

## Some Reflections about Sound, Music and Art

by Marc Sabat

Within the visual field priority is given to assembling a three-dimensional perceptual model of the space before us, within which changing gestalts are temporally tracked. Consider, by way of contrast, the particular utility of rapid air pressure changes, of *sound waves* as a medium of sensory information. It is exactly their *lack* of fixed dimensionality, and the *irreducible* role of temporal variations, that shape the feeling of *musical* fascination evoked by our attempts to follow the multifarious transformations of sound patterns.

It has become clear with the work of Cage that the thing we call ‘music’ resides in no special property of sounds themselves, but rather in some peculiar state of *listening*, a kind of auditory analysis, which also may be described as a compulsion to perceptually navigate an otherwise unresolvable manifold as it unfolds through time. The idea of musical composition, thus, might be thought of as a setting in play of similar sounding events or sound-generating actions, at otherwise different conditions of space and time, allowing a particular experiment of many-dimensioned perception to be empirically re-examined. *Experimental music*: the attempt to precisely formulate questions as perceptual propositions projected in time.

In this sense, perhaps more vividly than in any other human activity, the subjective experience of music, and how it activates memory, approaches a wish to extend present circumstances toward a possible future and thereby imagine the course of events in the universe.

Such an *open* definition of music, for me, is necessary: to embrace the intuitive concentration of Morton Feldman’s work, the enchanted spectral singing of Claude Vivier, the philosophical allegories of Walter Zimmermann, the spiritual ecstasy of Galina Ustvolskaya, the exquisite focus of Munir Bachir, the analytic angular forms of Thelonious Monk, the elemental energy of The Velvet Underground, the transduced science of James Tenney and Alvin Lucier.

I list these names simply as a reflection on personal experiences of new music, which for me were formative, life-changing. I’ve had enough of hearing so-called “New Music” filled with catalogues of grand gestures, clever noises, explosive multiphonics and any number of playing technique clichés of the moment. I believe that music has the capacity to engage our senses and our minds in infinite new ways — with simplicity, clarity of thought, imagination, beauty and feeling — yet being as complex and intricate as need be to communicate its sound-forms: perception-as-idea.

Let me be clear: I am not afraid of Charles Ives’ strong manly ears, Cage’s borderless listening to Sounds as Music, Xenakis’ geologic sound-mountains. Nor am I a dainty postmodernist, proposing history’s demise and the

impotence of the 'new', arrogantly taking claim to all things without responsibility. I believe there will *always* be unknowable new constellations of matter and energy in the ? dimensions of space-time, and the vibrations of music are but a small perceptible part thereof.

Nor do I suggest we stand naively on the shoulders of history: our present times as biological, sentient beings are unquestionably different from any imaginable past moment. When I think about the past few decades, the ungraspably rapid change of human life in relation to evolving mimetic technologies, to virtual self-replicating chains of information, both thrills and frightens me in equal measure!

But in the meantime, new music *culture* chews on its mangy tail, hoping no one notices its increasing irrelevance. Are we (composers) simply happy to enjoy an exclusive hobby? Do we entertain an insider scene that alienates even our potentially closest colleagues, visual artists, writers, filmmakers, poets, scientists? We ought to all be talking about it!

Of one thing I am quite certain: for me, the way of coping with it is not polemic, or ideological, or by continuing exhausted models of avant-garde taboo-breaking. The 20th century work was a struggle for freedom of material, of method, the delocation of art from object to experience, from genre or medium to questions of handling it. A door was opened: painting, sculpture, performance, film, conceptual art, text, experimental music, all the as-yet-unknown ways of working, are increasingly activities operating in a common ground of perceptual research, a place we should be playing together and simply calling it '*art*'. As Harry Partch might have proclaimed: "Return of an Ancient Ideal!"

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