Towards an Ethics of Creative Sound

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This article examines some of the ethical issues involved in working creatively with sound. Issues considered include: sound ownership; sound vs. vision as determinations of identity, and their relative iconicity; recorded sound; sound as physical phenomenon vs. sound as symbol; issues of copyright and trademark; community ownership; awareness, sensitivity and responsibility; composer responsibility vs. listener responsibility; the relative importance of contextualisation; and intercultural dialogue. We will conclude with a critique of the cultural and ethical shortcomings of the article itself, and a call for social, cultural and ethical engagement in creative sound work.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article intends to examine some of the issues involved with and surrounding the ethics of working creatively with sound. The term 'creative sound' is used here primarily in an attempt to think broadly about creative sound work, without narrowing it to an examination of a particular style, genre or practice; however, due to some of the issues raised, some of the discussion will be particularly relevant for categories that include working with recorded sound in some form.

It should be stressed from the beginning that we are not here attempting to define or prescribe a particular ethical framework for creative sound work. This is not an attempt to judge, nor to preach; it is instead an attempt to observe and outline some of the existing – and sometimes contradictory – mores, pressures, strictures, demands, requirements, prejudices and other social and ethical factors that come into play when working creatively with sound. It is an attempt to engage with and bring into play some of the many criss-crossing ethical strands that impact our work. It should also be noted that we cannot claim here to be complete, nor definitive, by any means, but merely to offer a few small points, and an attempt at an overview of some aspects of a broad and complex subject.

2. 'WHOSE SOUND IS IT ANYWAY?': SOUND OWNERSHIP

Some of the key questions regarding the ethical use of sound concern sound rights: which sounds can be used, and which sounds can't; by whom; in what manner, and so on. However, we will open with an issue that speaks in much less equivocal terms: sound ownership.

Is it possible – or meaningful – to 'own' a sound? For a sound to be the property of an individual, or of a community? One finds a range of decisive responses to this question, often quite polarised. Many of these are closely tied to questions of identity, as well as to varying cultural understandings of the nature of sound.

3. SOUND AND VISION

In both of these respects, it is perhaps informative to begin with similarities and differences between cultural attitudes towards ownership of sound and image. Generally speaking, ethical positions are often much clearer, and stronger, regarding image – photography, for instance – than sound. One encounters different reactions if one attempts to photograph a stranger in public, without their knowledge or consent, from if one captures a recording of their voice, in which case the imperative for consent tends to be significantly reduced. Photographing children on a playground is considered inappropriate; recording the voices of children at a playground, dramatically less so. If you photograph a stranger on a train, you are considered to be 'stealing' something from them; there is a question of ownership – the camera is used to commit a theft.[1] With a microphone, however, one is not accused of 'stealing' their voice, though one does risk being accused of spying on them – the technological extension of eavesdropping. No longer, then, a question of theft, but of invasion of privacy. There is the anthropological cliché of the belief that the camera will 'steal the soul' of the person photographed (Marr 1989); the equivalent belief regarding the recording of a person's voice, on the other hand, is either far less common, or less often reported. 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power'

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[1] There are, of course, situations in which public photography is more generally acceptable, or at least more common; for example, in heavily touristed areas. Such situations are not, however, without their own ethical entanglements. For a detailed consideration of the ethics of recorded sound in such contexts, see Naylor 2014 and Blackburn 2011.

(Sontag 1977: 4). 'The microphone takes away a man's words, but the camera takes away his soul' (Young 1975: 112).

In some ways, this seems a curious contrast. An image is the capturing of a single frozen moment; sound, on the other hand, through its temporal engagement and its collection of an evolving scene, seems somehow to hold more of the essence, the flavour, of the subject – more of one's 'soul'… Perhaps the issue is sound's ephemerality: a picture can be held in the hand, put on the shelf; a sound cannot – it retreats into its medium, awaiting fresh mediation to be conjured up anew. Perhaps this, too, is part of the distinction: the image is a moment captured and held, where the sound is simply ready to be born again.

4. ICONICITY

More critical, however, is the relative iconicity assigned to image and to sound. A person's image is considered to be imbued with explicit and immediate iconicity, without the requirement for any further symbolic content; the mere sound of a person's voice, however, is not in and of itself iconic – this is instead located in the words and their semantic content. The image, on the other hand, requires nothing further; the subject is not required to sign or signal a message in any way – the simple fact of their image is, in and of itself, enough, where the simple appearance of the sound of their voice is not.

5. ETHICS CONCRÈTE

This brings us to an issue of central importance in sound ethics: variations in conception of what we mean when we talk about 'sound', and which aspects concern us when dealing with ethical considerations.

Sound is an ephemeral phenomenon. How can we claim to 'own' such a phenomenon? What is it exactly that we are claiming to own? To claim as property something that cannot be held, stored or kept seems improbable and impractical. Except, of course, sound can indeed be stored, held and kept: the central glorious epiphany of recording and of musique concrète in the 1940s… Does the advent of recorded sound equal a similar revolution in sound ethics – does it lead us to a kind of 'ethics concrète'?

Unlikely. While it is perhaps conceptually easier to accept the notion of ownership of 'stored sound' – it is now a physical object, no longer merely a fleeting phantom, brushing past in the air – in practice, the fact of storage is largely irrelevant (culturally, if not legally, a distinction that will be addressed shortly). It is not the ownership of the strip of tape, disc or hard drive that happens to be the vessel for a particular sound at a particular moment that is at issue. Over what, then, is a claim of ownership being made?

The key to this lies with the central question alluded to above: what, exactly, are we referring to when we talk about 'sound'? While this may seem a facetious question at first, it is in fact both legitimate and crucial, and shifting definitions of 'sound' lie at the heart of some of the key differences in ethical perspective.

6. SOUND OR SYMBOL?

For our purposes, it is useful to draw up a contrast between two concepts: 'sound', and 'a sound'. The first of these is a mass noun, referring broadly to a physical and psychological phenomenon, as motion causes a pressure front to travel through a medium to reach a listener, who then experiences that phenomenon through a complex biological and neurological process. '*A* sound', however, is a completely different phenomenon. 'A sound' is a mental and cultural construction; it is a signified that wraps together a number of factors into the sign that is triggered by the reception and recognition of a particular sound pattern. 'A sound' combines the sonic unit – the recognition of a particular sonic gestalt, assigned to a particular source and a particular action – and, more significantly, the mental image that this triggers. This last element is a very complex unit indeed, tying together a number of 'objective' physical characteristics with a sophisticated and multi-faceted complex of culturally loaded ideas about the object in question and what it signifies (Atkinson 2007).

To summarise this much more simply: 'sound' is a primarily acoustic phenomenon, while 'a sound' is a cultural construct: a symbol. The vast majority of ethical considerations relating to sound concern primarily, or only, this second concept: sound as symbol. It is the symbol that is at issue, not the acoustic phenomenon of pressure waves in a medium, of cochlear reactions, nor even of sound stored on a medium. A sound wave is innocent; a sound wave that happens to form the sound of a person screaming in pain is not. Individual pitches are innocent, but pitches that build up to form a political anthem are not (McClary 1987).

One sometimes encounters an attempt to bypass ethical issues by casually side-stepping from one definition to the other: a philosophical sleight of hand in which the cultural symbol is surreptitiously replaced by the acoustic phenomenon, suddenly rendering all ethical considerations irrelevant and absurd. To avoid this, we must be clear which of these we are talking about.

Thus, when ownership is being claimed over sound, it is most often ownership of the sonic *symbol* that is at issue, rather than ownership of a precise wave

pattern, or of a particular instance of that pattern's storage. It is this emphasis on ownership of symbol that is reflected in the discussion of visual vs. sonic iconicity, above: a person's image is considered a more direct symbol than the sound of their voice, and is therefore more tightly guarded.

7. SOUND AS PHYSICAL PHENOMENON

While there remain ethical issues that relate specifically to the physical phenomenon of 'sound', rather than its role as symbol, these generally relate specifically to sound's physical properties: for example, its amplitude or its frequency. Potential consequences of unethical use of sound here range from mild annoyance, to permanent physical damage, with infractions ranging from small acts of thoughtlessness to serious crimes and human rights abuse.

It is interesting to note, however, that the severity of the consequences do not necessarily correspond with the degree of public censure. Loud music from neighbours is met with anger, rage and often a call to the police; loud music at a club or concert is not only considered acceptable, with some genres and sub-cultures it is often demanded by much of the public, who will be outraged if the necessary decibel levels are not delivered. The first of these two situations is no more than a nuisance, but regularly receives a reaction on an entirely different scale from the second situation, which results in very real, well-documented and sometimes tragic consequences, from slight to extremely serious hearing loss, tinnitus and other forms of hearing damage (Daniel 2007). The general public treats the nuisance as a serious ethical contravention, and the physical assault as an acceptable inconvenience, or even as a desirable quality.

Certain other instances that engage with the ethics of sound as physical phenomenon are more deliberate, and can therefore seem rather more sinister. One area of current controversy is the use of sound as torture – submitting a prisoner to music played at painful volume levels for significant durations, or to short bursts of loud music only a few minutes apart, 24 hours a day, thereby preventing the subject from achieving deep sleep (Cusick 2008). These are indeed issues that are ethically disturbing, and many voices have been raised in objection. However, the primary ethical failing here must surely be the act of torture: the judgement that 'torture is wrong' is equally true of sonic torture as of any other form of torture. There is a strange counter-current, however, that refuses to believe that music is capable of serving as torture, especially not such absurd examples as some of those in actual use for this purpose, such as the theme song for children's television programme *Barney the Dinosaur* (Worthington 2008). This again points to the dichotomy described above, sound-as-physical-phenomenon vs.

sound-as-symbol: it is in its capacity as physical phenomenon that it is being used as torture, but sound's capacity as symbol – in this case, for a harmless children's television programme and character – appears to contradict this capacity, despite its obvious irrelevance to the situation.

A less hostile, but still ethically dubious, sound practice, employing extremes of frequency rather than of amplitude, is the social control device known as 'The Mosquito' (Goodman 2010; Volcler 2013). This is a device in use in public spaces in the UK, France and elsewhere that emits a pitch at a frequency high enough to be no longer audible to the majority of those over a certain age. Its purpose is to discourage the gathering of youths in key public spaces, especially at certain times of evening and night. As an ethical act, this is clearly extremely questionable, open to accusations of both ageism and of impinging on people's rights and freedoms, not to mention its impact on individuals – young children for instance – outside of the intended target group. It is another clear example of an ethical question based on sound as physical phenomenon; there is no ethical complaint based on the symbolic content of the frequency produced.

8. COPYRIGHT AND TRADEMARK

The majority of ethical loci in creative sound, however, deal not with these physical characteristics, but rather with sound as symbol. We began discussing this above, with the question of personal ownership of one's own visual or sonic image. This leads in short order to aspects of sound ownership that are tightly wound up with copyright issues and questions of creative property, critical to debates around a number of creative forms: sampling culture, for instance. This is an intense, sophisticated and ongoing debate, so we will refrain from exploring it here in much detail, as it would require more scope than we can offer here.[2] Speaking more broadly, we will avoid specifically legal questions generally, in part because these tend to be firmly recorded and documented elsewhere, but also because here we are concerned first and foremost with ethics, and law is not governed by ethics alone, much as we would often like to believe otherwise; weight is also given for example to political questions, business and economic questions, and so on (Pound 1954). As a result, a given law may run counter to general ethical consensus. A relevant case in point is the trademarking of the NBC 'chimes' in 1950 (Harris 1996), a sound logo that amounts to a second-inversion broken chord, without any other signature sonic characteristics – no rhythmic elements, no morphological development and so on. The claim of ownership over such a basic unit of

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[2]See, for example, Newton 1988 and Schumacher 1995 for more information.

tonal music is clearly not in keeping with the culture's general understanding of sonic rights; however, one could argue that it is not this trademark's intention to control every use of this triad, nor does it appear to have resulted in much in the way of enforcement. This leads to the question of whether the ethical focus lies primarily in a law's intention, its wording or its enforcement (Pound 1954).

It also leads us back to the question of sound vs. symbol: it is not so much the sound – the triad itself – over which NBC is claiming ownership; it is its role as *symbol* – its service as a sonic signifier for the network. As such, it is not the musical use of the triad to which NBC might be expected to object; it is the hypothetical attempt by another company or brand to employ this same triad form for their own logo.

9. COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

However, we are here more interested in the broader social attitudes towards sound ownership than in purely legal questions. Having discussed individual ownership, what of community ownership? Here we find some of the most vigorous ethical discussion and debate over cultural ethics, including issues of cultural appropriation, cultural sensitivity, orientalism[3] and so on.

These are rarely simple questions. As described above, questions of sound ownership are often difficult to define; even more so when it comes to questions of group, community or cultural ownership. What constitutes a 'community' or 'culture'? Where does one community begin and another one end? What constitutes membership in a given community, and who is excluded? Who within the community can claim authority in questions of ethical use? Most importantly of all, when two communities or cultures disagree over appropriate use, who is able to adjudicate?

On a large enough scale, the answer, most often, is: no one. There is no one sufficiently free of cultural perspective, background, bias and baggage to impartially determine differences of opinion between larger cultural groups. This leaves the groups in question to attempt to navigate points of friction and conflict without recourse to umpire or arbitration – often a long, complex and delicate process, in which cultural values in conflict go head to head.

Once again, image provides clearer examples than sound: consider, for example, international conflict over the use of the image of the prophet Muhammad (Klausen 2009). For practising Muslims, this is blasphemous and prohibited; yet Western cartoonists have, on a number of occasions, claimed the right to present this image based on freedom of expression.

[3]See Said 1978.

Both of the two principles in play here – 'religious respect' vs. 'freedom of expression' – are culturally relative terms: they take their meaning from the cultures in which they are expressed. As a result, there is no possible point of comparison, even if some imaginary, impartial, extracultural judge could be found to consider the issue. Any comparison requires the translation of either term into the cultural framework of the other, rendering it unreliable at best, meaningless at worst, and invalidating any conclusions one might attempt to draw.

This seems to leave us with a choice: we can either ignore ethical considerations entirely, using sound and symbol in whatever way we wish, or we can choose to engage with the incredibly complex ethical cultural web. However, this is only the illusion of choice: although the first of these may claim to be a position somehow 'beyond' ethics, it in fact simply takes an extreme and consistent position on any ethical questions that might arise. We are therefore hopelessly bound to the ethical web, whether we like it or not.

10. AWARENESS, SENSITIVITY, RESPONSIBILITY

In attempting to elaborate the ethical concerns surrounding culturally sensitive use of sound, we can perhaps distinguish three key areas:

- being informed;
- being sensitive; and
- taking responsibility.

Are we primarily concerned about the inappropriate use of sound, or more about the ignorance this may imply? What was the artist's intention in employing this sound – were they unaware of the potential offence, or did they use it despite, or even deliberately because of, such offence? Is either of these ethically better or worse than the other – is it worse for an artist to be ignorant of the cultural implications of their work, or to have gone ahead despite and in full knowledge of these implications?

Let us consider an example. In a number of forms of sound-based composition, sounds are often chosen primarily for their purely sonic properties. Let us imagine a composer at work upon a composition employing recordings of human speech, deployed according only to these sonic priorities. Let us further propose that this composer cannot speak a word of English, but is using recordings of a number of spoken languages, English included. Let us now imagine that, enraptured with its sonic properties but unaware of its meaning, our composer employs an extremely offensive four-letter word, and the composition that results is extremely offensive to a great many listeners, the majority of whom know enough

of the language to be fully familiar with the word in question. To what extent is the composer at fault, or responsible for this situation? Would they be more, or less, at fault if they had employed this word in full awareness of its negative impact?

Let us complicate matters further: what if the word used is not English, but a language from a particularly small and geographically isolated linguistic group, one which is unlikely to come into contact with the resulting sound work? Is this ethically more acceptable? Perhaps – the number of offended parties is significantly reduced; perhaps not – the word's use remains equally disrespectful of a cultural group.

Another example: Steve Feld (1988) has described a situation in which he was reprimanded for a casual reference to the call of a particular bird, unaware that the local culture believes this call to be the voices of ancestors, and was therefore to be treated with deference. If one were to record this bird in ignorance of this fact and employ it in a piece, what are the ethical implications? None of the principles of the composer's own culture have been upset – is this the point at which the composer's responsibility ends? If responsibility extends to the principles of the offended culture, is ethical judgement of the composer's transgression tempered at all if that culture never hears the piece, and therefore remains ignorant of the offending act? Once informed, to what extent does the composer retain the right to judge for themselves the relative weight of the infraction, and to what extent must they balance this with the concerns of the offended party?

None of these are questions to which we can here provide an objective answer; however, all of these are questions that artists and creative professionals are likely to have to wrestle with from time to time. Only one thing is certain: the better informed we are of the cultural implications of a given sound, the more aware we are of the range of responses to the work we might expect. This is significant on both an artistic and a social level: we can choose not to use a controversial or culturally sensitive sound, or, if we decide to use the sound in spite of this, then we can be prepared for the public reactions that might result. Being informed is also an absolute prerequisite for cultural sensitivity: one cannot engineer the sensitive use of sound, if one is unaware of the context and cultural implications of that sound. And ultimately, we must be able and willing to take responsibility for our artistic decisions in using culturally sensitive material. The more culturally charged a symbol may be, the greater the responsibility the artist must be willing to take in using it; the greater the imperative that the use of this symbol be artistically or culturally validated. Casually employing Nazi imagery in a work for no reason at all will be likely to cause outrage; the use of Nazi imagery to construct a responsible critique

of fascism might not. And if one does opt for the trivial deployment of such imagery, one must be aware of and prepared for some of the probable cultural responses and consequences this may entail.

However, how much responsibility can we realistically take for a symbol? If we are concerned with cultural interpretations of our work, where is the line? In defining a cultural group, we can refine the group under consideration in ever greater detail, giving us ever smaller sub-cultures to consider, with a theoretical limit case of a membership of one. Yet it is taken for granted that no artist can be responsible for *every* individual's interpretation of their work; nor, indeed, can the artist be *fully* responsible for any single individual's interpretation. A number of famous examples present themselves: Charles Manson taking inspiration from The Beatles (Bugliosi and Gentry 1974); Mark David Chapman taking inspiration from J. D. Salinger (Jones 1992). The extent to which the broader community holds either of these artists responsible for the crimes committed by Manson and Chapman is limited.

More importantly, symbols are culturally relative: they are heavily dependent on the cultural web that surrounds them; move to another cultural web, and your symbol has changed, sometimes dramatically (Andean 2012). Does the composer need to be responsible for that symbol in every conceivable cultural interpretation? Furthermore, each of these cultural determinations of interpretation is extremely likely to change over time, theoretically leaving us with an infinite number of possibilities, so the answer to our question must surely be 'no'. But where is the line? Where does the artist's responsibility for a symbol end?

11. COMPOSER VERSUS LISTENER

For this latter question to be sensible, something must lie beyond this point – beyond the border of the artist's responsibility for a symbol, and it is here that we find the listener. The artist is clearly responsible for the presentation of a symbol, and this will have a significant, possibly defining, impact on its interpretation; however, it is in fact the *listener* who performs the interpretive act, and who must therefore share responsibility for this interpretation.[4] 'Just as the pain of the bite does not belong to the mosquito, nether does the buzzing sound belong to the bug. It, like the pain, belongs to the bitten' (O'Callaghan 2007: 7). The same can be said of the composer–listener relationship: a sound does not belong to the composer, but to the listener, and at least some of the responsibility for what results must surely lie with them.

This may at first appear to contradict the artist's power and control over their own work. But it is not

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[4]'to involve the listener in an essential part of the composition, namely to complete its network of meanings' (Truax 1996: 55).

the role of the creator that is being questioned by the relationship described above: it is the notion of the work of art as an independent object. Western culture has tended to imbibe such works with a sense of being, with an objective, autonomous existence (Adorno 1997). This appears to grant the work a degree of authority and self-determination that would make it difficult to interrogate its ethical implications. However, it can be argued that this autonomy is in fact an illusion, that the work of art is entirely transactional – a cultural negotiation, with artist and audience as the primary agents. As an independent unit, the art work is beyond the reach of ethics; as a locus of cultural communication, exchange and interaction, ethics are fully implicated in the very heart of the art work.

12. THE ETHICS OF CONTEXT

Many of the ethical questions and considerations described above rest on questions of context. It is often in the changing of context that a symbol becomes controversial; the appropriation of a symbol from an originating context and its creative application in a new context is a common cause of ethical protest. This suggests that one can ensure ethical use by maintaining or otherwise deferring to context: if the sound is appropriately contextualised, possibly by maintaining its originating context, offence and transgression are avoided.

However, the degree to which this is consistently or verifiably accurate is debatable; perhaps more importantly, this notion of 'context' can be extremely volatile. In much of the literature on soundscape composition, for example, the genre defines itself by its emphasis on the maintenance of context (Truax 1994, 1996, 2008; Proy 2002), in contrast to other forms of electroacoustic composition, with the implication of thereby offering a more ethically grounded compositional form. The degree of context this implies or assumes, however, seems to vary enormously from work to work and from composer to composer; what's more, this also varies significantly across many of the genres from which soundscape composition is attempting to differentiate itself. More importantly, it ignores the primordial decontextualising act: the severing of sound from source. Carefully laying this sound in a bed of surrounding sounds that have been similarly torn from their roots in the world to take up residence in a tape piece, composition or other work of sonic art seems fairly cosmetic by comparison with the initiating separation imposed by the act of recording. The practice of soundmapping[5] comes up against a

similar interrogation: once again, one finds a practice that places great emphasis on context – the careful linking of sound with place – in apparent denial of the extreme decontextualising act that is the severing of sound from the moment in which it was born. Further, this sound that now lays claim to representing place is but a frozen moment, pinned and examined under glass like a butterfly in a collector's case, a somewhat forlorn substitute for a living, breathing reality.

13. THE ETHICS OF DIALOGUE

Despite the many intercultural challenges described above, many composers are drawn to work in precisely the area 'in between' cultures, of cultures in dialogue and collaboration, despite – or perhaps because of – the heat of cultural friction. In doing so, many have taken a very close look at some of the issues we have raised to date;[6] many have gone to great lengths to ensure an exemplary degree of awareness, sensitivity and responsibility. Some have developed close collaborations that serve as models of dialogue and co-creation, with respect, creative flow and credit flowing freely in both directions, and all parties coming away satisfied and enriched by the experience and the results.[7] Despite the best of these efforts, however, there remain ethical concerns that cannot entirely be avoided or dodged. This is perhaps inevitable, and has less to do with a particular work, project or composer, and more to do with cultural challenges that we can none of us entirely escape. We remain inevitable representatives of the cultures from which we spring; regardless of the symbols with which we choose to infuse our work, we ourselves will continue to serve as symbols of the culture and context with which we are identified, and the reception and interpretation of our works will be infused with this knowledge. Similar use of a particular culturally loaded symbol by two composers of contrasting backgrounds will almost inevitably be interpreted differently – sometimes radically so – by the aware listener, as this symbol is transformed through engagement with the cultural signifiers of the composers' differing identities. We therefore risk being confronted or accused, not based solely on our actions or works, over which we have control and in which we can therefore exert and express the full strength of our best intentions, but based on our cultural identities and the full historical and cultural

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[5]Soundmapping is the practice of linking field recordings with recording locations, creating a network of sound bites to represent place and geographies. For more on soundmapping, including a

(F'note continued)

more detailed consideration of ethical implications, see Waldcock 2011.
[6]See for example Cipriani and Latini 2008; Ciardi 2008; Gluck 2008. See also Drever 2002, who ties these issues to the consideration of context and soundscape just discussed.
[7]Blackburn 2013 deserves particular mention here.

weight of what these signify in a broader context over which we have little to no impact.

To begin with, much of the discourse surrounding intercultural creative work focuses on 'dialogue' – with unquestionable sincerity, but also in an engaged effort to deflect the sharpest accusations of cultural imperialism: it is not an act of cultural appropriation if it is a joint and collaborative exchange between two committed parties. But, are we really seeing the kind of dialogue artists seek and crave? Possibly not.[8]

There are a number of potential reasons for this. To begin with, in many of these projects, it is very often 'our' side that initiates the exchange and proposes the terms: what each side will offer, what each side will gain. While there is generally no sense whatsoever of any disingenuousness here, it remains significant that the initiating proposal is often from a single perspective. As such, the exchange is often based on what one side seeks to gain from the other, and simultaneously on what this same side believes they themselves have to offer, as distinct from what the other side might seek to gain.

This is far from insignificant, as it is constrained by the full limitations and blindness of cultural bias, leaving the project open to the weight of a number of postcolonial criticisms (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1988). Every culture's artistic activity is born from and reflects many of the most significant aspects, current and historical, of that culture: political structures, social structures and so on (McClary 1987; Small 1998). Western culture has regularly attempted to ignore, avoid or deny this with regards to its own artistic output, for example by emphasising the autonomy of 'pure' art, or by downplaying social aspects of art-making while glorifying the artist as individual. However, there is nothing we can do; our art is as closely tied to the social, political and historical underpinnings of the society from which we spring as that of any of the cultures we observe with a pretence of anthropological neutrality (Shepherd et al. 1977). This is particularly painful in instances where artists might personally object to the political or social characteristics that surreptitiously inform or define the context for their work. We may object to aspects of our own society, but we nevertheless embody and internalise many of these aspects in ways that cannot be escaped, and – very significantly – we remain a symbol of that society to others. Many of these aspects seriously limit the relevance of any translation or importing of Western sonic art culture to other cultural communities: for example, the concept of 'the artist' as a distinct social role and position; the privilege associated with this position; the concept of the art work as a detached, autonomous aesthetic object; or, as a very specific sound-based example, the compositional use of decontextualised sound, which is often a source of bewilderment in the society from which it springs, let alone after cultural export. It is not so much, however, that our art forms have nothing to offer another culture; it is rather that these many elements of our own cultural perspective on our own art-making prevent us from being able to envision or understand another culture's potential perspective on our own cultural products, and thereby what they might find to be of use or value therein.

In fact, there is a very real risk that we would fail to recognise a genuine dialogue between our own creative sound culture and another culture, should one take place. When we select elements from another musical culture to employ in our own work, is this recognised by the other party as somehow having a relevant relationship to the practice from which we have borrowed? Often the answer here is 'no'. We have selected elements of interest to us, but there is no reason that these elements should happen to align with those qualities that are singled out as defining characteristics by the originating culture; instead, the various qualities – formal or structural, for example – that are considered definitional by the originating culture are now absent when the practice is reinterpreted by the other group, resulting in the rejection of suggestions that a meaningful dialogue has taken place. It seems probable that the reverse would likely also occur: that, should another culture attempt to engage with our sonic art practice, we would fail to recognise any connection with said practice, due to the loss of key elements in which we locate the nature and identity of the genre. Instead of looking hopefully for how another culture might engage with and interpret our practice, we instead are looking for a mirror that will reflect our own concerns back at us.

In fact, we might suggest that we have already seen examples of this phenomenon within our own culture, for example where so-called 'popular' musical forms have freely adopted and incorporated elements of electroacoustic music, while downplaying key formal or structural concerns considered essential and defining by the electroacoustic community (see for example Ramsay 2013).

In this, and elsewhere, the discourse is at times guilty of a number of postcolonialism's well-founded accusations,[9] because we either fail to recognise our own cultural and aesthetic biases, or fail to recognise our practice as culturally produced, culturally bounded and culture-specific. This leads us to propose a dialogue between an 'other' that is recognisably community based and culturally defined, and our own practice,

[8]There are, of course, a number of powerful exceptions: see for example Blackburn 2010 and 2011; Emmerson 2000.

[9]See Said 1978; Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1988.

which by exemption somehow claims an omnipotent position above and outside such mundane cultural roots. A key component of this illusion is geographical, with the claim that ours are fully 'international' practices that have escaped or evolved beyond any historical roots as strictly Western traditions, or even that these practices hold the key to universal, geographically egalitarian dialogue and art practice.[10]

14. CONFESSION

As stated above, however, some of this is perhaps the inevitable consequence of our inescapable identities as products of culture, and as culturally rooted, culturally engaged agents, with no possibility of fully extricating ourselves from the stickier corners of the cultural web. In writing this text, I am as guilty of this as anyone else; I am just as bound by my cultural background, education, and so on, as any of the artists or practitioners mentioned above, and the manner in which the problem has been discussed – indeed, the very fact of discussing it at all – is fully determined by this background. A different cultural background would probably lead to a very different framing of the issue, in very different terms, from a very different perspective; one might no longer see any value in a written treatise discussing what purports to be engaged social and aesthetic actions, nor any validity in the very notion of a disembodied, dislocated ethical framework. This seeps all the way down to the details of the discourse to date, based as it has been on a number of relatively abstract and entirely culture-specific notions – for example, 'sound as symbol' – which would be considered by a great many other intellectual traditions to be a meaningless proposition.

But here, again, we walk directly into the central traps surrounding such cultural issues, once again implicating me as much as anyone else in this same imbroglio. Because I have been trying to speak generally about our subject – as it is clearly impossible to enumerate and address each and every instance of creative sound work in which ethical and cultural issues arise – I have inevitably been led to repeatedly make or imply gross categorisations of 'us' – 'creative sound professionals' – and 'them': those 'other' cultures with whose sounds we are engaging in some way. Stated thusly, this is clearly problematic: to begin with, who is this 'other' to whom I vaguely and implicitly refer? On what grounds do I make the assumption that the 'creative sound professionals' for whom these might be relevant issues are necessarily Western, or rather that they share my own cultural background, while these

[10]See, for example, Hall 2013, which raises a number of excellent critical and ethical points.

'others' are not, and do not? This enormous reduction to a contrast between vaguely 'Western' tradition, practice and perspective, and a sweepingly generalised 'other', is, in fact, perhaps the most commonly decried failing of current cultural discourse, making me guilty of trespassing against one of the clearest of current ethical imperatives.

15. REDEMPTION

However, here, as in any act of creation, the goal has not been to entirely avoid any and all hint of ethical debate, but rather to engage as fully, actively and with as much awareness as possible. This will never be a straightforward proposition. On a social and cultural scale, we, and everything we do, are a vast web of points, all of them in motion, and all with ethical implications. And, as if this were not enough, every one of these points is in motion, which means that this vast web is in a constant process of reconfiguration. It is impossible to come accurately to terms with the entirety of the web; but, even were it possible, this newfound understanding would immediately become redundant, as the web would already have moved on, into new, constantly evolving configurations. Here we have, in essence, the cultural incarnation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: to properly understand the web of ethical and cultural relations, we must freeze it, in order to analyse it; but this is an entirely unnatural state for the web, whose meaning and identity is inextricably connected with its state of flux. Once removed from this flux for analysis, any observations or determinations become highly suspect, and open to misunderstanding, misinterpretation and distortion.

Nevertheless, it is our duty to understand as much of this web as we can – our duty, not as artists, but as human beings. To understand, but not necessarily to agree, or to accept: we may play here at objectivity, but in truth, we have our own active roles to play, as our own points in the web, and this requires us to take up ethical positions – never simply passive observers of the web. The creative act, in particular, is an act of social engagement, and therefore of ethical engagement. It is impossible to address all concerns, all perspectives, on all issues. Worrying too much about potential ethical conflicts would unnecessarily and unproductively shackle and burden creativity. Instead, the goal is, and must be, to engage: artistically, aesthetically, creatively, socially, personally and, yes, ethically. And, throughout, we must remember to proceed with optimism, good will and noble intentions – but most importantly, with eyes (and ears) wide open.

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