

**Martin Flašar**

**Standing on the river bank: Electroacoustic music between tradition and innovation**

Department of Musicology  
Masaryk University  
Arna Nováka 1  
602 00 Brno  
Czech Republic

[flasar@phil.muni.cz](mailto:flasar@phil.muni.cz)

**Abstract**

Past decades of electroacoustic music development have shown that a certain degree of ‘liquidity’ (using Zygmunt Bauman’s concept) has been manifested in the technology underlying musical creativity. For the sake of its radical innovativeness, electroacoustic music initially attracted massive attention among both creators and listeners. For a few decades this innovativeness remained the crucial attribute of this musical genre. Gradually the sequence of innovations became fixed as a standard, or even a tradition – specifically, a tradition of innovations.

Returning to Bauman’s concept, which is a topical update of Heraclitus’s notion of universal flux, we find ourselves standing on a river bank, watching the flow of electroacoustic music history bearing along things of surprising value amongst the detritus. There are two main ways of approaching the river: either through jumping into the stream and becoming part of it, or through watching it as a relatively stable flow though with constantly changing content.

To become a part of the river means to swim either downstream or upstream. Swimming downstream, in interpreting the history of electroacoustic music, obliges one to follow innovations in technology and also shifts in aesthetics, and to suggest and work out individual lines of development. Swimming upstream brings many inconveniences. Such a swimmer is constantly confronted with the power of the current and those who are swimming downstream. This strategy can lead to increasing visibility for the individual in the stream, but at the cost of high losses of energy and shorter life. Standing on the river bank removes an individual from the direct action, enabling him to adopt the stance of an independent observer. In fact, all theoretical and historical discourses emerge out of the time that is determinative for their subjects, including music theory, history and aesthetics. Here we are standing on the river bank seventy years after Pierre Schaeffer’s experimental challenge to the exhaustion of European post-war music. Although some of his achievements have been carried away by the river of time, many still remain: the will to carry out experiments, to play with sounds and not to be afraid of amateurism or even of failure. To experiment means to start always again *ex nihilo* despite the fact that these repetitions establish tradition.

The questions posed by my paper are as follows: how have creators/composers perceived the constant changes in technology? Has there been any place for virtuosity in the perpetually changing range of musical instruments and creative means? What have been the values of

electroacoustic music that disregards experiment and innovation? And what have been the needs that have led composers, musicians and designers to innovate?

## **Standing on the river bank**

The main axis of the beautiful city of Florence is the river Arno. This axis determines the movements of people, goods and art today as much as ever before. This flux of objects and events suggests a useful metaphor for interpreting the history of electroacoustic music. Approaching the river, one can adopt various postures: from watching it, standing on the river bank, to becoming part of it as a swimmer or sailor. But to observe changes in the movement one must adopt a fixed position. That is the role of the musicologist: to stand aloof and trace the history, theory and aesthetics of change in music; to observe it as a relatively stable flow, though with constantly changing content.

If one succumbs to the desire to jump into the stream, one will become a part of the flux, as a composer, a musician, a manufacturer of musical instruments, etc. And to become a part of the river means to swim or float either downstream or upstream.

Floating or swimming downstream obliges one to follow innovations in technology and also shifts in aesthetics, and to suggest and work out individual lines of development.

Swimming upstream brings many inconveniences. In that case one is constantly confronted with the power of the current and those who are floating downstream. This strategy can lead to increasing visibility for the individual in the stream, but at the costs of high losses of energy, and shorter life.

Standing on the river bank removes one from the direct action but enables one to adopt the stance of an independent observer. In fact, all theoretical and historical discourses emerge out of the time that is determinative for their subjects, including music theory, history and aesthetics.

## **Still experimental? Tourist, immigrant and trap of memory**

Today we are standing on the river bank, more than seventy years after Pierre Schaeffer's experimental challenge at the birth of European post-war music. Although some of his achievements have been carried off to oblivion by the river of time, many still remain. These include his openness to carry out experiments, to play with sounds and not to be afraid of amateurism or even of failure. To experiment means to be prepared always to start again from scratch, despite the fact that these perpetual repetitions themselves establish a tradition.

Michael Nyman in his seminal book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*<sup>1</sup> returns to the definition of experimental music by John Cage in his *Experimental music: Doctrine* (1955).<sup>2</sup>

„Where [...] attention moves towards the observation and audition of many things at once, including those that are environmental—[and] becomes, that is, inclusive rather than exclusive—no question of making, in the sense of forming understandable structures, can arise (one is tourist), and here the word ‚experimental‘ is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown.“<sup>3</sup>

Experimental music, based on Cage's claim, does not provide any norm – there are no expectations to be lived up to, no preceding paradigm. In consequence, experimental music

subsequently establishes its own paradigms. The musician is in the role of a random observer walking through sonic worlds he does not necessarily understand. Experimental means indeterminate, open, and continuous with human life, as opposed to the work of art, which is artificially isolated from life.

Cage uses the metaphor of a tourist, which is rather controversial in the present context, since when one arrives in Florence as a tourist one expects works of art, galleries, monuments, etc; on the contrary, I would claim that the behaviour of most tourists is highly determinate. By contrast, Iannis Xenakis used the metaphor of an immigrant for the experimental musician, in conversations with François Delalande. I find Xenakis's remark on the tricky role of human memory in the process of creating and inventing new music very important:

“Car la piège de la mémoire, du souvenir, donc du blocage est constant. C'est-à-dire qu'il faut cultiver constamment le regard neuf. C'est-à-dire la distanciation. Il faut être constamment un immigré, dans tout. Alors là, on voit les choses d'un œil beaucoup plus frais, beaucoup plus aigu, et beaucoup plus profond. Parce qu'on n'est pas rassuré par l'environnement dans lequel on se trouve, dans lequel on baigne.”<sup>4</sup>

In my paper *The future has already passed: A few remarks on history, presence and future of music* (2015), I proposed a similar interpretation of the problem of new music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century generally.<sup>5</sup> I suggested that one of the most inhibiting factors in 20<sup>th</sup>-century music has been the exponential growth of collective music memory, with an overwhelming volume of musical information, instantly available from all times and places.

I further suggest this as an explanation also for the exhaustion and decline in the development of electroacoustic music. The historical memory of this movement may have become so extensive that composers have become demotivated to expand it by composing their own music.

What is the solution to this problem? Perhaps some kind of 'enforced amnesia', or simply ignorance. Unlike an observer standing on the river bank, a downstream swimmer does not need to become distracted by considering the impressive history of electroacoustic music. A knowledge of the old is hardly the best preparation for discovering something new. To experiment means to remain young, bold and ignorant.

This is the stance of the modern composer – unlike that of the postmodern composer, who can turn the disadvantage of the memory trap to his advantage. As Simon Waters has pointed out, a way out of this trap might be by sampling culture,<sup>6</sup> through connecting the collective memory, representing the inherited music tradition, with innovative authorship, yet not through ownership of the music.

## **Czech experimental music**

Solutions to the historical problem of experimental music in Czechoslovakia were sought entirely outside the domain of music, i.e. politically. The Czech composer Josef Berg engaged in a polemic<sup>7</sup> with a newly-published book by Jaromír Podešva, *Současná hudba na Západě* [Contemporary Music in the West], (1963),<sup>8</sup> distinguishing between two types of experimental music. Podešva had assigned the label “experimental” to Czech music of the 1950s that followed the dogmas of Socialist Realism, and Berg countered this by asserting that this “experiment” had not been successful, and that most of the Czech music of any quality had been composed in spite of, rather than in response to, these dogmas.

In 1969, an Exposition of Experimental Music was held in Brno, as the first annual festival at which Czech and foreign composers of electroacoustic music could meet for the first time in the post-war period. After the second year in 1970, the festival was banned for political reasons. Revived after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the festival was renamed the Exposition of New Music.

What, then, does experimental music represent in Czechia today? In Brno there is a small company with global impact, “Bastl Instruments”, developing and constructing electronic musical instruments which „*range from pocket sized sound boxes or utilities to fully featured modular synthesizer systems*“.<sup>9</sup> This kind of DIY community seems to be both attractive and progressive in the contemporary world of electronic music-making.

### **The problem of virtuosity – fluidity versus stability**

How does experimental music correlate in practice with the phenomenon of virtuosity? The word itself is derived from the Latin nouns “vir” (man), “virtus” (ability, capacity, excellence, etc.), and “virtuosus” (one with great skill, one who masters the mechanical part of a fine art).

Since the late Baroque era, the notion of virtuosity has been related to performance on long-established instruments such as the violin or harpsichord. Mastery in the playing of such instruments came to be codified in a new type of didactic literature, and the increasing mastery of instrumental technique can be compared to the increasing mastery of production technologies by men of the industrial age.

Problems raised by the lack of stabilization in technological devices, during this rapid development, were also noted by Gérard Grisey, one of the leading representatives of French electroacoustic music. He addressed the rapid development of the technology, in which new forms were constantly thwarting any stabilization in technique for individual instruments. This tendency counteracts the emergence of virtuosity, as the ability to exploit the full technical potential of an instrument in performance. In an interview in *20th-Century Music*, Grisey speaks about his relationship to technology:

“Technology forces me to go back and work over again. A new tape. Changing from a tape to computer. And then from computer to a new type of computer. Or from one synthesizer to a new type. And it's endless. [I suppose there will come a time when] things are going to be stabilized. Well, I hope. But you know, a few years ago we all thought the Yamaha DX-7, for instance, was going to be stabilized. A lot of composers have written pieces for this wonderful instrument, and I have done it, too -- integrating it in a large orchestra. Here we are with an instrument that is already totally outdated, and it's going to be hard to find one in a few years. We belong to a throw-away society, you see, so they ask for pieces that are not supposed to last more than a few years. I don't want to be part of that.”<sup>10</sup>

The problems of instability, fluidity, dynamic variability and transience in contemporary art were expounded by Zygmunt Bauman, who coined the term “liquid modernity”. His essay, *Liquid Arts*, is devoted to the transformation of social and aesthetic values in the postmodern era. As Bauman noted, the consumer society at the beginning of the 21st century is not characterized by acquiring and collecting things, but by disposing of them and replacing them with new ones.

„Liquid modern life is a daily rehearsal of universal transience. Today's useful and indispensable objects, with few and possibly no exceptions, are tomorrow's waste. Everything

is disposable, nothing is truly necessary, nothing is irreplaceable. Everything is born engraved with the brand of death. Everything is offered with a use-by date attached.<sup>11</sup>

Bauman relates this premise not only to things but also to human beings (who are being consumed in interpersonal relationships or television shows) and, of course, to culture and art. Bauman turns to the aesthetic problem of the Beautiful, and claims that the Beautiful was historically always associated with perfection (i.e. completeness). Although philosophers of the arts have never agreed on defining the characteristics of art, they have reached a consensus that it is something remarkable, permanent, long-lasting, or even immortal, with a tendency to universal validity. These two characteristics of art, timelessness and universal validity, are explicitly highlighted by Bauman. Following Alberti's definition of perfection, Bauman states that art is a child of change and development, but that achieving perfection means eliminating the need for any further change, which would merely represent a change for the worse. Achieving perfection means the end of all change. In today's society, closedness and perfection are a nightmare, according to Bauman, because they represent stagnation, the end of development and movement, the end of adventure. Bauman concludes that we live in a world filled with aesthetic objects, but not with art.

Let us return to the metaphor of a flowing river. Swimming or floating down the stream means a constant change of position. If one wishes to savour a particular place in the river, one must reach shore and interrupt the voyage. This is the problem of virtuosity. A musician or a composer has to find his proper means of expression and escape from the flow of time (or history). To become a virtuoso means to stay stable, letting others float away. Virtuosity needs stability, whereas experiment is a form of fluidity.

## Paradigm Lost?

In Czechia there is certainly a remarkable history of electroacoustic music, nurtured by the Society for Electro-acoustic Music. But I am not sure whether there are any composers and musicians still declaring themselves to be „composers of EA music“. Although this category was highly relevant in the 1960s and even the 1970s, today this category seems to have become slightly irrelevant. On the Czech music scene there are composers, multimedia artists, sonic artists, and radioart producers, but almost no composers of EA music. It seems as if the whole paradigm has been lost, outdated or ignored.

Let me quote from Michal Rataj's part of our collective editorial note in the publication *Electronic music today: Where are we going and what are we doing?* (2014):

"*Electro-acoustics is not my field, this music says nothing to me and I will never go into it...*" - a sentence, said by a student, which, I believe, is worth more thinking about. No, he did not mean electro-acoustics as a technical discipline but the field which is usually called electro-acoustic music in the curricula of composition courses. Ironically, the student probably meant that he would never take again an electronic instrument in his hands (he plays synthesizers), never enter a recording studio (where he regularly records with his group) and never use any post-production tools there (percussion without reverb sounds really bad in the studio); he would not probably share his music on web or stream it on any of the musical servers, not mentioning that he might use some PA at his concerts or deal with the spatial aspects of his acoustic compositions in a concert hall.<sup>12</sup>

This statement does not necessarily reflect any immaturity in the young musician: rather, it highlights the fact that electronics has become such a natural part of the musical world that he

does not sense it. The second reason may be that the development of electroacoustic music opened doors to a plurality of approaches and aesthetics, which have overlaid the original movement.

Michal Rataj concludes that “The traditional category of electro-acoustic music and its reflection in the recent postmodern discourse became uninteresting. What has become interesting are all those new shades, tinges and reverberations of so many different covers of the current global acoustic art scene which has organically swallowed the traditional category of electro-acoustic music.”<sup>13</sup>

A wide variety of approaches to sound through electronic technology can be observed on the Czech EA scene today. We are experiencing sound art, radio art, field recordings, DIY hardware strategies, multimedia art, etc. What originally emerged as a creative method for the late industrial era has gradually branched into different streams and tendencies. It is difficult to keep all of them steadily in view when standing right on the river bank.

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