

Absorpsjon og resonans - lyd og mening

Absorption and Resonance - Sound and Meaning

Where Does Sound Art Fit?

By Leigh Landy

The hills are alive with the sound of sound art (with excuses to Julie Andrews). So are train stations, even museums and galleries. The problem is that our society at large doesn't quite know what it is, who makes it and where it can be heard (and seen). Even specialists, when confronted directly, often come up with their own personal views on the subject as there seems to be little consensus as to what sound art actually is. This brief article looks into some terminology issues that surround the term and makes an attempt to place it within the musical art form as well as within a broader cultural context.

In the year 2000 I reviewed two German publications simultaneously¹, a book and a CD-Rom. Both titles included the word *Klangkunst*. In the former case, it clearly meant sound art as is being proposed in this exhibition and thus in this volume. The latter, however, included a translation that used the term (rightly, in my view, given its contents), sonic art. In short, German, like Norwegian, has one word for both terms and I am aware that some other languages do as well. But what is sonic art and how might it differ from the *nom du jour* sound art? Before attempting to define them, let's look briefly at sound art's cultural context and the reason why our terms, most of them at least, related to sound art are so fuzzy.

¹ Helga de la Motte-Haber, (ed.) *Klangkunst: Tönende Objekte und klingende Räume*. Volume 12. *Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1999; and CD-Rom DEGEM-01 *Klangkunst in Deutschland (Sonic Art in Germany)*, 2000. The review appeared in *Organised Sound* 5(3): 191-194.

Not defining sound art

This brief tale begins in the previous century where, for better or worse, art was turned on its head and, as we approached the turn of the millennium, an "anything goes" attitude was accepted in terms of art and its content. Amongst a choice of potential starting points, perhaps the words of Edgard Varèse ideally serve the current discussion. Unsatisfied with the then current view of what music was, he suggested an alternative: music was "organised sound". The implication of this radical vision was that any sound could be used as musical material, similar to the later development where any physical movement could serve as potential material for dance. Halfway through the 20th century both *musique concrète* with its use of everyday sounds to construct musical works and *elektronische Musik* with its use of synthesised electronic sounds came into being. Today's *electroacoustic music* is a much-used term to collect anything that has roots in both.

Of course, one of the consequences of these new forms of music was the fact that notions of structure, musical building blocks, and even space were also thrown wide open. The making of this new music of sounds was as exciting as it was challenging and, to an extent, is still continuing today over half a century later.

So much for history, as that is not the subject of this short article. What has happened to the terms that have just been introduced? Let's look at them individually, investigate how they relate to sound art, and see how things have, indeed, become anything but clear as far as terminology issues are concerned.

Musique concrète has been replaced largely by the term *acousmatic music*, which essentially means that you cannot see the source of what you hear. *Musique concrète* was doomed in terms of a long shelf life for a variety of reasons; we can restrict ourselves to two here. Firstly, music made solely of this material, that is, without electronically generated sounds, became restrictive. Inevitably, the two were fated to meet as Varèse was referring to all sounds in

his definition. Furthermore, *musique concrète's* founder, Pierre Schaeffer, wrote an accompanying body of theory that placed a further restriction on the use of everyday sounds. He called for reduced listening, a situation where the sounds' source and cause were to be masked as it were. So what were the composers to do who were keen on having their sound sources recognised, such as those focusing on the sounds in our everyday environments? Did they need another name for their music? There are at least a dozen terms today for music focused on the use or re-use of everyday sounds; some remain vague whilst others are extremely well defined.

Other than in German, *elektronische Musik* has a historical flavour as it has a time frame, place and a method (post-war serialism) attached to it. Its equivalent in other languages, *electronic music*, can mean one of two things: music made with synthetically generated sounds or it is a synonym for *electroacoustic music*.

Electroacoustic music, as said, is a catchall term for what is described above. I once defined this word as follows: "Electroacoustic music refers to any music in which electricity has had some involvement in sound registration and/or production other than that of simple microphone recording or amplification". This definition can be found on the ElectroAcoustic Resource Site along with three other definitions which are by no means identical. (See: <http://www.ears.dmu.ac.uk/spip.php?rubrique125>.) In my case, I can easily see music with roots in popular music genres as fitting neatly under this umbrella term. Others, however, believe that this music falls under the traditional category of art music and must exist on a fixed medium (hard disk, DVD or the like).

Before leaving terms that include music or are associated with music, there are two more to join our cast of characters. *Electronica* is a word of more recent vintage and is often used in the context of electroacoustic popular music often related to dance music. For our purposes *electronica* is more commonly accepted as being related to laptop performance and recent genres

such as glitch, noise music, lowercase sound and the like. Where some associate electroacoustic primarily with pre-recorded music, much, but not all, of *electronica* can be performed live.

My favourite on this list is the one that really is ready for the rubbish bin, namely *computer music*. Some of the music described above was made before computers were a household name; most today is made digitally, but fear not, there are some do-it-yourself composers who still use analogue technology inventively. That's not the main issue, though. A meeting of people involved with computer music brings together musicologists, musicians, engineers, music psychologists and the like. Cognition experiments are discussed alongside computational syntax discussions of Bach in between concerts of works made using computers. This is wonderful in terms of eclecticism, but is useless in terms of describing a body of music.

So now we finally visit the first two terms mentioned above, namely sound art and sonic art. Let's start with the easy one, *sonic art*. In the review of the *Klangkunst* publications, I defined sonic art as "a time-based art form that uses the sound as its basic unit". This raises one thorny question immediately, namely, if notes as we know them from traditional music are a type of sound, do they have a place in sonic art? Given my broad view of what electroacoustic music embraces, it would be contradictory to suggest that notes cannot be used in sonic art. However, it is important to note that the rationale behind traditional music is not the foundation for sonic art. Trevor Wishart has called the basis of the music of notes "lattice-based thinking". This focuses on discrete pitch, time durations and dynamic symbols. The nature of sounds other than notes, on the other hand, can lead one to thinking spectrally, in terms of continua, in terms of real-life environments, etc., not necessarily in terms of metre, chromatic pitch and the like. The one issue with the term sonic art, besides its not having a clear translation in some languages, is the use of the word "art" as opposed to "music". We shall return to this issue in a short while.

In my view, *sound art* is a subset of *sonic art*. Most people would agree with me that *sound art* is organised sound that is not made for the concert hall in the first instance. I have known many people who consider *sound art* as organised sound made by artists, that is, not by musicians. I reject this statement as anyone can make *sound art*. It may take the form of a sound installation or it may involve performing objects in an alternative space or even letting a space "speak for itself". It may be sound-based work made for radio broadcast or for online collective creativity. The term should not be confused, however, with site-specific musical performance. I am thinking, for example, of works made for instruments, traditional and uncommon, on boats or in a natural setting or even contemporary works made for a carillon to be heard outside. I suppose what we're looking at is sound sculptures/installations - some of which may be interactive and involve the public - as well as sound-based as opposed to note-based performances. *Sound art* is often presented in public or communal spaces, whether it be in an outdoor space in a neighbourhood, in a gallery or virtually. *Sound artists* also normally have a particular context in mind whilst making their work in contrast to music in general. We shall return to this aspect later on.

Like all of these terms, *sound art's* inherent interdisciplinary nature plays an important role. *Sound installations* are obviously a hybrid art form with roots in both fine art and music; new media *sound installations* involve various forms of technology as well. Some believe that sound-based work within interdisciplinary audio-visual contexts, such as new media video, should be included. Even some consider text-sound composition, that is, works based on innovative recordings and/or performance of the human voice as a form of *sound art*. Many audio-visual and text-sound works are performed in concerts nonetheless. And so we have reached another point where clarity would be helpful. All of the above is *sonic art*, but the key to *sound art* is, in my view, that it is normally made for a particular context beyond the traditional concert situation.

You may wonder whether *sound art* and *sonic art* fit nicely within electroacoustic music. There are two reasons why this is not an exact match. First of all, one can avoid the use of electricity (or a similar source of power) in *sound* or *sonic art*. For example, a sound installation made of glass and metal objects is not specifically electroacoustic; it is acoustic *sound art*. Furthermore, electroacoustic music works do exist that are mainly focused on lattice-based thinking and therefore focus on new timbral forms of musical notes. It is for this reason that I favour what *sonic art* stands for above electroacoustic music, as the combination of the sound sources and what you do with them is what holds this body of work together. However, there is one major issue still to be tackled, and this, too, will not necessarily add to this article being able to offer a clear picture on the subject.

Is sound art music?

The fact is that Varèse continued to write primarily lattice-based works (with exceptions) after coining the phrase "organised sound". It is the combination of John Cage's open-mindedness and developments in fine art, music and technology that led to the existence of *sound art*. Those two items discussed in my review both made links to music. The book was part of a 20th century music series; the CD-Rom was distributed by *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and was a product of the German society for electroacoustic music, DEGEM. One might conclude from this that *sound art* and *sonic art* are both part of music. If only things could be so simple.

As stated, 20th century and, in particular late 20th century history demonstrates a great deal of contemporary music, as well as work in other art forms, being led into the margins of society. There are still, today, many people who would have difficulty placing the first work of *musique concrète* from 1948, which included the sounds of casserole lids spinning on a table top, as music. Some would say the same about works by John Cage from the same era. The marginalisation of the arts has been a worrying subject for me during most of my career and

must be at the back of most artists' minds when they work. Ironically, sound art is one art form that can easily form a bridge to a much larger public. Before addressing this exciting opportunity, we need to discover whether sound art is music after all.

The answer to this question is simply in the ear of the beholder. It is pretentious to tell an unwilling public that a given sound installation is music when they themselves don't see or hear it that way. Whether it is music or not does not influence appreciation; it does aid people in the ability to place or classify things. The revolutions in music thus call for good lobbying, better education and patience. I, for one, have subscribed to the notion of organised sound being music and see all sonic and thus sound art as music. The terms, however, are their best enemies as far as this particular discussion about music is concerned. Why weren't they originally called sonic music and sound music? (These terms do not sound very attractive; clearly some people cleverly decided to avoid the "m" word.) Does this mean that all sound works are not music or, alternatively, that all music forms part of sonic art? Both suggestions are rather absurd. What I do believe is that all note-based music and sound-based music (or art) both form their own entities.

What is being suggested, therefore, is that there is such a thing as a *note-based paradigm of music*, something that all people with the ability to perceive music are well acquainted with. Similarly, and this is an idea I have published about recently², I believe that a *sound-based paradigm of music* (or of art, depending on personal preferences) also exists. Paradigm is a trendy term, but it is useful in demonstrating the ability to bring knowledge together neatly into a structure. Knowledge in this case has to do with aspects related to

note-based and sound-based music's construction (for example, material and structuring processes), theory and the listening or perceptual experience. There are common points between the two paradigms as well as huge differences. Consequently, I have coined the term *sound-based music* as an alternative term to sonic art as a means of identifying this large corpus as belonging to music. I accept that some see this more as sound-based art, and therefore I am happy with the existent term, sonic art, for those people. Nevertheless, I experience this separation of sound art from music as artificial and prefer to see sound artists as people creating an interdisciplinary musical art focusing on the sound as their building blocks. One consequence of the acceptance of a sound-based music paradigm is the ability to challenge norms; for example, our reliance on the separation of art and popular music might be largely irrelevant when discussing sound-based works thus situating sound-based music within its own spectrum as opposed to spectra inherited from the note-based world. Sound artists are often keen to challenge norms as well. One such challenge is where the artworks are to be presented, when and how. The key challenge that sound art proposes is a socio-cultural one that is very important in terms of this placement discussion, as it is already helping to pull sound-based artistic work out of its largely marginal position.

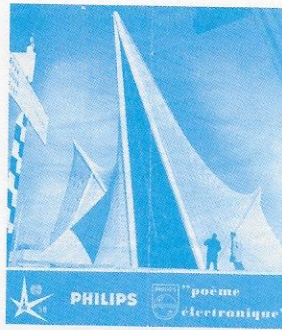
Social functions of sound art

The 20th century not only saw the rise of art consumption (as opposed to appreciation) alongside the marginalisation of some of its contemporary forms; it also saw many norms challenged. Where should our experimental ventures with sound take place, when and for whom? Are the rituals of the past ideal for today's artistic manifestations, or is the search for new modes of sharing the artistic experience worth investigation? It must be admitted that certain works, regardless of art form, of 20th century art were simply too complex, too out of the ordinary for a large public to be able to identify themselves with. Simply stated, a consequence of art for art's sake was the loss of communication with a mass public.

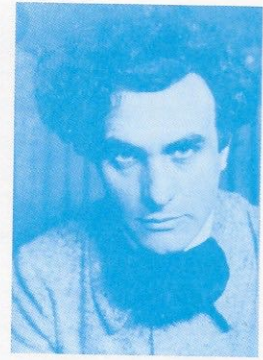
² See, for example, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press and *La musique des sons / The Music of Sounds* Paris: Mint/Sorbonne (distributed by Éditions Zurfluh), both published in 2007.

Fortunately, there is a positive side to this story. One of the many aspects that characterize sound art is the maker's desire to create links to the real world. This can be discovered in a large percentage of sound artworks. This allows an inexperienced member of the public the opportunity to make connections, something many contemporary artworks do not offer. Another means of making connections that sound art is associated with is that many sound artists make works for a specific context. A context often infers a particular public; community might be a better word in this case. Making connections is a means of allowing listeners and viewers the opportunity to create a relationship with a work and eventually gain an appreciation for it and ideally an understanding of it as well. The distance between artist and public is being reduced in other ways, too. Today's interactive forms of sound art allow the distance between the makers and the recipients of art to be reduced. In such cases participation can lead to appreciation and eventual ownership of artistic content. This is something that has been lacking, for example in difficult contemporary music works that are often heard only once by a listener. In this way, sound artists can be as experimental as they wish - and most are highly innovative - whilst building bridges between a particular public and an artwork. If someone were to take the trouble to define sound art, I would hope that the link to daily life, the focus on context and, by implication, community would be included.

In sum: sound art forms a key part of sound-based music. Sound art challenges norms and tries to connect art with the public often by making connections between art and our day-to-day existence thus allowing experimentation with sound to become a normal part of life. It is an art aware of its context and its public. Future sound artists might just help lift sound-based music out of the margins and into that train station or those hills where there will be an interested public of more than just a few people looking forward to new and challenging work, much in contrast with the lot of most contemporary composers.



From the Phillips pavilion at the World Fair, Brussels, 1958. Le Corbusier constructed the pavilion, and the music was by Edgar Varèse, who coined the expression about music being organized sound.



Edgard Varèse