FABRICATING AURAL LANDSCAPES: SOME COMPOSITIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF TROMPE L’OREILLE

Peter Batchelor
De Montfort University, Leicester, UK
Music, Technology and Innovation Research Centre
p.batchelor@dmu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article introduces trompe l’oreille as a legitimate area of compositional exploration within the acousmatic tradition of electroacoustic music, establishing its place within recognised theoretical models and offering ways in which it might be used to expand the existing acousmatic compositional palette, from simply exploring sound poetically in real-world environments to enabling narrative intervention within, or the aesthetic direction of reality.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article emerges from a related paper given at the Electronic Music Studies conference during June 2007 regarding trompe l’oreille and the fabricated aural landscape. In the previous paper, logistical and technical issues regarding the development and presentation of trompe l’oreille were discussed; the current text deals with the manner in which the concept may be used to expand the acousmatic compositional palette, enabling the poetic exploration of sound in real-world contexts, and perhaps also having ramifications in terms of public art presentation and acoustic ecology concerns. Trompe l’oreille, if we assume a definition based on that of its visual equivalent, involves fooling the senses (our ears in this case) into understanding a given fictional experience to be real. It involves the construction of a landscape, or fragments of a landscape, which sits within and is indistinguishable from reality. We must at this point distinguish such a practice from that of presenting sounds in a conventional electroacoustic concert context, which inevitably involves superimposing one constructed landscape over another (real) landscape in the concert hall or another listening environment, and thereby requires a certain suspension of disbelief on the part of the listener in order to permit his/her engagement with that other (pseudo-)reality for the duration of a given piece. Carefully chosen sound materials, along with increasingly high-fidelity (and portable) audio systems should enable the presentation of sound events which can appear independent of the acoustic in which the sounds were recorded, permitting them to be inserted (or immersed) into a new landscape and thereby yielding extremely accurate and convincing facsimiles of reality. Katharine Norman sums this up rather nicely as ‘the experience of, not “hearing the real thing,” but of “really hearing the thing”’ [7, p.220 (my italics)]. It is this experiential difference that is key to trompe l’oreille.

2. TROMPE L’OREILLE WITHIN EXISTING ACOUSMATIC PRACTICE

While theoretical discussion of trompe l’oreille is extremely limited, it seems logical that it should be considered firmly within existing acousmatic compositional theory and practice, particularly that pertaining to aural landscapes. Ambrose Field identifies four categories of landscape morphology in acousmatic composition [1: 45-7], which he defines as real, hyper-real, virtual and non-real. These four categories can be mapped to a notional continuum between real- and unreal-dominated discourse in acousmatic art. Field defines real as the unadulterated trace of an event or sonic landscape. Sounds are recorded and presented with no intervention from the artist beyond decisions regarding placement of microphones or the duration of the recording. (e.g. Chris Watson’s documentary field recordings on the Weather Report album (2003)). Hyper-real landscapes result from a degree of manipulation of these raw materials, via selection or subtle addition of materials to emphasise or encapsulate a particular characteristic of the real landscape, though otherwise leaving its ‘realism’ essentially intact, such that compositional mediation is entirely transparent (i.e. it’s impossible to tell the difference). Luc Ferrari’s commonly cited Presque rien No.1 (1970), for example, involves the abridgement of a day-long audio landscape into the space of twenty minutes, yet remains believable as a documentary experience. Still greater intervention yields virtual worlds, which involve looser (or more obviously imposed) narratives and surrealistic play. Thus juxtaposition, superposition, fragmentation and other manipulation of the recorded materials enable poetic play with the sounds, and by extension their meanings. Robert Normandeau’s Jeu (1989), for example, offers an elaborate sonic play on the word ‘play’ in which ‘[t]he different meanings of the word as well as its different use in expressions were “sounded” (put to sound), in both the literal and the metaphorical senses.’ [8]. Finally, unreal landscapes depart entirely from the real, encouraging intrinsic listening and, at least ostensibly, making no reference to real-world sounds or landscapes at all. Examples made up entirely
of the latter are hard to find, since arguably all sound invites referential listening, but acousmatic works regularly include moments in which the source is of less importance than the musical and sonic discourse (Field cites Smalley’s *Wind Chimes* (1987) as an example).

It is clear that most acousmatic works within the electroacoustic repertoire move fluidly between all four of these categories; indeed, in Normandé’s work, the movement between these states is very important in the dramaturgical development of its sonic and poetic content.

Field’s categories presuppose listening to electronically mediated sound, and likely sound that has been recorded, though of course contexts in which acousmatic listening might occur are by no means so limited (indeed, according to its etymology the idea and implications of listening to a concealed source originated considerably before the advent of recording [12: 41]). Thus no distinction is drawn between ‘real’ as the unmodified recorded document, and ‘real’ as the real environment; indeed, for the purposes of his argument Field explicitly considers the two as being synonymous [1, p.46]. Similarly, in detailing the concept of gestural surrogacy, Denis Smalley draws no distinction between a sound of first order surrogacy that is unseen but recorded, and one that is unseen but truly happening [10, p.111-2]. In terms of immediate perception, these amount to much the same thing, but for an audience that is curious to know what lurks behind the curtain, their phenomenology is very different; indeed, once the relationship with the source is revealed, manifestly the sound no longer performs the role of surrogate at all. With this in mind, when considering *trompe l’oreille* we may perhaps consider extensions to both of these continua: Field’s categories to include the real within its original environment, rather than abstracted from it – the real-unseen (or the real-real), as opposed to the real-recorded (or real-electronically-mediated); and Smalley’s to encompass a ‘zero-order’ level of surrogacy.

In offering this latter distinction it is acknowledged that *trompe l’oreille* clearly belongs to first-order surrogacy; however, in order for analysis of it within its context to be meaningful (or indeed for the real/unreal ambiguity to be meaningful), it needs to be truly comparable with the real-unseen from the point of view of perception. Thus zero-order implies that a sound is not surrogate at all, but that it could be. The addition is still more necessary in instances involving oscillation between real and unreal sounds within the real environment, such as in examples given below. It is the ambiguity between such ‘zero-order’ and first-order surrogacy that provides much of the interest in *trompe l’oreille*.

3. COMPOSING THE SOUNDSCAPE (1): DIRECTING REALITY

The imposition of an artificial structure and narrative on an existing acoustic environment can very much influence the behaviour of the occupants of that environment. This can have decidedly practical applications: the imitation of animal calls in order to lure prey is a strategy that has been practiced by hunters for millennia. On the other hand, playing back a recording of a barking dog behind a locked door is a powerful means of discouraging uninvited entry. In both of these contexts, *trompe l’oreille* therefore not only carries the potential to direct listening, but also to direct reality. It follows inevitably that this structured reality can be aesthetically conceived, perhaps enabling a crossover between functional and appreciative listening as proposed by Barry Truax [11, p.22]. Katharine Norman points out that ‘the notion of “real” listening in a work of “fictional” sound art is underexplored’ [7, p.220]. But it is surely possible to build hyper-real landscapes of the sort that one might in soundscape composition that have explicit narratives and as such might have the capacity to influence people’s responses to them over time, if only subtly, for aesthetic ends. This inevitably has implications for acoustic ecology, though interestingly while Murray Schafer proposes a culture of listening to the environment as a composition, and advocates the design of elements of the sonic landscape to influence perceptions of the environment [9], and Barry Truax proposes a comprehensive series of considerations for drawing attention to existing qualities of the soundscape [11, p.167], neither suggests doing so by means of fabricating and/or directing the existing aural landscape via *trompe l’oreille*.

This all raises a number of issues regarding the relationship between the work and the audience, which is clearly more complex than that existing in the concert hall. What are the implications of structuring reality in this way? And at what point do (or should) such narrative interventions become perceptible to a listener as being artificially imposed? The breaking of the illusion may be critical to the switch from Truax’s designated ‘distracted listening’ to a state of ‘listening-in-search’ [11, p.79] that permits both the highlighting of existing structural features of the environment, and equally the appreciation of the compositional intentions behind the imposed narrative.

4. COMPOSING THE SOUNDSCAPE (2): BEYOND REALITY

In short, we can compose the real. However, we can also go beyond composing the real, introducing materials into a given reality which are very obviously foreign to it, because although *trompe l’oreille* exists on the very edge of the real-unreal continuum outlined above, we can fabricate aural landscapes which explore other areas within that continuum. In other words, we can begin to introduce virtual (surreal) and unreal elements to that environment that begin to break down, or lead listeners to question their experience of the apparent reality that has otherwise been established. We are of course investigating the same boundary between the recognisable and the unrecognizable, and between indirectly related materials as is explored in anecdotal
compositional play for a fixed medium acousmatic concert work; the difference is simply that we are exploring this boundary in a real environment. And how much more interesting to do this in an environment in which we expect to hear the real thing?

Ambiguity remains, even in such a situation, largely because the way we interpret a sound in a space has much to do with context. A sound may be identified as being real, and belonging to a particular environment, even if it is/does not. Wishart observes: ‘a cricket sound might be difficult to identify in isolation, but put it in a ‘realistic’ acoustic landscape (or put an electronic imitation in that landscape) and it becomes possible, or even inevitable that it is associated with that landscape as a cricket sound’ [12].

Furthermore, there is a tendency towards inertia in perception which may be seen in our response to many illusions. Ernst Gombrich, referring to trompe l’oeil, observes that “[w]e may hold on to [a] wrong interpretation till it suddenly gives way to a different reading’ [2, p.187]. Thus presented initially with the real, it may take us some time to recognize departures from it. In discussing transcontextual sound play (e.g. morphing), Trevor Wishart similarly observes that our tendency is to understand a morphing sound as being one thing until it is so obviously something else that we cannot deny the change, at which point we may experience a dramatic and powerful shift of perception to accommodate the new interpretation [13, pp.24-5]. The transition between these states can vary in duration, but it usually involves a certain amount of cognitive exertion to reinterpret and make sense of conflicting interpretations of a particular (sound) phenomenon.

This is akin to musical tension (or can be used as such within acousmatic compositional context), and thereby functions as a means of generating musical momentum. Referring again to Wishart’s cricket example, poetic play via exploration of the referential content of sounds curated from the environment is the surely the more potent when they are heard in ‘life’ context since source bonding is inevitably strongest in this context. Any skewed meanings (ambiguities and contradictions between sounds and their apparent agents, or their placement spatially) which subsequently result from the manipulation and anecdotal exploration of concrete material are thus intensified.

5. COMPOSING THE SOUNDSCAPE (3): ENCOURAGING SOUNDSCAPE AWARENESS

With this in mind, an obvious compositional application is to fabricate landscape hyper-realities – not-quite-realities at one remove from objective reality – which present some kind of ambiguity between the real-real and the hyper-real. Christina Kubisch’s A Tree and Ten Sounds (1994) and Jon Aveyard’s birdsong (2002), using alarm buzzers/tone frequencies [4, p.22], and synthesised talea respectively, both pursue a condition of ambiguity in a given space by emulating, but falling short of replicating, the sounds (birdsong) commonly experienced in those spaces. The exploration of such hyper-realities has further implications for soundscape and acoustic ecology issues, in particular heightening a listener’s awareness of his/her acoustic environment. The aforementioned cognitive exertion engendered by ambiguity between the reality and unreality of sounds can actually focus attention on the natural phenomena that they ‘accompany’ precisely because of their alien nature. Robin Minard’s Klangweb (1994) involved sounds indigenous to a particular area but presented, over time, in increasing profusion so that they eventually caught the attention of passers by, encouraging them to look for the sources of the sounds. In Minard’s words, ‘What in the beginning seemed to be familiar acoustic stimuli turned out to be, upon closer hearing, at one and the same time familiar and foreign…, [sharpening] one’s sense of hearing in relation to the actual environment of the area’ (Minard, 1993, 102). This was effectively a means of drawing the listener’s ear ‘outwards’, making it more receptive to the existing sounds of the environment that remained in their wake. The very not-quite-reality of the imposed sounds and their behaviour drew attention to the reality of the real sounds/sound behaviour elsewhere in the landscape. I was aiming for a similar experience in my own Old Joe Sound Sculpture project (2001) which involved electroacoustic compositional manipulation of the quarter-hourly chimes of the clocktower at the University of Birmingham. Simply by artificially extending the resonances of clocktower chimes so that they became impossibly long, I hoped, with some chimes, to draw attention not only to the existing intrinsic musical qualities of the bells themselves, or indeed to their acoustic and social significance (for while its chimes inform the daily workings of the nearby community, they are largely taken for granted - - their sonic contribution to the environment noticed only when absent or persistent (i.e. during maintenance), but also to the soundscape that remained when the sounds eventually faded. Ultimately the aim was for resensitisation of passers by to their acoustic environment.

Clearly exploiting the ambiguity here is critical; in this way, fabricating aural landscapes enables us to insinuate art into everyday life such that we might hope to encourage an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities or even artfulness of a particular environment or landscape to the casual observer (listener) without it ever becoming apparent that elements of this landscape were artistically contrived. Perhaps we might identify, for the purposes of this text, an acousmatic non-art [3, pp.97-99] – the tacit appreciation of a sonic event as an art(-like) phenomenon, though it may never be accorded that

---

1 ‘using synthesised talea and color (a rotating series of pitches set against a smaller rotating series of durations)’ (Aveyard, personal communication, 26 March 2004).
Thus we hear what we believe to be reality; something exotic is made to happen within the (composed) limits of this non-real, and we might conceivably appreciate this as non-art. As Max Neuhaus has observed, this has implications in terms of empowering the public when presenting public art. Referring to his work Times Square in New York (which is presented anonymously, without label or explanation), in which deep bass sounds emerge from subterranean vents into the streets above, Neuhaus discusses the ambiguity surrounding whether the sound is an artificial addition to the soundscape or whether it is simply an unusual mechanical sound emanating from the city’s subway. ‘Most of the people who don’t know what it is take it as a beautiful anomaly in the city that they found … something which is inadvertent which they take as their own, I think the best way of putting it is that by not claiming it myself I allow them to claim it.’ [6, my italics]. In other words, by removing all indications of a composer/artist’s intervention in a space, a listener, rather than being ‘subjected’ to an experience; people can be led simply by their ‘curiosity into listening’.

6. CONCLUSION

Field observes that ‘reality can be directly alluded to, represented or subverted by the composer’ [1, p.37]. It is hoped that the above discussion argues convincingly for an art of trompe l’oreille and fabricated aural landscapes that embraces all three approaches, having implications for acousmatic compositional thought, soundscape studies and acoustic ecology. There are, of course, a number of issues which have not been addressed here, and this paper represents the early stages of what will be a more comprehensive exploration of the possibilities and issues discussed within. These include an examination of the ethical implications of attempting to direct reality in the manner described above, as well as the development of a provisional taxonomy of fabricated aural landscapes. Certainly the subject invites considerably more research – both theoretical and practical/compositional – to establish how extensive and effective such interventions into environmental sound might be. The very fact that there remains so much to explore, however, seems to demonstrate that this area is worth pursuing further which is, I think, encouraging.

7. REFERENCES