Contemporary Electroacoustic Music's Discourse:
Considering chosen aesthetic languages as socio-cultural interventions

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Abstract

As artist Richard Lohse has written, in "Art in the Age of Technology" (1982): "Systematic creative forms represent a parallel to the instrumental structure of present-day reality in civilization. Although identical ... they simultaneously question the social reality of these structures. By using objective means, transparent methods which can be calculated in advance, ... constructive art is destined in its philosophy and working methods to further our quest of changing society and the environment." While extra-musical social commentaries of new electroacoustic and computer musics are often quite palpable, it is typically less obvious how aesthetic choices themselves might be seen to pose questions and proposals regarding our environment. This paper will offer some observations about this in the context of diverse contemporary practice; and it will consider simultaneously the value of applying the term "language" toward this end, in light of its present day meanings, uses, and values.

I. The Question of Music as Language

Theory that has mapped syntactical structures onto musical ones and thus claimed linguistic-like properties for certain musics is well known; less carefully considered has been the tradition of using the term 'language' in a looser way to describe musical styles and genres. (For example, "the language of composer x"; "the language of late serialism" …, "the language of electroacoustic music.") It is this loosely evocative, necessarily imprecise nomenclature which I will consider here, looking at a few instances of how <u>composers</u> have talked about languages of electroacoustic music, what they've actually meant, and how useful the terminology is at this point in time. Do we refer to music as a language so often because we lack a better term, or because we cling to the view that music truly communicates, in the sense of verifiable information? Assuming that it is at least in part the latter, I will also consider how specific aesthetics of electroacoustic music may be in dialogue with the socio-acoustic themes that frame this conference. (My paper will refer to musical and linguistic sounding entities only.)

Though debated for decades, the question of music's similitude to language doesn't invite resolution. Music embodies patterns that acquire significance in context. Sometimes these contexts are even functional, as in tonality. Music is something like language in this regard. It is divergent from language in that its patterns do not point to or stand for discrete objects. Where its patterns point to ideas, these correlations exist in particular socio-cultural contexts.

Music, in other words, cannot be translated. But language itself doesn't use water-tight signifiers either. Idioms are poignant reminders that linguistic meaning arises through usage and behaviors, not merely a priori rules of the game.

There are at least two ways in which music can project a language-like aspect: one is internal correlation, i.e., a consistent matching of personal associations with sonic ones (and this would be a private language which can't really be tested); and the other is in its external, inter-textual behavior, i.e., a consistent set of sound objects from which we construe significance relationally – across pieces (and this would be like a dialect of a public language).

Especially noticeable now in the field of electroacoustic music (and music in general) is the diversity of technical and aesthetic approaches in use. The historical originations of styles have become masked, and it is increasingly less clear if and when we are using styles or genres as distinct languages. (Jameson's analysis of our post-modern situation, as one in which we explore static historical objects, thus continues to aquire traction.) If dinstinct technical and aesthetic choices articulate distinct value systems or codes of representation, we might explain the status quo as a state of electroacoustic Babel. In other words, we are gravitating toward a reconfiguration of separate <u>nation states</u>, with different languages. Another possibility is that our allegiances to particular aesthetics are waning, and we are nurturing a mélange – a megaloglossia. A third possibility is that although we speak only selected languages competently, we understand all of them better, since they derive from common sources and since we are inundated, positively, with increased diversity. Finally, a fourth possibility is that the language metaphor is particularly inept at this point in time. I will now try to test some of these possibilities.

Simon Emmerson (in his chapter "Relationship of Language to Materials" in his seminal text *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, from 1986) premises his discourse on the idea of a single comprehensive substrate for all electroacoustic music. His analytic grid situates 'mimetic' vs. 'aural' approaches, and 'abstracted' vs. 'abstract' syntax – though these are not mutually exclusive categories. Emmerson's approach, as well as Denis Smalley's, for ex., are genre-free conceptual frameworks. These approaches, along with those of Schaeffer and Chion, allow for a multiplicity of styles to be encompassed within large categories carved from the plastic medium of electroacoustic sound. The grid's internal fault lines are philosophical and ethical. The language of electroacoustic music that is rooted in source sounds sits across the dais from the music with abstract syntax. A moderator sits between them but cannot translate. They require their own interpretive listening strategies.

Basically, 'language', for all these composers, is a vocabulary of sensory materials. Even 'vocabulary' is a word borrowed from outside the realm of music. But regardless, questions emerge: what happens beyond the vocabulary? How are the words strung together? Is there actual communication of larger ideas taking place? What are examples of syntactic and non-syntactic electroacoustic music? And should the term 'language' be reserved only for the former?

II. Some Answers in the Context of Electroacoustic Music

Here are my tentative answers to these questions above. Heightened awareness of intransigent ambiguity in the word "language" was brought home to me last year at the 1st Biennial in Music Composition and Education at the National University of Córdoba, Argentina. During

a paper session I commented that increased student awareness of the "contingency and constructedness" of so many musical "languages" suggested growing tolerance and interchange – adjustment to a state of megaloglossia. A strong but interesting objection arose in response to my reference to 'language''s 'constructedness'. The objection was that language need not be a symbolic construct, rather, that *everything* is a language. "Moving, walking, looking, … are all activities that … constitute a way of 'talking'." In other words, language to this composer (Beatriz Ferreyra) represented personal expression. Her way of thinking is rooted in Schaefferian solfège – an analysis and classification system. In a 2007 interview, Ferreyra describes utilizing two spheres of characteristics – one being objective, e.g., high, low, near, far, steady, static, and on. There are infinite possibilities to compile. The other sphere she draws is subjective: e.g., tension, relaxation, nostalgia; but also associative, e.g., wood. These two spheres will be interlocked like gears.

Figure 1. Beatriz Ferreyra's pre-compositional charts (Source: Ferryra 2007)

Ferreyra's way of creating music has little to do with specific rules of progression or arrangement. It works with a categorization of objective and subjective qualities. They tend to arise in binaries, as opposites, but this is not consistent. When opposites are not named, the process of constructing categories is often associative: "Something doomed. Clear. Shaking. Metallic. Wood. Smooth. (*I* feel it smooth but maybe you don't.) Lightly. Cosmic. Whatever I feel, whatever I need, whatever I hear." It is not unlike divination perhaps.

III. Musical Example One

Ferreyra's composition (*Soufle d'un petit Dieu distrait*) relies upon a fixed set of logical connectives between perceptual sound objects. If we listen through categories of opposition, or exclusion, or association, a consistent logic of personal experience, encapsulated in sensory qualities emerges. *Comprehending* is thus an important listening category – turning a fair amount of responsibility back to the audience. While Ferreyra views what she does as language, the work lacks an intersubjective syntax. 'Language' is thus being used as a

placeholder for that for which we frustratingly may not have an ideal word. But informal use of the term does not preclude latent theory in the mind of the labeler. Disciplinary exchange can help here to expose underlying theory. By calling the musical process a 'language', we are prompted to see where the term fails, and what application of the term actually intends. In this case, for Ferreyra, musical 'language' seems a set of sensory 'containers' and connectives. It is a language of 'expression'. The first process we hear is 'transformation'. The second one *might* be transformation; but it might also be 'a cutting in'. These are both process terms given by the composer. The fact that even simple processes are impossible to identify as definitively one thing or another in context, demonstrates how non-linguistic-like is this music.

The affects in the containers are not easy to describe. Happy? Sad? Upbeat? Sinister? While rules exist for her music at one relatively high level – that of succession and combination – no syntax for creating a sound object or deciding upon succession readily emerges. Could her rules of organization still be codified and the piece recreated? Yes, although the content would be quite different. The composition pushes us toward a listening mode that Max Paddison calls an Adornian "cognitive" aesthetics, where we listen for intensities of qualities. It is at the material level that music becomes a mode of cognition (Paddison 2010: 208). Paddison contrasts this with a "functional" listening, after Max Weber. In the latter case, we listen for larger phenomena as finite relational segments on which we can confer significance. 'Acousmatic' is a term still viable to describe this piece's style and genre, but the uniqueness of the dialect does not inhere in style labels. The dialect is most strongly encapsulated in other conceptual features which, for lack of a better term, we will continue to call 'language'. This example would support the idea that musical language at this point in history typically implies a closed community of users who speak a particular musical dialect, who are tuned into relevant conceptual codes. And, we typically imply an intertextuality between works which allows us to traffic in second order significations.

To attempt to hear this music through a syntactic listening filter would lead to strange miscomprehensions. It would reduce and assign functionality. But, in fact, none of Ferreyra's objects are the same in form or function. Her piece speaks in the form of shapes and logical operators. Operating more like a Markov chain than a sentence structure, Ferreyra's language of expression unfolds through mathematical logic more so than grammatical syntax.

Is there any socioacoustic commentary in the aesthetic choice of the language itself? Specifically in its denial of syntax, this piece invokes a Sartrian abyss of freedom. If any 'thing' can turn into anything, we are led to consider, then where and how do we climb back in to the aesthetic horse-pulled cart? On which bases do we make our decisions? In sum, what Schaeffer, Chion, and Emmerson have done primarily (and others, e.g. Verfaille/Gusauvino/Traube, researchers at McGill University who in 2006 classified audio effects) (Verfaille 2006) is to create organizational systems that articulate vocabularies. Elevating a conceptual emphasis to a level of significance *as* an *aesthetic choice* makes it clearer to analyze how the work might engage with large socio-cultural issues.

IV. Musical Example Two

Let's look at another musical example, *À Pierre, Dell'Azzurro Silenzio, Inquietum* by Nono, a composer committed to a philosophy of 'art as intervention'. As he wrote in his Darmstadt

lecture of 1959, "Presence of History": "The origin of my works is always to search within 'human provocation': … to give testimony as a human being and a musician" (Nono 1975 [1959]: 40). The genre of *À Pierre* could be described as 'music for instrument and live electronics'. If I were to use Simon Emmerson's descriptors, I would read the piece as 'mimetic' with an 'abstracted' syntax. Writing the cd liner notes, Giordano Montecchi calls the piece: "… a filigree …, [of] … countless tiny sonic threads of truly Lilliputian polychoral dimensions" that work to "… simulate a sound object".

Nono wrote clearly about the integrity in his music of every note, despite his eventual rejection of serialism. He continued to think of sound events rather anarchically, as isolated ripples on a water surface. He creates a musical fabric in *À Pierre* through delays of 12 and 24 seconds. Was Nono thinking syntactically? He describes electroacoustic music as "privileging a new historical situation for the development of technical, linguistic, and structural possibilities" (Nono *Ibid.*, [1961]: 149). Nono uses two techniques toward turning material as *'literature'* __with signification__ (writing, and tropes which reference tradition) into pure music: First, he concentrates on a particular element such as timbre or texture; and second, he repeats the element. All sonorous phenomena are thus able to be taken either as sound or substance, like words in a language. But, what is different about music is the context-laden necessity of its meaning.

In this same essay Nono cites Schillinger's *The Mathematical Basis of the Arts* (1948): "If an artist is truly free, he will speak in his own individual language" (Nono 1975a [1959]: 35). Schillinger sees the scientific method as the key to the liberation from local dependency. But Nono, in contradistinction, urges an art that is intimately engaged with its historical moment. For him, use of technology is part of his language – part of the conceptual processes that drive his sonic vocabulary. In *À Pierre*, the technology poses questions of temporal relativity and collective memory. Nono bemoans "lazy subordination to aesthetic categories" due to a "false humanism" (Nono 1975b [1961]: 149). (We will return to this in a moment.) Nono's incitement on the music's title page, "*a píu cori*" shows his focus on the socio-acoustic and political aspect of musical structures. 'To many choruses' is exactly how the piece unfolds – creating streams of voices and letting them speak for themselves, determining the successive layers and ensuing moments of the piece. It is a democratic process in realization, just as it was a collaborative process in creation. (Nono visited the studio the day before writing the piece, listened to the performers' experiments, then wrote the work that evening. This piece is arguably syntactic – precisely through the application of technology. The rules are that all sound fed into the microphones is harmonized at the tritone and the minor 7th. The results are delayed 12 seconds and 24 seconds, bandpassed, and reverberated.

Are there syntactic units then? parts of speech? Yes, but they are temporal ones. There is a recursive process in which each 12 seconds of sound is recombined with its previous or previous' previous. The ordering is inflexible. As a verb modifies a noun, so a successive phrase modifies the previous one, literally, sandwiched on top.We infer the process of a syntax, even though we can't hear it clearly in the resultant sound.

V. Conclusion

In moving toward a conclusion, and to contextualize Nono's comments on fale humanism, I would like to point to a visual art example. Artist Richard Lohse, in his 1982 essay *Art in the Age of Technology* distanced himself from 'irrationalists' for whom: "… spontaneity appears

as *Deus ex machina* [i.e., a contrived spontaneity], [manufactured] … to celebrate … the dream of free individuality. For Lohse: "Systematic creative forms [run] parallel to the instrumental structure of present-day reality … [and thus] … question the social reality of those structure … [and urge] societal change…" "Wh[at] other art form could express the dynamics of the present era [as does] ... the picture as structure…" (Lohse 1982). (This was Lohse's 80th birthday address delivered at Kunsthaus Zürich, on September 10, 1982.)

Intervention in socio-acoustic dimensions, through aesthetic choices, has significant potential to communicate. The choice of our genres indicates what the artwork says about the large sociocultural *sforzandos* referenced in the Electroacoustic Music Studies 2011 theme. Both the syntactic and non-syntactic can comment usefully. Transcending the syntactic allows us to have experiences that we cannot understand through conceptual reflection, forcing us to use capacities that are largely ignored when we use natural language. Such capacities may include extrapolating from unfamiliar and complex situations in new ways, and relating to each other in new ways. It is quite 'natural' for electroacoustic music to bypass the syntactical norms that exist in acoustic music, related to exigencies of notation and performance – where notes are abstracted from timbres, and composition is impacted by reproducibility considerations. The second important factor of environmental intervention by electroacoustic music is its use of technology. How is the language itself rooted in the technology? What are the historical premises?

One of my paper's points is that *aesthetics do represent an intervention in the environment* in that they allow us to contest and reconfigure our culturally formed subjectivities. According to Rancière, we currently inhabit the *esthetic regime*, where what constitutes art is open and in dialogue with mundane activities, but still a singularity. It can thus be separate and intervene. "Aesthetic experience … produces no rhetoric persuasion… It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are 'equipped' for fitting it. It is a multiplicity of folds ... in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible" (Rancière 2006).

The closer a composition is to one of a kind, the less linguistic it is, and the more demonstrative of Lachenmann's opinion that "… structure [after Schoenberg] is the medium of a radical de-subjectification," with "each piece [harboring] a new…syntactic system with its own laws…" (Lachenmann 2010 [2006]: 339) or in line with Max Paddison's opinion that: "In post-modernism … [There's] a breakdown of "linguistic" norms…"[though all to the good] (Paddison, 2010: 208). Recent electroacoustic musics that push against linguistic structures, are thus harder to grasp subjectively according to a fixed a priori system, and are potentially more destabilizing in a positive way.

On this note, I will conclude. Electro-acoustic art music *is* becoming self-referential as its languages proliferate, but it is also becoming more connected to individual constituencies. This is happening not so much through proliferating modes of expression, but rather through large, widely perceivable themes and approaches to sonic materiality, and more important, to uses of technology, that translate as particular aesthetics, and that help us to come closer to an understanding of our evolving values and visions. The particular aesthetics may use distinct syntaxes, rooted in uniquely summoned sonic features or concepts. As descriptors, 'languages' and 'genres' are more palpable and comprehensible terms than 'styles' (personal utterances) for audiences trying to participate in sonic dialogues – though personal styles contribute back to the evolving discourse at the higher level, re-infusing and reflecting on our relationship to our

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environment. Language seems still to be a viable word, in that it indicates our view of music as existing on a continuum of cultural exchange and politically potent virtual reality. But the ability of musical language to transcend the syntactic is powerful and can make music a particularly meaningful player in global change.

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