

The Sound of Silence Paradox: How to deal with the Non-Sounding in the Study of Electroacoustic Music

Dr. Tatjana Böhme-Mehner

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle Wittenberg/
Hochschule für Musik « Carl Maria von Weber » Dresden (Germany)

Tatjana.Mehner@t-online.de

Abstract

Silence is one of the most ambivalent phenomena in music in general, and this is especially so in acousmatic music because the relatedness to a source gets lost along with its visual representation. This produces problems for everybody getting in touch with that kind of silence – composer, listener and researcher. In a phenomenological manner this paper presents the different kinds of silence appearing in acousmatic music, and asks for possible interpretations of such silence in communication situations.

Can silence as such be transmitted as more than the counterpoise to sound? On the one hand, no, of course it cannot, because the case represents an ideal type: the silence of the reception has little to do with the silence of the recording. On the other hand, of course, it can.

This paper offers a dialectic discussion on the phenomenon of silence, proposing some possible approaches to non-sounding in the study of electroacoustic music by adopting ideas taken – first of all – from communication and media sciences.

A lot has been written by musicologists on silence, on its role and function, especially in the interpretation of traditional music. But can this been adapted to electroacoustic music? What, in particular, about acousmatic music?

There is not much which broadcasters are more frightened of than silence. The silent loudspeaker always appears as a kind of paradox. The function of a loudspeaker is to reproduce sound, not to be quiet. Nevertheless, silence appears in the arts, and this paper asks how a researcher should deal with it.

Silence in an acousmatic situation appears as a sforzando, as mentioned in the description of the general conference topic. This paper presents possible approaches to the scientific understanding of the silent, from a communication-oriented perspective.

Introduction – The Phenomenon of Silence in the Arts

Of course, at first glance, it would have been most logical to start this presentation without words, without music, without sound – thus, somehow, with silence.

Although I'm not remaining silent, that is not the result of missing the logic, but is the result of the knowledge that silence is not silence, and that the silent in science is not really comparable to the silent in music, particularly in acousmatic music.

I would like you to keep the following in mind for my further reflections on silence and the non-sounding, which are not at all the same.

It is another thought experiment, which I would like to implement to get you into the topic. I would like you to follow me into the realm of literature, and to think about one of the numerous local spirits of this fabulous city. Carson McCullers, in her novel “Art and Mr Mahoney” (McCULLERS, 1949), presents the middle-class Mr Mahoney as well-drilled for the world of art-oriented Mrs Mahoney, and, thus, as familiar with the ritual of the concert. The novel is about the worst night of his life – being (for the first time) truly emotionally touched by music, he interprets the silence following a furious final chord of a movement as the end of the whole sonata. His applause at the wrong moment in the sense of the ritual means the end of his social standing and somehow also of his wedlock.

But what would have happened if the Mahoneys had been confronted not by a pianist, but by loudspeakers? Probably one would be right to assume that the Mahoney-type of concert listeners would not, in 2011 as in 1949, go to a concert of acousmatic music. But if they did I am sure that the story would be the same.

Silence and the non-sounding are both constitutive factors of music and of the social situation or ritual of listening. Nevertheless, I would like to outline that a central departure point for my talk is the fact that the appearance of silence in acousmatic music is something special, an extremely complex phenomenon, to be dealt with in a special and multi-layered way, and that it has until today not been systematically considered in the field of electroacoustic analysis.

There is no sound without silence, and there is no silence without sound. Even if we know that absolute silence is an ideal type, we have built the observation of our everyday auditory perception on a sound-silence dialectic.

As we know, physical and absolute silence, real non-sounding, is an ideal type and does not exist either in musical situations or in everyday life; for example, it is very popular for poets to illustrate an abrupt silence or a silence of dramaturgic relevance by the ticking of a wall clock, the dripping of a water-tap, or something comparable.

Silence Associations and Music Making

Everybody knows this situation: coming back to a place we love in some way, we enjoy the recurrence of the familiar, using all our senses. We smell the South, we feel the wind coming over the hills, we see the other way of light ... and we listen; we have the impression that we will find, even in the silence of the place, something specific, and we are convinced that we hear something special, a characteristic silence. This silence may carry associations. Of course it would be the same with a place representing the opposite. Remembering the silence of the school while waiting in front of the door to be told the results of our A level oral exam: nearly everybody would be convinced that this silence had a special sound.

But can we impart this or that sense of silence to music? Can such associations be common and thus really associative? How can we understand silence? How can we interpret it? And how can we deal with an analysis in a useful way?

Anyone who, as a sound artist or composer, has ever tried to integrate this special “sound of silence” into a soundscape composition has probably felt a kind of “sound of silence paradox”. Honestly considered, this silence is not really silent, since it comes from subliminally appreciated sound beyond our recognition threshold or is even consciously associated to silence.

What are we listening to when we feel we are listening to silence, and what makes the non-sounding to be perceived as silence?

This is what I call the “Sound of Silence Paradox”, a term quite rich in associations, even sounding ones. We may think of the Simon & Garfunkel hit “Sounds of Silence” from 1965, with its specific aura, which has been covered by thousands of musicians and people wanting to be “it”, and which exists in versions for choir, for flute, and so on. And of course I had this image in mind when writing the title of this paper.

And even if this seems to be too far from my topic today, we can find even here in that seemingly indestructible song two or three points which are helpful in fixing a suitable perspective for the treatment of silence in acousmatic music.

The first is that the two poets are not cagey about the fact that their experience of listening to the sounds of silence was a special communication situation¹, and that there was more than one sound of silence². And they chose darkness as the best environment for this communication³. Listening without seeing anything – this is the perfect acousmatic moment.

Silence and the Acousmatic

If we look up the term “acousmatic” in general dictionaries we find a fascinating interplay between two ideas: the premise of the acousmatic curtain of Pythagoras and the premise of the acousmatic curtain of GRM. Pythagoras wanted his students to sit in “absolute silence” to find the essence of his talk, and the person listening to acousmatic music should not see any source for the essence of the sound. Thus silence is a kind of framework for every acousmatic situation.

As a first point to hold on to we have here two interpretations: silence as a formal or structural phenomenon and silence as a substantive phenomenon.

Both ideas exist in non-acousmatic music too, of course. But usually the visual impression guides the perception of silence in the same way as any other sound perception.

A lot has been written by musicologists on silence, on its role and function, and on the phenomenon appearing in the production, interpretation and reception of traditional music, and especially on silence in the form of the rest. But can this been adapted to electroacoustic music? Yes, but only partly: it can particularly be adapted to all fields of live-electronic music in which the listener gets a complementary visual impression – a conductor continuing to conduct, or a player continuing in the stance of playing. Thus the listener usually has something to hold on to concerning the intention of the author to transmit silence as the intended form of sounding. But what about acousmatic music? A loudspeaker looks the same whether it is playing or not. What about everything coming out of nothing other than loudspeakers?

There are few experiences more unsettling to the public than an absolutely silent scene in a movie. (This has been used from the 1970s onwards for aesthetic effect). When Wim Wenders in his film “The American Friend” shows the first murder sequence in absolute silence, at the time one could not imagine anything being more gripping.

¹ The text says: “I’ve come to talk with you again.”

² The text says: “sounds of silence”

³ The text says: “Hello darkness my old friend.”

There is not much which broadcasters are more frightened of than silence, or the image of the silent loudspeaker. And they usually work hard to avoid silence. It is of great interest for my topic that one of the more influential regional German radio stations ran an advert during recent years dealing with silence. A car dealer said nothing in the advert about cars, but after 30 seconds of something strange to the medium a calm male voice told the audience that the car dealer Müller had just presented those 30 seconds of silence.

But of course none of the intelligent PR-strategists took the risk of just turning off the sound for the purpose of generating silence. In that case the effect would have been quite different depending on the situation in which the advert was heard – in the car, during breakfast, while washing the dishes or even while hoovering. Violence against the radio set or a simple change of channels would be possible reactions. If it is the absence of sound which is intended to be understood as silence, a strong visual guiding difference is necessary. No, of course the car dealer's sound of silence was meticulously planned and optimally composed from different sounds and sound patterns associated with silence – the buzzing of insects, the chirring of crickets, the twittering of birds – and was well adapted to the basic sound of the radio station.

What does this say about the social image of silence, besides the fact that if the silence presented by the car dealer had been non-sounding the listener would have hit his radio or switched to another channel? Sponsored silence means in every case something positive, such as a guarantee extension for cars that were sold. But, having a closer look at our social environment today, we have to notice that a phenomenon of the spirit of the time is represented here. (see e.g. JAWORSKI, 2008; KURZON, 2008)

When I was preparing this talk, I was confronted with the fact that there was also a new growing awareness of something I would call a concept of silence: during the last month silence has been the topic of several festivals, and nearly every day new music sites appear on the world wide web proposing compositions about silence, dealing first of all with the colours of silence. That has also a lot to do with sound ecology – having silence for content being a kind of original state of our sound environment.

Communication researchers especially have, during recent years, treated the field of silence from different perspectives, but particularly have looked at the question of how silence is perceived and understood.

Associations of Silence and its Perception

Slightly anticipating the field of associations which I will touch on later, at this point we should notice that a general association or impression of silence is that it is something not willingly man-made. When you demonstrate sounds from nature – even quite loud ones – to inexperienced listeners to that kind of music, they associate it very often with silence, in contrast to “noise” which is brought up as an association with nearly all sounds of civilisation.

Also in the field of associations, if we compared the semantic connotations of the words “silence” (English), “silence” (French) and “Stille” (German) – and this is not the case with “sound”, “le son” or “Klang” – we would find them to be nearly the same.

So in conclusion one could say that acousmatic music can also be understood as dealing with the sound of silence in a new way – putting some sort of an acoustic microscope on it.

And now back to acousmatic music: what happens when we don't see the source of silence? The first and most obvious answer is that this visual guideline is just missing. But, as is the

case with all changes and losses resulting from the new techniques of the 20th and 21st centuries, it leads nowhere if we just bewail this gap in matters of standards of analysis.

In traditional music we can describe silence primarily as a phenomenon related to time and defined by duration. How long a rest should be is one of the central questions in discussions around performance practice. Here silence gains a huge part of its characteristics and of the intensity of its reception by its duration, which interpreters will of course adapt to the moment and to the immediate situation in which the silence is received. The duration forms the silence by being perceived. As discussed widely in cognition sciences, perception – auditory as well as visual – holds on to an impression for a frame of three seconds. After these three seconds the perception changes. This is true of the perception of continuous silence as well as that of a continuously played sound.

Thus, when we ask when nothing becomes something and vice versa, we have to bear in mind that silence appears here first of all as a temporal phenomenon. Nevertheless, even at this point acousmatic music may be a special case – because the temporal extension of silence no longer depends on interpretation in the traditional way. It seems to be somehow absolute.

When we look at silence in contemporary music in general, and more particularly in music using recorded (thus pre-existing) sound, timbre and colour suddenly begin to play a role in the perception of silence, and silence thus gains a new dramaturgic functionality.

Thus the sound-silence dialectic discussed earlier as a kind of guiding difference in the realm of all the participants in musical communication has to be taken in account. Here analysis and intermediation of electroacoustic music have to be aware of the fact that silence is not measurable in a useful way. Thus we have to define – and this is the central difference from traditional instrumental music – how, and on which level or levels of musical communication, silence is generated.

As we can experience silence as a strange sound, we could say that sounding as well as non-sounding can be perceived as silence.

Why do I always mention the communicational character of the listening situation? This is, indeed, a central point for me, in order to find categories for dealing with silence in acousmatic music. It is just this communicational character which makes us understand music as music, and which, within this communication period, makes sound as well as silence constitutional factors for this music. The non-sounding can become silence through perception, and just through perception. Thus, silence is the result of perception, of listening, and thus of a social observation or even of a communication situation.

Therefore to generate silence we have to have two sides taking part in the communication. For the moment I will keep the traditional terms of an author (or composer) and a listener, and leave aside the possibility that the first takes over the role of the second. Let us assume – following Schaeffer – that in acousmatic music every sound has the chance to become music; it is in the form of the sound's appearance and reception, and in the unity of both, that communication occurs which makes the sound a musical one, and makes silence silence, and which finally attributes to silence a special musical role.

Thus – whether we look at McCullers' Mr Mahoney or someone involved in the Simon & Garfunkel listening situation – there are situations in which silence is a communication, which only succeeds if there is another communication; there is some sort of social reaction. This sort of formal function of musical silence has been understood: the audience must applaud at the right moment or keep – notice the word! – silent. I will leave this to one side

and come to the field of silence as content, of silence with a dramaturgic role in the narrow sense.

Even if silence is not identical with non-sounding, silence cannot be measured on a scale. Of course we could deal with silence by a binary code – 0/1 – Sound/Silence. But this does not really lead us any further.

How and why do we perceive sound as silence? And what should researchers do with these questions?

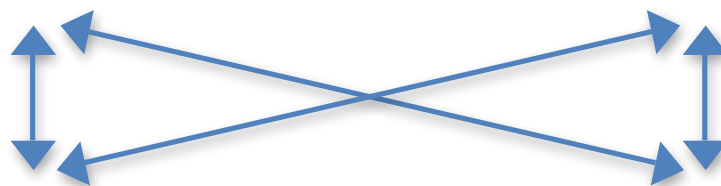
Following the communication approach discussed above, silence can't just be there: silence depends on observation, and thus on perception. And in acousmatic music more than anywhere else this can be understood as a multi-layer observation.

First of all we can – referring to Leigh Landy's and Rob Weale's Intention/Reception Project (see: LANDY, 1994; WEALE, 2006) – say that intention and reception have not necessarily got the same associations, but that listeners look for something, preferably a dramaturgy, to hold onto.

The principle should not be different when dealing with silence:

Silences as intended result of reception

Silence not intended result of reception



Silence as result of reception

Non-Silence/Sound as result of reception

Traversal cases of communication cannot per se be eliminated. The more they could be a problem for the author (in a traditional understanding) who wants to send a message, the more they could be helpful for research on the way silence is perceived and for analysis. This is a moment where more research, namely empiric research, would have to be implemented. Thus, I have to leave these cases to one side for today.

What should be of more interest is the question of how intended silence is generated and how it is received.

Recorded "Silence"
– immanent (sound) –

"Non-recorded" Silence
– external (sound) –

Perception/Reception
– as silence –

On the side of recorded sound we can find a kind of associative change from sound associations to silence and from silence to sound associations. Here the dramaturgy more than anything else develops a guiding character. A nearly perfect example may be the silence between the spoken phrase in Luc Ferrari's "Unheimlich schön"⁴, to which the subtitle

⁴ Luc Ferrari: "Unheimlich schön. Comment respire une jeune femme qui pense à autre chose." (1971).

already gives a certain significance, and which includes a more intense development than the “text”.

But the associations of silence, and particularly its duration, also depend on culture and the realm of experience.

On the question of non-recorded sound we have reached the point where it is absolutely impossible to deal with the question without having in mind the tradition established by John Cage’s silent pieces. The absence of formed sound does not mean the absence of silence. Reference to this can be an important moment of analysis.

Every performance, every loudspeaker, every audience, and so on, negotiate the silence by producing their own sound. Thus the silence of the reception does not have much to do with the silence of the recording. It seems to be just this moment of non-sounding which re-forms the performance in a particular way. Here we are maybe extremely close to what the here-and-now of interpretation in traditional music means; and analysis reaches comparable imponderability. But here we should learn from the history of those analysis problems, and deal with silence as a social aesthetic construct.

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