



## Editorial: Redefinition within the Changing Acoustic Environment

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*Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 3. (1993), pp. 1-2.

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*Leonardo Music Journal* is currently published by The MIT Press.

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## EDITORIAL

# REDEFINITION WITHIN THE CHANGING ACOUSTIC ENVIRONMENT

**A**s we near the end of the millennium it seems that many of our commonly understood definitions and accompanying boundaries are losing their clarity. As readers of *Leonardo Music Journal*, we are particularly interested in the term *music*, a term that, we might remind ourselves, is based in European culture and European language structures, where music is separate from other disciplines of the arts and from day-to-day activity.

The range of activity having some claim to being called music has expanded continually, but especially during the past 50 years. This is due in part to the availability of new technologies that have been applied in music, but it is also due to interrelated factors such as changes in the general culture and the work of John Cage and other composers and writers.

The boundaries of music are expanding to such a degree that we sometimes use terms such as *sound art* when describing work not intended for stage performance to indicate that we intend wider connotations than the term *music* implies. Do we need a new term to describe what we are talking about?

Many of the activities that most people now accept as “musical” go beyond the traditional meanings of the term. The radio is left on as background sound, keeping us company in our cars and kitchens with comfortable nostalgia and (rare) exotica. Television and movie soundtracks tell us, using their nonverbal language: pay attention, something pleasant/scary is about to happen on-screen. Music is used as a way of defining territory and community, as on a crowded beach where a boom box is placed on every blanket, broadcasting preferences from opera to rap. Music played on private headphones is used as a means of avoiding the local soundscape and of isolating the listener from external influence. Music is used as a crowd-control technique when types of music known to be repellent to certain populations (teenagers, for example) are played in public parks and shopping malls. Shopping establishments use music-based, purchase-stimulating Muzak. These are all dependent on technology but are in most cases independent of content, primarily affecting our methods of “use” and expanding only marginally on the historically accepted definition of music. Because these new uses rely on the unquestioning transfer of familiar terminology into new media, they are easily understood and accepted.

When people experiment with tape recorders, synthesizers, radios, etc., and call the results music, they are further stretching the definition of music. This category of music often contradicts the general, popular and historical understanding of the term *music*. Creating this music can involve knowledge of physics, mathematics, acoustics, electronics, computer science and many other disciplines, in addition to—and in some cases, instead of—a “musical” background. This music actually changes the parameters operative in music and alters definitions of familiar terms, thereby making the general comprehension and acceptance of its results more difficult.

As people interested in current thinking about technology in the arts and in new forms of music/sound art, we wonder how we fit into the larger cultural matrix. Most of us listen to radio, watch television, participate in and are influenced to some extent by “popular culture.” And the experimental musical activity that interests us is also part of the wider popular culture: its influence is pervasive, even though the original music itself is usually neglected and marginalized. Most of us would like this

music to become a recognized part of the larger culture—we would like to see it played on radios and in films and television shows.

Perhaps we would like it to lead the larger culture into more adventurous musical territory, as the term *avant garde* implies. The problem with this seems to be a lack of followers. Although the influence is felt, the underlying questioning that is inherent in the music we find interesting has been ignored, the ideas becoming exotica for the enlivening of old and formulated patterns. Perhaps the music can better reach listeners if an effort is made to accommodate the accepted terms and understandings of the larger culture.

It seems that we sometimes lose our footing when we try to work within the generally understood, historical meanings of terms like *music*. The meanings of such terms are based on past experience. We are unable, even if we were inclined, to think through the details of everything we encounter, beginning with the fundamentals. We must rely on preconceived understandings and, because they are still able to convey some level of understanding, we sometimes adapt the meanings of old words to include new variations.

Our preconceptions can help us to understand our experiences, but this can become problematic when preconceptions rely on models that “work,” models based on the way things used to be—when most people had a common understanding of what music was, when music was more clearly and narrowly defined. It seems we are not so sure anymore of the size or shape of the music realm. Yet our attraction to old habits of perception, based on our familiar preconceptions, remains strong. The contributors to *Leonardo Music Journal*, in articulating the intentions of their work in such detail, help us to perceive our experience of *sound art/music* in ways that go beyond the familiar and introduce alternative understandings of music and composition.

Their endeavors are based on new models, unendorsed by the passage of time or by the official sanction of the music world. They lead us to rethink our accepted patterns and in so doing have a special role in redefining our terms of reference within our changing acoustic environment. Why are we so interested in expanding our ideas of what music can be? This is a very large question. The value of continual re-examination of cultural assumptions lies at the root of the scientific method(s) and all philosophical inquiry, a large-scale human endeavor, to say the least—and one in which most of us would like to participate in whatever ways possible. We cannot entirely free ourselves from cultural assumptions, of course, and I would have to include here the assumption that these preconceptions should be questioned. Suffice it to say: in reading about new music we participate in its redefinition.

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