



JAMES ANDEAN

Musician, composer, performer, Doctoral researcher, Centre for Music & Technology, Sibelius Academy

CULTURAL RELATIVISM IN ACOUSMATIC MUSIC

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Introduction: Acousmatic music

Acousmatic music is a form of electroacoustic tape music which involves the use of recorded sound as material for composition. It grew out of 'musique concrète', developed by Pierre Schaeffer at the ORTF in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s. Schaeffer based this new genre on the concept of 'reduced listening', in which one listens to sound recorded from the world around us, focusing solely on the sonic characteristics and musical potential of the sounds, deliberately ignoring or effacing the source of the sound, denying the sound's role as signifier for the object, movement or action which produced it.

While the musical deployment of these sounds abstracted from their original contexts remains a critical quality of acousmatic music, over time it became increasingly clear that sounds continue to carry these contexts with them. While it is indeed possible to employ reduced listening to focus only on the sonic aspects of a sound, in the absence of this deliberate act or denial or erasion signification rushes forward once again. Sound continues to carry with it associations and references to the objects and gestures which made, or might have made, a given sound. These associations offer a further field of play for the composer to work in, in which images triggered by the unfolding sequence of sounds create an additional layer of meaning.

Acousmatic composers thus commonly work with their sound material on two levels: mining a given sound for its musical potential on the one hand, while

on the other hand, using the references and signification associated with the sound to generate images, themes, and metaphors, which infuse many acousmatic works with a sense of narrative (Fischman 2008: 118). Such narratives may range from the relatively abstract to the fairly literal; from a vague sense of theme, to more defined story-telling (Norman 1994).

Sound as symbol

Compositional control over the narrative aspects of an acousmatic work relies on the capacity of sound to act as a symbol – for that which produced or might have produced the sound, or as a reference to some category of archetypal actions, movements, or sounding objects. Once again, this can be extremely literal – footsteps on a squeaky floor, the turning of a door handle and clicking of a latch, followed by the squeal of rusty hinges... It is much more common, however, to use sound to open up or point towards areas of thought, feeling, or experience: the use of planes, cars, or running footsteps to indicate flight or escape (Andean 2010: 110); the use of songbirds, a light breeze, waves lapping at the shore to indicate calm or repose; the use of crows, ravens, a harsher wind to indicate desolation or death.

Cultural variables

This seems to ignore, however, the potentially significant degrees of cultural variability such material might possess. Sound symbols – be they literal or thematic – rely extremely

heavily on a web of associations which stem from common knowledge and experience, generally the result of a shared cultural background; as a result, the universality of such symbols varies significantly, and cannot be assumed. The cry of a crow as a symbol for 'bird' might perhaps be a connection which can safely be expected; the same cry as a symbol of death, however, is more culturally charged, and depends on an understanding of codes of folklore which might not translate automatically across significant cultural divides. The interpretation of sounds as symbols rests to an enormous extent on the chain of associations a given sonic reference might inspire; these, however, far from objective and absolute, involve a great deal of culture-specific coding. The sound of waves against the shore might inspire a sense of calm and peace in the average western listener; this same sound, however, might inspire a very different response from a listener in a landlocked country who has never seen the sea, or perhaps more importantly, from a listener whose village is regularly threatened by the sea's rampages. The list of such potential intercultural miscommunications is significant, ranging from cultural mores, to geographical contrasts, technological differences, social, historical, or class issues, and on to more extended levels of association and semiosis.

And yet, the acousmatic composer often relies heavily on such sonic imagery, and the references and symbols such imagery triggers is often a primary tool in establishing not just moment-to-moment narrative meaning, but broader qualities of theme, mood, and tone. Without a common network of symbols and signification, the composer's control over these aspects suffers. The listener fails to recognise the particular references of a given symbol, or fails to recognise it as a symbol in the first place; or, perhaps even more problematically, finds a particular symbol charged with a very different set of cultural baggage than that which the composer intended to reference. To offer a personal example, I recently used a recording of church bells tolling in a sombre manner in an acousmatic work as a symbol for finality, fate and death; eventually, a listener who had lived next to a church growing up pointed out to me that the peal of bells that I had used was, in fact, celebratory, likely for a wedding, and thus had a happy,

positive tone to anyone who recognised this fact. In the work, this sound was used to close the piece, and this difference in interpretation of the significance of the sound symbol at such a critical point in the piece resulted in a radical difference in the reception and interpretation of the meaning of the work.

One therefore sometimes encounters concern within the acousmatic community regarding the problem of acousmatic translation – that the genre, as currently deployed, restricts its audience by the use of culturally-loaded sound symbols to construct meaning within the work.

Cultural relativism

In essence, this is a problem of cultural relativism, although in an extremely prescribed sense. Sound symbols are not independent, self-sufficient, absolute entities, but rather derive their meaning from the complex cultural network and context of which they are a part; severed from that context, a given symbol loses its power, or is charged with new and changed meaning due to its altered role in a different cultural web. As Herskovits famously explains: "Judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation... Is reality, then, not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?" (Herskovits 1948: 64).

We will concern ourselves here only with a relatively narrow view on cultural relativism; not with broader questions of values and moral codes, but only with the encultured vocabulary of symbols, imagery, signs, and meanings which vary and fluctuate between and across cultures. While these exist and take on their full meaning only within the larger cultural framework of values and world-view, we will limit our consideration here to these smaller-scale matters of symbol and signification.

The problem

Thus there is occasional concern within the acousmatic community over this intercultural identity crisis. How can the acousmatic composer respond to the problem of the cultural relativism of sound symbols?

Must acousmatic composers work to ensure that their sound symbols are universal? Or perhaps specifically at points where the correct interpretation of the desired implications of a given symbol is critical? On the other hand, perhaps this is an inevitable but acceptable flaw of acousmatic music? Or must we conclude that acousmatic music simply cannot communicate outside of a specific culture – that its symbolic content presumes a certain ‘western’ background, or at least a common cultural background shared between the listener and the composer of a given work?

A reappraisal

Composers have occasionally done an admirable job of tackling these issues, often with great sophistication (see for example Wishart 2008), as have acousmatic’s close cousins from within the soundscape community (Truax 1996b). Here, however, rather than struggle towards a solution, we will instead focus on a closer examination of the problem.

To what extent is the crisis of culturally relative sound symbols really a relevant issue?

To begin with, the connotations of a given sound symbol are, to some extent, personal, regardless of cultural background, as demonstrated in the church bell example described above. The sound of a car may signify ‘freedom’ or ‘the thrill of speed’ for a teenaged male, while signifying horror and pain for a recent crash victim (see also Windsor 1995). Are such potentially significant variations in the individual associations inspired by a given sound symbol (see Ciardi 2008: 125) any less important than possible differences in association between cultural groups?



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Do we necessarily find greater discrepancies between the associations made by members of different cultural groups than we would find between any two individuals?

Furthermore, we live in an age of globalisation, of encroaching monoculture, of instant communication, with immediate access to ever-increasing amounts of information spreading and connecting us around the globe. In such an age, do these kinds of discrepancies in the cultural reading of symbols still persist to such a degree that they threaten to act as barriers to the communication and appreciation of acousmatic works?

It might also be unrealistic to imagine that a listener sufficiently unfamiliar with the symbolic codes embedded in the work would have, or want, access to acousmatic works in the first place. Regrettably, awareness of the acousmatic genre is largely limited to fairly particular, and often culturally specific, communities, as is the case with the broader electroacoustic genre. Is it perhaps unrealistic, or at least optimistic, to imagine acousmatic music spreading to listeners sufficiently unfamiliar with the symbols contained in a work that they are unable to accurately interpret or enjoy the piece?

Of course, to some extent it is a question of degree. The disconnect doesn’t need to be huge in order to disrupt the intended reading of embedded symbols. However – as with any artwork – won’t the listener, at least to some extent, interpret the symbols of the work with the composer’s cultural context in mind? The informed listener is likely aware that the composer is of a certain background – indeed, that the entire acousmatic genre is part of a certain cultural tradition – and is likely to interpret the sound symbols through the prism this knowledge provides. An uninformed interpretation upon first encountering any unfamiliar musical work is likely to be significantly altered when a greater sense of context is provided; how are issues of cultural relativism in acousmatic music any different?

Temporal relativism

In fact, the general interpretation of a work varies not only culturally or geographically, but, sometimes more importantly, temporally. Codes and symbols change, and works are constantly being reimagined and reinterpreted according to the code of the day; there is only the historian’s voice, raised from time to time, to

remind us of important differences in the work's original message and context. Much of Satie's piano music was deliberately crafted by the composer to be absurd and occasionally frustrating to the listener (Shattuck 1968); developments in tonal language, however, quickly swept past Satie's melodic capriciousness, causing the works to be commonly reinterpreted as pleasant and light. Similarly, certain modes in early music once intended as 'happy' are tonally reinterpreted by listeners in more recent centuries as 'sad' due to the inclusion of the minor 3rd, which has come to be perceived as the very personification of the 'sad' in music (Ball 2010: 275). And so on.

As a result, a more significant cause for alarm regarding acousmatic sound symbols might be their limited shelf life. Sounds we identify today as a 'car' or 'plane', may well bear little resemblance to the sounds of cars or planes twenty years from now; more importantly, there is a strong chance that what these symbolise today may well be very different in the future – today's 'escape' vs. tomorrow's 'charming nostalgia', today's 'casual travel' vs. tomorrow's 'irresponsible environmental destruction', and so on.

The Other

There is also, at times, something vaguely unsettling, possibly patronising, about concern over the intercultural communication of sound symbols. It seems, at times, to envision a romanticised 'Other' (Cipriani & Latini 2008: 90), some abstracted exotic culture – without access to the same technologies perhaps, and therefore unable to identify technological sound sources, while concerns regarding the potential incomprehension of differences in climatic or geographical sound symbols – rain, wind, waves – sometimes seem to drift towards the vague idea of some tropical southern land, where listeners sit beneath coconut trees and wonder at the strange and unfathomable acousmatic sounds emanating from their wireless...

Cultural divides

If one is concerned about the inability of acousmatic music to fully communicate due to cultural differences,

it could be argued that the focus on the cultural relativism of sound symbols is, in fact, something of a case of misdirection. There are far more important issues that will radically prevent the composer's



‘intended’ understanding of the work – with no need to look to an imagined Other for such differences, as they surround us right here at home: Electroacoustic? Acousmatic? What's that? Is this music? Why? How? No, that's not music. Where are the performers? If this is music, what are all those sound effects? I can't follow the story – what's supposed to be happening? This story makes no sense! And so on.

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The cultural divide that we should be concerned about is not that between the composer's and the listener's two cultures: it is between the 'informed' listener, and what we must then presumably call the 'uninformed' listener – i.e., most of the listening public. As already discussed, an appreciation of acousmatic music begins with a familiarity with the practice of reduced listening. Yet this practice is far removed from the listening modes with which the average listener will be familiar (Chion 1994). Without an awareness of this 'missing paradigm', acousmatic works are likely to be met with misapprehension at best, confusion and contempt at worst.

Although resources are of course readily available to any curious listener to help initiate them into the apparent mysteries of reduced listening and acousmatic art, the most common path to acousmatic understanding remains that of academia. Not that this is necessarily a problem; but it results in something of an informed microcommunity. If one is concerned about making acousmatic music cross-culturally communicative, there is more urgent need for a bridge between the acousmatic community and the uninitiated (Landy 1990) than

there is for better translation of culturally-coded sound symbols.

The illusion of composer control

All of this assumes, of course, that the precise communication of the composer's intentions is a key priority to begin with. This is often taken for granted within the contemporary music community; however, it is an assumption which is somewhat at odds with expectations in many other musical genres, and indeed across many of the other art forms. This is the 'illusion of control' of contemporary composition: that mastery of the composer's craft grants the power to directly and precisely communicate with the listener, who is able to read in full the composer's intent; the composer's craft is deployed to precisely control the listener's experience of the work.

Of course, there is a small degree of truth to this: the artist must indeed learn to direct and manipulate the subject's experience. Tonal music was particularly adept in this regard: thanks to the powerful tools offered by a commonly understood musical language and its central rhetorical devices, structural elements could be deployed to manipulate the listener in an admirably precise manner. In the first half of the twentieth century, these characteristics were, to a significant extent, abandoned; in spite of this, a residual assumption that the composer remains in detailed control of the listener's experience and interpretation of the work has been retained.

Thus, in the contemporary music context, it continues to be maintained that a composer precisely directs the listener's experience of a work, through careful control of the parameters of a given composition (Atkinson 2007: 115); in acousmatic music, this is sometimes extended to the narrative aspects of the work as well as the sonic, as these are often equally critical to a listener's appreciation and interpretation of an acousmatic work. Narrative aspects of the acousmatic work are thus too often assumed to be absolute and pre-defined by the composer, who carefully controls the listener's response to the work through subtle and detailed crafting of such material.

The way forward

This is not, of course, a universal preconception; indeed, cracks in the facade of absolute composer control have become increasingly visible in recent decades. A number of more recent acousmatic composers, in fact, can be seen as not only accepting the subjective nature of narrative material, but deliberately seeking out and cultivating the private and the personal as key elements of their work's narratives (see for example Young 2009).

This is a strategy with extremely rich potential; however, we can perhaps go further in reassessing the acousmatic problem of cultural relativism. The use of narrative sound material is an enormous advantage of acousmatic music over many of its more abstract peers

within the broader scope of contemporary music, as it aids significantly in communicating with the uninitiated (Truax 1996a). While the casual listener is generally unable to read the structural or formal codes of a great deal of contemporary instrumental music, for example, (and, indeed,



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may be equally unable to read the equivalent codes of the acousmatic genre,) a degree of connection – on some level – with the narrative qualities of acousmatic works is fairly probable (Weale 2006). Despite the potential inability to recognise structural concerns or aspects of the work dependent on reduced listening, uninitiated listeners are nevertheless able to recognise and relate to acousmatic sound through their mirroring and referencing of our daily, embodied existence.

Is it not, therefore, a mistake to cling misguidedly to the precise communication of the composer's intention in the deployment of a given symbol? Rather than hold with steadfast conviction to earlier tenets of twentieth century musical culture regarding the composer's unquestionable authority, acousmatic music would be better served by celebrating its capacity to tap into the individual listener's private experience, complete

with its own intricate webs of personal association and signification. Rather than working to deploy sound symbols which remain universally accessible and whose decoding by the listener can be predicted with certainty, the acousmatic composer should rather concentrate on crafting works which set up a field of maximised *potential* for meaning – creating works which offer the listener rich opportunities to find meaning, to be moved, to experience, as profoundly as possible. It is the access to this kind of experience that is critical, rather than complete control over the precise *content* of such experience. Acousmatic works are vastly enriched by their capacity to directly access private experience and the listener's personal history of engagement with the world. Rather than attempt to curtail this process in the misguided attempt to limit culture-dependent variations in reading sound symbols, the endless variety of individual listening experiences offered by the acousmatic genre should be celebrated as its greatest strength. ●

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