Ideas for a Musicology of Electroacoustic Musics: Notes to a Reading of Landy

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Abstract

The musicology of electroacoustic music has been reviewed by Landy (1999) in accordance with the traditional division of the discipline: historical musicology, systematic musicology and ethnomusicology, plus critical musicology. Because electroacoustic music cannot accept some tenets of Western art music, its musicology is necessarily critical. A study of musique concrète illustrates this. Electroacoustic music and its musicology are isomorphs.

In 'Ideology and Musical Style' Derek Scott (1999) states that 'the rise in recent years of "feminist musicology", "critical musicology", and "gay and lesbian musicology"[1] prompts the question: "are we living in an age of alternative musicologies, or are we witnessing the disintegration of musicology as a discipline?"' For Scott, since 'the unitary concept of a discipline is part of a now discredited paradigm for musicological thought', musicology must be viewed no longer as an autonomous field of academic enquiry or as a discipline, but rather as a field of transpositions of various signifying systems, an intertextual field. In 1966 Pierre Schaeffer (1966: 31) conceived of music 'as a "globalizing" activity, an *interdiscipline* proper; an activity that, confirming various particular disciplines, verifies by synthesis their partial contributions, at the level of the facts as well as ideas, and presents itself, like those disciplines, as a work of discovery, which targets the establishment of a knowledge, as much as — if not more than — the creation of pieces.'

Reviewing the musicology of electroacoustic music,[2] Leigh Landy (1999) follows the traditional division of the discipline: historical musicology, systematic musicology and ethnomusicology, plus critical musicology. In his view, the historical musicology of electroacoustic music has focused on machines and techniques. It should (1) take into account the works of systematic electroacoustic musicology, (2) put technological developments into relation with musical ones and (3) combine the histories of 'pop' and 'contemporary' musics into a single whole.[3] The systematic musicology of electroacoustic music encompasses a variety of sub-areas: new theories on sonic art, categorization of sounds (micro and macro levels), families of approaches/works, sound (re)synthesis, sound manipulation, spectral analysis, spectromorphology, new instruments, interactivity/performance interfaces, new protocols for digital control of sound, new approaches to performance (contexts), multimedia, sound and space/acoustics, new notations/representations, new approaches to analysis, ordering of sounds (micro-level), ordering of larger electroacoustic musical entities (macro-level), artificial intelligence, modes of listening/perception, psychoacoustics/cognition, archiving information, aesthetics/philosophy/criticism etc. Not always treated in a systematic

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[1] Insofar as 'gay' is a male, white and middle class construct, the designation 'queer musicology' seems preferable.

[2] 'Any music in which electricity has had some involvement in sound registration and/or production other than that of simple microphone recording or amplification' (Landy 1999).

[3] When narrated in terms of the 'tools' (tape recorders, synthesizers, software etc.), indeed, the two histories converge.

manner, these sub-areas relate defectively, according to an 'island mentality'. Works in this area should (1) indicate the potential relevance of results, (2) involve 'acquired feedback evaluation' (see Elliott 1991) and (3) state the potential applicability of the results, and the relation of such results to others.[4] The ethnomusicology of electroacoustic music is the less developed of the three. Concerned with the impact of electroacoustic music upon the listening, with aural culture, with our relation to the soundscape and with the huge acceptance of techno as opposed to the marginal acceptance of other electroacoustic genres (including experimental pop), it could nevertheless connect a somewhat ring-fenced electroacoustic community[5] to other communities in general. Landy advocates an *etic*[6] approach: electroacoustic music must be studied 'from the outside' as well as 'from the inside'.

In the Editorial of *Critical Musicology* Steve Sweeney-Turner (1997) defines critical musicology as follows: '(1) a form of musicology which applies aspects of Critical Theory[7] as practised within other humanities disciplines to music; (2) a form of musicology which involves the theoretical critique of previous musicological traditions.' Because electroacoustic music cannot accept some fundamental assumptions of Western art music (cf. Schaeffer 1953: 26–27), its musicology is necessarily critical, in the second sense.

An historical musicology of electroacoustic music must question itself as to the very meaning of 'Art':[8] the mutations of the essence of art in its relations to technology can be traced in the writings of Spengler (1918–22, 1931), Beyer (1928), Valéry (1931), Heidegger (1935–36, 1954[a], 1954[b]), Benjamin (1936), Adorno (1938), Simondon (1958) and Ponge (1961). A systematic musicology of electroacoustic music cannot embrace the 'note' as the unit of musical discourse: this theme has been extensively developed by Schaeffer (1966) and echoes in the dilemmas of musical analysis vis-à-vis atonal music and of ethnomusicology vis-à-vis transcription and description of the musics of aural tradition. An ethnomusicology of electroacoustic music must disown the esthesic/neutral/poietical tripartition propounded by Molino, popularized by Nattiez and ridiculed by David Osmond-Smith, for whom the neutral level represents 'a last resting-place for Kant's "thing in itself"' (Osmond-Smith 1989: 94). Finally, a musicology of electroacoustic music cannot be uncritical of the historical/systematic/ethno tripartition.

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[4] In my view, an historical approach could be useful inasmuch as it should shed light on the semantics of such terms as 'sonic object', 'morphology', 'musique concrète', 'electroacoustic music' etc., often at variance from one 'island' to another, from one author to another, and even from one stage to the other of a single author's trajectory.

[5] Contrary to what this statement may suggest, Landy is aware of the heterogeneity of the 'community' in question (see Landy 1997), which follows from his own definition of the field (see note two supra).

[6] For the *emic/etic* distinction see Nettl 1983: 140–41.

[7] 'The term really comes into play through the Frankfurters — Adorno et al. — and so has its roots in post-Marxist thought (we could argue about the "post-" if you want! LOL). Then, it kinda gets used for the Parisians who emerge in the sixties: Kristeva, Barthes, Cixous, Derrida, Deleuze, Clement, Irigaray, Lyotard et al.' (Sweeney-Turner 1999[b]).

[8] 'Surely this is an almost inevitable condition of *any* musicology of Modernist *or* postmodern forms of music?' (Sweeney-Turner 1999[a]).

The historical musicology of electroacoustic music has elected the *elektronische/concrète* dichotomy as founding myth and *Leitmotif* [9] to reduce it to a dichotomy of equipment (synthesizers and tape recorders), material (electronic and recorded sounds), method (total serialism and collage) or temperament (rationality and intuitiveness).[10] In 'Pierre Schaeffer, 1953' (Palombini 1993) I have suggested that for the electronic group technology was, so to speak, neutral, a mere means to the perfecting of Western musical tradition, while for Schaeffer new technology meant new thinking, the calling into question of that tradition. Schaeffer's relation to serialism might be summarized in the following proposition: in principle, but not in practice, I object to the application of serialism to traditional material; in principle, but not in practice, I accept the application of serialism to *concrète* material. Considering that tonal relations were inherent in the construction and technique of Western instruments, Schaeffer objected in principle to serial methods as applied to traditional instruments but he observed that, in practice, the *listening* to such pieces could be validated by a certain technique of hearing; considering that when applied to sound qualities other than pitch the series would lose its negative character[11] and open to new sounds the domains of tradition, Schaeffer accepted in principle the application of serial methods to complex sounds but he observed that, in practice, such sounds had little to gain from systematic recourse to serial techniques.[12]

Thus, synchronic[13] methods of comparative text analysis may prove insufficient an axiom of historical electroacoutic musicology and utter the history of music from another point of view. In reality, the adjectives 'historical' and 'systematic' do not qualify the method but the object of the discipline. Historical musicology deals with music history, systematic musicology with music theory. Still, it is possible to apply synchronic, diachronic, and comparative methods to music history,[14] as it is possible to apply synchronic, diachronic and comparative methods to music theory.[15]

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[9] One is repeated ad nauseam that electroacoustic music originates from the convergence between *concrète* and *elektronische* materials in Stockhausen's 1956 *Gesang der Jünglinge* and Berio's 1958 *Thema — omaggio a Joyce*. Henry's 1956 *Haut voltage* is traditionally ignored.

[10] Those familiar with the doctrine of the four causes (see Heidegger 1954[b]) will find here the *causa materialis* (electronic and recorded sounds), the *causa formalis* (serialism and collage) and the *causa efficiens* (rationality and intuitiveness), with equipment (synthesizers and tape recorders) substituting for the *causa finalis*.

[11] It is pointless to apply the series, whose function is to prevent tonal relations, to unpitched sounds, which do not engender such relations.

[12] 'Serial musique concrète could have been composed', writes Landy (1999). Indeed, a number of serial pieces was created within the concrète group in 1952 and labelled as 'abstract musique concrète' by Goléa in 1953: Henry's *Antiphonie*, Boulez's *Étude à un son*, Messiaen's *Timbres-durées* and Philippot's *Étude I* (see Goléa 1953: 39–43 and Palombini 1993: 543–44).

[13] The terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' are borrowed from linguistics to designate the study of problematics that are envisaged as occurring at a certain point in time (synchrony) or as unfolding in a certain space of time (diachrony).

[14] For instance, a comparative analysis of Beethoven's biographies available in Germany in the centenary of his death (synchrony), as opposed to a comparative analysis of Beethoven's biographies published in Germany between the centenaries of his birth and death (diachrony).

[15] For instance, a comparative study of the meanings of the term *corps sonore* as employed by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Boulez in those essays of *Vers une musique expérimentale* that were written in 1953 and published in 1957 (synchrony), as opposed to a comparative study of the meanings of the term *morphologie* as employed by Schaeffer in *Traité des objets musicaux*, which was published in 1966 but written in the course of fifteen years (diachrony).

In the early days of musique concrète, to use the remnants of an old organ destroyed by the bombings (see Schaeffer 1950: 33) was an act of love towards a certain past, and also the tacit acceptation that such a past was no longer possible.[16] Musique concrète gradually evolved from an art of making music to an art of listening to sounds. At a time when the whole world can be destroyed by the pressing of a button, everyday things are as important as 'works of art'. To unveil the sound organization of sonic *objets trouvés* is to turn listening into an Art. To be able to listen to any sound whatsoever for the sake of the analogic, causal and conventional relations this sound engenders, and to be able to switch — anarchically? — from one relationship to another, is an exercise that prepares one not only for creating new musics but also for making the experience of sounds, images and life in unexpected and more meaningful ways.

Studying synchronically the history of musique concrète and diachronically its theory one comes across issues of ethnomusicology. According to Nettl (1983: 132), 'if "music in cultural context" is standard musicology, the study of music in culture may be carried on with conventional methods of history and ethnography, while Merriam's study of music as culture [...] is an anthropological specialty.' Paraphrasing Roland Barthes (1974: 13–14), I would say that 'I no longer believe — nor do I desire — that musicology should be a simple science, a positive science, and this for a primordial reason: it is the responsibility of musicology [...] to question its own discourse: science of the musical language, of musical languages, it cannot accept its own language as a datum, a transparency, a tool, in short as a metalanguage; strong with the corpus of psychoanalysis, it interrogates itself as to *the place from where it speaks*, an interrogation without which any science and ideological critique are derisory; for Musicology, at least so I hope, there exists no *extraterritoriality* for the subject, even if he is a scholar, with regard to his discourse; in other words, finally, science knows no site of security and in this it must acknowledge itself as Writing'.[17]

Such a musicology is Text. The Musical Object is the subject of this Text. The Musical Object *is* Text. The Text is neither a literary nor a musical oeuvre: 'it is not an aesthetic product, it is a signifying practice; it is not a structure, it is a structuration; it is not an object, it is a work and a game; it is not an ensemble of closed signs endowed with a meaning it would be a question of discovering, it is a volume of traces in displacement; the instance of the Text is not signification but the Signifier, in the semiotic and psychoanalytic[18] acceptation of this term' (Barthes 1974: 13).

Now, if the signified is the signifier, as Barthes (1974: 13) wishes, and if music and musicology are Texts, then such Texts should be isomorphs. Musique concrète improvises 'new uses for things originally meant for something else' (Schaeffer and Hodgkinson 1987: 5), according to the rule of *bricolage*: to make do with whatever is at hand (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 17).[19] A new structure is invested with disused remnants of old structures (Genette 1963: 37), as practised by structural thinking and the savage mind, by electroacoustic

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[16] 'Auschwitz', Lyotard's (1986) metaphor for the demise of the *Aufklärung*, acquires unexpected concreteness here.

[17] For the concept of Writing see Barthes 1953.

[18] See Lacan 1966.

[19] The year is that of the first French publication, the page number is that of the English translation (see references).

composers in re-mix[20] and by American Indians in the creation of Peyote songs (see Nettl 1983). One saves up by not making it to measure at the cost of a double operation: *analysis*, i.e. extraction of various elements from organized ensembles, and *synthesis*, i.e. organization of these elements into a new ensemble where, ultimately, they will be entirely detached from their original functions. In 'Technology and Pierre Schaeffer' (Palombini 1998) I have selected excerpts from Benjamin, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Ponge, which I have assembled into a 'metaphysics' of Schaeffer's sonic object. In 'Reviewing the Musicology of Electroacoustic Music' Landy (1999) has chosen elements from historical, systematic, ethno and critical musicologies, which he has assembled into an electroacoustic musicology. Humans, writes Nettl (1983: 164), 'cannot create culture from scratch; they use building blocks already present, combining and recombining them'. When innovation takes place, there is an intimate linkage or fusion of two or more elements that had not yet been joined in just that fashion (Barnett 1953: 181, cited by Nettl 1983: 163–64).

Thus, Schoenberg (1931: 172–73) 'shuts himself off from no one'. From Bach he learns the art of inventing musical figures that can be used to accompany themselves; the art of producing everything from one thing and of relating figures by transformation; disregard for the 'strong' beat of the measure. From Mozart, inequality of phrase-length; co-ordination of heterogeneous characters to form a thematic unity; deviation from even-number construction in the theme and its component parts; the art of forming subsidiary ideas; the art of introduction and transition. From Beethoven, the art of developing themes and movements; the art of variation and of varying; the multifariousness of the ways in which long movements can be built; the art of being shamelessly long, or heartlessly brief, as the situation demands; the displacement of figures on to other beats of the bar. From Wagner, the way it is possible to manipulate themes for expressive purposes and the art of formulating them in the way that will serve this end; relatedness of tones and chords; the possibility of regarding themes and motives as if they were complex ornaments, so that they can be used against harmonies in a dissonant way. From Brahms, much of what he had unconsciously absorbed from Mozart, particularly odd barring, and extension and abbreviation of phrases; not to be mean, not to stint oneself when clarity demands more space, to carry every figure through to the end; systematic notation; economy, yet richness. Following a similar pattern, in 1953 Boulez will seek to re-synthesize 'needs scattered almost anywhere in valid contemporary music' (Boulez 1953: 31). From Stravisnky he takes asymmetry, independence and development of rhythmic cells; from Schoenberg, the series; from Webern, reduction of the musical discourse to serial functions, the structural role of orchestration and the series as a mean of *threading* the sonic space;[21] from Varèse, the use of chords for the sake of their intrinsic sonic qualities, intensity as a structural component and non-octaving scales; from Cage, refusal of the clichés of the traditional instrumentarium; from Messiaen, organization of pitch, duration, intensity and attack according to a single principle. In this manner, shutting himself off from no one, provided such a one enjoys great-Germanic-composer status, or re-synthesizing needs scattered almost anywhere in contemporary music, provided this music is 'valid', Schoenberg

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[20] On the meaning of the term 're-mix' see Austin 1999:

> A term that — for me — has taken on a new meaning is 're-mix'.
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> By extrapolation I think I understand the new usage. Rather than its former meaning as a verb — when a composer makes a 2nd, 3rd, Nth mix of materials for, say, a tape piece — it has a broader meaning these days as a noun: a re-combination of the materials of a piece — our own or even some other composer's or composers' (!) already finished piece(s).

[21] 'While melody remained the fundamental element even in the bosom of polyphony, in the serial system as conceived by Webern it is the polyphonic element itself that becomes the basic element; hence this mode of thinking transcends the notions of verticality and horizontality' (Boulez 1953: 31).

and Boulez pay heed to 'the arrogantly humble precepts of an evangelical snobbery' (Proust 1921: 585):[22]

> 'Remember that if God has caused you to be born on the steps of a throne you ought not to make that a reason for looking down upon those to whom Divine Providence has willed (wherefore His Name be praised) that you should be superior by birth and fortune. On the contrary, you must be kind to the lowly. Your ancestors were Princes of Cleves and Juliers from the year 647; God in His bounty has decreed that you should hold practically all the shares in the Suez canal and three times as many Royal Dutch as Edmond de Rostchild; your pedigree in a direct line has been established by genealogists from the year 63 of the Christian era; you have as sisters-in-law two empresses. Therefore never seem in your speech to be recalling these great privileges, not that they are precarious (for nothing can alter the antiquity of blood, and the world will always need oil), but because it is unnecessary to point out that you are better born than other people or that your investments are all gilt-edged, since everyone knows these facts already. Be helpful to the needy. Give to all those whom the bounty of heaven has been graciously pleased to put beneath you as much as you can give them without forfeiting your rank, that is to say help in the form of money, even caring for the sick, but of course never any invitations to your soirées, which would do them no possible good and, by diminishing your prestige, would detract from the efficacy of your benevolent activities.' (Proust 1921: 585–86)

Alternatives to petrol are currently being sought and genetic engineering will soon make it possible not only to clone the Princesse de Parme but also to endow that clone with the qualities of wit and beauty which — noblesse oblige — the Princesse so missed. After all she was, quite simply, a hugely successful re-mix.

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[22] The year is that of the first French publication, the page numbers are those of the revised English translation (see references).

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