IMAGINAL LISTENING AND PHENOMENA OF SOUND-IMAGES IN ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that listening is a phenomenal process, the subjectivity of listening should be considered an important and crucial factor that can be discussed and explained by phenomenological approaches. This paper examines two listening processes, perceiving and imagining, as the main correlates of the listening process in which listeners engage with EA music. It also discusses phenomena of sound-images, the product of the two listening processes and explains what we as listeners imagine and how we imagine when we listen to electroacoustic music. This argument lays the groundwork for a quaternary framework for electroacoustic listening in which listeners employ a comprehensive electroacoustic listening mechanism called acousmatic reasoning.

1. IMAGINING A LISTENER

Analyses of music presuppose a listener. The way that one approaches and talks about music is closely dependent on who is doing the listening. Understandably, however, identifying the listener in analysis is not a simple task, as discussed by Sloboda [7] and Cross [3]. And electroacoustic music confounds this task even further as listeners are engaged in more than musical listening. Gaver [4] separated musical listening from everyday listening in which the identity of an object comes to us almost instantly through the object’s various features, the initial stimulus of which leads us to seldom question an object’s affordance.

Separating musical from everyday listening, however, raises a thorny question in electroacoustic music. For not only does it help listeners employ musical listening, electroacoustic music may also succeed in inviting them back to the everyday world through the capturing and suggestive presentation of everyday sounds. Nevertheless, the absence of visual and tactile information, through which listeners often confirm their perceptions, makes the experience incomplete; the information needed to make the affordance of everyday things and experiences is, as a whole, inadequate and the experience difficult to accept.

How do listeners cope with the absence of other sense information when listening to electroacoustic music? Gibson argues that when faced with inadequate information, our “perceptual system hunts” [5], and the unsuccessful hunt for additional information leads to a suspension of judgment and, furthermore, to a decision to cease hunting for additional cues as assumptions, inferences, or guessing comes into play.

Although what Gibson proposes may be in accord with the way we cope with the real world surrounding us, it seems that what the listener does while listening to music is more than an assumption, an inference, or a guess. The electroacoustic listener is engaged with the music, not out of a search for truth or survival, but for the pleasure of the process; consequently, I argue that this difference makes of listening a different situation, one more intentionally creative in which the listener imagines.

2. IMAGINAL LISTENING

A thorough and passionate account of imagining is given by Edward Casey. In his book Imagining, Casey argues that imagination is an unpopular, if not controversial, subject that has either been unfairly criticized and summarily dismissed as to its role in more rational or quantitative disciplines or celebrated by disciplines like Psychology and Philosophy for the mysteries it might reveal [1].

But this is not what Casey and I mean by imagination. Imagining, as the process of imagination, is distinguished from hallucinations or illusions by the way it immediately connects our experience to phenomena, and, in turn, works to direct our mental activities back to what is happening to us, and around us, at any moment. Quite telling is his argument that imagining does not provide us with anything we do not know because “imaginative experience is inherently circular.” We imagine, not something new, but a new way to think about that which we already know [1]. This is, as I believe Casey contends, the power of imagining—a power not present in other mental acts often misunderstood as imagining.

The encounter with aural perception that Lucier’s I am sitting in a room, for example, is an experience resulted from two human processes, different in kind: one concerned with perceiving and another with imagining. Even though we perceive the sound of Lucier’s voice gradually disintegrated into the reverberant sound of the room, it is our imagining that leads us back to the work’s
opening voice and allows us to establish a relationship between the growing reverberance of the room and the voice we increasingly only remember.

To perceive is like recognizing dots, while imagining—which builds upon our perceptions—connects them (or changes the connections held together by conventional assumptions). Once connected by imagining, however, what we have perceived extend, and we witness this extension when listening to I am sitting in a room. As Casey argues: “this extension is imaginative and not perceptual in character... Imagining is not only capable of linking up with preceding acts of perceiving: it carries on their work in a different modality. Qua paraperspectival, imagining is an act by which the inherent partialness of perceptual experience is momentarily suspended—though not, of course, overcome. Through such paraperspectival, perceived and imagined components become interwoven as conjoint elements of a perceptual object or event which we are striving to apprehend more fully than we could by perception alone.” [1]

As such, electroacoustic music listening engages the interworking of perceived and imagined elements. But what, one may ask, does the interworking of perception and imagination produce? And to what should listeners be listening?

3. SOUND-IMAGE IN ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC

Listeners engage electroacoustic music by imagining a relational and developmental process between the sounds they hear. In fact, the use in many electroacoustic compositions of everyday sounds (and the characteristics we associate with them) naturally guides listeners into a process of imagining relations as they find themselves in familiar, if not, curious everyday territory or the vestiges of it. With time, movement through the work offers listeners the opportunity to create and project their own images onto the sounds they hear, as the everydayness of the sounds embolden them to ‘picture’ what they are hearing and the way the sounds sit, move, integrate, disintegrate, or generally relate to each other. The pictures or images that emerge are often called “sound-images” and are distinguished by the way the listener provides or gives them that which the listener believes the sounds may, in fact, contain (or desire to contain). If ‘image’ is “the mode of givenness pertaining to the total imaginative presentation” [1], then sound-image can be understood as a mode of givenness initiated and led primarily by aural presentation that, nonetheless, constructs the totality of the imaginative presentation through the act of imagining.

Sound-image is a puzzling word as it suggests that sounds are somehow seen. Still, that listeners and composers alike often characterize electroacoustic music in terms of sound-images suggests evidence of a common, shared framework based on qualities inherent to the activities of both. As Young [8] observed, if sounds in electroacoustic music have, to varying degree, a recognizable everydayness associated with their realism, then, realism, and the degree to which composers desire it and listeners perceive it, could possibly serve as a framework through which key features of electroacoustic music composition and listening might be mapped.

3.1. Sound-Images in Electroacoustic Music: What Do We Imagine?

Having explored the idea of perceiving and imagining using Lucier’s I am sitting in a room, and after looking closely at the idea and importance of imagining in electroacoustic music, two important questions emerge: what do imaginative listeners imagine and how do they imagine it?

The act of imagining is easily observed in our everyday experiences where our perception of events is typically only partial. For example, while I am writing this sentence in my study, I hear a series of loud sounds—beeps, sharp scratching, thumping and cranking—but I cannot see their source; nonetheless, I can and do create, out of past experience, a perfect visual image of a garbage truck just outside my apartment as it makes these sounds. I can even picture, almost exactly, what it does (and even conjecture its next movements). The typically partial nature of our perceptual experiences is likely due to “the fact that the perceiver is always anchored in some specific position in a particular spatio-temporal field” [1]; nevertheless, we somehow succeed in grasping experiences as completely as we need grasp. Furthermore, the principal element initially missing from the listener’s experience of electroacoustic music is often the visual appearance of the sound source, although listeners quickly learn to imagine the source as simply out-of-view. Therefore, it seems natural for listeners of electroacoustic music to express their experience in visual terms despite the fact that there is typically nothing to see.

As such, for listeners and composers, the interplay between what is given—what is perceived—and what is not—and which must therefore be imagined—is the very playground of electroacoustic music.

3.2. Sound-Images in Electroacoustic Music: How Do We Imagine?

When exposed to a certain set of aural data, the ecological hunting process may still look for other physical qualities that our body can actually sense, whereas the process of imagining may not, as it does not necessarily need them. How then does the process of imagining fulfill the goals of the perceiver who seeks to experience things whole? Casey notes that we “intend more than is given.” [1] It is our
intention to perceive things in their wholeness that initiates the process of imagining. Furthermore, we tend to move freely between what is perceived, which is given, and what is imagined, which is not given, so as to finally form an integrated whole.

In the eight-channel electroacoustic work Out of Breath by Paul Koonce, for example, I hear the sound of short and long inhaled and exhaled breaths; some stutter while others are prolonged; all sound as though directed into a tube whose color I soon recognize as that of a flute. A series of similar pitched flute-like sounds—they are flute-like, but not the sounds of a flute in a strict sense because, most of the time, I hear not the flute’s full spectrum but only groups of partials—tend to be heard first from the mid-front speaker, although the overall sound soon spreads outward to include the left-front and right-front speakers, followed by the side speakers. Also, I hear the reverberated sounds of the pitched flute-like sounds lingering on mainly in the speakers at the sides and the back. As I hear the sound again and again, in different variations yet with a constancy of shape and presentation, I imagine (as the sound-image appears) a performer in a space, exploring the sound of her instrument in the space as it somehow, fantastically, resonates certain partials of the instrument she holds. The piece seems to play with different configurations of the frequency spectrum of the flute, which are set in motion by the imaginary performer who, initially hesitant and nervous about playing the flute, gradually comes to accept what comes out of it. At the same time, the sound of the flute slowly opens up not only its own property as an instrument, but also the quality of the space in which it is played.

It is important to note that my experience of the piece is the product of what I am actually hearing and what I am projecting onto what is heard—what I am imagining. I could say that all I heard were a series of flute-like sounds—some reverberated, some dry—with added breaths and some additional hard attacks. However, my experience of the piece is much more; as I hear and follow the work, I begin to imagine things—a performer, a flute, the lips of the performer that touch the flute, and even the partials of the flute sounds as they fly about, bouncing back and forth between the walls of the space I am in. My imagining is inevitable, and in fact, the piece encourages it and the sound-images that result from it. Yet the experience is disconcerting, for while I know that, in listening to the work, I both perceive and imagine, it is difficult to determine where my perceiving of the piece ends and my imagining of it begins; I move between the two domains freely and immediately.

Casey argues that there are three primary ways in which we can image: imaging, imagining-that, and imagining-how [1]; and if we examine closely the way I was imagining while listening to the piece, we can surely discover these three ways of imagining with sound and sound-images.

3.2.1. Imaging and sound-images

First, when we listen to electroacoustic music, we are drawn to familiar images of specific, if not simple, form. Casey notes that to imagine is “to image,” which means, “to form an imaginative presentation whose content possesses a specifically sensuous—an ‘intuitive’ or ‘imagistic’—form” [1]. Indeed, my imagining while listening to Out of Breath created a strong representation of a flute and/or a performer. And the image of the flutist I created consisted not only of aural elements but also visual and even tactile elements as well. In my hearing of the work, I was almost able to see ‘the lips of a performer touching a flute’ or to touch myself, the sounds as they fly around the space (unbelievable though it may seem) because imagining almost always occurs “in a sensory-specific way” [1]. Moreover, these images often seem to take some form of action or to appear within the frame of some event.

3.2.2. Imagining-that and sound-images

Second, in electroacoustic music listening, we imagine not only sound-images but also their relationships. Casey notes:

"When we imagine, we not only envision or project objects and events in imagistic form and as distinct from one another in their sensory specificity. We may also imagine that individual objects or events together constitute a circumstance or situation: a 'state of affairs.'" [1]

Considering my imagining during my listening to Out of Breath, I see that I am imagining my sound-images establishing a form of performance—perhaps the flutist is rehearsing. Once I situate these sounds in this setting, I can listen further for possible performative clues from the various juxtapositions of these sounds. In other words, many of the sounds I hear make much more sense to me once I ‘figure out’ a way of imagining their situation(s).

3.2.3. Imagining-how and sound-images

Finally, in our hearing of electroacoustic music, we imagine how the sound-images we hear unfold, situated as they are in the circumstances we imagine: we imagine in a state of expectation. For when we imagine, we anticipate “what it would be like if such-and-such a state of affairs” were to happen [1]. In expectation, listeners play an active role in the process of imaging-how. As Casey notes:

"This kind of imaginative activity is not realized by projecting an unfolding scene of which the imaginer is the mere witness, but rather by entertaining an imaged state of affairs in which he (or a figure who stands proxy for him) is envisaged as himself an active and embodied participant." [1]
Furthermore, he goes on to say:

In other words, there is a sense of personal agency, of the imaginer’s own involvement in what is being imagined, which is lacking or at least muted in instances of sheer imagining—that. To imagine—how is to project not merely a state of affairs simpliciter (i.e., one in which the imaginer is not a participant) but a state of affairs into which the imaginer has also projected himself (or a surrogate) as an active being who is experiencing how it is to do, feel, think, move, etc. in a certain manner. [1]

Two of the most effective devices used throughout Out of Breath are repetition and silence. As I listen to the piece, these devices serve to challenge my assumptions about what the piece is about, or better, how (or whether) it will continue. Remarkably, repetition and silence prevent the sound-images I imagine, and all that I imagine is happening around them, from becoming fixed, keeping the idea of what the piece is about in motion so that I, the listener, can continue to expect or hope for something that is, yet again, new.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed how crucial it is to discern from our act of listening the two processes of perceiving and imagining. I have also examined how imagining fills the gap—that is, how it supplies what is not given—and how the addition of missing parts completes the sound-images any given piece seeks to represent. Finally, I have observed three ways in which we engage in the process of imagining. Again, it should be noted that, once the process of imagining is set in motion, these three ways of imagining are no longer easily separated from one another.

The observations made in this paper about the production of sound-images has given me elsewhere [6] an opportunity to develop a listening framework (see Figure 1) in which the two processes are interwoven by a listening mechanism called acousmatic reasoning.1

Listening is an everyday practice, and like any everyday practice, “depends on a vast ensemble which is difficult to delimit but which we may provisionally designate as an ensemble of procedures” [2]. And, as this paper has examined, perceiving and imagining are the two fundamental procedures that can shed light on the complexity of electroacoustic listening.

5. REFERENCES


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1 Acousmatic reasoning is a process of listening to and composing with dis-embodied and dis-placed sound materials based on their spectromorphological and semiotic significations and connotations. [6].