

Écoute Réduite – a wrong turn in the history of electroacoustic music?

Keynote talk – NZEMS 2009 (2 September 2009) Auckland

Prof. Leigh Landy

Music, Technology and Innovation Research Centre

De Montfort University (Leicester GB)

llandy@dmu.ac.uk

www.mti.dmu.ac.uk/~llandy

Abstract In many ways, all non-representational arts have distanced themselves to a greater or lesser extent from their potential public over the centuries due to the fact that art and life have been largely separated. For example, those who have supported the notion of art for art's sake for over two hundred years have been rather explicit about this separation. Nevertheless, most human beings still enjoy and find it natural to make links between the artistic and lived experience.

The inclusion of the sound as potential musical material has not only led to new and radical forms of sound-based music making, but also to the opportunity for life to become part of music. This talk focuses on the impact, perhaps unintended, Pierre Schaeffer had when he coined the term, *écoute réduite* and considered it to be of importance in terms of the success of what is known today as acousmatic music. An opposing view is presented, namely that of the use of real-life sounds across the innovative sound-based musical spectrum, primarily those genres employing electroacoustic or related new media approaches. It will be suggested that sampling is one case where musical experimentation may actually lead towards increased appreciation and artistic participation in new forms of music making. Regardless of this suggestion, the talk's aim as evidenced in its conclusion is one of synthesis, not opposition.

Preface

One of the *idées fixes* throughout my career has been my fairly lonely attack against today's reality of many contemporary artists working their way into a corner due to a lack of connection with a public larger than that of their peers. It is almost as if artists are actively working towards various art musics' own demise. Things need not be so gloomy, however. This talk will take advantage of my view that through sampling some forms of musical experimentation may find greater access than has been achieved by a good deal of contemporary 'academic music' around the globe. The reason for this is sample-based music's ability to connect with human experience, that is, in the sense of using 'recycled' samples from the real world.

The discussion will be structured as follows. It will commence with some thoughts regarding the relationship between art and life, both historically and in terms of today's art making to set the context. Then I shall investigate some perceived tensions between reduced and what I call heightened listening. The section that follows concerns music as 'organised samples' discussing issues related to sample-based work which may lead some of you to believe that I am taking sides, but this is only a step towards the talk's conclusion which is one of synthesis.

The key focus of this talk, as it is in my scholarly and artistic work, is that of 'sound-based music'. This term is defined as follows: sound-based music typically designates the art form in which the sound, that is, not the musical note, is its basic unit (Landy 2007a, 17). One may query why notes are being excluded here and, also, why the more common terms electroacoustic music and sonic art are being ignored. To cut two long stories short, it was proposed in this book and its successor (Landy 2007b) that sound-based music possesses its own paradigm, as does note-based music. This paradigm is highly associated with that of other new media arts and takes into account both poietic and esthetic aspects. The reason to avoid the two more widely used terms, discussed in my two recent books at length, has to do with the term, electroacoustic music being used inconsistently and also its inclusion of certain note-based works. The issue with sonic arts is that the term can be used as an excuse for works to be considered not to be music, a view that leaves me feeling uncomfortable.

The discussion will privilege the reception of sample-based works above the often-discussed areas of construction, tools and channels of dissemination. The reason for

this is that reception offers us links to lived experience, cultural impact and consequently access.

Art's relationship to life— contextual discussion Anyone studying ethnomusicology or anthropological aspects related to the arts will discover that in traditional societies art objects and performance have often both been directly related to life. Two short examples should help. The griots of Mali have sung their villages' history for years. Villagers know these stories and share in this form of communal music making. In traditional societies functional household objects have been made to look artistic as part of the ideal of the attractive home. This being the case, Paul Hindemith's term, *Gebrauchsmusik* was by no means a new concept; it was instead one being given a new meaning.

Throughout the centuries, and not only in Western societies, higher art forms were created. These art forms sometimes, too, linked content to function, but not always. A former colleague once suggested that in the middle of the last millennium artists started to become artisans, that is specialists in a single art form often dissociating their work from a specific purpose. The large-scale embrace given to art for art's sake is where the dissociation increased significantly.

According to Iredell Jenkins (Jenkins 1974, 109), Benjamin Constant first used the term, *l'art pour l'art* in 1804. She states that: "[T]he significance of this movement lies in the insistence that the work of art is an autonomous and self-contained entity; its meaning and value are exhaustively contained in its material and formal being" and adds: "It is not he who does or praises art for art's sake who must justify himself, but rather he who would assign to art any values, or judge art by any standards, other than those that are intrinsic to it" (ibid., 110). Art for art's sake seems to represent the polar opposite of the object of our discussion, namely that of art having something to do with lived experience.

And then there's the subject of commercial art becoming a consumer product in the last hundred years totally redefining the link between art and life, but that's another story for another day.

The astute listener will by this time have classified me as a right-wing representational artist. In fact, nothing is further from the truth as will hopefully become clear. Still music is an abstract art and has always been so. So why am I suddenly turning this into an issue?

Music, though abstract, has always been able to connect with its audience due to its familiarity/its connection with the past *plus* its novelty. Things start to change much more rapidly in the last century, in particular its latter half. This was good *and* bad: good due to the huge horizon of new possibilities; bad due to things becoming so diverse and often intangible for a larger public, thus marginalisation was inevitable. So this is not about abstraction per se, but it is about *making connections*, my something to hold on to factor, for example.

Let's discuss the work of three painters to exemplify this. Many of Andy Warhol's paintings, for example his Marilyn Monroe series, used realism as a means to create a popular yet experimental art form. Familiarity combined with icons of daily life being re-presented as art works force the viewer to confront Warhol's tilting reality ever so slightly. In the case of the melted pocket watch of Salvador Dali, we see a surreal or impossible yet almost realistic image. Familiarity combined with objects becoming unfamiliar through the surrealist approach make it comfortable (familiarity) and uncomfortable (the impossible aspects of the work) at the same time thus demanding the viewer to react to it. The action paintings of Jackson Pollock move us on to total

abstraction. So how do people find a means of connecting with his works? Some will seek something real in these images (especially children). Others will try to imagine what led Pollock to act in this way, for example, the pressures of mid-twentieth century life. Regardless, people seek a means of connection to be able to relate to this type of work.

Let's translate these descriptions to inexperienced listeners' experiences of sound-based music. It fascinates me, when working with people who have little experience with the experimental arts, to notice how they try to understand what they see and hear through lived experience. This is true in the arts in cases ranging from reacting to a Pollock painting to commenting on an acousmatic composition in which a Schaefferian *écoute réduite* listening strategy is envisioned by the composer. Still, similar to an acquired taste (and I would suggest that acquiring a taste for reduced listening works without connections to lived experience is more difficult than regarding non-time-based works), one *can* learn to value abstraction for abstraction's sake and why not? The only 'why not' in my case has to do with my *idée fixe* of *making art accessible to a larger, that is, more optimal audience*, thus to people who have yet to acquire that taste. This leads us to the issue of marginalisation, a subject I've focused my writing (and my artistic work) on for about twenty years. When Milton Babbitt (in)famously gave a 1958 article the title, "Who Cares if You Listen?" (Babbitt 1958), the panic button should have been pressed.

The moral to the story thus far is perhaps that the shift by many artists to the extreme that art for art's sake represents has made it most difficult for a more optimal potential public to be created for a good deal of innovative contemporary music as links to lived experience are by no means guaranteed. As said, things are never black and white, but discounting one's potential public beyond peers totally, making a break with the intention/reception loop normally related to music, has been the key catalyst of contemporary music's marginalisation.

Écoute réduite vs. Écoute augmenté: I would like to commence this section with an anecdote. A former Master's student of mine was born visually impaired. When his year group was discussing reduced listening with me he said, "I must have heightened listening to survive. Otherwise, I will not hear the obstacles I confront wherever I go. I consider this form of listening a natural human behaviour." He added a significant remark, namely that reduced listening is something people need to learn to achieve; I would add that they also achieve this when tired or not paying attention to detail.

Many acousmatic composers and, more recently, electronica musicians have been influenced by Schaeffer's ideal of reduced listening. (Think, for example, how little information electronica musicians offer on their CDs and websites.) Yet I would like to make a distinction between these two due to the more or less constant marginalisation of the former and an associated popular cultural context, club culture for the latter. Many interested in noise music and the like have not had to discover it by accident; thus there was some affinity with its *raison d'être* when opting to go to electronica performances. Does this have to do with the fixed medium vs. live debate, or is it simply the fact that one thing led to another for many electronica enthusiasts? Perhaps 'more traditional' acousmatic composers can learn something from electronica artists.

Music is, in my view, about two-way communication, isn't it? Thus some means of making connections are needed. Or are we to accept the post-modernist credo that the work no longer belongs to its maker once completed? I believe that people, particularly listeners new to a particular genre, generally desire or even need things to

hold on to. If that something is not related to a musical lineage, there are alternatives as I have discovered in two projects that I have led over those two decades.

The Something to Hold on to and Intention/Reception projects Two of my projects have been hugely important in terms of my better understanding of the issues surrounding marginalisation and appreciation. In the 1990s I worked on an empirical project that led to a paper held at a conference at City University in London and subsequently published (Landy 1994). What I wanted to discover were musical aspects that might aid inexperienced listeners in terms of navigating their way through timbral, in particular, electroacoustic works. I found a finite number of ‘things to hold on to’ and mapped these onto works that were readily available on CD at the time (some offered several items to hold on to). A significant number of pieces that I reviewed had none and, in general, this matched my expectation that they were ‘difficult works’. The composers I spoke to about my findings were generally aware of each aspect of their pieces that I had identified. After completing this project, I have added that the dramaturgy of a work, a composer’s intention is yet another thing to hold on to.

The Intention/Reception project (see, for example, Landy 2006 and Weale 2006) is a project that originally focused on two goals, the latter of which is most relevant to this talk. The empirical testing in this project involved listeners ranging from inexperienced to highly experienced to listen to selected electroacoustic works. The first goal was to discover to what extent electroacoustic works that included at least some identifiable sound material might be accessible to inexperienced listeners. The results of this were startling in the positive sense and are what might be considered to be ‘lobby fodder’ for those wanting the communications media and educators to give this work more attention. The second goal was to investigate to what extent the inexperienced listeners were aided in terms of appreciation based on their being drip-fed dramaturgic information (a title, a composer’s compositional intention). The overwhelming majority found this information useful, thus proving that, beyond their potential appreciation for this music (discovered *before* dramaturgic information was provided), that being informed of a composer’s thoughts aided the experience of appreciation.

I would now like to move on to what I call sample-based music as here we have something that is still quite new in many ways, yet it can and often does offer links to lived experience.

Music as organised samples

Paul D. Miller (also known as DJ Spooky that subliminal kid) has written: “Sampling is a new way of doing something that’s been with us for a long time: creating with found objects. ... New contexts form from old” (Miller 2004, 25). Miller is of course referring to samples taken from music work primarily, but I am of the view that this remark also holds for real-world sound sample and thus we might speak of both music-based and sound-based works in which sampling is the primary form of collecting sound sources. The fact that sounds are being recycled raises a fascinating issue, namely that of the relationship between tradition and innovation.

Innovation/tradition Larry Polansky, focusing on the transformational aspect of sample-based music, has called it “music as verb, not noun” (Polansky 1998) underlining its inherent innovative nature. Yet, in describing what I called music-based music, Chris Cutler has written that it “radically undermines three of the central pillars of the art music paradigm: originality (it deals with copies), individuality (it speaks only with the voice of others), and copyright (the breaching of which is a

condition of its existence)” (Cutler 2004, 143). Simon Waters, looking at sample-based music has written: “Sampling has an uneasy relationship between tradition and innovation incorporating the archival instinct of the former and the speculative and exploratory influence of the latter” (Waters 2000, 64). Yet are these problems in terms of the current discussion? Perhaps this pair is just what we need, namely, to be innovative whilst using something from a tradition that we can hold on to due to the listeners’ relationship to the content. Other than those producing what Kodwo Eshun calls ‘unidentified sonic objects’ (sampling’s reduced listening equivalent), many sample-based artists do want their sources to be identifiable. Tara Rodgers has suggested that: “The historical and cultural circumstances of a sample’s source, and the politics of its reconfiguration into ongoing, evolving sonic environments ... are ... essential to how sample-based music is interpreted” (Rodgers, 2003, 319). Thus samples may be used due to musical as well as cultural referential qualities (ibid., 313); this is of great importance in terms of the ability to make connections by way of the listening experience.

Sampling and the listening experience Clearly we can listen to sampled works both regarding their relationships to source and cause as well as their more musical/sonic relationships; in other words we can listen both musically and contextually, sometimes flip-flopping within the same work. This is dependent both on the composed and/or performed listening intentions of the maker(s) and the listening strategy of the members of the audience engaged with the music. I would suggest that, contrary to the single Schaefferian ideal, the reality of sound-based music is that there are often multiple means of listening including contextual listening, something most uninitiated listeners tend to prefer as was clearly evidenced in data collected for the Intention/Reception project. In terms of the listener’s quest towards making connections, contextual listening in sample-based music is one means of allowing life or, better said, lived experience to be part of sound-based art.

This leaving the choice to the listener to engage with sounds, experiences related to sounds and how sounds are placed in a musical context as well as the sonic quality of the sound organisation is in a sense a synthesis between the views of two thinkers whose names resemble each other, Schaeffer (reduced listening – listening without reference to source and cause, that is, listening purely to sonic qualities as opposed to content) and Schafer (clairaudience – clear hearing, aural awareness of the environment), the latter representing the point of departure for the contextual understanding of soundscape compositions as desired by many of their makers. The ability to listen differently is an incentive to discover a work more than once, something becoming increasingly rare regarding new innovative pieces given the huge volume of work available. The ability to identify narratives related to sounds as well as to the sonic experience, both of which can lead towards different forms of meaning and aesthetic reaction, is a key to making sound-based works accessible.

Convergence/Categorising sound-based music Let us return to our discussion of the context of the reduced listening issue. I am uncertain whether Schaeffer expected with this vision that his *musique concrète* or *musique acousmatique* would become another esoteric form of art music. He never really engaged with this issue to the best of my knowledge, although where and how the work was performed seems to suggest an art music attitude regardless of the roots in radiophonic art. Certainly, with some clear exceptions, many people in his circle ended up participating in the art music world, which has suffered from marginal interest for decades in most of the world.

That was then. What about now? I have written in my recent books that it is my belief that sound-based music, including sample-based music, can have roots in one

tradition but may not need to be classified as art or popular music. I am bringing this up, as I believe that one of the frustrations sound-based music has had to suffer is the lack of clear placement within the musical spectrum. The key word I would like to use here is *convergence*. The development of sampling culture and the technology that supports it has been a key catalyst in terms of the convergence of approaches and tools that are related to sound organisation by musicians with roots in both popular and art music. Although one may speak of the technological developments preceding the invention of the DX7 as favouring art musicians, due mainly to cost, and post-DX7 developments to the popular market, it is the arrival of the sampler and associated affordable tools that took this music technology to a wider group of artists. Many of these tools are of use to musicians regardless of their backgrounds. These musicians are currently sharing newly developing means of treating sounds. Some of these treatments have parallels in the visual new media arts. But tools, means of treatment and of construction form only part of the tale of convergence. Convergence can also be related to the listening experience in much of today's sound-based music and thus it has wide repercussions.

In my recent books, I proposed a sound-based paradigm (or supergenre for those who detest the overused 'p' word). One of the key findings in the research that led to this proposal was that a good deal of sound-based music in fact transcends the traditional art/pop music divide. What holds the music together is the engagement with sounds. Let's look at an example that transcends the art and pop music divide, John Oswald's music-based plunderphonic pieces. His sources include both art and popular music artists, but what is the finished product? With a wink of an eye to the original musical sources, he makes something that fits within his own sound universe that can be placed alongside works of electronica artists, electronic music composers and sonic and sound artists. He is one of many in-between category artists in the sense of how his music maps onto very few radio broadcasters, most likely only having a home in a late-night slot where odd musicians are allowed to have their say. As the internet permits us to have many more broadcast channels than our analogue and even digital radios and televisions can handle, things become a bit more interesting and more homes for the dissemination of sound-based music can be expected in the not too distant future.

Yet the fact that this is not yet the case may have its reasons. I have often discussed this through seeking some form of 'co-hear-ance' amongst sound-based works. This quest remains a challenge today, but why?

One issue I've often spoken about is the odd state of sound-based music's *genres and categories*. Looking at the ElectroAcoustic Resource or EARS Site under 'Genres and Categories', those related to sound-based music cover a huge range from acousmatic music to turntablism. What is of particular importance here is that most words on the list represent *categories*, not *genres*, that is, you can't necessarily hear what belongs to them. This is true regardless of whether one is referring to composed or improvised concert music, immersive environments, computer games, sound installations, interactive virtual music production and so on. Yet to offer access, associating a piece of music with a term related to the listening experience must be useful. This flies in the face of postmodernist individualism, but is very important in terms of aiding people who seek new musical experiences. It is my view that the addition of terms related to the listening experience equivalent to traditional musical genres will help listeners in their quest to find sound-based works of potential interest to them. This is, in a sense, a second phase of access after the initial one, offering access to new listeners by way of connections with lived experience.

Still, it has to be said that Schaeffer's reduced listening works have indeed led to the broad genre of acousmatic music, much of which follows his credo to a greater or lesser extent and has led to what might be considered a new musical tradition. Some find this a good thing as a critical mass has formed around this ideal with some offshoots offering some contextual beyond reduced listening. Others have complained that the music has lost its innovative concentration being ridden with sonic clichés. I do not plan to enter that debate today, as it is not that relevant to our discussion. What is relevant is that it does represent one of few genres that have emerged. My issue with this music is that it remains a bit of an acquired taste and therefore is often not that accessible to new listeners. If that does not bother the musicians, so be it. This is, however, the reason why I claim this to have been a 'wrong turn' historically, as it has been a serious hindrance to facilitating access to a new, hugely radical form of music equivalent to the highly construction-based focus of early electronic music in Germany. Neither took means of access into account.

So to summarise: my gripe concerning music based solely on reduced listening is that it has led to reasonably inaccessible music to new audiences. Fortunately, there are many exceptions; our tale is not black and white. Had Schaeffer allowed for both contextual listening and reduced listening thus not avoiding audible source/cause relationships, I believe that greater access to the music would have occurred earlier. Nonetheless, acousmatic music has made a major contribution to the co-hear-ance issue, although it remains the acquired taste in general that it has always been.

Developments related to the sound-based music paradigm have had, thank goodness, ramifications for so-called academic music. At the research centre where I work, our students, staff and invited artists span a very large realm of sound-based music. The word, eclectic, is used often as concerts may jump from glitch to Hip-Hop to the presentation of an interactive sound installation to an algorithmic sonic work. The roots and influences are often clearly audible so that connections can be made. Granted, some pieces will mix note-based and sound-based approaches, and why not; still the ivory tower is being replaced by a large space in which pioneering sound-based work can be created. What we try to convey to our students is the conscious realisation of where their music fits and how it combines the traditional with the innovative, how it is able to offer those important connections.

Etc. It is not either/or, but instead both/and. Dogma has done contemporary music no good for almost a century. I am interested in music that fits within its own paradigm (or supergenre if you prefer) that (also) privileges reception offering us greater co-hear-ance than we've been used to. There is loads of space for reduced listening in sound-based music as long as meaningful connections can be made. This being the case, the digital age offers us interesting opportunities: we live in a new environment in which the sharing of artworks, of source material and of tools is increasingly being integrated into art production and appreciation. This development is challenging the huge music industry and a redefinition of that industry is to be awaited in the next few years. In this environment of sharing, of readily available data and information new means of access to sample-based works are evolving, new forums for discussion, new communities of interest and so on. In short, interest in and new means of development of both appreciation and active participation are developing. Once educators at primary and secondary levels finally accept the reality of today's broad musical spectrum and start introducing a selection of relevant types of sound-based music to youths, interest will grow even further.

What we have seen demonstrated in this discussion is how the traditional relationship between art and life largely dissolved in the past and is being reclaimed in a reasonable portion of today's sound-based music. There are always new rituals being created around the globe and some may evolve that are related to this music, not least due to the new means of sharing and dissemination that have just been mentioned.

In short: life is being reintroduced to art in this broad musical corpus and, as a consequence, this reintroduction will take some of tomorrow's experimentation in music out of the margins and into a much more optimal community of listeners and participants. If there is indeed nothing new under the sun, we can always recycle existent sounds, make them new again *and* allow reduced listening to take place as long as it does within a setting that is in one way or another familiar to its listeners.

Bibliography

Babbitt, Milton. 1958. Who Cares if You Listen?. *High Fidelity Magazine*. 8/2 February 1958.

Cutler, Chris. 2004. Plunderphonia. In Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, 38–156. New York: Continuum. (This is an amended version of a text originally published in *Musicworks* 60 [fall 1994].)

Eshun, Kodwo. 1998. *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in sonic fiction*. London: Quartet Books.

Jenkins, Iredell. 1974. "Art for Art's Sake" in Philip P. Wiener, ed. *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Vol 1*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons: 108–111. (This entry was found at an online 2003 edition: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-18> – accessed 21.11.08).

Landy, Leigh. 1991. *What's the Matter with Today's Experimental Music? Organized sound too rarely heard*. Chur: Harwood Academic Press.

Landy, Leigh. 1994. The 'Something to Hold on to Factor' in Timbral Composition. *Contemporary Music Review*. 10/2: 49–60.

Landy, Leigh. 2006. The Intention/Reception Project. In Mary Simoni, Ed. *Analytical Methods of Electroacoustic music*. NY: Routledge: 29–53 + appendix on DVD.

Landy, Leigh. 2007a. *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*. Cambridge: Mass. MIT Press.

Landy, Leigh. 2007b. *La Musique des sons/The Music of Sounds*. Paris: Sorbonne MINT/OMF.

Miller, Paul (aka DJ Spooky that subliminal kid). 2004. *Rhythm Science*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Polansky, Larry. 1998. Singing Together, Hacking Together, Plundering Together: Sonic Intellectual Property in Cybertimes. Paper written for Humanities Research Institute 98, "The Tangled Web". Originally <http://www.the-open-space.org/online/polansky/singing.html/> – unfortunately no longer online.

Rodgers, Tara. 2003. On the Process and Aesthetics of Sampling in Electronic Music Production. *Organised Sound* 8/3: 313–320.

Schaeffer, Pierre. 1977. *Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines*, 2nd edition. Paris: Seuil. (Originally published in 1966.)

Tomkins, Calvin. 1997. *Duchamp*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Waters, Simon. 2000. Beyond the Acousmatic: Hybrid Tendencies in Electroacoustic Music. In Simon Emmerson, ed., *Music, Electronic Media and Culture*, 56–83. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Weale, Rob. 2006. Discovering How Accessible Electroacoustic Music Can Be: The Intention/Reception Project. *Organised Sound*. 11/2: 189–200.