

Agostino Di Scipio

Sound object? Sound event! Ideologies of listening and the biopolitics of music.

Ideologies of listening

I think we can all agree that some kind of awareness of sound phenomena is specific to all music (including musics that are not made of sounds, for that matters, and musics where sound does not matter). And that the way we understand *sound* enacts a way to understand *music* and other creative efforts in the medium of sound. The way sound is brought about and is born to perception, made present to us and kept in existence (however temporarily) is not only determinant of the kind of music made with it or by it, but it is also an element of meaning in and of that music. Ways of making sound, ways of dealing with it and shaping it, are an essential part in the human experience of music. They shape the life of music, allowing for the existence of music in the particular historical and geo-cultural coordinates. It seems reasonable to say that the meaning and relevance of cultural practices known as "music" lay, to a large extent, in the notion and the experience of sound that is vehicled in those practices.

Music lays, to a large extent, in the practices by which we address ourselves to sound: I mean, not only in the way we make sound present, but also in the way we make ourselves present to sound. The way we attend to it, listen to it, affects the life of music, and opens to what the life of music makes of our own life. Listening participates in making sound.

If we call the overall frame of cognitive attitudes and cultural descriptions involved in a particular way to view and orient ourselves in the world, an "ideology" - then what I am saying, at the beginning of this talk, is that ideologies involved in the auditory experience and in our dwelling in the sonorous world are significant to and of the cultural practices known as music - and I keep in mind, of course, that such ideologies in turn are themselves built, established, developed by cultural practices such as music making. What I am saying is that the existence of music - its past developments in history, its present and its future - has to do with the way we understand sound and listening. There opens, in my view, a vast field of discussion that I sometimes call the "biopolitics of music".

biopolitics of music (1)

With this expression, I mean a discussion - and an active artistic involvement - concerning the material conditions and the cultural devices (*dispositif*) that determine the life and the existence of music (I take the term "biopolitics" of course taken from

the work of Foucault and others, especially in the reading offered by Giorgio Agamben). I think we can agree that, as far the sensible knowledge of sound is concerned, the freedom we have to build the present and the future of music depends on the strategies by which we conceive of and operate in sound, as the primary material basis for music, and it depends on the representations and descriptions and conceptions of it we dispose ourselves with. That implies clearly also questioning the technological mediations that are in play, a discussion of the several "music technologies" we can think of (the frame of rational tools and means involved in the process of generating, transforming, transferring and channelling sound). This is especially relevant as technologies are, as we can easily agree, not at all a neutral, value-free agency of functional know-how, but a theatre of hermeneutic exchange, a site of clash or meeting of theories, ideas, competences, social expectations, relative to sound and music. It's in this domain, the domain of music technologies, that the battle is fought for the "freedom of action", or just for the "margin of manoeuvre", that is a prerequisite of freedom in (artistic) expression. It is in this domain that we define and implement our understanding and operations on and in sound.

biopolitics of music (2)

It is often said, although from several different directions and with different goals in mind, that music (making and listening) implies various levels of knowledge activities, and that music is, in short, a form of knowledge. Indeed music making is a broad domain of experiences and shows aspects of human sensibility that are unique in the broader cultural context (sensibility, e.g., to the passing of time, to the surrounding space, to coordination with other human beings, to well-balanced bodily relationships to mechanical devices, to subtle nuances in auditory experience, etc.), a domain of competence and performance knowledge that is peculiar and not at all accessible in other domains of experience (that makes it a rich element in educational programs in general). In my view, this knowledge is not just "musical knowledge", meaning a set of cognitive experiences separate from other instances of knowledge, but it is much more: it is a *musical* way of knowing, it is a particular declination of becoming aware, not only a skill specific of some technical and professional tasks called musical. Addressing ourselves to the material conditions that are today set to the understanding and the experience itself of sound means addressing ourselves to what changes occur in that way of knowing we call music, and it even means addressing the possibility itself for the existence of music in the society.

What is at stake in our understanding of sound and in the ideologies of listening is no less than the possibility of taking responsibility concerning the music and its

relationship with the cultural environment (including the larger social scenario). Given the present cultural context, given the largely predominant apparatus setting and shaping the boundaries of human activities, including creative activities called "music", I think appropriating ways of making sound is perhaps the only chance for appropriating musical practices. It's not a question of musical language or genres, or else - it's not an aesthetic determination: it is, as recalled already, the biopolitics of music.

Sound object

We live today in and with an ideology of sound and music that reduces the understanding and the experience of *sound* to the understanding and the experience of the *sound object*. That happens because of well-known historical reasons, reflecting the electronic media revolution so peculiar of the XXth century, starting with the sound recording technology, and branching into multiple stages and instances of *audio* culture. Implicit in this view is that we can handle sound unproblematically, we can use it causing no changes in it. We can displace it, we can stand in front of it (*Gegen-stand*) and "it" stays unchanged, remains perfectly functional to (musical) designs that are independent of it. In the '50s, Pierre Schaeffer needed "reduced listening" in order to isolate sound from all context, and making it a separate entity. That of course has been crucial to important advances in music. To be clear on this point, I want to say that I am personally very aware and respectful of several currents of electroacoustic music that developed based on audio recording technologies, and I have personally pursued research in the history of electronic music technologies (beside that, I have myself produced fixed-media, or "tape" music, as it was once called). Walter Benjamin recognised a positive, liberating potential in all arts based on "mechanical reproduction" devices (he addressed the oldest of these, namely photography). The historical experience of electroacoustic and computer music reflects an attempt (successful to some extent) to appropriate the new means of reproduction and to turn them into means of creative production. Today, however, "reproduced sound" is actually so ubiquitous that it sets the conditions for the perception of sound in general. Here is a case where the cultural artifact has re-shaped human perception, and taken over some of the peculiarly ecological functionalities it can perform. This *reductio ad objectum* - the objectification of sound - consisted in the forming of cognitive processes that lead us to usually consider all sound as a hard object that can be moved in time and space, that does not belong to any time and to any space, a *reservoir* (Bestand) that can be recalled and represented independent of the contingencies of its coming into presence.

Even "soundscape composition", born of research and artistic endeavours initiated by Murray-Shafer, Truax, Westerkamp and others, and involving a fresh new interest for "sound as not separate from context" and related cultural issues, today lends itself to a strategy of separation and objectification in that it attempts to re-produce, in the concert space, a sound space that is clearly foreign to the particular room. In some recent cases, soundscape composition revealed little more than *sonic tourism*. Here is an example of a cultural statement that, in order to be made, needs the means against which it argues, and thus reinforces them. It is no surprise that several critical points have been recently raised concerning the notion itself of "soundscape" and the art of soundscape composition, not only my practitioner artists (such as Donald Dunn, which held a severe polemic against "soundscape" in the 70s) but also by anthropologists interested in sound (I refer to Tim Ingold's paper "Against soundscape", 2007), not to mention scholars in sound studies (Kelman's "Rethinking the soundscape", 2010 Montgomery' "Beyond soundscape", 2009).

The reduction of sound to sound object opened a vast domain of experimentation and research, of the utmost historical relevance. However, it also opened to a very different and contradictory potential, the potential to capture sound and music in an economy of "exchange of equivalent goods" turning them into commodities, and making them the raw material for a huge industrial apparatus of "cultural production" (mass-produced music). This strategy reinforced the common perception of sound as an object one can dispose with at will, and had the collateral effect that a new type of pollution was created by the new cultural infrastructure, that we may dare call "music pollution": based on the ubiquitous availability of recorded sound, music became a pollutant, for many a form of noise (silence potentially disappear).

Faced with such circumstances, what is of interest for us, here, is that the sound object is trapped in a logic of separation that impoverishes and trivializes the knowledge element of auditory experience and music listening: it gets rid, in the very first place, of its inherent potential of relational, contextual, ecological experience, i.e. an awareness that the sound we hear and attend to is the trace of forces and agencies in the shared space and time, and that it is born of relations and interactions in that space/time unit.

Sound event

I'd like to suggest that it is important to revive today an understanding of sound as *event* (maybe not a perfect word, given the daily abuse of it, on one hand, and the philosophical resonances, on the other - *ereignis*, événements...) thus fostering an anti-objectivistic understanding of sound, in an attitude more sensitive to the *relational*

and *ecological* dimension of the living auditory experience. I'd like to suggest, indeed, something that our body already knows and that our perception has unlearned to recognise: that sound is difficult to reify, to objectify: experienced in its temporal unfolding, in the tridimensional space, in contact with the semantic connotations of the place, sound takes place - takes time - before our mental habits eventually frame it in a logic of separation and objectification, before well-implanted cultural templates displace it in a logic of measure and quantification. Indeed, the sound object has an entirely *ideological* status: it is born in our mind, it is born of (non-systemic) cultural habits (of bad habits). The sound object is a cultural device (*dispositif*). That means, it implements a historically-determined cognitive representation. As such, it can be deconstructed. In fact, no sound ever is really *object*, all sound is always *event* (including electronic or sampled sound); its presence is always the effect of causes contingent in time and space, including maybe causes not only physical and mechanical, but also electromechanical (maybe even digitally controlled electromechanical causes). On the one hand, sound has an *energetic* status: it's energy transferring from one body to another, across a medium (an intermediate body). On the other, it has an *informational* status: it's the audible trace of interactions that auditory perception binds to some form of communication (to some form of "acting in common", of bodies undergoing some kind of relationship). The ear senses that, in sound, everything is connected to every other thing, that no thing present before the ear is without consequences on the sound it hears. Not only the sound source: every surface, every obstacle, affect to some smaller or larger extent the sound that arrives to the tympanum. The body itself that the ear belongs to, and the ear itself, contribute to shape the sound and make it the sound that it is. Also, all technical mediations, all means of channelling sound, leave their traces in the process: the ear witnesses their mediations, the ear witnesses the non-neutrality of these mediating technologies. Even upon listening to the *sound object* we can always shift to the event that it is: the technologies involved are audible, they have their voice, they make the sound, don't just play it back "as such", "as it is" ("as it was"). There is no sound "as such".

Addressing ourselves to the sound event means cultivating the relational medium that sound is: as Ingold has recently observed, we don't hear sound - we hear *in* sound. The world manifests itself in sound. Music is made of sounding artifacts that result from wanted relationships in space and time, as well as from social or political relationships (technologies, architectures, and other factors stemming from large-scale mediations). The ear open to the sound event (the ear that has deconstructed the sound object) can listen to these relationships, can recognise them from their timbre, and it can thus

make us aware of the relationships sound is born of. The ear open to the sound event can listen to it's own relationship to what it hears in sound.

Theoretical implications (future work)

(A) An art of sound events - an art where sound belongs to given real-time/space units, and to the relationships and mediations taking place there - hardly translates into artifacts that can be recorded. Most sound installation art, since Max Neuhaus and Bill Fontana (1970s) to current efforts, can only be documented, it cannot be honestly be reproduced via audio technology (multichannel audio is no exception). The same happens for some forms of live-electronics, and even for instances of radical improvisation (since the time of Evangelisti's *Nuova Consonanza*, in the 60s). The same holds for works involving sound masses, maybe dispersed in nonstandard ways in the concert room (i.e. Xenakis's *Terretekthor*), or for works involving very sparse and feeble, almost inaudible sounds (Rolf Julius), or for "partecipative experiences" like thos described by Pascale Criton, in the talk she's just presented. And in general for all music where the direct experience of sound and the performing practice is not only auditory, but bodily (tactile), or conceptual, or site-specific. Acousmatic music conceived for multichannel diffusion, although made of sound objects, require that the audience gather in special places equipped with professional play-back equipment, in order to achieve a direct tactile experience of sound that no mass-media technology can play-back. Historically important multimedia works like the *Poème Electronique* or the Xenakis' *Polytopes*, with their strategies of mixing multichannel audio, architecture, and images, are examples of works that are either documented, however honest can the documentation be to the original, or made from scratch, made "original" again.

All such works, and many other artistic endeavors I can't recall here now, regardless of aesthetic orientations, are difficult and indeed impossible to record, except for purposes of mere documentation, as I said. These works defy the Benjamin's canon of "art in the age of its mechanical reproduction". Two observations on this point: (1) does it make sense to keep the Benjamin proposals (from 1936) as a paradigm for all electronic arts, and the sound arts in particular, as most authors and journalists keep doing? (2) Are these works resuming for themselves the character of "aura" that the technologies of re-production had ripped out (and with reason, at the time when Benjamin was writing)? Many authors have dealt with the question of "aura", recently, especially writing in the fields of the sound arts (U. Rùth, "*Stimmung, Atmosphäre, Aura*", *Musik-Konzepte*, 2008; D. Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchung zu einer Asthetik des Performativen*, 2002). From a different perspective, Bruno Latour

elaborated a notion of "2nd-order aura" (my definition), to describe the auratic phenomenon of technologically very advanced renderings of old paintings (he says Adam Lowe's digital rendering of *Le Nozze di Cana* by Veronese, presented in Venice in 2007, enacts an authentic sense of aura that the original, in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, does not, because of the poor way it is exhibited and maintained). Can we speak, when visiting a site-specific sound installation, of "auratic" art? I will not try to answer such question, which is a problematic one especially when dealing with music. I dare only suggest that we should perhaps speak not of a revival, but of a renewal of aura: in other words, just like the materials of art (Adorno), this immaterial character we call aura is itself historically determined, and changes in time. According to Leonardo Distaso, Adorno, in his 1963 essay on radiophonic art, in passing seems to suggest the possibility, in the future, of a newly auratic dimension in music (he was probably thinking of the chances he discusses in his own "Vers une musique informelle", 1961).

Similar questions have long been raised in the field of the visual arts: consider a work of land art, or consider works that consist in the creation of small communities or in actions pursued by visitors (like what has been called, not surprisingly and maybe interesting for people interested in sound, *relational* aesthetics; Nicolas Bourriaud, 2010). These are clearly examples of art that cannot be reproduced, they can be documented, or made anew. To go back to sound: the anthropologist Steven Feld (who calls his research agenda *acoustemology*) raises the point of the difficulty in documenting the soundscape of the communities he studies, because of both technological and conceptual-cultural problems.

(B) An art of sound events - an art where sound emerges from the relationships and interactions in play - is still an art where the *medium is the message*, to evoke McLuhan on the electronic media? Let's remind that, in McLuhan's view, the artist is depicted as particularly sensitive to the changes in perception brought about by the new technologies, so s/he can work with these new tools making the change itself in perception his/her focus of work, thus bringing to awareness what is actually determined by the new medium.

What exactly is the *medium* when we attend to the sound event? McLuhan implies that the domain of mediations is the electronic media that favoured and finally imposed a conception of sound as object. When we listen to the sound event, and set the sound object apart, the mediations we experience are *not only* technological, and certainly not only electronic: they are acoustics, they are psychoacoustics, they are social and architectural - in the end, the very vast array of mediations where the event of sound

happens, in the space and the body. The "message" here is more about the relationships among the agencies involved (certainly including the electronic), whose mutual interactions result in sound, and less in a specific technological medium. We can still adopt McLuhan's statement, to the extent that, sound being the experiential trace of the interactions in play, it is born of an interaction of acoustic or eletroacoustic devices that are designed by the artist. The medium is the message only if it the medium is something the artist crafted for him/herself, a way of being in the world, a way of listening, that becomes one and the same with the art work and the messages it is supposed to carry. Today, embracing McLuhan's view aproblematically, and without a much needed critical approach, confirms a technological determinism that is difficult to accept for whoever cares about the life and existence of music.