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### Telling tales

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## Telling Tales

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Taking models offered by the oral tradition as its central focus, this paper explores an analogy between the intentions of storytelling and the performing activity of tape music composers who use 'realworld' sounds – that is, candid recordings of everyday life – as a means to reflect on human experience. By inviting a restructuring of both ordinary and more traditional 'musical' listening stances, this 'realworld music' reveals an approach to composition primarily concerned with the dynamic, experiential, contributions of both listener and composer.

**KEY WORDS** storytelling, tape music performance, realworld music, experiential identification, emotional remembrance, listening.

### Introduction

Technology offers the means to prise open doors into new sonic worlds. We are accustomed to discussing the results in questing, forward-thinking terms. I would like to investigate some aspects of tape music that might also throw new light on familiar worlds, and on older compositional problems. Music in which 'realworld' sounds provide both material and subject can purposefully look *back* on reality; it reveals a compositional concern to explore the timbres of recollected experience as much as the timbres of recorded sounds. More specifically, I suggest that this approach to composing with recorded sounds can offer an unusual angle on that 'old' problem of tape music performance. My focus here is on how the emotional, experiential 'timbres' evoked by a composer's interpretation of realworld sounds might be interpreted, transmitted and creatively received by the listener: on how they are *performed*. On how they *tell their tale*.

### Performance Models

Despite our compositional ventures and adventures, performance issues evidently continue to trouble aesthetic evaluations of tape music. Why? Perhaps because there is a tendency to rely on unhelpful comparisons with established musical norms.

The reason that a lot of tape music sounds unsatisfactory is not because there is no performer on stage, but simply because there is no performer at all. . . . composers of electronic music must realize that they are the performers, and are therefore responsible for adding all the nuance of performance to the music . . . .The compositional process must extend to subtler levels. (McNabb, 1986, p. 144)

My gut feeling is that Michael McNabb is right; the compositional process in tape music does, and must, extend to include the composer's performance. But that is not sufficient; it is the *kind* of performance which needs to be investigated. Comparisons between tape music and live musical performance, such as his, are largely analogous: they make an understandable assumption, that works which share the same medium, sound, will be fundamentally alike in performance and – since performance might be deemed an engagement between interpreter and audience – reception. But attempts to duplicate the interpretive 'nuances' of the live, human performer and then somehow *affix* them to tape music are risky – even if the composer succeeds in conveying one set of convincing performative gestures the work can be reduced to an 'automation' of conservative norms. It might be fun for a while, but we eventually grow wise to its tricks.

Clearly, traditional definitions of musical performance as an enacted interpretation of a 'completed' score provide conservative, and rather restrictive models, especially when it comes to evaluating tape music. Low-grade criticisms that deem tape music alienating in its 'lack' of physical performer-presence persist in fruitless comparisons to this established model. Yet, even more sophisticated appraisals sometimes find the 'absent' performer in what are essentially abstractions of performative gestures. Although this latter approach is much more likely to yield interesting fruit it often, nevertheless, seems difficult to investigate tape music as performed, and *performable*, music without resorting to descriptions of what *isn't* on the stage. This seems a perverse, or at least confused, way to tackle the issue.

In any case, analogies with traditional norms don't hold up well for music in which *familiar* sounds are neither abstracted performance 'nuances' nor restructured into some kind of performer-lacking score. And there is another, rather more fundamental, reason why the analogy is unhelpful: the traditional musical performance model is intended to trigger 'musical' listening; it sits us down to perceive sonic relationships and aural structures which are internal to the illusory world 'magicked up' by the performer's activity. It wants to disconnect us from reality, and suspend our disbelief.

So this kind of performance model can be distinctly unproductive when it comes to exploring a compositional approach which celebrates a *connection* to the real world. To describe the connection briefly, and somewhat simplistically: when we listen to a processed realworld sound, and recognize it as such, we regard the composer as 'doing' something to familiar material. Processing becomes an activity that guides, and changes, our previous understanding of the source; it offers an interpretation. And the transmission of an interpretation surely amounts to *some* kind of performance. But, in offering a new interpretation of something that, nevertheless, remains 'known' from reality, realworld music invites us to deploy, and develop, 'ordinary' listening skills; it encourages us to feel that we are involved, and *participating*, in the creation of a story about real life. It wants to connect us to reality and encourage our belief.

### A New Analogy

I'd like to abandon musical analogies and offer oral storytelling as a new – or, rather, a very old – model for performance; one which *incorporates* performance as part of its creation. It provides an analogy that might offer clues to the presence,

rather than the absence, of performing activity in realworld music. Storytelling relies on the listener's creative *involvement* in a believable tale. It offers a performance model that is concerned with the interpretation of images of actual human experience, and one which acknowledges our pre-existing understanding of the material.

Oral performance, like all human activity, is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events – bounded segments of the flow of behaviour and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation, and evaluation. (Bauman, 1986, p. 2)

Consider Richard Bauman's above criteria for oral performance in relation to, for instance, Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien avec filles*, a work which takes recordings of environmental sounds – candid conversation, birdsong etc. – and edits them into thirteen minutes or so of articulated form. Ferrari's music wreaks havoc with traditional notions of musical form and intent, but it certainly goes some way to fulfilling Bauman's stipulations.

As an interpreter who 'does' something to realworld sounds, the realworld composer tells, or performs, one of many possible stories, including our own, available from intentionally recognizable material – from a 'bounded segment' of human experience. Now that we're listening to the composer's version of events we are perhaps less concerned with – or less aware of – tracing gestural contours or sonic relationships than with evaluating the composer's interpretation of the familiar in relation to our own.

*Somebody* is telling their tale, and we're aware of their presence.

### The Composer as Storyteller

In oral culture, the close connection between teller and the tale frequently depends on the fact that the story is, or appears to be, a transmission of the teller's actual experience. The performer's authority rests on their presence, or the impression that they were present, at the time these real events occurred. There is an expectation that the material – regarded as evidence of experience rather than imagined fiction – will be believed, recognized and ingested as authoritative, or 'true':

And I don't blame y'all if you don't believe me about this tree, because I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn'ta seen it with my own eyes. I don't know whether I can tell ya how you could believe it or not, but that was a big tree. (Ed Bell, storyteller, quoted by Bauman (1986, p. 99) as an example of metanarration in the oral telling of, ostensibly, 'true' stories.)

Here, the storyteller has woven his presence into his narration, to aid the 'believability' of the tale. The metanarrational performer-presence strengthens the authority of related actuality which, in this case, is elaborated wildly by the creative interpretation of the teller. And it also strengthens the relationship between performer and audience.

The realworld composer, like the storyteller, provides an interpretive presence that colours our reception of *believable* events. In the case of realworld music, we have particularly strong reasons for trusting the source material because, as 'found' rather than created sources, candid recordings provide apparently objective evidence of experience. The events recorded may well have occurred in the composer's presence but the material itself is increate and, consequently, we accept its apparent veracity. And if a composer makes a conscious 'directorial' decision at the recording stage, this action will have great import on the meaning of the material since it becomes part of the objectively preserved events.

To give an example: in *Desert Tracks* Michel Redolfi makes his presence known as part of his raw material, indeed the search for material seems as creatively important as its subsequent manipulation:

... the Desert Tracks project consisted of drifting from the place to place, microphone in hand, in a hypothetical search for the desert tone. (Redolfi, 1988)

In his recordings the sounds culled from the California desert are at times inseparably fused with the signs of his intervention: sounds travel as he moves the microphone about, we hear the sound of the microphone being handled, scrunching gravel, a rock moved and replaced. In fact all the natural but tell-tale signs of a mediating human being who, in his quest for the 'desert tone', literally scratches the surface to activate aurally reticent surroundings. He is very much a storyteller who leads us through the tale: his 'metanarrational' presence becomes part of his material, and part of his subject. He describes the initial *Ouverture* as 'a brief table of the desert's contents' in which 'the natural sounds act like a soloist in dialogue with synthetic instruments' (Redolfi, 1988) yet, ironically perhaps, the very 'naturalness' of the recordings is confirmed by the imbued human presence and the dialogue is in effect between presence and absence rather than natural and synthetic sources.

But, as already mentioned, the composer's performing presence is similarly evident whenever we are encouraged to compare our pre-existent understanding of realworld sounds – their referential, cultural and symbolic meanings – with a composer's interpretation. For instance, Paul Lansky's *Night Traffic*, in which the sounds of traffic are filtered and redistributed in time and space, depends on a deeper understanding of these culturally pervasive sources; Jonathan Harvey's classic work, *Mortuos Plango Vivos Voco*, asks for a remembrance of the learnt, spiritual meanings associated with bells.

### Making it Our 'Own'

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. (Benjamin, 1969, p. 87)

How do we make the music our 'own', and how do we listen to the story? Surely our creative, imaginative, 'intelligent' listening reception is as much a part of the performance as the composer's interpretation.

In real life our listening is generally engendered by circumstances; we listen referentially, functionally. We can choose to reflect imaginatively on a sound's purely acoustic properties, but contextual considerations prevent lengthy lapses into auditory hallucination. I can find myself enjoying the 'purring' of my car's engine, on the rare occasions when it's working properly, but my listening focus shifts rapidly to a more 'referential' listening when I try to get the damned thing into fifth gear. The composer can give us the chance, the freedom, to take 'ordinary', realworld listening to new heights in our desire to identify with the story. So identification ensures attention but, as a productive exchange between teller and told, the success of an oral performance depends also on the listeners' creative incorporation of the storyteller's experience as their own. In relating what we hear to what we already know, we continue to make use of 'everyday' listening, but we 'expand' this listening into a musical activity. And this creativity of reception – another aspect of performance – is encouraged by the experiential quality of the material.

### The Timbres of Experience

As experiential 'evidence' recordings immediately take on a specific temporality since they are now perceived as a vestigial sign of completed actions. They make a convincing aural imprint of time, an imprint which duplicates both the duration and the inner temporal relationships of the original source. But, surreptitiously, they transmit an additional, 'historic' quality; we hear the sonic trace of events 'happening', but happening *in the past*, and we are temporally separated from an actual experience in which we had no part. And this is itself a new experience.

Unlike recordings of musical works or filmed fiction candid recordings heighten our exclusion from the 'action' since our future listening presence – as 'audience' – isn't even implicit in the behaviour of the material. The events recorded were not performed, or intended as performance. So our attention to these naturally occurring events takes place from an externalized standpoint. Although we don't necessarily measure our distance from the sounds recorded in terms of minutes, hours or years we do, at some level, appreciate recordings as a 'recalling' of temporally distant experience. We may listen to a realworld sound 'as if' it were real life but our inability to revisit the original time of the sound now heard both distances us from it and infiltrates our understanding. Anyone who has listened to a recording of a long-dead relative, or a child now grown, knows the pang of nostalgia brought from this intuitive realization but the situation is the same, if less intensely perceived, when the recording has no personal relevance. When we hear Ferrari's 'slice of life', or Redolfi's personal quest, we are 'listening in' to experiences that have *gone*.

### Emotional Remembrance

But it is *how* we are 'listening in' that matters: we are listening in *through* the composer's interpretive performance of the sounds – an essentially emotional remembrance of experience. There is, I feel, a particular emotional poignancy in

listening to the passing timbres of human experience with a new, musical focus. The gentle politics of the realworld composer's performance comes from our identification, and new understanding, of a 'remembrance' of life, brought into the present by the telling of the tale. And this brings us to remembering, as the means to emotionally reconstruct the 'timbres' of experience.

As a changing act of remembering, oral culture has an unusual claim on authority, or perceived 'truth', since it prizes qualities of experience – *how* facts are remembered – as much as the facts themselves. It seems that the way we make the related experience of stories our 'own' may have less to do with simple recognition than with an underlying emotional empathy that involves us with the teller's public 'remembering' of events. The mental 'picturing' of memory is obviously far more complex than a mere recalling of visual, or other, sense data from which we duplicate experience. It is an *emotional* activity. In the present, our perceptions precede our evaluation of experience – our 'sifting out' of meaning from the perceptual information. Memory reverses the progression: the vestiges, largely intuitive or emotional, of the remembered experience, and our personal evaluation of this, precede an inward reconstruction of the perceptions which engendered it. As a result our memories of times in our lives are generally sentimental, in the strict sense of the word: remembered perceptions are transformed by our emotional projection of how the experience 'felt'; remembering childhood, the days seemed longer, the sun seemed brighter – emotional indications of the change in our 'self'.

When it comes to tape music, recordings – as composers are often only too aware – are not 'live'. But this, sometimes troubling, characteristic can offer its own rewards. Consider a recording of an event at which we were present: the recording acts as an *aide memoire*, but in fact it may significantly change our memory, particularly on repeated listenings, as we correct or 'update' our experience and deepen our listening attention. As the original experience recedes into the past, our memory of the actual might eventually be entirely supplanted by our attentive listening to the recording, a very different experience but now, somehow, more 'real'. Yet, unlike personal, subjective memories, recordings are ostensibly unselective in their objective perusal of life and their insidious eradication of first-hand memory. The recording plants a 'new' memory in our minds.

At first glance then, recordings seem to defeat an exchange of remembered experience because, rather like 'written-down' history, they freeze the past in a static, unchangeable way. But the recording presented by realworld music is not the unadulterated raw material but the composer's transformation of it. The ability of recordings to change or inform our memory of the 'truth' becomes the vehicle for a performed transmission of a personal interpretation. And, as in personal remembering, an emotional, changeable, remembering of the facts precedes and influences perceptual recognition. When Redolfi juxtaposes realworld and synthetic sounds or, later in *Desert Tracks*, forms a vibrant texture from bird and insect cries we listen to his emotional remembrance and proceed to a new perceptual understanding of familiar subject matter only through ingesting his response to past events as our own. In fact, he releases us from the 'frozen' reality of the technological image into the world of his recollection. We accept, and emotionally incorporate, an interpretation of events which we haven't ourselves experienced and personally remembered, in the same way that the audience incorporates the performance offered by the oral storyteller.

When it comes to considering tape music performance it might be best to shake loose from comparisons with 'traditional' notions of concert performance, and to stop worrying over their absence. My storytelling analogy is just a suggestion for a performance model that might make more sense, or at least offer more avenues for exploration when it comes to dealing with recorded sounds as material 'from life'. In the case of 'realworld' music it offers the possibility that not only is such music capable of being performed it is, to an extent, *about* performance. If recordings provide us with experiential evidence then the composer's interpretation of them forms – or *per-forms* – that experience into an affective whole. It makes musical stories from everyday sounds, it makes musical sense from 'ordinary' listening and it evokes an emotional response to the timbres of experience.

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