

Importing the Sonic Souvenir: issues of cross-cultural composition

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Abstract

Sourcing sound materials from distant and foreign locations has become a relatively common and elementary practice for the electroacoustic music composer to engage with. The ease and frequency of traveling has been responsible, in part, widening the availability of sound choice and collection and in turn providing a vast “acoustic palette as wide as that of the environment itself”¹.

This practice of cross-cultural sound sourcing may be understood by our attraction to the exotic, and the unadulterated soundworld sonic souvenirs can yield. The need for originality as a consideration for the electroacoustic music composer can be addressed through seeking out new and unique sound materials in this way.

With reference to terminology, ‘sonic souvenirs’² are discussed in an authentic sense and may be characterised by their environmental, instrumental or verbal origin. It is their significance and association with a unique place or culture that defines them. This paper attempts to make the distinction between elusive sonic souvenirs and more locally sourced sound materials, readily available within a composer’s vicinity.

In many respects, the analogy of the keepsake souvenir picked up on a holiday presents a point of departure. Souvenirs are attractive mementos, but also tend to be mass marketed items, symbolic of an original object, lacking genuine status. They provide a memory or representation of our personal traveling history, acting as trophies of our accomplished globetrotting. While in practice, importing sonic souvenirs into the studio remains unchanged from ordinary recording work conducted around and on our immediate doorstep, the significance of those materials can present a challenge in terms of their integration, consequence and reception of the finished work. The use of these sounds and the artistic endeavors that transform and sculpt these sounds into music raises a number of issues of ownership, integrity and appropriation. The need to be respectful in sourcing materials from outside ones own cultural home is often high on the composer’s agenda, but what does *respectful borrowing* entail? How do insiders and outsiders of a given culture receive this practice? What are the benefits and positive outcomes of this hybrid format? And how does this practice relate to common areas of investigation within ethnomusicology?

¹ Simon Emmerson, ‘Relation of Language to Materials’, in Simon Emmerson ed., *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, London, 1986, p. 18.

² The term ‘sonic souvenir’ was first mentioned in Manuella Blackburn, PhD *Commentary, Portfolio of Electroacoustic Music Compositions*, The University of Manchester, 2010, p. 57.

To answer these questions my paper will discuss a range of sonic souvenirs found within a collection of electroacoustic works from the contemporary repertoire including *Caspian Retreat*, Pippa Murphy, (2003); *Ho*, Ricardo Climent (2008); *Galungan*, David Berezan (2010) and *S.H.E.N.G*, Leigh Landy (1995). Discussion of these works aims to identify the issues arising from this cross-cultural practice.

My own compositional work has also been influenced by this concept and on several occasions I have incorporated sonic souvenirs into my acousmatic music (*Karita oto*, *Sonidos Bailables*, *Cajón!* and *Dance Machine*). This research builds upon my previous investigations into cross-cultural borrowing in electroacoustic music³. Cross-cultural issues are also discussed with reference to a new compositional project in conjunction with Milapfest – the UK’s Indian Arts Development Trust (currently based at Liverpool Hope University) where sound materials are sourced from entirely from musical instruments typical to traditional Indian music.

1. Preface and definition

My discussion is focused around responses to a questionnaire sent to four composers who have previously made use of cultural sound in their electroacoustic works. As a sample, these composers were specifically approached for looking beyond their surrounding home cultures for sounds and inspiration. All the works discussed in this paper were chosen for their demonstration of explicit and identifiable foreign sound sources. The questionnaire encouraged the composers to comment on their motivations behind the use of cultural sound in reference to particular works from their output. Their responses opened new avenues of thought surrounding this discourse and have directed much of the content in the paper that follows.

Before beginning my discussion, I would like to define a key term used throughout this paper. I have coined the phrase ‘sonic souvenir’ to encompass culturally tied sounds/sound objects that are not common or familiar to one’s own cultural heritage or immediate surroundings. The sonic souvenir is a relative concept that is dependent on individual cultural backgrounds, as clarified through the development of reception theory. Whilst the latter part of the phrase suggests the composer’s actions of physically collecting sounds from a foreign location, the paper presents some cases that do not conform to such an ideal. I propose that it is still possible to engage with sonic souvenirs without conducting field recordings in the sound’s geographic point of origin, ie. a composer may have sourced materials from the internet via file sharing, or sonic souvenirs may arrive at one’s own doorstep. Accessibility to all and any sound now finds itself in the middle of this equation where the once elusive ‘exotic’ sound can feature within our perception of what is ‘local’ and common. Landy summarises this point succinctly, “The local currently means that anyone anywhere, can make any kind of music due to its universal availability (think of the presence of “exotic” fruit at any vegetable store, “exotic” music at almost every record store)”⁴.

³ Manuella Blackburn, ‘Latin American influences and their incorporations into electroacoustic music’, (2007). Online Publication: http://cec.sonus.ca/econtact/12_4/blackburn_influences.html (accessed 20/04/11).

⁴ Leigh Landy, *What’s the matter with Today’s Experimental Music?*, New York, 1991, p. 38.

2. Early engagement

While my study of the sonic souvenir and its manifestation within electroacoustic works is concerned with contemporary composers, this moment is appropriate to introduce an early example dating back to the 1940s with Pierre Schaeffer's *Etude aux Tourniquets* from *Cinq études de bruits* (1948). This work incorporates the recorded sound of three African *sanza* thumb pianos⁵. It is likely that the choice of such exotic sound material was nothing more than a "haphazard coincidence"⁶, with Schaeffer making use of sound sources available to him in the studio at the time. On the other hand, it is possible to speculate upon Schaeffer's intentions to apply his theories to all musics and musical sound with the inclusion of foreign sounds in his larger and more extensive study of sound objects. Another notable example of foreign sound use in Schaeffer's output is his *Variations sur une Flûte Mexicaine* (1949) where a Mexican flute is integrated more identifiably and is presented in a variety of rhythmic patterns. It is worth pondering the reasons behind Schaeffer's inclusion of foreign sound materials and how and why he came into contact with these sources. I, like many other listeners, have become intrigued by cultural borrowings of this sort and question the significance of its explicit presence within the composition.

3. Unexplored sonic territory

Interest in cultural sounds may be explained by the fresh inspiration and unique sonic attributes available to composers when encountering previously unheard sound. Estimating how a sound might lend itself to transformation processes, and how one might communicate their individual compositional voice through these sounds can ignite creativity, and eventually feed into new compositions. American/Dutch composer, Leigh Landy, demonstrated his interest in the Chinese *sheng* instrument in support of this viewpoint. He describes how the instrument "sounds exotic and thus new to me and many like me... there were new sounds that could be made with this very old instrument." Identifying a sonic souvenir's unexplored potential when considering its use within a new electroacoustic music work appears to account for, in part, the allure of the exotic. Sonic souvenirs, of the instrumental kind, that are tightly bound to traditional or stylised performance practices, as in the case of the *sheng*, offer a vast amount of unexplored territory with regards to what has (or has not) already been done with the instrument. Bar the inclusion of a Chinese traditional secular tune in the middle of the work, Landy's use of the *sheng* in his mixed work *S.H.E.N.G* (1995) appears experimental and concerned mostly with extracting and demonstrating new sound. Landy states, "The clusters in the introduction and elsewhere in the piece with all of their beat frequencies typify what might be called one of the many potential new sounds for this fairly ancient instrument."

3.1 Inspirational travel

My study revealed recreational travel as being responsible for introducing electroacoustic composers to a wealth of further sound choices for creative work. Canadian composer David Berezan corroborates, explaining the inspiration for his acousmatic work *Galungan* (2010) as a result of a longitudinal relationship and fascination with Balinese culture. "My first travel

⁵ Pierre Schaeffer, 1952, *A la recherche d'une musique concrète*, Translated from French by John Dack and Christine North (Accepted for publication) p. 14.

⁶ Email correspondence with John Dack, April 2011.

there in 1993 marked a dramatic opening of specific aural and cultural awareness – it made a very strong impression that has resonated with me continuously since.” Berezan’s justification for his choice in sound selection (Balinese gamelan, rice paddy environments and *kecak* vocal utterances) stems from a desire to “explore the sonic landscapes of Bali in [his] own musical language.” Berezan outlines his concept for the piece as an “exploration of the night-music and sounds of Ubud”. *Galungan* presents and re-works “the magic for the visitor [of] the night choruses of frogs, geckos and cicadas, interwoven with the musical processions that can occur at any hour, relating to the seemingly endless number of rituals associated with Balinese life.”

Scottish composer, Pippa Murphy also attributes her travels abroad for introducing her to sound material for new compositions. Murphy communicated her interest in the sonic landscapes of Iran as justification for the initial attraction of her chosen sonic souvenirs in her acousmatic work *Caspian Retreat* (2002). The composition provides a contrasting parallel to the socio-political situation associated with this geographic location. Incorporating identifiable sounds from this culture undoubtedly strikes a chord with many listeners due to the gravity of the much-publicised political issues. Murphy states, “[the piece] was written at a time when Iran was announced by Bush to be one of three countries on the ‘axis of evil’.” Murphy’s intent however, was to “explore the beauty and complexities of contemporary life in a land steeped in ancient art, culture and music; a land rich in colour, smell and sound.” Interestingly, Murphy collected her sonic souvenirs (recordings of the Caspian sea, traffic in Tehran and the call to prayer) while working on a theatre and film project with university students four months before 9/11. Maintaining sound identity in this work reinforces the Iranian cultural suggestion, providing a way in for the listener to make sense of the work, while allowing them to draw their own conclusions. Murphy explains that it is “important that some sounds are identifiable.” “The traffic and the call to prayer” are regarded as culture-specific within the work, while “the piece captures a richness of the landscape and the listener is carried on a journey – taken away from reference and then back in again.”

3.2 Research fields

Research interests have also been key in introducing composers to new sounds and inspiration. Spanish composer Ricardo Climent communicated his long-term commitment to cultural engagements further a field from his European roots when responding to questions on his sound installation *Ho* (2008). “I noticed that most of my pieces are informed by a historical character who is often related to the cold war or some kind of conflict.” Landy also identified a long-standing academic interest in cultural sounds when justifying his inclusion of foreign sound sources within his musical output, “I have been attracted to the sounds of local music since I was young and learned a huge amount about the subject during a partial PhD study in ethnomusicology.”

4. A divided sound world

In studying the works and responses from the participating composers, it has been possible to further refine my key terminology used in this paper. Figure 1 demonstrates how the term, sonic souvenir may be distinguished from culturally familiar sound when considering recorded sound within the scope of this discussion.

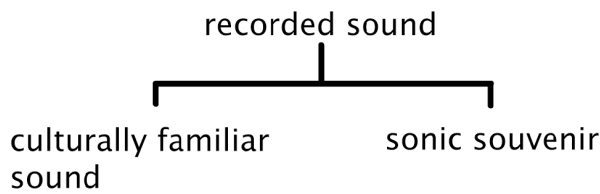


Figure 1. Dividing the sound world

The sonic souvenir may undergo a further division when examining the variable impact of signification associated with these types of sounds. Murphy’s *Caspian Retreat* presents an example of this subdivision when comparing the cultural specificity of the traffic against the call to prayer sounds. Audience members unaccustomed to the sonic landscape of Tehran may find it challenging to discern an exact location on the basis of traffic sounds alone, while in contrast, the call to prayer appears to indicate and function more precisely. As a sonic souvenir, the call to prayer carries (for many) a whole array of cultural meanings and associations. Of course these perceptions are wholly relative and dependent on individual experiences and cultural backgrounds, but one might propose the significance of including such symbolic sound and their potential function in communicating statements of cultural or political weight. This subdivision of sonic souvenirs, leading to the category labeled cultural emblems (Figure 2) accounts for sounds that tend to be highly loaded and culture-associative, often exhibiting strong sacred, religious, musical, political or geographic connections. For example, one might regard (again depending on ones own cultural background) castanets, bagpipes and foreign languages to exist within this grouping.

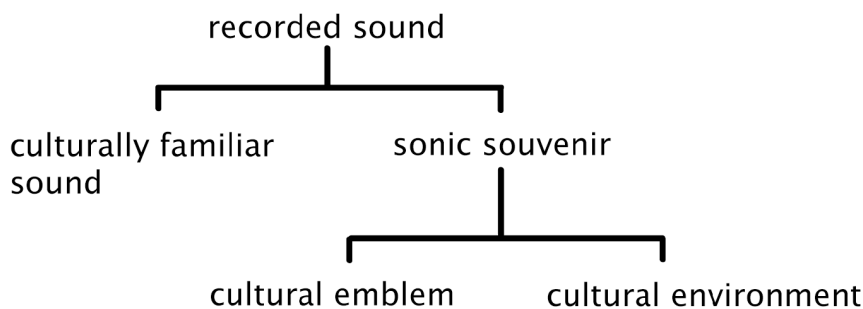


Figure 2. Subdivision of sonic souvenirs

4.1 Cultural source bonding

Making contact with new and foreign sound sources ultimately leads the composer to form a preliminary assessment of the potential or applicability of exotic sound sources. Estimating how these sounds may suit or function within a composer’s personal œuvre is an important factor when deciding upon what material to capture. This may go some way in explaining the attraction of foreign, exotic sound for the composers involved in this study. Berezan credits the “strong source bonding and evocation” of the Balinese sound sources for first attracting and inspiring his creative practice. Identifiable sound is particularly important within *Galungan* where a number of natural environments are highlighted within the work. “The natural soundworlds are intended to quite literally invoke those settings (though not specifically Balinese or Indonesian... just something more otherly).” In this statement, Berezan raises an interesting point regarding environmental sonic souvenirs and the ambiguous and often inexact source bondings that they may connote. Presenting an audience with sound material collected from a Balinese rice paddy will not necessarily signify this

exact Balinese location, even if the listeners are familiar with this culture. Such environmental sound (rice paddies, insects, frogs and geckos) will often and likely be described in a more approximate fashion, for example, as *tropical*. Environmental sonic souvenirs thus exist within a separate category (cultural environment, Figure 2) and I tentatively propose that they are often more generalised in their evocation of the exotic.

4.2 The virtual tourist

One work chosen for its different approach to cultural borrowing is Ricardo Climent's installation *Ho*. Described as a 'sonic expedition to Vietnam', *Ho* enables interaction with a variety of sound worlds involving the participant as "the captain of a ship", who controls a sound-wheel interface inspired by maritime navigation. "While navigating, he/she leads listeners on an aural journey with critical stops at specific locations." The source of cultural influence is significant as Climent explains, "I have never been to Vietnam, although I have traveled many times through my sonic imagination." In this respect, engagement with sonic souvenirs is distant and not first-hand as in the previous examples. Some traditional Vietnamese vocal music was used in the production of the work, however Climent mentions the need to avoid copyright issues, deciding to sing the Vietnamese vocals himself. "Most of the [other] sounds are unrelated [to Vietnamese culture]... although there are loads of cultural borrowing in the visuals, mostly from materials (pictures, songs, videos) given by people who told me that they had been there." Sourcing exotic material through the internet brings these (once) unobtainable sounds much closer to our fingertips as in Climent's case. I understand that this is not a viable option for many composer as often, the compositional process starts with the techniques applied in obtaining these sound recordings first hand. Climent's revelation of creating an imaginary setting based upon the preconceived ideas of Vietnam in this instance demonstrates an alternative approach to cross-cultural composition, while contributing to the work's appeal and charm.

5. Ownership

The way in which composers handle sonic souvenirs within their compositional processes can often differ to their usual working routines. In creating my acousmatic work *Karita oto* (*Borrowed Sound*) where all material was sourced from Japanese traditional instruments, I found myself hesitant in applying transformation procedures on this new and exotic sound material. This may be partly explained through my desire to maintain the attractive and rich sound qualities inherently exhibited by the materials. My approach was also tentative to avoid damaging and defacing the cultural sounds in their raw state. I am still uncertain whether this was out of 'respect' for the sounds or whether I was subconsciously keen to showcase the beauty of these sounds as I had first experienced them with fresh ears in Japan. Whatever the reasons, I acknowledge my compositional process changed to accommodate these unfamiliar sonic souvenirs. Reflecting upon this piece, I observe a less clear-cut sense of ownership partly attributed to my lack of a personal or hereditary link with Japan, the maintenance of a large amount of raw and unprocessed sound, and a general unfamiliarity with Japanese traditional music culture.

6. Insider reactions and respectful borrowing

Reception of Leigh Landy's work *S.H.E.N.G* demonstrates how audiences may react positively to an outsider's use of a sonic souvenir, in this case a cultural musical instrument. "The most important performance by far of this piece was when I played it at that very CCOM [Central Conservatory of Music] in Beijing 11 years after I completed it to see whether they would be angry, bored or possibly enthusiastic about it. The hugely enthusiastic response made the whole undertaking worthwhile for me." Performances taking place within the sonic souvenir's home culture is an important (albeit, apparently rarely occurring) part of the cross-cultural compositional process, potentially linking with the notion of respectful borrowing as a means of validating and evaluating one's actions.

While the topic of respectful borrowing is somewhat contentious and sensitive, the area continues to provide fertile ground for consideration, since each case of cultural integration is different and individual to the composer. Through this research it has been possible to extract a general consensus regarding the need for respect when borrowing cross-culturally, however the challenge remains in defining criteria for such respectful behaviour. Trying to articulate the meaning of respectful borrowing is not easy and attempting to lay down ground rules would be ineffective, it might even dissuade composers from undertaking similar sorts of activity. On the contrary, I am aiming to encourage and facilitate further cross-cultural activity by researching the issues, including the potential benefit, of borrowing. On this subject, Simon Emmerson (2000) identifies a "magpie" culture amongst composers with "voracious appetites for finding fuel for their inspiration"⁷ with regards to cross-cultural composition. Here he outlines the problematic nature of musical borrowings from highly developed traditions, including "performance practices, attitudes and aesthetics" being misunderstood in both directions. Emmerson (2006) furthers this idea by articulating a scale of cultural exchange with "appropriation with no exchange or understanding", ie. "a composer plundering local colour for sampling" at one extreme and "true exchange with the possibility of real mutual understanding"⁸ at the other. One may extract from this discourse that disrespectful borrowing entails a degree of naivety with the sounds and culture being borrowed from. Fully acquainting oneself with the culture in question would likely be welcome from an insider's perspective, and would be, at the very least, a starting point for acknowledging one's actions and intentions.

One final perspective on the continued use and evaluation of sonic souvenirs finds support in the literature of Peter J. Burkholder (1994) who proposes that we should "regard the study of musical borrowing as a field"⁹, which I would like to expand to include sampled sound as found in electroacoustic music. "Large categories like 'borrowing' and 'quotation' are not enough. There are many ways of using existing music [and here I also include recorded sound] and it is necessary to differentiate among them."¹⁰

⁷ Simon Emmerson ed., *Music Electronic Media and Culture*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, p. 115.

⁸ Simon Emmerson, 'Appropriation, exchange and understanding', Conference proceedings, Electronic Music Studies 2006, *Terminology and Translation*, <http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?rubrique45> (accessed 22/05/11).

⁹ Peter J. Burkholder, 'The Uses of Existing Music', *Music Library Association Notes*, Vol. 50, (3), 1994, p. 855.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

7. Doorstep resources/souvenirs

By considering the ideas discussed above regarding cultural exchange, I intend to lay the foundations for my future project utilising sound recordings of traditional Indian music instruments in collaboration with Milapfest (the UK's Indian Arts Development Trust) housed at Liverpool Hope University. Workshops and recording sessions with visiting and resident musicians will provide the opportunity for musical exchange from both 'cultural sides' with the objective of achieving collaborative music making. The use of these sounds in acousmatic and mixed media music will be discussed and considered by the musician's providing them, with the hope of gaining insights on creative practice using the sonic souvenir.

8. Conclusion

My brief and preliminary study of sonic souvenirs has dealt with a discrete collection of electroacoustic music works where cultural sound use is explicit and identifiable. Examining the significance of these sounds has enabled isolation of subcategories of sonic souvenirs (cultural environments and emblems) revealing their varying impact within works from the contemporary repertoire.

I believe there is scope to develop and expand this discourse, focusing in more detail on the range of integration methods composers use to deal with sonic souvenirs. Further study into works where cultural sound incorporation is less direct may also illuminate additional methods and issues arising from cultural borrowing in electroacoustic music.

The field of cultural borrowing stretches far beyond the scope of this paper and trends in sonic souvenir use are observable in the growing repertoire of electroacoustic music. While the constant search for new material and inspiration can find fulfillment in foreign sound sourcing, as this paper has established, this process still demands much care, consideration and study.

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