

Welcoming change

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Abstract

The paper discusses how electroacoustic music has developed, and develops rapidly, with the technologies and societies that nourish it. Core values, aesthetic directions and artistic concerns have changed over time, as has public interest and focus in the various aesthetic iterations of technology-based music.

Dramatic changes in networks for communication and exchange have transpired over the past 15 years, resulting in new market conditions for music technology, the manners in which it is distributed, and how it is currently integrated in nearly all types of music-making. This democratization of distribution has also given impetus to a number of new art practices, and attracted new artist groups to electroacoustic techniques.

In sum, historical change challenges traditional genres of electroacoustic and computer music, both in terms of education and in performance arenas involving social presence and a public gaze. The article discusses these challenges, and proposes a perspective on future coexistence with other sonic arts for the general public.

1. Introduction

Heritage and Future is an ambitious conference call, inviting discourse on the challenges that electroacoustic music faces. As my interests reflect more those of an organizer of creative use of music technology than a composer with a personal aesthetic, I hope that my perspective may perhaps add to the discourse. My perspective in the following is somewhat historical, somewhat philosophical, somewhat technical, somewhat social - and somewhat optimistic.

The call is focused on the analysis and understanding of electroacoustic music and its history, with the aim of developing an understanding of what may benefit future work in the field. In this context, I pose the following questions:

- How do we imagine, and perhaps more importantly, what do we wish from the future?
- Does our tradition get in the way of a productive approach?
- How do we see the boundaries for our work? Do we see integration with other art expressions in the future, or do we see electroacoustic music as a self-sustained discipline?

2. Development of electroacoustic music - a simplified rendering

Changes in the arts follow developments in economy and technology, and it is not uncommon to trace the ideas or beginnings of electroacoustic music back to the 1920s, to the experiments in form and material conducted by Futurists, Dadaists, Surrealists and others. This correlates with the start of modernist thought in composition. Certainly, there are early traces of electroacoustic music in film, as well as in early use of recording techniques, but the more common view is that the genre of electroacoustic music emerged at the French radio after WWII, rapidly followed by development at the German radio in Cologne, in Bell labs, New Jersey, USA, and in a number of other places.

WWII brought about a crisis in the contemporary music, and the need for a new musical approach was felt among many composers. The modernist focus on the art material and its embedded and intrinsic qualities, whereby art expressions become self-referential systems of internal coherence not accountable to other forms of logic, was dominant. Serial techniques seemed for many composers to be a solution to the perceived challenges of coming up with a new, uncompromised musical language, in the same way that exploratory work with new tools for recording and reproducing sound did for others. Despite obvious differences between, for example, the early Stockhausen's serial methods and Schaeffer's search for structure in recorded materials, the results were both true to the new idea that art should have a logic of its own and not find its value in relation to the activities in the surrounding societies. This position is highly demanding, and at the same time impossibly naïve, but it nonetheless points to the desire for art's autonomy. This was a Western idea, not commonly shared in the Eastern block, where art's usefulness in building society was emphasized. The focus on art's autonomy thus became part of the strong cultural clash between Eastern Europe and the West in the post-war period. (Sounders 1999)

Within this musical movement, electroacoustic music was especially radical, breaking with the existing pitch-based paradigm in music. There must have been a strong sense of 'creating the future' among the composers and other proponents of the genre. Electroacoustic music was composed with abstract and abstracted sounds, and with exception of the serialist approaches, it became characterized by detailed control of timbral development and a focus on spatial movement. Over the years, this approach has developed into a tradition, and although there are differences between, for

example, predetermined compositional structures vs. experimental, found or arbitrary forms, electroacoustic music is easily recognizable. It has the coherence of a well-defined genre.

Stepping stones in the development of electroacoustic music include early electronic instruments, the tape recorder, the proliferation of keyboard controllers for synthesis and sample playback, the introduction of digital technologies, new synthesis techniques such as FM and granular synthesis, new signal processing techniques such as phase vocoding, and all the compositional clichés that have developed from the use of these tools. However, the new technologies have not changed electroacoustic music much in terms of aesthetics, and the genre is broadly taught in a relatively consistent manner in conservatories and universities around the world.

3. Empowering technology

The dramatic changes in both music technology and its distribution over the last 15 years have resulted in radically different production conditions for music, and technology is now integrated in nearly all types of music. A real democratization has taken place, and the development has given impetus to new music and art practices, and attracted new artist groups to electroacoustic techniques. These changes have made it possible for large groups to play with sound, to make music, and to present it outside of curatorial 'quality assessment' and control.

Internet technologies have created the basis for widely distributed 'niche societies' that are large enough to sustain community development as well as commercial exploitation. (Anderson 2006) A consequence of this emergence of new genres and communities is that the traditional taste hierarchies and gatekeeper structures no longer carry the same weight or have the same impact. Electroacoustic music is no longer the benchmark genre for worthwhile aesthetic use of technology, but has become just another 'niche' expression.

New niches develop within, but also create social contexts. Aspects of sound, music and the activities of both performers and public fill a number of different functions in these social networks. Genres can for example be types of dance music distinguishable by different BPMs and further characterized by the use of specific types of sounds, or they can be slowly changing abstract soundscapes void of any hint of abrasiveness. Other genres could be the more or less demanding forms of electronica, noise and soundscape composition, as well as sound art's complex forms of expression in experimental music and works that rely on wide ontological approaches, or pure *klangkunst* or excursions in built acoustics.

The aesthetics vary widely between genres, as do the types of listening required for appreciating and making sense of them. Different social, cultural and professional contexts invite different listening strategies, and new music genres accentuate the multi-modality of the human perception, rejecting the traditional unimodal approach with a sole focus on the sounding object and a disregard of place, site and situation. The scale of aesthetic changes has been large - from the ever-so-careful integration of noise by the Futurists, to the aggressive current noise music, live and improvised. The contracts between listener, composer, performer, and community have changed from that of the traditional concert situation with the presentation of significant works; a process and community-oriented perspective has largely taken its place. The new musical genres have developed, and develop, in response to emerging concerns (and perhaps needs) in new social and historical circumstances. Many new genres have developed as commentaries and protests against both electroacoustic music and the mechanisms that are associated with it – the (elitist) limited accessibility to tools, the fine arts focus on uninterrupted attention in concert halls, the level of abstraction in the compositions themselves, as well as the lack of rhythm and the singular focus on space and timbral refinement. The focus for assigning meaning has been expanded from the almost singular focus on the sound object to situated perspectives often discussed in sociocultural approaches to understanding meaning making.

Several researchers, including myself, see these new genres as related to electroacoustic music. However, from within these new genres, it is not certain that the same kinship is felt, and bundling them within electroacoustic music simply because the tools are the same does not address these differences. Therefore, it may be beneficial to adopt a terminology for this super-genre that can be shared across spheres of understanding, such as the broader term 'technology-based music.'

4. Does tradition get in the way?

As the electronic avant-garde chose to retreat into educational institutions, adhering to the modernist survival strategy so distinctly outlined by Milton Babbitt (Babbitt 1958), it disregarded the general public and aimed for trained audiences with developed listening skills. This institutional embedding strengthened the genre's object-producing fine-arts character, while weakening its reputation as an expression of the rebellious avant-garde. Electroacoustic music, as the term is usually understood in terms of typical aesthetic characteristics, has now become one of several musical genres on a track towards perpetuity, as for example romantic orchestral music or Dixieland jazz. The formalization of electroacoustic music as a genre has clearly been useful, establishing a canon and a well-developed discourse around aesthetic 'trademarks', as well as institutionalized arenas for this discussion. The genre enjoys what has wittingly been stated to the author as a monastic existence.

We continually experience the emergence of new genres and forms of expression in society. Any new development of musical style is a cultural struggle about values; new values claim their worth in their social space, and in society as a whole. Within the sonic arts scene this is evidenced by the large number of artist-run galleries, and by the multiplicity of new concert series' and cross-media events. The rationale for these organizational efforts is that existing institutions reject the new aesthetics – or perhaps less negatively – will not prioritize them. This lack of involvement from the

established arts scene illustrates how tradition *gets* in the way, creating a situation in which new forms of expression seek and create new venues and organizations. Tradition is a prerequisite for development, however the electroacoustic genre seems to be largely circumvented rather than brought into a dialogue with new developments. Thus, electroacoustic music needs to consider how it posits itself as a genre, and reflect on how this position is regarded in the face of current and future developments.

5. Which future to choose?

In order to fully grasp the consequences of new artistic developments, more research on the mechanisms of change in the arts is needed. This research could also be useful in designing better processes at political and institutional levels, and better flow in funding systems.

The significant changes in hierarchy and curatorial gatekeeping that new Internet technologies have brought entail adjustments to well-defined, existing sectors like electroacoustic music. Many traditions endure change rather well, and given the existence of a well-defined electroacoustic canon, and the omnipresence of technology in all sectors of the music community, there is every reason to believe that electroacoustic techniques will remain relevant also in the future.

The first generation of electroacoustic composers, pioneers who invented and developed the formal language and main characteristics of the genre, will necessarily be well represented in this tradition, and the core values of the canon will be sustained. However, a perpetuation of the canon and the established aesthetics, with little contact with or involvement with the new genres is unlikely to have consequence for little more than electroacoustic music practitioners, as the music will not enjoy a broader public interest.

Advances in other kinds of technology-based music have made electroacoustic literacy commonplace, and many new genres of technology-based music enjoy a broad engagement with audiences that reach far beyond traditional concert halls. This has liberated technology-based music from the modernist straightjacket of accepted musical forms, and the new music embraces a more transitory existence. The notion of the work as an authority depending on specific decoding for the meaning to emerge has been supplanted by a focus on the contextual negotiations that constitute the creative processes in which composers, performers and audience participate in a situated cultural and social context.

As has been suggested by Landy (Landy 2001) and others, electroacoustic technology can be seen as the basis for folk music of the future – a broadly shared technology for making music of many kinds, and with a large number of participants and toolmakers of different aesthetical inclinations.

For traditional electroacoustic music to remain relevant in this development, a change in self-understanding is required. The genre would benefit from considering wider issues surrounding the situation for art production and meaning making rather than singularly on the sonic objects themselves. Such revised understanding of what is important in the musical situations for listeners, performers and composers will support a new discourse that may insure the relevance of electroacoustic music as a genre for the new generations of cross-media arts and their audiences. Theoreticians are encouraged to look across perspectives from media sciences, where art, tools, composers and audience are seen as expressions of underlying structures, rather than the more limited stimulus-response model more commonly utilized in music discourse.

6. Conclusion

Electroacoustic skills are relevant for future music, but electroacoustic composers need to participate in a socially relevant discourse and the development of the sonic arts in order to not become irrelevant. A necessary first step is to broaden the understanding of electroacoustic music as a genre; to include multimodal perspectives and an understanding of music as a situated process through which meaning is constructed.

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