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Metaphor, Abstraction and Temporality in Electroacoustic Music

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1. Introduction

This invited paper was written in response to Gerald Bennet's 'Listening to Electroacoustic Music' presented at ArtMusFair 2010, Warsaw, Poland and was first given as part of a panel responding to Bennett's paper exploring Electronic Music and the Challenges of the 21st Century. Other contributors to the panel were Katharine Norman and Jean-Claude Risset. Gerald Bennet's presentation dealt with issues of metaphor, abstraction and temporality in electroacoustic music. I will consider each of these in turn.

2. Metaphor

In its inclusivity of sound sources electroacoustic music encourages listening strategies that extend beyond those traditionally associated with western classical music. In instrumental music the way we make sense of what we are hearing is to engage in listening metaphorically. Throughout the history of music we have become enculturated to interpret various musical configurations, what Steven Jan [1] refers to as memes, as metaphors for emotions or states of being. One such example is the descending semitone figure found in Baroque music and beyond, from Bach, Handel, and Purcell through to Mahler and Richard Strauss, and universally used to indicate grief and lament. A secondary, more localized example would be the descending third in the clarinet in Beethoven's *Symphony no.6 'The Pastoral'* (1808) symbolizing the song of the cuckoo. In contrast to instrumental music, when listening to electroacoustic music we must acknowledge that the modes of perception are different from those of instrumental music. In electroacoustic music, because of its extended sound palette and removal of visual cues, we encounter a metaphoric/metonymic axis of perception - a model first proposed by Roman Jakobson in 1956 [2].

Metaphor belongs... to the selection axis of language, allowing [for] the possibility of *substitution*. Metonymy, however, belongs to the combination axis of language, allowing for the perception of *contexture*. [3]

Michael Bridger has applied the metaphor/metonym axis proposed by Jakobson to electroacoustic music. Bridger writes that,

It is arguable that much electroacoustic music operates in a largely metonymic mode, contrasted with other music's predominantly metaphoric operation... perhaps it could be argued that in conventional music an essentially metaphorical process is conducted by an overtly metonymic (syntactical) apparatus; and that in electroacoustic music these emphases are reversed... electroacoustic music, then seems to be a medium that commonly presents expressive potential in a metonymic rather than a metaphorical mode... certainly, in its use of concrete sounds, or non-musical human voice sounds, the inevitable Gestalt response is essentially metonymic. [4]

The issue of metonymy in electroacoustic music is significant as it encourages significant intrinsic-extrinsic listening strategies that are alien to the hermetic world of instrumental music. These extrinsic connections are both dynamic and fluid depending on both cultural and generational differences. Both Michael Bridger and Denis Smalley have further identified the

tendency of listeners to electronic sound to search for an implied physical source that produced the sound and therefore derive mental imagery that is directly associative rather than metaphorical as in traditional instrumental musical expressivity. In Smalley's terminology, these sounds are remote surrogates, where vestiges of gesture and spectromorphological attributes may stimulate extrinsic connections. In Gibsonian terms we find the perceptual system of the listener hunting within its known cultural and physical environment to assign meaning to the sounds presented within a composition. Smalley writes,

The wide-open sonic world of electroacoustic music encourages imaginative and imagined extrinsic connections because of the variety and ambiguity of its materials, because of its reliance on the motion of colourful spectral energies, its emphasis on the acousmatic, and not least through its exploration of spatial perspective. There is quite a difference in identification level between a statement which says of a texture, 'It is stones falling', a second which says, 'It sounds like stones falling', and a third which says, 'It sounds as if it's behaving like falling stones'. All three statements are extrinsic connections but in increasing stages of uncertainty and remoteness from reality. [5]

Depending on the intent of the composer these extrinsic connections may be actively sought, enriching the layering of meaning to be found in a work. However, Bridger implies that this initial metonymic mode of perception implies a certain poverty in electroacoustic music. Bridger writes that there,

seems to be some justification for rewarding the imaginative leaps of metaphor as a higher order mental activity than the more restrictive logic of metonymy which is clearly close to primitive levels of perception vital to survival, but because of that may be less likely to nourish artistic sensibilities which are associated rather with reflection and enrichment. [6]

Bridger's argument is more complex than he posits as the dichotomy between metaphoric and metonymic modes of listening are not as clear-cut as is indicated. In a work such as Francis Dhomont's *Espace/Escape* (1989) we listen in a de-synchronized dual mode of perception. Initially we listen in a metonymic mode attending to the recognizable concrete sounds and their extrinsic implications. As the work progresses we engage a secondary metaphoric mode of perception in which we reinterpret sounds as metaphors signifying notions of space and mobility. It is important to acknowledge this dual mode of perception as it differs greatly from our perception of traditional instrumental music.

3. Abstraction

Throughout the history of the arts and music we encounter different movements that tend towards or away from abstraction. We find abstraction advocated by Clement Greenberg in the 1950s revering the work of Rothko, Pollock and the abstract expressionists. A similar concern for abstraction and sensation is to be found in Christoph Cox's writings on the neo-modernist microsound artists such as Oval, Carsten Nicolai, Richard Chartier and Taylor Deupree. Cox writes that,

the neo-modernist sound artists undertake an investigation, at once spiritual and scientific, into the basic forms of aesthetic matter and the fundamental conditions of perception...to the postmodernist, the new sound art might seem to retreat from social and political concerns. But neo-modernism has a politics of its own – a distinctly avant gardist one that recalls both Greenberg and Theodor Adorno and implicitly criticizes post-modernism for its symbiotic relationship with the culture industry. In eschewing mass-media content, the genre proposes a more radical exploration of the formal conditions of the medium itself. Against the anesthetic assault of daily life, it reclaims a basic function of art: the affirmation and extension of pure sensation. [7]

My own work deals with predominantly abstract forms and abstract sound and I'll use this as a short case study to illustrate my thinking. *entangled symmetries* (2010) is concerned with an essentially abstract musical syntax and abstract structure. Musically it is indebted both to acousmatic techniques and glitch aesthetics. Perhaps more importantly is the dematerialization of the acoustic source: the instant recognition of a physical stimulus required to create a sound (a piano) but one that is physically absent. The impetus for creating such a listening context is to place the listener at the centre of the work. When played through headphones (the ideal for binaurally encoded sound) the listener is literally in the centre of the sound. This desire for abstraction and dematerialisation is echoed in the writings of Susan Sontag in *The Aesthetics of Silence*. Sontag writes that,

In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is 'art'... The 'spirit' seeking embodiment in art clashes with the 'material' character of art itself. Art is unmasked as gratuitous, and the very concreteness of the artist's tools appears as a trap...the artist's activity is cursed with mediacy. Art becomes the enemy of the artist, for it denies him the realization - the transcendence - he desires. [8]

What I am aiming for in *entangled symmetries* is not necessarily transcendence but what Deleuze would term 'immanence'. Often regarded as the opposite of transcendence (a divine or empirical beyond), Deleuze employs the term plane of immanence 'as a pure immanence, an unqualified immersion or embeddedness, an immanence which denies transcendence as a *real distinction*' [9]. On the plane of immanence there are only complex networks of forces, particles, connections, relations, affects and becomings:

There are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules, and particles of all kinds... [We call this plane, which knows only longitudes and latitudes, speeds and haecceities, the plane of consistency or composition (as opposed to a plan(e) of organization or development). [10]

For me, in order to convey this sense of unqualified immersion the musical argument has to be abstract and free of metonymic modes of perception as any such suggestion would imply a re-engagement with physicality and an awareness of spaces in which the listener is situated rather than one which the listener is inhabiting and embedded within.

4. Temporality

There is a striking similarity between Deleuze and Guattari's 'plane of immanence', pure sensation and the directionlessness of what Don Ihde terms 'surroundability'. Gordon Fitzell writes that,

The concept refers to an enveloping sensation or "auditory aura" that emanates an "ambiguous richness of sound." ... From the perspective of temporal experience, surroundability constitutes the opposite of directionality. Whereas directionality refers to a perception of predictable change along a particular dimension, surroundability refers to an experience devoid of predictable change. Within such a perception, the onset of each event is "enriched by the depth of those [perceived events] which have just preceded it *'equally' present*." [11]

Any discussion of sonic material that is directionless, devoid of predictable change, that creates an auditory aura perceived as continuing 'present' is inherently concerned also with issues of temporality. Prior to emergence of the Darmstadt avant-garde musical time was considered to be primarily linear, centred on the teleology of tonal structures. Many electroacoustic works still follow this notion of musical linearity, defined by Bob Snyder as 'a metaphor of physical causation, ... an attempt to make musical events seem to cause each other.' [12] Acousmatic works by Gilles Gobeil, Jonty Harrison, Natasha Barrett and Diana Salazar-Simpson all work within this model.

In the post-war era there have been numerous composers who have considered alternative modes of temporality in their work. Pierre Boulez wrote that,

A composition is no longer a consciously directed construction moving from a "beginning" to an "end" and passing from one to another. Frontiers have been deliberately "anesthetized." Listening time is no longer directional but time-bubbles, as it were. [13]

Stockhausen formulized this thinking further in his concept of *Momentform* [14] whilst Morton Feldman aimed at a disorientation of memory through constant changes in short fragments of material.

In order to understand how long-form compositions such as *entangled symmetries*, Richard Chartier and Taylor Deupree's *Specification.Fifteen* (2006), the *monochromes* series (2009) by t'um and the works of Eliane Radigue extend the traditional linear concepts of temporality it is useful to consider in relation to Edmund Husserl's exploration of experiential time [15]. In his theorizing on the structure of consciousness, Husserl developed the notion of a *subjective time-consciousness* that is distinct from objective time. From this, Husserl went on to propose the idea of 'inner time-consciousness', the main focus of this being an individual's 'temporal span'. Husserl maintained that the temporal span comprises three main parts that are inseparable: primal impression, retention, and protention. Fitzell writes that,

Devoid of substantial directionality, a nonlinear temporal experience permits no protentions of closure, only nondirectional protentions of continuance. Unlike linear music, which features readily apparent and often predictable temporal trajectories, nonlinear music curtails a listener's ability to anticipate conclusion. The effect is one of enduring present awareness. [16]

The drone compositions of Eliane Radigue are characterised by nondirectional protentions of continuance. Radigue studied with Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s, worked periodically at the Studio d'Essai, and was Pierre Henry's assistant in the early 1960s. However, following her experience working at NYU on a Buchla synthesiser in 1970 Radigue developed a highly individual compositional voice which had much more to do with the minimal aesthetics present in music and art in New York at the time than those espoused by Schaeffer and Henry. In the years covering the composition of the *Adnos* trilogy (1974, 1979 and 1980) Radigue became deeply influenced by Buddhism, an influence that was to culminate in the three-hour *Trilogie de la Mort* (1988-93).

What Radigue's works present is an extreme case of perceived parametric consistency, continuity that Thomas Clifton refers to as static succession, as 'sameness succeeding itself' [17]. Although Radigue's works do change over extended periods of time, the perceived moment-to-moment progression is one of implied motionlessness. Applying Husserl's ideas to Radigue's almost imperceptibly changing sustained tones the listener would identify a continuity of 'phases' between the beginning and end points as 'expired duration'. At any one moment in the composition prior to the end-point, the listener is unaware of the remaining duration though aware of duration resulting in the listener sensing no protentions of closure.

5. Conclusion

In order to accommodate the wealth of electronic music now being created we must be open and inclusive in our thought and terminology. For me, whilst the ongoing discussion of the metonymy-metaphor and abstraction-reality perceptual axis are important it is the different approaches to temporality that most characterize the plurality of contemporary electronic music.

6. Notes

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- [6] *ibid* 4, p.16
- [7] Cox, C., Return to Form, www.12k.com/chartierartforum.html
- [8] Sontag, S. (2001), 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will*, Vintage, London
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- [10] Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p.266
- [11] Fitzell, G. (2004), Time-Consciousness and Form in Nonlinear Music, PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, p.14
- [12] Snyder, B. (2000) *Music and Memory*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, p.230
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- [15] Husserl, E. (1964), *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (1928), ed. Martin Heidegger, trans. James Churchill, Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- [16] *ibid.* 12, p.22
- [17] Clifton, T. (1983), *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology*, Yale University Press, New Haven, pp.104-5.