

# Book review

**Thomas Gardner, Salomé Voegelin (eds.), *Colloquium: Sound Art – Music*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2016. ISBN: 978178279 895 8 doi:10.1017/S1355771817000413**

Sound art as a category has no clear definition, and there are several opinions about what the essential characteristics of sound art are. Is the key feature combinations of sounds that through their referential character provoke new associations and interpretations, or is sound art essentially concerned about space and the deliberate construction of spaces – and consequently about the more ‘objective’ aspects of psychoacoustics and human perception – or is sound art best characterised as experiments in music as an expanded field, in the tradition of, for example, Cage, Lucier and de Monte Young? These different understandings bring different theories to bear in the exchanges about singular works and which traditions they can best be placed in, and often fall between existing discourses in music and the visual arts. It is this lack of correspondence and coherence in the discourses that initially triggered the editors of this book to gather the colloquium that the book is based on.

The book is composed by provocations, responses and discussions from the colloquium with the same title *Sound Art – Music*, hosted by the editors in 2012 at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts. The agenda of the colloquium was to contribute to the current debate about the relationship between sound art and music, and more specifically to investigate the possibility of arriving at a common framework for discussion and criticism – ‘on whether and how sound art and music meet in practice, in discourse and in listening’ (p. 3). Colloquium participants were Simon Emmerson, Allen S. Weiss, Cathy Lane, Volkmar Klien, Leigh Landy, Claudia Molitor, Aura Satz, Angus Carlyle, Nye Parry, John Wynne, Peter Cusack, John Drever, Robert Worby, Michael Young, Anna Gritz, David Toop, Kathy Hinde, Seth Ayyez, Stephan Preston, Ed Baxter, Justin Yang, Helen Frosti, Max Estley, Salomé Voegelin and Thomas Gardner, and they have all contributed to this book. Their presentations and responses have been divided into three sessions, each consisting of two provocations and two responses, with discussions following each contribution. The book closes with an essay by Kate Lacey. Interested readers are also referred to the open

call issue of *Organised Sound* (20.2) that the editors produced in 2015.

A detailed description of all the colloquium discussions that have been included in the book will lead too far, so the following will be a rather summary description of the sessions and a few key arguments in the provocations and responses.

In the first session, ‘Tradition, Codification and Materiality’, Allan S. Weiss discusses how codified sounds that engage beyond mere recognition and responses to the aesthetics are challenged and transformed by modern soundscapes. He exemplifies with the Japanese *suikinkutsu*, a type of water zither cave that originally served to tune the mind for tea ceremonies. As these resonant caves have become amplified to stand against sound pollution, they have been turned into instruments, and the sense of magic has vanished.

Salomé Voegelin puts forward the idea of a continuum of sound, hoping to reconnect the practices of music and sound art, and to have them be discussed ‘within one critical language’ (p. 7). She finds that the focus on the visual elements in much sound art limits the listening strategies, and that the exchanges that follow could be strengthened by including vocabulary and terminology from music discourse. She proposes that changing the narratives about sound art will expand and radicalise the narratives also for the classic music paradigm, by activating contextual attention on a broader scale than what is currently most often the case.

In the ensuing discussion, it was suggested that music discourse often mirrors a desire to legitimise traditions, and that this presents an obstacle for including wider and more contextual perspectives. Another point that was brought forward is that music traditionally is scored and strongly codified, and that ‘listening to music as sound would simply be to *not* hear the music’ (p. 20). Clearly, musical concepts and their representations are different things. As a third element in the meaning-making process, the listening environment was brought forward, at the same level of importance as content and listening strategy, and in the following discussion, the role of institutionalisation was thoroughly debated.

In his response, Nye Parry elaborates further on the significance and role of the notated score, and how the term ‘music’ seems to be understood in much the same way by all practitioners (despite the lack of a clear definition), while the term ‘sound art’ escapes this type

of entrenched assumptions. David Toop's response develops along anecdotal lines, where he explains how his interest in crossing aesthetic boundaries has developed, and led him to more encompassing types of attention.

The second session, 'Commodification, Rhythms and Experience', is introduced by provocations from Volkmar Klien and Cathy Lane. Klien laments the existing boundaries for music, while at the same time articulating the need for 'artistic practice in music and sound to remain open-ended' (p. 71). He points out that the social aspects of sonic creation necessarily transgress boundaries, and argues that there is 'no need for a clear delineation between music and sound art' (p. 76). He does, however, not see music and sound art as identical, and maintains that while music 'increases group cohesion' (p. 73), it 'has rather limited means of incorporating reflection' (p. 75). Klein's point is dualistic, observing the differences between sound art and music, while arguing for practices that both encompass and transgress the differences.

Lane thinks of music and sound art as co-existing in a continuum, and believes that the fracture between music and sound art stems from intellectual and theoretical categorisation processes. Her scepticism to strict categorisation has its base in practice, and she would like to see more of an open understanding of works in actual artistic expressions rather than the limitation of understanding that follows from theoretical frameworks that focus on differences rather than the shared characteristics of experience.

A key point in the following discussion was the relationship between Dionysian (emotional) and Apollonian (logical, intellectual) perception, where Klien put forth the hypotheses that music is Dionysian in the sense that it grabs hold of the listener, and stops him or her from thinking. This type of dualism between emotion and intellect can have extreme effects; for example, in crowd behaviour. To several participants, the division between emotion and logic seemed a type of simplification, and criticism of this notion of 'romantic emotionality' was voiced.

In Leigh Landy's response, he brings the discussion of *continuum/rupture* further, by suggesting the addition of a new axis of *experience/structure*. With this addition, viewers and listeners are brought into the equation, and this new axis structures the inclusion of intellectual and emotional involvement in the discussions in a way that relates well to the organisers' intention of developing a basis for a common language for critique and discussion. The argument for bringing the axis of experience/structure into the discussion is underpinned by Aura Satz's responses on perception, where she discusses the contradictory experience of at the same time being 'sucked in and spewed out of an immersive experience' (p. 110). None of these experiences have anything to do with continuum

or rupture. Both responses bring attention to how psychological and social preconditions for understanding and appreciating art frame the intellectual and emotional aspects of art experience – for 'the heart and the brain' and how the reception of sonic arts depends on both.

Third, and last, is the session 'Participation, Listening and Place', introduced with provocations from Simon Emmerson and Thomas Gardner. Emmerson elaborates on the significance of ritual in the different arenas for sonic arts, and this is the main focus of his contribution. Rituals stem from both work types and social arenas, and Emmerson argues that the (musical) elite interest is to hold back the reinventions that sound art represents, if I understand him correctly. Emmerson argues for constructing new arenas – sound houses – thus echoing Francis Bacon's well-known visions of the future from 'Sylva Sylvarum'.

Thomas Garner, a co-organiser of the colloquium, distinguishes between different listening modes, and describes their origin in different work types. To him, the social listening where meaning is developed in reciprocal manner is key to musical experience, while 'grounded mimesis' (p. 135) does not afford the same type of interaction, dealing directly with a sounding environment, artistic or natural. It is in the combination of reciprocal and grounded listening he believes that richer relationship(s) can be conceived.

These two provocations triggered a lively discussion about listening strategies, and how listeners often phase in and out of concentration. Claudia Molitor argued that composers' intentions often are for specific listening, while sound artists more often 'give listening opportunities to the audience' (p. 146). Another point of view was brought forward by Aura Satz; that perhaps audiences are not patient enough in their listening. This points back to the modes of willed listening, which are strongly influenced by categorisation. In the rapidly developing exchange that followed, the key point that listening is shaped by pre-categorisation was discussed, tying the exchange back to the axis of *continuum/rupture* and *structure/experience*.

*Colloquium: Sound Art – Music* is a worthwhile read because it captures much of the current discussion about sound art. The transcriptions of the discussions show the ebb and flow of the exchanges, and since the panel of participants encompasses leading academics in the field, the perspective from the music side is well represented. However, the book does not delve much into discussions that emerge from architecture, the visual arts, electronic, kinetic or media art, and without perspectives from these genres, the possibility of attaining a common vocabulary might be reduced.

Nonetheless, the book helps along Voegelin's and Gardner's intention of developing a common analytical framework and critical language, perhaps most significantly with the suggestion of bringing in new axis

of understanding of what is common, in addition to the traditional focus on the obvious differences that follow from categorisation and arena. Transgressions are based on common ground, and perhaps there's another key to this common ground buried in the types of

conceptual play that were at the base of the early sonic transgressions.

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