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# Exploring our relationships with sound-based music

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In this paper, that is at various times provocative and speculative (for which I beg your indulgence), I outline the initial exploratory stages of a research exercise that looks towards exploring a particular corpus of electroacoustic music in terms of its function(s) and ultimately its value(s) - in both its individual and collective manifestations. This initial, small-scale exploration is based on responses solicited through questionnaires that were circulated amongst members of the electroacoustic community. *For this paper, the focus is on 'sound-based music' a term introduced by Leigh Landy (see Landy, 2007) - this term is being used (in this case) in reference to works that can be considered part of the Musique Concrète and soundscape traditions, wherein recorded sound is the principal unit of composition, and manipulation of the recording medium is, for the most part a compositional necessity. To this end music that can be considered part of the elektronische Musik and similar music traditions is not being addressed here. Throughout this paper, where appropriate, 'sound-based music' has been used as an alternative to the term 'electroacoustic music'.*

Through my intention/reception (I/R) research (see Weale, 2006) I have explored the sound-based music listening experience, what listeners are hearing, identifying, and how they are interpreting particular types of sound-based works. I have explored the communicative relationship between the composer of an individual work and the audience; what it was about the particular work or the particular type of work that listeners found engaging (or not). In other words, the ways in which the work functioned in relation to the listeners' perception at the point of conscious interpretation. My current focus is on broadening the scope of the exploration to look at sound-based music as a cultural practice through the experiences of sound-based composers and listeners; exploring the broader socio-cultural resonances beyond the immediate responses to sounding material within a work. Where the I/R project focussed on the 'inexperienced' participant (those who had never engaged with sound-based music previously) and in 'listening only' mode. My current exploration looks to the experienced and expert participants, both composers and listeners. It should be noted that this paper represents the beginning of my journey along this particular route of discovery. It is not a summation of a completed journey by any stretch of the imagination; hence its provocative and speculative tone.

In his book *Musicking*, Christopher Small, has noted that part of understanding the function of *music* is to understand the relationships that we have with it. (Small, 1998) My interest is in exploring the relationships that we have with *sound-based music*, as individuals and collectively. What is it that fascinates us about sound-based music as both composers and/or listeners? In what ways it might define us, give us an identity? And most importantly, how we *value* it both in the context of our 'individual' life, and in the broader socio/cultural sphere in which it operates? It is my hope that asking such questions may reveal some of the humanistic traits that are at work in sound-based music as a socio/cultural phenomenon, teasing out a deeper understanding of the function and value of sound-based music as something that is perhaps rooted in some of the fundamental aspects of human communication. To this end, the ethos of this exploration is in keeping with the access, widening participation and action research focus of the I/R project and other projects that I am involved with, such as EARS ([www.ears.dmu.ac.uk](http://www.ears.dmu.ac.uk)).

## Methodology (in 'extreme' brief)

A questionnaire was distributed across the Internet to three electroacoustic music discussion forums CEC (The Canadian Electroacoustic Community), SAN (The Sonic Arts Network) and Lowercase Sound.

Four open questions were asked:

- 1) How did you first become interested in electroacoustic music?
- 2) Why do you choose to compose electroacoustic music?
- 3) Why do you choose to listen to electroacoustic music?
- 4) What is your favourite (or one of your favourite) electroacoustic works and most importantly, what is it about this particular work(s) that appeals to you?

Thirty responses were received, most from CEC and SAN. Twenty-four respondents were academically employed, or students, or retired academics in music or music technology-based subjects. Six were non-academic.

**Key findings from analysis of the response data** (responses from questions 1 and 4 have not been included as they are not key to the particular focus of this paper - those responses that did not concern sound-based music, as defined in the introduction to this paper have also not been included)

### A. The relationship between sound-based music and the maker. Results from Q2 - composing

As there were many similar responses these have been grouped into categories.

## *1. Emancipation*

By far the most responses as to why people choose to compose sound-based music were related to the notion of emancipation (freedom). And these fell into the following sub-categories:

### *1a. Sound organisation as emancipation from the rules and formalism of traditional (note-based) musical approaches and aesthetics*

Which itself was divided between two poles:

\* *Freedom of 'referential' expression (referring to things outside of the music itself) through the particular nature of the material/medium (recorded sound)* - (located in the soundscape domain of the sound-based music corpus)

\* *Freedom of content organisation (intrinsic organisation of sound)* – freedom in that there is no 'finite', fixed, standardised code through which material must be organised in order to conform to the expectations of the musical form as it is defined - (located in the concrete domain of the sound-based music corpus)

### *1b. Provides the best means of 'self-expression' (which is the key term here) - in relation to other music*

This was again broken down into the two areas:

\* *Musical self-expression through the organisation of the intrinsic sounding elements* and:

\* *Direct expression of ideas/of verbal meanings in relation to real world things and events*

So there are two general levels of emancipation:

-Compositional emancipation, the ability to use whatever materials one wants and to organise these in whatever way one wants; not necessarily bound by 'abstract' rules of sound organisation as applies to certain forms of popular/classical music within the note-based paradigm.

- Expressive emancipation - being able to 'directly' express what one wants (in terms of real world references) through a sound-based art form, in an unambiguous manner.

There are some awkward problems here in that the lack of 'standardised' rules of sound organisation in sound-based music (in comparison to the rules governing the composition of popular/classical music in the note-based domain) allows for a feeling that one is being relatively self-expressive, yet without such rules the potential for subjective interpretation of this self-expression increases. So the composer can express her/himself in the minutest of sonic detail, and very directly through the use of real-world sound, but no one may actually be hearing or interpreting what the composer has to say. From this, the function of sound-based music for us as artists may not necessarily or indeed fundamentally be about 'actually' having ones expression received, but at the least being able to feel that free expression through total organisational control of all materials is possible. This idea gels with another response given: many respondents noted that they 'compose' material much more than they listen to that of others – which in itself suggests a significant supply and demand imbalance. Many respondents noted that they find the act of composition more 'engaging' and more 'rewarding' than the act of listening, that their pleasure comes entirely from making it, from the compositional process. I will be revisiting this particular cultural trait of sound-based music a little later in the paper.

Several respondents noted that they choose to compose sound-based music because it offers

### *1c. Exploration/experimentation potentials*

\* *To be able to explore the creative possibilities of real-world sound*

\* *To create new aural experiences from existing sounds*

Part of the attraction of sound-based music appears to be that it is continuously promising the potential for the creation of something new. This is due to the vast palette of sound from which to draw upon and the ongoing developments in music technology, the means of manipulating and organising sound. When one begins a new composition there is always the potential that one could produce something, perhaps stumble upon something that is significantly 'original'.

## *B. The relationship between sound-based music and the taker. Results from Q3 - Listening*

Participants offered the following responses:

\* *Part of my professional life (teaching)* – one has to know the historical 'canon', and be aware of the latest compositional 'trends' and technologies being employed in sound-based music composition in order to be able to teach it effectively.

\* *Potential for hearing something 'new'* – there is this desire for sound-based music to function as the deliverer of 'new' aesthetic experiences. Could it be that there is a proclivity perhaps in sound-based music participants for such things? The sound-based music audience (represented by the respondents in this study - therefore a very small/narrow cross-section) seem to have an incessant hunger for 'new' aesthetic experiences, which could be why they are (in part) drawn to this type of material.

\* *'Thinking' music – either referential or musical* - meaning that the music instigates an intellectual engagement with it. There is content that demands the application of the intellect, in either understanding the 'musical' language of the work. Or in that through its real-world context, presents themes of reference that encourage the mind to think around these

themes, unpack these themes. It is a music that attracts us because it demands active intellectual engagement, and we get pleasure from this process. It could also be that as the majority of the respondents were from academia their general MO is to engage at an intellectual/philosophical/analytical level with most of their lived experiences, be these experiences involved in the perception of art objects or any other aspect of their lived experience.

\* *Musical form that reaches deepest inside me* – this was a response from the soundscape side of the sound-based music spectrum, and is linked to the following responses that were offered in relatively significant numbers.

\* *An art form that offers a very direct link to the world at large*

\* *To understand other peoples ways of seeing, hearing, experiencing the world as expressed through organised sound*

These responses are to some extent mirroring some of those in the 'composition' responses, that a major attraction of sound-based music is the extent to which it offers a more direct means of engaging with reflections on the world at large, to a greater extent than can be achieved with 'do re mi'.

Several responses mentioned that that sound-based music (indeed this notion can apply to the entire spectrum of cultural production and beyond) *provides us with something to appreciate*, to utilise for our edification: it is a tonic, an escape. Which leads me to consider how a CD collection can be seen (heard!) as an apothecary, a 'sonic' pharmacy of various tonics, each of which has a different effect on us. Having engaged with the notion of 'composer' intention in the I/R project, one might also consider 'listener' intention as this is a function of the sound-based work and an area in which its value (on an individual level in the first instance) is perhaps quite significant. For example (continuing the sonic pharmacy idea): what am I intending to use the work for as I select a particular work to listen to? Do I want to experience a particular effect that I know can be produced in me by listening to a particular genre or indeed a particular work? To this end, why do I decide to reach for (for example) Henry or something concrète? Or why on other occasions do I reach for Westerkamp or something soundscape-based; other than as inspiration for my own compositional outings? In the same way as I might listen to techno or perhaps Vivaldi when I am feeling lively, or to Radiohead or Trip Hop when I am feeling relaxed. To what extent might this 'intended' listening approach, apropos to sound-based music, function in the same way as it does with the popular corpus? Does it indeed have such a function for all/most/some of us? And hence is this an important aspect of its value?

Returning to the results from question 3, the most prevalent response, obviously as all responses were from composers, was that sound-based music was listened to:

\* *To inform my own composition/to learn from the work of others*

This response albeit methodologically biased in terms of this study, may well be a reflection of a significant cultural trait of sound-based music – it being a musical culture in which the majority of participants are active composers.

Begging your indulgence once more whilst I take this assumption as given (and tiptoe along the precipice of generalisation), here there appears to be a cultural difference between sound-based music and popular music in that with popular music there are those who compose it professionally and as amateurs - those who listen to pop music to be inspired, or to appropriate, or to inform their own compositional endeavours. But there appear to be far more in the pop domain who *only* listen – those who have no developed knowledge of the means of production of the music or significant intellectual interest in the broader contexts of the musical form/genre – i.e. the pop music consumer. Whereas for the most part (it would seem), sound-based music participants (within the musical corpora being discussed in this paper) both listen *and* compose – hence the majority of participants have at least a basic, if not developed knowledge of 'production' techniques. Moreover, if one introduces the 'academic' context (a significant slice of the sound-based music community have an 'academic' relationship with it), a level of intellectual engagement with the art form that transcends the content (as aesthetic) to incorporate historical and philosophical contexts becomes a significant influence. Hence a much broader scope for intensive critical/analytical engagement with the work by the audience to whom it is disseminated is introduced. In contrast to the pop music domain, sound-based music in this case appears to operate in a culture of artisans who are producing work that is engaged with for the most part by their fellow artisans.

Questions that come to mind taking this state of affairs into account are: to what extent does the knowledge that our material will most likely be disseminated to a particular kind of audience, have an effect on the kind of material that we produce? Is there any difference between a sound-based work that is intended for 'all audiences' and one that has been composed for those within the sound-based music community? One area that may well be related to this issue concerns how sound-based music (particularly that from the concrète and soundscape traditions) appears to be relatively 'adult centric' in both its production and dissemination. What appears to be the case (in the UK at least) is that it is not presented (to any significant degree) to adolescents and children as a potential art form that they may wish to engage with. It would seem that many young people do not come into contact in any rigorous and meaningful way with sound-based music until they enter tertiary education. The result of this is that a great deal of sound-based music is 'adult-centric' - research, scholarship, and participation in the sound-based music culture whether as composer or listener (or both), begins and is propagated for the most part in an adult world. It appears that there is little sound-based music being *created by* and *disseminated for* adolescents; what might this suggest about the function and value of sound-based music - particularly as an 'accessible' art form? I do acknowledge that young people may well be exposed (second-hand) to forms of sound-based music through computer/console gaming, and (first hand) through some forms of live sound-based music; my point however concerns a community of listeners.

In this initial exploration of the response data, I have only begun to unpack some of the issues concerning the role and function of sound-based music in terms of our *individual* relationship with it. In heading towards the conclusion I would like to offer a couple of brief, bullet point examples of the kind of things that this project will seek to explore in terms of the ways in which sound-based music functions in broader socio-cultural contexts.

Sound-based music brings people together in social contexts, not only as a compositional/performative community, but also as an epistemological community, this occurs through such things as conferences where those of us who have an academic relationship with sound-based music share our knowledge of it. Indeed, one of the major socio/cultural developments in relation to sound-based music has been its gradual integration into education/academia (albeit one that still appears to operate for the most part in higher levels of education - at least in the UK). Education is a key area through which the 'value' of sound-based music can be positively articulated and taken forward in terms of widening participation and ultimately accessibility. In my opinion sound-based music has significant educational value - in particular in terms of its creative and communicative empowerment potential, and its strength as a means through which to articulate meaningful ideas about the world around us. It is an artistic medium through which we can quite directly articulate and attempt to communicate meaning to others; it is not overly clouded by abstraction and affords those with basic music technology knowledge and skills the ability to create an expressive artefact whose message/meaning does not have to be difficult to interpret, that is as long as the listener has some basic understanding of how to listen.

### **Some final thoughts...**

To bring this paper to a close I will briefly offer some of my thoughts on one key aspect of sound-based music in its performative social context - *concert practice* - exploring how our relationship with sound-based music functions in terms of the places in which it takes place as a collective spectacle. What *are* the rituals of our concert practice, if any? And to what extent are they *unique* in relation to other musics? It should be noted that I am not dealing with live electronics in this section, but focusing on acousmatic concerts, wherein fixed medium material is projected through loudspeakers.

In my experience, the sound-based concert hall is a democratic space for the most part (egalitarian here and there). The audience sits at the same level on the same kind of chairs. In diffused performances the music is (often, but not always) democratically distributed around the space. There is no (capital-based) social hierarchy established with some seats being more expensive to occupy than others. In most of the sound-based concerts that I have attended there was either no charge, or a nominal fee that was not variable based on where one would be sitting in the performance/concert space. Although, perhaps there is an unconscious hierarchy at work, based on 'envy' towards those in or closest to the sweet spot; indeed, might I suggest a new term - sweet spot envy - because despite the attempts of the diffusion performer to distribute the music around and through the space, it is *not* egalitarian in this respect. There are times when I know my enjoyment of a great performance was being compromised by my seating location in the back left corner of the space and a streak of envy did pass through my mind for whoever it was who managed to grab the seat directly behind the 'composer/diffusion performer'. Might we indeed see a future in which one has to pay more the closer one sits to the sweet spot?

What I find interesting is that during performance (in my experience) the acousmatic concert operates similarly to a classical concert whereby the audience sits in silence, offering no externally observable reactions to the music - there are no outward expressions of appreciation during the concert. There are some head nods at times but these could be the 'nodding off to sleep' gestures of uninspired listeners rather than nods of appreciation. In diffused sound-based music performances there is no audience to performer feedback during the performance, there are no immediate responses to a fader gesture that the audience likes, such as sudden applause or yelps of excitement/appreciation, as we might do when our particular 'guitar' hero does a riveting 'weedly wee' on the fret board. Obviously one of the reasons for *not* making noise or other distracting gestures is in obscuring the listening experience for your neighbour, particularly in concerts where the music is 'delicate'.

What is interesting in the concert situation, in this respect, is that despite it being a 'social' gathering, it is still a very 'individual' focussed listening situation - it has the same intimate level of contact between oneself and the musical material as when one is listening one to one (by oneself). In the acousmatic concert there are multiple bodies in the same space employed in the same activity, but interactions between the multiple bodies during the performance are negligible at best. So not only is there no audience-to-composer feedback during performance there is no audience-to-audience feedback or interaction. So on the surface it is a rather *un-social* happening in terms of the music itself being the catalyst for social interaction during the performance. Obviously the acousmatic concert ritual is what it is, that is how it functions, that is how it has evolved; the music at such concerts is not intended to be engaged with in any other way. But if the acousmatic concert listening experience is essentially the same as listening by oneself, why does the acousmatic concert take place? What is its function? What is its social value? What do we (as collective) get out of it in terms of a social experience?

### **In really brief conclusion...**

This journey of exploration, which is ultimately looking towards a large-scale socio-musicological (and potentially ethnomusicological) exploration of sound-based music (in its broadest sense), has only just begun to lift the lid in terms

of what really 'turns us on' about sound-based music – ultimately that is what I am trying to get at here. To this end I hope that I have provoked you in such a way as to encourage you to take a further interest in the project. As with the I/R project, this exercise is in some ways a rallying call to sound-based music practitioners to think about what function and value sound-based music has for *us*, to reflect on what sound-based music means to *us*, the relationships we have with it; but ultimately it is about finding the means through which to articulate to those outside of the sound-based music community the key values that sound-based music has in its broader socio-cultural contexts. It is about unearthing and finding the means through which to articulate these values in terms of the more common, shared aspects of human experiential nature. This may well go some way towards addressing issues concerning widening participation and accessibility in the sound-based arts; to continue to address its marginalised status, particularly in relation to adolescent and younger individuals - who are the current focus of my 'access' efforts - that in my opinion are still not being afforded (at least in the UK) sufficient engagement with sound-based music, either creatively or in terms of listening appreciation; or both.

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