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The Stockholm Studio EMS during its Early Years

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This paper is a presentation of my Ph.D. project with the working title: **EMS: Two music cultures – one institution. Swedish electro acoustic music during the 1960s and 1970s**, which concentrates on telling the story of the electronic music studio EMS in Stockholm during its early years. I'm about halfway with my studies, so this is a work-in-progress presentation. There have so far been little academic writings about this. Aside from the Swedish musicologist Per O. Broman's book from 2007, the writing that exists in relation to EMS during the institution's first 10 years is mainly produced by the artists themselves or by the Swedish journalist, writer and curator Teddy Hultberg. This paper is an overview on how and why I want to tell the story of EMS.

I have a background in historical musicology, and wrote my masters dissertation on contemporary German Klangkunst (sound installations, sound sculptures, sound performances and sound scapes). As many will be aware experiences of the phenomena time and space are often central topics within this art form. In arguing and defining this as a new category of art, the German musicologist Helga de la Motte-Haber goes back and questions the philosopher Kant's definition of time and space as a priori and separated categories, and she emphasises that our thinking in linear time is both experienced and constructed.

If we take these assumptions with us in writing history; they help me to write a story which somehow falls in between the past and the present. The story of EMS in the '60s and '70s, is, to someone like myself born in 1975, by definition in the past, but also present in some other ways. For example, when I visit EMS to day, to go to the archives, I have sometimes bumped into my informants (for example the composers) by coincidence. Even though EMS is not located in the same place as back then, there is still a lot of the old gear in the corners. The institution is also very conscious about telling its story about how it all started. Not only in lectures and presentations, but also by releasing reconstructions of the old heroes' works on CD. Besides that, I visit and interview 'eyewitnesses', - both composers working in the studios at the time, and visitors such as for ex. John Chowning during his visit to Copenhagen last summer.

How this in-between past and present history-writing also differs from writing music history, lets say - before the electronic age, is that it also includes TV and radio programs, and that my aesthetic material (the artistic works) are all stored on tapes. This also, I think, invites me to listen to the works with my present 'sound art' ears, and not only listens to them as historical documents.

Even though I have a background as historian, these observations are related to the American ethnomusicologist Phillip Bohlman's thoughts on past and present:

The present (...) is ongoing, but once inscribed in ethnography, it is marked by the syntax of pastness. The past, in contrast, is frozen in a timelessness, from which it must be wrenched to be synthesized into the presentness of history. The disjuncture between past and present makes it increasingly difficult for fieldwork to examine either, but necessary to examine both. (...) History can no longer be recuperated into teleological narratives that "once happened" and now can be told again and again in their inscribed versions. History, too, forms in a temporal space, contested because fragments of the past remain in the everyday of the present." (Phillip Bohlman: *Fieldwork in the Ethnomusicological Past* from Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Ed.): *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, New York 1997)

With these words I will like to present some of the major issues in my project very briefly.

EMS is and was an institution with studios for producing electronic music and sound art. The first embryo to the larger studio at the radio was a smaller studio in the workers' society of education, which is an organisation that shares its ideology with the social democratic party. This studio was set up in 1960. Courses were organised by the Norwegian composer and chairman of the society of contemporary music Fylkingen Knut Wiggen, who brought in teachers from abroad, such as Gottfried Michael Koenig, Iannis Xenakis and Henri Pousseur.

In 1964 the Swedish composer Karl Birger Blomdahl was appointed music director at the Swedish Radio. The story goes that he would only accept the job, if he was allowed to build up a studio for producing electronic music. The deal was made, and for the purpose he employed Knut Wiggen to be in charge of it. In 1965 an old radio theatre studio was opened towards composers, which has later on been named "klang verkstan" or "the sound workshop". This studio was meant to be only contemporary and very high investments were assigned a very prestigious and for its time high-quality computer music studio, which opened in around 1970. Up until the death of music director Blomdahl in 1968, the Swedish Radio (SR) invested quite an amount of money, but since the new director lost interest, EMS in 1969 became an independent organisation founded partly by SR, Fylkingen/FST and the government (through the Royal Academy of Music). In the archives I have found documentation that Olof Palme, who was the minister of Education from 1967-69, helped EMS directly with financial aid. In a debate book from 1960 it says: **"Education and research are parts of cultural politics, which most likely will be the easiest fields to get resources to, because of these fields' importance for the materiel progression. Striving to heighten spiritual culture will on the other hand also in the future be squeezed."** (Assar Lindbeck: *Att förutse utvecklingen fra Roland Pålsson: Inför 60-talet, Debattbok om socialismens framtid av tio författare under redaktion av Roland Pålsson, Malmö 1960 (Rabén & Shögren 1959)*, p. 79, translated by S.K.Groth) With this statement in mind, the foundation, organisation and ideas of EMS makes very good sense.

To Wiggen EMS was not only to be a studio for producing electro acoustic music, but also an institution of research. In an article in *Interface* from 1972 Wiggen writes that he would like to give the composer **"the possibility of describing sounds in psychological terms. This far, this system of description exists only in the form Pierre Schaeffer has**

given it in his theoretical work “*Traité des objets musicaux*”. We at EMS shall try if given economical possibility to realize the idea in terms of a computer program.” (Knut Wiggen: *The electronic Music Studio at Stockholm, its Development and Construction*, Interface, 1 (1972) p. 127-165 p. 134)

His research project can be described very briefly as:

- selected sound objects recorded on analogue tape are given a digital form, and the computer gives an analysis of the sound in physical terms.
- composers and researchers remove the sounds to which the ear does not react and find the least possible amount of information in order to synthesize a similar sound object.
- a test panel will compare the original and the synthesized sound and give its opinion about the sound in the psychological terminology invented by Schaeffer, and we will try to bridge the gap between the physical and psychological description.
- the next step is to try to build "scales" between two such sound objects by allowing the computer to change the physical properties of the sounds.
- a test panel will search for corresponding changes in their experiences, and we hope to construct a description in which the composer writes the desired sound within the framework of a number of psychological variables.
- the composer no longer plays with a keyboard, and he no longer presses buttons. He writes his sounds and musical structures in psychological terms, and the apparatus at EMS translates these terms into sounds.

Schaeffer himself fancied Wiggen's work quite a lot. In his speech given at the Unesco conference “Music and Technology” in 1970 in Stockholm - arranged by Wiggen, - Schaeffer, in relation to a discussion about the correspondence between physical systems and psychological systems ... , says after quoting quite a lot from a text of Wiggen: **“In fact we can be completely reassured by Wiggen's remarks: he in no way ignores the “ravine”, and was actually one of the first and only people who has continually echoed my own warnings during the last ten years.”** (Pierre Schaeffer: Music and Computers from Music and Technology, Stockholm Meeting, Unesco 1970, p. 77)

Besides the research project, Wiggen also worked on a computer program called Music Box, which later has been compared to Max MSP. The above mentioned research project was never realised in Stockholm. For various reasons, the good times ended, and various conflicts emerged from the beginning of the 1970s.

On an ideological and political level, the Swedish musicologist Per O. Broman describes the turning point, as - that (...) **the 1960s technique utopian visions for the future were replaced by the 1970s social utopian, and within this, the electronic music had no space, even though thoughts about electronic music as the music of the future did not lack social utopian features.** (Per O. Broman: Kort historik över över Framtidens musik, Stockholm 2007, p. 72)

So to say – he sort of explains it with characteristics we also know from the student revolt of 1968.

On a personal level internal to the organisation, there were also major problems, which might be a concretisation of the above; the younger composers wanted democracy and to set the agenda. Besides that, it is no doubt that Knut Wiggen must have been a challenging character to work with. Jon Appleton describes him as **“one of the most astute music administrators I have ever met (...) He combined the qualities of a visionary, an intellectual spokesman, a megalomaniac, and a con artist.”** (Jon Appleton: review of Bits and Pieces: EMS 30 years [CD], *Computer Music Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1999), p. 100-103) The Swedish composers Lars-Gunnar Bodin has called him a “demagogue”. Wiggen himself has several times both in articles, in an interview he gave to me, and in recent emails to me, said over and over: **“They turned against me – I don't know why, and because they weren't intelligent enough, they destroyed EMS and replaced the studio with what Blomdahl called “a bad studio”** (Knut Wiggen in an email to the author, May 29th 2008). Wiggen has not been to Stockholm since he was dismissed, and he returned to Norway in 1976.

The conflict culminated with a spontaneous boycott of the studio in 1973. Lars-Gunnar Bodin explains in an article from 1983: **“Many composers had already devoted a great deal of effort to electro-acoustic music and wanted to continue composing on these lines, preferably with improved production resources. Not everything should be committed to “the music of future”. There was also “here and now”.**” (Lars-Gunnar Bodin: A Short History of Electro-Acoustic Music in Sweden from Electronic Music in Sweden, MIC Stockholm 1984, p. 10)

Besides the experiments in the large computer music studio, many very fine artistic works were recorded and produced in the smaller studio Klangverstan. This studio was, as earlier mentioned, meant only to be temporary, but since the opening of the larger studio dragged on, quite a production appeared from there. The studio was much easier to use, and since it was almost always fully booked, it was starting to get worn down. The composers wanted new equipment, which also became part of the conflict.

Many of the works produced in Klangverkstan were made not only by composers, but also by poets. A great deal of these works have later been categorized as “Text Sound” -, which according to one of the composers themselves, is a **“genre between literature and music(...) which tried to use visual, rhythmical and emblematical aspects instead of metaphor.** (Sten Hanson: *Text-sound composition during the 1960s – The Evolution of a Genre* from Teddy Hultberg (red.): Literally speaking, Göteborg 1993). These works are - mainly - not based on scientific assumptions, but more on ‘hands on’ experiments.

Reading about EMS in overview books on electro-acoustic and computer music, the Stockholm studio is mentioned, but mainly with a focus on the computer music studio. Instead, the text sound pieces have drawn attention in relation to the writing of the histories of intermedial art forms such as concrete poetry, sound poetry, *Neues Hörspiel*, performance art, political art and even sound art.

In spite of certain canons and personal conflicts, I intend to write a history concerned with more than one aesthetic direction. Even though they seem very different, I believe they do meet, not only because they were made at EMS, but

also in aesthetic questions. I will, at the end of this paper, very briefly illustrate this by playing an example by the Swedish-Hungarian composer Tamas Ungvary, which includes speech synthesis. Even though this work was first performed at one of Fylkingen's rather famous Text Sound festivals in 1973, it has disappeared from the text sound reception. The work was realized with the computer language EMS 1 in cooperation with Gunnar Fant, professor at Department of Speech, Music and Hearing at the School of Computer Science and Communication in Stockholm. So, even though it technically belongs to a tradition of computer music, aesthetically and thematically, I believe it is also related to the idea of "text sound".

With a quote from another anthropologist Clifford Geertz I will like to end my paper:

Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going – trying to find one's feet – one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; (...); they are adopted from other, related studies, and refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. (Clifford Geertz: Chapter one: Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture, from *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973, p. 27)

Even though my topic "The Stockholm Studio during its early years" at first might seem a little narrow, I hope that I today have illustrated that following Geertz and thick description on at least three levels: political / ideological, personal and aesthetic, a complex, interesting and rather entertaining story opens up to us.

Extracts from the following pieces were played during the presentation:

Knut Wiggen: *Sommarmorgon* (1972)

Sten Hanson: *How are you?* (1969)

Tamas Ungvary: *Annons* (1973)