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TRK. SOUND CLUB: a case of experimental music concert season

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Abstract

This paper builds on my experience as music curator of TRK. SOUND CLUB, a series of concerts started in March 2016 and dedicated to experimental music, often featuring electronics. As a curator willing to propose cutting-edge and experimental music to our audience, we continuously face questions such as: what is experimental music nowadays? What is innovation? Where does (sound) research lie? In techniques, creative process, ideas or in the combination of those elements?

In this paper I would like to articulate the answers that we have developed in our practice as curators in the last few years and the directions we are expecting to pursue in the future.

While TRK. was born in the frame of the musical programming of Tempo Reale, we continuously strive to offer an artist profile that is rather uncommon. This profile can be described as: 1) not necessarily trained in conservatories, universities or academies; 2) artists who are both creators and performers of their own works (consequently, who do not write traditional scores or instructions to transmit their pieces to a performer); 3) artists who come from other artistic fields, such as visual art, video art, sculpture, etc.; 4) artists who create works that challenge the concept of "form", oscillating between concert piece, improvisation piece, and sound installation. The reason for these choices were the will to demonstrate that music research nowadays is not happening only in academic environments, but there is an effervescent, lively and complex "outsider" musical scene that is pushing the limits. Also, our goal was to schedule this kind of musical program in the frame of an institution whose history is strictly interconnected to the highbrow contemporary musical scene.

Introduction: the birth of TRK. SOUND CLUB

This year's EMS question was "Electroacoustic music: is still a form of experimental music?" I thought of contributing to this discussion in my capacity as musical curator working for TRK. SOUND CLUB, a concert series focused on experimental music within the programming of Tempo Reale. As a curator, I collaborate with a teamwork made of two other curators (Marco Baldini and Daniela Fantechi) and a coordinator (Giulia Sarno).

In particular I would like to reflect on what it means to me to invite "experimental musicians" and what I look for from a curatorial standpoint.

Tempo Reale is a musical research, production and educational centre founded by Luciano Berio in Florence in 1987 that since 2008 has also organized a festival in our city and several events (in Florence, Italy and abroad), focused mainly on historical and contemporary

electronic music, but also instrumental, and vocal, inviting Italian and international composers, ensemble and soloists. In recent years, however, within the Tempo Reale festivals, some evenings have been dedicated to musical experiences featuring young electronic and electroacoustic musicians, or "works in progress" by established artists: these evenings – still today scheduled in the festivals – have been called "KLANG" ("sound" in German).

TRK. was conceived as a sort of expansion of the "KLANG" concerts (in fact, TRK. stands for "Tempo Reale Klang or Klub or Kollektiv").

When we started to imagine TRK. – towards the end of 2015 – we were directly inspired by some other places. For example, in Italy, one of these was the O' space in Milan (which is also the headquarters of the experimental music distributor SoundOhm, one of the most important in Europe), the Area Sismica in Forlì, and the Centro D'Arte in Padova. In 2015, also the concert space Standards started its activity in Milan. Abroad, places that inspired us were, for example, Cafe Oto in London, Ausland in Berlin, The Kitchen in New York.

All the experiences mentioned above are physical spaces with a postal address and regular thematic programming. In other words, there is an identity between the physical place and its purpose or function: they can be considered as a sort of "clubs" devoted especially to experimental music.

Imagining the TRK. concert series, our purpose was to add us as a link in a national and international network of spaces devoted to experimental music. We wanted something like that.

Not being able to afford to have a space owned by Tempo Reale to devote to this new project, we set out to find a place in which to organize this new series. Our reasoning, then, didn't concern only the type of repertoire to present but also the physical space where organizing the performances: in fact, TRK. wasn't born as a festival or as something temporally defined, but rather as a regular appointment in a specific place in the city (like a club opened only for certain occasions). To underline this idea, the words "sound club" were added to the title.

Inspired by the many performance experiences outside of a concert hall that characterized experimentalism after Second World War, the place we envisioned should have had the following characteristics:

- being different from a traditional concert hall, i.e. not having a stage, in order not to create a division between the public and the artists;
- the cost of the tickets should have been limited (€ 5,00);
- the concerts should have been introduced with a short presentation;
- being an informal context, with people sitting on pillows or on the ground, with the possibility for the public to interact with the artists before and after the concert;
- there could have been the possibility to buy vinyls, cds of rare musical labels, thanks to the agreement with the SoundOhm distributor and the sale of and tapes inside the space;

Given all these considerations, we were lucky enough to organize the concerts in two beautiful art galleries in Florence. From March to June 2016 TRK. took place at the Galleria Poggiali e Forconi, in the city centre.¹

¹ For more information about the Galleria Poggiali e Forconi in Florence (now, Galleria Poggiali), visit the website <http://www.galleriapoggiali.com> (last visit on November 30, 2018).



Img. 1: Galleria Poggiali, Florence (© www.galleriapoggiali.com).

From November 2016 to today, the concerts have moved to the Galleria Frittelli Arte Contemporanea in Novoli, in the northern suburbs of the city.²



Img. 2: Galleria Frittelli Arte Contemporanea, Florence (© www.frittelliarte.it).

² For more information about the Frittelli Arte Contemporanea gallery in Florence, visit the website www.frittelliarte.it (last visit on November 30, 2018).

Who to invite?

When we started to think who to invite, we asked ourselves about what features a musician should have to make experimental music/to be considered “experimental”. Although we still continue to question ourselves on this subject, the first answers we have given reflect in part the definitions of “experimental music” that musicologists and art theorists have formulated in recent years. For instance, American musicologist Benjamin Piekut (Cornell University, Ithaca, New York), in the introduction of his book *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avantgarde ant its limits* (published by University of California Press, 2011) lists a series of characteristics of experimentalism, quoting also Michael Nyman’s book *Experimental Music. Cage and beyond* (1974):

“Experimentalism, he [Nyman] writes, offers fluid processes instead of static objects; antiteleological procedures instead of goal-driven works; new roles for composers, performers, and listeners instead of the hierarchies of traditional art music; notation as a set of actions rather than as a representation of sounds; a momentary evanescence instead of temporal fixity; an ontology that foregrounds performance over writing. [...] To this familiar list we might add commonly cited ideological imperatives such as [...] an expansion of the concept of music; an attenuation of intention; an openness to non-Western musics and philosophies; a mission to liberate sounds, stress timbre and rhythm over melody, and explore different tuning systems; an avoidance of stylistic continuity; [...] a “maverick” spirit, academic non-affiliation, and general non-institutionality.”³

Today, in our third year of activity, it is nice to have this occasion to reflect on the actual commonalities that we can identify among the artists we invited.

In order to write this text, I tried to find the common musical features of the artists we invited.⁴ The first one, concerning the musical background, was really surprising:

- most of them have a non-conventional musical background: in fact, they are autodidacts, they come from different artistic background (visual arts, video art, sculpture, etc.), but also scientific background (engineering, for example); however, some of them are classically trained;
- their works feature self-built sound sources, not conventional sound sources, extended techniques, found objects featured by a limited possibility of control;
- their works feature a nuanced relationship between improvisation and composition;
- there is an identity between composer and performer;
- there’s no written score (but sometimes a performative score);
- their works challenge/stress borders between/mix traditional musical forms (concert piece/installation /free improvisation);
- their works feature a site-specific configuration: i.e., the works are influenced by the space of the performance.

³ See PIEKUT Benjamin, *Experimentalism Otherwise : The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011, pp. 16-17.

⁴ All the artists invited at TRK. SOUND CLUB have been interviewed by the curators; all the interviews (videos or texts) are published on www.musicaelettronica.it, blog on musical research founded by Tempo Reale.

Laporte – Nakajima-Berthet – Les Frères Bobine

To move on to concrete examples, I chose three artists and projects we hosted at TRK. SOUND CLUB. Concerning the **use of self-built sound sources**, the first example I want to bring is the Canadian artist Jean-François Laporte, who was the guest of our very first concert, on March 4, 2016 at the Poggiali and Forconi Gallery.

Jean-François Laporte (Québec City, 1968) is a Quebecois artist, active on the contemporary art scene since the middle of the 1990s. He pursues a hybrid approach integrating sound art, musical composition, performance, installation and digital art.

He started his musical training pretty late, at 25. Before he was a civil engineer, working on recycling asphalt. He studied composition at the Université de Montréal (Québec), with Marcelle Deschênes, one of the founders of the ACREQ [Association pour la création et la recherche électroacoustiques du Québec]. Then he spent a period of study at the IRCAM (Paris, France). For the last ten years, he has developed and built new musical instruments that he has integrated to his works and installations. Among those are:

Tu-Yo: pipes of various sizes covered at their ends by supple Latex membranes and controlled by a mechanical system and software. Air circulates through the pipes, producing vibrations that range from sharps to flats.

Bol: acoustic musical instrument that uses air blowed over a latex membrane to emits a wide range of frequencies.

Flying Can: is a musical instrument comprised of an aluminium can on which is cutting an opening in the direction of its length. By rotating the instrument above the head, the Flying Can starts vibrating and producing sound. The resulting sound varies depending on the speed and the angle of the instrument relative to the ground. This sound source can generate a large spectrum of continuous sounds.⁵

What Laporte brought to TRK. was a performance of five pieces: three electroacoustic acousmatic works (*Electro-Prana*, *Dans le ventre du dragon* and *Mantra*), one acoustic work (*Rituel for FlyingCan*), and *Scratch and feeds*, an electroacoustic live work. The instrumental set of this work consists of a series of self-constructed sound sources (metal springs, small bitten membranes), activated by him or by motors that are controlled by a software; the sound of these sources is captured by contact microphones distributed on the table. The sound picked up by the contact microphones goes to the speakers in order to create loops. During the performance, Laporte can control the volume and decide whether to send the sound to the speakers on the table or to the sound system. This decision is made according to the acoustics of the space and also to the sonic reaction of the sound sources to Laporte's gestures. Being self-constructed, these sound sources have a limited possibility of control: the sound result of the piece is the outcome of an on-going process of action and reaction between the performer and the instrumental set, influenced in real time by its sound projection in the concert space.

Concerning the **site-specific configuration** of the work and the influence of the physical space on the performance dramaturgy, the second case I would like to present is the project *Dead Plants and Living Objects*, performed at TRK. in April 2016 by the Japanese artist Rie Nakajima and the Belgian musician Pierre Berthet.⁶

⁵ For photos and details concerning Laporte's sound sources and works, see his website <http://totemcontemporain.com> (last visit on November 30 2018).

⁶ For more information on Nakajima and Berthet, visit their websites <http://pierre.berthet.be> and <http://www.rienakajima.com> (last visit on November 30, 2018).



Img. 3: Jean-François Laporte performing at Galleria Poggiali for TRK. SOUND CLUB, March 2016 (photo © Michelle Davis)

Rie Nakajima has a background as a sculptor, but in the last ten years she has started focusing on sound. Her work is often composed in close relation with the peculiarities of the architectural space, explored through a combination of kinetic devices and found objects.

Pierre Berthet (Brussels, 1958) has an “academic” musical background, having studied percussions with André Van Belle and Georges-Elie Octors at the Conservatory of Brussels; improvisation and composition with Frederic Rzewski and Henri Pousseur at the Liège Conservatory.

The two met through the American composer Phill Niblock and started their collaboration in 2015. When they came to TRK., in April 2016, that was one of the very first performances of *Dead Plants and Living Objects*. This project has been really successful: since 2016, they have brought it all over Europe.

Dead Plants and Living Objects consists of a sound installation that is played live by the two performers, and that changes configuration every time, depending on the concert space (vedi foto). The work consists of a series of dry plants set in motion by mechanized systems and used as sound sources (created by Pierre Berthet), combined with a series of small objects spread out on the floor (Rie Nakajima): she accumulates or subtracts sound by setting the objects in motion, picking them up and moving them around. Other sound sources used in *Dead Plants and Living Objects* are metal stuff that are hit by sticks agitated by motors (bells and springs, and cans used as resonant boxes), a guitar played with a stick that hits the strings, a reversed vacuum cleaner that blows, with a choo-s in front of the pipe in order to make long sounds.



Img. 4: The set-up of *Dead Plants and Living Objects* at Galleria Poggiali, Florence, April 2016 (photo © David Matteini)

During the performance, the two musicians do actions activating the installation (each activates his own objects, without touching the territory of the other), walking around, waiting for the other's next step, building a dramaturgy made of interaction between themselves and between their sound sources.

Concerning the **nuanced relationship between improvisation and composition**, and also the **use of self-built sound sources**, the third example is the project Les Frères Bobine.

Les Frères Bobine is a project created in 2014 by composers Stefano Bassanese and Benjamin Thigpen, which features a sound research based on the use of inductors, coils, small metal objects, amplifiers and computers to generate magnetic and silent feedback circuits. For TRK. (in March 2018), they performed with clarinetist and radical improviser Massimo Carrozzo.

Stefano Bassanese has a background as electronic composer, having studied and collaborated with Luigi Nono, Alvisse Vidolin, and Mauricio Kagel. He has taught electronic music at Cuneo and Turin Conservatories. Benjamin Thigpen is an electronic music composer and performer, he has taught at Ircam, Cuneo Conservatory, and Mons; he uses space as primary compositional parameter, and loudspeakers as point-source instruments.⁷

The project was born during the residency of Stefano Bassanese at the GRM in Paris. Inspired by the work of David Tudor and the research of Nicolas Collins, Bassanese decides to work on the idea of a speaker that does not speak, a silent speaker, recreating its functioning: so, he decides to buy 50 m of wire and to wrap it around a Chinese pot found in Paris; then he creates a patch to handle the sound produced by an inductor and this coil. He shows it to Benjamin Thigpen and together they decide to develop this project.

From there, the project developed using two coils, and with the addition of the clarinetist Massimo Carrozzo, who taught them how to improvise with this new sound source, through long sessions of exercises. (However, when I interviewed them before their concert at TRK., they said that their performance was not a improvisation, rather an “instant composition”!).

The system consists of two coils, inductors and a signal processing system in the computer (software). In addition to the coil, they have also added small contact loudspeakers (exciters), designed to vibrate on surfaces. The exciters function like oscillators and create a feedback system. There are many variables that the musicians introduce into the feedback chain, so that they can control these oscillators only to a certain extent. This limited possibility of control forces them to maintain a high attention during the performance, and to constantly care to what the others are doing, caring to the reactions of the sound set and of the concert space and the audience. The sound result is therefore unpredictable every time.

⁷ For more information on Bassanese and Thigpen, visit their websites <https://www.stefanobassanese.eu> and <http://benjaminthigpen.net> (last visit on November 30, 2018).



Img. 5: Les Frères Bobine performing at Galleria Frittelli Arte Contemporanea for TRK. SOUND CLUB, March 2018 (© Simone Petracchi).

From the first concert of TRK., other similar realities in Italy have rapidly emerged, curated by young experimental musicians. Among these are the MU festival (Bologna-Modena-Cesena) curated by Giovanni Lami and Enrico Malatesta; the concert series curated by the Comet collective in Turin (Luca Morino and Amos Cappuccio); the festival La Digestion in Naples (curated by Renato Grieco, Mimmo Napolitano and Giulio Nocera), and the concert series Baed in Modena (curated by Riccardo La Foresta).

There is not only a network between experimental composers but also a network to experimental facilitators. Even though all these organisations are extremely small, we hope to increase our collaboration in order to provide more occasions to experimental artists and audience to meet.

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