

Dieter Kaufmann

**WHOM THE TENTH MUSE KISSES
or The Birth of Acousmatic Art out of the Spirit of Music**

As with reading, writing, and counting, we must learn to see, listen and understand, in order to perfect our "second nature", namely that nature which grasps things as signs. - François Bayle

For over twenty years, I have devoted myself to exploring the musical nature of found sounds, the acoustic and acousmatic dimension of "objets trouvés".

To be more precise, it began in the fall of 1968, at the Paris "Musical Research Group", where I was introduced to the revolutionary old maestro of electroacoustic sound-adventure, Pierre Schaeffer, and the theory and practice of work with concrete music.

Between 1971, when I published the article, "Concrete music – phenomenon and mastery", in the Austrian Music Journal¹ as a sort of initiation reference for a new Department of Electronic Music at the Academy of Music and Fine Arts, and today, when as a gray-haired professor and chair of the Institute for Electroacoustic and Experimental Music of today's College of Music and Fine Arts I can afford to take a position on the current situation of contemporary music, one thing has not changed: my vision of the phenomenon of "music in the electroacoustic medium".

Twenty years of technological development, meanwhile, has given this art form meaning and identity – and I find myself using the term "acousmatic art" less and less, although I am currently writing operatic and orchestral works, that is, I am writing "music" – to the point that we today face an era of music history in which a broad spectrum of the public is beginning to realize exactly what it was that Apollo's head (and probably scrotum as well) gave birth to after so many millennia: the tenth Muse, a plot hatched between God and the market; a child of free love with Euterpe; or "Birth of acousmatic art out of the spirit of music" (we could just as well be speaking of a bastard child of Saint Cecilia, father: Albert Einstein).

But humour aside, it is the technical evolution of the past years that has enormously facilitated work with "concrete materials" and thus it is impossible to wonder at the fact that today, in applied music as well, with the help of so-called "sampling", a technician is able to work creatively with

sounds that have little to do with traditional instrumental or vocal technique. Francois Bayle, from whose article “La musique acousmatique ou l’art des sons projetés”² I will quote often, describes the birth of the new muse thus.

Born from a chance meeting between Radio and Music, coming from a dual listening fashion, this art form – as one can read in thick archive pieces from the 50s – had an enormous appeal, as is known... The old sanctified arts, music and theatre repertoire showed themselves not only transported but transposed, while at the same time however, the medium itself, still in process and substantially untapped, served as an effective instrument of psychic power.³

“Musique concrete”, “objets trouves”, “acousmatic art”, these are terms which have become ever more common in the language of musicians, composers, and theoreticians without their meaning always being clearly defined. I will attempt to express myself as simple as possible. To that end let visual art help us describe audio art:

Situation 1

I paint a picture which contains a stand for drying bottles for example. I bought this object in a store. It becomes my theme. I translate this theme with the help of other materials (canvas, paint, etc.) into a two-dimensional picture. One calls this a still-life and refers to it as object painting.

Situation 2

Marcel Duchamp displays a bottle-dryer that he found in a restaurant, in an art exhibition. The stand is his “objet trouve”. Through the exhibition the consumer item becomes a work of art. Consequentially we speak of the art of the object. Futurists, surrealists, and dadaists are carrying this thought further.

Situation 3

Somebody makes a photograph of a bottle-dryer for example. He also discovers the object and once again an “objet trouve” becomes the theme. He adjusts the light settings and captures the image on film through an artificial eye (the lens). A photograph is created. We then refer to it as photography art, film art, etc...

And now the equivalent concepts in audio art:

Situation 1

Bartok writes the Wonderful Mandarin. His theme is the atmosphere of the city, which he conveys with the help of other materials (musical instruments). For the most part we speak of program music in this context, but strictly speaking - not every form of acoustic play is carried out by a program which

¹ Dieter Kaufmann: *Konkrete Musik - Phänomen und Bewealtigung*, Österreichische Musikzeitschrift, Wien, April 1971, No. 4.

² Francois Bayle: “La musique acousmatique ou l'art des sons projetés”, *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Paris 1985

³ Op. cit.

is only more or less verifiable? The story told by a phrase of a sonata is also contained in the program, except that the subject which it describes is hidden. Just like the watchers of the shadows in Plato's cave, we are able to cross from the world of acoustic discoveries, mediated by this program, into the underlying world of ideas. This has less to do with formal analysis than it does with non-verbal communication.

Situation 2

John Cage leaves the doors to the street in the rear of an auditorium open during a concert. The stage remains bare and the sounds from the street filter into the hall. What the astounded audience experiences are "objets trouvés", happenings of sound which through the medium of the concert hall become musical happenings, sound events.⁴ At the same time, someone on the street, stuck in the traffic does not experience the same sounds as a concert, for him it is just the daily "hell", sound garbage, so to speak. Working (acoustically or electroacoustically) with this naturally discovered sound material (objets trouvés), we refer to it as "musique concrète". Pierre Schaeffer called concerts in which musique concrète is performed "concerts de bruit" (concerts of noise).

"The material of musique concrète is sound in its original form, as it is found in nature, as machines churn it out, as it is reformed in through manipulation." These lines, for which we can thank Serge Moreaux, were the opening words to the First Concert of Bruitism in March, 1950.⁵

Situation 3

I make a recording of a moment of traffic on the street for example. The sounds that I find are my "objets trouvés". With my artificial ear (microphone), I register the waves that create for me an acoustic experience. The sounds of car horns are made into a sound object.⁶ Finally, I reproduce the sound objects, presenting them in an equally real space environment. The year 1950, when Pierre Schaeffer consciously went through this step, marked the birth of "acousmatic art".

Acousmatic art works with the electroacoustic projection of sound-formed time-related courses in space. New artistic spaces are opening up.⁷ Where sounds are obtained from is no longer important. Their musical quality is important, as well as the quality of their connections, relations – simply the composition. Distancing itself from listening and (instead of it) presenting equally

⁴ Cage did accent similar situations in many works, one bears in mind 4' 33"

⁵ Francois Bayle: "La musique acousmatique ou l'art des sons projetés", Encyclopaedia Universalis, Paris 1985.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about object in his foreword to L'artiste et sa conscience by Rene Leibowitz: "I always say about an object that it becomes purposeless, if it is the same as materialization of reality, which exceeds the object, but is not tangible apart from it and because of its infiniteness it cannot be adequately captured with any signs system. And it is always a certain kind of totalitarianism; totalitarianism of one person, of the surroundings, of an epoch, of the human nature. Mona Lisa's smile means nothing to me, but it is not purposeless itself."

⁷ With Bernard Leitner one can consider music as "secondary architecture".

representation and repetition, the sound picture, thanks to the (determining) fact that between the (psychic) cause and the (phenomenological) result stands form, is acquiring the status of a symbol.⁸ Electronics and the computer are only the intermediary part of the chain drawing the more subjective or abstract into new media.

Reproduction

Film is just as little a representation of theatre as acousmatic art is of the concert event. The possibilities of such “documentary” reproduction are only a by-product of new art, even though filling our broadcast channels with refuse of past accomplishments, they attempt to deaden our sensitivity to an autonomous awareness of sound. Banal and fundamental. At this point we should explain what kind of acousmatics we are referring to. Vinyls and radio endlessly bring us the most banal kind of acousmatic. Listening to this, it is clear to us from a steadily high number of indicators, that what is at issue is just a simplification of perception. Of course, the moderator or orchestra are not present at the moment of listening, but existed during the recording – and that alone is important.

At the same time, work with “objets trouvés” can also be one of the methods of reusing by-products even in instances when acousmatic art works with “cultural by-products”. A phrase from a folk song, or a bar of Mozart taken as a "sample" can just as well become elements of acousmatic composition as a piano note from some bourgeois salon or a score initiated event of an alpine yodel. That the traditional concept of artistic performance loses its meaning in the process is one of the new aesthetic aspects - let us recall only the cutting, the blending, the microscopic (microphonic) enlargement, the whole ... in film.

Technological process, in permitting the object to be represented in picture, becomes rhetoric. Montage, extraction, insertion, illustration, extension, or even interruption of time, disruption of the unity of a place, or mixing, double exposure, change of contours and finally the introduction of timing and space become means and content, medium and message.⁹

Photography is to film what a sound object is to a sound story (Elliot Carter speaks in another context of "free sound speech"). In a close domain, film, animated film, and photography, which came into being 100 years ago, attained their autonomy only fifty years ago. At this point it is necessary to note that all these art forms share with acousmatic art the studio realization with the help of various media "technologies", which require the care of an entire company of people.¹⁰

⁸ Francois Bayle: "La musique acousmatique ou l'art des sons projetés", Encyclopaedia Universalis, Paris 1985.

⁹ Op. cit.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

Projection

A few more words on the communication situation. Acousmatic art is possible to experience through headphones or at a reproduction installation, which qualitatively attains "philharmonic dimensions". Virtual space, created by the composer, this imaginary sound space, which is created in me through the headphones, may be reconstructed once again in real space. That is also a further dimension, which opens itself to new interpretation. Just as a theatre play must first be staged, for example. From listening in headphones (from the reading of a play) to the sound architecture in a given space (to the staging on a given theatre stage).

In order for the acousmatic concert to not degenerate into passive and monotone listening of something on a tape, which empties itself on some machine somewhere behind the scene - but on the contrary - for it to be a listening experience, a performance, rich in diversity of impression, dimensional contrasts and movements, shades and colours of sound, the following is simultaneously needed:

- sufficient development of acoustic registers,
- a certain minimum number of independent wave lengths, which permit variation in the sound level,
- a sense of the strategy or staging of dynamic happenings and acoustic colours,
- and finally works, which offer themselves for "interpretation" by the logic of their organization.¹¹

Acousmatic art, in the compositional form of all sound relationships, is therefore fixed to the sound carriers and then, through reproduction and projection, interpreted in a given space. Film found a corresponding form of communication very early on in the cinema. In acousmatic art there are certain tendencies - particularly in the francophone world - towards "sound cinema". In spite of several model attempts, our fate for a long time to come apparently remains the headphone.

Just as film exercised enormous influence on theatre technology (and not just on stage technology), so the realm of the acousmatic will not end in speakers.

Sometime an investigation will have to be made into how it was possible for the "post-modernism" - and this term is not at all just an invective for me - to develop so well thanks primarily to electroacoustic technologies and their free use of reproduction.

We must not confuse the "acousmatic" with "concret". Francois Bayle differentiates between three degrees of representative sounds according to depth of dimension. This "depth of field" is revealed in listening to music of subject sounds. In the first degree (the immediate) the "centering" of

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the hearing joins sequences with identifiable relationships, whether they are already realistic (voice, environment, sound space, and so on) or abstract (the morphology of rubbing, trembling, colliding, etc.). In the second degree "centering" are happenings (significant) or transformations with observable means: filtering, synthesis of the colour of sound, transposition, etc., just as signs which consciously belong to signature, to style: signs of interruption, visible change of level, persons, motives, etc. The third degree (sensual) consists of forms of expression and evolution which conform to internal laws, lines, texture, by use of formal apparatus which acquire orientation in moments of musical discourse.¹²

Even though a gesture is all that remains of the concrete material, it is the same as in abstract painting, where a line can represent the context of an entire concrete movement. The situation is only made acousmatic through the curtain, which the loudspeakers hang between the origination and reception of the sound.

It is said that Pythagoras invented a very original device for active listening. Standing behind a curtain he would teach his pupils in darkness and strict silence. Acousmatic (from the Greek word akousma, audio perception) is a word which he used in reference to this situation, in order that, just as his students, he was able to develop this concentration technique.¹³

Politics

A common characteristic of film and acousmatic art is that through the illusory 1:1 projection of reality they create an excellent instrument for critical reflection. The experience of completely reworking reality, can give one courage to view one's surroundings as amenable to change. "The right of art will always be measured by its ability to change reality.. The reality of the revelations, which art brings for the alteration of reality. The reality of the revelations, which it brings, and equally the reality of our perception of it through our consciousness and feelings. In this way, art writes itself into the progressive history of our conscious perception, which it itself also defines. The challenge to our minds in the form of deciphering of unusual messages opens the way to unusual decisions in the realm of social reality. Thought and the power of decision presuppose sensuality, art becomes a generator of politics".¹⁴

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Dieter Kaufmann: *Der Sieg über die Sonne 1913 und der Sieg der Sonne 1991?*, ton/herbstton, November 1991.