

How Often Have You *Seen* Your Compositions Performed?

A plea for more audio-visual collaborations in experimental music

Leigh Landy

ABSTRACT

The following text represents an attempt to stimulate a growth of interest within musical circles in the application of experimental music's potential in connection with the audio-visual arts. Today, contemporary music is primarily an autonomous genre, like literature and the plastic arts. But, unlike many of the sister arts, experimental modern music has not succeeded in reaching the public it deserves. It is this author's opinion that through active participation in audio-visual works, a much wider audience can be reached which in turn could lead to more attention being given to new music. Music's position in various audio-visual arts has been a sorrowful, undervalued one. The technology exists, yet there is still much to be developed in terms of its application. The following is a call to musicians to explore and utilize these possibilities while redefining music's importance in various audio-visual contexts.

I THE BACKGROUND: *OUR 'IMAGE CULTURE'*

Today's consumers, especially those born after the birth of television, tend to be more visually than audio-oriented. New technology is obviously partly responsible for developments which led to what is often called today's image culture. It is well-known that electro-acoustic and live contemporary music are also experiencing a period in which technological advances are becoming more and more prominent. (Just think of digital sound generation and recordings.) The question to be raised here is: can music, especially experimental, sound-based music, profit by a greater presence within our image culture by applying contemporary techniques to audio-visual contexts? The second part of this article, while presenting a number of pro's and con's, argues that it might be worth a try.

II A CHOICE OF RELEVANT AUDIO-VISUAL ART FORMS

In the following pages, a number of audio-visual disciplines will be discussed one by one to see what might be of interest to today's composer and where things have been difficult in the past, leading to points for future development.

It is clear that the composer, who in all cases has been trained to work independently - leaving a score and/or tape to his conductor, musicians or technician and thereby having an enormous freedom of movement - will have to 'share the wealth' in a given work. The loss of sole creative leadership can be

Handwritten scribbles

compensated by two factors: satisfaction in terms of artistic result and participation in the crushing of deeply-rooted traditions which have treated music in an amateurish fashion. (How many audio-visual artists are truly up to date where new music's repertoire and potential are concerned?) These two factors translate in music's playing a greater role in each individual art form.

It is also true that in order to be able to participate in such collaborations, many composers might have to undergo supplementary training to become professional in the new visual field. This does not mean that the composer must become a double specialist. The author is of the opinion that very, very few have the capacity to specialize in both areas at once. Exceptions like Mauricio Kagel¹, who compose music as well as 'composing' video, film and theatre, are quite rare and should not be seen as exemplary as for as this text is concerned. What is important here is the general knowledge of an audio-visual discipline, including its history as well as its specific current technical vocabulary.

— Theater

There's an anecdote which circulates among West German musicians: the composer, Gottfried von Einem (of One), could never make music for the theatre². If he were to do so, he would have to change his name to von Allem (of All). This joke is painful in two senses: first of all it shows how the theatre composer is expected to write like a chameleon, changing color constantly; he is to be a 'jack of all trades'; furthermore, it shows how the theatre composer often must adjust his standards to the wishes of his almighty director. Many film composers' destinies are no different.

It is clear that the role of the composer in spoken theatre does not necessarily have to be a major one; ironically when this is the case, most pieces are written for the opera. There are very few composers who have no interest in being either primarily an opera composer, or a 'theatre composer' - the von Allem - but instead to be a 'musical dramaturge', someone who attempts to introduce music as one of the main characters in a given dramatic performance. An ideal situation is where the composer collaborates directly with a playwright (think of Weill/Brecht and Glass/Wilson) in creating a new work in which the music is permanently integrated. The question is when, if desired, can one also find a similar amount of space within new productions of existent theatre works for which there is no pre-composed music?

1) See for example Werner Klüppelholz & Lothar Prox, ed. *Mauricio Kagel. Das filmische Werk 1: 1965-1985*. Meulenhoff/Landshoff Amsterdam, 1985.

2) The following four paragraphs are the most general sections of a text which concerned my musical work leading to a February, 1987 première of Heiner Müller's 'Philotetes'. The entire text appeared (in German) in the March/April '87 Basle, Switzerland theatre magazine. This text is not only relevant to theatre; it has been included here to introduce several general points of interest.

Artaud once wrote: 'The idea is to feed, furnish and let the space speak for itself. This quotation is of particular interest to the composer of new music for the theatre. How might one sonorously furnish the theatrical space? To begin with, those acquainted with recent advances in experimental music are aware of the important radical increase of musical materials, which used to consist earlier only on notes and now include all sounds; they also know about the liberation of the spatial dimension in music (in terms of new performance spaces, multi-channel recordings, spatial placement of musicians and loudspeakers). These two musical advances, combined with Artaud's plea, lead to an interesting potential starting-point for today's composer working in the theatre. In fact, the von Allem joke isn't all that irrelevant after all when one considers the potential sources of sound one can employ within a (theatre) composition: all instruments found throughout the world, new vocal techniques - this is of special interest when the composer can work with the actors' speech and singing techniques - and all sounds recordable via the microphone or produced electronically. The challenge is to bring together (i.e., assimilate) diverse sound sources and styles that are compatible to the composer and to the given dramatic situations.

A comparison is apropos: if one were to call Robert Wilson's theatre, the 'theatre of images', does the 'theatre of sound' exist and is it in turn a potential partner of this image-theatre as well as of the more traditional spoken theatre? This question may be answered in the affirmative when the composer liberally approaches music as the organization of sounds (specifically made in relationship to images and dramatic texts) while constantly working in collaboration with the direction team and with the actors as far as the non-visual portion of theatre is concerned.

Theatre is perhaps the oldest of all the art forms to be discussed here. It might be called the toughest nut to crack for today's composer as any musician with theatrical experience, especially in larger theatres, will know. It is most fascinating to see how little music has found its way into contemporary theatre with the exception of well-known musicals and the twentieth century equivalents of the operette (Brecht's theatre is therefore not particularly modern in this sense). Music has not at all kept pace with the enormous breakthroughs in scene designing and lighting of the past thirty-five years. Most theatre managers, dramaturges and directors - not to mention actors - have never taken part in the preparation of a play during which time the composer participates in general interpretation, specific execution (vocal techniques) and, of course, musical (sound) elements. This leaves the composer with the above-mentioned problem of trying to find a common language with which to communicate with his colleagues while attempting to free music from its rote of *musique d'ameublement* or just a number of songs. Once this common language is found, a slow, tedious but often rewarding process begins (theatre work is not for today's Bachs and Mozarts who enjoy completing orchestral works weekly).

Personal experience has demonstrated that smaller theatres with relatively low budgets are more interested in 'taking risks' experimenting with music and

drama. Alas, many of these theatres are not equipped to take on the challenges of producing and mixing multi-channel works complex enough to 'furnish' and 'feed' a particular dramatic work. When it does prove feasible, a great deal of possibilities arise which are not always present in a large hall (for purely acoustical reasons: relative proximity of speakers, the creation of a more 'intimate' atmosphere, and so on). Larger theatres generally offer a better technical potential, but often have all sorts of taboos, for example where loudspeakers may (not) be placed.

Then there is the question of the public. Personal experience has again demonstrated, ironically, a much larger 'tolerance' of as well as appreciation for new sounds and music from a general theatre audience than from the equivalent music public. (I am not referring here to the small circles already close to modern music.) This openness is surely due to the marriage between sound, image and dramatic action, the goal of any composer working in the theatre. While perceiving visual elements, the viewer discovers different meanings for (abstract) sounds, something often found to be (too) difficult in non-visualized music.

An important choice for composers potentially interested in music for the theatre is that between artistic globe-trotting and a monogamous bind to a single ensemble theatre. This choice is important, especially early on in this period of 'tradition-smashing', because doing work in several cities in several theatres entails introducing the audience to new music in theatrical contexts with almost every new piece. (A theatre which already possesses an experimental musical tradition is indeed hard to find.) Those who participate in several productions in one house often acquire respect for having added something to that theatre's artistic content; expectations are raised and music can thus become a fundamental part of many of that theatre's productions. Until now this has remained the exception as most theatres do not have a sufficient number of directors who are open-minded enough to maintain a music-drama continuity. Most musicians are therefore left leading a gypsy life. Teams such as Glass and Wilson, who have collaborated several times, are most important. The more such pairs work together, the more understanding will be developed within the theatre world, and the greater will be the available audience.

Another interesting question, which is by no means unique to the theatre, is the recycling of music composed for one specific production. If music is so integrated within a given production, can it have any use elsewhere after the theatre group has terminated its run? Suffice to say that each composer has his own answer to this question; fortunately, the answer is not a uniform 'yes' or 'no'.

Theatre is one of the oldest audio-visual disciplines and one of the hardest to enter. Contemporary music is the underdeveloped child of the theatre, but will inevitably gain in importance as its technology and aesthetics are fused to those of the other disciplines present in this richer (in terms of subsidy), better visited (than contemporary music) branch of the audio-visual arts.

— Film

The state of modern film may be said to be similar to that of contemporary music as far as the deep divide between the more popular and the more experimental is concerned. There exists a special circuit of experimental film houses, museums and festivals. Even those often considered to be 'art films', which are indeed sometimes shown at commercial film theatres, are mainly of a literary nature; new visual and sound techniques are almost always of lesser importance to these so-called art films.

There is another important parallel with music. We have seen an enormous increase in terms of technical potential in recent years (think of recent Hollywood science fiction spectacles). Yet how many non-commercial composers have had the opportunity to apply this potential? Happily there are some important sound hunters in recent film history, not the least of whom was Tarkovsky.

This division between very large and very small audiences dates from early film history. Composers like Satie and Antheil made music for the silent films of Clair/Picabia and Léger. Antheil, along with Copland, later landed in Hollywood as well. With the Antheil/Preminger partnership, a much larger public was reached than with his infinitely more interesting *Ballet Mécanique*. There is, of course, a rich history of film music, which has led to the tradition of elegant, safe music produced for today's popular films. However, the number of *sound* specialists for (experimental) films is fairly small and consists to a large extent of film makers, who have themselves (like MacLaren), made a hobby of working with sound.

A number of questions raised in the theatre and music discussion above are of course equally relevant to film and will therefore not be repeated. Suffice it to say that making movies, especially those for a large public, is an exceedingly expensive venture in which few (commercial) risks are taken. The (financially poorer) experimental film is in contrast quite different as it is based on the aesthetic, and therefore commercial unknown. As long as the gap between the two remains so large, the audio-visual composer will most likely have to restrict himself to the above-mentioned relatively marginal circuits.

— Video

Video, like film, is an art of modern times, an art made feasible through the availability of electricity. In the early years of cinema, an experimental mood prevailed; everything was new. Television, being younger than the movie, has seemed to skip the early experimental phase and has become in general an even more commercial medium. Video art is younger still. It was born of the necessity to apply the potential of video technology without being dependent upon commercial (or state) television demands. The experimental freedom evident in the works of (among others) Paik is perhaps a sophisticated variation of that present in early films of Man Ray or Buñuel.

Video is a potential best friend of music as there are several points of

intersection in recent image and sound technology. The word synthesizer, for example, is not solely applied to music. Earlier video artists either simply recorded existent music on the sound tracks of their tapes (like today's video clip) or tried to add home-made sounds themselves. In other words, a tape of images was made and music was then injected later or, conversely, the music recording presented the basis rhythm for the later mounted images.

The exceptional video works were first made by the multi-artists, such as Kagel, the Vasulkas and Paik. Recently, new credits have been popping up in video art. Not only are composers named but, alternatively, new specialists known as 'sound organizers', 'sound designers' and 'sound dramaturges' are listed as having co-realized a video work, and thus partnerships comparable to those between composers and playwrights are slowly but surely gaining ground.

Due to video's youth and enormous technological dynamic, this may very well be the most powerful discipline for the audio-visual minded composer. Works *a due* are being made more and more. The sound studios in video studios (like film) are in general of excellent quality and manned by technicians who, by the nature of their work, are at home in merging sounds and images. The only aspect which may be difficult concerns the problem that arises when video tapes are shown on television or on small monitors (at video centers). When the high quality sound track(s) are not heard through high quality speakers, one may see beautiful images and hear low fidelity sound. The technology exists, but one is never sure whether a good sound system will be available. For the fortunate few whose video pieces are shown on television one is, of course, certain of inferior sound quality in most private homes. (A good sound technician does attempt to account for both possibilities while preparing final copies of a new video work.)

Due to the growing success of video art (audio-visual studies are being offered in a growing number of countries), video artists are finding new collaborators from other disciplines as well. Video is being used more and more in dance and in staged music works. Very important, too, is the young genre of video theatre in which music almost invariably plays a major role, thereby adding depth to Artaud's theatre space.

A final word concerning television: video art has not had an easy time sharing the television medium with Dallas and weekend sports programs. This will of course change to an extent as society's discontent with television seems to be growing (at long last). Nevertheless, while television is the medium with the most viewers, it is not necessarily always the best method of disseminating video. The problem of the reception quality has been mentioned. Many video installations and high resolution video tapes being created these days simply cannot be presented like the 8 o'clock news. Videothèques, the equivalent of the movie theatre, are beginning to appear here and there. They will at least be able to present works as the makers desire. The composer able to work at 25 images/second (MM 1500) is invited to join in developing this younger art form.

— Traditional disciplines

This title refers specifically to the modernization of two genres, opera and ballet. The first coexists today with what is called 'music theatre', 'performance art', and others. The latter coexists with modern dance and the newer dance theatre.

So far most attempts to find an experimental equivalent to opera (the stage genre of music) have originated from that small minority of musicians who have talents in the visual arts: examples include Kagel's famous *Staatstheater* and Anderson's one woman performances. In both cases a good deal of the non-sound ideas were thought up by the composers, themselves.

More and more composers are considering making staged works in which music plays the central role. Few have had success. Why might this be so? Most likely, the primary reason is the high cost of organizing such works. Composers are in general low-budget artists. Opera is ultra-high budget art. Reputation and perseverance are the most likely roads leading to the realization of such works. Perhaps there will be more of such undertakings when composers have proven themselves within the organization of theatrical and video works, both of which belong to much more expensive art forms than the world of the string quartet or even the symphony orchestra.

In any event, newcomers should be warned if they have illusions of making large-scale staged works without a stage reputation. Kagel never even restaged his highly controversial, if not successful, *Staatstheater*. The ability to create such works must be seen as the climax of many years' labor within the world of staged music. (Operas for traditional ensembles form the exception as they of course are commissioned with some regularity. Yet how many of these new operas might one truly call experimental?)

The story of modern dance is a totally different one and is in fact one of the most gratifying audio-visual genres for today's experimental composer. The story may begin with Diaghilev, with Graham, with Balanchine, and accelerates with Cunningham. How many contemporary composers have had the opportunity to collaborate and thereby participate in the many successes of the latter choreographer? (A positive sign is the growing number of such collaborative efforts currently in France.)

Throughout the world more and more choreographers decide to use a broad selection of (electro-acoustic) music and soundscapes for their new pieces. Many of these choreographers have a considerable renown, many of their pieces are performed for months on end in large performing spaces. Other than a few dance (theatre, film, video) critics, there are not many spectators who seem to ignore the music they are hearing. In fact, in the author's experience, some electro-acoustic works not originally intended for the dance seem to acquire an added dimension of depth when performed as part of a choreographed work. Better yet are the pieces written for the special desires and needs of the modern dancer.

Dance and music have been partners in all periods of history, in all world cultures. It is therefore no wonder that modern composers who have worked

Dance and music have been partners in all periods of history, in all world cultures. It is therefore no wonder that modern composers who have worked with choreographers have been able to profit by ages of experience. What is of particular interest here is when the composer and choreographer (scene, lighting and costume designers as well) work together so that all forces of contemporary dance can merge.

A special development within modern dance is noteworthy, that of the birth of the dance theatre (e.g., that of Pina Bausch). It is in this branch of modern dance that all audio-visual possibilities meet (film or video is often used in performance). The composer with some dance and theatre experience has an important voice in dance theatre because of the dramatic as well as dance-accompanying role that the music usually plays in these works. Dance theatre is a young art. There is room for a great number of pioneers here.

— And also Hörspiel/radiophonic works

This last category theoretically does not belong in this article at all. Nevertheless, it is included for two reasons: its historic relevancy and its advanced state of development and appreciation.

Before television existed, radio plays were so rich in sound that one could 'see' the piece. One can speak of audio-visual art without images. In the early phases of this history, few experimental radio plays were made which stressed contemporary experimental music techniques. *But*, the enormous amount of knowledge needed in order to allow small pieces of wood to sound like the entire Soviet army led to the art of the 'bruiteur'. Given the tradition of the important role given to these sounds within radio plays, the request was made at the French radio in the late nineteen-forties that led to the birth of musique concrète. Today radio plays obviously occupy a much smaller role in the media world, but radiophonic art has (perhaps unexpectedly) not diminished.

Radio stations such as the WDR3 in Cologne have successful weekly programs for experimental *Hörspiele*. In this way contemporary artists from various branches have been able to learn and develop this genre. Musicians have played a very important role in radiophonic history and have thus helped in widening new music's boundaries.

The radio play improvised with sounds in a much more sophisticated fashion than Varèse did in his earliest scores. Had he had the knowledge of the bruiteur, the technical resources of the radio of the thirties and the interest, his *Déserts* and *Poème électronique* might not have been his first and only works in which he truly organized sounds. Radiophonic art is audio art with an often implied visual level. It is a fascinating discipline which, after its rebirth in the late nineteen-forties, has been dynamic enough to continue to grow in quantity and quality with new ideas and technical resources. It is the closest art form to 'pure' music presented here and is therefore a great training ground for musicians who hesitate to jump immediately into the lion's den known as theatre or cinema.

III ... AND THEREFORE

This entire text might have taken on a more manifesto-like character in which the author analyzed experiences and specifically described various technical breakthroughs in these audio-visual disciplines while fighting for the 'cause'. But participation by experimental musicians in audio-visual art is not at all a cause. It is instead an important broadening of the spectrum of new music in terms of content and dissemination. One could be criticized of a certain cowardliness, of not sticking to the holy domain of an audio-only new music, by working in collective teams, perhaps even taking on an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" mentality.

Those who prefer to continue working outside of the image culture should certainly continue to do so. Those willing to take the risk of participating in an evolution from within are invited. A continuing coexistence of 'pure' and audio-visual music? Obviously. Collaboration between experimental musicians and visual specialists? Why not.



Dr. Leigh Landy
Institute for Musicology
University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam
Leigh Landy (1951) is a member of the Musicology Department of the University of Amsterdam and is responsible for their experimental music programme. His compositions, including several electro-acoustical works for video and theatre, have been performed in Europe, the Americas and in Japan. Since 1988 Landy has been composer and music dramaturge working for the Dutch National Theatre Ensemble.