Sound Ideologies?

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This paper is a preliminary exploration of the distinction (real or created) between sound art and contemporary music practice in the Australian context. As a result of this examination one can identify a range of artistic and political issues which, I will suggest, exert a real influence on contemporary sound/music practice. I will take a 'top to bottom' approach; first considering the role of institutions and ideology, then attempting to identify differences between composers and sound artists.

Institutions, Ideology, Music and Sound Art

If one starts from the point of view that all music is sound and, as John Cage pointed out, all sound can be music, it follows that music shares the same attributes as sound: timbre, pitch, duration and spatial location. 'Pitch' is merely a by-product of a sound's timbral (harmonic or spectral) makeup in that the latter determines whether a fundamental frequency can be distinguished. Indeed, from the point of view of psychoacoustics, timbre is perhaps the most important attribute in that it carries the most meaning. It provides us with a wealth of information regarding the source - its physical properties, construction materials, size, location and, as a sign, carries with it a large cluster of powerful and quite specific associations or referents.

In the discipline of music as defined by 'traditional' western music theory and analysis, however, there has been scant critical attention given to the function of timbre (or space) within a musical work. Rather, there exists a large body of work which confines itself to discussions of music in terms of its pitch (and to a lesser extent its rhythmic/durational) syntax. The explanation for this situation is outside the scope of this paper, however I would suggest that the lineage of widely accepted formalistic analytical models, such as Schenkerian Analysis and Set Theory (both of which are somewhat qualitative) and Serial Analysis (which is empirical only when the composer employs 'strict' serial techniques), together with some of the principal tenets of high modernism in music have created a particular hegemonic discourse.

This, it could be argued, has the effect of removing discussions from a commonly understood language of sound, to a level where entry into the discussions is limited to those practitioners and scholars trained in the western notational system. It also has the effect of excluding artists whose work uses sound (and indeed space) as the principal organisational/improvisational framework from being discussed. As the discipline of musicology is dominated by music theory and analysis, that is, 'content analysis' according to institutionally accepted musical paradigms, the result is that only a narrow subset of practitioners are represented in the substantial body of literature which surrounds contemporary music practice. If one considers the dominance of music theory and analysis in musicological literature and the close relationship the former has had with a certain body of western art music in the twentieth century, it becomes apparent that the main criterion for a work's inclusion in this discourse (and its subsequent potential for canonisation) is its academic and institutional use-value in relation to currently accepted analytical and discursive models.

It is this value which can be seen to take precedence over any other value the work may have. Furthermore, it goes without saying that 'theory' or

'analysis' in mainstream musicology, unlike most other disciplines in the arts or humanities, is widely understood to mean syntactic or formalistic analysis as opposed to, say, 'critical theory' or 'textual analysis' which tend to situate or theorise an art work within a society or field of cultural production, attempting to account for how the work may function, seeing the artist/composer as an agent within a wider socio-economic or political system. Considered in this light, music theory and analysis and, by extension, 'traditional' musicology could be seen to be somewhat ahistorical, viewing a highly selective set of cultural products as autonomous entities and, most importantly, as being representative components of a linear evolution of western musical languages.

What this leads to is the creation and perpetuation of an hegemonic discourse which, it could be argued, through its very attempt to achieve an empirical specificity, fails to account for and reflect the reality and diversity of contemporary music and sound practices. One could argue that it is not within the realm of traditional musicology to take 'sound works' into account, leaving them instead to be discussed elsewhere. If one accepts this line of thought however, it is possible that traditional musicology, in its apparent failure to acknowledge or be referenced to a material reality, could actually be seen to function as an ideology, which not only has a negative effect on music criticism, but by extension exerts a very tangible influence on the practice of music itself. To be precise about what is meant by the term 'ideology', a succinct definition is provided by Michael Bristol (1990:8) who, in his study of the institutional apparatus of Shakespeare in America, states that

"[ideology] differs both from knowledge and from deliberate or malicious deception. Ideology is false consciousness or distorted communication that nevertheless has the functional equivalence of truth"

Not only does music theory and analysis (and by extension musicology) reiterate a number of permutations of the same ideology, I would suggest that by virtue of its existence, it generates a particular limited discourse, defining a kind of self-reflexive system, the mirror of which consists of the very boundary of the ideology itself. This situation would explain why a traditional approach to musicology excludes, and is unable to account for, a great deal of music created by diverse practitioners. Furthermore, this limited discourse can be seen to permeate and exert a regulating force upon practice.

To identify the core assumptions upon which of the aforementioned ideology is based, one only needs to survey the mainstream literature on contemporary western art-music [1] which represents a substantial majority of the documentation of contemporary practice. Such a survey reveals the following wide-spread assumptions.

1. Music is notated.

2. The printed score is an adequate form of documentation.

3. The most important attributes of music are pitch and duration.

4. Timbre plays a supportive rather than generative role.

If one adds to the equation the perpetuation of this model by major performing arts organisations and most secondary/tertiary music courses, one begins to see how the structures of powerful music institutions work to effectively exclude those who choose to construct their work from different means or artistic viewpoints. To verify this one only needs to assess the likelihood of say, ABC Concert Music putting on a concert of electro-acoustic music and sound works, or the likelihood of internationally recognised non-reading practitioners being accepted as undergraduate performance majors at state conservatoria. What can be identified here is a process of institutions dividing practitioners and demarcating sites for certain sanctioned activities.

The ultimate result of the above is that artists who choose to work with sound and do not meet the necessary criteria in some other way, have been forced to find other 'homes'. Within the tertiary sector they have been accepted by Art Schools, Communications/Media and Computer Science Departments. What can be drawn from this is that artists who choose to work in this way have become institutionally separated from (ideologically constructed) mainstream musical practice, discourse and documentation in our present environment and are thus marginalised.

I assert that they are marginalised because the work of these artists is very rarely discussed or even acknowledged within the context of mainstream Australian music. One only needs to scan the various books on Australian music to confirm this. A noticeable exception to this is the John Jenkins (1988) book 22 Contemporary Australian Composers, published by NMA, which significantly expanded and challenged the mainstream academic view of Australian music. Indeed the NMA journal, which is sadly no longer published, was an excellent example of a more representative and inclusive coverage of Australian music/sound work. Needless to say, 22 Contemporary Australian Composers was only a first step towards filling in the gaps..

The principle of access and equity for all artists needs to extend beyond the realm of project funding and commissioning to the documentation and dissemination of artists' work. Indeed, one can contest the notion of access and equity for project funding and commissioning in many instances. The ABC's composer commission selection process is a good example. Applicants are selected by a 'score-reading' panel. Even if one uses notation, the thought of a panel evaluating the merits of say an electro-acoustic piece, where the relationship between the printed event and the resultant sound is rendered arbitrary by the compositional process, is a disconcerting prospect. It appears that there can be only two premises upon which such a selection process can be built. The first assumption is that composers who use non-traditional compositional methods (that is, their work is not adequately represented in written form) do not wish to access the orchestral resources of the ABC. Failing this, the only other possible explanation is that these composers are not considered to be suitable applicants for the commissions [2] , It is clear from the above that the sound art/music split encompasses a complex network of power relations and a major contributing force to this split is provided by the hands of our institutions in their acceptance, perpetuation and implementation of quite specific ideologies in relation to sound.

These structural/institutional forces, I would argue, have done something far more consequential than present the duality 'A/B' (music/sound art), but rather have created a dichotomy which takes the form of 'A/not A' (music/not music). In order to explicate how such a separation manifests itself in artistic practice and is sanctioned and sustained by the ideological stances of institutions, the following broad tendencies can be identified, which relate to the unspoken criteria used to situate those who are identified as 'sound artists' and those identified as 'composers' or 'musicians'.

1. On the whole, composers have received training from Music Departments, and sound artists from Art Schools, Communications and Media Departments and are thus affected to varying degrees by the markedly different ideological stances of these institutions [3] .

2. It is my perception that a noticeable difference between sound artists and art-music composers is that most sound artists have emerged from an aural, rather than notation based tradition and, in accordance with this, operate from the point of view that a work

ultimately occurs at the ears of the listener. This is not the case for most 'art-music' composers who, emerging from the notated tradition, accept that the score adequately represents the finished work and thus may readily subscribe to the view that the score is the art-object rather than the sound itself [4] .

3. Sound artists tend to have a much more site-specific approach to the creation and performance of their work than composers.

4. Sound artists are more likely to have an interdisciplinary approach to their work.

5. Sound artists for the most part perform their own work, many composers do not.

6. Most sound artists tend to view recording as being primarily a creative rather than documentary process. Generally speaking, sound artists are more willing to allow the possibilities offered by recording technologies to radically alter the structure and content of a pre-existing work.

7. At the level of performance, musicians tend to employ sound producing devices which are either conventional musical instruments, mutations thereof, or devices built around the same conceptual model, for example keyboards, percussion devices, wind instruments and so on. For most musicians, it is easier to make use of their ingrained gestural vocabulary to produce sound, or at least to develop a technique which in some part can be seen to be a derivation of standard technique.

   Sound artists, on the other hand, are more likely to build custom instruments/sound generating devices, or turn documenting devices such as cassette recorders, DAT recorders, Minidiscs/CD-R discs, multitrack recorders and mixers into performance instruments. Sound artists therefore tend to develop a highly idiosyncratic gestural technique - one which the AMEB or the average Music Department, no doubt, would have a great deal of trouble in comprehending.

8. Most importantly, composers seem to have more potential than sound artists to be institutionally and economically powerful.

Of course there are, and will always be, artists who are seen to traverse the above boundaries to differing degrees. Entry into category A (art-music), however, is usually limited to those in possession of some form of traditional musical training or qualification. What can be observed, though, is that artists who traverse, or are situated at the boundaries of institutionally defined practice, being located in an 'ideological gulf' and remote from the mechanisms of power, are more often than not confined to the margins.

From direct experience and in light of the preliminary discussions above, I would suggest there is no simple split as institutions would have us believe, rather there exists a natural tendency towards a continuum of sound practices, resulting in a multitude of artistic trajectories, with notated orchestral music at one end of the spectrum, through (in no particular order and not intended to be exhaustive); instrument exploration, extended technique, new instrument construction, electro-acoustic music, interactive music systems, improvised music, multi-media, text-sound, collage, installation, to sound sculpture at the other. Even such a list may imply that artists may be comfortably situated within categories when, in practice, any one artist's work may span or combine any number of the above areas. In the context of actual practice, this may seem self-evident, however it is clearly not reflected in mainstream academic and institutional discourse. It can thus be argued that a significant disjuncture has been created and is perpetuated between discourse and practice. This disjuncture has been partially acknowledged at an institutional level with the recent setting up of the Hybrid Arts Committee at the Australia Council (which has now been

renamed the New Media Arts fund), a move intended to address the low success rate of artists' work which is not consistent with the paradigms adopted by the existing individual art-form committees [5] .

It is somewhat interesting to note the rapid name-change of the Hybrid Arts division of the Australia Council to 'New Media Arts' during the re-structure one year after its inception. If one examines the application guidelines for this fund, the term 'New Media' (which is confusingly used in many different contexts) seems to infer a link to new technologies, rather than new or hybrid processes, thus constituting a narrowing of the initial brief.

Rather than broadening the paradigms used by the individual committees to make them more inclusive, or abolishing the idea of single art-form committees entirely, the decision has been made to create a further category with its own set of qualifying criteria which, it could be argued, are just as restrictive as those adopted by the other committees and thus self-defeating . This policy, in its continuance of the idea of segmentation and classification, could be seen to present the last of a series of limited paradigms available to artists who seek to be funded and, as such, represents only a negligible step in addressing the problem of the wide gap that exists between institutional discourse and structures and artistic practice.

As I stated at the outset, this paper constitutes a preliminary investigation of the sound art/music split, however it is also a preliminary investigation of the conditions of actual practice which uncovers certain regulating forces which are at play but rarely referred to in the course of music criticism. In line with much work in other disciplines, I propose a way of viewing music and sound practices in their socio-political context - as activities which are framed and controlled by institutions. Furthermore, I wish to present the argument that the tendency towards a continuum of sound practices is profoundly disrupted by the lines and subsequent hierarchies defined and sanctioned by the ideological stances our institutions and, in turn, the responses of practitioners demanded by such an environment.

Footnotes

1. Non-mainstream, limited distribution literature, although in existence and being an important forum for alternative viewpoints, can be seen to have a somewhat negligible effect upon mainstream discourse and practice due to its limited and less institutionally powerful readership It is interesting to note that alternative critical models tend to be marginalised in much the same way as alternative compositional models. (return)

2. Australian institutions and most major ensembles in the past have been unusually resistant to expanding the 'gene pool' of composers officially sanctioned and thereby 'allowed' to access chamber/orchestral resources. In the USA for example, composers such as John Oswald, John Zorn, and Jon Hassell, none of whom normally write for chamber/orchestral resources, have all been commissioned by the Kronos Quartet, for example, and the resulting works now occupy a prominent position in their repertoire. (return)

3. Of course, many practitioners do not undertake tertiary study at all, although relatively few of these artists gain institutional support. (return)

4. It is true that, like sound artists, most of the world's musicians have emerged from an aural tradition. For the purposes of this article, however, I have chosen to limit the discussions to so-called 'art-music'. More specifically, I refer to art-music composers working in acoustic rather than electro-acoustic music. Even so, it is interesting to note the number of older generation electro-acoustic music composers (e.g. Stockhausen) who have felt the need to attempt to 'notate' electro-acoustic works. See the score for his

'Studie II', Universal Edition, 1956. (return)

5. See 'Guidelines for Applicants - Hybrid Arts Committee', Australia
    Council, 1995. (return)