Heightening Access and Cohesion within the Worlds of Electroacoustic Music

The promotion of triangulation in creativity, development and scholarship

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Abstract

Celebrating its fiftieth birthday in the late 1990s, electroacoustic music and its associated musicology are very much alive, but not necessarily as well as they might be. This text investigates why musicology is not supporting electroacoustic music adequately making various areas of the field relatively unaccessible. Its focus is the notion of triangulation, that is, investigating whether intent and reception (or application) coincide. Its thesis is: if triangulation were to be increased in all aspects of electroacoustic music, the communities' work would become more accessible and, similarly, there would be greater cohesion in its music, research and technological development which would do no one any harm.

1 Contextualisation

This text is one of polemic founded on years of observation supported by the views of several peers and those outside electroacoustic music communities.

At the turn of the century, the notion of "art for art's sake" evolved. Several, by no means all, artists subscribed to this new notion. In the view of this writer, there are too many artists still subscribing to this particular notion at the end of the century. Similarly, although challenged in the late 1960s and 1970s, the analogous "scholarship for scholarship's sake" seems to have avoided retirement. One of the key premises of this paper is that a large percentage of electroacoustic music activities ranging from art-making to research and development exists in isolation, something I have called suffering from an *island mentality*. Many might produce a counterargument that we continue to work within an experimental phase or will always work within an experimental art form implying a need for isolated thought; however, these are inadequate excuses as research in total isolation without any considered relevant application rarely leads to one; it is odd when carefully considered and élitist in any event.

To find our way out of this island landscape, the current paper suggests a substantial increase of the application of triangulation in all areas of electroacoustic music. Makers/scholars/developers need to work alongside colleagues and listeners to investigate whether goals are being met, are in any way applicable/relevant and are being received as such. It is assumed that readers share the common desire that this music and all that relates to it should be (more) accessible to a greater or lesser extent.

1.1 Clarification of Terminology

The word *electroacoustic* is used in its widest sense, that is, referring to any music (including pop music) in which electricity has had some involvement in sound registration and/or production other than that of simple microphone recording or amplification. Its cousin, *sonic art* represents the art form based on sound as its unit measure. For the purposes of this text *scholarship* will be defined narrowly. It refers to the use of the (written) word and associated image facilitating a greater understanding of what we in the electroacoustic community are doing, contextualising this and drawing links between a huge diversity of technological developments as well as musical artefacts and approaches. *Musicology* is the home of musical scholarship.

2 Triangulation

Research methodology in many subject areas allows for some sort of outside feedback to be included. In recent years, particularly in the field of education, the notion of "action research", that is, research which incorporates acquired feedback evaluation of one's own (creative) work throughout the creation of that work and afterwards, has grown in importance (see, for example, Elliott). This process key to action research is known as *triangulation*.

Within electroacoustic music scholarship, in contrast, how many articles and treatises have we read based on an individual's own vision or formalism? Avid readers of texts concerning electroacoustic music will agree that the answer to this question will be located in the ninety plus percentile. In short, triangulation in electroacoustic research is the exception, not the rule.

This imbalance, as there is no other word for it, represents an issue linked to the fact that in many cases individuals stake their claim to an idea, an approach or some such often without adequate contextualisation. More importantly here, this is done without adequate or any feedback or consistent correlation, using methodologies that are often self-referential. It is my belief that without looking into relevant application, reception and, yes, understanding, there is no closed loop. Ironically, Arts Councils, at least the one in England, expect evaluations to take place throughout a funded arts project. (Arts) Research Councils seem to be well behind in this respect.

One need not conclude that we are wasting our time producing the scholarship (or music or technological developments) that we are producing. What is being suggested here is that triangulation might contribute to debates concerning the pertinence/applicability of our work, and furthermore that the intention/reception loop should be investigated where relevant.

2.1 Islands vs. Continents

At events including ICMC meetings I often feel that, in many papers, posters, and even during concerts, specialists are more displaying than sharing their wares – talking *at* their public more than talking *with* them. Why is this so? Partially this is due to the nature of such gatherings. More importantly, many such offerings are provided with little or even without any handle for others to grasp on to in terms of relevance, potential and/or more general use.

Experimental work such as ours is often wrapped in a "this is a first step towards greater things" wrapper. This is fine whenever the potential greater things are not only suggested, but also contextualised. My maxim is: if I don't know why I'm executing a particular project, whether practice or theory-based, I shouldn't do it. (Several years of community arts work makes any other working practice impossible in any event.)

Still, what I have called an island mentality is too often present. Although there are signs of the percentage diminishing, this is not being handled as aggressively as it might. By applying action research in small circles, island clusters – that is small groups with common interests and goals – can be formed. This is perhaps an odd or ironic

notion in the (hopefully) latter phases of post-modern individualism. When clusters evolve into larger cohesive units, access in the forms of greater appreciation, interest and understanding is more feasible.

We needn't all create the same music, nor research the same procedures. This is simply an extreme reaction to current practice and is no longer viable given the diversity of taste. What we do need to do is contextualise what we are working on in terms of current and potential future contexts. To do so, we should acquire feedback from others to confirm not only whether our intention or message is coming across, but also to gauge how successful we are in terms of our own set goals.

2.2 Triangulation in Greater Detail

Given the allocated length of this article, it is not possible to offer lengthy "how to's". What is more useful here is to indicate the breadth of types of triangulation, and where they might best take place. For convenience I shall briefly investigate three areas in this section: music-making, scholarly research and development.

Music-making: I have documented in many a publication that it is easier to articulate the "what" and "how" of our compositions than the "why", that is, the dramaturgy of music. Yet without the "why" triangulation cannot take place. As will be mentioned in section 3.2, we seem to be very much fascinated by the formalisms of our music and music research. This is founded in education where formal discussions are easier to teach and to mark than what is sometimes thought to be subjective waffle. However, the reader is reminded that the element that makes many a piece of music work successfully is that which does not completely adhere to rules or structures.

Whatever the quantity of formalism, the "why" should be formulated before a work is commenced if the maxim above is to be adhered to. It then is tested and evolved during the creation of the work and evaluated once a work is completed unless the work is of a dynamic nature and can be continuously developed. Triangulation can and normally should take place before, during and after (if that is an appropriate description) the devising or composition process. In other words, outside feedback can already be sought during a conceptual phase and at appropriate intervals throughout a work's construction.

Is this a new form of bureaucracy? Certainly not, but it is instead an excellent form of quality control that should be part and parcel of any work for those interested in getting off their individual islands.

Scholarly Research and Development: These two tend to operate similarly in terms of chronology.

Both are based on proposals, both tend to involve testing hypotheses, both need to apply methodologies, and both envision certain types of outcomes/end products. (In fact, this is true of music-making as well although the vocabulary may seem inappropriate.)

An increasing number of researchers are, indeed, following this chronology including feedback during every phase of the process. The feedback informs the further developments of the project in question and also forms part of end evaluations. It ensures closure of the intention/reception loop as well as desired applicability. How this takes place specifically can vary from quantitative data through the use of, for example, formal questionnaires to qualitative data acquired in a manner deemed appropriate by all participants.

Who is involved in this feedback? This may vary based upon the level of previous knowledge needed for appropriate evaluation. For a project which is completely *entre nous* in one of the electroacoustic music communities, only specialists in relevant fields may be called upon. Anything for public use should involve just that, the public – whomever they may be.

3 The Musicology of Electroacoustic Music

It might have been sufficient to restrict myself to the introduction of triangulation in this article, as that is the key point to be made; however, it turns out that access never happens within a vacuum. With this in mind, triangulation should take place within an appropriate research framework. The source of research frameworks for electroacoustic music is electroacoustic musicology which, after fifty years appears much younger, or at least inexperienced (there are far fewer people doing this work to start), than its partner, electroacoustic music practice. Clearly, developments leading to new algorithms, software and hardware protocols, just to name a few, belong to the wide area of musicology, as does experimental composition for that matter. However, as scholarship was somewhat narrowly defined above, musicology is its home here. Electroacoustic musicology is where sharing knowledge about its music in the past, present and even future (potential developments) takes place. It has historical aspects, it is primarily an area involving system, but it also includes a socio-cultural axis, all of which are hugely important in terms of access and understanding.

3.1 Historical Electroacoustic Musicology

I have written about this subject at some length in Landy 1999. The major conclusions in this article now follow. History is often presented in a technology or theory-based wrapper. Too much emphasis is allocated to the first major theories (e.g., Schaeffer, Eimert). Too little emphasis is given to: a) updating/evolving such theories, and b) making these (updated) theories relevant to the problematics of today's music world. Finally, there seems to be only a small number of new theories (see section 3.2 below) that have made as great an impact as those ca. fifty years old. It is concluded that this does not reflect an ideal situation.

Three constructive proposals were presented in this article:
• Take relevant aspects of systematic electroacoustic musicology into account for relevant support,
• Attempt to merge musical developments with the technological where pertinent, and
• Attempt to create one single history, i.e., the pop and contemporary music versions of history should fuse into one entirety.

This final point deserves particular emphasis as the current paper is concerned with access. If we accept the notion of an island mentality in terms of a good deal of music-making, research and development, the parallel in historical discourse and a good deal of teaching is the separate treatment of electroacoustic 'art music' and pop music. Yet has this art music and pop music always evolved separately? This is only true to an extent. Most readers will be aware of the interpenetration of technology as well as musical approach in these two – not totally independent – musical worlds. Affordability of equipment has made all electroacoustic music-making more accessible, the technology base suggesting a more common tool box, that is, instrument collection (e.g., the commonly used sampler) than there was twenty to thirty years ago; there has also been a convergence of musical approach to some extent. Why, then, these separate histories?

Let's illustrate this briefly. Apparently sophisticated electroacoustic approaches to techno are accessible. Is this music that much more accessible than most other forms of electroacoustic music? To answer this question, work in the perception and reception areas of research (see 3.2) is needed as well as research involving (pop) music as a cultural phenomenon (see 3.3). Is a good deal of our music relatively unknown due to where it is produced, how it is "marketed" and how it is shared? Or is content a driving factor?

3.2 Systematic Electroacoustic Musicology

Systematic musicology is a bountiful basket of most anything that is not historical or cultural in the first instance. It represents the area of greatest treatment traditionally within electroacoustic musicology. This comes as no surprise.

Electroacoustic music is a music of technology. Technology is associated with science, science with formalism, formalism with system. Ironically, education in the arts, particularly music education, seems to appreciate system as well as university and conservatoire students are treated to structure, grammar and formalisms generally more than anything else. They are expected to continue these traditions as well in most instances. Where technology can often lead musical thought in electroacoustic music (I apologise, but this *is* often the case), formalism seems to lead in the broad areas of systematic electroacoustic musicology. (An elaborate list of these areas is presented in Landy 1999.)

The immediate translation of the above paragraph is that many of us in the worlds of electroacoustic music are searching for a pure science based on an art of application. But is that indeed what electroacoustic is all about? Clearly a good deal of system is inevitable in any music and scholarship, but is this what makes either strong? Music is founded on structure and should always remain so, but it is also an interplay between rule and exception. Granted exceptions cannot be identified without rules; nevertheless, I believe that systematic electroacoustic musicology needs to confront and embrace both. It is in fact the fusion of quantitative and qualitative information.

Critical musicology, a branch of the world of critical theory, is demanding this merger which is a good thing. It is demanding that intention and reception be brought into a loop of investigation. This loop is indeed the foundation of triangulation.

As previously stated, much current systematic electroacoustic musicology belongs to the vast individual island territories sketched above. If we are to better appreciation and understanding, it is suggested that research include the following:
• A statement of the intended relevancy of any research outcome. This could emphasise the "why" of the project or at least contextualise it,
• The use of an action research model or at least the inclusion of some sort(s) of triangulation as part of any project, and
• Applicability/linkage with regard to any outcomes.

As an aside please note that it is fairly absurd how traditional musicologists have kept as far away from electroacoustic areas as they can. In consequence eleectroacoustic musicology is still relatively weak in terms of analytical tools and procedures. This type of sectarianism might be said to be harmful for music in general. If this were not the case, new useful research models could be devised through collaboration and investigations of best practice through comparison could take place serving common goals. The "them and us" of musicology would become increasingly past tense.

3.3 Ethno-electroacoustic Musicology

The combination of developments in electroacoustic music and the sonic arts represent the greatest revolution in music history. I am by no means the first to claim this. This in turn has led to the emancipation of the sound as unit measure of these overlapping arts fields. The latter half of the twentieth century is focused on technological revolution and emancipation. Why, then, has the impact of this music been investigated so little? In an age of "tuning out" sound as we are overdosed with it due to noise pollution, muzak, and general noise virtually anywhere, how does the music of sound raise/alter our awareness? What are the implications of this total redefinition of music?

Furthermore, children seem to be totally at home with their Game Boy algorithmic electroacoustic audio-visual music-makers. They are in control of their compositions. What does this mean, not only in terms of reception and appreciation, but also in terms of instrumental dexterity? In fact, what does the re-presentation of sound in musical contexts offer us in terms of new forms of communication?

We have a good deal to learn here. These questions concern essential fundamental information about the role of music in our society. By the way, ethno-electroacoustic musicology is *the* branch of electroacoustic musicology in which triangulation is unavoidable. Research here is urgently needed.

4 Where Do We Go from Here?

Almost ten years ago (see Landy 1990) I spoke at the Glasgow ICMC conference on access issues. One of them concerned the distance between survey literature and difficult academic publications. Nine years later the problem remains to a large extent, that is, there has been little work published in the vast area between these two extremes. This relates both to research and development. Music, not surprisingly, has its parallels here as well. I believe that if triangulation were more universally applied, this problem would disappear within the foreseeable future.

What is (y)our preferred path? Islands? Island clusters? Critical mass? Access? It's all up to us.

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