

The Sublime in Acousmatic Music: listening to the unrepresentable

By

John Levack Drever B.Mus, M.Mus

Research & Postgraduate Centre, Dartington College of Arts,
Totnes, Devon, TQ9 6EJ, UK

E-mail: j.drever@dartington.ac.uk

Fax: +44 (0)1803 863569

It is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.
(Jean-François Lyotard, *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?* 1982)

Introduction

The perennial yet troublesome question I am posing in this paper is 'what is it that I am doing in my acousmatic music composition?' Such a searching question summons up the knee-jerk evasive excuses such as: 'the answer lies within the music itself, go listen!' or 'any exegetic verbalisation by the author will only put limits on the interpretation and appreciation of a work which otherwise would be boundless'. With J. M. Keynes in mind when he remarked that those economists who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory (Eagleton 1994:vi). Or as Terry Eagleton succinctly put it in his introduction to his book on Literary Theory, 'hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own' (Eagleton 1994:vii). In this paper I will attempt at a more critical answer which hopefully will open up a discussion rather than cut one off before it has even started. In this endeavour I am not going to probe too far into the general rules of the game, more explore my own intuitive decision making processes concerning the formation of structure and juxtaposition of substance in several of my acousmatic music compositions.

Through listening to my works composed over the past 8 years, I have picked up on a recurring theme (or set of relationships), which has on occasion in post-composition retro-audition even assumed the role of *raison d'être* of the work. Surprisingly, however this theme has not been rationally or empirically considered at the moment it was called into play during the devising of the composition. Such a naive, quasi-sleep walking compositional process, may pertain some sense to my auditory faculties and sub-conscious, however when asked to verbalise that sense I am rendered mute, save superficial narratives which are extrinsic to the work and knowledge of which are not at all contingent to a listener's grasp of the work. The recurrent theme in question is mutable. It is not uniquely a spectro-morphological idiom which can be analysed reducibly and as a consequence understood further. This theme is more an emotion that is aroused in me on listening to the works. A feeling, that upon collective consensus has

been shared among other listeners, albeit to different degrees and configurations. The woolly term that I am going to adopt for this feeling invoked by this theme is the sublime. In other words I want to propose that the sensation that has arisen in my consciousness (that I will describe in greater detail below) has something to do with the notion of the sublime.

Background

My acousmatic works explore a broad range of issues and approaches. Common to all the projects is that all the sounds used and presented at what ever stage of the process are either derived from field recordings or recorded in the studio, none are synthesised from scratch in the computer. Interdisciplinary collaboration has taken a key role in my compositions, working with a number of writers and performers, often with the intent to challenge and develop my musical language and conceptual underpinnings to art's practice, both in devising and performing. Many of my works are spoken word text based compositions, which take on the concerns of a poet. Other projects comprise of framing and/or juxtaposing found sounds with little to no retouching/ airbrushing, where the microphone takes the role of musical instrument. And some projects take minute samples to significantly long field recordings, which undergo significant transformation, where frequency, amplitude, duration, panning and envelope are interfered with. In such works sounds may be transformed to such a degree that there is no audible correspondence with the original sound, loosing all trace of origins or context whilst gaining new identities and relationships.

From the outset of my exploration into the field of acousmatic music, my interest as a composer of the genre was primarily a representational one rather than an aesthetic one. All the sound-objects I was appropriating and manipulating had strong extrinsic meanings to me, once I had established their relationships intrinsically within the work. That is, once the process of recording and selecting sounds and their consequent physical transformations had been completed, the sounds adopted fixed meanings outside of themselves in my head, over and above merely a description of the phenomena itself. I was quick to mentally confuse representation with that of presentation. For me there was no meaningful difference. The presence of an electroacoustic sound could be as full, as immediate and as intimate as any acoustic sound. More recently my overriding interest in sound and its creative organisation has veered towards soundscape studies, where compositionally I am very much concerned with the original context of sounds and how sounds are practised in the everyday. Although I am presenting compositions now where the sounds maintain reference to how they are heard in the real world, in most of my work there is an audible equivocation between abstract and concrete sound worlds. Some of my compositional projects in fact, such as *Peregrinations* (1998), sustain a level of abstraction throughout the work which lies just below the threshold of concrete representation, allowing an elastic semiosis. Such a work concerns evocation of ideas of which I am not able to represent with this genre. It is work of allusion not representation.

Notions of The Sublime

Interestingly notions of the sublime became popular in Europe during the Eighteenth Century with the translation of a study by Longinus of an audible phenomena, that of rhetoric.

He writes:

...sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression, and that it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown. The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. (Bolla 1989:36)

Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influence of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer. Similarly, we see skill in invention, and due order and arrangement of matter, emerging as the hard-won result not of one thing nor two, but of the whole texture of the composition, whereas Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plenitude. (Bolla 1989:37)

Through this description the tremendous overriding power that the sublime has over the listener and its capacity to mentally transport the listener is proposed.

The Eighteenth Century English philosopher Edmund Burke took up the study of the sublime in comparison to the beautiful in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759).

Here he prescribes and proscribes the characteristics of beautiful music:

The first is; that beautiful in music will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds which may be used to raise other passions; nor notes, which are shrill, or harsh, or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even smooth, and weak. The second is; that great variety, and quick transitions from one measure or tone to another, are contrary to the genius of the beautiful in music. Such transitions often excite mirth, or other sudden and tumultuous passions; but not that sinking, that melting, that languor, which is the characteristical effect of the beautiful, as it regards every sense. The passions excited by beauty is in fact nearer to a species of melancholy, than to jollity and mirth. (Burke 1970:234-235).

Whereas the sensuous experience of the sublime in sound is distinguished from beautiful music:

The eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions. I do not mean words, because words do not affect simply by their sounds, but by means altogether different. Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind, though we can observe no nicety or artifice in those sorts of music. The shouting of multitudes has a similar effect; and by the sole strength of sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in this staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being born down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd. (Burke 150-1)

Here we get the sense of an event of great magnitude that results in the listener's displeasure, that of pain and terror.

Delight, or the negative pleasure which in contradictory, almost neurotic fashion, characterizes the feeling of the sublime, arises from the removal of the threat of pain. Certain 'objects' and certain 'sensations' are pregnant with a threat to our self-preservation, and Burke refers to that threat as *terror*: shadows, solitude, silence and the approach of death may be 'terrible' in that they announce that the gaze, the other, language or life will soon be extinguished. One feels that it is possible that soon nothing more will take place. What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here', the most minimal occurrence. (Lyotard 1991:84)

A classic example of the sublime in art is the ocular experience offered to us in the landscape paintings of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) such as *The Wanderer above the Clouds* (1818). In the foreground we have a humble human figure looking out into a vast wild landscape, where the individual is in a liminal state between the finite and the infinite. The aim of this transcendental (from the Latin *trans-scendere* meaning to climb over) art is for the viewer to loose themselves in the contemplation of Nature.

Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Judgement called such a technique 'negative presentation'. As it is not possible to represent the absolute or the infinite directly in paintings because they are pure Ideas. However it is possible to allude to such notions.

The musicologist Carl Dahlhaus (1928-1989) offers us the possibility of listening to the sublime in Music in his work on *The Idea of Absolute in Music* (1989):

The idea of absolute music has many facets: ...the quasi religious function of listening, whereby proper hearing of sublime music can afford the listener a glimpse of the infinite, or Beyond, or at least produce an esthetic experience above mundane ideas, images, and things...(Dahlhaus 1989:vii)

Annunciations

In 'The Sublime is Now' a paper by American Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman (1905-1970), published in 1948, the notion of the sublime took on a new significance in avant-garde art. Newman calls for a break with the Western European Art tradition that was bound up with the quest for beauty in the perfect rendition of figurative art, stemming from the Ancient Greeks. However although with the rejection of Western concepts of beauty in art he was still concerned with the articulation of the Absolute in human experience:

We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you,

that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history. (Newman 1948:574)

Jean-François Lyotard (19-19), the Postmodern critic, explores Newman's paintings and the impetus behind them. Lyotard does not relate the experience of the sublime to some transcendental representational conditions between the object and one's capacity to reason but to the inherent physical properties of a painting:

A painting by Newman is an angel. It announces nothing; it is in itself the annunciation... Newman is not representing a non-representable annunciation; he allows it to present itself. (Lyotard 1991:79)

He goes on:

It is the feeling of 'there' (*Voilà*). There is almost nothing to 'consume', or if there is, I do not know what it is. One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous... The picture presents, being offers itself up in the here and now. No one, and especially not Newman, makes me see it in the sense of recounting or interpreting what I see. (Lyotard 1991:80-4)

Lyotard makes an analogy with the experience to listening:

I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of the silence; the painting is that sound, an accord. Arising, which is a constant theme in Newman, must be understood in the sense of pricking up one's ears, of listening. (Lyotard 1991:83-4)

Euphony

In my composition *Soundings of Angel* (1999) I attempted to evoke angels or the dimension that angels reside. The work was inspired by and based around three readings of the same poem by Alice Oswald titled *Angel*. The poem was conceived in the grounds of Dartington Hall and inspired in part by the paintings of Cecil Collins. One of Collins' trademarks were angel paintings. The composition is in six parts. There are three readings of the text by three different readers including the poet herself. These readings are then set to a background of bird song and abstract sonic material derived from recordings of glass exciting in different ways. The bird song was recorded in Dartington Hall Gardens at dawn. The readings are interspersed by three acousmatic interludes, which act as my readings/ translations of the poem. It is in these interludes that for me the sublime may be found.

The interludes comprise of very homogenous material, again derived from glass sounds that pertain a transparent quality. The notion of angles to me is an abstract one. It is a notion that I have only experienced on a conceptual level. Likewise my approach to (re)presenting angels in the work is conceptual. The listener is deprived of representational material as well as visuals. No traditional angelic symbols are called upon as a metonym. The glass sounds have been abstracted and transformed engendering an alien sound world, presenting a snap-shot of a sound world that points at the infinite

and the absolute through minimal action and content. There is continuous tension of 'nothing is going to happen' through out the interludes, where the experience of time is suspended and attenuated. The pendulum of past and future slows down and is still. A sonorous present is at hand. The moment we perceive its stillness, it is moving again into the future. The moment has passed. We experience all of this within the framing of the spoken voice and bird song, which underlines the absence in the interludes.

Through a reading of different notions of the sublime it is apparent that such concepts resonate deeply with my intuitive compositional process and can provide greater insight into the potential of such work.

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