

Diversity, Interdisciplinarity, Language and House Style

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In celebration of the twentieth anniversary of *Organised Sound*, the author browses past issues of the journal to explore its multidisciplinary facets and potential for ‘knowledge transfer’ to cognate areas. It is pointed out that despite the journal’s apparent ‘house style’, the written texts contain subtle variations according to disciplinary concerns and author’s perspective, and should be understood as one strand of a multi-modal form of expression, to be augmented by remembered aural and bibliographic references and associated conference discussions as well as the more obvious visual and sonic accompanying material.

A decade ago, I was arguing that acknowledging electroacoustics as a distinct area was potentially unwise, and that we would benefit more from general studies in music/sound (Mountain 2004). Luckily for *Organised Sound* readers worldwide, Leigh Landy and colleagues did not take my recommendation at face value, and the electroacoustics / music technology discourse has flourished. Moreover, it has frequently been discussed with reference to the broader realms of music and sound, which admittedly is more beneficial, as well as more natural, than my original admittedly radical proposal. The idea of the twentieth anniversary issue led me to reflect on the journal as tracing that discourse; in the process I find myself contemplating many of the same topics that have emerged in the course of my research amblings of the last twenty years: issues of perspectives, disciplinary differences and collaborative potential, modes of participation and communication, potential flaws in our cognitive schema and so on.

My initial impression on this current review leads me to think that *Organised Sound* is A Good Thing. However, as I was trained at perhaps too early an age to be highly critical, my second thought is that I should refrain from complacent satisfaction and discover its weaknesses. My tendency is to wonder whether the level of specialisation and ‘typical’ writing style are potentially interfering with the ‘transferability’ of the research being done. This quickly led me to acknowledge the advantages, and presumably the necessity, of a ‘house style’ and to wonder how this fits with the forces of group identity as revealed in the preservation of distinct languages, among other attributes.

What prompted my initial stance of urging an ignoring of the acoustic/electroacoustic boundaries was a conviction that acoustic music studies would benefit enormously from the tools and strategies being developed in the field of electroacoustics. I still believe this, but have recognised that (a) some boundaries can be useful – such as allowing the collection of relevant articles under an easily identifiable journal collection – and (b) there are many more boundaries involved that could be checked for porosity (and, if necessary, doors installed or bridges constructed). For example, I have realised that considering electroacoustic studies as the ‘other’ branch of musicology is also quite unnecessarily restrictive. Perhaps the traffic towards other arts and/or technological innovations or even questions of performance are more relevant and fruitful. In this sense, the multi-faceted discussions which can be included in a journal on music technology are potentially more open to a wider audience than those which would be found in a general ‘music’ journal.

A rough analogy for my traditional viewpoint is something like this: most of us *Organised Sound* contributors and readers spend much of our time in a large room in a large building, where the topic of study is electroacoustic music. In adjacent rooms, people are studying acoustic music, computer music, sonic art and so forth. Most of those in our room are comfortable in wandering into these rooms, as we are generally familiar with the music and the terminology, but each of us has preferences for specific paths and routes. Some will spend most of their time in the technology-heavy rooms, while others will gravitate towards philosophical discussions in rooms even beyond the music area of the building. What I used to find frustrating was the number of people (especially in areas like ‘traditional musicology’ but also in technology-heavy areas) who seemed so cowed by the different attitudes of other rooms’ members that they stayed glued to one spot. In addition, I have begun to suspect that the majority of creators and performers prefer to remain outside these buildings, and that those of us on the inside are gazing out through windows (of various degrees of opacity and distortion). This analogy can withstand considerable refinement of detail before breaking down; one can imagine the interiors of the

various rooms as reflecting aesthetic preferences: the Victorian wood panelling of Beethoven scholars and the urban industrial chic of the computer music aficionados, with the accompanying dress and manners – although the distinctions in dress seem to be fading over the years.

It has long seemed to me that we need to encourage more mobility between these rooms – and between indoors and outdoors – and to train more ‘translators’ who are adept at conveying the essence of one room’s explanations to those from other areas. As I am myself a self-appointed translator, I find it difficult to imagine wanting to specialise for too long on anything without running off to other areas, but I now (reluctantly) accept that not everyone wants to be metaphorically quadrilingual, and that the advancement of knowledge can benefit from specialists, as long as someone nearby can keep them informed of potentially relevant research and carry their findings back to other rooms.

Of course, the analogy is strengthened if one escapes the limitations of the architectural model to permit a constant reorganisation of the building’s rooms – updating to some type of space-age floating pods connected by flexible shafts – many disguised as the old pathways and still leading to the familiar destination, but as their relative proximities shift, other passageways open and some walls become more porous. And, no doubt, some new walls are erected, such as technological developments which require an investment of time and focus to grasp and which therefore provide barriers to easy communication with those who have not been listening. Another danger is that new or redecorated passages and stairways may attract with their glittering surfaces, even though they may bypass rooms with a high concentration of useful findings. Those who incorporate ideas borrowed from the new décor feel that they thereby identify themselves as ‘trendy’, despite potential inappropriateness.

On the basis of these reflections, I thought to browse various past issues of *Organised Sound* with an eye to noting the various disciplines represented or alluded to, and to see if I could spot any particular features or trends. It has been a very satisfactory browse, as anyone familiar with the journal can imagine. For there are indeed a wide range of issues discussed, and a relatively wide range of perspectives enlisted to study them. Naturally, there are basic themes which can be regarded as distinct sub-disciplines although forming part of the broader field of electroacoustics: soundscape and acoustic ecology; composition with and without live elements (performance, processing, etc.) and, by extension, collaborative composition, improvisation and so forth; instrument design; analysis, including tools and terminology; audiovisual relationships; aesthetics; history; and so on. The perspectives from which these are studied are also varied, if predictable: composer, performer, designer, listener, musicologist... So it is very

natural that an author in any one of these areas may well tap into adjacent or supportive disciplines, with a resulting universe of perspectives.

For example, many of the authors seem at ease with cognitive approaches – more so than in acoustic musicology, which I attribute in part to the need for a focus on listening in the absence of scores. Information classification and retrieval, another topic featured in a few issues, also deal with cognitive schema, but here I think there may be two distinct influences. One is simply that as electroacoustic musicologists did not find adequate structures in the traditional musicological field, there was a need to map out new ones. But to return to the building analogy, I have a hunch that many of the senior people in electroacoustics have always been more comfortable wandering into the more scientific ‘rooms’ than the traditional musicologists, who seem to be naturally more akin to the humanities. From tinkering with analogue synthesisers to writing computer programmes, it may be a shorter distance to schematic representations than for a scholar investigating Byzantine chant, for example, who will be more at ease browsing old libraries and conversing with historians, and suspicious of clear-cut diagrams and quantification methods. As I am personally more inclined towards the speculative musings of the humanist, I am happy to report that there are many insightful comments scattered throughout the many issues of *Organised Sound* that speak to the general conditions of humans and art, even though they are often made in passing.

Other fields which are touched on include the full range of sociology/anthropology/human geography/cultural studies/performance studies which study humans, their participation in and interaction with their society and environment, and their perceptions or reactions. These studies all raise issues which are increasingly viewed as fundamental to an understanding of whatever else we might be studying in terms of humans and art and aesthetics. I personally inherited a strong dose of this kind of perspective from my father, and supplemented it by observation, and therefore skipped most of the current literature on the subject. And I believe that it is the constant referral to its own leading writers that makes this cluster of disciplines sometimes daunting for a researcher who is actually more interested in art. Therefore, I am always grateful when an articulate writer can situate his or her own discourse within this field and thereby simultaneously stress the importance of context and point out the doorways that will allow us to explore further.

Aesthetics, frequently touched on in many articles and a focus of several (e.g. those in volume 13/1), is of course a branch of philosophy, so it is a clear and short step from one room to the other. What I found quite startling years ago was to learn that psychology was also originally a branch of philosophy; at the time,

I was acquainted almost exclusively with the more scientific (or, some would say, quasi-scientific) aspects of psychology, with measurements and testing, that seem one step away from the field of acoustics. To reflect that philosophy and acoustics are sister disciplines entices the artist in me to find and trace their links, as I assume it is not a direct line.

A particular fascination for me is the realm of terminology and organisational schema (as explored in various *Organised Sound* articles such as 15/2 and on the ElectroAcoustic Resource Site (EARS) pages www.ears.dmu.ac.uk) – mainly because it forces me to think about my own categories and preferences, and to try to discover and learn from other people's aesthetic and cultural categories and perspectives. This room is also a mere step away from psychology, as it can benefit from cognitive sciences, in the realm of both perception and organising schemata, though it also links clearly with areas of communication sciences, linguistics, semiotics and various other nearby rooms. And once we are there, we may discover experts in phonetics, who will lead us back to sound...

I will make a special nod to the field of gesture, as I find it one of the more interesting passageways between acoustic and electroacoustic, thanks in particular to my long acquaintance with the research of both Godøy and Wanderley.¹ This field cuts a broad swath through acoustics to music technology and even health sciences: it includes the study of physical gestures made by instrumentalists, the sonic configurations that conjure up physical gestures, and incorporates (and tests) cutting-edge technology in measuring, while dealing with cognitive issues to describe our perceptions of both physical and sonic gesture. The gesture can function as a sonic object but, by embodying a temporal shape, it avoids the implicit staticness of object that can be so problematic in Schaefferian discourse. In addition, this field seems to embrace much of the research on sonification and on mapping, which becomes essential to understand if one is designing a gesture controller to be intuitive. As a composer, I find both of these concepts offer rich sources for compositional strategies and design.

There has been too little discussion in the field on educational issues relating to existing and proposed curricula in schools and universities, both for specialist training and general music appreciation, although this has now had a substantial boost in the recent 2013 issue (18/2). Somehow, the enormous fields of education and pedagogy often seem opaque to artists and researchers, which is patently absurd, as we have all suffered more or less according to the education we have received,

¹See for example Godøy 2006 and 2010; Hunt and Wanderley 2002; Miranda and Wanderley 2006; Wanderley and Battier 2000; Winters and Wanderley 2014; and the review of Miranda and Wanderley 2006 in *Organised Sound* (Cook 2007).

and depend on well-educated people for our audiences as well as our research assistants.

Despite this dazzling display of diverse topics which underpin the twenty years of *Organised Sound* contents, I do notice a few areas which seem to be under-represented and which might provide fruitful areas for a focus of a future issue. One is the role of music technology and electroacoustics in contemporary multimedia works – although a few have been mentioned in individual articles, I think it would provide a broader view to collect an assortment of contemporary media works where the artistic use of sound and music technology is crucial to the work's success. Of course, this would probably necessitate a few issues: one for experimental art films, one for feature films, one for dance, one for multimedia extravaganzas ... and meanwhile, we would fall behind on the 'mainstream' topics and perhaps damage the 'identity' of the journal by strolling too far from the main room.

One topic in particular which I hope to develop as an issue theme in the near future is on time and temporal aspects. Time studies are still generally nebulous but extremely interdisciplinary, as attested to for example by the membership of the *International Society for the Study of Time*. Of course, time is such a central feature of all music that it might appear to be too all-encompassing to be useful, but it can be nicely broken down into issues of 'real time' versus 'outside-time',² scale (micro/macro, not pitch!), perceived time versus performance time, displaced time (as in recording), evolution of time (see Fraser 1982) and so forth. There are many researchers in different disciplines who are eager to understand more about the nature of time, and it seems selfish of us, who actually 'work' with time at a conscious level much of our lives, not to share our collective insights on the subject.

But my main concern remains: will all of this research reach those who are not already electroacoustic musicologists or music technology experts? Many of us have been scrambling in the past decade to assure our respective universities and granting agencies that we do have means in place for the transfer of knowledge, as they scramble to assure others that tax-payers' monies are not being squandered (a laudable stance in itself, but our type of research is often difficult to identify, let alone quantify, and very often slower in impact than the short terms of grants and political timelines). However, the diversity in perspectives seems to enhance the potential of *Organised Sound* articles being read – and understood – by those outside the field.

It stands to reason that the writing styles exhibit differences according to their subject matter and

²'Outside time' or 'hors temps' was Xenakis' term for the elements, such as timbre and mode, determined before starting the composition of a piece; see Xenakis 1965.

disciplinary slant. There is of course a certain conformity to academic standards, which is due in part to editorial pressure but probably more generally a knowledge of ‘house style’ and of course the prestigious name of Cambridge University Press. Personally, as is probably evident, I have been increasingly finding such norms excessively academic, and I was very impressed by the boldness of Katharine Norman’s defiance in her wonderful book *Sounding Art* (2004), where she chose to substitute such a style with the much more informal narrative to better convey not only some of the essence of her own thoughts but even the potential of words as sonic material and temporal design – something that most academic writers seem to ignore.³

Indeed, musicologists usually communicate, or are assumed to communicate, verbally – and more definitively in written form of an academic style. However, despite the many musicological topics addressed in *Organised Sound*, not all the authors are musicologists, so we benefit from a wider range of styles – the more poetic writing of an artist or the clarity of a scientist as well as the idiomatic and stylistic nuances resulting from translations from different languages, augmented by a range of non-verbal expressions – from spectrographs to charts to photographs to movies and sounds on the occasional accompanying DVD. In addition, it must be remembered that many of us read the articles against the background of conference discourse, especially but not exclusively the annual Electroacoustic Music Studies meetings, where key points of both past and forthcoming articles are debated. And one also assumes that most readers have mental access to aural memories of the various works being cited – or, if not, will go and find a recording. In this context, the *Organised Sound* article becomes simply one of various forms of expressions of the research, albeit the neatest one for long-term archiving and retrieval.

As my main interest in electroacoustic musicology is arguably the degree to which it illuminates non-electroacoustic issues, I am particularly interested in the degree to which an article can be potentially relevant for someone in a different, if adjacent, area. What I find most encouraging in scanning multiple issues of *Organised Sound* is the general readability of most of the articles, as nothing seems more counterproductive to interdisciplinary discourse than disciplinary jargon and repeated references to figures unknown outside their own rooms. I believe that another less visible trait of a good musicologist, regardless of stylistic preference, is that of being a keen listener, with a relatively vast experience in listening to

works of the genre being studied. This quality, in conjunction with some talent for verbal expression, contributes to the high quality of *Organised Sound* articles – and helps it enormously in being convincing for a ‘lay’ reader. In a similar category is the common quality of what I must call passion, unacademic though that word may seem. I think that what we do is probably considered ‘dry’ by many of our peers – including various composers and performers who choose not to talk about the field at large – and therefore a degree of passion (or at least total absorption) is a prerequisite to doing the exploration and then trying to frame it in a way that it can make sense to others, and preferably enrich their understanding of their own topics. Nonetheless, it seems clear that *Organised Sound* articles are not tossed off by listless professors responding to a ‘publish or perish’ order but rather the excited reports of discoveries by intrepid explorers.

It does seem quite evident to me from re-reading some of the early articles that we are a much larger group now – in fact, a collection of groups – and thus more confident that we are speaking to a knowledgeable audience and no longer need to clarify (to ourselves and each other) why we are spending our time this way. More importantly for me, it seems that we have expanded from a group of self-reflective electroacoustic composers to a community where people are comfortable simply explaining what they have found. And my initial puzzlement at the lack of references to early uses of electroacoustics in popular culture – from Jimi Hendrix to Delia Derbyshire – is fading as I see increasing blurring of distinction between ‘art’ and ‘pop’, and more references to the latter – although usually those references are to contemporary pop more than the 1960s classics. My assumption is that the early rock music with technological features was clearly non-high art and therefore not appropriate for academic discourse for those of my generation (I’ll be 60 by press time). But what I find interesting is that much of what I appreciated about that music – which was the first non-classical Western music I discovered which actually appealed to me – can be explained much more effectively through electroacoustic terminology: timbres, gestures, strange but increasingly identifiable synthesised and electronically manipulated sounds. What was (and is still) harder to express is the emotional impact of such counter-culture music. Perhaps it is a sense of respect for its anti-establishment stance that prevents us from discussing it drily in academic forums?

A related tendency, though evolving much more slowly than I would like to see it, is more reference to non-European repertoire (and sonic environments) – not just through special issues like 10/1 and the latest 19/2, but increasing evidence that more people are beginning to listen to music from different zones. *Organised Sound*, and particularly EMS, have been working for years to correct a northern-European/American bias in

³This deliberate challenge has helped contribute to the design of my own upcoming book, entitled *Conversational Musicology*, where I argue vehemently in favour of more diversity of modes of communication as well as more areas of focus – and more tolerance of alternate methods of exploration.

the history of electroacoustics, and I believe the Blackburn issue (19/2) will help significantly on broader questions of current practice and perceptions. But I am still a bit astonished to find out how many young musicians in this age of YouTube know so little of the music – traditional or contemporary – of other cultures, even in places like Montreal, a multi-cultural city, where the universities still try to maintain a colonial stance. This was revealed to me quite vividly this past semester, when I gave a special topics course on Persian and Indian music traditions. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the electroacoustic students in the class tended to be the fastest to adapt to the foreign sounds – perhaps encouraged by my using spectrograms to point out nuances in the timbres and melodic lines, and by requesting analyses of music that benefitted from ‘traditional’ electroacoustic analytical methods.

Thanks to my advancing age, many of my observations in this article are on the verge of being obsolete: familiarity with computers and technologies is so commonplace that it is no longer a means for distinguishing between electroacoustic practitioners and Baroque specialists – though I suspect that the predilection for science over humanities approaches may still be heavier on the electroacoustic side. (Or conversely, perhaps, those who are more comfortable with science will find the electroacoustic field richer?) However, I still suspect that, in North American universities at least, the exposure of all students to an array of electroacoustic masterpieces – and even works of some of the less pitch-centric acoustic composers of the twentieth century – is much lower than it should be throughout the undergraduate curriculum. In addition, a major problem which is growing exponentially, but receiving little attention in the form of recommended procedures, is that of information overload. As you may have noticed, there are a lot of journals out there, and a lot of conferences, and the effect can be staggering on the young researcher and the mature author alike. Thus, the high signal-to-noise ratio represented by *Organised Sound* articles is a great help in navigating these mountains of information and opinion, just as the wide disciplinary base makes the *Organised Sound* crowd a good source for guides in discipline-hopping. Hopefully, past and future issues of *Organised Sound* will continue to circulate in

ever-increasing circles, and the authors and readers will wander with increasing frequency into adjacent rooms, leaving copies of the journal on available tabletops.

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