IS MORE THAN THREE DECADES OF COMPUTER MUSIC REACHING THE PUBLIC IT DESERVES?

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ABSTRACT: This talk focuses on a number of subjects: any computer musician deals with on a daily basis, but often takes for granted. It is based on the assumption that groups such as the CMA pay too little attention to computer music's dissemination. Two hypotheses are presented: 1) We are living in the era of the image culture, yet we make use of today's audio-visual potential. 2) Many people have difficulty getting to appreciate computer compositions as their grammar is often left untold. Furthermore, the following key words are treated: the communications media, our schools, 'premier-died' and 'progress'.

PREAMBLE: Contemporary music is suffering from being (one of) the most supported art(s) today, especially in terms of its distribution. Why do our works reach relatively few people? Why do many of these people still have difficulty appreciating a good deal of this music? Where twentieth century music in general has experienced several revolutionary forms of expression, the most radical can be found in the birth of the music of sounds, the basis for today's experimental electroacoustic (or computer) music. If we want more people to look forward to the experience of our music, they must be given a helping hand to better appreciate it. What the helping hand may offer is the subject of this paper. Yet what do we talk about at our musical computing get-togethers? In general we are most curious to learn about new research accomplishments. Nevertheless, it is hoped that in the future the present subjects will not too often be neglected.

It is a bit dangerous to make the following comparison at an ICMC-conference, but perhaps this is a good starting point. One often hears complaints that remarks made about our television primarily concern their better image resolution and sound quality than last year as opposed to the (lack of) quality of what is shown on it. Computer musicians and computer music developers are fluent in their discussions of new hardware and software, but these same specialists are often most timid about discussing what has been achieved with these innovations. Surely we all know that our computers add sound source and color potential, spatial applications and above all total control over all musical parameters and we are highly fascinated by most new discoveries in our field. But what are we doing with these developments? Why are they still extremely marginal in a world in which commercial digital music is without question the most listened-to music of all? Below a number of interrelated discussion points follows, points which this author found to be of importance when he treated them at greater length while writing the recently completed book entitled What is the Matter with Today's Experimental Music?. Most of them are extra-musical in nature; those concern the state of lower and higher music education, the relatively little time allocated to electroacoustic music on radio and television, our avoidance of collaboration with other audio-visual arts and the difficulty of being able to hear works performed more than once (all dissemination questions) as well as socio-economic problems like: Who's in charge, the composer or the synthesizer manufacturer? These points are as diverse as they are relevant - therefore this pointillist approach. The musical section includes pleas for a 'dramaturgy' of electroacoustic works as well as support for more musico-logical research in this area. The fragile subject of musical quality has been meticulously avoided here - it is no less deserving of attention but obviously goes beyond the scope of the current presentation. Please bear with one remark on this subject, though: the number of 'faster works' today is proportionately as large as it has always been and it therefore not the reason for the marginal lot of our music.

Our music is not getting to as many eager ears as it should. The creation of the gap begins with our youth as will now be demonstrated.

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SCHOOLS/MEDIA: Let's start by briefly looking at two sources of the isolation of our computer music: our schools and the communications media. Experimental music is an acquired taste. However, it is a rarity in our lower and middle education that computer music or any contemporary music for that matter is presented as at. This means that young children are virtually never brought in contact with the music of sounds, which in turn is highly damaging for electroacoustic music's dispersion. These potential appreciative listeners have to discover it at a later age, often accidentally and mostly pretty ill-prepared. Thus there is a weak basis for making this music better known. Also many readers might agree about how contemporary music and especially electroacoustic music are often kept at a safe distance from other activities in our music(ology) departments. Integration with music as a whole suffers through this separation.

The first proposal in the current text is that computer musicians and educators might attempt to figure out ways to stimulate this music's integration (music appreciation, music making) into programs from elementary up to university and conservatory levels. Furthermore, these same people could be responsible for the creation of new curricula for its introduction at various types of schools employing 'inside of music' elements presented below.

We all often complain about the lack of adequate attention given to our music on the radio and especially on television. As long as electroacoustic music is not treated as an important subject in education, potentially creating - yes, indeed - a minor competitor to the monopoly of popular music, and commerce as well as state cultural organizations remain less than fully supportive, the media will continue to allocate too little time to this music. One might say that computer music has not yet found its proper place within our market economy. There is more supply than demand. The fault is not necessarily to be found in the supply (there's plenty of music available), but in the lack of the creation of demand. This leads to an input/output problem concerning the amount of work a composer puts into a new piece as compared to what (s)he gets out of it in terms of performance possibilities. Listeners' attention. We often talk about the politics of music. The relative lack of support from our schools and the media is at the heart of the politics of electroacoustic music as far as this writer is concerned.

Of course there does exist a community of people interested in computer music. The point here is simply: isn't this community a bit too marginal after three decades of major breakthroughs and important compositions? COMMERCE AND SOME PEOPLE'S INFATUATION WITH THE 'NEW': The 'new' in today's music is also very problematic both in terms of dispersion as well as in terms of industrial developments and 'nodes'. Surely many, including this writer, are always looking forward to discover new potentials in music and music technology; nevertheless some 'new's are less exciting than others. Two examples:

1) Why must every festival have to include so many (world) premières? Can we cure these festivals of their seemingly malignant premiérise-at? How often does one get the chance to hear a work for a second, third, ... time? Aren't these consent organizers aware of how many pieces need a second, third, ... hearing to be appreciated? In other words, many festivals tend to profile themselves by 'being up to date'. But by offering the newest works, one has got the chance to 'digest' them properly or find the way to get to know older works better, works which haven't yet been recorded. In this manner appreciation tends to remain superficial outside of the trained inner-circles of computer musicians. The moral of this story is that a concert's combining the newest with the 'less new' might not be a bad idea.

2) A point concerning commerce (the subject of the round-table discussion following this talk): Is everything we bring out on the marketplace to be considered a form of 'progress'? When MIDI arrived, it did not seem so due to the sudden restriction of several important sound parameters including pitch. MIDI has the advantage of having brought computer music to an enormous number of users. Its disadvantage is that MIDI instruments are all more non-designed than sound-designed. Sound works the likes of Wajszczuk's 'Archaic Symphony' are still exceptional. In short it is wonderful that MIDI has attracted many musicians to digital music; it is a shame that the limitations have taken reign above questions of content. In the analog years, experimental musicians called the shots as far as design was concerned. Today the commercial music world is more powerful due to its huge number of potential buyers. Ironically though,
some of today's composers who use such instruments are therefore allowing themselves to accept the restrictions electroacoustic composers spent so much time trying to overcome. This leads to one polemic suggestion: use and (have specialists) develop technology based on musical aims and nothing but...

A second suggestion: don't try to employ every new form of sound synthesis immediately; when a comes out. Our learning time is not to be underestimated. How long did it take you to master your first instrument? Changing instruments every three or four of years cannot be the healthiest way to build up one's musical continuity, one's style or one's own sound. Furthermore, dropping old instruments as being outdated can be counterproductive. For example it is said that analog music is dead, but can our computer music completely and efficiently cover the loss? Personal experience has demonstrated that for some types of sound manipulation, analog techniques are still most rewarding. So what's wrong with using 'obscure' technologies?

Agreed commerce has little to do with the dissemination problem. It is our talking about digital instruments more than of the music coming out of them which is of importance here.

A SPECIAL CASE - AUDIO-VISUAL POTENTIAL: Let's jump now to include a subject that could very well do electroacoustic music as much good as having it receive more attention in our schools and on our communications media. It is true that in a sense this point can be seen to be a plea for, 'If you can beat 'em, join 'em'. We are in the middle of the era of the 'image culture'. Television reigns supreme. For example, a pop number is doomed if its clip is not made on time. Our equivalent to this problem began in the twenties during the early tape-only concert of musique concrète and electronic works. Combining tapes with synthesizers and live musicians is one 'audio-visual' option. Working in collaboration with specialists in other, less marginal genres can be equally exciting, but is not often explored due to a composer's potential loss of autonomy.

Experiences in theatre, film, video, with contemporary dance and music theatre (as opposed to opera) are proposed. Much larger audiences can be reached, audiences which can acquire that taste they might not have discovered otherwise. In this manner expectations may grow for the inclusion of experimental music in more audio-visual works. It is well known that electroacoustic music can attain enormous timbral and spatial significance in all of these genres, but few have chosen to attempt to reach larger groups of potentially eager listeners through collaborative efforts. But then again, how many computer musicians are relatively tired of their audiences usually consisting of 50 - 150 listeners? Collaboration in audio-visual genres is one way out.

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DRAMATURGY AND THE MUSICOLOGY OF ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC: As we have seen, a great deal of the problems concerning computer music's less than usual dissemination can be found in extra-musical arenas. The following paragraphs, however, come a bit closer to the works, themselves. First of all a description of what might be called the 'dramaturgy' of a composition will be presented after which a few musico-technological points will be mentioned.

It is the opinion of this writer that the dramaturgy of today's compositions, its raison d'être is often left untold. Art for art's sake has not yet left us; yet music with a solid base (not necessarily a formal or technological one) is what most people tend to want to hear. In other words, we the composers often describe the 'what' and 'how' of our composition's tools and technological applications - that is what one most often 'earns' from computer composition instructors - but what about the why?

In general a composer does have an idea what (s)he wants to say/describe/reflex upon in a composition; program notes however are either technical in general or, conversely, mildly poetic in nature. Sall our new musical architectures or sources of inspiration are usually only part of the tale. What is missing is what a dramaturge in the theatre tries to formulate as the foundation of a given interpretation of a work of drama by a director, composer, scenic designer and actors. The dramaturge's work ties things together, makes aspects of the performance more coherent (without having to compromise any abstract - is the sense that music is said to be abstract - or experimental element of a mise en scène.). Why, then, is it a rarity that our music is presented along with and consequently profit from this eye of dramaturgy?

Untrained listeners have been known to confess that they fear they don't know how to listen to an electroacoustic work and would like to be helped in some way. It must be confessed that any dramaturgical text most certainly will not answer all questions listeners, lost in the...
The enormous diversity of today's music, might have. Still it can offer one way to approach a work. As a result, the complexity as well as new sounds and sound structures are to be found in a large portion of contemporary computer compositions, a helping hand can be most useful.

The discussion of the missing dramaturgy goes hand in hand with a few typically musicalological subtexts: terminology, classification, notation, aesthetics as well as the didactics of music. It is often said that certain composers use similar types of sounds (for example, think of the composers who have employed those typical FM-metallic sounds); it is less often said that computer music composers are dealing with related musical discourse. One might think therefore that computer music composition is the sum of each individual's activities. Certainly this is an exaggeration, but it does point to what seems to be a black hole in electroacoustic musical description today. Only relatively recently have we seen the first important analyses of electroacoustic music; only recently have studies been done attempting to describe electroacoustic musical languages.

Our lack of musicalological norms including a generally accepted descriptive terminology for this music is one of the reasons why our higher education of electroacoustic music suffers. Clearly people with established (University) posts (i.e. most CMA members) have the comfortable position of continuing today's important development work in computer music applications. As a reflection of this, our courses treat computer technical subjects and recent research. Yet how many courses treat the works, themselves? Certainly without this parallel training, the request for a dramaturgy of music is a bit idealistic, for it can only be learned through the experience of studying existing works. (It might be added here that even at ICMC conferences it seems that the first "C" (computer) in this title reigns above the "M" (music) outside of the concerts.)

Let's look at a couple of typical carefully avoided questions much in need of attention: What does one concentrate on or zoom into when listening to an electroacoustic work? When does the fusebox of our perception blow in terms of a music's complexity or density? Algorithmic composition, for example, might be worthy of examination based on the latter question. How about the thousands of those ingenuous new form and structure types created yearly? Isn't the listener, including highly trained composers and musicians, to be given any help? The dramaturgy is already missing and the added amount of new sound and structure, not to mention spatial information, is simply overwhelming!

Only through collaborations between our composers, musicologists and music educators can something be done about this. Their results could be most helpful in devising standards which in turn would be useful in furthering the creation of curricula for our schools as well as aiding in the formulation of criteria for repertoire choice by the media, concert organizers and so forth.

To reiterate, a descriptive terminology leading to more written sources about electroacoustic works - supplementing the dozens of books concerning music technology - is highly desirable.

A FEW CLOSING WORDS: A part of the good news is that it looks hopeful that experimental music will make a comeback after a period of relative hibernation (due to the recent general upward trend in our economies?). Experimental music of the 1990's will most likely be based on assimilating experimental (technical) advances of recent decades instead of looking for post-Cageian new and farther removed musical boundaries. Fusion and synthesis are "in" and can be supported by a composer's clear dramaturgy. Elegant works like the likes of Isser's "Baff" which are not overly complicated and are also technically interesting are available in decent supply. However, can a "musical community" such as the CMA find access to all such works? The fact is that this tends to be most difficult as the number of CD releases is still a bit low and submission reliance might not be sufficient.

What everyone wants is to have more pieces heard by more listeners. But what are we doing about this? Herein lies a problem we should all participate in solving.

How many major pieces are there? Certainly more than one would think. And if we are having difficulty finding them, imagine how difficult it is for the general public. In any event, what is of central importance is the answer to this paper's title: Is more than three decades of computer music reaching the public is deserves? Of course not!