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Steve Ingham

Electro-acoustic Music: Towards the Fifth Decade

Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (York: Imagineering Press, 1985) [available direct from Imagineering Press, 83 Heslington Road, York YO1 5AX], £12.50

Simon Emmerson, ed., *The Language of Electroacoustic Music* (London: Macmillan, 1986), £9.95

What you are about to read is probably my 'last will and testament' as a composer. It seems highly unlikely that the technical facilities, both in terms of machines and computing know-how, will become available for serious musical applications in Britain within my working lifetime. I'm committing my ideas and speculations to paper in the hope that a new generation of musicians will have the facilities and the imagination to explore this exciting . . . domain.¹

No, not Edgard Varèse, but Trevor Wishart bemoaning the present state of British electro-acoustic music, and sounding a warning note to the peddlers of perennial optimism and technological progress, a warning note that is symptomatic of the sense of unease currently permeating the charmed circle of EMAS devotees and university-based studio composers. The problem, put in its simplest form, would appear to be this: how is it, how could it *possibly* be, that

the only truly original development of Western music in the twentieth century²

has foundered on the rocks of public indifference and economic stringency? Has electro-acoustic music been somehow deflected from its true path, hijacked by commercial interests? Has it simply run out of steam?

Five years ago, Roger Scruton's dismissive description of IRCAM as a

musical laboratory . . . where the arcane tinkering of the initiated ring out in holy stillness³

could be happily dismissed as merely uninformed and reactionary. Today, those of his political persuasion are firmly entrenched in power at all levels, 'Thatcherite philistinism' is in the ascendancy (not only in Britain!) and the smiles are frozen on our faces. A chill wind is blowing, and contemporary electro-acoustic music is by no means the only experimental art-form at risk from hypothermia. What is left of the wave of enthusiasm that launched EMAS not so long ago? Where are the musical results of the rapid expansion of studio facilities in the sixties and seventies?

It may be argued that this crisis – if crisis it is – is not entirely attributable to external pressures, that it is all very well for university composers and others to whinge on about under-funding and lack of public support when really the truth is that they have quite simply failed to deliver the artistic goods? After all as Simon Emmerson himself admits:

The clue to the difference between the two decades [the 1960's and the 1980's] lies in the recognition of the concept of failure.⁴

I am presupposing in all this that Jean-Michel Jarre and Kraftwerk haven't yet earned their place in the pantheon alongside Ussachevsky and Pierre Henry. For it is obvious that there is a colossal imbalance between the 'serious' and 'commercial' implementations of the new technology, both in terms of

resources allocated (by whomsoever) and – dare I say it – in the popularity of the product.

In much the same way that Andrew Lloyd Webber, for example, is simultaneously shunned by the élite, and praised by many as a leading contemporary composer, 'electronic music' has become the property of the entertainment industry and emasculated itself in the process.

And so it would appear that the storm clouds are gathering. Genuine doubts and fears about the future direction and shape of electro-acoustic music, in the 1990s and beyond, cast a shadow over an area of artistic activity previously characterised by unquestioning optimism and an unshakeable belief in the inexorable forward march of technology. Now, forty years after Schaeffer's *concert de bruits* and the birth of *musique concrète*, creative artists in the realm of electro-acoustic music are experiencing a state of acute alienation. This may take the form of alienation from their non-electro-acoustic composing colleagues, or from the industrial concerns which develop and market the tools of the trade, or from the organisations which promote and disseminate new music in general. The danger today is that frustration will set in, leading to the isolationism and entrenched aesthetic posturing and defensive jargon-ridden cliquishness which is sadly all too familiar in, say, the world of musical analysis. Bruce Pennycook, in his perceptive contribution to Emmerson's anthology, formulates this paradox:

... with the exception of a small number of highly motivated composers and theorists ... teachers and students within the music institutions continue to reject the technology of electro-acoustic music and computer music research. The students most interested in the field are denied access or are diverted from expressing themselves in the musical styles from which their interests first emerged.⁵

All the more necessary, then, to assess the present situation in electro-acoustic music, to stimulate discussion of its methods, aims and directions and, with luck, to draw some tentative conclusions as to the more fruitful avenues of exploration. The publication of the two volumes under review here is, therefore, to be welcomed, adding as it does already to the fast-growing number of books and articles on the subject. This is especially the case as they come from composers in the 'front line', so to speak, of the medium.

Very little of the literature concerning electro-acoustic music published prior to the mid-1980's has attempted to promote such open-ended discussion. Eimert's *Lexikon der elektronischen Musik* (1977)⁶, for example, is not much more than a reference manual for the 'educated reader', a pseudo-scientific exposition of terminology. Although one senses that its authors would have liked to tackle wider issues (there are actually a couple of paragraphs on 'Aesthetik') they all too readily opt for a rather defeatist cookery-book approach.

Nicht nur, daß ... eine genaue Abgrenzung des Gegenstandes kaum noch möglich erscheint; vielmehr hat sich auch gezeigt, daß eine geschlossene Theorie der elektronischen Musik ... nicht ausgebildet wurde, und daß ... eine einheitliche Terminologie fehlt.⁷

(Roughly translated: 'Not only is it scarcely possible to define the limits of the subject; we have not yet been able to develop a unified terminology let alone a complete and self-enclosed theory of electronic music.')

Again, Paul Griffiths' *Guide to Electronic Music*⁸ is inadequate even at the level of an historical introduction to the subject, whilst educationally-targetted publications of the early eighties such as Richard Orton's anthology, *Electronic Music in Schools*,⁹ or David Keane's *Tape Music Composition*¹⁰ have necessarily occupied themselves with the 'how' of hardware and technique at the expense of the 'whys and wherefores' of ideology and aesthetics. Peter Manning's *Electronic and Computer Music*¹¹ was one of the first attempts (in Britain, at any rate) to produce a definitive historical survey which is both scholarly and well-researched; his solid tome is likely, however, to date quite quickly, unless his publishers permit a new edition.

And so to the new wave of writings on electro-acoustic music, typified by the two books reviewed here. They constitute, as far as I am aware, the first real attempts to transcend the text book or 'scholarly tome': provisional, opinionated, often quirky, but always lively and well-informed, composers themselves breathe some fresh air into the debate at last.

On Sonic Art, by 'a freelance composer living in York, U.K.' is a book which repays careful reading. It is both a complex amalgam of the author's own radical critique of Western musical tradition and a phenomenological exploration of the nature of sound, together with frequent excursions and side-steppings into areas as diverse as linguistics, anthropology, computing, behaviourism, mathematics and poetry. Any first impression, however, that this work represents the musings of a somewhat eccentric latter-day Renaissance dilettante is quickly dispelled by the sheer scope of the author's knowledge and the depth of this commitment. This is a defiantly individualistic volume, and its rather *samizdat* appearance (with its typos, amateurish presentation and cheap printer) underlines and reinforces Wishart's public image as a leading British musical anarchist whose involvement with the institutions and apparatus of music education and dissemination is kept to the absolute minimum necessary to ensure his functioning as an artist.

Refreshingly, unlike many writers on contemporary music, Wishart rarely allows himself to erect barriers of phoney erudition and home-grown jargon behind which to hide. His authorial posture alternates wildly and unpredictably between that of the pedagogue, the philosopher and the raconteur, and his sense of humour mercifully prevents the adoption of a tone of high seriousness or pretentiousness. Welcome above all are his views on the sterility of academic musical formalism and his obvious sympathies with the styles of music which lie outside the cosy, self-referential and totally rationalist world of what he terms 'the lattice aesthetic'. *On Sonic Art*, then, is the work of an 'outsider'; a polymath and autodidact who is, above all else, a creative artist whose scribal activities assume a secondary role.

Like Partch, whose *Genesis of a Music*¹² also explores the dichotomy of Western and non-Western musical traditions and proposes radical alternative methods of composition backed by systematic acoustical studies, Wishart is a true subversive who challenges the assumptions of academic formalists and pays the price of possible neglect. And like Xenakis, whose radical left-wing perspective he shares, and whose *Formalized Music*¹³ is in many respects a direct precursor of *On Sonic Art*, Wishart has remained staunchly independent and aloof, trusting only in experientially verifiable hypotheses in the realm of musical creation.

Moving now to the Emerson anthology, we find an even richer mosaic of theory and speculation. Split rather arbitrarily into three sections ('Materials and Language', 'Problems of Language' and 'Influence of Computer Technology'), we have here a useful collection of ten recent essays, incorporating Boulez' so-called 'classic' article 'Technology and the Composer' of 1977. Emerson, Wishart, Harvey, Smalley, McNabb and the other contributors to Emerson's anthology are all respected practitioners of electro-acoustic music, with a deep commitment to the future of the medium, rather than journalists or historical musicologists.

Many of these writers are suspicious and distrustful of academic formalism and are aware of the dangers inherent in the manufacture of instant music history:

... all information is afforded a veneer of neutrality all events treated as equally worthy of analysis; ... true critique is stifled.¹⁴

Unfortunately, those contributions that deal with individual composers' discussions of their own work are the least satisfactory and most boring. 'Suffice it to say', enthuses Michael McNabb, 'that I used the Weierstrass-Mandelbrot random fractal function'. This is pure self-indulgence. Why, too, should we be particularly interested in Tod Machover's lengthy ramblings on his latest operatic opus, proudly entitled 'A Stubborn Search for Artistic Unity'? My own feeling is that the more generalised philosophical attempts to impose order on the chaos by way of classification and analysis (in particular, the essays by Wishart, Smalley and Emerson) are the most successful.

As space does not permit a thorough-going discussion of each article, I shall confine my remarks to Denis Smalley's 'Spectro-morphology and Structuring processes'. This owes much to Schaeffer's pioneering *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966)¹⁵, a fact that the author readily admits. Central to Schaeffer's concept of the sound-as-object is the entirely novel and actually rather perverse idea that the apprehension of a sound should occur without relation to its source or cause. This 'acousmatic' or 'reduced' listening then becomes the basis for an analytical method founded on the supposed existence of sonic archetypes of one kind or another.¹⁶ Smalley then argues that a common terminology must first be established before any meaningful discussion or evaluation of electro-acoustic music can take place; accordingly much of the chapter is taken up with a meticulous classification and labelling of spectral types, morphological models and categories of sonic motion in the virtual space created by loudspeaker networks. The tone is didactic rather than speculative, and occasionally pompous (the royal 'we' appears regularly):

We claim that the very rapid development of spectro-morphology is the most radical change in Western musical history ... Spectro-morphological thinking is the rightful heir of Western musical tradition ...¹⁷

a cynical interpretation being that the 'vernacular language' (i.e. the music of the proles) is inferior to the other prong of the twentieth-century musical fork (i.e. what 'we' electro-acoustic composers get up to in our university studios). Such snobbery is forgivable, however, if only because Smalley constantly emphasises the primacy of aural perception as the ultimate arbiter of quality and source of all value-judgement, and because his rejection of formalism and excessive conceptualisation in twentieth-century music is as sincere as Wishart's. This is the thrust of his

concluding paragraph, in which he reaches the entirely laudable conclusion that electro-acoustic music deserves to go under

unless aural judgement is permitted to triumph over technology.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Smalley's penchant for jargon renders an otherwise interesting discussion almost impenetrable for all but the academics amongst us. 'Spectro-morphological', 'pitch-effluvium continuum', 'dislocated surrogacy' – these are learned neologisms hardly destined to delight the ears of the Clavinova player in his parlour or the street-wise rock musician at his local emporium. Nor is 'electro-acoustic' an adjective that rolls smoothly off the tongue, although institutions of higher education love it: its aura of scientific respectability conjures just the right images of sterile laboratories and earnest research.

But what are we to call this music if not 'electro-acoustic'? Wishart neatly side-steps the issue by coining his own all-inclusive phrase, 'sonic art'. If we are discussing sound and its organisation, then why not use the adjective 'sonic' and replace 'music' (a loaded term) with 'art' (pleasantly diffuse).

All this may seem like nit-picking, but our act of choosing labels, our very word selection, imposes an ontological status and narrows the limits of that being defined. Computer technology intertwines itself so intimately with so many aspects of life today that soon it will be taken for granted like electricity itself. And, just as we no longer talk about an 'electric' refrigerator or an 'electric' light bulb, perhaps we will one day soon be able to talk about 'music', if not 'sonic art'.

These contributions, to conclude, are most welcome at a time when studio composers' work is still being largely ignored, trivialised or treated as a fringe activity by the vast majority of the music establishment, press, and concert-going public alike. It is to be hoped that these writings and others like them, will spark off a forest fire of debate as we move towards electro-acoustic music's fifth decade.

1 Trevor Wishart, foreword, *On Sonic Art* (York: Imagineering Press, 1985).

2 Simon Emerson, ed., *The Language of Electroacoustic Music* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.1.

3 Roger Scruton, 'Harmony hath charm, din destroys', *The Times* (28 June, 1983).

4 *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, p.2.

5 Bruce Pennycook, 'Language and Resources: A New Paradox', *ibid.*, p.137.

6 Herbert Eimert & Hans Ulrich Humpert, *Das Lexikon der elektronischen Musik* (Hamburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1973).

7 *Ibid.*, foreword.

8 Paul Griffiths, *A Guide to Electronic Music* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

9 Richard Orton, *Electronic Music in Schools* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

10 David Keane, *Tape Music Composition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

11 Peter Manning, *Electronic and Computer Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

12 Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*.

13 Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971).

14 *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, p.1.

15 André Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*. (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

16 Smalley actually goes further than this and suggests that 'reduced' listening can be an alternative mode of genuine musical experience.

17 *The Language of Electroacoustic Music*, p.93.

18 *Ibid.*, p.98.