Body Representations in the Electroacoustic Music

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1 THE MANIFESTING BODY

In his article “La musique et le geste: prélègomenes à une anthropologie de la musique” Jean Molino carefully reflects upon the gesture in the occidental music and seeks the principles for an anthropology of music (Molino, 1988). Approaching the pertinence of the gesture integration in the musical analysis and of the different gesture gradations in the various types of music, the author affirms the following:

On the whole, the development of music notation marks the first essential rupture between gesture and pure music - and it is doubtless that this is one of the reasons of the emergence of pure music -; the erudite electroacoustic music led to a second rupture even more serious, bringing about the total disappearance of the instrumental gesture. (Molino, 1988:14)

At this point, we understand that the author is referring to the interpreter’s absence on the stage, in cases of acousmatic electroacoustic musics, the tape-music, or “musique fixée” which are diffused through loudspeakers spread around the space of the performance. But if the material instrumental gesture is not concretely live in the diffusion of these types of electroacoustic music, both the human body and its physical gesture are often there clearly represented. The acousmatic electroacoustic music eliminated the traditional instrumental interpreter, but has not excluded the human physical gesture. In other words, the human body, in this art genre, as well as in the radiophonic art, which gave birth to it, is not present in a live performance, but it is there in the form of representation.

The trend of the electroacoustic music that originated, although not objectively, this representation of the body was devised by Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, Edgar Varèse, and has been developed by the subsequent generations of composers. The first ones are inheritors of Debussy’s and Messiaen’s “French” compositions, which are clearly affiliated with the perceptive models, through the sensorial aspect, and which evoke an equivalent sensorial response in the reception.

Pierre Schaeffer’s first works, composed before the theoretical construction which would come in the Traité des Objets Musicaux, were at last his most mentioned and recognised compositions: Cinq études de bruit (1948) and Symphonie pour un homme seul (1950), two works in which a considerable strength is found in an expression that is beyond the system of reduced listening (écoute réduite) created by him.

The acousmatic electroacoustic music, as the one we are focusing, is far beyond from being a pure music, according to the concept defined by Molino in the article above mentioned. There is no object in this type of music which can be read on a neutral basis, that is, the access we have to it lies in the field of reception or in the act of listening. The composers who created, and are still conceiving this art, have and continue having the same anguish in an effort to build a system.

It is our hypothesis that the material itself, that is to say, the sonorous sign taken from the raw material of the world, has shown the way, even though this point of view had been avoided by Schaeffer. The composers of this kind of music - known as “without system” - sought in the human body its own coherence.

According to Molino, all types of music have the following characteristic:

art is neither contemplation, nor aimless, nor enchantment, but it is founded on perception and on the creation of values and rhythms which rest in physiological characteristics of our organism. (Molino, 1988: 13)

François Bayle calls the acousmonium as sonorous screens (Bayle, 1986: 146), but the real screens, on which the vibrations of sounds emitted from the loudspeakers are projected, are our bodies. Thus, in our bodies flow the sounds which awake all senses and in them are contained the perceptive models, the memories, the experiences which will do the readings of this music.

Jean Christoph Thomas, in his article on the imaginary space in the acousmatic music, points out the ways for us to think the representation of the human body in this musical genre. The first space Thomas highlights in the attempt on a semantic study of the space, is of the human body itself.

Isn’t our body, for example, a measure of reference? In the phenomenological area, does it not offer, for all things, “the human scale” (F. Bayle)? Since its glorious origin, several acousmatic compositions are, somehow, “symphonies pour un homme seul” [symphonies for one man alone, Pierre Schaeffer’s composition, mentioned above]. The allusions to the body (to its space: internal/external) are plentiful in these works. (Thomas, 1991: 141)

Indeed, the Symphonie pour un homme seul (Schaeffer/Henry 1950) was an inaugural work of this “human scale” in the electroacoustic music. In the project of this composition, Pierre Schaeffer planned a music of the noises produced by the human body.

I thought about the organic and the alive. The one man alone should find his own symphony in himself, not only conceiving music abstractly, but being his own instrument. One man alone has got a lot more than twelve notes of the occidental scale. He cries, he walks, he hits his fist, he laughs, he moans. His heart beats, his
breathing accelerates, he pronounces words, makes appeals and other appeals answer him. Nothing makes more echo to a lonely shout than the clamour of the crowds. (Schaeffer, 1952: 35)

Of all the projects, the final version, different from this conception, had a lot of the instrumental characteristics, to the extent that Chion affirms “most of the time it sounds like chamber music for the prepared piano and voice – deformed, inverted accelerated voices” (Chion, 1980: 26).

Schaeffer numbers his instruments for his symphony: from noises to the musical sound. He divides them into two categories: inside and outside the human body. In the first category, he mentions: wind elements, voice fragments, cries, singing voice, whistles. In the second: steps or analogues, slams of a door, percussions, prepared piano, orchestral instruments (Schaeffer, 1952: 64).

The Symphonie pour un homme seul is a representation model of the body and the human presence in the electroacoustic music. Inspite of the great limitation of the electroacoustic technique of the period, it contains most of the representation forms of this body and this presence, which have largely been developed in the repertoire of this musical genre up to the present.

We can find in Symphonie the following gestural representation:

1. Instrumental gesture: in the sequences “Prosopopée I”, “Parîtta”, “Valse”, “Scherzo”, “Collectif”, “Apostrophe” and “Intermezzo”.
2. Vocal gesture of the speech: Schaeffer, at this point, separates the gesture from the word, so that there is no intelligible speech, just the gesture and the melody of the speech – in the sequences “Prosopopée I”, “Scherzo”, “Collectif”, “Erotica”, “Apostrophe”, “Intermezzo”.
4. Body movement, displacement: steps, clearly in the sequence “Prosopopée I”.
5. Rhythmic gesture, dance evocation: a bolero in “Prosopopée I”, which returns in “Apostrophe”.
6. Gestures of the intimacy and proximity of the physical body: Chion calls it “poetry of speech” and everyday intonation (Chion, 1980: 26), the non-declamatory speech, whistle, humming, laughing, which create a space of intimacy with the body, in the sequences “Prosopopée I”, “Erotica”, “Scherzo”, “Erotica”, “Apostrophe”.

These body representations are commonly associated with a dramaticity, in a relation to the theatrical gesture, with the expression of emotions and with narrative structures. Even when the composers take the human body as a musical instrument and its sounds as pure sonorous materials, the reading of this music hardly separates these sounds from a human content, which is subjective during the reception.

Therefore, it is not possible to separate the different “textures of the body” in the works of the electroacoustic music. However, it is possible to emphasize the constructions of representations which are inspired in bodily models, such as the physicality of the voice and of bodily sounds, that is to say, the physical movements for their production. All this materiality is explored almost to the limits of the bearable, for they awaken in the listener’s body physical reactions, which are: 1) the kinaesthetic sensorimotor models, i.e., the neuromuscular memory of the movement, 2) the representation of the distance between the sound and the body, and 3) the instrumental gesture maintained as long as representation.

2 THE INSTRUMENTAL GESTURE

We recognized three levels of representation of the instrumental gestures in the electroacoustic music: 1) the traditional instrumental gesture, 2) the gesture that imposes a tactile sense of a sound, and 3) what we call transparent instrumental gesture. Recorded acoustic instruments are very common as the material for the electroacoustic music. This comes from the radiophonic tradition which gave rise to the concrete music. However, the electroacoustic music has a point of view different from the recording of an instrumental work. The composer of the electroacoustic music records the instrumental sound and, then, shapes his material by processing this sound. The instrumental gesture, that is familiar to us, is also present in this recorded sound. Examples of this instrumental gesture are found in several of Pierre Henry’s compositions.

The instrumental gesture in the electroacoustic music has also a second level, as we have mentioned above. This concerns what Michel Redolfi called “the tactile sense of the sound” (Redolfi, 1996: 10).

It is not difficult to have a mental image of a tactile sound, even though it is not obvious to explain why a certain sound causes this sensation, more than others. We could say, firstly, that there are certain sounds that make us feel a sensation of exacerbated materiality, but this is not only a question of its spectrum or its volume, since the tactuality of a sound is directly connected with its production. A tactile sound is the one near which it is possible to feel the physical gesture of its production, and the sonorous result being a vibration of the instrument added to the noise of the touch. It is the noise of the blow that is added to the sound of the wind instrument; it is the noise of the fingers that scrape on the strings of the instrument, or strike on the skin of percussion.

This tactility is a quality of the sound that has practically been excluded from the sonorous repertoire of the classical music. On the other hand, in jazz and in rock, this noise was and has been much explored. In these musical genres, the musician creates his personal touch through the addition of his own noise and of the instrumental sound. Also, the contemporary music resumes this sonorous matter. The musician who cultivates the sonorous quality, to which we are referring, has the wish to reveal the materiality of the sound and his gesture of production.

A third level of the instrumental gesture is the one perceived in the sound production, which is not necessarily considered an instrumental touch, or a tactile sound, with the direct touch of the hand. This gesture is translated into the movement when a human body produces a sound, but it is not inscribed sonorously in the result. We could call it a transparent instrumental gesture. For example, the famous small metal balls revolving, found in Tremblement de terre très doux (1978), by Bayle, in Points de fuite (1982), by François Dhomont, or in Volta redonda (1992), by Rodolfo Caesar.
We are, now, talking about the space built with reference to the movement in relation to this body. There is a symbolic representation of this space and this body is the centre of a perception of movement and of the sculptural material which will produce new sonorous materials, very often from their extra-textual referentiality.

Another distinction we can make is on the use of voice as a material which will produce new sonorous materials, very often in all its forms, other vocal sounds, including the nasal and the guttural sounds, as well as sounds of breathing. We find in the musical examples the spoken word in all its forms, other vocal sounds, including the nasal and the guttural sounds produced by the larynx, in coughs and belches, etc.

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We find in the musical examples the spoken word in all its possibilities: the declaimed reading, the usual reading, the murmured reading, the murmured voice, lamentations, angry voices, a parody of a lyrical song and declamation in other environments such as inside water or the speech obstructed by a material. All these registers of the voice articulation have a close relation with the sense that composers want to reveal in their music.

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This intimacy is created in two ways: first, the sounds of this music, whose archetypes of proximity are present in our imaginative repertoire, are recorded with microphones within a very near distance of their source. When these sounds are listened, we get the impression that we are very close to them, that is, with the ears clung to them. In the second way, which may be associated with the first, the composer takes to the music sonorous signs of our intimate life, of our everyday life, that is to say, signs which are familiar.

Naturally, the near voice, murmur, breathing, produced as direct sounds, are the commonest themes of this sonorous intimacy.

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To talk about the relation Schaeffer had with the recorded sound, in his task to create a new musical genre, Michel Chion makes the following comments:

As a composer, Pierre Schaeffer has a total and dramatic relation with the recorded sound. For him, every recorded voice, comes out from an original unit – moreover when it is about the human speech. For him, every recorded voice, comes out from a cut-off head ... the unity is always lost, there is only the break and the contradiction, with which one can compose (Chion, 1990: 18).

The lack of the instrumentalist’s physical presence, in a live contemporary electroacoustic music concert, that is, the lack of the “sound source”, which Bayle also gives emphasis as a neuralgic point of this music, perhaps not only reveals the wish to represent the loss of the instrumental gesture, but also the wish to recuperate the body, the gesture which in many instances is lost in the hard work of recording in a studio.

In the electroacoustic music, there are also uncountable examples of narrative structure which create hypothetical characters, narrators in the first person, who propose a sonorous-acoustic experience. To a certain extent, these characters make an appropriation of the listener’s own body – the subjective foreground of the cinema – evoking memories in all levels of this body: the intellectual, the emotional, as well as the sensory-perceptive.
As for the kinaesthetic convergence between music and painting, Jacques Parrat talks about an integral perception:

> Besides the perception of the visible and of the sonorous, there exists, as it seems, a global perception, which is original, indiscriminate, of muscular and kinaesthetic nature softly felt by the whole body (On this theme, Mikel Dufrenne evokes the existence of a preliminary region of the sensitive, a pre-sensitive which would belong both to the visual and sonorous domains, a type of "phenomenological archeology"). (Parrat:72)

When the composer of electroacoustic music expresses a wish to make the listener dive into the sound, it is this experience that he evokes. To achieve this aim, a representation of the body, or rather, of the models of the human body, is essential.

REFERENCES


1 Denis Smalley identifies four levels of what he calls the surrogate gesture in the electroacoustic music. Although his point of view is compatible with the author’s (of this paper), his classification differs in terms of approach. See Smalley 1997, pp. 111/112.


3 François Bayle in an interview with the author (of this paper), 1997.