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# Book reviews

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Helga de la Motte-Haber (ed.) *Klangkunst: Tönende Objekte und klingende Räume*. Volume 12. Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert. Laaber-Verlag, Laaber, Germany, 1999. 352 pp. ISBN 3-89007-432-4. RRP DM198.

CD-ROM DEGEM-01 *Klangkunst in Deutschland (Sonic Art in Germany)*. Can be ordered from the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, Leserservice, Schott Musik International, Postfach 3640, 55026 Mainz, Germany. Order no. T 5150. RRP DM49.90.

It would seem perfectly normal to commence this review with a translation of the word that appears in both titles above, but this is exactly where the problem at the heart of this double review begins. 'Klangkunst' could be translated into English as either sonic art or, much less used today, sound art, its literal translation. I would imagine that readers have more or less come to grips with the former term. It means something along the lines of a time-based art form that uses the sound as its basic unit. In fact, 'Klangkunst' has been translated as sonic art on the CD-ROM.

The latter term, sound art, is hardly used these days in English. It did exist and had a bit of a gallery flavour in the period from the 1960s until the 1980s and concerned sculptures and installations in the first instance, perhaps the occasional product of performance art as well. In today's terms, it would include most forms of site-specific and public art. It is ironically this dated notion that seems to come closest to what Helga de la Motte's edited volume considers, especially taking its subtitle, 'Sounding Objects and Spaces' into account. Confusing, perhaps.

## The book

I very much looked forward to receiving this volume knowing the high standard of this series concerning twentieth-century music. One of the first things I noticed when I received it was that Elena Ungeheuer had edited Volume 5 on electroacoustic music which I had not yet seen. So 'Klangkunst' was not going to deal with this area in the first instance and my theory concerning sonic art became even weaker, especially as artists including Trevor Wishart, whose names are associated with sonic art, are not mentioned anywhere. Although Volumes 10 and 11 consider aspects of technology and multimedia (amongst other issues), it seems, according to de la

Motte, that 'Klangkunst' is something that will overlap with many areas. It is known as multi-media, mixed media, intermedia, art synthesis and sound art, according to the editor, but is not just simply any of the above. She adds, in her Forward (p. 19), that 'A precise definition for an art form that crosses boundaries is inadvisable.' The term, in contrast, is essential in her view. This seems fair enough as long as we get to know exactly what this is at one point. Sound art seems to come close, but as we will see in the second half of this review, this solution was not equivalent to the somewhat broader selection on the CD-ROM.

Three of de la Motte's contributors seem to have had rather specific briefs. Yet her contributions in the first and final chapters, 'Klangkunst: Intellectual and Historical Premises' and 'Between Performance and Installation', and Sabine Sanio's in her chapter entitled 'Autonomy, Intention, Situation: Aspects of a Broadened Concept of Art', were clearly meant to be contextual. Three interesting points raised in these chapters deserve mention: (i) they both introduce the influence of the inclusion of aspects of daily life, i.e. something to hold on to in works of art, in terms of aesthetics; (ii) Sanio discusses the work of relevant writers (with whom I, at least, had not yet been acquainted) including the interesting views of philosopher Gernot Böhme who seems to work in a field somewhere between Murray Schafer and French postmodern philosophers; and (iii) important artists, such as Christina Kubisch, receive much-deserved attention. These portraits, often accompanied by illustrations of art work and useful descriptions, were helpful in following the discussion, but these chapters did not adequately answer my initial question.

The three other chapters were indeed somewhat more specific. The briefest chapter was written by Martin Supper, someone who also was able remarkably to cram in the history of electroacoustic and computer music into ca. 200 pages in his 1997 publication, *Elektroakustische Musik & Computermusik* (Wolke Verlag, Hofheim). This chapter, entitled 'Technical Systems of Sound Installations', considers closed systems, open systems and closed systems that can be influenced (or interrupted) by outside influences (e.g. cybernetic works). It includes a final page specifically naming computer systems, including MAX, which are ideal for work in this category today. One gets a feeling that this could

have been extended. It is perhaps the most relevant chapter for readers of *Organised Sound*, be it somewhat basic.

The following chapter on sound sculptures by Frank Gertich is equally self-contained. Here, he works his way through his own system of classification for early twentieth-century sound sculpture leading to some ideas of how 'traditions' in the area can be extended. The discussion is coherent in general and provides a reasonable survey in this equally exciting area. The only problem encountered with this chapter is the inclusion of experimental instruments by the likes of Harry Partch. Such instruments were created to be performed as part of his instrumentarium, not set up in a gallery for anyone to play. The sound sculptures of the much-discussed Baschet brothers, on the other hand, were often exhibited. It was their primary function. Sound sculpture performances did take place and even recordings were later made. The Baschets are key figures in the history of the genre. The inclusion of Partch in this chapter, although it befits de la Motte's criterion, namely that 'Klangkunst' is to represent an interdisciplinary field, is oddly one that is centred on concert performance, which confuses our understanding of the focus of the chapter and the book. Nevertheless, Gertich's inclusion of new insights such as a new classification for the Sachs-von Hornbostel music instrument system, pyrophones – instruments that need fire to be able to create their sounds – are most welcome. These insights make the chapter particularly enjoyable, recognising how adventurous work in this field can be.

My curiosity concerning whether performance 'fits' in this volume or not was part of the focus of Golo Föllmer's chapter, 'Sound Organisation in Public Spaces'. In this chapter we are introduced to a variety of art works that are offered in unusual places, from site-specific art to public art (although neither term is used as such) to art outside of the concert hall or gallery. After an interesting contextual section concerning the twentieth-century desire for comfort in various spaces, a journey which takes us from Thaddeus Cahill's (of Telharmonium fame) visions of music to sleep by to 'musique d'ameublement' to Muzak, *à la* background music or Eno's and others' ambient music) and walkman culture, Föllmer delineates his area into three: sound performances, sculptures and installations. It is the obvious addition of performance, perhaps derived from performance art, which again makes me wonder where the border surrounding 'Klangkunst' might be found. Some of Alvin Curran's works take place at sea. Charlemagne Palestine's carillon pieces, for example, are also site specific, but are they 'Klangkunst'? Such works are mono-disciplinary unless performing a piece in a public space turns it into a mixed-media work. His events are often billed as outdoor concerts. I have never particularly thought of them as performance art. Such works are distinctly different from sound installations and sculptures.

So what holds the work in this chapter together? It is the fact that everything here is destined to be experienced by those who happen to be in the right place at the right time. This is what acts as a binding force. Yet this point is only raised, not investigated in any depth.

I am left with an awkward feeling as there are very interesting arguments and excellent examples presented, be it understandably with a German bias. It just seems that 'Klangkunst' does not reach its full potential and gets too easily side-tracked. For those who have little knowledge of these areas, it is a useful starting point. It is a shame that digital art works seem to have been given less attention in this book than they might have had. (Digital art has existed for most of the latter half of the century.)

Ironically, in my view, the term 'Klangkunst' is probably unnecessary here. Either the choice of the volume's subtitle, 'sounding objects and spaces' or the choice of sound performances, sculptures and installations would have been appropriate and could have called for a more focused, perhaps better surveyed field of very interesting work.

I believe that part of the problem this volume poses dates from excellent earlier work of de la Motte being projected onto this field. She was author of the 1990 Laaber book, *Musik und Bildende Kunst* (Music and Fine Art), a book that was in a way the image, through the looking glass, of a famed exhibition, 'Vom Klang der Bilder: Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts' (Of the Sounds of the Images: Music in 20th Century Art, a 1985 Stuttgart exhibition, catalogue edited by Karin V. Maur, published by Prestel, Munich). Here are two examples of publications with very clear foci: art influencing music and vice versa, both excellently contextualised with superb examples to support underlying theses. These both represented expansions of the 1980 exhibition, 'Für Augen und Ohren/Écoutez par les yeux' (For the Eyes and Ears). So we encounter artists such as Jack Ox in 'Klangkunst'. Ox analyses music and then creates large-scale paintings based on these analyses. She receives an artist's portrait in the extended list of artists at the rear of the volume, whilst other key names relevant to the volume are missing, e.g. Max Eastley and Dan Senn. 'Klangkunst' is neither a rigorous survey, nor a fully in-depth investigation, although it does seem to attempt to achieve both. Misspellings aside (all of which can be deciphered), it is somewhat puzzling why such a huge aesthetic framework is created when in my mind the heart of the matter can be found in what makes the subject so special. That is how accessible much of this work has proven to be. Let me illustrate this.

Many readers may have visited the annual Festival at Bourges, France at one point. A very busy series of concerts is organised, mainly visited by people involved in the festival. Alongside this and their colloquium, there is often a group of spaces which house sound sculptures and installations, some in the municipal building where

the Festival's organisation, GMEB is based. Hundreds of visitors pass through these spaces daily, people of all ages and backgrounds, most of whom are amused, entertained, challenged or perhaps alienated by these works. The citizens of Bourges enjoy these works that can be visited at will; they tend to ignore the concerts.

People all have a strong opinion about public art, yet some eventually become proud of local sonorous works. The fact is that much of this work has been experienced by a much more general public than the vast majority of other forms of twentieth-century music. That is perhaps the vitality of this field, a subject that has cultural as well as aesthetic ramifications, but it seems only to have been glossed over, or perhaps treated too philosophically in this volume.

### The CD-ROM

No sooner had I read the above volume, number 5/2000 of 'Neue Zeitschrift für Musik' arrived which included a CD-ROM for its subscribers. To my pleasant surprise, the CD-ROM was entitled 'Klangkunst in Deutschland' and my hopes were raised to solve the dilemmas created by the Laaber publication. Yet the contents of the CD-ROM do not all fit within the book's areas.

There are three different sections offered: (i) portraits of seven artists, (ii) a presentation of the project situated in the northern German city of Lüneburg, entitled 'Aesthetic Strategies in Multimedia and Digital Networks', and (iii) a presentation of some of the work of the German Association for Electroacoustic Music, DeGeM. This association collaborated with Schott to create this CD-ROM.

Although I have never been one obsessed with the latest technology, I am always fascinated when I receive a CD-ROM to see how authors take on the new challenges and opportunities of this medium. This CD-ROM poses curious problems due to the integration of the three sections. The third is hardly dealing with anything de la Motte would consider to be 'Klangkunst'. To present this section briefly, the DeGeM portrait is a description of the organisation and its activities. Its survey includes on-going work at the Technical University in Berlin where data is being collected concerning electroacoustic music studios around the world, recordings on works made in these studies, as well as records and CDs that are or have been commercially available. The corresponding sound archive can be found at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. Although 'Klangkunst' as it was illustrated in the book falls partially under the DeGeM banner, one can understand that this CD-ROM is offering as much information as it can gather from the three different projects. The DeGeM portrait is therefore 'the odd one out' to an extent. There are no sound examples or videos in this modest section of this publication.

The Lüneburg project is extremely interesting and demonstrates that work in Germany is crossing boundaries. It is clear from what is presented that several

younger people (e.g. university students) are involved in this project, many of whom have a taste for contemporary popular music. One of the six examples provided, 'rokugo no watashi' is an automated rock band, one that performs algorithmic composition, including a well-known example of voice synthesis alongside the traditional instrument sounds in most pop bands. The video they include commences humorously with a 'dancing' automated mixing panel moving to the sounds of the music. This project clearly addresses the brief of the Lüneburg project, and can be seen to be a sound installation, but would de la Motte have included this in her volume? One wonders.

A second example called 'Workshop' involves, amongst others, a project where a small amount of grass growing is translated into sound in real time. Interactive electroacoustic music? 'Klangkunst'? Sonic art? What is significant is how adventurous the members of this project are.

There are three key texts included in this section, one of which was not completely accessible on my Macintosh, as well as portraits of guests who have visited the project.

The centrepiece for the CD-ROM, and in my view its 'raison d'être', are the artist portraits. They are: Werner Cee, Michael Harenberg (producer of the CD-ROM project), Robin Minard, Jutta Ravenna, the collaboration between Sabine Schäfer and Joachim Krebs and Johannes S. Sistermans, all but Harenberg and Krebs receiving a great deal of attention in the Laaber publication.

Each portrait, once you have clicked on the artist, is structured differently. For some reason, the makers of this CD-ROM decided to allow the user to discover how each portrait could be navigated; in some cases this was less than trivial. All portraits include useful textual information about the artists, their careers and their work. In some cases, there is too much textual description – although still photos are enlightening – and too few time-based audio or audiovisual examples of their work. Still, we do get a taste for the creative output of all of these artists by way of audio and video examples.

The curious thing is, to state the obvious, that sound installations, some involving dozens of loudspeakers, sound a bit reduced in stereo and look peculiar in highly condensed CD-ROM video format. In the latter case, quasi-video art works were made of installations which clearly exist for participants to experience in their own way.

This type of contradiction seems to be a signature of late twentieth-century experimental music. The notion of John Cage selling his scores through Peters Edition which called for people to make their own decisions is odd to say the least, particularly if you are aware of his interest in anarchist philosophy. Today's artist has very few means of dissemination. The Internet may bring an

end to this. In the interim, stereo versions of thirty-six-channel 'you have to be there works' combined with low-quality video is a reasonable way to gain a taste of the experience.

Performance art is highly represented in these portraits. Radio plays are also included as these artists clearly often work in more than one medium, but, oops, what does that have to do with the 'Klangkunst' definition in the first half of this review – or is a radio play site specific? The most CD-ROM-specific work is the one piece contributed by Harenberg entitled 'Persimfans'. This is an algorithmic interactive work that offers interesting sound and graphics. The user navigates his or her own performance similarly to a child playing a video game. The difference is that there are no rules in the case of Harenberg's piece.

Still, the goal of the exercise is to gain a better understanding of 'Klangkunst', not to determine whether a piece works particularly well on a CD-ROM. Having viewed almost all of the examples (one or two proved inaccessible on my machine as well), I can conclude that most works can be categorised as belonging to the field of sonic art. They do not represent that many areas of sonic arts, however. Also, some of the performance art works looked vaguely instrumental to me and could only be considered to be sonic art if all music were to become a subset of this art form. The majority of the work of the seven artists fits within de la Motte's world of sounding objects and spaces.

In short, as a survey of work, these portraits and the Lüneburg presentation are very useful. In terms of solving my problem about what 'Klangkunst' might be, I am still somewhat in the cold. Perhaps it might be any form of sonic art that is not mainstream or does not belong in the concert hall. But then, again, how mainstream is any form of sonic art and where do most performances of sonic art take place?

Before finishing with two examples to add to our confusion, a few remarks about this CD-ROM are worth mentioning. It clearly represents highly informative snapshot of the state of the art – whatever its name – at the end of the century and is a useful, though imperfect example of moving into a new medium. There are a few flaws, however. The 'English version' on the contents page offered very little English given the huge amount of text included. Translations would hardly have taken up much space! Users are warned not to use the RealAudio installer on the CD-ROM. It is an expired beta version. Do not demonstrate any impatience with the CD-ROM (e.g. clicking on the next piece by an artist before the entire image has come up). To prepare the review, I must have rebooted my machine a dozen times or more. This may not be the case with other types of computer, of course.

Two final remarks: A personal experience comes to mind that seems relevant. It concerns a piece of mine, *Sur Seine*, that was included in the 1982 Biennale de Paris. The piece was selected by the 'Section voix et son' (voice and sound section) of this event. The section's activities included sculptures and installations, site-specific pieces (as was my work) and, believe it or not, concerts. My piece involved boats, lighting and a video installation, but it also called for dozens of young instrumentalists, i.e. there was music. In short, the terminology problem is by no means new.

For those who are aware of the KlangArt Festival in Osnabrück, you will agree with me that this bilingual title has been used quite differently than 'Klangkunst' of these two publications, although the words are identical. It is a festival of the sonic arts. Why must terminology problems be omnipresent in our field when we discuss our Klänge and our Kunst?

Leigh Landy