History and Archival: the pitfalls of storage.

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Our musical history continues to expand at a rapid pace. Aesthetic boundaries are stretched to their limits and we begin to question if they exist at all. Yet we remain interested and excited by developments, both technical and aesthetic, in sound and it seems obvious that both are engaged by an understanding of theoretical and contextual elements. We all have access to our own critical histories and some are bound to be deeper and stronger than others, but the democratisation and change of technology has given rise to a breadth of information that stifles in-depth study. I would like to focus my thoughts around the inextricable links between composition, theory, analysis and historical context and the need to access pertinent data that is highly organised. I would like to suggest that our current archives do not allow for the addition of human emotional content because they are (quite naturally) obsessed with storage and retrieval of large quantities of electronic data. I would also like to suggest that for electroacoustic composers writing especially for fixed media, there is a huge responsibility to document above and beyond an audio file and that one should consider how others may adapt your work in the future.

Introduction

Questions, questions. The fact there are so many is both exciting and terrifying. Simple questions such as:

- ‘what do we need for a critical history of electroacoustic music?’,
- ‘what do we need a critical history of electroacoustic music for?’

lead to obvious answers, though if the answer to the second question is ‘we don’t, it will just happen or the market will decide’ then there are in my view sad implications for the morality of our cultural development. Questions relating to the
foundations upon what a critical history can build upon such as archive and experience are more complicated. Clearly both are influenced by the art created. It is rare for an archive to dictate the nature of art though, as we shall see, the compromises required to preserve electroacoustic activity call not only for us to think about how to further develop archives but how to further develop the compositional process.

Whilst attempting to present a critical discussion, I am neither a philosopher nor musicologist so I hope to tread carefully and draw heavily upon personal reflection. And as I begin to collate audio works from 2005 into a publication, preparing for this discussion has convinced me of the need to document and reflect more seriously than I ever have done.

What is a critical history?

Nikolas Rose, Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, previously Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths College defined the critical in the history of psychology by first describing ‘recurrent’ histories and ‘critiques’. The sanctioned history - that to which I probably adhere to (having had a classical music upbringing) is quite dogmatic. Recurrent history, in the case of psychology ‘helps demarcate that regime of truth which is contemporary for a discipline’; a history used to ‘police the present, but also to shape the future’ (Rose, 1991). Even that which is not sanctioned remains only to be consigned to a lapsed history. By contrast, the ‘critique’ sets up multiple paths for the future by charting where sanctioned history was driven off course, normally by external factors. Critical history attempts to understand these external factors and question that which we thought sanctioned. One word I see used quite often in critical histories of other subjects is ‘respect’ and notably a respect for the past.

As I began to think through ‘the basics’ of my critical history I turned to my books then to my compact discs. I rejected the latter as an impermanent record of history and fear I have fallen at the first hurdle of the acousmatic conundrum; finding a text. But that is not to say that this problem is the sole concern of the acousmatic domain. In fact, the lack of a text, or more to the point, the simplicity of storage, replication and playback may be to this music’s advantage. All electroacoustic music requiring some element of hardware technology in order for it to be performed immediately presents a problem, not only for future performances but for historical documentation and analysis. The proliferation of technology is truly a double-edged sword. Clearly it empowers composers, effects the rapid movement of information and ‘makes our lives easier’. In accepting this pace of change (and did we really have a choice?) I feel we have sacrificed our ability to make asserted value judgements and lost our motivation to investigate. Heaven forbid that my critical history began and ended at wikipedia. However, my search for anything more substantial and ‘legitimate’ about the people of electroacoustic music rarely delivers more than wikipedia’s cursory glance. I have in front of me
the work of my colleagues Profs. Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone on Olivier Messiaen (Hill and Simeone, 2005). This 400 page book searches through Messiaen’s public and private worlds and brings together extant literature with never-before-seen archive material. And here the archive means both the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and the bottom drawer of Mme. Lorriod. Storage is useful in itself but the material will not influence anybody unless brought to life by people with a firm belief in the importance of the subject matter. That there are so few electroacoustic musicologists makes it all the more difficult to create in-depth archives of material at a time when we still have direct access to some pioneering electroacoustic composers.

What do we need for a critical history?

Because I like to see things in black and white before adding colour, I see a critical history documenting a person, their work, and finally our understanding and perception of it. I see an archive as an exhaustive collection that is highly organised. In this respect the combined efforts of institutions around the world will give rise to meta collections, so long as the institutions remain open. An archive becomes a critical history.

Assuming that the codification of a composer’s life and music will end up in words, sounds, and images on the page or screen, what do we need for a critical history? It is clearly important to store and then archive material. A number of digital music archives exist (indeed one might suggest that google searches for any mp3 or wav of a composer forms an archive of sorts as you need know very little information to get started) but there seems to be a very little conformity across the sector and only the largest of institutions have the ability and finance to adhere to European archival standards.

Perhaps one of the most transparent resources on the web today and one that I use quite frequently is the EARS website (ElectroAcoustic Resource Site) (Leigh Landy, Simon Atkinson et al, 2004), a very useful citation resource. It has recently been contextualised by one of its founder members, Leigh Landy (Landy, 2007) and I would suggest this is a very interesting example of how ‘critical histories’ can be formed. But Landy’s work contextualises theory and remains solely in the domain of texts. Similarly, documentation such as The International Database of Electroacoustic Music (Hein, 2006), only helps us go part of the way in charting the past. The Canadian Electroacoustic Community’s Sonus project (Austin et al., 2003) supports a growing body of fixed media work. It is Bruce Pennycook in Organised Sound (2008) who raises all the concerns of the living composer of music using hardware technology that has long since been made redundant. Composers including Lawrence Casserley and Simon Emmerson in the United Kingdom have taken it upon themselves to port their early works to flexible software solutions, and it seems that IRCAM (Bachimont and Blanchette, 2004) are taking every effort to protect the lifespan of ‘their’ composers’ music. Miller Puckette’s Pure
Data Repertory Project (Puckette, 2007) brings a number of more complex works into the public domain, lengthening their existence. In my view, archival is useful, but translation to a format that remains relevant (possibly affording interpretation along the way) keeps both the archive and the document alive.

As a critical history requires a certain duration (and just how long this duration may be, is another interesting question), preservation and archive are very important tasks on the road map. Roadmaps tend only to look forward however. The S2S² roadmap (2007) singularly fails to respect the past in all but its opening remarks and instead assumes that critical information will be meta-tagged to the artefact itself. Indeed, in the preface it points us to a permanent (sic) website (http://www.soundandmusiccomputing.org/) that is now a blog. I had to search again for the document: it was out there, but not where I was expecting. The roadmap is a good example of how our celebration of the future can distract us from understanding the past. But perhaps it is true that, for technology and perhaps for music, the spirit of the past (a critical imprint at best) is all that is required. This imprint transfers through technology and we can see development from instance to instance. However, it may be very difficult to retrace our steps once a quantum leap has been made.

For many composers, concerned if only fleetingly with history and their place in it, this residue of influence is perhaps as far as they will get. They (and I) might well rely upon the last few remaining institutions and consortia to document and store something for posterity. And it is to France that most electroacoustic (especially acousmatic) composers still turn. IRCAM (the MUSTICA project already mentioned), IMEB (with a repository at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) and the GRM’s involvement in the CASPAR project (Esposito and Geslin, 2008). But even here, the archives are content rich, but critical only in that the composer has control over how they present additional, contextual material. In fact for one cited musical work (Hans Tutschku’s Distance Liquide) the preservation of all component files goes about as far as one can in this medium (short of inserting a video recorder between the output of the computer and the monitor). One of the main problems with acousmatic composition is that many composers tend to start work by recording sounds. These sounds are not reducible to anything that can be coded beyond the one and zeros of the file and whilst only small snippets of these sound recordings may be used, the choices made to edit these sounds were influenced by listening to the whole. Acousmatic composers also tend to work with multiple tools.

However, with works such as Trevor Wishart’s Imago (Wishart, 2002) which takes one sound sample as its starting point and uses the text based Soundloom software (Wishart, 2009) which brings multiple programs together in one environment to transform and mix, it might be possible to archive a more complete and efficient document than saving multiple pro-tools mixes. Csound compositions using only synthesis have a portability, neutrality and have a significant amount of content description built into the code. Kevin Dahan’s Sketcher environment
considered this by relating material and process as linked objects. More recently, the cross platform flexibility and object oriented approach of software such as Blue (Yi, 2008) has made reconsidering the amalgamation of sound, process and compositional thought within fewer environments more feasible (certainly for non-programmers like myself). In Blue, it is possible to nest and re-scale compositional structures. With programmable graphic front ends and python scripting it becomes possible to allow the composer to work creatively at a higher level, eventually identifying learned procedural responses to sounds and perhaps offering them to the computer to work through on his behalf. The idea of the electroacoustic composition wizard remains quite far fetched. However, I once tried to organise my sounds based on descriptive adjectives and treat them using the exact opposite (short make long through reverberation, timestretching or removal of silence, long make short by cutting in silence, bright make dark through filtering, dark make bright through spectral expansion etc.). The more one codifies or structures the trial and error in electroacoustic music the more possible it will become to store a comprehensive descriptor of the complete work. In the meantime, it is the responsibility of the composer to literally lay bare the facts about their work - or not to do so. Quite often, the practicalities of composition get in the way of doing this.

But here again, the GRM have been successful in finding a balance between online resource and critical commentary for a number of key composers of acousmatic music. The Portraits polychromes (Ina-GRM, 2008) present commentaries (commentaires), interviews (entretien) and analyses. Online, one finds aural documents that immediately give the researcher more direct contact with the composer in question including interactive analyses. Stemming from an initial venture on CDROM entitled la musique électroacoustique (Ina-GRM, 2000) the portraits have developed into precisely the right resource for students, researchers and interactive listeners. Évelyne Gayou in Organised Sound presents a thorough introduction of the Portraits and the Acousmographe software, and talks about the importance of the visual image in going some way to bridging the gap between poetic and aesthetic and helping us develop a ‘code of writing about electroacoustic music’ (Gayou, 2006). From a complimentary artistic point of view, the Sonopsy (Yterce, 2008) on Dhomont, Lejeune and Ferrari are documents that I will continue to turn to as I reinforce my personal critical history. Equally inventive is Katharine Norman’s book Sounding Art: Eight Literary Excursions through Electronic Music (Norman, 2004).

It would be foolish to assume that in 100 years our reflection back to the present will be similar to the 2008 retrospective awarded Olivier Messiaen at the centenary of his birth. Critical history, it appears can begin and indeed track a composer through and beyond their lifetime. And you do not have to have been around for 100 years to enter the critical in history. I read with interest that the publishing house Ashgate are to publish a new book entitled Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Attinello et al., 2009). Perhaps, only when something is on the verge of extinction do we try to preserve the remains.
As I argue for a more people-focused history, with accessible and interpretable content, might we ask whether the genre of electroacoustic music is too small and too specialised to warrant inclusion into mainstream archival methods? Previous attempts at preservation and restoration have included the IDEAMA archive (Goebel et al., 1990) which is notable for the 138 works the selection committee wanted to include but could not locate, and the MUSTICA Project (Bachimont and Blanchette, 2004), subsumed within InterPARES (http://www.interpares.org/), a highly complex and interesting body which has drawn up code standards and instruction sets for organizations wishing to archive data. The most recent incarnation of these projects appears to be the CASPAR preservation community (Cultural, Artistic and Scientific knowledge for Preservation, Access and Retrieval) (Esposito and Geslin, 2008; Ng et al., 2008). CASPAR’s view of MUSTICA does not inspire optimism save for acknowledging the need not to involve the composer in the recreation of the music. CASPAR’s view of MUSTICA does not seem to include the fixed-media work and I quote from their state of the art document, ‘The purpose of a contemporary musical work is seldom to transmit a given audio content to the listener’, (Caspar, 2007). MUSTICA online delivers some well organised information. I asked myself whether it would be possible to migrate Georges Benjamin’s work Antara, (2003) to pure data. On page 15 of the Ircam performance handbook I am instructed to ‘Copy the CD-ROM to the hard-drive of the OS9 Macintosh’. At which point, despite the fact that I find this piece particularly fascinating, I give up. I’m afraid that there is an easy solution: put the contents of the CD-ROM online and allow a community of interested parties free reign to transcribe (and, where appropriate, alter) the data to current operating systems and software architectures. I question whether the role of this editor would not be dissimilar to that of someone editing Bach.

An Open Archival Information System (OAIS) suggests responsibility on the part of the producer, manager and consumer when working with an archive of materials (2002). In an age where we have access to more information more quickly than ever before, it remains interesting to note that composers that accept a sanctioned history often end up in that sanctioned history. Remembering back to Professors Hill and Simeone searching for physical documents in the Messiaen archive or Felix Meyer’s documentation to the Sacher Foundation’s Varèse exhibition (Meyer, 2006), I feel somewhat bereft of the physicality of history when accessing countless online documents or email archives that give me no more than the briefest of overviews or most libellous of anecdotes. I wonder whether the i-phone generation will even miss the joy of the hunt that is at the heart of musicology. Current critical history in electroacoustic music brings critique and popular misconceptions to the fore and judges them against sanctioned understanding. Complementary information such as analysis, theory, perception and personality naturally create additional meanings. However, it is rare that all the facts are brought into view and it is this complacency with which many view history that leads to misunderstanding. But how can it be otherwise? On the one hand, the
internet is flooded with misinformation and disinformation. Perhaps, one could argue a memetic case for proliferation of data based on ‘survival of the fittest’, lossless compressed data that virally migrates through the internet. It is probably the case that those that see the futility of a history of everything are not that worried if their music lives beyond their lifetimes.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, one final, simple question: In 2010 what do we need to create robust archives that encourage musicians to think about history critically? The answer, not surprisingly is also simple: Well resourced, committed institutions. However, no matter how transparent they are, the idea of the institution is under public and political scrutiny. As a teacher in an academic institution I definitely feel I have both a responsibility to show the breadth and independent spirit of the genre and at the same time, compare music that shows a strong understanding of tradition (a recognition of a sanctioned history formed primarily out of institutions in the case of electroacoustic music) with works that do not. And I am not saying any one particular genre or mode of composition or performance is better than another, merely that a solid understanding of our recent history is a good starting point from which to change it. Again, looking at the OAIS reference model, institutional support is a necessity.

Critical history needs to look at its people, preserve what product it can and allow others to adapt to it by changing it. This may mean considering how performing materials can become more flexible and more neutrally coded - Electroacoustic music is going in this direction anyway. It may also mean reassessing the enormous value of concerts and written documentation printed on paper, and doing more here. The days of preservation as cookie jar are over.

**References**


