

Sound-based music curriculum Finding the meaning and meaningfulness of sound

Nasia Therapontos

Music, Technology and Innovation Research Centre

nasia_th@hotmail.com

Abstract

The theme of the *EMS12 Conference* “Meaning and meaningfulness in electroacoustic music” can be approached from many different perspectives, but holds a special place in music education. Pedagogy of electroacoustic music is based on meaning and meaningfulness of its ideas, concepts and techniques. Educating people in the field of electroacoustic music is always about understanding and meaning, especially with young and inexperienced listeners. Being able to provide the tools for others to reach a meaningful understanding and listening experience in electroacoustic music is essential for the continuation of this sound-based art. In order for this music to reach out and attract more people, it needs to get out of its marginalization as “elite university music”. This paper focuses on my own attempt to introduce sound-based music into public schools and the expected results of such as implementation. This paper will cover a literature review of similar research in the areas of electroacoustic music and education as well as how my own research in public schools of Cyprus managed to address issues such as inclusive education.

Introduction

Years now, sound-based music has been struggling to reach a wider public. The need for understanding this music but also constructing meaning and meaningfulness becomes an important element of the introduction of this music to a relatively new audience, either experienced or inexperienced with sound-based music.

Research supports that in order to promote sound-based music, it should be introduced at an early age in someone’s life to have the opportunity to familiarize himself/herself with it and accept it (Kopiez and Lehmann, 2008). This current research investigates the implementation of sound-based music in public schools in Cyprus. Building on previous research aiming to introduce sound-based music ideas and concepts into the music classrooms (Savage, 2005; Higgins and Jennings, 2006; Wolf, 2008; Holland, 2011), this research aims at creating a sound-based music curriculum that will be appropriate for the implementation in such a teaching-learning environment in Cyprus.

Research Initiatives

A few years back, in the *EMS10 Conference*, Ricardo Dal Farra concluded his paper reporting that people need to have the knowledge to do things differently and in their own way, especially in music and electroacoustic music, after they have received the appropriate knowledge. Thus educating the youth around electroacoustic music is essential to the development of our field and the generation of meaning and meaningfulness.

Educating people in the field of electroacoustic music is always about understanding and meaning, especially with young and inexperienced listeners. Being able to provide the tools for others to reach a meaningful understanding and listening experience in electroacoustic music is essential for the continuation of this sound-based art. In order for this music to reach out and attract more people, it needs to get out of its marginalization as “elite university music”.

Researchers especially in the last decades have been developing new ways to approach and educate more people in the field of electroacoustic music. Research in schools has also been taking place, like Jonathan Savage’s (2005) research in secondary schools, in which the ideas of electroacoustic music were approached through the experimentation, selection and structure of sound on electroacoustic music concepts (thus meaning) and techniques. Also, other researches like Higgins and Jennings in 2006 tested different teaching approaches of sound manipulation and structure of sound events, using a digital audio editor, reporting that students can better “construct their understanding through doing”, thus meaning was a result of creativity.

Nonetheless, one of the most important research that took place in 2006 by Leigh Landy and Rob Weale was the Intention/Reception project in which revealed that the types of electroacoustic music used in the research could be appreciated and enjoyed by inexperienced listeners after “meaning”, in this case composer’s intention, was provided.

Following the steps of this research, many online environments have been developing in order to educate people, such as the EARS website and the EARS II pedagogical website; multilingual online search engines for electroacoustic music as well as e-learning environments. Moreover, projects such as the “Sonic Postcards” of the Sonic Arts Network, try to interact more with students and provide meaningfulness to their sonic world, by exchanging soundscape compositions with other schools participating in the project from different places.

There are many researches and projects that are trying to educate and approach more people into this field of electroacoustic music, but as Jeff Martin proposed in the *EMS10 conference*, there is a need for a music curriculum development “that enable[s] *meaningful* participation with the living and transforming traditions of electroacoustic music” (my emphasis). Thus my own research project based on these previous projects, attempts to develop a music curriculum based on sound-based music (not solely on electroacoustic music) for the public schools of Cyprus, in order to introduce more people to this music, help them understand it and appreciate it, through practical and creative lesson plans.

Sound-based music in schools

Choosing to use the term sound-based music rather than electroacoustic music in my project is not only because sound-based music is a more general term than electroacoustic music, but because it is clearer for young students to distinguish that it is the music of sounds not the music of notes. This term was created by Leigh Landy (2007) in order to address the problem of having many definitions that can be used for the same electroacoustic music, such as electronic music, computer music, electronica. Thus his own definition of the term is: “sound-based music is the art form in which the sound and not the musical note is the basic unit” (2007). This term is more simple than any of the other terminology used for electroacoustic music and it also avoids highly technical descriptions that might not be appropriate for young people.

Acknowledging the positive results of the above research projects, this project is investigating the accessibility issues of sound-based music in the national music curriculum of Cyprus. The opportunity for this research to take place in Cyprus, was provided during the Education Reformation Project that the Government of Cyprus commenced under the indications of the European Union. This Reformation Project affected the music curriculum, providing the opportunity for this research project to start. The on-going evaluations of the new music curriculum’s targets, aims and objectives, offered the opportunity for this research to be initiated before the curriculum’s final evaluation.

Methodological background

After obtaining the approval of the Ministry of Education of Cyprus, and the appropriate ethical approvals from the principals, teachers and students taking part in this multi-site case study, the research project began. The background review was carried out by completing questionnaires, which were given to six teachers taking part in the research. Each teacher was from a different school, three in primary and three in secondary, each teaching in a different year group, between 9-14 year old students. The questionnaires were separated into three sections. The first section covered the school’s profile, the second the teacher’s profile; including educational background and years of service. The third section of the questionnaire referred to the teacher’s music teaching method and knowledge; including questions regarding ICT (equipment, use and restraints) and knowledge of sound-based music.

By identifying the background of the teachers and the restraints or enablers shaping their choices in the music classroom, lesson plans were created according to the needs of the teachers and the equipment of the classroom. These lesson plans covered theoretical as well as practical tasks for the students, guided by the teacher’s abilities and were structured through close collaboration with me.

Observations of lesson plans as well as interviews with the teachers after each lesson-plan implementation, guided the manipulation or evaluation of the lesson plan according to the educational benefits it offered to students and the abilities of teachers.

Lesson plans

The creation of lesson plans was based on concepts and techniques of sound-based music, such as soundscape composition principles and listening exercises, but in simplistic forms and through gradually developing tasks. The lesson plans were based on the concepts of authentic learning required in middle and secondary music curriculum, and the balance between “aesthetic” and “praxial” paradigms in music education (Alperson, 1991, Elliot, 1995, Regelski, 2005, Martin, 2010).

The sequence of the lessons created and implemented was particularly focused on meaning and understanding, following the concepts of the constructivist approach. Starting as a pyramid design, each level was adjusting the previous knowledge of the students implementing it with a new concept around sound-based music and reaching it to a new level. The lesson plans were separated in six areas, starting from general aural awareness listening activities and reaching actual composition techniques of sound-based music using the music software “Audacity”. During the lesson plans the aim was for all the students to understand and engage with the lesson, but also for the teacher to be able with minimum supervision to teach this material in the music classroom.

Findings

After the analysis of the data gathered throughout the research, using the grounded theory approach, it was revealed that sound-based music can provide many educational, musical and technological benefits to the students and also that it can support teachers in promoting an inclusive environment. More specifically, through creative tasks that have a range of technical abilities and can attract the non-traditional music student to engage and participate in the music classroom, students can understand and appreciate sound-based music. Enhancing their musical creativity, providing an inclusive environment in the classroom, as well as providing a sense of freedom to the students and enjoyment in the music lesson, we can make this music more accessible to wider public. Most importantly it can be identified that meaning and meaningfulness is a prerequisite for the development of curriculum projects that can educate others in relation to sound-based music and in extend to electroacoustic music, as understanding and appreciation is its driving force.

References

- ALPERSON P., “What should one expect from a philosophy of music education?”, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 25 (3), 1991, pp. 215-242.
- DAL FARRA Ricardo, “About teaching electroacoustic music and new media”, *EMS10 Conference “Teaching Electroacoustic Music: Tools, Analysis, Composition”*, *Electroacoustic Music Studies Network*, Shanghai, 2010.
- ELLIOTT David J., *Music matters: A new philosophy of music education*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- HIGGINS Anna-Marie & JENNINGS Kevin, “From Peering in the Window to Opening the Door: a constructivist approach to making electroacoustic music accessible to young listeners”, *Organised Sound*, 11(2), 2006, pp. 179-87.

LANDY Leigh, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organisation*, London: The MIT Press, 2007.

REGELSKI Tom, "Implications of aesthetic versus praxial philosophies", in *Praxial music education: Reflections and dialogues*, David J. Elliott (ed.), New York, Oxford, 2005, pp. 219-248.

MARTIN Jeffrey, "Electroacoustic music in middle and secondary education: Some concerns regarding curriculum development", *EMS10 Conference "Teaching Electroacoustic Music: Tools, Analysis, Composition"*, Shanghai, 2010, in online publications of *Electroacoustic Music Studies Network*, <http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article310> (accessed June, 2013).

SAVAGE Jonathan, *Re-imagining music education for the 21st century: Innovative approaches to teaching, learning and research with ICT*, unpublished PhD thesis, Norwich: University of East Anglia, 2004.

WEALE Rob, "Discovering How Accessible Electroacoustic Music can be: the Intention/Reception project", *Organised Sound*, 11(2), 2006, pp. 189-200.