

Sound and Narrative: Acousmatic composition as artistic research

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This paper will discuss acousmatic music as a simultaneously musical and narrative art form. Acousmatic narrative will be considered from the dual perspectives of the composer and the listener, and we will investigate some of the differences between these, and some of the mechanisms at play. A case will be made for the act of acousmatic composition as an ideal site for exploration and research into narrative processes. The composition and reception of the author's work *Déchirure* will be used as an illustrative example.

Acousmatic music

We should perhaps begin with a quick description of acousmatic music in general. At its simplest, acousmatic music is a form of electroacoustic tape music that often uses recordings taken from the world around us as a significant source of sound material. It begins in the 1940s and 1950s in Paris, with Pierre Schaeffer and *musique concrète*, before the adoption of the term 'acousmatic' by François Bayle in the 1970s (Battier 2007). For Schaeffer, the sounds of the world become musical material: any sound that can be recorded, is then edited, treated, and manipulated, until a composition is crafted from these real-world materials.

Central to Schaeffer's conception was his idea of 'reduced listening' (Schaeffer 1966), a listening paradigm in which the *source* of a sound is deliberately ignored, in order to focus on the sonic properties and characteristics inherent to the sound. We forget about what agent, object, or action made the sound, or what the sound signifies; we focus only on the musical properties of the sound – its internal rhythms, its timbres and textures, possibly some melodic elements. The argument here is that we are blinded to the musical potential of the sounds that surround us by their roles as signifiers for the objects or actions that made the sounds. If it's raining outside, we probably don't hear a beautiful percussive pattern of raindrops on the pavement outside; we only hear a signifier for 'It's raining'. This hidden musical potential is revealed once we, through a conscious act, remove the significative identities of the sounds, redefining a sound according only to its own sonic characteristics.

This, then, is the key concept of *musique concrète*: the emancipation of sound from its source, such that works can be created that are shaped through the musical deployment of recorded sounds. This is reflected in the term 'acousmatic', which originates with Pythagoras, who would lecture his students from behind a screen on the grounds that they would be better able to focus on his words if they were not distracted by the sight of the person speaking. These students were known as the 'akusmatikoi'; hence the term 'acousmatic music', in which the loudspeaker plays a similar role to Pythagoras' screen: we can focus on the sound, without being distracted by the presence of its source.

However, while the emphasis in *musique concrète* was initially entirely on reduced listening and on sounds of the world freed from their sources and causes, over time it became increasingly clear that, in fact, it is nearly impossible for the human mind not to ascribe, even if only unconsciously, a string of causes and sources for the sounds we hear. Reduced listening is possible, but it requires constant, wilful, active effort on the part of the listener to deliberately ignore the possible sources of the sounds being heard; even then, the extent to which these sources are really being completely ignored is debatable.

So, no matter how focused the creative act of composition might be on the purely musical qualities of the sound, in practice, the listener – although also fully capable of appreciating this musical level – is almost certain to simultaneously create, perhaps unwittingly, an evolving mental image constructed from the reemergence of the role of the sounds as signifiers. While reduced listening was revolutionary in adding a further dimension to our appreciation of the sounds thus arranged, it did not succeed in erasing or negating our in-built response to sound: the automatic and instinctive linking of a given sound with a source. (Atkinson 2007)

The musical/narrative duality

Far from implying a failing of *musique concrète* and acousmatic music, in fact the unique beauty of the genre lies precisely in this duality: the purely musical world on the one hand, where the sounds are composed and appreciated for their musical or sonic properties, and on the other hand, the stream of sources and imagined gestures that these sounds evoke. Any and all sound material used will tend to contribute to both of these two streams: a sound will always have musical properties, and will also always have the capacity to evoke some kind of real-world imagery. Acousmatic culture shifted rapidly, from the almost unwilling admission of this duality in the early 1970s, to a whole-hearted acceptance, and in fact to making this musical-narrative duality to a significant extent the heart and soul of much acousmatic work.

Of course, these are rarely discrete phenomena. The narrative properties of a work, rather than stalling at the local level as singular symbols, are often used to construct a rhetorical framework for the piece, either supporting, supported by, or occasionally independent of, the musical layer of the work. When Francis Dhomont, in his work *Points de Fuite*, uses sound material such as planes flying overhead, cars passing, objects rolling away into the distance, and so on, these are not simply employed for their sonic and textural properties, although they are certainly admirably constructed from this point of view. Rather, they are simultaneously employed for the symbolism inherent in such imagery, in support of the work's themes of flight and escape.

It is at times tempting, though, to propose that a given composer has a particular bias, emphasizing one over the other of our two elements. A strong case could be made for Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien* or Trevor Wishart's *Red Bird* as examples of an emphasis on the narrative, with the musical qualities of the work - especially in *Presque Rien* - almost an artefact or byproduct of activity in the narrative layer. On the other hand, there are a great many works - Denis Smalley's *Pentes* for example - whose focus on the musical aspect of the work results in a significant degree of narrative abstraction.

Thus, what tends to vary from work to work - and, often, from composer to composer - is, firstly, how much time the listener is likely to spend in each of these two modes, and secondly, how closely these two modes engage and interact with each other: whether they work together to build a potentially greater, more powerful artistic experience, or whether they simply remain two discrete aspects of a single work. Many composers have their own unique approach to this dichotomy - their own balance, and their own manner of weaving the two together - while some composers shift from work to work between dramatically different approaches to the musical/narrative duality. Consider for instance the contrast between the clear sound imagery of Robert Normandeau's 'cinema for the ear' works (Dhomont 1995), and the towering narrative monomania of his timbre spatialization pieces (Normandeau 2009); or the seminal shift in narrative approach between Ferrari's early works and the first *Presque Rien*.

Acousmatic narrativity

It is worth taking a moment here to examine our use of the term 'narrative' more closely, as it is in many ways a rather heavily loaded term. To begin with, it carries with it all the cultural weight of the fields of narratology and narrative studies, which, together with related fields - semiotics, for instance - have led to a number of approaches to musical narrative. Generally speaking, however, acousmatic narrative is either a different animal altogether, or at least a sufficiently unique case study to warrant its own consideration.

Narrative studies of instrumental music tend to focus on structural qualities on the one hand, and programmatic considerations on the other (Tarasti 1994, Almén 2008, Grabócz 2009). These remain present in acousmatic music, but their narrative power is dwarfed by the presence of recorded referents that tend to be sidelined or dismissed as 'extra-musical' by traditional approaches to musical narrative. These recorded materials have the capacity to strike us more directly, through our embodied experience of the world, than the presence of more culturally mediated symbols (Çamci 2013), be these structural or programmatic. For this reason, in the musical/narrative duality proposed above, structural or programmatic elements tend to be more relevant to the musical experience of the work, rather than its narrative reception (Andean 2010). This distinction separates the acousmatic listening experience not only from the reception of instrumental music, but also from forms of electroacoustic

music in which such real-world referents are either absent, or of reduced significance to the construction of the work (Grabocz 1997). As a result, acousmatic narrative is rather closer to narrative approaches to other art forms – film, for example (Normandeau 1992) – than to most approaches to musical narrative.

Composed narrative / received narrative

There is also a distinction to be made between the acousmatic composer's focus on either musical or narrative properties, and the listener's selection of either a musical or narrative stance. With regards to the latter, the musical/narrative dichotomy is not necessarily a fully 'either/or' proposition; however, there remains at least the potential for the listener to select either of these listening stances individually, or to move back and forth between the two over the course of a work (Brunson 2012, Andean 2010, Wishart 1996).

To be properly understood, acousmatic narrative must be simultaneously considered from both directions: through its creation, and through its reception; as a poietic act, and as an esthetic act (Molino 1990, Nattiez 1990)¹. To consider either of these alone only tells us one half of the story. The composer's narrative intentions in composing the work provide information about the construction of narrative; the listener's experience of narrative based on their listening of the piece provides information on the reception of narrative. Either one of these, taken alone, is of limited relevance without being coupled with the other for a more complete consideration of the full narrative process of the work.

In fact, to some extent, the composer's experience of the work presents a microcosm of the full process, in that it is possible to distinguish a separation between their narrative intentions in composition, and their own narrative interpretation of the finished product upon completion of the work, and to note that these are sometimes – or, indeed, often – not one and the same, and are in fact often remarkably distanced from one another. This information would be impossible to glean from an analysis based solely on the listener's experience of the work; at the same time, the composer's poietic intentions often blind them to the narrative impact the work will eventually have on a majority of listeners, whose responses in such instances can sometimes take the composer by surprise upon initial public presentations.

Thus, a more full understanding of the narrative life of a work is only achievable by taking both composer and listener into account. Composition-based artistic research is therefore an ideal forum for this kind of enquiry: a listener can provide one half of the equation, but only a composer can provide both, in that they are capable of interrogating the narrative poiesis of their own works, and the narrative esthesis of the works of other composers.

Narrative process in *Déchirure*

I will offer as an example my own most recently completed work, entitled *Déchirure*. It is possible to distinguish several, completely distinct, narrative approaches to the work: my narrative intentions, when first approaching the work; in the midst of the composition process; after completing the work; and the narrative reception of the work by listeners².

It is interesting, and very important, to note that not all of these distinct narrative approaches to the work are of equal importance once the work is complete. Perhaps not very surprisingly, the last two – intentions after completing the work, and the work's narrative reception by the listener – are of much greater relevance than the composer's initial or intermediary intentions.

The work in question was based on an existing archive of sound material³. This archive was

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- 1 Molino and Nattiez have described the process of musical communication, from a semiological perspective, as consisting of three dimensions: the poietic process, which is the process of the creation of the work; the esthetic process, concerned with the reception of the work; and the 'neutral' level, or the work itself (Molino 1990, Nattiez 1990).
 - 2 Statements regarding listener and audience reactions and responses are based on largely informal interactions between the composer and audience members, peers, and colleagues, after either concert or academic presentation of the work in question.
 - 3 *Déchirure* was composed as part of the 'Presque Rien' project, which offers materials from Luc Ferrari's sound archives for the use of new compositions; all of the original sound materials for *Déchirure* are from these archives. See

examined according to primarily sonic priorities, with sounds selected for use in the work based on their sonic qualities: texture, timbre, interesting morphologies, and so forth. Only a very few sounds were selected primarily for their narrative content, and very significantly, these mainly included language – a word here or there from a passerby, or even from the recordists themselves.

The first formal sketches of the piece were similarly non-narrative, again based entirely on sonic properties, organizing sounds into categories of foreground and background: more ambient 'soundbed' materials vs. more active, or even rhythmic, materials; lower frequency materials vs. higher frequency materials; pitched vs. unpitched materials; and so on, all of which I think is fairly representative of a typical process of acousmatic composition.

However, as the composition of the work unfolds, a narrative begins to take shape, largely of its own accord, while the composer's attention is focused elsewhere, busily organizing and arranging sounds based solely on their sonic qualities. A few of these sounds emerge as noticeably iconic: the familiar toot of a steam engine emerges as perhaps the strongest example.

AudioObject 1

As composition continues, there are moments of formal significance for which the composer seeks a dominant sound that will stand out or resonate with the listener, and these more narratively-charged materials suggest themselves. These sounds therefore very quickly come to shape and dominate the narrative discourse of the piece – not because they meet the pre-determined *narrative* requirements of the composer's intentions, but because on the contrary they initially met the composer's *sonic* interests, but at a later stage of composition stood out from other sonically-inspired choices of materials through their narrative content. It is upon these sounds, therefore, that the composer comes to rely more and more as the composition of the work progresses.

Finally, the work is complete, and the composer may lean back and reflect upon the results of their labours. At this point, one might find that one has succeeded in delivering the narrative arc or imagery one intended; one may find, on the contrary, that an entirely different narrative suddenly becomes apparent, as the work takes on a life of its own. Taking a different personal example, this was very much the case with my work *Maledetta*, which took as its sound materials snippets of Maria Callas singing the title role from Cherubini's opera *Medea*: this work, too, was constructed following purely sonic principles, but the strength of the narrative capacities of the materials themselves was strong enough that the experience of the work is completely dominated by the impression of the piece as a sonic portrait of the character Medea. In some ways not very surprising perhaps; and yet, noteworthy in that the composer in no way set out to paint such a portrait, and yet this interpretation immediately and completely dominated the composer's own experience of his own work, from the moment the work was complete.

Extra-musical narrative

To return to the example of *Déchirure*, we come to perhaps the most significant moment of all in the narrative construction of a work – a moment that is particularly remarkable, in that it is entirely extra-musical. This is the moment in which the composer must, first of all, give the newly-minted work a name; and shortly thereafter, provide some kind of explanatory programme note. These are rather alarming points in the process of a work's creation, as much of the time all future interpretations of the work will be to a very significant degree through the prism of these purely verbal choices.

The final phrase of *Déchirure* contains a brief tearing sound that leads to the final climactic impact that closes the work.

AudioObject 2

This is the only time this tearing material appears, and it has been given a very prominent placement in the phrase. Again, this choice was made for purely sonic reasons: the phrase required a certain quality of material at that point, and the tearing sound used offered the necessary morphology and trajectory. However, it was perhaps slightly odd, and not entirely satisfactory, that an entirely new category of material suddenly appears in the last phrase of the piece in this manner.

Searching for a name for the completed work, I eventually settled on *Déchirure* – French for 'tearing', or perhaps with more emphasis, for example the English term 'tearing asunder' – for a

number of reasons. This choice had the immediate effect of completely reinterpreting and redefining the tearing material of the work's final phrase: originally, the sound had seemed a sudden and slightly unwarranted appearance of new material, coming as it does unannounced and unanticipated in the work's final moments; now that the work is titled *Déchirure*, on the contrary, it acts as a kind of narrative resolution, finally providing a material that has been anticipated by the listener from the very beginning of their listening of the piece. Thus, this entirely extra-musical choice, made after the composition of the work was complete, serves to completely redefine the musical role of the work's final phrase, and thereby the form of the entire work.

Consider once again Francis Dhomont's work *Points de fuite*, or his closely related work *Espace/Escape*. As already discussed, these contain a great deal of material that narratively supports his theme. But, is this a consequence of the essential symbolic nature of the materials used? Or, are these symbols instead conjured up by the titles of the works, which imply a very particular narrative direction? I would propose that, if *Points de fuite* were given a different title, with a similar strength of narrative impetus, the symbolic identities of these same sound materials would shift dramatically, to support this other narrative thematic.

As a composer, I am often in the position of having to choose between several alternative titles for a work; this choice will have an enormous impact on the interpretation of the piece – not just for third party listeners, but for me myself. Each title results in a complete transformation of the work; and so, in choosing a title, I am not only choosing a handful of words that will go at the top of the page – I am choosing between a number of unique and independent identities for the work, each of which may share the same sonic shape, but present widely different narratives.

Then we come to the writing of the programme notes: again, a verbal and entirely extra-musical act; and again, one which will significantly impact the listener's interpretation of the work. From a multitude of possible approaches to the work, the composer must now choose and recommend one, singling this approach out as somehow more authoritative than others. Some aspects of the works are emphasized, while some are not mentioned; perhaps some of the strengths of the work are underlined, while perhaps some weaknesses are buttressed, by supporting them with a formal or thematic explanation. What's more, any such text from the composer will be assumed to represent the composer's compositional intentions, whereas, on the contrary, these are generally written after the fact, and therefore more commonly represent the composer's own interpretation of the piece as post facto listener.

Again taking *Déchirure* as an example, the programme notes must necessarily address the thematic of the piece, despite the fact that this thematic only revealed itself as the composition neared completion. This thematic draws the title of the piece together with the more narratively-charged symbols to draft a coherent theme, for example pointing to the train sounds that appear regularly as a symbol of departure and personal separation that might be in keeping with the title. This interpretation of the symbol, however, arose after the fact through a purely interpretative act, and not as a formative compositional intention; yet this is not how a programme text is likely to be understood.

These extra-musical acts of title and programme notes are, in this sense, largely a fiction; or, perhaps more accurately, they are as important a part of the compositional process as any other (Derrida 1987: 9) – possibly more important, as they will guide and restrict interpretation more than possibly any other compositional decision. What strikes us as strange about this stems from the fact that these are assumed to be neutral elements, simply reflecting an objective truth about compositional intentions, rather than as compositional elements in themselves.

The listener

Finally, we come to the listener's interpretation of the work. In some ways, the composer is the work's first listener, and can therefore serve as test subject for what the future listener might experience; while this can be reasonably effective, there are some serious hindrances, stemming from the composer's intense familiarity with the materials from having been submerged therein for quite some time. The act of reduced listening described above is not only a conscious act; it can also be an unconscious process, as aspects that are immediately apparent on first listening slowly vanish through repeated listening as one is working on the piece, replaced by new aspects that slowly unveil themselves over time, or especially by those aspects that are the focus of the compositional act. This

is true not only of individual materials, but also of larger compositional issues of development and form; and it is particularly true of specifically narrative properties, as these are what tend to strike one immediately upon first listen, to quickly fade into invisibility as the process of composition proceeds.

The encounter of work and independent listener is therefore often an extremely informative moment with regards to the nature of the work, and without this perspective, any consideration of the narrative aspects of a work are severely limited by the composer's narrowed field of focus described above. This can be quite an alarming moment, as the composer witnesses the transformation of the work they intended into a potentially very different artwork. At its best, this moment brings unexpected surprises that make the work that much richer; at its worst, unanticipated responses to the work or its materials contradict other elements of the work such that it is rendered confusing and ineffective.

As an example, an earlier work of my own opened with an elaborate acousmatic phrase of which I was rather proud, composed of a number of different sound materials, the last of which was a recording of scattering geese, honking and splashing into the distance across the water. This material was used, once again, for its sonic properties: it served as the denouement of the phrase. However, reduced listening had blinded me to the fact that this is nevertheless a recording of geese honking and flapping, an image that I quickly discovered listeners found quite amusing. What was intended as a moment of sonic grace and beauty, is instead taken to be openly humorous, and quite frankly I don't think the piece ever recovered.

The construction of narrative is therefore an act that is shared between composer and listener, with each playing a critical role. This involves the composer making a narrative proposition, and the listener reminding the composer of narrative characteristics which have become obscured, or which remained invisible until the listener takes up their role. In *Déchirure's* encounter with the listener, it immediately became a much darker piece than it had been, as narrative connections are made across materials and formal developments are for the first time independently interpreted. It is only here, in this esthetic act, that the work's narrative identity is fully revealed for the first time.

For composers, this is both a brutal and a wonderful aspect of creation. Some resent this as the hijacking of their work by the listener, and work to impose a restricted interpretation; others make the transformative power of this encounter with the listener the centrepiece of their artistic process. Love it or hate it, however, it cannot be entirely escaped, nor can it be fully anticipated, nor fully understood. This should not, however, prevent us from trying.

Conclusion

The intention here has been, on the one hand, to illustrate key aspects of the construction and reception of acousmatic narrative, and on the other, to demonstrate the capacity of acousmatic composition to serve as a testing ground for these ideas.

In this, however, we must consistently and persistently maintain the dual focus on composer and listener, without which we remain shackled to a perspective whose limits risk invalidating our results. The blinders of either taken alone are too likely to lead us astray, drawing us towards lopsided conclusions, or towards the tempting promise of fields of inquiry whose promises disintegrate when the other party is brought back into the equation. The dialogue between composer and listener, between narrative creation and narrative reception, remains central, essential, and inevitable. As a result, the dual acts of composition and listening, taken together, represent the most powerful site for the investigation and understanding of acousmatic narrative.

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