

The Shock of Risk
Hearing Risk in Acousmatic Music

John Young
De Montfort University

Paper presented at the Electroacoustic Music Studies Network Conference
Universität der Künste Berlin, 10 June 2014

jyoung@dmu.ac.uk

It is obvious that in life we engage with risk: we constantly weigh up everyday situations for risk to ourselves and to others—physical, psychological, financial, or reputational. And we evaluate the risks in any activity: we compare the statistically evidenced risk of the mundane act of crossing the street compared to the apparently more alarming risks involved in air travel. In such cases where there are tangible risks, we take them out of necessity or convenience, trusting ourselves, others, or computers to ameliorate them, shielding ourselves from the stress of apprehension. But humans still enjoy the feeling of risk: gambling and sports providing two obvious scenarios, predicated on varying degrees of luck and skill. And, of course, computer games offering reward with high scores but also risk of imaginary annihilation, as in *Temple Run*, whose imagined reality takes place on a winding parapet, pursued by a murderous gorilla. It is on just such a narrow ledge that Camus (1995) visualized art advancing ‘... between two chasms [of] frivolity and propaganda’ adding ‘On the ridge where the great artist moves forward, every step is an adventure, an extreme risk. In that risk, however, and only there, lies the freedom of art.’

An important value of artistic risk is arguably its role in connecting the experience of art with lived experience—it enables engagement with uncertainty where a negative outcome is a recognized possibility. The key word there is possibility—risk can only be felt where the consequences of an action or experience can be anticipated, and in order for there to be consequences, there must be constraints. We may be at risk without knowing it, or we may choose to ignore it, but in those cases the emotive consequences of risk are unavailable to us. Risk, when recognised, has the capacity to become a wider

metaphor for confrontation with the uncertain, the threatening, or a factor in the attempt to attain something desirable ... where attainment carries danger in the form of significant potential for failure and/or harm.

In contemporary artistic contexts, risk is perhaps most readily appreciated through performance: physical or psychological risks taken in the realisation or presentation of a work. In the aesthetic ferment of the 1950s and '60s one could regard theatricalized or embodied risk as an important conduit for meaning: the 'game' metaphor in Kagel's *Match* or in Charlotte Moorman's risk of physical vulnerability (and her risk in confronting perceptions of decency and legality) in Nam June Paik's *Sextronique*. This feeds the enjoyment of performance as spectacle as well as appreciation of the moment-to-moment negotiation of changes in the physical, ensemble or wider aural environment in which the performer operates. In electroacoustic music, this *procedural* dimension is certainly the sense in which risk is most commonly understood. The inherent capacity for unreliability in human/machine interaction leads to situations where computer responsiveness may stop, surges of uncontrolled feedback or dangerous voltages may be around, along with more traditional issues of risk in performance—something may 'break', there is a departure from the 'score' or from what was rehearsed, or a tenuousness is created through extremes of difficulty imposed on the musician.

However, in many performances involving tenuous forms of sound production, as encountered in the post digital world of hardware hacking, we do not necessarily move beyond this sense of procedural risk, where potential for imagining possible sonic states arising from the musical implications of sounds is secondary to some kind of physical interaction with paraphernalia. This can be engaging and evocative of risk as spectacle, but problematic from a musical perspective. Related are the kinds of risks associated with indeterminacy and improvisation. The varying imprecisions inherent in most musical notation bring with them risks for musical realization (as does extreme

complexity of notation). But the problem of risk derived from freedom of action in performance remains if we question how the organisational ethos of chance can be projected in a musical performance. Christian Wolff pointed to this in an observation about an indeterminate work by him for ensemble. The musicians had memorised the work but, as he said:

... I began to get vibrations from the audience around me that they were getting very restive and unhappy and more and more uncomfortable and generally turned off by the whole situation. ... What was communicated to them was the pleasure that the players were having with this material ... but the greater the pleasure the players were communicating in their activity, the greater the frustration of the audience at being excluded from the source of that pleasure ... it was... [a] ... game-like ... interactive situation, and the audience had no idea what was the basis of that and why ... (Fuller, 1987: 188).

According to Wolff, then, the vivacity of performance and the visibility of a communicative exchange were insufficient to convey the chance relationships conditioning the musical interactions. At one level chance offers a high-risk strategy in terms of predictability of outcome, but where the principles of implication are contained solely within the experience of the act of realisation how might the sounds impart a sense of risk: how would I know if I am participating as a listener in a discourse on the brink of failure?

In syntactical terms—the stuff of a musical argument—risk is most frequently encountered in what Jane Blocker (2008) describes as *rhetorical risk* where, aesthetically distanced, it is represented through syntactical contrivance, drawing on a listener's engagement with music as both a temporal and semantic experience— that is to say, the implications of events and possible future predictions and expectations. John Cage (1981) rejected the significance of musical syntax in those terms by drawing a parallel

with dance: suggesting that it matters if two dancers collide because of the risk of physical injury—something to which sounds are not at risk. However if we take the view that sounds carry meaning, and that meanings can be modified and inflected by the presence of other sounds or our treatment of them, then it is perfectly possible to regard a sound as potentially inhibiting the efficacy of another. More pertinently, the musical context we create with sounds is capable of evoking images of risk.

A good example of rhetorical risk in music is the well-known dissonance in 4 bars of the Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony (mm. 280-283). The chord has no immediate context for resolution: if we were to strip it down to either to an A minor triad or a first inversion F major chord then it does make normative sense as either 'subdominant' or 'Neapolitan' to the subsequent dominant 9th chord in E minor. But the orchestration of the E-F semitone dissonance, with its sheer edginess, counteracts certainty of harmonic function. The frozen moment allows us to experience the risk inherent in this ambivalence of tonal implication: risking loss of tonal direction and flow—a pillar of colliding tones rather than simply a momentary harmonic piquancy. Although a logical analysis of the text allows us to rationalise an underlying harmonic logic, this is an indication that Beethoven was composing more with 'sound' than 'notes'. The crucial realisation of this analysis, as I see it, is that this sound pulls itself out of the air of a normative tonal context. But it is because of that tonal context that it works—emerging from a passage of harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity it is a seemingly dead-end and, as a non-sequitur sound object it allows us to experience a powerful sense of risk, opening onto a marvellous musical escape act. In David Huron's (2007) terms, as the biology of pessimism conditions the flight, fight or freeze response, *aesthetic status* becomes invested in risk. Just by way of contrast, the unprepared suspension in the slow introduction to Mozart's Symphony no. 39, though briefly alarming offers, on reflection, less depth of risk—the path we can project from that moment is sensed almost immediately in the passage.

So if we were to agree that a sense of risk is a real and valuable aspect of musical experience, how might we understand risk in acousmatic music? At first glance, this might appear to be a musical domain that epitomises non-risk, certainly of the procedural kind, with music created in the coolness of the studio and committed to the permanence of a fixed medium. Now, procedural risk is not absent if we take into account the whole of the creative process: Experimental risk as we search among signal processing routines for some kind of new sound without quite knowing what will be the results, is obviously part of the acousmatic composer's world. But unless something of that search is invested in a musical argument it remains obscure and ineffectual.

Audaciously spacious uses of time, such as very repetitious minimal content certainly create situations of risk for instrumentalists by way of difficulties in control of sound production through breath or bow, as well as flirtation with aesthetic risk in the form of challenge to normative patterns of phraseology and discourse. What appears the risky suspension of directed motion through slow shifts in pattering or a fixed aural gaze on a recorded natural environment can transmute into an invitation to explore our own phases of listening attention, but can turn back into a form of aesthetic safety. Risk is *risk* where we can grasp or intuit the potential for 'escape': as an engagement with time and expectation—a drama of interplay solely between the materials in front of us—if we can imagine, ahead of the moment, possible outcomes. How we characterise those imagined outcomes is significant because that tells us what we are risking ... collapse into chaos or escape into radiance, perhaps? What we gain, or lose, is a struggle surmounted. Stay too long in one place and the real risk is that these conduits for meaning go past their 'use by' date. If Camus's metaphor is valid, a crucial element of that is in the idea of moving along the ridge, not in being fixed to the spot. From the opposite perspective, similar difficulties can be found in textures saturated with over-differentiation of sound sources. In the kinds of terms that I offered for the 'Eroica' chord-moment, the implication of motion, change of state or progression, will be stimulated if we are to sense risk.

Since it is received through fluctuations in air pressure, music is quasi-tactile: and in that tactility alone rests a source of music's power for the frisson of risk. For acousmatic music, then, an obvious source is in sound projection itself. A sense of physical risk is enabled by extreme low frequency reproduction (especially for those who remember Cerwin Vega's 'Sensurround') and, through omnipresent sound immersion, we can naturally be drawn to reflect on bodily scale and vulnerability when in the presence of virtual immensity. Silence also draws attention to our physical presence within an acousmatic work ... the presence of instrumentalists at rest often carries evocative anticipation but the loudspeaker's mute state is far more subversive and its restarting of the flow of sound altogether more evocative of risk: the shock value of loud sounds, without the gestural adumbration of dynamic or guiding hand, breath or baton lends itself to uncertainty, edginess and risk. But unless such rhetoric is underpinned by deeper forms of implication that allow us to engage syntactically, the risk may only be to one's hearing. After all, empty vessels tend to make the loudest noise.

So how in the material presence of sounds themselves might the value of risk be explored? Despite the sonic extremities made possible through digital audio processing, much acousmatic music trades on an affinity with sounds of the natural world. Notions of metaphor, surrogacy and analogy are important because electroacoustic sound can give rise to hybridity of source, energy and behaviour. If we think of risk pragmatically, it might be risky to make use of an inauspicious sound: a sound that contains little in the way of spectral, morphological or referential capital. An example is the lighthouse bell sound in Andrew Lewis's *Penmon Point* (2002-03). Elaborate processes of invention extending the latent spectral implications of that sound is used to draw a musical form out of the rather dull sonority heard in the first minutes of the piece. Banality of material is also a signature of Åke Hodell's *Mr Smith in Rhodesia* (1970) and without the spectromorphological fireworks that Andrew Lewis evokes. It is, however loaded with political implication: The story of the way the sounds were gathered, and the responses of reactionary expatriate British parents to their children's involvement in an anti-

authoritarian statement, brought about significant material and professional risk to the composer: destruction of recordings and a Swedish radio ban. Aside from that, the style of presentation, a kind of 'arrangement-juxtapositional' form of say-after-me slogans, helicopters, political announcement and whispers is crude but invites anticipation of fresh content and commentary: risk is conjured through its non-arrival. By negating further explanation or deepening of context, Hodell gently but unflinchingly holds one's attention. The result is also a kind of genre-risk: neither patently musical, nor radio play, nor documentary. Although we know 'text-sound' is a useful neologism for this kind of piece, in many ways, as a human statement of remediated content, it simply *is*.

To conclude I want to offer a final example of how I think rhetorical risk can be exemplified in acousmatic music. That is in Parmegiani's *Dedans/Dehors* (1977). The metaphorical play of inside/outside is a significant metaphor for meaning in this work but, in the fourth movement, 'Métamorphoses' there is, at the three minute point, a build up of sound material of great complexity: modulated noise, crackling impulses, continuous noise streams and pitched glissandi grow into a kind of pitch/noise struggle. The complexity of the texture via the presence of simultaneous objects makes the aural separation of sound-objects and object boundaries difficult at times: in Schaefferian terms this could be regarded as a dalliance with the over-original and unpredictable extremes of the typological scheme, risking a loss of coherence or material clarity. But forward-directed listening understands this as layers not just of contrapuntal but 'competing' identities. By hearing competition as a guiding textural metaphor, we might sense the state of risk to which individual sound objects are exposed, or as a more holistic risk of textural dissolution, saturation and self-destruction. By way of contrast, in the third movement 'Retour de la forêt' there is also a crescendo passage, involving an incremental growth of volume and rise in pitch of comparatively unchanging layers, that becomes almost saturate. The sudden truncation of the crescendo at 2'23" leaving only a high pitched oscillation is a surprise, but the process has not imparted the same gratifying sense of risk as in the previous example, where plurality of possible outcome derives from the musical implications of competing sound identities.

I am not ashamed of the overtly post-romantic overtones of these interpretations. Without interpretation, to which here my fulcrum is a notion of risk we, as listeners, are in jeopardy of falling into an uncritical black hole of undifferentiated experience. From a compositional perspective, two extremes: the seamlessly invisible ease with which acousmatic music can transcend physicality and the potential for overabundance of psycho-physically disparate materials probably tend to mitigate against a productive form of risk experience.

A notion of risk is not a one-size-fits-all analytical tool. Instead what I am trying to identify in this project is the idea of risk as a perspective, which might have some value in differentiating the way we understand many of acousmatic music's rhetorical devices and spectromorphological constructs, and characterize some of the nuances in the more general question of tension and release.

I will conclude with a paragraph by Lukas Foss (1972). I have always liked it and looking from the other end of the tunnel—from that of safety—it is a suitable summary of what I have tried to put to you and, in some ways, the ultimate challenge:

To take refuge in the past is to play safe. Avoidance of truth. To burn the past is to play safe. Avoidance of knowledge. Safety lurks wherever we turn. Improvisation that works is improvisation made safe: one plays what one can play, that is, what one knows, and one observes rules, insurance against disorder, traffic controls. Chance music is safe music if we accept any result as nature having its way. To control the result is also to play safe: freedom, choice handed to the performer because it does not matter what he does: the given entities control the music, neutralizing the performer's personal additions. Electronic music is safe: escape from the most dangerous elements in music: performance. Shock in music is always effective, hence safe: cringe benefits. Program notes in pseudo-scientific jargon are safe: language used to conceal rather than reveal. Silence is safe, even virtuous. Show me dangerous music.

References

- Blocker, J. (2008) Aestheticising Risk in Wartime: The SLA to Iraq. In Welchman, J. (ed.), *The Aesthetics of Risk*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier.
- Cage, J. with Charles, D. (1981) *For the Birds*, New York: Marion Boyars.
- Camus, A. (1995) *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, New York/Toronto: Vintage.
- Foss, L. (1972) Sleeve notes to *Paradigm, On The Contemporary Composer in the USA*, Turnabout TV-S 34514, LP recording.
- [Fuller, W.] (1987) Panel Discussion, *Interface*, 16, 187-199.
- Hodell, Å. (1970) *Mr Smith in Rhodesia*, on Åke Hodell—complete text-sound compositions *Verbal Brainwash and other works*, CD recording, Stockholm: Fylkingen Records, FYCD 1018:1-2-3, 2000.
- Huron, D. (2007) *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the psychology of expectation*. Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press.
- Lewis, A. (2002-03) *Penmon Point*, on *Miroirs obscurs*, DVD-A recording, Montréal: Empreintes Digitales, IMED 0789. 2007
- Parmegiani, B. (1977) *Dedans/Dehors*, CD recording, Paris: Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Ina G 6000/11, 2008.