

Associative and Investigative Processing: Listening Behaviours in the Acousmatic Arena

Lee Fraser

School of Arts, Histories and Cultures, The University of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK

leefraser@gmx.com

Abstract

This paper presents an expanded extract from a previously unpublished essay entitled *Ghost Semantics: An Enquiry into the Nature of Listening, Discourse and Value in the Acousmatic Arena* (Fraser, 2009). The selection put forward here introduces the concepts of *associative and investigative processing*, which are suggested as compositional aids.

Introduction

As a composer and enthusiast of acousmatic music, I am very aware of the problems faced by the listener when trying to navigate an acousmatic work. The potentially infinite number of variables available to the composer during the creative process makes the prospect of finding two pieces of acousmatic music that sound alike seem doubtful, at least in theory, and without the kind of structural constants that one finds harnessed in the practices of many other musics, evidence of form here can often seem elusive, even to the trained ear. I try to acknowledge this problem in my own work by continually questioning the transparency of its structural rationale. This may at first present itself as a redundant exercise, since it would seem evidently impossible to be able to anticipate or predict the listening behaviours of any audience, particularly an acousmatic one, and yet when considering the *kinds* of conversations one often encounters at electroacoustic events, there does appear to be clear patterns in the way the audience responds to the music. Indeed, this observation was the initial basis for an earlier paper of mine that was written during my time as an MA student on the electroacoustic composition course at City University, London, from which much of what follows is taken.

While at City I was encouraged to attend regular listening sessions, where the work of the postgraduate community there was discussed alongside selections from the repertoire. These sessions turned out to be incredibly useful to me from my position as both a composer and researcher. Not only was I able to exercise and develop my electroacoustic terminology in this way, and thus extend my capacity to engage with the music, but I was also able to gain an invaluable insight into the kind of things people were experiencing when listening to acousmatic works, at least the things that they were able or willing to give voice to. Of particular significance for the purposes of this paper, were the remarks offered by guests and students from other departments within the university for whom the experience of listening to acousmatic music was entirely novel. Free from the influence of discourse and the practice of its application, this decontextualised perspective helped to highlight, for me, some of the

pertinent issues concerning the role of language in acousmatic music appreciation, and forms part of a distinction which permeates the ideas put forward here. Other contributions to this line of enquiry include more personalised and detailed accounts from a variety of acousmatic listener types, of which seasoned academics or practitioners and newcomers to the field define the polarities. To offer some context along the way, I will at points try to situate my reflections alongside similarly intentioned treatments on the subject, and relate how my thinking has developed or diverted from these.

1. Associative Processing

In my view the sum total of listening attitudes towards acousmatic music can be defined within just two categories, what I have decided to call the *investigative* and the *associative* modes of processing. The underlying principle of each of these categories will be given in its turn, suffice to say for now that what separates one from the other is the distinct manner in which it regards what I shall henceforth refer to as the *projected sonic impression*. That is, the order of sonic information, every structural and material detail, sent to the listener during the presentation of a work. I use this term in order to draw a distinction from what Molino calls "the total musical fact", which can include a whole range of variables outside of the unqualified sonic message itself. Within both of these modes of processing I have outlined further divisions, three in the associative and two in the investigative, whose common bearing manifests itself in quite different ways. The first category I will introduce is the mode of associative processing.

Associative processing is defined by its "extrinsic" (Smalley 1997 p. 110) perspective towards the projected sonic impression. Through associative processing the listener tends to regard works as objects that have surface value. In this way, the projected sonic impression becomes a point of departure, or is treated as a trigger, exciting other areas of received experience, related or not. The associative mode of processing can also be seen as a means of placing a work within a wider context, or removing it from its context. In this mode, evaluative judgements are rarely attempted because compositional prowess is not really considered. The three divisions within this category are subjective association, symbolic association and stylistic association.

1.1. Subjective Association

In Pierre Schaeffer's *four modes of listening* (Chion, 2009, p. 19), the listener's subjectivity is a feature of two categories, *hearing* and *perceiving* (*loc. cit.*). The first refers to a kind of listening whereby the perceiver selects qualities within a sound object which for them carry no conceptual significance; therefore, it is the selection that is subjective. I align this attitude with investigative processing, because of the way in which the listener's attention is drawn towards the perceived content without maintaining any superficial interest - a more detailed explanation of this to follow. *Perceiving*, here, relates an attitude whereby one is "struck" (*ibid.*, p. 20) by a sound, which has no further influence on the listener and so is not situated within any kind of semantic code. This way of listening, therefore, is passive or disengaged. It is subjective only to the extent that it is received, else other listeners can attest to its place in a piece through discourse. What separates my listening attitudes from Schaeffer's, it seems, is the fact that they all have an agenda, which goes beyond the mere reception of a sound. As I see it, listening, unlike merely attending the presentation of piece, suggests active processing towards an extrinsic or "intrinsic" (*loc. cit.*) end. Each mode of processing here can support a

discursive examination of a work, whether the remarks are of any relevance to other listeners or not.

My conception of subjective association treats subjectivity as a *response* to an acousmatic work, shifting the listener's focus away from the projected sonic impression and directing it towards a more introspective end. The listener's experience in this mode of processing is predominated by personal reminiscences and can often betray cultural or social tendencies when articulated. An example of this kind of processing is illustrated by a quote from an early instalment of Leigh Landy's *Intention/Reception Project*, in which a participant who, when asked to give an account of their experiences of a work, relates a particularly private interpretation that enabled them to focus on "emotions based on memories" (Landy, 2006, p. 38). In this respect, subjective association is extrinsic in relation to the work.

1.2. Symbolic Association

Symbolic association consists of poetic or metaphorical meditations based on one's perception of a work, which are often borrowed from terminology more commonly associated with the other four sensory domains and the broader realm of aural experience. This kind of processing regards the projected sonic impression as an "unconsummated symbol", a term coined by Susanne Langer (Langer, 1980, p. 240), which it aims to furnish with weighted allegorical reflections. Labels used to describe evocative features of a work in this mode commonly denote a physical property or behaviour to which such features share an analogous characteristic. When articulated, these descriptions can often meet some agreement, or be tailored to agree, with other listener's interpretations, depending on the strength of their allusiveness. Furthermore, they can end up as fixed adjectives in acousmatic discourse. Here are some examples: airy, bright, cold, dense, dry, dull, flat, granular, metallic, sharp, etc.

Also included here, are those readings which tend towards the narrative. This approach often finds listeners dividing material into a network of scenes, scenarios and characters in order to produce a timeline of events that make *narrative sense*. Interestingly, in the *figurativisation* (Delalande, 1998, p. 47) mode of his study on listening behaviours, Delalande links these two aspects of symbolic association into a sequential chain of experience:

"The metaphors invoked are not simple designative labels ... but images which impose themselves upon the listener. On a first level these coincide for the three listeners concerned ... they diverge on a second level when they are integrated into a narrative interpretation." (*ibid.*, p. 48)

This "change of perceptual focus" (*ibid.*, p. 50), where "form becomes narrative" (*ibid.*, p. 49), meets a fulfilling conclusion when "one has a revelation, the satisfaction to discover at the end that one was on the right track" (*ibid.*, p. 52). However, as Delalande suggests, this kind of processing is extrinsic when considering the listener's engagement with the projected sonic impression. "Emotions are produced ... as an accident of the subject's listening behaviour rather than an aesthetic appreciation of the object" (*ibid.*, p. 58).

1.3. Stylistic Association

Stylistic association acts by situating a work within an extended artistic context. The degree of extension is elastic. It may serve to place a piece of acousmatic music in relation to others of its kind, by the same composer or those of a related compositional bent, or it might treat the work in terms of its relationship to other musics or artistic practices, such as dance, sculpture, architecture or film. Processing of this kind is also interested in placing work

within its historical or geographical context, and may strive to relate details of a composer's biography, if known, or infer his/her musical influences from the impressions it receives. As such, stylistic association can act by furnishing structural curiosity with contextual information. Therefore it may precede, or proceed from an investigative response. Yet, on its own terms, stylistic association makes no evaluative judgements; it is guided by extrinsic considerations.

2. Investigative Processing

After presenting the three facets of associative processing and considering the essential quality that binds them, I will now introduce the investigative mode of processing and discuss the divisions within it. Investigative processing is guided by an intrinsic tendency. This means that the sonic content of a work is considered only in light of its relationship to the projected sonic impression as a whole. An intrinsic perspective treats the work on its own terms. If the balance is perceived to be somehow disturbed, it is disturbed in relation to an idealised version of the work itself. Given this, evaluative judgements are often made.

Investigative processing finds the listener probing the architecture of a work, testing materials for structural robustness, sustainability or quality of production. This kind of listening is deliberative and achieved.

2.1. Structural Investigation

Structural investigation employs methods of analysis which have gained currency through acousmatic discourse to follow the contours of a work. Processing of this kind is concerned with the play of forms; it regards gesture, texture, time and space as equally important formal devices that can be used in any configuration, providing it agrees with the emerging logic of a piece as it transpires through time. The interest of a work, therefore, might depend on the composer's adherence to this logic, or their clever subversion of it. Structural investigation is largely defined by context.

One could see this kind of investigation as relating to Schaeffer's notions of *hearing* and *comprehending* (Chion, 2009, p. 19). Unlike Schaeffer, however, I doubt that the prospect of isolating a sound object within a work without applying or relating it to other objects is possible. I agree that one can train oneself to remove any extrinsic bond to the material under scrutiny, but what Schaeffer suggests in his *hearing* mode is rather like entertaining the belief that it is possible to dwell upon a single word in a conversation, without receiving any influence from the context of the exchange. Of course, there are ways of treating sounds in isolation, but this is common only with the assistance of some technology. Schaeffer does suggest that by adopting a particular mode one is not frozen to the influence of others (*ibid.*, p. 20). Similarly, I regard the listener's response as mobile, flitting between any sequence of processing behaviours. Yet, I fail to see an independent governor in Schaeffer's *hearing* mode. Thus, when combined with the semantic aspect of *comprehending*, one becomes engaged in an intrinsic investigation.

2.2. Methodological Investigation

The idea for the methodological investigation is borrowed largely from Smalley's notion of *technological listening* (Smalley, 1997, p. 109), since it includes as one of its central features the urge to identify the tools and techniques used by the composer in the construction of work. It is also guided by an impulse to distinguish any artefacts that might result from the

use of such tools, or techniques, and regards quality of sound production as a major consideration. However, I have expanded the scope of technological listening here to include the identification of source materials, which is not pursued with such rigour elsewhere in these categorisations, and is equally pertinent on compositional grounds.

Like structural investigation, its aim is sought in the material, which, to the methodological listener, assumes the form of a transient puzzle. However, the methodological investigation is deconstructive; it reduces the flow of information to a collection of deductive inferences. This kind of processing can be used to judge the transparency of a work; it can also be employed to assess the composer's attention to detail.

It must be said that this division is rather peripheral in relation to any of the preceding descriptions of listening behaviours, in that it is difficult to imagine how a listener might sustain a level of engagement, by this means, for any considerable length of time. However, because of the intrinsic nature of its bearing towards the projected sonic impression, the methodological division is aligned with investigative processing.

3. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by addressing a couple of possible grey areas and by adding some remarks as to the implications or applicative scope of what has been suggested in this paper. Firstly, I do not expect anybody to believe that each listening mode described here is always adopted consciously, or in complete isolation from any other. Potentially, all may be assumed within the presentation of a single work, as previously implied. Secondly, of these modes, it would seem that there are certain aspects which demand a degree of experience in order to be of service to the listener. Commonly, such experience is gained through the exposure to and application of discourse, suggesting that, to some extent, an acousmatic appreciation is conditional. To this I would agree that in order to deepen one's relationship with acousmatic music some analytical training would be beneficial. However, one of the most enduring qualities of the genre is its ability to inspire and stir up the unpredictable fancies of one's imagination, for which no training could ever be adequate.

The key features of associative and investigative processing outlined in this paper are not intended to describe some kind of listening agenda, but rather they are presented as a study of listening behaviour in acousmatic music, which, I believe, could prove beneficial to composers working in the field. There are many things that one can do as a composer to accommodate or avoid such listening experiences, and I would like to suggest that by attempting to measure the investigative or associative potential in one's structural invention or choice of materials during the creative process, one can, at least to some extent, frame the listener's perspective of one's work towards an extrinsic or intrinsic end.

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