

Understanding the Art of Sound Organization, Leigh Landy. pp. 303.
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Preface and Introduction

Our musical history continues to expand at a rapid pace. Aesthetic boundaries are stretched to their limits and we begin to question if they exist at all. Yet we remain interested and excited by developments, both technical and aesthetic, in sound. This book attempts to support our understanding of sound and its organisation and contextualise some sixty years of diverse research in this area; research which exists in numerous languages, is often more dated than the music it commented upon and is often highly subjective. Essentially, *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization* is an academic grounding to, and support for, a comprehensive and objective attempt to gather information into a structured database with an internet front-end called EARS:ElectroAcoustic Research Site (Leigh Landy, Simon Atkinson et al, 2004). This book concerns itself with the aesthetics of electroacoustic music; its analysis, organisation and reception. Although it does not concern itself with the practicalities of composition, it naturally discusses the relationship between analysis and synthesis and includes reference to the influence of technology upon practice.

Landy has for some time, suggested reasons why new, experimental music falls on deaf ears (1991; 1994), and has suggested a number of solutions to encourage audiences and composers to work more closely together. Compiling his own work with that of his students, he has shown how the intention of the composer and the reception of the listener might be triangulated through collaboration with an emphasis on dissemination of information.

The introduction searches for a term to cover all the existing terminologies that tend to confuse our self-identification with contemporary experimental music. It asks the question about the need to generalise. And there is no dispute: Landy's term, 'sound-based music' is a generalisation. But even if it is not adopted, Landy has laid down concrete reasons for the need to reassess current terminology.

The overall structure of the text is split into three chapters. Chapter one begins to look at how composers and listeners work together. Chapter two traces a path through a dense sea of theoretical writing about music and begins to link back to the the introduction and a search for an overarching term;

this establishes a foundation for what follows. Chapter three is a proposal of a framework for the study of sound-based artworks and the description and academic contextualisation of the EARS website.

Despite the clarity of the brief introduction, we are made well aware of the ‘no mans land’ that lies between E-Musik and U-Musik (the high art/serious and the commercial/popular).

Sound Art, Sonic Art, electroacoustic, acousmatic, electronic, computer music. Terminology once so divisive has now proliferated to such an extent that ‘a work’ may exist in multiple categories. Wikipedia has a fairly conclusive *List of music styles* classifying genres and sub-genres (2008). However, the Genres and Categories in the EARS website is considerably more focused. That the differentiation between Genre and Category is so closely bound up with technology is part of the complex problem of understanding the shared ground or ‘no mans land’ between the ‘E’ and the ‘U’.

This book will prove to be an ideal reference for anyone working with sound although it is clearly aimed at theorists and those with a strong understanding of the historical development of electroacoustic music, particularly chapters two and three. However, most attempts to unify practice and understanding, tend to lead to the aesthetic version of the uncertainty principle: the more one hones the definition through illumination or theory, the more one knows that the definition does not exist explicitly. The more open ended and freely traversable our route to understanding, the more likely we are to discontinue our search. Polemics versus Plurality. Hence the reason for this book. The EARS web site is excellent but it lacks a thorough context. It also lacks the experiential grounding that is so clear throughout the book.

Chapter one

In Chapter one ‘From Intention to Reception to Appreciation: Offering Listeners Some Things to Hold On To’, Landy draws our attention to previous studies for a search for the ‘missing link’ between composer and listener when faced with the daunting prospect of the new in music. In *What’s the matter with today’s Experimental Music?* (Landy, 1991), Landy clearly realised the depressing futility of commenting upon the state of the art, especially the public’s attitude towards the value of art. In the current financial quagmire of late 2008 we realise just how fragile and relative the term ‘value’ actually is. And we tend to link the term so closely with money that the need for the

critical valorization of art is completely neglected. However, Landy suggests the use of the term ‘appreciation’ (more related to a shared listening experience: shared between audiences, shared between composer and audience).

We are, unfortunately, slaves to the democratisation that technology has afforded us. We are increasingly willing to ‘sample’ and try new musics yet this very sampling culture disallows immersion and dislikes attention to detail. Reviews (especially of the critical variety) are replaced with blogs: we tend not to think much of anyone else’s opinion but they have a right to it. E-Musik is no longer Ernst but Elite and this just won’t do. Landy’s aim is, and always has been, to encourage active involvement. It is to be welcomed then that he quickly washes his hands of the woe and doom and considers all the positive reasons why sound-based music is so strong.

Sound-based music can influence both the head and the heart due to the tactile nature of sound and the possibility of discovery. Although Landy cites installation art as something of a special case, for the most part, listeners require a ‘helping hand’ when approaching time-delimited music. Time can be seen as something of a straight-jacket. However, is this really the result of sound-based music’s complexity or can we no longer sit still for ten minutes?

The “something to hold on to” project identified a number of key categories. Using over 100 works of electroacoustic music Landy found that people could hold onto:

1. some parameters for a start: e.g., dynamics, space, pitch, and/or rhythm;
2. homogeneity of sounds and the search for new sounds, e.g., pieces based on one or a few pitches, homogeneous textures, new sounds, and the voice and the special case of a live instrument plus recorded sound;
3. textures not exceeding four sound types at once;
4. programs, some are real but many are imaginary, e.g., nature, recycled music and “anecdotal music”, and acousmatic tales; and
5. others not yet discovered

(Landy, 1994, p28)

Whilst much of the above holds true today, item three has, I believe been tested, stretched and exceeded now that we have access to multi-channel

composition studios where we can craft dense ‘environments’ where multiple sound-types cohabit. We make musical sense of this environment as we would the real world. Whether a work has a program or not, the composer’s need to provide something else to hold on to (in addition to that contained in the music) remains as important today as it did ten years ago. Composers continue to write some form of programme notes. When these are written by a second party the composer is encouraged to enter a collaboration of sorts. Landy takes this further and suggests how collaboration (often cross art) can be an effective agent towards finding the dramaturgy in a work without losing integrity. For the composer, a collaborator is a middle-person between artist and audience: highly skilled but closer to the artist and the work than the audience and able to immediately offer informed judgements. Drawn from Landy’s experience of working in the theatre, where artists collaborate to produce a combined vision, he considers the positives of triangulation where feedback, discussion and reflection give rise to a more immediate sharing of ideas during the compositional process and (perhaps) a greater shared understanding of the listener’s view. As mentioned above, the interactive reader could well be frustrated by the closed-source nature of references to other academic journals. Landy continues in Chapter one to outline work with his then doctoral student, Rob Weale. The intention/reception project (Weale, 2005) highlights the emergence of, and need for triangulation using a number of case studies. The project leaves a strong legacy, especially a composer questionnaire (in the addendum of Chapter one) that all composers should read and remember.

Chapter two

Chapter two ‘From Concept to Production to Presentation to Theory: Creating “Co-hear-ance”’ takes a closer look at past and present theories of analysis (and in rare instances, synthesis) and seems aimed at those more interested in a detailed understanding of how a work might be analyzed without ‘something to hold on to’ - an analytical deep end if you like. The rather abstract terminologies of the French pioneers Pierre Schaeffer and Michel Chion are discussed in section one of nine subsections in this chapter.

- *Musique concrètement*: from acoulogy to spectromorphology
- Real-world music: from acoustic ecology to soundscape composition

- Appropriation: convergence (1)
- New sounds: from synthesis to microsound to noise
- An interim summary: all sounds are sound objects
- Formalized works: from “*Die Reihe*” to all things algorithmic
- The popular dimension
- The “split” between fixed medium and live electroacoustic performance: convergence (2)
- Sound art → sonic art: convergence (3)

This chapter becomes a worthy addition to a very small number of documents that actually make the lengthy tomes of Schaeffer (1977) and his contemporaries more approachable despite noting that, ‘Ironically, what has fascinated me throughout the years is how difficult it is to write about this genre in a concrete fashion’ (Landy, 2007). As Schaeffer and Schafer; Bayle, Chion and Delalande; Smalley, Camilleri, ten Hoopen and Young; Truax and Norman; Miller, Worby, Waters and Roads; and many others are brought together, so the middle-ground between *high-art/academic/E* and *downloaded-mp3/U* becomes more approachable by all parties (practitioners and audiences alike). The question ‘how do I make sense of this writing?’ is precisely where new research should be focusing. After all, if the music, some of which is emerging from academic circles is to be accessible, the literature surrounding it should be too.

However, this chapter is not for the faint hearted. For example, we learn again about Pierre Schaeffer’s four modes of listening, ordered from the passive to active:

- ouïr - perception of sound arriving at the ear
- écouter - a basic listening with some degree of search leading towards
- entendre - an intention to listen to reinforce a growing sense of
- comprendre - understanding.

Further terminological description ensues with some focus upon the triangulated work of Michel Chion, whose book *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen* (1990) further aids our understanding of audio by thinking about its use in film.

In his discussion of the use of real-world sounds in compositions, Landy contrasts the work of pioneer Canadian theorists and artists R. Murray Schafer (1994) and Barry Truax (1996) with equally groundbreaking ecological approaches by Luke Windsor (1997). Eric Clarke's (2005) contribution to this field of research is also worthy of note but is missing from Landy's extensive list of references.

Further discussion (often packed with different, but yet now, strangely familiar terminology) leads to the interim summary, and a reminder that if you were not already confused by the multitude of theoretical approaches to a multitude of categories of sound-based music, then the fact that these categories and theories can be used together only brings us to the conclusion that musical history moves faster now than it ever did.

Furthermore, as Landy reflects upon the adoption and dilution of a number of key theories mentioned above by the popular mainstream we find that it is technology - the computer and a number of key, shared software environments - that enables such cross-fertilisation of aesthetic. And as computer programming becomes increasingly easier, technology becomes increasingly transparent. It may well be that this transparency allows aesthetic intention to show through and for sound-based artworks to fall more readily into genres than categories.

Chapter three

By chapter three 'Toward a Framework for the Study of sound-based Artworks', we are already anticipating the interconnections between sound-based music and the theoretical writings presented in chapters one and two, and of and the fluidity with which practitioners, be they composers, performers, theorists, analysts or developers traverse this theory and practice. It comes as no surprise then that the holistic, interdisciplinary vision suggested as *modus operandi* is the EARS website.

Six main subject headings: 1) Disciplines of Study [DoS]; 2) Genres and Categories [G&C]; 3) Musicology of Electroacoustic Music [MEM]; 4) Performance Practice and Presentation [PPP]; 5) Sound Production and Manipu-

liation [SPM]; Structure, Musical [Str], lead the interactive reader through a series of indexes, glossaries and bibliographies. We can but look forward to a day when the EARS site delivers not only descriptions of and links to secondary sources, but complete texts.

Conclusion

The EARS web site (and Landy's book) remind us of the complexity and vastness of work that has taken place over the past sixty years of sound-based music. Chapter three provides a good 'rough guide' to the site. Contributors and author citations are a testimony to the web site's success. To those familiar with the scene(s?) it brings together material in a way that affords a more holistic vision and seems to be a highly polished research resource. Its aim is to act as a bridge: to further research through extensive citation. Detailed texts, definitions and examples are not present. Instead one is given a thoroughly annotated bibliography and links where appropriate. Interested readers can contribute to the site by on-line forms. As mentioned above, the interactive reader could well be frustrated by the closed-source nature of references to other academic journals.

The spectre of elitism can sometimes be seen to hang over anything that attempts to explain something and 'educate'. That this book may only reach academic shelves is therefore a real shame. The opening search for a term (re-discussed in chapter three) may seem pedantic in coming to a definition that is rather all-encompassing, but the documentation of projects both local and national that aim to identify the what, where, how, and most importantly, why of sound-based music shows that there is a clear need for a greater collective understanding: an understanding that the EARS web-site can provide. This book reflects the genesis of this project extremely well.

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