

Electroacoustic Music Studies and Accepted Terminology: You can't have one without the other

EMS06 – Leigh Landy
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Summary This talk will summarise the conclusions of my latest book, “Understanding the Art of Sound Organization” (to be published by MIT Press in the autumn of 2007), a book that is based on recent years’ experience conceiving and directing the ElectroAcoustic Resource Site (EARS) - <http://www.ears.dmu.ac.uk>. It is based on two worries: 1) current terminology usage in the field is at best fluid and at worst in a fairly weak state, especially category and genre terminology. This conclusion, the main focus of this talk, corresponds with the EMS06 theme; and 2) the field of Electroacoustic Music Studies (EMS), instead of engaging in foundational issues that have yet to be resolved, tends to focus on aspects of investigation at higher levels. I often describe this situation as follows: if EMS publications were to be presented in the form of a building, there would be a significant number of upper floor suites and rooms inhabited, but at least some of the foundation has yet to be designed. This unusual architecture is reflected in patterns that are emerging on the EARS site’s rapidly growing bibliography.

Clearly, these issues are interrelated. On the basis of the creation of the EARS site’s index structure and the above-mentioned patterns within its bibliography, areas of studies in need of development will be introduced towards the end of this talk after sharing some very odd discoveries concerning terminological issues that were noted whilst the site’s glossary was originally compiled and which remain unresolved today.

I shall choose to use a new term, one devised whilst writing this new book, as a denomination of the field that I believe the EMS Network covers. A proposal will be made to establish an international group investigating how we, not only in the English language, but also in others, should start to define or redefine our terms collectively, sharing language-based similarities and differences leading towards the creation of dictionaries and a thesaurus of the most basic terms relevant to EMS in a number of languages. The working group’s results could be made public on the EARS site. The group, possibly working under the auspices of the EMS Network, might also consider what the field of electroacoustic music studies consists of, that is, what the full architectural design of that building might look like.

The context of this talk During a substantial part of my career, one of my *idées fixes* has been the investigation of how experimental forms of music, in particular musics involving the organisation of sounds (in this case including, but specifically not focusing on notes), can achieve the levels of participation and appreciation that they deserve. This fascination has, of course, an outlet in my own artistic work. However, my compositions are not a focus of today’s talk. My investigations concerning access have several research

aspects in fact one of which was the theme of the talk I presented at EMS05 in Montreal, namely the Intention/Reception project where, amongst other conclusions, it was demonstrated that the potential audience for electroacoustic works is much higher than the one that exists today or even the one envisioned by most specialists in the field. I refer you to the publications on this project for further information (Landy 2001, Landy and Weale 2003, Weale 2006, Landy 2006 and 2007).

The aspects related to access as far as this talk is concerned are two-fold: 1) how well defined is our basic terminology, in particular our terminology related to genres and categories? We will discover that there is room for improvement; 2) how well defined is the field of studies found in the name of the organisation co-ordinating this series of conferences, namely Electroacoustic Music Studies? I firmly believe that we have a situation of a radical departure in music that is insufficiently supported by scholarship. But what do these two points have to do with access? To be quite frank, they are both access *sine qua non*'s. Both the clear use of terminology, in particular that regarding classification, and a field of studies supporting the understanding of this relatively new musical corpus are fundamental in order to create avenues regarding access to this music. Although interrelated, let's keep things simple and treat them separately. The key findings in the next two sections have been discovered as part of research related to the EARS site, a multi-lingual resource site consisting of a subject glossary in which disparate definitions for individual terms are included where appropriate; an index is offered primarily as the basis of the framework for bibliographic searches and there is also a rapidly increasing bibliography. Furthermore, a multi-lingual thesaurus of index terms will be introduced in 2007. For more information concerning EARS, please refer to project publications (Landy and Atkinson 2003a, 2003b and 2004). Working during recent years on EARS has led me to write the above-mentioned book in which a potential framework for the field of Electroacoustic Music Studies is proposed. The key findings are summarised in the following sections.

Terminology: We don't all have to agree, but the current state of affairs is embarrassing I suppose I have to admit that the more scientific the terminology, such as acoustics-based terms used in electroacoustic music, the less difficult or controversial they tend to be. What my colleagues working on EARS and I have discovered is that terms related to classification are in a fairly sorry state. So let's launch the classification debate.

- **Organised Sound:** We all know where this term came from, Edgard Varèse, who felt dissatisfied with the word 'music' describing his pre-electroacoustic compositions. One can easily understand what he was driving at, not least the ability that all sounds can be used in music. However there are two issues here: 1) does this imply that the term 'organised sound' is to replace music? and 2) what did Varèse actually mean when he coined the term? I believe that, perhaps with the exception of the Brussels performance of his *Poème Électronique*, he meant works involving sound organisation that can be presented within a musical context such as a concert. John Cage, on the other hand, gladly borrowed this term but took a much more liberationist approach to its meaning.

His much cited: “Music is all around us, if only we had ears ...” implies that we can take our concerts with us, as everything we hear is organised sound and thus music. Let’s deal with a specific case, an interactive sound installation in a public space. People who are willing, come into the installation area and ‘play it’. What one hears is organised sound. But is it also music? According to Varèse possibly not; according to Cage absolutely. This term has offered us two awkward problems, but things will get worse.

- **Sonic Art:** On the EARS site, Sonic Art is defined as follows: “this term generally designates the art form in which the sound is its basic unit”. Now, given what I said earlier in the section about context, this is exactly my area of interest. But here again there are problems, four this time: 1) Where do acoustic works fit here? This is actually not problematic in terms of this or the next term, but it is certainly so with electroacoustic music; 2) what is the difference between sonic art and sound art? I shall comment on this in a moment; 3) do all languages offer an adequate equivalent of this term? The answer is no. Just to give two examples, *Klangkunst* in German means and most often refers to sound art. *L’art sonore* is not used that often in French due to the historical fact that *les arts sonores* means music and is placed alongside *les arts scéniques* (performing arts) and *les arts plastiques* (fine art); 4) Last but by no means least, is sonic art music? Different people will have different answers to this question. Sonic art is a term I would be comfortable with were it to include the word music as I am very much influenced by John Cage as far as organised sound is concerned and do not believe in separating sonic art from music, something that is even more often pertinent with the next term.

- **Sound art:** This term is used in a variety of manners, but I can say that the key concept behind sound art is that it refers to works of sound organisation that are normally not conceived for concert performance. They can be found in galleries, museums, in public spaces, on the radio or wherever, but they are normally not presented as musical works. There are, of course, historical reasons for this. Sound artworks tend not to have a beginning or an end. Many choosing this term, but by no means all, have studied fine arts and are making an art of sound. But how different is this compared with the sonic arts? (Indeed, here is another problem; sonic art also appears in its plural form.) I think that this boils down to intention: sound art is usually an art with an implied context, again normally not a concert hall. Sonic art works may be played anywhere including the concert hall. Let’s put it this way for the moment; sound art is, in my view, a subset of sonic art. That said, there are those who believe that sound artists are people who don’t qualify to be musicians. I personally have great difficulty with this view.

- **Electronic Music:** Many people use this word as a synonym for electroacoustic music, particularly in the US and also here in China. This is somewhat odd in my view, as a soundscape composition, for example, which may involve subtle sound manipulation, but does not normally involve any electronic generation, would fit under this category. Electronic Music also has an historical connotation when used in German, *elektronische Musik*. Electronic music means electroacoustic music in which sounds are generated electronically to most people in my circles.

- *Musique Concrète*/Acousmatic Music, etc.: Often misunderstood to be music using concrete sounds (this was not Pierre Schaeffer's original reason for using this term), *Musique Concrète* has often been placed in opposition to *elektronische Musik* as one involved sound generation and the other did not. We acquire an understanding of what Schaeffer meant by this term by reading his theories on the subject including his views concerning so-called reduced listening. This limitation was so important to Schaeffer that one of his own protégés, Luc Ferrari, was expelled from the Parisian studios when he started to compose what he would call 'Anecdotal Music', that is, music for heightened listening using highly identifiable sound sources. Later other composers chose the term Acousmatic Music above *Musique Concrète*. A battle between those two terms continues, at least in francophone nations. In fact there are at least three other terms participating in this particular wrestling match. Fortunately, many musicians have moved beyond this and believe that all sounds can be used in an electroacoustic work and therefore the original French/German separation is long redundant. I believe that *Musique Concrète*'s purpose was slightly defeated by the theory of its originator; Acousmatic Music is a nice description of audio works on a fixed medium; it is only useful, however, in terms of classifying today's compositions that celebrate Schaefferian ideals.

- Electroacoustic Music: Definitions of this term vary greatly. Some believe that it refers solely to music on a fixed medium; many believe that it only refers to art music. I see the term as one that "refers to any music in which electricity has had some involvement in sound registration and/or production other than that of a simple microphone or amplification" (EARS site). This, of course, includes relevant forms of music with roots in popular music traditions. I would perhaps qualify this further by saying that where the above description is not the major focus in a given piece one can speak of using electroacoustic techniques; where it is the primary focus one speaks of electroacoustic music. I shall use the term in this manner from now on. The Canadians call this music and its studies Electroacoustics. This has not caught on very much outside the country but does relate the work involved with music making alongside scholarly research which is intriguing. There is another question that is worth thinking about: How does Electroacoustic Music differ from Sonic Art? Clearly Sonic Art may involve acoustic works, so that is one point. Another is that there are electroacoustic works that fully adhere to the definition, but do not necessarily focus on sounds in the sense used here, but instead focus more specifically on timbral aspects of notes. Such works do not necessarily belong to Sonic Art. Yet the two terms are often used interchangeably. The Sonic Arts Network in the UK works happily with other nations' electroacoustic music organisations, such as EMAC here in China (where the 'e', as suggested, stands for Electronic, not Electroacoustic). Then there's –

- Electronica: Although of reasonably recent vintage, this term is used in very different ways by different groups. For many in pop music circles, it is used as a synonym for electroacoustic music although when one digs a bit deeper writers tend to disagree with each other about what belongs to each term and which genres fit together. In contrast, for

those involved in recent laptop performance, just to name one example, and who adhere to concepts associated with Glitch, Electronica is what they make. However this music hardly fits into most pop musicians' uses of the term. There is little to no overlap here. Similarly in French *Électro* may mean any electroacoustic music or those rooted particularly in popular traditions. I tend to class much of the above within electroacoustic music, but am intrigued to see how, in five years' time, this term will be used.

- Computer Music: Of all the terms here, this is the only one I would like to see disappear in the not too distant future. Computer Music is a term relating to many disparate communities ranging from electroacoustic music to audio engineering to cognition (whose specialists are not terribly interested thus far in electroacoustic music as an object of study) to people creating analyses, traditionally notated scores and computer-based compositions for instruments.

Where does all of this leave us? It takes little imagination to see how these terms – and the various definitions relating to these terms – relate to/overlap with one another. Two abbreviations appearing here, EARS and the EMS Network organisation, both include the word electroacoustic. It may therefore seem odd to note that, given the above list of and these abbreviations, I am not particularly happy with this term. Electroacoustic Music has those two disadvantages in terms of my interest, sound organisation. Sonic Art, on the other hand, does not. However, the use of the word 'art' provides an incentive for many to disqualify this work as music. Again, I have difficulty with this.

So what does one do? I think the answer to this is two-fold. First I have decided in my recent writings to be bold and reject all of these terms for the music I am involved with and choose a new one. This may come across as highly egotistical, but I see no other way. I believe that the definition of Sonic Art needs to be used with a term that includes the word, music and because of this, I have come up with a new term, ***Sound-based Music*** as it is clear. I have admitted that those who prefer the Varèse view of Organised Sound to Cage's need not accept this new concept as Sonic Art may work well for them, but there's still that problem concerning the term's inability to be translated easily.

The second thing I think that one should do, and I would hope that as a result of this themed EMS06, we can start that project here in Beijing, is to create a working group of experts on terminology to make suggestions internationally for a tighter usage of some of these and associated terms. Suffice to say that when it comes to attempting to discover some coherence in the music that fits within Sound-based Music, genre and category classification is no easy task! This working group might look into an entire spectrum of terms. A positive result would play a highly important role in terms of making this music more accessible to non-specialists.

The Sound-based Music Paradigm Before moving on to the second area which I shall now call Sound-based Music Studies, I would like to make one more proposal at this point. I have used the words popular music and art music here, be it with great care. To

many the distinction between the two for most music is huge although there are fusion works and works such as traditional folk music that may belong to both or neither. But when it comes to Sound-based Music, how relevant is this distinction? As this is not the subject of this talk, I will share one conclusion of my book, namely, that I believe that a Sound-based Music paradigm exists that is not dependent on that boundary regardless of whether some works are made based on traditions coming from one or the other side. I have heard experimental popular music-based works from musicians I would not have encountered were it not for the kindness of people who do have interests in those areas sharing this music with me. Much of the music was of great interest to me and, I assume, would be to many of my peers as well. I assume also that this goes both ways: people in that particular community would be most interested in works that have roots within the realms of contemporary art music, but they are currently unaware of it. Here is a typical example: where does sound-based ambient music fit?

I mention this because it brings together all the types of music that should be investigated within the realm of Sound-based Music Studies. It also could prove quite relevant to discussions regarding the accessibility of this corpus of music. Clearly that example of a public art interactive work, if it was found accessible by its public, has nothing to do with the art music/popular music distinction and everything to do with sound-based music.

A Framework for the Field of Sound-based Music Studies As suggested above, research in the EARS project has included a focus on terminology. It also has involved a focus on finding means to structure our new field. In fact, just deciding on the site's six main index headers was the hardest decision we made. They are: Disciplines of Study, Genres and Categories, Musicology of Electroacoustic Music, Performance Practice and Presentation, Sound Production and Manipulation and Musical Structure. A point implied but not stated thus far is that these studies involve the music itself and the scholarly areas relevant to the creation of that music. Technological and scientific developments are obviously pertinent to this work, but do not in themselves form a focus as far as EARS is concerned. Only when music technological or scientific work takes the music and its context into account is it included in EARS and thus in our delineation of this area of studies. This is also a description of the areas of interest to the EMS Network community.

Sound-based Music is clearly interdisciplinary and the first category, Disciplines of Study, emphasises how many fields influence or form part of the area of research. Genres and Categories is the platform for the above-mentioned coherence discussion. The Musicology of Electroacoustic Music section is the heart of EARS. I shall expand on this momentarily. The last three categories might lean more heavily on science and technology, but are there in cases where such concepts are treated from a musical point of view. For example, any discussion on sound spatialisation that discusses why this might be useful or successful belongs to the realm. The technology of, say, ambisonics, on its own is not included. Similarly, convolution or the use of neural networks as a structuring tool is not of interest except when questions relating to musical creation and/or reception are discussed.

In my research leading to the writing of my recently completed book I came to the conclusion that existent theory fits into the following eight categories: 1) Musique Concrète/Acoustic Music; 2) Real-world Music and, more recently, Appropriation; 3) New Sounds (including Noise); 4) “All Sounds are Sound Objects”; 5) Formalised Musics; 6) The Popular Dimension; 7) The ‘Split’ between Fixed Medium and Live Electronic Practices; 6) Sound Art → Sonic Art. The framework I have proposed subdivides Sound-based Music Studies as follows: 1) Classification: from sound to work level; 2) The listening experience; 3) Modes of discourse, analysis and representation; 4) Organising sound from micro to macro-level; 5) New virtuosity; and 6) New means of presentation. Beyond these areas I also make a plea for historical writings to take history, theory and socio-cultural impact into account and to avoid, where possible, the art/pop divide as their histories, at least as far as this subject is concerned, are all intertwined. I also return to the Disciplines of Study category to illustrate how these disciplines also impact upon all six key areas. Time and space unfortunately do not allow for much elaboration here. In the book the combination of an overview of existent theory and this framework serves as a starting point for a discussion that complements that of classification.

Electroacoustic or Sound-based Music or however you prefer to call it is introduced or taught in a wide variety of ways. I have discovered that these introductions often exclude things not due to a tutor’s preference, but instead because (s)he does not have access to that information. I believe that if we, through the same or similar type of specialists’ working group as the terminology group suggested above, took the trouble to create a clear framework and contribute more foundational writing to the field, the information, pedagogic or otherwise, that supports this music and, consequently, access to the music would both increase enormously.

Bibliographic sources related to access-based research projects mentioned in this talk

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