Site Specific Live Electronic Music:
A Sound-Artist's Perspective

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Abstract

What makes live music aesthetically intriguing or meaningful? How can live music be essentially site-specific and in what ways a work can manifest itself in a particular space? In turn, why would this be of any interest to an audience? To what extent is improvisation still meaningful? Should a work remain live at any cost? What is communicated in a performance and why would it be of any interest? Does a performance necessarily aim to some sort of expression?

Such are the questions the author attempts to answer via his artistic output. This paper describes the main goals of this practice, and identifies the key elements that make a work substantially live, site-specific and (hopefully) aesthetically intriguing. It is further shown how this practice originates from a profoundly-rooted exploratory attitude to form a unique aesthetic ethos. It is of paramount concern for the author to address the technical challenges that a live electronic music paradigm poses while remaining faithful to his aspirations.

Aesthetically speaking, the author describes his general strategy in terms of three interrelating concepts: 'Ekstasis' (to bring someone out of their usual way of being), 'Gelassenheit' (the state where sound is found unequivocal and mysterious – its phenomenological quintessence), and 'Psychagogia' (to enact a shift in one's state of being). Various techniques allow the artistic output to be consistent with the aforementioned concepts, and selected examples are described.

Introduction

Sound is a phenomenon that is inherently site-specific and which has a foundational inter-correlation with space and architecture (Koutsomichalis 2009b, pp. 7-19). This relationship is essentially twofold: Sound is dynamically embedded into architecture as it depends on a series of on-site phenomena on a physical, psychological and cognitive level (Olson 1967, pp. 1-24; Augoyard *et al.* 2006, p. 4) while, in turn, it redefines the social and aesthetic qualities of a location (Barry Blesser 2007, pp. 2-66; Pallasmaa 2005, p. 49). Both sound and architecture are possible only via a reciprocal relationship as they significantly influence each other physically, semantically and phenomenologically (Campesato 2009, pp. 28-32; Ripley 2007, pp. 2-3; Blesser 2007, pp. 2-66). It is not by accident that, historically, the evolution of

musical spaces goes hand in hand with that of music genres and aesthetics, but an inevitable consequence of their interrelation in a social and aesthetic level (Blesser 2007, pp. 127-162).

Sound is also dynamically embedded into the human body, too, for all sound is in principle a physical force propagating through matter. Muscles, bones, organs, skin, body cavities and tissues all vibrate in the presence of sound and, given sufficient sound pressure level (SPL), sound can be literally embodied (Goodman 2009, p. x). Auditory cortex-dependent listening (i.e. that which depends on the auditory cortex, rather than the tactile sense of sound) builds on top of this straightforward confrontation with sound at a vestigial physical level, and on its own this encounter is responsible for several visceral reactions (such as annoyance, disorientation, nausea, discomfort, pain, psychological unrest, etc.) and could even result in severely affecting physiology (for more on how sound affects human physically and physiologically see Goodman 2009; Kryter 1994; Davies, n.d.). Moreover, sound is shown to significantly impact other perceptual modalities as sonic impetus can cause surroundings to vibrate, resonate, displace and on exceptional cases even to levitate or to break (Sprott 2006, pp. 166-169; Choi 2006, 2002) and, hence, is indirectly responsible for visual and tactile stimuli1[1]. In turn, cochlear listening necessarily involves some kind of consciousness and therefore is undoubtedly specific to each individual, as shown by phenomenology (for example Heidegger 1971, pp. 15-87). Auditory perception is not just the causal effect of some physical phenomenon; firstly the hearing apparatus, physiologically speaking, is shown not to be linear at all (Everest and Pohlmann 2009, pp. 41-82; Pickles 2008) and further, what a sound means heavily depends on individual idiosyncrasy, context, vernacular particularities and general socio-cultural background, as is furthered discussed in Koutsomichalis (2011b).

While sound may, by definition, be site- and consciousness-specific, music is not necessarily either, as it may be established upon abstract narratives and metaphors instead. At least as far as formal western tradition is concerned, composers have always been more interested in intellectual compositional systems. It was not until the technological breakthroughs of the 20th century that it became plausible for a number of pioneering artists to explore the way in which sound manifests through space, matter and the human body (Campesato 2009, p. 27; LaBelle 2006, pp. 149-153). The common topos of all abstract music is the use of some symbolic system which in turn is founded on intra-musical references and signification (Robinson 2008; Goodman 1976). From a post-modern perspective this is totally artificial as there is no foundational truth behind such systems which only legitimate upon a series of agreeable constancies and conveniences (Lyotard 1984, pp. 42-46; Wittgenstein and Anscombe 2001; Derrida and Caputo 1997, pp. 31-33). It is inevitable, however, that individuals will eventually develop their own expectations and idiosyncratic interpretations of a piece of music. In other words, meaning is constructed arbitrarily in respect to unique encounters rather than according the creator's original aspirations (see Stockfelt 2008 for a discourse on how the specifics of every encounter condition music itself and Duchamp 1999 for how audience contributes meaning to an artwork).

To compensate for such misinterpretations and loss of information, composers may inculcate the audience using program notes, introductory talks or similar conveniences. Yet music founded upon some conceptual abstraction will eventually succumb to discrepancy or appropriation. Following Husserl's (1983, pp.60–62) concept of radical *epoche*, the French school of concrete music proposed *reduced* listening as a way to disassociate sonic gestalts

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[1] It has been also shown that sound can directly influence visual perception (Shimojo 2001; Berger 2002; Gelder 2000).

from their symbolic associations and to achieve a phenomenological engagement with the essence of sound matter (Lopez 2008; Chion 1983, pp. 28-32). Nevertheless, sonic perception depends on both complex high-level attentional mechanisms and cognition and on lower-level primordial judgements (Fritz 2007, pp. 438-440; Bregman 1994, p. 641). Sensation is never pure sensation since every encounter with sound is already charged with some sort of meaning (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 3-14). Merleau-Ponty (1962) extended Husserl-ean (1965) phenomenology to encompass notions of language, cognition and socio-cultural static (Corness 2008). Consequently, every connotation that a sound may convey is not to be considered alien to it, but rather intrinsic to its very phenomenology. I consider it rather artificial and discrepant to favor a particular listening mode (see Cox 2011 for a similar discourse).

Personal Aesthetic Aspirations & Ethos

Sound is shown to depend on the specifics of involved architecture and consciousness and to propagate on top of an all-inclusive embodiment in both an intellectual and a more rudimentary visceral level. Imperative to my practice is the exploration of these properties that cast a work at a given space-time-consciousness complex. The aim is to fathom the materiality of sound within a given context. Music can be founded entirely on the particular conditions that define its very making; following the Structural/Materialist film tradition, music essentially constitutes a document of its own making (Gidal 1976). The specifics of sonic matter, space, consciousness and technology are to be found in the core of such a practice. Sharing some common ground with Dewey's aesthetic theories (Shusterman 2002), symbolism is abandoned for the sake of sheer pragmatism. In this context, music is thus a valid end in itself, a function of concrete circumstances and not a quest for some unassailable conceptual proposition or foundational truth (see Nietzsche 1911). Sound in turn is no longer the medium to some abstraction but valid music in-itself. Admittedly, abstract compositional ideas are present in my mind when developing artworks; but their role is merely to get started, and sooner or later they will be abandoned for the sake of empirical justification. It is a constant process of de-mystification and re-evaluation, as is elaborated in the next section, which validates a piece of music.

From such a viewpoint, compositional skill lies solely in liquidating the aforementioned directives into aesthetically intriguing experiences that rely on no conceptual premises. Although "aesthetically intriguing" is a rather vague notion, since every individual could appropriate it to mean something different, whether someone is indeed intrigued by some work or not is self-evident and can be empirically corroborated in each case. Since space, time, architecture, consciousness and perception are not abstractions but given prerequisites (which, moreover, are never fully stipulated), strict predefined compositional formulas and conceptual systems must be replaced by a methodical investigation of those specifics in-situ.

The principal objective is to allow the preeminent properties of a sonorous experience to realize their full potential and to enact a sonorous *gelassenheit* in which all music is equivocal and uncertain on its own terms.

Gelassenheit, in its original Heideggerian terminology, stands for the particular spirit of 'letting-be-ness' which permits us to experience things in a non-representational way, blurred in uncertainty and mystery (see Heidegger 1966 and Davis 2007 for more on *gelassenheit*). Here the term is instead used to describe the particular quality of music to submerge consciousness into its very materiality. There is no rule of thumb on how to achieve this in

practical terms, as it heavily depends on each distinct set of conditions; a great deal of subjectivity is involved since the artist cannot escape being part of these conditions. Therefore, the ability to decipher a conglomeration of sounds into its utmost and listen for what they ask for is crucial. For example, a monolithic inharmonic sound could be amplified to the extent that it resonates with architectural cavities and starts displacing objects, and this way exposes an implicit physical thrust. Alternatively, a complex texture could be equalized accordingly to become more transparent and unveil previously obscured details.

Within a sonorous *gelassenheit*, individuals are enjoined to develop unique personal convergences with it and are subsequently conducted towards some perceptional shift. I propose the term *psychogogia* to describe this phenomenon. The term originates from the Greek 'ψυχή' meaning 'soul', and 'αγωγή', meaning 'way' or 'guiding'. I define it as a shift in a subject's emotional or psychological state of being towards some definite or indefinite inclination. Certain perceptual conformations might require significant engagement on the audience's part, and thus also openness and an adequate exploratory attitude, but at a more rudimentary level *psychagogia* can be established – as in the presence of psychoacoustic effects, extreme SPL, visceral reactions to sound, etc. My compositional endeavor aims to translate these awareness shifts into a noteworthy *ekstasis* (literally 'out-of-balance' in Greek; from 'εκ' and 'στάσις'). That is, the aim is to bring an individual in a non-predefined out-of-the-ordinary transcendent state of being. From such a post-conscious state one is expected to resonate with surroundings in their essence and ultimately to achieve extended self-awareness. I am not referring some predefined state of being, but rather to a profoundly meditative occurrence in respect to each different set of conditions.

It might seem overwhelming to deal with these notions in a theoretical level, yet however metaphysical or obscure these notions may appear, it is quite straightforward to authenticate them pragmatically and even to quantify them empirically. Once again it is quite self-evident whether an individual has indeed experienced *ekstasis* or not. It is exactly in these empirical justification, and not in my persona or philosophical reasoning, where I try to found my practice.

Personal Artistic Practice & Technical Implications

I hope to have shown that sound, space, architecture, body and consciousness are reciprocally and organically interrelated as potential mediums for musical action. Concrete experiences are fundamental to the poetics of such an approach, therefore music is local to the particular set of conditions that define these experiences and not to be extrapolated. Site-specific live electronic music here stands for appropriating pieces of electronic music to fit the specifics of a particular occasion for which an audience, a site and a social opportunity are paramount prerequisites. Note that "live" does not necessarily means "performative" or "gestural", and also that "site-specific" does not necessarily means "site-dependent". That said, my artistic outcome usually falls in one of the following categories or in the no man's land between them: soundscape compositions; sonic geographies; sonorous architectures/sculptures; immersive performances; generative compositions. The following paragraphs provide an account of these various categories that describe my practice. It should be noted that what follows relates solely to my own personal practice and does not suggest some kind of typology.

Soundscape compositions are characterized by the presence of several distinct sonic streams occurring within a spatially wide but homogenous sound-field, following the paradigm of environmental sound. They are immersive, multidimensional music experiences which call for periphonic or holophonic audio spatialization techniques (such as ambisonics). As a rule of thumb, soundscape compositions are performative works whose poetics are pinpointed in the intuitive juxtaposition and audio spatialization of sound matter in real time. I usually follow a set of loosely-defined directives and explore the ways in which sonic elements interrelate, merge, clash or coordinate with each other.

Sonic geography refers to work that enacts several areas of different sonority in a given location. Such works are structured around the practice of ambulatory listening and they implicitly orchestrate the audience to inhabit the site, to wander in space and explore interesting routes within it (see also the notion of elastic space in Phillips 2009). Sonic geographies are intrinsic to accommodating locations and call for on-site development rather than appropriation at a later time. They are usually structured around site-dependent phenomena, such as standing waves or resonances, and the use of uncorrelated discrete audio signals. In essence, such works are meaningful conglomerations of locally perceived sonic events.

Sonorous architectures/sculptures are works of a somewhat more sculptural quality than sonic geographies, in the sense that they antagonize, challenge or supplement surrounding architecture in terms of being definite architectural elements which occupy space themselves. The critical focus of such a work is a prominent textural characteristic either in the temporal or spatial terrain or in both, e.g. a static monolithic mass that resonates in space, some very complex aggressive noise, rhythmic ubiquitous pulses, or highly static drones.

Immersive performances are open-ended on-site improvisations which can take a variety of forms. The term refers mostly to a strict performative attitude rather than to any formal characteristic. The word immersive is used to emphasize the fact that the focus is on pragmatic experience rather than on some conceptual framework; the result has to be empirically validated as immersive. Soundscape compositions, sonorous architectures and even other ambiguous textures could all emerge out of an immersive performance as textural sonic configurations. Usually I begin by juxtaposing predetermined material in space and intervene with them by modulating them and exploring alternative combinations. The use of equalizers, delays lines and filters in order to trigger various on-site physical phenomena and attain response from the surrounding architecture is essential. Improvisation, as to be examined shortly, is imperative.

Generative compositions are works structured around a higher-level procedural system. (See Eno 1996 and Collins and Brown 2009 for more on generative music.) Once again, however, the focus is on pragmatic justification as the objective here is not procedural music *per se*. These systems are typically highly complex and are composed using syntactical computer programming. Sometimes generative compositions are performative and allow for real-time interaction. Generative pieces are usually founded on complex behavioral rules as a result of arbitrary associations drawn between various parameters. Generative systems could be designed in response to some particular space or as general templates for performance that could be used in a variety of occasions.

In all these cases, since the fundamental requisites of music are ever-changing and occasion-depended there is no way to justify a work except for a constant process of de-mystification and re-evaluation, as mentioned in the previous section. This stands for exposing and

permuting all *ad hoc* elements of a composition (whether morphological, procedural or concrete) and empirically authenticating their meaningfulness on-the-spot; if something fails to validate itself as essential it should either transform or diminish. This suggests that I have to be actively involved in every occurrence of a work to guarantee zestfulness and cohesion, and since no predefined formula can cater for this, improvisation and intuition become paramount. Neither improvisation nor intuition is meant in an expressionist sense here. Unlike the various post-romantic expressionist theories (for example, Graham 2008, Groce 1999, Bell 1999, Harrison and Wood 2003, pp. 62-124) what matters here is to selectively explore, fulfill and pragmatically validate the potential of each particular set of properties, namely the location, the physical impetus of sound, higher-level music hierarchies and compositional structures, sonic materiality, surrounding architecture, and consciousnesses.

Examples

Short descriptions of some characteristic works follow:

Anasiseipsychos (for 16 sine-tone generators) was conceived in Athens, Greece in 2007. The work is structured around the prominent architectural trajectories of sine-tone glissandi which mix, coagulate and clash in their sheer materiality to set in motion a set of unruly psychoacoustic and site-depended phenomena. The resulting perceptual side-effects and visceral reactions to sound become the unintentional focus of the work (Koutsomichalis 2009a).

A series of untitled site-specific generative works have been composed in order to challenge the architectural and aesthetic qualities of the Trevor Jones Studio in York, UK in 2009. These works were not only designed to interact with this studio but were also conceived in response to its aesthetic properties. In an attempt to establish a spiritual bond with the location, I performed them without an audience. Recordings of these sessions made their way into a fixed-media album (Koutsomichalis 2009c), yet this album is an irrelevant byproduct; the original Trevor Jones Studio Sessions were meant to exist only for me and the space.

Domestic appliances project is a series of sound installations dedicated to the exploration of the musical and architectural potential of everyday domestic appliances. The first of these installations was exhibited on the 28th and 29th of June 2009 in the Arthur Sykes Rymer Auditorium, York, UK. In this case a domestic freezer has been selected as the only sound source and using a variety of carefully selected and placed contact microphones, coils and other transducers, sounds from the machine were amplified and projected into the auditorium to achieve both an exploration and an expansion of the appliance and to enact a sonorous geography. The work operated on an architectural level in competition with the freezer's corporeal presence and by enacting areas of different sonority within the auditorium. Visitors have been provided a ready-made sonic environment and an opportunity to wander inside it, to explore it and to define their own individual pathways through the work – their unique encounters with it (Koutsomichalis 2010).

Afield was composed in Heraklion and Rethymnon, Greece in 2010. It is a site-specific performative work for 6 displaced loudspeakers and an adequate number of subwoofers. It is structured around generative processes that allow for interaction with the way sonic material is scattered and diffused in space. The work attempts to dynamically interact with the spatial qualities of each accommodating space by providing an ever-changing unbalanced sound-field within it, hence its name, as the work operates implicitly in the space, making it less

intimate. The audience should be bespoken to explore the way sound occupies space and experience the work from various fixed spots as well as via ambulatory listening practices.

Paesaggio sonoro (for environmental recordings, performer and ambisonics) was composed in Rethymnon, Greece in 2011 and premiered at FKL's 5th Forum for Acoustic Ecology: *Keep an Ear On*, Florence 2011. *Paesagio sonoro* is a soundscape composition structured around the idea of moving through different acoustic spaces. Following a predefined set of directives, I juxtapose environmental recordings in real time to establish an immersive soundscape within which the materiality of the given elements becomes paramount. Movement from and to various distinct acoustic spaces demands linear transitions. Narration is not avoided neither entrusted; it remains an unintentional side effect of the work (Koutsomichalis 2011a).

Sygxysis is an audiovisual performative work (for supercollider, one or two audio channels and color projection) composed in Heraklion in 2011. *Sygxysis* ('σύγχυσις' in Greek) can be interpreted as disturbance of psychological or mental health, or unrestful vexation. The work is a study in complexity using recursive stochastic noise generators. *Sygxysis* attacks the audience with intense spectra to enact situations of discomfort and psychological unrest, setting this way both body and consciousness into a constant state of alert and establishing *psychagogia* via profound shifts in one's emotional and psychological state. The audience is challenged to experience an intense but rewarding chaos and allowed to indulge in a meditative introspection.

Conclusion

From my personal perspective, the poetics of site-specific live electronic music are not to be established on some nexus of abstract narratives and conceptual treaties or foundational truth, but on the way in which sound propagates through physical and conceptual space, enacting sonorous experiences for every individual to engage with. Music is a function of the particular conditions that define its very making in a post-materialistic fashion which calls for pragmatism and intuition. Critical to such an approach is the incitement of a work to foster perceptual shifts and enact situations of altered psycho-emotional state of being. Hitherto I have been responsible for an eclectic artistic output (in terms of both form and content) which practically supports these ideas. It is my purpose to keep exploring these concepts pragmatically via exercising site-specific live electronic music and in the times to come.

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