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A cross-genre analysis of the (ec)static music

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Abstract

This paper looks over a selection of pieces belonging to distant genres of today's music, in order to identify common practices to approach sound. Through audio, spectral and score analyses, this study examines essential musical elements (e.g. pulse, spectral properties, dynamic contrast, spatial arrangements) their characteristics and effects.

This method has been applied to post-spectralist and minimalist compositions (e.g. Georg Friedrich Haas, Bernhard Lang, R. Nova, Giovanni Verrando), as well as glitch, electronic and basic-channel style pieces (Pan Sonic, Ryoji Ikeda, Raime). The analysis reveals nine musical attributes that are common within the selection of pieces. These attributes indicate parallels, similar perspectives and a common affinity among different genres. The study contributes essentially by minimising artistic distances and establishing shared musical conceptions.

Introduction

During last century, various currents of experimental music progressively moved toward a more explicit interest to sound and its characteristics: some scholars refer about a timbre's evolution to the exploration of sound (Bériachvili, 2008; Solomos, 2013). Starting from the mid-twentieth century, several musical elements (e.g. non-teleological perspectives, the fusion of electronic/acoustic/concrete sounds, the extended use of sound spectra) were simultaneously developed across distant genres of music. On the one hand, spectral and electronic exploration of sound acted as a sort of springboard for the development of new musical styles, namely in the electroacoustic music (Griffiths, 2010). On the other hand, during the 80s' (and 90s') we witness an on-going process of constant and discrete refinements of many genres of popular and alternative music towards more advanced and sophisticated forms, e.g. noise, industrial, IDM, among others (Cox and Warner, 2007).

Nowadays, the two sides of this musical scenario proceed differently achieving comparable results and a shared desire '[to] create works that seek to engage the listener in a stimulating listening experience' (Weale, 2005: 30). Nevertheless a cross-genre outlook able to recognize and analyse analogous models among compositions coming from unrelated musical fields is

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currently a hot topic among scholars (Emmerson and Landy, 2012).[1] This paper would contribute to this subject developing a new strategy to approach such a diverse musical material in order to recognize similar musical elements, parallel uses and analogous practices among different genres of today's music.

Area of Research and Methodology

Today, the term electroacoustic is a flexible designation that could embrace an immense area of musical styles (Landy, 2007: 12-14): EARS (www.ears.dmu.ac.uk/), for instance, lists 81 genres and categories of electroacoustic music. I confine the examination to the field of music that approaches to sound as a 'sculptural' and complex material to handle, reflecting on it as a dense and tangible entity. This comprehensive description continues to be fairly generic and vague but allows going beyond electroacoustic music definition as a formal combination of acoustic and electrical sounds. The attention of this paper is drawn to identify similar perspectives and outcomes of different musical proceedings, thus including electroacoustic, acoustic or pure-electronic practices.

On the one hand, composers like Georg Friedrich Haas, Fausto Romitelli and Bernhard Lang have advanced their research, each one in his own method, continuing to approach sound as a complex substance to handle. On the other hand, post-minimalists and electronic performers, such as Alvin Lucier, Eliane Radigue, coming from the exploratory school of Cage and Schaeffer, have made free use of these musical theories, combining them into more instinctive works.

In this cross-genre area, it is possible to distinguish different perceptions of sound: as a physical phenomenon, (e.g. audio-acoustic experiments, sound installations, Alvin Lucier, Jacob Kirkegaard); an object (e.g. Michel Chion); an entity (e.g. Georg Friedrich Haas); an image (e.g. François Bayle); a corporeal event (e.g. Phill Niblock, PanSonic); an absolute perception (e.g. sound art); an extreme result of a technological atomization process (e.g. Ryoji Ikeda, Barry Truax). The following pieces have been analysed:

- Georg Friedrich Haas (*String Quartet n°2, In Vain*);
- Bernhard Lang (*Differenz/Wiederholung* series);
- R. Nova (*Eleven*);
- Giovanni Verrando (*Dulle Griet, Triptych#2*);
- Pan Sonic (*Kesto*);
- Ryoji Ikeda (*+/-*);
- Raime (*Quarter Turns Over A Living Line, Hennail*).

In order to analyse a heterogeneous material, this study focused on the cardinal components of the pieces, following a step-by-step analytic procedure:

1. Each composition is divided in musical events (*e.g.* in a narrative or a musical texture partitioning) (Giomi and Ligabue, 1998; Roy, 2003: 149-52);
2. These events are described as a cross-combination of the four factors: *time*, *dynamics*, *spectrum* and *mode*;

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[1] *e.g.* the collaboration of Ryūichi Sakamoto and Alva Noto with Ensemble Moderne; Bernhard Lang and Philip Jeck; or R. Nova, Atli Ingólfsson, Yan Maresz, Giovanni Verrando and PanSonic both with AlterEgo ensemble; the work of Zeitkratzer and Ictus Ensembles; and the London Festival (http://lcmf.co.uk/). See also Emmerson, 2007: 64 footnote #8; Dufeu, 2011.

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www.ems-network.org

3. Each event has various effects based on *space*, *sound's characteristics* and *repetition/difference practices* (Table 1).

This taxonomy aims to simplify the recognition of similar units within our selection.

	Factors of…	Effects on…
Musical Events	**TIME** (e.g. pulse, decay, waves, layers…) **DYNAMICS** (e.g. crescendo, contrast, distortions…) **SPECTRUM** (e.g. acoustic, electronic, real-world sounds…) **MODE** (e.g. acousmatic listening, multi-channels…)	**SPATIAL ASPECTS** (e. g. expansion/contraction, filling/removal, layering/uniqueness…) **SPECTRAL CHARACTERISTICS** (e.g. climax/anti-climax, approaching/leaving, enlarge/reduce, chatty/solo…) **REPETITION/DIFFERENCE ASPECTS** (e.g. single/continuum, excess/minimal fact, rhythm, trance…)

Table 1: Description of Musical Events

A complete examination reveals many musical practices with similar qualities and comparable effects within the selected compositions. These correspondences led to the identification of the nine musical attributes that are nearly common to all pieces.

These are:

- **Expanded Spectrum**, i.e. the use of extended frequency range, this trait is more evident for electronic or electroacoustic pieces;
- **Microtonal Variations**, i.e. the use of microtonality or more in general closed frequency interactions;
- **Systematic Glissandi**, i.e. the use of glissando embedded into the repetitive units;
- **Rhythmic Developments**, they are usually integral parts of glitch or techno genres, but occasionally appear in minimal evolution of other contemporary pieces;
- **Static Drones**, they are normally constituted by layers of sounds, but could exist in continuous stationary orchestration, e.g. Lang or Haas' pieces;
- **Repetitive Clusters**, i.e. unvaried musical motifs that could generate rhythmic patterns or/and hypnotic effects of mechanical and automated profiles;
- **Dynamic Contrasts**, they are usually related with the sculptural use of sounds, their combination and the succession of events in repetition or difference;
- **Hypnotic Reiterations**, they are generated by repetitive musical elements both for static and rhythmic purposes;
- **Sculptural Arrangement of Sound**, i.e. the use of a defined organization of sounds based on their different nature, background and foreground sounds are a simple case.

In some pieces these designations are frequently combined, e.g. glitch-electronic music usually exhibits repetitive clusters within rhythmic frameworks, while the use of repetition in Lang and Haas' pieces could at times be associated to non-rhythmic hypnotic reiterations or to more complex structures.

For instance, a representative case such as 'harsh interventions scattered into continuous layers of sound' consists on the superimposition of musical elements (i.e. mode factor, Table 1) of different type (i.e. time and spectrum factors) and opposite impact (i.e. dynamic factor) and reveal the following attributes: Expanded Spectrum; Static Drones; Dynamic Contrasts and Sculptural Arrangement of Sound. More generally, written contemporary compositions (i.e. Haas and Lang's pieces) make elaborated use of simple musical elements to create new effects. On the other hand, electronic pieces apply drastic timbric solutions

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providing analogous results. There are evident parallels within our selection, when static musical episodes are examined or even when electronic devices are used in written compositions.

Considering the global results, each work has in common with the others at least eight out of nine attributes. Therefore, even if these traits are pretty general, their concomitant fulfilment allow the definition of a clear frame of reference that validates our premises. In this manner, these nine musical features represent a description of a common cross-genres perspective. One could argue that this selection of pieces includes borderline examples that facilitate the comparison. However, this cross-genres examination is innovative, therefore it appears important to start with a solid musical platform that offers clear models of a shared outlook.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a new method to look over different genres of music. It focuses on aural characteristics and effects of primal musical elements, thus enabling the comparison of various typologies of composition (e.g. traditional instrumental piece, electroacoustic composed work or improvised electronic session). In this way, nine musical attributes are identified within the selection of pieces. These attributes relate to specific uses of sound material and reveal correspondences among distant compositions. In the future, it is planned to apply this method toward a more comprehensive list of pieces and I intend to extend the investigation using these nine indicators within listening sessions with questionnaires and interviews to expand the designation of this cross-genres perspective toward perceptual aspects. Thereby, a better understanding of specific fields of music would be developed, facilitating artistic convergences and the creation of a didactic and academic platform for the study of diverse musical contexts.

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www.ems-network.org

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