

# Récit Music: Musical community in the information age

ARIAN BAGHERI POUR FALLAH

Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. Email: [arianbpf@recitmusic.art](mailto:arianbpf@recitmusic.art)

**This article delineates a metaphysical concept, *musical community*, and considers its implications for material practices in the art world. It describes ways in which two theoretically distant categories of art music, namely, electroacoustic music and the concert-hall tradition, may converge given the emergent societal and technological shifts in the information age. The concepts of ‘networks’ and ‘reciprocity’, as developed by sociologists Manuel Castells and Marcel Mauss, respectively, constitute the theoretical lens for this analysis, which sees a number of musicological notions, including ‘musical society’ and ‘acousmatics’ reconsidered philosophically. Emphasis is placed, in lieu of the insular methodologies associated with the *akousmatikoi*, on broader Pythagorean society, its mythical links with present-day musical society, which are explored in relation to practical as well as structural proclivities permeating contemporary art music. These philosophical considerations are then used, so as to provide a general theory of *récit music*, a musical form designed by the author enabling creative employment of the impasses introduced in the information age. Finally, different reciprocities of the form with contemporary and traditional compositional philosophies are discussed, serving as an overview of the various theoretical and formal facets of *récit music* as methodology, approached in terms of three propositions.**

## 1. RECIPROCITY, DISPERSION AND ABSENCE IN THE MUSICAL COMMUNITY

### 1.1. Pandora’s jar: networks and electroacoustic music

There is a precept linking Manuel Castells’s remark on the spatial dynamics of the information age, namely that ‘[t]he network society is a global society because networks have no boundaries’ (Castells 2008: 2737), to the founding wager of spectromorphology,<sup>1</sup> that is, ‘[t]he art of music is no longer limited to the models of instruments and voices.’ (Smalley 1997: 107). In the latter thesis, ‘[e]lectroacoustic music’ is credited with having opened ‘access to all sounds, a bewildering sonic array ranging from the real to the surreal and beyond’ (Smalley 1997: 107), whereas in the former, the change is ascribed to another sociocultural

<sup>1</sup>This is by no means endemic to spectromorphology as an analytic methodology and is a recurring precept within broader electroacoustic music literature (see Moore 2016: 38).

phenomenon also largely determined through technological advancement, what Castells refers to as ‘networks’ (Castells 2008: 2737).<sup>2</sup>

The precept linking the two theses can best be explained through the myth of Pandora. The corollaries of modern technology, on the one hand, of recording and manipulating sound (Schaeffer 2012: 107), and on the other, of the information technology revolution (Castells 1996: 28–76), are as inevitable as paradoxical in nature, matching the highly ambiguous character of the mythical Pandora’s jar, variously interpreted by scholars as the root of all metaphysical evil (Byrne 1998) and material goods (Holzhausen 2004). While Castells, a sociologist, investigates the more damaging facets of the phenomena he identifies, Denis Smalley’s project is dedicated to the ways in which the art of music can employ the boundless in order to overcome its many impasses.

It goes without saying that Smalley’s central claim holds true to this very day. Sound-based music subsumes today broader art music (Landy 2007; Cobussen, Meelberg and Truax 2016), with the concert-hall tradition both directly and indirectly impacted by it (Rose 1996: 16; Kostka and Santa 2018: 241–59). The same is true of Castells’s thesis, no matter that one would agree with his political conclusions, which align him (in general terms though not strictly) alongside contemporary Marxist thinkers such as David Harvey (Castells 1996: 25, 449).<sup>3</sup> That the nominally boundless premise of networks – exemplified by the internet in the most tangible way – supports global economy as well as most human relations today is not a controversial standpoint. There is, in other words, little to be gained from debating either thesis, and the intent here is to uncover the more valuable insights that can be found in their founding, *mythical* makeup.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The concept of networks is discussed in section 1.2 and persists in the discussion thereafter.

<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting that Harvey’s views of Castells’s thesis are, if not entirely critical, not favourable (see Harvey 2000: 62).

<sup>4</sup>It must be stressed that the choice of a *myth* to frame the analogy here is inextricably linked to the broader discussion on *musique concrète* and later, *récit music*, both of which are taken to be predominantly *mythical* endeavours.

Hesiod's iteration of the myth of Pandora does not detail the jar's origin, where scholarship has traced it to passages in Homer among other poets (Hunter 2014: 244). In 'Babrius' narrative', however, the 'origin of the jar' is no longer treated as a mystery: 'it is opened by a man who cannot contain his desire to know' (Hunter 2014: 247). Suspending the more immediate, epistemological implications of this narrative,<sup>5</sup> I would like to emphasise, instead, the name given to the myth's main subject. The name Pandora (Πανδρα) is etymologically rooted in the words πς, meaning all, and δρον, meaning gift (Montanari 2015: 1591, 575). One of the most notable approaches to the notion of the gift in modern thought can be found in Marcel Mauss's essay of the same name in economic anthropology (Mauss 2002), which I will briefly discuss in the following subsection, concluding the comparative analysis of networks and electroacoustic music.

## 1.2. Reciprocity: the network society and the musical society

A classic in counter-capitalist literature, *The Gift* is concerned with how 'primitive economies' were organised, in contrast to the 'icy, utilitarian' and 'prosaic' calculations permeating classical economics (Mauss 2002: 98, 93), around the obligation to 'reciprocate'.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the essay, Mauss maintains that gifts were used in primitive economies, in a highly metaphysical manner, noting how things<sup>7</sup> were neither given freely nor sold/saved, but rendered – in order to foster balance – as part of a continuous reciprocal imperative (Mauss 2002: 10–23, 50–1).

Beyond its economic implementation, the concept of reciprocity is used, in broader (structural) anthropology, to denote the 'immediate resolution of the opposition between the self and the other' (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 22). If one were to regard networks and electroacoustic music as phenomena necessitating reciprocal exchange, these would have to involve not one but, at the very least, two participants. The question one should ask, therefore, is twofold: What are networks' and electroacoustic music's participants? What kind of social structures enable and partake in

the exchanges initiated by them? Here, Castells is quick to provide an answer as to the first part of the question:

Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the same communication codes (for example, values or performance goals). A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating without threatening its balance. (Castells 1996: 501–2)

Indeed, this is one of the characteristics unique to the information age, at once accelerating and transforming the pervasiveness of capital, as noted by the more vocal critics of capitalism (see Freeman and Louçã 2001; Zuboff 2019). Networks not only comprise dynamic, global social structures but also further absorb more participants, which range from 'virtual communities' to 'e-commerce' (Castells 1996: 389, 426), recruiting them ad lib in a process where they contribute to the continuum simply by *existing*. To reciprocate, therefore, is an integral component of partaking in the network society, present albeit not guaranteed to last as long (Castells 1996: 388), and as such, amoral in character. How about electroacoustic music?

Smalley's project mentioned earlier is arguably electroacoustic music's most recent theoretical framework analogous to a traditional music theory. And spectromorphology is, upon first glance, based on reciprocal exchange between the listener and the composer, that is, unlike traditional music theory, not designed as a compositional methodology, thereby assigning to the composer not the same central role. Spectromorphology is, at the same time, concerned with the composer and the listener, as separate social roles, while largely ruling out the performer, who is discussed in later literature (see Smalley 2007: 41–2) for the sole purpose of delineating the space-form and as a formation contributing to spatial difference; for example, ensemble space. Spectromorphological tools are meant to assist two of these admittedly separate social roles, namely those of the composer and the listener (Smalley 1997: 108). In other words, the composer has no obligation (or incentive) to engage with the performer(s), or other composer(s) (and vice versa). If s/he takes on the role of the listener, it is strictly so that s/he can improve on the insular quest of composing, or rather, to reciprocate with oneself as one's listener – thus becoming the 'composer-listener' (Smalley 1997: 111).

As early as in 1974, John Cage observed the many shifts in the social landscape of music engendered by technology. In his essay 'The Future of Music', he writes:

<sup>5</sup>The *will to knowledge* regarding electroacoustic music and the information age, respectively, call for critical inquiry.

<sup>6</sup>Parallel to its widespread and continuing influence, the thesis has since been criticised on both antipositivist and normative terms (see Derrida 1992 and Testart 2013).

<sup>7</sup>[E]verything – food, women, children, property, talismans, land, labour services, priestly functions, and ranks – is there for passing on, and for balancing accounts. Everything passes to and from as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter' (Mauss 2002: 18).

[T]echnology has brought about the blurring of the distinctions between composers, performers, and listeners ... However, to combine in one person these several activities [of composing, performing, and listening] is, in effect, to remove from music its social nature. It is the social nature of music, the practice in it of using a number of people doing different things to make it, that distinguishes it from the visual arts, draws it toward theater, and makes it relevant to society, even society outside musical society ... The popularity of recordings is unfortunate, not only for musical reasons, but for social reasons: it permits the listener to isolate himself from other people. (Cage 1981: 181)

So often when collaborative approaches to and socially engaged sound composition are discussed, society is viewed, as in participatory art, to exist always already outside the artwork, hence the call for its *participation*. The tendency to overlook the society immanent in the making of artworks – the society primarily comprising composers and performers in the case of music and sonic arts – is just about as problematic as it is ubiquitous, that is, even extending to critical literature on the subject of participatory art.<sup>8</sup> If anything, Cage's remark points out how technological advancements combined with greater availability of tools have long rendered inessential the very notion of reciprocity within the 'musical society', which denotes for us not merely the practitioners in the field but also the underlying social structures, including yet not limited to those dependent on and defined by the economy of need, to note a universal example, a composer's need for performers of a certain instrument and vice versa.

This is while electroacoustic music remains prone to this shift, more than any other category of sound-based music, by and large due to the truism that '[it] is indigenously a machine music' (Bowers 2003: 28) but too as a result of it being principally confined to recordings, which are especially given an epicentral role in fixed media wherein they become not only points of departure for but also the artwork itself. Addressing the diminishing role of the musical society is equally a task carried out neither by spectromorphology, as it has been discussed, nor antipodes of it (Waters 2000; Rennie 2014), in which sociological tenets prevail, the society outside musical society is given exclusive preference, and political information occasionally accommodated (see Rennie 2014). If one were to further recollect the inextricably linked fate of electroacoustic music and the concert-hall tradition

<sup>8</sup>The article 'The Problems with Participation' (Tanaka and Parkinson 2018) is a prime example, in which the authors, while sceptical of 'participatory art' in their case studies, only question the 'subject' of the artworks in the extent of the efficacy of the concepts proposed in the works themselves – works that by definition presuppose 'society' to be an always already external and excluded agent.

mentioned earlier, the present landscape of art music, including the plethora of problems permeating it – exposed not consolidated by the recent global pandemic as noted by Leon Botstein in a recent article (Botstein 2020) – would be far from surprising.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed is the sheer disjuncture between members of the musical society. Traditional concert-hall performers and electroacoustic musicians exist on prodigally distant planes, and there is an ever-expanding gap between audiences of art and popular music despite persisting claims that we should do away with the distinction. Already 'weakened by the erosion of philanthropy and the sustained absence of support from public funds', this is but one of the predicaments of contemporary art music, according to Botstein. He continues, '[s]ince 2000, adult attendance at concerts and opera performances in the United States has steadily declined. And the audience that has continued to attend is getting older and dying out' (Botstein 2020: 353–4). Yet the decrease of public interest in art music can hardly be criticised with only the musical society or broader society in mind. As noted earlier, the two are highly interdependent social structures necessitating continuous, active exchange, which need not be confined to endeavours jeopardising the character of one to include the other, such as participatory art.

One recurring reason for the decline of public interest in art music can be viewed to be the lacking reciprocity between composers and performers of electroacoustic and concert-hall strands. While multifaceted in nature, a clear repercussion of this is the division of art music into two secluded poles of unduly progressive (the case with most sound-based music) and regressive (the case with most concert-hall music). This division, while appearing as strictly aesthetic, it is here argued, to be largely representative of structural shifts within the musical society, which are best approached in creative terms. What this further exemplifies is the latent potential of a musical society more diverse and potent than any of its historical counterparts – a society capable of striking balance as with the network society before it but unable to do so due to inherent methodological separatism. It is argued, in the same light, that any creative response to social distancing and self-isolation emanating from sound practitioners failing to recognise the broader musical society, instead working to the benefit of a particular strand of music, such as those proposed by Botstein (Botstein 2020: 355–9), would only add to this vicious circle.

Placed against views of electroacoustic music as a machine music, maintaining that such views are derived from the history of the practice, thereby bearing little as to its future, it is further argued, for the



answer to lie with the acousmatic tradition, involving, however, a novel interpretation discussed as follows.

### 1.3. Acousmatics: a community of absence

The present state of literature on acousmatics,<sup>9</sup> while in many ways richer than 20 years ago, still leaves a lot to be desired. This is, among others, due to key publications from Smalley (2007) and John Leveck Drever (2002), works that are coincidentally left out of Brian Kane's book-length study of the subject (Kane 2014). Surely in a study where a melee of extraneous figures from Lacan to Les Paul are discussed at great lengths (i.e., entire chapters), there must have been room for the most recent and elaborate extensions of acousmatics. This is especially problematic as Kane's central argument is sketched against what he calls the 'Schaefferian tradition' (Kane 2014: 45), which he traces back and forth to Pythagoras and Michel Chion, through strictly historiographical readings that are confusingly delimited, as mentioned earlier, leaving out Smalley, among others. So, despite this not being the place to review Kane's book, a particular notion directly relating to the present article should be pointed out, and this has indeed to do with the Pythagoreans.

For all the attention paid to semantics and historical information in his study,<sup>10</sup> Kane proves particularly careless when concerned with words falling outside his rhetorical ken, itself fixated on the word 'acousmatic' and its various histories. The readership, for example, is never made aware of the most rudimentary constituent of the Pythagorean school. The *akousmatikoi*, the alleged camp within the Pythagorean school referred to by Kane (Kane 2014: 54), were more than a 'camp'. They comprised, along with the *mathematikoi*, a 'society' (Zhud 2013: 41), not a 'group' – not even a traditional 'school' (Kane 2014: 54). In his essay, 'Pythagorean Communities: From Individuals to a Collective Portrait', Leonid Zhud directs our attention to the following:

Why is it so important to look for the sources that explicitly call someone a Pythagorean? ... The problem is that the Academy, the Lyceum, and the Stoa were institutionalized schools with definite sets of doctrines, even if different at different times. The Pythagorean school, in contrast, was founded neither as a philosophical school, nor as an institutionalised school at all, but as a political society ... Pythagoras' teaching was never written down

<sup>9</sup>Reference is made to the chapter of the same name in Pierre Schaeffer's *Treatise* (Schaeffer 2017: 64–73). As for the literature on the subject, this article is primarily concerned with English publications.

<sup>10</sup>More than two-thirds of the book chronicles various attempts to historiographically trace the concept, with the segment 'Interruptions' (Kane 2014: 45–97) expressly dedicated to the Pythagorean school.

and the school itself was dispersed both geographically and chronologically. (Zhud 2013: 41).

What should be emphasised here is the simultaneous presence of the *mathematikoi*, the alleged 'different pupils', who preferred the empirical method over the rationalist approach of the *akousmatikoi*,<sup>11</sup> alongside the latter, in what essentially defined the Pythagoreans: the society. This twofold presence is entrenched in the very essence of the Pythagorean, which is, unlike as Kane suggests, not fundamentally different from its Schaefferian counterpart but rather only partially embodied in the latter thesis due to its eventual<sup>12</sup> emphasis on the reciprocity between listening and composing. Second, the geographically and chronologically dispersed character of the Pythagorean society reveals to us how presence was, in general, not a simple notion limited to the *akousmatikoi* and their insular methodology. Presence, for the Pythagoreans, remained inclusive of an absence with regard to history and geography as informationally traceable, verifiable objects,<sup>13</sup> for the Pythagorean society embodied in tandem with its many corporeal members, a mythical<sup>14</sup> facet that distinguished it from analogous, normative societies and schools from the era.

As discussed in the previous subsection, the musical society today is characterised through dispersion. The musical society is, therefore, already an absent society, and it is argued that this admittedly unfavourable character may well play a polarly opposite role in resolving the lacking reciprocity within it. But how does one materially achieve this end in the information age? Indeed, using the same tools made available through networks.

Musical performance needs to become untethered from the concert hall and opera stage. Faced with the Internet and streaming, let us give up an exclusive allegiance to acoustic purity. (Botstein 2020: 358)

The preceding quote is taken from Botstein's article cited earlier. One need not emphasise how well Botstein embodies the concert-hall tradition today,

<sup>11</sup>The implications of an early rationalist/empiricist epistemic divide are, in spite of a strong presence, entirely dismissed by Kane, which is particularly problematic concerning the study's heavily philosophical assertions.

<sup>12</sup>The shift from musique concrète to acousmatic music and its retroactive implications for récit music are discussed more closely in a forthcoming article on narrative and structure in récit music.

<sup>13</sup>This also explains Kane's failure to provide a unanimous account of the *akousmatikoi*.

<sup>14</sup>Kane declares 'Schaeffer's thinking about music, sound, and technology is ahistorical and mythic' (Kane 2014: 10), a point with which I wholeheartedly agree, '[g]ranted that "mythology" is not some doctrine of the gods invented by humans because they are not yet "mature" enough to do exact physics or chemistry, and granted that mythology is that historical "process" in which being itself comes to appear poetically' (Heidegger 1996: 111)

which as we see is on the verge of an evolutionary shift and in spite of a historical association with acoustics,<sup>15</sup> is beginning to favour acousmatic presentation. Among others, Cage's opposition to the musical record, now made principally immaterial thanks to the information age, is more of a quixotism today than a meaningful opposition. That is to say, Schaeffer's contemporary relevance has less to do with his exemplary philosophy, which Kane attempts to debunk, and more with his early grasp of art music's next turning point. One may debate the theoretical differences between a simple untethering of performance from the concert hall and traditional acousmatic music with its theoretical emphasis on listening, yet this article finds this to be, first and foremost, an opening for the convergence of the two.

To provide a material example – the author's individual work as director with the acousmatic ensemble and art collective The Blunder of a Horse, during the past ten years, has comprised several steps in this direction. The very notion of an acousmatic ensemble, which does not play well either with the conventional conception of acousmatics or with that of hybrid (mixed) media, has made some colleagues insecure. The approach has been referred to as 'a stretch', 'nebulous', 'theoretical', among others, baffling many peers while engaging others.<sup>16</sup> Yet, we see clearly today how the very opposing pole, of concert-hall tradition, is coming to similar conclusions. These conclusions, in the case of the acousmatic ensemble, which form broader methodology I refer to as *récit music*, amount to three principal propositions: 1) decentralisation of composers; 2) geo-temporal dispersion of performers; and 3) neutralisation of narrative.

## 2. THREE PROPOSITIONS: *RÉCIT*, THE MUSICAL FORM

It is necessary to establish first what is meant by the term 'musical form'. A musical form denotes here a complete compositional, creative framework with or without a particular set of aesthetics associated with its historical praxes. It amounts, therefore, not merely to contracted structural concepts (e.g. variation forms, moment form), but material frameworks through which works of music may come into being. The only forms introduced in contemporary art music, according to this definition, are fixed media and sound installations. Equally, forms that have survived and

proliferate the landscape of contemporary art music include yet are not limited to the symphony, the sonata, the concerto, and the suite – with the song emerging as the most ubiquitous form in contemporary popular music.

Closer to *musique concrète* in its foundation than to soundscape composition and sonic arts, *récit music* also retains the word *music* as ontologically germane. Its historical province, therefore, can be summarised as doing what spectromorphology failed to do for acousmatics – it imagines the artistic not analytic expansion of the latter's language. If *musique concrète* were analogous to pure poetry (Keane 1986), *récit music*'s analogue would be neither poetry nor prose but the literary/ethnographic form of *récit*.<sup>17</sup> It is, furthermore, unconcerned with the phenomenological aspects of acousmatics, emphasising instead reciprocity inside the musical community, which is best understood with the propositions first explored.

### 2.1. Decentralisation of composers

In *récit music*, no central composer is present, and s/he moreover is not replaced, as in conduction (Morris 2017), by another figure, namely the conductor. *Récit music*, likewise, does not operate through the absence of the composer, as in (collective) free improvisation (Schuiling 2018). Put succinctly, *récit music* comprises modular media that a) are aesthetically open and b) centre neither around (graphic) notation nor physical space (e.g., sound installations), while actively employing recordings, including but not limited to those of concert-hall and electroacoustic music and improvisation (EAI). More importantly, does decentralisation amount to a counter-compositional approach (as in various sound-based practices falling outside the domain of music, e.g., sound walks, or those ontologically designed, as retroactive, archival categories, to differ with the Western tradition of musical composition, e.g. musicking)? The answer is in the negative and deeply related to the interpretation of the concept of reciprocity at work here, exemplified in the employment of the term 'musical community' over 'musical society':

[The] reciprocity between communism and individualism ... leads us to question the very notion of reciprocity. However, if the relation of man with man ceases to be that of the Same with the Same, but rather introduces the Other as irreducible and ... always in a situation of dissymmetry in relation to the one looking at that Other, then a completely different relationship imposes itself and imposes another form of society which one would hardly dare call a "community." Or else one accepts the idea of naming it thus, while asking oneself

<sup>15</sup>Smalley, for example, almost exclusively refers to it as 'instrumental music' (Smalley 1997: 109)

<sup>16</sup>In the electroacoustic orbit, among figures who have found the idea engaging is Jonty Harrison, whereas Todor Todoroff has expressed concern over physical absence, noting it would affect his creative input, which relies on his physical control over the way sound-objects are conceived.

<sup>17</sup>This is discussed more closely in another article on narrative and structure in *récit music*.

what is at stake in the concept of a community and whether the community, no matter if it has existed or not, does not in the end always posit the absence of community. (Blanchot 1988: 3)

When using the term ‘musical community’, the intent is to move away from the notion of a musical society as employed by Cage, which is inevitably subordinate to greater society outside it.<sup>18</sup> Musical community is defined as a community not due to a wonted optimism as regards social exchange (Botstein too refers to communities on normative terms), or to compensate retroactively for an isolated instance of intertextuality, such as quotation (Ives), pastiche (Pärt), borrowing (see Russell Hallowell 2019), but strictly to situate it outside calculations of the real world and its laws, to distinguish its reciprocity as inherently metaphysical exchange irreducible to everyday histories and relations – and this is what principally defines récit music, which is a decidedly *mythical* endeavour. Here, reciprocity has an always already unsettled, enigmatic character, as Maurice Blanchot’s passage indicates. Exchange between I the composer/performer and you the performer/composer may be materially made possible via networks,<sup>19</sup> yet the ethics of such exchange are uncertain, insofar as ethics embodies ontology, insofar as I can only be mindful of your difference and you of mine.

In identifying the two opposing modes of socio-economic order, namely, communism and individualism, as reciprocal structures, Blanchot is likewise keen to remind us of the danger lurking in wishful thinking as regards man’s ability to break free of broader social structures that surround and support him and his enterprise. Counter-compositional tendencies and traditional compositional doctrines remain, despite normative differences, interchangeable exclusively in that they oppose one another, thus are mutually inclusive phenomena. To refer to a colleague’s question, why then insist on the term ‘community’, why not simply say practitioners? For one thing, and as noted earlier, while comprising practitioners, the musical society (as well as broader society) is not merely a sum of its members, and includes also, when viewed from a sociological vantage point, the many underlying social structures that may have very little to do with its members at a given point in time. By the same token, why not do away with the terms, ‘society’ and ‘community’ also, if we were to follow such a reductive, materialist worldview? This is indeed the question posed by Blanchot, to which one could never provide a satisfying answer. That is to say, employing

the term ‘community’ poses the same degree of danger as retiring the term does. This, and not a penchant for Platonism, is therefore what underpins the metaphysical proposition concerning reciprocity and musical community in récit music, of the which composers and performers form the most integral part.

## 2.2. Geo-temporal dispersion of performers

Temporal dispersion of performers, in its simplest terms, amounts to what is already an established practice in electroacoustic music, namely, using previously recorded material by performers (see Berezan 2017), while in récit music these would not be merely recordings forming part of the composer’s fixed media – a subject I will return to in section 2.3. Geographical dispersion, likewise, denotes the performers’ physical absence from and material presence in a given performance. Whether or not this is synonymous with online performance is a matter linked to the third proposition of récit music. Traditional acousmatic music, as well as soundscapes, are meant for speakers. Today, any recorded performance of a notated (concert-hall) composition, or freely improvised music, although not intended, also comes into being for most listeners in the same guise. Not surprisingly, this limitation/condition, long subject to criticism, has been aesthetically defended both by the advocates of free improvisation (Cook 2013) and, more recently, sheet music (Botstein 2020). I find this position economically untenable regardless of the aesthetic debate – as it would only fuel the vicious circle of information.<sup>20</sup> As such, récit music is to take a different path.

Modular media, works of récit music consist of *records* and *recitals*. What modularity refers to here is neither the notion of a chance-based composition nor participatory art. Modularity points, rather, to the way in which narrative is neutralised in récit music, a point outlined in the third proposition, wherein récit music’s central structural unit is also discussed. More pertinent to the second proposition, a modular composition is inherently not a work of fixed or hybrid (live with fixed elements) medium. The *record*, in récit music, amounts to a sound-object crafted independently of each recital. A gift given neither freely nor sold for money, it reciprocates creative correspondence from its receiver. Records are inherently and by design incomplete, aural simulacra of musical events, thus referred to as sound-objects fairly materially and free of the phenomenological debate found in traditional literature on acousmatics. These starting events range from integrally improvised work that is

<sup>18</sup>This is in principle why the tradition of soundscape composition has its roots in Cage’s thinking.

<sup>19</sup>Discussed in section 2.3.

<sup>20</sup>Today, performances are, briefly put, available no longer as physical media but as immaterial information, itself more often free and with little to no paying-consumer demand (Papies and van Heerde 2017).

not exclusively sound-based, material that is exclusively sound-based, to recorded performances of sheet music. Consider this: we, a string quartet, gift an electroacoustic composer whose work we find intriguing, an original work of ours comprising structured improvisation. The composer, reciprocating the gift, first attends to the record, creatively altering the work as it is the case with most electroacoustic composition, yet, instead of stopping, that is, presenting the outcome as fixed media, s/he continues the exchange, gifting the outcome to the Glenn Branca ensemble, which is an idiosyncratic electric guitar sextet experienced in working with structured improvisation, they reciprocate, expanding the work and then gifting it onwards. This circle stops only once there is no room for improvement: the process, materialised in the end result, is termed *recital*.

The tool par excellence of networks, namely, the internet, ‘the backbone of global computer-mediated communication (CMC)’, ‘the network that links up most computer networks’ (Castells 1996: 375) is what allows for the material aspect of this process. In other words, communication and exchange transpire exclusively on the internet. An online performance is, therefore, not what is implied here, and the dramaturgical aspects of *récit* music remain subject of future research. Calls for making music ‘intensely local’ (Botstein 2020: 357) are in this process perfectly honoured, however not in the sense implied originally. Recitals connect performers and composers in the information age, who are always already geo-temporally dispersed, while affirming existing local societies.

### 2.3. Neutralisation of narrative

The first and most urgent questions arising from the previous proposition are as follows: *Who* is the author of the work, in *récit* music, and *what* is the work, the recital or the record?

The subject of another article, the materially modular structure in *récit* music is closely linked with the idiosyncratic, metaphysical nature of narrative in it. Leaving aside the theoretical grounds of this reciprocity, what this means in succinct terms and as regards creative practice is that the work cannot be defined, ontologically, in a manner compatible with notions pertaining to human subjectivity. The central structural unit in *récit* music is the *record*, the primary sound-object, the *gift*. The process of reciprocating this gift, namely the *recital* is where the *musical community* comes into being. Yet, neither of these comprise the *récit*, which equally is not the synthesis of the two but *the potentiality of other recitals of the same record*. Before being accused of ontological incorrectness,<sup>21</sup> it should be stressed how compared with sheet and traditional sound-based music, this

is, if anything, an improvement in terms of ontological veracity:

[The *histoire*] stands by itself, preformed in the thought of a demiurge, and since it exists on its own, there is nothing left to do but tell it. (Blanchot 1999: 461)

[The *récit*] is like a circle that neutralizes life, which is not to say that it has no relationship to it but that its relationship to it is a neutral one. Within this circle, the meaning of what is, and of what is said, is definitely still given, but from a withdrawn position, from a distance where all meaning and all lack of meaning is neutralized beforehand. (Blanchot 1999: 459)

Sheet music, which, very much like a story [*histoire*] exists in the thought of the composer, is generally viewed to be a solid work of art, ontologically intact and recognisable. This is while it is overwhelmingly idealistic, in that it assumes the creative process to be either entirely fixed, or in the case of chance-based works, determined yet open to symbolic, equally insular alterations by the performer(s). It must be emphasised how this also applies to the majority of sound-based compositions, especially the fixed media,<sup>22</sup> whereby the composer, also responsible for the final work, presents narratives that not only comprise stories but are also, first and foremost, stories, and in that are told (fixed, determined) by an equally external figure.

Having made this case, the preceding propositions remain, like all instances of theory, subject to error. This is why an integral part of this project has been to empirically test and verify each proposition in manifold settings, which have so far amounted to identification of two broad categories of recitals, *circular* and *logarithmic*. In the first instance, production time is treated as limitless whereas in the latter an order is imposed on the work by the instigating agent. This is while different environments for testing, such as the size and aesthetic leaning of those involved, in the case of group performers, and technological proclivities, in the case of composers and individual performers, have nothing short of drastic impacts on the ways in which recitals develop but also belong in one or the other category. Which is why further discussion on the subject should be left to future research.

As for the empirical research already undertaken, equally noteworthy is how contrary to being ‘theoretical’ or ‘nebulous’, not a single performer (or composer, for that matter) who we have approached so far has found this methodology impractical, as they rather have cherished the idea of incorporating their

<sup>21</sup>Kane’s entire polemic revolves around Schaeffer’s ‘the sound-object is not [X]’ (Schaeffer 2017: 67–9).

<sup>22</sup>Schaeffer’s concrete/abstract dialectic is therefore not the emphasis here.



own image in a narrative that is not decided for them. To comment on a question posed by a colleague solely familiar with the theoretical aspects of the practice, neutralisation of narrative should not be conflated with its deletion. This is discussed in depth in a forthcoming article on narrative and structure in récit music, in which functions of the namesake process in the literary/ethnographic récit (which does have a *single* author) are closely examined. To briefly dispel this misconception, a neutral state is not a state of *equilibrium*, or lack of reciprocity. That is to say, a neutral state cannot be compared with and/or approached in terms of (normative) ethics; for example, utilitarianism. As stated earlier, ethics denotes here, above all, ontology, hence the equal unconcern for the phenomenology of sound (practice). It is assumed that such structures are inherently related to the character (contra function/utility) of the participating agents, thereby it is inapplicable to think of them as sharing the same grounding, albeit located within the same space (in the case of agents in society) and/or engaging with the same material (in the case of those in the musical society).

Further to determine the formal aspects of récit music, several empirical analyses have been planned. Until these are concluded, it can be affirmed that the creative aspects of the practice have been unanimously successful. *Alamut*,<sup>23</sup> a collection of six récits/recitals, was concluded recently prior to and during the pandemic, involving composer-bioinformatician Ashkan Zareie, composer-performer Norman Westberg, several improvisers, and the ensemble, The Blunder of a Horse, in eight dispersed geographies ranging from Palau to Rome to New York. This is, in other words, not an 'esoteric activity' not because it is declared as such (Smalley 1997: 125) but because it has been in active, creative development. Likewise, creative enquires from composers, performers, ensembles and collectives of all aesthetic bents are more than welcome, who can conveniently reach us for collaboration and/or instigate récits of their own, through the *magic* of networks – the musical community, even if not present physically, lives on a *phantasmic*<sup>24</sup> life of its own.

<sup>23</sup>Included partly in the Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States (SEAMUS) repertoire, with several festival premieres and a portrait presentation in progress.

<sup>24</sup>While Kane cherishes a tired concept, namely, phantasmagoria as it originates in Marx's equally incongruous brand of metaphysics (Heidegger 2000: 49–50), to attack (the spectre of) the Schaefferian tradition, this article finds Pierre Klossowski's concept of 'phantasm' particularly germane, as it is the creative impulse for a community not its calculations in relation to the society outside musical society that interests us, and that functions materially in récit music. Klossowski does not define the concept in normative terms, but through a description of the reciprocity between the physical and the phantasmic: '[Although] the unity of the individual may be complete physiologically, in its bodily appearance, in a way it is here exchanged for the phantasm, under whose constraint it is now exclusively maintained' (Klossowski 2017: 49)

### 3. FINAL REMARKS

The late Glenn Branca once ironically remarked, '[w]ould you want to read an improvised, collaborated novel?' (Oteri 2012). He was referring to Cage and the improvisatory, collectivist approach he found proliferated in Downtown music. While informationally inaccurate,<sup>25</sup> the mythical implications of this reading are critical: man has a contempt for freeness so strong that even when not there, he attacks its spectre, or to use Pierre Klossowski's invocation of Nietzsche – 'No one wants them even as a gift: so they must sell themselves' (Klossowski 2017: 68). What we would add to this dialogue is that we would not be interested in reading an improvised, collaborated novel,<sup>26</sup> but a récit of similar structure would certainly interest us.

As they relate to récit music, notions of authorship, narrative, structure, open aesthetics, modularity, dispersed time and process each require extended dialogue and empirical analysis, that is, in tandem with the central propositions. These are discussed in other papers, and the readership is encouraged to consult them, as necessary. Among these are conference papers dealing with, respectively, the employment of other musical forms, working with récit music as methodology as opposed to a musical form (Bagheri Pour Fallah 2021b), the reciprocities between physical, acousmatic and concert-hall spaces (Bagheri Pour Fallah 2021a), and the use of machine learning (ML) in conservation of récit-records as aural simulacra (Bagheri Pour Fallah and Zareie 2021).

On a closing, extra note, it must be stressed that this article was completed in the year 2020 and originally meant to be published by mid-2021. As a result, significant changes made to the core research, from early 2021 until the end of 2022,<sup>27</sup> are inevitably excluded both from the main text and the final remarks section, which the readership is strongly encouraged to follow up on, by consulting the research initiative website.<sup>28</sup>

### Acknowledgements

A succinct note of thanks to Ashkan Zareie, Norman Westberg, Jonty Harrison, Martin Iddon, and Framarz Bagheri Pour Fallah, for their multiform support, and last though not least, the late-Krzysztof

<sup>25</sup>A simple 'fact-checking' reveals that neither Cage nor Zorn ever intended to 'destroy written music' (Oteri 2012). They were and are, if anything, theoretically opposed to the idea (Feisst 2009) and no advocates of it in practice, where they remain the 'composers'.

<sup>26</sup>The many formal differences between the literary récit and the novel are explored at length in the article on narrative and structure in récit music.

<sup>27</sup>These include, yet are not limited to, research intersecting with emerging technologies such as blockchain and correspondant fields, e.g. cryptoeconomics.

<sup>28</sup>See <https://recitmusic.art>.



Penderecki, who, aside from being deeply supportive of the project, remarked in a conversation something which left on me a deep and lasting impression, namely in suggesting a possible *reconciliation* when I raised the question of a *rupture* between Christ's sacred, singular passion and Charles Fourier's material, plural passions.

## REFERENCES

- Bagheri Pour Fallah, A. 2021a. Acoustic Purity, Acousmatic Necessity. Paper presented at the *Joint SMIICTM-IE Conference 2021*. Maynooth: Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology.
- Bagheri Pour Fallah, A. 2021b. Collaborative Art Songs in Fixed, Hybrid and Modular Media. Paper presented at the *Art Song Platform: Art Song out of the Concert Hall Conference*. London: Goldsmiths, University of London, Royal Musical Association.
- Bagheri Pour Fallah, A. and Zareie, A. 2021. Récit as a Musical Form: Modular Media, Aural Simulacra, and Machine Learning. Paper presented at the *Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States (SEAMUS) 2021 National Conference*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia.
- Blanchot, M. 1988. *The Unavowable Community*, trans. P. Joris. New York: Station Hill Press.
- Blanchot, M. 1999. *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, trans. L. Davis. New York: Station Hill Press.
- Botstein, L. 2020. The Future of Music in America: The Challenge of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *The Musical Quarterly* **102**: 351–60.
- Bowers, J. 2003. Improvising Machines: Ethnographically Informed Design for Improvised Electro-acoustic Music. *ARiADA* 4. [www.ariada.uea.ac.uk](http://www.ariada.uea.ac.uk) (accessed 25 April 2020).
- Byrne, S. 1998.  $\lambda\pi\varsigma$  in Works and Days 90–105. *SyllClass* **9**: 37–46.
- Cage, J. 1981. *Empty Words: Writings '73–'78*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Chichester: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. 2008. Globalisation, Networking, Urbanisation: Reflections on the Spatial Dynamics of the Information Age. *Urban Studies* **47**(13): 2737–45.
- Cobussen, M., Meelberg, V. and Truax, B. (eds.) 2016. *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*. New York: Routledge.
- Cook, N. 2013. *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1992. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. P. Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Drever, J. L. 2002. Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music. *Organised Sound* **7**(1): 21–7.
- Feisst, S. M. 2009. John Cage and Improvisation: An Unresolved Relationship. In G. Solis and B. Nettle (ed.) *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Freeman, C. and Louçã, F. 2001. *As Time Goes By: From the Industrial Revolutions to the Information Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. 2000. *Spaces of Hope*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1996. *Hölderlin's hymn "The Ister"*, trans. W. McNeill and J. Davis. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Heidegger, M. 2000. *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried and R. Polt. London: Yale University Press.
- Holzhausen, J. 2004. Das 'Übel' der Frauen. Zu Hesiods Pandora-Mythos. *Würzburger Jahrbücher, für die Altertumswissenschaft* N.F. 28b: 5–29.
- Hunter, R. 2014. *Hesiodic Voices: Studies in the Ancient Reception of Hesiod's Works and Days*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kane, B. 2014. *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keane, D. 1986. At the Threshold of an Aesthetic. In Emerson, S. (ed.) *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 97–118.
- Klossowski, P. 2017. *Living Currency*, trans. V. Cisney, N. Morar and D. W. Smith. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Kostka, S. and Santa, M. 2018. *Materials and Techniques of Post-Tonal Music*. New York: Routledge.
- Landy, L. 2007. *Understanding the Art of Sound Organization*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1963. *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf. New York: Basic Books.
- Mauss, M. 2002. *The Gift*, trans. W. D. Halls. New York: Routledge.
- Montanari, F. 2015. *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*. Leiden: Brill.
- Moore, A. 2016. *Sonic Art: An Introduction to Electroacoustic Music Composition*. New York: Routledge.
- Morris, L. D. B. 2017. *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*. New York: Karma.
- Oteri, F. J. 2012. Glenn Branca: Where My Ears Want To Go. *New Music Box*. <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/glenn-branca-where-my-ears-want-to-go> (accessed 15 September 2020).
- Papies, D. and van Heerde, H. J. 2017. The Dynamic Interplay Between Recorded Music and Live Concerts: The Role of Piracy, Unbundling, and Artist Characteristics. *Journal of Marketing* **81**: 67–87.
- Rennie, T. 2014. Socio-Sonic: An Ethnographic Methodology for Electroacoustic Composition. *Organised Sound* **19**(2): 117–24.
- Rose, F. 1996. Introduction to the Pitch Organization of French Spectral Music. *Perspectives of New Music* **34**(2): 6–39.
- Russell Hallowell, S. 2019. Towards a Phenomenology of Musical Borrowing. *Organised Sound* **24**(2): 174–83.
- Schaeffer, P. 2012. *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. C. North and J. Dack. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schaeffer, P. 2017. *Treatise on Musical Objects*, trans. C. North and J. Dack. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Schuiling, F. 2018. *The Instant Composers Pool and Improvisation Beyond Jazz*. London: Routledge.
- Smalley, D. 1997. Spectromorphology: Explaining Sound-shapes. *Organised Sound* 2(2): 107–26.
- Smalley, D. 2007. Space-form and the Acousmatic Image. *Organised Sound* 12(1): 35–58.
- Tanaka, A. and Parkinson, A. 2018. The Problems with Participation. In Emmerson, S (ed.) *The Routledge Research Companion to Electronic Music: Reaching Out with Technology*. London: Routledge, 172–93.
- Testart, A. 2013. What is a Gift? *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(1): 249–61.
- Waters, S. 2000. Beyond the Acousmatic: Hybrid Tendencies in Electroacoustic Music. In Emmerson, S. (ed.) *Music, Electronic Media and Culture*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 56–83.
- Zhmud, L. 2013. Pythagorean Communities: From Individuals to a Collective Portrait. In D. Sider and D. Obbink (eds.) *Doctrine and Doxography: Studies on Heraclitus and Pythagoras*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 33–52.
- Zuboff, S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: PublicAffairs.

#### DISCOGRAPHY

- Berezan, D. 2017. *Offshore (2017). On Cycle nautique*. Montréal: Empreintes DIGITALes, IMED 18154.