

Art for Goodness^(*o*) Sake: It's your tea party and you can cry if you want to

Keynote Address

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Abstract

This keynote address takes into account the EMS2011 unusual and visionary call for participation and combines it with my well-established views regarding optimising participation and interest in innovative forms of electroacoustic music. The call speaks of addressing: “urgent questions that are germane to music and the world today”, i.e., making music relevant. These words catalysed the choice of the first part of the title: “Art for Goodness^(*o*) Sake” which is, in the end, not only an antonym of art for art's sake, but also an excellent point of departure for today's and tomorrow's electroacoustic musician. In today's highly networked world, the notion of communities of interest in which musical experience can be shared might just be a formula for relating our art to our lives. The text below is a lightly edited transcription of this talk.

I. Preface

I was pleasantly surprised by the ideas that the New York hosting team came up with as a thematic framework for EMS2011. The call stands out in terms of its direction and the fact that it is very provocative, much more provocative than the theme we came up with in 2007 in Leicester which focused on the language of electroacoustic music – those in the know will guess where that came from. Ours didn't quite have the ‘aha factor’ that some parts of the EMS2011 announcement text have, largely written by Meg Schedel, to whom I would like to offer my respect and underline her great courage. I thought, therefore, with such a nice theme and such a nice invitation, for which my profound thanks to Meg, Elizabeth Hoffman and all others in the EMS2011 organising team, I would offer a talk that would take the provocation which is embedded in the theme and see how far I could turn up the dial. In the next forty of so minutes I shall attempt to do just that.

The title of this talk, of which only half appeared on the conference website (I shall explain why that was in a moment), is: “Art for Goodness^(*o*) Sake”. (It includes that magic apostrophe and we'll need to talk about that, too.) The title continues: “It's your tea party and you can cry if you want to”. Here we go.

'Art is not a mirror held up to reality,
but a hammer with which to shape it.'

Bertolt Brecht?

Or was it Владимир Маяковки (Vladimir Mayakovski)?

That sentence has been a great inspiration to me as a composer from the time I studied composition at a university about six miles uptown from here. Bertolt Brecht has always been an inspiration just simply due to how he was able to take life and art and mix them. And, of course, as this is an academic conference, I am going to step into rather deep poo immediately because we do not know who proposed it first. It is believed that Mayakovski actually came up with this idea, but no one seems to know anymore to whom we can attribute this marvellous thought. So much for this being a scholarly talk! Now before I start offering reflections related to that call, I would like to share a second citation that has actually influenced me more than the first one.

'Art is what happens when you take an object
out of context and give it a new thought.'

Marcel Duchamp (Tomkins, 176)

These words take us back about a century ago. The idea of choosing something from real life, just twisting it the slightest bit, calling it art and presenting it to a public is like looking in a mirror that's not quite right, but almost, thus turning something normal into a bit of a surprise. I think that this is a great way to touch people. It is for this reason that I am a little bit more comfortable with this one. In any event these two quotations form another frame of this talk.

Here is the first example from the call that I would like to call upon: *Sforzando* hopes to investigate 'urgent questions that are germane to music and the world today' and is equally looking for 'sudden, forceful answers'. It's rare to go to a conference about music where such hugely important questions are raised. We tend to address the things we normally talk about and these statements are requesting us to step back a little bit and ask about how things are situated.

I would like to say at this point that this talk will focus mainly on finding the right questions as opposed to offering answers. I believe that if you pose right questions, finding good answers just might come easily. So I hope I won't be the only one who raises questions during the next few days.

1969 I shall now embark upon a mini-, uninteresting youth portrait that I shall try to navigate through as quickly as I possibly can so that I can address the call through experience and ideas that evolved afterwards. In 1969 I had a Ford Mustang which I drove to Woodstock. My hair was very long and there was something in the air about making love and peace, not war. A year later, I was tear gassed in Washington DC during an anti-war march and worked for an organisation at Columbia University that thrived on sending people out of the country, mainly to Canada and Sweden, in order to avoid the war. By the mid-1970s I said goodbye to the country and, in fact, in 1981 I became a citizen of The Netherlands. There is a political side of my life that I do not normally talk about in public, although it is deeply embedded in my blood. The move was to change my life. But this is not about my biography, so let's move on with something more interesting.

My journey In terms of this talk, my journey commences in the late 1980s, thus twenty years after Woodstock. My hair was not quite as long; its colour started to change. I started giving talks, writing articles and now quite a few books in which I questioned why electroacoustic, and other forms of experimental music had been marginalised so radically in society. I also investigated how one could make this music more accessible, thus enhancing appreciation as well as widening participation in terms of music making. This theme has been a hobbyhorse of mine since approximately 1988.

This journey has led me towards a number of foci. An important pair has to do with making music meaningful to people, beyond a specialist audience, and making music valuable to people. Normally when we talk about our music, we tend to avoid discussions related to either meaning or value. This has something to do with aesthetics, another daring word used in the call. I shall be returning to this important subject later on.

NYC 1970s Let's step back in time and see how I reached this important moment in 1988 when I started focusing on marginalisation issues. When I studied at Columbia there existed a distinction that I believe has become less strong over the years (and I certainly hope so as well). There was uptown music and downtown music in this city. Uptown music tended to be highly academic, tended to be post-serial, atonal and largely influenced by the likes of Milton Babbitt and Elliot Carter. I felt as if I was expected to compose like that, too. It felt like being part of a traditional 'compositional school', something I absolutely rejected, but that's not what I am here to discuss. I believe that most music that was made at Columbia at the time in the early 1970s formed part of what I call a musical antithesis to traditional forms of tonality and modality, one that had origins in music made in the 1920s. What I perceived as a student was a diktat that we all compose atonal music; we were not to create anything involving predictable aspects other than the atonality itself. There was a sense of opposing other traditions. And coming downtown there was a variety of forms of experimentalism on offer, although very little had to do with the type of atonality I was learning about. One of my great heroes, John Cage was a downtown leading light if, for no other reason, that he was not Columbia. In fact most tutors at Columbia did not take Cage seriously. It was only a single member of staff, a pianist, who was supportive of his work.

It appeared as if there were sectors of contemporary music fighting each other for their own existence, although most were fairly marginal. Ironically, John Cage, despite the fact that he has probably influenced everyone in this room in one way or another if not in many ways, represents another form of antithesis. In Cage's case, his work was not about predictability either; it was about the opening up of things. I often say that Cage was to music what Woodstock was to alternative society. Without them I believe the world would be a poorer place. Nonetheless, now, with the hair colour change, I see Cage as somebody who also took on an antithetical view, that of no more rules.

Anyone who has studied elementary philosophy will have heard of Hegel's tripartite thesis/antithesis/synthesis. Although many people indeed find this quite elementary, I am a firm supporter of synthesis in new innovative music. I believe that there is no question that the pioneers of antithesis have enhanced music, but their rather exclusive approaches are not the only place to be. We have an enormous amount of options to choose from and therefore an ideal way to make music is to bring things together in your own way, make connections and make the resulting music meaningful and valuable.

→ *Amsterdam 1980s* Parallel to my quest, in Amsterdam in the 1980s I became increasingly involved in collaborations. I would like to mention two briefly. The first was with a video,

now new media artist named Michel Jaffrennou with whom I worked for some fifteen years. Jaffrennou, based in Paris, perfectly exemplifies what Duchamp said. His artworks are extremely funny; they resonate with all sorts of people who receive them at their own level. Furthermore, they relate art to life in many ways. Working with him was absolute bliss as it's nice to laugh when you work and it's nice to hear people laugh once you've finished it. Of course, in several languages art music is called serious music. Serious and laughter don't necessarily fit in the same sentence; however, I personally reject that serious is the only way to fly as far as musical experimentation is concerned. The second collaboration, which commenced a bit later, was with the Eastern German playwright, Heiner Müller who is known by most in Germany as 'the son of Brecht'. He took that Brecht/Mayakovski remark to the nth degree because with every single play he was able to put on, he seemed to move the Berlin Wall a millimetre. Not only that, the 18 million people in the German Democratic Republic were aware of what he had achieved. It meant that his art was meaningful to society in the extreme.

Working with an artist who tickled people's funny bone and another person who made meaningful artworks for society changed my entire view about art. It brought me to the awareness that, when I was studying music, I was expected to talk about what I was making and how I expected to get there. However, not once was I asked why I was doing what I was doing or for whom a work was intended. I believe that these last two are at least as important as the first two. I am not saying that the first two are unimportant. I am also not saying that the others are equally important to everyone, but to me, realising that the why and for whom were of relevance changed my whole view in terms of how to make music. New terms came into my life, such as what I call the 1% tilt, a translation of Duchamp's remark, which calls for us to relate art and life. Dramaturgy became a sine qua non of my composition. I realised then that the way I was taught, although I wasn't aware of it at the time, was literally a manifestation of art for art's sake, a credo that was already 150 years old in the 1970s. I would like to propose today that art for goodness' sake is an alternative. It is my alternative.

Sonosphere/1 One of the questions in the call was: 'can we use sound to further our understanding of real-world issues?' My answer to that is: understanding absolutely, but I think we can go a step further and I hope some of you will do so over the next five days. We can also react to, we can criticise and we can make proposals concerning world issues in our work, but how many of us actually do that? I teased one of our hosts, Joel Chadabe about this yesterday. I said: 'I can't tell anymore whether the "E" in EMF stands for, ecological or electronic' (Chadabe is director of the Electronic Music Foundation), because he has become so heavily involved with ecological issues in recent years, and why not? That is his link to real world issues in terms of what he calls electronic and I call electroacoustic music.

This talk's vision/both parts of the title I believe I have disrobed the vision behind this talk a bit already, but let's look at both parts of the title for a moment. If we are going to value music, then art for goodness' sake (with the apostrophe) makes sense. But again, until I was about 35, I never ever considered that as an option. Art for goodness sake was just a kind of wake-up call based on the EMS2011 theme. So that is how the ambiguous first half of the title came to be. Now here is the anecdote I referred to earlier on about the second half of the title. When I was invited to deliver this talk, the title was already ready, because whatever I was going to talk about at this conference, it was going to carry the title, 'It's your tea party and you can cry if you want to'. Some people, including a number of members of the Organising

Committee, don't like that title very much given current US politics. I can well understand the unease, but found it humorous that it did not make it onto the EMS11 website.

We are all sensitive regarding what is taking place in the world today. Yet I hope that we are not schizophrenic. In other words, if we are going to spend so much time with electroacoustic music, it should not be divorced from the reality of the things taking place around us. I therefore found that catchy title fun, for, as an ex-pat, I am really worried about the US if a Sarah Palin or similar figure were to be taken as a credible option. We survived George W. for a long time and this could be worse. Our lives would all be influenced by this development. That does not mean that your next piece has to be an anti-tea party opus, but when there are things that move or worry us, perhaps we should do something about it, too, through our art with or without that hammer.

II. Goodness' Sake Discussion

We now move on to the section of this talk focused on goodness' sake and commence with some examples. These are drawn from my writings, so they may not come as much of a surprise to some of you.

- Too much complexity in music – people getting lost whilst listening to music. For those people in the know who have acquired the taste, complexity works and can lead to a satisfactory artistic experience. For those not necessarily in the know, complexity leads to the inability to navigate, confusion and the only thing that works in a work is that it is a work and nothing else.
- Very abstract works with little to nothing to hold on to. Similarly, abstract works can be very difficult for people who do not have any information regarding what they might be listening for. One can think metaphorically of a young animal or young human. When introduced to something for the first time and their initial experience is largely negative, they will find it difficult to learn to enjoy that thing afterwards. However if the first experience is positive, even moderately so, the subsequent experiences can get better and better much more easily. Thus confusing people in music is not my formula for a valuable, meaningful experience. I reiterate that there are some who do find value and meaning in such music, but am convinced this group will always be restricted to a very small specialist segment of the public.
- Pierre Schaeffer's *l'écoute réduite* (reduced listening). Let's take one that's a little bit closer to home. The implication of reduced listening is that source and cause of a given sound that one could relate to are present but, in fact, one doesn't because the goal is to mask them until they become just sound. Having worked with children from time to time and with community groups with people who are not initiates to such music, I can tell you that virtually everyone likes to make associations when encountering something new. They look at a Jackson Pollock painting and see a snake (or something else) in it because they have to relate it to something that they have experienced before. If I were to go into a classroom with 12-year olds with a piece that has been realised with reduced listening in mind, the likelihood of losing their attention is high. That's a normal human response. We therefore need to address the normal human response and help them to work their way into the intrigue, the fascination and the multiplicity of possibilities of reduced listening instead of diving right in. I prefer to lead someone down a path in my works. To me reduced listening is an acquired taste that one can indeed acquire over time.

It is for this reason that I consider the term that I came up with in the 1990s, the something to hold on to factor, to be of importance. It calls for our taking into account navigable musical information as well as what I have called the dynamic intention/reception loop where musicians offer people that something to hold on to. Offering listeners the dramaturgy, or the ‘why’ of the work, so that they can get a sense of what artists are trying to communicate, can be highly valuable, as can any audible musical device that forms a work’s focus.

Art for art’s sake does not attempt to communicate anything. Now you have the right to come back and say that a sonata is art for art’s sake, but things are not identical. We have all heard many sonatas; we know what to expect. In a great deal of new music, we do not know what to expect; thus we can easily get lost. It is with this in mind that the combination of intention and reception can be quite useful in terms of avoiding potential confusion.

Alongside this, one should also think about the social function, that is, the cultural placement of electroacoustic music in its broadest sense. Again, for whom do you make your music? What is to be communicated; what is to be shared? Ignoring such discussions is arrogant and frankly foolish. This attitude where such vital dynamic issues are carefully avoided is fairly self-defeating in terms of enhancing the societal placement of our music although, at the end of the day, it may be useful in terms of our retaining our jobs.

Let’s go back to the call: ‘challenging our traditional attitudes towards the cultural role of art music’. I believe that innovative art music of all sorts does that. I also personally believe that attitudes and received knowledge should always be challenged, in particular when discussing what I call sound-based music. Furthermore, the focus here on art music deserves to be challenged. I am of the view that much sound-based music can transcend the traditional popular music – art music boundaries. It exists in an area of its own. Thus we needn’t be placed within a high art tradition unless that is our specific personal goal.

I would like now to share my belief that sound-based music should be able to play a key role in this still young 21st century. The reason for this hypothesis of mine is that, because we are able to relate art and life in ways that instrumental music generally cannot, we can offer associations through our music that touch people in different experiential ways. Again, this does not necessarily mean that we have to drop reduced listening for heightened listening. We also do not have to drop abstraction for overt realism, but through realism we can approach these other options through various means of navigating through an artwork.

With this in mind, I would suggest that the acceptance of the fairly marginal position of most electroacoustic music can be challenged and our cultural position improved. A music that is still, after some sixty-three years, fairly revolutionary could become much more accessible to a variety of communities through the construction of meaning and value systems.

Sensorium Here’s another part of the call: *Sensorium* – ‘How do we experience the sounds of the world? What are the aesthetics in recording the sounds of the world? Is this music? Does electronic music project the physical aspects of music in a visceral sense?’ I was quite interested when I read that. However, when I first received it I didn’t catch something, namely the fact that the first three questions and the last are not really connected. There is a huge bridge between them. The first ones seem to be dealing with what François-Bernard Mâche called ‘phonographies’. He would make excellent outdoor recordings and present them as artworks. Some of them are absolutely sensational. We know about the work of Luc Ferrari and of soundscape composition as well, so we do not need to dwell on that very much. Nonetheless, many take that one step forward and, after making field recordings, they

organise the sounds according to their will. I believe that the bridge that takes us from these recordings to the organisation of the sounds that one has recorded is exactly what it's all about. It is here where we can ask excellent questions regarding viscerality, about aesthetics, and we can also share how we work and why we approach things in particular ways.

We are getting to the heart of the subject now and I would like to underline the word, aesthetics, which, at EMS meetings since the very beginning, has not been used very often which in itself is quite interesting. I would like to mention parenthetically here that I had to give a talk about aesthetics only a couple of weeks ago in Oslo and noticed that a few participants at this conference found the subject a bit daunting. During this talk, I felt obliged to define the word for in the 20th century I believe that aesthetics changed for many from a word that had to do with beauty and the discovery of value and meaning to one that was associated with what constitutes a work, an entirely different discussion. I suggest that we combine the two when we talk about aesthetics now.

Then there is the aspect of the visceral. Viscerality is something to hold on to. You can perhaps not put into words how that is achieved or how you perceive it, but it is part of an artistic experience. I work a good deal with dancers; they use the word more than we do due to their concerns involving embodiment, which, in my view, is a holistic process in which emotions are involved. I find the subject absolutely fascinating, yet how often do we investigate the visceral experience of electroacoustic music, discuss it, analyse it, look into its potential, and so on? We just sort of assume it. This appears to me to be a missed opportunity.

Communication is also mentioned in the call, something that I associate with intention and reception, but there are so many other ways to approach communication. Shared experience about music and the ability to communicate about it, that's what this is all about. It is essential to the musical experience. There is so much to be said about this, but let's move on to the next subject.

≠ *Celebrity culture, but = healthy communities of interest* This is a bit of an aside, but I think it needs to be said as it takes us to where this talk is headed. We are, just as much as in the 70s, very much part of a celebrity culture. The number of magazines, the internet coverage, the numbers of commercial downloads, etc. don't seem to be declining at all. The joke I always tend to present when discussing such subjects with undergraduates is that when Britney Spears isn't feeling very well or has something wrong with her private life, everyone knows about this immediately, but when someone composes an important piece of experimental music, most people won't find out about it in general. That is for me a summary of a very sick society.

I am not going to dwell on celebrity culture due to the fact that I do not believe that many of us here are that directly involved in it. (If you are, please tell me how you do it.) I am more interested in what I call healthy communities of interest. It has to do with groups of people with a shared interest. Of course in our networked culture, this can mean face-to-face as well as online. I believe that our online communities are going to be catalysts in terms of the development of interest groups arising around certain aspects of electroacoustic music. As electroacoustic music becomes less marginal and the demarcation of areas of interest becomes stronger, I expect value systems and the ability to discuss meaning regarding electroacoustic music to grow, all of which I believe is directly related to this call.

To assist in supporting communities of interest it is useful to redefine, that is modernise, some words that we use rather frequently such as participation in the arts. In a networked telematic,

interactive world participation has evolved enormously. We need to take that into account when discussing electroacoustic music. Audience members today are often participants.

What is an audience then? Is it an anonymous group or is it a group for whom you are intending to make music? Taking the above into account, it is also one's potential performers. Take, for example, a particular case of interaction where a performer – someone who is playing a sound installation is interacting with it, thus also performing it.

In another talk I gave recently, I ended up having to redefine for myself what the differences are between live, liveness and 'live'. When you hear something that was recorded live, it isn't live although the listener has a sense of live. This is also true when one uses recognisable samples. This is another subject that can also catalyse the creation of communities of interest.

Furthermore, the notions of global and local deserve redefinition alongside these other terms. As Thomas Friedman rightly wrote (2006, 478), localness is becoming global through the internet. People who have shared values about the sound of, for example, music in Bangladesh can share it if this is something that binds that particular community together.

III. The Future – The politics of electroacoustic music in the 21st Century

We now arrive at the last part of my talk where we look forward to the politics, that is, the cultural position of electroacoustic music of the 21st century. It wouldn't be right if I didn't go back to the call and there are a few items that are related to this final subject.

Socio-acoustics 'Given the democratization of art, what is the changing role of artists, virtuosity, expertise, creative excellence? To what extent is electro-acoustic music as a field becoming self-referential? Are we in any way deviant from a purity found in the early canon, or does the link between creator and constituency bring us closer to a kind of creative purity?' I shall expand on these in a moment, but first a couple of details that I would like to tackle immediately before adding another question from the call to this series in a moment.

Self-referential, that notion exists and it is very worrying. My key thought on this thorny issue is that I believe that electroacoustic music is inherently innovative; therefore, when sameness and clichés come into play, we can easily become our best enemies. That in no way means that music should be dissimilar. I just don't believe that it should stay in the same place for too long. It has been said and I have also been culpable of saying that acousmatic concerts in Europe started suffering from sameness in the 1990s. There are, of course, many exceptions to that, but I believe you all know what I am describing with this remark. It *is* wonderful that something in our music works so well that so many people want to work in the similar fashion; still, I get concerned when students start saying that this is the music of older people and we (the students) don't want to continue doing that anymore. (Having said that, of course many students do continue doing just that, perhaps using different methods.) So there are questions related to self-referential electroacoustic music that I believe are well worth looking into.

I am also not completely comfortable with the word, purity here, but I believe that it is good that we have been asked to consider it. Let's move on to the final statement that I am citing from the call before offering some final general comments.

Sonosphere/2 'Can we use creative networks based on music technology to lead us towards world peace?' This is another very courageous question to place in the call. As for world

peace, I do not think I have the pretence to offer a post-Woodstock utopian ideal to you, but the words of Brecht (or was it Mayakovski?) and Duchamp do seem to offer us an excellent starting point for your EMS2011 discussions on the potential roles, political or otherwise, of electroacoustic music. The question is: who amongst us engages with these powerful suggestions?

What I find really interesting about this is that musicology has largely kept its hands well off our area and musicians are a little bit nervous, embarrassed or unwilling to engage with these issues. Depending on where you find yourself along this spectrum, your position should influence how you address them, that is, if you address them in the next few days. I think by ignoring such things we work very strongly towards a status quo of marginalisation and I do not find that a particularly healthy way to go. I am not looking towards artistic compromise; I am looking towards communication. I personally believe that the combination of ‘communities of interest’ and ‘changing and developing artistic roles’ (both from the call) with a dose of web 2.0 and what follows will offer new links between creators and constituencies. Furthermore, given the rapidly developing aspects related to new forms of participation, the distance between creator and constituency may change, too, if not completely disappear, as everyone can be a creator. So what about that hammer? Isn’t art about making links with our lives, about questioning and challenging our societies and our own views?

My hope is that we can all think out loud about this very question over the coming days.

IV. Finale

So how have I responded to these challenges? First of all, after working for years with Jaffrennou and Müller my works became something very different from what they were in my early years as a composer. They address these issues in one form or another. If you do not believe me, ask me about any piece and I can talk your arm off about them and tell you several anecdotes about what I heard about them because there has always been that kind of communication involved including the pieces that didn’t succeed very well. There is also my teaching. Supervising many composers, I ensure that students question things as part of finding their own path as a musician. Finally, there are my writings and my research projects. I am only going to mention one now that I have mentioned at past EMS events. I’m pleased to say that this project has had a major injection this year. This project is called Composing with Sounds. It forms part of the larger EARS (ElectroAcoustic Resource Site) pedagogical initiative, also known as EARS II, which I discussed at Shanghai last year. We have now received an EU grant which involves the research centre where I work, NOTAM in Oslo, the GRM and ZKM and there are two associate partners, EPHMEE in Corfu and Miso Music near Lisbon. We are all working on a creative software platform aimed at children from 11 to 14 years of age. The software will be launched in six languages in mid-2012. In mid-2013, we shall offer concerts of music made on the Sound Organiser, the name of the software, with works by children and established composers in all six countries including concerts for schools and for the general public as well as workshops for teachers. The project also includes the creation of a hosting website where children and other interested people of all ages will be able to download the software, up- and download pieces and mixes (for remixes) and there will be a social networking area within the site. The intention is that this initiative is to serve as a catalyst to increase interest and participation, thus enhancing the depth and breadth of our communities.

As part of the EARS II initiative, it looks as if electroacoustic music is going to be embedded in the national curriculum of Cyprus (of all places) for the same age group within two years. Thus all children in that country will have the opportunity to become familiar with electroacoustic music in terms of appreciation and creativity due to the work of one of our centre's PhD students, Nasia Therapontos. It gives me great pleasure to see such things happen. It is hoped that the EARS II site will go public in about a year. I have also written a book called "Making Music with Sound" (Routledge) supporting the EARS II site which will also appear next year. I believe that this research initiative fits well within the Sforzando themes.

But this is not only about me, but very much about you as well, in particular how you react to this year's call. Therefore, simply stated, my conclusion can be summarised in one sentence: Don't wait for the world to change to help our music, but instead help our music challenge and ideally also play a positive role in the world!

References

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