
Cruising For A Fixing

Author: Darren Copeland

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So few are the ambitious manoeuvres made towards comprehending and upholding the ear's untapped potential for picking out various psychological, social, and physical features yearned for in our daily experiences.

So often qualities are captured within the eye's handy frame of representation. And could this not be the precise reason why sonic artists do not engage in the task of persuading the eye to allow the ear to describe our place in the world? Equally as uncommon are the environmental sound works approached with the sensitivity and devotion to a subject's natural character as that of a Paul Cezanne. Absent also are any scrupulous ventures for setting into motion one of the sites captured in a still life painting. At least, nothing that could match the (visual) extravagance of many recent works for the cinema.

Producing the aural equivalent for these ornate renderings of visual reality requires a departure into not only new compositional models, but more importantly, new levels of aural sensitivity. For example, environmental sounds should not only be considered for their spectral richness or pitch/rhythmic characteristics, but for their imagistic value, or rather, the associations triggered in the imagination of a listener. These associations can trigger memories from family life, love relationships, jobs, important historical events, and other experiences.

To help illustrate the extent to which the listener could aurally access these memories and feelings, take a moment to imagine how memories would be stored in the mind if they were experienced without vision.

Another area for enhanced listening sensitivity could focus on the surfaces that sounds play off of. When sounds pass through us in our daily experiences they come to our ears clothed in the architecture of their environment. For instance, there is the resonance or bright reflections of a foyer, or the "slap-back echo" caused by a certain arrangement of tall buildings. One could also focus or elaborate on the field of play between background and foreground events in a sonic environment. For example, consider the continuous murmur of automobile noise jesting and testing the exchange of gentle, intimate thoughts to a loved one on a busy street.

There are, of course, numerous other instances in which snatches of environmental sound reach us with much more information - associative and acoustical - than an educated guess could ever bargain for. And yet, the recording artist insists on filtering out - isolating and abstracting - the smallest particles of this richness. S/he stubbornly clings to abstraction despite the multi-layered textures and intricate interrelationships that characterize the sound canvases of the external world, which like a set of theatrical flats on rolling casters, absorb the strides made in life from one scene to the next.

Alas, there are layers of aural perception that electroacousticians and other sonic artists have still not penetrated. Expanding the discourse on auditory perception will require research into how the ear captures, interprets, and classifies the psychological and physical parameters of our acoustic landscape. Perhaps at the start of the next millenium,

the budding sonic artist will encounter an academic curriculum which investigates the imagistic component of environmental sounds. It is this generation which will sow new seeds and forego the debate over whether 'program' music has a leg to stand on. After all, does not "program music" alone (whether it be social realism or poetic impressionism) provide the sonic artist with a glimpse into the expressive possibilities of an imagistic sonic art?

A departure towards an imagistic sonic art requires a decisive parting from musical abstraction. The distance required from composed music is nowhere within earshot of the territory demarcated by the avant garde practitioner, who with each passing fashion, trades in one set of timbres and orchestrational tools for another. Such efforts towards change only manage to alter the garments worn by musical abstraction. In fact, this is exactly where we are in the late Twentieth Century: the establishment of an exhaustive and elaborate wardrobe for the new classical warrior.

On the contrary, the goal of this departure is to walk in a lateral direction beyond serious music boundaries and directly to the interior of the imagistic museum situated inside the ear. It is a movement to the front-line: in closer proximity to conflicts and complexities (physical and psychological) not accessible to the visual realm. Abstraction closes doors on the worlds located within the experiential world. Many creative possibilities continue to remain latent, because the electroacoustic abstractionist moves out into the soundscape only to peel away the desired specimens spotted on a weekend sojourn to a forest or multi-cultural market. After the sojourn, s/he assuredly retreats to the cool grayish walls of the hermetically sealed studio, where the specimens are contorted and dismembered beyond meaningful recognition.

II

Could the acousmatic "Art of Fixed Sounds" ever fix itself on firm renderings of the acoustic world "as is"?

Could its recent preoccupation with documentation ever spill over into a wide-spread explosion of creative practitioners re-learning, re-thinking, and revitalizing their understanding of sound in order to investigate aspects of human experience not explored previously by science, literature or the arts? Perhaps the acousmaticians' dedication to rendering matter as it comes to them could take a wild, revolutionary twist and send them into a sphere where their eyes and ears learn to interrelate much differently than they do at this time. The day for such a turnover could usher in the emergence of a new allegiance between the sonic artist/theorist and the critical thinkers/creators who rely on eyesight. Maybe the perceptual boundaries between the groups could be obliterated altogether. Perhaps there could even come a time when people employ sight only when it is absolutely necessary or particularly appropriate to do so.

What part could a sonic artist play in shaping our ear-lids and sharpening our hearing? I am sure there are many ways this problem can be addressed, and I imagine that there are several sonic artists & composers out there who could comfortably admit that s/he is fighting for this very cause. But then, how could the importance of this cause ever be intensified? Perhaps it will necessitate a scenario where sonic artists choose not to deal with the more common devices and concerns of working in a time-based medium. The extent of such a departure is illustrated in the following.

Imagine a time where a school of sonic artists arrived on the serious music scene (acoustic and electro-acoustic) with a fierce dedication to rendering real world sound

events in ways that were undeniably true-to-life. We could assemble this imaginary team of iconoclasts under the name "Audio Realism". The strength of their convictions being such that the true connoisseur of their art was someone distinguished by the ability to not only identify every sound etched into a Audio Realist sound canvas, but also the approximate distances of the sounds and the acoustical characteristics of the locations that the sounds were recorded in. If Audio Realism unleashed tremors of controversy through the serious music intelligentsia, than it is because they not only placed the tradition of western musical practice under scrutiny, but also the very nature of listening in the western world - especially in relationship to the hierarchy of the senses and the limitations imposed by the visual bias.

Audio Realists employed compositional techniques that ran counter to what was accepted as good musicianship. In fact, works could be created by purposefully neglecting the involvement of time as an expressive parameter. This is rather startling when you consider that time is an essential ingredient for making a musical work. However, the technology of recording and playing back sounds from the environment enabled them to approach the sonic environment from a whole other point of view. A perspective that believed in portraying and examining complex relationships and meanings evident in environmental sounds at the most minute levels of micro-inspection.

By creating a body of Phonographic Portraits, the Audio Realists formulated an index of subjective associations that were inspired by specific environmental sounds. This index advanced the descriptive talents of the ear. Sounds which previously could only be detected by sensitive listeners from subtle emotional or physical affects, could then be explained in words and made known to other listeners. With these developments, the Audio Realists undid the stranglehold that Music had on listeners. Environmental sounds were no longer exotic spectral resources available for morphological exploitation. Rather, their imagistic feature challenged musical expression by implementing a representational component into the battery of expressive devices available to composers. In their works, the Audio Realists employed imagery from the sonic environment with a versatility and savvy comparable to the artistic insight of a visual artist.

III

My plea for a high realism in the Sonic Arts is aimed at challenging the importance for the acousmatician in continually divorcing sounds from their everyday contexts. The sonic artist, after all, is not forced by necessity to participate in the games of illusion and interpretation that composers for concert instruments are faced with. The sonic artist can feasibly go out and record the news direct from its source. Abstraction is merely just one available working method amongst a host of others. Therefore, it is time that the sonic artist comes to terms with the fact that s/he is in touch with an artistic medium which can engage a new heightened realm of listening sensitivity. A mode of listening that can facilitate intellectual engagement with the meanings and messages embedded in the sounds of daily life. If sonic artists make this leap, than a new sensibility of acousmatic expression will take hold and challenge many deep rooted assumptions about listening and the experience of sound in western culture.

If the artist of fixed sounds is contributing largely to the listener's surrendering of not only their eyes but their knowledge of a sound's political and social origins, than what in exchange can that listener hope for in his or her encounter with an acousmatic artwork? What is there that can be taken away from the encounter and directed to one's experiences in the real world? What is there of the world in this "Art of Fixed Sounds"?

Footnotes

1. Stylistically speaking, the term Acousmatic has become a 1990's catch phrase for re-fashioned "musique concrete". However, the term can be used more generally in referring to the diffusion of studio-made music through Loudspeakers. For example, rather than saying that such and such a work is a tape work, one can say that it is an Acousmatic work. By being Acousmatic the work is meant only to be heard, and that the removal of the live instrumentalist cuts off the visual component of a concert, or perhaps more significantly, the social rituals prompted by the interaction of stage performer(s) and audience.

2. A phrase coined by French composer and writer Michel Chion in reference to the Acousmatic medium, or as it were, the medium where sounds (instrumental, electronic, or environmental) are fixed onto tape.

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