

## What's really going on *here*?

**Yiorgis Sakellariou**

Coventry University

ab8855@coventry.ac.uk

### Abstract

The title of this paper is borrowed by the homonymous chapter of Christopher Small's book *Musicking*. In this book the renowned musicologist describes, criticizes and analyses the classical music concert and uses the term *musicking* to introduce his theory that music is an on-going process, gaining meaning in a live performance, rather than a static object. In our case, 'here' refers to electroacoustic music concerts. If Small investigates and questions something so established and standardized as a typical classical music concert, I suggest that it is fruitful, if not essential, to examine the electroacoustic music concert not with the intention of devaluing it but to review the practice and re-evaluate its purpose. I believe we need to constantly challenge, explore and creatively doubt the traditions and settings of electroacoustic music and thus bring them into the present day.

It is not my intention to propose a strict definition of electroacoustic music. The term is broad, sweeping between acousmatic multi-channel concerts to harsh noise performances. It is used to describe purely electronic works of academic composers as well as improvised performances with laptops or field recordings. Nonetheless there are two main features of certain interest that I would like to focus on. Both are examining the concert, as a social activity that aims to create aesthetic pleasure.

*No audience underground* is the term used by musician and blogger Rob Hayler to describe the global underground experimental music scene. He emphasizes the fact that the participants of the scene (composers, label curators, concert organizers, radio producers etc.) make up the majority of the audience at almost every concert. In other words, the audience consists of people who are actively involved with the music and the presence of 'outsiders' is usually an exception. If we examine the constituent of concerts at symposiums or conferences, and despite any differences that arguably exist between the so-called underground/post-punk/DIY music and academic electroacoustic composition, we will observe that similarly the audience consists mainly of active participants (fellow composers, scholars and researchers). The general public is not even expected to attend as the event is organized by and addressed to specialists from the academic world.

I am not implying any positive or negative opinion about this point as I think there are several, even conflicting, ways of approaching this. One could argue that it is pure elitism and music is isolated in its own micro-cosmos, disconnected from the rest of the society. On the other hand, the involvement of the audience shows dedication and commitment. We are part of a small 'community of interest', as Leigh Landy puts it, where its active members try to contribute towards its development. Through the members' work, research and writings, the community evolves and, hopefully, progresses. Therefore, I cannot claim that being our own audience is necessarily problematic, however I would strongly suggest to reflect on what this means and how, and if, it affects our individual experiences in relation to our work.

The second feature of interest is also related to the notion of participation but now my hypothesis is concerned with the actual listening experience. If we examine the typical setting of an electroacoustic concert, and more particularly the surround sound system with the mixing desk in the middle and the audience sitting around it, we notice that the concept of a stage is negated. The performer, who usually is also the composer of the work, is sitting among the audience and there is no physical separation between the two. Furthermore, any technical skills are not visually exposed to connect the production or manipulation of sound with any specific gesture made by the performer. The lights are dimmed and often listeners close their eyes as well; the attention is solely focused on sound. Naturally, this has been explored and highlighted before but realizing it is not a sufficient precondition for a successful concert. An additional action is vital for transforming the concert into a significant and profound experience. What is furthermore required, and evident in this setting, is active participation through listening. It is the audience's attention and focus that ultimately elevates the work. Listening is a task, a challenge that can provide a way of creating meaning. The audience, through listening, becomes an additional, perhaps equally important performer. The value shifts from what we hear, or how we generate and organize sound, to how we listen. Active listening is a tool for transformation, of exploring the unseen, it is a way of expanding consciousness to a higher state in which we can encounter the divine.

Consequently, the completion of studio work is not the final destination but the beginning of a journey that takes place in a concert. The concert itself is a tool for intellectual exploration and not simply a platform to present works. We should always remember that a concert is ritualistic in design. In ours, as in every other community, it is a ritual with certain settings and models which derive from a common understanding and language, and symbolize ideal relationships with each other and with the rest of the world. These ritualistic events provide access to a sound-mediated hyper-reality that exists beyond the ordinary. Its social and technical settings suggest that we are all partly responsible for its success, not only as composers or as members of the audience but moreover as permanent participants in a musical community.

With this paper my goal is to find the right questions but not necessarily with the intention of getting concrete answers. Hopefully a set of intriguing questions will generate more original thoughts than any answer. Moreover, I would suggest we consider the EMS, and any other symposium or conference, as an occasion to be doubtful rather than express certainties. If we work towards understanding the set or relationships, the values and meaning that exist within our practice then, if indeed it is our aim, we will be able to spread the interest in electroacoustic music to other communities. Of course we should also think about what these other communities are (online, physical, social etc.) but this is a whole new set of questions to be raised and explored.

## Introduction

The title of this paper is borrowed from the homonymous chapter of Christopher Small's book *Musicking* (Small, 1998). In this book the renowned musicologist uses the word music as a verb, instead of a noun, to propose his theory that music is an on-going process, gaining meaning during a live performance, rather than a static object. In a similar manner, as theologian Bruce Ellis Benson informs us, 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt approaches language not as an 'Ergon' (ἔργον), the Greek word for product, but as an 'Energiea' (ἐνέργεια), the word for energy (Humboldt on Benson, 2003: 125). By applying

this idea to music, Benson writes that the work only triggers the musical experience; it is not the experience itself (Benson, 2003: 126). In other words, we create musical objects, the works, as a reason to act, to perform, and not the other way around (Small 1998: 108).

Small's focal point is the typical classical music concert. He explores and interrogates its physical and social settings (concert hall architecture, dress code of musicians, positioning of the orchestra, the price of the admission ticket which determines where its holder will be seated, etc.) and claims that musicking forms a ritual through which all the participants affirm, explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity. In our case, the title's '*here*' refers to electroacoustic music concerts. If Small investigates and questions something so established and standardized as a classical music concert, I suggest that it is fruitful, if not essential, to examine the electroacoustic music concert with the intention to review the practice and re-evaluate its purpose. I believe we need to constantly challenge, explore and creatively doubt the traditions and settings of electroacoustic music, not with the aim of abolishing or devaluing them but to bring them into the present day. In other words make electroacoustic music contemporary, which will enable us to initiate a dialogue that can be intense, exciting, insightful or shallow, rejecting and annoying, nevertheless in constant flux.

It is not my intention to propose a strict definition of electroacoustic music. The term is broad, sweeping between acousmatic multi-channel concerts to noise and glitch performances. It is used to describe purely electronic works of academic composers as well as improvised performances with laptops, field recordings or amplified objects. Nonetheless there are two main features of certain interest that I would like to focus on. Both are examining the concert, the performance, as a social activity but also as an aesthetic experience. Musicking is an action that makes human beings relate to each other in a musical and social context and indeed, as ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon notes, music making is, on one hand, the production of the sounds that we call music and, on the other, a cultural construction (Titon, 1997).

## **Participation in a social activity**

*No audience underground* is the term used by musician and blogger Rob Hayler to describe the underground experimental and DIY music scene (Hayler, 2014). He emphasizes the fact that the participants of the scene (composers, label curators, concert organizers, radio producers, etc.) make up the majority of the audience at almost every concert. In other words, the audience consists of people who are actively involved with the music and the presence of 'outsiders' is usually an exception. If we examine the constituent of concerts at symposiums or conferences, and despite any differences that arguably exist between the so-called underground/post-punk/DIY music and academic electroacoustic composition, we will observe that similarly the audience consists mainly of active participants (fellow composers, scholars and researchers). The phenomenon is also present in contemporary instrumental composition. In a recent article, composer Robert Hugill asks the question "Who are we writing for?" (Hugill, 2015: n.p.) and he describes contemporary composition concerts in a similar manner: very few people in the audience, usually composers or friends of the performers.

There are several, even conflicting, ways of approaching this. One could argue that it is pure elitism and music is isolated in its own micro-cosmos, disconnected from the rest of the society. If we examine an academic conference dedicated to electroacoustic music it has a

quasi-scientific structure and the specialized knowledge required to become accessible makes it rather exclusive. The general public is not expected to attend, sometimes not even invited, as the events, including the concerts, are organized by and addressed to specialists from the academic world.

On the other hand, the involvement of the audience shows dedication and commitment. We are part of a small ‘community of interest’ (Landy, 2011) where its active members try to contribute towards its development. Through the members’ work, research and writings, the community evolves and, hopefully, progresses. Within the community the members are sharing their thoughts, ideas, methods and, of course, their music. Furthermore, there are several exceptions to the above descriptions of marginalized concerts. For example, the Metanast collective organizes electroacoustic music concerts in clubs and when it comes to contemporary instrumental composition, the organization No Classical Music puts up concerts in bars where the audience can listen to music while having a drink in a more relaxed, as they call it, environment.

Therefore, I cannot claim that being our own audience is necessarily problematic, however I would strongly suggest to reflect on what it means to present music in conferences and what is the reason behind the need to be more open and play our music in alternative spaces. We should consider the difference of the performance environments, our decisions to play, or not, there and, most importantly, how, and if, all this is affecting our work on a compositional, technical, social and philosophical level.

## **Participation in a listening experience**

The second feature of interest is also related to the notion of participation but now my hypothesis is concerned with the actual listening experience. This experience is influenced, if not dictated, by the concert settings. If we examine the typical setting of an electroacoustic concert, and more particularly the surround sound system with the mixing desk in the middle and the audience sitting around it, we notice that the concept of a stage is negated. The performer, who usually is also the composer of the work, is sitting among the audience and there is no physical separation between the two. Furthermore, any technical skills are not visually exposed to connect the production or manipulation of sound with any specific gesture made by the performer. The lights are dimmed and often listeners close their eyes as well; the attention is solely focused on sound. Naturally, this has been explored and highlighted before but realizing it is not a sufficient precondition for a successful concert. An additional action is vital for transforming the concert into a significant and profound experience. What is furthermore required, and evident in this setting, is active participation through listening. It is not the setting itself but the audience’s attention and focus that ultimately elevates the work. This is not something new. In Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music the concept of an autonomous work, separated from performance simply did not exist (Benson, 2003). The audience, through listening, becomes an additional, perhaps equally important performer and to remember Alvin Lucier: “Careful listening is more important than making sounds happen.” (Lucier, 1995: 430; 2004: 63)

The value shifts from what we hear, or how we generate and organize sound, to how we listen. Listening is a task, a challenge that can provide a way of creating meaning. It also establishes relationships between performers and audiences as it is when we are open to each other. Active listening is a tool for transformation, of exploring the unseen, of entering a ghost world. It is a way of expanding consciousness to a higher state and reach the sublime.

As psychiatrist Anthony Storr reminds us, Nietzsche was claiming that the concert hall has replaced the church as a place where the divine can be encountered (Storr, 1992).

Consequently, the completion of the studio work is not the final destination but the beginning of a journey which takes place in a concert. The concert itself becomes a tool for intellectual and emotional exploration and not simply a platform to present works. We should always remember that a concert is ritualistic in design. In ours, as in every other community, it is a ritual with certain settings and models which derive from a common understanding and language, and symbolize ideal relationships with each other, the rest of the natural and perhaps even the supernatural world, with something beyond. However, what is the aim behind the design and performance of these ritualistic events? What is their function? The concert settings provide access to something outwardly or they are a norm where works are presented in a simple playlist mode? In any case the social and technical settings of a typical electroacoustic music concert suggest that we are all partly responsible for its success, not only as composers or as members of the audience but moreover as permanent participants in a musical community.

In May 2015 I played a concert in Athens, at *Idrima 2.14*, a venue that usually hosts punk and hardcore bands. Their online manifesto had a very intriguing phrase: “We believe that a concert is about the band, the team that organizes it, but also about the people attending the event. We all together make the show happen” (*Idrima 2.14*, 2015: n.p.). This DIY idea of participation highlights the importance of responsibility. When we are simply observing or attending an event, it can only be described and perceived as merely a spectacle, something to be consumed, but when we are active participants, the event transforms into a ritual (Stephenson, 2015: 112).

## Participation in a listening experience

With this paper my goal is to find the right questions but not necessarily with the intention of getting concrete answers. I see a question like the Lernean Hydra, the mythical creature that was slaughtered by Hercules. Lernean Hydra had several snake-type heads and whenever Hercules would chop one off, two would immediately grow out again. Similarly, a question can give us an opportunity to ask more questions. Hopefully a set of intriguing questions will generate more original thoughts than any answer. This will trigger the on-going dialogue that was mentioned earlier. Moreover, I would suggest we consider the EMS 2015, and any similar symposium or conference, as an occasion to be doubtful rather than express certainties. We have to think through the purpose of a conference. Is it to challenge or to confirm values and traditions?

If we work towards understanding the set or relationships and meanings that exist within our practice then, if indeed it is our aim, we will be able to spread the interest in electroacoustic music to other communities. But where are these other communities? Are they physical? Are they online? How are they defined? Anthropologist Clifford Geertz suggests that art, and therefore music, is socially constructed, in relation to an era (Geertz, 1993). But what is our society and in which era do we belong to? We live in a global village that makes it extremely difficult to find our social voice in and clearly identify who we are addressing out work to. Hugill is right to ask; who are we composing for? He is also concerned that we do not worry about listeners. And, indeed, we seem more interested in innovation or originality. However, this innovation and originality is designed to satisfy the needs and is tailored accordingly to specified requests of institutes, galleries and other establishments of authority (Chondros &

Katsiani, 2015). Jacques Attali, in his famous book *Noise – The political economy of music* writes that “like science, music then moves within an increasingly abstract field that is less and less accessible to empiricism.” (Attali, 1985: 113) I would strongly suggest to think about this lack of focus, or interest, on experience. Because, after all, it is where other people are getting actively involved and, we can even say, co-create the work.

## Creation

In my mother tongue the word for creation is δημιουργία. It comes from the words “demos” (δῆμος) which means public and “ergon” (ἔργο) which means work. Another etymology is that it comes from the ancient Greek verb “deo” (δαίω) which means to share. Either way, every creation, every work of art is public by definition. It is communicated to people and creates sets of relationships that are in need for further investigation, especially in electroacoustic music.

## References (Chicago)

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The political economy of music*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Becker, Judith. *Deep Listeners: Music, emotion and trancing*. Indianapolis, Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press, 2004.

Benson, Bruce Ellis. *The improvisation of musical dialogue: A phenomenology of music*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Chondros, Thanasis and Alexandra Katsiani. “Δύο διαλέξεις” (Two lectures). *Εμβοές (Tinnitus)* fanzine, independent publication (2015): 7-10.

Geertz, Clifford. *Local knowledge*. London: Fontana Press, 1993.

Hayer, Rob. “Liberation through a lack of interest: Jorge Boehringer on the no-audience underground.” In *radio free midwich* [online]. 08/12/2014: n.p. Available on: <https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2014/12/08/liberation-through-a-lack-of-interest-jorge-boehringer-on-the-no-audience-underground/> (last accessed 01/16).

Hugill, Robert, “Who are we writing for?” *Institute Of Composing Journal, Issue 3*[online], 16/04/15: n.p.. Available on: [www.instituteofcomposing.org/journal/issue-3/who-are-we-writing-for/](http://www.instituteofcomposing.org/journal/issue-3/who-are-we-writing-for/) (last accessed 01/16).

*Idrima 2.14* [online]. Available on: [http://idrima214.blogspot.gr/2015/03/214-idrima-214\\_3.html](http://idrima214.blogspot.gr/2015/03/214-idrima-214_3.html) (last accessed 01/16).

Landy, Leigh. “Art for Goodness(?) Sake: It’s your tea party and you can cry if you want to.” In *Proceedings of the Electroacoustic Music Studies Conference (EMS11), Sforzando!* New York, 2011 [online]. Available on: [www.ems-network.org/IMG/pdf\\_EMS11\\_Landy.pdf](http://www.ems-network.org/IMG/pdf_EMS11_Landy.pdf) (last accessed 01/16).

Lucier, Alvin. “Careful listening is more important than making sounds happen.” In *Reflexions: Interviews, Scores, Writings*. Köln: MusikTexte, 1995, 430. Cited in *Audio Culture – Readings in modern music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 63. New York, London: Continuum, 2004.

Neill, Ben. "Pleasure Beats: Rhythm and the Aesthetics of Current Electronic Music." *Leonardo Music Journal*, vol. 12, (2002): 3-6.

Small, Christopher. *Musicking: The meanings and performance of music*. Middletown (CT): Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Stephenson, Barry. *Ritual – A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Storr, Anthony. *Music and the mind*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992.

Titon, Jeff T. "Knowing fieldwork." In *Shadows in the field – New perspectives for fieldwork in ethnomusicology*, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, 87-9. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.