

Sanne Krogh Groth

Communicating EAM: Aesthetics vs. rhetoric

Department of Arts and Culture, Musicology Section
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
groth@hum.ku.dk

Abstract

Since the early years of electro acoustic music great self-awareness is found among the field's composers who often and willingly have communicated historical chronology, thoughts about analysis, aesthetic directions and rivalries. This we find both in relation to the historical studios (Schaeffer's work in Paris, the studio in Cologne and in the studio EMS in Stockholm) and in relation to today's discussions of EAM and Sound Art. The extended rhetoric about the music and the production of it is a useful tool in our discussions of musical development and analysis, but can in some cases lead to the disappearing of the aesthetic work and contemplation.

In the paper I will illustrate this by presenting an analysis of the rhetoric at the electronic music studio EMS, Stockholm: It's aesthetic and scientific context and its function in a political context. I will discuss what impact this displacement of focus from the sounding work to the contextualization of the work has had on the production, comprehension and reception of aesthetic works produced in the hybrid-studio at EMS. This discussion, I believe, is not only of relevance to historical issues, but is also to be considered in the discussions of today's communication of EAM and Sound Art.

Introduction

Since the very beginning of electro acoustic music, great self-awareness is found among the field's composers who often and willingly have communicated historical chronology, thoughts about analysis, aesthetic directions and rivalries. This we find both in relation to the pioneering studios - but also in today's discussions of Electro acoustic Music and Sound Art.

In communicating electro acoustic music we find the rhetoric weighted for reasons like:

- To get a broader understanding of the music in the communication to the audience.
- To get a broader understanding of the development of compositional techniques, hardware and software.
- To politically legitimise the music and the production of it.

Basically this extended rhetoric is not a problem; - it only becomes a problem if we as musicologists or other communicators and interpreters do not make the content and function of the rhetoric clear, and clarify its relations to such aspects as production and reception, aesthetical and political issues.

Field of study

The paper raises the question "Rhetoric vs. Aesthetic?" based on research I did writing my PhD dissertation on the Swedish electronic music Studio EMS from 1964 to the late 1970s.

EMS was established in 1964 under the Swedish Radio. In 1965 a previous radio theatre studio – later named the Sound workshop - was opened for the composers to work in. The purpose of EMS, though, was to:

1. establish a world class studio, with for the time being very advanced technology.
2. conduct an international research program in sound and sound perception.

This project was a very cost full affair, but in different ways the people behind the studio managed to achieve the financial support that was needed.

To achieve the financial support from the Swedish social democratic led government, the project had to fit the political issues at the time. It was of great importance how the EMS-project was communicated, so it would fit a political context, where issues like the cold war and the Swedish nuclear program were central in the debates. Development, science and research became important keywords, and the expectations to the future were sky-high.

As an important tool to manage to place the EMS project within this context, the communication was to be carefully planned. As I will illustrate with the following examples, the strategy of communication was not only to be found within oral or written communication, but on several levels:

- Research and technology.
- Studio design.
- Public communication – e.g. TV.

Research and technology

It is of importance to underline, that the research project that was planned in relation to EMS both is to be understood as a strategy of political legitimation and as an interest that went beyond this; to discussions in the Swedish and international modernistic contemporary music and EAM milieu. The Belgian musicologist Pascal Decroupet has argued, that with the new instruments and apparatuses of the electronic music, the music had for its first time been available as a materia, which “for the electro acoustic music composer meant a transition from ‘composer’ to ‘researcher into sound’.” (Decroupet, 2002: 42). Following Decroupet one may say that the position as researcher came along with the nature of the material and the process of composing.

The purpose of the research program at EMS was to develop a system of description that could communicate music in psychological terms. The similarities with Schaeffer’s research were obvious, and the director of the studio, the Norwegian composer Knut Wiggen (b. 1927) also referred directly to Schaeffer several times. Besides this, EMS and Schaeffer’s group initiated a collaboration in 1970, so the respect between the two studios can be considered as mutual.¹ Since an accomplishment of the research project demanded great exactness from the generators in the studio, EMS held a special position in this collaboration, because at this point, as Peter Manning writes in this book, the hybrid studio “was second to none” (Manning, 2004: 213). The technical design of the hybrid studio is therefore to be seen as a precondition for the research project to succeed.²

The construction of this hybrid studio was a very cost full affair. Not only was the development of the special made tonegenerators cost full, so was the computer – a PDP 15, which was installed in 1970. To achieve the money that was needed to realize the studio, the research project became a useful weapon in the political game, where the main argument was, that supporting EMS, was supporting the

¹ For further details on this please see my [EMS-network proceeding from 2008](#).

² In Stockholm though, Schaeffer’s project was transformed into an exact science. Integrating exact science in musicology (analysis with sonograms and so on) were trends at the time, but even though that the intension was to combine natural science and humanities, natural sciences took over in the Swedish project. Here the system of description became an objective one to one system, instead of a system based on inter-subjective results.

music of the future. In the archives in Stockholm I've found proof that show a very close relationship between EMS and Oluf Palme, who was the Minister for Education at the time. In the dialogue they had, the research project was intentionally used as a legitimaton of the studio. (Groth, 2010: 66-72)

Studio design

The image of EMS, as being a world class studio, became worldwide known in the milieus of electro acoustic music, and composers from all over the world came to Stockholm to visit the studio. The director at EMS, Knut Wiggen, was aware of this, and made sure that even though there were many technical problems, he would not disappoint the visitors.



Photo: Gunnel Lindblom

As we can see in the picture above the studio had a careful futuristic design with expensive design furniture (PH lamps and a Verner Panthon chair). At the time, this studio was by Wiggen himself described as an almost holy place, where the composer could work peacefully in undisturbed and air conditioned surroundings.³

At an exhibition at the technical museum in Oslo, Norway in 2009, where parts of the great consul now are exhibited (they still attract attention), Wiggen told me, that the design of the 9 m long consol, did not end up that long because of its function, but because it had to work as conscious propaganda: When people came to Stockholm, they would not only hear a quadraphonic sound of the world's most advanced studio, but also see the sound of the music for the future. - A sound appearing from an apparatus that would lead their thoughts towards a control room in a NASA space centre.

When music was played by the programmed generators, the consol board's little red lights would indicate the tuning of the generators. This was of course useful when the composers were controlling their programming, but it was also useful to *materialise* and *stage* the abstract loud speaker music. A music, that must have seemed alienating to most people, because of its non tonality, non melodic and non performing character. I do not think it is a coincidence, that the man behind this studio, Knut Wiggen, also was the man behind the first avant-garde happening in Sweden.

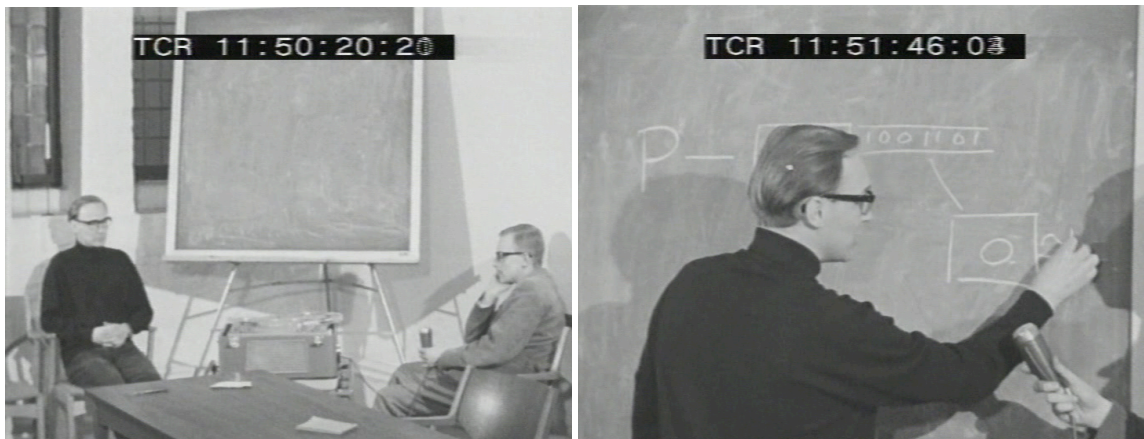
³ Knut Wiggen: 'The Electronic Music Studio at Stockholm, its Development and Construction' i *Interface 1*, 1972, p. 133.

This function of the studio is very well illustrated in the art film *EMS-TUI* from 1974 (available on youtube).⁴ The film is not a pedagogical introduction to the functions of the studio, but shows the composer Tamas Ungvary working in the hybrid studio. Most of the time we find, that his appearance in the studio and the background music are not synchronized, which makes the console appear as if it was a magical living creature.

Communication - TV

The discussions of technology and research were also the subject of many national and international conferences and seminars, where aesthetics hardly were discussed. The focus was put more on technology and the process of making the music, than at the result of it. The result was something that belonged to the future.

This was also the case when the people behind EMS were to communicate their ideas to the broader public. In a 3 minutes long TV-clip from 1963 (the year before the studio was established), Knut Wiggen presents electronic music, which he brands as “Music for the future”, on national television.⁵



Knut Wiggen and journalist Gary Engman, Swedish Television 1963

Before turning on the tape recorder the journalist says: “The composition we are about to hear is composed by an American computer.” Filtered noise shaped in short dramatic episodes is played, while close up pictures are shown first of the tape recorder and then of Knut Wiggen and the journalist. They both have a very serious and concentrated attitude while listening to the filtered noise. Then the journalist states: “Well, Knut Wiggen - composer - You, among others, think this is music. Actually beautiful music.” Knut Wiggen agrees to the statement without further elaboration, but continues by explaining the technical details of the process of composition on a blackboard: “As a usual composer, one starts with his ideas about the music, and then he programs it. [...] We can imagine, that we write a large P for programming. After this, he gives it to a programmer, who puts in into a computer. Out of the computer comes series of binary numbers, 1001101 on a tape, - and this tape, one puts into a converter. And as converter, it transforms it to voltage, which go to a tape recorder. And then we have composed tones.” To the question why it is, “that many of us, do not think that it is beautiful?” Wiggen answers: “Maybe you listen wrong and too little. I think that many people listen after what is not in the composition, than what is there – and should lead their attention to what

⁴ Ferenc Füzeskúti, István Tóthpál og Tamás Ungváry: *EMS – TUI*, Kunsthögskolan Filmverkstaden, Stockholm 1974 [dur. 9.59]. First time I saw this film was during a visit at Tamas Ungváry’s house. After the visit he uploaded this fascinating document to youtube. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCdITilrp5k)

⁵ Svensk mediedatabas: *Aktuellt* 17/3 1963.

is there.” In this very diffuse answer he never actually explains what it is he wants the listener to experience, or what it is, he finds beautiful.

The interview ends with the question: “Do you think this is the music of the future? Do you think this is what will listen to a couple years?” to which Knut Wiggen answers: “Yes I think so. Yes I think so.”

Musial work or historical document?

The replacement of the work of art from the present into the future, I rediscover in an analysis, the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus has made of the serialistic composers’ rhetoric in the mid 1970s.⁶ Even though serialism was not among the favoured composition strategies in Stockholm, there still are similarities to find.

What Dahlhaus here brings into dialogue, is the tendency of the composers to legitimate their compositions by explaining *how* they were made, *which* rules they applied and *what* position it gives them in music history. As one probably know, the serialistic composers considered their own work on the one hand, as responds or solutions to Webern’s work, and on the other, as the beginning of something brand new. They fancied showing the extreme complicated structure of the work, which reminded more of mathematical proofs than aesthetical discussions.

Dahlhaus compares this thinking and legitimation of the artistic work to the natural scientific discourse at the time, which was characterised by evolution and ideas that were most concerned about where the evolution would take us, and what would be happening in the future.

With the inscription of the artistic work in this natural scientific discourse, the work changes status from being an autonomous artistic object - to instead, to be considered as a brick in a larger puzzle or a *problemgeschichte* (history of problems). By this Dahlhaus argues that the musical work becomes so tied up in its own present, that it loses its function as autonomous aesthetic art work. The – in Dahlhaus’ words - aesthetic contemplation becomes impossible, which also involves an exclusion of an aesthetic afterlife. Instead the artistic work holds a character of documentary that serves to illustrate certain discussions at a certain period of time.

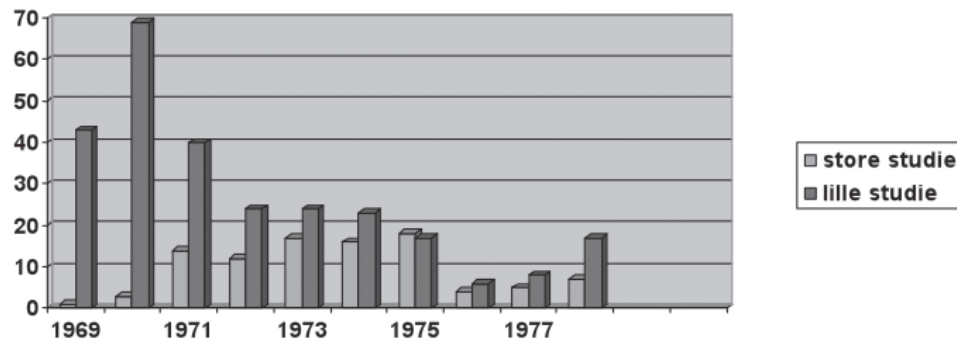
Even though that Dahlhaus’ insistent of the autonomous work today seem quite obsolete, it is interesting, that when we look at EMS, we actually find, that hardly any of the works produced in the large studio, have survived as aesthetic objects. Instead they appear in various contexts as documentary or historical objects, where they serve to give impressions of a time that has now disappeared and which can be characterized by a strong scientific discourse. This does not necessarily mean that the works produced in the studio were not successful pieces. They just never had an afterlife, which I think – partly can be explained with the thoughts Dahlhaus had on serialism. In Stockholm it was a context on technology and the future that overshadowed the aesthetic discussions.

Concerning the production in the large studio, a myth has later been established: that because of the many technical problems and the interest for research, there hardly were any productions made in the large studio. The Swedish musicologist Per O. Broman has for example described is this way: ”A little pointed it can be said, that the little studio was the place for the composers to work, while the large studio was the purpose of Wiggen’s visions.” (Broman: 2007, 171.)

But – while I was going through the archives at today’s EMS in Stockholm I managed to write a list with over 100 pieces of music produced in the hybrid studio at EMS in the 1970s. With this preliminary list, I conclude, that the myth is wrong, and that there actually were produced quite an

⁶ Dahlhaus presented these thoughts on the Darmstadt course in 1975. The text was printet the year after. Dahlhaus, Carl: ‘Vom Missbrauch der Wissenschaft’ i *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik, Ferienkurse 76*, Mainz 1976, p. 22-32.

amount of work. And in a comparison with the production in the little studio, the difference - after 1972 - wasn't really as large as it is in the telling is either.



Source: EMS archive, Stockholm (Groth 2010, 128) ⁷

A reason that all these works disappeared can be – following Dahlhaus, that the scientific discourse and with this, a focus on what was to become, took over in such a degree, that the artistic works got to appear only as bi-products of this. Another aspect, which also has to be considered, is that it has been the opponents of Wiggen that mainly - so far - has told the story of EMS. A story where research and technology were not to be the main characters. But, maybe, with a forthcoming digitalization of the works produced in the large studio, they might get new attention from younger generations of musicologists and composers.

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⁷ 'Verk fremställda vid EMS datorstudie /stora studion 1970-75' in *Statistik juli 1973-75 Studio ans*. [EMS archive]

Uppgifter om svenska tonsättare & kompositioner A-L (1968-70) [EMS archive]

Uppgifter om svenska tonsättare & kompositioner M-Ö (1968-70) [EMS archive]

EMS bandarkiv samt Utländska tonsättare och kompositioner (46) [EMS archive]

'Verk fremställda vid EMS klangverstan 1969-75' in *Statistik juli 1973-75, Studio ans*. [EMS archive]