

## Universalising the acousmatics: storytelling and culture-specific works

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### Abstract

Mannerism and the use of aesthetic *clichés* in its language have isolated acousmatic music from a potential universal audience. The term acousmatic here is being seen from the perspective of acousmatic space-form (everything that can be recorded and played back). This paper proposes a new musical vernacular regarding acousmatic creativity based on culture-specific sonic and storytelling elements, related directly to the sentiment of the specific cultural group. Most acousmatic works seem to have inherited a particular style governed by the “unity of sentiment” as Rosen describes it (Rosen, 2010). On the other hand, according to Truax, cultural sonic elements might include soundmarks, keynote sounds, sound events and sound romances (Truax, 2001). Those elements combined with recorded speech can form a storytelling device, utilizing the inherited sounds and stories derived from a community. Taking as a case study a site-specific sound installation presented at a rural audience in Southern Greece, using as context vehicle Smalley’s ecological concept of acousmatic space-form (Smalley, 2007), Landy’s “something to hold on to factor” (Landy, 1994) and expanding the notion of Young, that the acousmatic medium has the unique capacity to function as a mirror held up to lived experience (Young, 2009), this paper explores possibilities to universalise the acousmatic practice and expand its audience.

### Introduction

Acousmatic music in its various forms seems to be disconnected from the audience, offering no point of engagement between everyday experience and artistic practice. In this brief space my aim is to accomplish three things. First, sketch briefly some of Rosen’s arguments in regards to the unity of sentiment in Baroque music and relate them to acousmatic music nowadays. Second, I want to discuss a site-specific installation I created in 2012 and use it as a case study. Third, and finally, I want to discuss the potential of acousmatics to renew its musical vernacular and universalising by incorporating storytelling and cultural elements in the creation of new works. Works that return to the community they derived from.

### Mannerism and Acousmatics

Mannerism and the use of aesthetic clichés in its language have isolated acousmatic music from a potential universal audience. This can be easily evidenced by examining the poor attendance in acousmatic concerts, and at other activities organised by the community of acousmatic music. A specific composition language used by most of composers since the beginning of *musique concrète* seems today to lead to sonic outcomes of an identical (or

almost identical) nature and sometimes making works having no distinct differences between them.

Much of the acousmatic repertoire appears to involve clichés and common sound manipulation techniques and tactics applied to recorded sounds leading to technological listening and a specific vernacular in regards to gesture-making and material evolution.

The result is making acousmatic music stylistic monotonous, representing a discourse of the past, an old practice, rather than a promising evolutionary artistic process. The language has lost effectiveness isolating acousmatic music from its potential audience and from a more global acceptance.

But what do we mean by acousmatic music? And is it necessary to define it as “music” or would it be more valuable to consider it as a condition? Emmerson and Smalley (2001) stated that “acousmatic music is intended for loudspeaker listening and exists only in recorded tape form (tape, compact disk, computer storage)”. That definition describes acousmatic music as potentially including all kinds of different genres of recorded music reproduced by loudspeakers such as Classical music, the music of the Beatles, the Pink Floyd and/or the music of Parmegiani. Leigh Landy (2007) points out that “...soundscape works do tend to have one thing in common with their acousmatic counterparts...”. That view considers acousmatic music as being something different from soundscape works obviously in terms of aesthetic outcomes. On the other hand, Landy makes a crucial observation that “acousmatic listening is the opposite of direct listening, which is the ‘natural’ situation where sound sources are present and visible”, giving in that way a perspective for acousmatics to be a condition, a listening experience. So, is the acousmatic a musical style or a listening condition and approach? François Bayle (2013) perceives and defines acousmatic music as follows:

[...] accousmatic music would mean the music made for the aural perception. Accousmatic is an old Greek word that means music that we listen to, music that we want to listen to. All music is accousmatic!

Bayle states that all music is acousmatic. I would add: all recorded sound IS acousmatic. Acousmatic is not an aesthetic approach and does not (on its own as a term) bear any kind of aesthetical or stylistic attributes. Acousmatics are directly related to our experience of listening to recorded sounds, which trigger our aural perception and evoke our memories and imagination. Anything that can be recorded and reproduced can be considered as acousmatic.

It is a listening condition rather than a style. And if we start perceiving it in that way that might be the first step away from avoiding the reproduction of stylistic clichés, because composers will not need to follow or imitate a specific style.

## **The Unity of Sentiment**

Charles Rosen (2010) in his book *Music and Sentiment* described a condition regarding the music of Baroque period as being characterised by what he calls “the unity of sentiment”. As he puts it, “...the aesthetic of the Unity of Sentiment governed music of the early eighteenth century, and even continued to exert its influence... towards the end of the century” and he continues: “formally constructed pieces were subject to the requirement of a single affect”. Rosen actually points up that music coming from that particular era has distinct characteristics and attributes that are common to most of its composers (it is obvious that there are Baroque composers such as J. S. Bach that does not fall under this category).

To paraphrase Rosen's ideas, in the case of pre-classical music, unity of sentiment and its nuances of intensity and harmonic structure created the scenario and were a prophecy of the development to come a half century later. Drawing parallels between Rosen's assertions about Baroque and the played out style of acousmatic music as discussed previously it could be argued that most acousmatic works nowadays seem to have inherited a particular style governed by a unity of "acousmatic sentiment" and a monotony of affects, related to compositional approaches, formal and aesthetical decisions, gestures and sound manipulation strategies.

It is needed to make a footnote here and admit that there are exceptions in what we called "unity of acousmatic sentiment" especially in the field of experimental radio drama and/or radio documentaries (which are of course an acousmatic experience but of a different nature from that of the acousmatic concert). Radio dramas (e.g. BBC's *Between the ears*) make use of acousmatic sound processing in a brilliant and most effective way but always combining it with narration, a vital element which will be addressed later in this paper.

To return to the monotony of affects in acousmatic works, a plethora of pieces are heard as having not only a particular distinctive style but also a specific common sentimental mood, which could be characterised as *dark*. The unity of sentiment in acousmatics is related to repetition, adaptation and reproduction of old concepts and approaches to composition and sonic creativity and it could be assumed that it is one of the main reasons of concerts' low attendance as well as audience's distance from the genre.

So, what can be done about it? What kind of action or approach should be taken in order to bring the audience into acousmatics and expand / universalise the language and experience of it?

Leigh Landy (1994) coined a very important term for the studies of acousmatics: the something to hold on to factor.

[...] when a composer creates a work he/she makes it available to their audience, offering them something to hold on to in terms of appreciation in words and deed. That could be a range of sonic manipulation treatments leading to homogeneity of sounds or layering to an appropriate form of narrativity.

The "something to hold on to factor" has to be identifiable by the listener serving as means with which the audience would feel comfortable and providing a greater understanding of the work.

## Culture Specificity

But is it understanding or engagement (*methexis* in Aristotelian terms) that we are after? John Young (2009) argued on the potential and "capacity for sound recording to function as a mirror held up to lived experience". An acousmatic work by default provides a unique opportunity towards the use of this capacity. Sound recording can include not only absolute, neutral sounds but also culture-specific sounds and soundscape elements of a community as well as recordings of stories and the sound manipulation of all the above. The manipulation of recordings and of recorded stories places acousmatics in an advantage point having the capacity to preserve, create and expand oral history through the creation of radiophonic works presented either in concert halls, in radio/internet as podcast or as a sound installation. In this sense, acousmatic works expand their nature and heritage and acquire hybrid attributes and

qualities that make it a vehicle of a unique form of storytelling which serves as a perfect “something to hold on to factor”. Allow me to give a couple of examples of acousmatic storytelling taken from the repertoire.

## **Creating culture-specific acousmatic storytelling**

In terms of cultural sonic elements, Barry Truax (1991) made a vital contribution to soundscape studies by creating taxonomy valuable also to the acousmatic phenomenon. A *soundmark* refers to a sound specially regarded by people of a community or culture. Any past or disappearing sound remembered nostalgically is considered a *sound romance* and has the ability to trigger strong memories. Sounds heard by a particular community frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived are called keynote sounds. For example a keynote sound for a community of olive oil producers of the Mediterranean might be the hissing sound produced by the olive trees branches when wind blows, which actually for them it has practical information within it. A sound in its spatial and temporal context as part of a soundscape is a *sound event*.

Expanding the range of the ‘something to hold on to’ factor, the ‘mirror’ of lived experience and the cultural sonic elements of a community, together with recordings of voices of community members reciting stories related to that community, all these elements can be added as means of engaging with the audience and make a work directly derived from and related to that particular community or culture. An acousmatic storytelling, a sonic hybrid, combining digital storytelling techniques with technical approaches for manipulation of recorded sound but with content linked to the every day life of the community. Furthermore, the work needs to return back to the community from and for which it was created in order to accomplish the challenge of audience engagement. The acousmatic work in that way is taking a different form and diverges from the played out style. Now, it concerns the audience because within it they can see themselves as well as the artistic approach.

Truax’s taxonomy in conjunction with acousmatic storytelling approaches provided the basis for the creation of a new work that would involve solely cultural elements of a specific rural community. In 2013, I was selected to be part of a Residency organized by Medea Electronique artistic collective. My artistic outcome of the residency was a site-specific installation called *Stories of a Tree* that took place on a tree next to a coffee shop of a village in Southern Greece.

The idea of a tree (used as a metonym) becoming an agent of local soundmarks, keynote sounds, sound romances and sound events, an agent of cultural information (using the acousmatic medium for telling stories about the past and present of the village but from an artistic perspective) was my main goal. I tried to discover sounds that have meaning to that particular community. During the installation, six black boxes (within which small loudspeakers were placed) were placed on the trunk of the tree at the central square of the village. All of the boxes-loudspeakers were looping six stories (the idea was that the tree would ‘tell’ the stories). As the audience was getting closer to the boxes they had to bend and listen carefully what each box was “whispering” to them. They could listen stories, related to the olive oil local production or the years of the Nazi’s occupation of the village or the Greek Civil War and others, recited by some of the inhabitants of the village (after of course being interviewed by me). At the same time, a sonic environment composed only from sound

recordings of sounds produced by an olive tree (a vital symbol of the community's economic life) and of the soundscape and culture-specific sounds of the village was constantly coming out from all over the tree, using hidden loudspeakers.

It turned out that this installation interacted with the residents of the village by including them in the work both as makers and as audience, placing them, their recorded stories, their soundscape and their lifestyle, as a central theme of the work which was presented at their local public space. I intended to explore ways which an object of nature, a tree, could be transformed into an acousmatic storytelling device using the possibilities provided by the acousmatic medium and also relate it to the community where it belongs.

## Universalising Acousmatics

To connect all previous with the concept of universalisation; Appiah (2006) refers to universalisation as a concept describing a moving-forward contour, a development, an evolution of a process. It should not be confused with the term "globalisation" because it has more to do with how something it evolves and is being renewed. In relation to acousmatics, universalising might mean challenges and opportunities to extend and reach out audiences that have never heard or misunderstood this art form. One of the challenges is to overcome the played out mannerism and the unity of sentiment that governs the craft and move towards culture specific unity in works, reflecting the culture of a community back to it. That, in relation to taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the medium to create a hybrid device of storytelling, can lead to a new musical vernacular which is certain that is engaging communities with sound and sonic creativity without leaving a sense of communication breakdown between the work and the audience.

Most composers who use sound taken from a different (or not familiar with) culture act as if they were colonisers: they go to a place and they take back 'sonic souvenirs' [to use Manuella Blackburn's (2011) terminology] in order to use it in their own advantage as a material for compositions presented to a totally unrelated audience to the community from which the sounds derived from.

I believe that it is a critical point that the work will have to return to the community. Part of a composer's or sound artist's job is to investigate the community, find the important sounds of a culture and highlight it through their work.

## Conclusion

To conclude, if, as I have been describing, Charles Rosen's notion of unity of sentiment and monotony of single affect is apparent in acousmatics, audiences will continue to disembark from the provided experience and enjoyment because they will not be able to engage with it. Enriching Landy's notion of "something to hold on to" factor together with John Young's 'mirror' with elements of storytelling, cultural specificity and returning the work back to the community or culture that came from, is one method I suggest composers and sound artists should adapt. In that way, they would invest and reinvest something back to the sentiment of that culture with a more universal dimension, a unity not related to style, structural methods and thematic development approaches but rather a unity of culture.

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