

The Sound or Music
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As a long-time resident of the new-musical lunatic fringe I have spent more hours than I care to count addressing earnest audience members who want to know, “Is it music or is it sound?” A curious question, when you come to think about it. After all, virtually all music *is* sound and after John Cage we are also led to believe that all sound is (or *can* be) music. So the distinction seems an odd one, like asking “is it painting or is it oil on-canvas?” And yet, however tempted I might be to snap that “if you are standing in a concert hall, holding concert tickets and concert programs, it is music!” I know that the confusion is real, though perhaps poorly articulated. What people really want to know, I think, is whether what they are hearing should be understood as representational (sound) or abstract (the traditional domain of music).

To realize how habitual this distinction is, we have only to consider a film soundtrack. The typical soundtrack has three distinct parts: dialogue, sound effects, and music. Dialogue conveys the narrative of the film, and it is the element we are most conscious of listening to (though it is not essential -- look at silent film or subtitling). The effects track gives us sonic representations of the real world -- footsteps, screeching tires, babbling brooks (whether genuine, Foley or synthesized) which intertwine with scenery, costume and lighting to place the film convincingly in the physical world. The musical score is neither narrative nor representational, but evocative. It doesn't tell us what is happening, just how we should feel about it.

There are obvious practical reasons for this troika construction -- dialogue, effects and music are created and recorded separately, and they frequently peeled apart in later life when the film is dubbed, or edited for your in-flight entertainment. But the division goes deeper than mere convenience: the fact that nothing about the arrangement strikes us as odd is an indication of how closely the language/effects/music construction mirrors how we think about our aural experience.

Traditionally, music in Western culture has been understood as a non-representational medium. In contrast to painting and sculpture, music has rarely attempted to depict the world outside the concert hall. This absence of representation has, in fact, provided music with its claim to spiritual superiority over the visual or literary arts. Soaring above the mess and clutter of physical objects and human conversations, music, we are told, speaks directly to the soul. How does it manage this? Through a combination of psychoacoustic factors (the 2:1 frequency ratio of the octave, for example) and acoustical symbols that are internalized in toddlerhood. Thus, in the Western world we experience harmonic resolution as satisfying; a minor key as sad; an augmented fourth as tense; a string tremolo as nervous excitement.

There have been exceptions to this rule of abstraction -- composers from Biber to Messiaen have mimicked battle scenes, birdsong and other sounds of everyday life -- but these have been understood as novelties, entertaining eccentricities on the order of the squealy brakes in *Leader of the Pack*. And always, the representational novelty has been subordinate to an overriding “musical” -- that is, emotionally evocative -- purpose.

More commonly, music has represented other music. The underlying structure of established musical forms rests on the ability to repeat and alter musical material -- theme and variation. And composers have for centuries nicked famous motifs -- from each other, from their predecessors, from traditional folk songs -- trusting that the audience would recognize both the iconic status of the original and appreciate the cleverness of its new clothing.

But then -- and this is where life begins to get confusing for contemporary audiences -- came the advent of recorded sound, which did two important things. It gave composers the ability to *repeat* -- not merely imitate -- the sounds of the world; and it transformed performed music from a memory into an object. After centuries of transcendent abstraction, music now had all the trappings of an iconographic art form. It could now make direct and explicit reference to real world events; it could employ sonic images of iconic status, and it could become an object of iconic recognizability. (James Brown's signature grunts -- instantly recognizable, implicitly unscorable -- are one good example).

The effects of this are clear when we go to the movies: there you see the louche detective entering the speak-easy, a jazz band bubbling in the background. We understand instantly that this is part of the effects track, put there not to guide our emotions, but to place the scene chronologically and stylistically. We hear the music in iconographic, not musical, terms. But then the music swells in volume and fidelity; it ceases to be mediated by the acoustic environment of the club, with its haze of clinking glasses and smokey chatter, and moves to the acoustic foreground of the cinema loudspeakers; it becomes music. A swelling tremolo gradually overtakes it, and we interpret this instinctively as a sign of inexplicit danger. Both the band in the speakeasy and the tremolo in the cinema are technically music, but only one is understood musically -- in abstract, not representational terms.

John Cage's watershed composition 4'33" provides the audience with a difficult challenge. The performance is divided into three sections by gestures that do not produce any sound, thereby focusing the listener's attention on the sounds occurring naturally in the immediate environment -- fabric rustling, chair-leg scraping, door creaking. The fact that it is popularly known as his "silent" piece indicates just how often people fail to hear these sounds at all, much less hear them as musical. The perceived distinction between musical and unmusical sound would appear to lie not in the sounds themselves, but rather in the act of presenting (or representing) them: a *musique concret* composition consisting of the same sonic material that appears in a typical performance of 4'33" would be more easily accepted as a piece of music because the presence of tape indicates the intentional production of sound -- evidently music must be *made* as music, not just heard as such. But Cage's challenge, thrown down like a gauntlet, to hear representational sounds *musically*, to fuse the tracks as it were, has altered the face of music.

Subsequent to 4'33", we have Robert Ashley's pieces of the late 1970s consisting exclusively of dialogue, presented as music; Alvin Lucier asking us to hear abstract sounds *representationally*, in what Stuart Marshall called "music of signs in space;" and LaMonte Young performing "visual music" by feeding a bale of hay to a piano (*Piano Piece for David Tudor #1*, 1960).

The flickering of attention between two different modes of perception has always been of deepest interest to me as a composer. It strikes me that, just as

music has traditionally held our attention by shifting between dissonant and harmonic moments, a similar fascination could be managed in our recording-rife world, by suspending our ears between the tension of discordant modes of perception, which only briefly resolve into something familiar and knowable.

In *Devil's Music* (1985) fragments of live radio broadcasts were sampled, looped and "stuttered" in live performance. Partly due to the limited amount of memory available on affordable samplers at the time, and partly from compositional intent, the samples were very short -- under one second. A pop music fanatic might be able to identify a top ten hit from such a glimpse, while a total outsider might at most perceive its genre, but the average listener drifts between a nagging awareness of the source of a sound and a resigned appreciation of its new context -- between listening to Chic and Nic, as it were. In the process of jockeying multiple samples a text might be assembled, in the style of a *cadavre esquisse*, from different stations and languages, and its meaning would change as the samples shifted phase relationship. Just when one had relaxed into a sensorial sea of shifting sound, out would pop the briefest flash of a news report, a familiar voice, a James Brown grunt; the iconography detectors in the brain would light up, but before the fragment could be placed in meaningful context, it was gone again, slipping from icon to sound, from sound, to music. The meaning of *Devil's Music* lies in the very uncertainty of its components.

In the 1990s I did a number of pieces that revolved around spoken texts, texts that were chosen for their *sonic*, as well as *narrative*, properties. Stories are told, and various technologies translate the words into music: in *Sound For Picture* (1993) the strings of "backwards" electric guitars are resonated by speech, transforming the harmonic spectrum of the phonemes into a melody of undulating overtones; pitch-to-midi converters extract rhythmic or harmonic accompaniment from the rhythm and infection of the text. The narrative provides the linear framework for each piece, but words and music are equal in the mix, so that the audience's attention is constantly shifting between the two.

With *Still Lives* (1993), I accompanied text with a modified CD player, which could scratch slowly through recorded music, in this case ten measures of a canzona by Giuseppe Guami (1540-1611). As the CD steps from one isolated, looping fragment to the next, the continuous counterpoint of the canzona is suspended in wobbly harmonic blocks, and the "horizontal" intertwined melodies of the original are heard instead as "vertical" chords. The sense of suspension is heightened by a live trumpet which, mimicking the timbre of the early instruments, anticipates and retards phrases from the Guami score. But pelting alongside these overtly "musical" sounds, is the insistent digital click of the CD skipping "error," which sounds, unmistakably, like the malfunctioning machine it is. At one and the same time, the audience is asked to listen to a narrative, to the self-referential "effects" of the machine, and to "re-hear" modal music in the context of later harmonic models, which is essentially how most people perceive early music anyway, through ears washed by years of hearing the functional harmony of later classical and pop styles that dominate our musical world. The text, by Vladimir Nabokov, describes one of those unassailable moments in childhood when one felt assured that time could stand still.

In 1992 Ben Neill and I undertook a rearrangement of David Bowie's "Five Years" (1972, on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars.*) We had noticed that its lyrics were dominated by allusions to sound events ("I heard telephones, opera house, favorite melodies..."), mostly of a cinematic variety. We dubbed the Bowie record onto one track of a multi-track [recorder] and then dropped in an appropriate sound effect for each lyric reference (ringing telephone, audience applause, music box). Given the density of these cues, the effects grew into a multi-voice "counterpoint" of everyday sounds. One measure of the shuffle drumbeat of the song's intro was looped to create a rhythmic underpinning. The original song was dropped prior to the final mix, so instead of hearing our work in a cinematic mode, as an effects track synched to Bowie's narrative, it became a stand-alone musical composition -- a sort of pop-ish *musique concret* built around an inaudible, but nonetheless somehow perceptible, skeleton.

Sound or music? The answer, of course, is yes.