

Gilding the Dukatenscheißer:

Objects in sound and sound in objects

Lecture by Douglas Henderson on 1.Juni 2010, 18:00 in the sound studio of the HBKsaar, E-Haus

I'd like to talk about some of the major concerns in my recent works, to give some history of how I arrived at some principal questions, and to show how they resolve, or how they don't.

I can date my arrival into the category of "sound art" to an intensive workshop at the *Centre de Creation Musicales Iannis Xenakis* in Paris, July 2001. Some of Xenakis' ideas were presented, specifically his interest in the "extra-imaginary", which is to say, that which lies outside one's imagination. We can imagine everything that exists, and we can imagine a number of things we might like to bring into existence. Xenakis said, more or less, "that's great, but if I can imagine it, it is already finished. I am more interested in how I make the things that I cannot imagine". It is not an idea unique to Xenakis, but it was the first time I understood this concept, and it changed my way of working profoundly. Xenakis proposed structural solutions to the problem: invent an interesting process that will produce *something*, but never try to influence the result. Once you have this new something, you can judge it, and use it, or throw it away. Cage could be said to share the intention of the extra-imaginary, although his solution was to use random selection. Xenakis, and to some extent Boulez were making *process art*. This had not been done in music, outside some hazy Dada experiments, and for me it was new information.

My response was to use architecture as a structure for music; to make the space, location, movement and shape of sound the primary consideration. I would employ multiple speakers, and every acoustic trick I knew, to try to suggest physical forms in space. The needs of this sonic holography would dictate all choices in the composition. This worked very well, generating not only a progression and manipulation of sounds that I would never have imagined together, but also there was this remarkable, invisible physical object, made entirely of vibrating air. I realized that I was no longer so interested in how my pieces sounded. I was concerned with how the sound looked. At the same time, I was reading Morton Feldman's writings in which he described his music entirely in painter's terms; most of his friends were painters and their techniques gradually worked their way into his compositions and his thinking. Likewise, after a short time, physical objects started working their way into my compositions, and the idea of musicality was increasingly abandoned in favor of new ways of looking at time, space, relationships with audience, and sonic phenomenology.

The good side of Modernism: interest in the future. I find this attractive. I am no modernist, but I take this aspect of the movement seriously. We are surrounded by the past, and the semiotician's inescapable present. From these materials I am most interested in driving everything into the future, in a sort of ironic Hegelian optimism. I don't see this as "progress", nor do I have any foolish idea that progress is inherently good. I see here a method which leads to another set of

things that can be brought into existence; and which, if they are successful, can exist outside of time.

Realistically I am trying to build on some things I have enjoyed and to push them into a new place. Alvin Lucier has many pieces that describe phenomena, sometimes quite poetically, and always in a close, minimalist relationship with a specific sonic curiosity. For example, "*I am sitting in a room...*" in which he records his voice, then plays it back again in the same room, then re-records, and re-records for several iterations, until his voice is lost in an accumulation of room tones and acoustic feedback. He also has pieces exploring the spatial behaviors of pure sine tones, and so on. I like these phenomena, and I want to move some of the ideas forward. I want to *employ* the phenomena rather than present them; I want to mix them, and to lead them into jungles of meaning and form. Alvin's work is lovely, and important, and as time rolls along we have to keep working on these things, because otherwise they remain only a potential, living in a whirlpool of Minimalism. When you get your hands on these things and start to use them as plastic material, then they enter into a dialogue with the culture, which for me is where it starts to get very messy, and exciting, and very hazardous.

The materiality of sound fascinates me -- how a sound passes from a literal representation (once it is recorded), into a plastic material subject to manipulation, and then returns as a referent with a new meaning attached. So, the physicality of air pressure variation (or space/timbre/amplitude, or whatever you want to call it) is critical in my work. And it also rests on the powers of invocation, from a phenomenological perspective. I am playing with both the materiality of sound and the meaning attached to the material -- so in many ways this is an evolutionary development of Pierre Shaeffer's *Acousmatique* works. Shaeffer wanted to remove the meaning from the sound entirely so that we could hear it as pure acoustic material. By clipping off the first milliseconds of a sound, we no longer distinguish the source. The human mind establishes the identity of a sound in the first 40 milliseconds; identifies it and then moves on, usually ignoring the body of it. So for example if I record a door closing, and cut the first 40 milliseconds off, I cannot recognize the remaining sound as coming from a door. It becomes an unidentified sonic object. Shaeffer wanted to open the ear and he needed to have this detachment from meaning to teach us to hear differently. Now, thanks to that lesson and some sixty years of electroacoustic music history, I can build on the concept. I can return to the source material with new ideas on how to present its full signature, formal and political, and I can play with its cosmogony as well.

Some techniques:

I have developed a somewhat neurotic urge toward multiplicity. When I make recordings, I never make just one, I usually repeat the action or wait for it to be repeated 60 or 70 or more times. Sometimes I throw out all but one or two recordings, and sometimes I use them all in a form of synthesis. I discovered that by layering dozens of similar recordings, which is to say, playing them back simultaneously, the original action disappears, revealing a harmonic structure and a progression of forms. There is a threshold of identity as the recordings build up. The smallest details are amplified exponentially, while at some point the original source is lost. I think of a comparison to painter Chuck Close: Chuck takes dozens of abstract squares and combines them to form a figurative portrait -- I take dozens of literal recordings and combine them to make an

abstract gesture. This rather time-consuming process has one clear advantage -- the result is an entirely new sound, immensely complex, but somehow familiar, or perhaps plausible; as if it somehow occurs naturally. I have spent a great deal of time with purely synthetic processes, in both analog and digital domain, which are capable of making spectacularly new sound worlds. However, these invariably sound alien, otherworldly, and often artificial. I am looking for new worlds that seem related to our own, or that sound somehow *real*. These are the new sounds that will be able to resonate psychologically, and will be capable of invoking a conversation with the culture as a whole.

I was studying some paintings by Pieter Breugels the Elder, and thinking about his *metamorphs*, creatures he has invented by melding human parts with parts of animals or objects. I realized that this is very similar to some of the sound manipulation techniques I have been working with, for example “convolution”, a way of imprinting the frequency characteristics of one sound onto another, and also in simple mixing techniques, using various forms of distortion, equalization and speed changes to make two dissimilar things occupy the same spectral space/time. This reminds me of the “realness” of Bruegels’ inventions. In these transformations, I find psycho-acoustics to be very important, particularly on the psychological side, and perhaps phenomenology is the better word for this, following the work of Gaston Bachelard. These are transformations that result in “believable”, yet new, sonic actors, but only when careful attention is paid to the psychological aspects of the initial sounds. I want to make a piece about cold; then I must somehow engage in a psychoanalysis of coldness. In general I work with “base” materials: I don’t go off to Antarctica to collect the sounds of calving icebergs. I go to the refrigerator and rattle the bottles, or crack some ice cubes. It is in the sounds nearest to us, the ordinary events that we process daily, that the heaviest psychological power is harnessed. This is the area in which metamorphic sound is transmissible, in a heightened surrealist manner, where, as Louise Milne said, “This is different from anything available to visual surrealism, where a drawing can be viewed as a rabbit or a duck, *but never as both simultaneously*.” In these constructions, a casino full of people can be made to walk around on two legs, and to appear as a waterfall in the same instant. Convolution is one of my favorite ways to work this sort of magic, but it is only a technical means, and has no power unless it be through the choice of source material.

Within the sound composition is a physicality and possibility of suggestion that satisfies, yet it is still somewhat trapped. Now that I can “see” sound, I also inevitably notice where it is coming from, or rather *what* it is coming from, i.e. a speaker. This is present even if hidden, it is a distraction from my aesthetic experience, unless I find a way to include it. So now I want to try to make the speaker a deliberate and not accidental focus, and addressing it as sculpture, as a broadcasting object, putting it in the frame as an icon of some sort, opens a large door indeed.

For example, I have a sculpture of a duck, with a speaker inside it which makes the sound of a duck. Looks like duck, quacks like a duck, must be a duck. In fact this is not very interesting, I am hitting the same nail with two hammers. But say I have a duck that makes the sound of a thunderstorm -- now I am well on my way to poetry. I now have a puzzle, a resonance within the imagination, which must be resolved by the viewer. I have also, with the simplest means, met the basic variables of surrealist imagery: hybridity and scale. The duck sounds like a storm, it is a

hybrid image. The storm is too large for the duck, the scale is disproportionate. By making this simple alteration we are already on a very large stage; hybridize the duck, hybridize the storm, and the world is open, the possibilities increase exponentially. The ability to retain some control over this immensity, to communicate something other than utter chaos to the viewer, becomes more difficult, and this is the challenge and pleasure of the artist's vocation.

For myself, the play between the visual and the audible is at the heart of the richness of "sound art". There are many great artists that favor one or the other; for me, the form comes alive when I can feel these things working in equal measure, where they cannot in fact be separated. I would like to walk the thinnest, most treacherous line between sound and image, so that the sound colors the sculptural armature in precisely equal balance to the way in which the visual image frames, informs and supports the sonic energy. So while the sound composition for my work *Dukatenscheisser* can stand on its own as a piece of electroacoustic music, it becomes sublime and even shocking when played out of its physical manifestation, a tower of gold covered sewer pipes; the sculpture provides a startling reference, which then becomes a part of how the sound is perceived, and vice versa. I feel that I get closer to this balance, to this equality, with each new piece. And the closer I get, the more explosive the potential energy of the work becomes.

Despite all these formal and conceptual concerns, people, the viewer/audience/public, are the first consideration for me. Each piece starts with the people who are in it, who will be a part of it by virtue of witnessing it. Everything is woven around this first thought. If meaning first develops as a relationship between two players, then in my work, one of the players is always the public. These objects, these places, these sounds, develop meaning specifically from the presence of spectators.