

Aesthetics and Electroacoustic Music:
We need new Criteria for the Evaluation of Electroacoustic Music

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There is a well-known discrepancy between the qualitative judgement of contemporary music by specialists in this area and by the interested audience. It seems clear that this discrepancy is caused by the inherent different perspectives of each group because of their respective frames of reference, but certainly also by the lower tolerance that *specialists* seem to incorporate in their judgement. There is always a danger that their view of the potentially interesting contents of a composition is blocked by prejudices towards cliché-like compositional means. This phenomenon, which is so typical for the evaluation of contemporary music in general is in my opinion even more pronounced in the genre of electroacoustic music, because strangely enough – or perhaps logically – it seems that electronic sounds and effects are considered inferior to naturally produced instrumental sounds in terms of their musical potential. As a result, the perceived erosion of the originality of electronic music might be greater or begin sooner than that of instrumental music.

Generally, audiences often have a negative attitude towards *tape music*. For most, it has the image of being lifeless, cold, and lacking musical expression. Apparently, the composers of such music have not been forgiven for depriving the listener of the live experience of an analog instrumental performance. *Tape music* is usually seen as being inferior to instrumental music, for which music-sociological reasons are responsible rather than the quality of the works themselves. As a rule, contemporary music is often seen skeptically because of the inexperienced listener's lack of benchmarks to judge the quality of the composition he has heard in a concert. The situation becomes even more difficult with electroacoustic music since the degree of the unknown is even greater due to the technical aspect. In other words: Many listeners have the feeling that they have no way of genuinely judging what a composer of electroacoustic music has “brewed up” in a high-tech studio, seemingly like an alchemist in the Middle Ages. In the end, the problem is the traditional understanding of the audience's role in the concert situation, whereby the lack of live musicians robs the listener of being able to judge the quality of the artistic performance using familiar criteria. Although it may be sad for some: in my opinion this situation will not change in the foreseeable future, so that *tape music* will remain a marginal genre within contemporary music.

Treacherous pitfalls for composers?

But back to the judgement of the quality of electroacoustic music and its means. There is no difference here between *tape music* and *live-electronic* music, since in both cases the experience of the *specialist* and the *inexperienced* listener are very different. The means of synthesis of sound or the transformation of *concrete* sounds with electronic techniques has become so advanced and complex that judging the audible results according to particular criteria becomes increasingly difficult. This often leads to a superficial impression, which can become boring because of the undifferentiated character. Once the *familiar* is abandoned without any help in understanding the *unfamiliar*, then it is impossible to evaluate what is new out of the lack of a standard for judgement. Thus, a negative attitude towards this kind of composition is understandable.

This is the real dilemma: The sounds and structures with which the listeners have become gradually familiar are often considered to be artistically inferior clichés by composers and other specialists. If a composer wants to reach his audience, he attempts to square the circle. As an *inventor of music*, he or she constantly becomes involved in the tug-of-war between what he or she as a *specialist* considers to be artistically acceptable and necessary and what an audience is willing and able to understand. Therefore, it is advantageous to have the capabilities of the audience in mind in order to motivate it to follow the composer into new and unfamiliar areas. Detailed program notes do not suffice, because this quality must come from the work itself.

Using the following examples, I would like to illustrate potential cliché *traps* for composers, which are, I believe, seen by *normal* audiences as being typical for electroacoustic music:

1. Synthetic and concrete timbres

Everyone recognizes them, the synthetic sounds of the fifties and sixties with timbres based on very few parameters and with very limited possibilities for variation. From today's perspective, these methods of sound synthesis were technically very primitive, which gave them a particular character of their own. We see them today a bit nostalgically because the euphoric pioneer spirit together with the belief that one was discovering new compositional territories enabled us to ignore the technical imperfections. Examples are the *Moog-Synthesizer* as well as the legendary *EMS-100*, with which it was incredibly difficult to depart from their respective typical sound characteristics. Later, certain timbres become clichés independently of the synthesizers: for example, synthetic string sounds have been rendered useless for other composers since Pink Floyd and Tangerine Dream popularized them, as well as the *thick*, massive walls of sound and space employed so generously by *New Age Composers*. These are just as *out* as the FM-synthesis produced in its most popular form by the legendary *DX7*, or the typical sounds dominated by *ramp*-waveforms in the additive sound synthesis employed by commercial synthesizers.

Apart from synthesizers, sounds based on concrete material can also be tricky: i.e., the typical result produced by filters or the *Mickey-Mouse-effect* of transposed speech. Everyone has heard those breathy choral sounds or the typical piano sound of many samplers. The results of the latter seem “cheap” or “plastic” when compared with an analog Steinway grand piano. Finally: how many footsteps on stairs, sandy ground, stones etc. have been used in electronic pieces, and how familiar (and often boring) we find the steady and ritual voice which recites the *poem* in the *off*, upon which the composition is based! Traps and ambushes are everywhere!

2. Structures and sequences

There are certain musical processes in electroacoustic music which are typical for this genre and therefore seem like clichés. They have been negatively affected because they have often been used in historical compositions. The use of vocals, in particular of boys' voices, is always in danger of being associated with Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* – the same goes for national anthems (i.e. Stockhausen's *Hymnen*). Luciano Berio's *Visages* set compositional standards as did John Chowning's *Strya* or Jean-Claude Risset's *Songes*: the sound aesthetics and compositional techniques were often copied without ever reaching the quality of the original.

The use of sequencers, in the rhythmical form as well as in the production of sound-clouds which consist of many individual sound-points, is also very dangerous. The former has become uninteresting due to its popularity both in minimal music and popular music, and the latter because of general over-use. It is important to point out the typical feigned virtuosity and complexity in electroacoustic pieces. We repeatedly encounter compositions which seem arbitrary and uninteresting because of uncontrolled density and seemingly indiscriminate choice of sound. And compositions that evolve from the American music aesthetic of John Cage and Morton Feldman, and which repeat copies of the compositional *almost nothing* again and again and again and again...seem destitute for lack of material.

3. Live electronics

The delay is one of the best examples of a cliché in live sound-processing: as a single event as well as an echo cascade, and even worse if connected with a sound transposition (*glissando*). It is only possible to use it under very particular circumstances. Repetition is not welcomed as such in contemporary music anyway, and especially here they usually seem more like blurred photograph of a beautiful painting. There are similar examples for reverberation programs. Especially the *infinite reverb* with its typical sound characteristic has become a cliché. *Chorus* and *flanging* effects can also sound just as stereotype as *harmonizers* and *filters*.

Pitfalls and traps also lurk in MIDI-controlled live-electronics. More and more often we encounter sophisticated techniques, which approach a sort of artificial intelligence. However, put through MIDI with all its limitations, the musical result is often disappointing. MIDI is known for being inflexible since the data flow is limited. This is further reduced by the limited capabilities of samplers and synthesizers. Besides, MIDI is slow, which makes more complex structures become less precise. Altogether, a typical music

characteristic and a uniformity of sound emerges, which quickly becomes a cliché for this medium.

It is virtually impossible to include all the dangers during the composition and realization of electroacoustic music. It does however seem to be a real problem that the erosion of the quality of compositional means is particularly pronounced in this genre. I have even received the impression that this effect is accelerating: the discovery of a new technique or method automatically leads to a new fashion, which can then be found in uncountable compositions and which in turn becomes a cliché. With that, we have a development in the opposite direction: while computer technology enlarges the flexibility of the realization of electroacoustic music, saving enormous amounts of time, new sounds, structures and techniques become worn out quickly due to over-use.

Do we need a new approach?

Perhaps a new approach is necessary for the evaluation of music in general, and particularly of electroacoustic music. Now, at the end of the 20th century, with the perfection of the information flow in the entire world through Internet, we can for the first time have access to almost all news about contemporary composition. This constant flow of information leads to the question whether it is even possible to expect similar broad compositional discoveries, as were common in the 1950s and -60s. Names like Stockhausen, Boulez, Ligeti, Penderecki, Cage, etc. are automatically associated with certain compositional styles that made musical history. *Intuitive music*, as a reaction to the apparent dictatorship of serial music, flourished just as much as *minimal music* with its demand for a new listening consciousness. The complete separation from every musical convention, regarding both the scores and the performance practice blazed new paths. And the inclusion of the seemingly endless world of noise arose to become a musical language, reaching as far as the total denial of the natural instrumental sound. I certainly have not mentioned all the facets of contemporary composition., but almost all have one thing in common in an absurd way: They all claim – whether directly or indirectly – to have discovered the absolute wisdom about the direction which contemporary composition is to take. On the other hand, one could ask at this point, whether everything on the compositional sector that one believes to have just discovered in composing a new piece, has not in fact been done before.

Consequently, it has been possible for quite some time to observe that particularly younger composers are somewhat at a loss for new means. This results in an immense variety of compositional styles and with that, a clear abandonment of the rigid position of the older generation of composers. The latter's personal styles led to *schools* which musicologists enjoyed greatly, as many prefer to use classifications as much as possible. Because of this development, perhaps new ways of thinking have emerged to evaluate *new music*, which replace the requirement of the *new* and *pioneering* as a criterion of quality. This requirement would consequently lead to an *art of avoidance* if only that which has never been used before is considered quality. It seems to be a difficult criterion, especially if we consider the endless musical means of expression available at the end of the 20th century. In other words: if almost everything has been used compositionally sometime, somewhere in the past – and much speaks for that assumption - then the question of the artistic value of a composition should be reconsidered.

The definition of *new music*, an expression which I personally do not like very much, should be transformed: It is not just what is new in a composition that automatically determines artistic quality, but rather the composition itself. The above-mentioned evaluation of the novelty of contemporary music is usually primarily defined by the concert organizers and critics. The musicians, audience, and initiator, i.e. the composer, often seem to be much less important. I therefore suggest that it no longer suffices to compare the quality of a new composition with the so-called *state of the art*, but rather to evaluate the merits of the piece itself. In this case, criteria of judgement could become important that are deemed obsolete and have perhaps been discarded as being too conservative. The question of the function of music must be posed anew, just as much as the question of the transmission of musical content to the listeners –intellectually as well as emotionally.

Thus, we must ask again: What objective criteria for evaluation can be accepted as being generally applicable? Do criteria even exist that help distinguish artistic quality from musical *garbage*? I cannot give a definite answer because I believe that musical judgement is primarily subjective. How often have we been able to observe that music considered inferior by *experts* has become successful and particularly valuable in

historical review – and vice versa. The only solution to this dilemma seems to be to demand as much tolerance as possible towards all different styles of contemporary music. Certain so-called *specialists* should perhaps consider whether a broadened horizon of musical perspectives might not be more conclusive for their work than narrow-minded, dogmatic viewpoints.

In this context, the variety of musical expression used by the younger composer generation should be seen as an advantage. The clear abandonment of compositional *schools* and the release from the typical attitude of specialization in regard to contemporary music might offer a new chance to reach new qualities, which could break up the often-rigid artistic standards of the *new music* scene. Traps regarding clichés of composition and sound effects would then lose importance because the subjective judgement of the quality of a composition would be based on other characteristics. In any case, it would then be necessary to find new criteria in addition to those currently in use for contemporary music, in order to enable fair judgement.