

Schaeffer est Mort! Long live Schaeffer!

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This paper examines two groups of composers and discusses their points of correspondence through the use of similar memetic material. As a result of this commonality an examination of the ways in which these composers have expanded the electroacoustic language through the hybridisation of electronica and musique concrète techniques is undertaken. It will then be demonstrated how these works, whilst pushing at the boundaries of electroacoustic music can nevertheless be discussed and analysed with reference to Emerson's language grid as originally proposed in *The Relation of Language to Materials* (Emerson: 1986, 24). It will be demonstrated how, with the advent of sampling technologies and proliferation of works utilizing concrete materials, Emerson's language grid can be used as the basis for a wider discussion of electronic works.

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It is now twelve years since Schaeffer died. Yet how do we interpret his legacy? As both a composer and philosopher his work means different things to different contemporary sound artists. Although, as Ambrose Field writes,

electroacoustic aesthetics have so often redefined Schaeffer's terminology to fit prevailing compositional trends... (Field 2000: 36)

what we are now witnessing in many ways goes beyond this. Schaeffer is for some the founder of musique concrète and the starting point for all subsequent experimental electronic music, whilst for others he is the first turntablist in that he used the turntable to create and manipulate sound rather than merely re-playing recorded music. For a still larger group, Schaeffer is the grandfather of electronica. How can we reconcile these differing and competing claims? Are we witnessing the genealogy of electronic music slowly being re-directed or re-appropriated before

our eyes in order to legitimate or construct a history for specific areas of contemporary electronic music, or a realignment informed by current aesthetic trends? One such example occurs in the book *Modulations: A History of Electronic Music: Throbbing Words on Sound* which states that

At the end of the nineties, the innovations that began with GRM's founders have been fully integrated into the everyday working practice of almost all musicians working across the entire musical spectrum. The breakbeat, created entirely from the manipulation of records on turntables or from recorded segments spliced together either manually or digitally, is the epitome of musique concrète (in Young 2000: 15).

Whilst many acousmatic composers would take issue with the grouping together of breakbeat and musique concrète from a stylistic point of view, what the above quotation highlights is a connection through process rather than aesthetic content. Whilst it could be contended that merely making a connection between different genres of music through the use of a shared technical procedure and disregarding the aesthetic intention is somewhat simplistic, we can explain this 'procedural' connection between the practices of breakbeat and musique concrète at a memetic level. Richard Dawkins refers to a meme as a unit of cultural transmission, and that

examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches (Dawkins: 1989,192)

The connection between breakbeat and musique concrète which operates at a behavioural level – one of a shared common approach to technology in music

production – is explained by a broader definition of the meme by John Langrish. Langrish, a researcher in design writes that,

Some writers (e.g. Ball 1984 and Durham 1991) have seen memes as being more than unit bits of information or unit ideas. They can be complexes of things, behaviour and ideas but still transmitted as units and firmly placed in something called culture (Langrish: 1999).

If we accept such a definition, then breakbeat and musique concrète can be shown to share certain behavioural or procedural characteristics. From a memetic perspective, contemporary culture itself can be interpreted as entirely constituted of memes. It is through the cross-fertilization or mutation of these memes, that we chart the rise of the next trend in urban culture as much as its development.

From a compositional perspective, the conscious identification and usage of memes in composition inherently implies the drawing together of different musical elements either from within a genre, or from another genre: in electronic music, sampling. To paraphrase Steven Jan, one of the first writers to apply memetics to music, memetic mutation arises out of errors in copying. It also arises out of a composer's misremembering (however deliberate) or assimilation of other composers' works or ideas.

In light of the application of memetic thinking to music and composition we can posit a hypothesis defining the contemporary composer that draws together Eno's idea that contemporary composers need to be good arrangers, curators or assemblers of material, and Stravinsky's oft-quoted phrase that good composers do not imitate, they steal, namely that an original composer is one who charts a culturally aware path through differing musical *idioms* or *dialects* drawing together strings of memes. Examples that illustrate this definition, and

at the same time pose interesting issues regarding style, can be found in the works of Alejandro Viñao, Ned Bouhalassa, Richard Devine and Matthew Herbert.

In order to understand how we might listen to Herbert's music and discuss its use of materials in a meaningful way, we have to look no further than Emerson's language grid originally applied to electroacoustic music in 1986. Emerson, in 'The Relation of Language to Materials', writes that he is concerned

with how the imagery evoked interacts with more abstract aspects of musical composition (Emmerson 1986: 17)

For Herbert, the stories behind the music are almost more important than the music itself. Herbert argues that

It's the difference between art and entertainment. A Britney Spears song is just exactly that. There's no other story to tell... What excites me is that with a sampler there is the possibility of imbuing the music with these kinds of stories (Herbert: 2005)

If we examine how Herbert puts his music together we can see this quite clearly. On the *Plat du Jour* (2004) album Herbert employed his PCCOM (Personal Contract for the Composition of Music) Turbo Extreme: a personal manifesto that limits the concrete source materials used in a track to those referenced in the title or connected with the source recordings. Herbert takes this process further by constructing the proportions and tempo of tracks from factual information related to the source materials themselves. In *These Branded Waters* Herbert records samples from different bottled waters. He explains that,

The track is 182 bpm because it takes 182,000 litres of water to make one ton of steel. Sanitation coverage is 53% in Bangladesh, so the track is 5'30' long... all melodies and chords are a sample of blowing over the top of a San Pellegrino bottle (Herbert: 2004).

The structuring of this track clearly demonstrates that Herbert has

created an abstract architectonic form into which the material was ‘poured’ (Emmerson 1986: 36)

- a phrase Emmerson originally applied to Stockhausen’s *Telemusik*.

At the beginning of Herbert’s tracks *McDonalds* (2002) and throughout *The Truncated Life of an Industrialised Chicken* (2004) Herbert utilises narrative elements that Luc Ferrari termed ‘anecdotal music’ (Emmerson: 1986, 35). As a result of this use of concrete anecdotal material and its subsequent transformation to create both the melodic and rhythmic components of the tracks, the way in which a listener approaches Herbert’s work recalls Emmerson’s discussion of mimesis and abstract discourse in Schaeffer’s *Etudes aux Objets* in ‘The Relation of Language to Materials’ (Emmerson: 1986: 17-39). Emmerson writes that,

the listener is confronted with two conflicting arguments the more abstract musical discourse... of interacting sounds and their patterns, and the almost cinematic stream of images of real objects being hit, scraped or otherwise set in motion (Emmerson 1986: 18)

This ‘conflicting argument’ is not uniquely applicable to Herbert in the field of electronica. The language grid can be equally applied to Matmos, Amon Tobin, Leafcutter John, Scanner and Richard Devine, and is clearly now no longer the sole domain of the electroacoustic genre due to the proliferation of sampling techniques and transfer of memes from one genre to another. In Richard Devine’s work on *Alea Mapper* (2001) and on the later album *Cautella* (2005) album we can clearly place his work in the aural discourse/abstract syntax category as defined by Emmerson where,

...syntax still originates from an abstract domain, superimposed on and not drawn from perception of the sounds themselves (Emmerson 1986: 26)

Devine describes his work in terms that many acousmatic composers would find empathy with. Devine has stated in interview that his music,

experiments with time fields, shifting timbres and different rhythmic placements within space... I love music that doesn’t repeat... My intentions are not to really make people dance, but to engage the listener in a surround-sound experience of acrobatic sound textures (Devine: web interview 2005)

In *Sigstop* (2005) from the *Cautella* album, Devine’s *intraopus* style makes use of a number of memes that we would recognise as referencing the acousmatic genre. Devine himself has said that,

Academic electronic composers of today still intrigue me and I constantly find new ideas from this area (Devine: 2007)

In the previous two examples, I have specifically chosen composers who would not traditionally be classed as acousmatic or electroacoustic. It is due to the continual evolution of electronic music through the sharing of memetic material engendered through sampling techniques that have enabled an expansion of the range of music that can be discussed together under Emmerson’s original grid categories. As categories/types/designations are themselves memes, they are therefore subject to selection and evolution over time. Such an expansion is not to claim that Devine and Herbert are acousmatic composers but rather to demonstrate that the blurring of musical boundaries is not merely marketing hype propagated by cross-over artists but rather a reality of a culture that is dominated by the continual transference and mutation of memes.

If we examine the proposition from the opposite perspective, we again find some interesting results. In Alejandro Viñao’s work *The World We Know* (2003) Viñao

specifically chose what he termed ‘cliches’ of our culture. One of these is a hip-hop rhythm. Viñao here is employing a technique of genre-sampling, as the meme (the short hip-hop rhythm) is treated as a sonic resource that undergoes a more abstract musical development. At a surface level, however, what we hear is a warped electronica track. Viñao writes that the

basic rhythm becomes the centre of gravity, the point of reference from and through which ‘the world’ is perceived, including other past and present music clichés. In the beginning of the piece the common ‘concrete’ sounds of the world organise themselves into a hip-hop rhythm. Eventually, the hip-hop rhythm is itself modified by the sounds coming from the concrete sound world. In the second half of the piece I could not resist the temptation to subject the different sounds and patterns of my hip-hop rhythm to a process of ‘Nancarrowisation’, deconstructing them by applying some of the ideas about simultaneous multiple tempi and irrational rhythmic patterns developed by Conlon Nancarrow. (Viñao: 2003).

The work clearly occupies a mimetic discourse/abstract syntax position in Emmerson’s grid as musical material, cliché or not, is poured into a process of ‘Nancarrowisation’. The issue here becomes one of *dialect*. Although Viñao’s use of the hip-hop rhythm is no different on the surface from his other works which utilize stylistic quotation: (e.g. plainchant in *Hildegard’s Dream* for soprano and electronics), such is the cultural loadedness of the hip-hop rhythm as a meme that it causes an ambiguity in assigning the work to a particular genre. This ambiguity is also found in Ned Bouhalassa’s *Urban Cuts* (2005) composed at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. The work uses environmental sounds in an anecdotal manner from a number of different cities including Montréal and Berlin. Just as in *The World We Know*, Bouhalassa uses drum rhythms as a sonic signifier of urban culture, a status reinforced by the sonic artifact rarely being subjected to radical processing that destroys the integrity of the groove. Whilst Bouhalassa’s work demonstrates a mimetic

musical discourse and abstract/abstracted syntax combining

montage based on both the specific acoustic properties of the sounds and a more abstract schema based on a carefully determined symbolic narrative (Emmerson 1986: 36-37),

we also encounter an ambiguity in the *dialect* due to the continual shifts between the anecdotal presentation of environmental material and the driving rhythms associated with pop music.

In certain of my own works, memetic hybridization causes the work to be read on a number of different levels. In *Symbiont* (2002) I consciously adopted sound sources from driving electronica drum rhythms, heavy digital distortion as well as vinyl samples of classical recordings. All of these disparate materials were subjected to processing techniques that I have used in my works for over a decade. For me the work was an acousmatic piece, albeit one with a strong rhythmic profile, that drew together a number of disparate elements. I saw these materials, both the sampled material and the acousmatic sounds created as a result of processing the sampled elements, as ‘interpenetrating’ one another – a technique used originally by the Futurist painters and termed ‘divisionism’. I also had in the back of my mind Emmerson’s dialectic basis of language/ discourse, whereby

Two opposites are juxtaposed and form a new relationship (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), this relationship in turn creating a further dialectic and so on (Emmerson 1986, 30).

However, reviews of this work have often referred to it in terms of ‘hardcore breakbeat’ (Lindsay: 2007) or other hybrid terms, perhaps reflecting this ‘further dialectic’. This implies a multifaceted reading of the work is possible, one in which structure and surface are perhaps at odds with one another. The categorization

of *Symbiont* as having an abstract language/aural discourse, whilst explaining certain qualities of the work, does not explain its stylistic interpretation. The ‘language’ of the work is complex - it demonstrates qualities that allow those working within the acousmatic *dialect* to interpret it in one way, whereas those from an electronica background perhaps relate more to the rhythmic surface of the work.

It is clear that in the composers’ works mentioned above we are dealing with similar issues of interpretation despite their commercial or non-commercial origins. What a discussion of these works demonstrates is that the ‘language’ of these works is no longer categorizable as solely experimental or commercial. The transfer or deliberate mutation of memes has resulted not only in hybrid musical works but also in works that necessitate that the listener has a knowledge of both genres in order to fully appreciate them.

However one decides to ‘read’ the works mentioned above, through clearly placing these artists’ work within Emmerson’s mimetic grid we can demonstrate the growth and hybridization of electronic music.

If we return to my opening question regarding Schaeffer’s legacy, perhaps what we are now witnessing is similar to Boulez’ article following the death of Schoenberg (though less polemically motivated): namely that the ripples of the sonic revolution precipitated by Schaeffer’s compositions and theoretical work are spreading across more and more areas of musical thinking, particularly that which is technologically mediated. However, whereas Boulez was critical that Schoenberg had not taken his revolution far enough, many contemporary sound artists are more embracing – celebrating the past and looking forward to the uncharted sonic territory that awaits as the

ripples of Schaeffer’s revolution in sound become ever wider.

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