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## Excentric sounds/balanced sounds and the 'sublime'

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My talk will concentrate on Schaeffer's 'sons excentriques' or excentric sounds (I have used the spelling 'excentric' as a neologism rather than the common spelling: 'eccentric' to be consistent with Schaeffer and to emphasize in English the position of sounds which are distant from the centre of TARTYP). Thus, I shall begin with an appraisal of Schaeffer's sound typology with particular reference to the excentric sounds. This will include a brief comparison between these sounds and the 'sons équilibrés' (balanced sounds) and, more importantly, a discussion of the kinds of musical languages these types give rise to. I will then suggest, tentatively perhaps, that certain concepts from Immanuel Kant's third critique - the 'Critique of the Power of Judgement' - can assist in an understanding of the particular value and importance of these sounds in electroacoustic music and by extension in contemporary music in general. Of course, with such an ambitious enterprise more work remains to be done.

In the creation of his system of typology Schaeffer formulated six typological criteria. He linked them in pairs: Mass/Facture, Duration/Variation, Balance/Originality. A fourth pair Articulation/Stress also exists but this dualism was principally for the identification of units of sound - the first stage of typology - and is of little real importance for the purpose of the present discussion. The other three pairs, by contrast, deal explicitly with the task of classification. Such classification, it must be remembered, takes place in the acousmatic situation where no recourse is possible, or even desirable, to real sound sources and their inextricable links with the physical properties of real materials, construction of sound bodies and causal behaviours. According to Michel Chion in the 'Guide des Objets Sonores': 'These criteria are already morphological (descriptive) but they are used only to establish approximate distinctions, allowing main types of objects to be defined. It is their interaction in 6 dimensions (reduced by 'contraction' to 2 in order to fit on a two-dimensional diagram) which generates the principle of typological classification' (Chion, 1983: 122).

The two-dimensional diagram to which he refers is, of course, the 'Tableau récapitulatif de la typologie' or TARTYP (see Schaeffer, 1966: 459). I doubt that Chion literally means six dimensions which would mean that each criterion operates within its own space and it is clear during subsequent explanations that certain criteria share the same dimension. A precise definition of these six criteria is unnecessary and I would, of course, refer those interested to read Schaeffer and Chion. But it is absolutely essential to bear in mind that TARTYP represents a space in more than two dimensions, hence Chion's reference to interaction in 6 dimensions (see Schaeffer, 1966: 436-438 and Chion, 1983: 121-122). There is a very good explanation of the three dimensional aspect of typological space by Andrea Valle (see: [www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article290](http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article290)). The multi-dimensional aspect of these criteria is therefore extremely important.

The facility with which one can achieve a too hasty interpretation of TARTYP is dangerous and can make us forget that it is in fact a subtle and, in my view, largely successful diagram of the sound universe - and the universe as we are all aware exists in more than two-dimensions! It is clear that these pairs exhibit a complex network of relationships. The relationship between the criteria in each pair is perhaps the most obvious. For example, in the pair Mass/Facture a sound with a very mobile and complex mass would tend to display little or no facture, particularly in sounds of long duration. Exceptions would be those in the columns of balanced sounds. Michel Chion emphasizes Schaeffer's aim that 'we want to use sounds first and foremost to make music' (Schaeffer, 1966: 431) and suggests, therefore, that function - how we use, or propose to use the sounds - is a feasible way to classify them. It is also worth considering the diagram 'Recapitulation of typological criteria' (Schaeffer, 1966: 436) which, though nowhere as detailed as TARTYP, demonstrates by its sparseness the central importance - literally the central importance - of balanced sounds. In TARTYP, Schaeffer made no distinction between 'pure sounds' or sine tones and tonic sounds.

However, my intention is not to go into the typological criteria in more detail - important though this subject is - rather, I want to concentrate on the 'excentric sounds'. These sounds are classed as too original, too complex. By definition, they are not 'balanced' and, as such, they are situated at the very edges, the peripheral boxes of TARTYP.

The 'excentric sounds' are the Sample, Web, Large Note, Fragment, Cell, Ostinato and Accumulation. As I have already stated, three of them can be seen in the columns of the 'balanced sounds': the Large Note, the Fragment and the Cell. I would suggest that these excentric sounds, in particular those of longer duration, issue a challenge to their own status as musical sounds. To quote Schaeffer himself: 'If indeed one of these sounds occurs in a work, there is a danger that it may distract the listener's attention to itself, because as it is too structured, too unpredictable, and generally too bulky (...) in the structure where it occurs, it becomes the central point rather than simply one element amongst others.' (Schaeffer, 1966: 452).

Such value judgements are common in the 'Traité des Objets Musicaux'. Schaeffer did not exclude any sound, he simply stated that some sounds were more likely to be of use than others. But, naturally, the composer might want such sounds to become a central point. This is a good example of where theoretical speculation needs to be verified, or at least modified, by examining the work of composers. We know that Schaeffer was suspicious of theory-driven systems such as serialism. He believed that practice should precede theory. Consequently, I cannot help thinking that in the light of many compositions which use such sounds as the principal means by which the work communicates, a hierarchy might well emerge giving precedence to these sounds. They will become the central point and their constituent elements will have the potential to be extended by the composer in languages based as much on texture or grain as pitch.

The 'excentric sounds' are the least 'instrumental' in typological classification. This is clear from their locations in TARTYP. By this I mean that unlike the 'balanced sounds', attributing a physical cause is difficult if not impossible. Of course, the physical cause to which I refer is 'virtual'. This is the value of the term 'facture' which refers to the possibility of the kind of sound producing event that could have resulted in such a sound. To quote Chion: 'Facture is the qualitative perception of the energetic sustainment of sound objects' (Chion, 1983: 117), he then writes that facture: '(...) denotes the intention embodied in the instrumental gesture (...) and by extension the realization of sounds in the electroacoustic studio (...)' (Chion, 1983: 118). If a sound's facture is assessed as unpredictable or non-existent then it will not be placed in the central nine boxes. Instrumental examples of 'balanced sounds' are plentiful. Chion lists several on page 128 of the 'Guide des Objets Sonores'. Thus an N' could be a xylophone note, and an N'' a violin staccato. Y is a violin glissando and Y'' a timpani tremolo glissando. Naturally it is not necessary to try to match a sound object with a real cause, though our listening strategies frequently tend to operate in this way. But these 'balanced sounds' have the advantage that they exist within the 'optimum memorisation time for the ear' (Schaeffer, 1966: 443). The exception is the impulse though this had to be included as it constitutes the central column from which everything else radiates and logically it could not be excluded.

Essentially these 'balanced' sound objects display the three temporal phases: attack, continuant, termination. Schaeffer also claimed that they should not be too simple or 'elementary' as such sounds would not be interesting and would in all likelihood be 'subsumed by structures more worthy of memorisation' (Schaeffer, 1966: 435). However, they should also not be too 'structured' by which he means they should not display too many individual components which might be fragmented by the ear into more 'elementary' objects. It is obvious that Schaeffer took real-world behaviour as a kind of criterion for interesting sounds. This is hardly surprising for the man who invented musique concrète and who was, rightly or wrongly, suspicious of electronic sounds which were, he thought, essentially of little interest. I am reminded of his comment in the 'Traité des Objets Musicaux' (which is both self-deprecating and witty) where he writes that: 'We worked then, some of us constructing robots, the others dissecting corpses. Living music was elsewhere and only revealed itself to those who know how to escape from these simplistic models' (Schaeffer, 1966: 61). The fact that these

'instrumental' sounds could be arranged into musical structures that might be perceived in a similar fashion to traditional music was their advantage. Such sounds could be grouped together into 'sound families' or 'genres' purely on the basis of their perceived characteristics. A genre identifies a '-like' ('in the genre of') sound according to Schaeffer (Schaeffer, 1966: 519) and thus, when working with recorded sounds, it was ultimately of little relevance what the sounds' origins were - whether the sound was an unmodified recording, a highly processed recording or even purely the result of synthesis. Genres are flexible and can fragment, innovative reconfigurations can emerge as a composer creates new relationships between either different genres or objects within the same genre. For Schaeffer, such sounds led to what he called a 'musical' type of music. A music based on discrete relationships between the characteristics of such sounds would lead largely to a language that can be compared with instrumental discourses. The sounds had to be of the 'balanced' type because if they were too long, like many 'excentric sounds', they would be perceived in a different manner. Relationships can be heard, of course, but the length of sounds and the complexity of the behaviour would tend to dominate. If a composer wishes to make use of vibrato or texture then the duration of the sounds will often exceed the medium durations of 'balanced' sounds in order that these characteristics are clearly perceived. Schaeffer thought that the sounds of longer duration around the edges of TARTYP functioned more successfully as part of a 'plastic' language where the listener perceives features such as energetic profile and spectral evolution. The durations and lack of fracture of these sounds makes them more suited to this kind of language than one based on the differences between features in discrete sounds. At the end of the 'Traité des Objets Musicaux' Schaeffer summarised the difference between the two kinds of language thus: 'One could even imply that it ('plastic' music) gains its meaning where the preceding music ('musical' music) lost its (meaning)' (Schaeffer, 1966: 636).

Furthermore, the value of the 'excentric sounds' is in their refusal to resemble explicitly any particular origin. I would suggest that they can be said to justify in a sense the medium of electroacoustic music in that they are intrinsically electroacoustic. In my view when confronted with such sounds the listener must exercise their imagination. Not in naively attempting to construct fanciful, non-existent sound sources but in allowing the imagination to make connections between and within sounds as much as hearing the sounds behave in strange and interesting ways. But where does this leave Immanuel Kant?

The reference to the 'sublime' might be considered as contrived. There is always the danger that a method of analysis or understanding is forced upon a work with which it is simply not commensurate or appropriate. Nevertheless, there is much in Kant that illuminates any discussion on the sounds under consideration. Perhaps it's a sign of impending old age as I frequently turn backwards with perhaps excessive nostalgia to see how electroacoustic thought can be informed by earlier thinking. Schaeffer himself did not subscribe to a tabula rasa; he did not repudiate tradition or the past. I would also like to emphasize the role of the imagination. The gradual shift from rationalism to an emphasis on mental faculties like the imagination that was heralded by German Idealism should not be dismissed in seeking to understand some of the ways in which 'excentric sounds' might function - though I am not for one moment suggesting that Kant would have privileged imagination over reason. I must also add immediately that I will refer to the Kantian sublime rather than Burke's (this has been used as the basis for a discussion by the Scottish composer John Drever). In addition, I am avoiding the post-modern use of the term as in the aesthetic theory of Lyotard.

In the First Section, Second book the 'Analytic of the Sublime' we find Kant's discussion of this particular topic. There are many criticisms of Kant's organization of the 'Critique of the Power of Judgment' which have even led some commentators to dismiss whole sections of Kant's work as incomprehensible or inconsistent - a totally incorrect assessment in my view. Thus, for many, Kant's account of the sublime sits uncomfortably within his Critique. For Kant, the 'sublime' was like the beautiful in that it was one type of aesthetic experience. The beautiful is founded on 'delight' or 'pleasure' leading to harmony and reconciliation. The sublime presents the contradictory notions of attraction and

repulsion. Unity and coherence are undermined or even destroyed. The sublime makes us experience 'awe' or even 'outrage' by being overwhelmed by something. Our awareness of our human frailty can be overcome and in so doing we animate our sense of moral freedom. We become aware of ourselves and thus transcend nature. I confess my talk cannot touch on the subject of moral freedom but I think it is clear that an interesting reading of sounds of excessive duration and unpredictable facture is possible by means of Kantian aesthetics. Certain objects, sounds go beyond the power of our imagination to grasp them and however unnerving they might be - and some sounds in electroacoustic music are unnerving - they are interesting, even exhilarating and exciting to hear. Interestingly Kant also referred to form and formlessness and with descriptions of 'excentric sounds' as incoherent or chaotic a connection is possible. He wrote 'The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it (...)' (Kant, 2000: 128) Later in the same section he states '(...) since the mind is not merely attracted by the object, but is also always reciprocally repelled by it, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure.' (Kant, 2000: 129). I would like to add that form might exist, of course, but at such a greater level of duration or complexity that it cannot be comprehended in one go.

Kant made the distinction between the 'mathematical' and the 'dynamic' sublime. Basically, and once again I accept that I am being slightly simplistic, the former relates to size, the latter to power. To grasp something of great size we need to use both our memory and imagination. The memory retains the moment by moment experience of the object and these are unified by the imagination into a totality. If we are presented with something that is too long in duration it is not difficult to understand the problems of both our memory and imagination being unable to cope. Thus, as embodied beings we experience the world and if something exceeds our human dimensions then it is hardly surprising that it inspires awe.

Without wishing to appear as if I am simply adding a mitigating disclaimer - much still remains to be done. However, I am convinced that an intelligent analysis of many Schaefferian concepts is possible using concepts from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his post-scriptum, Schaeffer concludes the 'Traité des Objets Musicaux' with quotations from Heidegger and Descartes - perhaps considering another philosopher situated historically in the middle of these two might be enlightening.

#### Selected Bibliography

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