
Globally Speaking

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Cheaply available high-quality digital recording equipment, and the ubiquity of computer music tools and the Internet make the creation of electroacoustic music in diverse localities, and its dissemination around the globe, extremely easy. This raises important questions about the relationship of local sound worlds and cultural experience to a potentially global audience. This quandary is examined through the compositions *Globalalia* (which deals explicitly with speech material from many languages) and *Fabulous Paris – a virtual oratorio* which uses speech in different ways to contrast our relationship to the local and personal with our relationship to the mass experience of the globalised mega-city. The problems in relating to both a local and a global audience are considered in relation to the composer's current project recording speech materials in local communities in the North East of England.

We have reached an era in which the electroacoustic arts have become *normalised*. The sophisticated large-scale structuring of sound in which I'm interested takes its place in a continuum of possibilities from musical 'Kunst', through popular culture to pure amateur messing about with sound. In particular, the use of human speech as material for studio work offers a natural bridge to everyday human activities not intrinsically connected with the arts, and therefore with any particular presuppositions about the nature or style of artistic production.¹

In the late 1960s, when I first began to experiment in the electronic studio, electroacoustic music swam in a context of high modernism where tones had to be atonal, rhythms arrhythmic, counterpoint or texture dense and hypercomplex, and forms non-redundantly impenetrable (the theoretical notion of maximising information through non-repetition) or enigmatic. And, because of the costs of the equipment involved, production was confined to university studios or special

national centres (Radio Warsaw, the GRM...). The audience was miniscule, a tiny element of the already tiny audience for contemporary music in general, and confined to specialist venues where the necessary hardware for performance could be assembled. Now production is completely decentralised – anyone can make electroacoustic music on a home desktop computer (The Composers' Desktop Project, in which I have been involved for many years, was a key player in this field, liberating the public-domain software in use in big institutions such as IRCAM, Stanford and San Diego and going on to develop hundreds of new signal processing tools, making them available cheaply to the new constituency of non-institutional producers of sonic art). Very high-quality digital sound recording has become cheap and easy, and there is a welter of sonic material available through the media and the web.

This new ease of access to sound materials and tools has also ushered in the vast growth of electronica and experimental DJing in the world of popular music, and artists such as Square Pusher, Aphex Twin or Richard Devine help blur the boundaries between art-music and popular entertainment, re-establishing a link lost towards the end of the nineteenth century. Before that time, the piano in the living room was a place where the 'Classics' could be played alongside the latest music-hall songs. (And there were still easy-to-play classics.) The computer as a sound recorder and manipulator has re-established the link between popular and art-music applications of this technology, and with amateur involvement in 'sonic play'.

There are also the new fields of soundscape art (where the focus is on the authenticity of what is recorded) and installation art using sound (also known as sonic art, but coming out of the art world, rather than from the music tradition) where sound can be an adjunct to a visual exhibit, or an exhibit in itself, and where the listener experiences sound in his or her own time-sequence, in a gallery space, rather than following a clear start-to-end time-line defined by a composer. And, because of the ease of assembling sound materials and the simplicity of processing, one can knock together a sound piece of some kind in a short time – its now commonplace to give the drummer a break and put together a quick

¹For example, people have become accustomed to hearing broadcast voices (disembodied voices in the sense that the speaker is not physically present) as if they were a part of the aural scenery, like a raconteur down the far end of the pub – although one can certainly give a stylistic analysis of the mannerisms used by e.g. record-presenting DJs on radio, for most people these voices have become part of the seamless thread of everyday banter, and certainly not isolated in some special domain of 'Art'. By working playfully with the disembodied voice, in the studio, we can extend, build on or contradict this sense of the 'everyday'.

electroacoustic atmospheric track amongst an album otherwise of three-minute songs. This is what I'd like to call 'light electroacoustic music' without denigrating it in any way, the modern equivalent of those wind-band pieces written to be played in the park in Old Vienna when one wasn't writing the next symphony.

In this context where there is no longer any absolute divide between 'high art', popular culture and reportage, either professional or amateur, it is possible for electroacoustic projects to grow out of very local situations not even connected with the arts world, and to connect these situations to a more worldwide audience with access to sound media.

1. THREE PROJECTS

I would like to briefly describe three recent compositional projects which attempt to form a bridge between the local – the use of language or speech in particular communities, or by particular individuals, as source material – and the global – the organisation of this material into a work that can be appreciated independently of the locality in which it originated.

Fabulous Paris – a virtual oratorio, recently premiered at the Sound Travels Festival in Toronto (August 2007) and released on CD, was first inspired by reading a statistic suggesting that 50 per cent of the world's population would be living in cities of over a million people by 2010. We reached that threshold ahead of schedule in 2007. The first movement, 'The Division of Labour', deals with the basis of this new order, the increasing specialisation of work tasks that makes human material productivity rise enormously. The text, taken from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, describes how the making of an apparently simple object like a pin in an Edinburgh pin factory is divided into 18 separate tasks, and how this division of labour increases productivity more than a thousand-fold. However, we can also see that it destroys the notion of meaningful work and leads to human time being treated as a commodity. In Sound example 1 we hear the text, spoken in a Glaswegian accent: Adam Smith, a Scot, was professor of logic at the University of Glasgow.

The piece explores this contradiction by making a set of variations, or dividing the labour, of the spoken text, vastly extending its possibilities. For example, in Sound example 2, the material is expanded into a chorus-like variation, a 'miraculous' extension of the individual voice, like the miraculous productivity that the division of labour makes possible.

However, in the penultimate variation (Sound example 3) we hear a recurrence of the original text, but scrambled in a way that preserves the order and contour of spoken phrases, so that it perhaps appears that it might be meaningful, but the syllables within phrases are scrambled, so that no sense remains.

And the piece ends with the voice as a mere trace, hidden in the shuddering of the sound's tail.

More important from the standpoint of this article, the second and third movements contrast the individual and the collective experience of this new society. 'Angel' (movement 2), made in 2006 in Toronto through a commission from the Deep Wireless Festival, uses the voice of my aunt, in her late 70s, reminiscing about her childhood and young adult experience, about those insignificant yet personally meaningful experiences which she treasures. The piece focuses not only on her very particular and local experiences, but complementarily on the very particular features of her speaking voice. The overall form of the piece is roughly a rondo using the phrase 'And this is me when I was six' as the framing theme (Sound example 4).

The musical processes employed extract the particular melodic and motivic characteristics of the voice, derived harmonic fields, and the shape of particular turns of phrase in Yorkshire speech, and use these to control synthetic instruments, or voice-like backdrops to accompany the voice, which is also spectrally ornamented in other ways. Two examples of this can be heard in Sound examples 5 and 6.

In contrast, the final movement, itself entitled 'Fabulous Paris', tries to deal with the overwhelming flood of information we experience in the modern megacity. It uses dense, often almost impenetrable, textures of voices from TV advertisements and game-shows, traffic and traffic announcements, funfairs and other sources, many collected from the US media and secondhand record stores in the early 1980s, when I was a composer-in-residence at San Jose State University. The voices we hear are generally de-personalised – the voices of the media, of commentators, or actors in advertisements; voices of people we all hear but none of us know. The piece opens (Sound example 7) with a mass of traffic announcements on the California freeways, collected for me by the sound poet Larry Wendt. I had been intrigued by the specialised vocabulary that has been developed in the USA for describing different kinds of car accidents, and by happy coincidence Larry's recordings were made at a time of unseasonable flooding in Southern California.

Formally the piece falls into three long sections, the last being a telescoped and transformed recapitulation of the opening, in which the massed voice slowly transform into the voices of frogs and insects as the other sounds of the city float off into the ether, Ur dissolving into dust, poetically speaking. The piece also employs several other transformational devices. In particular, the sounds of traffic sirens you hear at the end of the opening, passing across the stereo stage with Doppler shift, are derived from the voice of Hitler, but this is only revealed at a much later stage of the piece (Sound example 8), where we hear the demagogic ranting through the cityscape.

The principal formal or craft device used to corral the mass of materials was a bank of filters tuneable to the pitch set of any specified harmony (and the harmonics of those pitches), which harmony could also change over time. The filter bank also had time-variable Q allowing the cityscape to be slightly or strongly harmonically coloured. In Sound example 9, the end of section 2, the first pitches you hear are derived from the stacking of pitched materials like the screech of wheels on rails in the Paris metro, but the section ends with the harmonic filtering of the noise mass, and a harmonic shift which brings the piece back to the pitch-field of its opening (for the recapitulation).

Thus these two movements present a view of the modern urban experience through different ends of the telescope.

In *Globalalia* the idea was to work with human languages, and to emphasise what unites us as human beings, rather than what divides us. Although human spoken languages, being largely mutually incomprehensible, can exacerbate divisions between people in different cultures, they are all constructed from a remarkably small set of syllable sounds, human universals of a kind. So the piece takes recordings from local radio stations in different countries (collected by friends and colleagues at my request) or from digital TV channels broadcast from around the world (also collected from a friend's television), comprising material in 26 different languages, and then separates these into syllables (there were over 8,300 syllabic sound sources once the editing was complete). The piece consists of a series of short musical movements each investigating one or two syllables or syllable-types in sonic detail, but also relying on the inner animation of each voice as part of the musical interest. A curious feature of the piece is how a rapid sequence of, say, 'co' syllables still preserves the local character, and individual vocal characteristics, of the source speakers, the text becoming a kind of global ur-speech.

The formal structure of the piece is taken from a literary device, the frame tale, the best example of which is the story of Scheherazade, also known as the *1001 Nights* or the *Arabian Nights*. Scheherazade's husband, the sultan, who has a large harem, likes to take one wife per night, have his way with her and then have her executed the next morning. In order to avoid this fate, Scheherazade hits upon the idea of telling stories to the Sultan each evening, which entertains him sufficiently to want to hear more the following night. So a frame tale is a story that allows us to tell other stories. I needed a more abstract formalisation of this for it to work musically. So in *Globalalia* the 'frame tale' is a theme consisting of several different types of syllables, all of which will be developed in the inner 'stories' as the piece progresses. This theme (Sound example 10) recurs, with variations throughout the piece and at the end. Sound examples 11 and 12 present two examples of these

variations, the first highly compressed, and the second with internal imitation.

These then frame the series of studies that form the rest of the material of the piece. For example, the phrase in Sound example 13 develops the rasping ends of utterances in the highly stylised voices of Japanese TV actors playing samurai warriors. (These voices were sent to me by a Japanese friend who found them very funny, the Japanese equivalent of hypermacho.) To create this study I devised a signal processing process that would naturalistically (or plausibly) extend the vocal grit, a much more difficult problem than it may appear superficially (looping is an absolute non-starter to 'time-stretch' such natural iterative sounds). In Sound example 14 we hear an original source followed by two time-stretched versions. Sound example 15 illustrates the same process applied to a different recording.

My current project takes the link between language and locality much further. I'm currently composer-in-residence in the North East of England. I applied for this post as, following on from *Globalalia*, I wanted to make a piece that used the characteristics of speech across a whole community, from the very young to the very old, from received pronunciation and articulation to almost impenetrable dialect and everyday vocal dramaturgy, and the position seemed to offer the opportunity to make such a piece, like *Globalalia*, an affirmative piece about human community. The working title of the project is ...and that says it all

In order to collect the material for this piece, I have travelled out into the community to meet people in their daily lives. For example, in order to record the voices of children (very young children, just learning to read, 10–11-year-olds, and teenagers) I have travelled to schools (urban and rural) to run vocal workshops in which children devise their own pieces, using transformations of speech that they explore and choose to use, within a formal framework I supply. In parallel with this activity I gather small groups of children to talk (about anything that interests them) and record their voices. To record the (massed) spoken voices of adults, I have set up voice improvisation scenarios with local amateur choirs. To record individual adult speakers I have made contact with voluble local shopkeepers and tradespeople, and with societies involved in preservation of the local dialect and folk music. In the latter case, human speech has been a catalyst to bring together what have usually been two opposite ends of the musical spectrum. To record older people I have visited drop-in centres for the elderly or seniors discussion groups, and recorded individuals discussing their memories of the past or their interests and concerns about the present.

At this stage, it is not possible to talk in detail about how the piece will be structured. I shall spend the next year carefully listening to and classifying the collected sounds and deciding on the best composing strategies to use. Once the piece is completed, however, I would hope

that many of those involved, and their friends, might want to hear the piece performed, but most people will probably have no experience of electroacoustic concert music. Furthermore, my own interest is in making a piece that is both local in source-content but global in its reach – it must be possible to play the piece to an audience in Tokyo, for example. This presents various challenges. A very local challenge would be how to structure a long sound piece so that some of the youngest children involved in its making can listen to it – they are not going to sit through an hour of pure sound art. Similarly, the local audience will have a definite interest in what is being said by the voices they hear.

At the other extreme, how is an audience who knows neither the region nor even the English language going to relate to the piece? Undoubtedly the sonic cues for age, gender, health, attitude and other such human attributes will carry between cultures, but much more depends on my ability to abstract and musically develop the contrasting characteristics of individual human

voices. (One technical possibility that interests me is to map the timbral qualities of individual voices onto synthetic instruments that no longer speak but still carry the character of the original voices. This may prove to be technically impossible, but is part of my research agenda.) But it is, above all, the totality of the community, the inter-relationship between its parts, which I expect to be comprehensible to other local communities in our globalising world.

The collision of the local and the global, the ‘everyday’ and the artistically contrived, made possible with electroacoustic sound-manipulation and globalised communications networks, does not automatically make the task of communicating with an audience easier. That which is local and that which is global are, for our human experience, not quite the same thing, despite the attempt of the market economy to make everyplace into the same shopping mall. The struggle to relate these two in a sound composition is comparable to the more general problem of defining our own personal identity in a globalising world.