

Examining Intention and Reception in Electroacoustic Music: An Empirical Enquiry and Post-structural Analysis

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If considered a machine, the listening body becomes fluid. Its function is only specific to the connections it forms with other machines. (Deleuze and Guattari: 1988, 4) What it means, according to Deleuze and Guattari, *is* what it does. (Ibid) My first experience of listening to electroacoustic music was not a musical one. What the music *did* to me was force me to rethink many years of classical training. My reaction, as was echoed by most of my peers, was that 'this is NOT music'. It called into question everything I *thought* I knew about music. This experience is what prompted my interest in the research offered by Robert Weale who tested the extent to which the naive listener would come to better appreciate the music if they knew something about it. (Weale: 2005) Weale's experiment involves the introduction of three e/a pieces to listening subjects and the evaluation of their experience. Through repetitive listening and the introduction of the composer's expression of intention, listening responses were examined by means of a questionnaire. The grounding of the experiment arises out of a variation of Nattiez's semiotic tripartition, Weale augments the tripartite to include a fourth element of composer's intentions termed 'dramaturgic information'. Following on from the research of Leigh Landy, Weale explains that dramaturgic information is concerned with the communicative intent of the composer and it includes all the components that have influenced the production of the work. (Ibid, 35) Landy's research suggests that by providing the listener with what he calls 'Something to Hold on to' then the listener is better equipped to appreciate the music. (Landy: 1994) The 'something to hold onto factor' is a point of reference which guides the listener towards what to listen *for* thus helping the listener to navigate the music. (Ibid) In this sense, Weale uses the dramaturgical information provided by the composer as a Something to Hold onto Factor.

This paper is a report of my ongoing research which seeks to explore the relationship between electroacoustic music and its reception by listeners utilising two different approaches. The first approach replicated the experiment undertaken by Weale in order to gain firsthand knowledge of undertaking such a task. I was interested to find out what the experiment would uncover within the context of my own environment. The second approach, also experimental, aimed to contribute to the research from a different perspective by reflecting philosophically on the experiment and its findings using the philosophical methods of Deleuze and Guattari. Rather than focus on the disparities between the experiment and the post-structural philosophy, I will draw on the concept of the machinic assemblage in order to ask questions about the experience of listeners.

In an attempt to replicate Weale's results I undertook my own small scale experiment utilising Weale's design. The first part of the experiment required the selection of three electroacoustic pieces which contained three varying degrees of abstracted real world sound material. A range of Australian composers were targeted via email and two works were secured, 'Bells and Brakes' by Shaun Rigney, which employed un-abstracted real world sound material and the piece 'Silver Traffic' by Gail Priest which contains moderately abstracted real world sound material. The third piece proved a little harder to obtain, given the time constraints and the lack of suitable pieces a decision was made to recruit a fellow music student Michael Binkins. His composition 'What are Words Worth (as such)' was composed using two male voices which were totally abstracted through granular synthesis. Initially this didn't present itself as a problem however after examining the results it became apparent that this had produced two interesting phenomena in the data which will be discussed later in this paper.

The next stage involved the recruitment of listener subjects which also proved problematic. I expected a total of twenty participants however, a total of twelve attended the test session. Listeners were grouped into three subgroups based on musical knowledge. The subgroups were made up of five non-musicians classified as naive listeners; five music students were classified moderately experienced listeners and two listeners who had substantial experience listening to electroacoustic music comprised the experienced listener group. Ideally the sample group would have been larger but given the scope of the project and time constraints I decided to continue with a smaller sample group. During the test session listeners were asked to complete two different questionnaires. The first questionnaire was completed during each listening of each piece, each time it was played. This real-time questionnaire invited a free form qualitative response which asked listeners to report on any thoughts or images that came to mind during the piece and to report on whether knowing the title or dramaturgic information had changed their initial views. The second questionnaire was completed only after the first listening of each piece and it aimed to gather a more detailed response by asking listeners specific questions such as 'what might this piece be about?' The analysis of the qualitative data collected from both questionnaires was interpreted using Weale's 'Sound Identification Strategies'. (Weale: 2005, 212-16) These strategies were used to identify and group key themes arising out of the data. The strategies were extremely useful because they provided a method for grouping responses together. On the other hand, surprisingly, some participants reported responses that could not be grouped into any of the strategies suggested by Weale. An example of this came from one participant who drew pictures.

On the whole, my results showed similar findings to Weale's. For the first listening of the first piece, every listener identified at least one of the sound source materials. When asked what the piece might be about, every response was in line with at least one of the two ideas that the composer had intended on expressing. The simplicity of the real world sounds coupled with the minimal nature of the piece perhaps contributed to the fact that it was easier to identify some of what the composer was trying to achieve. The majority of listeners reported that knowing the composers intentions had enhanced their listening experience by confirming their own ideas of the piece. For the second moderately abstracted piece, listeners had a harder time identifying the abstracted sound material. Still, most listeners were able to identify at least one of the many sounds which revolved around a city or traffic theme. The composer's intentions were reflected in listener responses to varying degrees. 4 out of 5 of the inexperienced listeners reported directly on a traffic or city theme. Only 1 of the 5 listeners from the moderately experienced group directly reported a response which was in line with a traffic or city theme. The remaining moderately experienced listeners focused on the gradual transformation of the real world sounds into something more abstract, an idea which the composer did directly express in their intentions. For the third most abstracted piece all listeners were able to identify the voice as a source material. However, an interesting phenomenon occurred in the data for this piece. Though all participants reported the sound of speech or voice within the piece, nearly all participants reported hearing additional sounds such as trains, aeroplanes and helicopters. The only sounds present in the piece are two male voices. It is hard to ascertain whether participants were influenced by the previous two pieces given they both contained transportation sounds, or whether the rhythmic qualities produced by the vocal processing could have led participants into thinking about the sounds of aeroplanes and helicopters. It was hard to distinguish between whether listeners thought the voice *sounded* like a train or plane, or whether the listeners actually *heard* a train or plane. Furthermore, after learning the composer's identity it became clear that several participants used this as an important something to hold onto factor given that some of the listeners knew the composer personally. I found it interesting that listeners read into the piece as a reflection of the personality of the composer. For example one listener reports 'The music suits what I perceive to be of the composers personality – random, abstract, anti-establishment, eccentric'.

Two listeners reported that the piece might be about disintegration. For example one listener reports a disintegration of reality, another reports a disintegration of communication and these two responses from the moderately experienced and experienced groups are perhaps the most in line with the composer's expression of intention. Across all three listening groups the first listening of all pieces tended towards the identification of the real world sounds. After sound identification the inexperienced listeners usually described a scenario or place whereas the moderately and high experienced group, after sound identification usually described the musical and technical attributes of the piece.

On the one hand, the experiment emphasises the importance of meaning (in the form of 'something to hold onto') as an imperative constituent of an enjoyable listening experience. Conversely, Deleuze and Guattari, argue that there is no singular or stable meaning. This perspective therefore renders such meanings a much less relevant part of the listening experience. But this is not to deny the fact that listeners may use or need something to hold onto. I certainly did. In the translators foreward to 'A Thousand Plateaus' Brian Massumi explains:

The question is not: is it true? But: does it work? What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body? (xv-xvi)

And it's precisely these kinds of questions that I thought about when undertaking the philosophical analysis. The machinic assemblage is useful in that it enables a shift in focus from the summarising of results to looking at specific instances of affect and difference. A machine is made up of interconnecting parts, parts that have their own function. The parts join with other parts and, subsequently the course of their production is altered. The parts *become* something new through their connection. The machinic assemblage is therefore not so much a thing as it is a process. (Colebrook: 2002, 102-04) My results suggested that though most listeners generally have an enhanced experience if made aware of the composer's intentions, there were instances where listeners reported that they preferred their own interpretations of the works. One participant from the inexperienced group, after learning the intentions of the composer responds: 'Repeated listening helps understand the intentions but that doesn't mean that I prefer it, I like my narrative'. Another similar response, also from the inexperienced group, reported disappointment because the piece did not reflect what they had imagined. The same participant actually goes so far as to say that they do not like being told what to hear. Interestingly, the responses which reported disappointment over knowing the composers intentions came from the inexperienced group. On the one hand, this kind of response is not of huge interest to the experiment because the listeners who felt this way are a minority. But from a Deleuzio-Guattarian perspective this response is really interesting because if we think about the listener as a discrete category, a machinic assemblage, then we can understand that these particular listeners do not necessarily desire an understanding of the piece in the form of the composer's intentions. Rather, the enjoyable part of their listening experience came in the form of creating their own narratives and their own meanings; *this* is what they held onto. For these listeners, what the piece *means* is a result of their own creation via all the rhizomatic connections that make each listener unique and each experience unique.

This led me to think about whether the experiment informs the experience of the listener. The real-time questionnaire asks listeners to list any thoughts, images and or ideas. Most of the listeners reported what could be considered a representation of a cerebral response acted out as thoughts or images in the listener's brain. To quote Weale:

The actual, fundamental listening experiences are taking place in the mind of the listener and so are not externally observable by the inquirer. These lived experiences cannot be studied directly. I can only study

representations of experiences: verbal and written texts, stories and narratives. I have no direct access to the inner psychology and inner world of meanings of the reflexive subjects. (94)

The experiences of listeners are undoubtedly mediated through the language they use to report on their experience and a reasonable expectation is that listener responses would reflect this as Weale suggests. I had not expected to find traces of what could be considered corporeal or even psychological experiences, but I did. For instance one participant reports on the first listening of the first piece: 'The constant pace gives me a calming sensation' another participant reports on the first listening of the second piece: 'The sounds seem like they have been digitally altered. It makes me feel like I am being abducted by an alien space ship...I noticed the piece is stressing me out and I have been biting my nails'. Whether the listener was overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of the sounds within the composition or whether there was some other reason for feeling stressed is ambiguous but this is clearly an account of an experience which manifested as corporeal affects generated by the assemblages formed between the listener and the piece. Weale's experiment was cautious about structuring the listening experience for listeners and as such the real time questionnaire was devised to invite a qualitative response, free from leading the listeners into thinking about their own experience in a particular way. A foreseeable result is where a listener would describe what the sounds conjured in the listeners mind, as discussed earlier the real time responses usually reported sound identification, description of a created narrative or description of musical attributes. Another example of a different kind of result came in the form of something quite unexpected. In contrast to all other participants one participant stood out from the crowd. In the real time response for the first listening of the first piece this participant reacted *not* by reporting or describing their experience with words. Rather, this participant drew two pictures. The first was labelled by the participant as 'stardust' and the second was labelled by the participant as 'ripples'.

The lack of audience for e/a music is evidently a concern that is shared by many in the field and the work of Landy and Weale has taken a productive step towards understanding why. Weale's research highlights an approach which gathers specific information about how listeners engage with the music and to what extent the title and dramaturgic information can be used as something to hold onto. My research has a different agenda in that it attempts to provide a model that applies philosophical complexity to issues of practical relevance and as such this paper is in no way offered as a means to an end. Perhaps all it really does is generate more questions, but it is these questions, which I believe warrant further study. The Deleuzio-Guattarian reflection allows one to think about the results achieved outside of the empirical framework. In a sense, it does the opposite to the empirical study because its concern is difference. Despite this, I feel a dual method has the potential to help us think about why we are losing our audience and how we can engage listeners better. My doctoral research will develop this dual approach in order to understand how the listener is indoctrinated into electroacoustic music by examining the many different listening models and their take-up within tertiary music education. I will examine this from an epistemological perspective in an attempt to understand the discourse that forms a fluent listening subject and what constitutes a legitimate listening experience.

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