Where are We Listening?
and What are We Listening To?

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The great thing about being asked to give a keynote—and thank you very much—is that one can mull over one's view of the landscape, without having to produce conclusions. And I fear there will be no conclusions—just a short wish list, and some listening recommendations.

So here's my short wish list. I'm stating it right at the outset, mainly so *I* can keep it in mind—in case things change. Because you know how it is—the very best of intents can fail (or, perhaps, can seem to fail).

A short wish list…

- Language
- Listening
- Reflection

You go off to the shops with a scrap of paper on which you've scribbled 'buy bread, eggs and envelopes'

… and you somehow end up coming home with a new phone, sushi, and a mirror

Lists of objectives can easily go astray. Perhaps they should do. Perhaps scrappy notes about what we think we want are far less interesting than those unforeseen possibilities we come home with by mistake—which of course must have already been there, somewhere at the back of the mind. And perhaps the back of the mind is worth visiting more often when discussing creative matters.

Anyway—I digress, or possibly transgress.

The Leigh Landy Effect

Years ago, on my way to a conference at City University, also organized by the indefatigable Simon Emmerson—I sat on the plane musing about one day writing a paper about aural aspects of music that might offer a 'non-specialist' listener some way 'in' to those more experimental—perhaps intimidating—kinds of peculiarly timbral music. The next day, at the conference, Leigh Landy beat me to it, by giving an excellent paper, which many of you will know, under the title of 'The "something to hold on to factor" in timbral composition'.

A bit later, at another conference, I was in the audience for a round table discussion that I was finding increasingly infuriating (I admit I can't remember much about it now, but I felt the speakers were expressing indefensibly elitist sentiments). I was just summoning up courage to speak when I heard a small incendiary device going off a couple of rows behind me. It was in fact Leigh Landy again, this time self-ejecting from his seat in order to berate the panel with customary intellectual zeal.

A few weeks ago when I decided to browse the papers from last year's EMS conference it really came as no surprise to discover that Leigh had already *given* the paper on terminology that I had been sketching out as my original keynote idea. His version was, predictably, rather good and made my effort somewhat redundant.

So all I can say is that I'm extremely thankful that Leigh is out there, but quite glad that he isn't going to speak until after me at this particular conference. Just in case. Even so, it is comforting when someone appears to share your thinking or 'speak your language'—and who gets there first or later is really no matter. Because at its best thinking is a community endeavour—don't you think? And it is even more interesting when people who are thinking differently from one another, and from very different disciplines, are able to speak together—about the same things.

New Phone (Language)

I bought a mobile (cell) phone the other day. I haven't had one for several years. I've been living on a small island; getting any kind of phone signal there involved driving up a hill and hanging out of the car while a couple of bald eagles gave you funny looks. But right now I'm living somewhere with a better signal (and no eagles).

My new phone was the cheapest in the shop, yet it still has everything from a video camera to games and web browsing, not to mention the ability to vibrate erotically and a range of equally unpleasant ringtones. Some might call this 'creeping featurism' but I actually find it rather cool to have access to all those onboard toys—after all, one can choose how much or how little one engages with the technology. Technology is not a competition, it's an assistance—and it can be a means of assisting communication.

Surely our notion of phones and phoning will develop and change until the fact that phones can be mobile, or portable, or cellular will be assumed, as will all the features, and more. Very soon *all* phones will be mobile (or whatever you decided to call them in your corner of the world); we'll simply use the word 'phone' for this multi-purpose tool. Nokia, with an ear to globalization of course, already assiduously refers only to 'phones' on its English-language web pages.

The phone's meaning—its place in our experience—will be different from now, as it is already different from then. Today it is certainly no longer what in the 1960s Marshall McLuhan referred to as the 'irresistible intruder in time or place' (McLuhan 1964, p. 238[1])——we can resist: if we want to be undisturbed, we simply switch to voicemail.

Language is a deliciously unreliable system populated by a huge array of working definitions. And these respond to the shifts and adjustments, the focusing and re-focusing of human experience. It's not just that we coin new words; it's also that old words open their arms to encompass a different breadth of understanding. Yes, new technology is just one thing that indirectly makes us change our language for a while—we put special words or phrases in the linguistic spotlight as we figure out what distinguishes new experience from old. But after a while those particular working definitions are abandoned from common parlance again as the novelty is assimilated. So when I was little my grandmother would ask me to 'switch on the electric lamp' as the evening drew in, but today I simply 'turn on the light', without a second thought, *linguistically*, as to how it's done.

My personal fantasy (or at least the one that I'm willing to divulge) is that working definitions like electronic music, electroacoustic music, computer music, digital music and electronic art music will simply melt away. Because I don't think that they *are* **working** as definitions anymore. And anyway, the working definition of 'music' can probably accommodate them—it's suitably general already, after all.

To my mind, Cage's prescient comment, foretelling 'music made with the aid of electronic instruments' wasn't far off the mark as to where the priorities could—should—

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[1] McLuhan, Marshall (1964): *Understanding Media.* New York: Mentor

lie. A technological involvement of itself implies no *particular* aesthetic preoccupation in music. Although it certainly enables—and encourages—a wonderfully diverse variety of thought and creativity, and ways of thinking of music, and music in conjunction with technology, that would not be humanly possible otherwise. Music has acquired some great new onboard features to play with, ones that are changing not only the working definition of music but the activity of *doing* music—what Christopher Small, a writer and thinker I happen to admire, once called 'musicking'.

It may seem trivial to worry away at such a slight shift of perspective. Yet rather than conversing about creativity with interesting strangers, sometimes we seem to spend valuable time debating language and terminology amongst ourselves (anyone who belongs to the cec-conference list must be aware of how circular definitions of 'electroacoustic music' can become…) Forgive me for being cynical—but are we trying to establish anything more than bloodlines and traditions? Are we trying to be inclusive—or exclusive? Those useful linguistic walking sticks to lean on at the beginning of the journey are now in danger of becoming sharpened posts around a stockade. 'Electroacousticians' will become a small, secretive inbred clan, speaking an arcane tongue that is difficult to translate. This makes communication with—and from—others difficult (even if you do have fancy phones). And without communication, networks fail to proliferate—instead they break down and fall out of use. That is, they become obsolete. In fact we may end up being reduced to the musical equivalent of an interesting telephone museum. Please don't take this personally—because I include myself among the possible exhibits.

If you're going to group music by certain approaches, or certain technologies, or certain performance characteristics, or whatever—well, that's fine as far as it goes. And it goes a long way. But I think a problem—and it is a problem—in spending time fastidiously pinpointing genres (or theories) for some of the music we make today is that it may not matter so much any more. Exclusion zones—disciplines, genres, schools, theories, solutions—make less sense than inclusive groupings by commonalities, rather than disciplines, or even genres. And if you do that more transdisciplinary approach, then there's no point in worrying so much about what 'it' is you're talking about. Instead, you can talk about why you're talking about it as part of studying what it is that makes us conscious, expressive, human–and how we exhibit that in art.

So I wish for 'music' as a working definition that many different people, working in all kinds of areas and disciplines, can understand. And if you have a common language you can start to share ideas and recommendations. You can start to listen to each other.

Sushi (Listening)

To get back to shopping for a moment. My friend Jim introduced me to sushi—I'd never tried it before. For me, brought up on the delights of British cuisine, it had always seemed rather alien. I was a bit apprehensive about all that slimy raw fish and having to master a new technology, chopsticks. But he said, hey, it comes in all kinds of types and flavours, and the textures are great. And once I got the hang of eating raw salmon without inadvertently impaling my neighbour I was completely hooked. So I bought some the other day, just to remind myself.

There are only two papers in this conference that have the word 'listening' in their title. That intrigues me a tad (though not quite as much as the 'Sex, Lies and Audiotape' paper, which I'm certain not to miss). But surely 'where we are listening, and what we are listening to'—not to mention who 'we' are in the first place—are essential concerns in trying to pin down what any music is doing, might do, and how that might affect us.
        But this is really a rather silly criticism of mine because (a) I'm certain that many papers are fundamentally concerned in some way with listening and (b) after all this isn't a music and cognition conference. However, my second wish list item is not so much about the listening that goes on but how to engender *more* of it.
        I stole my keynote's title from John Cage's 1975 essay 'Where are we Eating? And What are We Eating?', which is published in *Empty Words*. You may well have read this glorious extended prose poem in which Cage describes what he and members of Merce Cunningham's dance troupe eat together while they're on tour. Cage takes great delight in describing the different foods that people choose to eat and, incidentally, he also offers a great recipe for nut balls. It's all in simple, approachable, enthusiastic language. But of course, Cage often speaks in complex metaphors. Perhaps one of many dishes he is recommending is the one that provides some necessary ingredients for making art: travelling, creating, rehearsing, performing, and sharing sustenance as a fuel for getting ready to do it all again—and again; and, of course, always being ready to take delight in other people's recommendations.

Now I remember 'electroacoustic music' events here in the 80s sometimes used to be accompanied by 'hands-on' pre-concert workshops. I think they usually involved some combination of a complaining Revox reel-to-reel tape recorder, an evil little Atari computer and a rather scuffed Yamaha DX7 keyboard. It was all great fun—and in fact I was one of the people who turned up to have a go.
        Today most people don't find the prospect of handling technology as fascinating as they used to, and actually I'm not sure that the chance to 'try it yourself' ever really provided much of a way in to *listening*. In retrospect, I actually think that this kind of invitation to 'play with music technology' in the earlier days of digital technology was even possibly detrimental—because it put the focus on the tools, not the music. It was not

technology that intimidated people it was the way the music sounded—to *them*. It was not that the music was completely alien, it was just that the sonic relationships seemed to require a completely different kind of listening—an unfamiliar kind of musical literacy. Even people with quite sophisticated listening tastes were worried that the music on offer might be raw, slimy and impossible to eat. It wasn't a dish that recommended itself. And to many it still doesn't.

In the real world of shared experience (of which I trust we here are all part) most people respond to enthusiastic recommendations from people they have reason to trust. Enthusiasm encourages participation—and with just a bit of vague explanation as to why someone is enthusiastic you can find yourself agreeing to eat unfamiliar foods—metaphorically or otherwise. You must try this sushi, you'll love it—there are so many interesting flavours. You must listen to this piece by Smalley, it's amazing—those sonic textures are so intricate.

And what's important is this—you only need a few words of general encouragement from a friend.

Actually my friend Jim hadn't recommended sushi, I was making that bit up. But he is indeed a great one for recommending things—he's actually an artist, writer, broadcaster, and very avid listener, and what he recommended to me the other month was Pandora.com, which you may well know already.
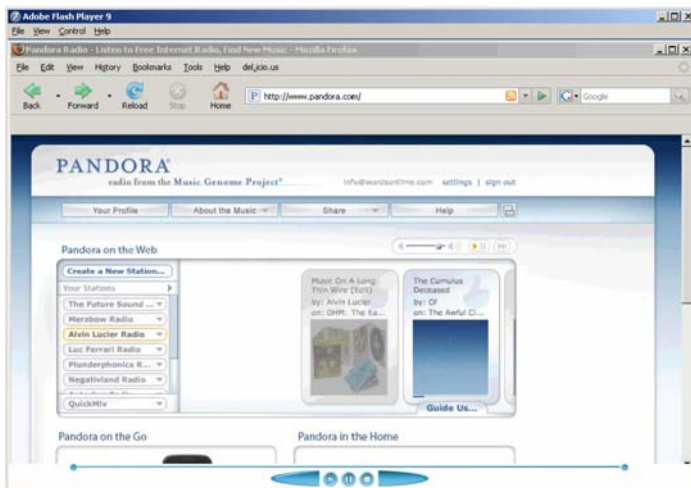
'It's not about what a band looks like, or what genre they supposedly belong to,
or about who buys their records
–it's about what each individual song *sounds like*.' (Pandora.com web page)

Well, I recommend Pandora quite highly as a starting point for listening. It is essentially a playlist maker. You give it the name of a track or an artist, and it will cough up a string of 'similar' tracks. You can vote on whether you agree or not, and get a bit of info on why that track was offered. The backend of all this is the Music Genome Project, actually quite a straightforward evaluation system by which tracks are defined by means of a fairly extensive list of attributes—most of which are rooted in how it *sounds*. A human listener has created the list.

   The brief 'why we are playing this' messages are derived from the attributes *aurally* apparent in a particular track, but they are merely a précis of why a certain song has been recommended. These verbal descriptions are simple, imperfect, and not ideal—they are impermanent, and partial, and you don't read them unless you ask to. I like that.

   I like that attributes are called on to seek out *commonalities* between 'all the music there is' in this particular music resource. Sure, rather haphazard genre terms are used—but you can't really choose to listen 'by genre'.

 (verbal descriptions offered by Pandora for tracks)

Distroia, by Mouse On Mars
'based on what you've told us so far, we're playing this track because if features synth tweaking, a highly synthetic sonority, subtle use of noise effects, prevalent use of groove and many other similarities identified in the music genome project.'

Far-West News, by Luc Ferrari.
'....sampledelia compositional qualities, idm influences, an experimental musical style and many other similarities....'

I think Pandora has a lot going for it as an approach. I enjoy starting from a point that I 'kind of' know, and getting all kinds of interesting recommendations that I'd never thought of. I feel unintimidated, I feel they're on my side, I feel no onus to 'understand' or 'like' it all. I feel in control, I feel interested. I feel as if I'm exploring—I'm feeling adventurous, I'm ready to engage with the unexpected and yet I'm surprised by how much seems quite familiar in strange ways. I am open to listening. But then again, there is a lot of *other* music that I know—and want to recommend to Jim—and at present, a lot of it is completely missing from Pandora's listening resource.

   So my wish list includes the utopian hope that resources such as Sonus, EARS, and other online projects that study from the starting point of music—in this case music made with, and about, creative technology; might think hard about how to use the 'languages' of the semantic web to share listening; might share resources proactively, between disciplines, with that kind of delight in sharing sustenance that reaches out to distant friends in other fields, and with other sensibilities.

   Come to dinner, listen. Breaking bread creatively requires far more than putting it all on a hard drive and adding a searchable index.

   We need help. There's a need to get social—to get together to provide intuitive search engines, and rich resources full of associative linking, online presences, avatars and events. Provide interfaces (including interactive human beings) that will be open, inviting, enthusiastic with their recommendations, and easily engaged with by someone whose listening may not

have been exposed to the many different kinds of music that we, here, are especially interested in. We net to get semantic software designers—get listening. We need to integrate these accessible resources into the teaching and learning of creativity, make them *work* as an integrated part of a broad musical education for all undergraduates, and for anyone else who might be listening out there, rather than in here.

Because we'd like them to listen, I presume. I'm *almost* confident that this wish list item is redundant—because even yesterday I heard thoughts about archiving and funds and people permitting, this will be addressed – but it's not something that can be done by us, in isolation. And how to access and search resources through associative links and ontologies is not something that works easily when applied after the fact – it needs to be built in, to the way we think.

Mirror (Reflection)

`You may look in front of you, and on both sides, if you like,' said the Sheep: `but you can't look ALL round you—unless you've got eyes at the back of your head.'

 (*Alice Through the Looking Glass*)

To go back to shopping: I bought a mirror because I wanted to see the back of my head. I guess it's the next best thing to seeing the back of your mind.

I once stayed in a hotel in Montreal where the small bathroom was mirrored on three sides so that, if I leant forward precariously, I could see myself reflected into infinity—an endless visual reverberation. Rather sadly, considering my age, I spent a great deal of time playing with this rather self-centred bathroom preset.

But my final wish list request is for *more* reflection—more thinking (and writing) that reflects on music creatively, and throws back useful light. But—more importantly—also more thinking (and writing) that reflects on other things, *through* music. Because I believe both approaches to study can lead to interesting reverberations.

Certain kinds of approach to study beget certain kinds of language. And after a while a reliance on certain kinds of language dictates a certain kind of approach—and then you're locked into a rather frustrating pattern. To give just one example: Much *writing* about music in which computers are involved has taken, and often still takes, a quasi-scientific approach—solutions are proposed, tests are run, empirical evidence is gathered and interpreted. Proclamations are made, and the chisels come out—ready to engrave new terms in stone. Of course, sometimes the language of analytical science may be entirely appropriate—but sometimes not.

There seems to be still a sense in this technologically-preoccupied area of 'computer music' and even 'electroacoustic music' that consideration lacks credence unless it can produce some kind of 'solution'. I'm really glad that the EARS site here at DMU fully recognizes the paucity of, as they call it, 'arts' based writing and research, but intrigued that nobody seems to know how to shift the balance away from the more scientific approach. I tend to think this is by far the most important imbalance in the field of music made with technology,

and one that will not be rectified without a concerted effort to change the way that music is taught.

Perhaps one does not necessarily need to start with a problem to be solved or a theory to be proved in order to come up with something that may be worth listening to. One can start instead with a sleepy mix of half-formed ideas. Ideas that may or may not start to form useful reflections as they cast light one upon the other. And if ideas start to connect, it's time to think—hard—about why one perceives them as important, what they might be concerned with, and how to articulate what they might reveal.

We don't know what to do with subjectivity. We don't trust ourselves to use it in, and as, research. But I shall get on my soapbox and say that I'm beginning to think that that this may be where the only useful future lies, in terms of research that is transdisciplinary. Not the superficial subjectivity of self- or artist-promotion, of half-baked artist statements or surveys, or interviews that are little more than mutual appreciation or overt 'gig promotion'. Instead, writing that subjectively reflects on subjectivity—research that rigorously considers the nature of experience, and of experiencing—through music (among other things).

Again, I don't think it's going to happen—or at least it's not going to grow—unless disciplines such as electroacoustic music allow for a bit more transdisciplinary reflection— which is not necessarily the same thing as interdisciplinary art.

I am personally rather concerned to be eccentric in my reflections. (Some people would say that I am far too eccentric in general…) But what I really mean by this is that when I write I often choose to circle a subject from an off-centre position, often because I am not sure what the subject is—or might develop into—at the beginning of the journey. One thing I am usually certain of is that subject is not music *per se.* For instance, in my book *Sounding Art* each chapter is a long essay that circles an issue by simultaneously reflecting on a variety of preoccupations that include music. As these come to rest I try to explore what connects them— but I try to do this in ways that are not necessarily made explicit, and may be experienced differently by each reader. Just like listening to music. I cannot experience your experience, or you mine. But perhaps we may meet part way.

For instance, one chapter in my book, *Sounding Art*[2], melds the notion of the 'emblem book' (an epigrammatic means of religious contemplation[3]) with some considerations of diverse pieces of music that, I feel, explore space in some respect. Along the way there is also an analysis of Leonardo's painting *Annunciation* (which features a recently airborne angel) and some quotations on metaphors of flight by Bachelard.

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[2] *Sounding Art: Eight Literary Excursions through Electronic Music*. Ashgate, 2004 (more info at www.novamara.com/book.html)

[3] 'Emblem books are a form of text not altogether familiar to us today. An emblem book represents a particular kind of reading. Unlike today, the eye is not intended to move rapidly from page to page. The emblem is meant to arrest the sense, to lead *into* the text, to the richness of its associations. An emblem is something like a riddle, a "hieroglyph" in the Renaissance vocabulary – what many readers considered to be a form of natural language.' (from The English Emblem Book Project at Penn State University, http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/)

I don't really have time here to go into what connects these elements—subjectively, to me—because my explanation is the book chapter itself (so you'll have to read it!). But it has to do with 'reading around' a subject in a non-linear fashion, in search of something as yet undefined.

Various preoccupations—Bachelard and metaphor, emblems and meditation, Leonardo and perspective—and various pieces of music started life swimming around in my head in as yet unrelated circles. Closing in on each led me to reflect consciously on the fact that all were to do with aspiration—the aspiration to rise upwards in metaphoric 'flight'. With that metaphor in mind I could go back and probe each of my related obsessions anew. And maybe the result would communicate some kind of insight. Or some kind of in-hearing, perhaps. At least one has to trust that, through allowing subjective research, this *might* happen. And of course, in the end the writing is not 'about' music, it is about what that useful working definition, 'music', might reflect on.

Well this is simply what I do in my own thinking, and the writing it leads to—and I regard this activity as composing of a kind. And, personally, I have nothing to prove or solve, and I'm not always sure where I'll end up. I'm simply trying to chart territories that, to me at least, seem previously unexplored. I'm trying to reach the back of my mind (perhaps).

So that's it, I guess—just a short wish list and some well-meant, enthusiastic recommendations. Thank you for listening.