

Between Meaning and Meaningfulness – “Understanding” Anecdotal Music

Tatjana Böhme-Mehner

Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

Tatjana.Mehner@t-online.de

Abstract

During the last few years some impressive initiatives centring on the anecdotal music of Luc Ferrari have been implemented all over Europe, which tell us a lot about the difference between the concepts of meaning and meaningfulness in that kind of music and those in so-called ‘traditional’ music. The principle of (*r*)*écouter*, re-listening, as the basis of re-mixing, offers considerable input to the scientific debate on how to deal with the internal and external meaning of pre-existing sound in audio art.

In this paper the observational position of the re-mixer is introduced as a departure point, taking account of the fact that this position has to consider two kinds of ‘meaning’ – the anecdote itself, somehow taken from the real world, and the anecdote of anecdotal music. The somewhat provocative question therefore arises of whether meaning in audio art is generally only generated by the difference between the two, and whether this process of generating meaning is reproducible at the same level, as would be the case of a quote in the abstract world of traditional instrumental music. Finally, the paper asks when it might be useful to introduce the category of meaningfulness as a fixed term into the analysis. We ask polemically whether categories from the analysis of ‘note based’ music such as that of the quote are useful at all for anecdotal music. A quote is a quote is a quote – but is it anything else?

Sounds in Sound

“A rose is a rose is a rose” – everyone, I guess, knows the Gertrude Stein (Stein, 1922) quote and about its philosophical background. “A rose is a rose is a rose” – deals with concepts of representation. Transforming the quote to terms of our art, we will easily get in trouble. “A sound is a sound is a sound ...” or “A noise is a noise is a noise ...” wouldn’t work in the same way, even if we replace the abstract terms of sound and noise by the names of concrete sounds and noises, such as a bell ring, water dropping, a watch ticking, a violin tone and so on. The above named approach to representation refers to the visible world, as most approaches using the idea of representation do, and as the inexperienced listener does in acousmatic situations.

We don’t have to practice the Schaefferian *écoute réduite* to feel a kind of ambivalence at the sound; we don’t have to experience the situation of integrating a special sound into an artwork out of its context – somehow implementing it into another context and thus constructing new

meaning – to finally feel the relativeness of “understanding” the pure sound; and we don’t have to try to win 10,000 euros in the quiz of a radio-station for recognizing the fragment of a certain sound to get the impression that there is no sensory organ more fatuous than our ear. It is not only the fleetingness of sound, which makes it somehow unsettling to refer just to this in the field of communication.

We feel or even know all this, but in matters of our terminology we are usually far from being free of the visually determined approach to the idea of representation. And even if the researcher is, in terms of analysis, increasingly free of the ballast of traditional methods somehow related to the visual – the note-based sphere, the inexperienced or not so specialized listener is – interested in finding, namely in the situation of the acousmatic perception, sounds which are somehow functioning as representations. Presuming that listening to music in the sense of art perception, thus, as an aesthetic act, has to be communication, as I have already discussed on other occasions within the frame of EMS, this search for representations can be a central point in the discussion of the role of meaning in sound-art.

It is not the also very interesting field of psychoacoustics, and of how our hearing is outsmarted, that I will address here, but the idea of the meaning and meaningfulness of concrete sound as a kind of difference marking the interface of the social and the aesthetic, namely in audio-art.

As a kind of presumption, I would thus like to introduce a central relationship between meaning and meaningfulness in the field: the meaning of a sound can change with the context of its appearance, its meaningfulness somehow not. But the meaning results in a way from its meaningfulness, which is conversely amplified by the understanding of this or that meaning. “Understanding” is here defined in the Luhmannian sense of receiving *a* – not *the* – “message” provoking a new communication. (e.g. LUHMANN, 1984)

Back to Gertrude Stein. When I said, that the quote addresses the concept of representation, but it was not assignable to our art, that was of course meant to provoke in some way, thus, to point to the question of representation in sound-art. It is in just this field that meaning and meaningfulness are connected. The understanding of sound-art is a kind of continuous oscillation between meaning and meaningfulness. The listener has first to understand, that something could be meaningful. That means he recognizes the situation as that of art perception, decodes a meaning in the next step, and understands that this is just a –not the – meaning; thus, it is somehow the meaningfulness, and by reflecting this meaningfulness, he understands the art work in its specific character. This process is the more difficult, the more the used and recognized sounds are reducible to concrete real-world phenomena.

Possibly this problem does not exist in the same way within the field of traditional instrumental music, where the listener – educated over generations to this situation – understands in the communication process that the message or expression can be taken as the information; that – apart from any *l’art-pour-l’art* attitude – the sound was just the representation of itself; that in the end music was representing music. Even in so called programme music people have learned to communicate like this. However, sound-art still provokes the impression that, while dealing with sound, it is dealing with something external concerning the sound, and if it was its history. What may be somehow a problem for the sound-artist can be of interest to the researcher. At least this phenomenon marks out a central problem of the social perception of every aesthetic object. Meaning thus carries meaningfulness and meaningfulness is the necessary frame for generating meaning.

Thus, for the researcher it may be of interest to discuss the point, at which the one is formed by the other or – better still – perception refers to one or the other. Reception history, therefore, appears in some way to be a continuous reforming process of meaning and meaningfulness.

In quite a prototypical way we can study this phenomenon in the case of Luc Ferrari, and the reception of his music in a wider sense. I am here especially interested in the phenomenon of a special form of what we usually call remixing. However the idea of *(R)Écouter* – (re-listening) is not just a special form of remixing; the name also says a lot about the approach to the sound – mixing or listening. The difference is clear. The focus lies in another relation to the sound, and in another behaviour against the sound. And thus – by centring somehow on the receptive as a central moment of the creative – it opens new perspectives on the moment of understanding.

As Brunhild Ferrari, the widow of the composer, tells, it was the idea of Jacqueline Caux, the writer and intellectual very close to the Ferrarian concept of anecdotal music, to open up parts of the archives to young composers to re-listen to the sound collections to work on the sounds from today's perspectives. And she herself was, as she remembers it, at first shocked at this idea, but after reflecting on it in its relation to the idea of anecdotal music and Luc Ferrari's own works on older sound collections within his last years, she agreed. The *Prix Presque Rien* competition was born, as well as an adaptation of it at the ZKM in Karlsruhe.

When we are talking about the special appearance of meaning and meaningfulness in this re-listening to works, we could include the works Brunhild Ferrari herself created on the basis of her husband's sound libraries too, such as *Tranquilles Impatiences*.

Thus, the principle is simple: a work or a sound collection is given to the creator to encourage new compositions with a current perspective on the material. The results are as different as they are impressive. By looking at the sounds selected by the re-mixers, and also by asking about the context, we can learn a lot about the different levels of the meaning of a pre-existing sound within and without a context, and thus learn more about the meaningfulness of that kind of sound in general. Looking for similarities in the “understanding” of a characteristic sound and its use, we can discover a kind of spirit of time, which forms the meaningfulness of sound. Taking the ZKM competition with five selected works as an example, it is striking that – from within a large library that has been given to the composers – some sounds are being selected by more than one composer. Even more striking is the fact that most of them are, in their character per se, musical or taken from musical situations or – in the rare cases where language is chosen, keeping its semantic behaviour – point to the situation of listening. Thus, sounds already somehow representing a kind of aesthetic meaningfulness had been chosen very often and placed in central positions.

Let me take the observational position of the re-mixer, or better the re-listener, as a departure point, taking account of the fact that this position has to consider two kinds of “meaning”: the anecdote itself, somehow taken as such from the real world, and the anecdote of the anecdotal music. Brunhild Ferrari tells us that in her work on her husband's sound collections she was more careful in treating those sounds. And indeed, taking as a kind of premise that the capture and the recording of sound is already a creative act, we have it to do here with a special kind of observation; that is, a receptive kind of observation, working for the moment on a kind of difference of meaning and meaningfulness, which are both present at the same time in this observation perspective.

Of course, this leads to the somewhat provocative question of whether meaning in audio-art is normally only generated by the difference between the two, and whether this process of generating meaning is reproducible at the same level, as would be the case of a quote in the abstract world of traditional instrumental music. Whether the process is the same, depends on the perspective – because every second order observation is an observation too. But it may appear necessary to outline that in terms of analysis it is important to take – especially at this point – account of the ideal differences between traditional note-based music and what is namely the world of the anecdotal; especially in terms of forms of the quote. It would lead nowhere to state finally a structure made of quotes. And where to find the end or the beginning in this definition of the quote? Here the remarkable meaningfulness of a sound structure can be a helpful workaround.

Thus, we can assume that there are at least two different forms of meaning in anecdotal music, which when somehow simplified are an internal and an external meaning. Constructing a – or the – meaning is impossible without the social. It is maybe just *the* central action within the action of listening. The special appearance of meaningfulness is what marks the action as an aesthetic one.

There appears to be at least three central categories of meaning interlinked in the meaningfulness of a sound:

On a first observation level we find something I would call for the moment “natural meaning”, although it does not automatically have much to do with nature. This should just be mentioned here as being somehow consistent, although in the context of the Ferrarian approach to the anecdotal it is not really of relevance. Here, all kinds of sound are embraced, including natural sound in its simplest form and function, outside any communication process, which is the case in selected sound walks and installations with a decidedly ecological approach (even so it is rare). It is not my topic for today, but in the field of art the existence of this “natural meaning” is a paradox as such, because being noticed, and so somehow the source of a social action, it can easily be transformed into the field of the social. A short excerpt from the *Petite Symphonie Intuitive Pour un Paysage de Printemps* shows why this category is not of interest in this case, and thus that thinking in categories of meaning and meaningfulness sustains the paradox that the non-social is rendered impossible. Simplifying a bit a very complex aesthetic field: the fact, that, what could from a certain perspective, be seen as natural, interpenetrates with – in a stronger sense – a musical structure and with sounds taken from interviews, and generates our second category of meaning, by generating a dramaturgic context; and this meaning is not only a social fact because Ferrari at the time appeared to be somehow socially engaged in the more popular sense. (see: BÖHME-MEHNER, 2005, 2007)

What I would call the “social meaning” in the sense of the abovementioned categories has to deal with the balance of internal and external meaning. It is in its pre-existence as a social fact, that sound develops meaning at the base of meaning. Every sound with a somehow communicative character appears in this way as social. Thus, every analysis dealing with this kind of meaning has to develop or apply sub-categories, which look for the levels of meaning in the use of voice and language, signals and so on. A crucial point in this is the appearance of sound taken from musical situations.

This leads to the last category, which becomes more interesting with the concept of re-listening then ever before – something I would call the “musical meaning”, which always

results from a kind of reflecting observation. Here I address a sound, which already has a sense in a musical context, understood in a semantic or syntactic way, that is already understood to be meant as just this sound, as the representation of its meaningfulness. Finally, every sound used in an anecdotal composition can reach this state of meaning, and thus – the more the sound is remarkable or recognizable – the creative re-listener has to deal with that meaning too. Thus a sound is no more just the sound – but it carries all those levels of meaning. It is impossible to implement the famous sheep baaing from *Heterozygote* without the possibility that this former musical meaning could be “understood”. There are lots of examples like this...

However, this is especially of interest when the anecdote of anecdotal music deals with a sound pre-existing as music, such as sounds recognizable as those of musical instruments, sounds taken from traditional musical situations and so on. It would be another talk to give an overview of this or to discuss the various musical anecdotes in a proper sense in their appearance and function only in the work of Luc Ferrari.

Indeed, the field of traditional or pre-existing music in general as an anecdote in anecdotal music is wide and fruitful, namely in the search for the interpenetration of meaning and meaningfulness in this kind of music. At this point it is of interest to ask: which moments of meaning persist, which are reproduced and which are, perhaps, newly constructed? The role of pre-existing internal meaning is a central point in the discussion of meaningfulness – because the sociologist as well as the analyst has to be aware of the fact that nobody knows which meaning dominates for the listener, for the re-listener, for the re-re-listener and so on, compared to the huge and somehow abstract pool of meaningfulness. Thus, it is not simply works such as *Strathoven* (see: MEHNER, 2008) which are of interest at this point; works such as the sound art composition *Jetzt* – formally named as a *Hörspiel* – offer a lot of such possibilities.

Of course, the three forms of meaning mentioned are ideal types and I just raise them to give an idea of the complexity of what appears as meaningfulness behind the meaning of a sound. From the re-mixer’s perspective all the three forms of meaning may appear, as well as from this audience’s perspective. But not all three necessarily appear.

Bearing in mind that the composer wants the listener to build up his/her own anecdotes while listening, we can find kinds of building blocks constructed on quite strong formal or compositional principles – quite often somehow grounded in musical tradition. Here the interpenetration of internal meaning (which can be understood as dramaturgic meaning) and external meaningfulness (which is now first of all a communicative matter) develops the character of a guiding difference, leading to a new meaningfulness, which is first of all aesthetic. An internal, dramaturgic, meaning somehow structures and thus reduces external – and somehow indifferent – meaningfulness, reducing complexity or randomness. If, in anecdotal music, everything can become an anecdote, it is just the concreteness of its appearance, thus somehow its context, which constructs or re-constructs *a* – once more, not *the* – meaning.

And in the reception situation of this kind of music the listener has in mind the meaningfulness of the sound, as a kind of contingency; that is, the listener knows that everybody in this situation could know about it, but he can’t be sure, who really did.

Both, the musician and the listener have this in mind, both know about the meaningfulness of the several perception acts within musical communication.

Taking this double contingency into account, it is only the context in which the sound appears, thus somehow the dramaturgy of the piece, which is left to reduce meanings to meaning – of course at the background of meaningfulness. At this point the sound-art work gets close to the traditional music artwork mentioned above, wherein the expression is the information. And it is this assigning of an aesthetic character to the sound that thus makes it an artwork, just by that convertibility. The principle is the same, but it happens in the field of sound-art at another level of meaningfulness; thus somehow in a more complex structure of sense and sensitivity. And maybe it is just this level of meaningfulness and the knowledge of it, which is characteristic of communication within the art system.

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