles about EAM in the leading newspapers. The general public interested in the arts have no idea what is going on in EAM today because the information is so meager. It should be the duty of every serious EAM composer to write at least one article a year addressed to the public at large in cultural magazines, newspapers, radio-programs, etc.

ICEM, the International Confederation for Electro-acoustic Music, should be a driving force in this respect but so far has not managed to do anything substantial in that direction. ICEM could play an

important role here and be more active in public relations and general information and maybe perform more aggressive lobbying on the music scene. ICEM could also become an active pressure group against music copyright societies in order to obtain fair revenues to EAM composers and elevate the status of EAM economically. In many countries the revenues for EAM are alarmingly low. A radio performance of a 15-minutes piece in some countries will give you around 50 cents. It is only by pressing the copyright societies that we can change the situation. It should be the obligation of all composers to try to improve the conditions we operate under. A lot of things could also be done to improve the dissemination of EAM. Again we have to put pressure on concert administrators and radio producers in order to increase the EAM output. Good results will need well coordinated action. Unfortunately many composers are individualists and are not very keen to move in unison toward mutual goals.