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New spaces/new places: a Sound House for the performance of electroacoustic music and sonic art

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Abstract

The author has written articles and papers on the possibilities of differentiated spaces in the composition of electroacoustic music (1994, 1998). He extends this into a more practical discussion on the spaces used for the presentation of electroacoustic music (acousmatic music and 'live electronic' music), sound installations and other sonic art. The move into more informal 'club' environments is not without controversy. The 'sampling' approach to the very act of listening and 'consuming' sonic art has challenged traditional concert hall presentation. This paper brings various possibilities into plans (at once conceptual but also intended to have practical application) for a multi-space 'Sound House': a centre for the performance of the sonic arts. This centre is socially embedded within interpersonal human interaction and is not to be found in the current performance possibilities of the internet - though it may be connected to others of its kind through this means.

1. ‘SAMPLING’

Listening is always selective.

"All animals always hear. To hear is the fundamental involuntary activity that initiates experience of the external world. But hearing is not listening. Only when the flow of hearing is interrupted by attention does listening occur. There must be *desire*."
(Oxman (1978))

Philip Oxman's description amplifies the difference between the first two of Pierre Schaeffer's *quatre écoutes* (expanded from Chion 1983: 26) –

- (1) Écouter: I listen to sounds as indices of events which cause them – “I hear the sound of a car and do not cross the street”.
- (2) Ouïr: I hear sounds without attention – “Traffic noise is continuous outside my office window but I am not aware of it”.

This can lead us as musicians and sonic artists to engage the other two -

- (3) Entendre: I perceive and focus on salient features of the sound – “That sound has a texture which transforms from harmonic to inharmonic” (words are inadequate in this case – verbal descriptions are notoriously incomplete).
- (4) Comprendre: I comprehend what I believe to be the ‘sense’ of the sound through its perceived qualities and my understanding of a ‘code’ which gives it significance – “That piece made real sense to me and I enjoyed it”. (Once again a verbal description of this process is inadequate.)

A concert is clearly intended to be an experience involving modes 3 and 4: we learn the codes of the musical genre through experience – exactly what are the salient features of the sound? The first time a western ear perceives gamelan or raga it brings expectations of a different musical genre to bear and may need to reorient itself, what the ethnomusicologists know as the shift from *etic* to *emic* response. Taken originally from the words ‘phonetic’ and ‘phonemic’, *etic* refers to measurable acoustic difference, while *emic* refers to the significant differences which contribute to meaning within the agreed system of signifiers. A comparison of regional pronunciations, for example, will contain many etic differences which do not have emic significance when practitioners communicate. In music we hope to learn what is significant in what we hear. We then hope we ‘comprehend’ the music, although we can never be sure it is what the composer/performer intended (Nattiez 1990).

Schaeffer called modes 1 and 2 ‘concrete’ and modes 3 and 4 ‘abstract’. This reflects how western civilisation has partitioned these modes of listening socially: 1 and 2 for the everyday, 3 and 4 for the heightened awareness of the ‘special occasion’, the ritual, the performance.

But let us look more closely at the transitions between the modes. There are two causes for a mode 2 to mode 1 ‘flip’: we may initiate it ourselves and *choose* to pay attention to the television above the pub bar; alternatively the sonic reaction to the goal just scored may *force* our attention to focus upon it. Our Darwinian evolution has guaranteed such an autonomic response to a sudden sound or change in sound. But it *is* possible to bring the other modes to bear. As sound artists from the Futurists and Cage to the soundscape composers have shown, we can, if we choose, focus on environmental sounds as sound objects and not just as indices of a cause. From birdsong to street sounds this may be more common than is evident. In every day life mode 4 may be rare but not impossible, although it requires an act of will to say with Cage “My favourite piece is the one we hear all the time if we are quiet”. Cage followed the Futurists in extending our appreciation of the sounds of the rural forest walk to include the urban soundscape – something the Vancouver Soundscape Project has balanced so well.

But if all life’s a concert it could follow that all concerts could be life. Christopher Small (1998) has pointed out that it was only in the 19th century that western concert activity became so separated from pleasures such as eating and drinking with companions. In a convivial environment with activity and exchange all four modes might be engaged as we shift our attention at speed from non-perception of background through recognition to understanding. Then there is the willed focus of the ‘cocktail party effect’ when we can home in on a sound source in a noisy environment. We have not been asked to use this skill for music recently. Usually short sounds (cough, paper rustle) are distracting and we might call for quiet. But in the presence of a band of noise we may reengage this ability to focus our attention and discover it to be as effective on musical sound as on speech. Indeed this psychoacoustic social skill *must* now be re-engaged in the club environments for music production and reception. Here all four of Schaeffer’s modes are available to us.

2. A WALK THROUGH THE SOUND HOUSE: SAMPLED FOCUS AND EXTENSIVE FOCUS LISTENING

Let me describe an imaginary event in, say three years time. It is 2004; in the true tradition of the narrator I will talk in the first person singular. I will talk you through an imaginary journey which, in this case, is intended to provoke and stimulate administrators and architects to think more creatively. It is a fantasy that could easily be realised.

I enter a crowded room with bar and low soft chairs; it is noisy and at first undifferentiated and my attention is unfocused except on the voice of a member of the bar staff requesting my money for a beer. I turn and choose to focus on a screen image and the surrounding sound which immerses me; it somehow resonates within me and is exciting. A few moments later my attention refocuses involuntarily on a friend greeting me and a short conversation follows. But the sampling of this noisy flux can be extended if I choose; I take a seat and focus for some considerable time on the sounds and actions of a group of people themselves intently focused on their laptop screens connected via the internet to a similar group in Germany. I can't be sure the sounds are 'theirs' but I sense their influence on the flow. Sometimes my mind wanders (as it does, for sure, at more traditional concerts) and I am transported 'somewhere else' in my imagination.

Actually (in parenthesis) this makes me a little concerned about Schaeffer's mode 1 – there may be many instances when we hear without conscious attention and it *does* affect us deeply. I believe I have reveries which are subliminally affected by the sonic environment at every level – indeed often provoked by it.

Such a sampled environment is by definition an 'open work'. Each listener has a different experience – quite literally at the physical and acoustic level, let alone the level of interpretation. Some composers will reject such lack of control over the reception of their product (we shall return to this) others will celebrate its potential. In such a situation the concept of musical form evaporates – or at most it becomes arbitrary and unique within an individual's memory after the event. What remains is a perception of process and change within the continuous flux. In some sense the river is never the same each time we put our foot in it, or perhaps it is always the same. These are merely two sides of the same coin! But I have been distracted from the narrative.

I am sitting in this flux of sound and I want to focus on a piece that has attracted me and I become frustrated that the continuous level of sound intrudes on its quieter passages – if there are any. So my mind wanders and I want to continue my journey in this sonic labyrinth. One of the video projections tells me (as it has told anyone on the hour every hour all day) that a performance in the nearby quiet listening space is beginning in five minutes.

I get up and (my beer in hand) walk through an unobtrusive partition into an acoustic labyrinth, and the sound of the club space recedes. I find myself in a pleasant room, also with easy chairs and tables as before but the people around me are quiet now, relaxed and concentrating. There is a brief programme note projected unobtrusively and further information is available as text message if needed. There may be a preferred direction to face but I am free to move my orientation - although encouraged to remain in one place. I listen once again to Denis Smalley's *Pentes* (it is its thirtieth birthday) and hear something new in this, the 100th time I have listened to it. I exit before the next piece begins to get another beer. I will come back later in the day for a live electronic work for which a stage in the centre

of the room or the seating area can be elevated and for a diffusion of Stockhausen's *Studie II* (a fiftieth birthday celebration).

The quickest way to get refreshment takes me on a different route. I exit through another acoustic labyrinth (I may not be aware of it) to a larger space, strangely subdivided with good quality acoustic screens and small isolated 'rooms off'. Here, there is an exhibition of 'sound and performance art'. Some of the exhibits are interactive and there is a group of 'life-long learners' avidly creating their own sounds with what looks like an electronic violin wired to a computer and a movement activated interface (developed by Laurie Anderson). I stop and look and listen to one sound system I didn't see last time I was here (exhibits change and rotate). There is a small isolated area with a longer-term sound installation, but I don't go in as I find that kind of experience more meaningful when I drop in at the end of a working day on my way home. I pick up my beer and am surprised to discover that I have inadvertently participated in a performance of Cage's *Variations IV* (it is its fortieth birthday), as the bar is miked and the sound of my placing the beer bottle down has been highly amplified and projected into the club space elsewhere. I pause for a moment to buy and download a piece I heard yesterday into my palmtop and return to the club space where I have arranged to meet one of the organisers. I need to check the arrangements for a performance I am doing tomorrow morning which requires an installation in the sonic exhibition space. The performance will actually carry on for several days and will combine elements composed by me with sounds created interactively by other composers, visitors and performers. It is not true that all these contributions will be anonymous and undifferentiated – far from it, there will be great variety and change, and the event will be documented (in VR: video/audio formats) and available to participants as they leave (if indeed they ever do).

3. THE CONTINUING NEED FOR CONVIVIALITY (ILLICH)

Returning to today we can observe that all the elements of my fantasy are already available in principle and in practice. A Sound House along these lines – and there can be many variations involving greater degrees of visual art, dance and theatre involvement – is essentially a social centre and a source of group interaction. It celebrates this conviviality (Ivan Illich's central tenet (1973)). The network (about which we hear so much) is of course a channel for communication and transfer of information. It will only increase the desire for interpersonal meeting places, the human presence and human touch. Not just individual-individual but group-group. Furthermore as we move from consumption to production, all aspects of the Centre will change focus. People will come to make or learn how to make and not just to view or listen. Time is a combination of fluid and structured. I choose my itinerary, yet all rituals require a degree of structure and order. As in the flux of sound itself, some aspects of the Sound House need never close, it can be a centre of production and consumption, installation and performance. The absurd inflexibility of the evening concert is a product of a nine-to-five society which separates work from pleasure, schooling from life-long learning, young from not-so-young, beginners from experts – not to speak of composers from performers from listeners.

In Figure 1 I have summarised the three spaces through which I wandered at will, although with knowledge of a timetable for those performances that required it. The central 'area' common to all three (conceptual as much as architectural) is the 'navel of the world' connecting the spaces to each other and the Centre itself to the immediate and distant environment (via the network). It is a contemporary space in need of a real physical manifestation.

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Figure 1: The Sound House: Three listening spaces

