

Playing Loudspeakers, Unsettling Concerts Gender and Performance in Interdisciplinary Electroacoustic Music

Hannah Bosma

mail@hannahbosma.nl

Introduction

Where and how to find gender in electroacoustic music, its practices and performances? In my research on electro-vocal music, the voice is an entry point to discuss gender in electroacoustic music. (Electroacoustic music may seem abstract or “neutral”, but voices are clearly gendered.) One of my conclusions is that musical and vocal gender stereotypes are encountered more often in rather traditional concert settings, while breaches in gendered conventions mainly occur in electroacoustic music when ontological and institutional changes are at stake, such as the departure of the concert stage, of the musical score and of the concept of the musical work, the changing roles of the creators, and interdisciplinarity (Bosma, 2013, 2006, 2003). Moreover, women in the electroacoustic music field often combine different musical roles, with different gender connotations, and they frequently cross-established categories of media, disciplines and genres. The traditional notion of authorship may collapse through women’s preference for interdisciplinary work and collaboration.

Performance is both fundamental to music and to gender. Music is considered a performing art; however, this is not self-evident for electroacoustic music and sound art – indeed, this genre, as well as this conference, invites us to reconsider the notion of musical performance. Gender is performative, according to Judith Butler: gender is continuously re-established or re-performed, but can also change by its performativeness. The performing arts and the performativity of gender imply different notions of performance. While the performativity of daily life and culture at large, including gender, goes by mostly unnoticed or unreflected, the performing arts provide occasions to focus and reflect on performance. Can new conceptions of performing music, with or by sound technology, go with changes of gender performance?

With this paper I elaborate further on the relation of gender to fundamental aspects of electroacoustic music, related to discourse, technology, performance and signification, while focussing on electroacoustic practices that critically reflect on or play with concert performance and related electroacoustic practices, such as the work of Huba de Graaff and Cathy van Eck with loudspeakers and soundwalks. This paper offers a preview of some of the issues discussed in my forthcoming article on gender for the *Routledge Companion to Sounding Art* (Marcel Cobussen, Vincent Meelberg and Barry Truax (eds.), forthcoming 2015). Looking for women, men, femininity and masculinity, I encounter fundamental issues constitutive of electroacoustic music.

1. Gendered Fundamentals of Electro-acoustic Music

Although women did and do invent, (re)produce and use technological artefacts like machines and computer programmes, technology in general is seen as a masculine domain. Technology is mostly associated with stereotypically masculine values as: activity, reason, control, independence, and a focus on things, technical processes and abstract ideas instead of on human relations (Milthorp 1996). An emphatically technological approach in electroacoustic music resonates with these general stereotypes of masculinity.

In electroacoustic music there is a strong modernist strand, with a discourse that overemphasizes formalism, objectivism and technology. This seemingly abstract or 'neutral' discourse is related to masculinity (Born, 1995; Bosma 2013). Susan McClary (1989), for example, points to anti-femininity in modernist music. Modernism is a 'refuge of masculine prestige' (McClary, 1989, p. 71).

The technical discourse of electro-acoustic music is gendered as well. Andra McCartney (1995, 1997) points out that there are many metaphors in the discourse of music technology that are gendered as masculine, such as bang, trigger, master tape, etc. Tara Rodgers (2010) argues that the audio-technical discourse fundamentally and historically consists of metaphors that relate sound to masculinity and colonialism.

Rodgers discerns two metaphors: sound as waves and sound as individuals. Waves invoke associations with on the one hand fluidity and excess, related to ideas on femininity and female bodies, and on the other hand with the seas, related to colonialist practice. Electricity is represented by water metaphors as well, with terms as 'current', 'flow' and 'channel' (Rodgers 2010: 58). Rodgers also argues that since the 19th century, sounds are as well represented as individuals with varying properties (such as pitch, amplitude envelop, timbre, duration) to be analyzed, controlled and generated by electroacoustic means, and she argues that this is entwined with gendered and racial ideologies.

Material reality was thus rendered in audio-technical discourse through gendered and racialized terms: particles were constructed as agential white, male subjects; waves were described with tropes and narratives associated with female corporealities and imperial conquests. (Rodgers, 2010, p. 59)

These gendered metaphors are related to the control of nature, femininity and non-Western others by masculine subjects.

Loudspeakers, microphones, amplifiers, cables, recorders, players and other audio equipment are usually considered as neutral and transparent. That is, one aims and expects to hear the sound that is transmitted through the equipment, not the sound caused by the apparatus itself (such as hiss, hum, crackle, clicks, feedback noise, resonances). Such transparency of the audio apparatus is related to the ideal of objectivity and universality. The denial of the non-ideal sound of the apparatus is a denial of imperfection, of materiality, of vulnerability, of lack. A perfect audio apparatus implies the masculine ideal of total control over unruly sound waves and materials. Thus, the modernist discourse of electroacoustic music avoids femininity (such as subjective musical experience and immersion in uncontrollable waves) by substituting, disguising or controlling it with something masculine (such as objective discourse and distancing visualization techniques). In this context, the work of Huba de Graaff and Cathy van Eck is of specific relevance.

2. Loudspeakers

2.1. *Lautsprecher Arnolt*

The music theatre work *Lautsprecher Arnolt* (2004) presents the story of Arnolt Bronnen, a historical figure. Bronnen had a crazy life in a crazy time period: he was a playwright, he became severely injured in World War I, he was a friend of Bertolt Brecht and of Joseph Goebbels, he married Goebbels lover, the actress Olga; he was a Nazi, but joined the resistance at the end of World War II, he became a communist, and in the end he moved to East Berlin.

Lautsprecher Arnolt is a co-creation. Huba de Graaff (NL) is the composer and the creator of its main concepts, such as the role of the loudspeakers, which is a recurring theme in her oeuvre. Loudspeakers are not neutral, invisible entities in De Graaff's work, but hilarious theatrical personae, or otherwise prominently present. In *Lautsprecher Arnolt*, the stage is overcrowded with all kinds of loudspeakers. Some loudspeakers are like singing puppets, which move independently or are manipulated by the only human actor (Marien Jongewaard), seemingly in a dialogue. The loudspeakers are also material entities, funny looking, inventive objects, but also obstacles that stand in the way and are thrown around.

The loudspeakers emit a multitude of voices, sounds and musical styles, partaking in the performance and evolving along with the dramatic course. While having fun with loudspeakers, *Lautsprecher Arnolt* also has a political focus, dramatizing the role of public address sound technology in Nazi Germany and other mass movements: loudspeakers as a political medium.

A male composer and a female vocalist are a common combination in electroacoustic music, as I showed in my dissertation and previous articles; and this relates to gender patterns in other cultural domains. The performance of male actor Marien Jongewaard is remarkable in this respect. Marien Jongewaard's performance is intense, bodily, emotional, expressive; ranting, singing, screaming and crying like a madman. In *Lautsprecher Arnolt*, the bizarre story of Arnolt Bronnen becomes a display of excessive masculinity going rampant. This man is a 'loud-speaker' in a world of loudspeakers.

Lautsprecher Arnolt is a show with loudspeakers, about loudspeakers. Instead of the assumption of neutrality, abstraction and perfection of the electroacoustic apparatus, in *Lautsprecher Arnolt* there is an emphasis on both playfulness and socio-political meaning of sound technology¹.

2.2. Cathy van Eck

Opposite to the ideal of the transparency of the audio apparatus, Cathy van Eck's artistic research focuses on the question whether loudspeakers and microphones can be used as musical instruments. The result is not a new musical instrument, but an acknowledgement of the hybrid character of this technology, that can be used for sound reproduction, sound amplification (supporting), synthetic sound (generating) and as a musical instrument (interactive). It is the impossibility to make a 'normal instrument' with loudspeakers and microphones that interests her (Van Eck, 2013, p. 201). This impossibility refers not only

¹ See www.youtube.com/watch?v=oF_yd7wzMUI for a collage of video excerpts of *Lautsprecher Arnolt* (last accessed 09/14).

to the hybrid character, but also to the instability and unpredictability of such configurations.

Instead of being highly sophisticated objects which can be controlled by experienced musicians with a high level of precision, these set-ups seem to be the opposite: they are not highly controllable, and the musician plays a different role from that of “mastering” the instrument. (Van Eck, 2013, p. 276)

Cathy van Eck casts loudspeakers and microphones as musical instruments that change the notion of performance itself.

Microphones and loudspeakers can thus be part of a musical performance, and performers can interact with them. What happens when these devices are actively taking part in a musical performance is a change in performance praxis itself. Owing to their resistance to acting in ways we expect of conventional musical instruments, they twist the familiar elements of a performance into a new configuration. (Van Eck, 2013, p. 201)

Although she does not discuss it explicitly, Van Eck’s own musical works show that this fundamental change of musical performance may include gendered aspects. For example, Van Eck uses in her works not only musical instruments and equipment, but also objects from the feminine realm of every day life, such as a hairdryer and a pot plant, in *Groene Ruis*², for a small box tree, hair dryer and live electronics (2007) and in *Pièce d’ameublement*³ for grand piano, plants and live electronics (2011). Another example is *Double Beat*⁴, a performance for plastic bags, breath, two heart beats and live electronics (2013). It is performed by a pregnant woman; Cathy van Eck did it herself, but in her description she leaves the possibility open for performance by an other one. The heart beats of the woman and of the infant are picked up with a fetal Doppler ultrasound device that is normally used by medical personnel to check the health of the unborn infant. The detected heart beats are played over the loudspeakers. The feminine aspects of concert performance are featured in Van Eck’s pieces as well. The stereotype of woman as visual object is countered by her neutral black clothes and by hiding her face behind a screen or in a box, such as in *Square Head*⁵, a performance for one performer, a box, two small loudspeakers and one audience member (2013).

*Song No 3*⁶, for one performer, loudspeaker, microphone and live electronics (2010), elaborates on the feminine role of singing (on the femininity of singing, see Green 1997, Cusick 1999, Bosma 2013). The head of the performer is hidden behind a large sheet of white paper. She has a loudspeaker membrane, attached to the paper, at the place of her mouth and holds a microphone in her hand. She is not singing, but making gestures with her arm and moving her head, manipulating the distance between microphone and loudspeaker. The sound processing is controlled by the amplitude of the microphone

² For more information, a picture and a video registration of a performance of *Groene Ruis*, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/groene-ruis/ and www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0G7Deg2neM (last accessed 09/14).

³ For more information on *Pièce d’ameublement*, with pictures, video and score excerpts, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/21-piece-dameublement-2011/ (last accessed 09/14).

⁴ For more information on *Double Beat*, and pictures and sound recordings, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/299/ (last accessed 09/14).

⁵ For more information on *Square Head*, with pictures, video and score excerpts, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/27-square-head-2013/ (last accessed 09/14).

⁶ For more information on *Song No 3*, with pictures, video and score excerpts, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/18-song-no-3-2010/ (last accessed 09/14).

signal, which is influenced by the gestures, that is, the distance between microphone and loudspeaker. The gestures resemble the gestures that singers make, for example bringing the microphone to the mouth, or enlarging its distance. Van Eck proposes a historical context for this focus on the singer's gestures: she argues that at the end of the 19th century, the gestures of the singer, as well as other visual aspects, were not considered essential anymore to musical performance.

If viewing the gestures of a singer had been regarded as an essential aspect of a musical performance, it would have been much more difficult to convince audiences that listening to a record at home is comparable to attending a musical performance in a concert hall. (Van Eck, 2013, p. 111)

This paved the way for the acousmatic experience of recorded music. *Song No 3* is – as it were – an inversion of this historical account: the gestures are now in the middle of the attention. The gestures and their influence on the sound (by sound processing) are composed. The influence of the gestures on the sound varies during the piece. For example, while one would expect the sound to become louder when the microphone comes closer to the mouth, at the end of the piece this becomes the inverse. By the changes in the relation between the arm positions and the resulting sound, the identity of the performer and of the instrument becomes dispersed, argues Van Eck.

To use these gestures to control sound is to make an intervention in their “normal” meaning in a song by affixing to the gestures a different sound not previously associated with them. The different relationships between sound and gesture can be composed, and the relationships, which are established during the piece, can be questioned during the same performance by establishing another gesture-sound relationship. Due to these constant changes, shifting from one to another identity, a fixed personality on stage can never exist. (Van Eck, 2013, p. 73)

3. Soundwalks

‘Soundwalks’ is a sounding art genre with prominent female makers, as Andra McCartney remarks in her recent, extensive overview.

It is important to note that many of the major figures in the field of soundwalking are women, unlike with many other areas of electroacoustic sound art and research, indicating possibilities for changing gender dynamics in relation to sound and technology. [...] It is notable that many of the best-known practitioners of soundwalking and related practices, such as Westerkamp, Corringham, Cardiff and Kubisch, are women. This is unusual in electroacoustic soundmaking practices, which tend to be dominated by well-known male figures. (McCartney, 2014, pp. 212–237)

There are profound differences between various species of soundwalks, varying from walking and listening attentively, to audio tours or documentaries, and various other art forms. These differences relate to the way of listening (with or without headphones), the sounds (composed or not, recorded or not, processed or not, speaking voices or not), and the listening attitude. These differences are related to different backgrounds of the makers and thus to the interdisciplinary character of the soundwalks. Cathy van Eck (NL/CH) turns the soundwalk – as it were – inside out and adds another layer to this multifarious genre.

*Extended Ears*⁷ (2013) offers different listening experiences of the environment by transforming the sense of hearing when walking. There are three versions: by holding a horn to the ear, by a portable microphone-loudspeaker instrument, and by a live electronic processing iPhone app. Thus, the mediation of hearing is stressed.

In *Hearing Sirens*⁸ (2007), Van Eck wears large yellow loudspeaker horns on her back that emit sounds, while she is walking alone or guiding an audience group. By projecting the sound with the horns into the environment, she makes the acoustic space audible: for example, close to a building, when the clicks bounce to the walls, this sound is different than in an open field. A horn is part of an emergency siren. But the two horns on Van Eck's back also look like the wings of the bird-women, the mythical Sirens that are alluring and dangerous (Cavarero, 2005; Bosma, 2014). As Andra McCartney (2014) remarks, implicit in soundwalking is that a woman's presence on the streets is marked by her gendered visibility; walking with large yellow horns, Van Eck adds an extra dimension to her visibility.

Conclusion

The discourse of modernist music and audio technology is gendered as masculine. Alternative conceptions of music and sound go with alternative practices, when audio technology is not used as an abstract apparatus for perfection and control, but staged as resistant materiality, as multifunctional media technologies with musical and socio-political impacts, or to reflect on and change musical performance.

Apparently more women are at home in interdisciplinary roles in sounding arts than as sole composers of autonomous music. This mixing of roles and disciplines leads not only to changes in the production practices of sounding arts, but can also be heard, seen and felt in the music itself. It is affecting musical and institutional conventions, such as the format of the concert and the idea of autonomous music. Not only the lines between composing and performing, but also between production (composer, performer) and consumption (audience) are crossed by soundwalks.

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⁷ For more information, pictures and video, see www.cathyvaneck.net/ownworks/28-extended-ears-2013/ (last accessed 09/14).

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