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Original Citation

Dodd, Rose (2009) The Living Dolls of Electronica. Sonic Image in Electronic Music: the use of subversive text and narrative to expose gender dichotomy. In: Representing Gender in the Performing Arts, 12-13 November 2009, University of Groningen. (Unpublished)

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'The Living Dolls of Electronica. Sonic Image in Electronic Music : the use of subversive text and narrative to expose gender dichotomy.'

Keywords - Electronica – Parody/Self-Parody – Deviation – Cybernetic Transformation – Text – Image/Narrative – Display

Abstract: The musical tradition of electronica is new and emerging. A selection of practitioners who acknowledge gender in their output will be examined in this paper; strategies being the extent to which corporeality is explicit or exploited by composers in their works, how far the gadgetry of technology is knowingly used as a narrative tool, whether subversively or with an element of parody.

The act of composition is mediated through the acknowledgment of historically inherited musical traditions. This is as true of electronic music as classical, jazz, rock, or any other genre of music. However, the relationship between the electronic form and its close relation the electroacoustic idiom is indistinct, not least because it is difficult to cite exact influences. This is in part because electronic music draws not only on the historical for formal authority, but also references other contemporary genres in its search for artistic innovation. The range of influences for each work is vastly different than those for another work - there is therefore no median definition of what an electronic piece is, what materials constitute it, what form it should take and which influences it might display. What is certain, is that the influence of modernism pervades both the classically derived electroacoustic and electronic forms, retaining its hold into the twenty-first century.

The reappraisal of classical idiomatic language takes a different shape with regard to electronic practice. The tools and materials necessary to make an electronic composition are exotic and alien in relation to traditional classical musical instruments. As Sadie Plant observes:

Whether they are gathering information, telecommunicating, running washing machines, doing sums, or making videos, all digital computers translate information into the zeros and ones of machine code.³

Thus, the electronic project at its very foundation rests upon digital blundering, and sublimation of various technological gadgets and gizmos as the means to contrive a paradigmatic musical language. This is in marked contrast to the classical venture, whose very method and intention is synonymous with purity of musical articulation and execution. The classical musician embodies a grace and erudition reflective of an historical tradition which has finely honed the performance practice of instrumentalists. In marked contrast, the language attributed to the digital and technological domains is well documented for its coarse nature and its very highly charged use of gendered terminologies.⁵ Because of its intrinsically different nature, composing with any kind of software or hardware demands new ways in which music is transported from the composer's original aesthetic intent to the final composition as artefact.

When a composer embarks on the act of composition, he/she encounters a variety of intersecting phenomena. Firstly, he/she faces the knowledge of what has gone before. This enters his/her consciousness as a comparative infrastructure, an aesthetic yardstick against which he/she is duty bound to

³ Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones - Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (London, 1997), 34.

⁵ See Andra McCartney, 'Inventing Images: Constructing & Contesting Gender in Thinking about Electroacoustic Music,' *Leonardo Music Journal* (San Francisco, 1995), v, 57; in which she interviews composer Wende Bartley who describes the gendered metaphors she encountered when teaching an electroacoustic studio course; the description of how wiring plugs fit together using "male" and "female" connections, colleagues describing unused tape as "virgin," and a "disk-swapping" party at a Toronto store that specializes in MIDI equipment.

measure any original expression which he/she wishes to introduce into the genre.

Particularly within electronic music, it is the male composer who has created the tradition of using a specific range of technological tools. This commodification of the classic electronic studio environment has been perpetuated globally. Whether in Stockholm, London, Wellington or Prague, the globally available studio-as-artefact restricts the development of specifically local contributions to our aesthetic heritage. The perpetuation of these tools contributes to the continuation of a man-made Eurocentric aesthetic heritage. Put simply, the emphasis within the electronic aesthetic has transferred from a preoccupation with melody and rhythm, as exemplified in the Western Art Music tradition, to technological process, and a preoccupation with the syntax of exotic timbral & mechanical interrelation.

Electronic music produced using initially available technologies collided with the advent simultaneously of High Modernism in the early 1950s. This markedly changed the aesthetic aspiration of the electronic genre and launched electronic music into a swift rate of change in response to the developments in technologies. This in turn has stimulated composers who use the computer as their creative stimulus or ascribe to develop a myriad of methods of composition. The more generalised term, current in Britain, France, Sweden and Quebec, in particular Montreal of 'electroacoustic music', is sometimes interchangeable with the more aesthetically distinctive 'acousmatic,' although it is fair to say that this terminology has recently

become antiquated and works now subdivide into the 'fixed' electronic category / or 'live lap top' performance categories.

The origins of electronic music still exert a marked influence on current musical and theoretical developments within its domain, in particular structures of authority which still pervade current practice and the extent to which these may affect compositional and theoretical articulation. The structures of authority I am particularly interested in exploring are those which influence the daily workings of the composer in the studio environment. The nature of the contextual framework to which an electronic composer refers while involved in the compositional process differs from composer to composer. In each composer's situation there are diverse factors which have contributed to the evolution of such a framework: cultural, historical, social, contextual and technological.

When we begin to participate in any form of computer-generated composition, how much aesthetic control do we submit to either the mastery of the computer application, or the cultural paradigm in which we find ourselves? Are these submissions simply ignored or do they remain unrecognised? Is the use of technology invasive? Does it inhibit the spontaneity of creativity?

It is fair comment that the electronic studio environment is culturally a male preserve. Over the last 35 years a few fine female practitioners working in the electronic medium have emerged including Françoise Barrière, Kaija Saariaho and Laurie Anderson to name but a few. Will their participation in the studio

environment and their contribution to the ever-growing canon of respected mainstream electronic works ring any changes for the existing electronic contextual framework, or are the existing structures of authority within this framework monolithic and unassailable?

These structures of authority, alongside questions of authorship and identity, create a confusing environment in which electronic music strives to survive. For the composer of electronic music who wants to develop a coherent compositional identity within which he/she can pursue freedom of creative expression these are fundamentally difficult times. In Mike Vaughan's words:

The manner in which the available technical resources interact with the composer's view of a specific musical work, and its internal processes of construction, is of paramount importance. This is because the tools of realisation tend to elicit forms of normative behaviour determined in part by tradition but also, and more significantly, by the architecture and design of the various components present in the production chain.⁷

This epitomises for me a significant drawback to widespread access to the same tools of realisation within what has become a global marketplace. A normative studio set-up represents one form of authority inhibiting the studio composer. Maybe the new predilection for live laptop performance will force a resounding air of equality through an increase in performance-based practice.

Other issues of authority emerge. Certain aspects of electronic compositional endeavour remain limited. Stereotyping of the female voice type and

⁷ Mike Vaughan, 'The Human-Machine Interface In Electroacoustic Music Composition', *Contemporary Music Review* 10/ii, (1994), 111.

consequent perpetuation of the vocal performer as a lonely female vocal exhibitionist provides one salient example. In Hannah Bosma's words:

A musical partnership of a male composer and a female vocalist is typical of electroacoustic music. This stereotype relates woman to body, performance, tradition, non-verbal sound and singing and man to electronic music technology, innovation, language and authority. It resonates with the tendency in contemporary Western culture to associate singing with women, not with men (Cusick 1999), whilst technology is seen as a man's world (Benston 1988). More generally, it reflects the dualistic opposition of masculinity versus femininity and mind versus body that is so prevalent in our culture.¹⁴

I find this quite provocative when I think about it in relation to my own electronic works. I, a woman composer, choose purposefully not to use women's voices as spectacular. In my works to date they do not display classically honed qualities in the traditional Western Art Music sense. Indeed, one may conclude that I choose my female 'vocalists' precisely because of their antithetical position in relation to such a spectacular ideal.

One of the best known ways of presenting text in the classic electroacoustic format is to use a male narrator. Michel Chion terms this an acousmètre, 'a powerful master who can only be heard and who often sees and knows all.'¹⁶

This filmic presentation of text taps into our adeptness at receiving information, practised daily in our saturated culture. Erik Mikael Karlsson's *Epitaphe pour Iqbal Masih*¹⁷ provides a fairly typical example of codified textual

¹⁴ Hannah Bosma, 'Bodies of evidence, singing cyborgs and other gender issues in electrovocal music', *Organised Sound*, vol. 8 (2003), 12.

¹⁶ Hannah Bosma, 'Bodies of evidence, singing cyborgs and other gender issues in electrovocal music', *Organised Sound*, vol. 8 (2003), 14.

¹⁷ *Two Composers: Jonas Broberg, Erik Mikael Karlsson* FYCD1009 (Sweden, 1997)

presentation, a poetic French text spoken by an omnipresent male narrator.¹⁸ Lyrical and understated it conveys a powerful and evocative narrative. I believe that *Epitaphe* perfectly fits the requirements of a classically proportioned electroacoustic work.

This is in sharp contrast with Frances Dyson's composition *Window Pain* (1993) which I posit as a deliberately diametrically opposed comparator to *Epitaphe*. Perhaps composers such as Frances Dyson in *Window Pain* are constructing a body of work encompassing an ironic view of technology. Dyson conjures highly female bodily content within a heightened and personalised narrative – a documentary musical form. She, the composer, depicts the journeys undertaken by various women with the gynaecological disease 'endometriosis'. Dyson creates a sound montage of recordings of women relaying their experience of the pain of the disease. A clock ticks symbolically, forcing us to identify with the ticking clock through hours and hours of pain, the extent of which gynaecologists generally don't believe – as one line from the text emotes : 'You have no clue how often your face is wet with tears.'³⁷

Specific references are made to attempts to allay the evolution of endometriosis through various drug therapies which simulate pregnancy and menopause; placing the body in a kind of reproductive stasis. Interspersed throughout the composition, 'natural' and 'processed' forms of noises of baby squeals and gurgles interject, invoking the longing of these women for the

¹⁸ Who is in fact the composer Roger Cocchini.

³⁷ Ibid 36.

baby that is now in jeopardy due to the disease. The narrative of the pain culminates in the documentary comment:

'two male surgeons have cheerfully suggested me another operation to fix me right up, including slitting my throat and fusing my neck vertebrae; now there's a temptation!'³⁸

Donna Haraway puts forward the view that a cyborg body is anything but innocent.³⁴ If this is the case, women practitioners within the electroacoustic genre are well placed to contribute knowingly, aware of the structures of authority and technology which surround their activity: woman as a knowing cyborg.

There are several consequences to taking seriously the imagery of cyborgs as other than our enemies. Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden, it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted.³⁵

Women composers who operate in the contemporary climate forge diverse strategies in how they position themselves. They acknowledge the situation they find themselves in. One fact binds their endeavours together - each composer striving to create their own space in a musical heritage which has excluded them until the last fifty years or so. Andra McCartney interprets Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*²⁶ as unravelling:

³⁸ Ibid 36.

³⁴ Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London, 1991), 180.

³⁵ Ibid 34.

²⁶ Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London, 1991)

the image of the Cyborg, the hybrid organism both human and machine, as a powerful metaphor...[and]..the traditional relationship between man and machine as a boundary war: the machine as enemy, to be controlled, just as woman is to be controlled.²⁷

My question would be whether the hankering to demonstrate technological and aesthetic assimilation could be viewed as an example of the control that Haraway articulates? If she is unquestioning of the tools at hand, and the encoded normative practices, wo/man is deemed to have successfully controlled the machine. It could be seen as naïve, however, to ignore the covert influence of the machine, and the significance this may exert on compositional codes and practice. How might a woman tell her own story, using the studio gadgetry to her own ends?

In my own work I have re-evaluated the acousmètre principle in two pieces : *Six Haiku for Body Ratio 1:8* (1999) is a piece made up of six short meditations by survivors of breast cancer, written in the form of haiku as part of their recovery strategy. Through the sparseness and the sporadic nature of the musical articulation there is space enough for the most important feature: the words. These words originate from raw life experience and they are mediated in that they are formalised. The text's innate rawness is refined to fit the stylised language of haiku. The haiku are performed by a female acousmètre creating a stylised presentation which distances the text from its original guttural earthiness. In many musical traditions throughout the world special ritual music is performed to celebrate and to mark rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. The use of the distinctive ritual-sounding bell in *Body Ratio 1:8* is deliberate. I am referencing the Japanese origin of the

²⁷ Andra McCartney, 'A prelude to EA Gender Issues', *Contact!* 8/2 (1982), 68-74.

haiku, but simultaneously evoking the idea of ritual, the rite of passage that experiencing cancer must surely be. The fact that the acousmètre is performed by an American voice is to honour the origin of those who created the text, but is also a nod to the confessional nature of contemporary American culture.

Playing the Bones (2005)

In 1998 I recorded Nancy Salmon (1918-2005) talking about her early life. Of particular interest to me were the minutiae of her daily life, how her household survived, who formed her household, what they ate, where they lived, what they did. It is fascinating to reflect how society has changed, yet how in essence it still remains the same. Above all I wanted to communicate how full of life and fun an old person's reminiscences can be, how vivid the memory remains to the person whose it is. I also wanted to portray the very humanity of Nancy, to capture her through recording her stories. To heighten this sense of domestic reminiscence I've also included three music hall songs: *The Window Cleaner* (1936) sung by George Formby, *When I Take My Morning Promenade* (1912) sung by Marie Lloyd and *The Laughing Policeman* (1926) sung by Charles Penrose. Through talking to family members I've discovered that the period about which she is telling her stories, when she lived in Smith Street, is likely to be the late 1920s/early 1930s. These classic music hall songs would certainly have been current when Nancy was growing up. After a quick succession of the music hall fragments, the second one, *When I Take My Morning Promenade*, plays out between 5'06" to 6'47". This is exceedingly long in composition terms. I have purposefully placed this at the central point in the piece; to me it is as if we are listening to the radio. Thanks to the beauty of

the electronic idiom I've also place a harpsichord in her living room – evoking sonically a domestic interior that heightens the sense of the 'salon' - in *Playing the Bones* Nancy Salmon is by implication, imagined sitting in her domestic surrounds telling her stories.

The pieces *Window Pain*, *Body Ratio 1:8* & *Playing the Bones* convey a sense of the very female bodily/corporeal - subverting the traditional technological face of the electronic genre. Susan McClary says of Laurie Anderson, an acknowledged seminal exponent in the creative use of technology:

as Anderson../[the female composer]... wrestles with technology, she displaces the male subject who usually enacts that heroic feat. And by setting up an implied alliance and identification with the machine, she raises the conventional anxiety of the self-directed robot - the living dolls of science fiction or gothic stories of the uncanny, but a living doll who is self-created, who flaunts her electronic constructedness.³⁹

Frances Dyson has conjured up similar terrifying spectres, spectres never contemplated before in electronic music. Using the medium she evokes sonic images of that most taboo and personal of female inner workings: gynaecology; women's bodily parts, the womb and blood. The living doll⁴⁰ documented through *Window Pain* is very much alive. McClary tells us that:

One of the principal features of performance art is the insistence on the artist as a performing body. Gone is the division of labour in which a composer constructs an object and passes it on to a performer who executes faithfully the demands of the master. In performance art, artist and performer are usually one, and the piece is that which is inscribed on and through the body. The radical separation of mind and body that underwrites

³⁹ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota, 1994), 138.

⁴⁰ Ibid 39, McClary's definition.

most so-called serious music and music theory is here thrown into confusion.⁴¹

Obviously Dyson, through drawing on the experience of other women, cannot claim to be a performance artist in a conventional sense. However, she has enabled the experiences of her gender to be exhibited and displayed within her works of art. The piece *Window Pain* can be said definitively to have been 'inscribed on and through the body.'⁴² The female subject is at the very core of this piece. To exploit technology with this most womanly of experiences is certainly a powerful tribute to Dyson's creative vision and similar to the practice of performance-based artists, such as Laurie Anderson. Dyson's *Window Pain* and my own *Body Ratio 1:8 & Playing the Bones* place the female poetic experience into the masculine arena through using and discarding qualities of masculine gesture to our own creative ends. Knowingly, we create compositions, secure in the cultural and sociological arena in which we find ourselves.

A woman composer can construct a compositional discourse which lays bare elements of her life, so that we may more intimately know her: woman as acousmètre, seizing control of her own identity and the identity of the aesthetic path she is choosing to create, not replicate; nourishing existing musical structures with new creative energies; using the corporeal to situate an intimate idea of woman's identity within technology; using difference so as to bring about change to the existing language of the electronic idiom.

⁴¹ Ibid 39, 137.

⁴² Ibid 39, 137.

