
EDITORIAL

2011 is Denis Smalley's 65th birthday year, an occasion which prompted Katharine Norman's initial suggestion of an issue of *Organised Sound* exploring the influence of his music and ideas. In the field of acousmatic music, and increasingly in live electro-acoustic music, few can claim to rival the influence of either Smalley's music or his theoretical writing. In fact, for this very reason it might appear to some that an issue of the journal devoted to ideas arising from Smalley's work is almost redundant (birthday celebrations aside): his work is already so well known, and so regularly and widely cited; his development of the theoretical approach known as 'spectromorphology' is, of course, of near universal importance to the study of acousmatic music. Robert Normandeau's recent survey turned up 52 articles containing direct or indirect references to the term, the overwhelming majority of which have appeared in this very journal (Normandeau 2010: 87–8). What purpose, then, might a Smalley-centric issue of the journal serve?

One response is to observe that while Denis Smalley's work is very often cited, it is less often developed directly. The citations are often passing in nature rather than substantial, acknowledging a real debt to a body of work which no scholar of acousmatic music can afford to ignore, but not necessarily taking forward Smalley's concepts or ideas in a substantive way. Denis Smalley himself has acknowledged that there are many fruitful avenues yet to be explored in the development of what has become known as 'spectromorphology' (Smalley 2010: 97–100), and this clearly will require the efforts of a good number of properly engaged thinkers and writers. An important aim of this issue was therefore to encourage and publicise original work which builds on and extends Denis Smalley's own work in new and substantive ways, and sometimes in completely new directions – and I trust we have achieved just that.

Another important aim is the pinning down and clarifying of ideas and language. Many of Smalley's carefully cultivated terms, definitions and concepts have now escaped into the wild and taken on lives of their own, independent of the theoretical framework in which they were first formulated, and certainly well beyond the control of their author. We have witnessed the emergence of a sort of viral vocabulary,

which seems to experience the same sort of natural mutation as that characteristic of everyday language. As Smalley himself has recently lamented, 'The trouble is that irresponsible misreadings are perpetuated in the literature' (Smalley 2010: 93–4). It is not just in the literature that the problem is evident, however. The verbal culture of acousmatic music, especially that shared between teachers and students, displays deeply embedded misunderstandings (or perhaps more charitably, 'adaptations') of Smalley's ideas. The term 'gesture', for example, is widely and frequently used, though it is often not clear what is really meant. Are we really talking about 'gesture' in the sense of implied human/physical causality, or in the more often encountered colloquial sense of 'shape', 'phrase', or even sometimes just 'event'? All this seems to me sufficient reason to try to bring together in one place some of the current thinking arising from Smalley's work, in an effort to try to consolidate and clarify, as well as to develop and expand. On the other hand, of course, we must never lose sight of the fact that the conversation is enriched immeasurably when scholars develop concepts in new, surprising and hardly anticipated directions, as several of the contributions to this issue illustrate most vividly.

A third motivation for this issue is that the musicology of acousmatic music, and especially that which is of real practical use to composers and listeners, is somewhat under-developed compared to other forms of contemporary music. There is a real need for work which develops the theoretical basis of acousmatic music while at the same time engaging with the reality of the music as a living, breathing art form. Much of what this issue contains highlights that aspect of Smalley's theoretical writings that I personally appreciate above all – that Denis Smalley is an active *composer* of real significance, and that his theorising thus both arises out of and informs compositional practice and listening experience.

This is as it should be, of course, since the nature and substance of acousmatic music is only properly appreciable, and indeed only really makes sense, in the context of actual musical experience. (Yes, we might claim the same for other kinds of music, although in acousmatic music there is no equivalent of the imagined experience it is possible to derive

from reading a conventionally notated score.) Its ability to make an immediate impression on listeners, even – or perhaps especially – on those who are unfamiliar with the genre, is one of the unique strengths of acousmatic music. There is something inexplicably compelling in its conjuring of unknown yet aurally engaging sound-worlds, and its evocation of a transcendent physicality; and this is especially the case in really good concert performances (of which there are far too few, admittedly) which can leave both novices and seasoned campaigners deeply affected. Yet despite its evident immediacy as an experience, there is something about acousmatic music which seems unusually resistant to intellectual appreciation. That the term ‘acousmatic’ evokes the shadowy figure of Pythagoras – at once mathematician, musician and mystic (and, in all probability, myth) – seems particularly apt: while the music that comes to us from beyond the Pythagorean veil often suggests (at its best) a fabulous logic and super-human coherence that other musical forms can only hint at, it nevertheless remains somehow intangible, intellectually transcendent and frustratingly elusive to the analyst, as if the term ‘spectromorphology’ might refer as much to the morphology of spectres as to spectra.

It is one of Denis Smalley’s great achievements that he has led efforts to address this relative lack of serious acousmatic musicological work written in English. The situation is more positive for the Francophone world, of course, which has for decades had access to a rich tradition of acousmatic musicology arising directly from the work of Pierre Schaeffer, but Smalley has done much to provide English-speaking scholars with some connection to this tradition. In adopting what seems, in many ways, to be a typological approach (though it is much more than that) Smalley’s spectromorphology clearly builds on Schaeffer’s work – as Smalley himself readily acknowledged in his 1986 article (Smalley 1986: 61, endnote 2). Yet, for me, there is an important distinction between the two approaches, and yet again this relates to the role and importance of creative practice. As a composer, Denis Smalley’s work exerts considerable and continuing influence on the development of acousmatic art *as practised*; in contrast Schaeffer, despite his unchallengeable status as pioneer, or even ‘inventor’ of acousmatic art, is primarily a theoretician, whose influence is conceptual rather than ‘practice-led’. For me, one consequence of this distinction is that, unlike Schaeffer’s now monolithic theoretical framework, Smalley’s thinking on spectromorphology seems to be continuously developing and evolving, much as his musical language, style and preoccupations have developed, with the published articles offering snapshots of that development at particular stages, much

as the musical works perhaps offer snapshots of an artistic development. There almost seems to be a metaphorical (or possibly even real) parallel between Smalley’s habit of revisiting and reworking sound materials from earlier pieces, and his refining and reworking of concepts and definitions in his writings: new insights, as well as new subtleties and refinements, can emerge in both cases. While Schaeffer’s approach seems to me decidedly absolutist in nature – a quest to formulate an all-embracing ‘theory of everything’ for sound art – Smalley’s approach is intimately linked with, and draws its energy and ideas from, his ongoing, living and evolving compositional activity.

The importance of Smalley’s work is perhaps evidenced most effectively in the widespread use of some of the terminology that he has coined in his efforts to describe the indescribable. Trying to put music into words is a perilous business at the best of times, and never more so than with acousmatic music. The perceptual fragility of its material and the often fluid, unstable forms it adopts seem to render it especially susceptible to suffering violence when handled with the primitive stone tools of mere human language. One of Denis Smalley’s great contributions to the discussion is in his gift for finding particularly precise and nuanced terms with which to approach acousmatic music (and, incidentally, posing considerable challenges to translators of his writings into other languages). This effort has not been without its critics, however, perhaps because, even with Smalley’s refined descriptive language, it is impossible to avoid the inevitable frustration facing any attempt to put the non-verbal into words: that the act of description draws attention to the semiological gap between signifier and signified, and that the more complex and precise the words are, the greater the awareness of that gap becomes. Somehow, in the act of describing sounds, we become ever more acutely aware of the obvious truth that sounds are not words, and music is not language.

Manuella Blackburn’s article goes some way towards filling that gap by appealing to graphical illustration as a kind of intermediary between Smalley’s language and sonic reality. Pictorial representations of Smalley’s terminology serve not just to illustrate the terms, but to anchor them more closely to their actual sonic manifestations. The purpose of this is not descriptive, however, but creative. Blackburn’s previous work introduced the striking notion that the conventional directionality of spectromorphological thinking (that is, *from* the musical artefact *towards* a description and analytical understanding of it) might be reversed, so that it becomes a means of formulating compositional strategy. This, she points out, is entirely consistent with Smalley’s own view that while spectromorphology is certainly

not a compositional theory, it can nevertheless inform and influence compositional practice (Smalley 1997: 107). In her new article Blackburn extends this idea, using pictorial representation not only as a means of illustration and visualisation, but also as a source of inspiration as part of the compositional process, for both creative and pedagogic purposes.

Although much has been written on the topic of spectromorphology, it was a motivating factor behind this issue of the Journal that there is much work still to do, and so many directions in which further work might lead. Smalley himself has declared that he wishes to develop his thinking on (among other things) spectral space (or 'spatiality') and texture, particularly spectral and spatial texture (Smalley 2010), and Erik Nyström's article deals with precisely these topics, bringing them into close juxtaposition, and developing a vocabulary and typology which fits very neatly alongside Smalley's own. Like Blackburn, Nyström appeals to the visual world to help achieve this, and in doing so explores a fascinating interdisciplinary connection. He takes up and develops the notion that 'textons' – a concept first developed to explain the perception and cognition of visual textures – might have an auditory equivalent, and uses this to develop ideas about spatial textures and – crucially – their propagation. This is, incidentally, perhaps another example of the close relationship between spectromorphological theory and compositional practice, since tools which are able to create such multi-faceted, granulated textures are now so commonplace and so widely used.

If Nyström's thinking is very much in line with the trajectory of Smalley's own current thinking, Michael Pedersen's article is an example of how Smalley's work can be extended in quite different and unexpected directions. Taking up the idea of 'gestural surrogacy', he suggests what initially appears a modest modification of Smalley's original categorisation of gesture, but is actually a quite radical one. He extends Smalley's notion of 'gesture' to include non-human phenomena, and also separates out what he terms 'surrogacy of the source' (the sound-producing object or objects) and 'surrogacy of the cause' (the human or other actions or energies which elicit the sound production). This is a significant shift in Smalley's original idea of gestural surrogacy, which leads to some profound questions about the nature of surrogacy in particular instances, such as the playback of a recording which contains audible reproduction artefacts. Pedersen then uses this new definition of surrogacy to probe an area which merits only a single sentence in Smalley's 1997 article, that of 'primal' or pre-sounding gesture – what Smalley has elsewhere called 'level zero' (Smalley 2010). Pedersen's investigation of primal gestural surrogacy takes a surprising leap into interdisciplinary waters,

drawing on Georges Bataille's notions of 'base materialism' and anthropological ideas on taboo, uncleanness and the 'transgression' of categorical boundaries. This results in the postulation of a new order of sound surrogacy – 'transgressive' – and a discussion of its possible implications.

Dante Tanzi's article perhaps comes closest to a critique and appreciation of Smalley's spectromorphological and related work, placing Smalley in context with a wide range of composers (of acoustic as well as electroacoustic music) and theoreticians. He pays particular attention to the role that Smalley's ideas (and, by implication, his music) have played in helping to bridge the gulf between composer and listener, through the use of extra-musical models (or, in Smalley's terms, intrinsic–extrinsic links). In doing so, Tanzi uncovers both connections and discontinuities between Schaeffer and Smalley which shed light on the supposed ideological heritage of spectromorphology.

David Hirst contributes the issue's only focused analytical study of Denis Smalley's music, which he undertakes in order to explore the relationship between the development of Smalley's musical practice and that of his theoretical thinking. He postulates that the development of Smalley's ideas between his 1997 and 2007 articles is mirrored in a parallel development of musical practice between *Wind Chimes* (1987) and *Base Metals* (2000). Of particular importance in this regard is Smalley's declared and increasing interest in formulating coherent ideas about space, and the evident preoccupation with the exploration of space (especially 'spectral space') in *Base Metals* and other later works.

James O'Callaghan deals with the presence of referential elements in acousmatic contexts, and explores the phenomenon in Smalley's music. While to many Smalley might be considered the archetypal 'acousmatic' composer, ideologically wedded to the Schaefferian notion of 'reduced listening', O'Callaghan points out that a good deal of his music contains significant and deliberate use of referential sound material, and this leads to a discussion of the surprisingly controversial topic of what we actually mean by the term 'acousmatic'. He discusses ideological and even dogmatic approaches to acousmatic composing and listening, identifying these as the source of some of the controversy, and then attempts to transcend these ideological boundaries by exposing a rich network of connections between the 'abstract' and 'mimetic'. He explores the relationship between spectromorphology and soundscape theory, relating the discussion to Denis Smalley's musical development over a considerable period, from *Pentes* (1974) to *Empty Vessels* (1997).

Aki Pasoulas' subject is the perception of time. Referring to works by a wide range of composers he

discusses the way in which extra-musical associations have an impact on time perception through the ‘meanings’ and contexts which they evoke. He deals with ‘time’ in both a material sense (the issue of pacing within a work, for example) as well as a more metaphorical sense (such as the evocation of perpetuity). He also discusses what he considers a more ‘spectromorphological’ situation in which such associations are absent or suppressed, as well as the possible interaction of abstract and referential sound materials on the perception of time within a work.

Miroslav Spasov’s article was initially included as an ‘off-topic’ contribution, though in fact it raises some fascinating questions with respect to both Smalley’s notion of ‘gestural surrogacy’ and Michael Pedersen’s development of it. Spasov’s system allows ‘gesture’ (in the sense of physical movement) to be captured and used as the basis for sound generation and control. This is aimed, at least in part, at capturing so-called ‘cognitive archetypes’, basic and deep-seated mental forms which the performer/composer may express through unintentional hand gestures (for example). The purpose of the system is to enable performers and composers to generate sound material in an improvised and intuitive way. Such a system creates the unusual situation in which sounds have a direct and very physical human gestural cause (and in which, presumably, the nature of that gesture – its energy, for example – is sonically discernible) and yet no direct contact between the human action and any sounding body – nor, in fact, with any physical controller at all. It is fascinating to consider

how one might interpret the nature of the gestural surrogacy implied in such a situation.

Denis Smalley has recently retired from his full-time academic position, but his career, of course, continues. With the delicious irony that many academics will recognise, he will no doubt now be giving more time both to composition and to the further development of his theoretical ideas. In discussing this issue with the editor, we therefore came to the conclusion that, as with all issues of *Organised Sound*, this is but a marker, albeit it an important one, with regard to Denis Smalley’s achievements to date. These submissions represent a few of the steps currently being taken to develop his ideas further, and this journal intends keenly to follow this path and all associated paths in future years.

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